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ALIEN BEACH

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Chapter One

DAY 1

"You're not listening to me," the woman told the soldier.

She was right; he did hear her, but he wasn't listening. The soldier lay staring at the tiny black-and-white TV set before the bed. The newscast was hurried, stunned, as if the Second Coming had happened without warning. The soldier was initially testy enough to shout at the woman to shut up, but in the next few seconds he didn't care to. Transfixed by the small screen, he took in the breaking news.

"The signals are being received from a point off the plane of our solar system, at a distance twice that to Mars. World-famous astrophysicist Carl Sayers, known for his work to find extraterrestrial intelligence, has gathered with other scientists at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, the NASA command-and-monitoring station for deep-space probes, to study the signals.

"Professor Sayers could finally give this comment to the CNN just a minute ago..."

"We have now established, beyond all reasonable doubt, that this is not a hoax. The TV broadcast comes from an extraterrestrial source, extremely strong and with tremendous bandwidth; that's why it shows up on so many of the world's stations. The source is a moving transmission disk, with a diameter of... roughly, a thousand kilometers. And from the way the signal increases in intensity, we have calculated that the disk is approaching the Earth with decreasing speed.

"We now have reason to believe, that the disk is in fact an enormously huge solar sail, made up of very, very thin metal foil, which is slowing down as it moves into an orbit...parallel to that of Mars. It will probably settle in orbit, in the wake of Mars, where it can be shielded from the solar wind - kind of a port in a cosmic mistral, if you like.

"And according to the alien broadcast, a smaller ship will leave the solar sail and orbit the Moon while awaiting our invitation to visit Earth. I cannot express to you the excitement I feel, as do all my colleagues here at the JPL. This is... this is..."

The excited scientist obviously hadn't slept very well for the last few 24 hours; neither had the soldier. The headaches were still interrupting his nights - despite the booze, the women, and the pills. The soldier's head was a little less heavy this morning, and he felt like getting some more sleep - but the news of the alien TV broadcast pestered his brain, not with the dull pain of headache but with the rush of anticipation. He couldn't remember being this excited since the war.

The woman, next to him on the bed, gave him an impatient push.

"What's the matter, soldier? You want me to go?"

He sighed, rubbing his temples, avoiding her sharp voice and stare.

"Yes," he groaned. "Go. I don't know you."

She pulled back strands of black hair from her tanned face and leaned closer to him, her soft hands trying to gently pull his gaze from the TV.

"But we just met," she said softly into his ear. "I want to get to know you better..."

He turned to face her, and gave her an angry look. *No you don't*, he thought, and she let go - as if she had heard his thoughts. Without a word, the woman gathered her clothes and began to dress. From the other side of the half-closed window shutters, the street was teeming and clamoring with human life.

The soldier had not wanted to be part of such life for the last two years. He had been drifting around the Middle East since the war, in permanent early retirement, going nowhere, until this morning when his life got a purpose again. Struck by instant epiphany after the TV news, he now knew that he had to learn everything he could about the aliens. And then, just maybe, get a chance to see them.

And then - he couldn't picture what next.

Already, mocking his noble intentions, the thirst for booze, pills, whatever, was setting in. When the fully clothed woman closed the door behind her, he watched some more TV.

"The strangest feature of the Sirian broadcast is its wondrous clarity and brevity. Even a child can understand it; the smallest satellite disk on a house is sufficient to receive it. Videotape and CD copies of the main message, running ninety minutes long until repeated, must already exist in millions of households all over the world.

"The broadcast has been on the air only since yesterday, and already many viewers have asked us: isn't ninety minutes too much of a coincidence? How come the alien solar-sail wasn't detected long before? Wouldn't this and other odd things indicate that the broadcast is a fraud? At a closer look, there are elements in its narrative structure that

seem inspired by 1950s' TV shows and broadcast films. Strange as this may seem, it is not overly strange - since the extraterrestrials claim to have had their sights set on Earth when they picked up and decoded our early wide-band broadcasts. Being more advanced, and encountering their first messages from our emerging technological civilization, they responded in kind...in both NTSC and PAL signals.

"Long will future generations of humans watch that historical first broadcast over and over: moving, somewhat jerky black-and-white photographic pictures, accompanied by written, clumsy English subtexts and simple sign language, carrying the Sirians' intent to mankind. And they will reminisce how with it, the fantastic suddenly became mundane; alien visitors from space became a daily chatting topic, like Iranian missiles or the greenhouse effect..."

The pundits were already turning the event into an excuse for endless media navel-gazing. Painstakingly, the soldier got up from bed and stumbled into the shower. *Amphibians from space*, he thought. *Bet they don't have to take showers. Bet they don't feel dirty, foul, exhausted all the time.*

The soldier cried as he thought so, but he stayed in the shower to escape seeing or feeling the tears on his face.

A while later, when the sun stood at the zenith, the soldier left his hotel-room and went out into the bustling city. Situated on an island off the coast of the Persian Gulf, this garrison town was something of a freezone in the Arab world. Here were bars which served alcohol to infidel soldiers - though not as many bars nor infidels for the past few years, since terrorists started

putting pressure on Filipino barmaids to cover their legs and arms. He brought a Walkman radio with him, so that he could follow any further news about the Sirians. Resting the small headphones around his neck, he cranked up the volume to hear it over the prayer-calls.

Above the city, the tall, newly-built minarets spread their wailing, two-note message through loudspeakers: *"God is greater... there is no god but God..."*

The soldier suppressed a smile of sudden ironic insight. He thought: *A call from the sky. Looks like the competition is thickening, God. What will all these people think, they who go on pilgrimage to kiss a rock that fell from space, ages ago? Would they kiss an alien spaceship too?*

The soldier wandered into the street-corner café near his hotel. Earlier, the regular Arab customers used to give him hostile looks - after all, he still wore some of his old uniform - but after a few months they had gotten used to the brooding foreigner. This morning, the soldier was almost completely ignored; the men inside were caught up watching the TV set above the counter. Unsurprisingly, they were watching CNN as well.

The soldier overheard bits of the conversation, and though his Arabic was shaky he understood them well:

"They look almost human."

"They're amphibians, they say."

"Imagine. Like a National Geographic team from space!"

"What if they bring disease with them?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Yes you are. We all are."

"We've got missiles too, don't we? And the Iranians, and the Israelis too... they could come to good use after all."

"Let them come. If they try anything...*ffchh...boom!*"

"Maybe the angels are coming. *Inshallah.*"

"Angels with - *ugh!* - arms like snakes! You're talking nonsense!"

"Monsters. Demons. It's the end of the world."

"Aw, shut up!"

"It must be a fraud. The Jews set it up to undermine our faith."

"The demons are coming from hell, in the guise of angels."

"Naah, it's nothing but actors in rubber suits... look, you can almost see the zippers!"

"Ah, like that American show, 'X-Files'..."

"To hell with 'X-Files'. This is for real!"

The bravest customer, a suave youngster with leanings toward Western culture and clothing, turned to look at the soldier - as if he alone possessed an understanding the older men lacked. The soldier had sat down in his regular corner at the end of the counter, drinking the strong local coffee, eating late breakfast, watching the TV news. The young Arab touched the soldier's sleeve, addressing him with serious intent. With an ill grace, the soldier gave him half a red-eyed look.

"Hey, *amrikani*. What do you say?" The young man gestured toward the TV screen. "Is this an American bluff?"

The soldier felt vaguely accused by the youngster's tone of voice, and he didn't like the dark stares from some of the older customers. He made an averting gesture - couldn't think clearly. He had nothing in common with

these people; he was an alien here. And the land he used to call "home" had become an alien world of artificial people obsessed with health, money, silicon, steroids, and happiness pills. The soldier couldn't answer the Arab's question. He could only think of one thing to say, but aimed at the sky: Take me away from here. Take me anywhere, but away from this planet. Which of course would have sounded stupid. So he looked down at his plate and kept his mouth shut.

One elderly man with a hookah at his table stopped puffing to say: "He's homesick. Go home to Mars, *amrikani!*"

Everyone laughed. The soldier nodded toward the joker with a faint smile.

"Home... phone home," he said in nasal English. Only the young Arab seemed to get the joke; he fell silent, as if he understood its underlying meaning.

The soldier stood up and walked out of the café. He had to struggle uphill now, if he was to get anywhere with his newly found aim in life. First of all, he must avoid just going through the old drinking routine. The urge was there all right, to buy the cheapest illegal liquor and get drunk in the afternoon. His headache, forgotten for almost half an hour, was returning... he could no longer tell, whether it was withdrawal or the war injury that was the source.

He stood there in the hot, dusty street, people jostling by, fingering his forehead, fighting the old numb thirst for booze, looking about him with unseeing eyes. *He moved his right tentacle toward his jaw, and wondered what had happened to his stubble... his jaw had never felt so large and*

smooth...

The headache grew stronger - he groaned with pain, squinting - and the blue-green waves roared crashing through the street. As he crouched, he saw his feet: flat, long, and gray, making little flapping sounds as he staggered through the wet, white sand. His gaze shot upward. The sun turned green (natural or filtered through the atmosphere?), outshining its tiny white companion star.

He opened his mouth and screamed.

"Gnnh... chiskr-r-r... chiskr-r-r... chis chiptl mmer-r-r-llee!!"

The soldier collapsed in the street. The passing citizens stared at the fallen Westerner, amazed at his inhuman gibberish. A few men rushed out of the café and leaned down around him to see. The soldier lay unconscious but seemingly in turmoil - his arms and legs made strange, almost undulating movements, as if he attempted to dance. Or swim.

"He's having an epileptic fit," one of the café-goers said. "Get this man to the American military hospital. Hurry!"

A pen was wedged between the soldier's jaws; the café owner called for a taxi with his cellular phone. Within a minute, the men could carry the soldier into the passenger seat. He had ceased moving now, and lay limp in the seat as the car drove him through the streets of the city.

Chapter Two

Astrophysics professor Carl Sayers stirred from an uneasy sleep; after a moment's confusion, he got his bearings. He had dozed off in his guest office at the JPL headquarters. Back at the old JPL at Pasadena, California, he mused - all the old days spent here, designing space probes, following their orbits through the Solar System, paying off at last. Someone knocked on the door; he shouted at the caller to come in.

"Did I wake you up?" asked biologist-anthropologist Ann Meadbouré as she entered the provisional office.

He recognized her slight, crisp French accent from the phone. Carl made a sleepy-sly face as he straightened in his armchair, yawning.

His own voice, when he answered, still carried traces of the old Brooklyn accent: "Hi, Ann... question is, why didn't you wake me when you arrived?"

The younger woman smiled; she was still carrying the bag with the airline tags on it, but she had arrived almost an hour before.

"The staff were going to wake you up, but I told them you deserved some rest. I'm rather tired myself, what with the flight from Sri Lanka."

Carl brightened up at mentioning of the island.

"How is Arthur doing now? I bet he wanted to follow you on this job."

Ann slumped down on the sofa next to Carl's desk. The office was one of several with a panoramic window overlooking the command central, which was now crowded with scientists. A horde of journalists was camping

outside the building, and Ann had had to push and elbow her way past them. As they talked, Ann noticed some other newcomers out in the command central. They waved at Ann, and she waved back.

"Yes, he and the rest of the world. But he's getting to be too old and sick for travel now. Poor Arthur! The first contact is finally happening, and he can't board the space-shuttle to come and greet them."

Carl groaned, holding his gray, shaggy head between his hands.

"Don't *say* it! I'm the one who wrote that stupid book about a first contact! And imagine... they, the Sirians, may have actually seen parts of the film on TV! I feel like the greatest dork in the universe."

Ann reached forward to pat his hand, but didn't quite reach it.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Carl. I'm... I'm sure they haven't seen it. Pity Hollywood instead, with their invasion movies."

He chuckled, his face wrinkling into a sardonic grin. Carl was pushing sixty-five and getting rather thin, but he still hadn't lost the childish twinkle in his eye; the hawkish nose was yet instantly recognizable. Carl Sayers' face had, through the years, become something of a public media icon - especially in the last few years after Hollywood made a movie of his book about contact with aliens. However, his lifelong commitment had never really changed. After the first excitement of the alien message, he had cleared his head with new resolve: he would not let the greatest moment of his life turn into a media circus. It was his long media experience plus his devotion that had made him the focus of the recent events; as newly appointed head of NASA's Extraterrestrial Contact Team, he was determined to keep the media at a strict distance from the aliens.

Carl had insisted on bringing Ann Meadbouré to the project, since she had shown a similar devotion and was a friend though he hadn't seen much of her - Arthur, an old writer and mutual acquaintance, could vouch for her skilled research in dolphin-human communication. Now their commitment would be put to the ultimate test - they would be allowed to communicate with real-life aliens.

He stood up and shook hands with Ann, who gave him a hug.

"I really appreciate that you'd join us," he began, hoping he didn't sound too friendly - Ann looked younger than her thirty-five years, and was quite beautiful in a very French, elegant sense of the word. Her short-cropped blond hair framed her symmetric features and clear gray eyes - the eyes had been covered by ugly glasses the last time he saw her, but now she seemed to be wearing contact-lenses; she wasn't blinking much.

"Don't be silly, Carl," she said with surprising self-control in her voice, "I'm one of the lucky few and I know it. When do we all meet up?"

"Please, Ann - I must save my energy for the big briefing tomorrow. I know how hard it is to relax now. You know what I did when NASA first called me about the alien transmission? I thought it was a damned joke and hung up on them!"

Ann grinned, almost laughed as she rummaged through her bags for cigarettes, listening to Carl without looking at him.

"It seemed like a joke then, because I thought such a huge transmitter in space would show up in the telescopes, years before it came this close! And intelligent life, more advanced than our own, coming from a double-star system that is only one billion years old? It defies belief! Planets just *plain*

can't hold stable orbits in a double-star system for long enough that life can originate. Their planet would be thrown out into the cold or swallowed by one of the two stars!"

Ann couldn't remember the last time she had seen Carl so upset.

"They must be thousands of years ahead of us, you know," she suggested. "Maybe they can do things we can only dream of yet."

She lit a cigarette and drew the poisonous, acrid smoke into her lungs. Ann had quit weeks ago, saving a pack to test her willpower. The moment she had seen the Sirian TV broadcast, she took up smoking again - the irony of which now escaped her somehow. She had to work constantly to keep her outer persona cool and detached, to control the threatening confusion and chaos building up inside her head...

The older scientist paused, paced in no particular direction, stopped at the window. She thanked the god she didn't believe in, that Carl didn't notice how nervous she really was. Carl's lined face, as he looked out at the command central outside, was reflected in the glass so that Ann glimpsed the vast, exhausting awe he felt. He looked not happy, not sad, but overpowered... mentally flattened.

"No," he said, voice husky with exertion. "Tens of thousands, perhaps even a *hundred thousand* years ahead. *They* can understand *us*, the way *we* understand monkeys. Question is... how can we possibly understand them, or even be sure we do?"

Carl frowned. A half-conscious thought that had begun when he saw Ann up close, suddenly cleared. She had made herself prettier not for him, not for the other scientists - but for the aliens.

Ceremony, he had forgotten ceremony. Should they all dress up for the occasion?

"Isn't your wife here?" Ann asked - Carl's wife usually worked close to him, both being scientists and devoted to each other as well as their work.

Carl explained, somewhat awkwardly: "We, uh, decided that one of us should stay behind with the family, just in case there was a danger of exposure to alien microbes. But we keep in touch every day."

It was the truth, yet he feared people would misinterpret it. Then the phone rang, and all of a sudden Carl had a million other things to deal with.

DAY 2

The next morning, the newly-formed ECT gathered in the lab's Von Karman Auditorium for their first big meeting: a dozen people, mostly astronomers and specialists in the fields of biology and spaceflight.

Also present at the meeting were the NASA chief, the U.S. Air Force Joint Chief Of Staff, the Vice President, and the head of the National Security Council. All three visitors sat silent in the background, perhaps out of insecurity in the new situation; they listened intently to the chatting scientists around them. A cameraman from the White House was filming the entire meeting, so that the President and the UN Security Council could follow it from the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Other guests connected via the camera link were various scientists, NASA staff, and Ann's friend Arthur back in Sri Lanka.

Carl Sayers, standing at the small lectern, introduced the people present and made some formal notices about discretion - then he went on to

his main speech.

"I assume that you've seen the Sirian message already; it's all over the world, and they'll surely keep repeating it until we respond. Well, as we speak the President and the United Nations Security Council are discussing the next step. I'm pretty sure most heads of state are eager to get their hands on alien technology, so they won't refuse the Sirians a visit altogether.

"Now, NASA's preliminary plan is as follows. First, we establish a certain frequency and stick to it, so that the aliens... uh, Sirians are clear about who they should listen to - remember, almost anyone can send something they might receive with their big disk!

"Then we send a radio message on several frequencies, making it clear that they are welcome - as long as we decide the conditions of their visit. They must not spread alien microorganisms or other uncontrollable life forms into our system, so personal contact will be difficult. I assume we can work something out, or that the Sirians can provide some kind of solution...

"The first close encounter would have to take place on neutral ground: close enough to make it soon, but not too close to Earth. I have suggested the surface of the Moon, and the President has declared his support of the idea."

He nodded toward the camera, and flashed a quick smile.

"Now, who will be the first to meet the Sirian envoy in person? Not me, I'm afraid..." The scientists laughed. "In all likelihood it's going to be an American astronaut, shuttled over from the space station, who's appointed Earth Ambassador. A great honor.

"The Sirians have mentioned a first, personal meeting in their

message, but they weren't precise about the conditions. How should the initial communication proceed? *We don't know*. Can they speak our language, since they have taped our own TV and radio broadcasts since at least the 1950s? *We don't know*. Do they have complex rules of conduct, which we must learn before we can risk a close encounter? *We don't know*. Should we hold them off as long as possible, and stick to telecommunications? *We don't know*. And, of course, how many of them are there on that big mothership? *We don't know*."

A scientist on the second row couldn't contain his thoughts, and raised an arm.

"What if someone outside NASA gets to hold the meeting first, or... or tries to intervene?" he asked.

Carl Sayers gave the anxious caller a grave look.

"Remember that the President and the entire UN Security Council are watching. There is an exceedingly small risk that some rogue state - we shouldn't be pointing fingers here - is planning a pre-emptive missile strike on the Sirians. I should warn anyone with such ideas, that the Sirians may expect to be attacked. Don't forget, they've seen our TV. They know what we are capable of, so they shouldn't arrive defenseless..."

An uncomfortable moment came over the people in the room, a sense of collective shame. For all its supposed intelligence, mankind had until now dismissed the idea that it was being monitored by a superior civilization. Unless the world's television broadcasts had been censored overnight, images of war, starvation, crime and pornography were yet available to the Sirian receiver-transmitter disk.

Ann Meadbouré, the anthropologist, broke the silence.

"There is no reason for panic," she told the assembly, and stood up. "Everything in the Sirian message and their behavior is non-violent. They act like scientists, they come only to study - not to interfere, or to build permanent settlements, or form alliances, or in any way judge us. There is no..." She hesitated: it was obvious to the point of silliness. "There is no moral dimension to a visit from scientists! Especially in the case of scientists from an entirely different world!"

Carl nodded to Ann, gesturing subtly at her to sit down.

"Ann Meadbouré is right," he asserted the audience. "No one is being judged here. The Sirians must come from a world that's quite unlike our own, which brings me to my next point..."

He used his remote, and the room darkened. On the wall behind him, a series of enlarged, fuzzy black-and-white photographs were projected: clips from the Sirian TV broadcast.

Gray humanoid shapes walked past the camera, the view slightly convex for unknown reasons. The aliens' size couldn't be determined, since there were no humans or man-made objects in view for reference. No easily definable machinery could be seen, except for smooth, silvery shapes and garments hung around the necks and chests of the Sirians. Long conic heads that were slightly swept backward, large eyes half-shut, all bodies having two arms each. Soft arms, almost tentacles with fingers. No clothes. Male and female genitals were easily discernible, astonishingly anthropomorphic except for lack of visible body hair. The faces were flatter than human faces, dominated by the eyes and their thick, smooth eyelids. Their age and size

appeared to vary, though most of them seemed to move in their physical prime. Carl's audience lost their concentration and once more gazed at the eerie pictures. It was still too unreal to grasp. The Sirians were too human-like, too unlike the weirdest fantasies of aliens. Too... *not ugly*.

Carl cleared his throat.

"The Sirian broadcast, probably made in black-and-white to simplify matters of interpretation and transmission, came in two parts. First a purely abstract part, with simple words and sign-language. We'll skip that for now. Second, moving images of the Sirians themselves, taken during their long journey. As you can see, this travelogue also displays their route from Sirius to other stars, back to Sirius, passing our Sun, then spiraling outward to more distant systems.

"I was amazed to learn that this wasn't their first expedition to the Solar System. The first Sirian ship sailed us by without actually landing, more than six thousand years ago. That ship has now passed far, far out into the galaxy. The present visit is the fourth or fifth expedition from Sirius.

The NSC man rose from his chair.

"Doesn't this indicate," the man asked gravely, "a mass migration from Sirius? Is their home system becoming uninhabitable?"

Carl put on his best TV documentary-host manner.

"Now, this isn't entirely explainable yet. I'm not even sure the Sirians originated on Sirius! Because if they did, and if they are as similar to us as they seem, their planet must have gone through enormous cataclysms! We know next to nothing of how the Sirius system formed, but normal double-star planets should have extremely unstable orbits and will be thrown out

into the cold for very long periods. We might be dealing with a nomadic species, who colonized the Sirius system just recently... perhaps they even brought their own homeworld with them."

Now it was the Pentagon man's turn to ask anxious questions.

"You are suggesting the Sirius system was uninhabitable to begin with, and was colonized by the Sirians later! Have we got any guarantees that they ain't planning a similar colonization of our Solar System?"

Carl seemed almost insulted. The Egyptian psychologist of the ECT team stood up and faced the general, ready to explode; Carl answered quickly, before the Egyptian had the chance to respond.

"This isn't the time for invasion hysteria." His tone sharpened. "A shorter visit is what the Sirians've asked for, and I certainly think we can risk that. Besides, general - if they had colonization in mind, wouldn't you want to learn more about them? Otherwise we would surely be defenseless."

The general stiffened and said nothing. He cast an anxious glance at the camera, which carried his image to several important places in the world via the Internet.

"Now," Carl resumed, "what are we to make of the Sirians' proposed visit? I have a simple theory of why they want to visit our world in person. Shouldn't an automatic probe such as our Voyager or Pathfinder craft do the job just as well, at much lower cost and risk? No. These beings are looking for something more than atmospheric data or soil samples. They want -"

A cell-phone signal broke off his speech. The Vice President picked up his phone and talked a few words into it. Then he rose from his seat, looked around the briefing room. His face burst into a grin.

"The President called. The Security Council has just voted approval. The Sirians will be allowed to land on Earth! Get ready for the real thing!"

The assembled scientists broke out into spontaneous applause and cheering. The Vice President shook some hands, and then took the general and the NSC man aside.

"Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel just quit their membership in the United Nations," he said softly. "The Orient is getting ready for war. Space war. We fly to New York now and meet the President for a crisis council."

Chapter Three

DAY 3

The soldier came to his senses.

"Why is the sea... huh?"

He was lying in a clean, white hospital bed, the room crowded with beds. A TV set hung from the ceiling. He took in the news:

"The Saudi Ambassador's speech was unrehearsed and contradictory, but he was clearly supported by his superior, King Khadi. To our journalist, the Ambassador made a brief comment as he left the UN building..."

"God is with us. We act in the strength of God's truth! The Moon's surface shall not be desecrated by unclean creatures!"

"This just in - the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh has been formally notified by the Saudi government, that all U.S. airbases in Saudi Arabia must be closed down and evacuated within one month. Political commentator Steve Russert is with us live to discuss this development. What do you say, Steve? Has King Khadi become an ally to the fundamentalists?"

"Well, Barbara, it could be a gesture meant for the home opinion. The Saudi kings have shown these moments of pious posturing before. Speculations are that his real agenda, if he has one, is the Saudi kings fear aliens will share with us their advanced technology - which could make oil obsolete as fuel..."

The soldier tried to reach for the calling button next to him. He found

that his arms and legs had been strapped to the bed.

"Let me loose!" he shouted. "I'm not a maniac!"

Other patients began screaming too - some jokingly, others not.

"He's right!" a grave-faced neighbor declared. "He's an emissary like me! Our minds are telepathically linked with the Holy Venusian Priests!"

Each patient claimed special insight, making the latest news part of his individual delusion.

"Hale-Bopp-be-bop-alle-luja!"

"To infinity - and beyond!"

"Sirius, the final frontier!"

"The truth is out there!"

"I come in peace!"

"Klaatu barada niktou!"

The cacophony of shouting lunatics quickly grew unbearable. The soldier wanted to scream in agony - then he recalled the words he had uttered just before he blacked out in the street.

"Ch... chiskr-r-r-r... chis chiptl mmer-r-r-r-llee," he mumbled to himself.

Yes, it meant something. No, he was cracking up. It was all so confusing. A doctor came up to him, accompanied by a nurse. He asked a few questions, checked the soldier's heart and eyes, and ordered the nurse to undo his straps. Once free, the soldier sat up and looked for his real clothes. The nurse handed them to him, and he began to change his hospital gown for his own veteran's wardrobe.

"You ought to have your brain scanned for tumors or lesions," the

doctor told him. "If this is your first seizure, you must take precautions -"

"Already did," the soldier said, buttoning his desert-camouflage shirt. "Just after the war. The shrinks found nothing they could change. Chemical weapons screwed up my brain. I'm a permanent war cripple."

"Nevertheless, another scan is necessary. If you stay here till -"

"I'm going. You can't hold me here."

He was gone.

The soldier marched out of the hospital as briskly as he could without running. A part of him wanted to stay there. Another part warned him that if he stayed there, they would never let him out again. He would have become just another kook among kooks there, babbling about a "higher insight". Maybe it was madness. But he had experienced something. For a moment he had been on a strange world, been something not quite human. He glanced down at his feet. Ordinary feet, stuck in badly shoe-laced army boots, size 12. He didn't know in which direction he was walking, but any "higher insight" he didn't feel at all.

The soldier stopped in his tracks. A veteran rolled past him in a wheelchair, thick arms pushing the wheels around... his face had made brief news some time ago, when he stepped on a terrorist bomb. Barely twenty, and the guy had no legs. How old was the soldier himself? His head was starting to ache again. He popped an aspirin tablet and walked on, out of the well-guarded hospital compound. It was another hot, cloudless day, jet airplanes making white tracks in the sky.

As he squinted at the burning sun, it blinked out of existence. The sky

went almost dark, save for the pinhead of a white sun at the horizon. The stars began to come out; he couldn't recognize any of the familiar constellations. Out there in the darkening night he could discern a very bright yellow star; and he knew it was the Earth's Sun.

Someone shook his shoulder; the vision flickered away. He found himself leaning against a wall, just outside the hospital gate.

"You all right, soldier?" the other man, a younger soldier, asked.

"Yeah," he said faintly, "just a little dizzy. The sun, you know."

"Better get your cap on," the man said. "Are you in service? You look like shit."

"No," the soldier said truthfully, straightening himself to face the other soldier, "I'm retired. Veteran's pension. Served in the Gulf."

"Sorry to hear that, man. I was in the Gulf myself, but I never got into any serious shit."

The soldier saw genuine concern in the other man's face. Maybe the Army could help him, he thought. Get back into the service, start over. Yeah, right - like they helped that guy with no legs.

"I'm okay now - thanks. Say, have you heard any buzz from the top brass, about this alien contact stuff you know?"

The other soldier made a wry face: "You kidding? They're pissing in their pants now! Every goddamn missile there is, is being pointed into space. Of course the bigwigs ain't tellin' us, but the word is out."

"You figure there's gonna be a war?"

"Shit, I don't know. Word is, we're going to evacuate the bases soon. Anything could happen. Just about anything. You wait and see."

The soldier thanked him and said goodbye. No, obviously the Army was the wrong place to turn to for help. Dammit, he wanted to meet aliens - not be ordered to shoot them. And he had no desire to go back to America, either. He wanted to go in one direction only. The soldier looked up at the sky, which now was studded with vapor trails from aircraft...

Up.

Up.

Up.

He would think of something, as soon as he had sweated out the old thirst for booze and pills. It was going to be a couple of long nights, though he could look forward to more TV news about the Sirian visitors. If only he had possessed one of those new Internet-connected, computerized TV sets - then he could have had even more access. But that would cost money he didn't have.

An hour later, he saw on CNN the released list of scientists appointed to stay close to the aliens, during their one-year visit on Planet Earth.

"A rigorous selection was made, before a select team could be assembled and approved by the U.N. Security Council. The ECT is now under the direct coordination of astrophysicist Carl Sayers, president of the Planetary Society. The other dozen members are...

"From the U.S.: The writer and astronomer Stone Pound, a well-known popular science writer, with his own Internet column.

"From Egypt: Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Lazar Mahfouz.

"From France: The anthropologist and marine biologist Ann

Meadbouré, who has studied dolphin behavior with Arthur C. Clarke at his Sri Lanka research station.

"From Great Britain: The acclaimed biologist Andrea McClintock, one of the world's leading experts in evolutionary theory.

"From Germany: Best-selling historian Bruno Heinzhof, lecturer at the leading universities of Germany, Israel, and America.

"From Japan: Takeru Otomo, award-winning engineer with outstanding merits in nuclear power plant design.

From Sweden, an unexpected choice: The physician Mats Jonsson, just recently awarded for his discovery of a new procedure to..."

DAY 50

The whole world watched, as the orbiting space shuttle released the Moonlander module.

Across every time zone on Earth, humanity was watching the astronauts land on the Moon - a nostalgic moment for those who remembered the Apollo landings. This time, someone was waiting for the astronauts. The Sirian lander craft, a sleek, silvery shape ninety meters long, had arrived just hours before. A trio of Sirian envoys walked to greet the Earthlings welcome. One of the two human astronauts walked out of the lander, seeing three Sirians approach from their own landing site. The aliens wore spacesuits made from some metallic dark-red fabric, and their movements seemed surprisingly heavy. One Sirian sat languidly down on a rock, while a third figure wandered up close to the first astronaut.

The world watched, breathlessly; generals and tyrants ready to order the launching of missiles, poor people waiting for the salvation they had been denied - others just hoping for something new and different to change their predictable, aimless lives. One lumbering human, white armor shielding him against the cold of space, closing in on red-clad figures with soft arms.

When they were just three meters apart, the closest Sirian halted and sat down in the dust. He measured a little more than two meters in height, and his face was dimly visible behind a brown visor-plate. An aged face peered out from the helmet, deep cracks running down from the small of his standing-oval, half-shut eyes, past the corners of a wide mouth. The alien face, aged as it was, retained a streamlined shape; its features seemed modeled onto an artillery grenade. Unexpectedly, the alien's cracked lips widened. He was smiling, and it seemed to come naturally. The astronaut halted, looked back toward his landing craft, and tried hard to control his bladder from bursting in a panic reaction. With an effort, he succeeded - and kneeled down on the dusty ground, documents in one hand. He waited a while for the alien to take the initiative. A radio communications link came alive in the astronaut's headset - unfocused at first, then sharpening into utter clarity.

And for the first time, humanity heard the Sirians speak. A creaky voice, deep with large lung capacity, drawling, breathing heavily - yet oddly *singing*.

SIRIAN ENVOY: "*Goood mmmorniing... Greetinnngsss... wweelcome.*"

ASTRONAUT: "Er... welcome to the Moon. You... you speak good English."

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"Thank youu..."*

ASTRONAUT: "My name is... Eric Bennon. I am an elected ambassador for the people of Planet Earth."

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"Hoow doo youu do, Aaambassaaador Eric Bennoon..? Mmy lannd-naame iss Ranmotanii..."*

ASTRONAUT: "I...I am doing fine, thank you... Ambassador Ranmotanii."

MISSION CONTROL: "The letter! Hand him the letter!"

ASTRONAUT: "I hereby give you this document of approval, signed by the most important leaders of my planet, which verifies that I am the elected ambassador for this first meeting.

"The document also explains our conditions for your visit to our solar system... to our planet, Earth... up there."

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"Thank youu... weee rrrread iiit."*

MISSION CONTROL: "What are they doing?"

ASTRONAUT: "I think they're reading it... one of the three must be an interpreter of our language. He, or she, is using sign language and talking to them over their own radio. Houston, can you take in their conversation?"

MISSION CONTROL: "Negative, Bennon. The Moonlander antenna can't pick up their internal comlink. Keep going, you're doing fine."

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"Thank youu...Aaambassaaador Eric Bennoon... I uuunderrrstaand the meeeaniing thhhat buillt the... documeeent. Yyyou speeeak ffforrr yyyour ppeoplle. Yourrr leaderssss... hear uss taallk noow?"*

ASTRONAUT: "Yes, Ranmotanii. Our leaders, and all the people of Planet Earth, up there. You can ask them anything... through me. Do you understand?"

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"Underrrrstannnd. Yyyes."*

ASTRONAUT: "I am very happy that you understand. What do you want to talk about? We have much time.

"Houston, Ranmotanii is discussing something with the other two. They are... taking something out of a pouch. An object, about the size of my head. Should I return to the lander?"

MISSION CONTROL: "Just stay calm. They're not gonna eat you."

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"Ammmbassadooor Eriic Beeennon. Mmy ppeopllle giive the... giift off frieendsshhip too youu aaand peoplle of Planeet Earrth. Thank youu..."*

ASTRONAUT: "Thank you... thank you very much. What is it?"

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"A maaachiine... to recooord aaannd repllayyy th...thoughtsss."*

ASTRONAUT: "We will have good use for that. Ranmotanii... I have a gift to your people. It is harmless..."

MISSION CONTROL: "Bennon, what are you doing? This is not in the plans! Stay with the schedule, that's an order!"

ASTRONAUT: "Here..."

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"Thhank yyyou... thaaank yyyou veryyyy muchhh. Whaaat iss iit?"*

ASTRONAUT: "It is a flute. An instrument to make music. I wanted to give you a guitar, but this was the smallest thing I could get. The flute..."

needs atmosphere to work."

SIRIAN ENVOY: *"I knnnoww muuusic. I hearrrr yourrr mmmusiic... in rrradiio. Yooour mmmusiic is sssso diiifferrrent ffffromm ourrr muuusic. Nooow... I caaan mmmake yourrr mmmusiic?"*

ASTRONAUT: "Yes. Yes, that would be wonderful. We could play music together."

The astronaut laughed, and the old Sirian made a slow, repeated clicking noise over the radio... laughter. The world made a collective sigh of relief; aliens who had a sense of humor couldn't be all that bad.

Somewhere in a shady bar for Americans, that served alcohol in a predominantly Moslem country, the soldier sat and watched it all on TV.

Among the laughing men and women, he heard one guest comment: *"That doesn't prove anything! Anyone who sees us on TV for forty years must develop a sense of humor."*

The soldier said nothing. He knew the man was right, terribly right. The aliens were oh so polite. Of course: they obviously had to, knowing what kind of creatures they were dealing with. The circumstances - decades of TV programming - were dictating the encounter. What had he expected, anyway? The soldier felt the bile of disappointment swell in his throat. The greatest moment in human history was turning into a trivial talk show. And there was nothing he could do to alter it. How did this fit into his vision of another world? Was the universe populated with beings just like humans? Would it never get better than this?

He grabbed the nearest glass he saw and hurled its contents down his

throat.

"Hey!" said the righteous owner of the drink. "Buy your own booze, weirdo!"

The soldier grinned joylessly.

"You talkin' to me?" he asked, turned away, then spun and punched the other man in the stomach before he could react.

A confused, puke-stained brawl followed, but nobody was seriously injured. Before long, the military police were showing up. Among the MPs, the bloodied soldier recognized the private he had talked to days before, outside the hospital.

"Sorry 'bout the mess, pal," he slurred to the MP as they carried him out to the jeep.

"Just keep your bleedin' mouth shut, soldier."

"I'm not in service anymore," the soldier protested lamely.

"How come you're still fighting, then?"

The soldier couldn't answer that. But then he fell asleep.

Chapter Four

DAY 51

The CNN reporter tried hard to sound casual about her surroundings; she barely made it.

"The scientists of the ECT have expressly denied journalists their legal right to disturb the alien visitors. This hasn't stopped scores of curious observers from circling the three-mile perimeter of the small atoll the Sirians have rented for their stay. However, the U.N. fleet of American and British ships cruising the waters outside the perimeter, will ensure the Sirians safety from terrorist attacks.

"With me on the CNN cruiser I have tribal chief Jonah Fongafale, the legal owner of the atoll. He's the man who allowed the Sirian ship to land at his islet and let the Sirian crew live there.

"Chief Fongafale, how did you first get in touch with the Sirians?"

"I saw them on TV, like everyone else... then I saw what they looked like, and I knew they needed much water to live. The water-humans resemble the dolphins we have around our islands. Talking dolphins, they are. Listen to them speaking English! You hear a certain melody that can only come from living in the sea. The South Pacific is full of dolphins. It was the only right place. So I called NASA and they arranged the rest."

"Did you do any face-to-face negotiations with the Sirians?"

"I did. I met their... he's a kind of spokesman... Ranmotanii. He

called me a 'land-human'. They call themselves humans, not 'Sirians'. He's a sympathetic fellow, but not a clever businessman. I struck a good deal."

"Can you tell our viewers how much you made on the leasing deal?"

"I'd rather not answer that question. But the atoll has no value to us. It is merely a chunk of sand and a wide lagoon on a reef. They asked for a lagoon."

"I see. Well, what do you think of this visit from space? Will both our races prosper from it, will there be a great cultural exchange?"

"Our people have the scars of history on ourselves. We know what will happen."

"Could you explain what you mean? Mr. Fongafale...? Well, thank you for sharing your time with us here at the CNN cruiser."

"Thank you very much."

"As you can see from our roving helicopter camera, the Sirian lander - not the mothership, that behemoth is still parked somewhere off Mars - is now permanently resting underwater for the rest of their stay. It appears to be used as a base camp for the twenty-odd visitors, who prefer sleeping in the lagoon. The human scientists, on the other hand, have just put up their jerrybuilt habitats on the island's surface. At a closer look..."

Carl observed that as usual, the media messed up all the facts. Sick of watching his tiny pocket-screen, he switched off the news and put his

sunglasses back on. He turned to the beach, and gazed across the glittering, soft-scented sea. Next to him stood the big signpost, just erected, facing the lagoon:

Welcome to ALIEN BEACH

**This area is under the protection of American and British Naval Forces
under the United Nations**

Disgust with the media's treatment of the whole affair, that's what the team felt and vented... and he had to agree. The dumb interviewer had entirely missed the point of Fongafale's ominous words. Carl sensed a creeping insecurity coming over him now, as he and his team waited for the Sirians to surface. He could put up with his own shaky knees, his restless stomach, the mindless phobia of the unknown. What really frightened him was the risk of disappointment. By now the team had accepted why these amphibians were so strangely humanoid: an old Polish science-fiction writer had offered a plausible explanation.

"To travel through space," the writer had loftily explained over the Net, "to accept the vast expenses and sacrifices it demands, is something only certain kinds of animals will do. It is then reasonable to assume, that if other species develop space-travel they should resemble humans - if only in their obsessive restlessness.

"To expect alien life to be ugly and misshapen is plain dumb. Bipolar symmetry is a universal advantage, and should appear in almost all evolved life forms. Two legs are better than three. Pairs of stereoscopic eyes are

better than single eyes. Beings unable to grasp abstract thought and mathematics could never reach space. Thus, if an intelligent species is very different from humans, it is likely to stay put on its own world... unless it gets outside help."

And yet it remained to be seen, just how like us the Sirians could be... the diplomatic stage show had ended and the real communication would - hopefully - begin.

Carl wandered across the soft white sand, and joined the conversation of a small cluster of people. He knew only a handful of them personally, such as Ann Meadbouré and a few astrophysicists of his own profession; the Egyptian psychologist, Lazar Mahfouz, he had never met until the first team briefing. All were wearing light tropical clothing; Ann wore a wide straw hat instead of sunglasses. At least two scientists were filming the historical event - live-TV crews were banned, though.

Carl sent a silent thought to the countless scientists who couldn't, shouldn't or wouldn't come near the islet: Arthur must be watching the whole spectacle on TV now, and Carl's family too. He wished his wife could have been with him now. At the horizon, a jetfighter roared off from a U.S. carrier, and shot into a sky that was already streaked with vapor trails in circles around the atoll. The sight worried him: one of those planes might be carrying a bomb he hadn't been told about...

Carl switched on his pocket-sized screen again, flipped through the channels, looking for unexpected bad news.

"...really be safe from extraterrestrial microbes, Dr. Watts?"

"The evidence was approved by scientists, and the world leaders

accepted it: the alien visitors have somehow expelled their own internal bacteria and replaced it with the intestinal bacteria of our own, such as the harmless E. Coli. We have as yet received no explanation of how this was done, or how they have adapted to our microbes so fast. Frankly, I expected them to stay in quarantine much longer."

"So the ECT scientists run no risk of catching an infection from the Sirians?"

"One cannot be completely safe. But the risks are mutual - perhaps greater to the extraterrestrials, than to us."

"But if a handful of alien spores come into our atmosphere, what would happen?"

"I cannot guarantee total safety, not even the Sirians can. But in an established, old ecosystem like ours, newcomer bacteria simply won't last long. It is not adapted to our planet and the other microorganisms - so it will be poisoned or eaten by the hostile majority."

"And if one of these should survive, mutate, and gain a foothold on our planet? Could it threaten life on Earth?"

"There is good reason to believe that alien spores have fallen to Earth in all times, and it hasn't meant the end of life as we know it. You could just as well expect all different species on Earth to start killing each other off, instead of co-existing together..."

"Thank you, Dr. Watts. Despite these official assurances, the fear of alien contagion has caused an upsurge in demand for antibiotics, disinfectants, even penicillin. Hospitals report a wave of psychosomatic illnesses among patients since the landing of the Sirians on Earth:

headaches, nervous fever, aching joints, insomnia and neurotic behavior. Nevertheless these are just nervous symptoms.

"We now go live to the CNN cruiser outside Alien Beach, where the ECT seem to be preparing for..."

Lazar hadn't said much since that briefing; neither did he now. But he was clearly following the scientists' conversation with great interest.

"If the minerals in our ocean correspond to the composition of their own oceans, alien microorganisms could multiply from their bodily waste. These waters are warm, ideal for bacterial explosions or algae -"

"But what about competition from the established biosphere -"

"Carl, listen to this fool! He -"

"I get diarrhea whenever I drink foreign water; why would tourists from another planet be different?"

"You know nothing about their metabolism - you think they're stupid enough to go here unprotected?"

"Why do you keep referring to the amphibians as perfect, infallible beings?"

Carl interfered, before the argument could deteriorate into a passionate shouting-match between academics. He partly wished he could have gathered more down-to-earth people to deal with the visitors. It would have been great to have the Sirians all to himself, but... he simply had grown old and mellow enough to suppress such selfish impulses.

"Lazar, what do you make of this squabbling bunch?" he asked. "Are they fit to confront our visitors?"

The old thin-haired Egyptian made a face of benevolent confusion.

"Who am I to judge? I am just as conflicted myself," he confessed aloud. Lazar Mahfouz, Nobel Prize-winning psychologist. They all looked - mute - at his leathery, lined face, as if he had betrayed their common weaknesses. He winked behind his thick glasses. "Just think of this when they arrive," he told them with sudden urgency, "both we and they are observers of another species! *Observers!* Don't forget!"

Lazar must have glimpsed a movement in the lagoon. The dozen humans turned their full attention to the waters, as if directed outward by the curved palmtrees that pointed out to sea. A few of them stepped closer, but some innate caution stopped even Carl just meters from the lapping waves.

Ann pointed excitedly toward the center of the lagoon.

"Over there!" she shouted in French.

A long glistening head, shaped like an asymmetric bullet, cleaved the waves and shot up, water dripping off it. The head was that of a female amphibian; she pulled back a Mohawk mane of hair from her big, oval eyes, squinting at the sun, blinking nervously. Then another head bobbed up, and another. Twelve of them in all. Bald-headed males and females with horse-mane hair, all in varying shades of gray. They gained a foothold on the sand and waded up through the water, coming into full view of the group of humans.

The first thing that struck the scientists was that the Sirians wore no real clothing. Only a few wore silvery metal discs and earphone-like gadgets on their bodies; others carried waterproof pouches slung over their shoulders. The aliens squinted as they looked about themselves, but made no efforts to cover their private parts.

The second thing that struck Ann Meadbouré was that these were creatures of great beauty. The way they carried things, tentacle-like arms curling instead of bending, fingers making circular patterns instead of showing protruding knuckles. Their oval, slightly flattened eyes seemed taken from a Japanese cartoon, only these were real - the oldest Sirian's eyes were bloodshot with dark veins, yet they radiated no threat or senility. The oldest alien, Carl now saw, had to be Ranmotanii.

The legs of the amphibians moved with great control despite their flapping, flat, dark feet, and with every step thigh-muscles flexed through the smooth blubber skin - skin like that of a dolphin or a seal. The females had large buttocks, full of muscle and fat; their breasts stood out like full, smooth swellings in their chests, not drooping sacks like those of humans. Their nipples appeared as dark spots in their skins. The males, oddly enough, lacked nipples - their inhumanly wide chests were perfectly featureless, only slightly paler than the surrounding skin.

The male amphibians bore other differences: their coarser faces had thick, fishlike lower lips, whilst the females' wide lips more resembled those of human females. They lacked noses, the one frightening feature the Sirians shared: both nostrils were wide open, like on a naked human skull.

As the marching amphibians walked up, they threw up seawater from their lungs; from the nasal openings and the ear-holes, clear water sprayed over their smooth shoulders and chests. One female made a quick knot of her hair, soft fingers working rapidly; to Carl, it looked like she almost tied her own fingers into knots. His doubts melted away, and he stepped forth to shake hands (hands?) with Ranmotanii.

Carl tried to remember the speech he been preparing, then thought: *To hell with speeches. This, this is what I really want to do.*

He stretched out his sweaty right hand, a little shaky and pale. Ranmotanii, carrying an inscrutable closed-lips smile on his face, stretched - literally stretched - forth his right arm, elongating it a few inches. At its end, the tip had a kind of stalk-like thumb, with four longer, softer finger-stalks branching out along its base. A little awkwardly, eyes focused on each other's hands, Carl and Ranmotanii intertwined their fingers.

Carl felt a chill that wasn't fear or lust, a wave of strangeness surging from the handshake through his arm and into his head. It wasn't any supernatural force, just the sensation of touching alien fingers that felt like nothing human. They were stronger and dryer than he had thought, quite warm but firm - he felt minute bones in that arm, in that hand! Carl risked strengthening his grip a little, and Ranmotanii responded in kind. Carl looked up at the Sirian's long, lined face and made a short laugh - he didn't quite know why.

"Well - here we are..." he stuttered (he hated himself then, for saying that to an ambassador from an ancient civilization), but didn't yet dare to release his grip or do just about anything but stand still.

If the alien had been the physics teacher of his college days but ten times wiser and more awe-inspiring, Carl would still have known how to behave in his presence. But there were no rules for this kind of authority.

"Yesss... wwe aaare heerrre. Mmy land-naaame iiis Ranmotanii," sang the alien, a bit loudly.

Carl swallowed involuntarily - his mind went blank - but he spoke.

"My land-name is Carl... Carl Sayers. You can call me Carl. Welcome."

Ranmotanii lowered his bass-voice slightly.

"Caarrll... wweee taalk forrr wee, or wwe talk forr ourr peeoplle?"

"You mean now?"

Ranmotanii released his "hand" and made an obscure gesture which might mean "yes". Carl nodded.

"Yes." Then adding: "Now, when we are on this island, we talk to get to know more. That is what we should do. We..." He started to use hand-gestures, to clarify the meaning of his words. "We who you see here now, are scientists. That is, scientists work to seek knowledge. Who we are... and where we came from... that is not important. To know, to learn more about everything, that is all to us. That is what it means to be a scientist."

Ranmotanii, his face neutral, nodded and made the same approving hand-gesture again. Now other Sirians stepped forth, arms outstretched. All the human team members shook hands, jittery but happy. Only one of them was paralyzed with panic, and must be helped aside. Official documents from the scientific organizations and the U.N. were given to the Sirian delegation. Some more procedure followed, and all humans felt terribly awkward about it.

Finally, Carl Sayers got the chance to offer the visitors to sit down in the shadow of the palmtrees, nearer the barracks. The two groups walked to the place, still keeping apart but looking at each other constantly. Straw mats were already laid out, and a pile of gifts for the amphibians.

Carl asked a linguist to explain the use of the gifts: a hundred pairs of

Bermuda shorts and plain t-shirts in different colors, size XXL; two crates of English dictionaries; a box of wooden flutes (a NASA PR executive had lobbied through that last-minute addition), and other trinkets. It took some effort to explain the necessity of wearing clothes, but the Sirians graciously accepted the gifts.

The flutes were instantly appreciated; this was something of a novelty to them, and a few Sirians immediately tried blowing into the flutes. It sounded awful. The human scientists laughed happily at the ear-piercing noise, some even applauded.

Next, the Sirians produced their own gifts to the scientists: a dozen copies of the mind-recording device that Ranmotanii had given the astronaut earlier. The group's best engineer, a mid-thirtyish Japanese named Takeru Otomo, examined his copy with an intrigued expression. A female amphibian sat down and awkwardly explained it to him. The device consisted of a set of two broad, thick elastic metal bands, forming a helmet shape with an open top. A metal knob at one end recorded the impressions from the most active parts of the brain; the whole mechanism was powered by solar energy.

By the mere press of another knob, the user's thoughts could be replayed in his mind - it might be the closest thing to television the Sirians had. Or the closest to art; they made the early impression on Lazar Mahfouz as being peculiarly artless. Machinery devoid of ornament or paint; featureless tools and ships; no tattoos or jewelry on their bodies. He thought this extremely odd - did they feign artlessness or was it their way of being?

The Japanese engineer, Takeru, was not mystified by the artlessness

of the aliens; he was enchanted, though he did not openly show his emotions. Moving close to the center of events, he was the first to try and use the machine; he ignored the warnings of the others and put the metal bands around his head, clasping the knob that switched it on. He wished intensely to be the first man to use alien technology, and ignored the risk. Carl saw what was happening, too late to stop it.

The knob made a little singing sound, like a word of Sirian speech - the contraption stiffened and stuck firmly to Takeru's scalp. He felt a brief heatwave from the machine into his hair, and sweated even more. After a few seconds, he switched it off and removed it. His scalp felt a little raw, but that was all.

At once, the female amphibian gestured at him to put the contraption back on. He did so, pushed the knob, felt the device freeze stuck again - and was transported back in time to the minute before, when the device was on his head the first time. It was a perfectly recorded experience, except for his breathing and heartbeats; he was like a visitor in his own mind's past. Then the replay abruptly ceased - Takeru was back in the present. He was shaken by the brief experience, trembling and sweating.

"Thank you," Takeru stammered to the Sirian female - an adult-looking, dark-gray individual with a peculiar expression in her half-shut eyes. "What did you say was your name?"

"Laand-nammme... Namonnae," she said in a clear voice, pointing at a spot between her large eyes. Even when they were both sitting down, she was one head taller than he was. Takeru smiled uncertainly at the female, repeated his own name and pointed to the corresponding spot between his

own eyes. The female's lips widened - Takeru couldn't quite make out what that expression meant, but hoped it was a benevolent smile.

Not immediately but profoundly, it dawned on Lazar Mahfouz what the alien "trinkets" were worth. A traditional psychoanalyst would have given his right arm for a machine that recorded dreams.

"Ask her if the machine has a memory limit!" he begged the Japanese engineer.

"This machine... how much can it record? What happens when it is full?"

Takeru repeated the question with sign language added, until Namonnae understood. She looked them both in the eyes, blinking rapidly.

While pointing a finger-stalk at the memory-section of the device, she answered in her singing, drawn-out way: *"Mmmachine... iiis nooot fuuull... Wwill nnot beee fulll... uuuntiil... knowww nooot trrranssslate. Unntilll muchhh vvveery lonng tiime passees. I wiill telll morrrre lateeer. Muuust lllearn mmmorrrre yooour lannguuuage. Parrrdonn...?"*

Takeru understood that Namonnae was much smarter than her speech indicated; Sirian intonation was completely different from any human pattern, and quite likely to remain that way.

"It's okay. No problem now," Takeru assured her, trying a wide grin.

Namonnae seemed to be taken aback, and her eyes widened instantly.

Lazar tapped him on the shoulder: "Takeru, these beings don't smile with their teeth. Didn't you know that baring your teeth is the universal threat of attack?"

Takeru, shocked by his own blunder, bowed down before the Sirian

several times in the traditional excuse ritual.

"I'm sorry! I did not mean to threaten you!" he pleaded, then repeated his excuse. Nammonae folded her soft arms into two outward-turning arches, closing her eyes once, emphatically.

"Iis nooo proooblemm nnow," she told him in calm tones. "I'mmm sorryyy... alllsooo. Languuuuaage iin proooblemmm... nooot impooortaaant... knooowleeedge, Caaarl speak of. Morrre immmpoortaaant."

"Yes."

"Yes, absolutely."

Lazar made an effort not to imitate the body language of the Sirian, then wondered why he felt the strong urge to emulate them. It might confirm something he had feared before the visit, though it was much too early to draw conclusions yet...

Carl clapped his hands to call for attention, and made another announcement: according to the customs of Pacific natives, the newcomers would be welcomed with a great feast. Unfortunately the scientists did not know what the amphibians could digest, and vice versa. Despite this, Carl invited the Sirians to return to the beach at sunset that evening, and bring their own food, while the humans brought theirs. An agreement was made with crude phrases and gestures; even figures in the sand were drawn, and an artistic scientist drew pictures for description; then the Sirians were free to do as they liked until the celebration.

Ranmotanii told Carl the idea was good, and thanked them all. All the Sirians joined him in the gesture of gratitude: they stretched out their arms before them, cupped their "hands" together, and pointed them up above their

heads. Then the visitors, chattering rapidly among themselves in their own tongue, packed their gifts and walked back into the lagoon.

"Welcome back!" Ann shouted, waving after them.

Carl let out a deep sigh of relief when the last amphibian had dived into the waters. His mouth felt as dry as sandpaper, and he could barely speak. It amazed him, by comparison, how calmly Ann had behaved.

"You have a lot of nerve, Ann," he rasped. "My hands were shaking so badly I could hardly lift my arm. Seriously: what were you on?"

Ann made a nervous laugh: "I was scared... just like you... I still am, I guess... but when I was among them and talked to them... it felt so safe... like... I can't explain. They are giants, even the females. I couldn't be afraid when they were near, you know? Carl, I cannot believe this is really happening! I shook hands with one of them!"

They gave each other a spontaneous hug.

Carl said: "These mind-recorders gave me a great idea. Let's call for a general meeting now -"

One of the physicians of the team, a curly-blond Swede by the name Mats Jonsson, overheard the discussion.

"Carl," he interjected, "you'd better put that meeting on hold for a few minutes. About half the team suddenly got nervous diarrhea. I gotta go."

Mats Jonsson darted off across the sand toward the nearest row of toilets.

"Curiouser and curiouser," muttered Carl.

This first contact was turning out strange all right... and comical to the

point of slapstick. He was glad the media was being held at bay. Carl returned to his barrack, glancing at the surrounding sea. The background rumble of distant helicopters and jet airplanes was nearly constant now.

A little later that day, the scientists gathered to hear Carl's idea. The man with the camera switched to an unused disc.

"Let's see, we've got thirteen of these mind-recorders... what I suggest is we put them on during the Sirians' visit. Why not? Using our own eyes is way better than standard video equipment! With these devices, we won't miss any important detail of this historic first contact!"

Lazar Mahfouz raised a hand.

"But they are set to stay a whole year. What if the recorders don't last the whole time? I have a suggestion. Let's use the recorders while we sleep instead."

At once, one American scientist protested loudly - he seemed to take the proposal personally.

"I won't give away my private dream-life to science! Besides, what we dream is not important to this mission! *Facts* are important, not fantasy!"

Lazar responded with only a hint of aggravation: "And why do you think they gave a dozen people a dozen recorders in the first place? They already knew we had cameras and such things, since they've seen our TV for years! Their gift was the logical conclusion!"

"From now on, what we dream is highly relevant. Because there is a world outside this island, a whole world that will dream about Sirians - dreams full of fear and desire and curiosity! Dreams that reflect motives!"

With this technology, we can anticipate the world opinion and prevent it from turning against the Sirian presence. Carl, you understand what I mean, don't you? You worked in television."

Carl understood quite well what Lazar meant. But he wasn't ready to accept it yet. The implications cut too deep, also into his own mind...

All of a sudden, he wanted to shrug off the existence of the infernal mind-recorders, and concentrate on hard facts. Why couldn't this affair be simpler? Then again, Lazar did talk about hard, inescapable facts. About what the human mind was really like. A haunting image from an old film flickered through Carl's memory: a thinking, bloodthirsty ape, wielding the first weapon as he committed the first murder of a fellow ape...

"I'm not going to force anyone into anything," he told the group after a time. "But if any of you want to follow Lazar's suggestion and record your own dreams for later analysis, please feel free to do so. I guarantee you the privacy of your own dreams."

The group murmured a general approval, and set about preparing for the evening's feast. Carl went over to the hospital barracks, a large cluster of connected buildings marked with Red Cross symbols, and said hello to the physician Mats Jonsson. Mats had a patient: the middle-aged German historian, who had fallen into a catatonic fit when a Sirian attempted to shake hands with him. The man lay on a cot now, breathing deeply but steadily.

"I gave him something to sleep on," Mats explained. "He's in the risk group for heart-disease, but he didn't have a stroke - thank God he took his nitroglycerine pills before they showed up! Can you imagine the public

reaction?"

Carl went cold, and wiped some sweat from his forehead.

"Yeah... '*Aliens scared scientist to death.*' That was a close call. Don't... don't talk to anyone about this just yet. But I think we have to do something... the responsibility lies on me."

They both stared at the patient's newly acquired mind-recorder, lying on a table near the cot. The Swede looked uncomfortable.

"Is that necessary?" he asked warily.

"Takeru tried it, and it worked without harming him. If Heinzhof is going to suffer a nervous breakdown during the most important meeting in history, then I want to be warned in advance. Put the damned thing on his head. Or I'll be forced to send him right off this island with the next supply boat."

The Swedish doctor was clearly unhappy about it, but he put the device around the sleeping patient's head and switched it on. A Sirian voice-signal confirmed that it was activated. The patient turned about a little, but remained asleep.

Carl left him that way, already busy with other pressing concerns. He had to e-mail his wife and his children, and tell them everything was okay. And beneath all his worries, he actually did feel quite good. Carl went into to his quarters and unpacked his old violin. He secretly hoped to play a musical duet with Ranmotanii during the feast.

In the palmtree grove, the team cleared an area for more straw mats and a great bonfire. The American astronomer and writer Bruce Pound, the fattest

of the bunch, was appointed barbecue cook. Another scientist gathered his colleagues on the beach and showed the portable tapedeck he had brought with him. He proudly held up the tapes for them to see. They were all visibly excited.

"*Yellow Submarine*?"

"*All Together Now*?"

"We'll have a cosmic sing-along!"

"What if they don't like the Beatles?"

"Would you rather let them hear Nirvana?"

"It's crazy! It's totally unscientific!"

"It's gonna be great!"

"I hope the Sirians bring the flutes we gave 'em! We could teach them to play *Yellow Submarine*!"

Chapter Five

With only the ceiling lights for illumination, the soldier couldn't tell the time of day. He had awakened a few minutes ago, alone in his cell. There were other drunken and unruly customers in the adjoining cells, most of them servicemen. The American military prison was in fact full. Those arrested soldiers who weren't apathetically hunched down on their cots, were wailing in terrible anxiety or talking in their sleep. The soldier couldn't sleep for all the noise. It reminded him of the lunatic wing of the hospital he had just escaped.

Crazy, he thought. Something really different happens, something that could make a radical change for mankind, and what do we do? We think of nothing better than to get drunk and act like complete fools. Maybe this isn't happening. Maybe I've been sitting on this cot all the time, strung out on pills and booze. All a crazy, drunken dream.

The soldier spotted an MP guard on the other side of the bars and tried to sit up. The headache stung him in the temporal bones - he regretted having moved at all.

"*Hey!* How long have I been here?"

"Shut up and sleep it off! It's eight in the morning."

"I've slept it off. Look - let me out of here, I want to make a phone-call."

"Okay, but puke on my boots again and I'll beat you senseless."

The guard unlocked the tiny cell and let the soldier stumble out. He made his call on the public phone - he had lost or sold his cell-phone, he

couldn't remember which. But the number he remembered.

After five signals, a sleepy voice answered from far away: *"Hello?"*

"Hi. It's me. I've decided to return home."

"Oh... I'm glad to hear that, but do you know what time it is over here?"

"Sorry, I forgot. Could you send me some money for the trip? I'll pay you back, but I don't have enough for the flight ticket right now."

The voice at the other end paused, yawning or sighing, then answered: *"Tourist class. But if you booze away the money this time, I'll never do it again, y'hear? This is the last time!"*

"Yeah. I promise."

"I love you, dear."

"Love you too, Mom."

The soldier hung up and faced his captors with a nonplussed grin.

"Where do I sign?"

After some procedure and receiving a court order, the soldier was free and walked out to the gate of the U.S. military base. He swore to himself that as soon as the money arrived in his bank account, he would buy a ticket. Not home, wherever that was.

A ticket to the South Pacific.

Night fell, and the Sirian group surfaced a second time - all twelve of them. This time, the amphibians were wearing the Bermuda shorts they had received earlier. The scientists saw a new awkwardness in the Sirians' walk, as they came to greet them. Another series of handshakes followed, and the

extraterrestrials were urged to sit in the palmtree grove with their hosts.

Ranmotanii was the first one to sit down, flanked by the younger Namonnae - and another aged male, who called himself Oanorrn. He had not been present before, and seemed much weaker and paler than Ranmotanii; his skin was thin and wrinkled, and he supported himself on Namonnae's strong shoulder. Carl made some conversation with them, slowly explaining the occasion.

Other, younger Sirians carried loaded sacks, which they emptied before them onto wide, silvery plates brought by their comrades. The plates turned out to be some kind of serving-machines, which scurried across the ground on scores of knobby black "legs," much to the amusement of the human hosts. The mobile plates served loads of freshly captured fish from the surrounding sea, together with assorted seafood from the floor of the lagoon. Ann Meadbouré could name several of the captured species by looking at them; some were still stirring, the occasional fishtail flapping reflexively. When all amphibians and humans had settled around the bonfire, Carl turned to Ranmotanii and made welcoming phrases.

"To share food and music in peace," he declared loudly to all, "is the best thing there is. We want you to feel this too, and hope it is your way of things, as it is ours. We will play our music first, but we also want to hear your music later. Now eat, drink, and be happy!"

The scientists applauded, and the Sirians did too - only it sounded off-key, with the aliens' near absence of palms to clap. The scientist with the tapedeck played the Beatles tape on a pleasantly low volume, while the guests partook of the food. A male gave Ann a large, raw, fresh fish to eat -

she smiled, hiding her embarrassment the best she could.

"Thank you," she said painstakingly, holding the fish with unsteady hands. "You can have half the fish... I cannot eat all of it. Please?"

"*Thaaank yyyou,*" the amphibian said, his voice a youngish, singing bass tone.

On his cone-shaped head was no hair at all, nor a wrinkle of age. But he was big, a little over two meters tall - much due to the oblong head, almost twice as high as a human head. With one arm, he grasped the fish in the middle and squeezed - it split as if a cut by a dull knife, leaving Ann with the tail half. The Sirian gave Ann a curious look, saw no obvious fear in her face, and bit into his half. He had single rows of small, separated, cylindrical teeth, vaguely similar to those of dolphins; he made a crunching sound when he bit off a fist-sized bite of raw fish and swallowed it. Then he looked at Ann again, blinked rapidly several times, and seemed to wait for her turn.

She smiled, and explained in a slow voice: "I must... cook the fish... before I eat it. In the fire."

She pointed to the barbecue chef Stone Pound, who was frying food by the bonfire.

The alien sang: *"I seee thiiis beforrrre... frommm yourrr telllevisssion transmiiiterrrs. Manyy hummmans whhen eeeat fisssh nooot burrrn iiii firrrst. Aaand mmmany humaaans burrrn food firsst."*

He pointed toward a nearby couple of guests, and with amazement Ann saw what Takeru Otomo was doing. With a knife, the engineer was slicing fish into bite-size chunks and served it raw to humans and Sirians alike. The other Sirians ate the sushi as quickly as Takeru could serve them.

"Not me," Ann said, shaking her head. "Wait here."

She brought her piece over to the chef, who happily accepted it; he was singing along with the music, probably the merriest cook she had ever seen. Ann heard the multilingual conversation soar about her - scattered phrases in simple English, singing slow English, and the strange, singsong tones and clicks of Sirian-to-Sirian speech. A sense of intoxication, of wondrous insight filled her; she wanted to cry with excitement. After spending most of her younger years trying to communicate with dolphins, this confirmed what she had learned: when everything else seemed vague and difficult to convey, the simple things in life could be understood by all species. Food. Warmth. Music. She was partaking in primal communion.

And she thought: if it can work with beings from another world, as different from us as we are different from dolphins... then it should work among humans too! It really is so simple, all over the universe it is as simple! The world must see it!

Her head pivoted from side to side, and she caught sight of a man with a camera. It wasn't being broadcast live - but it would do. There was yet hope for the outside world. Stone Pound called out for Ann and gave her a paper plate with her fried fish. She brought it over to the male Sirian, sat down and cut a piece for him. She had to goad him a little, but he accepted it. After a first, cautious taste, he swallowed the piece, closed his eyes fully, and savored the taste for a full four seconds.

"Thaaank yooou. Good, alllso fisssh cooked," he said finally.

"My name is Ann." She pointed at her forehead.

"Annn." The amphibian cocked his tall head to the side, narrowed his

eyes to slits, and made a smiling face.

"*Easssy sayyy Annn. Easssy, also good.*" He pointed a finger at the spot between his eyes. "*Mmmy lannd-naaame iiis Oanss.*"

"Oanss. *Oanss!* A good name."

They studied each other's faces with equal curiosity. Their facial proportions were so different, yet all the details were equal in numbers: two eyes, two nostrils, one mouth, two ear-openings... it seemed to Ann that life was drawn up after a universal plan. Once when the Earth was young, there had been life forms in the oceans that were asymmetric or shaped like absurd nonsensical shapes... but those had soon died out. Maybe the simple symmetry of the Sirians was - though she knew it to be her own vanity - what humans would look like in a million years. All the rough edges and odd clumps of hair polished away by eons of time, until only the essence was left...

A sudden outburst of louder music interrupted their searching. The tapedeck was on, playing the Beatles song *All Together Now*. The beat was simple, and the refrain couldn't be easier to get into - yet the Sirians were reluctant to join the humans in singing. Their voices were much too different. Only when Carl and the others started clapping their hands to the beat, the guests caught on. Humans sang, and aliens clapped what passed for hands among their race.

The party lasted a few hours, food and drink being shared generously; for security reasons, alcohol was banned. Then, in the middle of the night, the oldest Sirian Oanorrn was suddenly forced to return to the lagoon;

Ranmotanii and Namonnae escorted him back to the ship. Underwater lights from their submerged vessel started to illuminate the dark waters, forming an eerie halo around its streamlined shape. Now the ship could be discerned better than during the day, resting on the coral-bed twenty meters below the sea: a manta-shape three times larger than a blue whale; the top of its hull nearly touched the surface. The lights were attracting all sorts of fish, yet the retreating Sirians made no attempt to catch any as they swam past - maybe they were just too stuffed.

Other amphibians began to follow. They made polite gestures of goodbye, and croaked promises of return the next morning. Carl took this as unsurprising; he sensed the Sirians weren't "sleepy" in the same sense humans were; the amphibians didn't yawn or walk slower when they left. Within twenty minutes' time, the last young Sirian had dived into the waters and disappeared under the keel of the submerged ship.

Carl bid the other scientists goodnight, and remembered the mind-recorders they had received from their visitors. Should he use his device? He thought of calling his family as he entered his barrack, but he suddenly felt completely exhausted. It was getting to be too much already, and he thought: *God, they're still going to be here tomorrow... and the day after... a whole year. I'm too old to lead this circus. It should be Ann doing it... she seems to get along so well with them.* He slumped down on his bed, too tired to put the alien device onto his head, and fell asleep.

Meanwhile, three houses farther north, Ann was in her own little room that took up half a barrack - the other half, separated by a flimsy wall, held the quarters of the biologist Andrea MacClintock, a reclusive Nobel Prize

winner of sixty-two years' age. Ann was tired now, yet full of energy; she almost knocked on the flimsy wall, hoping that MacClintock would chat with her about the Sirians. But she knew she shouldn't - she ought to sit down and take notes on her computer...

Then she recalled the gifts. She bent down and pulled out the box from under her bed, unlocked it, and picked up her mind-recorder. It felt smooth and soft in her hands... no hum from electronics there, no heat from internal power-sources. How the hell did this thing work? Her friend Arthur back on Sri Lanka had a saying: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

"Ah!"

Suddenly she started, and almost dropped the apparatus. For a moment it had felt as if the machine had... moved in her hands, or its smooth texture had changed. She looked at the inside of the thick metal bands, probed the surface with her fingers. Yes, the texture was changing ever so slightly as she touched it... like the scales of a fish, only the scales must be microscopic. Ann brought the device over to her small worktable and put a part of it under her optical, low-resolution microscope. Magnified a hundred times, the silvery surface of the apparatus really did resemble fish scales. She put a finger to it... and now she saw the metal palpitate minutely, reacting to the touch or the heat of her flesh. What had the machine done when Takeru put it on his head? Had it sent out tiny needles into his head, without him feeling it, or...?

Ann recognized two drives in her body: fear in her skin, and shame in her gut. It would all boil down to a matter of trust, she thought. Put in on

while you sleep, and prove to yourself your trust in the aliens. Or never use it on yourself, and always know you had never really trusted those slick, inscrutable deceivers from another world. If she trusted Oanss...

Ten minutes later, she lay in her bed with the sheets pulled up to her neck, the device resting around her head. It cut into her hair, creating an uncomfortable sensation - perhaps, she thought, it would only work on crewcut or bald persons - but she could manage the pressure. She reached up and squeezed the switch knob...

The device spoke in a pre-recorded, small voice: "*Chiik!*"

At once she felt a sudden heat in the headband as it tightened around her scalp - it receded quickly, and she felt nothing more. She spent one hour turning and twisting, listening to the air-conditioner, until she fell asleep.

And with sleep came the dreams.

DAY 52

The next morning, failing to recall what she had been dreaming, Ann Meadbouré put the machine back on her head and replayed. She saw the first dream, as clearly as if she had been asleep - and gasped. She could withstand fifteen seconds of it, before she tore off the machine and locked it up. *No one*, she swore, *no one was going to see that dream again*. She rushed into the shower and tried to scrub the shame off her skin...

While washing down his last piece of breakfast with fresh pineapple juice, Carl walked out of his barrack, talking to the U.S. President over his cell-phone.

"No, sir, there was no trouble. The Navy boat came over and picked up the videotape of the party this morning. You'll receive it later... didn't the air surveillance pick up the singing? They did? Thank you, sir. It was a great success. The Sirians are marvelously civilized. But there was one thing... our historian passed out, as you may have heard.

"Yes, the German guy. I'm going to check his health now, but I'm thinking of replacing him with someone else and let him go home. So there will be a vacancy... we need a history expert - or a great communicator... yes, we will inform the universities as soon as I've made the decision... it's all set then. Till next time then. Goodbye, Mr. President."

Carl put away the phone, and cast a glance at the boat leaving the lagoon for the distant aircraft carrier. Another boat came in, loaded with fresh supplies from a nearby, inhabited island. Carl waved to the military personnel unloading the supplies, and knocked on Lazar's door. The dark-skinned, thin-haired Egyptian opened; he was already dressed in shorts and a shirt like Carl. Lazar gave him a brief smile, and started talking very rapidly.

"I did it, Carl. I had the machine on my head while I slept, and played it up the first I did when I woke up. Of course I was afraid, but..."

Carl asked him to explain on their way to the hospital-barracks; they had to check out the German's health.

Around them, the little community was up and moving. Andrea MacClintock the biologist and Ann Meadbouré the biologist-anthropologist were jogging across the white sand, talking to each other. Takeru, the engineer, and two other scientists were setting up antennas and what might be camera equipment on poles around the area. Lazar understood nothing of

electronics. He was carrying his Sirian mind-recorder in a small case with him - and he understood nothing of that either. All he cared about were the implications, and those were vast.

"Carl, I dreamt with total self-consciousness. While asleep, I mean. I have proof. It was amazing. Knowing that my thoughts were being recorded, my super-ego stepped in and - and supervised my dreams. I dreamt all sorts of things... obscene things, silly things, profound things, but all the while reasoning about it... and it was wonderful! Even when I replayed it!

"When you can hide nothing, how can there be shame or sublimation? Never before in history has this happened. Always when humans recount their thoughts, they have been filtered, softened down, interpreted, censored... now, perhaps, *total self-reflection* is available. The most private sphere, that everybody thought sacred, is an open book. People will be able to really communicate feelings, dreams, thoughts. What will happen? Is this the key to universal communion?"

Carl smiled wearily at his excited colleague, and said: "Maybe our patient can help us find out. Now please don't ask him all that much at once."

The Swedish physician had seen them coming and opened the door to greet them.

"Good morning, Mats. Slept well?"

The Swede's face was alert but expressionless.

"Yes, but I didn't use my... helmet. Our patient just woke up, and I have his mind-recorder here. He refuses to let me use it without you hearing him out first..."

The German historian, his hair and beard frizzled, was sitting on the edge of his bed and gestured wildly at the physician.

"Give me that infernal machine! It's mine, they gave each of us a copy! Dr. Sayers, tell him he has no right to read my mind!"

Carl sighed, and sat down next to the German.

"Bruno, this might come hard on you, but please stay calm."

Pause. Bruno sat still, his eyes flicking now to Carl's face, now to the mind-recording device in Mats' hands, as if he refused to let go of it for a moment.

"I know what you're going to say," he croaked. "You want to send me home and replace me. My health is endangering the mission, is it not?"

Carl nodded slowly, deliberately.

"I'm afraid so, Bruno. I just talked to the President on the phone, and he has no objections against replacing you with another historian..."

The German's head sunk down, and he knotted his fingers so tightly together they whitened. Some great inner tension kept him on edge, something he was deathly afraid of revealing... except maybe in his dreams. Lazar had to make an effort not to ask Bruno directly, and let Carl do the talking.

"Bruno," Carl asked softly, "what was recorded from your dreams? What caused you to pass out when that Sirian tried to shake your hand?"

The man's entire body shivered with his sigh.

"I'd rather tell you everything, than let you see my dreams. Give me my machine, and I'll tell you."

Carl nodded toward Mats, who handed Bruno his mind-recorder. The

German hugged the device tightly; with his eyes fixed on the floor, voice receding practically to a whisper, he explained.

"I was born in 1945, in West Germany... my parents were card-carrying members of the Nazi Party during the war, but they pretended otherwise... all through my childhood, they kept telling me the Jews were to blame for our defeat... the global conspiracy against us, the real Germans... and I, growing up and seeing the country growing rich again, I believed them...

"I joined the Social Democratic Party when every other teenager did... but it was a lie... secretly, I hated all foreigners and Jews just as much as my parents did, even more... I thought East Germany was ruled by Communist Jews... I made a career in history, and I never mentioned my real views in public... nobody accused me of being hateful, I was always looked upon as a paragon of impartiality... respected, dignified, loved... even Jewish academics commended me...

"Then the Berlin Wall fell, and I rejoiced... I also rejoiced when the Neo-Nazis began to attack immigrants more boldly... I hoped it was the beginning of an awakening... but then these aliens came! Now there were not only Jews among Germans, among my colleagues... but Jews from space as well, more powerful than ever! Trying to infiltrate our culture from within! They know what my parents did, they know about the war from television... And they can read our dreams too... when they find out what I have done, they will... will -"

Carl and Mats stood listening, speechless. There was nothing to do but to send this psychotic away. Lazar was also listening, and thinking: *There's*

your "total self-reflection," Lazar! Bruno realized his innermost self was open for everyone to see, and it destroyed him. And if Bruno's case was any indication of the "collective dreams" Lazar had once mentioned as so important - then the backlash against the alien visit was just beginning. And it was going to get worse before it ended.

"I have no questions for Bruno," Lazar told them. "I suggest we let him go, but someone must stay with him all the time. I need to work on this some more, Carl, but I'll compile a preliminary report for you - and for the President. Much later, that is."

Carl nodded.

"That's fine. I'll go to the communications barrack at once and get in touch with the university networks. The transfer should be made as fast as possible. I'll say Bruno suffered from heart trouble, and that's what you tell anyone who asks. Is that understood?"

Lazar's face wrinkled as he frowned, and he said: "Soon, you know, there might be no point in lying anymore. About anything."

According to the timetable, the Sirians would appear again at noon. What lay beyond that, would have to be made up as they went along - the U.N. treaty was not too specific.

Chapter Six

DAY 54

Suva, Viti Levu Island.

The soldier stepped off the airliner and put on his sunglasses.

The weather was sunny with drifting clouds. The airport of Fiji's capital, Suva, was crowded to the full with passengers, and military guards were posted at every exit. The soldier had changed wardrobe and discarded his old army fatigues for good. He now looked just like any of the other crewcut, tanned tourists, journalists, fortune-seekers and other pilgrims to the South Pacific. Among the crowds, the soldier spotted something that stood out. He took off his shades to see better... *Buddhist monks?*

A quartet of people in crimson-red robes were gathered in the main hall, chanting in chorus to each other... an ear-grating noise, like that of a happy-go-lucky retard. One of them, a bald woman, was handing out pamphlets to passers-by under the watchful eyes of the military. The soldier walked up to the pamphlet-carrying woman - like her friends, she had had her eyebrows and hair shaved off, had her eyes painted to make them seem larger, and might be a European from any country. She must have arrived recently, for her skin was getting badly sunburned. The woman gave the soldier a serene smile, looked him in the eyes with her own eyes half-shut, and stuck a pamphlet in his hand before he could ask for it.

"Good morning, greetings, welcome," she said in a lofty voice.

"Good morning. Say, you're not Buddhists are you?"

The woman laughed, as did her friends.

"Some of us were, before they saw the light. Are you also here to seek enlightenment?"

They could see it on his face. Like them, he was looking for answers. And maybe half the crowd in the hall was, as well.

"Do you happen to know how I can get across to Alien Beach?"

The bald woman in the crimson robe shook her head sadly.

"The U.S. fleet is surrounding the area. Nothing save our telepathic prayers can get through. Join us in prayer to the Sirian tribe, so that Ranmotani's flock will come across to us."

The cultists resumed their chanting, and the soldier excused himself. While he left the airport hall, he glanced at their pamphlet:

THE CHILDREN OF RANMOTANI WELCOME YOU

Good morning. Greetings. Welcome. Those were the first words of the Sirian gospel, that...

The soldier crumpled the pamphlet and tossed it away. Bunch of starry-eyed fanatics, he thought angrily. He grew even surer now that he needed to rent a native boat, or get onboard that CNN cruiser at least, if he'd have a chance of meeting a Sirian face-to-face. It was several days by boat from Fiji to Alien Beach...

He saw the taxfree-shop entrance nearby, and his thirst grew. No, he shouldn't be falling back into his bad old ways, not now! He popped an aspirin and drank half a bottle of water, but his tongue still felt dry as sandpaper. The soldier understood too late, how comparatively easy it had

been for him to avoid booze in a Moslem country - and here he was, surrounded by tropical bars, alcohol advertisements, and taxfree shops... it wasn't fair! He gestured to catch a taxicab, and jumped in while he still could resist the urge to buy booze.

"To the cheapest hotel," he told the driver.

The driver - a dark, podgy man with a thick Afro haircut - nodded and drove. As the car nudged its way through the congested traffic crawling to and from the airport, the driver cast the soldier a questioning glance.

"You out looking for cone-headed aliens too, mate?"

The soldier clenched his lips together and looked out the window; the driver, who sounded more like an Australian than a Fijian native, grinned into the rearview mirror.

"You'll get your chance soon," he said.

The soldier's eyes darted back at him.

"What?"

"I'm just a poor taxi-driver, with three children and an old mother to feed..."

The soldier handed him ten dollars.

"If I take you straight to the American Consulate now, you can take part in the lottery. Five civilians can be squeezed in on the ship when it sails back to guard Alien Beach, and there're many who are prepared to pay. But if you were a journalist, you would of course have to bribe your way on board the CNN cruiser..."

"Ship? What ship?"

"The *U.S.S. Powell*. It sails this evening. You won't even get near the

three-mile perimeter on a civilian boat."

"Okay, take me to the Consulate right away."

The driver swerved his car and took a new route.

The soldier said: "I heard from a couple of American travelers, officials or scientists or something, that the Sirians are soon going to make little excursion trips outside Alien Beach. What do you know about that?"

The driver said nothing more for a few seconds but made a knowing face, until the soldier tossed dollar-bills in his direction.

"The word is, mate, that the aliens will travel in discrete little groups, never out in the open. See the world. Then they'll meet the world leaders, whenever the aliens feel ready for it. I like the idea - putting the politicians in their place, y'know? 'Course, I could be misinformed... Don't know if they'll wear disguises, but how can you hide those bloody coneheads of theirs? Imagine them walking among us, in top hats and sombreros, bunch of bloody David Attenboroughs from space. Ask me, they should've stayed at home and not started messing with our affairs..."

The driver laughed loudly. When the cab stopped, the soldier thanked the driver with a generous tip and stepped off at the Consulate. A multitude of people were already waiting or standing in line at the reception hall, next to an intimidating sign:

ANY ALIEN BEACH MATTERS THIS LINE ONLY.

OFFICIAL PERMITS FOR THE U.S.S. POWELL CRUISE TO ALIEN BEACH CAN ONLY BE GIVEN HERE. UP TO 5 CIVILIAN U.S. CITIZENS ARE ALLOWED ON THE NEXT CRUISE; TICKETS WILL

BE DRAWN FROM THE APPLICANTS PRESENT HERE AT 1700 HOURS.

Any attempt to approach Alien Beach without permit from a U.N. membership state will be stopped by U.N. forces.

The U.S. Consul of Fiji

The soldier cursed to himself, but saw no other choice than to join the line. He was starting to get real hungry, and regretted having skipped lunch in his eagerness. There had to be at least thirty people standing in line before him. Among them, he spotted two bald-shaven figures in crimson robes; that cult was getting quite a following. Behind him, after just a minute, another two people filled in the ranks. One of them was a teenage girl, in ordinary clothes - but her head was shaven bald too, except for a Mohawk mane of hair at the top of her head, dyed gray. Her skin was dyed a dark-gray hue, as were her arms and legs - and her eyes were painted to make them appear large and ovoid, like a Sirians' eyes.

What the hell was going on here? He felt annoyed and insulted, as if the girl's fashion statement had cheapened his unique vision. But he was afraid of saying plainly what he knew, and this wasn't the place.

Looking quickly over his shoulder, he told the girl: "Haven't you heard? Punk is dead."

The painted teenage girl glared angrily up at him. Her companion, an adult man in a light suit, glowered at the soldier's neck. On the man's fingers were several gold rings, the soldier noticed in the corner of his vision.

"You watch it, fella," the man warned him with barely controlled fury.

"You make any trouble, none of us get our permits. No one messes with me, you hear?" The man squeezed the girl's arm, and added with a chuckle:

"Don't worry doll, I'll get us both a ticket. You just gotta know how to oil the wheels of bureaucracy..."

The soldier kept his nose turned in the direction the line was moving, and ignored the man. Then, five seconds later, he suddenly started backward and deliberately stepped on the girl's foot. She screamed loudly, alerting the armed security guard at the door.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to -"

"You *damn well* meant it, you -!"

The girl's angered protector reached out at the soldier who feigned complete innocence, but the girl stood in his way - and suddenly the guard was pointing his rifle in the man's direction.

"You! Get out of here! Yes, you with the rings! Now! Or I'll have you arrested!"

The man with the gold rings turned red under his too-even suntan, but obliged the armed guard. Still cursing and threatening the soldier, he dragged the painted teenager with him, out through the open entrance and into the sunshine. The soldier smiled inwardly; at least those two derelicts of humanity weren't going on that ship.

It took a long wait, but he finally came to the counter. A tired clerk asked for the soldier's passport, asked a few questions about his background and purpose of the visit, and wrote some data into her desktop computer. Then she gave the soldier a slip with a number and a seal of the United States Navy.

"Be here at 1700, when the five numbers are drawn."

"Can I try for the next cruise too?" the soldier asked quickly.

"No," the clerk replied flatly. *"Next!"*

He walked outside to catch some air, and moved into the building's shadow. The waves roared nearby, past a grove of palmtrees and planted bushes. Airplane vapor trails streaked the sky here too - he could recognize some of the shapes as military craft. And all across the horizon ships, ships, ships. There might be others who had had the same visions forced upon them, just like him. But how could he separate them from the vast mass of lunatics out there? He squinted up at the blinding, bright cloud-puffs.

Please let me meet them before some madman starts another war.

That's all I ask for -

The headache took him by surprise this time, sharp as a nail driven into his right hemisphere.

"Gaahh!"

The soldier clutched his head, staggered into a shadowy corner, hoping he wouldn't be seen - and struck something cold.

He was leaning against a wall of gleaming ice and rock. The sun had instantly shrunk to a speck of blue light, too faint to warm the frozen sea that spread out before him. An entire ocean, frozen into cracked, jutting blocks of unimaginable size, black and lifeless. The sky was very dark, though the shrunken sun was shining. It grew darker still, and a gray haze began to form above him.

From the haze fell snowflakes - first a slow, drifting fall of feathery

flakes, then a faster fall that lasted longer, then a hailstorm. And then there was no atmosphere left - all the air had settled in a layer of white snow upon the frozen sea. The sky was completely black and riddled with stars. The soldier looked down upon his body - it was covered in a red metallic spacesuit. There were other spacesuit-clad figures crowding up around him. Their faces were sad or grim... Sirian faces. At the horizon, a bright yellow light was born. The ground started to tremble under their feet. The frozen ocean rippled - without a sound - sending cascades of ice up into space. The light at the horizon became a flame, shooting up, up into the sky at a low, outward angle. The tremors increased, and the group of figures fled into silvery vessels that sank down from the sky.

He understood then, that it was their homeworld that was being frozen. And that they had to abandon it temporarily, before it was hurled away from the sun. The pillar of flame continued to burn, pushing their world away from the sun, into the night between the stars. The others called for him to join them while there was still time. Pieces and blocks of ice were starting to crash into the ground, exploding silently around him. He could hear himself breathe, feel the tremors in the ground, hear the voices and calling-signals of the others through his helmet. Yet he stood there like a fool, mourning all the animals that had frozen to death in the oceans. Some would survive even that long period of freezing, like his kind had learned to put itself in stasis. But most of them were dead for good. When their world would come close to another double star and the oceans would begin to melt, the stench of rot would suffuse the seas.

Then life would return to their world again, as it had so many times

before. He finally found the will to move toward his waiting ship and safety. Life and light would return again. Something hard struck him - a chunk of ice maybe - he was hit again, and he fell onto his side.

The man with the gold rings glared down at the soldier, kicking him.

"*Hah!* Told you, sucker... no one messes with me!"

The soldier was too dazed to really feel the pain of the blows.

Suddenly the teenage girl shouted a warning; the man ceased his assault and ran off. The soldier heard a car start and roar away; a uniformed man crouched down next to him.

"Are you all right? Can you stand up? Careful, now."

With the guard's help, the soldier got on his feet - now he noticed the cracked rib. He pressed his lips together so that he wouldn't scream.

"Hey, hey!" the guard said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going in to get my ticket," the soldier responded in a strained voice.

"I can't allow that - you're hurt. I'll get you to the consulate doctor, right away. You're a U.S. citizen, aren't you?"

The soldier wanted to lie down and wait for that guy to come back and kick him some more - preferably in the head, where it might do the soldier some good. He blew it, just when he had had the chance! There had to be another way.

A half-hour later, his ribs bandaged, the soldier was escorted to a waiting taxi to take him away from the U.S. Consulate. He slumped down in the backseat, hurting in his ribs when he did so, in spite of the painkillers. He

didn't look at the driver until he recognized his voice.

"Bad luck eh, mate? Y'can't win the lottery every day."

"Piss off, mate."

The driver merely grinned.

"Be cool. For a modest sum, I'll show you a better way to get close to those pointy-headed fellows..."

"I'm not paying until I see it."

"Ah, but this is fail-safe! All you need to do is get yourself a new hairstyle and a more local appearance..."

"What appearance?"

"You've got to learn how to look like a native. Then you can rent the passport of a relative of mine, who lives on one of the islands near Alien Beach. They are allowed to use their boats in the area, because they have to. If you can pass as one, you can take a boat as near as... why, practically a step away from Alien Beach!"

The soldier gave it some thought. An offer this stupid - it just had to be a scam.

"Deal," he said.

Chapter Seven

DAY 54

The meeting took place out in the open, with four poles and a canvas for a roof - there was no barrack large enough to comfortably house a dozen people in the hot weather. Carl stood up from his deckchair and scanned the group: sitting or standing, mostly men and a few women of all ages thirty and up. He noticed Ann Meadbouré standing to herself in a corner, wearing sunglasses; he had been too busy to talk to her in a while. It worried Carl, but he didn't yet know for what reason. As the crowd's murmuring died down, he spoke up.

"Good morning and welcome to the daily briefing, everyone. You might have heard rumors of what happened to Bruno after our beach-party the other night. I assure you he's feeling fine, physically speaking. He used the thought-recording helmet, as did others, and they have reported no side effects. But Bruno has expressed ethical concerns about the use of recorded dreams, and I want this matter settled once and for all."

Stone Pound, the American astronomer who Carl didn't know well, interrupted loudly.

"*Hey Carl!* Come clean about Bruno! Why are you sacking him from the team? You'd better have a reason good enough to tell us!"

Others murmured agreement; Carl raised his voice slightly. An odd fatigue was starting to drag his spirits down.

"Please, everyone! It was Bruno himself who demanded to be taken off the project, for personal reasons all his own. I promised him to respect

his privacy. No one has seen his private dream recordings - they and the device are his personal property, a gift from the Sirians."

The scientists fell silent a little too quickly - his words had hit a nerve. Carl hadn't recorded his own dreams, but he knew. And they knew he knew. They just weren't ready for this kind of technology and its implications yet, and they felt a collective defeat. And this was just the beginning, he realized. Could it get worse?

"You keep your gifts, people. You do with them as you find best. Any more questions regarding Bruno? No? Fine. His replacement has already been chosen from the waiting list of candidates. It is..." Carl checked his papers. "Bishop Edmund Soto of the South African Anglican Church. You may have seen him on TV a few days ago, when he discussed the studying of alien religions. Bishop Soto arrives with the U.S.S. Powell in a few days. He will take over Bruno's old quarters... any questions?"

There was confusion in the group for a short while; Ann Meadbouré spoke up.

"So far we have seen no sign of religious rituals among the Sirians. Shouldn't we ask Ranmotanii before we bring a priest here, who might step on their own religious taboos?"

Carl looked at his wristwatch, and answered: "Which brings me to the other important subject - Ranmotanii told me they'll come out of their ship and gather on the beach this evening - and they didn't want to talk. He was vague as usual, but it just might be some ritual they are about to perform. We are welcome to watch, he said - if we keep a distance."

None of them could speak for a moment, while the news sank in.

After the meeting the crowd split up, and everyone went about their planned tasks. The biologists - among them Andrea McClintock - prepared their storing tanks and microscopes for when alien tissue samples, or even sea animals taken from other worlds, would arrive. Physicians checked the sole X-ray scanner in the field hospital, hoping for a chance to examine a live Sirian. Psychologists and anthropologists - among them Lazar Mahfouz and Ann Meadbouré - went through recordings of Sirian-to-human communication and the first Sirian transmissions, looking for the parameters of alien mind and culture.

Engineers and nuclear physicists - among them Takeru Otomo - recorded and measured the electromagnetic fields and particle emissions emanating from the alien vessel in the lagoon, planting hydrophones in the water to record the sounds of Sirian underwater speech.

Under the coordination of Carl Sayers, the vast and growing amount of recorded material was continuously fed by cable to the communications barrack, then transmitted by satellite to the Internet and directly to the universities, research institutes, and governments across the world. No one was to be left out - that had been the Sirians' demand from the very first broadcast - or they would not stay at all. Then again, it was not much they had revealed to mankind thus far.

If there were any secret intentions behind that demand, the visitors kept them to themselves. During the last few days, the Sirians had spent most of their time underwater, being left alone. And the scientists waited...

"There he is - my half-brother George. Let me do the talking."

The taxi-driver's relative owned a small yacht in the main harbor of the Fiji capital. When the soldier and the taxi-driver found George in the late afternoon, he was busy cutting fish and packing it in boxes filled with salt. The man was similar in build to the taxi-driver - podgy, frizzle-haired and dark-skinned. The soldier couldn't possibly see how he was going to impersonate him to get past the Alien Beach perimeter.

"Hello George," the taxi-driver said cheerfully. "A couple of fine fishes you've got there! Shouldn't we eat them before they go bad?"

The busy fisherman shook his head, barely offering the soldier a look.

"Shut up, Norman. I got this great business idea last night, when I saw the TV clip from Alien Beach. Did you see the aliens eat?"

"Yeah?" Norman asked.

"I'll start selling this catch I couldn't sell this morning, first thing tomorrow, to the tourists. I'll call it 'Sirian-style cooked' - isn't it great? The dumb suckers will pay double for yesterday's fish!"

Norman laughed loudly, as if he had heard a great joke. The soldier didn't know whether to laugh or cry. A fat woman wearing shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt came out of the yacht's cabin and darted him a quick, suspicious glance. Then she stepped onto the pier and walked past them, to the city.

"Don't buy anything too expensive yet, woman!" George shouted after her. "Wait until we got the money!"

He gave his half-brother a look, as if to express: *See what I have to suffer?* Norman nodded, and urged the soldier into the boat.

"Come on board for a beer, mate, and we'll discuss the whole scheme."

The soldier shook hands with George.

"Call me Coffin," he said. "That's what they nicknamed me in the Gulf."

George made a grave face.

"Because you killed a lot of people back there?"

"No, because I always looked *ready* for the coffin - white as a corpse and scared stiff."

George and Norman burst out in laughter.

"I like this American, Norman. He's funny! Come on in, Coffin."

The sun sank abruptly in this part of the world. One moment a beautifully colored sunset glowed over the horizon, and a brief flash of the legendary "green light" - the next moment it was dark and a myriad stars came out. Carl loved the Pacific sky; the constellations so different from the Northern hemisphere, and no city lights to blot out the luminous veil of the Milky Way. The lights from the passing ships disturbed the view somewhat, though.

As Carl sat on a deckchair outside his barrack, stargazing after a hard day's work, Stone dropped by.

"They here yet?"

"Who?" Carl said, still watching the stars.

"You know who." Stone lowered his voice yet another notch. "Haven't you noticed the silence around us? Our people are squatting down with their

cameras ready... waiting to see the Sirians perform their ceremony."

"I sorta knew that," Carl sighed, offering Stone another deckchair. The overweight astronomer sat down and set the baseball-cap on his round head pointing straight. "I can wait a little more," Carl mused. "Astronomy teaches you patience, Stone...? We sit up night after night, year after year, watching the planets and comets and stars wander across the sky..."

"Yeah," Stone admitted, "though I never believed all that star-gazing would pay off this big in my lifetime."

"I never stopped hoping. Never really. I lived for this moment, even through the cancer that almost got me. In another timeline, I might've died just before the first Sirian transmission came."

They paused.

"But now they're really here," Stone pointed out. "Now what? They land, have a look around, take a few snapshots, and leave? That's all?"

"Go on."

"You know damn well what the politicians and the military are thinking: The only reason to visit another star system is to *claim* it, to establish a colony. They are ready to go to war."

"All the aircraft buzzing about. No one says it out loud, but it's obvious."

"And what if they're right? Do we have a chance? The aliens could wipe out all of mankind without firing a single shot."

Carl sat up in his deckchair, frowning. It was too dark for both men to see each other, so they watched ahead of themselves.

"Where'd you get that idea?"

"MacClintock, the biologist. Weeks ago, when she first heard about how the amphibians had replaced their own intestinal bacteria with our own *E. Coli*, she got suspicious. She just told me. Her study of the *E. Coli* was so extensive, the results came only today. Didn't you get a copy?"

Stone rested his double chin on his palms and stared out at the surrounding sea. Out there, the lights of the cruisers and aircraft carriers formed a pearl-string of glittering lights around them.

"I've been too occupied with the politics and red tape of this whole circus - Andrea hasn't had a chance to talk to me," Carl finally said. "There ought to be more of us here to share all the paperwork, but the politicians are afraid to lose control if there are more of us."

Stone swallowed, and looked Carl in the eye. He was adapting to the dark better than his older colleague, and just barely made out the faint reflexes in Carl's eyeballs.

"Andrea told me - if you put one of those ordinary bacteria in the guts of an alien amphibian, even remotely related to, say, a dolphin - then the bacteria would surely die. And any of us humans have literally *billions* of microorganisms living on our skin, in our hair - much more so than an amphibian with smooth skin and less hair! How come *Ranmotanii* didn't get infected and die after shaking your hand?"

"But I did wash my hands that morning -"

"Come on! You wash your hands ten, twenty times - you *plain can't* scrub off your natural skin germs. So, the Sirians must be using some additional technology we can only dream of - nanomachines on their skin, maybe, or direct genetic engineering of their own immune system. With that

kind of knowledge, they could re-shape this environment completely. Turn it into their own world. We wouldn't stand a chance."

Carl wanted to shout at Stone, call him a prejudiced, reactionary idiot - yet Stone's suggestion frightened him.

"So if they could wipe us out, why haven't they done so already?"

"Wasn't Columbus friendly with the natives, at first?"

"Columbus claimed the land, from the moment he stepped on American soil. The Sirians haven't put up one flag. Not *one*."

"We'll see about that now," Stone half-whispered, starting at the sudden sounds from the beach.

A group of figures were emerging from the lagoon. In the background light, Carl and Stone could recognize the cone-shaped heads of at least ten amphibians. And among those rose three egg-shaped, silvery spheres, each slightly larger than a man, moving with a force and limbs of their own.

"Robots again," Stone whispered to Carl.

"Shh!"

They intensely studied the group and saw Oanornn, supported by Ranmotanii and Namonnae. The amphibians made little noise and no small talk; their attention was fixed on their machines. The three egg-shapes wandered up to dry land, then settled themselves into the sand and began to sink. Then it became apparent, with sand cascading up around the spheres, that they were digging themselves down - the sound they made was a deep hum, but unlike any familiar motor or dynamo. In less than half a minute, the silvery shapes had vanished under the surface. The Sirians gathered in a wide circle around the three sand-piles left by the machines, and locked

"hands" with each other.

Carl began to feel the goosebumps and trembling of real, physical terror. Were the Sirians hiding bombs, biological weapons, surveillance equipment? Had he been a blinded fool all this time? Yet there was no sign of secrecy in the Sirians' behavior - they must have known they were being watched from all directions. A light jet aircraft flew by several hundred meters away... taking close-up pictures, no doubt. Carl forced his breathing to slow down.

The ring of humanoids began to move... to dance. Their flat, clownish feet moved with remarkable agility and control, in slight, measured movements, so that the circle slowly moved - first clockwise, then counter-clockwise, in some obscure pattern. Still, not a sound came from their lips. The small devices hanging from their chests sent out rapid blinking light-pulses, aimed at the sand-piles at their feet. Was it only machines communicating internally, or something more advanced?

And suddenly came a long, loud warning peep from somewhere - it could have been the devices carried by the Sirians - and they all backed off from the piles, squinting their large eyes. The piles moved. Three long, thick metal antennas shot up like absurd cybernetic plants, sprouting smaller outgrowths with amazing speed, until they had reached a height of at least four meters. A series of crackling *pop-pop* noises came from the alien antennas; a stray blue electricity-bolt cracked out of them and struck a palmtree, fifteen meters away. The Sirians seemed a little stunned, but focused their attention on the top of the antennas. A faint blue, glow, some kind of radiation, began to flow up from the sprouting antennas - an instant

shaft of deep blue, pointing at the stars.

"That's impossible," Carl heard Stone gasp. "Radiation of that magnitude is lethal! They're going to get sick if they don't move away!" But Stone must have been wrong; the blue beam shone on, undiminished, silent; the stars above began to blur. For a moment, Carl felt as if he was going insane, fearing the stars were going out. It couldn't be.

And it wasn't. A haze at first - then in half a minute, strips of clouds, forming high up in the night sky, a dark-blue swirl around the deep-blue light shaft. The breeze began to pick up. Now the Sirians uttered their first words.

All dozen voices at once, chanting up at the sky, with inhuman loudness and intonation: "*Chiiiskr-r-r-r... chiiiskr-r-r-r mmer-r-r-r-llee!*"

The chant was repeated, triumphantly, as the swirling clouds above thickened and the wind rustled the tree-crowns of the island. No hint of cool observation or objective analysis came through in the alien voices, only ecstasy and revelation, and something else Carl couldn't understand. For the first time in his life, he felt there was something he might not want to understand, and he was ashamed.

Then, just as abruptly, the blue beam died and the antenna went dark. The wind leveled off slightly; the Sirians began to sing something more lighthearted in another, even more alien tongue - clicks and peeps like the speech of dolphins - were they laughing? They formed pairs, walking off in individual directions toward the rolling surf. Carl glimpsed a male and a female amphibian embracing as they moved out of sight, caressing each other's bodies with their soft arms. Their intentions were quite obvious.

Only Oanornn stood alone at the antennas for a while, gazing up at the new clouds, until he turned and moved toward the sea. The others had already dived into the waters.

As his legs splashed into the surf, Oanornn turned his head toward the barracks and shouted in his deep, creaking singsong voice: "*Goood niight, lannnd-humaaanss!*"

The sensation down Carl's neck and face was blushing. He was heading a bunch of Peeping Toms. Takeru came up to him with a headset, carrying a suitcase-sized oscilloscope and a handheld PC.

"The blue radiation..." he began, and hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Ordinary blue and ultraviolet light, power output on the scale of a battery of light-bulbs. Its temperature flickered between a hundred to several thousand degrees Kelvin in irregular, short bursts - each cycle shorter than a ten-millionth of a second. Emitted by..."

"Plasma?" Carl suggested.

He assumed it had to be, either from charging the atmospheric gases with electricity from the antenna, or by emitting the plasma directly from the antennas. Schoolbook science, as simple as a neon-light strip - he thought.

Takeru shook his head: "No. Plasma would leave traces of ionized gas afterwards. But this... glow... just... vanished, straight up into the air. Plasma that changes temperature from cold to blue-hot in millionths of a second? And travels in a straight line? I don't think so."

"Then... it must've been directed along a strong electromagnetic field?"

Takeru seemed mortified, even more so in the nightly gloom that surrounded them.

"I thought so too, when the antenna discharged that electric bolt. But... there was no electromagnetic field there. Just... a blue glow... moving without outside force."

"You mean our instruments couldn't measure the field. It might have been too strong..."

Carl's voice faltered - because it all sounded utterly ridiculous. Neither he nor the world's brightest engineer had a clue to what had just happened. Stone joined them, irritated.

"Look," he interrupted, "for all I know we could have been treated to a sophisticated laser show. We'll go through the results again, until they make sense. Jeez..." He held up his hands in resignation. "What was that lightning charge, then?"

The Japanese scientist replied: "A lightning charge, plain and simple. I took some still photos with light-sensitive film, and the video cameras were running... I'll find an explanation."

He excused himself and returned to his lab, with Stone following.

"A *rational* explanation," Takeru added, so that Carl barely heard him.

"Look - over there," the soldier said to George and Norman, waving his beer-can to the north of the harbor, where the starry sky met the dark ocean. "Is that a thunderstorm?"

Something was happening, many miles out at sea. Brief blue flashes

of light flickered, so distant they barely managed to reach above the horizon.

"It's coming from *Alien Beach*," George said with a slight shudder to his slurred, drunken voice. "Maybe the U.N. forces are shooting at intruding aircraft or something."

"Or someone is nuking the aliens," Norman added.

The soldier's weary face screwed up in a grimace of despair.

"*No!* Not so soon! The bastards had to go and do it already!"

He took an impulsive step, fell off the deck and into the harbor waters with a big splash. Norman rushed to the nearest life vest and tossed it after the splashing soldier. The soldier gasped, grasped the life vest and pulled one arm into it. And like a stranded sailor seeing a ship sail off, he began to swim away toward the faint flashes at the horizon.

"Come back, Coffin you idiot! There's a million sharks in there!"

After about thirty meters, the soldier felt his broken rib poking into him. It was either going back, or drowning. He turned and swam back to the anchored boat, coughing up saltwater as the sea lapped over his face. He wished he'd been an amphibian - so he could have dived the way across. The two brothers helped him back up on deck, laughing and cursing him simultaneously.

"Don't worry, Coffin," Norman assured him, and offered a towel. "It was just St. Elmo's fire you saw. Or northern lights. Or a shooting maneuver. George, turn on the news will you?"

The fisherman stepped up into the nearby boat cockpit and switched on a small TV set.

"Louder," Norman told him.

"Wife's asleep inside," George said but turned up the volume one notch.

The news anchorman's voice, crackling slightly, spoke: "**...has confirmed that he will visit Alien Beach as soon as humanly possible. Bishop Soto, who won the Nobel Peace Prize during South Africa's apartheid years, has recently defended the Sirian presence in the face of much controversy in the Christian community...**"

The soldier thought: *Of course. The priests are looking out for the new competition. What will it be: missionaries or the Spanish Inquisition?*

Chapter Eight

DAY 56

"You won't believe your eyes, Carl," Stone said as he shoved the thinner, older man into the electronics lab barrack. "We stayed up all night working with this - couldn't sleep, the results were too exciting."

The six meters long, three meters wide space was crammed with sensitive electronic measuring devices. Stone indicated an oscilloscope on one table, which Takeru had connected to a computer terminal.

"I'll replay it again, but slowing it down a million times," Takeru said from his seat at the terminal. "Each second you'll see in the oscilloscope, corresponds to one millionth of a second as I recorded the blue glow. Now watch carefully."

He typed in a command on the keyboard, and the playback fed into the oscilloscope's fluorescent cathode-ray screen. On the dark screen was projected a swarm of dancing green lines, making wave-patterns that resembled nothing Carl had ever seen during his years in astronomy. Waves of low energy, interlocking, so many that they formed a moving blur.

"I recognize the frequency of those waves," he said, staring fascinated at the screen. "That's the ultraviolet and blue light, falling and sinking... the glow flickered, but so fast the naked eye couldn't see it. These patterns... so complex!"

Takeru nodded, and said: "Then consider the other readings we picked up later that night. In the excitement I almost forgot the mass spectrometer I had rigged up. I was going to examine the weather changes with it..."

"And?"

"Get this," Stone Pound interrupted. "*Nothing*. We were scanning the entire beach at the time. We used a battery of twenty photocells and lasers, enough to register a passing fart. Brilliant Japanese hardware that Takeru brought with him.

"From the area around the Sirian antenna they registered all objects that crossed the beams, the numbers were fed into Takeru's computers, and crunched with the known spectra of objects on the beach. Us, the trees, the Sirians... even air pollution. Easy stuff for Takeru."

Takeru, showing little of his pride, explained: "But we detected nothing at the source of the blue glow, except the Sirian antenna itself and the air. And the antenna was not emitting any significant energy when the blue glow appeared. It was almost cold - slightly above room temperature. If the antenna had emitted that blue glow, the tips would have become so hot we'd register it. But it didn't."

Carl felt dizzy, and found a chair to slump down on. Stone served them some coffee.

"*Teleportation*," Carl said finally. "That could be the answer. The Sirian antenna could be a teleportation receiver, not a transmitting device. Teleporting an energy signal from somewhere else in spacetime. Instantaneous communication."

"You mean, instant messages from other Sirians?" Stone asked. "From their mothership, from their homeworld?"

"Amazing," Takeru muttered to himself in Japanese.

This invention could revolutionize the world if it came into human

hands. He did not say it, but he was already thinking that his employers had to get the blueprints of the machine first. He would have to take X-ray photographs of the antenna contraption, and make copies for quick smuggling back to Japan. Takeru wasn't thinking of money, but of glory and a compelling sense of duty to his nation. Another part of him, a suppressed part, called him a corporate whore who betrayed his own scientific passion. Takeru shut his eyes hard for a moment, pushing that part deeper into his mind where it could be held in check.

"Take a rest, Takeru," said Carl. "You deserve it, you've done great. The team needs you tomorrow, too."

"Thank you," said a part of Takeru.

DAY 57

Bishop Edmund Soto of the South African Anglican Church, another famous face, waved goodbye to the crew of the U.S.S. Powell and the handful of civilian and official passengers.

"God bless you all!" he boomed benevolently at them from the staircase.

Then he stepped into his waiting motorboat and took off toward the nearby Alien Beach. The heavily built, very dark-skinned bishop wore light tropical clothes and a straw hat, and might have been a tourist - if it hadn't been for the crosier in his hand, and the single episcopal vestment draped over his large shoulders. A couple of suitcases at his feet contained his clothes and personal belongings.

Soto sat down at the side of the boat's rail, opposite an American

naval officer, who was to carry protocol when Carl Sayers received Soto into the ECT colony on the small island.

"Are you nervous, sir?" the officer asked over the boat noise.

Soto replied with a wide grin.

"Absolutely terrified!" he laughed self-deprecatingly. "Is it true that these... Sirians are taller than humans?"

"That's right, sir. A bit above two meters on the average. Haven't seen any children of theirs though."

"Has anyone been allowed to meet them underwater yet - in their ship?"

"No, sir - they haven't made much communication yet. We're sort of waiting for them to make the first move."

"I see... but look at the bright side, man! The Sirians are neither black nor white - they are gray! At least I won't have to worry about racial prejudice!"

They both laughed; Soto was well known for his sense of humor.

Then the officer, still smiling, added: "They're not even another race. They're another thinking species. Should that make a difference?"

"You mean, 'Can they have souls?' The churches are being torn apart over the issue as we speak. My position stands firm. If they can think, and dream, and have religious beliefs, then they are human and must have souls. It stands to reason."

"But isn't faith more important to you than reason?"

The bishop gave the man a disbelieving stare.

"Faith without reason? What is your faith worth, if it hasn't been

tested by reason... and has transcended it? If you haven't the mind or heart to test it - the capacity to *doubt*?"

The officer turned away, grabbed the rail and pulled himself up to face the receding battleship.

"Could the... could the Sirians have a faith, a different faith that is closer to God than ours?" he asked.

Bishop Soto sat silent for a minute, squinting through his glasses out at the open sea. They would land on the beach in just a few moments. Finally he answered, in much weaker, graver voice.

"I will talk to them. We shall see." Then, squinting up at the sky, he asked the officer: "What are those strange clouds above the lagoon?"

The officer was too busy to answer, picking up the bishop's luggage and bracing himself for the landing. The stern of the small boat slid up onto the white beach and stopped. Bishop Soto looked about himself eagerly. But there were no aliens in sight; a group of people rapidly moved in on them from the barracks behind the palm-grooves. Soto climbed off the boat and set his feet onto - or rather into - the soft, fine sand. He made a sigh of relief, held the crucifix that hung around his neck and kissed it, and cast a brief humble glance up at the clouds.

The officer put down his suitcases and waved hello at the approaching scientists. He asked Sayers to sign a clearance form, gave him some overseas mail, and walked back to push his waiting motorboat back into the waves.

"Welcome to Alien Beach, Bishop Soto!" Carl called out from a distance. He came across and shook hands with the grinning bishop. "How

should I address you - 'Your Eminence' or 'Father' or..."

Soto made a mock-embarrassed face.

"Please - we are all God's children here! I will not hear of any lofty titles as long as I stay on this island!"

All the dozen scientists crowded to shake hands with the bishop; he put away his crozier and shook them all. Even among the devoutly atheistic among them, Soto instantly became a deeply needed beacon of integrity and optimism - they didn't openly tell him, but one could read it in their faces. Soto raised his arms to calm his new flock.

"Thank you all for this fine welcoming!" he boomed. "I cannot even begin to tell you how grateful I am for this opportunity. During our stay here, I will attempt to repay for the honor of being among mankind's finest..."

"But - where are the Sirians?"

Soto's questioning eyes wandered from face to face, seeing only confusion and awkwardness.

"Do you have a telephone or radio link to them?"

Silence.

"But what have you been *doing* for the past few days?"

Carl Sayers answered.

"Well... we haven't had much actual communication after the first contact. The Sirians keep very much to themselves, in their ship out in the lagoon, that is. We have a lot of cameras and detectors out across the island, measuring their activities. From those results, we assume they are trying to acclimatize themselves to the new environment - underwater, that is..."

Soto shook his head.

"What is this?" he asked them, his tone rhetorically shocked, as if holding a sermon. "Are mankind's finest *afraid*? Afraid to take the first step toward genuine communication? Is that what I think I see?"

Ann Meadbouré swallowed and said awkwardly: "It was they who came to us first... so it's natural to assume that..."

She couldn't continue. Soto lowered his voice to a somber note.

"It always grieves me when a fellow man willingly casts off the free will that was God's gift to him. The Sirians are keeping to themselves, *ergo* they expect *you*, their hosts, to take the initiative!"

He began to shout in righteous indignation: "It is *our* planet and we should assume they respect that! Go to them! *Talk* to them! Or I will!"

The scientists were too stunned to reply. Soto turned and marched off to the nearest storage barrack, where a few rubber dinghies lay unused under a canvas. He opened the barrack door, immediately saw the scuba diving gear gathering dust there, and pulled a set of equipment off the racks. Before the silent stares of the scientists, Soto proceeded back to the surf, putting on the scuba gear. They saw he had been wearing a bathing suit under his clothes all the time.

"Is he joking?" Ann asked Carl who shook his head in reply, his eyes fixed on Soto.

"No, no... he's right and I've wasted a whole month sitting on my thumb. Everybody listen! To the shack - gear up and check it's working! Ann is the diving expert - she'll help you get it on. Now move, move, move!"

In a desperate hurry, the group took to following the bishop's spirited

initiative. Ann and Takeru helped the inexperienced ones get their gear in order. At last the time of formalities was over.

The warm azure waters of the lagoon enveloped the dozen divers; their diving-flippers lifted off the sand and they floated off ground, their bodies weightless as if in space. Ann took the lead, her legs paddling with experienced, steady movements. She grabbed the much fatter and slower bishop Soto by the wrist and pulled him along, both heading down toward the lights of the submerged shape at the bottom. Below, the Sirian lander vessel loomed, a silent manta-shape ninety meters long; slowly spinning spotlights shining from its sides... at a closer look, one could see the huge inflated balloons on which the ship was resting, like black pillows of some opaque alien substance.

Ann Meadbouré and Edmund Soto swam closer to the hull's underside, between two of the support balloons. They came close enough to touch it, and the spotlights moved away from their gaze, pointing down toward the coral bed. The visitors were being noticed. Edmund reached out and touched the hull: it was perfectly smooth under his fingers, cold and dark, dull metal. (Was it really the same ship he had seen landing on the Moon on TV? It seemed so much more massive now.)

Ann tugged at his arm and pointed down to the hull's underbelly: a round opening had irised out in it, brightly lit from inside. And a Sirian was floating down through the opening, gesticulating at the divers to enter up through it. She just couldn't wait for clearance from the world's leaders, or from Carl - she swam straight for the bright opening, leaving Edmund

behind. The Sirian figure waited, and Ann recognized him as she was approaching. Oanss, breathing water without effort or visible aid. Wearing Bermuda shorts. Underwater, his eyes were opened much wider, pupils larger - an almost fishlike face. His skin hue was more blue-green than gray down here. She floated still, grasped the side of the opening to fight the faint current, and grinned through the visor of her breathing-mask. Oanss' lips widened in a smile, and a shiver ran down Ann's back.

He leaned closer, his lips parted - he said something, and Ann actually heard his voice carried through the water, slightly warbled but recognizable Sirian-pidgin English: *"Aaannn! Aaannn... Wee wwwaiiit foorr yyyou tweeeelvve commme visiiitooor heeerrre..."*

Oanss stretched out his branching pseudo-hand tentacle for her. Ann hesitated, turned her head and peered outside. The others were rapidly gathering up around the opening, waving and grinning. Oanss waved back, urging them inside. She glimpsed Carl's gray-haired head with the breathing-mask on, looking her in the eyes. He nodded; she could go first.

She trembled with fear, yet a tingling exhilaration filled Ann's body. She placed her hand in Oanss' narrow, outstretched palm and clasped it. He moved up into the light, pulling her with him through a bright shaft - suddenly, they were above water, inside the illuminated ship. The lighting inside was weaker than that from the spotlights, and blue-green instead of white, limited to two light-sources in a large blue dome.

A dome? Rather a fake blue sky, with one bright pinprick sun - and a larger, blue-green sun. Ann blinked uncertainly, stepping from the pool of water up onto a metal ledge with rubbery handles. She took off her

breathing-mask, and took in fresh, salty air. Then she looked down at the floor, and gasped - she saw no floor where the pool-ledge ended. They and the pool appeared to be floating in mid-air, high above a wide sea strewn with rocky islands, and plateaus rising high above the glittering waves. She must be dreaming - she stared up at the taller, upright Oanss, who had let go of her hand. His eyes and eyelids narrowed again, in this bright artificial light - but his face was calm, solemn even. Edmund and the other scientists gathered in the pool, climbing up, pulling off their masks, staring too. Carl was about to say something scientific to explain it all, but all of a sudden he couldn't word a sound.

Oanss pointed out and around them, at the alien, rocky landscape below. The alien sea rumbled faintly, but there was no wind blowing - suddenly, a huge oblong shape hummed past their view - a vast, cigar-shaped airship, much larger than the lander itself, carrying a transparent gondola with waving Sirians looking at them. It was a kind of motion picture.

"Ssee... Pictuures oof myy woorlld... beefore, siixx thhousannd yearrs befooore. Pictures buillt thhen tiime."

Carl shuffled his feet in small circles to follow the 360-degree view, until he became dizzy - and had to support himself on Stone Pound to avoid falling over. There was too much information to take in one sitting. Images faded over into each other, with dates superimposed in English - six thousand years of history compressed to six minutes. Yet, there was a pattern to the events, and an obvious editing of the films. The fantastic images had a bland, censored quality, like a televised travel magazine,

showing only happy Sirians doing nothing in particular, nothing that could be described as overly strange or obscene.

Many images were from under the sea. A pregnant Sirian female swam past the towers of a bustling, illuminated city that was partly underwater, with a small infant in tow...

Enlarged by microphotography to the size of a horse, a silvery robot no larger than an ameba moved inside the red veins of an old Sirian, mending the membranes of his lungs by sowing threads of tissue through them...

A near-still image faded in, which the scientists could recognize from the first black-and-white transmissions: The Sirians' giant solar-sail floating in outer space, near Mars. The view zoomed out from the center of the immense, slightly curved disk and onward to the passenger habitats. These consisted of cylinders clustered along a high, spindly boom standing at the center of the disk; the central boom might have been several hundred meters high, but as the view zoomed out, the tower came to resemble a puny tip on the upside of a huge umbrella... Takeru took it all in, but his eyes refused to believe the sheer scale - his brain interpreted it as a small model, not life-size. He took as many pictures as he could with a waterproof digital camera; the Sirians did not seem to mind.

Then rows of computer text lined up in vertical rows, in several Sirian alphabets, the symbols of which resembled little waves on an electrocardiogram... one scientist, a linguist, started filming frantically with his portable camcorder. No Sirian tried to stop them from recording what they saw.

They stood gazing at the moving holograms for a long while, until the images finally faded off to be replaced by a blank metal dome and flat floor. Through a round doorway, Ranmotanii and Namonnae came to the group, greeting them welcome to the lander craft. A set of blob-like silver robots moved in to form a circle of seats, where humans and Sirians could sit facing each other. Takeru took the seat next to Namonnae, and tried to look her in the eyes; she avoided his gaze.

Carl caught his breath and said to Ranmotanii: "We have a new man in our group. That is, instead of a man who was too sick to stay on Alien Beach. We brought the new visitor here. His name is Edmund Soto. A... a priest, he is."

The formalities and mutual staring were quickly done away with; Soto had seen and heard Sirians on TV by now, and the awe was not as great as during the first man-to-alien encounters. He told himself not to be intimidated by their height. Then, facing the newcomer, the aged, wrinkled Oanornn asked him what the word "priest" meant; he explained he had come across the concept in many TV broadcasts, but never clearly understood it.

Soto answered proudly, slowly: "A priest talks to God... and God talks to the priest... and other humans talk to God through the priest."

The Sirians seemed puzzled. A robot served them some freshly caught, flapping small fish and crabs, which they casually devoured. Oanss offered Ann a barely dead fish, which she politely refused. Oanornn leaned forward and closer to bishop Soto, and peered wonderingly at his dark-brown, round, jovial face. Soto looked back, unflinching, with even greater wonder in his face. Apart from Lazar Mahfouz, Soto was the only dark-

skinned human in the ECT team.

Then Oanorn asked something entirely unexpected, in a sharp, clear voice - a question aimed solely at Soto.

"Doo yyou taalk too thhe Ancestorrrs?"

Soto swallowed, and mustered all his mental might to avoid wincing before the old alien's searing, large eyes.

"No. I talk to God. God is not an ancestor."

Oanorn did something with his face that might have been a frown, but it wrinkled in an alien manner.

"Whhat is... God?"

"God is what created the world and the humans. Us. You. All living things."

"Whhat is... a liviing thhing?"

Chapter Nine

Carl experienced a sensation not unlike falling. *Here it comes, the moment I feared and anticipated; all our familiar notions about the universe, thrown out the window like a bucket of garbage.*

Soto wasn't discouraged now - he was prepared. This was his moment, his cosmic catechism. His faith would be tested, and win. He knew it. There was no doubt in his voice, no tremble or stutter.

"A stone... is not a living thing. This ship... is not a living thing. But you... you are a living thing. And I am. That fish..."

Soto held up one little fish that had just stopped flapping.

"This fish was living, until it died. Now it is like a stone... not living."

Ranmotanii, seated near Oanorn, said something to the other Sirians. Namonnae, who leaned closer to Oanorn, made a brief click-sound - most of the scientists realized she was laughing. Other Sirians mumbled, and made little gestures that were impossible to decipher. Oanss stood up, looked up at the ceiling of the dome, and said something to himself, in his own language. Ann listened carefully.

"Chiskr-r-r-r ... chiskr-r-r-r..."

Ann tried to remember the sounds - maybe when she had come to understand his language, she could...

An expression of - concern? - crossed Oanorn's wrinkled, flattened face. He seemed to be thinking hard, and blinked several times. He looked up at Soto, took a slow breath, and pressed his soft arms tightly together.

"I doon't undeerstann. We thinnk thiss sship iis a liviing thhing. Wee

maade itt movve, aand brreathe, and thhink. It iss mostly metal. Metal struuctuure cann bee destroyed, llike uss. Iit caan diie, like uss. Doo youu meann therre is morre thhan oone way off being a livinng thinng?"

"Yes. Hundreds of millions of people who believe what I believe, are convinced that only living, thinking beings created by God have a soul."

Pause.

"Exxplainn. Exppllain crreated by Godd... aand... soull?"

"Created by God means, not built by humans - not by land-humans like us, or by humans like you. It means being born like all other living things, that is to say directly from another living being."

The Sirians listened - intent, silent.

"Beeing bornn frrom iinside aa motherr paarent."

"Yes."

"Annd youu, and mme, uss haave soull... and thhe deead ffish... havve a ssoul, befffore."

"Well - yes and no. The fish had no soul to begin with. But you and I... each of us have a soul. The part of us that thinks, feels, and wants to learn more... that is a soul."

"I donn't underrstannnd. Wheen I aam deead, I willl stiill haave a ssoul..."

"No, no. The soul leaves the body when you die."

Oanornn began to say something, but stopped; he glanced at Ranmotanii, who merely blinked back.

He went on: *"Iff a sooul iis whatt thiinks annd wanttss... thenn itt caan livve oor die. Iis thatt nnot the sammme forr thee ffish?"*

"Please... you misunderstand me. Forgive me for taking the meaning of our words for granted. What do you think we mean by the word 'dead'?"

Oanornn spoke faster, more urgently, voice on the verge of stuttering - almost human, if not for his off-phase intonation.

"Wee saw mmany transmiitted imaages from yourr pplanet. Maany off the iimages weere oof dead laand-hummans. Sso we thhink, 'dead' iis whenn yourr bodyy doess nott mmove, breathhe... wheen boddy stopss woorkinng."

"I also think so. Science supports that idea. But I, as a priest, I hold another view also. That, when my body stops working, my soul will move away from it and live forever with God."

"Thhen soo God iss aan anceestorr."

"No! God is not someone who lived and then died. God is the one eternal being that created everything."

"I thinnk I uunderstand moorre... somme off yyour wwords meean thinngs wee do noot undeerstand noww. Whhat happenns to the ssoul oof thee deead fissh?"

"A fish has no soul!"

"Whyy?"

"Because it does not think, does not want to learn more, but us humans do!"

"Haave you leearned aabout the fiish aas a ssciientiist learrns abouut thee worlld, or doo yyou think iit wiithoout learrning itt firsst?"

The bishop was taken aback a little - an edge was in the alien's voice, his face set hard. Now Oanornn spoke so fast it became an uninterrupted

stream of words - as if all the time, he had been slowing down his speech for the sake of humans.

"Wwith-my-people-to-learnn-iss-too-ffind-moorre-about-the-world-by-working-iin-it-noot-onnly-thinkinng-aboout-iit-you-cann-ththink-anything-but-dooes-nnot-maake-iit-reall."

One scientist asked the old amphibian to repeat what he had just said. His colleagues hushed him down, indicating the cameras and recorders in use around them.

For the first time ever, one of the aliens had revealed himself as being impatient, maybe even angered. But he quickly seemed to gain control of himself, and his soft arms loosened up - features returning to that otherworldly serenity of his.

What the hell was that all about? Carl wondered. Even the other Sirians stared at their elder, with eyes inhumanly wide. In the few moments of silence, one man moved to speak - Lazar Mahfouz.

"Oanornn! What does the word 'real' mean to you?"

"Too mmy peopple, rreal is...liike soo. Aa stone... iss reall. The meetal in thiis shipp... is reeal. The deead fiish iis reeal. Thhe partss thaat are inn myy bodyy - boones, cellss, lliquid, ssmall machiines - iss rreal. The staars aare reall. Thee emptyy ssea between the sstars.. iss not rreal."

"Are you real?"

"No."

There wasn't a moment's doubt in the alien's reply, not a raised eyelid from the ten or so gathered Sirians. They might just as well have been discussing the weather.

Are you real? No.

"Does that make you sorry... sad for not being real?"

"Whhy...? Iff I wass reeal liike thhe deadd fissh, theen I coould nott learrn moorre aabout thee reeall in thhe woorld?"

Stunning. It occurred to Lazar then, that the words "real" and "learn," or the closest Sirian equivalents, meant something special to them... something crucial to the fabric of nature itself. Seeking facts about the world, yes, but more than just that. He had to learn more.

Namonnae mumbled something in the elder's ear-hole. Oanornn made a strange, coughing sound and hugged her head, gently. She rocked her head slowly, while staring at the humans with narrowed eyelids - a strand of her thick dark mane fell into her eyes.

Takeru felt a sting of compassion. He wanted to rush forward, say something to soothe her, but he was too afraid of doing anything wrong or inappropriate at this important moment. So he sat still, with his hands tightly folded.

"So..." Oanornn asked. *"Whenn yoou bisshop Edmmund Sotoo, wheen yourr boody sstops wworkinng, yourr ssooul willl beecome ann Aancesstoor?"*

"No."

Oanornn shut his eyes, kept them shut, raised his arms, and clapped loudly into the air once.

"I unnderstandd," he boomed. *"Itt iss aas I thhink earliier. We willl not taalk about thosse worrds againn. Ranmotanii! Aall of our peeopple! Do*

not talk about those words with laand-hummaans againn!"

Soto, looking quite shaken, thanked the Sirian elder for the debate and turned to Carl. His voice was hoarse, and he wiped his sweat-glistening face as he spoke.

"These extraterrestrials... such no-nonsense people... Now I'm convinced they have souls like us. But their faith is more like the ancestor worship... of my own African ancestors! How ironic!"

"It could be," Carl suggested, "that they picked the word 'ancestor' by mistake from our TV broadcasts. It is very likely they refer to something else."

Soto clasped his forehead in puzzlement, casting brief glances back at the alien hosts.

"But Sayers, they believe that even *fish* have souls... Then how can they eat live fish so carelessly?"

"That's not so strange," Lazar fell in. "In - pardon the expression, primitive cultures, gods and souls are not so powerful, because there are many of them. If the Sirians think there are ancestor spirits floating around everywhere, they may sort of nullify each other's influence to almost nothing. When they eat fish, the fish's 'soul' or mana is just added to their own spirits, without effort."

"These are not primitives!" Takeru interrupted them - he had been following the discussion with increasing excitement. "Their technology is far beyond ours. You saw the solar sail. Their culture has holographic records that are six thousand years old. Can you imagine the inner strength of a culture lasting that long? Not even China is older than three, four thousand

years - Egypt, perhaps five thousand. Whatever their beliefs are, they are rock-solid with age and experience!"

"So you believe in ancestor spirits?" the bishop asked Takeru.

Takeru nodded faintly, as if embarrassed to confess it aloud. Most Westerners had trouble grasping a concept that he more or less accepted without rational reflection, but he didn't like to discuss it.

Carl heard that the assembly of murmuring, whispering scientists were rambling ahead into another internal conference, and called for order. Sometimes he wished his profession didn't attract so many eggheads.

Oanorm retreated to the innards of the ship, too tired for further discussions. The scientists conferred with Ranmotanii the activities of the upcoming months, and the Sirians made a definite request. They explained that the time had finally come to study Earth firsthand, as soon as possible, and asked permission from the world's leaders.

Carl promised to bring forth the message to the U.N. Security Council immediately. There were no normal means of communication inside the ship - no signals reached in or out without the Sirians' letting them - so Carl politely asked to leave for the surface. The other scientists, when raising the question, were given clearance to visit the Sirians whenever they wanted, even at night.

Mutual declarations of continued communication were made, and the ECT team dived back into the water by small group.

The last ones to leave were Takeru and Ann. Takeru came up to Namonnae, held his breathing-mask in his hand, pretending to be ready to leave, looking

up furtively at her long, smooth, dark-gray face.

"You... you looked sorry... when Oanorrn touched you. I mean, not because of him..."

He looked at her dark, flat feet, waiting for her to answer. They were ugly, swollen and dark with capillaries - he knew this, because the first Sirian messages had disclosed details of their amphibian metabolism. Her feet were built to siphon off excess body heat that gathered under her blubber.

She is ugly - inhuman - loathsome. He thought so, shocking himself as he looked at her immobile face, then realized that he was confusing his emotions.

"Yes. I amm soorry. Soorry whenn I ssee yourr traansmissions. Yoou haavve nno Anceestoors. Ass reeplacemment, you havve buiilt thesse maachiness callled 'teeleeviisioonn,' thhat seend yyour mmany dreeamss throough thee worlld. Everyoone seee themmm. I do studyy off laand-humaans eenough, thhat waay.

Doo nnoot wantt to goo outsside our sship, doo nnoot wantt to mmove iin yourr woorld. Ranmotanii and Oanorrn telll mme I aam too younng to unnderrstannd you. I unndersstand eenoughh.

"Go baack to lannd, lannd-huumaan. I will staay here uuntill we go baack intoo thhe biggeer sea."

"The bigger sea...? Oh yes, we call it 'outer space'. Goodbye, Namonnae. I was... glad that we could talk to each other."

"Goodbyye, heello."

There was nothing more he could say. What could a primitive land-

human possibly say that would be of use, or comfort, to an advanced amphibian? Still averting her steady gaze, Takeru put on his mask and splashed into the pool.

When he was gone, Ann stopped wandering around the dome and went looking for Oanss. He was occupied doing some work with other Sirians, holding strange metal instruments into the air.

"Oanss?"

The amphibian said something to his friends and walked aside with her. He gave her an attentive look.

"When you go outside this ship, to study our planet... can I come with you? I can help you learn more..."

"You cann heelp mme. Ththank you, yess, muuch. Aann, you mmove in thiis ssea...like nnot aaa lannd-huumaan at aall. Liike yyou werre oone oof myy peopple."

The thirtysomething biologist-anthropologist giggled like a moronic teenager, and blushed slightly.

"Thank you... I have been working close to dolphins for years... you know, dolphins? The animals that swim around your ship and look a little like Sirians?"

Oanss made an undulating gesture with his arm, like imitating a swimming animal.

"Dollphiins, yees. Wwe talk too themm soometimess, annd theyy talkk to uus. They assk forr fissh, alwaays almosst. They aare frieendlyy, noot but soo intelliigennt aas yourr peeopple."

In an instant, a lifetime's aspirations collapsed in Ann's mind as she

realized that the Sirians could communicate with dolphins - and had found nothing to talk about except food.

"I have so much to think about now, work I must do... But please... come and talk to me tomorrow. Okay?"

"Muuch okaayy, Aann. Now yyou slleep wwith yourr peeopple...?"

She shook her head, motioning toward the pool with the oxygen-tubes strapped to her back, blond hair held in place by a sweatband.

"No, we sleep alone... I mean, in separate rooms. Up on the island, in the barracks. At least - at least I think most of us do."

At least, she knew, she did. Always alone, with or without company.

"Goodnight, Sirian humans."

She made a sudden, smooth drop down into the pool and was gone with just a small splash.

"Good -"

Oanss began a reply, but stopped. He turned away from the pool and walked away to join his flock.

During the evening, just as the sun was setting, Carl left the communications building - exhausted again. The world was pushing for his attention, from his wife to the President himself. God, if only he could escape it all somehow - preferably into space, with the next Sirian ship...

Carl stumbled into the door of his barrack - he had left it unlocked; the only thing he kept locked up was his Sirian dream-recorder. Then he noticed Ann was in there, sitting on his bed by the lit bed-lamp. She wore the same Bermuda shorts and white t-shirt as earlier during the day.

But she had combed her hair and set it up in a way that framed her face beautifully, just like on the day she first entered Carl's JPL office in Pasadena.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi... please get off my bed, I'll crash on it now if you don't mind."

"A hard day, hmm?"

She moved aside, so that he could slump backward onto the bed and close his eyes. He sighed deeply... and felt her warm hand on his forehead. Carl opened his eyes and looked up into Ann's face. He understood what was on, all right.

They were close friends, but that issue had somehow never been raised between them - until now. Ann had always struck him as a very lonely person...

"I'm a happily married man, Ann."

"The kids grown up, flown out?"

"Yeah."

"Never had any brief flings with female colleagues?"

"Yeah... it led to my current marriage."

"I envy her."

"Don't. Please."

"For old friendship's sake?"

Carl sighed, and merely turned his head away from Ann's hand. She stood up and went out the door without a sound. He knew he had hurt her, and it felt shitty. For a moment, he had contemplated a brief fling... hell, they had all been spending too much time holed up on this damned island.

As he fell asleep, Carl thought of how great it would be to guide the Sirians around the globe for a change... and then get home to see the family a few days, before returning to Alien Beach. He missed his wife so much, missed the way they could talk for hours. And there was plenty to talk about...

Meanwhile, Ann sat on the beach, watching the ships and aircraft pass by... and she cried silently.

Meanwhile, Takeru dreamt something strange but significant; the next morning, he wished he had recorded the fading memory.

Meanwhile, in his barrack, bishop Soto kneeled by his bed and prayed alone, crucifix in hand, until he collapsed to sleep.

Meanwhile, in the medical barrack, talking to Mats Jonsson, Lazar said: "They showed us nothing that gave us a sense of change, of their history, nothing we didn't know from their first messages... I am not paranoid. They are deliberately hiding things from us."

The Swede shrugged: "Sure. I have accepted that they are superior to us. The Sirians are talking down to us, like we were children... wouldn't you?"

"Do you remember Oanorrns's debate with the bishop today?"

"Sure. Never seen one of them angry before."

"Oanornn made a mistake... out of eagerness or perhaps senility, and

then he corrected himself. He very nearly broke some kind of taboo. It has to do with their view of reality, their faith. I should really discuss this with my colleagues all over the world, but..."

"But?"

Lazar exploded: "But the Sirians are *right*, damn them! It's too dangerous to let loose an alien philosophy upon this primitive civilization! Ancestor worship. Living beings who are convinced they are not real. Living metal in symbiosis with living flesh, yet without surgical implants. Giant spaceships. A culture older than Egypt. And that's what they do tell us. What they're hiding must be so fantastic it could destroy us... like Christian missionaries destroyed the pagan cultures they encountered."

"We're all scientists here, Lazar. I don't like censorship any more than you do. But this is going too fast. We have to keep the outside world in ignorance, until we know more. Don't go public just now."

Lazar nodded. From the pocket of his khaki jacket, he picked a small liquor bottle and took a swig. Mats refused to have a taste - with all the medical alcohol in his office, he had to stay sober.

"Go to sleep, Lazar. That's my medical advice. And don't use that dream-recorder again. You're getting circles under your eyes."

"It's hard to resist once you've learned to use it. I can already control my dreams to a certain extent. Some dreams are good enough to replay..."

The Egyptian moved to the door and grinned knowingly, as if to say he was self-destructive and proud of it. Mats waved him away, not saying what he was thinking: *The proud American Indian was destroyed by the white man's whiskey... and now the proud Earthman is being destroyed by*

an electronic toy. I wish I could help you, Lazar, but I'm afraid I can't.

Mats dug out his own recording-helmet, went outside, and took it to the edge of the darkened beach. He stood there for a while, unable to toss it into the ocean. Then he noticed a figure sitting nearby with her back to a palmtree, looking at him. He walked up to the cluster of leaning, arching trunks and saw that it was Ann.

"Ann? It's getting awfully cold. You'd better go inside and -"

Before he could react, Ann leaped up and locked her arms around his head, hard. He dropped the Sirian device in the sand and held her, patting her shoulders reassuringly. When she started kissing him, he didn't turn her down. They both lay down in the sand - oblivious to the distant rumble of jet engines from the aircraft carriers at the horizon... and the subtler rumble from the circular clouds in the sky above. And the satellites above the atmosphere, which sent pictures of every square inch of the island to the military...

Chapter Ten

DAY 60

It was a slightly cloudy day, for the Pacific Ocean.

Bishop Soto led a small morning mass on the beach, attended by a handful of scientists. After mass, a group of Sirians were on that beach, waiting as a big U.S. Navy helicopter hovered down to pick them up. Each member of this group wore bermudas and what resembled soft metal vests covered with small round knobs - without doubt wearable machinery. Among them were Oanss and Ranmotanii; as she had pledged, Namonnae had chosen to stay at Alien Beach. For health reasons, the elderly Oanornn had also chosen to remain at the base camp.

The seven cone-headed tourists had no fixed route planned - the U.N. Security Council had agreed to a very discreet mode of travel to avoid terrorist attacks or public panic. Joining the Sirians as guides and mediators were an ECT linguist from England, then Takeru Otomo, Ann Meadbouré, Lazar Mahfouz, and Carl Sayers. Stone Pound would lead the group on Alien Beach in Carl's absence.

The chopper thundered down on a wide carpet of canvases that would minimize the dust thrown up. The group shielded their eyes as they made their way up into the passenger cabin. A few remaining Sirians and human scientists waved them goodbye, and the helicopter took off toward the carrier. Inside, the Sirians blinked nervously as they sat in the narrow cabin seats, keeping their tall heads down to avoid hitting the ceiling.

"No, I don't think they were thinking of amphibians when they

designed this thing," Carl joked to the other scientists.

The noise inside seemed to cause the Sirians more distress than the humans - they quickly did something with their metal vests, and small gobs of black, clay-like substance popped out of them, which the Sirians put into their ear-holes. They soon relaxed a little.

Aware of the need to give *Ranmotanii* some privacy after hassling him almost constantly, Carl now concentrated his attention on *Oanss*. He tried to ask *Oanss* about his other fellow travelers, whom Carl had not really talked to before. Five males and females of varying ages presented themselves, all taller than humans, all males being bald, all females having long manes of hair on the back of their heads. Carl could barely pronounce their names...

Oanss and *Ranmotanii* he "knew," stretching the term; the two sat next to each other, conversing in clipped Sirian phrases. Sometimes it seemed they were exchanging information using their vest devices, but Carl wasn't certain how they worked.

Mnmnonns, a young-looking female with slight hair and an air of shyness about her.

Aonasann, a blocky, narrow-eyed male with a few lines of age on his thick throat, who said and did little - his nasal ridge ran thick along his face and sloping forehead. Some of the silvery, blob-like devices he was carrying were sticking out of his ears.

Moanossoans, a quite tall female who smiled a lot, shielding the top of her head with her soft arms, talking rapidly in her alien tongue, and doing the odd clicking laugh at every new sight she saw.

Snaosnee, an aged female - thinner than her younger sisters, her breasts had sunk into her chest and virtually disappeared, making her the most androgynous member of the group; her mane had a near-translucent sheen.

Tmmtenaa, a male of slightly fatter build than Oanss, mostly gazing out the portholes of the vessel, holding an extension of his machine-jacket to his head - whatever he was recording or measuring, it seemed intriguing enough to keep him out of touch with any other beings.

Only now did Carl see, how different from each other the aliens were. He grew aware of the tension from the military personnel at the pilot's end of the cabin, and said aloud to the officer at the door: "Don't stare, soldier - they won't bite."

"Sorry, sir!"

The naval officer ceased staring at the alien passengers and barked some orders to the pilots in the adjacent cockpit instead. The aircraft carrier came closer; the chopper went down to land on its deck. Rows of onlookers stood waiting at the edges of the deck. The chopper touched down and was secured on the deck; quite suddenly, a heavy rain-shower started pouring out of the clouded sky.

The Sirians seemed happy for getting wet, and stepped out to wave at the rain-soaked crewmen and passengers. From less than sixty meters off, the battlecruiser U.S.S. Powell sailed by, scores of people waving and pointing from its decks and rails. The seven Sirians and five scientists waved back until their arms ached. This part of the tour was just showbiz, and Carl impatiently demanded that their jet would be cleared for immediate take-off.

Only an hour later could the group enter a converted V-22 Osprey VTOL plane and lift off for Australia. They would later continue toward Asia, Europe, and America. Unsurprisingly, the Sirian travel committee had announced to Carl that they wished to travel along the course of the sun - from east to west. Even aliens disliked jetlag.

From the little yacht, the soldier watched the aircraft carrier through his binoculars. He saw the Osprey aircraft take off in a westward direction. He had come too late to even catch a glimpse of the aliens boarding their plane.

Norman put a hand on his shoulder and said: "Hey, Coffin - there must be some of them left on Alien Beach. You could wait in the vicinity, and they'll show up eventually. You'll get your chance."

The soldier wavered where he stood, absentmindedly scratching off some of the light-brown skin-dye from his thin face.

"Do you by any chance know where they'll land?" he asked, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the vanishing aircraft.

"Australia, that's for sure. And what with these conehead mates being amphibians, they'll stay close to sea. You could go after them, but so will everyone else."

The soldier peered after the vanishing Osprey, and realized with a chill that the recent rainfall had ended abruptly, just before the Osprey took off. As if someone was controlling the clouds... did the military use rain-crystals here? Was the whole affair so staged, that nothing was left to chance? If so, would the men in charge allow the Sirians to get close to ordinary people? The generals had been running the whole show from the

outset, flashing their guns to show who was The Man.

The soldier whispered to himself: "I... hate... all... officers."

He would wait. As long as the visions wouldn't stop coming, he would keep waiting. George and Norman told him something about stopping at their home island, two day's journey off. He barely listened; they clearly sensed that he was a man possessed. And if the soldier had been less self-absorbed, he would have seen that they were growing afraid of the absent stare in his eyes when he had one of those sudden visions. The soldier's acidic irony and wisecracks could no longer hide how remote he was becoming - he responded to the world around him with indifference, if at all. Strangely enough, this didn't alarm him now.

For each nautical mile closer to Alien Beach the boat had brought him, the more calmly he had received the recurring visions... until he could see them while standing up, just freezing still as his eyes glazed over. They came in irregular waves by now, short bursts of vivid, full-sensory hallucinations followed by up to an hour of normalcy - then, maybe, might come a long waking-dream that he would sit through for several minutes.

For a brief moment he could be seeing empty space around him, specked with stars, or he could spend what seemed like an hour swimming in a flock of Sirians through a freezing-cold green sea - lit by a faint sun above his head. Emotions also forced themselves upon him with the other impressions, but no abstract information beside that. And the memories of the visions stayed, as vividly as real life. The soldier had almost forgotten to ask what it all meant; it was easier to just lie back and enjoy the ride. Even the accompanying headaches were getting less intense.

In a moment of clarity, as he helped the brothers pull in a fishing-net from the yacht's stern, the soldier thought: *Why not keep waiting? Why bother with why the Sirians are doing this? Could be an accident, after all. The visions might go away the moment they leave this planet. And then I'll be stuck here again... No. No, there's got to be a way! Listen, whoever you are who keep sending these visions into my head. If you can read my mind, please help me. What should I do? Is there anything I could do?*

The lukewarm breeze blew in his brown-dyed face, playing with his black-dyed hair. A distance away in the wake of the yacht, a dozen dolphins came leaping up and down, chasing the vessel for scraps of fish. In a few moments, a flock of noisy gulls and a lone, drifting albatross joined in the pursuit. At the horizon, the strange clouds appeared to deliberately shield the lagoon and island from the sun - silent, never quite concentrating enough to form a rainfall, but never spreading out too thin to hold together. A slowly swirling galaxy of clouds, specked with smaller spiral patterns. Every few minutes, patrolling aircraft flew through them effortlessly, like arrows through mist.

There came no answer to the soldier's plea. No insane "voices" in his head either. Yet, he knew what to do.

"Hey - Coffin. Don't jump in the water again. There's a patrolboat watching us there - we shouldn't risk them boarding us."

"I'm not going down again, George."

The soldier took his stand at the rail, stretched his arms up into the sky and faced up at a cloud, ignoring the aircraft, cleared his throat.

And shouted loudly upward, with the alien intonation of his first

vision: "*Chiis... chiskr-r-r-r, chiis, chiptl, mmer-r-r-rllleeee!*"

And again. And again.

George and Norman came up behind him, grabbed his arms, and forced him back onto the fiberglass wall of the pilot-cabin.

"You're bleeding mad, mate!" Norman hissed fearfully at him, as the two brothers dragged him down into the cabin. "You want us boarded? That disguise might work from a distance but up close they'll get you."

They locked him up in the cabin - he didn't really try to fight them - and resumed their work, trying to keep up appearances for the approaching patrolboats. The soldier felt nothing, no frustration, no anger with the others, no worry. He thought he knew why: he had given up, and it was about time. The visions would end. The Sirians would move on. And his life would remain as it had been; without meaning, aim or hope.

From outside, he heard the two brothers curse him loudly. He felt a bit seasick - that was new. The boat rocked heavier all of a sudden... the jet aircraft rumble in the sky was smothered by rolling thunder, and the soldier peered out one of the dirty portholes. The cloud system over Alien Beach was thickening. How could that be? The last moment he'd been looking, the breeze had thinned it out. As he watched, the breeze grew into a gale, tugging at loose strands of rope that hung from the boat's railing. The voices of the brothers outside sounded more upset. There was a clatter of things falling onto the deck, and the roar of the boat's engine being cranked up to full power. They were moving out from the island at full speed, the boat's bow rising and falling in the angered waves; the first flash of lightning hit the island.

The soldier checked his wristwatch. It was no later than noon. Now at last he understood the meaning of the alien phrase he had spoken in the first vision. It was a call to something beyond human control, something that was out there. Something real, and it had heard him! He made for the cabin door, pounding on it until they let him outside. The wild-eyed soldier rushed out like an animal released from captivity, and leaned along the railing, starting to laugh with uncontrollable joy. He stared up at the dark clouds, overcome with gratitude, and the mask of superior irony fell like the worthless cover it was.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you..."

When the first heavy drops of rain hit his face, it was already wet.

"Where'd that storm come from? I was sure they'd board us, but then the weather forced them off our backs -"

"Shut up, George. I'm taking her to the home island and I'm never going near Alien Beach again. That atoll is cursed!"

The boat skimmed the foaming waves, seeking out a safer harbor.

DAY 61

Sydney, Australia.

No real preparations were made, no elaborate welcome was planned, and no publicity was allowed. Of all the Australian authorities only the government cabinet had been informed, half a day in advance. The U.N. Secretary General and the U.S. President, the only two persons with unrestricted access to Carl Sayers' coded cell-phone number, had pestered Carl incessantly with anxious calls from the start of the journey across the

Pacific: What are they doing? Who are they talking to? Are you being followed?

Before the Osprey had landed at a secluded military airfield in Sydney, Carl had tried to explain to Ranmotanii the dangers of moving openly in crowded human cities - not to mention the pollution and smell. Smiling inscrutably, Ranmotanii had nodded and ignored the warnings. He had expressed complete faith in superior Sirian technology to protect him against disease or accident. Then he once more had explained that he wanted to see land-humans in their natural environment, whether it smelled or not. Yet, at the last minute, the amphibians had (reluctantly?) agreed to let their hosts determine the route of their first excursion outside Alien Beach.

Now, the group exited out onto the sun-baked airfield, where a handful of Australian cabinet members greeted them; behind them stood a platoon of armed soldiers. The politicians, too afraid to shake hands, merely bowed awkwardly to the taller guests; the Sirians, trying to follow custom, bowed in return.

"We understand your stay will be very short, then?" the sweating Minister of Defense asked Carl as the group was escorted to the waiting bus.

Carl, squinting in the dry heat, more worried about how the amphibians would take the local climate than for himself, gave the politicians a wrinkly grin.

"They will stay as long as they want to. There is no set schedule, apart from the agreed one-year stay on this planet. It's all in the original treaty."

"But our surveillance expenses..."

"Would you rather have the rest of the world's leaders having the

Sirians all to themselves? Who knows what opportunities you'd miss? Tourism, trade agreements?"

The Minister of Defense nodded nervously, as if afraid to upset anyone. The group, save for the soldiers, entered the bus, which had been fitted with special windows that prevented people from seeing the Sirians inside. The air-conditioned interior was spacious enough even for amphibian heads, and several rows of seats had recently been removed to create space for their legs. Carl noticed no open nervousness from the aliens, though he sensed that they put more trust in him and his three fellow ECT members, than in the tense locals.

"What happened to the laid-back, cool Aussies I've heard so much about?" he quipped to Ann and Lazar.

"They will never even know the Sirians passed by. Ironic, no?" said Lazar.

"This tour is a joke - but it's a start," Ann muttered with a guilty glance toward the seated Sirians. This wasn't what she had wanted.

Sighing, Carl declared: "Okay, gentlemen - give us a slow tour of the city."

On the command of the Minister of the Interior, the busload of aliens moved and, escorted by security cars, drove out into the outskirts of Sydney. It was late in the afternoon, and the city lights were beginning to come out.

The bus drove around most of the city in one sweep. The Sirians stared at everything they saw and took records - not entirely unlike ordinary tourists, though much quieter. A few outside pedestrians looked after the passing bus, as if they suspected what was behind those reflecting windows -

but no one outside saw the Sirians. Three hours later, the bus took them to their "hotel" - a large house at the beach marked as government property, which was sealed off with barbed-wire fences and watchdogs. When the Sirians stepped off the bus, watchdogs on the other side of the fence started barking briefly. The Sirians looked them in the eye, and the dogs fell silent and cowered in obedience, or fear, or both.

Ranmotanii was now showing signs of exhaustion, so much so that humans could discern them; his skin was starting to lose its luster, and his feet were dark from excess heat. The other amphibians led him toward the secluded part of the beach that belonged to the property, and helped him to rest in the surf for a while. Other Sirians soon joined them, and they eventually disappeared under the waves to sleep. Only Ranmotanii and Snaosnee - the oldest ones - returned from the sea to sleep on land, indoors. The two seniors, keeping their vests on, gathered on the carpet in the living-room that overlooked the beach. They cuddled together and bid Carl's team goodnight.

Carl asked them why they wouldn't join their friends underwater. They explained that they were too old, their lungs too weak to breathe water for extended periods. The older the Sirians grew, the more they became "land-humans". Ann wanted to ask more, but Carl stopped her - he suddenly felt a special bond with the resting couple, a kinship of age that Ann yet lacked...

He suddenly desired to talk to Lazar; Lazar was old and wise, understood everything and judged no one. But the old Egyptian asked to be left alone to sleep, and he was carrying the dream-recording helmet with him

in a small bag wherever he went. What was he dreaming? One day, Carl thought, he would gather the courage to ask Lazar to see one of his recorded dreams - one day when his strength of mind wasn't so dispersed.

"Carl," Takeru began to say.

"Not now, Takeru, please. I gotta sleep."

Takeru had intended to ask permission to study the Sirians sleeping underwater, or at least put some underwater cameras in their vicinity. The security measures appalled him; that, and the lost opportunities to observe the Sirians at all times. There was so much Takeru wanted to learn - and, just maybe, emulate...

Were the Sirians cyborgs, unable to sustain life without the aid of their machines? How was their social hierarchy constructed? Was the nuclear energy that fueled their lander craft based on hydrogen fusion or anti-matter reaction?

How exactly did one spend one's life in a culture so advanced? Did they have an economy based on money, or services? Did they breed naturally or through genetic engineering? Did they feel, they way humans did, or were they just faking emotion as a courtesy?

Did they all hate him like Namonnae did?

Takeru took a sleeping-pill before going to bed, just like he had been doing almost every night since he first talked to her. The pills helped blotting out the dreams and the anxiety.

Chapter Eleven

DAY 63

It was late morning, air drying up, temperature climbing slowly.

The soldier palmed Norman the agreed fee in U.S. dollars and gave George back his passport. George argued with his brother, asking him to accept less. Norman reluctantly gave the soldier back one-third of the sum and walked away without saying goodbye, still bickering with Norman as they headed back to the boat. So much for Norman's cunning scheme.

The soldier picked up his threadbare canvas bag and walked across the tiny concrete pier of the two brothers' home island. He had been neglecting his light disguise during the journey, and erosion had faded down his skin and hair color to a dirty, speckled hue that hardly rang true. Yet, here he did indeed blend in. The small island, with its tiny fisherman population, was now teeming with paler visitors. The soldier halted when he first saw a group of bald-shaven people in crimson robes. It was that cult again - so close to Alien Beach and so soon? How come the authorities hadn't chased them away? And that awful retarded chanting again - the soldier winced with recognition.

Now he understood it: the worshippers, dancing with their arms raised in undulating movement, were actually trying to sound and move like the aliens shown in the media.

He took a wide path around the dozen robed cultists, past the back-alleys of what passed for Main Street: rows of low ramshackle houses and worn-down old colonial-style buildings side by side, remnants of old times

surrounded by the cheapness and junk of modernity.

A pack of dogs rooting through garbage cans, sniffing him out and begging with their eyes.

A dirty native boy, perhaps ten years old, swooshing past him on a pair of shiny new rollerblades - hogging the concrete pavement because the rest of the island was just sand.

Clusters of crimson-red tents, everywhere.

Swarms of buzzing insects hovering here and there. And over everything, the stench-cocktail of a collapsed waste disposal system, calculated for much fewer than the hundreds of cultists gathered on the island.

As the soldier strolled out of a wide alley, he glimpsed a group of local police officers at a shop, wearing khaki uniforms and assault rifles. He stopped, turned and took another detour. A small miracle the cops hadn't spot him at the pier. The soldier went cold with paranoia. They could pin just any excuse on him for kicking him off the island, pushing him farther away from his goal. If he had another fit and they saw it, it was over for him. Before they might spot him, the soldier slunk into the nearest red tent. Inside, he nearly stumbled on an assembly of four cult members who were sharing a late breakfast of rice and lentils.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to... I thought this was... do you know where I can find a bathroom?"

One of the cultists, quite sourly, pointed out the row of Port-O-Lets in a palm grove thirty meters off. The soldier excused himself and went over to use it. Afterwards, he sought out the main street marketplace and shopped

for supplies. Everywhere around the place he spotted men and women in red robes - and something else familiar. Teenage girls mostly, but also a few boys were walking about with their heads and faces painted gray, hair cut Mohawk or bald, makeup around their eyes to make them seem large. And no clothes except Bermuda shorts and - gray diving-flippers, cut to amphibian foot-shape.

It took the soldier about one minute to grow tired of ogling all the topless women - diving-flippers just didn't do anything for him. Contempt? No, he admitted to himself, he didn't simply despise the cultists and the fashion-conscious youths - he also envied them their community. Maybe he was alone in his genuine visions; he was also alone with them. Surrounded by the chanting, herd-following crowds who wished just as much as him to meet the Sirians, the need to talk to someone, anyone overwhelmed him. If he could only beat his fear of being called a madman, if there was any other human he could share his experience with...

"Hey! I remember you from the airport!"

He started at the voice - and saw a bald young cultist standing next to him in the marketplace, grinning at him.

"What?"

"You asked me for a leaflet about our church! How wonderful to see you made it across here! Isn't this a wonderful place to be?"

The soldier said just the opposite of what he thought, taking a sniff of the less-than-pure air: "Yes, a wonderful place. How great to see all these people gathering in the quest for higher understanding... Sorry, I forgot to ask your name the first time we met."

"Patty." She suddenly seemed to recall a procedure. "Good morning, greetings, welcome." Patty made an obscure hand-gesture and gave him a much more artificial, tight-lipped smile than her first one.

"My friends call me Coffin, or just Soldier."

"Are you here alone, Soldier?"

"Yeah... I'm looking for a place to stay, actually. A cheap one."

"Come with me, Soldier. I see what you need."

Patty tugged him by the arm with a firmness of grip that belied how gaunt she was. The soldier meekly followed, expecting nothing good, on the lookout for suspicious police or military. A fifteen-minute walk took them to a cluster of crimson tents surrounding an open place with a stage... like the setup for a rock concert, minus the band. Patty led him past it, to a shack labeled MEMBERSHIP OFFICE.

He didn't try to resist, or think up ways to resist the subtle brainwashing techniques that he knew would follow; he was grateful to them, to Patty. These people, at least, would listen without prejudice. And he would be safer among these large numbers, close to Alien Beach. The soldier was welcomed in every way possible to the Church of Ranmotanii; the only things they asked him to check at the door were his old clothes and freedom of mind.

Papua, New Guinea.

The Osprey aircraft went down to a few hundred meters above the green, steaming hilltops. Below the aircraft stretched miles upon miles of rainforest valleys, where the Sirians had asked to land and study the

environment. They found a relatively open space on the top of a slope, and the Osprey rotated its engines upward for a vertical landing. The air was hot and sticky, with a burnt scent to it - burnt grass from the landing... and something more. A nearby village lay in a lower grove, almost invisible from the air. From the straw houses in the distance came excited shouts.

"Wait inside!" Carl told the seven Sirians. "Let the official talk to the people out there first."

Carl and an official from Port Moresby, plus an armed officer, exited the landed aircraft and descended carefully down the grassy slope. In the fresh grass were scattered blackened tree-stumps and roots - the area had recently been cleared for primitive farming. About two hundred meters down the slope, where the rainforest began, a line of dark-skinned men began to gather and ascend to meet them.

Carl shouted after the government official, who was considerably younger and faster: "I thought there weren't any isolated tribes left?"

"We have many isolated valleys like this one!" the official replied without turning around or slowing his steps. "One can still find a handful of tribes that have never seen a white man... or don't watch TV! So they know nothing of space aliens... they may not even know anything exists outside this valley!"

The thought of the Sirians meeting really primitive humans unsettled Carl profoundly. He would rather have the Sirians seeing some sympathetic Australian Aborigines, but that opportunity had been splendidly missed. Apparently, the dry Australian air had deterred the Sirians from pressing for a mainland trek - something about Ranmotanii's old age had been hinted.

This encounter was also completely unprepared by humans - but now there weren't even any police or army around to protect the Sirians. The line of natives began to wield their shields and spears; they definitely looked and sounded hostile.

"Don't shoot!" Carl called out desperately to the officer, who was fingering his rifle. "If you have to, shoot in the air! We must not make a bad impression in front of the Sirians!"

To his credit, the officer did not shoot. He told the official something, and moved ahead of him. The officer stopped thirty meters away from the line and shouted some words in a local tongue Carl didn't know. The native warriors stopped at a shouted command from the village, and another man came marching up to meet the newcomers - a chief or witchdoctor, judging by his ritual head-gear. He had a brief conversation with the officer, who seemed to know their language or its closest equivalent. Carl looked at his watch, then up the slope at the parked Osprey, not entirely unlike a big white bird and probably being mistaken for one by these natives. Carl wasn't merely nervous, but embarrassed. This wasn't the face of mankind he had wanted to show his wonderful guests.

The official waved for his attention.

"Mr. Sayers, we're lucky. The chief of the tribe happens to have been outside this valley when he was brought to school, so he knows a bit of the language apart from his own. And he happens to own a battery radio. So he knows, vaguely, about the visit from another world. Yes, he very much wants to see them, even if his tribe is scared to let any aliens near the village.

"These are not educated people, Mr. Sayers. When they see something

they don't understand, they react in predictable ways - they turn and run, they attack, or they start a new religion. We will avoid violence, as you and our government don't want an incident... but I cannot guarantee the safety of the Sirians if they come here. You do understand that?"

Carl nodded, and used his cell-phone to contact Lazar in the parked VTOL plane.

"Give me Ranmotanii," he said.

Lazar's voice receded over the phone, as he explained the matter to the others. Then the oldest amphibian's voice sang into the phone, a bit loudly, asking if they could come down and visit the human habitat. Carl tried to explain the special risks involved. Ranmotanii talked in his own tongue to his fellows. They replied, and Ranmotanii declared over the phone that they estimated the risk as acceptable.

Carl looked up the green slope and cursed - the Sirians were already starting to walk downhill from the Osprey. And worse still, the local natives had spotted them. Their shouting turned into uproar and instant panic - most of them fled into the village or the forest. The chief of the tribe, a blocky man with long hair, a bone through his nostrils, and an impressive penis-horn covering his private parts, stood wide-eyed and shouted at his tribe, attempting to pick up his scattered ranks. A few brave, trembling men stood by their chief, while the women and children hid indoors.

Suddenly Carl recognized the situation, and had to smile. In the frightened natives, he saw what he himself must have looked like - less than two weeks ago - to the Sirians. A trembling, cowering native who bravely

overcame fear by the power of his curiosity and intellect. He had no right to call these men primitives - in this company, all humans were. His embarrassment receded, and he stepped aside to let Ranmotanii face the staring tribal chief alone.

The natives were short and stocky, but the amphibians made them seem like pygmies. Two shaking warriors raised their spears; their chief barked at them to step back. The chief held his distance for a minute, intensely studying the seven cone-headed, gray-skinned aliens. The seven amphibians stood very still and silent, as if they instinctively understood the importance of staying calm. Ranmotanii tried a tight-lipped, enigmatic smile. The warriors reeled back one step; the chief stiffened with fear. Very slowly, Ranmotanii stretched out both arms, showing his stalk-like hands to the chief. There came a collective gasp from the natives, and some muttered words.

Ann, Lazar, and the British linguist arrived late and out of breath. They joined Carl at the edge of the scene. None of them dared to speak up in the tense atmosphere. Neither humanoids nor natives seemed to be bothered by the humid heat; unlike Carl's group, the natives did not sweat. The only indication that the Sirians were too warm was that their big, flat feet were darkening.

Suddenly Ranmotanii, his arms rigidly held forward, turned his head slightly and uttered a name: "*Mnmnonns*."

The youngest-looking female with the slight hair made a squeaking noise of approval. Ranmotanii said something; Mnmnonns produced a thin wand-like object from her metallic jacket. She slowly put it to her thick lips,

soft fingers curled around it, and blew air into an opening.

With her flute - a gift from mankind - she played the first notes of "Yellow Submarine". Ranmotanii tried to sing the words, awkwardly because he stuck to the exact speed of the original recording.

*"Inn th' towwn whrr I-wa boornn,
Livvd a-maann who sail-to-see..."*

The scientists grimaced with bewilderment. What was this? The other Sirians took up singing as well, not doing very well but trying hard. The tribal chief began to grin, and hum along knowingly... he had heard the tune before! Ranmotanii's eyes moved onto Carl's group. They joined in too. Only the official and the officer remained in silent confusion. When they finished singing, the chief was laughing happily, and finally dared to touch Ranmotanii's hand for a greeting-gesture.

An hour later, the meeting abruptly ended. The Sirians took farewell and unceremoniously began to wander back up to the waiting plane, while the tribe sang *Yellow Submarine* after them. Carl tried to ask the Sirians what the hell had happened.

Moanossoans explained it thus: The Sirians' vests contained measuring instruments to record electromagnetic wave patterns from the surroundings. They had already been measuring the patterns emitted by Carl and other humans, during their time together. But facing very simple cultures, the Sirians could use the measurements as a kind of simple interpreter - reading the mood of the natives by comparing it with known patterns in familiar humans. The music turned out to be the safest known way Ranmotanii knew of making friendly communication and calm the chief

down - sonic manipulation, as it were.

Their purpose of the village visit was to gather as much measurement data as they could, which then could be used to construct a model of the mental and cultural processes of that small tribe. All they needed were some shifting moods and images to record, and in a simple culture that was quickly done - there wasn't very much to record or analyze.

Lazar cautiously asked them how much time they reckoned was needed to record and analyze the entirety of human cultures.

Moanossoans immediately responded, surprising them: the Sirians weren't really going to record all human cultures - only the ones they found personally interesting, or happened to meet on their way.

A little later, when he dared to, Carl suggested to Ranmotanii that their methods of survey seemed arbitrary rather than systematic. The old Sirian reacted quickly, raising his deep singing voice to drown out the plane's engines.

"Buut I aapoloogizzee... Nott nnooww Carll Saayerrs... Nnnow too earllyy. Buut I waant explaain llaterr. Waant beecause... I waant. Cannot trranslllate."

Carl nodded, and gestured for a handshake. Ranmotanii shook it, as was the custom he had learned.

"Yes, Ranmotanii. Later is good."

But "later" seemed anything but good.

DAY 65

He referred to himself as the church's "Regional Elder" and was called

"Tanii" by everyone else: a fat, ruddy, jovial man in his forties resembling a bald, bearded Santa Claus not using enough sun-lotion. He talked for a long time to the soldier, alone. After two hours alone with the jovial man who never stopped talking, the soldier looked for something to drink and an escape route, but there was nothing to drink and Tanii urged him to hear him out.

After another grueling two hours - Tanii must have had a camel's hump concealed somewhere in his robes, for he seemed able to talk forever without so much as a drop of water - the soldier dozed off on the straw mat where he sat. But they shook him awake, and let him hear another two hours of Tanii's endless gab. Three more times they had to shake him awake.

The soldier started to feel giddy, and his head went light as if it were filled with air. He hadn't suffered any headaches for the whole day, and no sudden visions. He didn't reveal the visions to Tanii, though - not that Tanii seemed interested in any but his own. The gist of the leader's monologue was that Ranmotanii was telepathically linked to the highest members of the cult; they would share their cosmic enlightenment with their cult disciples, but only in small portions so as not to overwhelm them. Also, outside influences were considered a distraction and should be avoided. No cult member was allowed access to newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, cell phones, cameras, or the Internet.

Then, suddenly, the session was over. Patty led the soldier to an outdoors dinner party where at least a hundred other cultists gathered.

All wearing the same red robes.

All chanting that terrible warped nonsense.

All eating rice and lentils and beans.

All looking a bit skinny under their suntans.

All loving each other.

He was served a bowl of food... Rice and lentils again. The soldier was exhausted, and the meager food failed to sate his gnawing hunger, but he wasn't alone or afraid any longer. He felt he might soon be ready to share his experiences with Patty.

His legs were starting to get badly bitten by sand flies, and soon the itching was annoying him constantly.

Chapter Twelve

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

The Sirians had seen the Vietnam War on TV, along with newscasts stretching back to the 1950s.

After having concluded their brief visit to New Guinea, they asked to see the country that had been mentioned so often in human broadcasts - broadcasts that were more recent to them, given the long distance to Sirius. The Vietnamese government aired a few objections to stall the unexpected visit, but the U.N. Security Council could clear the group in a few hours.

As the Osprey closed in on the green Vietnamese coastline, the seven amphibians seemed to act and talk with greater confidence; they made detailed requests to meet certain persons who had been mentioned in old TV broadcasts from around 1970. They even handed out a printed list of names on a slate, with still images taken from TV. Black-and-white images, blurred, of men and women in uniforms, some staring into the camera - others just walking past.

The Vietnamese government received the list, and could soon respond that most of the men and women mentioned were dead, or in one case did not exist - at some point in the past, the Sirians had confused a fictional film with live news footage. Only one man on the list was still alive and prepared to encounter the extraterrestrial visitors at such short notice.

The group met him in the secluded park of a retirement home in Ho Chi Minh City. The bus carrying the visitors was taken to a back entrance; the passengers were moved into the park without being seen by outsiders.

After a half-hour wait, the requested man came out into the little park. He was a frail old ex-soldier with thin white hair and thick eyeglasses. When the old man first saw the seven tall, gray aliens, he gasped and tried to escape back indoors. Two younger police officers stopped him, insisting that he should come forth to greet the visitors.

The four ECT scientists were embarrassed. Carl wanted to ask Ranmotanii to spare the poor old Vietnamese from being frightened by strangers from space. And why him? Just because they spotted his name in a grainy TV broadcast sent out twenty-five, thirty years ago?

It took a few minutes, but the old man gathered some courage and made the government men let go of him, by shouting and wielding his walking-stick. Trembling terribly, he staggered the twenty meters down to the benches where Ranmotanii and the others sat waiting - all except for Tmmtenaa, who was preoccupied with studying the layout and architecture of the park.

The old man stopped two meters away from Ranmotanii, who rose to greet him. That was a misjudgment - at two meters' height, he loomed over the little old man and frightened him even more. Yet somehow Ranmotanii did not need instructions. He showed his narrow palms to the old man, a universal gesture saying: I come in peace. The old man stood frozen. A few mutual opening phrases were uttered, with the British linguist interpreting Ranmotanii's broken English to the old man.

The old man knew about the alien visit - everyone knew. He only asked to know why the Sirians were here, and why they wanted to meet him. Ranmotanii explained about the list, the few people whose names they had

been able to pick out of old broadcast newsreels. Then he asked the old man if he had witnessed the real war. The man nodded. Ranmotanii asked him if all the killings they had seen in the broadcasts were real or staged. The old man answered that most of them had been real. Ranmotanii then wondered if the casualty rates mentioned in the enemy broadcasts were accurate. The man replied, not without bitterness, that far more people had been killed than mentioned in any broadcasts.

Ranmotanii thanked him for the information, and sat down on his bench - visibly paler than before, his big old eyes more bloodshot than before. His final question came after a minute's pause: Was all information of the war broadcast in the full knowledge that someone outside Planet Earth might intercept them? The old man began to shake again. He demanded to be let back indoors and left alone. Carl conceded, and asked the Sirians they should leave to avoid an incident.

Lazar took Carl and the linguist aside, and told them in a hushed voice: "Carl, this could be a bad sign. The Sirians don't trust us completely - that's why they dug out a list of old witnesses, to confirm that the war broadcasts weren't fakes."

"Where does *that* leave us in relation to the Sirians?" Carl wondered. "None of us were directly involved in that war. I actively protested against it."

"From their perspective, that doesn't matter! First we let every advanced civilization within a light year's radius or so know about our wars. Then they come over here, and we're suddenly dying to show how peaceful and civilized we are... what would you make of it, had you been one of

them?"

Carl shrugged; Lazar went on.

"That our hospitality might turn into open hostility at the slightest notice. Put simply, they now have witness proof that they are among savages. They've got guts, Carl."

They looked in the direction of the Sirians - who were studying the park, as if they hadn't noticed the discussion. Tmmtenaa ran around chasing butterflies.

DAY 66

Delhi, India.

The bus stopped by a minor Hindu temple. A newly built shrine, garishly painted, stood by the entrance, adorned with flowers and offerings.

The shrine, two meters high, showed a stylishly sculpted figure of a blue-gray Sirian, wearing a red spacesuit. Apparently excited, Moanossoans pointed it out to the others, talking in her tongue that no human had yet deciphered.

Takeru, studying Moanossoans' moving lips, tried to perceive the breaks in her speech that should come between each word - but her speech came too fast, making it sound like uninterrupted song to Takeru's ears. He stopped the small tape-recorder in his pocket, connected to a near-invisible mike in his clothes, and replayed the Sirian speech in his earphone. Still it sounded too rapid for him. He replayed it again, slowing down the speed of the tape with the adjustment dial. At very slow speed, he could clearly make

out the breaks between her words... strange indeed. Some words were profoundly different in structure, containing several compressed signals in a second... surrounded by words that were almost like human syllables.

The Sirians really did have several languages, sometimes using all three at one time. One ultra-rapid, radar-like signal language for conveying information about distance, size, shapes... then one archaic, unchanging language made up of basic word concepts... and finally what they called the "land-language" with its phonetic alphabet, modern and flexible. As if their brains housed three different stages of development simultaneously. He couldn't take his eyes off Moanossoans' mouth, so beautifully formed yet strange like Namonnae's...

"Takeru? I said we'll leave the bus and have look at that temple! Are you coming?"

Takeru, blinking, grinned at Carl.

"No, go ahead, I... I can't stand the air outside."

It was partly true; the hot air of the overpopulated metropolis was overripe, compared to the antiseptic climate of his lab. The driver, an impassive Indian security officer, stayed inside; so did seven amphibians, and Takeru. He made an attempt to join the alien conversation, by asking them what they were talking about. The amphibians almost stopped talking, wording a few clipped phrases and sounds to each other. Then Tmmtena, the male who appeared to be the reclusive tech-head of the group, looked at Takeru and made some sort of explanation. His English was stuttering, awkward, rapider than Ranmotanii's.

"I speeeak dooo nnot... riiight oonnehundred perccentt... I tryy

*sooo. Siriaaann humansss... uuus nnow regissster speecialll braiinn
 patternns ffrom come lannd-humans iin name 'temple' houuseee... I see
 brain patteernss wwith our machinesss... see patternns thaaat imiitate
 patternss in otherr plllaces timmes wwe meeet lannd-humans outsiide buss.*

*"I try say sso... Them innn temple think same aas when they lllook at
 that statuue, aas time llland-humans saaw uss realll. Takeeruu... know more
 like whhy?"*

Takeru felt as if his stomach had dropped through his abdomen and into his legs. He was used to separating science and faith razor-sharp - there was one Takeru praying before the ancestors' shrine (given time), and another Takeru performing tensor analysis on composite-metals for the industry. But these simple, artless creatures (he suddenly thought of them, annoying himself yet again) saw human 'faith' as just another scientific phenomenon, a distinctive pattern in the brain's higher functions.

"I have a question. In your own brains, can you measure patterns that resemble those patterns in land-humans?"

Tmmtenaar closed his large eyes suddenly, stuck his "hand" into a socket in his vest, and produced an instrument similar to the thought-recorders that the scientists had received. He put the device around his head and did something to activate it, eyes still closed. The other Sirians studied him silently. After an interval of roughly half a minute, Tmmtenaar opened his eyes, let his fingers dance across the knobs of his vest, and addressed Takeru. He sounded livelier, less awkward now.

*"I maade regiister off mmy owenn brrain wwhen thinnkiiing oof my
 Aancestorss. Thhose patternns arre nnot muuch differennt, mmuch thhe*

saame aas. Takeerru think llike goood. Thhank-you-very-muchh for your heelp."

"What are these 'Ancestors'? You have mentioned them before."

Tmmtenaa blinked rapidly, turned away from the Japanese engineer, and moved closer to the other Sirians.

"Tmmtenaa?"

Tmmtenaa sat still, eyes shut, clutching one of the female Sirians like an overgrown child. A complete change of behavior for someone who seemed the least inclined to hug any other being. Had the amphibian made a slip, had Takeru frightened him? Maybe these beings weren't quite as superior as he had taken for granted. Maybe they could be outsmarted after all, if one pandered to their high self-confidence. He had to find a way to make them confide in him... but how? If there was anything on this planet the Sirians valued highly enough, to do as a bribe... Gold? Metals? Food? (They had enjoyed his sushi at the welcoming party.) More music? Pure groveling? Affection, friendship? Secret deals, power bids? Takeru's mind raced, finding no possibilities...except friendship. He had to try harder.

He couldn't talk to the others about this, they must not know that he had been offered a fortune, if he could bring back some valuable Sirian know-how back exclusively to Japan. The whole world might benefit from what the scientists learned from this alien visit - but he could make his nation a favor and himself rich, if he learned something more. He ought to have no moral qualms about it. Surely, he assured himself, wouldn't every scientist on Alien Beach also be a citizen and a patriot when required to?

The inner voice that called him a corporate whore returned, but so

faintly he could shut it off almost without effort. Takeru checked his watch and realized that the away team had been out for half an hour. He asked the security officer to contact his colleagues over the radio and check how they were doing.

Chapter Thirteen

DAY 68

The soldier was sworn into the Church of Ranmotani together with a handful of other new recruits - a sea baptism on the beach, led by Regional Elder Tanii and accompanied by more chanting from several hundred assembled cult members.

All the same.

All happy.

All loving each other.

Now the soldier was one of them, his head shaved, dressed in a crimson-red monk's robe, plain sandals on his feet. The Regional Elder proclaimed to the new initiates that they were receiving blessings from Ranmotani; the cultists chanted with joy in response, dancing together on the beach. But there was not a single Sirian in sight.

It briefly reminded the soldiers of his days in the army. That community had been based on love of the homeland, and hatred of whoever the "enemy" happened to be. Now he was part of a family based on love of the Sirians, and of each other. He felt dazed and happy - though he suffered recurring urges to shout obscenities and run away from the crowd. The baptism was over; scores of cultists hugged him and the other initiates warmly, congratulating them. The soldier kept looking for Patty's face - but all faces looked the same here.

Only at dusk after too much chanting and praying, when he staggered to his tent, did Patty show up. She disrobed in a single movement, smiled

invitingly and lay down with him. He guessed it was a gesture of reward, on behalf of the church... and he accepted it. When the soldier was shaken awake early the next morning, Patty was already up and away. The group overseer shouted at him to get up and get to work.

DAY 69

"This is World News with Veronica Palazzi..."

"In a surprise move, the governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran today signed a military pact between them, that includes a common defense policy against what they call 'extraterrestrial invasion'. Ever since these major oil powers recently left the United Nations, this alliance has been rumored. Since both countries acquired their own nuclear arsenals just before the Sirian landings, the new pact has completely overturned the previous balance of power and deterrence.

"The smaller powers of the region are now in a unique situation: Iraq and Kuwait, bitter enemies, find themselves squeezed between Saudis and Iranians and may now be forced into each other arms. And Israel, the third nuclear power in the region, has cut itself off from the United Nations as well as from American support. It may now face a combined nuclear threat of the two former rivals. An expansion of the pact to include Israel seems unlikely."

Kuwait City, Kuwait.

As seen from the airplane, the desert was still flecked with old soot. Not so long ago, Saddam Hussein's armies had set the vast oilfields on fire,

sending black smoke across the entire region.

Carl asked the Sirians why they had chosen Kuwait this time. Ranmotanii and Oanss could easily count several reasons. They had seen TV broadcasts about the Gulf War, even as their solar-sail ship was on its way; it was one of the more advanced desert Arab countries with the close sea proximity the Sirians craved; and it would serve as a resting-stop before they continued to Egypt. The destination of Egypt hadn't been overtly mentioned before, yet somehow Lazar had all the time felt it would - considering the previous probing of Earth 6,000 years before. Naturally, he thought, the Sirians would be curious to see what had become of the once-great culture of the Nile.

Before the Osprey could land at the U.S. Air Force base in Kuwait City - the plane's official nationality was American - a radio message reached the pilot. He asked Carl Sayers to respond directly. Carl made his way to the small cockpit and took a headset.

"Carl Sayers of the ECT, speaking."

"Is this link secured? Okay. Hello, Mr. Sayers, this is General Jack T. Rappaport, commander of the U.S. airbase here in Kuwait City. I got the news just an hour ago. You're really coming down with a delegation of Sirians, are you?"

"Um, the news is confirmed, General. It's me, a few others of the scientist team, and seven of the Sirian visitors on the plane. Is anything the matter?"

"Well, sir, I've been briefed on the deal with the aliens... free to visit any place on Earth, clearance with the U.N. Security Council and the

President, but... this country barely comes under the Security Council's jurisdiction. I would strongly recommend you to rethink -"

"General, the last time I checked, Kuwait was still a member of the United Nations."

"Sure - just barely. For God's sake, have you seen the news today? Oil prices are plummeting all over the world, all because of your amphibian friends. The Arabs are scared shitless that the aliens will reveal advanced power-sources that'll make oil as obsolete as burning wood. If the Kuwaiti public would learn that the hated Sirians are landing on their soil, they'll demand that Kuwait leaves the U.N. and all American troops are thrown out! You could start a new Gulf War here!"

"I see... General, we have already plotted an alternative landing-site on the U.S. aircraft-carrier off the coast. We will take that route for now, and I'll return to you later. I promise I will put forward your advice to the Sirians. Thank you very much."

"Sayers, I've got nothing against extraterrestrials. But you've got to reckon with the reality of the situation here."

"Yes, of course. Bye."

Carl gave the pilot the order to head for the aircraft-carrier, and went to explain the situation to the Sirians.

The Sirians were not surprised to hear of the danger. As before, they expressed no worry; it seemed foolish of them to be so fearless. But for once they accepted the denial without discussion. Carl quickly informed the President over the phone, then discussed the matter with the other three

scientists.

"Could it be that they counted on being refused?" he probed, thinking out loud. "Sort of testing the waters, seeing how far they could go with us?"

"They might have had all kinds of reasons to visit an Arab country which had figured in a televised war," Ann said. "It doesn't prove anything particular."

"Why is it that they never seem to make advance plans with us?" Takeru said, taking the others by surprise. He had barely spoken at all to them during the journey, mostly been photographing and recording the Sirians in travel. He could no longer resist the urge to voice his thoughts.

"Is it possible," he speculated, "that they have become victims of their own technology? They have robots of all sizes, taking care of all their needs... probably no sickness, no schools, instant knowledge at the press of a button or a thought signal... could it have made them clumsy, even dumb, when they face a new culture that has none of their comforts?"

"That does sound credible, Takeru," Carl said. "I wouldn't take too much about them for certain. Maybe - this might sound crazy to you - we could try appealing to their machines rather than to the Sirians themselves."

It didn't sound crazy to Lazar or Takeru; Ann didn't voice her disagreement, for fear of sounding too emotional. The sign FASTEN SEATBELTS blinked above the doorway to the cockpit. They all - Sirians included - buckled up.

Machines, machines everywhere, but not a drop to drink, Carl thought absentmindedly. Would we be human without them...

DAY 70

Gizeh, Egypt.

It proved a complicated process to get the Sirian group safely out into the desert, without undue attention from tourists. The Sirians were expressly uncomfortable with the region's dryness and heat - yet they insisted on visiting the pyramids and the Sphinx personally, or they would immediately return back to Alien Beach. Their interest seemed almost obsessive. Lazar was proud over his country's ancient heritage, and the Sirians' interest in it.

Still, he asked his teammates rhetorically: "Would such advanced creatures even bother coming to Earth in person? Why the risk and cost?"

It wasn't that mankind's culture in itself was of any intrinsic value to the Sirians. Human technology was ridiculously primitive by comparison - not to mention loud, smelly, and unsubtle. The Sirians did not care to explain their demand. They simply pursued it, and got what they wanted: a visit.

At nighttime, the pyramids and the Sphinx were eerily illuminated by yellow floodlights, which accentuated every crack and crevice of the withered sandstone. With no tourists allowed nearby, the scientists and the seven Sirians followed the government guides past the monuments. First, they stopped nearby the Sphinx. It was huge this close, dwarfing even the tall extraterrestrials into a kind of humility. Silently, they studied the corroded body and head, walking slowly and without undue haste. The aliens' feet were bare on the hard gravel and sand, at the least to the human eye. Lazar had been silent during the journey from Kuwait to Egypt; now he

couldn't contain himself. He had to know.

"Ranmotanii, please tell us the truth about Egypt. Was there a great culture, a big city, here - before these pyramids were built?"

The old Sirian studied him with his eyes open wide, now that the sun wasn't distracting them. Their very size, the blackness of their pupils, the myriad capillaries made Lazar feel faint and small. After a long moment, Ranmotanii opened his mouth and sang an answer.

"Maany aanswerss cann wwwe mmmake to yourr quuestionn... orrr liiike sso: ffor twennty-five thouusannd yearrs at lleast... waas theree aa ccity or aa laarrge culltuure hhere. Ssometimmes thee ciity waas abandonned. Sommetimess iit was ruined. Soometimmes therre waas a wwwar. Buut the Sphhinx waas uused duriing aall thhat timmme. Llazar... Yyou undeerstand thhhis? Thee Sphhinx waas used ass lonng aas humaans wwere hhere?"

"Yes, Ranmotanii. Thank you! Thank you so much."

"You'rre wellcommme."

Lazar felt so grateful he could cry - and he hadn't even been hoping for this information, though it felt so important. Carl took Lazar's arm and brought him out of the range of the cameras, to spare him public embarrassment.

"Please get a hold of yourself, Lazar," he asked softly. "We are representing others than ourselves. You almost fell into tears there."

"Sorry, Carl. I don't know what came over me. But they just opened up history for me - their perspective is so much longer than anything humanity's got."

"I agree. But we're here to find out about them, not ourselves. We shouldn't let them divert us like that."

"But you will find out about yourself, Carl. We all will."

Something about Lazar's strange off-hand comment made Carl shiver. He blamed the freezing desert night.

"Over here!" the guide shouted. "Here is the path that leads to the pyramid entrances..."

DAY 71

The soldier's old migraine was coming back, as before the first visions - only without the visions.

No vivid images and experiences forced themselves into his brain - just dull, dumb pain. Deeply missing the visions he wondered, hazily, why they had stopped so soon. He briefly thought of asking the Regional Elder, who always claimed he had a unique mental link to the Sirians. Then again, why should the soldier bother his brothers and sisters with those insignificant visions of his old life? There was a greater vision guiding his life now, the vision shared to them by the illuminated Regional Elder. And everyone loved each other - though hardly physically, because there seemed to be no energy left for such things. Every day meant hard work, chanting and praying, then a deep sleep of exhaustion.

There were no more visions. They had ended, and the soldier came to a conclusion: he had finally done what his Sirian benefactors wanted, when he had joined the Church of Ranmotani. He still wondered how it had been done - if there had been a science behind the visions, it was beyond his

grasp.

His headache increased, and he had to ask for medical help from the overseer.

DAY 74

Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

The city of circular ruins on the African savannah had been around for - there were no good theories anymore, because even the Sirians confessed they didn't know for sure. Their automatic space-probes, they said, didn't date back that far - a fact that made the circular ruins seem even more impressive. All they could tell Carl Sayers was that the visible ruins were built on a much older, underground foundation. Carl suppressed his personal anger over previous generations of European scientists, who had either claimed "Negroes" were too primitive to have built the city, or that the ruins were not that old anyway.

The visible ruins, like the pyramids of Egypt, might well be a small remnant of a previous culture, now turned to dust. So many cultures, so many generations had existed before the present, that their traces made up part of the very ground that the group walked on.

The Sirians took their time walking around the ruined city, the ancient cobblestone pathways, feeling the dark stones, probing with their instruments. Some of them closed their eyes and put devices over their heads, seemingly sinking into waking dreams of another time. Takery tried asking them if they saw images from back when the ruins were a living city,

but got no definite answer. The Sirians kept a lot of secrets for no apparent reason; Takeru began to wonder if they would ever share them with mankind. He decided to attempt something desperate, telling himself he was acting as a citizen and patriot.

"Moanossoans!"

The tall, talkative female amphibian had been straying a bit apart from the rest of the group, and he had followed her to a clearing.

"Yyyes?"

"Look, Moanossoans... look at the beautiful flowers growing over there!" He felt like an utter fool as he pointed out the dry flowers growing in the cool shadow of a black ruin wall. "Do you want me to pick some of them for you?"

"Is iit allowwwed?" she asked, eyeing the flowers curiously.

"Yes, no problem. Wait here."

Takeru nervously hurried across a ruined street-crossing, snatched a half dozen small, purple-and-white flowers from the ground, then returned to the much taller Moanossoans and offered her the bouquet. She took it at arm's length, punched a knob on her metallic vest, and seemed to listen for a second. Then she smiled down at the shorter Takeru with her wide, thick lips, and made a rapid clicking-noise. Her already half-closed eyes narrowed further.

"Whhy do yyou diiid liike sso?" she asked.

"Because... because I like Sirians. I like your people. And to do like so, is one way of showing I like you."

She did not put the flowers under her nasal openings to take a sniff -

Takeru assumed her sense of smell was so good she didn't have to. But there was the slightest stir of her nasal openings...

"Explaaain howw you llike mmy peopllle..."

"I want to be like your people. I want to be near your people, and do the things you do. I... envy you. Do you know that word - 'envy'?"

He looked around him - no, the others hadn't gone looking for them just yet. At length she nodded, once.

"Yyyes... envvvy."

Moanossoans suddenly devoured the bunch of flowers, stalks and all, chewed them thoughtfully, and swallowed with an audible gulp.

"Veryy good food, like you mmade oon Alieeen Beachh. Thhank yooou vvvery muchh, Takeruuu..."

She gave him a quick smile - too quick - then turned and walked rapidly off down a path where the rest of group had went away. Takeru was no social genius, but he knew a brush-off from a pretense of ignorance. He wanted to kick himself; that female had seemed the most easygoing of them all, yet she had seen through his feeble act of flattery at once...

"Where you been?" Carl asked Takeru when the Japanese engineer returned, a minute after Moanssoans had joined her group.

"I just had to take a leak," Takeru lied. "Are we staying here all day?"

"I'm not sure. They're already talking about the next place they want to stop by."

"Europe?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"It doesn't take an Einstein to figure that out."

Ann could stand the blistering African heat; she was wearing her straw hat. Even the amphibians were starting to wear them, much to the amusement of some humans. She hated ruins. They only made her think of death, decay, and oblivion. There was so much life, so much activity and growth they could be studying instead... but the Sirians kept dragging the group on these morbid excursions to dead civilizations. She couldn't keep her discontent silent for much longer.

DAY 76

Rome, Italy.

Ann: "It's creepy, the way they take pictures and use their instruments on the old ruins."

Lazar: "All the other tourists do."

Ann: "It just creeps me out, don't ask me why."

Lazar: "We need to discuss this later. I'll get back to you."

Ann asked Oanss his opinion of the sights of the 2000-year-old Roman ruins: white marble columns, restored wall mosaics, and worn-down, white cobblestone roads lined with tall pines.

Oanss told her it reminded him of all the other dead cultures he had seen before... images of Earth from Sirian space-probe images, thousands of years old. She asked him how ancient the oldest dead, great culture on Earth was, and its location. He told her Egypt, twenty-five thousand years ago - to

his knowledge. The foundations of the circular Zimbabwe ruins were older but he didn't know exactly how old.

A terrible thought came over Ann.

"How long do you think my culture will last, before it becomes ruins like Egypt or Zimbabwe?"

Oanss made a face somewhat like a child being suddenly frightened, and croaked something she could not make out. He walked away from her, huddling like he had never done before. It was answer enough. The obsessive recording and recording of data... the breakneck-speed tour around the globe... the fixation with ruins of cultures once discovered while still active... there was only one reason why the Sirians were in such a hurry to learn all they could about mankind.

She had to warn Carl.

"I've been talking this over with Ranmotanii before," Carl explained to her. Ann was on the verge of tears, and her hands trembled as she held her coffee-cup.

"D-do you think he would have given it to us straight, huh?" she said angrily. "Right up in our faces: 'Earthlings, you're doomed! Now say cheese, so we can get some nice postcards of your civilization - before it crumbles, just like every other culture you ever built!' Do you think he would say that?"

"No - and he didn't. But he assured me that they aren't invaders, waiting to take over. Their culture is inherently nomadic, so they expect settled cultures to die out in time - it's natural for nomads to assume that."

"What bloody difference does it make? We're doomed anyway -"

Carl grabbed Ann's hands, commanding her attention.

"Ann, Ann, calm down! Mankind as a whole is not doomed. What he meant - what I *think* he meant - was that if cultures settle down in one place for too long, they will die out - whether it's a city or a planet doesn't matter. So if mankind stays on the move, we're practically safe! You know I've always supported the drive to colonize space..."

"Yeah... yeah. I understand."

"Good. Now, even if the Sirians won't share their nuclear-powered spaceship-drive with us, or explain how they built that huge solar-sail... at least their example will inspire humanity. So we're not doomed - only those of us who are stuck in the mud."

She nodded, sobbing slightly.

"You mean those who will not be inspired... those who will only feel threatened... who will respond like settled peoples have always responded to nomads..."

"Yes. True. There is a real risk of war, and it's getting more obvious by the day. Believe it or not, the fleet that surrounds Alien Beach is there to protect the Sirians from attack, not the opposite."

"Yeah. Thanks, Carl."

She wiped her eyes, and just for an instant Carl was tempted to kiss her. He moved away from her, and grinned reassuringly (or rather he hoped it would look reassuring).

"We've all been working too hard on this project, Ann. There's a lot of tension around. As leader of the team I strongly suggest you take a vacation

away from Alien Beach."

"Not yet. I just have to -"

"As of now."

"Well... okay. I was planning to go back to Sri Lanka, to see Arthur. He's been begging me to come and tell me about... you know. As soon as this tour is over, okay?"

"Okay."

Chapter Fourteen

DAY 77

"Patty. Are you asleep?"

"Hmm?"

"Patty... tell me more about yourself. I mean, I've been here such a long time and I still barely know you."

"I did not truly live until I joined Ranmotanii's flock. As you see me know, you know the real me."

"Okay... but what was it like before?"

"You really need to know?"

"Yes. It... could help me enlist more adepts."

"Soldier... you must tell no one else. Outside influences are a diversion from the true path."

"Of course."

"I... I was raised by rich parents. My mom was a big movie star in her youth, then she married her director. He's a rich Hollywood producer now. They groomed me to become a star. Dad cast me in his new TV series. I had it all... lovers to pick and choose, a new nose, new breasts, expensive clothes, fashionable drugs, five cars, my own Beverly Hills apartment..."

"Did they treat you badly?"

"My life had no spiritual bearings. My parents meant well, but they were blinded by material success. Then, when Dad started to plan a TV series and a movie about the Sirians, he invited the Regional Elder from the new Church of Ranmotani as a consultant... and the Regional Elder showed

me the true path of life. I soon left my old life to join his flock."

"Didn't your parents intervene?"

"Oh, they tried. They almost lured me from the true path with promises of money, fame, a starring role in Dad's next movie... but I rejected their false ways. I'm happy now. Don't think of it."

"Don't you miss them sometimes?"

"No, not at all... Did you leave anyone to join us?"

"Didn't have much of a life to leave. Patty, there's something I must tell you about. When the Sirians first made themselves known to us, I had these sudden visions..."

"You should talk to an Elder about it. We are not allowed to discuss individual experiences in private."

"But -"

"Talk to an Elder."

"Okay."

DAY 78

Cannes, France.

Mats Jonsson made a phone call to Carl, from Alien Beach.

"It's time for your physical check-up again. Please drop by the nearest hospital and get a quick scan of all of you, Sirians excluded."

"Can do. E-mail the specs, will you?"

"Check your laptop, it's there already. Just tell the hospital to send their results straight to me without analysis. I need your full-body X-rays, CAT scans, blood samples, urine..."

"I think we can get it for you, Mats. Thanks for the reminder."

"How is the group doing so far?"

"You mean us, or the...?"

"Both."

"Our visitors are fine I think, but the 'land-humans' are a bit tense.

Ann had a small nervous breakdown in Rome, and I'm getting worried about Lazar. He's using his Sirian thought-recorder every night, he claims it helps him in his work. But he's been acting strange the last few days..."

"Strange?"

"Sort of... distant, not quite there."

"Have you tried asking him to stay off that device?"

"He won't listen, and what can I do? Until he also cracks up, I cannot interfere with his work... and somehow I trust him. But the ones left on Alien Beach, how is their health? Any alien infections showing up yet?"

"No. We've had a few upset stomachs and headaches, but it turned out to be stress symptoms, no alien bacteria at all. In fact our crew is healthier now, than when they arrived! And those pesky sand flies have all but disappeared. Can I blame it on the Sirian machinery on the island?"

"Ask them if they are actively keeping germs and pests off the island. It might be they are protecting themselves and accidentally keeping you clean as well."

"Will do. When will your team return?"

"Can't really say. Weeks... months... it's up to them now."

"Okay, see you then. Take care."

"Thanks. See ya."

Carl put down his phone and felt at his chest. His heart was beating steadily, and he didn't feel anything to be wrong with him. One day, as the doctors had warned him, his cancer would return and finish him off. Carl wanted another lifetime, three more lifetimes with the amphibians... and all he had been granted by the U.N. was this one, measly year. His heart began to pound harder.

DAY 79

Lascaux, France.

The group was allowed deep into the painted caves, where images of ancient life adorned the walls; bison, deer, mammoths and smaller animals. Oanss was fascinated, even more so than the other amphibians.

"Thiss was nnot ooon the iimages froom the oold Sirriann expeditionn!" he exclaimed to Ann, who was standing next to him in the lamplight. "Thiss is ollder than sso..."

"Do you like the painted images?"

"Caannot sayyy... hhhow I like the paiinted imagess. Like soo... I amm..."

Oanss seemed to fall into a trance. Without warning, he tried to reach out past the handrail and touch the cave walls.

"Stop, Oanss!"

Unthinkingly, Ann grabbed hold of Oanss' upper arm and stopped it. She jerked still, swallowed - for one moment afraid of his response.

"The images are too old, they will be destroyed if you touch them," she explained. The taller amphibian made a formal nod and shrank back

from the wall, turning away from her gaze.

"Correect, yess... I amm sorriry Aaann... Oanorrn ssays land-huumaan imageees arrre baad ffor ouur braains."

"We need them in order to live. We call them 'art'."

"Exppllain thee woord... 'aart?'"

"Art is... Lazar? Help me out. I think you know the answer?"

"Oh yes, I understand what you're getting at. Oanss, 'art' is what we land-humans have instead of your machines that record and play dreams. You see what I mean? Instead of actually knowing what we think, we make art to try and show our thoughts to each other."

"Yesss... yees... I think sommethiing sstrange noow. Iff I couuld nnot rrecord annd plaay mmy thoughts, I wwould doo painteed imagess iinstead?"

"Yes!"

Ann giggled. She couldn't recall seeing any Sirian do anything artistic, except song, simple flute-playing, and that ritual dance on the island. She looked at the amphibian, and she was intensely curious to follow his thread of thoughts.

"Oanss. A question: if you painted an image of what you were thinking, on this wall, what would you paint?"

Oanss'e eyelids fluttered rapidly; he looked from Ann to Lazar to the cave paintings, with visible and growing confusion.

"I doo not understaaand," he told them, voice rising to what might or might not be a wail of inner turmoil. *"I doo noot understaaand!"*

Oanss suddenly walked away from them, back up to the cave

entrance, ignoring their shouts and gestures.

"What... what did I do?" Ann asked Lazar. "How could it be so hard for him to imagine that, with all his knowledge..."

"Plato's cave," Lazar muttered. "Plato's cave."

"Let's go back up. Explain yourself."

They ascended toward the surface, ducking down in places where the roof came down low. Lazar did the talking, while Ann helped him tread his steps through the ill-lit passage.

"Do you remember from school textbooks, that ancient philosopher Plato... who wanted to abolish all artists from his imagined 'perfect state'? Well, the Sirians have finally reached that 'perfection' themselves. At first, I didn't know if they were hiding their culture, to avoid making too much of an impression on primitive mankind."

Ann shook her head dazedly; Lazar went on.

"Of course they must've had 'art' at some point in the past, while they were yet developing. But now... they have reached all their dreamed goals. And whenever they feel like sharing their thoughts and yearnings with a fellow amphibian, their technology can handle that.

"So there is no need for art as a creative outlet, or to channel your inner secrets to the community. Hence the blandness of their culture..."

When they reached the exit, Lazar was sweaty from the exertion, his voice hoarser than usual.

"I've come to these conclusions in the last few weeks... but I decided to not talk about them... until my final report is delivered at the end of the Sirian visit..."

Ann stared at the wrinkled, sweaty light-brown face of Lazar. He was smiling at her, as if he hadn't noticed the incoherence of his last sentence, and casually wiped his own brow with a handkerchief. She looked away reflexively, yet knowing that he was oblivious to her reaction. As if... as if he... she refused to finish the thought.

"Let's see where Oanss went," she said abruptly, avoiding Lazar's strange, contented gaze.

DAY 80

"Brother Soldier, for the last time: reject these false visions! Your mind has been clouded by the mental pollution of a materialist society!"

"But Elder Tanii, they *meant* something. Just help me think this through -"

"*Don't* think! *Unthink* these false visions! You must let nothing obscure the true path to Sirian enlightenment!"

"Yes, Elder."

"Chant with us, brother Soldier. Chant the praise of Sirius!"

A disturbing mixture of sweat-inducing panic and ecstatic joy filled the soldier. The chanting, ever louder, sounded like the roar of the ocean to him. He began to vacantly stare out at the nearby Pacific Ocean.

"Yes... Such beautiful song... now I truly hear the meaning of the chant..."

He thought his head was aching, but he wasn't sure. It was all so fuzzy.

DAY 81

Berlin, Germany.

The group took the bus straight through the city. The Sirians asked for some postcards. They said very little, even to each other. Carl and the scientists sensed a new ambience from the silent, watchful amphibians - something akin to tension, without an apparent reason. Carl dared not ask what was bothering them - he was afraid of what their answer might be, and recalled the fate of Bruno Heinzhof. How much did the Sirians know of mankind's history? Still, they came here of their free will... why?

In the evening, Carl became too confused to think or see clearly. He felt incredibly weak and inadequate, a mere child trying to make sense of a too large world. They were incomprehensible to him. Perhaps they would always be. There had to be some factor he was overlooking... some vital clue...

Lazar felt ill. He wanted to leave the city. It had to be his age showing.

"This is an evil place," Takeru said to himself.

"What?" Carl asked.

"I just realized that I missed the chance this year, to see the blossoming of the cherry-trees in Tokyo," Takeru told him. "A very important festival back home."

"I wonder why the Sirians did not ask to see Japan when they were in the Pacific Region," Carl said. "Takeru?"

"Why don't you ask them?"

Carl did so; their answer alarmed him. He hurried to tell Takeru in private.

"They have equipment that's measuring the tensions in the planet's crust... and they expect a major earthquake in Japan."

"When?" Takeru asked.

"They couldn't tell for sure. But we ought to warn the Japanese government."

"Yes, yes. Why didn't Ranmotanii warn us, until we asked them - by - by pure coincidence?"

"I really don't know. I thought I had them figured out, but -"

Both men were speechless. At least, a great loss of lives could be averted - but how many other waiting catastrophes did the amphibians already know how to predict?

There was something on the soldier's mind, a thought struggling to take shape... but his near-constant hunger and the constant work schedule made it hard to think. He needed more food than they allowed his group. The downtown marketplace? He had no money, and he ranked too low in the church to be trusted with any.

To steal, then.

When the opportunity came, he opted to join a small group on an errand to the marketplace; the group's overseer followed and watched them. The overseer's name was Patty. The soldier waited, tense, until the moment Patty looked another way - and snatched a can of corned-beef from a market-stand. He was in a crowd and the shopkeeper didn't see the theft. The

soldier's stomach rumbled more painfully, but he kept the can hidden the whole day.

Later, he found the time to eat the stolen food. He ate too quickly, and his stomach reacted violently after having been adapted to rice and lentils. Pale and sweaty with nausea, the soldier excused himself from his group and went to rest in his tent. Yet a few hours passed; he felt a little better.

DAY 82

Stonehenge, England.

The site had been evacuated just an hour earlier. British troops had forced the regular tourists away, before the Sirians were allowed to enter the open hill with the stone circle in daylight.

The Sirians were excited and happy, examining the tall, ancient megaliths, stroking their surfaces with reverence, using their metal instruments on the gray rock. And for once, they eagerly told the scientists why: the previous Sirian visit by an automatic probe - 6,000 years ago - had surveyed and recorded the site while it was being actively used by humans. The old Sirian records matched the location perfectly, confirming their reliability.

The British linguist of the team asked permission to see the recordings of Stonehenge from circa 4,000 B.C. The Sirians surprised the scientists by accepting at once. They set up a small device, and projected a hologram onto the surface of one of the megaliths, for everyone to see.

Moving 3-D images at natural speed appeared, showing primitive people at work and in rituals, dressed in skins, furs, and woven clothing -

more and finer clothing than one usually associated with the "Stone Age". There were few surprises in the images, except that they were taken at such close range. The Sirians explained that the observations were made by a camouflaged, remote-controlled probe that the natives mistook for a bird. In these moving images, Stonehenge had not yet taken its present form. The circle of stones was familiar in size and position; but the stones themselves were much smaller, less impressive and more irregularly shaped.

This made sense to the scientists. It was a well-known historical fact that new religions often built their ritual grounds on the sites of older, dying ones. Tents and wooden structures, an entire provisory village, surrounded the outskirts of the open height of the central site.

Then followed images that shocked the team. A priest tied up and sacrificed animals to the sun god, on the central altar of the Stonehenge. First tame dogs, then a wild boar, then a deer, then a bear... then an adult man, then a woman... and finally a little child. There were even recorded sounds, coming from small loudspeakers in the Sirians' wearable machinery that the group could hear. The animals screeched and so did the little child, as the grave priest slit their throats. Only the adults died without protest, and the primitive crowds cheered the slaughter.

Lazar thought: *It must feel peculiar to look at the human race's history from outside, and see the patterns we don't see...*

Carl said almost nothing during the rest of the day. He could barely make himself speak over the phone, even when his wife called.

DAY 83

With his full mental capacity slowly returning, herding and stealing all kinds of food in secret, the soldier could finally find the strength to realize what had been nagging him.

He was still unhappy.

Not just because he was shaven bald, owned nothing (even his shabby robe and sandals belonged to the Church of Ranmotani), and his life now consisted mainly of hard labor and chanting. As if for the first time, he saw his entire past life, and saw that he had always been unhappy - with himself, with what he could expect of his life, with being human, not even a very bright human at that. Why had he wasted so many years of his life acting like an overgrown teenager?

In hindsight, his joining the army had been nothing but a desperate attempt to break with adolescence and become a grown-up, once and for all. His army years, he saw now, had been an immense disappointment; the war had shattered his aspirations to improve himself, to belong to a purpose. He had proved incapable of following the basic purposes of any army: to kill in combat, and to obey orders without question.

The soldier felt moved by a sudden, skewed gratitude toward the cult. The half-starvation it had put him through, must have cleansed his system of all the alcohol and dope he had been destroying his brain with, ever since he dropped out of the military. Finally he was cured of his addictions. With the poisons sweated out, he could no longer escape himself and his past. So, the soldier asked himself as he was sweeping the open place before the main stage, what should he be doing now? What about the aliens on nearby Alien Beach, he wondered. Had they really anything to do with his visions...

He had not yet decided if the cult actually was in touch with the Sirians - there was still some mental block that stopped him from doubting the cult's leaders. For now, he had to assume the visions were an individual experience. And they were about alien life, about life in a totally different culture. He could not have made the visions up himself; they were too detailed, too vivid. And there was a pattern to them; each vision had felt like coming from the one, same alien. Sampled experiences from a life.

The soldier recalled the TV broadcast from the first Sirian landing on the Moon, when that astronaut had received a gift. What was it again? A device that records and plays thoughts, wasn't that what Ranmotanii had called it on TV? There had been no further news of that detail - the government had of course classified it.

You idiot, the soldier thought, how could you have missed such an obvious lead! They have the technology to record and play thoughts, and I'm the living proof. This is some kind of experiment they're doing... First they contacted us with television, because they wanted to meet us on our own level. But then they'll start to try and communicate in the way that feels natural to them. But how? And why me? Shouldn't there be others receiving visions as well? Others in this cult?

Out of the corner of his eye, the soldier glimpsed Tanii, the Regional Elder, coming his way across the dusty field. The fat bearded man moved closely surrounded by his robed officers, bodyguards, and his accountant from the church's American headquarters. The soldier stepped aside, and they passed by like he didn't exist. The Regional Elder had discarded the soldier's hallucinations as mere delusions. But if Tanii was in telepathic

contact with the Sirians, as he always claimed, why didn't he also read the soldier's thoughts now?

Screw you, you fat bastard, the soldier thought, glowering at The Regional Elder's neck. The Regional Elder didn't even slow down his pace. The soldier frowned with newfound insight. He had been indoctrinated. And he had been too weak, too addicted, to desperate for acceptance to resist. But after curing his drug addiction, the cult could be of no more help. It was getting to be time to leave, when the opportunity came.

A few days before, two cult members had tried to escape on a boat leaving the island; one of them made it, but returned back on his own a day after - so strong was the pull of the cult. The soldier could admit to himself now, that he too had grown afraid of the outside world which might condemn him as an insignificant lunatic among others. With that insight came great shame.

Chapter Fifteen

DAY 85

New York City, USA.

With only half a day's beforehand notice, the security buildup had proved swift and immense.

Yet, anyone could have expected that the Sirians would eventually come to New York, the city featured in countless broadcast images and words. Armored police trucks were driving down every block of Manhattan Island. Heavily armed officers, wearing vests and helmets, were posted on every street-corner. Scores of helicopters were buzzing in the dirty sky above the high rooftops.

Four Secret Service agents, constantly overhearing the police band through discrete little headsets, flanked the back and front end of the bus. The Sirians had been asked to visit the United Nations Headquarter long before, but they had not given a definite answer - up to and including this particular day.

"We can take you straight to the U.N. building, where you must meet the leaders of the planet. The rest of New York... is just not worth seeing."

Carl explained the state of things to the seated Sirians, before the bus left the Kennedy airport. He wanted to take them straight to the United Nations building - this was the city where he grew up, and he didn't want his guests to risk visiting it.

Moanossoans spoke up for her group: *"Caarlsssayeers... vvery impoortant ffor uss to ssee really. Nnnot onlly traansmitteed imagess offf*

Neeew Yyyork. Wwhen wee see reallly... wee becommme less nooot realll. You doo understaand thhis I sayyy? Uniteed Nationns... lateeer. Whennn theen wwwe sayy soo."

She assured him she knew the place's reputation for danger. Ranmotanii casually agreed with her - whatever authority the old alien purportedly held, it now seemed far less absolute than the humans had first assumed. (Which went to show how much humans took for granted.) Carl could at least comfort himself with the fact, that New York was less violent now than it used to be. It was also a lot blander.

"Give'em the grand tour, then head for the U.N. and wait for further orders," he told the driver.

The bus moved, went from the airport onto the highway, across one of the many crowded bridges, and entered one of the most urbanized islands in the world. Most of its major sights were passed by on the way. The seven amphibians stared out the one-way windows and pointed excitedly at various things: the Statue of Liberty, the rebuilt twin towers of the formerly destroyed World Trade Center, the neon signs on Times Square, and the new, pastel-colored Disney block. They behaved much like the other tourists groups from Europe, Asia, and South America, though their "cameras" were infinitely more advanced.

After an hour's driving through the straight streets of Manhattan, a brief summer rain ended. The sun burned mercilessly at the wet pavements - Carl was busy talking over the phone with various important people, preparing for the Sirians' hotel stay and their security arrangements for the U.N.

Headquarters - if they should suddenly decide upon going there after all. A large concentration of police forces were already sealing off all blocks surrounding the building. Ann and Lazar were talking to Oanss, asking him what he thought of the city.

"Neww Yoorrk lookss llike otherrr... oother than Siriuss way off liife. You uunderstannnd thiis? I donn't uunderrstand wwwhy manny laand-hummmans live inn thee conncentraation oof nummber llike soo."

"Land-humans want to live and work close to other land-humans. Back at Alien Beach, we always saw you, Sirians, moving in groups of several people... so you are a little like that too?" Ann suggested.

Oanss didn't nod when he answered - nodding didn't come naturally to his kind. Instead, his lips widened slightly. Suddenly understanding that Oanss hadn't intended to speak, Lazar made a question.

"Oanss, have your people seen cities that resemble New York, but on other planets than this one?"

The amphibian blinked slowly - he fumbled uneasily with the knobs of his jacket, but didn't linger on any of them - then he replied.

"No... will not talk aboutt thhat yeet. Look... theree llook. Is thaataan animalll?"

He pointed out toward a Mickey Mouse impersonator in the street, half a block away on a corner of Times Square. The man-sized "mouse" pranced about outside a huge IMAX cinema, surrounded by tourists and children, his lifelike facial expressions shifting constantly - the very latest in animatronics, Ann and Lazar realized.

"Mickey" was soon joined by "Donald," "Goofy," and a new figure: a

Disney version of... a *Sirian*.

"What the hell is this?" Ann gasped, staring at the cute, tall moving suit with its dangling tentacle-arms. The impersonator's costume had huge, rolling animatronic eyes and was drawing quite a crowd. Ann wanted to cry with anger; she bit into her knuckles and swallowed her fury, trying not call for more of the Sirians' attention.

"It's like some bad joke," Lazar mumbled to Ann. "What are we going to tell them?"

She merely shook her head.

"Isn't that illegal?" the bus driver asked out loud, taking the bus closer to the cinema. "Breach of copyright or something?"

"The movie probably won't be released until after the Sirians have left the planet," Lazar said bitterly.

Inexplicably, "Mickey" seemed to be more convincing to the amphibians than to the children. From the front of the bus, the hydraulic doors hissed open, then shut.

Carl started when his phone conference was interrupted by a shout.

"One of them just sneaked out!"

"What?"

Carl and everyone else in the bus looked out to Times Square, and saw two tall, cone-headed figures in the nearby crowd.

One, an impersonator in a cute animatronic suit.

The other, a real, frightened amphibian.

Moanossoans shrieked - a high-pitched squeak, like an umpire's whistle or a dolphin's call. It was Tmmtena who had sneaked out the door,

while one of the Secret Service agents was opening it to talk to a street cop. Now the crowd of tourists and New Yorkers surrounded both Tmmtenaar and the impersonator, closing in without mercy. In the instant he realized what was happening - his worst nightmare turned real - Carl's mind stopped. He could not shout the right order to the driver or the Secret Service men. He found himself unable to call in the police and disperse the mob.

A thousand human eyes of all ages stared at Tmmtenaar at once. In all directions, he was surrounded by hands unlike his, stretching out to touch him. The crowd's voices merged into a cacophonous roar of emotion. A little child was pushed down and trampled by older children. Cut off from the bus, Tmmtenaar stood helpless with his oval eyes flickering open-shut, open-shut, mouth pinched, arms paralyzed. Ann thought she could see him tremble. The crowd was mostly children; they couldn't harm him. But the team had to get him inside quickly, before...

There was no bang; the sniper must have been using a silencer. The crowd screamed and scattered, fanning out from the spot where Tmmtenaar collapsed. Two drops of purple-red blood dripped from his head onto the asphalt. From his metallic vest, a black liquid blob had swelled up and was covering his upper body.

A very loud, shrill warning signal came from his vest, making every human bystander hold her ears. The time elapsed from the moment Tmmtenaar had exited the bus, to when he had been shot, was less than a minute. The Secret Service men rushed outside with their guns drawn, closely followed by Moanossoans and Oanss. The two Sirians shut off Tmmtenaar's warning siren and carried him back into the bus, moving fast

and hunching down to cover him. From somewhere above, a second silent shot hit the pavement close to their feet.

"Drive to the Bellevue, quickly," a Secret Service man ordered the driver. "Don't wait for the police escort, they'll catch up on the way."

The bus driver obeyed. Carl tried to get close to Tmmtena, see where he had been hit - and Moanossoans blocked him with her arms, baring her white, cylindrical teeth at him, eyes turned to reddish slits. She made a squeaking warning-shriek, that made his ears smart. He didn't back off.

"Please, let me help. We have people who can help -"

Another, sharper squeak came, and he had to back away to the front of the bus to avoid going deaf. Ranmotanii moved up to Carl, trembling a little, and faced him.

"Tmmtena iis daaamageeed mmuch! He can die reeeally now! Ouur machinnnes say a buullett come dowwwn and liittle almmost movve into Tmtena's heead..."

There was panic in the alien's wailing voice.

"I tried to warn you! I grew up here," Carl said quickly, barely in control of his own panic. "Why didn't you listen to me? Tmmtena shouldn't have gone outside the bus!"

Face ashen, Ranmotanii shut his bloodshot eyes and opened his mouth as if ready to scream. He uttered no sound save for his quickened, deep breathing. Carl fell silent for a long moment, himself unable to calm his heart.

"I'm so sorry, Ranmotanii."

They looked toward Tmmtena, who was lying down in the back of

the moving bus, almost completely covered with the black substance oozing from his vest. The nature of this technology had not been explained, but Carl assumed it served many functions - in this case as a sort of emergency life-support system. Three other Sirians were kneeling down at Tmmtenaa's side, holding their heads, making low moans and squeaks. For all their superior knowledge, these beings appeared to instantly lose their calm when confronted with injury and the threat of violent death.

An hour later, the Sirians declared that the bullet had been removed from Tmmtenaa's head. They demanded to immediately be brought back to the airport and flown directly to Alien Beach, where he could receive special treatment in the lander vessel. For the moment he was being held in hypothermia, the black substance forming a frozen, hard cocoon that steamed with exhaust heat.

Carl could do nothing but accept their demands. The guided tour was aborted.

Chapter Sixteen

The soldier woke up in the middle of the night, his head suddenly aching. His heart beating faster with eager, conditioned anticipation, he waited for the vision to come...

Nothing. Nothing came. He saw only the usual canvas walls of his tent, faintly illuminated by the moon and lights from outside... No, wait - there was something after all. But it had to work harder to come into his consciousness, struggling and flickering.

Now it flashed through his mind's eye, lasting a subjective few seconds: A dark forest of tall trees, shaped like giant gray corkscrews with thick black leaves for crowns. This was a remote inland part of his homeworld, but it wasn't Earth. In the sky hung a violet-tinted, thick gloom. He was standing there alone, away from his company, sensing the presence and ambience of animal life, somewhere in the darkness. A sudden whizzing sound - something darted past his head, too quickly for him to perceive if it was an animal or a thing. Then he felt warm blood flowing over his face, and he knew he had been injured. A brief moment of panic -

The soldier blinked, and he was in his tent again. His hand flew up and felt his face. The injury was not real. But it meant something, clear and simple this time. Someone had been hurt, or would be. He had to be cautious and expect real, physical danger.

"We interrupt this program for a breaking news feature, live from the NBC studio in New York."

"This is Cathy Courier, live from the Today studio. Just a few minutes ago, not far from here, a visiting Sirian was witnessed being shot and injured outside the Disney IMAX Theater. Apparently, the Sirian male took part in a secret bus tour through the city, when he unexpectedly left his cover and moved out into the crowd watching a parade of impersonated Disney characters. Our roving camera team cannot reach the site now, since the police have sealed off the area in search of the one or several attackers who fired the shots.

"The whereabouts of the wounded Sirian are not certain; an unconfirmed rumor holds that he was immediately taken to the Bellevue Hospital.

"It has been known to the public for several days, that a covert Sirian tour of the world's countries was in progress; the sudden upsurge of police activity in New York, plus reports of similar activity in a consecutive number of countries, had indicated that New York was next on the list. Who was behind the attempt to assassinate a Sirian visitor is not yet known. The official leader of the ECT on Alien Beach, Carl Sayers, has been unavailable for a comment on the current crisis.

"Later on Questions and Answers, Polish science-fiction author Lew Stanislawsky will discuss the impact of this event on the extraterrestrial visit to Earth..."

DAY 86

"Tmmtenaar's going to make it, Mr. President. The shot hit him square on the head, but his suit stopped the bullet before it could enter his brain -

no, I don't know how it was done. Invulnerable they are not, but the Sirian technology is unbelievably fast sometimes..."

Carl put his hand over the phone for a moment, and looked at his colleagues in the plane seats: Ann, Lazar, Takeru, and their linguist. The Sirians were also on the plane, in a separate compartment, watching over Tmmtenaar's recovery. The injured alien could not yet speak. There were all these people he were responsible for, Carl thought, and he had failed them all. He half wanted to ask the President to resign from the ECT, half feared becoming a public scapegoat if that happened.

"Yes, sir. We're doing fairly well, but we're all quite shaken as you can understand. What? I see... well, I'm grateful the Security Council didn't vote me out. Thank you, Mr. President, for me not having to face them in a hearing. Ha, ha. I know. Right. Thank you, sir. Bye."

He put away the phone and sighed deeply. Lazar awakened from his slumber and cocked his head in Carl's direction.

"Are the politicians looking to put the blame on you?"

"Since when did you become so cynical, Lazar? Early on, I pictured you as the great humanist who understood everyone."

"I do try to understand all men's thoughts, but I'm not forced to like everyone. Let's say the jetlag made us all surly."

Carl yawned, and replied: "I shouldn't even be here now, you know. Except for the Sirians who never seem to plan anything in detail, everyone thought they were going along with our plans. Head straight for the U.N. Building, talk to the world leaders, call for global peace, I take a week off and see my family - everyone's happy."

"Have you spoken to your wife and children after the shooting?"

"Just a few hours ago. The President and his blasted staff have been on me all day and night. Thank God I had the foresight to arrange that the media can't find me."

Lazar cleared his throat.

"We need to talk, Carl. The whole team too, but you and me first. I'm starting to understand this whole process - the things that are going on between humans and aliens. It's like a psychic drama being played out with the planet as a stage - two different ways of thinking, colliding head-on... from a certain perspective, the attempt to kill Tmmtenaa was being forced through by humanity's collective imagination."

"Explain yourself. And why did he go out into the crowd anyway? The Sirians never even bothered to explain it to us - almost as if they took for granted we understood."

Lazar put his palms together before his face, features set frowning hard: "When it comes to Tmmtenaa's motives, I can only speculate. Assume... assume he was becoming claustrophobic, and was desperate to get out of the bus after all those days. Remember, these beings have been traveling through space for years, and they sleep in the ocean. The sight of the Sirian-impersonator was the impulse that made him act out an overwhelming desire for open spaces. These beings do tend to be impulsive sometimes, even playful."

"Go on..."

"The impersonator - was he arrested?"

"Yes - the police did suspect he was sent out as a decoy. They couldn't

prove it though - his costume was genuine merchandise, and he was working on schedule."

"I'll take it as coincidence then. The bus was probably being followed by the attackers long before the shooting."

"You said 'psychic drama'? Explain yourself."

Lazar leaned closer.

"I'm indebted to the Sirians, for giving us those helmets that record and play thoughts. I've been using mine every night, and it's really helped me understand myself... Have you been using yours?"

"No, no, not once."

"You were afraid of it, right?"

"No! There just wasn't time to..."

Carl stopped, sensing his own guilt. Lazar shook his head - he saw straight through the lie.

"Yes," Carl admitted, reluctantly, "I was afraid of it from the very start."

"So was I, Carl. But my professional curiosity was too great to resist using my machine..."

Lazar straightened up, eyes widening behind his thick glasses.

"Yes!" he said. "I realize now, that ever since poor Bruno broke down, you and the others have unconsciously repressed the existence of the mind-recorders!"

"You must be mistaken, Lazar. Early on, I told the crew they were free to use the devices on their own, and you did..."

"I did... no one else. Or at least, no one has even mentioned using

them to me. On this little world tour, did you see anyone but me bring their helmets along with them?"

"Well, no."

"When we come back to Alien Beach, ask the team. I'll promise you very few will have even touched their mind-recorders while we were away."

"So... why the repressing?"

"This is complicated, but I'll try..."

"All Earthlings know instinctively, that the Sirians are the ultimate outsiders. In spite of the fact that they look much like us - ironic, no? So on a sub-conscious or semi-conscious level, humans will tend to think of the Sirians as *not being real* - as an intrusion on our reality."

"The public thinks they are a fraud?"

"An intrusion on our reality. A *hallucination come alive*. A *vaguely supernatural entity*. A projection of our deepest desires and fears. And to experience that boundary between reality and imagination breaking down, does of course make you feel insecure, make you fear you're going crazy. Add to this the unexpected gift from the Sirians - a little machine that enables you to experience a dream as if it was waking existence! That's just too much. Our minds are not ready for that yet. So humanity treats Sirians as more than real, as... gods, maybe, or demons. Hence, us scientists repress these irrational impulses, and in particular our own dreams."

There was something about Lazar's matter-of-fact tone that made Carl's skin crawl. He had to suppress a weird urge to run away.

"This is outrageous," Carl objected. "You could just as well suggest we, all of humanity, wished the Sirians into existence."

"And assume we did?"

Carl blinked. Lazar met his disbelieving stare without a flinch - smiling, too. Carl went cold with fear.

"Isn't it *too* much of a coincidence," Lazar continued, "that they made themselves known to mankind now? The public interest in UFOs has been increasing steadily for the past fifty years. The schizoid cases I've been studying during my long career have also changed. They used to imagine demons - now they think it's 'aliens' who are causing the voices in their heads."

Carl shook his head; now it was too obvious what was happening, too painful to repress. He had to break the news slowly.

"Lazar, you're starting to scare me. What if your using the dream-recorder is breaking down *your* distinctions between dream and reality? What if a kind of mental crisis hit the Sirian civilization long ago... and is now happening to you? What if that's why Tmmtenaar went out of the bus - because he and his kin are so confused about dream, artifice, and reality, that they took the Disney impersonators for real beings? He thought the fake Sirian was real!"

Lazar seemed startled, but only momentarily; when he answered, he sounded shocked.

"I thought I knew why the Sirians are so artless... no ornaments, no decorations, no clothes, no decorative colors, just one single font for all letters, just blank surfaces on all their things..."

Carl had the same thought; he stared before him, clasping his hands together hard to prevent them from jerking outward.

"They are clinically insane... *all* of them. A whole culture of hyper-civilized, peaceful schizoids. They can't have art or stories or dreams, because to *them*, making a fiction is to *make up reality as well*. That's how you survive if your dream-life is equal to being awake... you avoid imagining things. You don't dream. *Anything*."

Lazar nodded slowly; it was like in one of those nightmares of his childhood, where he could see the menace coming but was unable to move out of its way. Was it really himself he heard speaking?

"And they travel around the universe... because if you can't have an imagination, reality is all you have and direct physical experience becomes the most important thing! That's why they came in person the second time, instead of sending automatic probes... that's what Oanornn meant, about dead things being real and thinking beings not being real..."

Lazar hid his face in his hands and broke down.

"Oh God... I'm going insane..."

Carl didn't know whether to hate the Sirians for having hurt Lazar, or pity them. He hugged the sobbing old Egyptian, tried to comfort him; he could feel the man's aging limbs shake with each of Lazar's panicky heartbeats. As Carl patted Lazar's shoulders, he began to see the whole picture coming together. The humanoid, friendly appearance of the Sirians really was deceptive... but in a way he hadn't imagined.

And the Sirians, he thought, can no longer imagine what it's like for us, us who take the real/imaginary distinction for granted. All the mutual misunderstandings between humans and aliens, all the strange ideas Oanornn had been trying to convey to Edmund Soto... now Carl understood them.

That is, Lazar understood them better - because mentally, Lazar was becoming one of them.

How on Earth were they going to tell the President *this*? What wouldn't the generals and warmongers do with such an argument: *The enemy is crazy, so it's no use reasoning with them.* The amphibians probably considered "land-humans" to be crazy from their point of view. This truth was way too dangerous to reveal at once. Could he himself communicate any further with the Sirians now, knowing they didn't - *couldn't* think alike?

One other option: succumb to the Sirian paradigm. Carl could use the recording-device like Lazar had done, record his own dreams and play them up while awake, day after day, until he had no fantasy-world any more... just "real things" - rocks, atoms, energy, animated matter that resembled life...

"No!"

Ann opened her eyes, rose from her seat, saw the weeping Lazar and Carl who was staring at nothing, sweaty and wild-eyed.

"Why did you shout? What's happened?"

Carl looked at her with a face of utter despair.

"I can't say... Ann... go back to sleep. Please. Dream something nice. He's fine. I'll see to it. Sleep. Please."

Ann started a little, confused and frightened.

"Is it Tmmtenaa? Is he dead?"

"No! I mean... go check how he's doing."

Ann obeyed, and left the others alone in their compartment. The British linguist was still asleep in his seat. *Dream, you lucky bastard, dream, Carl thought. How do they live that way? Do they suffer? All I wanted from*

them was answers to all the questions that've troubled me all my life... and the answers they give... I'm not sure I want them.

Midnight.

All the cult members on the island were gathered to hear their leader talk about the assassination attempt. A videotape of the TV news had been shown to them: edited by the Church, but enough to inform what had happened and its consequences. The soldier sat next to Patty, gazing up at the stage, which was lit up by lines of flickering torches. The Regional Elder, dressed for the occasion in a black robe, held a microphone in his hand, connected to a rather inadequate loudspeaker; he compensated for it by shouting until he went hoarse.

"Woe and pain! Woe and pain! This is how the evil forces strike at our collective heart! My poor friend Tmmtenaa - I can feel his pain even now, as his wound heals!"

The bloated cult-leader raised his free hand, seemingly writhing with telepathically induced pain, and the cult crowd roared with unleashed emotion.

Suddenly, the soldier was completely awake. He thought: *"Feel his pain?" What a joke! That fat clown is preening like this was a rock concert. He's not in telepathic contact with Ranmotanii. The crowd is hypnotized all the same. Now is the time to escape!*

The soldier clutched his mouth and stomach, feigned an attack of nausea, and made his way through the crowd to the dark edges of the open place. No one had attempted to stop him. He halted in a dark shadow, and

caught his breath. The petty cash he had managed to collect wasn't nearly enough to get him to another island. He could seek shelter at the local police station - they would probably send him to Fiji and the U.S. Consulate - and he would never be allowed near Alien Beach again. He just knew it.

The soldier stopped and listened to the voice of the ranting cult leader.

"The time is nigh to join our amphibian brethren! Ranmotani speaks to me, even now, and his message to us is: Faithful ones, do not despair! You are still welcome to join us in the new world we will create on this planet - not on the polluted evil surface, but in the blissful, undisturbed underwater world! If your faith in the Sirian gospel is strong enough, we will transform you into amphibians, and be able to breathe water like us."

The soldier thought: *No, you fools! Don't listen to him!* But the assembled cultists, hundreds more now than when the soldier had first joined, sounded enthusiastic enough to try out breathing water immediately. The soldier was much too aware of where this madness might lead.

Patty.

He didn't particularly like Patty, he had told himself many times, apart from a vague physical attraction. She only had eyes for the cult itself and its leader; the soldier owed her nothing. And the Sirians, the real Sirians, obviously couldn't care less. He really should be running off now, and mourn Patty's fate later...

The soldier stood still.

Chapter Seventeen

DAY 87

"This morning's press conference brought few explanations for yesterday's New York shooting, but some facts came out:

"The Sirian known as Tmmtenaa has been brought to the lander vessel at Alien Beach to recover. The police are investigating a number of known militant Islamic groups which may be involved in the assassination attempt. The Sirian spokesman has not yet given a public response to the incident.

"Surprisingly, except for the standing members of the U.N. Security Council, very few statesmen have condemned the attack in public, or pleaded for peace and reconciliation with the Sirians.

"Here with me in the CNN studio we have the renowned political analyst Gore Wyndham, who came out of retirement to offer the public his views on the recent events. Thank you for joining us, Mr. Wyndham - why are the world leaders quiet?"

"This goes beyond politics. Way beyond. I followed the Cold War closely and, for all its atrocities and planned genocide, it was still a struggle between humans. The raw instincts that fueled that war - the greed for power, the fear of losing power - these are still present. But the presumed opponent now is not of this earth.

"Furthermore, the superior technology and science of the Sirians represent a challenge to all the established power structures... *of... the... entire... planet.*

"Our leaders know that. But of course they would never admit this to the public - that they secretly fear for their own privileges and authority. They must pretend they are still on top of things... yet they most of all wish the Sirians would pack and leave the next morning, so that the 'chosen leaders' could continue their petty power games. Hence the attack... hence the ominous silence from the establishment.

"Now the public has seen that the visitors can bleed - they are that much like us. And that means they can be killed, which means the establishment can seriously consider an all-out war that might be winnable. I came back to the media to warn the public: You must stop your leaders from leading you into a war that could end human life on Earth.

"The path to annihilation has been entered for real this time - a Cold War between the species has just begun. It is up to you, the public, to stop it before it's too late."

"Er... thank you, Mr. Wyndham. The other news... after this."

DAY 89

Alien Beach looked more or less the same as when the group had left it. The weather had gotten worse.

Ann was eating dinner with her colleauges. She said to them that the constant clouds above must be caused by the Sirians' manipulating the atmosphere. She suspected that the Sirian antenna-structure on the beach was a weather regulator.

Takeru was sitting at the same table. He was angered to hear Ann talk

about the weather manipulation to the others, but said nothing. He had been suspecting the same thing about the weather, and had kept his thoughts to himself. Takeru still had his mind-recording device, but he did not dare to use it after the initial test. Lazar, who used his mind-recorder regularly, was steadily growing more and more eccentric. Takeru needed to learn more about the side-effects, if he was ever going to claim a safe patent on these fantastic machines.

"Mats," he asked after dinner, "I am deeply worried about Lazar's health. He is acting so strange. Please tell me if there's anything wrong."

The Swedish physician seemed reluctant to talk about it; then again, he wasn't the talkative type.

"While you were on tour, I made some thorough tests of my own thought-recording helmet," he said after a pause. "Have you?"

"Well, not really," Takeru lied with a straight face.

"My finished report is made public at the end of the year," Mats said enigmatically.

"Are the devices dangerous? Is it safe for me to try and use mine? I was going to..."

The Swede swallowed the bait.

"I'd recommend that you not use the helmet, on yourself or any other humans," he answered quickly. "Do you know how it actually works? The helmet, like all the other Sirian machines, is like an organism made of intricate metal cells. The cells of the mind-recorders are special.

"When activated, they squeeze themselves close to the scalp and shoot out millions of microscopic needles, three millimeters long, which perforate

the subject's cranium. Somehow these needles do not trigger a pain response; instead, they connect into a matrix that registers the entire spectrum of higher brain activity, which is then... imprinted in the helmet's cells."

Takeru nodded, and said: "I want to know what is troubling Lazar, but I cannot ask him. Would it be possible for me to borrow his helmet and replay his recorded thoughts in my own head? Is that safe?"

He was fairly sure why Mats' answer would be no; he wasn't disappointed.

"Whatever you do," Mats said, "avoid that! Any brain that you record from has a unique structure, like a fingerprint. It follows that the recorded thought can only be replayed on that same brain. If you would try on Lazar's helmet and 'borrow' his thoughts, you'd risk physical pain and all sorts of mental side-effects. I should have warned the group long ago, but... they seem to have been avoiding the devices on their own accord."

"This is an amazing invention," Takeru admitted. "Do you think they have even more advanced technology. For instance, artificial telepathy?"

"You mean, like radios connected to their brains? That wouldn't be any stranger than our cellular phones."

"No, I mean sending thoughts directly into the brains of humans."

Mats frowned at the shorter Takeru, saying nothing.

"I heard it on the radio the other day," Takeru explained, "while I was monitoring the electromagnetic activity from the Sirian machines. There is this new cult that worships the Sirians, and some of them have set up camp on another island not far from here. Their leader claims he is receiving telepathic messages from Ranmotanii..."

Takeru quickly laughed along with Mats, so as not to appear dumb.

"You fooled me there, Takeru!" Mats grinned, pointing a knowing finger at him. "That is just so absurd. Is the human brain built to receive and decode radio messages? No! We have eyes and ears and noses for communication. And even if the Sirians had organs to transmit and receive thoughts, would humans be able to receive them? No! Not in any case! And I know by the simple measurements I've done on Sirians, that their brains work on other frequencies than ours - they're 'tuned' differently. To them, our thoughts should just resemble static."

"So the claims of the cult are not based on facts?"

"Not any that I know of. To actually project thoughts directly into a human brain, bypassing the normal senses, demands a physical, chemical manipulation of brain cells. Please, Takeru, don't bother with those ridiculous cults."

"Yes, you're right."

Takeru decided that Mats had to be right... yet, there was something about the cult coverage that had struck a chord within him - an uncomfortable urgency he could not quite shake.

Suddenly the intercom link buzzed in Mats' office.

It was Stone Pound: "Get to the mess hall quick! The Sirians are going to address the world on TV again!"

They rushed out across the sand, the few meters to the crowded barrack and saw Carl talking to the group, accompanied by three Sirians. Why do those amphibians always have to announce everything at the last possible minute?

Mats thought angrily.

"Tmmtenaa has recovered. And, according to Ranmotanii, he has been discussing the situation with the other Sirians. They are not going to leave Earth because of this one incident. In fact, they were aware of the risks and well protected. Now, they have asked to hear your advice before they inform the Security Council about their new TV broadcast..."

"Inform," not "request" or "ask permission". The scientists found themselves tongue-tied. It wasn't every day that important people asked *them* for advice which might alter the course of history - much less people from another world.

Lazar spoke up first: "If Tmmtenaa makes a public speech to the people of this planet, there are people who, I regret to say, will see a wounded Sirian as a sign of weakness on behalf of the Sirians. Do you understand this?"

The question was aimed at the amphibians present. They failed to understand it.

"Explainn the wwoord... 'weeeakness". Yyourr conntextt iss difficullt," said Oanornn.

"He means," Carl said, "the sight of a bleeding or injured human evokes an aggressive response in some humans. A primitive instinct. So in a public appearance, a Sirian should avoid to appear physically damaged."

The Sirian delegation eyed the humans, then each other. They replied that Tmmtenaa intended to appear fully recovered, in a few hours. A transmitter would first send the message to the Sirian mothership at Mars, where the thousand-kilometer wide sail-disk could send back the amplified

signal to the entire planet - in the manner of the initial contact message. Carl immediately thought: *They don't trust us. They wanted no human help or interference.*

Before leaving, abruptly, the amphibians explained that the new message was meant to reinforce the message of the first-contact broadcast. Their meaning was not lost on the scientists: You have to repeat yourself when talking to children.

"We interrupt this broadcast for an incoming message from the Sirian mothership near Mars. Do not adjust your TV set. The signals are on all channels and will override all Earth-bound transmissions..."

DAY 90

Ann was waiting for the chopper to arrive and take her away from Alien Beach, her bags and suitcases packed.

The afternoon sky was turning a livid gray hue, and she felt a little cold. She hadn't told the Sirians about her departure; she was afraid to, and ashamed of her fear. A scientist in any field was supposed to be cold, detached, immune to subjectivity... but that was all a myth. All her colleagues here, despite their obsessive dedication to their work, had shown great feeling at some point or other - even a control-freak like Takeru, or that cool-headed Swedish doctor... Ann tried to repress the memory of her night with Mats Jonsson. It had meant nothing to either of them; just an outlet of pent-up tensions, she told herself. She put on her sunglasses in spite of there being little sunlight, standing stiff-backed, pretending to check her pockets

for eventual forgotten things. Why couldn't they see that she was going to pieces? Why didn't Carl just declare her mentally unfit for coming back to Alien Beach?

Ann saw a movement in the lagoon, and felt her heart jump. A group of amphibians were coming up through the surf. She recognized Namonnae, Tmmtena... and Oanss. He was waving at her, walking faster than his friends. Ann stood dead still, afraid to move or say anything.

"Aann... wwill you come baaack to Allieen Beachh?"

She nodded imperceptibly, keeping her shades on - though she knew the Sirians had superior eyesight and could see right through them.

"Yes. In two weeks' time. I will be going to visit a friend on another island. It's called Sri Lanka - in the older radio and TV broadcasts that you've seen, the island was also called Ceylon."

Tmmtena spoke up - he had a small black patch on his head and his large oval eyes were slightly bloodshot, but he seemed to have recovered.

"Annn... do nnnoot sayy to peeeoplle theere, nooot sayyy: Tmmtena iis rreally dead orrr... Nnno. Saay thhat Tmmtena iss haappy to bee onn thiss pllaneet."

Ann smiled at him; the convalescent's thick lips widened, though his half-shut eyes seemed tired.

"I promise, Tmmtena. I'm so happy to see you are well."

Oanss, who had been keeping a respectful distance to Ann, stepped forth.

"Aann... caan I foollow yyou to yourr timmme too Ceyllonn?"

His friends did not seem the least surprised by his request. Ann

thought: If they share all their thoughts with each other, every Sirian will know, in full detail, what Oanss thinks and feels - or what I say to him. No privacy of mind. No secrets. No shame. No self...

"You cannot go without your people to Ceylon - it would be against your agreement with the United Nations."

He said, *"Myy peeople wwill nooot stoop mmme... We leearned sommmething nnew in Neew Yorrk... iit iis allowed to coome disguuuised aand preeetend to be frommm an otherr peoplle..?"*

Ann looked nervously behind her; the other scientists were occupied ten meters farther away and hadn't heard Oanss make his insane statement. He's being sarcastic. Must be. Some kind of alien attempt at humor... Can't risk assuming that -

"No, Oanss," she said in a low voice, "you must not try to move among land-humans in disguise. It is very dangerous."

"Yyes... I beelieve yoou. Machiine I wearr cannn reegisster hhow youu aare affraiid noww. I wwill noot dissguisse. Soorry forgiive mee."

Oanss turned away and walked back into the surf, his head held high. The other Sirians studied Ann's face for a long moment, and she could see the little silvery blobs resting on their necks and heads... their machines, no doubt measuring her, reading her emotions like an open book. She began to choke with anxiety, shielded her eyes to somehow prevent those all-seeing alien eyes from looking straight into her head...

Ann barely noticed the heavy helicopter until it was close enough to blow sand in their eyes. The Sirians backed away; she grabbed her luggage and rushed to the salvation of the cockpit. Two weeks without aliens around

would set her head straight.

Had to...

Takeru looked after the shrinking helicopter in the sky, then quit his checking of the antenna rig and joined the group of Sirians at the edge of the surf. He saw Tmmtenaa, digging with his flat feet in the moist gray sand, playing with some device connected to his temples.

"Hello, Tmmtenaa..." Takeru called from a distance.

The amphibian seemed oblivious to his presence. It reminded Takeru of a child listening to music through a headset, lost in his own reveries... or replayed dreams, maybe... Takeru moved out of Tmmtenaa's line of sight and hid behind a nearby cluster of sloping palmtrees. He produced a small camcorder with an ultra-sensitive, stick-shaped microphone, and began to film the alien from ten meters behind his back...

Takeru started at a sound above, and turned to face Namonnae, looking down at him from the crown of a palmtree. She had been lurking there without him noticing it! Never before had he seen a Sirian climb a tree... how naive he had been.

"H...hi, Namonnae..."

Namonnae blinked at him with her large, deep standing ovals of eyes. Once, twice, slowly... eyelids five centimeters wide from end to end. The whites of her eyes faintly translucent, the pupils large black spots in oval gray irises. Takeru stared into them, defying her judgement. *You have no right to judge me, alien! I won't kneel to you!* He grew angry, without knowing where the courage to be angry came from.

"I thought your people were superior to us..." he half-whispered up to her. "More intelligent, more rational, better in every way. But you are just different... different. Not even very different from us."

"Why doo yyou noow feelll angrry?" asked Namonnae, voice calm, curious.

He giggled as if it was funny: "Yes... a very good question, yes? Why do I feel so... confused when I try to... feel something about a Sirian? When I want to like you, I hate you. When I want to hate you... but I cannot feel right about something which I do not even understand."

"Explaain thhat woorrd againn... word 'understandd' in coontextt nnow."

Takeru scowled at her.

"First, I want you to explain something to me. Why did Tmmtenaar go out of the bus in New York? Why did he go after the man who was dressed up to look like a Sirian?"

"It iis difficullt to eexplain too lannd-huumans," Namonnae said, a little uncertainly.

"But you can try to."

She nodded theatrically, imitating human manners. She explained that Tmmtenaar was a former criminal of sorts. Like most of his comrades, he had been born on the homeworld. When others replayed his recorded dreams they discovered that he was disturbed; he was planning to destroy and kill.

So they waited until he made the attempt, stopped him, and decided to change his brain, take away the parts of it that made him want to kill.

Tmmtenaar remained altered as he grew older; he would be childlike and

naive for the rest of his bodily life.

Her explanation might have come uncomfortably, but she showed no distress - she once cast a glance at the sitting Tmmtenaa, without blinking or lowering her voice. How obvious, Takeru thought. In a perfect society where thoughts can be recorded, where do all the killers and maniacs go? He asked Namonnae how the other Sirians had reacted to the Sirian impersonator in New York.

Her answer: they had registered a living being in the suit, but weren't certain whether the suit was a part of the being; only later had they learned about the animatronic disguises. Another obvious thing, Takeru realized - beings who never wear clothes get confused about the distinction between apparent skin and actual skin.

"But why would you bring along Tmmtenaa on a long and dangerous journey to another world? How many of you are there, out in the mothership?"

"Lesss than ffour hundred peeople... sleepinnng."

"Why haven't you told us how many you were before?"

Namonnae said nothing, climbed down the sloping trunk, and set her feet on the ground a few meters from Takeru.

"Because itt iis... diffiicult too knnow whhen yoou are prrepaared ffor nnew iinformatioon. I muust thinnk ssmall thenn... liike yyou thinnk..."

In spite of the warm, humid air, Takeru felt himself blush. And he knew it didn't matter how he reacted, because Namonnae would see it as proof of her superiority.

He clenched his fists and walked away without a word.

Chapter Eighteen

"Yesterday's worldwide broadcast from the Sirians came with almost no advance warning; it was broadcast without agreement from the United Nations or the U.S. government.

"The broadcast lasted about one hour, during which the same message was repeated three times. This show of strength stunned many, but the message was one of reconciliation - a formal apology from the Sirian Tmmtenea who survived the assassination attempt in New York. The Sirian plea for peace and reason was welcomed by many world leaders, including the U.S. President; the governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran declined to give any official comment.

"This just in... the management of this network has decided that CNN will set aside funds for public information on the Sirian visitors, in order to promote a spirit of trust and cultural exchange between humans and extraterrestrials in the future.

"Next: Fashion goes to space. Crimson coveralls and gray bodystockings are hot... after this."

The cult was changing rapidly, yet predictably - and the soldier tried to conceal his growing fear to the other cult members.

Discipline was slacking considerably - the overseers were getting so careless, he could easily herd food for himself and avoid unpleasant orders. But at the same time, the members were becoming so fanatical that the overseers were scarcely needed. The bald-shaven cultists dyed their red

robes black like their leader had done. His every whim and minutest utterances were closely observed and obeyed.

And the orgies began.

The soldier hid himself from the tents where the orgies occurred, but sound traveled far in this part of the world. Throughout the day and into the night he could hear the manic group chanting, the insane wails and rants of the leader and his flock, the excess of drink and debauchery that merely underlined how lost they were.

The cult's once so hypnotic cheerfulness and solemnity was gone, replaced by the exhilaration of imminent doom. The soldier kept planning in his head how to snatch Patty with him, away from the island, but every scenario stumbled on one fact: she had no wish to leave. Ever since the assassination attempt on the Sirian, Patty spent all her time following Tanii - whenever the fat, but increasingly hollow-eyed leader opened his mouth, Patty replied "Yes!" or "Our father!" with an illuminated gleam in her eyes.

If the soldier had dared to outright kidnap Patty, she would have the cult lynch him. He had to wait, stay sober and out of the worst, until the others were too crazed or dazed to resist. Or he could kill the leader and run; the idea didn't make him happy. A vision from the aliens would have been a great comfort, had it come to him - all he had now were just ordinary nightmares and a daily existence like lifted from a bad dream.

DAY 93

Carl read his transcript of Ranmotanii's taped monologue, over and over again. It was easier to grasp the words this way, than in the awkward

diction of the Sirian himself. He recalled the beach, the signs they drew in the white, wet sand, and Ranmotanii's words:

I want to show you, Carl... like a joke? We will laugh? Because now my people has learned more how your people think. Like so... your people draw lines and points in the sand. And like so, you believe all the world is like lines and points in sand. You call it "symbols". Then but! My people begin their living in water. We see and know and hear and talk through water. The world is like so... we are in water all time. We should laugh?

When we live the first years as living things, then the water is to us... like the air is to your kind. Like so we learn to think, we talk a water-language. We talk sound-signals that give us positions, like your dolphins - not positions like drawn in sand! Positions from one human to another, from one real thing to another. The water is only... something that hides the real things from us.

Many periods time go, thousands of years. Then but! My people finally learn that the air above the water, and the space above the air, are the same type of real. We learn and then know always... then that there is no point. No line. No space... No time. No life. No thought. No symbols. We should laugh? Not real... only the things are real, the small things you call elementary particles, or energy, or the smallest measurable distances. But funny! We living things are not real like the smallest things that make us, but we think and breathe unlike smallest things. So we can influence... good word... influence real things. Or become more like the real things, but not be dead things. Not dead, but real!

Years before this, I saw a television transmission from your planet. And in that, a land-human said: "There are things man was never meant to know." It took me a long period to understand the meaning of this he said. Until this now. My young relative Namonnae understood this before I could. There is so much I want to say, but that is too early to say, and your language is too small, too young to describe. When, you can choose that, maybe your kind learns to think like my kind. The mind-recorders we gave to you are a start... one small step for a man, but a giant leap for mankind... like so a land-human said.

Though he hadn't written down his taped response to that, Carl painfully remembered his every word, once there were no others within hearing distance:

I do want to learn to think more like a Sirian, if it helps me understand more, understand better. But I am old! I will die soon, too soon. Is there... if you could... make my life last longer, then -

Carl had hid his face in his hands, ashamed to show his inner turmoil. The humiliation, the desperation was too much; he had almost begged the aliens to give him longevity. Ranmotanii's reply had been sad:

I can see you are not well healthy. Our machines have learned to read your bodies now. I saw you have been much sick, almost dead. And will be maybe similarly sick soon. You want to live a longer period of time than others.

Carl had tried to defend himself:

No... please... not that. Not just for me. I want all land-humans to live

longer. We need it, we need more time to learn a better life. Our time of living is too short, shorter than yours.

And Ranmotanii's last comment, before he had retreated to the Sirians' huge underwater vessel:

Great much shorter.

Carl reflected, as he lay on his cot with his personal computer in his lap, facing the transcript on the screen: *Perhaps there'll be no outcome of this visit at all. Perhaps all my dreams of alien contact were just delusions, confused religious yearnings like Lazar calls it. Then all the real visit could do, was to destroy those delusions. Leaving humanity with...*

But if they cannot dream themselves away from reality, how do they cope with their own inevitable deaths? What can they have to live for?

He got up, and looked at his small quarters. On the wall hung photos of his wife, friends, and children. A printout of an e-mail note from his oldest son was pinned to the wall. Carl read:

I'm proud of you. You are the bravest, finest person I know. We are all counting on you to make this year the one when mankind finally got out of its 100,000-year childhood. I love my father.

Designing space probes and watching the stars had never seemed all that important to his kids before... not like this was. Carl had grown aware recently that the team members were impatient with him. They were demanding better response and support from the outside world. Yet, like him, they were also afraid to show the world their amazing discoveries. A part of him was hoping that public interest would start to fade. In the following months, maybe the Sirian visitors would become yesterday's

sensation? Ordinary people had a remarkable ability to adjust themselves to change.

And then, not sooner, would the ECT team step down from the proverbial mountain and reveal a whole new outlook on reality to mankind... and nothing would ever be the same again.

"I hope you'll still love me after I've screwed up your entire world," Carl said to the photos on the wall, and touched them. He typed down in his computer what he had to tell the group - and eventually, the world:

We must go on, or be destroyed by our own fear - by the doubt that has beset every discoverer who ever ventured into the unknown. Not the fear of being wrong - but the fear of falling, without a foothold for the mind. Take that step, and you will fall for a short while - until you find a new foothold. Because you must. Refuse to fall, and you will become less than scientists, less than human - just grunting animals who are afraid of the dark.

Like it happened to Bruno Heinzhof. The last thing Carl had heard of him, was that Bruno had retreated into a small room and refused to leave it, ever.

Carl thought about his son's respect and love. He put the silvery helmet-like device on his head and found the knob that activated it.

The device squeezed tight -

DAY 95

Early in the morning, air cold and rank, the soldier sneaked out of his nightly hideout and went to see if Patty was all right. Last night's orgies had

sounded nastier than usual; the chants had been harrowing, and a ghastly scream had pierced the air.

Why don't the local authorities raid the place? he thought. Rumor was circulating, that rich financial backers - some of them now loyal cult members - were providing legal protection against police inquiries. Or, the soldier glumly reflected, maybe just nobody gave a damn about a bunch of bald, skinny rejects on a remote Pacific island - he felt at his scalp, where his hair was just starting to grow back. If the cult members let their hair grow back, they would soon regain a bit of individuality...

The soldier tripped on some junk and fell into the dirt - the open place at the outdoor stage was a mess after last night. If not for the loud snoring of a couple of cultists who lay unconscious at a corner of the stage, surrounded by beer cans and bottles, the silence would have been eerie. The soldier got up and peered down at the thing he had stumbled upon. His sandal-clad foot was smeared with blood - he swore, believing that he must have cut himself when he tripped. Then he saw the thing in the dirt, from which the red smear had come.

A white, round object, about the size of his head.

A severed human head, dirtied with sand and blood, stared up at him with glazed dead eyes. The soldier gave out a short scream, and bolted away from the open place. Flashbacks from the war rushed through his fevered mind - enemy soldiers being cut in half by gunfire, body parts lying scattered around blast craters, a blinded man screaming for help as he ran without seeing. The soldier had tried not to remember, tried to forget with booze, pills, flippancy, and cynicism.

Stumbling, running, crying, the soldier shouted at the indifferent morning sky: "Aliens, you! Why didn't you warn me! I never wanted to join an army again, never join a bunch of butchers again ... I hated the war, I hated the killing... and I went and joined this atrocity they call a church! I don't deserve any of your visions... just kill me now and put an end to the madness! Fucking high-and-mighty bastards..."

He stopped and leaned against a tree, holding his chest and forcing his heart to pound slower. It wasn't Patty's head in the sand, he told himself. It wasn't her this time.

The sky, at least above this small island, remained indifferent.

DAY 102

Lazar and Carl had been discussing the question with a few colleagues, in the presence of Oanornn, who had graciously offered his advice in spite of his weak health. They were sitting under the stars, while a soft breeze fluttered in their light clothes. A small campfire provided just enough illumination for Carl's group to see each other's faces.

Carl concluded: "So you mean, Oanornn, that all beings of the same species can replay each other's dreams and thoughts with no physical harm."

"Yes."

"And your people do this whenever you feel it to be necessary, but never against your will."

"Yes."

"And when you gave us these devices, you assumed we would like to use them for our own good, instead of relying on our own more primitive

devices."

"Yes."

Carl was about to reproach his colleagues, but changed his mind. Better to act. He stood up and held out his Sirian thought-recorder for the group to see. The device, small enough to fit into his two hands, glistened in strange rainbow patterns, as if the metal surface was a soap-bubble. The pseudo-living cells of the machine were restless, waiting for the next command. Carl swallowed, and gave the other scientists an unflinching blank stare.

"Here are my recorded dreams of the last two weeks. I want you to share some of them with me."

The others sat dead silent around him, barely breathing: Stone Pound, Mats Jonsson, Takeru Otomo, Andrea McClintock, Lazar Mahfouz, Bishop Edmund Soto and Oanornn. Only Lazar and Oanornn seemed less than tense. A minute passed. Carl did not move; neither did the others.

Lazar stirred, somewhat disappointed: "I'll do it then."

"Wait," Andrea said with a rasping voice. "Let me."

The British biologist, a heavysset woman of fifty-eight with eyeglasses and a permanently pinched expression, stood up unsteadily and reached for the device. With slightly trembling hands, she fitted it over her head; it became softer, molding itself after the shape of her skull. With gestures, Oanornn showed her how to activate it. The device gave out a sound signal. Andrea shut her eyes hard - not that it would have made any difference. The sudden input from the device completely overrode her normal senses. Carl gasped, seeing Andrea's expression change when his sleeping thoughts and

emotions invaded her mind - her otherwise tight-lipped mouth opened wide in astonishment, her face became childlike, vulnerable. She mumbled to herself, as if in her sleep...

"Oh, Carl, I'm so sorry I doubted you... I didn't understand I was being so wrapped up in myself and my petty little neuroses... I love you too... your family is so lovely, I wish I had one like you... ha ha... what a rude joke... you silly boy!..."

"What? What's that? No! Mr. President, you must not attack the Sirians... stop the missiles, stop them... *help!*"

Her stubby fingers fumbled blindly for the control knob; Carl stepped forward and turned the device off for her. Andrea opened her wet eyes and gasped for air, then became fully aware that the dream had been cut off. She spontaneously clasped Carl's hand as he removed the device from her head.

"I-I can't... express... so many thoughts... so much like me, yet... It was like being you... I thought I was the only one who... I'll never feel... alone again."

Both grinned spontaneously at each other; both experienced the sensation of being close, like having become twins; this was way more intimate than sex could ever be, yet totally different. Carl thought of his wife back home in the States, and prayed she would forgive him for sharing thoughts with another woman - and perhaps, in time they would be able to share the device too.

"You're very brave, Andrea. Now you have a little piece of me in you - a piece of my thoughts remembered. I trust you with it; and I trust any of you who might come across that memory from her thoughts."

Andrea stroked her sore scalp.

"I was afraid it was going to hurt," she confessed to the group, "but it really doesn't feel that bad. Heh... once when I was a young student I dropped acid and thought I could read other people's minds. Hippie bollocks! This is much better - much more terrifying too..."

Andrea looked Carl in the eyes; they both saw they were thinking of the same element in Carl's dreams. The image of the U.S. President, helpless to stop an attack on Alien Beach. Images of military aircraft, ballistic missiles, and the blinding flash of an explosion...

"Just a dream, Andrea. Not reality."

Oanornn smiled at them.

"Wwhen thiis ttechnnoloogy was innventedd, iit chhangedd mmy peopple greeat mmuch. During manyy yyears' time, wee chaanged. Thhat waas beffore thee tiime off thhe rreal Annncestorr..."

Then suddenly the wrinkled old alien seemed self-conscious, and excused himself. They all bid him goodnight, and he wandered slowly off to a waiting transport-robot shaped like a huge metal egg.

"Who's next?" Carl asked.

Takeru rose to his feet almost before the question had been finished, but faced away from Carl and remained mute. He could not bear revealing his betrayal of his colleagues' trust. I have failed as a scientist, he thought. I wish I were dead. Carl became curious, but assumed Takeru was simply afraid of sharing the intimacy of another person's dreams. Then the black bishop came forth, crossed himself briefly, and bowed his head.

"I believe it is my turn," he said softly.

Edmund Soto had no precise idea of what would happen when the device was switched on. Perhaps an evil spirit would try to settle in his head. Perhaps God's love would manifest itself through a machine - or just a more direct form of human-to-human communication would occur. He could not have predicted the more profound side effects.

When the device was switched off and removed from his slightly sore head, Edmund was overwhelmed with emotion. His first impulse was that every man on Earth should try it. All his life he had been deeply sad with the awareness of the soul's isolation. If this device had been available before, maybe the hatred and suspicion that set people against each other would never have ravaged his homeland.

Then he realized something else, with a new, colder clarity of mind that he had not experienced before - as if his brain had absorbed a piece of the scientist Carl Sayers: If all it takes is this piece of metal to bring people together, there's no need to force each other to think alike to form a community. Flags - nations - parties - group characteristics - creeds - religions - might become obsolete. Love did not need words or the Gospel anymore, when it could be transmitted from mind to mind. It could even become a mere commodity, traded like dope from sleazy street-peddlers. The mind of a pervert could become instantly accessible to a decent man, and vice versa.

"This is a fantastic but dangerous invention," Edmund rasped.
"Mankind is not ready for it."

"And who are we, us frail land-humans," Lazar said, "to decide

whether others are ready or not? Do we have the right to put ourselves above the humanity we have pledged to serve?"

"Both of you have understood the significance of this technology perfectly," Carl said. "But there are other effects as well, which could be more insidious. Using the device during an entire lifetime, the border between sleeping thought and waking thought will be blurred. Life will become dream, and dream will become... I think Lazar is better suited to explain this to you. Then you must decide what we'll do. What we decide to tell the outside world can affect the entire future of our species."

As Lazar began to speak, Carl had the oddest feeling: for a moment, he had felt as if Lazar wasn't a human being at all, but something created by Carl's imagination. He flicked his head to a point where he expected Oanorn to be standing, and opened his mouth to ask about the odd sensation.

He blinked, and realized that Oanorn had said goodnight several minutes ago. Dizziness forced him to sit down. Had he been waking-dreaming that Oanorn was present? He dared not ask the others, for fear of sounding old and senile. How silly of him, to almost see the ghosts of the living...

Chapter Nineteen

Sri Lanka.

"Ann, listen to this," Arthur said in his gravelly voice, his accent sounding American in spite of him being born British.

He pointed at the small portable flat screen of his laptop, which was showing a live newscast via satellite. Ann recognized the images from the island not far from Alien Beach, and the bald-shaven cultists who were increasingly appearing in the media all over the world.

"Takeru told me -"

"Sshh."

"The controversial Church of Ranmotani, which in just two months has gained an estimated one million paying members worldwide, now stands accused of crimes following the assassination attempt in New York. Rumors of cult orgies are flourishing, even reports of disappearances of members who might have been murdered. In Germany and Japan, police authorities have already raided local cult compounds and confiscated large caches of weapons and chemicals that could be used to manufacture so-called 'truck-bombs'.

"But it is on this small island, just miles from Alien Beach, where the core of the cult is now gathering; more than two or three thousand people according to estimates. The cult's official spokesman and legal advisor here, James Townsend, made this statement on a press conference in the morning..."

"The groundless accusations against the church and its venerable leaders are part of a plot of governments, who wish to suppress free speech and thought. We condemn the undemocratic clampdown on our headquarters in Germany and Japan. The arms supplies found there were stored strictly for self-defense. The church is a peaceful movement which upholds good relations with the Sirian delegation - any attack on the church should be considered an attack on the Sirians themselves."

"Mr. Townsend refused to specify exactly how the cult, which has been denied any contact with the Sirian visitors, could possibly 'uphold' any relations with it. But the cult leader claims to be in constant telepathic contact with Ranmotanii himself.

"Little is known of the cult's leader, who calls himself Tanii, or Regional Elder. His real name is Marlo O'Brien, a renegade minister who founded the Church of Ranmotani the same day the first alien broadcast reached Earth. He has never given any interviews; yet, the CD recordings of his 'telepathic sessions' from ecstatic cult meetings have sold a million copies worldwide.

"Relatives of cult members are now organizing to put pressure on the Church of Ranmotani, which sits on millions of dollars donated by members - bank accounts, real estate, hotels, shares in large companies, and the life savings of people who poured all their hopes into the vision of Marlo O'Brien. The cult compound remains closed to journalists, and the local authorities on the island are accused of taking huge bribes from the church to leave it alone and grant mass visas.

"The government of Fiji promised today, that it will have this

little island's mayor and its chief of police replaced within a week."

"Bloody fools," Arthur growled, shaking his balding head. "I hope by God the Sirians don't think that cult is representative of human behavior."

"I must go back," Ann told him.

"Yeah. I wish I could go too, but the bloody doctors won't let me travel that far."

She gave him a warm smile, and moved to adjust the blanket that covered the electric wheelchair in which Arthur sat.

"You've been living a long, rich life, Art. But there's nothing anyone can do to stop time."

"Perhaps they can," he said in a lower voice. "Tell me again, how old did the Sirians say they could become?"

"In biological time, at least two hundred years. If you count in the time they were in suspended animation during space travel, some of them may have spent centuries or more in space."

"It's hard to be so close to see one's dreams realized, and then one is too frail to reach all the way..."

"Oh Arthur, please. Whether any of us lived one or a hundred years more, wouldn't make much of a difference. The Sirians can't change us overnight."

"I guess not," he sighed. "Are you leaving soon?"

"No, I need another week. I want to do some more diving and find the dolphin family I grew up with."

"I remember those. What did you name them... Babette, Rostand, and

Cyrano, the one with the long beak?"

"Yes. Couldn't find them yesterday."

"Be patient. They should still remember you after all these years - well, those who haven't died of old age."

They laughed together, immersing themselves in fond memories. The dolphins Ann had played with in the Indian Ocean of her childhood were her oldest, perhaps truest friends. Until someone had told her, she suddenly recalled, that he had already talked to them and found no profound meaning or deep understanding in their minds... only a simple craving for food and play.

For a moment, Ann deeply hated the amphibians for having sabotaged her childhood fantasy. This brief return couldn't change it back to the way it was. Her nostalgia began to feel like a hollow thing, an artifact. It was time to grow up, to move on...

DAY 110

Ann Meadbouré stepped off the motorized dinghy and splashed across the beach to dry land. Several of her colleagues were waiting for her, and she went warm inside sensing how much they had actually been missing each other.

"Welcome back!" Carl said, hugging Ann. She responded with slightly less affection, squeezing the old astrophysicist. He was different, she noticed, more relaxed, but also less concentrated...

"I feel much better now," she assured him. "This vacation helped me get a clearer perspective on things, how important this mission is to us all. I

doubted, Carl. I was afraid, but no more. Whatever it takes, I will not leave Alien Beach before they do."

"You're 'one of the lucky few,'" he quoted her.

"Yeah. This time I know what it means."

"There's something you should know. The team has taken an important decision - well, several of us - while you were away. It's the thought-recorders."

Ann froze for a moment. Then she calmed down.

"I understand. I'm not ready yet. But I will be. All I ask for is time."

"Of course."

"But right now I'm dying for a swim. Is the scuba gear ready?"

"In the shed." Carl indicated the rusting shack nearby.

Ann asked Andrea and Bishop Soto to join her. They politely declined, claiming they were busy working together. Ann was struck by how strange they sounded. Since when did a bishop and a biologist work together? It made Ann long even more to escape into the warm ocean. She got her gear ready as fast as she could, changed into her white one-piece bathing suit and ran out into the waves.

Ann relaxed in the suffusing embrace of the blue-green waters, and let her tensions uncoil. She spun lazily, rolled and made loops on her way down. The underwater world of the lagoon was also slightly different now. The waters were more opaque with dust, and she recognized the signs of pollution from the fleet out to sea from lifelong experience: the corals had changed color slightly, the fish were more but smaller, the very smell of the

sea was less than right.

None of the pollution, however, came from the parked Sirian vessel - it lay still on its black balloon pontoons, sending out spotlights that attracted the sea life. Ann approached the underside of the dark hull, peered before her... and there, from an open airlock, two Sirians came swimming toward her. One of them was Ranmotanii, holding an oblong robot drone that pulled him along. The other amphibian was a much younger, heavier shape with wide, standing ovals for eyes.

She pulled out the mouthpiece of her aqualung, briefly, and shouted his name into the water. It sounded warbled to her own ears, but Oanss seemed to start at the sound, and swam closer while Ranmotanii continued upward into the shimmering sunlight.

She could faintly hear the two exchange speech between them; clicks and hums and wails which somewhat resembled that of whales and dolphins. When Oanss came close enough for her to reach out and touch him, she heard him say her name aloud. She took out the mouthpiece once more, to smile at him. He wasn't using a breathing apparatus, just his own natural lungs and the extra oxygen supply in the adjacent sacs. Bubbles of carbon dioxide and nitrogen escaped his naked nostrils as he spoke. He made a smile that was halfway his own, halfway an imitation of a land-human - it looked so clumsy Ann had to laugh. Oanss blinked in confusion, then made series of rapid clicking sounds - he was laughing too.

Ann succumbed to a childish impulse and rapidly pumped water with her legs, shooting upward and above him, then dove straight down behind his back, making a loop. She finished the loop - and Oanss had disappeared

from her sight. A sudden peeping shout from behind her made her heart jump. She turned, and saw just a stream of bubbles rising where he had been.

The world's oldest game continued; they ducked and turned as they chased each other among the corals. Ann acted more confidently now, listening and feeling with her entire body for streams and vibrations that would reveal Oanss' position in the dimming lagoon. She lost track of time, the game became everything and she became one with the element like she had once learned as a child.

Finally she found him, huddling behind an egg-shaped metal tower rooted in the coral-bed - another Sirian robot of some kind. Oanss let out another taunting shout, and bolted away with forceful treads - he was faster than her, yet he seemed to be holding back, keeping her just out of range. He dove deeper, outward to the darker, colder open sea. She slid past a stray, small white shark and felt a tinge of fear - she had passed the ultrasound barrier that the Sirians had erected to keep out large predators.

She looked outward, and could just make out a two-legged, tramping shape making little twists and rolls ahead of her. Her wristwatch showed a depth of twenty meters; the pressure on her ears was starting to wear on her. She shouted into the water, as loudly as she could: "Oanss, come back! You are going too far out!"

She knew he could hear her voice; but the shape increased its speed, and she lost sight of him in the dark-blue gloom. Ann recalled his earlier wish to follow her to Sri Lanka; had he actually intended to travel underwater? The military forces would have spotted him; she had seen the tower of at least one submarine out at sea. Fear overtook her and she swam

farther out, frantically searching the gloom for Oanss. Suddenly, something large and silent appeared out of the dim dark. Another, bigger shark, cruising straight toward her. She reacted on learned reflexes and slowed to a halt, avoiding sudden movements that might provoke the sleek, primitive hunter. The shark swam past her, perhaps ten meters away, eyes like black buttons. Ann held her breath - the shark moved silently around her, cutting her off from the lagoon. Another shark shape came into view.

Ann looked at her wristwatch again - and, too late, she saw what had attracted the sharks in the first place. A long, almost superficial cut in her leg, probably from when she swam past the coral-bed, and she hadn't noticed it until now. Their sense of smell was far superior to that of humans, probably to that of Sirians as well. A third shark appeared, and all three circled closer. Ann panicked; she fumbled for the anti-shark powder she should have been carrying in her belt, fully aware of the protective chainmail she wasn't wearing, the harpoon gun she hadn't brought along. She pulled out her single weapon from her belt, a knife, and held it out before her. She would have to try and break through the circle immediately.

Ann took a deep breath from the oxygen tank, bolted diagonally upward in the direction of the lagoon as fast as she could, and let her heartbeat speed to a painful rate. The sharks bolted after her, acting out their ancient program with perfectly honed precision. She would never make it to the ultrasound barrier.

Then her ears were stung by a terrible piercing siren-signal, which came from all around her. The sharks scattered and fled. She rolled around to see behind her and discerned Oanss closing in, his jaw wide open as he

shouted. It was the same inhuman signal-shout that had scattered the crowds in New York, only more effective against underwater life. Ann felt an incredible relief. Oanss moved up to her, took a firm hold of her arm, and dragged her along back to the lagoon. She went limp and let herself go, unable to think or protest.

She barely noticed how one large, dark sphere came floating up toward them, opening itself up at the bottom. It settled at the surface, giving them a place to breathe without exposing them to direct sunlight or surface pressure. Ann crawled up on the inside of the smooth, semi-opaque bubble, pulled off her aqualung, and gulped stale air. She saw Oanss next to her, eyes wide with fear, tentatively holding out a "hand" to touch her. She wanted him to touch her, but shrank away from the tentacle-like, soft fingers.

"Why..." she finally gasped, "why did you go so far out? You made me afraid."

The alien, his singing voice so low it approached a drone, expressed deep regret. He had also been taken by surprise by the shark attack, and said it was his fault - he should have smelled the blood from the cut on Ann's leg, and understood it might attract predators. His preoccupation with play had jeopardized her.

"I amm... a leess iintelligennt huumann thhhan otheerr. Ollderr humanns are betteer intelligeeently than yyoung ooness liike mee."

"How old are you?"

"I waaas boorn on myy homewwoorld... my thinnking liiffe is... like so, twennty-five Eearth yearsss."

A mere teenager by their outlook, Ann sensed. She was less civilized, but still more mature in a deeper sense... or was she, really?

"Oanss, I was worried about you. You should not take such risks. Please come to meet me, but be more careful."

He made a studied nod, shut his eyes, and remained still. A "land-human's" face could express more subtle nuances than his streamlined features; yet Ann was certain what he felt, and it pained her. She reached out and touched the sleek part of Oanss' face that was his left "cheek".

"Please. I want to be your friend. I want... your people to stay on this planet longer than just this year. I wish you could stay here."

The amphibian did not move an inch. Ann removed her fingers, not too fast or too slowly; Oanss rubbed his finger-stalks against the spot where she had touched his face, and put them to his lips. She could not see them part, so minutely did they move. His eyes opened wide, instantly, as if the taste of her touch had startled him.

Why were her fingers feeling sore, almost burning?

"Is your skin dangerous to touch for a land-human? Is there poison in it?"

"Iii doo not knnow. The aanswerr I thhink iss, nnnno."

Then she understood - the moment she had touched him, the muscles of her hand had tensed so tightly she had almost went numb.

"Can you please open this thing up? It's getting hard to breathe."

Oanss grabbed and twisted a thick lump on the bubble - it buckled and split open with a pop, leaving only the float-ring upon which they rested.

They both squinted at the sun, moved uncertainly, undecided where to head;

the southern rim of the lagoon was close.

"Myy frriend. Annn," the amphibian said, fixing her with the wide slits of his squinting eyes. *"Hhhow ddo weee... shhhare thiss?"* He indicated his head.

"Can we just talk? I mean, in land-language? English?"

The Sirian seemed appalled or bewildered by the suggestion; his face was so slightly contorted, she couldn't tell the difference.

"Try it. We can begin by telling each other everything about our lives, in words, the life story from the time we were born. Can you do that?"

Ann was forced to explain the idea one more time before Oanss seemed to understand. No machines. Just talking. His gaze began to drift; he felt at his head.

"Thiss iis difficult... neew thingg..."

Ann began to giggle, shameless as it was; she couldn't help but think his reaction was so typically male.

"But my people do talk, instead of sharing thoughts directly. Take a rest now, and we can try it later. Okay?"

"Okayyy."

He gave her one last puzzled glance, then slid off the floating ring and dived into the lagoon. An indistinct ache began in her stomach; she knew not what it was. Nothing about her made any sense anymore.

The soldier had asked Patty to arrange a private audience with the Regional Elder; he would make one last attempt to reach through to him, before the soldier bailed out of this escalating madness. (Security was tight; he had had

to abandon his plan of smuggling in a knife to kill the leader with.)

To his surprise, the leader granted him an appointment.

The soldier entered the ramshackle beach house, which lay apart from the main camp of tents. He cautiously looked about him for any signs of an ambush; there weren't any. The leader, whatever he felt like being called at the present moment, sat in the gloom of a corner, dressed in a black silk robe. His scalp hair was growing back; his ruddy beard was tattered and filthy. The soldier frowned, when he saw just how much weight the leader had lost; his formerly large belly was all but gone.

The cult leader's breath was a heavy wheezing; he refused to move from his seat when the soldier entered. If not for the much-used insecticide and flypaper, there would have been more flies buzzing around; now, there were no more than half a dozen of them in the room.

"Elder... are you all right?" he asked, more out of curiosity than concern.

It took the leader a whole minute to gather the energy for an answer. When he spoke, his voice sounded harsh and monotonous.

"This... mortal shell... I shall cast off. When the sign comes, our flock descends into an undersea kingdom... and we leave the surface to its own deserved doom."

"Elder, please. I want to ask -"

"Shut up! Or I'll have you tried for heresy." He sniffed petulantly, tried to reach for a bottle, and barely succeeded. He took a swig, then dropped the bottle among the others on the floor.

"Have you come to seek forgiveness for your sins?" the Regional

Elder said, sneering with open contempt. "You have come..." - he farted - "...to the right place. For Ranmotani speaks through me, and I am his eyes and ears."

The soldier took a deep breath - and almost gagged. Somewhere, very close, there was a rotting cadaver. He put up a handkerchief in front of his nose.

"Elder... I must learn more about the Sirians. About their homeworld. About what it looks like."

"The pictures are all over the Internet and TV channels," the Regional Elder said with a gesture of irritation.

"Not those. The other pictures. That the Sirians send into the minds of certain people."

"Oh yes. It's on my CD, 'The Secrets of Ranmotani Revealed'. The homeworld is a hollowed-out sphere, larger than the sun, with an immense ocean that fills up the inside..."

The soldier shook his head; the leader obviously knew nothing save his own invented nonsense.

"Listen! Just for once, *listen* to me! There really is someone putting messages into someone's head, but I don't know what is doing it or how! Something other than Sirians, maybe... do you recognize this phrase?"

The soldier cleared his throat, and attempted to repeat the alien call he had spoken during the first vision. He studied the Regional Elder for a response, any sign of recognition. The leader stared back in a mindless stupor. The soldier turned to leave; the wheezing wreck of a man called out to halt him.

"Wait! Are... are you... a messenger from...?"

The soldier did not even bother to look back as he walked out. If only it were that simple, he thought, a fairytale of perfect saviors stepping in to solve everyone's problems by a snap of his fingers...

Chapter Twenty

DAY 111

They dived together into the lagoon to catch something to eat; it wasn't audibly agreed on, but just turned out that way.

Ann used a small net and caught some small fish. Oanss nabbed a small octopus without any tools, and dragged it ashore. The two found some privacy on the southern end of the islet; this part was mostly petrified coral, worn smooth by the lapping waves, with very little vegetation or sand.

The sun burned hard, but they found a bit of shadow between two jagged rocks and proceeded to barbecue their catch; it was relatively easy for Ann, once she had recalled how she had seen people eat this way on the beaches of Sri Lanka.

Oanss, being taller and heavier, ate most of the octopus and one fish; they were in no hurry and said next to nothing. Then, lying upon the slope of a rock drenched in pleasant afternoon sunshine, he began to talk. His vocabulary had been accumulating recently; Oanss confessed to having read an enormous amount of the truckloads of books and periodicals being delivered to the Sirians by boat each week. He asked Ann if she knew about something called "science-fiction". She answered, still drowsy, that it was a rather unimportant form of fantasy tales that were mostly inaccurate from a scientific point of view. (She meant it; fiction in any form had seldom interested her, and what little she had read proved disappointing.)

Oanss said that he was amazed by how much land-human writers had speculated about extraterrestrial life, before they could possibly have known

of any life outside Earth; this interest intrigued him.

"Why is that?" Ann asked. "When you grew up during space travel, did you learn much about other life in the universe? Weren't you interested in other life back then?"

He agreed that, sure, he had learned much about land-humans from watching their television transmissions on the journey to the Solar System, and the older information from ancient Sirian space probes. The Sirians had discovered much life on other worlds, mostly primitive organisms or plants; the only other really intelligent living species they had ever encountered was that of Earth.

Yet, the question of life in the universe did not make Oanss anxious or particularly eager; the matter interested him, but not enough to fantasize about it the way Earthlings loved to. Then again, Ann, reflected, these amphibians in their present state weren't much inclined to fantasize at all.

Oanss asked her again: Why did land-humans find speculation about extraterrestrial life so interesting? She moved from her resting position and regarded the distant fleet with new eyes - yes, it was the obvious question to put to all those eager Earthlings. Aliens come here, they stay a while, exchange a few courtesies, leave for another world. The universe is full of life, and holds more than enough space for everyone. So why obsess about it?

What did it all mean to her?

Alien, shmalien... just a label on which to apply one's own murky fears and hopes. Bug-eyed savior, flesh-eating demon from space; all of it just childish projections.

And here she was, sitting next to the real thing, just starting to take him for granted. In a few months he would be gone forever, and mankind would start making more stupid films and books about his kind, less and less realistic the further time passed...

"Why, Oanss? Why did you come here?"

Oanss made a strange alien gesture that she could not identify with; he twisted one soft arm once around itself, up at the bright sky, as if it was an antenna and he the radio. It lasted a few seconds, then he uncoiled; a bone in his arm snapped audibly as he retracted it.

"I diid nnot maake thhe deecisionn... iit is aaa... tradiitiooon. Myy peeeople muust migrrate wwhen manny yyears hhaave passsed. Aand thiss woorld waas sso welll knownn to uus looong beffore, iit waas... ineevitablle."

"That is all?"

"I thhink thatt iss aaall."

The gypsies of the universe. She ought to have understood it was that simple.

"Could you imagine at least a few of your people settling down here, staying here for the rest of their lives?"

The alien laughed in his peculiar manner, making loud staccato clicks; the sound sent an unexpected chill down her spine. She feared what his reason for laughing might be, despite Carl's attempts to calm her.

"And then? What will you do with the rest of your life... are there any important things you want to do before you die?"

She expected no answer from someone who appeared so carefree, so

secure, so innocent. She was wrong.

"To beecome ann Aancestorr iss thhe moost importannt thhing foor aa huumaan," he said, and the note of his singing bass voice turned almost flat. *Ancestors*. That imprecise term again, that Takeru assumed were related to his own fuzzy Shinto practices. Ann wasn't a believer, though.

"Oanorn said you should not talk to my people about Ancestors," she remarked, not being too serious.

"Because you haave no Aaancestorrs," he said, in a tone so low she barely heard him over the waves.

"Takeru thinks that he has his own ancestor spirits, spirits who live in the world but cannot be seen," she said uncertainly - as if she wanted to defend herself, but why?

The next thing she heard Oanss say was incomprehensible to her. He stood straight up, peered at some clouds, and made a long wailing call, rounded off by some burring notes. He remained frozen in that position. One minute went by, then two; he repeated the call, so loudly Ann's ears began to smart.

The breeze blew; the clouds drifted; a few birds flew by. Nothing particular happened. Oanss made a wheezing sound that might have been a sigh - his large rounded shoulders sagged and his head bowed down. Ann moved closer, careful not to touch him, and asked him what was the matter.

"Lllittle laand-humannn. Withouut ourr machinnnes, I mmust uuse yyour worrds wiithh more iintelligence. I caan not ffind thhe beetter worrds too sayy my ththoughts noow. Waait..."

"Alllone."

"Alone," she echoed.

A wave of conflicting thoughts welled up in Ann's mind. She was instantly paralyzed, as if her nervous system had short-circuited. The amphibian moved drunkenly, uncertainly, back into the lagoon and the safety of his people. Ann's throat would not allow her to shout at him to stop. Her legs would not let her to run after him; her face did not want her to show sadness.

She cleaned up after their meal, picked up her diving equipment and walked up the beach, back to the barracks a few hundred meters northwest. She would not let herself think, and concentrated on her work schedule instead.

DAY 112

"The Pentagon has just disclosed to the public new satellite images, which show a large military buildup in the Gulf countries. A joint Arabian-Iranian fleet, including three aircraft-carriers and nine submarines, is now moving out of the Persian Gulf. The fleet's official destination is the Timor Sea north of Australia, where it is to perform a maneuver in cooperation with their newest ally - Indonesia.

"Indonesia is yet a member of the United Nations, though the largely Moslem population has demanded they leave the U.N. in protest against the alien presence in the Pacific. This morning, the U.S. Secretary of State called the intended maneuver 'a thinly veiled threat,' and warned the Arab anti-Sirian coalition against 'even considering the unthinkable'. She also again emphasized the fact that the current

American fleet presence in the Pacific outnumbers the Arab fleet.

"Despite this show of confidence from the American government, international concern is growing over the perceived nuclear threat from Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both the leaders and the public of these Moslem nations, though few of them have yet realized their threats, are fiercely opposed to the visit of the Sirian amphibians to Earth. The exact motives for this are many and conflicting; CNN correspondent and Oriental expert Albert Sayed, live from Cairo, explains..."

"The visiting Sirians have actually done very little to upset the feelings of Moslems over the world; nothing has leaked out from Alien Beach to suggest, for instance, that the religious practices of the Sirians are against the laws of Islam. As everyone has learned by now, Sirians eat seafood and vegetables only; reportedly, the mere smell of pork offends their delicate senses.

"Nevertheless, the Islamic protests against the Apollo Moon landings were nothing compared to the vast mass demonstrations against the Sirian Moon landing, in Saudi Arabia and Iran several months ago. Similar demonstrations have been staged practically every week since.

"The imams and high priests of both Sunni and Shi'ite Moslems have from the outset argued thus: the Sirians cannot have been created by God, therefore they must be some kind of 'mock creation' by Satan, to defy the original humans as created by Him.

"The few priests in these countries who openly oppose this doctrine have either been imprisoned on grounds of heresy, or

murdered, or driven into political asylum. The fact remains that the Koran says absolutely nothing about life on other planets, except for the realms of heaven and hell.

"Fundamentalist terrorist groups, which until a few months ago spent all their energy attacking American and Israeli interests, are now intensely active spreading anti-Sirian propaganda and supposedly planning attacks on the Alien Beach base.

"I quote from this leaflet which can now be found in almost any café in Cairo: 'The so-called extra-terrestrial visitors are cleverly designed remote-controlled robots, built by American contractors in service of Jewish media conglomerates...'

"Another hate tract claims that the Sirians are not robots, but in fact demons: 'Satan's hordes are setting up a beach-head for their coming large-scale invasion of Earth...'

"I have asked many average Egyptians on the street what they think. Only a few of them wholeheartedly agree with the extremists. Most people here are like the rest of us: divided in mind, uncertain of what the future will bring, and painfully aware that things might change radically over their heads.

"As one old woman said to me: 'If these creatures call themselves humans, maybe they are so in spirit, I don't know. But if they are like us, wouldn't that in itself make them dangerous?'

"This is Albert Sayed from Cairo, for CNN."

Chapter Twenty-One

DAY 113

The mood of communal meals of the ECT group was changing, especially for the seven who had agreed to share their dreams through the Sirian thought-recorders.

They felt like the chosen few, said little, but exchanged knowing glances that excluded those who were not in the know. Takeru and Ann, Stone Pound, Edmund Soto, and Mats Jonsson were among those who had stubbornly refused to take part in the mind-sharing sessions; each had his or her public excuse, neither of which the others really cared about anymore.

A certain air of giddiness was about Carl when he passed the food around the lunch-table; he was at the forefront of a revolution of the mind, which he would soon get to share with his own family back home. He had hinted some of this discovery, but not all, to his wife over the phone. Oh, how he longed to know her like never before... as soon as the risk of long-term injury had been investigated. The cell-phone vibrated in his shirt-pocket; the display told him the President was calling.

"Carl speaking..." he said in a relaxed voice.

"Hi, or should I say good morning, by the time over here? There is something we haven't brought up for a while, Carl, because our other scientists have been busy ever since it happened. Do you recall the moon landing ceremony, when Eric Bennon received the first thought-recorder?"

"Yes, I do. We have of course been examining our own ones, and the results so far are very positive..."

"I'll read your report later. We know the machines work, and they have no obvious side effects - fool-proof technology. But we tried to take

apart and examine Bennon's copy, just in case. The device has no seams, so it had to be cut open - the metal cells consist of, lessee, mercury, titanium, aluminum, magnesium, copper, and a gazillion other alloys. The machine resisted being cut! It had a life of its own, and it tried to crawl away when it felt the heat of a laser. Eventually it started to self-destruct, and just melted - as if it was programmed not to give away its design."

"With due respect, sir, that doesn't surprise me at all. The amphibians are very careful not to give away too much knowledge too fast."

"But you are on good terms with them?"

"As good as they can get."

"Then try to make them understand we need their superior technology to defend them against their enemies here on Earth."

Both men were silent for a moment.

"Then the rumors are true," Carl said. "There is a war coming."

"Afraid so," the President said. "I wouldn't be this blunt otherwise. Hell, I don't know what the Sirians really want. Some of my generals are still saying it's a setup for invasion. But those damned Arabs have made up their minds, and right now they are the greater threat! If only the Sirians would lend us one small weapon, not a deadly one, just enough to stop the enemy missiles from detonating - then they could keep the rest of their secrets."

"But these are peaceful beings. You saw them use their high-frequency screams to fend off the crowd in New York -"

"Anyone who'd visit such a violent world as ours, would be an idiot to come unarmed. Ask them. I take full responsibility."

The conversation ended a minute later. Ashen-faced, Carl pocketed

his phone and addressed his colleagues.

"It's no use keeping secrets anymore, so I'll give it to you straight. There's something we need to discuss."

They hadn't agreed on the meeting-place; Ann showed up at the same southern spit, and waited among the low rocks until Oanss' familiar shape appeared in the surf.

She was melancholy; so was he, or so he appeared to her. He immediately asked her to explain to him where she was born, about her life, and what would happen to her in the future. She couldn't stand still, but wandered around as she talked; Oanss squatted upon the top of a jagged rock and followed her movements with his eyes.

"My full name," she began, "is Ann Catherine Cláve Meadbouré. I was born thirty-four years ago on Sri Lanka. My mother, Ann-Christine Cláve, was a scientist like me. My father... died when I was one year old; I have no memory of him, but he was a soldier in the Vietnam War, which you know about. So I grew up on Sri Lanka, away from the cities, with very few other children for friends. My mother was... I think now, that after my father's death she became withdrawn from the world. So she took us to the most isolated village on the coast, where I could grow up while she did her work with Arthur and explored the sea life just nearby.

"Arthur is... here's a picture of him with me when I was nine years old. He and his friends taught me to swim and dive safely, and introduced me to the scuba diving gear. I met Arthur when we lived on the coast, and he was a good teacher of mine. I followed his work, and learned all I could

about sea animals... and dolphins. I always used to think dolphins were leading so much happier lives than land-humans, and they are so intelligent... they liked me just as much as I liked them. Have you seen people playing with dolphins? On television?"

Oanss nodded.

"There are so few other animals that my people can become true friends with. Dolphins, dogs... that make you feel someone other than a human cares for you, understands you. Do Sirians have pets, or like, animal friends?"

The Sirian blinked repeatedly, and said: *"I thiiink nnno."*

"Of course, you have so much better things instead. Metal pets... Anyhow... I met Carl Sayers on Sri Lanka once, when he was visiting Arthur. We just said hello, he gave me a few books to read, that's all. Later I went to a university in America to complete my education in biology and anthropology... that's when I met Carl a second time, when he held a lecture there. What he said about his work to find extraterrestrial life made me very interested. I felt that we were both looking for intelligent life, only in separate places... he was looking to the stars, I was looking into the sea. Do you understand this?"

Oanss said he thought he did.

"We talked and became friends, not close friends, but enough to take an interest in each other's work and write letters to each other several times a year. Of course, it helped that we both knew Arthur. So over the years, after I returned to stay in Sri Lanka, we kept up the correspondence. You see, land-humans have been using letters for many thousand years, to

communicate over great distances. Sometimes people who write to each other become friends, without ever meeting in real life."

"I doo nnot uunderstand thhis. Explaain wword 'frriend' innn thiis conntext..."

"A friend can be many things, all of them good. It is someone who you help, and who helps you."

"Alsooo iif a frieend iis nnot ablle to reallly touchh youu?"

"Yes... yes."

He asked her to proceed with an account of her future.

"After... after your people leave, I will continue to work as a scientist. Many years I will spend understanding all the information we gained from your visit. We will probably start working on our own space travel to other planets, maybe one day to Sirius..."

"Thhere iis nno life iin thee Siriius syystem," he said.

"What?"

He told her: Earth scientists ought to know the double-star system was uninhabitable in the long run; the 'Sirians' had been living there for thousands of years but were now moving onward as had been intended all along. Ann didn't know what to say; this was crucial information that the amphibians had refused to reveal before.

She calmed down when he explained, without her asking him to, that the main migration was directed toward an altogether different star system - which one, he wasn't allowed to reveal. There were other ships than the one that had entered the Solar System.

"You understand that I must tell this to my friends?"

Again the amphibian made his alien laugh. *"It iss diffiicuilt foor mme too... adaapt tto thhe ffact thhat you doo noot shaare thhhoughts wiith otherrrs. Yees? I offten maake a mmistake aand... thhhink yoou knnow all I thiink, beecause iit is llike sso wiiith Siirianns. Thhis is aa jjoke? Go oon..."*

"It is confusing. Well... I will grow older, then perhaps I will move to France. My mother has asked me to move to France where she lives now... and in fifty or sixty years from now, I will probably die of old age. And that's all."

"Expllain 'diie off ooold age'."

"Our machines, our science has its limits. A few of us can get as old as a hundred and twenty years... then the body just stops working. The heart stops, the lungs stop, the brain stops. The cells of the body cannot regenerate anymore. The cells start to decay. Bacteria start to eat the body. The body falls apart to dust. Only the bones remain. That is death to us."

Ann halted, and looked at the reflection of her own face in a puddle at her feet. The lifelong exposure to tropical sunlight had tanned and wrinkled her skin early, though it looked soft and healthy; the lines around the eyes were starting to run deeper. Her half-long hair was bleached by the sun and salt, making her skin appear almost brown by contrast.

Old age? It hadn't even started on her yet. Arthur was really old; he might pass away any day. Carl was dangerously close to too old to lead the ECT. She wondered what her mother looked like now, living in retirement in France. They hadn't been on speaking terms for ten years. Oanornn was about two hundred years old, or so the Sirians had told them - if one didn't count his time spent in suspended animation.

Oanss, Ann thought, would still be in his prime when she was a dying, bitter old crone in a wheelchair.

A tall, breathing shape behind her grasped her gently, and she imagined she was weeping. She wanted it to be a dream, and shut her eyes, trying to wish it so.

"I did nnot undeerstand reallly buut noww... lllittle laand-humann doo not diie yyyet. Iit iss sssso alllone iif yyou doo..."

"But you will die too."

"No. I wwill becoome, rreally, nnot inn fiictioon, but llike in scieence aan Annceestor. Decaay thhen... vvery muuch slooww. A trraditioonn... ffor many thousaaand yyears."

The words sounded inadequate, the vocabulary inane, in a language not made to describe the facts he attempted to communicate. But it was so simple. Not a surprise to her at all. The surprise was that she didn't react to it. His hold ceased; Ann turned around at the sound of a splash, and he was gone.

Ann came to Carl's barrack late that night; she repeated to him Oanss' words about the Ancestors. She had to go through it several times before Carl was sure she had heard it right.

"I need more proof," he told her. "You must keep quiet about this until we learn more."

She agreed, but added: "I couldn't keep this from you. If... if there was a chance to save you, if your cancer comes back, I... thought you deserved a chance more than any one of us."

They hugged each other hard, and Ann left for her own barrack. She wasn't feeling quite as alone as before.

Chapter Twenty-Two

DAY 114

Around five in the morning, they knocked on his door. Carl stumbled out of bed, slightly irritated, and opened.

"Professor Carl Sayers?"

He faced a grim-looking general in dark sunglasses flanked by two soldiers - Pentagon guards, by the look of their uniforms.

"Who the hell are you? Make an appointment and come back later."

The general removed his shades and took a step into the barrack. He was of middle age, and Carl drowsily noticed his NSA badge.

Shit, he thought. *Intelligence people.*

Carl had met their kind before, and he despised them with all his heart. After two arrests for demonstrating at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, and having openly criticized the "Star Wars" program, Carl Sayers was branded a traitor in certain military-industrial circles. He had deliberately avoided this department of the project, though he knew this would only confirm the intelligence community's suspicion of him.

"Whaddya want?"

"Please sit down, professor. You, make the professor a cup of coffee. I'll have one too - black, plenty sugar."

Carl sat down by his table while one of the soldiers went to work on his coffee maker; the other soldier shut the door and blocked, it as if guarding a national treasure. Both soldiers wore pistol holsters.

"I'm General Harrod, chief executive of the Alien Beach Security

Committee. We haven't met before, for security reasons. I assume you were paying attention when the President told you a few months ago - the intelligence agencies were to open a field office right outside Alien Beach..."

"...on the U.S.S. Powell, I remember," said Carl. He got his coffee and took a sip.

The security officer produced a hand-held tape recorder, and said: "Well... During the routine surveillance of the area, our personnel picked up this conversation from the island."

He played up the conversation between Carl and Ann, barely six hours old. Carl flew up from his chair; he wanted to punch the general's teeth in. One soldier sprang to attention, his hand on his holster.

"Calm - *down!*" the general hissed at them both. "Don't play the ravished virgin with me. Did you really think we'd let your team of scientists run the whole show unchecked? The President has already been informed. Contrary to some opinions voiced by you and your colleagues, the intelligence community remains loyal to the best interests of the country."

Carl sat down.

"I refuse to talk to you. I will only discuss this tape with the President himself."

"The President is busy, what with the war coming that your alien friends helped stir up. Now tell me what they're really up to." The officer, still standing, sipped his fresh coffee and stared down the world's most famous astrophysicist as if he was a freshly caught spy. "How many of them are there in the mothership? What are their weapons? Have you been subjected to mind manipulation? Are you currently holding a position within

a Sirian organization? Do you consider yourself loyal to The United States' government?"

Carl burst into laughter. The moment was equally absurd to the occasion, decades ago, when a diplomat from Soviet Russia had offered Carl to spy on the U.S. space program for them. His agenda did not concern single nations, but the world; some people would never understand that. The general's humorless face reddened with anger. Carl lifted his coffee cup - and tossed the scalding-hot liquid onto the general's chest. The furious bureaucrat grimaced, hesitated, and backed off toward the door.

"You think you're untouchable now, Sayers!" the general shouted with hysterical pointing gestures. "But when the day comes your name'll be on my list!"

He exited, closely followed by his henchmen. At least, Carl thought as he stood shaking, they made good coffee; his drowsiness was gone.

Carl immediately called his special direct number to the President.

"You asked for a weapon, Mr. President. They may have something much, much more powerful. But it's too early to say. Sirian thought processes operate differently from those of humans, at least at our present level of contact. They seem to have partly abandoned classical logic, which makes them unpredictable in the extreme.

"They'll never tell you everything at once. This latest information was just a fragment. No, there's no plan to it. It's just the way they are. Remember that we haven't understood them yet. But this much seems certain: the Sirians are convinced that they possess a technology that makes

them immortal. I don't mean just 'longevity'. I mean life, or existence at least, without end."

He patiently waited for the news to sink in; he could hear nothing but the President's breathing for three minutes. At length, there came a reply.

"It'll be impossible to keep the lid on something this big. If the U.N. Security Council starts to think I'm keeping this to myself, the core of the Council might break up - and that's the end of world peace. And if I tell them this..."

"Tell them the truth, Mr. President. There is no longer any point in lying about anything."

Later the same morning, Takeru heard Carl recount to the ECT the latest information; he taped it all on his concealed pocket recorder, then excused himself. He had to smuggle the tape to his employer in Tokyo as soon as possible. This scientific breakthrough would make him a national hero, the savior of Japan...

While Takeru was walking back toward his barrack, lost in daydreams of grandeur, his head began to spin with dizziness. The "Ancestors" Carl had mentioned... did that include his own ones as well? Was this science or faith come real? His skin began to prickle; he thought he heard whispers in the breeze; he was going insane...

"Grandmother! Grandmother, where are you? I miss you so..."

"Takeru? What's wrong? You were saying something in Japanese."

Mats Jonsson had run up to Takeru, who staggered against a palmtree for support. The Swede felt Takeru's wrist for his pulse.

"You're sweating heavily, hyperventilating, and your heart rate... Lemme help you into the medical barrack, and I'll give you something to relax, okay?"

"I'm fine," Takeru whispered. But his legs wouldn't carry him anymore. Some invisible force was sucking away his vitality, and he couldn't tell whether it came from within or without. He pressed his palms hard against his ears, afraid to hear the breeze and what it might whisper to him.

"You're *not* fine, and you're coming with me," Mats insisted, pulling up Takeru by the arm.

He dragged him along to the hospital barrack, humming to himself. Mats felt rather excited himself about what little Carl had said - and not too surprised. In fact, he was confident and inspired. Whatever happened to mankind from now on, someone, somewhere had beaten his old enemy - death - and as a man of medicine he saw this as a victory. He hummed and whistled to himself all the way to sick bay.

Rumor is the poor man's oracle; it feeds on the desires and fears that are common to all people. The rumor fed on Man's supreme fear; thus it spread faster than any other word-by-mouth ever shared. General Harrod's security measures, imposed on the surveillance of Alien Beach, had to break at some point; one leak sufficed, and the rumor became unstoppable.

By noon on the 114th day, every statesman in the world had heard. In the evening, word broke through onto the Internet; the Church of Ranmotani was informed just minutes before that.

"During the last two hours, Libya, Jordan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Palestine have terminated their United Nations memberships. The declarations were made before the U.N. Headquarters in New York; the diplomats then left the premises without making further comments. From the White House it has been announced that the President will address the nation and the world within the next few hours.

"In another shocking development, Kuwait and Iraq have also terminated their memberships in the United Nations with immediate effect. Their governments have just openly requested to join King Khadi's alliance. Such an alliance, if completed, would be able to put a stranglehold on the world's oil resources.

"From countries all over the world are reported sudden and violent riots in the cities; most reports include testimonies of spontaneous attacks against churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. This outbreak of hostility against established churches may be connected to a strange rumor that's been circulating on the Internet for several hours..."

THE LAST HOUR OF DAY 114

Marlo O'Brien, reduced to a hysterical shell of a man, tore his robe apart and shouted to the 3,100 ecstatic cultists through his microphone. They swirled around his stage like a single, roaring entity.

"The time has come! Do not hesitate! I am the vessel of Ranmotani! I

say, you are now one with me! By the cosmic power of my might, I make you immortal! You are now fully functional amphibians! We march to our undersea kingdom that I have built for you my beloved children! *Join me in eternal oceanic life!*"

The soldier struggled through the howling crowd, desperately seeking the face of Patty. All faces looked the same: staring masks, their mouths gaping wide, devoid of reason or sanity. Their leader, naked but dark with filth, marched off toward the nearby beach, and the thousands of followers tore off their robes, joining him. The soldier was swept along; he couldn't go against the tide of flesh without risking getting trampled. They pressed him onward, still howling - was it the old chant he had heard at the airport? If his panic gained control of him, he would drown in the commotion.

From every direction the soldier was elbowed and pushed by naked, unkempt people; the darkness around him deepened as they pressed into the crashing waves of the beach. He couldn't see, only feel the water current pulling at his feet, the current of hands dragging him down. He took a deep breath and shielded his head with his arms; the writhing crowd pushed him forward and he tripped into the warm water. Still they pushed forward, flailing and dragging him down.

Too late, he heard the screams of the children struggling not to drown. There were just a handful of children in the cult - their parents forced them down with them, in absolute conviction that the children would not die when their elders forced them to breathe water.

The soldier's clothes were torn off. Now totally surrounded by water and bodies, his feet pumped but found no foothold; he surfaced once, took

another breath, and was pushed down again. Panic caught him, and he lost control of his limbs; the crowd was sinking down with open mouths, gulping down water into its lungs, voices being abruptly drowned, making comical "blub-blub" noises. Then he recalled - there was something that wanted him to live - something that had lifted him out of despair and given him a glimpse of another life, of being something other than human.

He struggled upward, kicking and treading with his arms, past the grasping, drowning shapes, and surfaced again. He coughed up seawater, kept swimming - and the struggle ceased. The light from the beach made a faint reflection across the waves, and he could swim against the current back toward land. He bumped into a floating mass. Then another, and another. Yet another thing floated up to the surface and bumped into him. Thousands of drowned bodies, their lungs filled with water.

All looking the same.

All thinking the same.

All dead.

He didn't want to see their faces. He didn't want to see Patty, or even the hated leader. At last he treaded on solid ground and could stumble back onto the beach, where the waves were washing ashore clusters of naked, slumped corpses. Without thinking, he found his way to the camp, found some decent clothes and put them on, grabbed the last of his food stash, and headed for the nearby town.

Alien Beach, he thought. *Whatever it takes.*

The large TV screen in the mess barrack showed the first images of the mass suicides.

Then more suicides were reported, and still more. The casualty figures climbed by the dozens and hundreds for each new report from the cult compounds scattered across the globe.

"This is terrible!" Edmund exclaimed to Carl. "All because of your spreading of rumors to the public! You must immediately denounce the rumors, before thousands more die!"

"And then what?" Carl said, cold with terror, wishing it was all just a bad dream. "Now I really need proof."

"What proof?"

"Proof to show the world. The only way to end the rumors before they cause more destruction."

"You're mad!" cried the bishop.

Ignoring him, Carl went out to the beach, found a Sirian and asked him to send a message to the lander in the lagoon. The reply came within the hour: a meeting was to take place after sunset.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Carl and the other scientists gathered at the site of the tree-like, four meter high antennas the Sirians had erected on the beach. At the erection ceremony, a lightning-bolt had escaped the antenna-sprouts and burned a palmtree; now, months later, that palmtree was dead and had toppled to the ground. The amphibian group, the whole dozen, surfaced and walked up to the site.

"Ranmotanii, Oanorn... do you know why I have called for you?"

"Yees, Caarl-Ssayerrs. One oof ourr peeoplle haave toold yyou who thhe Annncestorss aare. 'Wwhat haappens happeens'... llike sso onne laand-humman saaid."

"You are the Ancestors. Or rather, you will be."

"Yees."

"There is much that we must decide upon, because your group is in danger now. Right now, land-humans are killing themselves because they think you have promised them immortality."

The Sirians had access to most media; they knew, all right.

"Thhen you land-humans doo nnot knoww enoughh aabout thee Ancestooors."

To the scientists, an undercurrent of sadness could be heard in Ranmotanii's voice.

"Tell us everything we need to understand them."

The Sirians had an internal discussion, which lasted a few minutes; the scientists began to grow restless.

"Carl," Stone said, rubbing his cold hands in the rising and falling night breeze, "what did Ann really tell you? I thought this 'Ancestor' talk was just a bunch of religious phrases, you know, like we say 'Oh my God' but we don't mean it..."

"You ought to know better, Stone. These beings are on a level where practically everything is meant seriously. They don't joke about death for instance, because they don't fear death anymore. They have so few internal conflicts, because they don't fear being wrong anymore. They have no sense of being alone anymore, because they are never alone. They are not afraid of us, because they have a powerful ally we can't even see.

"Takeru! Have your measurements registered any weird patterns from the clouds above the island? Electromagnetic anomalies that can't be caused by the weather, or particle emissions coming straight out of the air?"

The team's master engineer consulted his pocket computer, where summaries of his surveillance data were listed.

"Well, there have been a few anomalies every month, but almost negligible, could even be isotopes from jet aircraft passing by..."

Takeru meant it; the results had been vague and inexplicable... until now. The rational part of his brain was at odds with his emotions; he no longer managed to keep the conflicting sides split apart. Mats' medication barely kept him stable now; Takeru was aware of actually coming together, but he felt like coming apart.

"Hasn't the weather struck you as odd lately?" asked Carl.

"It has. The clouds up there are caused by heat that doesn't emanate from the sun - even now, in the middle of the night that air is being warmed

up. First I thought it was all the air traffic heating up the stratosphere, but the extra heat is much more than airplanes could emit, and it seems to come from nowhere. Either that, or the heat sources are so small they don't show up on my instruments, smaller than a millimeter - but there's nothing there except air and vapor."

"Can you count the heat sources?"

"I told you, Carl - the heat is there, you could go up in a balloon and feel it yourself - but the sources cannot be pinpointed! My theory is that the Sirians have a space probe which shoots high-energy laser beams into the atmosphere, but so thin we can't see them."

"We do register radio traffic between the Mars mothership and the lander craft here, Ranmotanii. Are you using some kind of energy transmission from the mothership to cause those strange clouds?" Stone asked.

"Nnno... Ancestoors aare up thherre... annd they heat uup thhe atomms iin thhe aair ass they mmmooove. Wwhen Ancesstors slllow downn, yyou wiill ssee bluue llight..."

Stone shook his head: "No. No, this is impossible. I won't believe in things I can't see. I didn't even believe atoms really existed, until they invented a camera that could take pictures of them."

Carl said to Oanorn, who was waving for attention: "You must show us. Can you make the Ancestors do something - that only they can?"

The wrinkled alien with the whites of his eyes shot through by capillaries nodded, once. He gestured at the humans to move away from the antenna cluster, and urged his flock closer. Namonnae and Tmmtena got

the scientists to shut down most of the nearby spotlights; the beach became almost dark. The Sirians quickly formed a standing ring around the cluster. Without a signal, the ring of humanoids began to dance. Their flat, long feet moved in slight, measured movements, so that the circle rocked in unison - clockwise, counter-clockwise, in a pattern.

They started chanting up at the sky, with inhuman intonation:

"Chiiiskr-r-r-r... chiiiskr-r-r-r mmer-r-r-r-llee!"

A series of popping energy charges sounded from the alien antennas; the metal crown of the tree began to glow with blue radiation. Almost instantly, the sea breeze grew into a roaring gale that whipped the palmtrees; the whirling cloud cover blurred into a haze. The amphibians continued their dance, gazing up at the sky with expectant faces.

Carl's group stood paralyzed, set apart from the Sirians, when the lights began to appear.

"Lightning balls!" shouted Stone, throwing himself down on the ground. A swarm of small, fuzzy blue spheres, fainter and smaller than old light-bulbs, scattered from the antenna crown and shot outward over the heads of the Sirians - who shouted out loud and threw their arms up in triumph. The lightning balls zipped silently back and forth across the beach, at velocities akin to a jet aircraft smashing the sound barrier. Streams of them flew past Carl's head at close range - he barely perceived them at first, except as blue beams.

Glowing apparitions. How many were there? They were everywhere around them - the balls split up like particles in an ultra-slow cyclotron collision, slammed together and fused, disappeared in a flash, re-appeared an

inch further away, froze still, then shot away like bullets. It was impossible to count them - there could have been anything between a thousand or a billion. Ann instinctively reached out to touch them - and she saw a fuzzy bullet of blue light fly right through her hand. She felt the briefest burn of heat in her hand, but no mark was left on it.

Carl remembered he ought to be breathing, gasped out loud - and the light show just vanished. Gone. The strong wind stopped dead. The blue glow around the antenna cluster died away. Mats Jonsson checked his watch; the phenomenon had lasted no more than twenty seconds. A smell of sharp, stinging ozone hung in the air. Stone looked up from his lying position, felt at his baseball cap to see if his head had been burned. No one had been hurt. The Sirians kept chanting to the sky, oblivious to the shocked scientists who staggered together, shaking like leaves.

The man who shook the most was Bishop Edmund Soto.

He held a crucifix to his lips, and croaked: "But where were *you*? Where were you when they asked me: 'Why won't he show himself to us?' Why have you failed us for so long?"

Andrea came over to Edmund and took his hands.

"It was not God we saw, Edmund. It was traces made in the air by another, higher life-form."

"Don't you think I understood that?" he told her, prying his hands from her hold. His eyes gleamed in the dark round face, mad with despair. "I have attended hundreds of funerals in my homeland... I have promised weeping mothers that their sons, shot and tortured to death by thugs, were going to a better place. But did any one of all those murdered sons appear to

his mother in the form of a blue lightning ball? Not *one!*"

He fell to his knees in the sand, utterly devastated. The scientists, moved to see the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize suffer such anguish, genuinely wanted to say something to comfort him. There was nothing they could say.

Carl clasped his chest, fearful that his pounding heart would burst with the excitement. He had been utterly wrong about the Sirians; they weren't schizoid at all. If there had been any lingering doubt in his mind about them, now it had vanished - they were everything they claimed to be. When he saw Ranmotanii walk up to him, Carl had to repress a childish impulse to kneel down and kiss the old amphibian's feet.

"How... how is it done?"

"Wwwith ccertain mmmachiines..."

"Can they... see us... now?"

"Yyyes, innn theirr ceertain wway."

"Can I... communicate with them? If I send a radio message, could they answer it in a way I can understand?"

Ranmotanii seemed to hesitate.

"Rissk iis thhat noot."

"I think... yes, one of us had the camera going when it happened. I am forced to show the videotape of this event to my leader, the President of the United States."

"Doo nnot liie too himm," Ranmotanii sang. *"Even whhat yyou sayy aand thhink, thee Ancestors knnow. I do nnoot knoww iif thhis inffformation comes too ssoon forr youu to uunderstaand."*

My God, Carl thought, this is unreal. They don't believe in their gods... they *build* them.

"Tell us everything about the Ancestors."

The Sirians gave the scientists a few new, portable devices, which spoke synthetic English and projected film-like images on any surface. Again, there was a distinctly censored quality to the knowledge imparted. But what was told, was more than enough. Each of the dozen team members fully realized what it was like to be a tiny ant walking on the skin of a cosmic giant, scrutinized by trillions of invisible eyes. Two of them panicked, and had to be sedated. One of them decided to get stone drunk. Another immediately resigned from the project as soon as he understood what was going on.

Carl stood firm under the pressure.

Lazar stood.

Ann stood.

Takeru stood.

Mats stood.

And Edmund stood, perhaps taller than ever.

"My God may have abandoned me, but he is still greater than this," he told himself.

Seabound exit from the cult compound was blocked by half a mile of chain-link fence, topped with razor wire. The soldier himself had helped building it a month ago.

He made his way along the beach, until he came to the spot where the fence ran into the sea. He stepped out into the surf, prepared to make a swim past the fence. A rumble came from the sea, louder than the waves... the soldier looked and saw a moving light in the dark sky. The rumble took shape, became the familiar pounding noise of a helicopter... no, it was too loud for that...

The landing party took him by surprise: blinding searchlights were switched on just fifty meters away and pinpointed the huddling soldier. A fifteen meters long, bulky landing vessel clanked to a halt on the flat beach. Its stern opened into a ramp; out of the boat rolled a small tank, followed by armed troops wearing night-goggles. They had him cornered; the helicopter closed in above his head, whipping up sand and water droplets; from somewhere, a megaphone voice barked at him. The squinting soldier raised his arms in surrender.

It was almost one o'clock in the morning, local time.

He said nothing, made no resistance. It was over. The soldier was arrested and brought to a waiting helicopter, which brought him to the U.S.S. Powell. The flight took just a few hours.

DAY 116

The jetlag from flying halfway around the world put quite a strain on Carl's energy; he tried to rest as much as he could in-flight.

One of the benefits of old age, he mused - it became easier to doze off and take convenient naps. When he exited the plane at the airport in New York, one of the President's closest aides rushed to meet him. A half-dozen

Secret Service men escorted them to the waiting limousines. The President was waiting at the U.N. headquarters, with the Secretary General and the Security Council.

"Mr. Sayers, I assume you have ordered the ECT team to keep quiet to any outsiders about -?"

"Yes. All communications to and from Alien Beach have been cut for now."

Carl wondered if the aide was trustworthy, then told himself to lay off the paranoia; it didn't matter. Inside his limousine, he received a secured phone line with a TV camera linkup. The President's face seemed drawn on the car's small monitor, eyes haunted and restless. Suddenly it dawned on Carl: a race that could read thoughts was a politician's natural enemy.

Even his own benefactor might turn on him.

"Carl, my friend," greeted the President's image on the monitor, making Carl even more suspicious. "The U.N. Security Council has been up for hours over this new information. We've turned every fact over again and again... but we've come nowhere. The U.N. membership nations are bound by the agreement with the Sirians to protect and escort them during their stay... which means that every one of those nations may become the target of a nuclear attack from King Khadi's rogue alliance."

"Will the core of the Security Council hold together?"

"If it broke up, where would the members go? And reject the chance to befriend the mightiest civilization in the world? The permanent members are terrified of staying, but even more terrified of leaving."

Just months ago, "the mightiest civilization in the world" would have

meant the USA. Not anymore.

"Tell me what to do, Carl. Nobody on Earth knows them better than you do. Is there any way we can make them help us out of this crisis? Or more to the point: do they *want* to?"

"They have been perfectly straight with us from the start; they really *are* just on a visit. When they leave, it will be for... thousands of years, maybe, or forever. I'm not even sure they'll leave our mind-recorders intact."

"Self-destructing. Figures."

"After they've left, mankind will have to face itself again. But the very knowledge of the Sirians being out there, will prove a uniting influence. It could bring the world's peoples together. That's the vision I have always believed in - one world, one humanity. The world leaders must explain this to the peoples of the world... and then maybe the peoples of the rogue states will understand that their leaders are deceiving them."

"These are not exactly working democracies. King Khadi or the Iranian ayatollah don't care one damn bit if their peoples disagree with them, because they're convinced that they are doing God's business waging war against the Sirians."

"You've been talking to Khadi?"

"A secret meeting - me, the Chinese Prime Minister, and a few other Security Council members. We talked with him for three hours. God, how we tried to convince him that Allah might have created life on other planets than Earth - but no! That old crank had made up his mind! I quote: 'The Sirians are not humans, they are Satan's creations and must be destroyed!' The Iranians wouldn't even talk to us."

Carl silently wished that it was all a bad joke - that the fate of mankind couldn't be depending on a few pig-headed old men with a 13th-century model of the cosmos. But it was crass, unfunny reality.

"They must come to their senses, or their underlings will do it for them."

"How?"

"You must let me talk freely to the world."

"What will you tell them?"

"I'll show you when we meet."

The U.N. Security Council was shown the videotape from Alien Beach. They said nothing, perhaps out of of fear - fear of an unseen power that might or might not be listening to every word and thought that escaped their minds.

One member hinted, finally, that Carl was running the errands of the aliens, that he might be an unwitting stooge serving them falsified information. Carl shook his head.

"You don't understand how big this is. They haven't even told us half the truth. The Sirians we see, the beings of flesh and blood, aided by semi-organic machines... are just parts in a greater cycle. A cycle their culture has built up over tens of thousands of years. At a certain stage of development, their outlook on life, reality... changed completely. And all that went before that change... is just childhood, a passing phase. The phase we're in now, the human race."

"This is madness, not science!" objected a council member, frightened

by Carl's strange speech. "Are you going to let this man tell these outrageous stories? To the public?" he asked the President.

The President sighed; his shoulders rose and sank slowly, limply.

"I will. In this case, the people should judge his words, not us."

The protesting council-member was talked into accepting Carl's proposal. They decided upon a time; just soon enough to allow Carl a few hours' rest. Then the council members took their phones and called the embassies of the Saudi alliance in person. Everyone, including the enemy, was to hear this.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DAY 116

"This is Christiana Mahnpour live for CNN, from the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Today's extra session of the General Assembly is in a state of total confusion - no agenda has been set yet, and the Secretary General is being besieged by requests from the delegates to make speeches and declarations. The delegates are spreading conflicting rumors among each other. According to some sources, there has just been an emergency meeting with the U.N. Security Council, where a representative of the scientists on Alien Beach disclosed a 'critical discovery' concerning the Sirian visitors.

"Delegates from the renegade states, among them Israel and Kuwait, are unexpectedly present, not in their old seats, but next to the speaker's tribune.

"Christiana, can you tell us if any Sirian delegates are in the building now -"

"Wait, Tom - I'm being told the Security Council members are entering the hall. I can see Carl Sayers, head of the ECT, with them now. The U.S. council member, I mean the President, is talking to the Secretary General. Wait... the President of the United States takes the speaker's chair... he calls for order..."

"Members of the General Assembly... fellow humans... this is a moment of

utmost significance to us all, and I ask you to gather all your strength of character. Carl Sayers has demanded to make an official statement. In the light of recent events, the U.N. Security Council has been forced to allow him to disclose a recent claim from the Sirian visitors at Alien Beach. The issue at hand is so important, that the Security Council has decided to let Carl Sayers speak. You be the judge.

"Please welcome astrophysics professor Carl Sayers, Field Director of the international Extraterrestrial Contact Team."

"Thank you, Mr. President..."

"A few days ago, the extraterrestrial visitors of Alien Beach imparted to us new facts about their culture, which they have kept secret until now. Rumor of this has leaked out, and caused misinterpretations... that have led to several tragic suicides in certain fringe cults. This statement aims to put an end to such misinterpretations, and to force us to confront an issue whose moment of truth has come - if our civilization is to go on surviving and developing.

"This much the Sirians have just told us. After thousands of years of research, a collective cultural effort that began at the dawn of mankind on Earth, they learned that... there is no such thing as a natural afterlife.

"No organic life form, in its natural state, can transfer its consciousness into another form. There is also no evidence, in spite of the beliefs that even Sirians used to hold, that any supernatural force can, or has ever extracted a living consciousness - a 'soul' - from a dying or dead organic life-form. In other words, when a living structure is irreversibly destroyed, it stays dead - forever.

"However, this research led the Sirians to another breakthrough in the science of life. I cannot go into the technical details, because the Sirians are not yet prepared to give them away. All I know is the summary I give you now.

"What is life? All living things are made up of elementary particles, but the particles themselves are dead. It is the way the particles are connected into larger, self-aware structures, that constitutes life. Life literally is order, structure - beginning with the double-helix program of the DNA molecule. The Sirians, by the way, also have DNA in their cells, very similar to ours - because the same laws that govern all atoms, also decide the workings of life throughout the universe. Break the structures, and the life ceases to be - back to dead atoms.

"The Sirian scientific breakthrough has a long, long history, which I will have to try and summarize...

"When overwhelming evidence forced the Sirians to give up the idea of having naturally indestructible souls, they sought desperately for a remedy - beyond mere longevity. They have developed several techniques of suspended animation, which they now use during extended space travel. But those techniques led further still. Since life equals certain structures, Sirian scientists attempted to emulate organic forms using new materials, such as metals and silicates.

"They managed to create organic machines out of these - pseudo-life, if you like. These organic machines now live in perfect symbiosis with Sirians, who exert a great deal of control over them - for instance, the Sirian lander vessel is such a giant pseudo-life organism. Each such machine

consists of billions or more cell-like robots, locked together, each having a program resembling the DNA molecule in function, but not in form.

"Eventually, thousands of years ago, some Sirians embarked to remake their own organic structures in these new materials - to regenerate their exact forms from flesh into living metals and silicates. I don't know how much time was spent to accomplish this... but apparently they had some sort of success. There are no such reconstructed Sirians - you might call them 'androids,' artificial humans - on Earth now. From what I've been told, it seems a huge segment of the Sirian population underwent this reconstruction, then sort of... branched off from the rest of their kind. They moved off into space, never to be heard from again.

"I suggest a 20-minute break now, before I continue... "

"The remaining Sirian culture concentrated its efforts on going further in their search for alternatives to organic life. They developed new ways of scanning and storing enormous amounts of information, in the hope of being able to regenerate the newly dead from the atom level and up.

"But here the laws of nature put a halt to their efforts. For a long time now, the Sirians have had a working technology that in, a fraction of a second, can record and store all the information that makes up a living being, such as a human. But the energy concentration of that 'scanning' process annihilates the subject - melts his atoms into energy.

"Compare the process to that old TV series 'Star Trek,' where humans are routinely teleported from their spaceship to a planet. Remember, at the speed of light it took only about nine years for the original Star Trek

episodes to reach Sirius! One moment you see a whole man being disintegrated into energy - then the next moment, he is instantly re-created, thousands of miles away! We can only 'teleport,' if you put it that way, single particles today. In fact, even the Sirians cannot destroy a being, and then perfectly re-create him somewhere else - it's scientifically impossible. Because if the information that makes up the disintegrated being is moved - even measuring something involves 'pushing' it with particles of light - it will be irreversibly altered in the process. So a reconstructed being will be a slightly altered copy, never a continued existence of the original.

"But the laws of nature, the Sirians discovered, contained a tiny loophole. If the information that made up that being was to remain in the exact same place, not moved even the smallest measurable distance - then that information, whatever its form, essentially is the same being! A being made up of living energy, the structure of the organic person recreated as pure information - which is to say photons, light. Of course a being made up of photons would normally disintegrate, because light has no mass and photons do not attract each other. At the present level of human knowledge, this would be a dead end of the hope for immortality.

"Here we come to the point where Earth scientists are no longer able to follow Sirian thought, at least not yet... The amphibians have told us that they have found a way to instantly re-construct a living being, from this inconceivably brief state as pure information, into something our language cannot describe.

"The actual process, the technology involved, remain secret to us - but we assume they carry it with them on a long space journey such as the one to

Earth. The ECT scientists have made this crude model...

"Picture this: You take a whole living being, excluding the bacteria in his guts and on his skin. Then you isolate him completely from the outside world in some kind of force-field bubble. No information can reach outside or inside - the bubble is, for a very short moment, like a miniature black hole. Then, triggering multiple nuclear devices contained inside, the being is instantly exposed to an energy concentration we cannot even imagine - and when I say 'instantly' I mean the shortest interval of time that can be measured. Due to the energy density created, the fabric of space and time ceases to exist inside the bubble. The laws of nature can no longer be accounted for inside it - no one, no Sirian, can rationally describe what happens inside, or if anything truly exists there.

"But in the next instant, the bubble collapses - the energy burst that has been concentrated inside, ruptures the force field. And the organic being that had entered the bubble now appears transformed into a new state - something that has no definite size, is neither mass nor energy, cannot be directly seen, but can emit real energy and move through space at nearly the speed of light. This... entity cannot be communicated with directly, because it exists under conditions totally different from ours. But it may, and I say may, contain all the information that made up that disintegrated being from before. It can receive new information, such as ordinary light from the normal world, and absorb energy the way we eat food. This entity, once created, cannot be destroyed... unless it plunges straight into the heart of an exploding star... or unless an infinity of time passes.

"On the screen behind me you now see video footage from yesterday,

when these beings appeared to manifest themselves on Alien Beach.

"The process which I have roughly outlined here, the Sirians have been performing on their old and dying for several millennia. Hundreds and hundreds of generations, hundreds of billions of beings moving through space by their own force, riding the solar winds...

"Excuse me...

"I... I understand this is much to digest so quickly, but it's paramount that you learn the rest of it. Please take note...

"I have already asked the Sirians if they are willing to disclose the full technology of this... 'afterlife process' to us. Their response has been not unfriendly, but negative so far. I was told, that they sincerely believe the process creates immortal entities - they chose the word 'Ancestors' to name them - that not only contain all the information of the former beings - but also all their previous memories, their entire lives. And that's not all.

"Given the added abilities of such 'Ancestors,' these can also gain access to virtually all light in the universe - the ability to see what happens to one's relatives, see every person one ever met in one's earthly life, follow the thread of consequences from every act previously done.

"The Sirian belief is that if they do not lead near-perfect lives, their 'Ancestor' existence will become an eternal hell of remorse. This can of course be disputed, but the Sirians feel that our species are not ready for that kind of commitment to an afterlife -

"Wait - please! Hear me out! Quiet! Let me finish -"

"Christiana, what's happening there?"

"Tom - total chaos is breaking out in the General Assembly. The Israeli delegate, screaming and cursing, is trying to storm the podium and attack Carl Sayers. The Secret Service men are restraining him now... the hall is in an uproar, Sayers tries to shout over the noise but it's impossible to hear him. Some delegates are starting to fight each other with their bare fists... other delegates are blocking the podium, shielding Sayers from further attacks... furious, screaming delegates are throwing their pens, documents, even shoes at Sayers, who is pulled away from the podium by Secret Service men... the Secretary General steps up, calling for order... Security personnel are asking us to stop - keep shooting! Get away from me -"

"Christiana? Can you get the camera back..?"

"Eh... It seems the Secret Service has just cut off all television teams in the U.N. building. We will return to the U.N. incidents and keep you updated... after this."

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Chapter Twenty-Five

The battleship was bustling with activity in the middle of the night. The handcuffed soldier was led past metal corridors into a small room with a bunk, and allowed just an hour or so of sleep in his cell. He was awakened when a general, flashing his NSA badge, entered with two guardsmen. The brass grinned at him.

"Good morning, soldier! I'm General Harrod of the ECT Security Committee."

The soldier didn't recognize Harrod; they had never met before, as far as he could remember. He sat up on his bunk, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, not quite sure what to say. He hardly expected his mysterious benefactor to help him out of this mess, and he did not deserve more help.

The general ordered the guards to free the soldier from his handcuffs, and began an all-too-familiar prisoner routine. The soldier remembered it from his old combat manual. He had no secrets they would believe, anyway. A brain-damaged vet talking about his 'visions'? Better to say nothing.

Over coffee and cigarettes, the general made the requisite small talk before getting to the point.

"You seem reasonably stable-minded, soldier," Harrod stated with less-than-convincing sympathy. "What made you join this... cult?"

"I was... curious. About the Sirians, too."

"Of course, who isn't. But... you survived the brainwashing and the rigorous controls of the cult. Could you explain how?"

"I have a thick skull."

The general laughed, too hard.

"I see. I just heard about how they found you in the cult camp... this may come as a shock to you, but you're the only survivor the troops found."

The soldier realized that he must have been in a state of shock, for only now he felt anything like sorrow. Women and a few children, more than three thousand people, had drowned themselves. Such a pitiful waste... and he hadn't been able to save a single one of them. Patty was dead. He wondered why he didn't cry for her sake, and it slowly dawned on him: though he had tried, he had never really known Patty as a person - just as a brainwashed, sermon-spouting mouthpiece for the cult. He clenched his fist and pounded his other hand.

"I guess what you want to know is: 'How could such a level-headed person have joined that crazy cult to begin with?'" He sounded bitter. The general looked at him with cool appraisal, no doubt evaluating his body language. "I knew it was crazy, from the day I joined. I was looking for answers, okay? I wanted to get closer to the real aliens, get to understand them. Like you."

The general nodded thoughtfully: "Right. We have something in common. I've been briefed on your background... undistinguished service in the Gulf War, retired after possible injury from chemical weapons or antidotes to such... look, if you're bitter at the Army, I understand. I'm an Army man myself..."

"Did you ever see any action?"

The question contained a silent accusation: *Did you ever put your life on the line, or was it just deskwork and sending others to the slaughter?*

The general blinked, revealing his unease. "Try to put old grudges aside for the moment; there are bigger things going on. The alien spaceship. Just a few miles from this vessel."

That got the soldier's attention.

"Your country, no, the *world* needs you," Harrod said, leaning forward and lowering his voice. "Right now, the Sirians have brainwashed the ECT to do their errands and gain the confidence of the President himself. Meanwhile, the Arabs and Iranians have for the first time united against a common enemy - the Sirians, whose technology could render their oil industry bankrupt. This is an extremely dangerous situation. An unexpected move from the aliens could trigger a nuclear world war."

The soldier went cold with anxiety; the general was telling the truth.

"But the Sirians can be talked to... I've seen it on TV... they can help us with their superior technology, right?"

Now it was the general's turn to show bitterness: "And if they had, the whole conflict would have blown over. But these are a devious, inscrutable lot. We're monitoring them as closely as possible - you couldn't drop a fart on Alien Beach without my people hearing it. They have revealed nothing that could be of use to us in the coming conflict - they don't trust us with their technology. Yet I know, I just know, that if I had one of their machines under my command, we could stop the approaching Arab fleet dead in its tracks..."

Gee, what a surprise, thought the soldier, seeing in the soft-faced general a two-bit Napoleon with little concern for the future of humanity. He couldn't believe Harrod hadn't drawn the obvious conclusion: the Sirians

would not give us their machines because they knew us too well.

Harrod said: "If we had an insider on Alien Beach, who could withstand their mind-control like you did with the cult, he might learn about their real plans. But I should warn you - it's quite a dangerous mission. I wouldn't suggest this if we weren't so short on time and information."

"I've got nothing to lose," the soldier said.

"You start tomorrow. My staff will brief you until then."

As the general moved to the door, the soldier made a request.

"Can you fix me a TV and Internet? I gotta catch up."

They quickly brought him a TV set with a browser, and some food. The CNN news explained, among other things, why the crackdown on the cult had come so late.

"In the middle of the night, on orders from the ECT Security Committee, American troops under the U.N. stormed the cult compound of the Church of Ranmotani. This move came after a wave of suicides in other cult camps over the world. The cult's lawyers had for a long time been able to stall an impending search warrant, and the local police authorities have confessed to taking bribes to allow more cultists. Unfortunately, the troops came just too late to prevent another, the largest mass suicide to date. Three thousand cult members had drowned themselves. No survivors have been reported found yet..."

The soldier thought of his invisible benefactor, who had been absent for so long, and who might or might not be connected to the alien visitors: *If you can see all this violence and misery we keep inflicting upon each other, please don't judge us too harshly. Man is but an ape, that aspires to*

godhood... and so am I.

Alien Beach was finally within the soldier's reach. And the funny thing was, he could no longer get excited about it. Because he would still be trapped on Earth, and - was he the first one to understand something so obvious? - as long as the Sirians stayed on Earth, they too were trapped there, besieged by mankind.

I will ask you to take me with you. I know you will have to say no. But I'll ask anyway, he thought.

"The head of the ECT team left the U.N. Headquarters among much turmoil, and is said to be returning to Alien Beach in the Pacific Ocean as soon as possible. The U.N. Security Council has now decided to step up the military presence around Alien Beach, in the face of increasing threats against the Sirians. A small security force will be dispatched to 'ensure the safety of the ECT and the Sirians against direct terrorist attacks.'

"Though the original agreement with the Sirians expressly forbid any weapons inside the island's perimeter, the Council has managed to sidestep the no-arms clause: a platoon of U.S. Marines equipped with unloaded, plugged firearms will soon be stationed on the island. Analysts assume that the aircraft circling the airspace will be on permanent standby to drop ammo and weapons supplies to the troops.

"Today, political analyst Gore Wyndham made this statement..."

"The extra troops are obviously an intrusion on the agreement with the Sirians. The real reason for their presence is for the Pentagon

to keep a closer scrutiny of the scientists and the visitors. The issue is control, and of course espionage. I'd like to warn the Sirians; their safety cannot be guaranteed, in spite of - or because of the military presence."

The soldier had missed out on the live broadcast of Carl Sayers' speech to the General Assembly. Bits and pieces of it were being re-run constantly, jumbled and incoherent, but - he understood enough.

The visions had a real outside source. And the source had a center.

"I'm dreaming. This must be a dream."

DAY 118

"You must believe me when I say I tried to stop them," Carl told the assembled team. "We must be strong now, and not let ourselves be intimidated."

The team members were silent, sullen. His voice, his drawn face betrayed a sense of defeat; the chaos in the U.N. had drained a little of his spirit. Yet a little more spirit had gone upon Carl's return to Alien Beach: half the team had handed in their resignations. Everywhere he turned, it seemed to him now, people were lining up to betray him. He was unprepared, however, for the blow that followed after the meeting. Lazar, also showing signs of burn-out, asked to see him in private.

"My government has pressured me to resign," he confessed. "The Egyptian president just sent me a personal message... said I would be a blasphemer and a traitor to mankind if I stayed here. And General Harrod's

people are making phone calls to me each day, insinuating I must be a spy for the 'Arabs'."

The old psychologist's hands were shaking. He seemed like eighty years instead of his sixty.

"What? Has the Security Committee been threatening you?"

Lazar nodded imperceptibly; Carl saw now, how bloodshot his friend's eyes were.

"It isn't safe for me to return to Cairo either; the fundamentalist factions are telling the public that I am a fifth-column, and the government can't or won't stop them from trying to kill me."

Carl struck the wall of his barrack with his fist. His anger was amplified by his own memory of Lazar's recorded dream from a week ago. He had shared Lazar's own emotions and aspirations, felt his private pain literally.

"Damned idiots! I tried to make them understand. I showed them, the leaders of the world, the tape of the Ancestors... and they started to shout 'humbug' at me. They don't want to trust the evidence! And now the troops are landing on this island, without even asking the Sirians permission first... what will they think?"

"You could always bail out in protest," Lazar said, his voice weak.

"You look exhausted."

Mats had already warned Carl that he ought to take a vacation, but Carl dared not. He would not give up this great responsibility.

"If I quit, Harrod would grasp the opportunity to step in with his jackbooted morons. I warned the President about that man, but I'm not sure

he listened."

Lazar laughed.

"I'll stay! You've convinced me..." He gave his friend a hearty hug. "...that you need all the support you can get. I'd be a coward to let you down now."

Carl shook his hand.

"Thanks, Lazar. Just give me a nudge if I start to go ga-ga, okay?"

His phone vibrated, and he picked it up. It was General Harrod again. Carl listened through the message, and hung up.

"The reinforcements are on their way in," he told Lazar. "Let's come and greet them."

Carl announced the news over the intercom system, and asked everyone human to gather at the lagoon's northern edge.

Less than an hour later, Carl and his team stood and witnessed as two military landing vessels hit the beach.

The stern hatches opened into ramps; out marched a platoon of soldiers in khaki uniforms and flak jackets, carrying heavy backpacks. From the second vessel, prefabricated barracks were unloaded, not unlike those the scientists were using. A truck unloaded a few tons of bottled water. Last came a camping trailer with the text CAPTAIN'S OFFICE stenciled on it.

The soldier was equipped just like the other Marines. He had been "officially" reinstated in service as an ordinary grunt, but technically speaking he was still a retired soldier. Only General Harrod and his aide

should know that the soldier was an undercover agent for the ECT Security Committee.

The moment the soldier stepped onto the beach, his stomach twisted into a knot and his legs felt unsteady. The other soldiers looked nervous as well, casting anxious glances around the beach. There were no aliens in sight, no blue dots zipping by - just a few scattered metal artifacts standing here and there in the open places. He told himself to calm down - maybe he would become disappointed and think that they were smaller than they had seemed on TV.

Carl thought to himself that by now, the Sirian machines had probably learned to read the emotions of all humans in the vicinity - so the amphibians would stay down in their ship, until their instruments read "land-humans have stabilized" or the like.

A captain came up to Carl and introduced himself, asked to use the northern edge of the lagoon for the platoon's barracks, and handed over some documents from General Harrod.

"Just some formal questionnaires he'd like you to fill in and send back, Mr. Sayers," said the captain. "Don't worry about us, we won't disturb your important work. If you need a few extra hands, don't hesitate to ask. We're here to help, you know."

"Yes, of course," Carl said indifferently.

"By the way, when do the Sirians usually come up to... you know, communicate?"

"When they feel like it. A lot of the time it's we who come down to

see them. If you feel like diving in the lagoon, there's scuba gear over there in the shack."

"I see... is Bishop Soto here?"

"That's him over there."

The captain peered past the pointing scientist and spotted the bishop - Carl noticed the surprise on the captain's face. Had Edmund really lost that much weight?

The soldier couldn't help but ogle the scientists and the bishop as he marched past. He recognized most of their faces from the media, including the famous astronomer Carl Sayers. The soldier had seen the man's television programs and even read some of his books. If there was anyone who had spent a lifetime preparing for contact with extraterrestrials, it had to be Sayers... though he did seem weary. The sergeant shouted at his platoon to start helping out with assembling the barracks. All the time during work, the soldiers kept looking for aliens, but none showed up.

After sunset, Ann sneaked out behind her barrack, making sure none of the soldiers saw her, and made her way to the southern cape. There she waited throughout the night.

DAY 119

Ann woke up at daybreak and she was still alone.

She started back toward the barracks, when a peep came from the ground. Ann discovered a small silvery blob, no larger than her thumb,

clinging to her canvas bag like a leech. The miniscule device sent out another tinny peep. She touched it, and felt it stir minutely.

A recorded, tinny voice came from it: "Of course, you have so much better things instead. Metal pets..."

Her own words. Ann plucked the thing from the bag and held it to her lips. It was silly and weak and pointless of her to cry; and maybe someone, someone she couldn't see was watching... someone who had flown right through her hand... a being in a state of neither energy nor matter... the next phase in Oanss' existence.

He had always seemed to be quite pleased with his present form; no Sirian showed contempt for being flesh and blood and blubber. Maybe to them life was just... an education of sorts. What then, would Oanss learn from his visit to this planet, this island? Ann couldn't think of anything except sadness. She wiped her eyes and put the metal blob in her pocket. Standing on a low cliff, she could see how the landing vessels were pulling back into the sea, leaving the camouflage-painted new barracks at the northern cape, nearly half a kilometer from her position. She thought of her father, whom she had only seen on an old photograph - a negative space in her memory - who had impregnated her mother more than thirty years ago, then abandoned her and Ann, to go and get killed in some stupid, senseless war.

Then, Ann wished she could chase away the soldiers; she resented them for always taking orders, and the officers for giving the orders. There seemed to be no escape from soldiers; her work had taught her that all primates were that way. Ranks, orders, hierarchies... the leader of a pack of

chimps wasn't much different in behavior from a general. (There was a rare species, the bonobi, who were much less aggressive and militaristic, but African natives were exterminating them and would probably succeed within the next fifty years.)

Dolphins were comparatively less aggressive than primates... and so were the Sirians. Only, they hadn't really originated from Sirius. They called themselves "humans," or their equivalent of that word. Andrea had shown the team her own research with gene samples donated from a Sirian. They had DNA molecules in their cells, no different in form and function than any other life on Earth; all genes were written in the universal language of chemistry. Andrea was hoping to decode the gene samples and make a model of the previous species that the Sirians had evolved from.

In Andrea's working hypothesis, the amphibian ancestor was a seal-like creature that could breathe either water or air. Roughly the size of a man, it sported a pair of long, fleshy appendages on its sides. Its legs were probably no more than two knees and feet at the time; the creature lived among the rocks and reefs of long, shallow lagoons and spent most of its time underwater.

Then, perhaps twenty million years ago or less, the amphibians began to develop legs; the appendages grew stronger, the amphibians learned to crawl, and could make progressively longer inland treks. The factors that triggered this development could have been many - fierce competition for space and food underwater, or the need to escape predators by switching terrain fast, or just the need to migrate by land during periods of cold, unstable seas. Time took care of the rest...

Yet, that was all guesswork: the Sirians had said nothing of their origins and maybe hadn't found out themselves - their sights were set elsewhere.

Ann made herself a promise: she should not distract Oanss from his life's path. She would not make him feel sad for her. But she couldn't quite shake the sensation that his gift was getting warmer in her pocket, and she stuck her hand there to hold the little metal blob. It briefly turned warmer, close to her own body temperature. Maybe it was a spy microphone. It didn't matter. Maybe those Ancestors were swirling around her at this very moment, reading her every thought. Didn't matter.

In time, they would head elsewhere; there was nothing here for them to dwell on.

His gift spread warmth through her hand.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The soldier had been put on guard duty with most of the other grunts, while the rest of them relaxed with beach volleyball and frisbee throwing.

He and the others on duty were carrying their unloaded, plugged assault rifles slung across their backs. Functional or not, he disliked the presence of the rifles; they reminded him of the war. Moving in pairs, the guards strolled about - aimless, watchful. They were on strict orders not to approach the aliens or the scientists - easy enough, as the aliens were absent and the scientists avoided them.

From far away, the soldier saw a woman in bermudas and t-shirt come walking from the southern cape. She was blond, tanned and had a rather grave look about her sophisticated, thirtyish face. The other soldier stared at her tanned, muscular legs moving - and the soldier poked him in the ribs.

"Cut it out!" the soldier hissed. "Don't you recognize her face? It's that Frenchwoman, the one I saw on TV next to Carl Sayers."

His colleague straightened up as Ann Meadbouré walked past them, ten meters off, demonstratively ignoring them.

"Yeah, I see. So? There's not much else to look at here, you know?
The palmtrees... the sand..."

"The aircraft..."

"The alien artifacts..."

"The boats..."

"The gulls..."

"The picturesque barracks..."

"The soldiers playing beach volley..."

"The blue lagoon..."

"The sea..."

Both men grinned, recognizing how badly they fit in the serene surroundings.

"What I want to know," the soldier said, "is what are you gonna do when one of the aliens peek up from their submarine-spaceship-whatever. Are you gonna piss in your pants and run screaming for the captain?"

"Get outta here! No, I ain't scared of no aliens. They're... *foreigners*, okay? Some foreigners are civilized like us. Others ain't. All I need to know is which foreigners to shoot, and which foreigners not to shoot."

"Would you shoot a Sirian if they ordered you to?"

"Hey, man," the other man replied, "I was just kidding. We're not here to hurt anyone."

The soldier received a suspicious glance, and neither of them said more. They kept marching, to keep up the impression of doing something useful, and consumed bottled water.

In his boredom, the soldier got an idea. When his shift was over he went to see the captain.

The captain was working the laptop computer in his camping trailer.

"Captain - I'd like to request permission to dive in the lagoon."

The captain stared at the soldier as if he had suggested something obscene.

"Are you aware that the alien visitors are renting the lagoon, the

island, and the three-mile perimeter? That according to the treaty, we are to carry no weapons here? We're risking enough just being here with no ammo. To let you even closer to them is out of the question. Request denied."

"Sir. I swear I won't try to contact the Sirians. I just wanted to go diving, that's all."

"Now you watch it! You were transferred to this platoon at the last minute... I don't know what Harrod is up to, but I know a mole when I see one. Go tell your general I won't let you risk the treaty, no matter what orders he gave you! Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

The soldier exited the trailer, at least satisfied with the knowledge that he had blown General Harrod's cover. Now he could concentrate on his real objectives, and the captain would dismiss his behavior as espionage on behalf of the Security Committee.

But he was finding it difficult to concentrate. Too many things to think of, too many distractions, too much waiting for the visions to return... and no aliens, as long as the military was occupying the island. He had to get out of his uniform - it was a stigma, a perceived threat to everyone who saw it. The soldier sneaked away to a cluster of palmtrees, and stripped down to his underwear. The sunshine suddenly stung him, and he looked up at the sky.

The clouds - all gone! The circling clouds that had sent rain to help him escape before, and were in so many of the TV images of the island, had now just vanished.

"But you were there just an hour ago," he whispered, "you can't go

away now... now when I've finally got here... please! I know I disappointed you. I was weak! I shouldn't have joined that crazy cult! But it helped me get here, see...? Give me another chance... if you took yourself the trouble to get me in the first place, you must give me a second chance... I swear I won't take orders again! No more uniforms. No more officers. I'm not a soldier anymore."

He stopped, anxious that someone else might have heard him. No, there was no one there - for a moment he had felt as if someone was looking...

A drop of rain fell from the clear sky - *plip* - and hit the back of his outstretched hand. One single drop. The entire beach was left dry. He kissed the drop, covering the spot like some precious treasure.

"Thank you, thank you so much," he whispered to the clear sky. "I will try harder this time."

He almost asked the sky what his orders were, then got wise: orders were not on the agenda. "They" had never sent him orders and never would. Time to stop thinking like a soldier and start thinking like... something else.

"How many times have we shared our thought-recorders?" Carl asked the assembled group: Lazar, Andrea, and Edmund.

"Yours once, mine once, Andrea's once," said Lazar. "Edmund never got Bruno's device to record his own thoughts on."

They all turned to study Edmund's sunken face. He couldn't muster his old good humor; the booming voice was now more like a shrill drone.

"Why?" Edmund asked them. "I have seen your thoughts now. You

are indeed full human beings - full of things good and bad, mostly good. None of you carry truly evil secrets. I have grown by sharing with you, but... me, I have nothing to share that would benefit you. I have seen too much suffering, too many people killed in my homeland. I don't want to burden your minds with my sorrows. That's not for a priest to do... a priest carries everyone else's burdens. Think of all the people who have confided in me, when only God could overhear... if I let you record my thoughts and see them, I would betray all the people who trusted in me!"

The others were surprised themselves, that an argument they would have agreed on before now sounded strange and incomprehensible. Carl had been fairly active against the invasion of privacy caused by new media, an invasion that trivialized personal matters into petty sleaze and gossip. He had to restrain a fanatical impulse, the fundamentalist instinct to force his new perspective down everyone else's throats.

"These recorders were not meant to be used against anyone's will. Edmund, I respect your decision. No one has the right to demand your thoughts. No machine, no matter how great, can relieve us of responsibility."

The others agreed.

"Now for another matter. About half the team has resigned, and they will leave Alien Beach in two, three days. And yes, they are under pressure from outside. Except us here - Mats, Takeru and Ann have promised me they're staying the year out. There won't be any replacement scientists coming over, because of a decision made by the U.N. Security Council just after my TV speech. They decided not to accept any new scientist candidates for the ECT."

It was as if they could predict Carl's next words, as if the mutual bond created by the mind-recorders had created a permanent rapport between them. He didn't have to say it: the fear of spies and terrorist attacks, plus the general suspicion of the ECT among the politicians had grown too great. In any case, new volunteers would be vetoed by the council members - which could eventually lead to the break-up of the Security Council. For the sake of world stability, science would have to bend over for politics.

"Are we supposed to take sides now?" Andrea said gruffly. "I'm no bloody government stooge. I'm nobody's stooge."

Had Takeru, Ann, or Mats taken sides? Without access to their thoughts, this group could not tell for sure.

"And in case you were wondering," Edmund said, "I'm not into altar boys."

It was a welcome joke, and everyone laughed; some of the bishop's strength seemed to return. He took up a prayer; two of the others joined him.

DAY 120

"Welcome to Insight. Today we discuss the growing threat of conflict between King Khadi's alliance and the American fleet stationed at Alien Beach. As you can see on the map, The Arabian-Iranian fleet has now entered the Timor Sea, and has not stopped. If the fleet continues toward the Torres Strait, it will come within striking distance of Alien Beach in a matter of days. It is believed that the Arab fleet is equipped with mid-range ballistic missiles.

"The governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran have finally cut off

all trade and communication with non-Moslem nations. The U.N.'s long-standing threat of an international oil embargo has been overtaken, since the Arab countries themselves stopped the shipping of oil to non-Moslem countries.

"As predicted, oil prices today shot up twenty percent: the oil blockade is seen by many as the last move before an open full-scale war. With us in the studio we have Tom Lancet, bestselling thriller writer and consultant to the White House in security issues...

"Welcome, Mr. Lancet."

"Thank you."

"If the worst were to happen, how could a war scenario play out?"

"This is almost impossible to predict. It's very likely the Sirians have technology that'll turn nuclear missiles into junk. Or a missile attack might be bounced off by a repelling force-field screen. Any scenario is certain to be guesswork. Let's assume the Arab fleet moves on into the Pacific. Basically, the President's choice will simply be this. Either strike first, without being able or capable of invading Saudi Arabia and Iran. Or: wait until *after* Alien Beach is destroyed, and then order the retaliatory strike. In either case, the enemy is bound to save a few submarines and send nuclear missiles at Hawaii and the West Coast. Millions of Americans will die."

"I take it there are... other options?"

"Well, unless the enemy suddenly changes its policy that 'all aliens are the Devil's cohorts,' I can see a few options.

"Option one - the President tells the Sirians: 'Go home. It's not safe for you here. For the sake of world peace, leave now.' Given how advanced the Sirians are, they should see reason and take off. Only, the Arab missiles will still be here, and the threat of war will never go away as long as we know the aliens are still out there in space.

"Option two - the aliens stay, but the U.N. pulls out of the Pacific, we leave Alien Beach undefended and see what happens. Maybe the aliens will take off and leave the planet - maybe they'll stay and fight. We don't know. Those who still don't trust the Sirians' motives, would choose this strategy as a test. This is a tremendous risk - the Sirians might wreak revenge on the planet and put an end to mankind, just to make sure they won't have trouble with us in the future. But again, they seem too civilized for that.

"Finally, there is the option to side with King Khadi against the aliens. After all, it's *his* planet too, and at least we know he's human - right? A show of global unity against the Sirians could well scare them off. That is, if that's what we want - chase away the only other known intelligent species in the universe."

"Thank you, Mr. Lancet. We have asked the President for a comment, but he has not been available; he is believed to be in New York, making last-minute attempts to negotiate with the Arab alliance..."

A large helicopter landed on Alien Beach, surrounded by the waiting platoon.

When the President stepped out of the helicopter, the soldier's first thought was: *What the hell is he doing here?* Then he understood why the troops were there: the President had never been here before, or met an amphibian in person. Come to think of it, the President had all the time avoided being openly associated with Sirians; he had always sent others to communicate with them. The man's face and hands were pale - or maybe it was the mist coloring everything that way - and his movements were awkward. Just behind him came General Harrod - and both men wore dark sunglasses.

The would-be mightiest man in the world was a coward.

A gray mist had settled over the island, smothering the breeze, lingering as if it were waiting for something. The soldier saw Carl Sayers come up to greet the President; Sayers seemed surprised too. Then they both went away to the barracks, closely surrounded by guards. The sergeant ordered the platoon to secure the helicopter.

Ten minutes passed. The soldier saw something stir in the lagoon. They were coming. Eleven of them! Marching up from the sea, spitting up water, and walking in his direction! He began to shake - they really were that tall, two meters on the average; their eyes really were like the huge ovals of Japanese cartoons. He wanted to rush forward and talk to them.

"Ten-shun!" barked the sergeant at his troop.

The soldier knew the sergeant would order the other soldiers to stop him. Damn! And he had promised not to be a soldier anymore! Here he was, meeting them with a gun in hand... and the aliens walked onward, about

forty meters away, passing the soldier's line of sight. He stared, standing to attention; some of the Sirians stared back. The shame was unbearable.

The soldier stood still - and let his assault rifle slip and fall to the ground. The sergeant began to shout, but stopped - suddenly and frightfully aware of the stares from the big-eyed amphibians who walked past with confident strides, much taller than he was. He shrank back, pale with fear and insecurity.

Another soldier dropped his rifle - but stood unmoving. Then another grunt slipped. And the man next to him as well. All but eight of the row of thirty Marines dropped their arms. The soldier beamed a sheepish grin at the passing amphibians. One of them, a female with a long translucent mane down the back of her conic head, smiled right back at him - the soldier's heart skipped a beat. The sergeant looked like he had just wet himself. The aliens disappeared among the scientists' barracks, and the sergeant ordered his men to pick up their rifles. Without a word or a smile, the soldier obeyed. *Just playing along*, the soldier promised the misty skies. *Just enough to get to stay here. I would rather die than harm your people.*

Even before Carl had figured out what to say to the Sirians, they were at the door. only Oanss was absent. The President stood up from his seat when the dozen Sirians came in; he seemed terrified and eager to run away. If Carl had ever doubted the President's positive standpoint on the aliens, there was no longer any doubt. The President was afraid to face them, because he had always chickened out of a commitment - to anything. *Go ahead, Mister 'I-Feel-Your-Pain,'* Carl thought, and his contempt was *great, try and weasel*

your way out with these people!

The President quickly gained control of his panic, homed in on Ranmotanii, shook hands and stuttered a few meaningless welcoming phrases. The aliens all took turns making the greeting ceremony with the President, giving him just enough time to calm down from outright panic. Carl had learned just enough about their body language to recognize confusion in Ranmotanii, but that wasn't all. The old amphibian was tense, sort of... irritated?

"Thee Annceestors arre agitaatedd!" boomed the even older Oanornn when it eventually came to his turn to greet the President. *"Too-laate-to-be-quuuuuet-wwith-mmeee-youu-thhhe-Prresiident-wwhyy-doo-yyou-nnot-taaalk-to-uuus-beefoore?"*

The President giggled nervously, eyes flicking to his sides - he was quite tall, but this slightly bent old alien's eyes were at level with his own. The man silently beckoned to Carl talk to Oanornn; Carl sat immobile and did not lift a finger. *It's time to show what you're made of*, he thought.

Within minutes, the "emergency conference" turned into an embarrassment.

The President's way of using the English language proved incomprehensibly vague to the alien visitors. The Sirians' broken English and direct questions were by turns incomprehensible, too blunt, or too demanding on the President's mindset. Carl took Ranmotanii aside and asked him if the Sirians could create a man-to-Sirian link with the mind-recorder, and bypass the speech problems. Ranmotanii curtly explained that this was just not possible.

Finally, more than an hour later, the President managed to make a clear statement to the Sirians. An enemy force would soon attack the area with nuclear weapons and destroy it, unless the Sirians left the planet within a few days. Ranmotanii and his flock shouldn't have been all that shocked to hear this - after all, hadn't they seen decades' worth of TV-broadcast footage from Earth? But all the same, they stared at the President with what had to be great concern. Maybe it was too difficult for them to understand and predict the thought processes of human leaders; Ranmotanii was certainly no politician.

Ranmotanii considered the presidential statement for a minute or two, then solemnly declared that the Sirians were to consult the Ancestors the same night. If the Ancestors gave the sign to do so, the Sirians would evacuate without objections. No land-humans were allowed; their presence might disturb the ritual.

Then he turned to Oanornn, and declared: *"I aask opeen questioonn too Oanornn. Thee Anceestorss aare present, at Aalien Beachh?"*

Oanornn's ribcage became briefly visible when he sighed; then he shut his bloodshot eyes and stood silent for a whole minute. The President stared at the scene, utterly bewildered. Eyes shut, Oanornn's cracked lips widened in a grin of white, tubular teeth.

He purred: *"R-r-r-r..."*

"He said 'yes,'" Carl told the President. "Do you understand what this means? Do you? A higher life form is present here, right under your nose!"

The President seemed hurt in his pride, even resentful: "You're asking me to believe in an old shaman who's talking about ghosts. Real or not,

ghosts cannot fight wars."

Oanorm said something to the other Sirians in their own tongue; they became concerned again. Ranmotanii translated: the Ancestors were among them, but their "concentration" or "presence" was different today... he found no adequate words for it.

"Can the Ancestors stop an attack? Without your help?" Carl asked him.

"Iii doo noot knoww... thaat hass nnot happenned beefore."

"Are you prepared to leave this planet before the end of the year, even if the Ancestors do not give the sign?"

"Why?"

"Please understand... do you know what nuclear weapons are? That your enemies here will try to use nuclear weapons against you?"

"Waat iis... 'ouur eenemmmies'?"

Carl wished that some miracle could transport King Khadi to this spot, so that he himself could hear Ranmotanii's words. Only a man who had never met this human being, could think of him as an enemy. For a few moments Carl wondered if the Ancestors might manifest themselves directly to the Saudi and Iranian leaders, and frighten them into surrender - but quickly discarded the idea. People of their mindset could very well interpret a fuzzy blue glow as another demon invasion, changing the situation for the worse.

The conference lasted until the evening. A very tired President said goodbye, retreated to his helicopter... with no promises of militarily nor technological

help from the Sirians.

His last words to Carl were: "The best thing for everyone, you know, would be if they just left our solar system, and never came back. Could you make them understand that, that the whole idea of visiting our planet was a mistake?"

Carl swallowed; had he been a younger man, he would have lost his temper at this supreme insult.

"I will try and make them consider a temporary retreat to space. Right now, it is you who must convince the world that the Sirians are not after anything or about to give us anything - they really are just visitors."

Presently, as the President entered the helicopter and took a last look at the little island, Carl saw the man's disappointment - and he felt a little sympathy. Both of them had set their expectations too high, expected too much personal benefit - like animals begging food scraps at the table, and getting miffed when their masters said "enough".

The helicopter rose up through the darkening air with a tremendous noise, and Carl shielded his eyes from the draft. *Now*, he reflected with gloomy awareness of the irony, *I have the alien visitors all to myself - just like I wanted all along... and the rest of world's pointing a gun at us.*

Ann dared not ask where Oanss was, why he wasn't attending the meeting with the others - dared not go searching for him where he probably was. Passively she watched the eleven Sirians return to the sea and the submerged spaceship...

It felt almost like his gift was burning in her hand.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

DAY 121

At 00:30 AM, the nightly sky above the island was clotted with stars - the Milky Way shone as a bright band across the visible cosmos.

The lights were out on the island; the soldier knew not why, but was grateful for the darkness. He managed to sneak out of his barrack without waking up the entire platoon, and the sergeant slept soundly too - thanks to the pills the soldier had slipped into the platoon's coffee supply. Barefoot, wearing T-shirt and shorts, the soldier crawled and sneaked his way to the open place where he had seen the Sirian antenna-tree from the TV broadcast. This was where the blue lights had manifested themselves; it had to be a kind of lightning rod for the Ancestors; he had to get closer to it. Maybe all the answers he needed were in that place.

Knees and elbows sore from crawling, the soldier hid down behind a fallen, blackened palmtrunk - the only convenient place to hide behind - how lucky he was, that a tree had died just there! - and peeked out past the large root clump. He saw the antenna cluster, four meters high, perhaps ten, twenty meters away. It was silent still; no glow or heat came from its shiny metal sprouts. The soldier waited, watched the starry sky, and rubbed his arms and feet to keep the cold at bay.

After a while, the entire group of amphibians appeared; they must have excellent eyesight, the soldier guessed, because they moved with confidence and stumbled on nothing in the gloom. The ritual dance began again, as in

the TV broadcasts. The soldier feared his own pounding heart and quickened breath would give him away. Again, the chant... but this time he could hear it clearly! It was almost the same alien words as in his first, strongest vision. He had to resist interrupting the ceremony, so much did he want to ask the aliens what the words meant. If only he could repeat the words to them and... no, not a chance.

The antenna-tree began to glow blue in the dark, very faintly - but abruptly the glow ceased to be. The sky was still dark and clear. The circle of amphibians stopped moving - they seemed confused and frightened, staring at each other, then at the metal tree for guidance.

Abruptly the soldier stood up, urged by an irresistible yearning for knowledge - at once, the amphibians saw him. One young female made a warning peep; the others scrambled into cover behind the antennas - from the small devices they were wearing, a swarm of little black and silvery shapes emerged around the place. Immediately, the fragments took the shape of several inch-long robots. The tiny robots scuttled up toward him, wielding tiny mandibles and spikes. The soldier put up his hands, beckoning at the frightened aliens, to which he was but another dangerous land-human...

A blue lightning-ball materialized out of thin air, between the soldier and the attacking miniature machines. In a second, each little robot was zapped by a barrage of miniscule electric bolts from the blue glow, and lay still. Then, the blue glow vanished. The soldier stood agape, opened his mouth to speak -

"Mer-r-r-lee!"

He saw the Sirians stop and listen. He continued to utter words he

didn't understand, with an inflection that wasn't his own... and began to notice how odd his arms and hands looked. Each of his arms was single-jointed, and the palms were too broad and bony. His field of vision was too narrow, the spectrum of colors stunted. His head began to ache again, and for the first time since the war he knew why: his skull had the wrong shape, the brain pressed against the top of his cranium. Straining for breath to keep on talking, he found his lungs to be inadequate and small. Why didn't he look right, like the other Sirians? He had to stop talking - the headache overpowered him and he clutched his scalp - what was all that hair doing all over his head?

"Help me."

The soldier sat back on the fallen palm trunk, struggling to stay conscious. And he made it. The Sirians, silent but intensely curious, gathered around him, touching him, holding up small instruments, checked his pulse. Their touch was so strange, yet soothing.

A very wrinkled alien faced him down with his eyes very wide, and said in English: *"Mmy naame iss Oanorrn. Doo yyou understaand wwwhat happennns to yyou noow?"*

His deep voice had a pattern that sounded like a wailing song - the speech that the cult so pathetically had attempted to mimic.

"No."

"Aan Annceestor tallked ththrough youu... hee ssay ththey chhhoose to staay heere. Seeveralll Ancceestoors."

The soldier nodded and clutched his head.

"Why does my head hurt... when the Ancestor comes to me?"

The wrinkled alien just stared at him, awed or surprised, or both. Then Oanornn called for attention, and declared something in his own, singing language.

But this time, the soldier understood what some of the words meant: he heard Oanornn say "Ancestors," "land-human" and "not move". The amphibians began to retreat from him, but a few of them lingered. One male knelt down by the soldier's side, and told him his name: Oanss. A slightly shorter female stayed and stared at the soldier from a distance of a few meters; he couldn't read her expression. An older male, who the soldier recognized as Ranmotanii, sat down beside him and scrutinized his features like he was trying to recognize a face in a crowd of people.

In the alien language, Oanss asked the soldier his name.

"I cannot answer," he said in English.

Oddly, the soldier didn't understand why he couldn't answer. But it didn't upset him too much; he was among friends now. The more time he spent with them, the more new words he learned. There was a warmth about these people that made all his fears go away. And yet, he couldn't muster the courage to say what he most wanted: Take me with you when you leave.

After a while, he recalled the sedatives that he had fed the other soldiers; he had to leave before the effect wore off, and it hurt to leave.

"I must go now," he said to them, and they replied in their own tongue, that they accepted it.

"Immportaat maan, yyou wiill undersstand iin timmme," were the last words of Oanornn before they parted their ways.

The soldier returned back to his platoon's barrack unseen; the other grunts were still soundly asleep. As the soldier lay in his bed, his headache receded away. The dreams that followed were vague, and he only recalled fragments of them later. There were Sirians in his dream, the sensation of being surrounded by water; the sound of radio wave static from space, mixed with the wails and clicks of Sirian underwater speech. When the sergeant's shouting woke up the soldier in the morning, his first thought was: *Why am I sleeping on this angular thing, and not near water?*

"The world is waiting for an official declaration of war from King Khadi's alliance, but the alliance has so far declined to answer any questions from outside media. It has been hinted more than once, that the rogue leaders consider themselves to be the last free humans, and the rest of the world has frequently been painted as 'possessed by extraterrestrial demons' and beyond all help. Yet, the rogue alliance does seem to be holding back its armies. A few political analysts think they have the answer to this puzzling strategy. Edward Sayed explained it thus..."

"They are waiting for a divine sign. As the rogue leaders see it, the Sirians are a physical manifestation of demonic evil - so it follows by the same logic, that God will soon counteract this intrusion with a divine, benevolent manifestation in a universe that he created. It's no longer quite enough to close down U.S. airbases on Arab soil and say 'God told me to' to rally the home opinion - the peoples of these countries are too well-informed nowadays and will recognize the old

rhetoric. But as everyone can see, no divine sign has occurred - God hasn't taken sides.

"If such a manifestation still won't occur, I see two possible developments. One is that the moderate political forces of Iran and Saudi Arabia will step forward and openly denounce the religious accusations against the Sirians. This could end the imminent crisis very quickly.

"Unfortunately, testimonies are leaking out that King Khadi has grown increasingly isolated during the last few weeks; he listens only to advice from his favorite priest, reads only the Koran, avoids all news media, and prays incessantly. If he, in his isolation, comes to think that God has told him to attack the Sirians, he will give the final order and the Iranian leaders will be forced to follow. What Israel will do with its own vast arsenal after this, can only be guessed at.

"For the first time, the leaders of Iran appear more sensible than the royal family of Saudi Arabia. Contacts of mine have told me rumors, that U.N. people are trying to contact the Iranian government without the knowledge of King Khadi. But it's hard to say whether these secret talks can accomplish anything."

Later during the morning of Day 121, the boat came to pick up the scientists who had resigned from the ECT. Among them was Stone Pound, and Carl took it personally.

"I thought I knew you better, Stone," Carl told his colleague. "Why?"

"It was my decision, I'll let you know that," Stone said. "I wasn't

blackmailed like the others."

He made an effort to busy himself with his luggage.

"But you took an active part from the start!" Carl pestered the fat man as he dragged his suitcases on board the Army patrol-boat. "Have you already forgotten the great beach party, when humans and Sirians made music together, the great prospects? An opportunity like this won't come back! Why did you even get into astronomy - don't you want to learn more about the universe?"

"Is it me you're trying to convince, or yourself? Look - you're a greater man than I am. I wish you well, but - I just can't stay here. I can't."

"Stone! What frightens you so?"

"A million things. I don't have time to explain, and I don't owe it to you."

Carl made a last desperate attempt to challenge Stone - for his own good.

"You're chicken!" Carl said angrily. "A spineless coward, with the backbone of a jellyfish. They shout '*Sit,*' and you sit. You're a pathetic excuse for a scientist. I'm ashamed of having had you here -"

Carl saw the blow coming; Stone wasn't too fast. He pivoted out of Stone's lunge, and the fat man stumbled onto the beach - but quickly came up and ran at Carl again, red in the face, breathing hard - he made a sound halfway between a grunt and a sob. Carl retreated, up to his knees, into the nearby surf; two unarmed soldiers from the Security Committee came running and grabbed Stone by the arms.

"Not everyone... is the saint... you are..." Stone gasped, out of breath.

"I was... against the... thought recorders... all the time, remember...?"

Carl shook his head sadly, and said: "You haven't understood anything. So you have personal secrets? You think I would judge you? Unless you've murdered someone, I don't think that would happen. Besides, no one - no Sirians, no Ancestors - would use your thoughts against you. They've seen more than enough dirt on mankind from our television - they're bloody Jane Goodall and we're the chimps!"

Stone's breathing slowed down enough for him to respond in a steady voice: "I'm gay."

"That's all?" Carl replied. "I don't believe you. With all that's happening here, you must have something bigger to hide."

"Okay, okay... I'm a spy. I was offered a truckload of money if I brought technological secrets back to a certain company, and I needed the money for my research. But when the Ancestors showed up, I got scared. Don't make it any more humiliating than it is."

Carl almost fell for the explanation - but it was too simple.

"You're lying. You could've stayed and spied however much you liked, and it wouldn't have made a lick of a difference to the Sirians. They won't reveal their technology, period."

Carl told the soldiers to release Stone, so that the man could enter the boat with the other departing scientists.

"A million things," Stone repeated. "All those things taken together scare me. For instance, that they have immortality and I don't. Or the way they look at me, like we watch chimps in the zoo. They're everything we *should* be, and now one can't even hide from them - even when you don't see

them, their 'ancestors' could be anywhere."

Carl said: "So why run away then? It's pointless. Just stop being afraid, just for once. You know, they say obese people use their fat as a shield, to protect their sense of self against a threatening world..."

Stone stood on the top of the ramp leading up to the boat's deck, struggling silently with himself. The other defectors said and did nothing - they had their own problems, and little compassion for those of other people.

Finally, after a long minute, Bruce sighed and made a gesture of surrender. He walked back down with his bags, moody and defeated.

"Okay, I'll stay a little while longer. Maybe the Sirians can reveal their seafood diet to me, and I'll get as thin as they are."

Carl grinned: "Wrong again - they're all fat. Blubber, under their skin, like seals! They'll have to teach you how to distribute your fat evenly."

Both men started to laugh. The defecting group remained dead silent; with a noise that attracted a flock of seagulls, their boat backed away from the beach and moved out toward the fleet. On their way past the lagoon, the passengers could see one Sirian stick its head up above the water. The figure peered after them momentarily, then disappeared below.

The President's voice on the phone was urgent, and slightly distorted by white noise. Carl wondered from where the man was calling.

"Mr. President," Carl said, "a Sirian messenger robot just delivered a kind of voice-mail from Ranmotanii. They're starting to use their machines as middlemen."

"And?"

"The Sirians have just consulted the 'Ancestors' and are now determined to stay the year out. They couldn't quite explain to me their motives, but... the Sirians are a little concerned about the military activity reported in the TV news."

"A little concerned'? Well, are they ready to defend themselves, then?"

"They couldn't answer that, actually. However, Ranmotanii has requested that the platoon posted here by the Security Committee will remain for the duration of their year - but the soldiers are not allowed ammunition for their firearms. Trust me: you couldn't smuggle in a single bullet without the Sirians noticing. And another demand - not one of the soldiers must be allowed to leave. Don't ask me why."

"Okay, I'll tell Harrod's people to stay put. Anything else?"

"Just obscurities. Our scientists have been working on the tapes of the Ancestor manifestations, and we have a few theories..."

"Anything new?"

"It could be, that an Ancestor is a living, naked singularity."

"What's that?"

"It's a like a black hole, without the surrounding black event horizon - only not a collapsed star in this case, but a collapsed being. Compressed without measurable limit, in a shorter time than can be measured... yet, containing all the information that made up the living being."

"How can a compressed being still be alive?"

"Only if the collapsing process is indescribably fast, and thanks to a process we can't recreate in a hundred thousand years. It's more complicated

than that, because an Ancestor being cannot be 'alive' in the strictly temporal sense... linear time does in fact not exist on the quantum level... I know it sounds absurd, but the Ancestors may exist partly outside the everyday flow of time!"

"You mean... they can travel backward and forward in time?"

"If you were smaller than a proton, you would not perceive time as going in any particular direction. The word 'time-travel' is then pointless, even if these beings are assumed to at least remember when they lived in linear time. It gets weirder! It could be that an Ancestor doesn't have 'a' size, *any* 'size,' at all."

"I... can't see how something without size, form, or a sense of time is supposed to help the Sirians against the approaching enemy, here in the everyday reality."

"A being outside time also has access to virtually all time, all information that exists in time - access without delay. And since information can only be communicated by energy, this also means access to limitless energy in the space-time continuum.

"Takeru and Stone are now doing the calculations, to estimate just how much energy output an Ancestor is capable of. There could be great restrictions put on each Ancestor that we can't calculate... Mr. President?"

Carl heard just static for several seconds; the presidential voice came back - weaker, but perhaps more sincere.

"When I was a small child... I sometimes wondered how big God was. Was he as large as the water tower in our city block, or bigger than the Empire State Building, or bigger than the whole universe... Never did I

imagine a godlike being so small, that it fell between the seams of the universe."

"Then you are beginning to see what this all could mean?"

"Are you insinuating that I should send prayers to these Ancestors, as if they were the gods of the microcosm?"

"Don't even think that. We're not related to them. They came from one race, and they respond only to them - by kinship, I think. Bishop Edmund Soto has been in personal turmoil ever since he came here; a man of lesser spirit wouldn't have managed."

"So you're saying we're locked out of the club."

"I don't know. I just don't know. Don't lose faith now."

"My faith isn't the problem... the problem is all the world's disgruntled and embittered people who think *I'm* the one responsible - the man who *controls the world*. Thousands of fanatics, many of them in America, think of me as a kind of evil god that knows everything about them. My office used to receive hate mail and threats every day. But now, the hate mail to the White House is directed at the Sirians. Now the fanatics fantasize that aliens control *me* - and you too. What if the discovery of the Ancestors gives the disgruntled of the world a motive for total war?"

"If fanatics truly believed such an entity was in control of things, wouldn't they feel threatened by the very air they breathed? It took me some effort, but I can live with the knowledge of the Ancestors, whether they influence my world or not. But a madman -"

"A madman would go completely psychotic with the knowledge. I have reason to believe that the ruler of Saudi Arabia has now become a

madman."

The President proceeded to share with Carl his latest intelligence on the king's mental health.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Lining up outside their barrack, the soldier and his platoon were briefed by the captain: at the request from the aliens, they were to stay on Alien Beach, but remain unarmed.

Most of the other men looked quite worried over this news; the soldier and a few others could hardly keep from grinning. Their actual duties were few - there wasn't much to guard, they were once more forbidden to fraternize with the alien visitors, and had no access to recreation save for beach games and the TV set.

"In order to stay alert to the terrorist threat," the sergeant said to end the briefing, "I will lead you in unarmed combat training every day - six hours on weekdays, four hours on holidays. It is your duty to stay informed about the development of the current crisis, but do not spread wild rumors from the Internet!"

Their single TV set had a built-in Internet browser; all private computer equipment had been confiscated for security reasons. After the briefing, the soldier and a few comrades used a short break to access the CNN website. The headline they found was not comforting:

ROGUE FLEET ONLY DAYS FROM STRIKING DISTANCE;
PRESIDENT MAKES PUBLIC APPEAL TO SAUDI PEOPLE

The entire platoon joined in to listen to the President's speech. One particular sound bite struck the soldier.

"The Sirians are peaceful visitors, who will soon leave the solar system without revealing any potentially dangerous scientific secrets to

mankind..."

"That may be true, but the aliens are making an impact on our world," one of the grunts said out loud. "Have you seen what teenagers are wearing these days? They dress up to look like aliens!"

Another Marine made a confession: "Just before I got here, my own wife put up this huge poster in the kitchen - a blown-up photo of a group of the aliens coming up from the water - and was starting to collect all such pictures she could find. She's making a goddamn shrine to them!"

"A few weeks ago, I saw a hardcore porno movie was for sale," one Marine said, "*'Close Encounter of the Sex Kind'*. Actors made up like aliens, screwing each other underwater. We're lucky the Sirians don't have cable!"

The soldiers grinned and laughed knowingly to each other, but they sounded more nervous than cocky. The soldier had wanted to ask them about the Ancestor, but was not willing to risk exposure... until another Marine brought up the subject.

"You hear almost nothing on the news about those 'Ancestors' that Carl Sayers mentioned in the U.N. speech. Y'think he was telling the truth?"

"Hell, no! I don't believe in no ghosts!"

"Don't shout, 'Rambo' - they can hear you..."

"I watched the videotape from this island, the blue lightning-balls flying around... but I haven't seen anything like that with my own eyes since we landed here."

"We could ask the scientists -"

"You can't do that, man -"

"We could ask the captain to bring over Carl Sayers here, to explain it

all to us."

"He could be in on it," suggested one man, his hands restless in the absence of weapons to take apart and fondle. "This could all be one giant scam."

"What for?"

"I read this book," the Marine with the restless hands explained, "where they built a fake UFO with a dead fake alien inside, and used the fake threat of an invasion to create support for the government."

The soldier suddenly spoke up: "Or this could all be a hallucination created by the Ancestors."

The others just stared at him; a few laughed as if it was a joke; others made the "he's-got-a-screw-loose" sign. Their debate was interrupted when the sergeant entered the barrack; he ordered everyone out for combat training. The physical effort of the training helped the soldier forget his thoughts for a while... but his head was feeling strange, kind of numb. Was he being drugged without knowing it? Or was the Ancestor who sent him visions also shutting down his pain centers? If the soldier hadn't known better, he'd thought his head was swelling.

At the end of the day, pleasantly exhausted, the soldier ate and showered, then went to his bunk for a good night's rest. Lying in bed, he held up his shaving mirror and looked at the reflection of his head; the crew-cut scalp seemed normal. Only when he felt at the top of his head though, he could feel a new, slight ridge... running from forehead to neck. The numbness seemed to be the only thing that was holding back a terrible headache.

What was this? His hair had gone gray; why hadn't he noticed that before?

He scrutinized the fine wrinkles around his eyes, held the mirror closer, closer, until his vision blurred - and sharpened again. The mirror image zoomed in, covered his entire field of vision - his left eye was magnified to a huge, wet bulge, crisscrossed by blood vessels; the surrounding skin seemed as wrinkled as an elephant's hide.

The image continued to magnify; he discerned it as if he was approaching the surface of his own eye, while shrinking rapidly. The surface of his left eye expanded into a whirling ocean; each time he blinked, a tide swooped down and washed away teeming bacteria and dust particles.

His vision zoomed into his left eyeball and inside a pumping blood-vessel; he became surrounded by a never-ending stream of flattened red blood cells, with occasional round white T-cells scattered among the red. He zoomed in on a smaller, cramped network of ducts leading from the vessel - now he was in among the brain cells themselves - again he seemed to shrink rapidly; the blood cells became huge rounded boulders and their color faded to transparent tissue.

Now he approached a single brain cell, growing bigger and bigger until it seemed like a huge tree of colorless tissue, sprouting in all directions. He could clearly discern small molecular movements and flashes of light in his view, blurring the edges and surfaces of things - the very membranes of the cell were boiling with chemical activity. He was plunged in toward the dark sphere that was the genetic core of the cell.

The cell's core was full of holes, where strands of molecules, like

yarn, were drifting in and out; the whole structure boiled and pulsated, creating a stream in the surrounding liquid. He slipped through one of the holes, as it expanded around him. The spectrum of light shifted again; where there had been visible light, there were now just sharp surfaces, flickeringly illuminated by flashes of radiation.

A forest of DNA strands opened up before him; fleetingly, he could glimpse the myriad of double-helix chains that made up the cell's chemical memory and program. Ahead, he noticed a much smaller clump of molecules, with rounded lumps that flickered with hyperfast change. The "clump" was cutting one strand of DNA apart; at the cut-off edges of each strand, drifting molecule debris attached itself and formed complete new double-helices from the parent strands.

The debris in his view got thicker - his range of vision shrank to almost nothing; all he saw were globs of round, vibrating atoms dancing about, and frequent flashes as stray photons hit his line of sight. He homed in on a single hydrogen atom in a water molecule; its outer rim was just a flickering pair of electrons - flickering with the photons they sent out when outer sources bombarded them with energy. The soldier could not see the electrons or make out their form - the wavelengths of radiation and light were too wide to shed light on a single electron.

He fell past the flashing, flickering shell of electrons and into darkness. There, straight ahead, another flickering energy source was approaching, at first just a pinprick of energy compared to the outer shell - the single proton that was the core of the hydrogen atom. His vision was not perceived as light anymore - but as a pulsating energy field, a probability

matrix where things more or less existed in certain locations. He began to see brief flashes of almost-real particles zipping in and out of existence - even the "empty" space around the proton simmered with virtual energy.

The proton shape grew larger still, and he couldn't stop falling closer. It was not round as in the textbooks, more like a fuzzy cloud of being - as it grew to fill up his entire vision, the fuzziness became like radio static or television "snow". Struggling to stay real - two abstract forces struggling to uphold the boundaries between existence and non-existence - *one force aimed forward along the time axis, the other force aimed backward* -

He fell.

The soldier hit something hard and screamed; he shook spasmodically, trying to gain a hold of reality before he fell through its cracks - and felt the wooden planks of the floorboards. He was in the barrack again; everything was back to normal size. The other Marines were up and gathering around him.

"Hey, Coffin? You fell out of bed! Are you all right?"

"You're shaking like a leaf and sweating - are you sick?"

The soldier grabbed one hand with the other and forced them to stop shaking. It took him a minute to regain his ability of speech.

"Y... yeah. A bad dream... I was back in the Gulf. I'm okay. You guys go back to sleep. Stupid of me to wake you up."

"Hey man, it's cool. Just relax."

They thought they understood: flashbacks.

This was a different vision - it was totally unreal. No man could've

seen that which he had just seen - he began to shake again. The memory was so sharp, not at all a dream - he had "seen" things smaller than the wavelengths of light. Like an entirely new sense... a sense of energy. The Ancestors' way of seeing reality. It was too much; he couldn't grasp how it was possible to see each atom in the world and make sense of it all! There had to be more to it than just seeing small things. The soldier knew from popular science, that time was an "emergent phenomenon"; that the arrow of time only existed in the large-scale macrocosm. On the scale of atoms, time flowed but had no specific direction. And in a deeper sense, time's flow might be an illusion.

But time was a dimension, a direction of space. Then why couldn't space also be an illusion? With the outlook from the smallest parts of the universe, time and distance should fade away. No past, no present, no future, no here nor there, no time to move if there is no spatial movement - just energy's dance with nothingness to weave a semblance of reality. He looked around him and the sight of the barrack, the bunks, the sleeping grunts seemed utterly different.

The space wasn't really there?

Distance and time just pretended to exist?

All his life, all that it contained, was really a complex configuration of photons, interwoven with the rest of the universe?

The soldier fell heavily asleep, and had no more dreams that night.

DAY 122

The remaining members of the Extraterrestrial Contact Team gathered

in the mess hall: Carl Sayers, Lazar Mahfouz, Ann Meadbouré, Takeru Otomo, Andrea McClintock, Mats Jonsson, Stone Pound, and Edmund Soto. First on their agenda was the breaking TV news feature they sat to watch.

"Today's top stories: Saudi leader King Khadi miraculously survives assassination attempt; rumors of a state coup come from Saudi Arabia.

"The world holds its breath, as the Saudi-Iranian fleet is ordered to a halt, just hours from striking distance to Alien Beach.

"Secret talks with Iranian leaders may have halted the fleet - a CNN exclusive..."

"The situation is getting critical," Carl told his team; he was strangely calm though, as if his faith in the visitors and their ancestors subverted his words. "The Sirians are fully aware of the crisis, of course - they're still taking in Earth's TV signals. I guess that's why they're staying in their ship. Can't blame them, though - the military presence here is supposed to 'protect' us, but that's just a sham. If any more of you have planned to leave, don't wait any longer."

No one made a sound. The only ones Carl hadn't shared recorded dreams with - Edmund, Takeru, Stone, and Ann - met his eyes without a flinch.

He added: "We'll soon learn if the coup was successful... but I hope so. Whoever comes after Khadi can't be much crazier."

"I still can't believe the Sirians aren't doing anything," Stone said. "They are so technologically superior, they could reach any head of state on

this earth, no matter where he was hiding. What if..."

He let the next statement hang in the air. Ann stood up, red-faced with anger, and faced down Stone.

"You stupid American! You haven't understood anything! If they wanted to rule the planet for us, they would be doing so! But they haven't, guess why? Because they don't want to! Go ahead, come crawling to Ranmotanii and beg: 'Stop all wars! Rid us of all bad leaders! Make me thin! *Solve my problems!*'"

Stone blushed, too shaken to answer. Takeru brightened up with silent insight: That's why they didn't warn us about the coming earthquake in my homeland, until we asked them - so that humanity would not become too dependent on them! He thought: The females treated my shameful attempts at flattery with ridicule and contempt - because they would not let me become their underling. I've been a fool...

Takeru wondered if it was too late for him to restore his dignity and self-respect. To hell with the money he had been promised for spying on the amphibians - as Lazar was so fond of saying, there was no point in lying about anything anymore. Takeru had by now more or less convinced himself that the Sirian Ancestors had nothing to do with the dead ancestors he himself prayed to; they belonged in a different realm altogether. Yet, with one realm proven real (in some sense), the other one felt ominously closer to reality as well. Somehow, he would redeem himself in the eyes of the Sirians. And in the eyes of his own, earthly ancestors.

"Calm down, Ann," Lazar said. "Our visitors, I'm sure, are rather safe. They can escape an attack in their ship - I saw the film of when it landed

here, it's quite fast - we should worry more about ourselves and our loved ones."

"I should tell you," Carl confessed, "that my wife has pleaded that I return to America until the crisis is over. I made her understand that I cannot abandon this responsibility, but... my family is worried." He almost choked on his words, but restrained himself enough to go on. "I will take a delegation to the Sirians now, and request shelter in case of a missile attack. This hasn't been asked for before, but I hope the Sirians will understand the situation and offer some help."

"You will ask Ranmotanii for personal favors?" asked the Swede Mats, frowning.

"Once," Carl said, "I'm not certain, maybe I did try to ask for a favor, but I intended to share it with all of humanity. If we evacuate the island now, trust me, it will be much harder to get back in touch with the Sirians. We owe it to them to try and stay close, after the effort they made to get here in the first place.

"Someday, when this is over, people are going to ask: 'What was in it for us? Did the poor and powerless of the Earth gain anything from this small visit by a dozen lofty-minded humanoids?' And if we pull off this, we'll be able to answer them: Yes. We gained hope and inspiration, by seeing a glorious future without end, that will belong to our descendants - if and only if we strive for it with determination and intelligence."

Right now, Carl added in his mind, priority one is to stay alive through the day.

"Now, who will join me to the lander vessel?"

All except Stone raised their hands.

This time around, the dive went with little effort. The lagoon seemed devoid of Sirians, even of animal life. The massive, dark manta-shape vessel lay immobile on its supporting black balloons; no spotlights were shining from its hull. Ann took the lead and reached the spot where the airlock entrance should be. The shaft opened up as she reached out to touch the vessel's hull, and lit up her body with blue-green light. Almost ignoring the others, she shot up through the water-filled shaft and surfaced inside the ship. The great hall seemed the same as last time she had been there; a blank metal dome and a flat floor. The large round doorway was shut; a few egg-shaped metal robots, taller than the humans, moved about on scores of black, spider-like legs - the machines had no visible eyes, but steered clear of them with ease.

Ann stood still, freezing a little in spite of the lukewarm air, and waited for the others to join her.

When the last man had been helped up and removed his breathing-mask, Carl called out for the ship's crew to show themselves. In a vessel this big, it was fairly easy for twelve humanoids to hide... but why? Twice he shouted, until he saw the futility of it - of course no one could enter the ship unnoticed.

"Sit down and wait," he told the group. "You can take off your bathing suits to dry if you want to, don't be embarrassed."

Mats, Andrea, then Lazar took off their scuba gear and clothes, and hung them up on a ledge. Suddenly the entire ship lurched; a few people lost their balance, others staggered for a handhold. The sudden movement

stopped in an instant.

A tunnel irised open in the dome wall; a male Sirian came out, and presented himself - it was Aonasann, one of the older, less communicative members of his group. He was wearing a pair of blue Bermuda shorts - ignoring the nakedness of the land-humans, he briskly walked up to Carl.

The amphibian activated a Frisbee-shaped speech device on his chest: a simulated English voice explained that the ship was re-positioning itself. Aonasann would not give any more details; he finished by asking the land-humans to leave the vessel and stay in their barracks, while some Sirian protective machines would escort them back onto Alien Beach.

He repeated the last request, then abandoned them and disappeared into the innards of the huge vessel. The entire ship lurched again, and a faint rumble came from somewhere; Carl told the group to get dressed, gear up and evacuate the premises. No one objected; they jumped into the shaft one by one. Carl waited until only he and Ann were left. He saw how she lingered, waited, looked for more Sirians to appear.

"No, Ann," he said. "You can't come with them."

But who was he fooling? He wanted to come along just as much as she did. Ann clung to a railing, shook her head mutely. And Carl saw, as for the first time, how desire had changed her. When she walked into his JPL office months ago, she had been controlled but tense under the surface, just as she had been most of her life. Only while diving or playing with dolphins, had she displayed spontaneity or recklessness.

But during this time on this tiny island, Ann's personality had turned inside out; all her emotions were now plain to see. Her face had that certain

sheen that Carl used to see in his wife's face just before they made love to each other - Ann's body itself had changed, the curves had swelled.

Carl could at last admit to himself the obvious. Still, it frightened him. He grabbed her by the wrist and gave it a tug. She startled at how pale he had turned.

"It *wouldn't work*," he said, a little harder.

She turned her face away from his gaze, and for a moment Carl thought she was going to cry. She took a deep breath, and nodded at him, her eyes red and her lips pinched. Carl released her wrist, and they both entered the airlock shaft. As they sank down into the lagoon, the lights from inside the ship went out. The airlock went dark; they were alone.

The looming vessel began to spout up sand from the lagoon's floor, and it moved ever so slowly, just a meter upward. A strong, warm stream was created, and pushed them away from the ship like they were feathers. Carl was struck by fear, and began to swim upward as fast as he could manage.

Carl and Ann surfaced, headed for the beach and waded up, where the other team members sat waiting for them. Edmund was praying in a corner, and two team members had joined him; Carl was touched, even though it dawned on him that they weren't necessarily praying for his safe return from the ship.

"Are they finally going to leave?" asked Stone, as Carl squatted down on the beach to rest.

From the lagoon, a cluster of bubbles mixed with sand billowed up

and burst onto the surface. The sky above was free of clouds, and the sight saddened Carl deeply.

"You sound like you *wanted* them to leave," Carl muttered almost inaudibly, but Stone heard him.

"It's all for the best, right? We're just not ready for the 'galactic community' yet. What I'll never understand, is why they bothered to come here in the first place. The TV programs should have been deterrent enough."

Carl had to resist an urge to rise up and punch Stone's pudgy face. If he resorted to senseless violence now, it would only prove Stone was right. He hid his face in his hands.

The others left Carl alone, sensing his need for privacy. Edmund stayed behind on the beach, praying by himself, as afternoon began to shift into evening. Carl looked up, and noticed something new: the fleet out at sea had shrunk. Either it was moving out from the three-mile perimeter, or it was dispersing, or both. The sky was also a lot less noisy than usual - there were next to no aircraft circling the sector. Slowly, Carl put two and two together in his mind.

"You chicken-shit bastard of a President," he muttered, casting a furious look out at the diminishing fleet. "You spineless opportunist."

It made perfect political sense. If not in words then in deeds, the leaders had taken sides. All that remained was to use the Security Committee's soldiers to force the scientists off the island, so that Khadi's alliance could bomb the island without - without "human" casualties.

"No, I'm not as low as you," Carl said to himself, and stood up.

"Edmund! Come with me. This team has one final decision to make."

 Around them on the beach, the soldiers were on patrol, stopping now and then to look at the new, large metal eggs that had marched up on the beach and settled there.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The soldier desperately wished he could just walk up to Carl Sayers and ask what was going on, but he couldn't risk getting thrown off the island now. The Ancestors would explain, somehow, what the commotion was about...

When the ECT team checked the TV and Internet channels, they could find very little media coverage of the dispersing Pacific fleet - all attention had focused on the events in the Orient and the approaching enemy fleet.

It was likely that the Security Council had decided the retreat at the last possible minute before the enemy reached striking distance to Alien Beach - a cynical, desperate attempt to limit the unstoppable confrontation, to one between Khadi's alliance and the alien visitors. Carl rounded up the team, and explained what would most likely follow when the fleet had retreated - forced evacuation of all humans.

"So who will stay here?" he asked them. "It'll get rough. Even if they're principally unarmed, these troops are trained soldiers with no scruples against clubbing down civilians if they are ordered to."

"I'm old and not very afraid of dying," Lazar calmly declared. "If we are all that stands between the Sirians and their enemies, then I will fight to stay."

"The same goes for me," answered Takeru. "If we stay here, our governments will be forced to take a stand against King Khadi's threats. To abandon the Sirians now would be a cowardly act and a disgrace to the original agreement."

"How can the president of the United States be so lacking in principles?" asked Andrea. "Is he willing to sacrifice our relations to an extraterrestrial civilization, to avoid a confrontation with a senile Oriental tyrant?"

"The President is a lawyer by profession," said Carl; no one laughed. "But I should say in his favor," he added, "that if the Arabs attack Alien Beach the next target could be America. From his point of view, he's just protecting his voters."

"It doesn't make a difference to our governments if a handful of scientists are in danger!" retorted Stone. "So your brave moral stance serves no purpose!"

"Then why are you still here?" asked Andrea, more out of curiosity than contempt.

"I'm scared all right. I'm not as eager to become a martyr for science as Carl here. But I think the amphibians are way, way superior to us. They could stop a missile dead in its tracks. Think of the mothership disk out there! If it can transmit a TV signal powerful enough to show on all stations at once, then it could also focus the same energy into a death-ray, and literally fry any city on earth. If they weren't so damned civilized, I'd be sure they'd win even before the war started."

Takeru recalled the day when Tmmtenaa's unusual condition had been explained to him, and made a startled face.

And he said: "I think they will wait before using force. It's in their nature to defend themselves when, not before they are attacked."

Carl then talked about the Sirian machines on the beach, and their use,

and suggested proper action against a military raid. He put all his hopes on the Sirians helping them, or they would fail.

Ann said nothing.

DAY 123

"This appears to be the picture so far: after the assassination attempt, the crown prince and the ruling family have spent the entire day rounding up suspects in the government, the police force and the military. Unconfirmed rumors claim that hundreds of suspect rebels have been executed.

"King Khadi himself has seized direct control of the armed forces, declared martial law and dissolved the parliament. He has been expected to make a public appearance within the next few hours, if his health allows it - he is old and was lightly injured by debris from the bomb explosion. Ecstatic supporters of the royal family are now marching in the streets of the capital Riyadh, chanting and wielding pictures of the royalties. Any hopes of a successful overthrow seem crushed for now."

"This just in - the famous astrophysicist Carl Sayers, head of the ECT on Alien Beach, has just made a public announcement to CNN over the Internet.

"In this video clip, he declares that he and the remaining scientists in his group will stage a protest against King Khadi's war threats by staying on the island until the end of the Sirians' agreed one-year visit. His group will refuse to evacuate under any circumstances. By making

themselves into living shields, the scientists hope to encourage their home nations to take a stand against 'the senseless aggression of the rogue leaders'.

"More on this new development when we come back..."

Most of the team stayed in their barracks and watched CNN on their TV sets and PCs. Some made phone calls to loved ones; others just waited. Ann finished her dinner - she hadn't uttered a word nor made a call during the entire day - and returned to her barrack.

The platoon was ordered to stay alert, but avoid the scientists; a forced evacuation of Alien Beach could not occur without the direct order from the U.N. Security Council or the President.

The soldier felt a stronger pull toward the ocean this evening; when he started to get sleepy, he yearned for the soothing embrace of the warm lagoon. But with the yearning also came the memory of the cult's collective suicide by drowning. It wasn't death he wanted; he had seen more than enough of that. He tried to ignore the invisible pull of the ocean, and wrapped the blanket tighter around him.

Relaxing was impossible; his head felt swollen when it touched the pillow. When he ran his fingers over the ridge on top of his head, he became certain: it really was growing higher. He started in bed when a crack of thunder rattled the barrack; the next second, the rain was hammering down on the roof.

The sun set.

In the cloudy night and faint sea breeze, even the faraway noise of aircraft faded. Only the timeless rumble of the lapping waves seemed to matter.

Ann couldn't sleep; every inch of her skin felt raw, as if it had been badly sunburned. There were too many things on her mind; she couldn't form a stable thought. She sneaked outside and wandered down to the southern cape, alone. Upon arriving, she tore off her clothes - human clothing was a cloying, smothering annoyance. Ann sat down where the waves could splash her legs, and pulled her knees up to her chin. Time passed, though she hardly perceived it. A human observer would have noticed how vacant her wide-open eyes were, and a restlessness barely held in check. Her body was tense, her skin glistening and flushed; her nipples stood out hard from her breasts.

She saw him rise, tall and proud, above the waves; first the long pointed head, then the sleek, smooth body and massive torso. He too was naked; perhaps he also wanted to escape the entrapment of human things. The amphibian froze still as he perceived her presence and wavered there, up to his knees in seawater, staring at her. His eyes were open to the point of being inhuman, fishlike. If it was another late-night swim with her he wanted, nothing in his poise or expression indicated so. He spoke; very slowly, down almost to a drone.

"Aannn."

She looked him straight in the eyes - not an unskilled feat, given the size of his irises. And Oanss made a face of such naked anguish - like he

wanted to cry, if Sirians only could - that a sudden twinge of compassion made Ann stand bolt upright, electrified by his presence. He spoke to her faster, stumbling on his tongue.

"I haave asked... Ancestorss... too mmake youu - onne of thhem - hhave aasked many tiimes. I asked myy peoplle ssame... leet mme diie, llet me decoommpose to nnothinng... leet Aann becommme Ancesstor iinstead. Thee Aancestorrs arre quiet nnow. My peeople... are aafraid off yyour kinnd. Wwon't lleet you bee touchhed by thhe riight mmachiine. Woon't hellp yyou.

"I waanted too giive yyou thhe righht knnowledge, too builld the rright mmachine yoursself... buut therre iis veryy mmuch not eenough tiiime!"

He bared his tubular teeth to the clouds, his wail sounding almost human: *"I doo not waant too bee an Aancestoor!! I wwant to reallly diie, llike heer!"*

Like an unsubtle movie cliché, the sky responded with a crack of thunder - and suddenly the rain was pouring down, whipping the sand into foam and smattering on the palm-leaves. The world disappeared behind curtains of dark-gray water.

NOW: time breaks up into a nonlinear array of fragments in Ann's mind. Memories mix with present time; a unique pattern takes shape, pointing like an arrow, pulling with unstoppable force -

THEN: Ann, thirteen years old, walking alone on a Sri Lanka beach, while her mother and friends are busy working some project. She sees a dolphin look up from the water - their eyes meet, and it speaks to her in its

squeaking, alien language. She is electrified -

NOW: Ann is rushing up toward a taller, humanoid gray shape - or it is rushing toward her - a hot breath, salt with seawater, gushes onto her face -

THEN: A rapid moment - together with Arthur and Carl on a movie set, Arthur in a wheelchair. Jokingly, they all express disappointment with the rubbery space-monsters being filmed on the set. They are not children any longer; that is not what they want. That is not what she wants -

NOW: She is being lifted up by an embrace closer, more intimate than humanly feasible; she gasps, ecstatic, wanting to be transformed into something more than she is -

THEN/NOW: And that does happen -

NOW: Ann is running, panting, in shock. The night is still, the moon hidden by the silent clouds. She remembers the Bermuda shorts in her grip, and puts them back on, but stumbles on a cable and falls into the sand. Her gaze flickers about - deathly afraid someone has seen or heard her, afraid of hearing her own thoughts, afraid of feeling that joy again...

NOW: Oanss lies in the waves, water lapping just over his eyes, waking him up from a heavy slumber. He gazes up into the dark, rainy sky. Face tired yet triumphant, defying the sky... then turning blank, then wide-eyed with fear as he sits up and sees he is alone. A trail of water-filled human footprints leads away from him, back to the scientist barracks on the other side of the island. He opens his mouth to call out, but hesitates for too long; his courage

seems to vanish. He looks up to the clouds again, anxious, waiting for the judgment of the heavens...

The rain ceases as abruptly as it came, and the clouds begin to swirl into more distinct shapes. The large metal eggs on the beach begin to stir, and at once Oanss understands. He pivots onto his feet and runs toward the scientists' barracks.

The soldier gave up trying to sleep, and joined the rest of the platoon watching the ongoing TV news. In the middle of the program, the captain burst through the door - the odd thing being, that almost at the same instant the torrential rain ceased.

"Full alert!" shouted the captain. "A cluster of missiles has been launched from the Arab fleet and will impact this area in less than ten minutes. Two Navy choppers are on their way to evacuate the ECT. Grab everything you need and run for the scientists' quarters - *now!* Move move move!"

The Marines scrambled for their unloaded rifles and ran out the door on a single file. The scientists' campsite lay just a few hundred meters to the west; it was a straight run past the palmtrees and over open flat ground. Their boots splashed through the slushy sand and water puddles as they ran. The soldier glanced upward once - and glimpsed a sky unlike any he had ever seen. The clouds were so thick they were pitch black - and this was supposed to be a night with a full moon! He couldn't make out the details in the dark, but the overhanging clouds appeared to be pulsating, rapidly enough for the naked eye to perceive the movement.

There wasn't time to think; before he knew it, the platoon arrived at the campsite, the sergeant barking orders. The soldier barely understood what the man was shouting, but the other Marines began to break open doors and force their way inside. The soldier found himself pounding on the door of a barrack, then forcefully opening its front door - it was unlocked. Inside was an untidy, cramped quarter with a single bed, lit by a strip light in the ceiling.

He stopped in the doorway, and stared at the figure on the floor - for the briefest instant, he thought he had seen the ghost of Patty. A beautiful woman sat there, naked but for a pair of Bermuda shorts - holding a small electric shaver in her hands. Cut-off blond locks of hair lay strewn around her. The woman looked up at her, gray eyes terrified - she had shaved her head into the horse-like mane of a female amphibian. The water on the floor and her moist hair suggested that she had been out in the rain recently.

Ann looked up at the uniformed soldier with the rifle, who had just burst in through her door. She was still dazed, unable to think, but her gut reaction was fear. Ann couldn't move, nor did she want to.

The soldier hesitated long enough for Ann to perceive what this intruder looked like: a Caucasian of indefinable lineage, who seemed to have aged too soon. His crewcut hair was gray and his face wrinkled with worry lines. There was a bulge in his upper forehead, and his long nose line seemed to merge almost seamlessly with his brow. His build was strong but a bit thinned, maybe from prolonged malnutrition; he appeared more confused than angry.

The soldier saw that she would not let herself be moved.

"Be quiet, wait here," he told her, uncertain of his intentions; he switched off the light and rushed back outside, slamming the door shut after him.

"This one's clear!" he shouted to the sergeant. Other soldiers came up, dragging two civilians between them - one fat American with a big mustache, and a European woman in her late fifties.

"Where are Sayers and the rest of them hiding?" shouted the furious, frightened sergeant at the fat American.

Stone gave him a mean-spirited grin.

"What's the matter, Sarge - can't find a date tonight?"

The sergeant punched his nose in - Stone's baseball-cap fell off and he began to bleed. Andrea fought to pry herself loose, but the troops held her in check.

"They're with the Sirians!" she shouted defiantly. "You'll never get them now!"

The sergeant scrutinized the triumphant face of the fiftyish, frizzle-haired woman for a few seconds. Whatever he had considered doing to her, there wasn't time; the two rescue helicopters were already coming down on the beach, a hundred meters away.

"Grab these two and run for the choppers! Go! Go! Go!"

The soldier saw his "comrades" head off for the waiting helicopters, carrying the two captured scientists like limp dead animals. He looked frantically for an escape route.

"Move your feet, Coffin!" bellowed the sergeant over the rotor noise. "Or I'll have you shot!"

The soldier ran after the others, closely pursued by the sergeant. The captain stood in the open sliding-door of one helicopter, sweeping the beam of a large flashlight across the beach to spot any movements. The beam was reflected by the alien artifacts scattered across the beach. The large metal eggs were stirring, spouting up sand and dirt - digging themselves down into the ground like robotic ants. There was no trace of the missing scientists - the rain had washed away all but the most recent footprints. The soldier stepped up into the open cabin of the other chopper and grabbed a holding strap. He was standing next to the female civilian, who sat surly and quiet in the crowd of Marines.

The captain gave the signal with his flashlight; without shutting the big sliding doors, the choppers took off from the beach. As the helicopters picked up speed, the soldier saw his last chance.

He took his flashlight, aimed the beam outside, and yelled: "Wait! There's someone in the water down there! They're trying to swim out to sea!"

The soldier pushed himself free of the others, jumped out the opening and braced himself. It was a ten-meter fall, his velocity at least forty kilometers per hour - the dark waters hit him with a blow. He plunged down feet-first - the boots were too heavy - he had to pull them off to avoid drowning. Holding the boots in his hands, the soldier swam until his feet touched bottom.

He put the wet boots back on, and used the flashlight to make his way

across the dark island. He was getting tired and out of breath now but ran on, lungs aching, past the sand-heaps where the metal eggs had dug themselves down. The eggs he somehow understood were mobile shelters, and the missing scientists had taken refuge inside them.

Where had that Frenchwoman with the alien haircut gone?

Inside one of the metal eggs, Carl and Lazar were sitting with their backs up against the black, padded material of its inner wall. A soft white light from the round ceiling lit up the cramped space; they could barely sit down without touching each other's feet. Carl was hyperventilating, and his heart beat much too fast.

"I hate closed spaces," he said tensely. "Always did."

"How far down are we?" asked Lazar. "I assume this thing knows how to get up to the surface again."

"I couldn't find Ann. Damn! *Damn!*"

Carl thought of his family, and tried using his cellular phone - but the signal couldn't get through. The walls around them trembled slightly, and the whole egg shifted. They were both quite afraid; perhaps also their shelter was?

The soldier ran inside the Frenchwoman's barrack again. It was empty. Outside, the sky was so dark he could only see the horizon. With his flashlight, he spotted a trail of fresh, bare footsteps in the soggy sand.

He followed the trail past the back of the barracks - the trail became two tracks, the other one made by long, very flat feet. He hurriedly followed

on, through a grove of palmtrees, until he discerned the tree-like alien structure, four meters high, sixty meters ahead.

At the base of this cluster of thick, silvery metal poles he could make out two standing figures. One female human, clinging to a taller, male humanoid with the characteristic bullet-shaped head and soft arms. The male was holding a pair of the overhanging metal branches.

He was wailing something, and the soldier sensed that if the wind hadn't been so loud he would have understood the words. From the black sky came a growing noise, not unlike aircraft but higher-pitched - nearer the horizon, the soldier spotted trails of light. Heading his way.

And he wasn't afraid.

Stone Pound and Andrea McClintock were in the rescue choppers, still heading out toward the escaping fleet, when a pilot shouted over the loudspeakers: "Cover your eyes and brace yourselves for the shockwave! Impact in fifteen seconds!"

The passengers obeyed, and waited - someone said a prayer. The fifteen seconds passed. Nothing happened. A few more seconds passed. The helicopters were jolted by a strong gust - but much weaker than had been expected. Everybody looked out the windows, at the darkened island.

It was still there, untouched - a few lights were still visible on it.

One could discern that the missiles had reached the black clouds - their vapor trails were vaguely illuminated by the full moon - and had vanished. The clouds were moving faster now, gaining sharper outlines - within a minute, they had become a spinning saucer-shape, at least ten times

wider than the island. The saucer-shape began to glow a deep blue. The helicopters were hit by more turbulence, pulling them back toward the island - the pilots took their vehicles down lower and steadied their course.

A few minutes later, they landed on the deck of the carrier; the wind had now reached gale force, and the seas were foaming. Andrea eased herself past the military personnel on the deck, shielded her eyes from the blinding spotlights, and got a clear view of the island at the horizon.

The flickering skies illuminated the island with a faint blue sheen, making it look even punier than it was - and the giant glowing cloud fragmented into a thousand smaller ones, each growing a minor appendage at its bottom - a thousand glowing typhoons. Just then, the bang of a million thunderbolts slammed into the carrier. Scores of its windowpanes shattered; the front windshields of the rescue helicopters popped and cracked.

The swarm of small typhoons began to move, reaching into the sea outside the lagoon. Several of them sank entirely underwater; others speeded out westward, at what must have been several hundred kilometers per hour. The rest of the night sky was in total chaos; clouds formed and dispersed in minutes, the wind alternately dropped away and increased to a gale without warning; the fleet had to retreat farther away. Alien Beach lay calm at the center of the chaos; a large blue typhoon stayed above it and held the outside weather at bay.

It was the last minute of the 123rd day, local Pacific Time.

Chapter Thirty

DAY 124

"This is Breaking News...

"In the city of Riyadh, King Khadi of Saudi Arabia is now making his first public speech since the attempt on his life. For the first time he is openly declaring war on the Sirian species, which he describes as 'demons from hell,' and vows not to rest until they have been driven away from the Solar System. Ambassadors of Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait are also present among his audience, and applaud him enthusiastically.

"Here is Albert Sayed, live from our newscenter in Cairo..."

"The official war declaration came just after the commencement of the much-awaited missile attack on Alien Beach, launched from the Saudi-Iranian strike fleet. The government of Iran has been strangely silent all the time, perhaps waiting for the divine sign that never came.

"But King Khadi is claiming in his live speech, that he was commanded by God in a vision, to give the strike order - never mind the illogic that God would have to ask for nuclear weapons and not intervene himself."

"From his tribune, in front of the cameras, the ruler of Saudi Arabia appears haggard and he has a disturbed gleam in his eyes - but he shouts and waves his fists energetically. A crowd of, maybe, ten thousand souls are cheering him - all middle-class city people, whose wealth is perceived as under threat by new, advanced energy sources that - still! - the Sirians refuse to share with humanity.

"I'm telling you, the man is insane! Now he's calling for a common prayer, and a mullah comes up next to Khadi - the crowd shouts and points to the clouded sky. A kind of blue glow is visible in the clouds - what was that? A bolt of lightning just struck the speaker's tribune, and destroyed the king's microphones! This is incredible! Nobody was hurt, but Khadi has retreated and is escorted away by security guards. The crowd scatters in panic, screaming hysterically that - "

"Albert, can you please hold on a minute? This just in - the missile attack on Alien Beach seems to have missed its target. The island stands unhurt - but fierce, unnatural storms are raging through the area. The U.N. fleet is mostly retreating, and no military moves against the Saudi-Iranian fleet have been reported as yet. From the White House, no comments have yet leaked out..."

Ann clung tightly to Oanss; she was convinced that if she lost hold of him, the storm would kill her. From her viewpoint, she saw only rainstorms and lightning outside the island; but here, in the eye of the largest glowing typhoon, there was almost no wind at all. And yet, some of the deafening noise of the outside chaos could reach their ears.

Only in furtive glances did she look up into the sky - above them hovered the inside of a cylinder of wind and water, many hundred meters wide, winding upward into the diffuse dark-blue glow of a spinning cloud, two thousand meters up. Every few seconds, stray lightning illuminated the "walls" of this vortex; several palmtrees were struck and shriveled into black

stumps. Oanss kept clinging to the Sirian antenna tree, straining for breath as he kept intoning sentences - it sounded almost like prayers - but stayed fixed on the tree and the glowing vortex above them. Not one lightning-bolt came near them.

Then - Ann could not sense how much time had passed - she spotted a figure approaching them - and yelped intelligibly. Oanss turned in the direction of the soldier, who warily came closer.

All three were silent. Any speech, any language, was inadequate to the situation. There were so many things that the soldier could have said; a thousand lies that Ann could have uttered to hide her true feelings; Oanss could have been asking questions for the rest of his physical life. The soldier held out his hands in a gesture of peace, and walked close enough to touch the pair. Ann stared at the long bulge that ran down the man's forehead. Oanss seemed uncertain, if not afraid; his arms moved into a protective position, tense and trembling.

But the soldier merely smiled, put one hand firmly on the side of the metal tree, and shouted over the wind: *"Don't be afraid! It is not you who make them angry!"*

From the sea came a rumbling echo of what might have been an explosion. A huge column of water cascaded up from the north, and crashed onto the empty army barracks. The sea flashed blue, and the boiling surface bulged upward ten meters.

Ann screamed, when something she thought was a giant whale shot out of the water and crashed down on the shore. It smashed the barracks flat under its weight. A wall of dirt and steaming water was thrown up as the

nose of the giant black shape plowed through the sand and stopped in a cluster of trees, a hundred meters away. The shape turned on its side with a ringing noise of twisted metal, and lay still.

It was a huge nuclear submarine; the markings on its sides were partly in Arabic. The soldier wondered for a moment if the stranded submarine might explode, or if all its crew were dead. Then the blue glow from the sea came back, and flickered away; up from the depths surfaced row upon row of floating black spheres. The high waves swept the spheres ashore, and they popped open; inside each ball, curled up in a fetal position, lay a crew member - twitching or in shock, but visibly alive. In the next few minutes, at least fifty live crewmen were vomited up from the sea.

A few kilometers farther out west, a glowing blue typhoon re-surfaced, sucking the ocean up along itself as it rose. It was carrying another submarine in its spinning vortex-tail, resembling a tiny toy caught in a net; with amazing speed, the typhoon carried the eighty-meter carcass to the brink of the lagoon and spit it out; the wrecked submarine crashed into the waves and sank instantly. More black spheres floated up and began to drift toward the island.

The rescued men from the submarines were too shocked to act coherently. Whatever they had gone through to get snatched from inside their vessels, it must have happened too rapidly for a human to comprehend. Most of them just sat and shook like they were freezing, though the air was much hotter than usual. A few of them glanced in horror up at the glowing, flickering inferno above their heads - and knelt with their heads down before

the great unknown power.

This sight seemed to disturb Oanss; the soldier was filled with sadness. No, it was not their deity the crewmen were seeing - not at all. Yet, several of them thought so, shut their eyes and averted their eyes to the storm, shouting desperately that God would show mercy and not kill them outright.

The soldier rushed out to one of the kneeling men, a clean-shaven Saudi Arabian or Iranian man in a blue uniform; his stripes indicated he was a submarine captain. The soldier mercilessly tugged at the man's sleeves, shaking him so that he would open his eyes.

"No! Look at me! Look at it! That is not what you think it is! It does not want you to worship it! Look at it!"

The terrified officer whimpered and shook his head in denial, convinced that if he looked into the eye of the storm, the power behind it would strike him dead. The soldier restrained himself, and let go of the kneeling man. He ran back to where Ann and Oanss were standing. Around the island, the storm continued unabated; it seemed as if the vortex above them was sucking in all the clouds in the atmosphere. The smaller cousins of the central vortex speeded away to the west; the opened black capsules that had transported the sailors ashore were dissolving into rubbery flat puddles.

The soldier shouted to the tall amphibian: "Where are the other scientists? Where is your ship?"

Oanss blinked uncertainly, and pointed out to the lagoon where the waves were crashing onto the beach.

"Are they all safe?"

Oanss nodded and grunted a yes, as was the Earth custom.

The soldier began to check the stranded sailors for weapons - not that any of the men had so much as a shred of fighting spirit left in them, but he didn't want anyone to attempt suicide. Some were still carrying guns, but they were rendered useless by the rubbery black substance that had crept into the barrels. If there were suicide pills around, no one seemed to be using them.

An hour or two the soldier spent wandering about the groups of shocked, defeated crewmen, finding those who were wandering aimlessly around, gathering everyone he could see at the stranded submarine where they could find shelter from the raging storm. Eventually, he found one sailor who spoke good English, and was composed enough to listen. The soldier took him along to the scientists' storage barracks, gathered water bottles, blankets, food packs and first-aid, which they dragged back to the group.

The soldier saw that these men were people, not faceless hordes; they were just as much cannon-fodder as soldiers in any war - and he felt genuinely sorry for them. For thousands of years, the same thing had happened again and again; young men being sent out to the slaughter, just to feed the bloated ego of some tyrant. But not this night - there was no enemy to kill these men, nor could they ever, ever have killed what they were sent out to fight. The soldier swept a blanket around a shuddering, crying Arab, who looked no older than twenty years - and talked soothingly to him, in what little Arabic he knew.

"It's all right. You are not a prisoner. Be calm. Here, have some water.

Sleep if you can."

The man said something in Arabic - the soldier had spent long enough time in the region to understand.

The man said: "Thank you, my friend."

The soldier began to walk off in no particular direction. His relief was immense; if he had been more the man he once was, he would have cried. Instead he looked out to the west, where quick blue flashes were illuminating the dark horizon.

He thought: *And now what? You have shown them what you can do. You took their stupid atom bombs, ate them, and spat out the pieces. But a storm can't govern a whole people. They have to learn on their own now, whether you change them or not after this. I know you are changing me, and I'm grateful - your experiment is succeeding.*

But are you going to change all of mankind? Even if it could be done, would it be right? If you do, they will make themselves your slaves - they will worship you, out of fear more than understanding. Is that what you want - slaves, not free beings? I cannot think you are that small-minded. Please, let them change themselves. You have shown enough to last a long time, to point them in the right direction.

I'll help them, I swear I'll do what I can. It's not much, but I'll try. Yet - why? Why this world? Why me? Why would you even care, when you have the entire universe? Could you just answer that question, and I'll never ask for anything again...

He shut his eyes and waited for a vision; he waited a minute and gave it up. A notion, fully his own, had taken shape in his mind while watching

the stranded crewmen pray for absolution. If land-humans were so damned keen to worship things, then why not give them something worthwhile to look up to. As the storm continued outside, the soldier sought out Oanss again.

"It is important that I talk to your people soon," he explained. "I have a suggestion."

Chapter Thirty-One

Carl had finally fallen asleep inside the protective capsule, when it began to stir again.

"We're moving upward!" Lazar said hopefully.

The machine had served them some water, but done nothing else for hours - they badly needed to visit a bathroom. The machine vibrated and burred madly for several minutes, then lurched and turned over. The two round exit hatches sprung open, and the morning sun blinded the two men. All was calm outside, save for the sound of the gently rolling seas, the rustle of a faint wind in the trees, and flocks of seagulls circling the area. The sky was a bright, uniform blue - as if last night had been but a dream... They awkwardly climbed out of the pod, onto the surface of the island, right where they had escaped into the pod the night before.

"Look!" gasped Carl, pointing to the huge submarine wreck on the northern side of the beach.

There was another wreck sticking up from the water out at the lagoon. Palmtrees were burned; scores of uniformed Arabs were squatting down in the shadow of the stranded submarine. Next to Carl and Lazar, several other pod-machines dug themselves up like busy ants - the other scientists were let outside, squinting in the sun. Carl was happy to see that Takeru, Edmund, and Mats came out safe and sound, if a little wobbly.

"Where's Ann?" he asked them; she had never appeared when the machines opened. "And Andrea, and Bruce?"

"Use their cell phone numbers!" suggested Takeru, already pulling out

his own phone. Carl punched in the code and waited... No answer from Ann's number. Maybe she had lost her phone in the commotion.

"I've found Bruce and Andrea!" Takeru called out to Carl, phone to his ear. "They were evacuated by the troops just in time!"

"Good! It was great of them to volunteer for that little diversion. But maybe it wasn't necessary after all, fooling the troops into thinking we were in the submerged lander. Send my thanks. I've got to look for Ann..."

As he spoke, Carl and the others hurried back to their barracks.

Takeru stayed to watch the stranded newcomers. It unnerved him to see so many military people on the island, but they seemed passive. The noise of approaching helicopters, several of them, came from the sea. Was the military going to land and take over the island after all? Takeru's concerns were answered by an uproar from the lagoon. The sound of the surfacing lander vessel was deafening - every man felt the vibrations in the air and in his feet. It rose on a bed of hot jet streams, forcing Takeru to run for cover even from a hundred meters away; the huge dark manta-shape hovered in a plume of clouds, and slowly moved in toward the beach.

The submarine castaways panicked. Some rushed into the water and tried to swim away, but soon gave up. Others just stared at the weird vehicle, that to them must have vaguely resembled a futuristic submarine. The lander vessel settled down on the lagoon's beach, throwing up clouds of sand; huge black pontoons were rapidly inflated under it to support its weight. The vessel came to a rest several meters above ground, the pontoons creaking gently in the breeze. The arriving helicopters, a dozen of them, made a

sweep around the island and retreated back to their base.

Carl, alerted by the thunderous noise, ran up to the lagoon's edge and stopped. He arched his neck backward to see the top of the sleek black hull - when a metallic sound came from up there. A Sirian peered down from the top of the vessel, and waved at the scientists standing below on the ground. By way of some sort of elevator, eleven Sirians descended to the beach.

First came Namonnae, somber-looking and holding one hand on the shoulder of Ranmotanii, beside her.

Then the young-looking Mnmnonns, carrying a bundle of flutes in a pouch.

Aonasann, communicating to someone (maybe the ship itself) via a small device clasped onto his blocky head.

Moanossoans, the tall female who smiled so much, pointing excitedly at the group of stranded newcomers.

Snaosnee, the aged flat-chested female, her sleek face filled with wonder at the sights around her.

Tmmtenaa, shy but smiling furtively at the scientists as he set his feet on the ground. After him came a few others - only Oanss was missing.

And last came Oanornn, the oldest one, sitting on the descending elevator, supported by... a soldier?

Carl vaguely recognized the uniformed stranger as one of the platoon members who General Harrod had posted out on Alien Beach. The man came up to Carl and extended a hand for a shake; he seemed controlled and upbeat. Carl mutely shook hands, frowning at the bulge in the soldier's forehead and his gray hair. How old was he really?

"Where are the other soldiers?" Carl asked him.

"They won't come back, Mr. Sayers. We just picked up a newscast; General Harrod resigned from his ECT post a few hours ago. The President has promised the amphibians, in public, that no more military personnel will come near the island for the rest of the one-year period. He apologized on behalf of mankind for the attack, and pledged to start immediate peace negotiations with the attacking states."

"Peace negotiations? You mean... negotiating for the Sirians?"

The soldier laughed. Oanornn merely seemed puzzled.

"As if the amphibians were ever at war with anyone on this planet! They'll just go back to their schedule."

Carl took a deep breath; the situation was unreal.

"But... Oanornn. They tried to kill you... what if they try again?"

"'They' wwill noot trry againn. Noow we wiill mmake musiic wwith thhose peoplle. Bee haappy, and llike soo wee thhank the Aancestooors!"

The old amphibian made a few click-sounds - a chortle? and slowly walked away, the soldier supporting his gait. The two were heading for the submarine wreck, conversing in English like old friends - Carl heard with increasing amazement that the soldier was using some amphibian sounds as well. The man laughed with click-sounds and spoke a few land-language phrases with a hint of singing intonation. The female Sirian with the flute bundle hurried after them, joined by Moanossoans.

What was going on here? At least Carl knew what the flushed, burning sensation in his face and gut was - raw, selfish envy. But he ignored that and called his wife on the phone; she was overjoyed to hear he was alive

and well. They both spent two hours talking. Twice during their conversation, Carl saw a message flashing on the phone's tiny screen: the President was trying to call him. Carl happily ignored him as well, and kept talking to his wife. He felt so certain all danger was over, he even promised to try and get her a pass to visit the island.

"That would be wonderful," Carl's wife said, "you think they would grant us that privilege?"

"My dear - in an infinite universe, anything is possible!"

He forgot about Ann, wherever she was - probably in a safe place.

"Today's program will be several hours long, concentrating on the many aspects of the aborted standoff between the Sirian visitors and the Khadi alliance.

"During nighttime in the Pacific Region, the awaited attack on Alien Beach was stopped under mysterious circumstances. Several unnatural storms have raged through the region all night, causing enormous damage to the Saudi-Iranian fleet. None of the fired missiles appear to have reached their intended targets - they disappeared from radar view just as they were about to hit Alien Beach.

"Even stranger, no casualties have been reported from either side; civilian ships are now picking up distress calls from all over the Pacific, from Saudi ships that have been wrecked. Several black balloons of unknown origin are being found, which appear to have helped wrecked aircraft carriers and sailors to stay afloat and shielded them from injury.

"From the capital of Saudi Arabia, this just came in: King Khadi has been declared unfit for office, and the parliament has taken over control of government from the ruling family. All military forces are now being ordered withdrawn from the Pacific. From Iran, Iraq and Kuwait, similar orders are being issued. No explanation has come from either country, except the usual rumor mill..."

As the day passed, the boats that Carl had requested from the fleet came in, with new food supplies and equipment to house the castaways until they could be shipped home.

Edmund, Takeru, and Mats took time off from their scientific work and joined the Sirians at the submarine wreck. Later in the afternoon, Carl came over and saw the strangest sight. The almost one hundred stranded castaways - Saudis and Iranians from the submarine crews, judging by their different uniforms - were peacefully gathered around the amphibians, with several bonfires, eating together... and singing. Mnmnonns was playing an improvised flute quartet with three other flute-playing sailors. Aonasann was learning Arabic song from a grinning officer.

Carl strolled about the place until he located the soldier, sitting next to Oanornn. They stopped talking when he came - Carl felt excluded, though he sensed something profound was going on. In spite of his doubts and misgivings, he spontaneously greeted the soldier with a smile.

"I see you're making progress with the newcomers. Congratulations!"

The soldier turned his attention to Carl, calm and benevolent.

"Mr. Sayers, you're wondering what I'm doing here, who I'm working

for - you deserve an answer. I assure you, I'm no longer working under governmental or military jurisdiction. This is a private matter entirely. In due time, I might be able to explain, but - as it is now, I suggest you just let things happen the way they happen and worry later. The Ancestors are still with us."

"I thought so. Thanks, whoever you are. Now, have you seen a blond, rather tall woman named Ann Meadbouré? She's been out of sight ever since last night."

"The Sirians told me she was meeting Oanss over at the southern cape."

Carl was about to go there, then realized it would be pointless. He opened the suitcase he had brought along, produced his violin, and began to play along. The jam session included several elements - Arabic folk music, English pop music from the 1960s, amphibian song and chanting-calls, and Bach by violin. The looming submarine wreck caused an interesting resonance effect, which gave the tones more volume. For a few hours, before the outside world gathered the courage to approach, the island was a happy place to be - almost like the first feast between amphibians and humans. If the Sirian lander vessel, which lay still at the beach facing the lagoon, was alive like the amphibians had hinted, it might have heard the music being played. It lay silent, though, like a stranded sea creature from another world guarding its eggs.

At the southern cape, Ann sat with Oanss and watched the sun set - and listened to the music and laughter from the other side of the small island.

A great melancholy overcame Ann, for the sounds reminded her of the first party on Alien Beach, when she had first shared a meal with an amphibian. She sat at arm's length from him on a flat, curved rock, perfectly still. Oanss was equally immobile; they had been that way for two hours.

Both knew what separated them. One would never die, the other might live perhaps fifty or eighty years more; they were too genetically diverse to have children, and belonged to cultures so different in age and customs that the situation bordered on the absurd.

Both also knew, now, what attracted them to each other. Neither had touched the other once during the two hours; what had happened, had happened - but it changed nothing. The situation remained impossible.

Some part of Ann, the part that had made her cut her hair like a Sirian, refused to accept the obvious. That part was thinking up what she ought to tell him: *You can persuade them let me come with you! To hell with the rest of mankind - you can make one exception. I know I'm not as good a person as you, but I don't want to become an Ancestor. I'd settle for a limited life, as long as it is with you! Why don't you stay here, with me! You would eventually see me die of old age before you become an Ancestor, and that would destroy you - your kind are no longer used to seeing their loved ones pass away... not for real.*

But you'd still have the memory of me! To hell with eternity. You said you wanted to die like me, you liar - if you really love me, you'd do that for me!

All the same, she hated herself for thinking so selfishly. Of course she had no right to demand that kind of sacrifice. She couldn't know what Oanss

was thinking as they sat there - she had learned to read his face better, but this time it was particularly expressionless. Then, as if he had spent the day considering what to say, Oanss spoke - slowly, without meeting her gaze.

"Llittle laand-humman... thee Ancestors haave nevver spokeen to mme. Aand noot nnow, when I need theirr aadvice. Haave theyy comme to yyou Aann, inn paast timme?"

Ann cleared her throat, hardly able to speak.

"No. Never. But... I never asked them for advice."

She wasn't a religious person - and this wasn't quite religion. The Sirian Ancestors were real - and not in the everyday sense of the word.

"How... how do you get contact with Ancestors? Can I... contact Ancestors who were related to you?"

"The Annceestors caan ssee eneergy iin all ittss fforms... iff yyour ththoughts aare... cannoot translaate... llike so - a raadio cann abssorb the raadio signalls if iit iss tuuned to thhe rright ffrequennnciess... yyou uunderstand?"

"I think I understand."

Her "radio" was PAL, his was NTSC. Different systems... and the Ancestor "station" didn't broadcast in her language. As long as her mind remained that of a land-human...

"I could have my body changed, mix your DNA with mine, and become more like your people. It could be done."

"Doo yyou wwant liike soo?"

Their eyes met. She wanted him to believe - tried to make her face neutral. There was a tiny metal blob lodged next to Oanss' left ear opening.

He put one fingertip to the device; it made tinny sounds in his ear, and his eyes changed. He shook his head; they both knew.

"This is where I'm supposed to get all sentimental," she said, as if to herself. "The violins start playing."

In fact, they could hear the faint tones of Carl's violin playing in the distance - but it was a rendition of a partita by Bach, stringent and rational, not exactly romantic ambience.

"I can't cry any longer," she said. "Do your people cry? I mean, are you physically capable of weeping?"

"No."

"Are you sad now?"

"I aam maany kindss nnow."

"Same for me."

"I wwant youu to uunderstaand thhis diifficulty I haave nnow. I waant to liive, buut not. I amm noot uused too thhis paainn."

"My people are."

"Yyour peoplle haave thhings mmy peeeple nnot haave. Too maake ssmaller oof painnn."

"Yes."

"Moost of alll thhe musiic."

She nodded. And finally, they managed to hold each other tightly, and held on until the sun had set. Then they parted ways, without a word. He walked up along the beach, to the huge silhouette of the lander vessel; she walked off to the barracks.

The violin music kept playing Bach for a while, accompanied by

flutes and song, until that too ceased.

At least, she thought (hoping he thought so too), they would be able to see each other for eight more months. The memory of that night before was still unfocused in her memory - she had not been injured in any way, yet... she could not quite recall what had happened, or would not let herself remember. A restraint that went beyond mere shame. She cried then, in frustration over what could not be resolved.

Chapter Thirty-Two

DAY 125

A young U.S. naval officer, unarmed and carrying a suitcase, came off the supply boat and asked a passing scientist for Carl Sayers.

"I think he's over there," said Takeru, pointing the way to the giant lander vessel a hundred meters further in.

The officer went pale under his suntan, but resolutely walked that way. In the shadow of the mighty alien ship's supporting pontoon balloons, he soon found Carl, next to a Sirian machine that resembled a giant silver egg. The scientist was examining the pod with another, small instrument of alien origin - it resembled a miniature telescope.

"Mr. Sayers?"

Carl looked up, recognizing the officer from previous visits.

"Hi again! Did the fleet suffer any damage in the storm?"

"A few scratches, nothing to worry about. Say, that's an impressive-looking ship."

"Did you know that each and every one of their machines is made out of metal cells?" Carl mused absent-mindedly. "That possess a kind of pseudo-life? Even that big ship has a mind of sorts. Only, it doesn't rebel against its passengers. Isn't that amazing?"

The officer was too amazed to answer.

"But I assume you came to gather some information for your superiors in the Pentagon," Carl added, with no audible malice.

"I beg your pardon?"

"These are our terms: the castaways are not prisoners. They are to be picked up by civilian ships as soon as they reach the three-mile perimeter. No military prisoners are to be taken from this island. Any attempt to take prisoners will lead to a protest from the amphibian representative Ranmotanii. You can ask him yourself. Tell that to General Harrod's successor."

"There isn't exactly a *successor*, sir."

"Who, then?"

"Admiral Boswell, commander of the U.S.S. Powell, has taken over transitional leadership of the Alien Beach Security Committee, while they try to find a replacement. To tell you the truth, nobody wants the job now."

"Why?"

The officer lowered his voice, as if it would make a difference.

"They're afraid. I know this sounds stupid - the top brass in the intelligence community, Pentagon, CIA, the NSA, you name it - all the talk about those Sirian Ancestors has scared the living daylights out of them. Their entire concept of secrecy is coming down."

"I think I understand what you mean. Was there anything else I could help you with today?"

"In fact, yes - I was ordered to look for a member of the unarmed platoon. He went missing during the evacuation, and our patrol boats haven't managed to find his body."

The officer gave Carl a photograph of the missing person. The man on the picture was that soldier, all right - but when Carl had last seen him among the Sirians, the soldier had looked at least ten years older and had a

bulging ridge running along the top of his head. Carl thought about it. What would a Sirian have said?

"Lieutenant, you are not yet in the position to understand the information I possess about the missing soldier. Later, when you are wiser, I will tell you more. Can I keep this picture for now?"

"I... yes, sir. I'll come back in a week or so then. P... please call us if you find anything."

The officer gave Carl a last baffled glance, and retreated back to his boat - trying not to give away his hurry to get off the island. The sight made Carl grin. Then he looked at the photograph again, and understood a little more of what was going on.

He touched the huge metal egg and said: "Send this message to Ranmotanii: 'Carl Sayers wants to meet Ranmotanii and his new guest this evening, in Carl's house.'"

Silently, the machine instantly transmitted the message.

Not only Ranmotanii and the soldier, but also Oanorn and Namonnae came to meet Carl that evening.

"I think I have a right to know why you are here," Carl explained to the soldier. "It's not too soon to tell me."

"It was just yesterday that you agreed not to ask too much too soon."

"That was yesterday, and now I know more; thus I will understand better now. The fact is - you are mutating. Why?"

Carl pointed straight at the soldier's forehead bulge. The prematurely aging soldier gave Carl an excusing grin.

"I've been asking myself that for quite a while, Mr. Sayers. Maybe... maybe the chemical exposure I underwent during the war, altered my brain so that I became receptive to Ancestor communication. This is not the work of the Sirians you see before you; they have no plans to mutate us into their own kind."

"I wasn't accusing them of -"

Carl's voice died away. Well, maybe he *was* accusing them.

The soldier said, not without humor: "The idea has a certain charm to it, I admit - instead of replacing mankind or killing us off, they could let loose a mutating technology and turn us into their own kind. A soft invasion."

And Carl saw the childishness of the idea - it was like taken straight out of a 1950s B-movie. Neither the amphibians nor the Ancestors needed to make that effort, when they had an infinity of worlds to choose from. Why bother with one that was already occupied, polluted, being used up?

"I'm sorry," he said. "You know how self-centered our species is - we always thought we were the center of the universe. Tell me, is it the Ancestors who are changing you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"When did this begin?"

"It's not certain. Maybe even before the first contact with the amphibians - their Ancestors have an entirely different perception of time and space. It began -"

The soldier had to stop - he began to laugh nervously, his head felt light and he got tears in his eyes.

"I just realized - this is the first time I talk to another human - another land-human - about my experience, and he's actually listening. I was so afraid of being called a lunatic, you wouldn't believe it -"

"After what I've been through, you sound sane enough," Carl replied gravely. "Go on, this is important."

With eyes that had become imperceptibly different from human eyes, the soldier gave Oanornn a questioning stare - and the old amphibian nodded.

"It began with the first vision, about four months ago..."

As the soldier strained to recount the many visions that had lodged themselves in his changing brain, they fell into place. The thing that had communicated itself to him, the sum of its messages, could finally take the form of human speech. The soldier was no longer all himself, but partly composed of the memories and experiences of that "other."

And the other spoke through the soldier...

"I was among the first ones to become an Ancestor. This was long before Ranmotanii's group journeyed from Sirius to this planet. At the time when I was transformed into the nether state, our homeworld was still orbiting its original sun. The homeworld was the most beautiful planet known to us - it still is, as my descendants propel it from star to star with their great machines. When I was born, in the northern ocean of the homeworld, our population had grown to the limit of the star system's capacity.

"Yet, this was not why we decided to leave our sun and seek out new space.

"At the time when I grew up to be a young infant, I learned - like so many other children - that our civilization was built upon the remnants of a dead one, that had lived exclusively on land. Perhaps this dead culture had once created us, to allow intelligent life to survive what catastrophe destroyed them; no one knows. So I always knew that our culture must move or die.

"Yet, this was not why we decided to leave our sun and seek out new space.

"Movement is in our nature. I remember as a child living mostly underwater, asking why the bubbles always strive upward to the sun. And my mother said it was the way of things - like the bubble striving to become part of the greater ocean of air, I was going to feel the pull toward the greater ocean above. She was right; and it did not end there. Once we had come to explore all land, we were attracted to go further upward, into the biggest ocean, that you call 'outer space'.

"Yet, this was not why we decided to leave our sun and seek out new space.

"For as long as our species had existed, we had firmly believed that the Pull, the urge to soar upward, would always continue without interruption. My own, really dead ancestors thought their minds would soar into the star-filled sky when their bodies died. I recall the sight of my own old relatives dying physically... their corpses were carried to a hilltop and burned. As the smoke was carried upward, we sang for their safe ascent into the greater ocean. Every star, we were told by our elders, was the home of an ancestor spirit...

"Yet, this was not why we decided to leave our sun and seek out new space.

"As the land-living part of our culture had developed, partly by learning to use the many machines left behind by the previous species, we had learned the way of thinking you call 'science'. Many, many generations before my birth, scientists had learned to use telescopes to map out the skies. When I had grown old enough to spend most of my days on land and work there, our people largely knew the terrible truth: our dying minds did not soar into space. The faith in the Pull was rapidly breaking down, and everyone was stricken by a sense of lost purpose. The universe was no longer the place we had assumed it to be.

"Once I had fully accepted the futility of burning my dead relatives, I overcame my despair and decided to become a scientist. I reasoned with my friends thus: we had to find a way to complete the ascension of our people, restore the Pull - or our people would be doomed. One thing our species has never lacked, is courage - within my earthly lifetime, a third of our homeworld's resources had been directed toward this goal.

"*This* was why we decided to leave our sun and seek out new space - to keep the Pull going forever. Once our astronomers learned of the disaster that would eventually befall our solar system, the great work began to move our entire people to new stars.

"But there was still one great fear that held us back from spaceflight - the fear of the emptiness of space. No air to breathe; no soothing water to sleep in, and this caused an innate panic in us, which runs very deep. The challenge seemed too great, until one of us constructed the machines that

made the Ancestors real things. With the Ancestors there ahead of us, our fear of empty space was alleviated.

"I became one of the first, real Ancestors - the risk of failure was high, and several volunteers had died in previous attempts to become transformed. At the time of my turn, I was so old that I had come to live exclusively on land, and my body was frail. To lessen my fear of real death, I took to repeat some of the funeral proceedings of the old faith, just before the transformation process could begin. These proceedings came to live on in the new tradition.

"As was the ancient custom of our old and dying, I stood upon my home beach, where countless generations had stood before me, and shouted the ritual words: '*Ancestors - I am ready!*' Though it might have seemed a mockery then, it made me more confident - I spoke not to the previous ancestors, but those who were to come after me. How do I describe the transformation process? The amount of energy involved is considerable - this energy is used to break down time and distance, the illusions that the real things create when they dance. I ceased to be in time and distance, and became... real.

"Since real Ancestors are not in time and distance, it is as if they all are present... everywhere and nowhere. All who have ever been transformed are together, generation after successive generation. From the first one, to the last one that ever was transformed at the end of my people's time."

"Once this process had begun with me and my friends, it was to continue. From an early stage it was understood, that one could not be born an Ancestor, but first had to grow into maturity. Our children cannot walk on

land until they have grown appropriately. Finally, inspired by the apparitions of real Ancestors in the sky, my people could make the mass exodus from their home star with confidence.

"Like so, the pattern is unbroken; the Pull is forever. Even among Ancestors, the Pull exists in some form; I cannot describe it, but it must go on - forever higher. The energy I use to speak through this being should not be continued... it would damage him."

The soldier's eyelids fluttered; he woke up from what he perceived as a trance. He could recall most of what had been said, but some limit of nature must have been reached - the memory of the Ancestor's message was already fading. His head began to ache again.

Carl, Oanornn, and Namonnae were too stunned to speak or react. None of them seemed prepared for this.

Finally, Namonnae said slowly: *"I doo nnot know iif thhis iis aa reaal Aancestor tallking. Laand-humaans aare nnot reeliablle."*

And in the eyes of Carl and the soldier, she was being perfectly honest. Oanornn's face turned sunken and sad. He talked to her in their own tongue, slower than usual - she replied in terse, clipped phrases.

"They are arguing," the soldier told Carl. "Something about her being mistaken and immature. He says she has not understood her own kind as related to land-humans. She could be his daughter, but I'm not sure if that's what they mean. Namonnae dislikes... land-humans."

Carl hushed the soldier, took him aside, and let the two amphibians argue in private.

"So what are your plans then? When their year is up, the amphibians will return the island to its native owners. Will you go back to America with us?"

"I cannot answer yet. There is something I need to stay here to get done, before the year is up."

The soldier pointed at his own growing forehead ridge, and explained: "This is going to continue - it's the Pull in me, it has been so strong and now it's finally being released - but it needs time to grow. No one ever became an adult from the moment he was born. It could be of good to others, but who can tell now? Just let it happen."

Carl didn't quite know what he ought to be thinking.

"Okay. Okay. Just one thing - I found this the other day. You'll need it."

Carl gave the soldier Stone's baseball cap.

"So people won't stare at your head."

When they parted ways and Carl returned to his other duties, he recalled the cheap paperback novels of his youth, which brought him escape from growing up in the rough streets of New York. In those books, the hero traveled to other worlds and met fantastic creatures - some of them beautiful women.

The hero of his favorite novel had teleported himself to another planet by merely wishing it so; Carl had, as a naïve, yearning ten-year-old tried to wish himself into space, with no result. He had grown up and eventually accepted, that one doesn't get something for nothing.

And yet - here was that soldier, that nobody, coming closer to aliens than anyone else, without any technical equipment at all... as if his wishing it so was all it took... Carl shook his head, recalling a quote: *We are all born in the gutter; but some of us look to the stars.*

He found himself longing for his wife's love and support, so much so that it hurt.

Chapter Thirty-Three

DAY 127

"Today, the first rescue ships are allowed in to the edge of the three-mile perimeter around Alien Beach. They will pick up stranded survivors of a Saudi and an Iranian submarine crew, for transport to their homelands. Patrolboats from the U.N.-controlled fleet handle the transfer of the survivors to the rescue ships. A few of the castaways gave these comments to the CNN, on board a rescue vessel..."

"The Sirians are like humans, not demons! Our leaders lied to us! Allah is greater than any leader, for he created an infinite universe."

"I talked to a Sirian, and she gave me this flute. I will leave the military, and become a musician. No more war for me."

"We went to attack, and they took us from our submarine. I cannot describe what happened. Now I am still afraid, but I am going home to see my family again, and I am happy for that!"

"This war was a great mistake."

"The leaders of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and the new Saudi interim government today jointly declared peace with the amphibians, and agreed to follow the amphibians' original agreement with the United Nations. Their military alliance has been terminated indefinitely. The leaders will also meet with the U.S. President this week, and negotiate improved relations. King Khadi of Saudi Arabia reportedly suffered a debilitating stroke yesterday, and has lost the ability to speak. His family is now under house arrest, following rumors of their attempted

coup against the interim government..."

The soldier waved goodbye to the last Iranian crewman, safely out of view of the American patrolboats, and saw him head away with the last group of castaways. And he was thinking: *Be careful, now. You'll have a lot of things to tell the folks back home. And even if their leaders will try to silence you, they won't succeed. Just bring back the right message. Don't tell them you met the sky gods, but... the sky people.*

Just a wisp of clouds hung above; circling birds filled the blue sky. Just for once, everything seemed to be going in the right direction.

DAY 130

"Carl Sayers left Alien Beach today, to visit his family in the United States for a number of weeks. The journey is shrouded in much secrecy, to avoid any lingering risk of terrorist attacks..."

Carl's wife ran up to him at the airport, and flung herself into his arms. They were both too overjoyed to speak; she began kissing Carl in a frenzy. Their adult son came and joined the reunion; all were so happy to see each other in safety, that not a word about amphibians was uttered between them for the remainder of that day.

"The media are beginning to question the United Nations' handling of the Alien Beach crisis. Even though advance plans to deal with extraterrestrial contact actually existed, the United Nations did far less

than expected to unite the world's peoples when faced with the first contact. A few member states are now suggesting, that the U.N. should take the first steps toward becoming a world government, to represent the whole of mankind in such events. Other representatives, chiefly from the Middle East, claim the U.N. organization is too compromised by history to form an unbiased world government. Nevertheless, the question of a world government is for the first time being taken seriously by politicians, and the next one hundred years may well see such a structure come true."

"Next: The Pope speaks out about Ancestors. Bishop Edmund Soto's first public report on amphibian religion sparks cautious criticism from the Vatican... after this."

DAY 140

"They are leaving already? Why? What did we do wrong?" said Takeru, his face distorted by pent-up emotion.

Carl explained to the team, keeping his own grief in check.

"Nobody's fault - change of schedule, that's all. The lander just received a message from the mothership: the entire Sirian expedition must move out of the Solar System sooner than estimated, to catch up with the homeworld as it passes by."

"So it's true then," Ann said. "Their entire home planet is their real mothership."

"Who told you that?"

"Oanss did," she said, with more than hint of defiance in her tone.

Carl nodded.

"It's official then. But their homeworld's orbit will remain secret, and we won't be able to see it, I assume. Apparently, they will hold a special ceremony on the island just before taking off - I didn't get any more details."

Lazar said: "Today I found that my mind-recorder was broken. It was just decaying into a lump of dead metal. They won't let us keep anything but the memories and our own records of their visit."

Mats Jonsson suddenly seemed to grasp the news: pale in his face, he slumped down on an empty seat.

"I had collected DNA samples from some of them. The genetic samples are all that'll be left of them when they're gone... should I destroy them, just to make sure they're not misused?"

They all thought about it for a while.

"Check that the Sirians haven't destroyed them."

Mats rushed away to his lab barrack.

Later, the Swede gave them a report: "It's all there. All the cell and DNA samples... in Sirian cold-storage canisters they gave me. It is possible to clone a living Sirian from these. We could do it. And they let me keep them, knowing the risk. Why?"

"You must show some confidence in humanity!" Takeru croaked, his eyes red, his voice choking. "Besides, the Ancestors... they would notice if Sirians were re-created here, no? You said they would be able to tune in on any Sirians, anywhere."

"This could mean something," said Mats. "If only I knew what."

Takeru had a few ideas about that, and he kept them to himself.

DAY 141

Takeru asked to meet Namonnae. She refused to come out of the ship. He persisted, and stood calling for hours, until the sun went down and he had to retreat. The next day he returned to the ship and continued calling for her. And the next day, and the next...

DAY 149

"This is the last time we can meet?" Ann asked Oanss.

He explained to her, that this was not strictly true: when he would grow old and be transformed into an Ancestor, he would gain access to all his past time - and be able to remember all their moments together, as clearly as when they had happened. As an Ancestor, he would also be able to perceive all her descendants, for as long as they existed.

Ann asked him for a parting gift; not any machine or technical knowledge.

"Give me some of your DNA," she said, perfectly calm. "I will store it, preserve it, until we can cross-breed my DNA with yours - and we will have children. Or at least, the possibility of children."

Oanss hugged her. Holding onto her, he explained he had already given Mats his cell samples in a storage container. She did not have to clone children from them, even though the suggestion pleased him.

"Thank you," she said into his ear opening. "I love so you very much."

He squeezed her tighter against himself, and said nothing.

Chapter Thirty-Four

DAY 150

A multitude of large Sirian machines was active on the beach, operated by amphibians via remote-control mental links. A monolith made of transparent blue quartz alloy, three meters thick, was quickly erected in the center-point of the island, reaching five meters above ground. Its base reached two meters into the coral bed, where the machines welded it to the volcanic bedrock.

On three of the monolith's four sides, the same message had been inscribed in three languages with Roman letters, 30 centimeters high:

WHEN ALL PEOPLES OF THE HUMAN SPECIES HAVE REACHED THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF CIVILIZATION AND ALL WARS HAVE CEASED, THIS MACHINE WILL OPEN AND REVEAL TO ALL THE KNOWLEDGE OF ETERNAL LIFE.

ANY ATTEMPT TO MOVE OR OPEN THIS MACHINE BY OUTSIDE FORCE WILL CAUSE IT TO SELF-DESTRUCT.

On the fourth side, the message was repeated in the amphibian land-alphabet. No one in the ECT knew who wrote the original test. Some speculated that Carl Sayers had helped the amphibians formulate it; he denied the rumors. The placing of this artifact, on a remote Pacific island of no other importance, would make pilgrimage difficult. Nevertheless, there was already talk of pilgrimage tours being organized under the supervision of the Fiji government and the United Nations. The two "evacuated" scientists, Andrea and Stone, had returned to witness the ceremony; only the

ECT and the amphibians were on the island. A few helicopters were skirting the perimeter, and ships were cruising by farther out at sea. For the benefit of the world, Takeru had rigged up a battery of TV cameras with a satellite link, broadcasting the entire event.

After the monolith had been secured and the machines had retreated into the bowels of the lander, the entire group of amphibians came out to look at it.

Carl, Lazar, Takeru, Andrea, Stone, Mats, Ann, and Edmund stood quietly by the foot of the monument and waited, while Ranmotanii's group came closer. They were all painfully aware of the cameras and the eyes of the world watching them through the cameras.

Ranmotanii was dressed in Bermuda shorts, like every member of his flock - probably the last time they would wear wear land-human clothes. He went over to each and every one of the scientists, and clasped their hands in his. His eyes seemed a bit drawn, but he kept a straight face throughout - as if he too was aware of the cameras, and posterity. Then again, for him to stoop down to hug Carl and the others would have seemed condescending. When Ranmotanii was done pressing hands, the other Sirians took turns making official farewell-gestures.

The young Mnmnonns came forth, put a flute to her delicate lips and played a piece of music, improvised or composed. It was an entirely new melange of human and amphibian sounds, that made the scientists' eyes water. Without doubt, this was the most beautiful, moving music they had ever heard; they were grateful the music was being recorded for future listeners. Her piece lasted about three minutes.

Aonasann, whom the scientists had come to think of as the quiet type, unexpectedly held an hour-long speech in broken English. He mostly talked about the beauty of birds and animals, the likes of which did not exist on his homeworld. He finished off with a mentioning of the Ancestors and shook hands with all the scientists, then retreated to his group. It was hard to judge whether Aonasann was trying to control his emotions, or was naturally calm.

Moanossoans, the tall female, hugged each scientist for half a minute... nearly squeezing the breath out of them. She made a little wailing sound to the sky, told Carl that she wished the Ancestors should guard him, and excused herself.

Snaosnee, the aged female, her face solemn, also invoked the Ancestors. She then performed a ritual dance like the one around the antenna tree. The undulating movements of her arms became waves, lapping against the shore that was her body. The dance ended with her stretching up against the sky, becoming a sleek projectile about to launch. The scientists applauded her, though it felt embarrassingly inadequate - like tourists applauding an arcane ritual.

Tmmtenaar had completely recovered from the bullet wound to his head. He repeatedly wailed with sorrow; Moanossoans tried to comfort him, and managed to calm him enough not to interrupt the ceremony.

Oanss, when his turn came, shook hands with the ECT team - as was the Earth custom known from TV broadcasts. When he came to Ann, he squeezed her hands extra long, invoked the Ancestors, and reluctantly let go of her - she let out a shuddering sigh, and shut her eyes.

Oanorn, standing in the center of the group, supported by two

younger Sirians, appeared older than ever. His legs seemed about to give out under him, and he repeatedly squinted as if his vision was faltering. Restlessly shifting position, struggling to stay upright, he waited for Namonnae to come forth. She stood at the outskirts of the group, and averted her eyes from the entire scene.

At length, while listening to Tmmtenaa praising the architecture of Earth's cities, the scientists began to sense something was wrong. Their mind-recording devices had self-destructed - on cue from their visitors, no doubt - but the after-effects of the technology remained.

Those who had shared thoughts once could sometimes *feel* they were thinking the same thing. And this weird sensation was returning now. As soon as Tmmtenaa had finished his half-hour speech, Carl, Lazar, Edmund, and Andrea faced Ranmotanii and refused to let him pass. Carl told the team to switch off all cameras; they obeyed immediately.

"Why have you not said a word about this... this *thing*?"

Carl gestured up at the towering monolith that shimmered in the sunlight; it cast a glowing blue shadow on the white sand.

"There is something about this monolith that is not in your nature," Edmund said, his strong, precise voice commanding Ranmotanii's attention. "The words are too well chosen - they were picked by a land-human. Yet none of us here admitted to helping you write those words. Why?"

"That soldier helped them," said Lazar. "It must have been him, and he's not here - why?"

Takeru added, cautiously at first: "I made a scan of the monolith while

it was being erected - the writing on it says 'machine'. But this cannot be a machine. It has no moving parts. It does not absorb energy, hence no information. Its blue color might make people think it has something to do with Ancestors, but that is not the case. If this is just a stone with a piece of text on it, why call it a machine?"

The Sirians were very silent. Their eyes squinted, their limbs were tense and still.

Ann said: "So *this* is your gift to us, to save us from ourselves - a few pretty words written in stone."

It was Namonnae who answered; all the other Sirians were like paralyzed.

"Wee aare noot good at llying... uunlike youu. Llike so, it waas a laand-huuman who assked uus too maake jusst this... 'mmonuumennt,' liike hee caalled iit. Annd a maachine it is, in iits wway - iff yyou will leet it bee called ssoo. Wwhy muust you ask mmore froom uss? It iis... nnot humann to bee liike yourr peoople -"

Her words were cut short by an anguished, hoarse squeak from Oanorn. The Sirian group fanned out to give him space, but he was not calling for help. With shaking limbs, Oanorn pushed aside his supporters and faced Namonnae. He began to shout at her in rapid Sirian land-speech, and she seemed taken aback, but retorted with a sharp-sounding sentence of words. Several other amphibians made hissing noises, upset by the argument. The "land-humans" were stunned - they had never before witnessed such an intense row among their visitors.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Takeru shouted, running in between Namonnae and

Oanornn. He stood himself half a meter from her face, and looked straight up into her eyes, struggling not to choke on his feelings. He must not break - this was his last chance. "Namonnae!" he pleaded. "Please look at me, like I was a real human. Don't look down at me, put yourself at my level! Please!"

Her eyes, incredibly beautiful half-shut standing ovals, widened - her sleek arms flew up against her chest. Her gaze flickered from humans to amphibians, and back again - but no one would help her, Takeru would not move. He saw her exquisite, dark lips move, gasping open and shut like a fish fighting for air. Namonnae shut her eyes almost completely, and sank down. Standing upright from her knees and up, her eyes came at level with Takeru's face. His hands were unsteady, and he was close enough to smell her scent - a strong scent, uncluttered by artificial substances, which intoxicated him in an entirely new way. He forced his hands forward and clutched her rounded, smooth, muscular shoulders.

"Did you want your people to put that monument here? To help us? Or did you say no to it?"

Namonnae struggled not to look at him, and her icy mask of indifference began to fall away. How strained her voice sounded, how much pain there was in each singing syllable:

"I diiid ssay... yyyes. Buut the yees meean nnoothinnng... Yyou wiill nnot channge beecause oof it. Iit chhanges noothhing oof youu. I haave sseen greeat mmuch enoughh oof yyour hiistoryy... youu lland-huumans aare bad. Yyou made uus saad. Yyou waanted too killl uus. I haate yyour peoplle."

Takeru ought to have been devastated by her words. By some miracle

of spirit, he could answer at once.

"Look! listen! Your people have helped me see and understand more, now it is your turn. Listen to this! More than a hundred years ago, the people of my homeland saw a new, strange people sail into our waters - in new ships, driven by metal machines. Our rulers then decided, that we must become like these newcomers, if we wanted to survive their arrival. And so my ancestors did. Yet even those newcomers, for all their superior technology, also wanted to learn something *from* my people. And so they did; they became better people - *more real* - through their contact with us. But those few newcomers who saw only our poverty, saw only our faults, they learned nothing! They did not *grow*! Like so, you are not growing! Ask yourself: what do *land-humans* know, that Namonnae does *not* know?"

She suddenly went limp in his grasp, her shoulders loosening up; her tall sleek head swayed, as she tried to deny his words.

"Wee doo nnot llearnn ffrom yyou... wwe leearn ffromm Aancestoors... ffrom uus, froom thee uuniversse!"

"Then why did you come here? To prove that you are better than us? Is that what your Ancestors wanted?"

The other Sirians stared at Takeru in open fear, as if they were all being accused. Carl saw Oanorrn's agony over Namonnae, this one child of his who had failed to grow. At one time earlier in his life, Carl had feared his own child would also go that dark, inward way.

Namonnae could not answer, but kept rocking her head. Then Takeru understood, and he was filled with joy. She had twice his physical strength. He wasn't holding her down - she was, without admitting it to herself,

surrendering. Or she was too young to find the words, or the language was too alien. He cupped one hand over her ear opening and whispered the words to her in English.

Then, speaking out loud, he added: "I thought you hated me, for not being like you."

Finally she could look at him, and her arms knotted themselves together, then unfurled.

"Iii thought I haated yyou onlly. Nnnow I knnow mmmore... I cannn ffeel maany thhings aboutt a huumann. It iss diiifficult to ffeel really."

"Yes. It hurts to feel many things at the same time."

She reached out and embraced him, squeezing his bony shoulders with warm tenderness, and repeated his name like a chant, a spell against her sorrow: *"Taakeruu, Taakeruu."*

The moment seemed to charge the air, or maybe it was just in the minds of the people present... but amphibians and humans alike were able to share the moment. Time, or the illusion of it, briefly ceased.

Until Oanorn broke the silence with a triumphant, reverberating cry: *"Chiskr-r-r-r... chis chiptl mmer-r-r-r-llee!"*

Carl spun around and saw: the old amphibian was stretching up his arms, blissfully turning his face to the sky in a welcoming gesture. All the other amphibians scattered away from him.

From the parked lander vessel came a metallic noise, not unlike the sound of a steel ball being dropped into a bucket, only deeper and more drawn-out. Oanorn collapsed, all strength vanishing from his limbs. A swarm of silver spheres shot out of a porthole in the round stern of the

lander, scores of them, each the size of a human head, and flew with a force of their own toward the crumpling old amphibian. Instead of hitting him, the metal spheres flattened out with a ringing sound and enveloped him like a liquid, while fixing him in the position of a coiled-up fetus. A few seconds had passed.

The metal cast of Oanorrn had barely hit the ground, when a much larger metal sphere swept down from the lander and swallowed the frozen statue - the machine snapped with sparkles of barely contained energy. The large sphere began to hum, and took off from the ground without visible exhaust, rising on invisible energy columns, humming louder and louder, accelerating incredibly, until... Like an anticlimax, as it touched the clouds, the sphere vanished with an echoing bang, the bang of air rushing in to fill the hole the sphere had left.

And Oanorrn vanished from everyday reality.

The Sirians peered up at the clouds for a moment, speechless, awestruck - then Namonnae took up a chanting call, clear and long, and the other amphibians joined the call, a choir of amphibian voices blessing the new Ancestor. Suddenly the few humans on the beach were just being ignored, looking feeble and small next to the taller, ecstatic beings who expressed their rapture and reverence to unseen bloodlines beyond time. Yet the scientists did not revert to petty envy - the event was too wonderful for that. They began to laugh and cry, scanning the clouds for signs of the Ancestors' presence, thanking whichever gods or spirits they still had faith in, that they had been allowed to witness this ascension. They saw the blue monolith with new eyes now, and understood it really was a machine, like a

book was a machine that changed a reader's mind.

As Carl looked up past the monolith, he saw how a cloud swirled into a little vortex high above and dissolved. He thought: *Maybe, with a little tweaking of reality, you could drop by in one of my dreams. Oanorrn, Ranmotanii, Namonnae... you are, in a way, already Ancestors and have always been so. Before and after you came to our planet, where time is just an aspect of real things. You don't have to give me an everlasting life. It's enough knowing you were always there.*

When the Sirians withdrew into their vessel, and it began to slide back into the lagoon, hours seemed indistinguishable from minutes. The lander moved out into open sea, rose on a cloud of roaring jets, and began its flight up through the clouds.

The behemoth shrank into a rumbling black speck, leaving a wide vapor trail as it speeded away, and finally went out of sight. The scientists were left on the beach, gathered around the blue quartz monolith.

The soldier was nowhere around to be seen.

Chapter Thirty-Five

DAY 162

"Good morning, and welcome to our live Sirian Departure special feature, which will last all evening.

"As you can see on these recent satellite images taken from Earth orbit, the Sirian lander ship is now heading back toward its mothership, near Mars. In a matter of days, our friendly visitors will steer their course for some other star. It is unlikely that mankind will hear from the amphibian people in many years to come; space is without end and our galaxy holds billions of stars. No more transmissions to Earth have been sent from the amphibians after the departure of their lander."

"Yet, we have been given memories and wisdom to last for ages, and the parting message inscribed on the blue monolith on Alien Beach.

"The native owners of Alien Beach have agreed to let the island keep its new name, and are expected to reap huge profits from the expected waves of tourists on pilgrimage to the site. Chief Fongafale, who holds formal ownership of Alien Beach, has told our reporter he will restrict visitor quotas to a minimum, to spare the archipelago from over-pollution and exploitation.

"The U.N. Security Council has stationed a permanent peace-keeping force in the area to uphold law and order as the stream of pilgrims increases - cult tragedies will not be repeated in the future.

"Only now, in the Sirians' absence, people start to realize the visitors' deep and lasting impact on culture, language, religion, and

science. It is already proving to last longer than expected. The early excesses of the suicidal cults are being replaced by a more thoughtful approach to ancestor worship. The trend of recent years to only hold up the faults of previous generations, is making way for a greater respect for the past, without which neither of us would exist.

"Our attitudes to clothing are changing, perhaps permanently; in the tropical and subtropical regions, more and more people are taking to wear no clothes except jackets to carry their personal belongings.

"State and private funding of space exploration is now being boosted in a way not seen since the race to the Moon. Related sciences, such as the study of controlled fusion and high-energy states, are also receiving generous grants. A new generation of students, who previously might have spurned science and technology as dull and soulless subjects, are now expressing a newfound link between science and the spiritual world. Music classes are more and more being mixed with science classes.

"To help us understand these profound changes, we have with us Carl Sayers live from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, with his longtime collaborator and wife, Eve Andru. Also, from Cairo, we have direct contact with Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Lazar Mahfouz. And also with us, from London, are Andrea McClintock and Bishop Edmund Soto. They have all graciously offered CNN the time to answer some of our questions.

"Thank you for being with us, Mr. Sayers. May I personally congratulate you for your great effort with the ECT."

"Thank you. The honor belongs to my colleagues of the team as well, and the team of amphibians, bless them all."

"Well - they have taken off, to wherever they're heading next... do you think we'll ever hear from them again?"

"I think we will. In an infinite universe, anything is possible... Eve?"

"I agree. Future generations will depend on what we decide now. It's not over."

"What will you do now, Mr. Sayers? It's being widely speculated that you'll receive the next Nobel Peace Prize."

"It's not important. Sure, it's going to be hard to wind down... going through all the data that we gathered during our year will take the rest of my life. It's going to be great. But I will gradually leave the workload to younger people, and spend more time with my family. I've had offers to host a remake of my old cosmology TV series."

"What about the rumors of your ill health? Are you still suffering from cancer?"

"It never really went away. I'll have to keep fighting it, but I have a long experience of doing that by now."

"What about you, Mr. Mahfouz - will you wind down your lecturing schedule now, or keep on working?"

"I'd rather die working, while sharing my experiences from Alien Beach, than face obscurity. My family will, I'm afraid, feel a little neglected but... I hope they understand."

"Bishop Soto? What lies ahead for you?"

"I haven't yet decided if I should retire completely from my duties, in order to devote all my time on writing down my experiences. Not an easy decision, you see, and made more complicated, because... Now the public wants to see me, reach out and touch me, in a way that I haven't experienced before. A certain religious confusion has arisen about my status. Some people seem to expect me to represent a kind of extraterrestrial religiosity - and that's something I was never meant to do. Which might force me to resign from my post, either voluntarily or by higher decision. Andrea?"

"My plans... yes, I will certainly keep working, and do all I can to inspire younger generations. I have a duty to the public now, I can't just isolate myself the way I used to. I... I have seen how others think, and I'll never feel alone again. The Sirians have my deepest gratitude."

"So... what came out of this visit? Who learned the most, they or us? Was this contact a success, Mr. Sayers?... Mr. Sayers?"

"The contact was a wonderful, glorious, inspiring, breathtaking failure. It can only inspire us to better ourselves. Therefore, it was of enormous value. Like Eve says, it's not over."

"Thank you, both - and good luck."

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

"Those members of the ECT who have not yet optioned retirement, are expected to remain occupied with analyzing data they gathered during the contact. A handful of them have chosen to stay in the archipelago to study changes in the wildlife, and to make sure no

alien microorganisms are spreading from Alien Beach.

Among them are Ann Meadbouré, Mats Jonsson, and Takeru Otomo, who all have declined comments. They are regularly assisted by visiting expeditions from the scientific community, but get to spend most of their time on their own... until the pilgrimage route opens later this year."

DAY 220

"Look!"

Ann pointed up into the night sky, past the flickering red point that was Mars. A new star was being lit.

It was the Sirian solar-sail, slowly turning its reflecting side to face the Sun and Earth at once. The Sun's light was reflected across a thousand-kilometer wide, extremely thin metal foil, so that the pressure of radiation could push the sail out of the Solar System. This new "star" was not nearly strong enough to light up the Earth, but it outshone the other stars and competed with the Moon in brightness. Mats and Ann stood and admired the bright star for a long while, thinking of the beings who were in it - the passengers who were on their way to their moving homeworld, somewhere out there.

"Where's the soldier?" asked Mats. "I'll go find him."

"Don't," Ann told him, holding him back. She knew where the soldier was, and didn't want to disturb him; he had been spending the last few days and nights in the deserted lagoon.

The soldier opened his eyes -

He was back in his old high-school classroom - sitting down by his bench - and across the room, at the teacher's desk, stood the soldier's old homeroom teacher. The man's profession was mathematics, and he was a middle-aged man with a slight overbite in a melancholy, lined face.

"Son," said the math teacher. He had never used the title 'soldier' - enlistment had come years after high school. "I called you over here for a serious talk. About how to overcome your difficulties."

Now the soldier recalled the entire situation - that awkward, humiliating talk with the homeroom teacher, way back when he was an overeager, curious teenager who asked weird questions. He knew in advance what would happen. This was the day he had tried to forget for the rest of his life - the day when he had decided he was not thinking right...

"You interrupted class again today," the teacher said, more like a stating of facts than an accusation - yet the soldier felt his neck flush with embarrassment. "I told you then, that you shouldn't ask such questions. If you don't admit that, how are you going to pass the tests this year?"

The soldier protested lamely, amazed at how squeaky and unbalanced his voice sounded - he was talking like a teenager again. "But this could *mean* something, Teach. If you'd just help me think this through, I might get it out of my head."

Already the soldier saw that the protest was ill-phrased, half admitting that he shouldn't have made the question at all. Why was he doing this?

The teacher smiled his agreement. "If it'll help you, sure. What was your question again?"

"What's one divided by zero?"

"You can't say that."

"But I just said it."

"I mean, you're not allowed to make that question."

"Why?"

"There is no answer to it - the equation is pointless."

"You mean mathematicians have tried to figure out the answer, and failed?"

"No... look at it this way. There is an infinite upon infinite number of possible mathematical statements one can make. A number of them are useful to describe the real world, such as..."

He wrote on the blackboard with his chalk piece:

$$1 + 1 = 2 \text{ (TRUE)}$$

"A very large set of all possible statements are logically false, such as..."

$$1 + 1 = 3 \text{ (FALSE)}$$

"And so you can make false statements, but they're not useful as a tool to understand the world. See? That's why you flunk your tests."

"But I was asking about this special equation: one divided by zero. How do you know this 'statement' is as useless as 'one plus one equals three'?"

"Let's sort this out once and for all. 'One' can stand for just about anything in the real world - say, 'one apple,' 'one electron,' or 'one universe'. It doesn't matter which, as long as it is 'one' something. 'Zero,' on the other hand, can't be used to represent a thing - because it stands for nothing at all. Therefore the setup serves no point. It's a joke on mathematics."

The soldier said: "Suppose there was a use for that kind of setup. If one really needed to describe the relation between... something and nothing in mathematical terms?"

"So you assume this equation will reveal the relation between something and nothing. Let's try to find some answers for..."

$$1 / 0 = ?$$

The soldier replied: "I figured there could be several possible answers... for instance, 'infinity'."

"Aha," the teacher said, "but if you take..."

$$6 / 3 = 2$$

"From that you will get..."

$$2 \times 3 = 6$$

"So if you say the answer is 'infinity,' you would get..."

$$1 / 0 = \textit{infinity}$$

$$\textit{infinity} \times 0 = 1 \textit{ (FALSE)}$$

"See? The answer is false. Zero times infinity is still just zero, not one."

"But how do you *know* that?"

"The question should not be made. Besides, even if your answers to the equation were taken as valid, it would prove nothing."

"Why?"

"Because the 'zero' in the equation cannot correspond to anything in the real world."

"Why shouldn't you be able to use the 'zero' to represent something?"

"It's pointless to talk about non-existence as if it were a thing!"

"But if we can't use the concept of 'non-existent,' then how are we supposed to know what 'existent' means. You can't have 'yes' without 'no,' 'true' without 'false!'"

"That's philosophy, not mathematics. I don't teach ontology in my class. Look, I only want to help you - your other grades are not that bad, but - you mustn't sit and dream in class. Just concentrate on the curriculum, and you'll make it into college... make it in life. Let's shake on it. Okay?"

The teacher extended his hand - its palm covered with white chalk-dust - and gave the soldier a suave "let's-be-pals" face. It all happened again, like before... the soldier would shake hands, make his promise and would spend the rest of his life in a downhill slide of wrongful choices, aborted

careers and failed relations. Teach only wanted to help. He was right, he had to be. The soldier moved to shake the teacher's dry, white hand...

He froze. Something *was* different from the way he remembered the event.

This time around, the teacher he saw was himself a defeated man, the melancholy in his face tinged with bitterness. Disappointment and frustrated dreams oozed from every pore and line of the man's face. The soldier hadn't seen it so clearly then, only felt a vague doubt. Only now did he realize how deeply this small defeat had wounded him. He stood up from his chair and faced the teacher, whose hand had frozen still.

"Why?" he said out loud. "Why did I let you scare me into thinking I was stupid? Why did I chicken out on this day? I remember it all now. You made me promise - no, that's wrong - I made *myself* promise never to ask such questions again. What was I so afraid of, that I willingly shut off a part of my own mind?"

"What are you talking about?" said the teacher, voice oddly neutral.

"There was nothing wrong in asking a question, just because the answer wasn't pre-printed in the books! You were afraid of my question, because it forced you to actually think instead of repeating old memories! It's you who didn't make it in life - and you wanted to drag me down with me!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Ancestor - I don't know your real name - it's you who brought me back, isn't it? Thank you for having helped me see. This was the moment in my spacetime continuum you saw, from your vantage-point outside time and

space. You saw the promise I showed - but I betrayed it, just for fear of falling. I'm not afraid anymore. I will pursue the unanswered questions to wherever they lead - even if they should lead nowhere."

"Nowhere *is*," said the teacher, but his mouth didn't move.

"Teach" had become a ventriloquist's doll.

Someone was operating his speech clumsily: "Energy in direction... to your vector of smaller representation... weak link in the wave function..."

But the words had rhythm, and music.

"A beautiful wave like my own - *'five, six, seven, eight nine ten, I love you'* - like the part in my wave function that is bifurcated into the Ancestor continuum - *'some kind of happiness is measured out in miles'* - but also goes in other direction difficult to align with direction along the time vector - *'why don't we sing this song all together'* - you like me the first Ancestor in the direction of your choice - *'look at me!'* - the music plays differently in different directions -"

The music -

The soldier shut his eyes, and opened them.

He was at the beach again, rising from the warm blue-green waves, treading the ground under his long, flat feet. Ann was there and saw him; she was wearing a vest full of pockets, carrying diving equipment in a backpack. Her sun-bleached hair fluttered in the evening breeze, as she walked up to the strange figure that stood in the foaming surf.

She came close enough to touch, and saw what he had become.

"Who are you?" she asked.

a.r. yngve - alien beach

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"My land-name is -"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The musical albums listed below (many still available) served as invaluable inspiration during the work on this novel. From the story's birth as a detailed synopsis with illustrated sketches in 1991/92, up to the final stages of writing, music helped my brain get up to speed and visualize key scenes.

Music can induce images in the mind: expressions of transcendence, apocalypse... or the plain joy of being alive. I am indeed grateful that music exists.

A.R. Yngve

February 12, 2005

The Beatles: *Yellow Submarine*

Various: *The Music of Cosmos* (from the PBS TV series "Cosmos")

Jean-Michel Jarre: *Revolutions*

The Grid: *Evolver*

Gustave Holst: *The Planets*

Modest Mussorgsky: *Night on Bald Mountain*

NOTE: This 2006 version of ALIEN BEACH is a slightly revised edition of the novel which appeared as a web serial in 1999-2000. The plot and characters are unchanged.

Do you wish to make a PayPal donation to the author of this novel?

Do you wish to learn more about ALIEN LAND, the sequel to ALIEN

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