

STRANGERS AND ALIENS

by D. L. Hamilton

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household...” —*Ephesians 2:19 (NASB)*

Copyright © 2004 by D. L. Hamilton
All rights reserved.

Scripture taken from the *HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION* ®. *NIV* ®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

“Scripture quotations marked (NASB) taken from the New American Standard Bible®,
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973,
1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation
Used by permission.” (www.Lockman.org)

Chapter 1

“That’s it. They’re dead.”

Stan’s comment was a simple statement of fact. It was a foregone conclusion based on months of seeing the exact same scenario played-out, with the result inevitable. The instant he saw their attack formation on the Tactical Monitoring screen, he knew. The Scylla would use the same attack pattern as always and would be destroyed.

“Fighter group ready?” came the squadron leader’s voice. The two others, then Stan, all answered in the affirmative.

“Derek?” said Stan. “You ready to shake and bake, buddy?”

“Let’s melt some mechanical monsters,” came the gunner’s reply from the Weapons Pod in the upper aft section of the Advanced Fighter Prototype 3. Stan smiled at the feeling of confident security he got from this automatic verbal exchange with his best friend. This would be their forty-third mission. Their forty-third successful mission. Their early successes had earned them the chance to be among the elite. They were among the first to fly the new AF series—the series that was so dramatically turning the tide of the war.

“Gail,” said Stan into the air.

“READY, STAN,” said a pleasant young female voice.

“Switch to Tactical Command Mode.”

“TCM, AYE.”

“On Jomo’s ‘launch’ command, execute Tactic Epsilon—assist mode.”

“AYE, SIR”

“Range?” The computer did not answer aloud but displayed it on the monitor. Judging from the distance, he knew the Scylla would start the attack in about ten seconds. Their methods

were so unvarying, so predictable it added convincing fuel to the rumor that they were a race of robots.

Though the ensuing silence was only a few seconds long it sat like a lead weight on every member of the squadron. Each one's stomach tightened with anticipation.

"Launch!" came the leader's voice. The Lion engines on Stan and Derek's AF-P3 jumped to life. His hand on the control stick worked artfully in tandem with the fighter's computer to bypass the nearest and most obvious target in the enemy's formation. Instead Stan moved to intercept the notorious "trailer"—the peak of the Scyllas' horizontal reverse-pyramid formation. Before Earth's development of this new, superior fighter it had been this trailer that had been so devastating in battle after battle. Now the Scylla seemed incapable of adjusting their attack patterns. Their once-deadly tactic was no longer able to inflict even minor damage while consistently netting them the loss of their entire attack force. Still, nothing changed. Sortie after sortie ended Earth 4, Scylla 0. To be sure, the Scylla's untarnished record of self-destructing to avoid capture assisted the Earth forces' string of "shut-outs." Anytime a Scyllan ship was in any danger of capture it readily blew itself into molecule-sized smithereens. Now Stan watched as the trailer ship reacted to his Epsilon maneuver in the same predictable way as all the others before it. Attempting to continue with its original plan, it moved to gang-up against squadron leader Jomo's fighter, which was already in a dogfight. Stan spun and accelerated the exquisitely maneuverable craft and saw Derek locking-on. That meant the Scylla's chances had just dropped from little to none. Derek's second shot turned the lights out on the Scyllan craft before it could even get within range of Jomo.

"COMMAND PATTERN FOR SELF-DESTRUCT DETECTED."

"Emergency escape! Get us out of here, Gail."

"AYE, SIR."

Stan's ship was already fleeing the wounded enemy ship before the computer's verbal response. By the time the brilliant flash indicated its disintegration, they were well out of range of any collateral damage. Two identical flashes occurred in rapid succession behind Stan's ship, one at four o'clock and one at nine. *Two more defeated ships making sure no human ever learns their technological secrets—or meets a Scylla face-to-face*, thought Stan. *That is, if they have faces.*

"Jomo, you need any help?" said Stan.

“Negative, stay clear.” A second later a final disintegration flash occurred at twelve o’clock. A familiar thought floated through Stan’s mind. A reminder that he, too, would have to blow himself and his ship to bits were the situation reversed. “Okay that’s it,” said Jomo. “Let’s go home, gang.”

“Gail, TCM off. Switch to Conversational Mode.”

“OKAY, STAN. CONVERSATIONAL ON. NICE SHOOTING, DEREK.”

“Gail, thanks.”

“Nice shooting?” gasped Stan. “Two shots? Whatever happened to hitting something with the first shot? You must be getting rusty, or else eating too much Choco-crunch.”

“I’ll have you know I did hit something with the first shot,” said Derek, obviously not appreciating Stan’s teasing. “I keep thinking if I can just take out the crew, maybe it won’t self-destruct. Wouldn’t that be something?”

“You’d certainly be a hero, buddy. Man-oh-man.”

Derek’s voice became thick with emotion. “Just think, maybe it’d help end this blasted war.”

“Stan, you gonna tell him or should I?” It was squadron leader Jomo breaking into their conversation, and he meant business.

“Nah, I’ll tell him,” said Stan with a sigh. “Look, Derek, I understand fully what you’re after. I’d like to see this thing end as much as anyone. But every time you fail to cripple an enemy fighter because you’re experimenting with some idea like that, you put the whole squad in jeopardy. Just because we’ve got the upper hand right now, doesn’t mean we’re invincible. The Scylla might be slow to adapt their methods, but this war ain’t over yet. Not even close. Don’t forget how deadly they can be, or how radically they changed once before. Right now all we can do is win one battle at a time—total victory, no friendly casualties. We win enough of these and eventually it’ll all be over. You with me?”

There was a deep sigh. “Yeah, I got it.”

“Okay, buddy, end of lecture,” said Stan with a laugh. “You coming back up front?”

“Yeah, I’m climbing down now.”

“Hey, bring me one of those frozen juice sticks when you come, okay?”

“Be right there Stan.”

Derek came and sat in the auxiliary pilot seat next to Stan and handed him a juice stick.

“Sorry about the lecture, buddy,” said Stan. “You really should wait until you get up here where we don’t have to use com-cast to talk about stuff like that. I had to make sure Jomo and the rest heard my comments. You know what I mean?”

Derek grinned sheepishly. “Yeah, I understand. Don’t give it a second thought. I know it’s standard policy, plus it really is the safest, surest approach. I just thought...”

“I know. I’d love for this thing to be over, too.” Both men went silent as each was thinking the same thing. Life without war—what was it? The war had been in full swing throughout each man’s 26 years of life and for almost 20 years before that. Born a Space Force brat, Stan had only been to earth a half-dozen times. From his earliest years there had never been a question that he would be a fighter-craft pilot. He had become one of the best and had a whole drawer-full of medals and commendations. Even so, he longed for an end to the war. He knew it was possible that all those old-timer stories, about how great life had been before the war, were exaggerations. Or, perhaps, selective memory. Nonetheless, he had other things he wanted to do with his life, especially now that so much had changed. He had wreaked his revenge for his sister Gail’s death many times over. Now, like so many earth people, he was war-weary. He caught himself stroking his dark brown beard as his thoughts came back to the present. He looked over at Derek.

“You wanna, or shall I?”

Chapter 2

“I’ll do it,” said Derek brightly. Then he bowed his head. “Lord, once again You’ve protected us by Your mighty hand, and for that we give our humble thanks. God give us complete victory over this wicked race of murderers. Lead us to completely and utterly annihilate these evil and godless creatures. Give us peace from our enemies as Jesus gives peace in our hearts. Amen.”

“Amen,” repeated Stan. He felt a bit uncomfortable praying for the utter annihilation of an entire planet’s population. Yet all he had to do was think of Gail and his heart readily reiterated his “amen.”

After several minutes Derek broke the silence. “So, what would you do if it ended? Like, in a few months somehow.”

“Same thing as most everybody out here, I guess. Head for home. Home, where there are scads of eligible women. I’d pick the first one that had never left the home world—and that would say yes—and marry her on the spot. Me ‘n her would get started right away on those twelve kids I want to have. Then I’d find a little piece of property out in the sticks somewhere and start a dairy farm, just like where my granddad lived as a kid.”

“Hey, now,” said Derek. “You don’t have to wait till then to find a woman. I happen to know of a perky little number in our very own C wing that’s *very* interested in you. You know, a certain Lieutenant Lassiter who seems to drop by just to chat with you every spare minute she gets.”

“Maci? Nah, we’re just friends. Besides, like I said, it’s got to be someone non-military; who hasn’t been involved in kill-or-be-killed. We military types can never allow ourselves to get too close to anyone out here. The odds are too high that you’ll end up mourning them.” Stan

caught himself and blushed slightly, as he realized that, contrary to his own philosophy, Derek and he had become like brothers. Indeed, now that Derek had brought him to Christ, they were brothers. Either would be devastated were anything to happen to the other. Stan disrupted the awkward silence. “How about you?”

“What would I do?” said Derek. “I know exactly what I’d do. I mean, I’d want to start a family, too. But as for a living, I’d—now this is going to sound silly—I’d open a restaurant. Not a fancy one, just a little place that specializes in breakfasts and lunches. I remember about eight or nine years ago when I had a furlough. I was in Philadelphia. I remember it was close to noon and I stepped out on the street. All of a sudden a little breeze wafts my way and something smelled so delicious. I saw this little lunch counter on the corner. I went in and said, ‘I’ll have an order of whatever that is I smell.’ It was a cheese steak, one of the best I’ve ever eaten. Mmmm, makes me drool just to think about it. I’d want to have people come in just for the aroma. I’m actually pretty handy around a stove, you know.”

“Oh, I’d have bet on it. The way you open those reconstituted meal packets, you’ve got a real chef’s flair. Guess that means I better find a woman first. Your cooking talent will definitely put you in greater demand.”

“STAN, ENTERING FIGHTER BASE VICTOR-TANGO-6. DO YOU WANT AUTOMATIC DOCKING?”

“Gail, okay, but you better let me be on manual assist.”

“MANUAL ASSIST, AYE.”

“They still haven’t perfected this automatic docking to 100% reliability,” he said to Derek. “That’s all I’d need is to dent some fenders. That would wreck our week’s R and R for sure.”

“Wreck *our* R and R? You don’t think they’d blame bad docking on a gunner do you?”

“Come on, Derek. This is the military. They’d throw the book at anybody within a two-parsec radius. Besides, you being a whiz in the kitchen, you’d be a natural choice for extended KP duty.”

The banter stopped as Stan concentrated on the delicate maneuver until they were fully docked. Gail, the ship’s computer, managed it without actually requiring any manual adjustments.

Although it created the usual brief disorientation, both men were glad to get back to artificial gravity. After a much lengthier and more intense debriefing than normal they headed directly for the only spot on Victor-Tango-6 not serving a specific military function. It was a lounge area with snacks and drinks that served as the fighter crews' hangout between patrols. As such, those returning from the multi-week patrols and those leaving were rarely there concurrently. Stan and Derek were surprised at how packed the place was this time. Derek flashed a smug look at Stan as Maci Lassiter managed to sidle up to Stan before they were three steps into the room. She was a pert but rather plain, willowy young woman with short-cropped, dishwater blond hair. She was easy to like and became more alluring to Stan with every passing stint on patrol. She looped her arm through Stan's and then, as an afterthought, the other through Derek's as they walked together.

"So, did you knock 'em dead, Ace?" she asked with a grin.

"Oh, yeah," came Stan's answer. This brief exchange had become a tradition between them.

"I didn't think they were ever going to let you out of debriefing," she said.

"No kidding," said Stan. "You'd have thought we just returned from a spy mission on the Scyllan home world. So, what's been going on while we were away, Ms. Maci? And why is this place so crowded?"

"Well, as for why it's crowded, I can't really say. Just that there's been an influx of personnel arriving—a few crews a day—but none leaving except to go on the usual number of patrols. But that's not the real news."

He could see she was ready to burst with something exciting.

"Well, let's hear it."

"I've been accepted into flight training!" She was struggling to keep from bouncing up and down for joy.

"Maci that's great," said Stan.

"Super!" chimed-in Derek as they did a group hug. "When do you leave?"

"Two days," she said, her eyes betraying a hint of sadness to Stan. He decided he might as well state the obvious.

"Guess that means it'll be unlikely our paths will cross from here on."

She looked down at the floor. “Yeah, I guess so. Maybe we’ll have to make the next two days memorable, huh?” She laughed as if she had meant it as a joke, but Stan detected that she was more than willing to have a wild two-day fling with him. However, that would require him to suspend his Christian morals that she had hinted in the past were too prim and proper. Derek tried to help the uncomfortable silence that followed with a different tack.

“But Maci, how will Gail survive without her number-one maintenance crew’s number-one supervisor?”

She smiled. “Oh, Gail will get along just fine. She rarely needs much attention anyway. Either she really knows how to take care of herself or her flight crew babies her.”

“No doubt it’s some of both,” said Stan. “But nobody will take care of her with as much heart as you have. You’re the best.”

“Thanks,” she said.

They joined a large group that contained mostly people they knew. One of the exceptions was a crew headed up by a know-it-all pilot named Braddock. He was holding court in between mouthfuls of reconstituted corn chips heaped with four-alarm salsa. Stan understood the need for the salsa. There were few things in the universe worse than reconstituted corn chips.

“Take Sierra-Delta-5,” Braddock was saying as he shoveled a huge mound of salsa balanced atop three large chips into his mouth. He continued talking around them as he munched and gulped. “Not like some of these stark outposts with no amenities. Fella told me they got a whole recreation center there. B-ball courts, 3-D participative arcade games, even a pool and spa. Yeah, an actual swimming pool out in space.”

“Come on,” said a voice from a chair in the corner. It was Tom McCormick, a fellow pilot Stan had met the first day he had arrived at Victor-Tango-6 two months earlier. Stan had taken an instant liking to him. “You don’t actually believe that, do you? You ever see it? Personally?”

Braddock showed no concern for his story being met with skepticism. “In a way, yes. I saw it being built. Didn’t know what it was going to be at the time. I heard later what it was. Maybe if I told you who I heard it from you would understand why I’m so confident. Ever hear of Major Hawk Wainwright?” He scooped a huge glob of salsa onto an overtaxed chip and into his mouth as he paused to let his words soak in—illustrating that the name itself had impact. The

looks on the other hearers' faces suggested they were as mystified as Stan was. Only Braddock's crewmate nodded recognition.

Finally McCormick's gunner ventured, "Yeah, I think so. Wasn't he the guy that flew the first P-1 prototype mission?"

"Humph," grunted Braddock. "He test-flew the original experimental models. And he's the most straight-up guy there is. I'd believe him over my own mother."

"Why, what does your mother say is on Sierra-Delta-5?" cracked McCormick to a brief chorus of laughter from the group.

"Okay, smart guy," mumbled Braddock as he positioned a chip to scrape up a glob of salsa he had slobbered onto his shirt. "But how do you think they found out the Scylla were robots?" He paused dramatically. "Wainwright, that's how. He saw them with his own eyes."

"Found out?" said Stan. "I thought that robot story was just rumor and conjecture."

Braddock stared at him then looked around at the others as if checking whether there might possibly be other morons in the group besides Stan. "It's not no rumor," he said with such incredulity that he even stopped eating momentarily. "It's an absolute eyewitness fact. You guys *have* heard the story, haven't you?" When there was no response, Braddock moved forward in his chair and began to speak in authoritative, though conspiratorial tones. He was obviously enjoying the limelight.

Chapter 3

“Happened way out in Libra-227-40 sector at the fringe of Xray-Foxtrot-28’s range—way out there like this is, only worse, know what I mean?” Heads nodded. “Wainwright’s on a shakedown mission just before the first AF’s go full scale production. Has a run-in with three bogies that apparently were off-course or something. Anyway, he wipes out the first two and puts the third out of commission but it only limps away—doesn’t self-destruct. He’s gonna pursue it when he notices his steering is fouled up. Looks out and sees that the starboard stabilizer jet is not only stuck on but must have been grazed during the dogfight—it’s barely fastened and is firing around in all directions. Wainwright knows he’d be okay if he could just get rid of the thing, but if he goes EVA out in the open with a wounded bogey somewhere around, he’d be a sitting duck. Then he spots an asteroid—chunk of rock about five times the size of his ship. He figures maybe he can get close enough to hide next to it while he goes out with his hand weapon and gets rid of that stabilizer jet for good. Everything goes great until he’s just ready to get back into his ship. Then he sees a stabilizer jet trail from the opposite side of the rock. He circles the asteroid—still out in his EVA suit—and whammo! There sits the bogey doing exactly the same as him, hiding next to the asteroid. Only they ain’t doing any EVA. So what does Wainwright do? Head back to his ship for cover? Not on your life. He goes right up to the front view port of the bogey ship! No lie! That’s the kind of guy he is—fearless to a fault. So, he—now get this—he peeps over the lip of the view port and looks in. That’s when he sees them.”

Braddock sat back in silence, knowing the question that was coming. To heighten the drama he loaded no fewer than five chips with an Everest of salsa and began a monumental battle to keep it within the confines of his ample mouth. This enabled him to keep his audience’s

rapt attention for several long moments following the inevitable inquiry as to what, exactly, Wainwright saw. Braddock grunted and held up a finger to assure his audience that he was working toward answering. He spoke in fits and starts as he began to get the upper hand on the mouthful of food. “Mmph, as I hear it,” he said before one swallow. “As I hear it,” more chewing, “they’re best described as giant,” another swallow, “at least, man-sized,” another more difficult swallow, “metallic lobsters.” Feeling this had sufficiently whetted his listeners’ interest, he paused to quaff the entire contents of the large mug that had been sitting in front of him, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, puffed out his cheeks with a quiet belch then continued. “Big, ugly things with eyes on stalks and six or eight appendages, the top two being larger than the rest only instead of pincers they got these fingerless hands—sort of mitten-like. But the most important thing is that the whole crew—there were four of them—was all unquestionably machines. Wainwright was absolutely positive about that.”

“What happened?” asked Maci.

“One of them looks up and spots Wainwright through the view port. Now Hawk’s scared—I mean, who wouldn’t be? He hightails it back to his ship and takes off only to find that nobody’s chasing him. He decides this is the perfect chance to capture one of their ships and just starts to head back to it when it self-destructs. He hadn’t gotten far enough away. He figures the only thing that saved him was that the asteroid was in the way although it blew into a zillion pieces. Best he could figure those metal monsters weren’t trying to fix their ship, they were trying to fix a bug in its auto self-destruct mechanism. Anyway, Hawk’s ship was pretty beat up by the time he got back to Xray-Foxtrot-28. Ordinarily it would have been a big brouhaha him bringing Space Force’s pride and joy back looking like scrap-metal. But you notice, nobody said a word. That’s because his story was way more important than the condition of his ship. The brass did everything they could to keep it hush-hush, but you know how stuff like that gets out. And don’t go thinking that Hawk made the story up to stay out of trouble for wrecking the ship. I’d believe it of anybody else, but not Wainwright. No way. Anybody that knows him at all agrees, one hundred percent.”

“You heard this story from this Wainwright guy himself?” asked McCormick.

“You kidding? They sent him off to top-secret-land on the double. Doesn’t matter, though. I know my source is reliable. Adjutant to the Top Brass in my last outfit before I was assigned here was directly involved in securitizing Wainwright’s debriefing files. He got the

story from the Operations Officer who copied them and who heard Wainwright's entire account during the process. We're talking a guy with Class One For-Your-Eyes-Only clearance here. No, this ain't just scuttlebutt. This is the real deal."

"It's garbage!" said an angry voice from the back of the group.

Every head turned around to see who had spoken. A pilot stepped forward with a fierce look on his face. The name on his uniform was Ryder. Stan had heard of Gus Ryder, but had not met him.

"Don't listen to this. I don't care who said they saw what. Those devils are flesh and blood. They feel pain just like we do. Their knees knock and they get sweaty palms when they hear their damaged ships start the command pattern for self-destruct 'cause they know they're headed for hell. They're flesh and blood all right, and one of these days, after we've wiped out their army we're going to invade their home world. And I'm going to get there first with a tank of reaction catalyst. Ever see what catalyst does to flesh? A thousand times worse than concentrated sulphuric acid. I'm going to drench their women and children just to hear them scream—scream like my wife and baby son did when a Scyllan fire raid burned our home. Don't tell me those murdering devils are mechanical. They can feel pain and, oh, how they're gonna feel it."

Ryder's eyes were wild by the time he finished ranting and the entire room was silent. A buddy, presumably his gunner, put a hand on his shoulder, snapping him out of it. He looked at all the eyes fixed on him and hung his head. He and his buddy pushed through the crowd and off toward the crews' quarters.

After a pause, Braddock spoke up again. "Poor character. I know why he feels the way he does, but it doesn't change anything."

Another voice spoke up, a female near the back. "I agree with him. Most all of us have lost someone in battle or the raids. We want those creatures to suffer."

"Look," said Braddock. "You all can believe whatever you want. I'm just telling you what I know, that's all. You can take it or leave it." Now that he had the floor again and his audience back, he decided to milk it some more.

"You know, you guys don't seem to be too in-touch with what's going on. Like, do any of you know why there's so much brass around here all of a sudden? And what so many of us are all doing here in this fringe outpost at the same time? Don't tell me you haven't noticed."

Stan had not been back off patrol long enough to have seen any brass, but that there were triple the normal number of fighter crews could not be denied. Indeed, at the risk of seeming conceited he had wondered why such crack outfits as his were stationed way out here at the very edge of occupied space. The way the war was heating up he would have expected to be in Scorpio-12-9 sector, right in the thick of things. It would be hard to imagine a less likely spot than the Victor-Tango-6 base for any tide-turning battles to be fought. Braddock had his attention.

“Okay,” said Stan. “I’ll bite. What *is* this all about?”

Braddock leaned forward and hunched his shoulders, looking from face to face. “Look, I can’t say too much. Besides I don’t really know how much is rumor and how much is fact. But the word is that there’s some kind of summit conference going on here—like the top dogs are planning Armageddon. Stuff so secret it can’t be transmitted no matter how tightly encrypted. Our job is gonna be to see that the brass—and whatever they’ve come up with—get delivered safe and sound to Scorpio sector. Even if we have to die trying. Now, like I say, some or all of this could be just somebody’s fantasy or even a red herring planted by the brass. Still, if it means Armageddon, this could be what we’ve all been hoping for. And we could be right in the middle of it.”

“You know, Braddock, for a guy who can’t say too much, you don’t seem to leave much out,” said McCormick tersely. Then he turned to the group as a whole. “I’d strongly suggest we all forget what we just heard. And above all else don’t discuss it—not even with each other. Now I don’t know any more about whether this is true than any of the rest of you. But if it’s not, there’s no point in talking about it, and if it is you could be putting our entire planet in tremendous jeopardy. Our jobs are to follow orders and not worry about the ‘who’ or ‘why.’” With that he tapped his gunner on the arm. “Let’s go see if we can find a card game or something.” The gunner nodded and they left. That had the desired effect and the whole group began to disintegrate and go their separate ways. As they left, Braddock was lobbying for everyone to remember he was just repeating scuttlebutt—commonly discussed—not classified information. Apparently McCormick’s reaction had frightened him a bit.

Maci, Derek and Stan strolled toward a table that was just being vacated. “You think that lobster story is really true?” asked Derek.

“Aw, I don’t know,” said Stan. “That kind of stuff is always somebody who heard it from a guy who knew somebody whose second cousin heard, blah, blah, blah.”

“But it could be true, right?”

Stan was puzzled why Derek would want it to be—why he would care.

Maci spoke up. “If it is, I can’t help but wonder who’s making all these lobster-robots. I mean, there would have to be some real, sentient being creating them, right?”

“Unless the original creators died-out long ago and these lobster-bots create more of their own kind, or something,” said Derek. Then he looked down at his hands. “It just makes it easier knowing you’re destroying machinery; not killing living beings.”

Stan finally understood his struggle. Derek had destroyed scores of the enemy and was bothered by the possibility of violating Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies. Destroying machines—no matter how advanced—was devoid of spiritual or ethical concerns.

“Oh come on, Derek,” said Maci. “They attacked our world, unprovoked, with the expressed intention of destroying every creature on it. Don’t forget they nearly succeeded till they got too smug and careless and our last-ditch Trojan horse effort sent them home long enough for us to arm ourselves. I have no sympathy for any of them, mechanical or not.”

Her words took Stan back to the stories he had heard of how it had all begun. Sudden destruction from outer space, the world in a panic, totally ineffectual defenses, and finally the loss of all hope. All except one last crazy idea. A space shuttle was packed to capacity with the most powerful nuclear explosives obtainable. The real intent was that while Earth’s destruction was certain, at least they might destroy some of the despised Scylla and go out with a bang, not a whimper. Broadcasts were sent on all frequencies pleading with them to let humankind prove they were creative enough to have value as slaves. The contents of the shuttle were said to showcase ways humans might prove of use to their conquerors. As always there had been no communication from the Scylla, no acknowledgement that they had heard or even could. Yet, the huge mother ship—the space equivalent of a navy carrier—did not destroy the shuttle but opened its innermost docking bay and welcomed it in. The handful of fighter craft that were away from the ship were all that survived. When it exploded they headed immediately for home.

Knowing the Scylla would return with a vengeance, Earth devoted every ounce of effort for the next twenty years to building a viable space force. In the twenty-first year it was put to the test as the Scylla returned and the war was on in earnest. For many years Earth hung on by a

thread, as losses at the front and casualties and deprivation at home took their toll. It was at the latter part of these dark days that Stan's kid sister had been killed by the Scyllas' senseless wanton attacks on harmless civilian populations. Eventually a means was found to reach the Scyllan homeworld with unmanned weapons of destruction causing them to pull in their horns considerably. Then technological advances enabled Earth's forces to begin holding their own in nearly every battle. Finally, with the development of the AF craft, the tide of war had turned. Earth's weaponry was clearly superior. Now it was commonly believed that the right strategy, if applied before the Scylla's technology and tactics could catch up, could win the war.

Unlike Maci, Stan understood Derek's plight. But unlike Derek, though he could understand the ethical conflict, it posed no dilemma for him. His deep abiding hatred of the Scylla remained unshaken regardless of their origin. While Derek's hope was that he was destroying only lifeless mechanical devices, many Christians subscribed to the robot theory to avoid having to explain the absence of any Biblical reference to this entire race of beings. If they were not really living creatures, why would Scripture bother about them? It was not a particularly satisfying position to take, but it allowed them to set the issue aside for the most part. As for Stan, he simply compartmentalized the entire Scylla issue separate from his newfound faith, and closed the door on it. It was an aspect of his life that he disconnected from his Christianity. Thus, he could give full vent to his hatred of the invaders with no thought of it conflicting with his beliefs. However, since Derek could not, he would do what he could to help ease his friend's conscience.

"Still," Stan interjected, "the robot theory makes more sense than any other. It squares with their lack of creativity and the absence of verbal communication. It's all digitized, just like you'd expect from machines. Not to mention their ability to kill without the least hint of compunction." It escaped his reasoning that throughout human history various people had exhibited that same remorselessness. Nor did he find ironic his own cold-bloodedness toward the Scylla. Nonetheless, his words seemed to set Derek's mind at ease, at least for the present.

The three talked and snacked for over three hours. At first it was almost imperceptible but as the evening wore on, Maci exhibited a growing restlessness. Her desire to have a farewell fling with Stan, abandoned earlier in the evening, had apparently reasserted itself. For his part, Stan was finding the extended time in close proximity to a not undesirable—and blatantly

willing—female a powerfully erosive force on his self-control. Finally, when there was a brief lull in the conversation, she made her move. She laid her hand gently on Derek's cheek.

"Derek, love, would you be a dear and get me some more to drink?"

The gesture and phrasing were both out of character for her and generated a little smile of confusion from Derek. Nevertheless, they produced what seemed to be the intended result.

"Sure, Maci. Of course. More of the same?"

"Yes, please," she said with a look of appreciation far too sincere for the simplicity of the request. "And thank you," she added as if he had just laid his cloak over a puddle.

The instant he was far enough away she slid a keycard to her quarters under Stan's hand. Then she took his hand in hers and looked deeply into his eyes.

Stan swallowed noisily. "You know I really care about you, Maci. It's nothing to do with you—I'll miss you a lot—but this is really hard for me."

"I know," she sympathized as she nodded with a gentle smile. She took her hand back as she saw Derek out the corner of her eye heading toward them. Then with her most alluring look she said softly, "Come as late as you like. I'll be waiting."

Chapter 4

Stan's brain was whirling with conflicting thoughts as within less than twenty minutes Maci claimed fatigue and headed for her quarters. *I just need to get away by myself and think this through*, he told himself. He pushed aside the thought that not getting by himself—remaining in Derek's company—would almost guarantee he would not give-in to Maci's scintillating offer. The need to get off by himself was merely the devil's lure to enable him to get to Maci's quarters via some different route than the most direct—right past his and Derek's quarters. It was as if his ability to prevent Derek from knowing what he was doing would also keep God from knowing.

"You know what?" said Stan suddenly. "I just remembered a message Kelly Pierce told me to give to Tom McCormick next time I saw him. He said he was going to play cards, didn't he? I bet he went up to the mess hall. I'm going to head up that way, buddy. If we get to swapping old war stories I might be late, but I'll try not to make too much racket." Although pilots and those who had been at the station the longest, like Maci, were often able to secure private quarters, many pilots chose to room with their gunners. Stan and Derek would have it no other way. However, just for tonight, Stan wished it were otherwise. He had carefully laid-out his lie so as to imply that Derek was ready to hit the sack, whether he really was or not. It worked. Derek headed for their quarters and Stan played the part to the hilt by taking the first side-corridor he came to while bidding Derek good night. He took numerous twists and turns while his libido and the Holy Spirit waged war for his heart. At last the flesh got the upper hand and his heart pounded with anticipation over the choice he had made. Maci was waiting. He would deal with the consequences tomorrow.

His whirling mind oblivious to his surroundings, he resolutely headed down a narrow passage as a shortcut to the corridor where her quarters were. A voice shouted at him from behind.

“Hey! You there! Halt.” For a fleeting second he thought it might be the Lord, vetoing his decision to succumb to temptation.

“This is military police and I am ordering you to stop and turn around immediately!”

He turned to see a frowning MP pointing the business end of a Lectro-Laser shoulder weapon directly at him. It was enough firepower to cripple a fighter-craft and definitely got Stan’s attention. Instinctively he raised his hands as the MP approached from twenty yards away.

“Put your hands against the wall and spread your feet,” he ordered. Stan complied immediately and spoke gently to the wall.

“What’s the problem? I was just headed to my quarters—”

“Stow it!” demanded the MP as he frisked Stan. “Okay, now put your hands behind your head and turn around. Slowly!”

Stan did so and saw the MP’s name, Duncan, on his chest. The MP had backed away a few steps and while still holding the weapon at the ready, it was no longer pointed directly at Stan.

“Now, what are you doing here? Really.”

“I—nothing,” stammered Stan. “Like I said, I was just taking a shortcut—”

“Right, a shortcut through a restricted area.”

“Restricted?”

“Come on, you mean you didn’t see the signs all along the main corridor?”

Stan truly had not noticed them. “I was kind of preoccupied, I guess. Honest, I really didn’t see any signs.”

“Or hear the announcements for the past week to stay clear of this area?” said the skeptical MP.

“I haven’t been here for over a week. I just got back off patrol earlier today. You can check it out if you don’t believe me.”

“That is exactly what we are going to—”

His words were cut short by a door being opened a few meters away. Three men and a woman exited the doorway and headed right toward them. The next person to emerge was General Norton whose eyes got as big as saucers upon seeing Stan and Corporal Duncan.

“Quick, this way,” hissed Duncan. They hustled ahead of the group and into a small office. As the MP went to shut the door, Stan caught a better glimpse of the second man in the group. It was Earth Defense Minister Antoine. The two stood alone in the small room for several minutes as a steady stream of footsteps passed by outside the door. After they had faded away for a minute the door opened. It was General Norton.

“Okay, let’s hear it,” he said to Stan. “What are you doing here?”

“Sir, I didn’t realize this was a restricted area. I’ve been on patrol all week and—”

“Jericoff,” said the General, reading the name on Stan’s uniform. “Stan Jericoff?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good grief, Jericoff, you’re one of our very best fighter pilots,” he said in a much gentler tone. “What are you doing wandering around through restricted areas?”

“Says he didn’t know, sir,” said the MP.

“Did you see any of those people just now?” asked the General.

Stan hemmed and hawed for a minute. “Well, yeah, sort of I guess—”

The General blew out his cheeks and shook his head. “Of course you did. Corporal, take Captain Jericoff to my office. I’ll join you there in about ten minutes.” He looked at Stan then rolled his eyes and shook his head before leaving the room.

When the General joined them in his office he got right to the point. “Jericoff, did you recognize any of the people you saw in the corridor tonight?”

Stan cleared his throat nervously. “Well, I couldn’t be sure—”

“Jericoff!”

“Yes, sir. One of them, sir. At least, based on the video transmissions I’ve seen, one of them looked like Defense Minister Antoine.”

The General nodded. “Thank you, Captain. Corporal Duncan, I don’t know where you were or what you were doing that allowed this lapse of security to occur and frankly I don’t have time to delve into it now. But you have just acquired a new assignment. You are to escort Captain Jericoff to Major Mustafah’s quarters—he’s already vacated them—and see that he stays there for the next 24 hours. At that time, Stan, you’ll be briefed and prepped for your next

patrol, which will start at 0400 hours Wednesday. Corporal, you are to see that Captain Jericoff has every comfort you can possibly acquire for him, any food he wishes, any entertainment he desires. He is not, I repeat, not under arrest. However, he is to have absolutely no contact with anyone and is not to leave those quarters for any reason until time for his briefing. Do you both understand?"

Stan spoke up. "Sir, I was supposed to get a week's R and R."

"Canceled. And just so you don't think you're being picked-on, everyone's has been canceled. Since you're going incognito, I can tell you a little about what's going on. Have you heard the scuttlebutt about an armada of fighters escorting some VIP's off this station?"

"Yes sir."

"Well then you know why you're not getting R and R. And I want a list of names of crewmates, buddies, anyone who might wonder where you are. They will all get word that 'the old man' sent you on a special assignment. They'll think you got stuck with some flunky duty. Sorry to have to do this, Captain, but this is too important. Okay gentlemen, you have your orders."

Stan's boredom was magnified a hundred times by his restless anticipation of the monumental upcoming mission. This could be what led directly to the end of the war—a victorious end. Having this prior knowledge, and all the nervous energy it engendered, bottled-up in his confinement quarters pushed him to the brink. He half ran to the briefing room when his time was up and at last he was summoned. The General himself addressed the crews.

"Gentlemen. The codename for this operation is Greyhound. Your mission will be to provide fighter support for two transports. As you know such convoys generally consist of a single escort squadron. In this case we'll have nine. You may have heard rumors about who or what we are carrying. I am not at liberty to go into any specifics, and that is for your own good as well. I can say only that no sacrifice is too great to see that this mission succeeds. It is imperative that these transports reach their destination safely. That destination is contained in these sealed orders being locked into the dual-custody compartments in each fighter. They are to remain sealed until we reach the Lobo rendezvous area at which point you will each open, read, memorize, and destroy them. Between here and Lobo our intelligence reports only a couple of enemy sniper squadrons. In fact, we do not expect any significant opposition until we are much

nearer our endpoint. By that time we have some additional measures that will help insure our success. But you must be vigilant and expect the unexpected. We cannot afford to be surprised. You may have noticed that we have assembled the absolute cream of our fighter crews. You are the very best and we will require more than your best. It is possible, if our attempts at keeping a lid on this operation have succeeded, that all this talent and firepower will be overkill and unnecessary. But should it require you to do the impossible, then that is what you must do.

“One more thing. If any of you suffer damage and cannot continue, there will be no rescue efforts. I repeat, no rescue efforts. Our mission is too critical. We cannot afford to lose the services of multiple fighters trying to salvage the crew of one, even if it only means a brief delay. There will be rescue backup standing-by at this station to help if needed although that might mean a long wait. But under no circumstances will any member of this convoy leave its mission responsibilities to render aid to a fellow member. I know that sounds cold and flies in the face of our usual practices but it is absolute and non-negotiable. If your craft becomes unable to continue and there are enemy craft approaching, you must self-destruct. However, the reason the best fighter crews in existence have been assigned to this mission is because you’re not going suffer any damage. You’re going to inflict it!”

There was a muffled assent and smattering of applause by the hearers. The General continued. “All right, gentlemen. I won’t say good luck. Luck will have nothing to do with this. I will only say Godspeed and good hunting. Colonel Heinz?”

Colonel Heinz then gave them the few specifics that would be necessary to coordinate the launching of the fighters and their proper deployment around the transports until time to open their orders. Everyone was then immediately dispatched to his spacecraft.

Derek entered “Gail” but Stan took a short detour to the maintenance crew performing final pre-flight external checkout. He walked directly up to the diminutive supervisor.

“Maci, I—” He looked down, unable to recite his prepared speech.

She looked up and smiled, and he thought she had never looked so beautiful. “It’s okay, Stan. I was way out of line. I just thought...” She looked down, embarrassed and unable to come up with any words to finish her sentence. “I’ll start preparing to leave for flight training as soon as we get you launched. So I guess this is good-bye.” She was obviously fighting to keep her emotions under control, but losing the battle. She started to turn away.

“Look,” said Stan, spinning her back toward him. “You’re not getting away from me that easily. Someday this whole mess is going to be over. Then I’m going to come find you. Wherever you are, I’ll find you. So this isn’t good-bye. It’s just ‘see you later.’ I’ll see you after.”

She smiled. “Yeah. After.”

He scooped her petite frame into his arms and kissed her with an urgency that surprised them both. She did not pull away but as soon as their lips parted she walked back toward her crew. “Knock ‘em dead, Ace,” she called over her shoulder as he headed for Gail.

“Oh yeah,” he said. He took one long lingering look as she walked away.

The need to defend the transport and its Top Secret cargo added a thick and unfamiliar tension inside each fighter craft. The instinct for survival in the face of a deadly foe combined with the commitment to defend the other members of the squadron at any cost normally increased one’s adrenaline. But in that case everyone involved was thoroughly trained and experienced in combat. Here, those in the transport were totally dependent on the fighters for protection. That heightened the tension creating moist palms and long periods of silence onboard each AF-P3. Stan and Derek’s only speech consisted of occasional clipped commands to the onboard Flight Assistance and Tactics System. Nearly the entire fleet had programmed theirs to sound husky and answer to the name FATS. Stan had chosen Gail with a voice just like his sister’s.

Between three and four hours into the flight the convoy passed within a short distance of a small clump of asteroids off to their left at the extreme fringe of the war’s theater of operations. Beyond them lay a long stretch of nothing and then a few star systems that had only been explored by unmanned probes. The limited flight plan showed that some twenty minutes after passing these asteroids they would alter course and make a beeline for the Lobo rendezvous area. From then on the mission would begin in earnest and the probability of attack would be at its height.

Stan became aware that he was sitting forward at the instrument panel in a tense and uncomfortable position. He had been sitting that way for over an hour and his back muscles were getting stiff. He blew out his cheeks and sat back in a more normal posture and tried to convince himself to relax. After all, a person could be relaxed physically and still alert mentally. He was usually almost too relaxed when on patrol. It fed that cocky, invincible attitude that

helped make him so successful. He rubbed the back of his neck and started to comment on the unusual tension to Derek.

At the same instant the fighter's display panel lit up like an arcade game, and Jomo shouted "Bogies ahead, ten o'clock. Bravo squadron primary assault. Delta secondary. Standard pattern."

Chapter 5

From behind the asteroids came the familiar horizontal inverted pyramid of four enemy fighters. *Hiding behind a rock?* thought Stan. *That's a new twist.*

They had the element of surprise so there was little time to collect one's thoughts. Superstitiously Stan felt the need to follow the normal routine.

"Let's shake and bake, Derek."

"Let's melt some mechanical monsters," came the taut reply. It did not have the usual confidence.

"Gail, TCM" said Stan.

"READY, STAN. TCM, AYE."

Jomo issued the launch command.

"Execute Tactic Epsilon—assist mode."

"AYE, SIR."

It didn't feel right. Stan kept telling himself to settle-in and let his natural reactions take over, but it wasn't happening. His movements were deliberate and there was a disconcerting seed of concern sprouting in the back of his mind. He knew why, of course. If the Scylla were using new tactics, there might be other, possibly deadly, innovations forthcoming. *Relax*, he told himself, *there's no evidence that they've developed superior weaponry.*

As usual, he bypassed the number one bogey and headed for the trailer. It was moving slower than usual, lagging the others and if anything giving Derek more opportunity for a bull's-eye. As always it moved into position to back-up its squadron leader intending to gang-up on Jomo. Stan and Gail deftly maneuvered the fighter into an intercept course. In seconds they

would be in range and at that instant Derek would destroy the Scyllan vessel. Stan felt his shoulders relax a bit as the unexpected gave way to the familiar.

Suddenly another bogey appeared out of nowhere at maximum speed on an intercept course with Stan. It was closing fast. *A five-ship squadron?* thought Stan. But there was no time to think, only to react. Gail displayed their situation but did not verbalize—the eye could assess and respond to the visual pattern much quicker than the computer could describe it aloud. Stan was already taking evasive action but felt the need to report it aloud to Derek, even though Gail was displaying the same information to him.

“New Bogey! Eight o’clock!”

“Got it,” came the response as the weapons locked onto it. Concurrent with Derek’s last word was a double flash and a wild rocking of the fighter. It was followed by a muffled whoosh and the feeling of g-forces in an odd direction. The scene outside the view port was a streak of stars moving from lower left to upper right. Stan used the video display to figure out that they were spinning and tumbling out of control.

“Gail!”

“READY, STAN.”

“Help me get this thing stabilized. What’s the matter with it?”

“ENGINE FOUR IS DAMAGED. IT IS OPERATING AT FULL THRUST AND WILL NOT RESPOND TO THROTTLE CONTROLS.”

“Okay, but why am I having such a hard time getting this thing to stop spinning?”

“CONTROL THRUSTERS THREE AND FIVE ARE OUT. ENGINE FOUR IS ALSO THRUSTING AT AN ANGLE OF 17.28 DEGREES.”

“How can we get it just headed in one direction so I can regain directional control?”

“WORKING, STAN.”

It was only the second time Stan could remember the onboard computer needing to take time out to work on a problem. In a few seconds Gail responded.

“PUT ENGINE TWO ON FULL THRUST TO COMPENSATE AND FIRE THRUSTERS ONE AND SIX FOR TWO MINUTES, TWELVE SECONDS.”

“Execute.”

“AYE, SIR.”

Such a long continuous burn of the control thrusters would severely tax them, but he had to regain control of his ship. A dozen questions crowded his mind. How far were they from the rest of the squad? What was happening in the battle? Had Derek disabled the one that got them? Speaking of Derek—

“You okay back there, buddy?” said Stan.

“MY OPERATING SYSTEM IS FINE, STAN. HOWEVER THERE IS CONSIDERABLE DAMAGE IN OTHER AREAS OF THE SPACECRAFT.”

“Gail, TCM off. Switch to Conversational Mode.” This way she would only respond to oral statements starting with “Gail.”

“Derek, I was talking to you. You okay?”

There was no answer.

“STAN, SEVERE CODE THREE DAMAGE TO REPORT.”

“Okay, Gail, but first give me a communication status.”

“ALL TRANSMISSION CAPABILITIES ARE DISABLED EXCEPT SHORT RANGE VIA EVA SUIT AND COMPUTER VOICE COMMAND INTERFACE.”

Stan considered that both bad and good news. The bad news was that he could not communicate with anyone other than with Gail unless he put on his space suit and even then only short range. The good news was that it was one hopeful explanation as to why Derek couldn’t hear him.

He could feel the ship starting to stabilize although with two engines at full thrust they were heading at breakneck speed for who-knew-where. *Better get back there and check on Derek*, he thought.

“STAN, SEVERE CODE THREE DAMAGE TO REPORT.”

He sighed. *Yeah, yeah*, he thought, *I already know. No transmission capability, an engine gone wild and two thrusters out.* “Okay, Gail, damage report,” he said as he unbuckled his harness.

“THERE IS A HULL BREACH IN THE WEAPONS MODULE. DEREK’S LIFE FUNCTIONS HAVE TERMINATED.”

Stan was just preparing to open the hatchway to the weapons module when Gail’s words hit him like a left hook. “What? Derek?”

He twisted furiously at the hatch handle but it was immovable. “Gail! Open the hatch to the weapons module. Now!”

“I CANNOT, STAN. THERE IS A HULL BREACH. OPENING THE HATCH WILL COMPROMISE CABIN PRESSURE AND LIFE SUPPORT.”

Although infuriating, it was exactly what Gail was supposed to do. Part of her job was to ensure that crewmembers didn’t kill themselves by making dumb mistakes like that.

Stan was already in an EVA suit but needed a helmet. He donned and sealed it in less than ten seconds—a record.

“Gail, I’m in my EVA suit. Now unlock that hatch.”

“SUIT TELEMETRY IS GO. STAN, I WILL NEED TO EVACUATE THE CABIN FIRST.”

“Okay, okay! For God’s sake just hurry up!” At the mention of God, Stan realized that a prayer was long overdue for this situation. “Lord,” he said aloud, “Derek can’t be dead. Save him Lord, or enable me to do it. Or bring him back. You can do anything—Derek always said You could. I need You now like never before.”

The hatch unlocked and Stan was through it in an instant. Ever more regulation-conscious than Stan, Derek had worn his helmet. Though the weapons module was fried with a gaping hole in the roof, Derek’s suit looked intact. He unhooked his harness and pulled him back into the main cabin and sealed the hatch.

“Gail, repressurize the cabin.”

“AYE, SIR”

The instant Gail was done Stan removed Derek’s helmet. There was no evidence that his suit had lost integrity or that the Scyllan Lectro-Laser had hit him directly. Yet he had neither pulse nor heartbeat and his skin was cold. Stan knew that very often when a Lectro-Laser beam hit, those nearby were simply electrocuted. He quickly backed away a few steps and pulled out his sidearm Lectro-Laser. After adjusting the setting on it he shot a blue-white beam at Derek’s lifeless body causing it to flop slightly to one side. He ran over and again felt for any sign of life. There was none. He repeated the process a half-dozen times. Then he knelt beside the body and used the old fashioned CPR technique on it. After half an hour he just hung his head where he knelt and cried.

“Gail,” he moaned pitifully.

“READY, STAN.”

“Gail. Help me. There’s got to be something I can do. How can I bring him back?”

“I KNOW OF NO REMEDY OR PROCEDURE TO RESTORE DEREK, STAN. I AM SORRY.”

Another person would have been impressed at the computer’s ability to interpret Stan’s emotional state as one meriting an expression of regret. Stan took no note.

“God! God, help me. Surely You can do something? This is Your servant lying here. I need a miracle Lord. Right now. Bring him back. Please God, bring him back.”

He fell on Derek’s chest and sobbed for several long minutes. Finally he sat up, scooted over to a bulkhead and leaned against it. He stared off at nothing for a quarter of an hour.

“STAN. WE ARE RECEIVING A TRANSMISSION FROM JOMO.”

After a deep sigh, Stan monotoned, “Okay Gail, let’s hear it.”

“Bravo two, acknowledge. Stan, I don’t know what you’re doing, but we can’t come after you. We are returning to Greyhound. Just leave that rogue bogey and get yourself turned around and get back here. If you can hear me, acknowledge immediately.”

Jomo repeated the message twice more then ceased transmitting. *Looks like the battle’s over*, thought Stan. *We must have won, if Jomo’s resuming Greyhound*. He looked at Derek’s body and sighed heavily knowing what he must do. He removed Derek’s ID and the cross he always wore around his neck. He re-suited the body, attached the helmet and pressurized the suit. He pulled the body over to the airlock and then got his pocket New Testament and opened it to 1 Corinthians 15:53 and began to read.

“For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

With that he took the body into the airlock, came back in and closed the interior hatch. When the airlock was evacuated he opened the outer door. He then used the long, flexible robotic arm inside the airlock to grasp Derek's body and maneuver it outside the ship.

"I'm gonna miss you more than you can believe, buddy. But I'll see you again. Wait for me up there will ya? Unless I can get this ship headed somewhere, I might be joining you pretty soon anyway. I guess the Lord decided we'd done enough and it was time to bring us home. I'll see you my friend. I'll see you again."

With eyes swimming he used the robotic arm to "throw" Derek's body out and toward the aft part of the ship where the Llon engines were still pouring it on. He watched as it drifted away and behind. In less than two minutes he could no longer see it.

He returned to his pilot seat and sat with a weary sigh. Although he wanted to just sit and think about his friend, he needed to get the ship under control and headed somewhere on purpose rather than just accelerating aimlessly. A check of the craft's location and heading revealed only that it was already well beyond the boundaries of what was called Known Space. Some generalized study had been done of the area outside the boundaries and a small amount had been explored by unmanned probes. The purpose of both had been only to verify that it contained no secret Scyllan bases, not any quest for scientific knowledge. The war left no time for pursuits not directly related to the survival of the human race. "Gail" was headed out toward an expanse of nothingness in a long, gradual arc.

For no reason that he could discern a phrase Jomo had used popped back into his mind. "Just leave that rogue bogey..." he had said.

Chapter 6

“Gail.”

“READY STAN.”

“Report all identifiable Scyllan craft you can detect.”

A graphical display showed only one, roughly in front of him at the farthest fringe of detectable range, deep into the unknown expanse. He sat up, a rush of adrenaline supplanting his weariness.

“Gail, can you retrace your tracking since the last dogfight and tell me if that’s the bogey that hit us?”

“AYE, SIR. IT IS THE SAME.”

“Are we closing on it?”

“AYE, SIR.”

“How long until intercept at present course and speed?”

“PRESENT COURSE WILL NOT INTERCEPT.” The display showed that the long arc his ship was on would cross the wake of the Scyllan craft then gradually veer away from it.

That blasted engine four, he thought. I’ve got to find a way to shut that thing off.

“Gail, get me technical readout. The question is: Without electronic control how can I shut down an engine?”

As is so often true of technical documentation, it told him dozens of things he already knew but very little that would answer his question. The most he could determine was that he needed to go outside the ship, or EVA, and stop the flow of Reaction Catalyst necessary for a Llon engine to function. The flow was normally regulated electronically but engine four’s regulator would not respond to Gail’s or his signals.

As he prepared to exit the ship he attempted to rationalize his actions. Chasing a runaway bogey way off into unexplored space was not appropriate to his mission. But then, the mission had already—quite properly—gone on without him. There was no catching-up to it now. Such a chase also was not by the book for a damaged ship no longer under threat of attack. His primary responsibility was to get it back where it could be repaired and readied for use as soon as possible. Fighters were extremely valuable commodities. Of course, he reasoned, he had to take this time to do something with his runaway engine anyway. If it so happened to take him within firing range of the scum that murdered his best friend, well, *c'est la vie*.

His conscience salved, he clipped a tether to the connector next to the airlock's outer door and exited the ship. Each engine was controlled through its own independent circuitry. This provided redundancy enabling others to remain functional even if one were put out of commission. Apparently little thought had been given to there being one that *refused* to go out of commission. Outside the ship he got his first look at the ugly melted scar that was once the weapons module. Behind it was a meter-and-a-half-long divot in the ship's hull where considerable circuitry had been turned to charcoal.

He dug into the hole, prying away charred electronics to get them out of the way. At length he found where engine four's tubing came from the catalyst reservoir to its reaction chamber. A further search revealed a tiny motorized valve—one of the few mechanical devices in the entire engine assembly. It was undamaged but the circuitry from which it got its orders was part of that which had been cooked by the enemy's Lectro-Laser. Using an ordinary pair of pliers he forced the valve to shut and watched with satisfaction as the brilliant blue engine exhaust tapered down and went out.

Back inside he wasted no time.

"Gail, engine four is now offline. Give me ten-point-zero acceleration using all remaining engines and come to bogey intercept course."

"AYE, SIR. THROTTLES ON ENGINES ONE, TWO AND THREE ADJUSTED. COURSE RESET." The new heading showed on the display with lines indicating the two ships' paths crossing not far ahead of where the Scyllan ship now was.

"Gail, what's the time to intercept at present course and speed?"

"SIX HOURS THIRTEEN MINUTES EIGHT SECONDS TO TARGET INTERCEPT."

Given its distance from him, Stan was surprised he would overtake it so quickly.

“Gail, is the target craft under power?”

“NEGATIVE, SIR. NO ENGINE ACTIVITY DETECTED FROM TARGET VEHICLE AT PRESENT.”

Just coasting, huh? he thought. And no evasive or aggressive action. It must not have seen me yet. Or maybe it has no capability to react.

“I bet you nailed it, Derek,” he said aloud. “Probably knocked-out its ability to detect my presence—maybe damaged its engines enough that they conked-out after it made a run for it, too. Must not be too bad though, or it would have self-destructed. Okay then, we’ll just sneak right up to point-blank range and hit that thing so hard there won’t be enough left for it to self-destruct.” In his mind, nothing would be sweeter than sitting a few kilometers from it and pulverizing it into little fragments. Better yet, just maybe a couple of the fragments would be large enough to take back and have the science boys get some juicy tidbits of information from them.

As each hour passed, Gail’s charts had less and less detail on them. He was heading uncomfortably deep into unexplored space—much too deep for a damaged ship that could not call for help. But this was his mission now. It was one he would complete or die trying.

Finally he came within visual range of it and the waiting was almost over. Stan and Gail expertly slowed the ship until it crept close enough that he could see it clearly through the view port. They were gradually closing on it, a few meters per second. He waited till it loomed large; taking note that it also was missing the structure that Intelligence had always assumed was the Scylla’s weapons module. A sly smile of anticipated triumph slowly bloomed on his face. He wiggled a little deeper into his seat. Sweet revenge was at hand.

His voice was a quiet, icy calm. “Gail, lock weapons on target.”

“NEGATIVE, SIR. UNABLE TO COMPLY.”

“What? Why? Gail, is Targeting out?”

“NEGATIVE, SIR. WEAPONS OUT.”

“Gail, are you saying we have no weapons or just no automatic weapons control?”

“ALL WEAPONS SYSTEMS AND MANUAL OVERRIDE CIRCUITS ARE NONRESPONSIVE. WEAPONS ARE NON-FUNCTIONAL.”

A rush of panic ran through him. It was an unfamiliar feeling—he was not one given to panic, but now he realized that his perfect opportunity for revenge might instead see him destroyed. Should he run away while he remained undetected? Live to fight another day?

No. A cold resolve came over him. *I do still have a weapon*, he thought. *I'll run right through that piece of junk and guarantee the death of everyone on board.*

“Derek, unless I somehow miraculously survive this, it looks like I’ll be joining you sooner than I thought, old buddy. We’ll say ‘hello’ to Jesus together.”

“Gail.”

“READY, STAN.”

“On codeword ‘execute’ give me emergency full forward thrust directly into target vehicle.”

“AYE, SIR.”

He gripped the controls and swallowed once as he silently prayed a quick final prayer. He took in a deep breath and was about to speak when he saw movement outside the Scyllan ship through his view port. In the silence of space he had finally crept close enough to see that someone or something had gone EVA.

“Gail, cancel prior command!”

“CANCELED AYE.”

“Gail, put front view port image onscreen and magnify it.”

“AYE, SIR.”

Now he could see it clearly. The Scylla, in an EVA suit, appeared to have its back to him, deeply engrossed in some kind of repair work on the aft portion of its ship. *Funny*, he thought, *those don't look like lobster claws from here. And I wonder why a robot needs a suit.*

“Gail, how many Scyllan life forms can you detect in or around target vehicle?”

“ONE, OUTSIDE TARGET VEHICLE.”

That was not conclusive. The detection process usually indicated two Scyllan crewmembers per fighter. But it was based on movement detection within the Scyllan ship, an inexact science to say the least. Attempts to scan for biological signs such as body heat had never succeeded in penetrating the Scyllan hull—or else, as most had concluded, there were no such signs since they were not biological beings but mechanical. Thus, non-visual probing into any Scyllan ship was recognized as educated guesswork at best. That meant that there might or

might not be more Scylla than the one doing the EVA. It was the answer he was looking for, but he needed a contingency just in case. Now that he had a moment to think about it, there was something even better than ramming it.

“Gail, on codeword ‘execute’ or if my life functions terminate I want immediate self-destruct. SDS-command-immediate authorization Samson.”

“AYE, SIR. SELF-DESTRUCT-SEQUENCE AUTHORIZATION
ACKNOWLEDGED.”

He put on his EVA suit and helmet, took his hand Lectro-Laser and headed for the airlock. *I’ll kill that thing and any others that might be alive on board then tow that ship back to Victor-Tango*, he thought. *If I fail and they get the drop on me, Gail will blow it into another dimension.*

“Gail, move us around so the main hatch is within three meters of the Scyllan crewmember doing EVA.”

Gail had re-learned how to manipulate the ship in the absence of some of its attitude thrusters and complied with his request quickly and smoothly. The Scyllan, still focused intently on the repairs, was completely oblivious to the silent maneuverings going on directly behind its back. The shot from Stan’s hand weapon would be point-blank. As Stan prepared to open the outer hatch he spotted the flexible robotic arm and got a flash of inspiration. He holstered the weapon and extended the powerful, pincer-like graspers on the robotic arm until each was a meter in length. He then took hold of its manipulator control. With the hatch opened and the alien within easy reach he aligned the pincers vertically to insure he would trap both its arms. Then he swung the arm out to the side then away toward the Scyllan. He waited a second or two till both the Scyllan’s “arms” were at its sides then, like the strike of a viper, he swung the pincers across the thing’s midsection and clamped them shut, pinning its arms to its sides. Only at the last instant did the Scyllan notice the pincers, much too late to react.

Stan watched the thing wiggling to free itself for a full minute, hand weapon at the ready in case it was not as trapped as he thought. It was clear, though, that the alien could not get itself free. He moved the arm around to bring the Scyllan inside the main bay, closed the outer hatch and re-pressurized the cabin.

Stan stepped inside and stood back away from the thing that was still wiggling and struggling against the pincers, not unlike an insect caught in a web. He took off his own helmet

and gloves. The Scyllan was smaller than he had imagined. Although close to him in height, it appeared to be thin compared to his husky 5' 11" frame.

"So, I'm gonna get a look at one of you things, huh?" he said aloud. "I wonder though, would it be safer to kill you first and then look? Or should I indulge myself and see the look on your face while you die? Assuming, of course that you have a face."

The thing's squirming slowed then renewed in earnest as he spoke, almost as if it understood at least some of what he said. He walked slowly up to it, hand weapon at the ready. He got within a third of a meter of it but still could not see through the mirrored faceplate of the alien's helmet. As he reached up to see how to remove its helmet, its struggling went into overdrive, giving him great difficulty even though the fasteners were not so different from some models of Earth's own EVA suits. He fumbled with the gyrating helmet for five full minutes, finally having to re-holster the weapon so he could use both hands.

"I'm really going to enjoy killing you," he said. Then, a second later, "Hah!" as he finally got it twisted and ready to be removed.

What if this thing spits some venom at me or something? he thought. He again drew his weapon and stood to the side as he removed the thing's helmet with one hand. He pulled it off by grasping the back of it and lifting it up and forward.

Chapter 7

The first thing he saw was a thick profusion of platinum blonde hair-ringlets. As the helmet came the rest of the way off, the alien pulled its head back defiantly and shook the hair from its face. To say that it was a woman's face would be the utmost understatement. Absolutely flawless golden-tan skin, perfectly shaped and proportioned facial features from the alluring lavender lips right to the long, dark eyelashes and precisely arched eyebrows. All of which was secondary to the stunningly-brilliant violet eyes. They were like gems that might be used as eyes on the statue of a goddess. He was so dazzled that he actually recoiled backward a bit and stared at her dumbfounded. She stared back at him without moving for several seconds.

Stan finally spoke, his words slow and hushed. "Suffering Cygnus. You—you're beautiful. You're easily the most beautiful wom—er, female I've ever seen. Or that anybody's ever seen. At least, I hope you're a female."

At that she resumed her thrashing with renewed vigor. Even as her face expressed the travail and frustration of her struggle against the jaws that held her, she remained exquisitely gorgeous.

"Oshpuway shtrelkow!" she shouted with a strained voice. She continued her thrashing. "Bonaria leshminda." She looked defiantly at Stan and said, "Velinka." Then, after pausing a second to pant, she repeated, "Velinka!" Her breathing appeared to be labored.

"All right," he said cautiously. "I'll release you. But I'll have to tie your hands and feet first, so just hang on a minute. With a face like that, I've got to see what the rest of you looks like."

He spoke mainly to himself, knowing she could not understand. Nevertheless as if triggered by his words her wiggling and straining against the robot arm's pincers reached a whole new level of intensity.

He found some straps used to secure stowage and came toward her just as she got her outside arm free. She grabbed at him and then took a swing at him with her fist.

"Wooh, you're a feisty little thing aren't you?" he said as he backed away a short distance. "Guess I'm going to have to give you a wide berth to get back behind you and tie you up." Then he noticed she was no longer flailing at him but was furiously manipulating a set of buttons on the belly panel of her EVA suit just below where the robot arm came across her. It took Stan several seconds before it hit him that her rather curious actions might mean she had some sort of weapon within the suit. He had not, after all, had any opportunity to frisk her.

"Hey, now, what do you think you're"—

"STAN, COMMAND PATTERN FOR SELF-DESTRUCT DETECTED."

His stomach turned a flip. "Gail, emergency escape!"

"AYE, SIR."

He tried to brace himself for the mega g-force of forward thrust as the engines roared to life. He was in no way prepared for the sudden lurch sideways as the exploding Scyllan ship walloped Gail and her occupants. He flew to one side and, as the back of his head collided with the airlock inner hatch handle, he lost consciousness.

It seemed that his sister was talking to him as she sat in the pilot's seat. Next to her sat her best friend, a violet-eyed beauty she called "Severe-ko." But those words she was saying, they meant something. Something else, something important. Something he needed to respond to but could not—or did not want to. Yet, he knew he must. He had to discover what they meant to him, but he could not quite decipher them.

Then a realization came to him that he was half inside the emergency supply storage compartment in a tangle of equipment. His eyes came into focus and he recognized the words he had half-dreamed his sister saying as those of Gail, the ship's computer.

"STAN, SEVERE CODE THREE DAMAGE TO REPORT."

Now he knew why it had been important. He needed to answer. He needed to hear the particulars. Unfortunately, his coming-to was accompanied by a headache far beyond any pain

he had ever experienced. He felt the back of his head and there was a swollen lump too sore to touch a second time. As best as he could determine there was a large amount of dried blood all down his neck and face.

“STAN, SEVERE CODE THREE DAMAGE TO REPORT.”

He was dying of thirst but the thought of expending the energy necessary to extricate himself from the storage compartment was daunting. He noticed movement nearby. It was the alien, still held by the robotic jaws. Instead of flailing and struggling, however, she was lolling her head slowly back and forth.

“STAN, SEVERE CODE THREE DAMAGE TO REPORT.”

“Gail,” he rasped.

“READY.”

“How long have I been out?”

“PLEASE RESTATE THAT STAN.”

“Gail, how long has it been since the Scyllan ship self-destructed?”

“THIRTEEN HOURS TWENTY-FOUR MINUTES.”

“THIR—? Gail, where in heaven are we?”

“UNABLE TO DETERMINE SPECIFIC COORDINATES. PRESENT LOCATION IS WELL WITHIN UNMAPPED SECTION OF SPACE.

“SEVERE CODE THREE DAMAGE TO REPORT.”

His head was in such pain he could hardly think straight, but he knew he needed to force himself. With great effort he untangled himself and got back into the main cabin. He could not escape the feeling that cleaning the wound and the blood off himself would help the pain somehow. He guzzled the contents of an entire water container then opened the first aid kit and found some antiseptic wipes. As he tended to the wound and tried to remove some of the caked blood, he responded to Gail’s warning that had probably been given every few minutes for the past thirteen hours.

“Okay Gail,” he panted through the pain. “Damage report.”

“THERE IS A POINT ZERO THREE SIX MILLIMETER TEAR IN THE REACTION CATALYST RESERVOIR.”

Stan frowned. “A tear? Sounds like a pinhole. Gail, is it leaking?”

“YES, STAN. CATALYST LOSS RATE UNDER PRESSURE IS SIX POINT EIGHT-FIVE LITERS PER HOUR.”

“Pressure? Gail, are we still under acceleration?”

“YES, STAN. WE ARE STILL AT FULL EMERGENCY THRUST.”

“Sufferin’ Cygnus, no wonder we’re out in the middle of nowhere. Gail, all engines stop!”

“AYE, SIR. ALL STOP.” The hum of the engines ceased.

“Gail, what other significant damage is there?”

“THERE IS A BREACH IN THE AIRLOCK OUTER DOOR SEAL.”

“Is the inner door secure?”

“AFFIRMATIVE.”

“Is the airlock usable?”

“YES, BUT A 12.4% LOSS OF CABIN AIR WOULD RESULT ASSUMING AVERAGE AIRLOCK ENTRY OR EXIT TIMES.”

Stan considered this fairly minor relative to how bad things could have been.

“Mmnh,” came a voice. It was the Scylla. Her head lolled as if she were on the verge of passing out.

“I forgot all about you. You’ve been clamped in that thing for over thirteen hours.” He hurried over to her then stopped. “Then again, I’m not sure I should be in too much of a hurry to help you. You almost got us killed. In fact, it may happen yet.” She was apparently still conscious but did not respond. She was pale and no longer struggling against the robot arm.

“All right, I’m going to get you out of that thing, but first we’re going to get rid of that suit—just in case there are any more surprises in it.” He got a pair of scissors from the first aid kit and cut away enough of the suit so it would come off her when she was released. His mistrust of her was such that he tied her hands behind her anyway before releasing the pincers’ grip. But when he released it she slumped over and offered no resistance as he guided her to a fold-out seat just behind the co-pilot’s seat. Her under-suit garments consisted of what could be best described as white satin long johns. Stan paused a minute after placing her in the seat to admire her startlingly perfect figure. She was female all right. No doubt about that.

“Mmnh,” she moaned again. He grabbed a water container and moistened her lips. She strained at it so he let her have several long drinks. He wondered if she had suffered internal

injuries while clamped so long in those jaws. The drink revived her enough that she narrowed her gorgeous eyes at him and sat up. She fought the bonds that had her wrists tied together behind her for a moment then backed away and scowled at him, her eyes wide with a mixture of terror and hatred.

“Now just calm down. I’m not going to hurt you—not yet anyway. Here, have some more water.” As he approached her she kicked at him so hard he felt the wind of it ruffle his hair as he ducked.

“I said calm down!” His words had no effect as she fired another sharp karate-kick just grazing his cheek. Like a gunslinger from the Old West he whipped out his hand weapon and pointed it at her. “Get back over there! I’m warning you.” She stopped short. “Oh,” he said nodding toward the weapon. “So this is something you understand, huh?” However, instead of intimidated she seemed more to be woozy, as if the sudden exertion had overtaxed her. He seized the moment to grab another strap and tie it from the first one on her wrists to a handle on the bulkhead behind the seat where he had originally placed her. She struggled but only half-heartedly. She was obviously not feeling very well.

“Now, let’s start over. This is water. It apparently is okay with your system since it helped revive you a minute ago, so try some more. If you try kicking at me again so help me I’ll tie your feet to your hands. Now drink it.” He stood to one side of her, water container in one hand, weapon in the other. “I know you can’t understand what I’m saying, but I’ll say it anyway. Even if you did kick my teeth out, you’re tied to that bulkhead and can’t go anywhere, so sooner or later I’d end up shooting you. If you just calm down and relax you might stay alive a little longer. And you know what they say, ‘where there’s life, there’s hope.’” He laughed lightly to himself. “No, I guess you wouldn’t know what ‘they’ say, would you?”

She accepted the water as if forcing herself against her own will. As soon as she’d had enough she turned away, toward the wall, her eyes seething with loathing—definitely for Stan, perhaps for herself for having accepted anything from him.

“Okay, well, just let me know if you need anything,” he cracked as he went over and sat in the pilot’s seat. “You know, a cup of coffee, a magazine, something from our snack bar—just name it. It’s our goal to make your stay with us as pleasant as possible here at Murdering-Scum-Aliens Cruise Lines. I’ll just be over here trying to figure out where in the ever-lovin’ universe we are and what we do next.” He turned to the control panel.

“Sufferin’ Cygnus look at our speed.”

“Gail.”

“READY, STAN.”

“What will it take to get this thing slowed-down and stopped?”

“A FIFTEEN HOUR FORTY-ONE MINUTE MAXIMUM DECELERATION BURN
ON ALL REMAINING ENGINES.”

Stan felt the pit of his stomach tighten as he asked the next question. “Gail, what will that do to the remaining Reaction Catalyst?”

“AT THE RATE OF LOSS UNDER MAXIMUM-BURN PRESSURE, WE WILL
HAVE ONE POINT THREE-FIVE LITERS REMAINING.”

“One point thr—? Gail, will there be any way for us to then get back to Known Space?”

“NOT POSSIBLE GIVEN CURRENT CONDITIONS, STAN.”

Chapter 8

“Gail, what about redirecting our course instead of reversing it—making a huge U-turn to get us headed 180 degrees the other way. Can we reach Known Space that way?”

“NEGATIVE, SIR. THE REACTION CATALYST LOSS RATE WILL NOT PERMIT THAT MANEUVER.”

“Gail, what would it take to repair the leak?”

“ALL TECHNICAL READOUTS ARE VERY CLEAR THAT A HIGH-PRESSURE LEAK OF THIS NATURE AND LOCATION IS IRREPARABLE WITHOUT SPECIALIZED EQUIPMENT AVAILABLE ONLY IN PORT. SORRY STAN.”

He blew out his cheeks then drummed his fingers on the arm of the pilot’s seat for a moment. Then he sat up. “Okay, Gail, how long can I survive on present life-support?” He looked over at the Scylla, who was studying him intently. Quickly he added, “Correction, how long can two people survive on present life-support?”

“APPROXIMATELY FIVE HUNDRED HOURS, PLUS OR MINUS ONE PERCENT.”

Stan did a quick calculation. “That’s about three weeks. Gail, compute the distance we can travel in five hundred hours in all possible directions given present velocity and the need for us to decelerate for the final 15.5 hours. Then determine if there are any potentially inhabitable locations within that radius.”

“WORKING, STAN.”

Stan didn’t hold out much hope that Gail would find anything. Very little of this area of space had ever been as much as observed, much less explored. He then considered what better odds he might have if he could double the five hundred hours by eliminating one of the life-support consumers. He narrowed his eyes at the beautiful alien who had murdered his best

friend. Why should this evil being be permitted to live anyway? How many other best friends and kid sisters had she and her kind killed? Wantonly, unprovoked, these wicked creatures had brought decades of war and misery on an entire planet that wanted nothing more than to be left alone and at peace. Why should he allow her to live and reduce his own chances of survival? It wasn't like he could bring her in as a prisoner of war and let the intelligence boys try to get information out of her—he was not ever going to make it back. And no one was coming to rescue him. Or her either, for that matter. He let his mind fantasize about him drilling her with the Lector-Laser and pitching her lifeless corpse out into space as six-weeks later he landed on some distant inhabitable world. Alone.

He sat back slowly and frowned, his mind whirring. That word. “Alone.” The situation. No, it could not work that way. He looked into her eyes as a new perspective hit him. This was different. This was no longer the same old war, the same old us vs. the enemy. The loathing in her eyes softened ever so slightly as curiosity crept in.

“READY TO REPORT FINDINGS, STAN.”

“Go ahead Gail.”

“ONE INHABITABLE PLANET FOUND WITHIN DESCRIBED RANGE. IT IS IN A STAR SYSTEM KNOWN ONLY AS S447. AN UNMANNED PROBE WAS SENT TO THIS SYSTEM TWELVE YEARS AGO TO INVESTIGATE A RUMORED SCYLLAN OUTPOST. NO EVIDENCE OF SUCH AN OUTPOST WAS FOUND, BUT ONE EARTH-CLASS PLANET WAS DISCOVERED, S447-BETA, HAVING POINT NINE FIVE G'S GRAVITY, BREATHABLE AIR, MEAN TEMPERATURE OF TWENTY-SIX DEGREES CELSIUS AND SURFACE WATER PRESUMED POTABLE. NO ACTUAL LANDING WAS MADE.”

He was surprised and excited. “Gail, how long will it take to reach this planet?”

“APPROXIMATELY 471 HOURS ASSUMING COURSE HEADING MODIFICATIONS OCCUR IN TEN MINUTES.”

“Gail, it will take extra burn time to soft-land. Will the Reaction Catalyst be sufficient?”

“AFFIRMATIVE.”

“Gail, will there be enough left to leave the planet after landing?”

“NEGATIVE. ONLY SUFFICIENT TO OBTAIN A LOW, RAPIDLY DETERIORATING ORBIT.”

Stan took a deep breath. He was fully aware that this would be one of those decisions that would irrevocably alter the rest of his life—however brief that might be. “Okay, Gail. Set course for soft-landing on S447-Beta on my mark. Mark.”

The engines fired briefly and the ship could be felt to shift several degrees on the (-X, Y) axis.

“AYE, STAN. COURSE SET.”

Stan looked over at the Scylla who was studying him intently. “Too bad you don’t have any idea what’s going on. I just altered the future of both our lives, one way or the other.” She glared at him, her eyes following his every move as he turned the co-pilot’s seat around and faced her. “I guess we’re going to have to figure out a way to communicate,” he said. He stroked his beard as he thought about how to solve the communication problem. Suddenly a call of nature roused him and he entered the soft-partitioned latrine just beyond and across from the Scylla. He exited, still deep in thought about where to begin trying to teach the alien some simple words.

Highly agitated, she pulled and strained against her bonds. Her writhing and twisting were somewhat different than the brute-force tugging and yanking of her earlier efforts.

“Look, you may as well calm down,” he said. “You’re not going to break those straps or that bulkhead handle and we’re in for a long haul. So save your strength.”

She rolled her eyes then glared at him in exasperation and continued pulling in a specific direction. He frowned slightly. “You know, it almost looks like you’re trying to tell me something. Is there something you want me to do for you?”

She exhaled sharply with frustration.

“What? Do you need more water?” he asked while pantomiming drinking from a pretend cup. “Another drink? Is that what you’re trying to say to me?”

“Excretion,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I must use your toilet,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Oh, sure, I’ll—hey! You talked!”

“Of course,” she snapped.

“But I had no idea”—

“That is because you know nothing,” she groused. Her speech was clear and understandable but with a Russian-Germanic sounding accent. “Unfasten my hands.”

Slowly and somewhat in shock Stan untied her, then pointed the weapon at her. She rushed to the latrine. “You just use that, well there’s that sort of hose thing and well, you”—

She had already enclosed herself, apparently having no problem figuring out how to use the facility.

“Wow, this is great,” he called through the partition. “I mean, we can communicate. That’s really important given our circumstances. We’re all we’ve got. Each other, I mean, because—”

At that instant she leaped out at him and knocked the Lectro-Laser from his hand. They both sprang for it but she got to it a fraction of a second before him. She pointed it at him and backed away.

“Well, well,” he said nervously. “So you’re in command now. Before you kill me, maybe you could let me in on what you plan to do.”

“Return to Brankshtok.” She spoke as if he were an idiot to not already know that.

“Brank—? Oh, you mean your home world. What we call Scylla.”

“You call it that because you Earthers are hopelessly inferior beings and know nothing.”

He spoke quietly, trying to sound matter-of-fact and to keep her trigger-finger calm.

“Yeah? Well, that may be but this inferior being knows one thing. You ain’t taking this ship anywhere it’s not already committed to go. Right now that’s a little planet called S447-Beta.” He looked toward the command console. “Gail, voice command mode only.”

“AYE, STAN.”

“Now, Princess, go ahead and try to change course. There’s the joystick over there on the command console. You know how to use one, don’t you?”

The alien shook the weapon at him menacingly. “You think I do not know you have overridden manual controls? I am not an intellectual inferior like you, Earther.” She looked around and shouted into the air. “Gail!” No response. “Gail, plot new course for ‘Scyllan’ home world.” No response.

“It’s no use,” said Stan. “She will only respond to my voice. So if you kill me, you’re sunk.”

She fidgeted nervously. “Sunk? One cannot ‘sink’ in space.” She curled her lip in disgust. “You are so inferior. You know nothing. If this craft is headed for a planet as you say, I will simply kill you and go there alone and await my comrades.”

“No you won’t—go on alone, I mean.

“Gail.”

“AYE, STAN.”

“No!” shouted the alien. “No more commands!”

He backed away with his hands up like a robbery victim. “No commands. Just listen.

“Gail, what happens if my life is terminated?”

“IMMEDIATE EXECUTION OF SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE.”

“I trust you know what that means, right Princess?”

She looked a bit flustered, raising her volume. “What is this name you call me? I am not of any decadent royal lineage. I am also not afraid to be destroyed as long as you also die.”

“One Scyllan death for one ‘Earther’ death. A pawn traded for a pawn. That’s only a draw. Not a very heroic way to go, is it? Besides, as long as this ship is intact, you stand the possibility of getting it back to your home world, right? Think what a prize that would be. Wouldn’t your military complex love to dissect one of these? Find out what makes it tick? Find and exploit its weaknesses? You’d be the greatest hero your world has ever known. The one who single-handedly brought victory to her people. I’d say taking a chance on that happening is a lot better than having your molecules blown all over space, wouldn’t you, Princess?”

“Stop using that term for me!” She was obviously greatly agitated that his suggestion made more sense than hers.

“Okay, okay,” he said trying to calm her. “I only use that name because I don’t know yours. Mine is Stan. Stan Jericoff.”

“I do not care what you call yourself. You are an inferior being worth only being destroyed along with the rest of your vile human race.”

“Fine, whatever. But what, may I ask, should I call you?”

“Call me nothing! Do not speak with me! You are all vermin not worthy of being permitted to address a Shtokian.”

“Shtokian,” he said slowly. “That’s how you refer to yourselves. I never thought about what you call yourselves.”

“That is because you know nothing.”

“Shtokians” he repeated. “Very well then, I will no longer refer to your race as Scyllans but as Shtokians.”

“Do not use our name. It is profane coming from your disgusting lips. It is like an intestinal parasite claiming to be part of my body. It is loathsome to me even to hear you speak of our magnificent race.” She shook the weapon at him. “You are never to use it again.”

Never had Stan encountered such pure, unabated hatred directed at him. Getting in a dogfight with a Scyllan ship was a military encounter; each seeking victory over an unseen enemy. But this was deeply personal revulsion focused on the human race as a whole and specifically him as an individual. He no longer felt that detached amusement at her overzealous patriotic fanaticism. In his mind a line had been crossed from curiosity about this beautiful alien woman to outrage at her groundless loathing for him. He felt his temper boil over.

“All right then, *Princess*,” he said through clenched teeth. “Have it your way I’ll never say the word SHTOKIAN again. But I’m through playing around with you pointing that thing at me.” He crossed to the other side of the cabin.

“Halt!” she said shaking the weapon menacingly. “Do not go there. What are you doing? I warn you!”

He punched-in a code on a keypad to the left of a panel and another code on an identical keypad to its right. The panel slid open. “Put that weapon in here.”

She shook her head and backed up slightly.

“Look,” he said his voice rising to coincide with his rising anger. “You keep waving that thing around and you’re either going to blow a hole in the ship’s hull or kill me. Either way we’re both dead. Now put it away. In here. Now!”

“You think I am such a fool? You will simply take it out and kill me with it.”

He rolled his eyes in exasperation. “See this button above the keypad? It has the word ‘set’ on it. Now that the panel has been opened you can set whatever code you want on your pad I can do the same on mine. That way both of us have to key-in to get it open. This is used for certain dual-custody orders. Neither of us will have access to it unless the other allows it.”

She curled her lip at him. “I do not trust you, Earther. You will have your computer open it for you when I am asleep.”

He started toward her. “Y’know? I don’t care whether you trust me or not. If you don’t put it in there then either I’m going to take it away from you and put it in there or you’re going to shoot me and blow us both to smithereens. And, quite frankly, at this moment that actually sounds preferable to being cooped-up in here with you for much longer. So put the weapon in there! It’s the only option you have that makes any reasonable sense. Now do it!”

She had the look of a treed mountain lion. “I will wound you; in the extremities—first a leg then an arm. I will cause you much pain but not kill you.”

“All right, enough of this,” he hissed. “Gail!”

“READY, STAN.”

He glared directly into the alien’s eyes. “Gail, initiate 15-second self-destruct sequence on my mark, SDS-command-immediate authorization Samson.”

“AYE, SIR. SELF-DESTRUCT-SEQUENCE AUTHORIZATION
ACKNOWLEDGED.”

“Mark!”

“SEQUENCE INITIATED. FOURTEEN SECONDS TO SELF-DESTRUCT.”

“It’s your choice, Princess,” he said coldly. “If your plan is to wound me and watch me writhe in agony, you ain’t gonna get to enjoy it for long. Now put...the weapon...away.”

Chapter 9

The alien's chest heaved as her fury and her powers of logical deduction battled within her.

"TEN SECONDS TO SELF-DESTRUCT."

"Make it stop!" she ordered.

"Only one thing's going to stop it. Put the weapon in that compartment." Knowing how stubborn and hate-filled she was, he was silently saying a final prayer in anticipation of seeing Jesus in just a very few seconds.

"FIVE SECONDS TO SELF-DESTRUCT...FOUR..."

Finally she jammed the Lectro-Laser into the compartment.

"THREE..."

"Gail, 'salvation,'" shouted Stan.

"CODEWORD ACKNOWLEDGED. SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE
TERMINATED."

He blew out his cheeks and looked at the alien. "Wise choice; thanks," he rasped out of his dry throat. He pressed the "close" button on the panel. He then positioned his body so she couldn't see, hit "set" and entered a code number.

"Okay, now you," he said and turned his back. "You done?" he asked after a couple of minutes.

"Yes," came her voice from across the cabin. He turned and saw her staring at him in confusion. It turned to shock as he went back over to his seat.

"Why do you not simply kill me now? Why do you prolong this?"

He took a deep breath and spoke in a voice weary with exasperation. “Listen, whatever-your-name-is, let me recap it for you. We are alone on a crippled ship headed for a section of space virtually unknown to either of our people. There is zero chance of some other ship—from either side—just happening by and it’s much too far out of the way for anyone to come looking for us. Our respective armies have much more important things to tend to. Besides, we have no ability to contact anyone to let them know where we are even if they cared. Meanwhile, what little odds of survival we have are going to require all the skills and energy you and I combined can muster. Assuming by some miracle this crate actually does land us safely wherever it is we’re going, and the air really is breathable, and the climate doesn’t burn or freeze us to death, and there truly is potable water, and we somehow can find something to use as a food source, and we manage to devise some sort of shelter, and we don’t get ravaged by some kind of fatal creepy-crawly and we finally are able to survive, then we can always kill each other later if we really want to, okay? But for now, hate it or not, we’re all we’ve got.”

“I will survive far better on my own. You will only be a drain on resources while providing no benefit. You are worse than useless because you are inferior and you know nothing.”

Stan gave a slight chuckle and shook his head. He had no idea how long they would be able to survive, but it was sure going to *seem* like a long time. “Well, Princess, you may be right, I might not know much. But I do know that I’m famished. How about something to eat?”

The look of abject disgust that crossed her face actually surpassed any he had seen thus far. “I would die before I ingest anything you have touched, Earther.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He grabbed a meal packet from the ration compartment and put it into the reconstituter-warmer. After a few seconds he opened the packet and began to squeeze the food into his mouth. She watched him carefully while pretending not to. Although designed not to release too much food aroma, some always did manage to escape the packets. Stan could tell by her reaction exactly when it reached her. He knew she was every bit as hungry as he had been. He could see her forcing herself to avoid showing any interest. He got another packet and held it up, speaking softly to her.

“You’re going to have to eat sooner or later. We’ll be stuck on this ship for weeks—much too long for you to fast. No sense in you getting to the brink of starvation and then eating anyhow, is there?”

She defiantly turned her face toward the wall.

He started to put the packet away then turned back toward her. “Look, Princess, you had the choice to die a few minutes ago and chose to live instead. It is completely irrational for you to now starve yourself to death. You do understand rational, reasoned logic, don’t you?”

“I understand more than you ever could. And I told you to stop calling me that name.”

“All right, fine. I’d be more than happy to call you by your name. Only you’ll have to tell me what it is first. So what is it?”

She looked away from him and spoke very quietly. “That is because you know nothing. It is D’melle.”

“Dim-MELL?”

She nodded slightly. He was surprised at the femininity of the name. Given what little he had heard of her language he had expected something guttural—all hard consonants and no vowels. “Hmm. D’melle. That’s very, um, nice. A very good name. Now, D’melle let me fix this food packet for you.”

After preparing it he gave it to her and was as amazed as she was at her reaction to her first taste. It was followed quickly by an ample mouthful. Between chews she asked, “What do you call this?”

He read the label on his own identical packet. “Chicken. This one’s called chicken ala king.”

“Mmph,” she nodded while eating another mouthful. “Tastes like aboontja.”

Stan laughed heartily and nodded. “You know, I would have bet on that. So, tell me about yourself, D’melle, about your planet, your people.” He anticipated that her having given her name, spoken one civil sentence and filled her stomach would have eased her antagonism. Instead she stared at him as if he were insane.

“I will tell you nothing. You think I will reveal our secrets to an Earther? You will get no information from me, ever. You obviously know nothing about us, about what noble warriors we are or you would not even think to interrogate me.”

“I’m not interrogating you,” he said. “You said it yourself, I know nothing about your people. I’m not asking for any military secrets just some basic facts. Like, are all of your people blond with those startling violet eyes? Most humans believed you were a race of robots since we’d never seen you or heard you communicate.”

“That is because our discretion and methods are so superior to yours. You with your broadcasts all over the system—we know everything about you and you know nothing about us. It is clear evidence of our superiority. We know all we need to about your kind, Earther, and it revolts us. But I will tell you nothing. You think you can get me talking about meaningless things and then pry into our intelligence, but you are a fool. Such trickery is useless against me just as your trickery in battle will also prove useless. It is your only weapon and serves only to reveal that you are aware of your weakness.”

“Now, you see. That would be a perfect opening for me to try to engage you in a discussion of battle tactics. That is, if I were trying to get information from you. But I’m not. What use would it be? Neither of us is ever getting back into this war. Neither of us is ever going to see a squadron or anyone we know ever again. What good would gaining secret information be without any way to share it? Face it, for us the war is over.”

“Hah,” said D’melle turning away from him. “You know nothing. My ship issued a continuous distress beacon from the moment it was damaged until it destructed. My comrades will find us and take you and your ship captive.” She glared intently at him. “Then do you know what will happen to you?”

“I’m on pins and needles for you to tell me.”

“You make no sense,” she said. “No matter, I will tell you anyway. They will strap you down and cut you open and remove your organs one by one while you watch in horror. And I will watch and listen to your cowardly screams with great delight.”

“What? And not wield the scalpel yourself? How disappointing.”

“Humph. You pretend to be so brave when we both know it is false courage. You will crawl on your knees and beg me to have mercy and kill you quickly when they come.”

Stan sighed loudly. “Okay, I guess worthless conversation is better than no conversation at all—maybe. Let’s think about this for a few minutes, shall we? First, as I’ve already said, both our armies have better things to do than look for one distressed fighter. Remove a valuable fighting vessel from patrol to go on a wild goose chase halfway across the galaxy after a damaged—possibly destroyed—ship? Never happen; no way.”

D’melle flashed a sly grin. “That is where you show your ignorance and prove that you know nothing.” She lifted her chin and spoke with great ceremony, “Gurntchka taw jroon gurntchka!”

Stan raised his eyebrows in expectation.

She translated. "A comrade never abandons a comrade."

"Is that like your motto or something?"

"It is our rule of honor, 'Gurntchka taw jroon gurntchka.' No Shtokian would ever violate it. No one. Ever. Of course, your kind would know nothing about honor so this makes no sense to you."

"Actually it makes a great deal of sense. But it doesn't change the situation any. Words of honor notwithstanding, let's put your theory to the test.

"Gail?"

"READY, STAN."

"Gail, is long range D-TECT working?"

"IT IS UNDAMAGED AND OPERATING NORMALLY."

"Good. Gail, do a 360-degree scan at maximum range for spacecraft of any kind."

There was a brief pause. "SCAN RESULTS: NOTHING FOUND."

"Gail, thanks."

"YOU'RE QUITE WELCOME, STAN."

"Well, at least somebody around here has manners," he quipped.

"This is meaningless. Your inferior equipment's faulty findings are useless."

"Okay, let's go back to logic then. Suppose, although no one's doing so now, eventually a search party does set out to find you. They'll go to your beacon's last transmission and find residue of your ship's self-destruction. End of search."

"Your inferior detection methods may not be able to, but ours would find that this ship continued on."

"No question—so would ours. But why would *your* people waste their time following *my* ship? They certainly wouldn't guess that you're on it—that's never happened before. Plus they would see it's headed off into oblivion—so far from any fighting, this ship is as harmless as if it had been destroyed. Not worth the cost of pursuing it. Not to mention that once they found me they would have to expect that at best they'd get to watch me blow this thing to bits. It would be a fool's errand. I'm sorry D'melle but I'm afraid your comrades are not coming, and neither are mine."

She folded her arms and turned toward the wall. “You know nothing.” After a moment he heard her repeat softly, “Gurntchka taw jroon gurntchka.”

Stan shook his head slowly and then yawned. “Gail, chronometer.”

“TWENTY-TWO THIRTY-EIGHT HOURS.”

“Whoa, way past my bedtime. No wonder I’m so bushed.” He rubbed his still-throbbing head and looked over at D’melle. We have these sleep stations that strap us in so we don’t float around all over the place. This one’s mine and that one’s—” He hung his head and had difficulty swallowing. “Never mind, you take mine.” He fastened himself into Derek’s. He glanced around for sharp objects or anything that might be used as a weapon. He thought it better than fifty-fifty that he would awake with a knife at his throat, or perhaps not awaken at all.

“Gail, subdue lighting.”

“AYE, STAN.” The cabin darkened and D’melle, who had been ignoring him, finally took notice. Stan pointed to the sleep station across from him, but she just looked away. His sleep was fitful until the fourth time he awoke and saw that D’melle was strapped into the other sleep station. At last he slept more soundly.

He awoke and saw that she was no longer in the sleep station. It took a few seconds for him to comprehend what that meant. He looked around and saw her silhouette against the console lights and displays in the cockpit. Silently he unfastened the straps of the sleep station and moved up behind her.

“Finding anything interesting?” Although he spoke quietly she was so startled she spun 180 degrees before flailing at him and raining a plethora of Shtokian curses upon him.

“Easy, easy. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have frightened you like that.”

“I am not frightened,” she said quickly. “Nothing you or any Earther could do would ever frighten me or any other Shtokian. We are without fear, especially from ones as inferior as you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he griped wearily. “We’re so inferior, we know nothing, you’re all wonderful—y’know, you’re going to wear that out. In fact I’m getting pretty fed-up with that same old tired line. Am I going to have to listen to that stuff the entire time we’re together?”

“Hah, so it is difficult for you to hear about your inferiority. It must be painful to know that you are—what is the word?—pathetic compared to the least of us.”

“Yeah? Well I got a news flash for you. You continually saying it doesn’t make it so. In fact it sounds a lot to me like you’re trying to convince yourself. You keep hoping that if you claim to be so superior often enough maybe it will come true. Well it hasn’t, it won’t and you aren’t.”

“You Earthers are as worms compared to us, such superior warriors are we. When we first found you, you could not even travel outside your own planetary system. You are primitives with no knowledge and no hope against us.”

“Oh really? Then maybe you can explain why you so-called superior beings are losing the war.”

“Losing the—you must be in space too long. Is this the propaganda you are being told? Only someone who knows nothing would believe such a ridiculous lie.”

“I don’t have to listen to propaganda,” said Stan.

“Gail,” he said into the air.

“READY, STAN.”

“Gail, display the kill readout on the video screen.”

“AYE, STAN.”

“Okay, Miss Know-it-all, take a look at that. Forty-four straight kills myself including yours and that ain’t propaganda, that’s first-hand knowledge. The last 40 of those were with my current squadron without the loss of any ships so you can multiply that times four. Figuring two crew members destroyed in each Scyllan ship, that’s over 300 of your comrades turned into space dust. Now figure the number of squadrons throughout the entire battle zone and you do the math—your ‘superior’ race is losing the war, lady. I bet you can’t remember the last hit you scored on an Earth ship.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Yours,” she said.

Chapter 10

“Humph. Yeah, thanks for reminding me that you killed my best friend. You want to know what kind of guy Derek was? He was so tenderhearted he actually worried that you might not be a race of robots. It bothered him that we might be killing living beings.” Stan’s eyes began to puddle. “He, he was like a brother—in fact he was my brother, but in a way you could never understand. Here, let me show you something.

“Gail.”

“READY, STAN.”

“Show video record of our last battle’s aftermath.”

“AYE, STAN.”

The screen showed Stan donning his space helmet and waiting to open the hatch to the weapons module. Then it showed him bringing Derek’s body down and removing his suit.

D’melle sighed loudly and asked, “What is the point of this?”

“Shut up!” roared Stan. “You killed him; you’re going to at least watch his funeral.”

Her brow furrowed as she watched Stan fire his Lectro-Laser at Derek’s body. “You accuse me? You killed him. It is right there on the recording. You are shooting him.”

“Gail! Pause!”

“AYE, STAN.”

“I was trying to revive him,” he said angrily. “And you call me ignorant. Key in your code.” He went to the keypad compartment and entered his own code as she stood watching in confusion. “Key it in!”

“What are you going to do?” she asked warily.

“I’m going to teach you something. Can you learn?”

“I can learn more than you can even think of.”

“Then prove it. Open your side.” She complied, her eyes filled with suspicion.

“Pick up the weapon,” he said. She did so reluctantly. “Now look at the back of it, above the grip. See that sort of knob thing?” She nodded. “Push it in and twist it one-quarter turn to the right. There, now that setting sends a jolt into the person you shoot that works very much like a defibrillator. Many times, if the person was not hit directly, this will restart his heart and revive him.” He became quieter. “In this case, unfortunately, it didn’t work.

“Okay, put the weapon back in the compartment,” he said. She stood there for a long moment. He could tell she was wondering if there was a way to parlay this new knowledge into an advantage for her situation. Apparently she decided the time was not right and placed the weapon into the compartment and hit “Close.”

The recording then was continued until it showed him casting Derek’s body into space.

“Gail, stop playback.”

“Very informative,” said D’melle dryly. “If only I had a recording of your shot killing my comrade we could both weep over them.” She curled her lip at him. “Such behavior disgusts me and dishonors your comrade. Was he a warrior or not? If he was then have the decency to let him die like a warrior and stop this sniveling. Though you killed my comrade in much the same way, I would never disgrace her with such shameful actions. She was a brave, noble warrior who died in battle—to die otherwise is to die a coward. Warriors fight, warriors die. It is the way of war.”

“Listen to this voice,” said Stan. “Gail, chronometer.”

“OH SIX FORTY-ONE HOURS.”

“Gail, Thanks.”

“YOU’RE QUITE WELCOME, STAN.”

“Do you know why the onboard voice response computer unit is named Gail and has that voice?”

“No, and I have no interest.”

“Well too bad. You’re going to hear why anyway. Gail was my kid sister. She was just fourteen; just starting to become a beautiful young lady. She was planning to join up and become a pilot like her big brother soon as she was old enough. Only she never got the chance. One of your fire raids, manned by your brave, noble warriors exhibited every vestige of their

honor by blowing away a defenseless school filled with innocent children. Gail and 800 others were murdered. My, what courageous warriors you Scyllans are. You're beneath contempt."

"They would have become warriors; you said it yourself," she said. "Besides, one of your unmanned weapons killed both my parents when it destroyed four of our hospitals. How honorable was that?"

"You Scyllans or Shtokians or whatever you call yourselves deserve destruction. You brought it all on yourselves. All we've ever wanted was to be left in peace. You started this war without any reason."

"We have a reason."

"Oh, and what might that be?"

"It is so very simple," she said emphatically. "I have told you over and over. It is because you are inferior."

"You attempt unprovoked annihilation on the entire population of an unsuspecting planet because you think them 'inferior'?"

"Certainly, only we do not think you are inferior, we know it."

"Even if that were true, which it isn't, how could that be justification for the wholesale slaughter of innocent people?"

"You cannot understand because you know nothing and are inferior."

"No, no. Don't try hiding behind that 'I can't understand' stuff. How about you just try me. See if you can explain this in terms that an inferior such as I can comprehend. Or are you not up to the task?"

She rolled her eyes in frustration. "You have loathsome creatures on your planet called cockroaches, do you not?"

"Yes."

"You despise them and attempt to eradicate them whenever you see them. And you do not destroy only the visible ones, you seek to destroy them all, the entire nest. Is this not true?"

"Yes, but that's if they invade my house. I don't fly halfway around the Earth just to find some and destroy them."

"But what if the home next to yours was infested with them—billions of them?" she asked. "Would you not destroy them to prevent invasion of your home?"

"We are not insects! We are sentient beings, not so very different from you, apparently."

“How can you say this?” she said. “You are an infestation on your planet as different from us as cockroaches are from you.”

He shook his head at her stubbornness. “But we represented no threat to your world. You said yourself we were only very primitive in terms of space flight when you attacked.”

“In less than thirty of your years you went from primitive explorers to warriors. Plus for decades we had listened to your signals searching for civilizations on other worlds. You would have found and sought to conquer us eventually. It was inevitable.”

“So you were afraid of us,” he said, knowing it would set her off.

“We fear nothing! Certainly not inferiors like you.”

“If I understand your philosophy, you believe it is perfectly right for any people with greater ingenuity and military might to completely destroy a lesser one. That means if beings from another world with an army twice your size, twice as skilled, with twice the firepower, and ships that were twice as fast and maneuverable, if such an army found you it would be okay with you for them to annihilate Brankshtok. In fact, you would believe it their duty to do so. Right?”

She waved him off. “You know nothing. There could never be such an army. We are the most superior. There is no purpose in discussing it further. It is like speaking to a cockroach.”

He exhaled a loud sigh and shook his head slowly. “Well, I can agree with one thing you’ve said. There really is no purpose in discussing this with you further. Anyway, this cockroach wants some breakfast. You hungry?”

“I can manage on my own. I do not need you to feed me.”

“Look, I’m going to make some for myself anyway, I might as well get yours ready as well—unless, of course, you think I’m going to try to poison you.” Just at the moment that didn’t sound like such a bad idea.

She turned away in a huff. He let out another loud sigh. “Okay, here, come on over and let me show you where the food packets are and how to work this gizmo.”

“Gizmo? What is this word?”

He laughed lightly. “Just a meaningless word for any piece of machinery.”

“I do not need instruction in using machinery.”

“Whatever you say, but at least watch me once, okay?”

They ate in silence, Stan's mind churning over and over their earlier argument. Finally he could hold it in no longer.

"D'melle, I know we said there was no use our continuing our last discussion, but I'm trying to understand what motivates the people of your world to behave as you do."

She studied her food packet and shrugged. "You cannot understand. You are inferior."

He rolled his eyes. "We searched the heavens, yes. But it was out of curiosity, the desire to learn, to know if there was life elsewhere. Had we found a less advanced alien planet we would have been amazed, intrigued and excited. I am not so blind as to think that the greedy among us would not exploit them and even conquer them for the sake of some form of gain. But I cannot imagine even our most unscrupulous people destroying them simply because we could.

"But wherever you encounter those less powerful than you, you feel it your obligation to annihilate them. No attempt to befriend them, to understand them, even to coexist with them—just murder them in cold blood. If that is honor, if that is nobility, I want no part of it."

"How you talk. You Earthers would do exactly the same if you could find beings inferior to you. I have seen your broadcasts, I have read of your wars. You slaughtered each other for countless centuries just as we did. But we eventually rose above such things. Instead we became one united people fighting side-by-side against a common foe."

"You mean you turned on us to stop yourselves from killing each other?"

"It is very effective as you yourself have seen. You no longer fight among yourselves, true? It is the only way to have internal peace."

Now he understood their motivation. *All based on a faulty premise*, he thought. "No it isn't," he said.

"Oh?" she said. "By what other means can one have peace?"

He swallowed loudly. "God," he said. "By turning one's life over to Him. If only more people on my planet had done so they could have found peace long ago."

"God? That is an ancient, obsolete myth about a superior being, is it not? Hah, maybe a premonition of us!"

"No!" he yelled fiercely. "Not superior, *supreme*. He is the God of all the universe, even of you, whether you acknowledge Him or not."

"Humph. For One so supreme there is only the slightest of references to Him in all the information we found about your kind. This God must not be so important."

“The vast majority of my people do not believe in Him. But that does not change the fact of His reality. As I said, if more people on my world had turned to Him, peace could have been ours ages ago.”

“This is also something we discarded years ago. All this teaching about peace and infinite existence—and Hilundt, God’s Son, with his loving the enemies and turning the other cheek, it is ridiculous.”

Stan stared at her dumbstruck. “What did you just say?”

Chapter 11

She frowned. “I was talking about the myth of Hilundt. It is only something inferiors believe.”

“You mean there are believers among your people?”

She curled her lip and spoke with what appeared to be embarrassment. “There are a very few of our people who are inf—that is, not as superior as the rest. They stubbornly hold to these ancient myths in secret, knowing that those of us who are enlightened would not tolerate such thinking.”

Stan began scurrying around, leaving D’melle perplexed. Finally he found what he had been seeking—his pocket New Testament. He flipped a few pages and then hurried over to her.

“Here,” he said excitedly. “Listen to this:

‘You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

‘You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.’”

“Yes, yes,” she said. “I have heard these sayings before, but they are only the myths of Hilundt as I have already told you. They are nonsense.”

“But don’t you see? These are not the teachings of Hilundt. They are the teachings of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God—the God I worship!”

She looked confused. “What are you saying?”

“You recognized these words. But I could not possibly have read any sayings of Hilundt. Until you came aboard this vessel no person on earth had ever heard or read so much as one Scyllan word. In fact the few words I’ve heard from you represent the sum total of our planet’s knowledge of your language. What I just read came from the lips of God’s Son, spoken to our people thousands of years ago. Yet they match what was spoken by God’s Son to your people. How long ago did this Hilundt live on your world?”

Her face showed alarm. “I am not certain. Perhaps two or three thousand years ago.”

“Do you realize what this means?”

She swallowed hard. “It—it means nothing,” she said.

“Nothing? What do you know about this Hilundt? About his life, his teachings?”

She fidgeted uncomfortably. “Very little. He is a myth and the stories about him are foolishness believed only by those unworthy to be warriors. All I know of these tales are the few incidental references found in the history of ancients who held to these myths.”

“Let’s try a few. Was there a claim that He was born of a virgin?”

“Hah, yes, and how ridic”— She stopped short and became even more agitated.

“How about this one. Was He believed to be able to heal the sick, perform miracles and even raise the dead?”

“I—I might have heard this, I cannot say for sure.” Body language told Stan she had indeed heard that but would not admit it.

“And is He supposed to have allowed Himself to be killed as a way of paying the price for all your world’s offenses against God?”

“I do not know. We only hear these things, a little here and there, we do not listen to them.”

“And do they say He arose from the dead?”

“Yes, yes, I have heard this but it is not true. It cannot be true.”

“That He ascended to His heavenly Father, God?”

“I do not know, I tell you. I do not know these things.”

“Let me read one more small passage to you:

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

“Sound familiar?”

Her voice was tight. “Even if it does, of what importance is that?”

“D’melle, I think you know why it is important. How do you explain that our two worlds—who knew nothing about each other thousands of years ago—had exactly the same Person come doing and saying the same miraculous things and claiming to be God’s Son?”

“It...is...coincidence,” she tried unconvincingly.

“Coincidence? Come on now, you know all this cannot possibly be coincidence. It can only be explained one way. That these accounts are true and are according to the express plan of God in both our worlds. Which also means that there *is* a God—the One His Son spoke about.”

“No! I will not believe this. It cannot be true. Do you mean that Shtokians and Earthers are related? This is impossible.”

“Not related, D’melle, at least not exactly. Only in that we have the same Creator.”

“But we have been taught all our lives that this God concept was only a fable. All but a tiny few understand this. Am I now to believe that all these intellectuals, all I have been taught, that all of these are wrong? I cannot. I will not.”

“D’melle, most of my world doesn’t believe in God either. Over the years they have been teaching that God is not real and only a remnant of Earth’s population recognizes the reality of Him and His Son. But we now are privy to information that—” he suddenly realized what he was about to say— “that no one else on either planet knows. In fact, this moves us from faith supported by evidence, to faith supported by near-certainty. If those who taught you and me not to believe knew this information that we have just discovered they would be forced to rethink their entire concept of life itself, their whole value system.”

He looked at D’melle to see her reaction, but she had ceased to listen. She had strapped herself into the co-pilot’s seat and was turned away from him toward the wall. Her face was

buried in her hands. He was not quite clear why she was as upset as she was, but decided to back off and let it rest until she had a chance to mellow a little.

To his surprise that mellowing did not occur. Day after day she sat in silence, rising only to relieve herself and take an occasional drink of water, eating nothing. She did not even move to the sleep station but remained where she was from lights-down to lights-up. Stan's efforts to converse with her were ignored as if he were not present. He tried music of all varieties, describing the positives and negatives of each and asking if Brankshtok had anything similar, but to no effect. He gradually came to understand that, while the discovery of their two peoples' common link to God confirmed his most cherished beliefs, it wreaked havoc on hers. It was a huge weight heaped onto her already burdensome circumstances. Though understandable, her depressed state was threatening to drag him down with it. By the eighth day he had become desperate.

"D'melle, I can't stand this any longer. I'm going to go stir crazy if this keeps up, and I'm not just a little worried about you. Now listen, I've got an idea. How about we each engage in learning something, to stimulate our minds? I'll teach you how the ship operates and you can teach me, um, your language. Yeah, that's it, teach me Shtokian. I'll admit I'm no linguist but I suspect you're a very apt teacher, right?"

There was no appreciable response.

"Okay, here. Gail."

"READY, STAN"

"Gail, enable console command access."

"CONSOLE ACCESS ENABLED, AYE."

"Gail, grant console and voice command rights to passenger D'melle, authority level two. Authorization code 'Keys to the Kingdom.'"

At this D'melle perked up and watched him intently.

"AYE, STAN. LEVEL TWO COMMAND AUTHORITY IN PROCESS. PLEASE INPUT NAME DIMMELL ON CONSOLE."

He addressed her gently. "D'melle? I don't know how you spell your name. Of course, come to think of it, you might not know how to spell it in our language either. Or do you? Can you write in our language as well as speak it?" He gestured at the console keyboard. "Can you type?"

His barrage of questions was met by a deep sigh from D'melle. She unstrapped herself and went directly to the keyboard. She typed in D-'-m-e-l-l-e.

"INPUT FOR NAME D'MELLE ACKNOWLEDGED. ENTER ADMINISTRATOR SECURITY CODE VIA CONSOLE, STAN."

Stan gently scooted D'melle aside and typed in a password that did not redisplay.

"SECURITY CODE INPUT ACKNOWLEDGED. LEVEL TWO COMMAND AUTHORITY GRANTED TO 'D'MELLE.'"

Stan looked at her and smiled. "There, now you can operate the ship either manually or through Gail." Though she obviously understood and was at least involved, it was evident her deep melancholy remained.

"D'MELLE. I AM CONSTRUCTING A VOICE PRINT MAP FROM EARLIER CONVERSATIONS. PLEASE PRONOUNCE THE WORDS LISTED ON THE CONSOLE ALOUD TO FILL-IN VOICE PRINT GAPS."

A group of about 50 words appeared such as marry, merry, Mary, zither, wild, sparse, jungle and virtue. D'melle spoke each one.

"VOICE PRINT MAP FOR D'MELLE COMPLETE. WELCOME ABOARD, CREWMEMBER D'MELLE."

D'melle looked over at Stan who nodded that she should respond. She furrowed her brow slightly and said quietly, "Thank you."

Stan shook his head and whispered, "You have to say her name first so she'll know you're not talking to me—or, like I sometimes do, to yourself."

Her frown deepened a bit but she tried again. "Gail, thank you."

"YOU'RE QUITE WELCOME, D'MELLE."

The mere process of speaking and interacting had seemed to enliven her spirits a bit, so Stan jumped at the opportunity.

"Now, try a command," said Stan. "Go ahead, ask Gail for something. Like maybe"—

"Gail," interrupted D'melle.

"READY, D'MELLE."

"How long until our expected arrival at target destination?"

"ELEVEN DAYS, NINETEEN HOURS, FIFTY-FOUR MINUTES."

"Hey, not bad, huh?" said Stan, perhaps too enthusiastically.

D'melle stared at him with a strangely resigned look then climbed back into the co-pilot seat.

"Would you like to try out the controls?" asked Stan. "Just be sure you don't take us off course."

She turned to him very slowly with a faraway look in her eyes. "Please, could you get me a food packet?"

The question—and its politeness—took him aback for a second. "Food packet? Oh, oh sure, you must be starving. 'Atta girl, yeah, get some food into you." He went over to the ration compartment. "Y'know, you had me worried there for a while. Um, what would you like? There's—"

Suddenly D'melle shouted rapid-fire, "Gail, initiate immediate self-destruct sequence on my mark, SDS-command-immediate authorization Samson!"

Chapter 12

“COMMAND DISCARDED, INSUFFICIENT AUTHORITY LEVEL. I’M SORRY, D’MELLE, YOU DO NOT HAVE PROPER AUTHORIZATION TO ISSUE THAT COMMAND.”

Stan’s shoulders slumped. “Nice try,” he said bitterly. “That’s quite a memory you’ve got.”

D’melle jammed the heels of her hands into her eyes. “I should never have allowed you to take me captive. I do not belong here. I am a traitor. I would be better-off dead!” It was clear she was crying.

Stan rushed over and grabbed her by the arms. “Stop it!” he shouted. As she twisted to free herself from his grasp, he shook her. “WILL...YOU... listen to me? You are *not* my captive! Do you hear me? There are no captives here. And no captors either. Only survivors. There are no ‘Earthers’ on this ship; no Shtokians. We are not enemies.” She pulled away and looked at him as if he’d gone mad.

“It’s true,” he continued. “You and I are not enemies. Not anymore. That war between Earth and Brankshtok, that’s a war in a different universe, a different dimension. Those combatants no longer exist for us. They belong to a time and space we can never return to. Where we are and where we’re going there are no Shtokian fighter craft for me to engage. There are no Earth spacecraft for you to hunt. There is no war.” She looked unconvinced.

“Listen carefully and give me your honest answer,” he said. “Suppose tomorrow, through some amazing circumstance, the Shtokians realized total victory; completely annihilating the human race. What effect would that have on you tomorrow?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what would you do differently because of their victory?”

“I would celebrate,” she said simply.

“No you wouldn’t,” he countered. “You couldn’t possibly celebrate, because you would not know it had happened. D’melle, you would never, ever know that it happened, not for the rest of your life. Nor would you mourn if the opposite occurred and Earth won. You would be completely unaware. Neither of us will ever hear the outcome of that war. As I said, it may as well be a part of some parallel universe. Right now, this is our universe. This little battered spacecraft hurtling through unknown space, this is our entire world: population two—you and me.” She averted her eyes from him. The look on her face told him his message was finally starting to penetrate.

He softened his tone. “D’melle, I am not your enemy. I am one-half the population of your world, and—” his voice broke as he spoke “—and I need you. More importantly, *you* need you. You need that warrior with the unconquerable spirit that lives within you. Suicide, trying to blow yourself up, is a disgraceful, dishonorable act reserved for sniveling cowards.” Her eyes flashed and she leapt from her seat causing him to back away and speak more quickly. “And if I’ve learned one thing about you, it is that you are *not* a coward. Your problem is that you’ve missed who the real enemy is.”

She stopped. “Real enemy?”

“Yes. Earth, Brankshtok, they are not our enemies; we can do nothing to affect them for good or ill. Our enemy is out there, all around us, waiting. Waiting to get its icy grip on us, and only our combined courage and determination will conquer it. Our enemy is death. Will you, a noble, proud warrior surrender to it so easily? It waits for us outside this tiny enclosure. It waits for us on the planet we’re bound for. Unless we join forces against this common enemy, just like your warring factions on Brankshtok did, we will not achieve our victory, our goal: survival. Personally, I’m weary of all this ‘Brankshtok is superior; no, Earth is superior’ stuff. It no longer has anything to do with us. I’m no longer a part of the Earth military—I have no weapons and no military foe even if I did. In fact, I no longer can claim Earth as my home world. My home world is this ship and, hopefully soon, S447-Beta.”

“You are becoming a deserter?” she asked incredulously.

“I have become a statistic. Officially, missing in action and presumed dead. And there is no way to correct that conclusion. It was made clear when this mission started there would be no

rescue if any of our fighters got into trouble. Now I'm *persona non grata*. So in a sense the Earth military has deserted me. Instead I belong to a new army. The Stan Jericoff and D'melle army. Our mission? Survival. Will you join with me?"

"You expect me to desert? To be a traitor?"

"That's just it," he said. "A traitor works against his own comrades; something you could not possibly do even if you wanted. You have no comrades...except me."

"No! You are not my comrade. You will never be my comrade."

Stan sighed deeply. "Then, since we both have the same cause to fight for, survival, can we at least be allies?"

She did not answer. He was unsure what her silence meant. A sudden realization hit him; a trump card that was extremely dangerous but one that just might bring her around.

"D'melle, are Shtokians truthful?"

"What is this question? What are you saying? We are more honorable than you."

"So if you give your word of honor about something, you will not break it?"

"You obviously do not know us. We would die rather than break such an oath."

"All right," he said. "Then, if I give you equal command authority to mine, I want your word of honor that you will not use it to destroy either of us."

"Equal authority? You mean, highest level security?"

"Precisely. If we are to be an army of two, there must be equal rank and mutual trust. If you give your word, I will accept that as unbreakable."

She eyed him suspiciously. "I have never trusted those who talk too much. And you talk incessantly. But, very well, you have my word of honor that I will do nothing to destroy us."

"Fair enough," he said, knowing he might be writing his own death warrant.

"Gail, increase D'melle's command authority to maximum."

"ENTER ADMINISTRATOR SECURITY CODE VIA CONSOLE, STAN."

Stan once again typed in a passcode, only this time he showed her what it was. "If you're going to be at my level, you may as well know what I know. This top level passcode is 'Thu\$ \$aith the L0rd.'"

"SECURITY CODE INPUT ACKNOWLEDGED. MAXIMUM COMMAND AUTHORITY GRANTED TO D'MELLE."

“There,” he said to D’melle. “You now have the power to do anything on this ship I can do, including to countermand any order I give to Gail. I guess that makes you a captain also. Captain D’melle of the...of the...I guess our army needs a name. The name of our new home perhaps. Hmm, the ‘S447-Beta’ army doesn’t sound right does it? I know, how about we rename the planet? Let’s call it ‘D’melle.’ And we are both captains in the D’mellian army. How does that sound?” There was no reaction. “Well, aren’t you going to say something?”

She was silent for a full minute, then slowly looked up at him. “Where is my meal packet?”

“Your—?” He thought for a second then burst out in laughter. “Let me guess, something with aboontja—chicken—in it, right?”

Over the next several days he showed her in detail how the ship operated, or would have operated were it not crippled. For her part D’melle kept up a running commentary on how every aspect of the ship’s function was inferior to that of Shtokian vessels. Stan just let it roll off.

“Here, let’s have some fun,” he said at one point. “Gail, set voice to Stan and give current location coordinates.”

The computer responded, but in Stan’s voice. “LOCATION IS 881096.3327.PS-BY-999364.0054.PS-BY-2595011.8717.PS SOLAR MEAN STANDARD.”

“Pretty cute, huh?” he said to a stone-faced D’melle. “Now listen to this.”

“Gail, set voice to D’melle and give current location coordinates.”

The computer repeated the data but in a perfect imitation of D’melle’s voice.

As with everything else he had showed her, she was unimpressed. Undaunted, he carried on. He even revealed a design deficiency.

“Here’s a neat trick based on a bug in this prototype that they’ve fixed in the regular production fighters. We call it recursive commands. Watch this.” He typed-in the following command: PAUSE=10, SAY=GAIL <3> SUBDUE LIGHTING/USING STAN.

He entered the command and ten seconds later they both heard Gail, in Stan’s voice, say, “Gail.”

To which Gail’s voice answered with, “READY, STAN.”

Next they heard Stan’s voice say, “Subdue lighting.”

Gail again answered. “AYE, STAN.” The lights dimmed as for sleep period.

“The computer’s voice duplication is so perfect, it hears itself and thinks it’s hearing me. Now you try it in your voice,” said Stan.

She typed in an equivalent command from memory this time using her voice to bring the lights back on.

They heard Gail, using D’melle’s voice this time, say, “Gail.”

Again Gail answered, “READY, D’MELLE.”

Next D’melle’s voice said, “Lights up.”

The lights came back on as Gail answered. “AYE, D’MELLE”.

D’melle shook her head in disbelief. “This is something I would expect from such an inferior ship.”

Stan shrugged off her criticism. “Kind of fun, but I can’t think of any practical use for it,” he said.

As he showed her the spacecraft’s functions he discovered that D’melle’s egotistical assessment of her capabilities was actually not so overstated after all. She gave every indication of being a cracker-jack pilot. She also grasped even complex things quickly and had a steel-trap retention for details. She understood everything the first time, never requiring something to be restated in a different way and could repeat it exactly even after several days had passed.

Such was not the case for Stan’s language lessons. At first D’melle obviously struggled with the notion that teaching him Shtokian might be something akin to collaborating with the enemy. Though Stan could see that she recognized the logic in his premise that they were no longer part of the war and needed to join forces in their quest for survival, he could tell it still required a tremendous effort on her part to downgrade Stan from hated enemy to merely disliked inferior.

Though frustrating for Stan it went a long way toward explaining Shtokian military behavior. They were a fiercely stubborn and prideful people. They were absolutely convinced of their fundamental superiority, to the point of believing themselves not only invincible but infallible. Setbacks could only be the result of some combination of their enemy’s deception and pure dumb luck. It could never be the result of superior weaponry, capability or, least of all, tactics. Thus, the very thought that their original strategic and tactical approach could need to be modified was repugnant to them. That would be to admit that this hopelessly inferior cockroach-brained opponent had the ability to, at least on some scale, out-think them. Worse than that, it

would require admission by those who had developed the original approach that it had become ineffective. They equated stubbornness with perseverance, seeing it as the noble refusal to compromise one's firmly held convictions. Once a direction was determined, to have to change for any reason was tantamount to admitting failure—something quite out of the question. Given that a change of convictions came only slowly and with great distress to one isolated Shtokian pilot—D'melle—it was no wonder that it took catastrophic losses to convince the entire Shtokian military hierarchy to change tactics.

As for Stan, once D'melle relented and began teaching him Shtokian, he wondered if he might actually *be* inferior. He certainly did not have her once-is-sufficient uptake or her inerrant retention. Worse than either, however, was his painful pronunciation. She would correct him repeatedly and insist that he continue until he got it right. His attempts to find humor in his difficulties were completely lost on her. To her, failure at anything was cause for humiliation, not hilarity. Nonetheless, the endeavor did accomplish some good. It stimulated their minds, helped pass the time and, of greatest significance to Stan, helped erode the wall of cultural separation between them. While D'melle still would have preferred to be anywhere else in the universe than with this slow-witted Earther, she had at least conceded to coexist with him.

Just as they were beginning their final week in flight, Stan had D'melle make a minor adjustment in the ship's attitude.

"Very good," he said. "Nicely done."

"Of course," she said. "It was quite simple. But for what purpose?"

"This," he said dramatically. "Come on over here to the view port. I wanted us to be able to see it with our own eyes."

She joined him, still not quite sure what he was talking about.

"There," he said, pointing to a small cluster of stars centered in the view port. "That brightest one, the one in the middle. That's the S447 system. Before too long we'll be able to see its planet Beta, now known as the planet 'D'melle.' That's where we'll make our home, Lord willing." She turned away and said nothing.

"By the way," continued Stan, "what about survival skills? Are you, y'know, good at that sort of thing? Personally that's a little out of my line. I mean, I'm hardy enough and a hard worker, so that doesn't concern me. But all my training and focus has been on being the best

fighter pilot in the fleet—not much use in doing the whole Robinson Crusoe routine.” She did not respond. “So, how about you?”

“If survival is possible on this planet I will survive,” she said at last.

“Good. That’s the spirit.”

“Whether or not you will....” She just shrugged. Then she called out into the air, “Gail.”

“READY, D’MELLE.”

“Use long-range D-TECT and perform a maximum range scan in all directions for spacecraft of any kind.”

“AYE, D’MELLE. WORKING.

“SCAN RESULTS: NOTHING FOUND.”

Stan started to speak, but thought better of it. With each passing day the chances of seeing her hoped-for comrades-to-the-rescue dwindled. Once they landed on this nearly unknown planet, the odds would reduce to almost zero. Gurntchka taw jroon gurntchka, the code of honor, was crumbling. From his perspective, Stan fully understood why no rescue effort was being made; indeed it would be irrational if one were—from either army. But he had come to realize that rationality didn’t play well for D’melle when it ran counter to her preconceived ideals. This was as difficult for her to accept as any other aspect of their situation. He hoped that once they were on the planet, no longer out among the stars, time would fade her feelings of abandonment and betrayal.

Stan’s pulse quickened when Gail re-oriented the ship in preparation for the long deceleration burn. After so long in the cramped cabin with an antagonistic cohort he was willing to give the planet a shot even if the reports were wrong and it had no breathable air. And breathable air was becoming an issue inside the cabin. It was beginning to feel heavy and their lungs kept demanding quicker breaths, but quicker breaths accomplished little. Yet it was a subtle change, so gradual they scarcely noticed their increased frequency of yawning and their growing sluggishness.

“STAN, D’MELLE, I HAVE A LIFE-SUPPORT ISSUE TO REPORT.”

Chapter 13

“Gail, what is it?” asked Stan.

“CABIN CO₂ LEVEL IS AT CODE-ONE SEVERITY.”

“Gail, I thought you said life support was sufficient to reach our destination.”

“STATEMENT IS CORRECT. UNDER PRESENT CONDITIONS CODE-THREE STATUS WOULD NOT OCCUR PRIOR TO ESTIMATED LANDING TIME.”

“How soon till code two?”

“CODE TWO SHOULD COINCIDE WITH COMPLETION OF DECELERATION BURN.”

Stan frowned. They were going to need their wits sharp to find the right spot and land this crate with accuracy. “Gail, your original estimates indicated plenty of leeway for life support beyond the landing time. Why is it that now we’re barely going to make it? And, more importantly, why are we just now finding out?”

There was a pause. “STAN, THERE MUST BE AN UNDETECTED MALFUNCTION IN ONE OF THE FILTERING UNITS CAUSING INEFFICIENCIES IN CO₂ REMOVAL. I WAS NOT REQUESTED TO MONITOR CO₂ INCREASE RATE CONTINUOUSLY. STANDARD TELEMETRY PROVIDES FOR EXCEPTION REPORTING. CODE-ONE IS THE INITIAL EXCEPTION LEVEL.”

Stan waved his hand at the front of the ship in disgust. “Aw just forget it.” He turned to D’melle and shrugged. “Looks like the air is going to get pretty bad in here before we land, so we’re going to have to monitor each other and make sure our thinking doesn’t start to fade at critical moments. Code-two will be cause for concern, but it’s not life-threatening. Code-three

doesn't mean instant death, but after a few minutes we'll have trouble staying conscious. Still, there seems to be enough time. We should be able to stay alert if we're careful."

D'melle's only reaction was to tighten the corners of her mouth in disapproval. "So, your inferior spacecraft has trouble reaching its destination. What else could be expected?"

Despite the disconcerting news regarding their air supply, the firing of the LIon engines got Stan truly excited. D'melle showed no reaction until, well into the burn, S447-Beta became distinguishable out the view port. It was as if she only at that moment realized they were going to land there—and stay for good.

"You say this planet has water, but how much is surface water?"

"We don't know," he answered. "The only report we have just says there is surface water, not how much."

"Is it drinkable?"

"The report is that there is water that is 'presumed potable.'"

"Presumed? Is there any food source?"

"I have no idea. Sure hope so."

She shook her head and sighed in disgust. "I should have realized you would know nothing," she said sourly. "You talk of this as 'our world' and give it my name but do not even know if it can support life. You are a fool, just as all Earthers are fools."

"Excuse me, but I've been telling you all along that hardly anything was known of this planet. No one's ever landed on it. It was only surveyed from space by an unmanned drone craft. Of course, if you have Shtokian data on it that can fill in the gaps, I'd love to hear it."

"What use would we have for information on such a remote place?" she asked. It was a valid question.

"Probably none," said Stan. "Nor did we have much use for the information. The drone spotted it, analyzed it from afar and reported its findings. That's it; that's all we've got."

"Then why come here?" said D'melle.

"It was the only option other than flying around space headed nowhere until Gail's life support ran out and then dying. If you prefer death in space to exploring this unknown planet, I suppose you could exit out the airlock before we land. But I'm guessing that your sense of curiosity will have you at least see what's on this planet. If we are to die there, it's only a matter of a few hours difference anyway."

D'melle frowned. She clearly hated it when his logic was reasonable.

The timing of the deceleration burn found both Stan and D'melle in need of sleep only a couple of hours into it. Once the initial excitement subsided, he was bushed.

"Gail, wake us with one hour left in deceleration or if anything unexpected happens."

"AYE, STAN."

He was roused by Gail making some kind of report. He struggled to come fully awake. D'melle was already up and he could not be sure she had slept at all. "Wha—what did you say Gail?"

"READY STAN."

"She said the carbon dioxide levels were at code-two severity," answered D'melle.

Stan had to think for a full minute before it registered what that meant. Once it did he asked, "Gail, how much longer till we enter orbit around S447-Beta?"

"TWO HOURS NINETEEN MINUTES."

"Gail, how long till life support goes code-three?"

"SIX HOURS FOUR MINUTES."

"Gail, how long will each orbit around S447-Beta take?"

"ONE HOUR THIRTY-TWO MINUTES ELEVEN SECONDS."

"So, we'll have a chance for maybe two scouting orbits before we'll have to land," he said.

D'melle gave him a puzzled look. "Why not just put on a spacesuit if the cabin air gets critical?"

"We only have one. I cut yours off of you, remember?"

"Where is your comrade's suit?"

"I put it on him before space-burial. It was on the video I showed you."

She shook her head as she recalled it. "Can you explain what purpose there was in putting a spacesuit on your dead comrade? It could be of no use to him."

He looked away, embarrassed. "I guess I wasn't thinking too clearly. Besides, at the time I didn't figure to need more than one suit."

She did not need to berate him for his ineptitude; one roll of her eyes said it all.

“Anyway, we probably won’t need it,” he said. “If we do a careful survey we should find a landing spot within two orbits.”

Stan spent part of the remaining time before orbit familiarizing D’melle with the ship’s surface-surveying equipment. It did little though to prevent the time from dragging interminably both from anticipation and the ever-increasing need for a breath of decent air. He sat at the controls as the injection into orbit was achieved although Gail accomplished it all without help.

“S447-BETA ORBIT ESTABLISHED.”

“Gail, good job,” said Stan. “Activate surface-survey viewer and give me topographical readout alongside.”

“AYE, SIR.”

“D’melle, we need to try to find the best combination of landing spot and long-term survival location. That will probably require we go onto manual assist or even manual only. Gail’s good, but she can’t make that kind of judgment call.”

“I agree,” said D’melle. “But if the choice is between optimal survival site and optimal landing site, choose the survival site. A good pilot can always get her ship landed somehow, even a damaged one.”

An AF-P3 did not have the equipment to provide the close-up ground detail from orbit altitude that other non-fighter types of craft would have, but it could give them a pretty decent idea. They both monitored the geographic features of the planet as they circled it. There were two large land masses on roughly opposite sides of the planet, each in the midst of a huge global ocean. Most of the land masses appeared to be rugged mountainous terrain with the tree line well below the peaks and confined to narrow valleys. As near as they could tell it was either sheer mountain cliffs or deep impenetrable jungles with almost no happy medium. One of the continents had a sizable island just off its southwest coast with a narrow strait separating them.

“There,” said D’melle. “Can you—how do you say?—show closer?”

“Zoom-in?”

“Yes, zoom-in on the area between the continent and the island.”

“You mean where that strait runs between them?” he asked.

“Yes. See all the green area and what might be a river on the continent side?”

“Okay, I see it now.” Stan positioned an electronic crosshair over the area. “Gail, maximum zoom-in.”

“AYE, STAN.”

They could tell there were trees or bushes of some kind surrounding a crescent of white sand beach. Just to the north of the beach was a river that flowed into the ocean. Perhaps creek might have been a better word for it, but without better definition it was hard to say. North of the creek the steep mountains met the sea with towering cliffs. Only one small sandy cove a short distance north of the creek broke an endless line of beach-less sea cliffs. “Look there,” said Stan. “On the east edge of the main beach, see that lighter green area? It looks like maybe a large meadow. And the island, it has some even wider beaches. That would make landing a whole lot easier. What do you think? Land on the island?”

“No,” said D’melle. “We land across from the island on the easternmost edge of the meadow.” This was not presented as an opinion or suggestion.

Stan started to argue but decided he had no real grounds to do so except that he didn’t much care for her attitude. But then, what else was new? “Okay, Captain D’melle, the meadow it is.”

He positioned the crosshairs over the edge of the meadow.

“Gail, mark ground-scan position,” he said.

“POSITION MARKED, STAN.”

“Gail, that’s our landing target. Put us on manual assist mode.”

“MANUAL ASSIST FOR LANDING ON IDENTIFIED TARGET, AYE.”

“Gail, deploy wings for atmospheric flight.”

There was a pause. “UNABLE TO COMPLY, STAN. MALFUNCTION ON STARBOARD WING DEPLOYMENT LOCK.”

“Gail, retry.”

Another brief pause. “TEN RETRIES UNSUCCESSFUL. DO YOU WANT ADDITIONAL RETRIES?”

“No.” He exhaled loudly.

“Is she saying one of the wings won’t lock into place?” said D’melle.

“Yeah. Trying to land this thing on a full-gravity planet with an atmosphere without wings is going to be dicey. The wings allow us to pretty much glide down. Without them it’s all engine-burn deceleration and hope we don’t burn to a crisp. Come to think of it”—

“Gail, will the engines survive a direct stern-first touchdown landing?”

“NEGATIVE. REACTION CATALYST WOULD BE DEPLETED AND ENGINE SHUTDOWN WOULD OCCUR AT APPROXIMATELY 1,094 METERS ALTITUDE.”

“Great,” griped Stan. “A thousand meter free-fall to the ground. There won’t be enough pieces of this thing left to fill a dustpan.

“Gail, how about a water landing? Can we survive that big a drop into the ocean?”

“PROBABILITY OF SURVIVING THE LANDING APPROXIMATELY 1%, NOT ACCOUNTING FOR POSSIBILITY OF BEING TRAPPED INSIDE THE VESSEL OR DEATH FROM EXCESS WATER PRESSURE AT DEPTHS UP TO 900 METERS.”

“Thanks for the cheery news,” he mumbled as he reexamined the area near the target site. “What do you think, D’melle? Try the 1% water landing? Guess it’s better than the 0% alternative. D’melle?”

He looked up to find her fully clad in his spacesuit, just putting the helmet on.

Chapter 14

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

“I am going out to fix whatever it is that is preventing the wing from locking,” she said.
“Now come over here and enter your half of the code so I can get the hand weapon.”

“Wait a minute. What makes you think you can fix this thing? Most of the locking mechanism is up inside the hull. You can’t just go blow a hole in the hull with a Lectro-Laser. It’s liable to rip this thing into pieces on re-entry.”

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Once again you prove you know nothing, as I have been saying. The longer you keep up this talk-talk-talk the less chance we have of surviving. I am going to use the weapon to clear whatever is obstructing the wing from extending fully. Now open the compartment. I have no time for all this talk.”

He keyed-in his code and handed her the weapon. “You know, I should be the one to go out there. I’m much more familiar with this ship than you are.”

She completely ignored his comment and fastened the helmet. Her half-closed euphoric eyes that resulted from her first breath of the suit’s rich, clean air supply illustrated clearly just how foul the cabin air was getting. “Gail,” she said.

“READY D’MELLE.”

“Prepare the airlock for me to exit.”

“WARNING, D’MELLE, OUTER AIRLOCK SEAL INTEGRITY IS NOT INTACT. CABIN AIR LOSS OF APPROXIMATELY 12.4% WILL RESULT FROM USING THE AIRLOCK.”

D’melle sighed deeply. “Doesn’t anything on this inferior ship work?”

“Most of it worked pretty well before some lunatic tried to blow it up,” Stan shot back. He turned toward the cockpit as he usually did when he talked to Gail, as if she were sitting there. “Gail, what will D’melle’s exit and re-entry through the airlock do to survivability as life support now stands?”

“NET CABIN AIR LOSS OF APPROXIMATELY 25% TO 22.22 Hg.”

“Gail, what would that be like on Earth?”

“AVERAGE AIR PRESSURE AT 2500 METERS.”

“So, Gail, what would that do to our life support status?”

“AT CURRENT CO2 LEVELS THE REDUCTION IN TOTAL CABIN AIR WILL RESULT IN CODE-THREE STATUS.”

D’melle spoke up. “Can we—Gail, can we survive at code three until target landing assuming we are able to glide in?”

“SURVIVAL PROBABILITY 92% AT LANDING. CONSCIOUSNESS PROBABILITY 16% AT LANDING.”

“Those odds are good enough for me, D’melle. You better get going.”

“The suit,” she said. “Perhaps we can add its oxygen to the cabin when I get back in.”

“We’ll work all that out later,” he said. “Right now we can’t waste any more time. You were right.”

“Gail, D’melle’s going EVA. Get that airlock open and ignore warning messages.”

“AYE, STAN.”

There was a whoosh as the inner door to the leaky airlock opened. Everything in the cabin that was not secured was sucked toward the door, pelting D’melle as she tried to get into and close the airlock as quickly as possible.

As soon as she was through she yelled, “Gail, close inner door immediately.”

“AYE, D’MELLE.”

In addition to the mechanical closer, D’melle pushed from the outside of the door and Stan put a foot on each doorpost and pulled the hatch handle for all he was worth. It finally latched shut leaving him panting from both the effort and the reduced cabin air. He hurried over and switched video to ship-exterior. The only remaining working camera was on the port side. He located D’melle working her way over the fuselage toward the starboard wing.

“I’ve got you on video D’melle, at least for now. Hey, where’s your tether?”

“Such things are nuisances and might get—how you say?—snagged? There is a lot of twisted metal on the fuselage.”

Very astute, thought Stan. She disappeared out of the camera’s line of sight. He wanted her to hurry up but did not know why. A sudden thought hit him.

“Gail, how soon do we reach the point of no return for achieving target on this orbit?”

“RETRO-BURN INITIATION MUST OCCUR WITHIN THREE MINUTES EIGHT SECONDS.”

“Gail, what are survivability odds if we do another orbit before landing?”

“ZERO.”

“Did you hear that, D’melle?”

“Yes, I heard. I should be done in plenty of time, but look for an alternate landing spot just in case.”

“Right,” he said, greatly impressed by her calm, businesslike manner. “Gail, give us a standard countdown to point of no return.”

“AYE, STAN. TWO MINUTES FIFTY-ONE SECONDS.”

He refocused on the craggy terrain below. Even the shoreline appeared to be mostly rugged cliffs right out to the water’s edge. Unlike the beach D’melle had spotted the few others he found were tiny slivers alongside sheer bluffs or were covered with huge boulders providing no decent landing site. The foul, thin air was making it hard to concentrate.

“I’ve found the obstruction blocking the wing,” came D’melle’s voice. “Part of the wing-slot cover is crumpled in the way. Gail, retract the starboard wing all the way.”

“AYE, D’MELLE. WING FULLY RETRACTED.”

“Good. I am”—

“TWO MINUTES.”

“I am going to use the hand weapon to remove the obstruction.”

“That’s good, D’melle but work quickly you’ve got less than two minutes until—”

Sudden fear gripped him. They had just under two minutes to begin the retro-burn that would drop them into the planet’s atmosphere. But D’melle could not use all that time for the repair. She needed time to get back inside the cabin.

“Gail, how much time”—

“Stan,” interrupted D’melle. “I have a problem.”

“D’melle, you don’t have as long as Gail’s countdown indicates. You still need time to get back inside before”—

“Stop talking! I have a problem. This inferior weapon will not fire.”

“D’melle, I’m trying to tell you that you’re running short of time. We’ll miss the retro-burn window and I can’t find another landing spot.”

D’melle exhaled loudly in exasperation. “I will make sure we don’t miss it!” she said.

“Gail!” she shouted.

“AYE, D’MELLE.”

“Begin retro-burn five seconds before point of no return.”

“AYE, SIR.”

“There,” she said quickly. “If I do not clear this obstruction it will not matter.”

“ONE MINUTE.”

Unfazed, D’melle continued. “This weapon does nothing and I cannot remove the obstruction with my hand. Think, Stan, what could be wrong with it?”

Hearing her use his name and asking for his help cleared some of the fog from his CO₂-clouded mind for a moment. “I don’t know. I’m sure it works. It should be charged. You mean it doesn’t do anything when you fire it?”

“It shoots a bright beam but accomplishes nothing—except generate a few sparks from the target I am shooting at.”

“Sparks?” He knew that was significant. He knew exactly what it meant but fought to get his addled brain to bring it to the surface.

“Um, i-i-it’s the knob. You know, the knob on the back. It has to be straight up, not at a quarter turn to the right. D’melle? D’melle, did you hear me?”

“THIRTY SECONDS.”

“D’melle, did you check the knob? Does that help?”

“Be silent!” she said. “Gail, retry wing deployment.”

“WING DEPLOYMENT, AYE.”

“What are you doing?” yelled an incredulous Stan.

“I have to make sure it works,” she said, obviously amazed at such a dumb question.

“FIFTEEN SECONDS. WINGS DEPLOYED AND LOCKED.”

“D’melle, get back in here! If you’re outside when those engines start”—

“TEN SECONDS.”

The effect on her, outside the ship, would be as if it suddenly took off and left her. Stan’s difficulty breathing was turning his concern into panic. D’melle didn’t have ten seconds, the engines would start five seconds ahead.

“Gail! Don’t start the retro-burn until D’melle’s inside the airlock.”

“Gail,” said D’melle, “seal outer door.”

“DOOR SEALED. RETRO-BURN INITIATED.” The ship slammed Stan into the rear bulkhead and pinned him there.

“FOUR SECONDS.”

“Gail, I told you not to begin retro-burn until D’melle was inside.”

“THREE SECONDS. AFFIRMATIVE.”

“Gail,” came D’melle’s voice. “Cease countdown and as soon as the burn is completed resupply the airlock and open the inner door.”

“AYE, SIR.”

“You made it!” said Stan.

“Certainly. Now get ready. You are going to have to help close the inner door once I am inside.”

As the engines slowed the ship they could feel it start to descend toward the planet. As soon as they shut off, Gail re-oriented the ship to position its heat-shielded underbelly for reentry.

“AIRLOCK AT MAXIMUM RESUPPLY. OPENING INNER DOOR.”

Once again there was a rush of air toward the door. He helped pull D’melle inside against the suction.

“Gail, close inner door!” shouted D’melle.

“ATTEMPTING TO COMPLY. CABIN CO₂ LEVEL IS AT CODE-THREE SEVERITY.”

Stan and D’melle pulled the door for all they were worth to avoid losing any more air than necessary. At last they heard it seal shut. Stan was panting from the effort but it was not helping his need for air.

“INNER DOOR SEALED. ENTERING GLIDE PATTERN FOR TARGET LANDING.”

Stan staggered over to the pilot's seat, gasping for air. D'melle remained in her suit.

"Better leave that on," he said nobly. "One of us needs to help land this ship."

D'melle looked over at him. "Precisely," she said matter-of-factly.

He tried to focus on the landing pattern display Gail was showing them but could not keep his eyes from crossing.

"What?" he said.

D'melle furrowed her brow. "I said nothing."

"No, no, your room card," he said slurring his words. "I can't come to your room tonight. I don't have your room card. I left it with Derek."

She rolled her eyes and made sure he was buckled into his seat. "No more talk," she said. "Save the little air that remains. We'll be at the landing spot in just a few minutes."

"Derek?" he mumbled. "I need Maci's card so I can see D'melle. I don't know where you put it. No." He reached out as if trying to grab something out of thin air then drifted off.

Chapter 15

Two exquisitely beautiful bright violet eyes were looking down at him from an angelic face surrounded by magnificent platinum curls. This vision was contrasted against a royal blue sky. A soft, warm breeze urged him to take a deep breath of air as pure and sweet as any he had ever inhaled. Stan decided that if he were dead the Lord must have kept his promise, for this could only be heaven.

Then the angelic vision frowned at him and spoke with an all too familiar accent. “So. Are you just going to lay there or are you going to get up and do all of this survival work you speak of so much?”

He sat up and looked at D’melle kneeling over him, arms akimbo. *On second thought, maybe I goofed-up somewhere along the line and this is my eternal punishment*, he thought.

He was on the inner edge of a meadow about 500 meters square. Through a thicket he could see the AF-P3 sitting a few meters to his left and beyond it was a dense wood. The meadow ran to his right and was bordered by a wide beach. Beyond that, out to the horizon was blue ocean. The woods formed a semicircle around the meadow. The AF-P3 had stopped with its nose less than a meter from the nearest line of trees. Sitting snugly between the woods and some bushes, the ship looked as if it had been parked in a driveway.

“That must have taken some mighty good flying. Sorry I had to miss seeing it.”

D’melle shrugged-off the compliment. “It is what pilots do. You were unconscious, so of course you could see nothing.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Yes. That was my point. I think.” He stood up a bit unsteadily and then looked around. “Wow. Nice place, huh? Warm, but not intolerable. Have you looked around at all? How long has it been since we landed?”

“You revived just after I brought you outside the ship. I have done no exploring.”

“Well, let’s take a tour, huh?”

“Wait,” said D’melle. “We must first close up the ship. There must be no damage to it.”

“Oh,” he shrugged. “Okay. That’s probably a good idea. We’ll need to use it as our quarters.”

“No. We must build a shelter. The ship must be kept able to fly.”

Stan furrowed his brow. “That’s fine with me, but why the urgency? Gail told us it could only manage a low, rapidly deteriorating orbit at best.”

“It is our only means of escape from this planet,” she said. “We must maintain it.”

Stan shrugged. It seemed rather pointless to him but he decided that for the sake of long-term D’mellian international relations, it would be best to choose his battles carefully. This was not worth quibbling over.

As they entered the ship he remembered something. “Hey, this crate has a survival kit back in the rear supply-storage area.” He dug around in the chaotic mess for a bit then found a meter-square case. As he opened the case he said, “I think this has a—yeah, here it is. Look here, D’melle.” He held up a wallet-sized electronic meter with two probes attached to coiled wires dangling from it.

“What is it?”

“This little gizmo will run a chemical analysis on anything, including whether it’s toxic or can be ingested and, if it can, approximately what it will taste like. If something’s poisonous it’ll even recommend an antidote. Pretty slick, huh?”

“This could prove helpful,” she admitted, with far less enthusiasm.

They took a few food bars and a container of water each. He took the chemical analyzer and a buck knife from a small onboard toolkit. She took the Lectro-Laser.

“We’ll almost certainly have to come back for more supplies, no matter what we find,” he said as he shut the ship’s outer door behind them. She nodded her acknowledgement but remained adamant that he close the ship up.

“Where to first?” Stan said, half to himself.

“There,” she said pointing to the row of trees and shrubs on the north edge of the meadow. “That is where we saw what looked like a stream.”

“Good idea,” said Stan as they headed toward it. “Since the air is obviously breathable, fresh water is the next most important need. Of course, I suppose it’s possible that the ocean could be potable, though less likely. Earth’s certainly aren’t. How about those on Brankshtok?”

She looked at him and he thought for a moment she was going to berate him for pumping her for Shtokian secrets. She instead looked forward and after a long pause said, “They are too salty for drinking. But sailing on them is marvelous. That is what I enjoy most, next to space flight.”

“Sailing? Wow, that’s great. I haven’t spent enough time on Earth to try it, but it looks like great fun. Bet you’re pretty good at it, judging from your flying abilities.”

D’melle got a distant look in her eyes. “Sailing combines absolute freedom with the challenge of battling a force so powerful it can take your life in an instant. It is most exhilarating.”

“Maybe we could build a boat of some kind. There’s plenty of wood. We could sail over to that island. Assuming you were willing to teach me.”

“Humph,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Based on your Shtokian lessons, I am not sure you can learn anything.” When Stan laughed she looked at him as if he were insane.

They came to the creek and Stan was greatly impressed by its beauty. It flowed down a series of cascades out of the steep crags above. One waterfall was some three meters high and poured into a shaded crystal-clear pool with a grassy bank on the near side. From there it emptied into a smaller pool out of which it ran steeply down to meet the ocean while the bank climbed to a high overlook with a breathtaking ocean vista.

“Man, would you look at that,” said Stan. “If a guy could book vacations here he’d be rich overnight.” He began removing his shirt. “That looks too refreshing. I’m going in for a swim.”

“Are you not going to test the water?”

“Oh, yeah. Guess I’m not going to book too many vacationers if I’m dead from toxic water, huh?”

“How can there be vacationers?” she said. “We have no means of contacting anyone. You have said this from the first.”

“No, no, D’melle. I was just kidding.” She gave him a puzzled look.

“It was a joke. Well, not a very good joke I’ll admit but just something for a laugh. You know, just trying to be amusing.” She stared at him.

“You do laugh don’t you? Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you laugh.” He put the ends of the wires into the pool and adjusted the meter.

“I do not understand,” she said. “What is funny about saying the water is toxic and will cause death?”

“Well, nothing. See, it was the idea of making money off vacationers but then not being able to because of the water. It’s a sort of unexpected twist. It’s a form of irony. Irony is often funny. Something that purports to be one thing, but then can’t possibly be. I’m not explaining this very well, am I? The sheer impossibility of it is meant to be sort of funny. See?”

She frowned and shook her head.

“No, I guess you don’t. So tell me, what makes Shtokians laugh? What makes you just laugh right out loud?”

Her eyes got a faraway look as she smiled. “Victory,” she said. “When we have absolute victory over an enemy; when we see our foe totally vanquished, then we laugh. We laugh and cheer and celebrate. To see the enemy helplessly pleading for mercy makes us laugh the most joyously of all.”

He spoke warily, “And why is that, exactly?”

She grinned and stared intently into the eyes. “Because there is no mercy and our enemy’s pleading is in vain. We know this, but the enemy does not.” She gave a slight chuckle. “It is like irony, is it not? An unexpected twist? Perhaps that is why we laugh. Does it not seem that way to you?”

Stan wore a sickly look. “Yeah, I’ve always considered watching the helpless plead for mercy before I kill them as a real knee-slapper.

“Anyway, here’s something that’s not funny, but it ought to be worth a smile at least.” He held up the meter. “Look at this. Unless there’s some element here on this planet that we’ve never heard of and can’t detect, this is good old H₂O. And quite pure, too. Okay, that’s enough talk.” With that he handed the meter to D’melle and dived into the pool.

“Wahoo!” he yelled as he surfaced near the middle. “Oh this is great.” He took a big mouthful. “Mmm, tastes good, too. Come on in. You’ll love it.”

“So, can you be sure there are no poisonous creatures swimming around in there?” she shouted to him. His eyes got big and he made a beeline back to the bank and out in a matter of seconds.

“You think there might be?” he asked, panting. “Did you see something?”

She exhibited the slightest hint of a smile. “No. It was a joke. You were meant to laugh.”

He grinned, then forced a short laugh. “Yeah, okay. Pretty good. You got me pretty good.”

She knelt down, scooped up a handful of water and tasted it. “This is good,” she said nodding.

“So, now we have a livable climate, air and fresh water,” said Stan. “One more major hurdle and we’re home free—literally.”

“Yes,” said D’melle. “Nourishing food. And I think I know where we can start.” She pointed to a flock of what looked like wingless geese waddling across the meadow about a hundred meters away, between them and the ship. She drew the Lectro-Laser and dropped one with a single shot. The others paid little attention.

They chose a flat, somewhat sandy area on the edge of the meadow near the stream to build a fire and it tacitly became their permanent campsite. They roasted the fowl which Stan laughingly dubbed aboontja following D’melle’s declaration that it had the same flavor. To their delight, aboontja nests also yielded edible eggs.

They also discovered vines with pods containing something akin to lentils, a plant with tuber roots D’melle called zwantchka that cooked up like potatoes, and various greens. There were large seedless purple berries the flavor of whose juice was reminiscent of passion-fruit. The best of all though was a luscious tree fruit that Stan named a “pearch” since it tasted partway between a pear and a peach; always sugar sweet. According to the meter, eating one was like taking a multi-vitamin tablet. The problem was that they were the favorite of the only mammalian specie they had seen on the planet. They resembled a gazelle on stilts and their long necks enabled them to eat all the pearches within reach from the ground. Despite gorging themselves on the fruit, the gazelles themselves were always emaciated-looking. Stan and D’melle’s only attempt at roasting one of the animals yielded only a disappointingly small amount of tough, strong-tasting, gristly meat. Getting the fruit, then, required climbing into the

prickly trees whose weak limbs made doing so perilous. The skin of the fruit was so thin that it would disintegrate if dropped, so picking any quantity of them was a challenge.

The ocean water was less salty than that of Earth but could be evaporated down to provide a small amount of salt for cooking. It also contained other trace chemicals, some of which the meter could not exactly identify. Whether these were the cause or not, there was surprisingly little in the way of ocean life.

Having food sources available, they next turned to building a shelter. Though the weather was tropically warm, every four days like clockwork an afternoon thunderstorm would drench them and all their possessions. Their campsite would be dotted with puddles of standing water. This made finding a dry place to sleep the night after the rain difficult. Stan, knowing the Lectro-Laser's energy would not last forever, used it to hew and sharpen axes and other tools out of rock. When cutting trees for the shelter he found one type that had a strong membrane just under the bark which, when dried, made a durable fabric for clothing and the roof for their shelter. Another palm-like tree yielded nearly-unbreakable fibers suitable for everything from wood fasteners to rope to thread. They made a hut that was completely open on one side and sat on logs to keep it above the rainwater. Each corner of the hut was partitioned into a triangular one-third and served as a bedroom, with the final front third their "living room." They used the membrane fabric and aboontja feathers to make mattresses for themselves. Fortune continued smiling upon them when they found a deposit of a mild base which was easily ground up and worked well as a general cleaner for everything from clothes to eating utensils, even their teeth. D'melle recognized a succulent plant similar to one on her home world. Its thick sap was similar to aloe and when heated with some powdered base cooled to a sweet-smelling body wash and shampoo.

Their uniforms began to become tattered and finding a way to wash them modestly was difficult so clothing was the next order. Stan made himself a membrane wrap with a fiber-rope belt, then advanced to a pair of walking shorts of which he was quite proud. D'melle made what she called a tramba dress—a form-fitting little dress with one shoulder strap. Seeing her in any kind of dress immediately caught his notice. But her favorite outfit did even more so. It was a little wrap-skirt accompanied by a bikini top. As their basic survival needs were conquered, Stan's interest in D'melle increased geometrically.

Chapter 16

They truly worked together well, despite D'melle's competitiveness and continual condescension toward Stan. He found its predictability amusing and responded by agreeing with her proclaimed superiority. This baffled her to the point that she eventually found little purpose in putting him down. Still, while their joint survival efforts had removed her outright hostility toward him, she remained distant—no better than all-business.

A more positive step in their relationship came from a rather unexpected source. While the Lectro-Laser made aboontja hunting a snap, they needed to conserve it for more important tasks. So he found some strong, resilient branches and, using twisted palm fibers, made them each a bow. He also found that peach branches, though too thin to be of much help in climbing into the trees, were straight and solid enough to serve as arrow shafts. Some small metal parts from unimportant internal fixtures on the ship made excellent arrowheads once they were properly shaped and sharpened. His presentation of a bow and arrow to D'melle yielded the greatest amount of enthusiasm he had ever seen from her. While her gratitude was not exactly effusive, her excitement was. The net result was the foundation required for any kind of relationship with her: competition. They both set about honing their skills with the weapons and quickly began competing with each other. At last there was a recreational activity for them to share—a first step toward actual friendship, he hoped. They both became adept archers in short order. Though their stationary target competitions were close to a toss-up most of the time, D'melle actually held a slight edge. Stan held about the same advantage with moving targets, making him a slightly more successful hunter. That their skill-levels were too close for her to gloat or be critical was at first frustrating for D'melle. Within a few weeks though it appeared to have the effect—though never indicated through any explicit means—of raising her opinion of

Stan to almost that of an equal. It was shown in subtle ways, primarily by the rapid reduction in the frequency of put-downs and the cessation of references to him as an “inferior Earther.” For Stan’s part, any improvement was welcome. This was partly because a steady diet of animosity had begun to wear on him and partly because he was certain that a bond of friendship between them was a necessity both for their physical survival and their psychological well-being.

Yet there was more. He was undeniably attracted to her. He had a suspicion that it was primarily physical desire, given his long abstinence and her breathtaking beauty. Indeed, an attempt to identify what non-physical assets she possessed produced a decidedly short list. Her humorless, combative personality was not exactly magnetic. Nonetheless, Stan found himself deeply admiring her and completely unable to view her in any detached, fellow-survivor context. Thus, he continually looked for ways to please her, never quite certain whether he was nobly demonstrating lovingkindness to her or wickedly trying to charm and seduce her. Whichever it was, two immediate benefits were that she was far more pleasant to be around and that they had mutual goals to work toward.

In this same spirit, he initiated the building of a catamaran, a project she supported with such fervor that it quickly became her project, with Stan serving only as a flunky. D’melle was perpetual motion, never willing to just sit and relax for more than a moment as long as there was light enough to see. Stan made a concerted effort to keep up with her and the net result was that their projects moved forward with astonishing speed. The catamaran, though crude, was functional and ready to test in less than two weeks.

During its construction, on a trip to the AF-P3 to recharge the hand weapon, Stan took the lenses out of one of the survey-viewers and made a spyglass out of it. When he focused it on the island just off the coast to the southwest he shouted at D’melle to take a look.

“What is it?”

“Look at what’s growing on the island.”

She peered through the telescope briefly. “A large number of peach trees.”

“Right,” he said. “But what about the fruit?”

She studied through it for another few seconds. “They are low! Within easy reach from the ground!”

“There must not be any D’mellian gazelles on that island. Now I know where we need to take the catamaran on her maiden voyage. Just think, we could load it up with fruit and have enough for weeks.”

It was late afternoon when they put the finishing touches on the boat and were ready to try it out. D’melle was justifiably proud and obviously pleased as he heaped compliments on her for her accomplishment. They named it the Trell-Derek after their respective departed comrades. In honor of the first launching they had made headbands with Trell-Derek marked on them in passion-juice. Since Stan had no sailing experience whatever, he had no way of assessing whether the boat was seaworthy. He was, in any case, thrilled to find that it rowed well and sailed even better. They stayed close to land and sailed up to the small cove just to the north, the little craft sailing flawlessly under D’melle’s guidance and him just doing what he was told.

“Let’s put it to some practical use,” he said. “Let’s go get some pearches.”

They changed course and the sun was just above the horizon when they ran the little boat onto the island’s beach. To the left of where they landed, a creek ran into the sea, similar to their campsite on the mainland. Just as they had seen, nearby were dozens of pearch trees heavy with sweet, ripe fruit. Picking it was so easy that in minutes they had a large stack on the boat.

“Not too many,” warned D’melle. “We do not want to overload it.”

“Hey, look back here—behind the trees,” called Stan. “Passion berries. Lots of them. This is going to be a terrific way to replenish our supplies.”

She joined him and they walked deeper inland. After a short distance the stream crossed their path so they followed it for a ways. Edibles were in abundance as well as a few plants they could not remember having seen before. Stan had brought a small, waterproof carrying pouch so he could take anything interesting back and analyze it. One unique plant was a bush that formed a hedgerow across their path, covered with orchid-like flowers. In the fading light he could still see their deep violet color and immediately thought how they matched D’melle’s eyes. He picked one and looked at her, suddenly overwhelmed by her beauty. He had diligently sought to avoid thinking about her that way for fear it would drive him crazy. She was exquisitely gorgeous and ever in his immediate proximity, yet the distance between them could hardly have been greater. He had not the slightest doubt that she would be violently repulsed by any romantic intentions on his part and would very likely respond by scratching his eyes out. Even

so, seeing her silhouetted against the gold, pink, and turquoise of the sunset he impulsively took the orchid and placed it in her hair. She pulled back and looked at him quizzically.

“It matches your eyes.” She reached up quickly and felt it but did not take it out. He gulped before saying the next words. “Very pretty,” he said smiling, “like that sunset.”

She turned and looked. “Mm, the colors,” she said nodding but did not seem to grasp what it all meant. She continued walking without further comment and, for his part, Stan was amazed that he still had all his teeth. They rounded the end of the hedgerow and came upon a profusion of tall succulents with shimmering translucent gold blossoms. Intrigued, Stan picked two of the delicate-looking flowers and put them in the pouch. They oozed a thick greenish-brown sap with a slightly minty fragrance where they had been picked. He used his headband to wipe the residue off his hands and threw it into the pouch with them.

“We must go back,” said D’melle. “It is getting difficult to see.”

He had not realized how quickly darkness was falling. “Yeah, you’re right. We don’t want to be stumbling around unfamiliar terrain in the dark and it’ll be a while yet before any of the D’mellian moons are high enough to provide adequate light.”

They headed back down the hedgerow toward the stream. At the base of a large tree ahead of them was a shadow but it looked out of place. There wasn’t enough light for such a dark shadow and it was the wrong shape. Then it changed shape. D’melle spoke before he could, her voice tight.

“There is something up ahead. I do not know what it is.”

As she spoke Stan looked to his left. Starting a few meters from where they were, the ground was jet black and the blackness was moving—toward them.

He spoke quietly as if trying not to startle the thing. “Whatever it is it’s to our left also and moving toward us.”

D’melle pulled out the Lectro-Laser and looked behind them. “We are surrounded,” she said with amazing calm.

“Look,” said Stan opening the buck knife. “It’s not one big entity; it’s a bunch of little flat creatures of some kind all crawling over one another.” They covered the ground like a black blanket with only the tree trunks sticking out among them. “I don’t know if they’re dangerous but I’m not sure I want to find out.”

“Very soon we will have no choice,” said D’melle.

The shadow creatures had advanced to within two meters of them on all sides.

“They are not in the trees,” said Stan. “Maybe they can’t climb.”

“Then we should.”

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when the wave of black rushed upon them. Like land-based manta rays they swarmed at their feet. An instant before the creatures reached them D’melle’s weapon lit up the darkness. She fired all around them and those nearest them stopped moving but they were quickly replaced by others.

“Head for the tree!” she ordered and shot a path to the trunk. “Now!”

Stan made it in four strides and quickly shinnied up to the lowest limb. The shadow creatures could only make it half a meter or so up before falling back. He got onto the limb and saw D’melle firing furiously in all directions around her, circling her way slowly toward the tree. They had apparently discerned that to approach her tentatively meant certain death and were swarming her from one side as quickly as she fired at the other. He could tell she was not going to make it.

He quickly crawled out onto the limb till he was just above her. “Jump!” he shouted. “I’ll lift you up.”

At his words she looked up, squatted slightly in preparation, and then jumped. An instant before her feet left the ground one of the creatures attached itself to her calf. She screamed and flailed her leg trying to shake the creature off as Stan caught her by the wrists.

“It is biting me!” Her voice was not one of fear or revulsion but of pain. Although her efforts to dislodge the creature were understandable they made the task of getting her up onto the limb infinitely more difficult.

“Kill it!” she screamed.

Stan did a power-lift and got her seated on the limb. He grabbed the furry creature and pulled its long fangs out of her leg. As he did so, D’melle, her hands now free, blew it out of his hands with the Lectro-Laser. She immediately grabbed her leg and moaned in agony. During their entire time together and despite numerous injuries during their construction projects Stan had never seen her react to pain. Once she had dropped a stone so heavy on her foot that it had resulted in a black toe and the loss of her toenail but she had only winced slightly when it first happened. Her threshold for pain was far superior to his own. He had caught a glimpse of two bloody fang marks on her leg before she gripped the wound in both of her trembling hands. He

looked into her eyes and saw something else he had never seen before from her: worry. She swallowed and began to pant.

“It is swelling,” she said through gritted teeth. “I can feel it. Very soon I will not be able to move my leg.”

“We’ve got to get you out of here.” Stan looked into the gloom.

“Give me the weapon,” he said. He took it and fired randomly into the teeming mass of creatures below. He was not interested in killing them, although the thought of doing so pleased him. He needed the light to see if there was any way to go from tree to tree back to the boat. But no other tree was close enough to this one to do them any good.

As if reading his mind, D’melle spoke up through shallow breaths. “The water,” she said. “There are none in the water.” At first he thought she meant the sea and wondered how she could know that. Then he thought of the stream. It was true; the line of black creatures appeared to stop at the bank. He fired the weapon for confirmation.

“You’re right, D’melle. If we can get to the stream we can follow it down to where it empties into the sea.” It was about three meters wide and, from what he had noticed earlier, about one and a half deep. “That next big limb over there hangs clear out to the edge of the stream. If we can work our way over to it we can get in position to jump in from there. Can you make it?”

She bit her lip, closed her eyes, and nodded.

“That’s my girl. We’re going to get you out of here and get you fixed up, y’hear? Just hang in there, okay?”

By the time they got to the other limb her leg was becoming difficult for her to move. It made maneuvering out toward the end of the limb a slow, arduous process. Eventually Stan would scoot out and then drag her to him, inching their way along. The limb began to sag as they reached where it forked into smaller branches.

“Okay, about one more meter and we’ll be out far enough to jump in,” he was saying when the limb gave out a loud crack.

Chapter 17

“Jump!” he shouted and literally threw her over his head toward the water as he jumped. They both reached the water but hit awkwardly and painfully. It took him a few seconds to figure out which way was the surface. He reached out and felt D’melle’s shoulder near his knee, grabbed her under the arm and pulled her up. He heard her gasp and then groan in pain but there was another noise. It was a hissing from the bank nearby. There was the beginning of moonlight, enough for him to see something like steam rolling up from motionless creatures. He slapped a spray of water at some live ones. Those closest writhed and steamed while the others scrambled away leaving a creature-less ring around where the spray had landed.

“D’melle, look. I think water kills them.”

She nodded but clearly had bigger concerns at the moment.

“Let’s get going,” he said. She swam as best she could while he pulled her through the water after him until at last they came to where the stream emptied into the sea. As he had expected, the shore—where it was completely dry—was teeming with shadow creatures, including all around the catamaran. There was a large rock some fifty meters off shore.

“Let’s head for that rock out there. I’ve got to get a look at that wound. Can you swim that far?” She only half nodded. He suspected it was more an answer of desperation than of actual belief that she could do so. All her normal confidence was gone which, in turn, was generating a gnawing fear in him.

He towed her toward the rock and could feel her efforts to help swim weakening. His fear that she was dying spurred him to press on with all the strength he could muster. By the time he pulled her up onto the rock she was barely able to help herself. He propped her up and inspected her left leg. Below the knee it was feverish and swelling all around the fang marks in

the calf. He used his vine-cord belt as a tourniquet and drew his knife to cut a cross over each fang mark. His medical training was limited to some basic first-aid several years ago, too little of which he now recalled. His nervousness at the prospect of cutting into such a painful site on D'melle's injured leg caused him to fumble the too-large knife. Fearing it would drop into the water and be lost he grabbed it, cutting two of the fingers on his left hand. He clenched his fist to slow the bleeding and went ahead with cutting tiny crosses over each fang mark. He sucked at each cut like he had seen done with snake bites. Even as he did so, the fevered swelling around the bites made him worry that it was too late for this procedure. His mouth filled with something horribly bitter causing him to shudder as he spat it out. He sucked the venom from the second cut with the same results. He repeated the process for each cut and then threw up. He rinsed his mouth with sea water and continued the suction, at last getting the salty taste of blood. The pale light of a rising D'mellian moon enabled him to see the angry red swelling of her leg and she moaned in pain with its every movement.

"I know this hurts, hon', but I need to reposition you." He moved to a small ledge even with the water's surface and held her in his lap with her leg in the water. "There's some trace chemicals in the sea water that might help the wound," he said. He could both see and feel that his fingers had not completely stopped bleeding. He took the sweat band out of the pouch and wrapped his fingers with it. The cloth was wet with something but he needed to stop the bleeding so he could refocus his attention on D'melle.

"If I could get you back to camp there might be something in the first aid kit that would help," he said. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I'm not that good a swimmer. I'd just get us both drowned. Those things are all around our boat. We'll just have to wait until daylight." He stroked her dripping wet hair and tucked her head under his chin. "So you hang in there, y'hear? Don't give up on me, show me that Shtokian fortitude."

She looked up at him for a moment then said weakly, "I will kill them. Those creatures that did this, I will kill them all."

"That's my little warrior. We're going to do that, you and I, we're coming back here as soon as you're well and we're going to have ourselves a massacre, right?" She nodded gently and he hugged her up closer and began rocking her slightly. She seemed to drift off to sleep. He hoped so, knowing how painful the leg was. Then he whispered a desperate prayer for her recovery. "Father in heaven, although we are as far from home as any people have ever been I

know You are never far away. In fact, the only one who has been far away is me. Forgive me, Lord for neglecting my relationship with You. Lord, you have shown me that D'melle and her people are Yours just as we are. And I know the same power in the name of Jesus that can bring about miracles for inhabitants of earth can heal her. Lord, I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help her but I can't lose her. Please Lord, please heal her or at least show me how to help her. Help us, Father. I ask this relying completely in the name of Your Son. Amen."

It was a mild evening; slightly cool sitting in wet clothes, but nowhere near cold enough to be causing D'melle's shivering. In the almost two hours he had been holding her she had developed a fever and was suffering chills. He gently tried to lift her leg and was shocked to see how much it had swelled and stiffened. It was still hours before daylight. The possibility that she might not survive affected him in a way he could not fully understand. He was overwhelmed with a desire to help her, to comfort her, to make her well. He stroked her hair and gently kissed her forehead, to which she did not even react.

"Sweetheart, I just can't sit here and wait while you get worse." He looked out at the water. "I can't lose you. You mean too much to me. I've got to do something. I'm going back to get the boat. Will you be okay here while I'm gone?"

She nodded absently. Her breathing was shallow and labored; she was in no condition to object although he felt sure she would have ordinarily.

"I should be back in ten or fifteen minutes, so you hang on, okay?" His primary concern was that she might pass out and slide into the water. He gently sat her off his lap and hooked her arms around the crags as best as he could. "I'm going to go kill a bunch of those vile creatures and I expect a hero's welcome when I return triumphant, okay?" In the moonlight he could see her flash the slightest bit of a smile and nod. Then she laid her head back and rocked it slowly side-to-side.

It was a lengthy swim made longer by his frequent stops to look back at the rock to verify that she was still sitting upright. Three-fourths of the way there he began to remonstrate himself for having left her. If she did faint into the water he was much too far away to rescue her. What chance did he have against these creatures anyway? This was a fool's errand, his mind told him. Even if he managed to get the boat and get her back to camp, then what? Wipe some iodine on her infected and inflamed wounds? *Oh well, at least we'll both go down fighting*, he thought. *That's what she would want*. He realized at that moment that what she wanted mattered a great

deal to him. He paused one last time to check on her before his final push to shore. “Lord, I care so much for that beautiful woman. I know that now. Please, please help her. Or help me help her. Or both. Whatever, I just can’t lose her, Lord, and it’s all in Your hands.”

He stood up when he got to waist-deep water to catch his breath. He stood for a moment and watched the black tide of shadow creatures ebb and flow along the beach. Water was their nemesis so water it would be. When the fatigue of the swim abated somewhat he began splashing water up onto the dry sand of the beach. He focused on a strip just wide enough for him to walk up without them being able to reach him. The waves were small and calm so he scooped water between his arms and chest and continued wetting the strip up toward the boat. The creatures scattered from the water and avoided the wetted areas. On a couple of occasions he actually hit creatures with some droplets and took great joy in watching them writhe and die. Fortunately the stern of the boat was not that far from the water. The bad news was that the boat was loaded with fruit. He took hold of the stern and lifted for all he was worth managing to roll a portion of the fruit off onto the ground. This in turn made it lighter and easier to lift. He continued lifting until he could slide it a short distance toward the water. He kept at it until he was able to set it afloat and climb in. He could see that D’melle was still on the rock and prayed again that she was still alive.

He picked up an oar and noticed that somewhere in the process he had lost the kerchief that had wrapped his fingers. He made a quick inspection of them and then did a double take. Though the moonlight was not sufficient to see much detail, he could not find the cuts. There were two slightly darker stripes on his fingers where the cuts had been, but no flaps of skin, no soreness, no real evidence of the injury at all. For the moment he was too determined to get back to D’melle as soon as possible to think it through, but there was no denying that something unusual had happened. He paddled furiously to get back to her, pausing every few moments to look at his hand again. It was as if he’d cut them weeks ago and they were now completely healed. But why? The sea water? The chemical analysis had indicated traces of unknown substances in it but two hours of exposure had not helped D’melle in the least. What else? All he had done was wrap his cut fingers in cloth. Hadn’t there been something on the cloth? Something wet?

He pulled up to where D’melle was. She was still sitting, but not moving. A rush of panic swept through him until he heard her strained, shallow breathing. He loaded her limp,

fevered body into the boat. Her leg was even worse; she was burning hot and then began shivering uncontrollably. Maybe the bark cloth had some healing powers. He reached into the pouch even though he knew there was no more cloth. His hand came out covered with a gooey substance. He reached back in and found the succulent flower. The sap from where it had been broken off the plant had oozed out into the pouch. Quickly he smeared D'melle's wounds with it. Was this what had healed his hand? Was it in time?

He paddled back to camp and carried D'melle to the hut. Her limp body seemed so fragile in the absence of her usual fiery spirit. He found a towel they had brought from the ship and dried her off. With the tropical climate there had been little need for blankets and such, so he wrapped her in the few he could find to keep her warm. He found some fever-reducing medication in the first-aid kit. He worried what it might do to her alien anatomy but desperate measures were required. He managed to get her aware enough to take a drink and swallow a pill. He lay down and held her to keep her warm. After half an hour or so her trembling stopped and shortly afterward they both dozed off. When he awoke it was still dark. She was sleeping peacefully, her skin clammy but cool to the touch and her breathing no longer rapid and shallow. They had been asleep long enough for Stan to get a monumental cramp in his hip. To move might wake her so he forced himself to go back to sleep. Upon his next awakening both his hip and his shoulder were screaming for relief and would not be denied. His repositioning did indeed awaken her.

"How long until dawn?" she asked.

"I'm not sure." He rose up and looked toward the southeast. The horizon was slightly brighter there than the rest of the sky. "An hour or so maybe." When he turned back toward her she was starting to get up. "Whoa, where do you think you're going?"

"To get some water."

"No you don't. I'll get it for you. You just lay right back down and stay off that leg." He lit a torch and brought her a dipperful. He was elated that she drank so heartily. "Well, you sure seem to be doing better. Let's take a look at that leg."

He was utterly astonished. There was no swelling whatsoever and only two red welts with tiny cuts in the middle marked where the bite had occurred.

"Is it sore at all?" he asked.

She flexed it and touched the wounds. “Only a little.” She stood up and walked around with only a slight limp.

“And you feel okay other than that?”

“Yes, quite well; a bit hungry perhaps.”

“Say no more! That’s the best thing I could hear. I’ll rustle you up something in no time. How much do you remember about being sick?”

She thought for a moment. “I remember getting up on the rock. You helped me. You—you must have towed me there. I don’t remember swimming that far.”

“That’s right. Go on.”

“I remember that my leg felt as if it were on fire and the rest of me was so cold. It was terribly painful to move my leg.” She looked down and spoke very softly. “You were kind to me. You sucked the venom from my leg and held me. Then I remember you left me and I wanted to stop you but I did not have the strength to speak. I think I remember being in the boat and then being wrapped-up here on the bed and you holding me until I was warm. Then I awoke and now I feel much better. I thank you for helping me.” Those last words seemed to be especially difficult for her to say.

He grinned, “Aw, that’s okay. You had me worried for a while I’ll tell you that. But do you know what I think did it? What cured you?” He got the pouch and pulled the little succulent flower from it. “See this gooey brownish stuff oozing out of this flower? Last night I cut my fingers with the knife. They were bleeding pretty badly. I accidentally got some of this goop on them and within an hour or two they were completely healed. Look.” He held out his hand and only a faint scar remained. “I figured it couldn’t hurt to try it on your wounds and now look at them. They’re better than they’ve been since two minutes after you were bitten. This stuff is a miracle cure.”

By that afternoon D’melle was her old self again. At supper, where they normally sat opposite each other, she got up and came over and sat next to Stan.

“I have something to tell you,” she said staring directly into his eyes.

He felt his heart turn a flip. “Yes?”

“I remember something else about last night. Something you said.”

He cleared his throat nervously. “Oh?”

She turned and looked into the distance. “You said you—you and I would go back and kill those vile creatures.”

His shoulders slumped. “Oh, yeah, I guess I did say that.”

Her eyes lit up. “Well, I have been thinking about this. We cannot use the weapon—there are too many of them and it would need to be recharged too often. But I have thought of the perfect way to kill them. We build a sort of barge with a large water tank on it. We attach hoses at the bottom and use the pressure from the tank to spray them. We can kill thousands of them. Do you agree?”

Had he not been so let down by the subject matter of this, their first heart-to-heart talk, he would have thought it interesting that she sought his concurrence.

“Sure, sounds like a great plan.”

“Good. Then we will start construction first thing tomorrow.”

They built the tank out of D’mellian bamboo with a waterproof bark-cloth lining and made two large pontoons for it that—without the tank—would easily convert to outriggers. The hoses were bamboo pipes with a flexible connector at the tank that allowed movement. Stan rigged a shutoff valve mechanism at the nozzle end of each pipe. Again because of D’melle’s fervor for the project it was completed in just ten days. It felt to Stan that it was every bit as much work to fill the huge tank as building the thing. When all was ready they towed the tank behind the catamaran, grateful that the sea was exceptionally calm since the heavy tank was almost more than the pontoons could bear. They beached the tank, just as the sun was setting, at the same place they had landed before. Only this time they were ready.

The tank was filled to the brim. They stood side by side, her on the left, each with a hose-pipe as the sun dipped below the horizon.

“What do you think?” said Stan. “About this angle? That ought to reach to the line of trees, don’t you think.”

“Yes. Remember, you must spray first to block their escape. I will tell you when.”

“Got it.”

They heard the rustling just beyond the line of trees. Then they saw them. Shadows moving furtively in the dusk. Though in constant movement they advanced only slowly—a meter closer on the left, two closer on the right, now the line of shadows advanced within ten meters directly in front of them. As the dusk deepened they drew ever nearer. It occurred to

Stan that D'melle and he did not have the benefit of moonlight yet. Only the fourth moon was visible and it only a sliver. *Maybe we should have brought torches*, he thought. The creatures grew bolder; those nearest him were only a half meter away. The entire beach in front of them was black with them. One came within a few centimeters of his foot. He looked over at D'melle who was watching them intently. *Anytime now D'melle*, he thought. *I'll give you another five seconds...*

Chapter 18

“Hold your ground,” she said as if reading his mind. “Ready...ready...ready...now!”

He opened the nozzle and sent an arching stream out toward the back of the swarm of creatures. He could hear the hiss of dozens of them and saw the steam rise all along the end of his stream of water as he rotated the hose-pipe like an old-fashioned sprinkler. Those near them became greatly agitated. *You ever going to kill these at our feet, D’melle?* he thought.

“More over to the left!” she shouted. He complied but wished fervently that she would worry more about those at hand.

“Good!” she said. “Now take this. Hah!” In seconds she had soaked all those within three meters of them, shouting joyously as she heard them hiss in agonizing death. Stan was trying to soak every area where any escaped, so that their means of retreat would be cut off. The shadow creatures began crawling on top of each other as their panic drove them in multiple directions at once. Soon he began drawing the outer arc of his stream of water closer and closer in as D’melle’s moved outward. Within a few minutes there was only a thin band of the creatures still living. He turned his nozzle off and let her kill the last of them. It took some doing as the water tank was nearly empty yielding minimal pressure. After she was done she looked over every inch of beach for any surviving creatures, but found none.

“Guess that’s it, D’melle. Quite a kill, huh?”

Her face was beaming in triumph. “Perhaps we should refill the tank, in case more come,” she said.

Not only did Stan not have quite the enthusiasm for this that she had, there were practical issues also. “I don’t think that will happen. The beach is too wet now; none of them will venture

out here until it dries out some. Besides, the darker it gets the harder it is to make sure we get them all.”

She thought his words over for a bit as she surveyed the carcass-covered beach then nodded. “Yes. We will go. We will return though. They will learn to fear us as they fear the water itself.” Then she raised her arms above her head and laughed uproariously. “Victory! Is it not glorious? We will return and celebrate victory after victory until the last of them is dead!”

Stan was surprised at how much it pleased him to hear her laugh. “We’ll be back all right,” he said grinning. “Only next time, could you kill those closest to us just a little sooner?”

She looked at him with a frown for a moment, then laughed loud and long. “Oh, it is a joke; you make a joke, yes? You pretend you were a coward when really you are brave. It is irony—a joke. Very good, very funny.” She continued to laugh as they shoved off and began paddling toward camp.

Moon two had risen half full and was bright in the crystal clear sky. She was still smiling and it was a gorgeous smile. He realized he had never seen her smile before. He wanted to keep her spirits up. “We make a pretty good team, don’t you think?”

She smiled again. “Yes,” she said, “a very good team.”

“Nothing can stand in our way, right comrade?” he said.

“Nothing can defeat us, com—” Suddenly a look of shock came over her and she looked away as if amazed that she could commit such a faux pas.

Quickly he added softly, “D’mellian comrade, hmm?” He held out his hand to shake hers.

She looked at him, deep in thought for a long minute. Then smiled gently. “D’mellian comrade.” Instead of shaking his hand she placed her right hand on his right shoulder. He followed suit. Her shoulder, though strong and muscular, was magnificently soft. “Yes, we are comrades,” she said, patting his shoulder.

“Ah, so this is how comrades greet each other in Brankshtok,” he said. She nodded. “You know, the word ‘comrade’ in my language suggests a fellow warrior,” he said thoughtfully, “which we are. But I prefer another word. One that means we remain loyal to each other, even when there are no battles to fight. The word is ‘friend.’ D’melle, are we not also friends?”

“I am familiar with the word.” She turned and looked off toward the horizon, weighing what she was about to say. “Yes, Stan, we are friends.” Her use of his name generated

butterflies in his stomach. He felt he was about to go through a door he would never have imagined existed.

“Here’s how friends greet in my world.” He shook her hand and she looked quizzically at him. Even the touch of her hand made his heart race. He laughed lightly. “I guess it is a bit odd. I think it had to do with showing the other person that one was not holding a weapon in ancient times.”

She nodded vigorously. “Yes, that is the same origin as our hand-to-shoulder gesture.”

They paddled in silence for a minute, but Stan was not willing to let the moment end. He continued, “In that case I don’t think either gesture is appropriate for us D’mellians. I already know you’re not going to use a weapon on me, and you know I’m going to use one on you either. We should create our own unique D’mellian friendship greeting, don’t you think?”

She pondered this for a moment and then nodded slightly. “What would that be?” she asked.

His mouth suddenly went completely dry. “How—ahem, how about this?” He put his arm around her slender waist. “D’melle, my friend,” he announced, half expecting her to clobber him with her paddle. To his surprise he felt her arm go around his waist. She looked into his eyes for a second then away. “Friend,” she said. After spending a long moment being intoxicated by her closeness he ever so gently removed his arm and picked up his paddle.

“Guess we better get on back.” To his delight she took her time removing her arm from him. He wanted desperately to tell her how he really felt about her, but dared not press his luck any further. Still, the magic of the moment had not been lost on her. He watched her out the corner of his eye as she paddled-on mechanically while in deep introspection. This had meant something to her, just as it had to him.

When they docked the boat he took her hand and helped her out. She looked at him strangely but accepted it without complaint. Through supper and around the fire afterward they recounted their exploits. D’melle kept trying to devise ways of improving their kill quantity the next go round. At length they grew tired, and Stan headed over to his bunk.

“Goodnight, D’melle,” he said. He wanted to throw his arm around her and work the “friend” routine again, but thought better of it.

Not quite understanding she answered, “Yes, it has been a good night, friend Stan.”

A muddled dream incorporated a bang-bang-banging in Stan's subconscious until it stirred him awake. The sky was light but there was no sun yet. He shook his head and staggered to the doorway of the hut to see what the cause of the racket was. D'melle was hammering furiously at one of the pontoons for their floating water tank. When she stopped for a second Stan called out to her.

"D'melle! What in heaven's name are you doing?"

She scarcely glanced up. "Detaching the outrigger so it can be used as a canoe."

"At zero o'clock in the morning? Why so early? Is there some urgent need for a canoe all of a sudden that a guy can't sleep at least till sunup?"

"Sleep, sleep, sleep!" she groused. "You would sleep your life away. Do you not know that it is much better to do hard labor now rather than after the day becomes hot?"

"Yeah, yeah. But I'm not such a morning person. Getting up ahead of the sun is not as natural for me as it is you."

"Hah, this is a true statement. You have not arisen before me since we landed on this planet." She waved him off disgustedly. "Go back to your bed and wait for the aboontja's call to awaken you."

He shook his head and gave a deep sigh. "Okay, okay, I'll be down to help in a little bit; I'm going to wash up. Unless you want the falls first."

She glared at him incredulously. "I did that an hour ago."

"I should have known that. Look, I'll only be a few minutes. As soon as I get back how about you knock-off while we have some breakfast and then I'll come help you. Okay?"

She nodded absently then went back to her hammering.

They breakfasted on boiled aboontja eggs and half a peach each.

"These are so good," said Stan. "Too bad that horrible island didn't work out."

"We could go during the day," said D'melle. "There is no danger then."

"How sure are you about that? I'm not. I wouldn't have thought there was any danger after dark either until we experienced it. No thanks. I don't need easy-to-reach peaches so badly that I'd put you at risk again. No chance."

"You mean, 'put *us* at risk again.'"

He looked intently into her captivating violet eyes and spoke quietly. "I meant exactly what I said." D'melle diverted her eyes and shifted uneasily in her seat.

“Anyway,” continued Stan, “that night is still much too vivid in my mind to venture back over there—other than with our water cannon to annihilate some of those disgusting creatures, that is. I should think it would be even more vivid for you. You’re the one they nearly killed.”

“Yes. The memory is still quite fresh.” She hesitated, apparently wanting to say something but uncertain if she should.

“Stan,” she said at last.

“What is it, D’melle?”

“When I was suffering the effects of the shadow creature’s bite, you said something—something I wish for you to explain.”

He tried to think back but his was not the photographic memory hers was. “Okay. What was it?”

“You spoke words to one you called your ‘father.’ And you spoke of the one you call ‘Jesus,’ the one you said was the same as our Hilundt. You asked for help in healing me. Can you explain this?”

He smiled gently. “Certainly. The ‘Father’ I spoke to is God. He hears my every word—knows my every thought—even way out here. He has told us that if we trust Him, He will take care of us. He is omnipotent. Do you know the word?”

She shook her head.

“It means all-powerful. He created the entire universe and its every living creature. We, you and I, exist at His will and pleasure. Just as His power is inexhaustible so is His love. I asked Him to heal you. And, so it appears, that is just what He did.”

“I thought you said it was the sap from the flowering plant that healed me.”

“Yes. But did the plant have the power to heal before my prayer? Would I have found out what it could do in time without the prayer? You see, that is the way of faith. We ask for help and when we receive it there is always some alternate explanation. Faith says I asked the Lord to intervene and He did. The faithless say it would have happened anyway. But I know this: I asked Him for you to be healed when there was no way for that to happen and now, here you sit, perfectly well.”

He braced himself for the barrage of ridicule he was sure would come. Instead there was a long silence before she spoke.

“What was the reference to Hilundt—Jesus?”

“I only have access to the Father through the grace of Jesus. All of us have alienated ourselves from God but by surrendering our will to Jesus and having faith in Him as His Son, we can be reconciled to our heavenly Father. Then we can have a close, personal relationship with Him and ask Him for help in time of trouble.”

“This is difficult to understand. It is so strange to me.”

“D’melle, would you like to hear more? Let me go get my pocket New Testament.”

At first he read to her, beginning with the book of Matthew but the first time he grew tired she asked to have the book and read to herself from where he left off. She was an incredibly fast reader—particularly impressive given it was a language so different from her own. She asked questions here and there, especially related to Israel and the Jews as God’s chosen people. Not having an Old Testament, Stan gave her a recap of it as best he could from memory. The book of Revelation greatly confused her although she found its images of heavenly battles intriguing. Stan assured her that it was full of symbols some of which probably had more meaning to John’s early readers than those of the present.

“Nevertheless,” he said, “the essential message of the book is that those of us who belong to Jesus win in the end and live forever.”

To Stan’s surprise her first response to finishing the New Testament was to go back and read it again, cover to cover. Midday on the third day of her readings she closed the book and sat deep in thought wearing a troubled look. Finally she looked up at Stan.

“So, these people waited countless generations for this Messiah to save them?”

“Yes, that’s right. Of course, they misunderstood who He was to be. They thought He would be a great warrior, a champion who, by God’s blessing, would make their nation the mightiest on earth. He instead taught them that to be mighty and great in God’s sight is to be kind, loving, gentle, and humble.”

“And for this they killed Him? The One they had waited for all those years?” she said.

“Well, they killed Him because they were people. Just like me—and you. We are all inherently evil, self-centered, proud. The idea of loving others, especially the unlovable, the weak, and the downtrodden is foreign to our very natures. We naturally want to be the most important, to come out the winners, and just generally to have everything our own way. Jesus’ way is to put others ahead of ourselves, to seek their good, not ours.”

“But this makes no sense. If people expend themselves worrying about the good of others, who will worry about them?”

“Ideally, the others.”

“You mean if I spent my time taking care of you, you would seek to take care of me?”

“Absolutely.”

“What is the benefit of this?” she asked. “How is this better than each of us being concerned with ourselves only?”

“Because it is wonderful,” said Stan. “Having a relationship where we put one another first is the most glorious way to live there is.”

“You mean, like when one faces death to save a comrade?”

Stan studied on the statement for a moment. “Actually, yes. That is a very good illustration. Only it doesn’t apply just to life and death battles, but to everyday living. In fact, the perfect example of that is Jesus Himself. Although He had the power of God and could have avoided death, He allowed His own creation to kill Him as a means of taking upon Himself the punishment we deserve. He gave His life for us but, of course, He was victorious over death. No one else since the beginning of time, no matter how powerful and brave a warrior, has returned from the dead to live forever—but Jesus has. When we give up control of our own lives and proclaim Him our Lord, He gives us that same victory and we become God’s sons and daughters.”

She thought for a moment. “And this is why God answered your prayer for me?”

He smiled gently. “Yes.”

“But why would he help me? I do not know this God. I am so far removed from Him and these teachings.”

“He’s not far away from you D’melle. He hears us speaking this very minute. More than that, He knows the words we are not speaking, the ones in our hearts. This Hilundt you speak of, are the stories about Him the same?”

“Yes. They told them to us during our years of training—always they made fun of them, how ludicrous the stories were. They always spoke of Hilundt as a pathetic warrior who willingly surrendered, allowing Himself to be killed without even a fight. We were taught to hate Him and to scorn those foolish enough to believe in such tales. We even laughed at the meaning of the name, Hilundt: Savior. He could not even save Himself.”

“D’melle I believe it can only be that the God of all creation sent His Son to the people of your world just as He did to ours. On both our home worlds there remain only a remnant of believers but the evidence is now so strong that it would seem that the believers have been right all along.”

She looked into the distance and slowly shook her head. “I must think about these things.”

Chapter 19

It was just dawn. Slowly, silently he crept toward her bunk, listening to her long, slow breaths of slumber. He stopped a foot from her face and reached into the bowl. Her breath became inaudible as her highly trained ears detected that someone was nearby. Just as her eyes opened he threw a handful of water into her face. She sat up with a gasp.

“Hey, sleepy-head, who’s staying in bed all day this time?” he said laughing as he hurried back out to the table.

“What are you doing?” she fumed.

“Waking you up. You don’t want to sleep your life away, do you?” He turned away and laughed. Suddenly his laughter stopped. It hadn’t dawned on him until this exact instant that she might not be as playful as he hoped. She might consider this an insult to her honor and shoot him on the spot.

As she bolted out of the hut she narrowed her eyes and looked around. Quickly she spotted the water bucket, reached into it and just as he turned back toward her, threw a handful of water in his face.

He grinned with relief. “Oh, wanna play huh?” With that he threw the remainder of the bowl on her and took off running. He looked back in time to see her grab the whole bucket and head after him. The look on her face was not one of anger, but sheer mischief.

“Whoa-oh!” he shouted and headed up the hill toward the waterfall. He made sure she caught up to him just as he reached the water’s edge. He turned just in time to get the entire bucketful in the face. He purposely staggered back and fell into the pool. He surfaced to the joyous sound of D’melle laughing hysterically. He splashed water all over her and swam off toward the falls. “Can’t catch me!” he yelled and she dove in after him.

They played and roughhoused in the pool for more than half an hour until they were both exhausted. They dragged themselves onto the grassy bank and lay side-by-side panting and laughing. As they regained their breath they looked into one another's eyes and he felt a wave of emotion rush over him. *I love you, D'melle*, he thought. *I love you with all my heart, wholly and without any reservation.* It was all he could do to keep from blurting it out. Her expression indicated she was reading his eyes and knew exactly what he was thinking. The encouraging thing for Stan was that, if she did know, she was not objecting.

He stood up and held out his hand. "How about we take a little walk to dry off? Then we can go have breakfast." She took his hand and stood. He could not bring himself to release it and she did not pull it away. They walked hand-in-hand along the stream toward the overlook, his heart racing more now than it had from any of the running and swimming they had done earlier. She stopped momentarily, bent over and used her fingers to jostle the water out of her hair. She shook her head and it fell into perfect golden ringlets, as if she had just stepped out of some beauty parlor.

"Do you realize that any woman on my planet would give her right arm to have hair like that?" He lifted her chin. "In fact, any woman anywhere would give anything to look like this. Your beauty is superior to anyone on my planet. Even though I haven't met them, I'm certain it surpasses anyone on your planet, too."

Though she was silent her eyes were wide with anticipation of what he would do or say next. He took her in his arms and thrilled to a long, deliciously soft kiss. Her arms, her lips were as eager as his. They parted and he smiled as she took a half step back. She reared back and fired a roundhouse right that nailed him squarely on the chin and dropped him like a sack of rocks.

Stan could not quite make sense of his surroundings. He was on his back with his right arm pinned awkwardly underneath him. He felt like he was on a hill that slanted both upwards and downwards in the same direction. Where he was, exactly, and how he got there was just beyond his ability to reason-out. There was a reason, an important reason. He felt certain of that. But its importance did little to clear up what it was. Something inside his head was prodding him to concentrate, and to sit up. Difficult as it was, the latter seemed infinitely easier than the former so he struggled against the uphill-downhill puzzle. Finally he groped his way to

a sitting position. The fog in his brain began to clear exactly as quickly as the pain in his jaw made itself known. *D'melle*, he thought. *She clobbered me but good*. He rubbed his chin but it was the hinges of his jaws that were the biggest problem. He opened and shut his mouth several times trying to see if he could get his upper and lower teeth to resume their former relative proximities. Something did not feel quite right in there but he could not be exactly sure what.

He got to his feet and shook his head to clear the rest of the cobwebs. The uphill-in-all-directions feeling disappeared and he recognized that he was on the gentle slope leading to the overlook. He remembered the kiss; exquisitely soft, warm and sweet. Why had she—in fact, where was she? He took stock of himself and found that his back was covered with mud due to his wet body flopping onto the ground. His knees were a bit shaky for the first couple of steps but quickly returned to normal. He walked back to the waterfall and was disappointed that she was not there. He swam out to the fall and back to wash the dirt off. The grassy bank where he pulled himself out brought back the memory of how he had been lying here adoring those gorgeous eyes earlier. What in the world had happened? One instant she willingly accepted his kiss of deepest adoration and the next she fired a haymaker and knocked him cold. If he had grabbed her and tried to force himself on her, he could understand. But he had not only kissed her, she had responded. Of that there was no question.

As he stood to return to the hut he tried another line of reasoning. Maybe, in the immediate aftermath of the kiss, she had suddenly become aware of what she was doing—allowing a vile, inferior Earther intimate access to her person; placing her mouth on that of a “cockroach.” Even that was an unsatisfactory answer. She could have pushed him away, yelled at him, even spit at him. But to slug him was inexplicably strange even for *D'melle*.

But with *D'melle* things could always get stranger. He found her out at the kitchen slamming utensils around ostensibly attempting to prepare breakfast. Her actions only hinted at the anger displayed on her tense, tight-lipped face. The phrase “beating eggs” does no justice to the mauling she was subjecting two aboontja eggs to. Stan had such a muddle of confused questions he could not think where to start. He just stood a few meters from her for a good five minutes while she ignored him. Finally he could wait no longer.

“*D'melle*?”

Her only acknowledgement that she had heard was an increase in the fury of her food preparations. She hacked mercilessly at a zwantchka root until she had murdered it into the tiniest of pieces then slammed it into the egg bowl.

Stan could feel his own anger beginning to take over. If she thought that a simple kiss, no matter how repulsive, was cause to declare open warfare on him, she needed to have the facts of life explained to her, but quick. *Hmm, facts of life*, he thought. *Now there's an ironic phrase. It would be almost funny if it weren't so infuriating.* He had been ready to give her his heart; totally and without reservation of any kind. His reward for loving her? A right-cross on the button. Well it was time for the silent treatment to stop, he decided, and for him to demand some answers.

“D’melle, we need to talk.”

She paused for an instant, leaning on her hands with her head lowered. She resumed her furious attack on the food for a brief moment then stopped again and raised her head. The rage in those purple eyes was more intense than he had ever seen—even more than when he had first captured her. As she spoke it was obvious she was struggling to keep her emotions under control.

“Talk? Do not talk. Do not ever talk to me. Ever!”

“D’melle, why? What’s wrong?”

“Why? Why should I talk to one who treats me with such chreenej?”

Stan turned his palms up and shook his head. “Chreenej?”

“Oh!” She turned red and sputtered. “What is this word? Um, oh, Disdain! Disdain! Disrespect! Dishonor! Chreenej! I would never have thought it of you. I could not have believed it of you.” Her voice began to break and to his amazement tears were replacing the anger in her eyes. “That you would treat me in such a way...” She threw down the bowl and headed toward the beach at full speed.

Stan stared after her dumbfounded. She was crying. That was terrible. He had never seen her cry before. Something about him had her crying. That was wonderful. He was in some way that important to her. Her words were of hate but were her tears of love? That was confusing. Confusing? Till yet he still had not the vaguest notion why she was so distraught. Except that he was the cause. Because of a kiss? This was beyond confusing. It was mind-numbingly inexplicable. Like a square circle, he despaired that it could ever make sense; it was

not possible for it to make sense. But he was overwhelmed with the feeling that he might very well go mad if he did not get an answer. His stomach was twisted into knots as he sprinted after her.

He spotted her sitting by the mouth of the stream, still crying as near as he could tell. She did not notice he was there until he was almost upon her. When she looked up at him he got a full look at her tear-tracked face and pained eyes. He felt something squeezing his heart and almost broke down in tears himself. She turned her back toward him and covered her face with her hands. He circled her and knelt in front of her, trying to look into her face.

“D’melle?” he said so softly it was barely audible. “D’melle it hurts me to see you like this. Please help me understand what I’ve done.”

“You know what you have done. You have humiliated me. Now leave me. Leave me and never see or speak to me again!”

A sigh of frustration accompanied the sagging of his shoulders. “D’melle, we’re the only two people on this planet. We have to get along somehow. We have to resolve this. I can’t just leave.”

“Then I will leave,” she said. “I will go to some other part of this world.” She stood up.

“D’melle, stop! You can’t leave. I love you.”

Now it was her turn to look confused. “You say this? After what you have done?”

He turned his palms up and looked at the sky. “D’melle, it was only a kiss. If I’d had any idea it would—”

“You see? This is as I thought. You lie! You speak of love, you act so loving, but your own words prove they are lies. I will hear no more of them!” With that, and her voice betraying the advent of more tears, she stormed away in a huff.

“D’melle! Wait, you can’t keep running away from me. We have to talk this out. Please. What harm can it do to talk, to help me understand?”

She stopped and whirled around. “What harm? You want to make a fool of me again. I will not allow it.”

“How did my kissing you make a fool of you?”

Through teeth clenched with the pain of humiliation she said, “Because I thought it was more than ‘just a kiss.’”

He stopped short. “You did?” He half smiled. “Well, so did I, actually. Much more.”

“More lies! Have you no honor? Have you so little respect for me?” She hurried back to the camp.

Stan was approaching the point of emotional exhaustion trying to sort out the pieces of this agonizing puzzle, but there just were not enough pieces. When he arrived at the hut D’melle was collecting up some food supplies. She was planning to leave.

“No!” he shouted. “Don’t leave. Don’t go. I’ll leave. I’ll take an outrigger to the little cove up the coast. You can have the camp all to yourself, only please don’t leave. Please. I couldn’t bear it if you left. I’ll go.”

She did not respond but his perception was that his leaving was fine with her. She headed for the beach while he gathered supplies. By the time he loaded the outrigger she was nowhere to be found. He launched the boat and slowly made his way up the coastline to the only other habitable spot they had seen. It was a cove, a sliver of land about a kilometer long, roughly half the narrow breadth of which was beach. It was bounded inland by abrupt sheer black cliffs of solid rock a good thirty meters high. The only break in this wall of rock was near the north end of the cove. There a deep triangular slice cut out of the wall whose sides were equally steep as the rest. Along both sides of the cut ran two brooks whose source appeared to be a waterfall of runoff from the every-fourth-day rain. The triangle was situated such that they had not noticed it on their sailing excursions near the cove. The interior of the triangle was what could only be described as a garden. It boasted a passion berry bush heavy with fruit, a large number of zwantchka plants, one small peach tree untouched by D’mellian gazelles—due to its isolation, he surmised—and, just for good measure, D’mellian orchids all around its perimeter. *This will do nicely*, he thought. Even D’melle would have to be impressed by the beauty and abundance. He sighed deeply. As lovely as the garden was, its beauty would be enhanced a hundredfold if she were standing in its midst.

The first few days he busied himself constructing a camp near the sheer wall near the entrance to the triangle. He built a lean-to shelter to keep the rain off him. He found a long piece of driftwood and whittled it into a spear. By the second week he found himself pacing like a panther in a cage. He took the canoe and paddled out into the surf with his spear, telling himself he was looking for fish. Though rare and seldom of the same species, the few they had found had been tasty and, as far as they could tell, quite nourishing. He rowed parallel to D’melle’s beach and peered intently toward the hut in the distance, hoping to catch a glimpse of

her. He had given up when he caught sight of her stepping out of the hut. Even as far away as she was, his heart leaped. She stopped and seemed to be staring at him. *What would she do if I came ashore?* he wondered. *Could I beg her to talk to me, to help us get this mess straightened out?* He had just about decided to make this bold move when she turned and ran off into the bushes. His shoulders sagged and he paddled back to his lonely camp.

He beached the canoe and wondered how he would survive. Oh, the basic necessities were there to meet his physical needs. But what about the pain in his heart? The wrenching loneliness? He realized that throughout history people had lived in total isolation for years, finding ways to survive. He knew that, had he landed here alone, he could have done so, too. But this was different. Companionship was only a short distance away; and yet it could not have been more unreachable. And not just companionship; D'melle was more than a companion. She was the woman he loved. "Lord, how will I live without her? Why should I live if it is to be without her? Help me, Lord. Please."

Chapter 20

His thoughts were disrupted by a splashing where one of the twin streams became shallow as it met the sea. It was even shallower than usual because, for the first time since they had landed on the planet, the fourth-day rain had not happened. It had been seven days since the last rain. The splashing was a fish caught in the shallows. It was trophy size, an unusual emerald green, and with too many fins to look what Stan considered normal. He grabbed the spear and after several tries, once almost seeing it get away, he skewered it.

“Well, at least there’ll be some good eating tonight.”

He filleted the strange-looking creature and cooked it over an open fire. When thoroughly done he examined it for bones and took a large mouthful. Its taste was strong, as if it were several days old instead of freshly caught. He forced himself to eat two more mouthfuls, each smaller than the previous before deciding that it was not merely strong but foul. “Yech. That’s enough of that.” He disposed of the rest and rinsed his mouth with creek water. He thought about how good a peach would taste and how it would rid him of the rank taste. But that morning he had eaten the last of those he had picked. Now it was too dark for him to find his way to the garden’s peach tree and, besides, he was not feeling too well. He decided that sleep was more what he needed.

When he awoke, two of the D’mellian moons were up enough to provide a minimal amount of light. His stomach was feeling queasy and the disgusting taste in his mouth was making matters worse. His mind was begging for the sweet juice of a peach and would not take “no” for an answer. He dragged himself to his feet and staggered over to the near brook. He leaned into the cool water and drank but the foulness of his mouth ruined any chance of refreshment. He looked across the creek toward the tree and thought he saw one of the

wonderful fruits on the ground not far from him. *Must have dropped it last time I picked some*, he thought. He sincerely hoped it was not just a round rock. He was feeling worse by the minute. He hopped across the little stream and walked over to the round object lying near three dark patches of ground. As he reached down he was pleased to find that it was indeed a peach.

Dark spots! Too late. The three shadow creatures converged on him in an instant. One bit deeply into the right forearm that had grabbed the peach. He staggered back, fell and rolled toward the stream. He plunged his right arm into the water and the creature released its bite as it agonized to death. At the same time a second one latched itself onto his left arm just above the elbow. He slid completely into the water, whirled around in it to thwart any other attacks and rolled out onto the safe bank. He screamed at the incredible pain. Now he knew the searing torture D'melle had endured. He could not believe that the nerves in one's body could produce such agony. Immediately he knew he was going to be in big trouble if he did not get some help. Still crying out from pain he forced himself to get up. The use of his arms to get to his feet put the pain off the charts. He staggered toward the canoe and could feel his arms swelling and stiffening with each step. Attempting to push the canoe toward the water hurt him beyond anything he could have imagined. As he forced himself to get the canoe afloat he began to realize that it was more than just excruciating pain, his arms were ceasing to function. He tried to get into the boat but his useless arms failed him and he fell facedown into the surf. Though the water was only half a meter deep he was totally unable to get up. He tried to get his feet under him using just his legs but the moving surf made the already difficult impossible. He realized that he might drown and, given the ceaseless agony of the bites, sincerely questioned whether that would be so bad. He floundered helplessly and exhaled into the water generating a profusion of bubbles—the last of his air.

Suddenly something grabbed him around the chest and raised him to his knees. He gasped and panted noisily.

“Stan, what is it?” said D'melle. “What's wrong?”

He nearly wept. “D'melle, help me,” he rasped. “Shadow creatures, both arms; I can't move them.”

“Quickly,” she said. “I'll get you onto the catamaran.” She hauled him onto the boat and performed the same first aid he had done on her. As she sucked venom from his wounds he faded into a semi-conscious state. His next cognizant moment he was lying on his old bunk in

their hut with her toweling him off. He tried to speak and was amazed at the effort it required. He was weakening just as she had done only faster due to the dual bites.

She stroked his hair. "Stan, can you hear me?" He managed a weak nod. "The sap from the succulent flower, the sap that heals, it is no good. It is all dried out, solidified. I must get more, from the island; and I must go now. Do you understand this? I must leave you but only for a short time."

He shook his head and forced the words out. "No. You cannot; you must not. Too dangerous. No good for us both to die. You must live, my d—" His words were cut short by a shot of pain that wracked his entire body and escaped as a loud uncontrollable groan.

"You must hold on until I return. I can wait no longer." As she turned to leave she called out over her shoulder. "Say a prayer."

The good news was that a fair breeze was blowing and she made it to the island quickly under sail. The bad news was that it had clouded over making it especially dark. She had a powered light from the AF-P3's stores but worried how she would carry it while fending off the vile shadow creatures. She brought the catamaran right up to the mouth of the creek and dropped its stone anchor. She walked up the creek, amazed at how low the water had become in the rain's absence. As her light shone on the land around her, the ground moved with the undulating creatures. She felt a burning desire to kill huge quantities of them but knew she could not afford the time. Time would be short enough even if her plan succeeded perfectly. Plan? She really did not have a plan. Just somehow to get the succulent plant blossoms and return. Exactly how that would occur she would figure out as she went along. At last she found the hedgerow and the large tree they had used as an escape the last time. She had a small container and used it to slosh water out of the shallow creek enough for a path to the broken limb. Ignoring that it could have broken completely away from the tree under her weight she climbed back along it to the huge tree's trunk, then back out on the limb closest to the succulents. But that was not close enough. There was a good ten meters of open ground between her and the goal with no way to get there except to wade through a nightmare of those horrible creatures.

She fired a barrage along the ground she would need to traverse hoping to create a path, but to little purpose. As soon as she cleared them in an area and moved to another, they re-converged in the first area. *I will just have to shoot quickly enough*, she thought, knowing it was hopeless. Even if she could manage to keep them off her, she would have no time to obtain the succulent flowers she needed.

“God,” she prayed haltingly, “I do not know You but Stan does and he needs Your help. Please help me help him. Please, I cannot do this alone.” She took a deep breath, fired her weapon to clear a spot to land and jumped down from the tree. She ran spinning and firing all around her feet as she did so. To her amazement she reached the row of succulents without being bitten but now was confronted with the inability to obtain her prize. To do so she needed to stop firing, turn toward the succulents, shine her light to locate a flower, pick it, stash it, and then resume firing until she could get back to the tree. If Stan had been with her, one could have held them off while the other did the rest. But the creatures were not going to just go away while she obtained the desired item. She thought about just letting them bite her, knowing the balm would heal her. But having seen how quickly paralysis had overcome Stan with multiple bites, the odds of her reaching the boat, the mainland, and their camp seemed incredibly slim.

The weapon was increasingly hot in her hand. A quick glance at the flashing red indicator told her it was becoming overtaxed from continual firing and would cease to work in a matter of seconds. She reached blindly behind her into the plants hoping against hope she might grasp one of the blooms—if there even were any. Then there was a sound; no, two sounds. One was a pattering, the other a hiss. The ground around her suddenly lightened. The tide of shadow creatures ebbed and withdrew amid the occasional hiss of a dying creature. A drip landed on her eyelashes and at last she understood. Within seconds the pattering became a downpour, a full-fledged cloudburst. There was not a creature to be seen. They had apparently sensed the coming deluge and retreated to whatever waterproof lair they lived in. She turned and examined the nearest succulent plant. Seeing three flowers, she picked them all, making sure each was drooling plenty of the healing sap, and put them into the pouch. She raced through the rain back to the boat. The entire trip she prayed as best she knew how that he would still be alive when she returned and that this miracle cure would work one more time.

That he was still alive was obvious from his raspy, labored breathing but the efficacy of the healing balm would not be known until after two days and nights of touch and go. At last he awoke the third morning, lucid, with an appetite and the ability to sit upright. As he ate she sat and stared at him nervously as if wanting to discuss something very serious with him.

“D’melle? What is it? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so jittery.”

“It is about the healing balm from the plants on the island.”

“Yes, great stuff, huh? This is twice we’ve been saved by it. I guess we should keep a fresh supply on hand all the time just for emergencies.”

“Yes, this is true.”

He could tell there was something more. “Go ahead, D’melle. Say what’s on your mind.”

She nodded. “When I was surrounded by the shadow creatures I—I did not know what to do. There was no way out; no way to complete my mission without—without help.”

Stan narrowed his eyes, unsure what she was getting at. She seemed almost embarrassed by whatever it was she was revealing to him. “Yes, go on.”

“So, I prayed.”

“Well, sure you did,” he said gently. “That’s perfectly understandable. I prayed for you while you were gone. At least I began a prayer, I’m not sure I didn’t pass out before I finished it.”

“But you do not understand. For a Shtokian to look to anyone else for help—and to this God, this superior—er—Supreme Being...” She shook her head, shocked at her own actions.

“D’melle, it’s okay. Realizing one’s dependence on God is nothing to be ashamed of. I know it’s foreign to your ways, but it is not something to condemn yourself for.”

“But this is not so much the issue. The prayer, it was answered.”

“Answered. Yes. Here I am well, just like when I prayed for you.”

“Oh, but it was more than this. I had no way to stop the creatures so I could get to the plant. Then I prayed. Then it rained. It rained! It has never rained at night here, but just in time it rained and all the creatures were gone. Then I prayed that it would be in time to heal you and you are well. It is a miracle.”

Stan smiled joyously. “Yes, a miracle.”

“But why should God do a miracle for *me*? I have not given my life over to His Son.”

“Perhaps He knows it’s just a matter of time.”

With that she jumped up and announced that she was going to the pool to wash up and rushed out the door of the hut.

D’melle stepped back from the waterfall and flipped her thick hair back with a toss of her head. She took a deep breath and submerged into the pool, swimming slowly through the pool’s calm silence along its bottom toward the grassy bank. When she surfaced, she reacted with surprise seeing Stan standing on the bank.

“You must be feeling much better,” she said with a smile.

“Just like my old self,” he said, “thanks to you.”

She remained in the pool, overlapping her hands on the bank and resting her chin on them. “It is good to see you up and walking again.”

“It’s good to hear you say that.” He sat cross-legged directly in front of her. “I owe you my life, D’melle.”

She paused a moment then gave a facial shrug. “Just so. We are even.”

“D’melle, you didn’t risk your life to save me because you felt obligated to even the score. Doggone it, D’melle, I’m in love with you and I can’t go on without you. And you’re in love with me, too. Oh, I know it may sound disgusting to hear me say that, and you may not even be willing to admit it to yourself. But way down in the depths of that little alien heart of yours I bet you really do love me. Or at least you could if you’d give yourself half a chance. Now, I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that nothing could be more repugnant than to love an inferior Earther like me but deep down you must feel something for me. Right?”

She pulled herself out of the water and stood over him, delectable in her little swimsuit. “I had thought you were over the fever but it must have affected your mind.” She plopped down next to him.

“Look, all I ask is that you give it some time, some thought and—”

“Of course I am in love with you,” she continued. “Any blind fool could see this.”

Chapter 21

His mouth hung open stupidly as he stared at her, then looked aside, then back at her.

“He could? You are?”

“Certainly. This is why I sailed out to check on you every night, to be sure you were all right.”

“You did?”

“Now, how else could I have been there so quickly when you were hurt? I had to come there.” She swallowed noisily and her chin began to quiver. “I had to because of the aching in my heart from being away from you.”

“D’melle, you really do love me, then?”

She nodded and was crying outright. “That is why it hurt so much when you treated me with such chreenej.” He reached for her then stopped.

“Oh no, not this again,” he said. He took her by each arm and turned her toward him.

“D’melle, my dear, precious, D’melle. If you do indeed love me, even a little, would you please do me just one simple favor?”

She wiped her eyes. “What is this favor?”

“Tell me exactly what I did that upset you.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “This is ridiculous,” she groused. “Or do you enjoy humiliating me so much.” Her eyes were puddling-up again.

“Ah-ah-ah-ah, none of that evasive stuff. Let’s take it from the top. I was overcome with love for you, kissed you, and you decked me. At least that’s all that happened from my perspective. So tell me what I did that was so disrespectful. You’ve been saying since the day

you first spoke to me that ‘I know nothing.’ Well, now I’m admitting it. As far as what it is you think I’ve done to you, I honestly know nothing. So,” he said, sitting back. “Enlighten me.”

She sighed loudly then spoke quietly, obviously deeply ashamed. “You treated me like a melochk.”

He shrugged. “Melochk, I don’t know that word. What does it mean?”

She lifted her hands and wiggled her fingers trying to find an equivalent word in Stan’s language. “A, um, road walker?”

“Road walk—? Street walker? You mean a prostitute?”

She pointed at him in acknowledgement. “Yes, that is the word. Melochk.”

“You mean when I kissed you I was treating you like a melochk?”

“Of course not,” she said, her voice dripping with exasperation. “Did you not realize that I was also involved in the kiss?”

Stan’s shoulders slumped in confusion. “Yes. Yes, I thought you were very much involved—that you enjoyed it. I know I certainly did.”

“Well,” she said as if it were all explained, “I did also.”

Stan shook his head. “I’m sorry, I still don’t get it. If the kiss was okay with you, how did the kiss treat you like a melochk?”

Now D’melle’s shoulders slumped. “Not the kiss. The kiss was wonderful. There was no gurnosh!”

Stan accompanied his blank look with a slow head shake.

Frustrated, D’melle looked for a translation. “You know, gurnosh. Oh, what is your word for it?” She snapped her fingers several times. “Come now, you must know.” Still no light came on for Stan. She sighed loudly. “You know, the Contest.”

Stan finally held up both palms toward her. “D’melle, suppose you just explain what this gurnosh is.”

“It is the mating battle. What is your word for it?”

He frowned. “D’melle, the reason you cannot find our word for it is that we don’t have a word for it. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“This is ridiculous. You mean to say you do not know what a male and female do when they decide to become life-mates?”

He raised his eyebrows and gave a short laugh. “Oh, I think I’ve got the important parts of that figured out. But it certainly doesn’t include any kind of battle. Look, D’melle, why don’t you just explain the whole gurnosh thing to me as if I had just dropped in from some other planet.”

Although her countenance showed her incredulity that anyone could be so dense, D’melle proceeded. “When a male and female become interested in becoming life-mates the female initiates the gurnosh—a combat to prove the male is worthy of her.”

“Worthy? How?”

“No female would become the mate of a male who cannot defeat her in battle. What hope would their children have of becoming mighty warriors? You must have the same Contest, do you not?”

“No, nothing like it.”

“This is not possible. How can the female know if she has chosen a worthy male?”

“I dunno. Just hopes love will suffice, I guess.”

“You cannot be serious about this.”

Suddenly Stan brightened and he began tapping his forehead. “D’melle! That’s why you were so upset! You knocked me cold and, since I lost the battle—one that I didn’t even know I was in—you think me unworthy of you, right?”

She sighed, her shoulders sagged and she rolled her eyes. “Of course not!”

“Huh?”

“If it were only that I defeated you I would be dismayed, perhaps disgusted, but this would not treat me like a melochk.”

“Oh,” he said regretfully, “yeah, that’s true. I guess you’re going to have to keep explaining about this melochk thing.”

She shook her head in amazement that something so basic was requiring so much explanation. “There is no combat with a melochk. These are females who have no honor, no self-respect. They allow any and all males to use them in exchange for favors, money, or whatever it is they are after. The males who use them have no need to prepare themselves for battle since they know the melochk will not initiate the contest.”

Stan thought for a long moment as her words assembled themselves in his head into the answer he had been seeking. At length he flopped his head back, looked up at the sky and

groaned. “Oh, I get it. By not even preparing for ‘the battle’ it was as if I considered you cheap, right?”

“Cheap?” The hurt came back into her eyes. “Yes, this would be a good way to say it.”

He smiled and shook his head slowly. “D’melle, sweetheart, I had no idea. Like I said, my culture doesn’t do that—anywhere on my planet, as far as I know. My being unready for battle wasn’t to dishonor you, I would never do that. I was unprepared because that’s not what we do. Quite the opposite, in fact. We become more, well, loving; more kind and tender. Squaring off for battle after a kiss of love is the last thing that would occur to someone from my planet.”

She squinted at him skeptically. “I want to believe you, but it is very difficult. Without the gurnosh—your children...” she shook her head doubtfully.

“D’melle,” he said softly, taking her hand. “My dearest D’melle; I know this is completely different than what you’re used to, but it is absolutely true. In the culture I come from couples generally give very little thought to how their future children might turn out. We just trust that somehow they’ll be fine. And we do not focus on them becoming warriors. Most people rather hope the war will end before their children are old enough to be involved in it. For us, a child who grows up to be an adult of integrity, kindness and who makes the world a little better somehow is all we could ask. Whether the child excels in combat is usually secondary at best.”

She furrowed her brow. “This is so strange. Such an alien attitude. I do not know if such a difference can work between us.”

This made Stan’s stomach flip over with excitement. “Actually, it really doesn’t matter,” he said. She stared at him incredulously. “It’s true,” he continued. “Regardless of whether or not you and I are concerned about our future children’s combat skills, they would be excellent warriors.”

“How can you know this?”

He stood up with a sly grin. “Because you are the greatest warrior I know. And yet I can defeat you in any gurnosh any time. And if you doubt me, just you try it. This time I’ll be ready.”

She slowly smiled and stood up. “This is the truth?”

“You betcha. Bring it on.”

“Where? When?” she said excitedly.

“How about we go back and start over where we were before? Just up here at the overlook.”

“Yes. Yes, we will begin over again. This is good!” They joined hands and headed toward the overlook. “But wait. You are not yet strong enough. You have only just recovered from the illness.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that,” he said. “I got plenty of stamina when it comes to winning the woman I love. First though, you better give me the details. I don’t want to get surprised again. This battle, I trust it’s not to the death. That would sort of defeat the purpose, right? So how do we know when it’s over?”

“It ends when I—the female—say ‘kronta.’ That means ‘champion.’ When I call you my champion. Or, if you are unable to...”

“Never mind about that. That’s not going to happen. So, once the battle is over, then what?”

Her eyes got big. “Then? Then the male carries the female to his bed and—and—”

“That’s enough, I get the rest. So there’s no ceremony or anything? No guests?”

“Guests? At the mating? Is that the Earther way?”

He laughed. “No, before. Here let me explain. Instead of a battle, the male asks the female if she will consent to be his wife—his life-mate. If she agrees, the couple has a ceremony where they invite friends and family. They then make solemn vows before God that they will remain united and loving to each other for life.”

“Is it not assumed that they will mate for life?”

“Humph. That’s supposed to be the way it works but even with the vows, people don’t always live up to their promises. Then, well, it gets complicated. Anyway, when it works it’s great. And the ceremony can be really beautiful.” He stopped and took both her hands. He was surprised at how nervous and emotional he was all of the sudden. He looked into her luscious violet eyes and spoke with a catch in his voice.

“D’melle, I love you. With every part of my being I love you. I want to be your life-mate, your husband, and for you to be my wife. Will you? I mean, assuming I pass the battle test.”

She smiled gently, the loveliest smile he had ever seen. “Yes, of course.”

He exhaled loudly and grinned with relief. At last he was completely certain about her feelings. “Then, I think we should do both a Shtokian contest and an Earth wedding. That way we can compare them and learn more about each other.”

She gave a slight shrug. “Very well.” She looked around. “We are here now. Shall we begin?” She gently put her arms around his neck and leaned her lovely soft lips toward him. He tried to relax and enjoy it but could not help being tense anticipating a possible sucker punch at any second.

As they parted she again reared back and threw a roundhouse right. This time he evaded it easily and the battle was on. She ran at him and attempted a whole array of lightening-quick karate-style kicks and punches, only one or two of which managed to graze him lightly. Although he knew the stakes, he could not bring himself to use any technique that had the possibility of hurting her. Instead he moved-in close so as to make an inviting target and waited for her to resume her attack. The wait was only a second or two. But this time he used her attack, skilled as it was, to get position on her. He grabbed her arm and used an old Academy wrestling move to gain her opposite leg and get her to the ground. She fired a kick to his solar plexus that backed him off but quick. Had it been as hard as it could have, he’d have needed several minutes to get his wind back. As it was he retreated to the perimeter of the clearing near a thick hedge.

“I’ll say one thing,” he panted. “Our kids are going to inherit some mighty good combat skills from their mother. You’re terrific.”

She beamed. “Thank you.”

“Terrific, but not quite good enough, I’m afraid,” he said grinning. “Come on. It’s time to quit fiddling around; time for me to end this contest, right now. You have no chance against me, Scyllan.”

“We shall see, Earther.” Her lips tightened and her eyes squinted with fiery determination. Just as he had hoped, she was just miffed enough to abandon caution and charge at him. As she lunged for him he used judo-like leverage to send her head-over-heels into the bushes. He was on her before she could think and got her on her back, arms pinned underneath her and a tight grip on her legs. If it had been an actual collegiate wrestling match, he would have been credited with a pin. She was exceptionally strong, but thin, small-boned and light. He

used his superior size to work his way on top of her where he sat lightly as he could on her abdomen and pinned her wrists to the ground.

“Ready to holler ‘uncle’?” he said smiling.

She raised one eyebrow with a devilish glint in her eyes. “Not quite.”

With that she deftly slipped her ankle under his chin and attempted to throw him off her. Her lithe body strained to escape, but he thought he detected that she wasn’t straining with the same strength he had felt earlier. Fatigue? No, she was in far too good of condition to be tiring so quickly. As he recovered to once again pin her wrists he smiled with a new understanding of how the mating-battle was actually waged. When a female had decided on a male, one way or the other he would win, even if it required her collusion. She was making sure he won—not without plenty of effort—but the outcome was never in doubt. She wanted him and now that the tradition had been satisfied she could have him with a clear conscience. His smile broadened as they panted and looked into each other’s eyes for a long moment. She smiled back and recited an ancient incantation, mercifully translated for his benefit.

“Kronta. You are my kronta. My lifelong champion. A mighty, worthy kronta whose children I will be proud to bear. We will never be apart and together we can never be defeated.”

He leaned down and kissed her as he felt her relax and surrender completely to him. When the kiss ended he suddenly flinched.

“You’re not going to belt me one again are you? The combat thing is over isn’t it?”

She laughed. “Of course. You know nothing.”

He got up and helped her to her feet. “Oh yes I do. I know that I love you more than life itself. And that’s something.” He scooped her up and began carrying her back toward the hut.

“I thought you wanted to do an Earth ceremony,” she said.

“Oh. Yeah. I did say that, didn’t I? It will take a little time for some preparation.”

“What do I do?”

“Get yourself all prettied-up—maybe wash off the dirt of battle and all, you know? When everything is ready we’ll come back up here to the overlook.”

Chapter 22

She was breathtaking in her little one-strap tramba dress with a D'mellian orchid in her hair that perfectly matched her lovely eyes. They stood at the pinnacle of the overlook.

"Usually someone else conducts the ceremony, but obviously we'll have to do it all ourselves." He held up some words he had written out. "The real ceremony doesn't totally apply, so I kind of adapted it just for us."

He turned directly toward her and read, "I, Stan, take you, D'melle, to be my mate for life. For better or for worse, in sickness or in health, no matter what happens I will be your loyal comrade, your truest friend and your loving husband till death should part us. As God is my witness, I give you my promise."

He handed the paper to her, but she did not use it. "I, D'melle, take you, Stan, to be my mate for life. For better or for worse, in sickness or in health, no matter what happens I will be your loyal comrade, your truest friend and your loving wife till death should part us. As God is my witness, I give you my promise. And—"

She hesitated but obviously had more to say. "And?" he repeated.

"And I wish to commit my life to the Son of God. I believe that He lives and that if I live for Him He will give me life forever."

"D'melle, that's wonderful. You're wonderful." They embraced and when they parted she looked into his eyes.

"Is the wedding done?"

"Not quite," he said, lifting her chin.

Her eyes moist, she looked at him expectantly. He said aloud to himself, "You may now kiss the bride." He gently pulled her to him and kissed her.

They looked at each other for a long moment. “What happens now in the Earth ceremony?” she said.

“Well, often all the guests have a feast; but not always. And there’s usually music and like a party, only sometimes it gets kind of out of hand. Sometimes the bride and groom try to run away while everyone follows them or the guests play tricks on them and...” He looked at her questioning eyes. “Y’know, actually I think I like the Shtokian way from here on better!” With that he scooped her up and headed for the hut. And this time they made it all the way there.

After the glorious joys of intimacy within the context of their lifelong commitment to each other, the next morning they took a stroll out onto the beach. It occurred to Stan that any couple would be deliriously happy to spend a honeymoon in such a beautiful tropical setting as this. The two of them would get to spend their entire lives here.

The days that followed were joyous ones. Their oneness had replaced the strained, competitive emphasis on their differences. She laughed, at last, over things other than triumphs in battle; over simple events only the two of them would have found funny. He had not experienced her in this giddy state of love. To him it could not have been more wonderful. He did everything he could imagine to please her, at times literally waiting on her hand and foot. She resisted at first, thinking it somehow peculiar, but seeing how much he enjoyed “doing” for her and how disappointed he was when she forbade him, she eventually just decided to accept his rather odd ways. Their strange courtship, which had been at the same time both quite long and very short, resulted in them being genuinely in love and at the same time wildly infatuated. Thus they spent a great percentage of their time with their feet firmly planted in the clouds.

There were few references to their respective home worlds and no mention whatever of either being superior or inferior. They were citizens of the planet D’melle and their loyalties were solely to each other. Or so it appeared to Stan.

He was aware of the adage, “Never ask a question you don’t want answered.” But on one occasion he abandoned its principle and allowed the musings of his curiosity to override his own better judgment. They were sitting at the table one mild afternoon. She was putting a new hook on one of their fishing lines while he sharpened an axe blade with a piece of granite-like stone.

“D’melle,” he said trying to sound casual.

“Yes?” she said absently.

“I have a silly question for you.”

“A silly question?”

“Yeah. I mean, it could never happen. But, what would you do if, by some crazy situation, a Shtokian ship landed here?”

She put down her work and stared wistfully into the distance. After a long moment she smiled broadly. “Oh, that would be wonderful. To be able to once again be a warrior; to fly into battle and know the excitement of victory. If only this could be true.”

Stan cleared his throat, finding words difficult to come by. He did not look up as he spoke, trying too hard to remain nonchalant. “And what about us?”

“Us?”

“Yeah. Me.”

“Oh. Well.” She thought for a moment. “That would be no problem. You would simply join me. Yes, we would be a flight crew together! Two of the best pilots ever known! We would be the greatest fighter crew in history.”

His words became sharp and clipped. “That is ridiculous and you know it. Your people would never even allow me near a Scyllan ship, much less fly one. You think they would entrust one of their fighters to an Earther?”

Her voice in turn became harsher. “I would explain to them that you are one of us now—that we are life-mates.”

“Even if it were true that I became a traitor to my own planet and joined yours—which I have never said—do you really think your protests would stop them? Wouldn’t they be disgusted that you were mated to a cockroach? You’d be lucky if they didn’t kill you first. You do remember assuring me that these wonderful comrades you long for would remove my organs while I watch in horror.” He turned and marched away several paces as her eyes welled-up from both rage and the stab of Stan’s unexpected attack.

“What of your people?” she shouted at his back. “What would they do to me if the situation were reversed?”

He turned to rebut her but stopped short. Suddenly he remembered a vengeful pilot named Gus Ryder vowing to use reaction catalyst to melt the flesh off Scyllan women and children for the joy of hearing their screams. He visualized his beautiful D’melle tied to a torture stake as gleeful sadists threw the horrifying liquid all over her. He ran up to her and engulfed her in his arms as if he feared she might vanish.

“No,” he cried. “No! I’m sorry. Oh my love, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.”

She was sobbing like he had never heard or even imagined she could. “What would you do if your people came?” she choked out.

“Don’t! Don’t talk about it.” He held her even tighter. “Let’s don’t ever talk about it. D’melle, I’m so sorry. How could I speak to you that way? Can you ever forgive me? I don’t care about any of that. You are all that matters to me. Not other worlds, not other planets’ wars, not comrades, not duty; you, just you. I give you my solemn word; I will never speak to you that way again. Do you believe me?”

Still weeping softly, she gave a slow nod.

“I also promise you I will never bring this subject up again. Ever.” He gently backed away to arms length and looked into her tear-streaked eyes. “I do love you. With every part of me, I love you. Please believe me.”

She smiled bravely through her tears, but there was a hurt in her eyes that cut him in two. Even he could not be sure which caused him the greater pain, to see how deeply he had wounded her or the sting of knowing her loyalty to Scylla still superseded everything else. He could do nothing about the latter—not now and perhaps not ever. So his focus would be to erase the former. He would love her in every sense of the word, from the deepest emotional level to the purest Christlike selflessness. His mission would be for her to never shed another tear as long as he had breath. He wanted to tell her, to reassure her, but could not find the words. He kissed away her tears and again held her with desperation. As if sensing his resolve, he felt her relax in his arms and saw the shock and pain leave her beautiful features as they were replaced with the warmth of reassurance.

“Am I forgiven?” he asked softly.

She gave a demure little smile. “Yes. But you are correct. We must never speak of these things again. Such talk does no good. It brings only pain and trouble.”

He lifted her chin. “And this is too beautiful a place—and you too beautiful a woman—for there to be pain and trouble. Let’s always focus on the good; the joy of knowing and loving each other in the glow of God’s provision. Life is good, D’melle, much too good to let stupid mind games create problems. Let’s just dwell on our love.”

She kissed him deeply and urgently. Looking directly into his eyes she said solemnly, “I love you, Stan Jericoff. With all my heart, I love you.” They kissed again, and then again with a

renewed sense of urgency to prove the depth of their love. In no time their passion became intimate and the honeymoon resumed unabated by the momentary dispute.

As days turned into weeks they successfully resisted allowing the mundane duties necessary for survival to douse the fires of their adoration for one another. They continued the growth of their relationship which had already progressed from co-survivors to comrades to lovers.

Stan awoke to the sound of D'melle softly singing a sweet but unfamiliar tune with Shtokian words—something about a golden sunrise as best he could tell—as she strained the pulp from a cup of passion juice. She was still humming after he finished washing-up and kissed her good morning.

“You’re in good spirits this morning,” he said smiling as she handed him some juice.

“Ah, well it is a lovely morning, do you not agree?”

He looked around. They had grown so used to the pleasant tropical surroundings that it was easy to forget just how idyllic the place really was. It was indeed a beautiful morning albeit no different from the past dozen mornings. “Very lovely indeed,” he answered. “But then, you make any place beautiful.”

She smiled and put her arms around his neck and gave him a long, soft kiss.

“Let’s go for a swim,” she said excitedly and practically dragged him up to the waterfall pool. They stood embracing each other under the crashing waters for an extra long time. Stan luxuriated in the love of this beautiful female. They frolicked, splashed, romanced, and played under the falls for nearly an hour, then pulled themselves out onto the grassy bank and rested.

At length she stood and took his hand to help him up. “What are your plans today?” she asked as they walked back to camp.

“Oh, I thought I’d use the Lectro-Laser and make some more tools out of that super-hard stone. It’s not going to last much longer so we need to make the best use we can out of it. In fact I’ll need to go back to the ship and recharge it again. It’s gotten so it only lasts about ten shots anymore between charges and only has three or four left in it now.”

They entered the camp and she slipped her little tramba dress over her head and then strapped on the weapon. “Mind if I come along? Just to talk?”

“Silly! Of course you can come along. You know I love having you with me every minute.” He furrowed his brow slightly at her. “Is there something we need to talk about?”

She laughed lightly. “Do not be so suspicious,” she said. She held out her hand to him. “Ready?”

“Guess so,” he said taking her hand.

The conversation was about nothing in particular until they reached the edge of the shrubs surrounding the ship. She let loose of his hand and faced him. Her voice took on a more serious tone. “I have been thinking about the ship and our future here.”

“Yeah?” he said cautiously. “And?”

She turned and continued walking. She seemed to be searching for the right words. “There is an important change—”

“You speak to this creature as an equal, comrade?” The deep bass voice spoke Shtokian and both D’melle and Stan literally jumped back a full stride.

Chapter 23

D'melle had the weapon out before her feet retouched the ground. In the clearing toward the back of the ship stood two Scyllan male soldiers, weapons drawn. Both were blond with violet eyes and the one who spoke was slightly larger than his companion and apparently of higher rank. Somehow they had landed without Stan or D'melle hearing them. Undoubtedly while they were under the noisy falls.

"And now you threaten us to protect him?" continued the Shtokian.

D'melle gulped noisily. "You startled me," she said in Shtokian with a harshness Stan had not heard in many weeks. "It is the proper reaction. What are you doing here?"

"That is a question better asked of you, I think," he said. "You allow an Earther to live. You can explain this?"

"We have had to use extraordinary means to survive here since we landed. The Earther was necessary to assist survival."

"I would rather have perished," spat the smaller soldier.

"I do not care what you would have done," said D'melle with an imperious tone. "I owe you no explanations. I am your superior officer."

The larger of the two responded. "How are we to know this? You are out of uniform."

"I am D'melle of Ungrenanch, Commander Primary Fighter Wing, 92nd Division 14th Armada. My uniform has been destroyed. Now again I ask you, who are you and why are you here? What is your mission?"

"My apologies, Commander," said the superior. "I am Lieutenant Brokt and this is my weapons officer, Taroshk. We will not discuss our mission in the presence of our enemy. I will kill that creature first. Then we will talk." He aimed directly at Stan's chest.

“He is my captive!” she shouted stepping in front of Stan. “He has been useful to me as a slave and can be of immense help in our struggle against Earth. I will dispose of him when I am ready. Besides, he is inferior and cannot understand Shtokian. Now again I ask, what is your mission here? Or are you deserters looking for a place to hide?”

Taroshk, the smaller Shtokian, went berserk at the insult and would have fired on her had Brokt not restrained him. “We are on a mission of utmost importance” said Brokt. “The Final Battle has begun. We have superior determination, courage and skill but the Earthers’ technology is their edge. We followed the ion trail of this Earth ship in hopes that it was still intact and suitable for returning to our scientists. Can it still fly?”

D’melle licked her suddenly very dry lips. “It is capable only of attaining a low, deteriorating orbit, if that. That is why we have been stranded on this planet.”

“It is enough,” said Brokt. “That will be sufficient for us to tow it to our nearest outpost. There is no time to lose, comrade. This might mean the difference between a glorious final victory and...” He shook his head, unable to bring himself to even speak of the alternative.

Stan was not fluent enough in Shtokian to follow every bit of the conversation but he got the gist well enough. He realized things must be pretty bleak for the Scylla if they were all the way out here on such a low percentage mission of desperation. Added to that were the relatively tepid words regarding their prospects. There was none of the exaggerated bravado and fanatical self-assuredness to be expected of Scyllan speech. There was even the unspoken hint that defeat was possible. To Stan that indicated that it must be, as things now stood, highly probable.

“I will pilot it.” offered Taroshk.

“No,” insisted D’melle. “Valuable time will be lost. Earther technology is inferior and takes time to learn. I have already mastered it. You two go to your own ship. I will pilot it and rendezvous with you. It may take some time to get it powered-up. It is badly damaged and has no transmission capability.”

“Your heroic reputation is legendary, comrade,” said Brokt. “We have confidence that you will help us accomplish this most critical mission.”

“Thank you for your confidence, comrade. Now let us proceed.”

“Wait!” said Taroshk. “We cannot be certain this Earther is as unable to understand us as he claims. It is far too easy for us to believe their ignorance, but they have deceived us before. I will kill him before we leave.”

“No,” she said quickly. “He has too much value as a specimen.”

“There is not enough time for clinical research on Earthers’ weaknesses. By the time we obtained enough information of value it would no longer matter—either way. No, we must focus all our attention on their technology. And we must destroy this disgusting creature.” He raised his weapon and motioned for her to move away.

“I will dispose of him,” said D’melle quickly. “Do not concern yourselves with that.”

“No concern,” said Taroshk. There was a note of suspicion and doubt in his voice. “If you wish the pleasure of killing him, we will watch.”

“I thought we needed to hurry,” she said. “You must leave immediately.”

Brokt pointed his weapon at her. “We can wait that long. Kill him. Now. Unless you have grown soft in your loyalty to Brankshtok and would prefer that we do it.”

She turned her back on them and pointed the Lectro-Laser directly at Stan. He knelt down and whispered a brief prayer, then mouthed “I love you” to D’melle.

The force of the shot knocked Stan flat on his back. D’melle spun around and faced the two Shtokians defiantly. “There. It is done. Now let us get on with the mission.”

“Wait,” said Taroshk. “Let me see something.” He walked over to Stan.

“What are you doing?” she said indignantly. “You question my abilities?”

“Not your abilities,” said Brokt, “your state of mind. You have been stranded here too long.” He nodded for Taroshk to proceed who then felt Stan’s jugular vein.

“Dead,” pronounced Taroshk, wiping-off the hand that had touched the filthy Earther.

“I hope you are satisfied,” said D’melle, her voice full of emotion. “Now let that be the last time either of you points a weapon at me. And never question my loyalty again or it will be you lying dead on the ground. I remind you that I am the ranking officer here. Let us get on with the mission.”

Taroshk looked genuinely reprimanded while Brokt had already headed off toward their ship. Taroshk hurried to catch up to him but turned just in time to see D’melle fire another shot into the corpse for good measure.

The two Scyllans completed one full orbit before they detected the Earth ship leaving the planet.

“Comrade D’melle, we are using the Earthers’ outmoded digital transmission communication method since that is all their ship can receive. We can hear your internal ship communication through our Extended Surveillance probe. Are you able to hear us?”

D’melle replied, “The ship is operated by vocal commands to the onboard computer, so you will hear me speaking to ‘Gail.’”

The two Scyllans looked at each other somewhat quizzically.

“READY, D’MELLE.”

“What is our time to rendezvous given present course, velocity and engine life?”

“ONE MINUTE SIX SECONDS TO RENDEZVOUS, D’MELLE.”

Brokt looked over at his comrade and spoke. “Make sure the automatic grappling works. I do not want us to waste time having to go outside the ship to tow the Earth ship manually.”

“It should work; but will we not have to wait for D’melle to join us from the Earth ship?”

“She can ride in the Earth ship. At least for now. I do not altogether trust her somehow.”

More talking was heard from the Earth ship. “THIRTY SECONDS TO RENDEZVOUS.”

“I have you on visual now,” D’melle said to Brokt.

“We have you on visual also,” replied Brokt.

“REACTION CATALYST EXHAUSTED; POWERING ENGINES DOWN.”

“Please adjust your attitude and velocity for optimum alignment, Lieutenant,” said D’melle. “We will depend upon your efforts to match our velocity and alignment since several of the Earth ship’s thrusters are out.”

“Understood. We are almost within grappling distance.”

“RANGE TO RENDEZVOUS VEHICLE FIFTY METERS. TEN SECONDS TO RENDEZVOUS.”

“Gail,” said D’melle, “initiate immediate SDS on my mark, SDS-command-immediate authorization Samson.”

“AYE, D’MELLE, SELF-DESTRUCT-SEQUENCE AUTHORIZATION ACKNOWLEDGED.”

At the words “self-destruct” Brokt and Taroshk both sat bolt upright and looked into one another’s eyes. Simultaneously they lunged for the emergency escape control.

“Mark!”

The two watched as a “star” flashed bright enough to see in the broad-daylight sky followed instantly by a second seemingly in the same spot.

“There,” said D’melle sitting with her back against a boulder. “It looks like both have been destroyed.”

“Yes, I see it,” said Stan, his head in her lap. “You are an absolute genius. The perfect blend of beauty and brains. But how could you be certain you would be able to revive me with the special setting on the Lectro-Laser?”

Her eyes grew moist as she struggled to answer. “I was not certain. I could only pray it would work.”

“But what if it hadn’t?”

“I would have ridden the ship up and given the command for self-destruct in person rather than using Gail’s recursive command feature. Besides, it had to work. I could not have our baby growing up without a father, could I?”

Stan did a classic double-take. “Baby? Our baby? You mean you’re—oh, D’melle that’s wonderful. Oh, my precious darling I—”

With that he sat up to hug her and nearly fainted.

“Easy, easy,” she said with a laugh and laid his head back onto her lap. “No exertion for a little while yet. Remember, you were dead not that long ago.”

“Yes, until you saved my life; our lives. You are truly a great warrior—and an amazing woman. Simply amazing.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Gurntchka taw jroon gurntchka. I could not abandon you.”

“Yes, I know, but to do what you did, choosing us—me, you, the baby—over your comrades, your home planet. It is just too astonishing to put into words.”

“Not so amazing I think, Stan Jericoff. After all, you would have done the same thing if the situation were reversed. You have said it many times. This is our home planet now. The past, the war between Brankshtok and Earth, these no longer have anything to do with us. You would have sabotaged an Earth mission seeking the means to win the Final Battle just as readily, would you not?”

Stan sat up slowly, deep in thought. If an Earth ship had landed, desperate for one last chance to avoid final total defeat, would he have destroyed them? Would he have doomed the human race’s only hope of survival to save D’melle and their peaceful little life here? Blow up two of his buddies and condemn Earth to utter annihilation at the hands of their enemy in the process? The magnitude of what she had done became clear to him. He found he could not answer her question.

“Stan? You would have done the same, right?”

He looked into her beautiful violet eyes, so full of love and trust. “I—I don’t know, sweetheart. I love you with all my heart, and I have always said that our universe is just you and me. But, would I have condemned the world I knew?” He shook his head in uncertainty, then worried that his ambivalence would upset her.

“You would have,” she said gently and confidently.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because you would have done the same thing I did. You would have asked God to let the deception succeed only if it was His will. And now that we see the result, I am at peace.” She gave him the sweetest, gentlest smile he had ever seen.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her as if she might disappear.

“I absolutely adore you. You are superior to me in every way, especially in faith.”

She stood up and held out her hand. “There is no superior and inferior, my husband. As God says, we are one.” She smiled lovingly at him. “Now, come, if you are feeling better. I have an idea for making a cradle.”

THE END