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In Search of Intelligence

by Tatum Este'l

Chapter One

Communication and transportation had joined, an inevitable evolution of the sciences and technology. Scientists found a way to jump through hyperspace. This brought a new dimension to the way space travelers could communicate with each other and to their home world. It was discovered that the same engine that created the leap forward through space-time could be used as a communication device from one engine to another through subspace.

From across the galaxy came an interrupted message from an explorer ship through the back draft of a wormhole. The ship's black box automatically sent conversations from

inside the ship back at NASA. The communications crackled through the speaker: "... they said we have intruded and they will destroy ... no mercy ... we are being fired on ... Base, can you hear me? Can you hear ..." The message was repeated several times before it faded out.

A single carrier left immediately to investigate, an intelligence gatherer with one man on board, Col. Michael Bradley, a man known for his ability to survive in the blackest of space and return alive. A rumor spread that he was a priest of some sort because he preached a sermon on base one Sunday when the chaplain was sick. Yet when people met him, he seemed quite ordinary, of average height, bronze skin, dark hair, and dressed in a military uniform. His eyes pierced your soul. He radiated a severe countenance, as though he knew all your thoughts. Meeting him was like going to confession. You felt compelled to spill your secrets to him. Some say it was his training as a ninja. He could link his mind with engines and animals to control them. When anyone asked who or what he was, he said, "I am only a man."

The Foundation for Human Intelligence hired him to study and enhance his brain. Their publications showed they had trained dolphins and apes to talk, and not to rely on signals as they had used for centuries. These dolphins and apes had evolved quite rapidly under the tutelage of the FHI scientists who found a way to alter the brain of primates and higher animals with the aid of computers. The animals learned to manipulate their mouths and throats to speak. The Foundation also worked to produce an ape that could replace men in space, having enhanced ape intelligence to perform complicated tasks such as computer programming and repairing electrical equipment.

Astronauts experienced timelessness in space-time warp. Time lasted an eternity or

a few minutes, depending on their attitude. If one daydreamed, meditated or pondered on his life it took only a few minutes, but if he had to tinker with the ship it seemed to take years to go the distance. For a man stuck in the physical world, it would take a long time to get anywhere. Michael Bradley used a type of multitasking and didn't need a computer for most things. His personality split into different savants that could calculate as fast as several computers linked together. With the help of the Foundation, his ship had been hooked to his brain, and anywhere he went took only a few minutes because he daydreamed, but his dreams were of voltage manipulations, tensor computations, sensor readings and all the differentials that ran the ship.

Michael came out of warp a thousand kilometers from where the signals had originated. In his dreamworld of the ship's sensors he saw pieces of wreckage strewn among the rings of the world under investigation. He circled the world and took readings. The wreckage had had time to be distributed throughout the entire ring. A blaster beam had hit the explorer and left a faint ionization trail. He followed it down.

He entered a blizzard. The snow blew horizontally. He struggled to fly his craft along the low wide valley. He didn't have time for feelings or opinions. He compensated for the force of the wind, using more fuel to keep in a straight course. His sensors suddenly pierced the snow and fog, seeing an army of gigantic black knights in armor. He swerved in and out of their legs to keep from missing them, but they stood their motionless, not seeing him, so he slowed to a smooth curve. As he circled around, he noticed that each one was dotted with windows which were blacker than the knights themselves. The knights resembled towering buildings, each one, ten times taller than the Statue of Liberty back home. He calculated that his little ship could fit exactly in one of

their palms.

The ion trail he had been following led into a pipe that came out of the mountain to his left. One of those towering statues could fit inside the bore hole horizontally. He flew into it, took readings and calculated the shape the ion trail took as it left the bore.

As Michael flew deeper into the hole, a blackness he could feel, as if it were a hot palpable ink, engulfed and then flowed through the carrier, turning off all the lights inside the cockpit. It even pierced his brain, shutting down all calculations. A night with no stars drenched the surface of the dead planet. The darkness felt intelligent as it crammed down against Michael's mind, and he shuddered. At the same time, the tube repelled his little ship with an unseen force, crashing it against the shin of one of the statues. The windshield slammed into Michael. The ship careened out of control, hitting the ground and rolled over several times, coming to land on a huge rock. It lay there with a gash in its side. One of the two short wings had its tip missing.

Michael woke with a migraine headache, as if sabers stabbed his head. Snow blew into the cabin and covered everything, including him. Wondering if an emergency beacon had been sent back to Earth, he opened a compartment on the control console and retrieved a silvery blanket, pulling it over his body before he passed out again.

* * *

Dirk and Mike Jr., Michael's boys, worked at the Foundation, and were one of the reasons he had volunteered to be experimented on. Mike Jr., the older one, had reached the height of his dad while Dirk was a half a head shorter. Both boys dyed their hair

blond like their mother's, and their complexion was pale like hers. The boys got along with each other well. Both were still teenagers working on their doctorates. Mike worked on cellular biology, more specifically, the evolution of mitochondrial DNA and how it came to be in the cell. Dirk studied the language ability of apes and their social integration with humans. Their father had introduced them to the Foundation and persuaded the director that the Foundation needed someone who understood apes. Who better than teenagers?

Dirk and Mike walked out of the foundation carrying their lunch pails with Old Man, an orangutan they took care of at the foundation, and Centauri, a young chimpanzee who held Dirk's hand. Of the two apes, Centauri was the only one wearing clothes. He had to wear diapers, for he was not yet potty trained. The brains of these apes had been altered with computer chip implants, but potty training became slower if they suffered from massive surgery, and Centauri had. All four talked about the dolphins, Blue and Bobbie, who were jealous of the attention Doctors Schaeffer and Killdare gave the killer whales Ori and Buzz.

Schaeffer and Killdare walked down the sidewalk from the opposite direction, appearing tall in their white lab coats. They had been out to lunch in the park behind the Foundation and were now returning.

"Such intelligence shouldn't be coming out of an ape," Schaeffer said. He took Old Man by the muzzle and turned his face this way and that.

"We shall have to dissect his brain and find out what makes him talk so," Killdare said.

Old Man looked at them both and shook his head and said, "You won't find

anything in there.”

Everyone laughed and went their way down the sidewalk. The two doctors told each other jokes on the way to the building. Dirk and Mike were interrupted by a comment made by Centauri.

“I don't get it,” he said with a puzzled look on his face, contorting it as much as he could.

“That's because you don't have a brain,” Old Man laughed. “Yours is mostly electronics. You're a cyborg, one of the doctor's experiments into intelligence. They forgot to put your emotion chip in.”

“Emotion chimp? Emotional chimp?” Centauri spit out. “I have a perfectly good brain. It suits me fine. When I grow it will do me well enough to get my doctorate on the balderdash of human intellect.”

“You just can't take a joke, Centauri,” laughed Dirk.

Dirk suddenly reeled and caught his head with his free hand. “Oh, my head!”

Mike and Old Man laughed, but Centauri looked on with interest.

“No joke, guys!” Dirk said as he lowered himself onto the sidewalk.

“What's wrong?” Mike asked as he joined him.

“It's Dad. He's in trouble.”

“How do you know?” Mike asked. He felt left out of things he couldn't understand or experience first hand. “What's going on?”

“It's a message,” said Dirk as he held his head in both hands. “A cry for help. I just know it's Dad.”

Centauri walked to him and patted him on the head. “We need details.”

“It was a subspace message,” Dirk said, “resonating to the frequencies of my brain. I remember being right there with Dad and talking to him. I will have to be hypnotized to remember the details, but it's all there.”

“Where is he?” asked Mike. At the same time Mike thought, I can't believe I'm witnessing a psychic phenomenon. My brother is psychically connected to Dad.

“On that planet they sent him to. It doesn't even have a name, it's so old, completely lost to civilization. There is no life there, only darkness, a cold blizzard, and ... and gigantic statues that might be buildings of some kind.”

* * *

Michael, still asleep, dreamed. Michael Bradley, he exclaimed in the dream. I am Michael Bradley. I came from Earth.

Why have you made war on us?

We come in peace. We are explorers. We mean you no harm.

Why did you fire on us? What is your purpose here? Why did you come and invade our peace? We didn't invite you. We don't like others. We want to be left alone.

My ship crashed. Need to get back home. It's all the way across the galaxy. I'm cold.

We're all cold. There is nothing but cold and darkness here. Why do you come? Do you want to set us free?

How am I going to get out of here? Which are my thoughts? Which are your thoughts? Which are our thoughts? Who are we? Who am I? There is only darkness here

and cold!

Michael dreamed of a golden age with this valley filled with buildings in forms like people, filled with people that looked like the buildings. The buildings, almost like knights in shining armor, were fashioned in the image of a people that wore tall helmets and plates of armor that covered their bodies. But the armor appeared to be made of stone, and their faces were the faces of giant shrimp. They appeared to be humanoid, but they were crustacean. Small vehicles zoomed through the air and took people in every direction and to every place on the globe. The valley had been lush and green, the surrounding snow-capped mountains cut like multicolored gems. Fountains of melt-water came down the mountains into shining lakes and were pumped back to the top. Everyone lived a pleasant life.

In Michael's dream an invasion force came out of a wormhole right into the Solar System headed for Earth, led by himself in his single carrier. He woke momentarily and blinked his eyes. Not if I can help it, he thought. My! I'm freezing! Got to get that hole boarded. He tried to move. He reeled as the pain in his head felt like someone hit him with a brick the second time. Have to get to that window. He blacked out again.

Michael took inventory of his body parts in a dream and began putting his body back together. He sewed the gash in his head, put salve on his bruises and fingers and toes, dragged his body into a warm room, a kitchen in fact, where he smelled freshly baked bread and roast beef. He crawled into the oven and warmed his fingers and toes. His body repaired itself as he slept. His various savants worked in conjunction to put things back in place and warm him through the solar plexus outward to his extremities. He had learned this yogi healing meditation process at the institute. It became automatic

in trial after trial for three years. His training took eight years altogether. Now that he needed it, his training paid off. Although he had been able to heal a small cut or bruise quickly, he had to be murdered as a last exam. A bullet in the chest when not expecting it had sealed his training. He had healed himself then; he healed himself now.

* * *

Dirk finished putting a bandage on Old Man's hand just as Mike walked in. The room was filled with bubbling tubes and flasks of differently colored chemicals, and the ozone smell of buzzing electrical equipment intermingled among the tanks of floating monkeys and fish on black chemical resistant tables.

“Hey,” he greeted cheerfully. “What's wrong with Old Man?”

“He had an encounter with a razor,” Dirk answered. “Didn't you Old Man?”

“Centauri had no business shaving. I tried to save his dignity as an ape,” Old Man said, peering at Mike. “He got himself incarcerated, he did.”

Mike saw Centauri sulking in his cage.

“So, Dirk,” Mike asked. “You hear anything from Dad? I mean, like any dreams or visions?”

“Not directly,” said Dirk as he raised his head to see his brother. “Not like I did yesterday. I did have a dream, though, of a butterfly caught in a spiderweb, and a spider came along and wrapped a cocoon around it.” Then he turned back to Old Man. “There. Now go back to your tests.” The ape jumped off the table and left to talk to Centauri.

They could hear Centauri say, “I just wanted to look smart like you guys.”

“You're an ape!” Old Man screamed, shaking his fist at Centauri.

Centauri screamed back.

“Dumb apes,” said Dirk. “You can teach them to talk, but they're still only kids, always will be.”

“Maybe that dream is saying that Dad is trying to heal himself,” Mike conjectured. “You know how connected you two are.”

“Yeah, but you're connected too, if you would admit it,” Dirk said. He closed the first-aid kit and placed it back on the shelf. “It could be a message from him. But I get these dreams of dark places mostly. Caves and scary creatures moving around in them.”

“Could mean you're worried about him.” Mike put his hands into his pockets and stared at the floor.

“Yeah,” Dirk said as he slapped Mike's shoulder. Then he moved away to watch Old Man. Then he asked Mike, “How is your thesis going?”

“Might have to change it.”

“Doctor Ormstead won't like that.” Dirk watched Old Man solder some electronics together. “What is it this time?”

“You won't believe it! It's still about the mitochondria, but wait till you see this! Come over to my room,” Mike motioned to Dirk.

“Just a minute, Old Man. I'll be right back. Don't burn yourself.”

Old Man grunted and smirked. “Yeah,” he said to himself. “I'm just the old dummy.”

The two boys walked across the hall to Mike's room which which had very little room to move around in, as the floor was practically covered with computers and

measuring equipment.

“I made a computer that can run programs inside cells,” Mike said, “You can reprogram the cells and create different forms of life in such a way that even a spaceship can be grown. I’ll show you.”

Dirk and Mike hovered over their equipment, while light years away their dad woke .

* * *

Michael grabbed a tent and a rivet gun out of a sply bag he kept handy and scooted over to the main gash in the ship. The howling wind blew snow at him as he fastened the tent over the hole. Then he roamed about the ship making an inventory of the damage, and by rerouting the back power, created zones of energy to untouched parts of the ship. He ate a can of rations and went back to sleep. He awoke with a jolt and grabbed his blaster gun from under his pillow, yelling out, “Who’s there?”

“Put away your weapon,” came a soft voice out of the shadows. “I won’t harm you. I’m lonely. A little conversation might be nice after such a long time.”

Michael’s brain cataloged the voice under Boris Karloff.

“Show yourself!” Michael commanded.

“Put away your weapon, please. I’m a bit shy, as you can see.”

Michael didn’t sense a need for fear. Taking deep breaths, he calmed down, and put his gun back under his pillow.

“Turn it off,” came the soft voice.

“Turn what off?” Michael asked.

“Your blaster.”

“How did you know it was still on?” Michael wondered out loud.

“My senses, like yours, are very acute. You should remember your training.”

“You can read my thoughts.” Michael reached back under the pillow and turned the gun off. “Okay,” Michael said. “It's off. Can I trust you?”

“Can I trust you?”

“Okay, okay. Uh, we will have to trust each other as ambassadors.” Michael sat on the side of his bunk.

Covered in a pale blue silk robe, the tall man who entered appeared Chinese and Caucasian. He looked old with shoulder length white hair, bald on top. A thin fine beard rested on his chest. His bright eyes, deep and piercing, showed a high degree of intelligence. His countenance shone, and Michael felt a strong attraction for this stranger as if they were kin. He felt embarrassed and thought maybe this guy had x-ray vision and could see right through him.

“Each man radiates who he is,” the stranger said, “and all is an open book to one who knows how to read. Thank you for thinking so highly of me.” He tilted his head slightly then sat on the floor and folded his legs.

“How did you get in here?” Michael asked, forgetting about the condition of the ship. He realized he should have said, “How dare you come in here!”

“I've always been here,” the old man said. “But that is not important. I could come into your quarters in a number of ways, seeing your ship has no protection.”

“Who are you?” demanded Michael, though in a soft, conversational voice.

“You know me.” The old man explained, “My people did not use names as you do. We knew each other. Names separate. We didn't do that.”

“I see. My sons take care of an old ape we call 'Old Man.' I'm sure the apes don't call each other by names. You remind me of that old ape for some reason. Can I call you Old Man?”

“If you must, though there is no reason you need to distinguish me from someone else. I am the only one of my kind left, thus my desire to converse with you. When I saw your ship, I felt greatly relieved.”

“Where is everyone? I have the distinct feeling there are others here.”

“They are here. You heard them when you crashed. They are different from me. They have been transformed. ”

“Yes,” Michael said and paused. “I remember now. I heard a scream, or was it a lot of screams? Look. I'm here because some friends of mine got shot down. We lost contact with them, and I came to see if they are dead or alive. Did you fire on them? Did those other people, those you said were transformed, did they fire on them? My friends weren't hostile. They were only explorers. Did they do something illegal, or what?”

“This planet has an automatic defense system,” Old Man said with a wave of his hand. “I'm sorry your friends are gone. They must have done something to show hostility. Maybe they got too close. We can't allow anyone to land here.” He placed his hands on his knees.

“You didn't shoot *me* down. Why did you let me land?”

“Did you land?” Old Man laughed gently. “I thought you crashed. I tried to throw you back into space, but something went wrong.”

“Something went wrong all right.” Michael took a breath to control his emotions.

“Yes. The equipment is getting old.”

“I see. Old equipment. I'm curious. How old is your civilization anyway? I mean, like, how old is this city?”

Old Man said, “Eternal,” but he rubbed his chin with his thin fingertips and then said, “a million years.”

Michael didn't believe him. There must have been some misunderstanding based on different means of measuring time.

Chapter Two

“That's funny,” Michael said.

“What's funny?” Old Man said.

“When I was younger, my dad crashed on Titan on his way to Io to make a survey. No one knew his location. We finally found him, but I had to fight the system. Now I'm in the same situation except that it looks impossible for me to get back. I have no way to fix my ship. He didn't either, but there were ships in the area, and they searched for him. I'm too far away for rescue.

“I remember I had awful headaches and weird dreams. One was of his crash. My mother said it was only due to worry and stress. Yet, I came to believe that he lived and had crashed on a moon of some kind. I went on line and found pictures of Titan, and that was the same picture I saw in my dreams. I had difficulty telling anyone. They didn't want to listen to a kid.

“I kept pestering my mother about it, and she said all the right things, showing me that she was listening, but there was a far off look in her eyes as though they were glazed over.

“Our Uncle Bob had been an astronaut like my dad. But he had to retire early and began teaching science at Eli's high school. When he came over to comfort my mother, I tried to tell him about my dad, but he turned everything into a joke and discounted my feelings, spoke down to me and treated me like a ten year old little kid. I was though.

“It was really difficult for me to get anyone to listen. I decided to go to my brother Eli. He was busy with homework all the time, but he knew how to get around on the

Internet a hundred times faster than me. I kept bugging him for several days until he noticed that I was serious. I broke down and cried. That's when he noticed. He apologized, of course, and then asked what was wrong. I told him that no one would listen to me, that I knew where Dad was and what had happened to him. He had crashed on Titan. He asked me how I knew. I went on the Internet and showed him the pictures of Titan I had found. I told him it was the same pictures that were in my dreams.

“He called Uncle Bob and told him of my dreams. Of course Uncle Bob discounted dreams. He assured my brother that I was worried and set, just like everyone else. He said a search was on its way to find our dad. Eli told Uncle Bob about Dad being on Titan, but he assured him that all of the telemetry showed that Dad was not in the vicinity of Titan when he crashed. He told him not to worry and that they would find my dad, to trust our instruments, to trust science. Uncle Bob would send a counselor to work with me and help me get through this.

“They did get me to a counselor, and she helped me with my feelings, but again, she told me that my dreams only reflected my worries and fears. Very polite and kind, she still didn't believe me when I said I knew the location of my dad. I could feel something inside me more real than the world outside. It told me the truth, and I couldn't know anything else but this truth. That made her worry. She wanted to give me a pill to take away this truth. She convinced my mother, so whenever Mother gave me the pill, I would hide it under my tongue and swallow the water. It didn't take her long to see through that trick. She caught me a few days after I started taking the pills. We had a Saint Bernard called Betsy. I would spit the pills on the floor and she would lick them. She got terribly sick. Mother asked what was wrong with Betsy. I had to tell her. I had

never learned to lie. I guess that's what got me into trouble all the time, and, that's how I learned things. My love of truth finally got me through school and into the Foundation. But Mother wouldn't have me spitting out the pills, so I ran away. I would not betray the truth I knew. Have I mentioned that I was only ten?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Well, anyway, I caught a bus that took me to NASA in Houston. I used my allowance doing that. What a huge complex that was. A little boy could get lost in there and nobody would ever find him. Or a little boy could hide in there. I had learned to read by the time I was three. I taught myself to use the computer when I was four. I watched people. I watched my dad mostly. We had an affinity towards each other.

Anyway, I read my way around the complex hiding behind vehicles or boxes and barrels. I would hitch a ride on the back of a Hummer and get around that way. One time I was spotted, but I jumped off and crawled into a ventilator shaft. They sent a dog after me, but for some reason, the dog only followed me. It never did go back to its master.

"The dog and I finally made our way into the ventilator system of the communications complex. We searched all over the building for a long time, watching people at their computers through the air ducts. We learned where the radios were that talked to the astronauts. At night we went into an empty cubicle and I got onto one of the computer radios. I used the codes dad had taught me so I could talk to him, that is, if he still had power. Of course, there was no response. I tried all night. They found me and the dog asleep the next morning, me in the chair, and the dog at my feet.

"The dog whined and looked back at me with big sad eyes when they took him away.

“When they brought me home, Mother was so gaunt and twisted in her face like she'd been doing drugs. She grabbed me and hugged me and scolded me and hugged me again. Tears streamed down her face. I explained that I was trying to contact Dad. She assured me that NASA was doing all they could, and that I didn't need to go running off.

“Eli was so proud of me. He said there were many times he had considered running away, but he never had the courage. He asked me all kinds of questions about the NASA complex and what I thought of it. We talked about it for the next several hours.

“I tired of that and escaped to my tree house I had inherited from Eli. there, I had a powerful experience. As I sat thinking about my dad, I started calling his name and talking to him. During that crying session it seemed that my consciousness stretched beyond myself and opened like a door. I could see my dad. He was in his spaceship making himself as comfortable as could be. The copilot with him lay on the ground dead. There was a section of ship that wasn't crumbled. That's where Dad made his home.

He had cordoned off areas of air and energy like I have done. I guess I learned it from him. Well, there he was, eating some rations when his mouth dropped open. He muttered to himself that he guessed he was going to die sooner than he thought or that he was having hallucinations. I had an out of the body experience and stood right in front of him. I started talking to him. I told him I was there to help and asked him what I could do to get him rescued.

“Dad told me to get hold of his brother Bob and tell him the word 'Bobbie Body Snatcher,' and give him his location. He would know what to do. It was a secret code they used whenever they got into trouble. He showed me on a map where he was, and he told me that he only had two days of air left. After he ate, he would go into a self-induced

hibernation. I was so excited that I almost jumped out of that tree. I fell halfway down the ladder, but I wasn't hurt, and ran in to tell Eli. He immediately phoned Uncle Bob, but he wasn't there. He told Mom that we were going to leave to find Uncle Bob. She got set and said something about not running away as we slammed the door behind us. I rode on the back of Eli's scooter, and we zoomed away to the high school. School was over at that time of day, but we found him in his classroom setting an experiment for the next day.

“I told him I had talked to Dad, using some kind of radio in my head. I didn't understand these things in those days. I wish now I could contact my boys that way. I never thought of it until now. Maybe they can get me some help. I will have to concentrate or something. I've never been able to delicate that again, but really, I've never tried. I've been concentrating on science for so long, even the science of the body. I forgot all about this. I've read about it, how to do it, but it has always evaded me. I've never really needed it until now. I'll lie down here and concentrate.”

“What about your Dad?” Old Man asked with an turned hand.

“Oh, he's dead now. He couldn't help.”

“Did he ever get rescued?” Old Man asked with visible consternation.

“Oh, yeah, sure. Uncle Bob didn't believe me. He thought I was going schizoid. Then I told him the secret word, the password. He asked me how I learned of that. He hadn't heard that since he broke my dad out of jail ten years before. Then he said Dad must have been telling stories about when they were young. Eli said he had never heard it. I told him as urgently as I could that I was telling the truth. Eli told Uncle Bob that I never lied or made stories. Then I showed him a map on the Internet of the exact place

they would find my dad. I told him that he had only two days of air left. He got out his hand calculator and figured things and said that I was right, that he would have two days of air left. He asked me if I was studying calculus. Eli and I both laughed. Well, he said he still had some friends at NASA, and he would go there right away.

“He didn't tell them that a little boy told him where he was. He reported later that he told them he had been getting messages on a strange frequency while working on a science experiment at school, and that he was in brief contact with his brother but couldn't repeat the communication. They said that it was impossible until he explained the theory of sub-space communications. Then he and his friends ran into some scientists there on their way to a conference on that particular subject. They sported his claim and eventually he was believed. They sent a scout to investigate the area on Titan, and found the ship with my dad in hibernation.”

“A very interesting story,” Old Man said, putting his index finger to his chin. “And now you better get some sleep.”

“My engine I communicate with is burned . My instrument panel is crumpled. If I could repair the damned thing, I could send out a distress signal, but I would have to be out in space to do it. It would blast a hole in this planet.”

“Better not do that,” Old Man said. “Better to astral travel.”

“Yeah. That's what they called it. Astral travel. Maybe I can reach one of my boys.”

Michael had a heavy fatigue overcome him, so he lay back down on his bunk. The stranger arose, and with the wave of his index finger, commanded softly, “Go to your son, Dirk. He is ready for you.” Michael felt as light as a helium balloon and drifted off

to sleep to dream of Dirk.

* * *

Dirk sat on the bank of the large pond in the back of the Foundation. The grassy hill sloped gently away from the water toward the willow. He was day dreaming. Old Man came and sat down beside him. His natural state was that of relaxation and meditation. He looked out over the pond and watched the water birds paddle their way across the water. The turbine-powered electric cars whizzed by on the highway beyond sounding like flies. Somewhere in his reveries he saw a man walking on the water.

Old Man flipped his index finger into the air. "Dirk, do you see that?"

Dirk looked out over the water lazily and said, "Yeah, there's a man walking on the water," thinking it was part of his daydream.

"Well, he's motioning to us. I think he wants to talk to us."

Dirk, chewing on a piece of grass, peered out over the water and stared at the man waving to him. In a moment the figure came into focus, and he knew it was his dad. He jumped and the man disappeared.

"Oh, it was an illusion," he told Old Man.

Old Man scratched his head with one finger and said, "No, it was a vision, I think. We were both sitting here in reverie seeing the same thing. If it were in both our minds I wouldn't discount it. Two witnesses and all that."

"Yeah. Maybe it was a vision. I mean, a real vision. Maybe it was some thought projection from a long way off directed in our vicinity. We simply happened to be here to

intercept it.”

Old Man scratched his forehead, and with a swing of his arm lay down on the soft grass. He pursed his lips and contemplated. Dirk thought it a good idea and lay back down and chewed on a fresh stem of grass. They breathed the warm Summer air and enjoyed the cool breezes from the willows. They daydreamed. In their daydreams a man came walking across a lunar moonscape. Giants walked behind him pierced by lights that looked like windows of buildings. He said, “I am here,” and “Bobbie Body Snatcher.” “Sub-space communication is cut off.”

Old Man sat lazily and leaned on his elbow toward Dirk. “Now if that wasn't sub-space communication directly with our brains, I don't know anything.”

“DNA can be used like a radio,” said Dirk.

“You're in tune with your dad,” Old Man said, looking at the sky as if he could see where Mike's dad resided.

“Better tell Mike, I guess. He's interested in things like this.”

* * *

Michael and Old Man talked way into the night until Michael fell asleep. He woke hearing a scratching sound. He whipped into a fighting mode, attaching himself onto a bulkhead like a spider except he faced out with his stomach and face exposed.

Old Man waved his hand and said, “No need for that. It is me they are wanting. I will leave.”

“Where are you going? Are you coming back?” Michael asked anxiously. He now

saw Old Man as his only hope of rescue.

Old Man on leaving, turned his head and said, “I am always here,” and disappeared into the shadows.

“What is it? What are those things out there?”

There was only silence and shadows in the broken craft. Michael came down off the wall and went back to his bunk to sleep, turning off the lamp. He was wide awake thinking of all that had happened since he arrived. He stared off into the darkness wondering when the sun would appear. Sometime in the morning hours he fell asleep hoping to see the sunrise.

Chapter 3

Michael woke with a start. Was it a dream or had he heard the scraping of metal along the hull of the ship? He grabbed his gun from under his pillow. With his other hand he picked a nutrition bar, dropped it on the bed and then grabbed an orange drink from the deck. He alternately ate the nutrition bar and drank his orange juice, and with gun in hand, watched for intruders.

He needed to work on his engine. That was the only way he would be able to communicate with Earth, but he thought of the cold and dark. There may be creepy crawlers out there. He fought the cloying comfort of bed and sleep. Well, he thought, can't wait for them to rescue me. I could run out of supplies. He put on his environmental suit, checked for battery power and tools on his belt and went out the back panel, gun in hand to tour the ship.

The headlamp on Michael's helmet put out a beam of light that made a bright oval spot on the hull of the ship. It raced away every time he turned his head by a small arc, so he had to be patient and go slowly. He saw that the entrance hatch had been torn open, and there was a gash along the side. The back end had been smashed. He turned around and cursed the giant statues. They appeared almost human. On each one the right eyebrow turned down into the face to become a nose. The mouth was a sneer. He imagined they stared back at him with disdain. The ship had bounced off one of them and crashed onto this rock, crushing the cockpit. on examination, although the cooling tubes

were mangled, he saw the engine could be salvaged. He would have to straighten them and check for coolant. He glanced at his chronometer and then at the stars wondering how many days it would take on this planet. Maybe one or two. Compared to Earth though, it could take a couple of weeks. By then, his supplies would run out. He would have to take some time to search for food and water.

By Michael's chronometer it would be midnight on Earth. He worked one Earth day to free some of the tubes. The stars above had moved very little. It was about this time he heard a scratching again and saw something move in the dark. He grabbed his gun from his suit belt and pressed his back against the ship. Peering into the darkness, his headlamp extended a light beam out to infinity. He studied the beam and thought, oh, and turned on his night vision. The blue beam disappeared, and in the red glow of his heat sensor, he could see giant crabs or spiders rattling away. They gave him a start. These things could obviously see in infrared. That must have been what was scratching at the ship. The last time Old Man had visited, he said they had wanted him. Were they searching for the old man and had some business with him, or had they come to harm that ancient one, and had he been trying to escape from them?

Michael returned to the ship to eat another nutrition bar and find something to make an infrared fire, a wide-angled glare to keep those things away. He spotted electrical parts underneath other things he had thrown back there a hundred years ago. He grabbed the parts and went to his quarters, got the snack bar and was gnawing on it and setting an infrared light when Old Man showed again. Startled, he turned around with his gun ready to shoot.

“Your friend in hand won't protect you from the xeedlers,” the visitor said. “They

have vicious armor.”

Michael chewed and swallowed the bite in his mouth, still pointing the gun at Old Man. “What protects you from them? Xeedlers, you called them?”

“The truth,” he said calmly.

“The truth!” Michael spit. “What's the truth got to do with it?” He put away his gun and continued eating.

“What are you doing now?” Old Man asked flatly. “Building yourself a fire? They will get used to it. They are very adaptable.”

“Well, it will give me time then, won't it?” Michael said with his mouth full as he finished off his bar. He said, “Excuse me,” and grabbed bottled water to wash down that last bite. He put his helmet on and walked slowly to the back panel to leave. “Don't have a suit with you, do you?”

Old Man followed him out the hole without a suit. Michael asked him as he mounted the spider light, “You can breathe out here?”

“It doesn't bother me,” said Old Man. “The question might be, can *you* breathe out here?”

“I don't know. My instrument panel is smashed to pieces, so I don't know.”

Michael returned to the engine, dismantling it as much as he could to examine the inner cylinder. If it was intact, he could form a subspace radio. The coolant would be the only problem. By mid-afternoon the next day, Earth time, he was through and could see the damage. All the while, he spent the hours talking to Old Man.

“What do you do for a living?” Michael asked.

“I live,” he said.

“No, I mean, what is your occupation?” Michael grunted, turning a wrench.

“I don't occupy space-time in the same way you do.”

“What do you do to survive? Are you a mechanic, a doctor, a lawyer, a street sweeper, an electrician, a scientist, an engineer, a mathematician, a salesman, a teacher?”

“My existence doesn't depend on what you call an occasion,” said Old Man.

“Though I spend much of my space-time watching.”

“What do you watch?” Michael asked. doing some more grunting and throwing pipes onto the ground.

“The heavens mostly, and the xeedlers.”

“So how do you get your food, clothing, shelter?”

“The xeedlers provide it.”

“They're your servants then, not your enemies?”

“I have no ... enemies. The xeedlers are what you call ... friends.”

The conversation went on for several hours as Michael tore the engine apart. When he got to the inner cylinder and saw the damage, he realized he may be stuck there for a long time. He wanted to cuss, show some emotion, but his training and the strange surroundings prevented him. He stared at the chewed circuits and lines and what used to be components of a complex device, components that he couldn't dlicate here.

“Teach us,” said Old Man.

“What?” asked Michael as things started spinning around him. He took deep breaths, hands holding his helmet as if trying to get to his head.

“Teach us how to build your engine.”

“That could take a long time.” He sat on the ground, knowing he could die within a

week due to loss of oxygen. Maybe within that time he could figure out how to find more.

“It seems that time is all you have left now.”

“It could take the rest of your winter.”

Old Man put his hands together and smiled. “That is about the right time for you to leave.”

Old Man walked away, and Michael followed him out into the darkness as if he had been invited. They continued talking. Michael said, “You never told me why you shot down our first ship and you didn't shoot me down.”

“It is difficult for you to understand, but you shall see once we get to my place.”

* * *

Tommy Stephan, a graduate student from Hall's University in Baltimore, found Mike Bradley's thesis on programming cells to grow machines and came to the Foundation to talk to him about it. In their conversation Mike told him that his father was stranded on the other side of the galaxy.

“How long has he been gone?” Tommy asked Mike.

Old Man sat on a stool next to Mike. He interrupted, saying, “About two years now isn't it?” bringing his finger to his lip, looking as in thought.

Tommy jerked. He didn't know the ape could speak. He looked at Old Man and Old Man peered back at him with squinty eyes. Tommy started laughing and Old Man picked a wrench from the table and held it menacingly in the air.

“Back down Old Man,” said Mike. “Remember, Dirk said that you must obey your babysitter.”

“I'm not a baby,” Old Man muttered.

“Ape-sitter, sorry.” Mike saw that he was still holding onto the wrench. “Put down the wrench and Tommy will apologize.” He looked at Tommy and grinned.

“I apologize Old Man,” he said. “I come from a completely different paradigm. Cellular biology is all I ever think about.”

“My cells are intelligent,” Old Man muttered. “I don't know about yours.”

Tommy squared his shoulders and cleared his throat. “So, about two years? Why so long?”

“They've sent two different probes,” Mike said, gathering some papers that were on the table. “No information has ever come back. They believe that something keeps shooting down through the worm hole, but its unrecognizable, just static. My brother keeps having these dreams, nightmares actually. The same thing over and over again. Some sort of giant crabs chasing him. I keep thinking Dad's dead. I've given hope. I say, let it be.”

“Dirk doesn't think so,” grunted Old Man. “He has a spirit in him that tells him these things.”

“A spirit, huh?” asked Mike. He turned to Tommy, handing him the papers. “He thinks he has some psychic connection.”

Mike hopped off his stool. “Come over here and see my results.”

Mike led Tommy over to the electron microscope. “Look in there.”

Tommy peered into the scope. What he saw surprised him. It appeared to be

microscopic crabs.

“So,” said Tommy, “You have made some nano-structures.”

“They are biological,” said Mike. “And they can be programmed. All nano-structures to date have been non-biological. They have been little machines, albeit, they can become components of a computer, and that microscopic computer can be programmed.”

“How are they programmed?” asked Old Man, cantering to them.

“Well, Old Man,” said Mike turning around. “By simple DNA manipulation, I can create a worker, a warrior, a drone, or a queen.”

“You mean,” asked Tommy, “that the programming is done at the time of creation and not during the life of the thing?”

Old Man pushed aside Tommy so he could look inside the microscope.

“Well,” replied Mike, “there has been a lot done already, treating disease through DNA manipulation. I can simply inject the programming right into the little crab.”

“What about growing organs for replacement parts?” asked Tommy.

“Besides it being against the law, my purpose here is to enhance intelligence or look into the source of intelligence...”

“As is the purpose of the Institute, of course, I know,” interrupted Tommy. “So, do you think you have found the source of intelligence?”

“It has been debated by some schools that the whole purpose of intelligence is a great machine controlled by gonads or if you get right down to it, the DNA molecule replicating itself.”

“It's all about sex,” said Tommy, “as I expected.”

“But,” interrupted Old Man, “what about the higher aims of family, art, literature, science, the creative, and reaching for the Infinite? What about the spiritual side of intelligence?”

“What is religion,” asked Tommy, directing his question to Old Man, still surprised by an ape who was a thinking and feeling machine, “but the acceptance of the immortality of intelligence?”

Tommy and Old Man were left to talk philosophy while Mike returned to his experiment.

Chapter 4

It had been two years now living in the darkness. Michael yearned for sunlight, and he was homesick. Living underground wasn't without its artificial light, but having good old Sol in the sky and green grass under your feet was getting awfully tempting, but there was no way yet. He had to teach Old Man and the crabs the technology that made his ship. He had to get used to eating crab. It was paradoxical actually, having crabs serve you crab. They weren't the monsters he thought they were. They were only servants, as Old Man explained. He created them for food in the beginning, and they looking to him as their father, became good servants. They were like machines. They didn't have any concept of life or death. Getting dinner was like a lottery. One of the group was chosen, grabbed and thrown into the pot. In addition, there were vegetables, grown in a hydroponics plant. The crabs ate roots like the two men. Everything hdd to be grown. That was the trouble, having to translate Earth technology into the universal technology of life: growing things. Even screwdrivers were grown. They felt like a cross between plastic and ceramic, or like bone. Of course, you had to use plastic screws. They didn't have metal. They didn't mine. Talking to Old Man, Michael found out that they couldn't find it in them to dig holes in their mother, their planet. The caves they lived in were made from the natural caves that already exited. This was their culture, growing things. They grew spaceships from embryos.

Old Man stood in the lab watching Michael write mathematical formulas on a tablet, a monitor with a wireless attachment to a unseen computer. As he started a formula, the computer would finish it for him and calculated the results. Michael at first

thought it irritating, but it did speed thing along. When finished, he handed it to Old Man who stared at it a couple of seconds.

“So, this is the final frequency. The sum of the other components of your ship?” asked Old Man.

“Yes, and it represents the waveform of all the data elements communicating with each other throughout the ship. We call it a Laplace,” replied Michael.

“Yes, we can do that now,” Old Man pointed to the tablet. “Now we will grow the elements that will do the communicating, like a nerve network. That will take a few weeks, ah, your time, of course. In our time, only a few hours. We like to think we are going fast here.” He laughed.

Michael laughed too. He had begun trusting his captors, but in the back of his mind, he knew that is what they wanted. He now played with the little crabs that would jump on him to preen and clean him as though they were his pets. Yet, there was something suspicious. He was always aware of places he wasn't supposed to go. The crabs would block his way or direct him to other avenues. He got the feeling that they were using him somehow. There was an undercurrent deep within his awareness that these were still his enemies and his captors. On the surface there was politeness and trust and even playfulness, but he thought that it was the cultural differences that proved to be the barrier. That would eventually be broken down, he thought, but he wasn't planning on staying that long.

Was it curiosity or suspicion that killed the cat? It could have been boredom. But in Michael, all these emotions were mixed and contributing factors in his roaming about when he was supposed to be sleeping. Because of his training Michael needed only half

the sleep Old Man expected of him. Eventually, he would find out what this old man was up to and how he might have more freedom by roaming through the air ducts and empty passageways. Of course, little bitty crabs were also wandering the air ducts and empty passageways. Some of them were microscopic.

One morning, after wandering around and taking a needed shower, Michael found his room locked from the outside.

“Um, hello?” Michael queried, trying to project his voice through the door.

“Yes?” asked Old Man, sitting on Michael's bunk.

Michael spun around, startled.

“How do you do that?” he demanded with his hands behind him, palms on the door, ready to spring into action.

“You've been a naughty boy, Michael,” Old Man said, ignoring Michael's question.

“You're keeping me here as a prisoner!”

“I am only protecting you, Michael. Come, let us reason. You are out on your own at night. You can't sleep and so you go roaming around in your host's home simply out of boredom. There are many things in my house that I can't protect you from. I only shut the door so I can talk to you. I take you into my home, and you get bored and don't respect my privacy. Should I turn you out to the elements? Say, 'Go and fix your own ship, see what I care?' No, no, Michael, that is not civilized. I ask you for your respect as a guest in my house. That is all. Just that.”

“I am sorry,” Michael said apologetically. “I have been showing my bad manners.”

“Yes, you have,” Old Man responded. “Remember, you are the invader here. You

are a guest of my hospitality. I must rethink this. If and when I decide that you are trustworthy you will be allowed your freedom again. Let me think it over for a few days.”

Michael stared at the floor. It took only a split second, but when he looked again, Old Man had disappeared. He wondered about his own sanity. Maybe I'm still aboard my ship in a coma, he thought. Or maybe I have been rescued and I'm in a coma in a hospital. Maybe he can transport his body like in those science fiction movies. It's funny, mankind has never been able to do that, but that technology is on the verge of being discovered. It can be done in outer space in ships, but to take a single object or a human being and send him through a wormhole or through subspace hasn't been done. It still takes an attached engine and environment.

Michael had no way of telling time. He could have slept for ages or a few hours. It was hard to tell how long he stayed awake. His biological clock had been adjusted to the cycles of the sun and moons and planets, and now there was no way to tell. He had left his chronometer back at the ship two years ago. At least he had been told it was two Earth years. He spent a lot of time bouncing off the walls for exercise, crawling around on the walls, meditating, reading books loaned to him. There was one thing he could tell was happening to him. He felt groggy as though he was sleeping more. That was to be expected. He had read of people living in caves and under the ocean. It had been recorded that they started sleeping for 24 hours or longer as well as staying awake longer. And then there were the periods where he slept very little. It seemed to come in cycles. Was he adjusting to this planet? Or was he getting bored? Sometimes he didn't know whether he was awake or asleep. He started having dreams while awake. He saw Robert Keltner.

Robert Keltner was one of the pilots of the craft that had first disappeared on this isolated hell hole. He was of Michael's stature but with a square face and red hair. (Michael had oval face and dark hair.) Robert had an English accent. Michael wondered why he was dreaming of this ghost walking around in his apartment. Maybe he was feeling guilty of thinking of his own skin trying to build a ship that would get him back home. He should have pressed Old Man for more information on the crash. Had there been any survivors? Whenever he had pressed Old Man, he had always changed the subject or discounted the crash as their fault. Who's fault? The survivors or the crabs?

Robert was always muttering to himself, as if trying to solve a problem. He took to sitting on Michael's bunk or in a chair. He looked worried.

Michael knew how to get rid of ghosts. You stare at them. Then they vanish. It was simply a trick of the mind. But Robert wouldn't go away. If he stared at him he could know if he was a ghost and also know if he was awake. Focusing on something in a dream usually woke him. So he stared. He stared for a long time. He became as objective as he could. Yet, Robert persisted. Then Robert looked him straight in the eyes and asked, "Can you see me?"

Michael continued to stare. He couldn't believe that the ghost, or dream image, or whatever he was, was talking to him.

Robert came over to him and slapped him in the face, saying, "Hey! Wake up!" But before Robert could take his hand back, Michael had grabbed it and threw Robert onto the floor.

"What the!" Robert reacted, rubbing his head.

Michael stared at him still, but asked, "Are you real? I could actually touch you."

“Hey!” cried Robert. “I’m real! Where’d you come from?”

“What do you mean?” Michael asked. “I’ve been living here for two Earth years.”

“Are you from Earth?” Robert asked, gathering his feet underneath himself.

“Yes,” said Michael, still staring in amazement.

“Can I get up? Or you gonna throw me again?” Robert asked, getting ready to jump into action with his palms on the floor.

Michael laughed, saying “Oh, I’m sorry. I try to keep my reflexes active. Here,” and he reached out his hand. “Let me help you off the floor.”

Robert grabbed his hand and let this man lift him to his feet.

“What’s this about you being here in my apartment for two years?” Robert said with his hands on his hips. “I got here yesterday, or so I thought, after we were blasted out of the sky. They gave me this apartment and locked the door. I think we’re prisoners. They put you in here too? And what do you mean two years? What kind of time warp is that?”

“I’ve been locked up for so long I started dreaming while awake,” Michael said, sitting down on his bunk. “I thought you were a dream. I’m still not so sure.”

“Same here,” Robert said. “I thought you were a dream until you started starring at me.”

“So you’re alive?” Michael asked.

“Yes, I’m alive.”

“Then,” said Michael smiling, “I’m your rescue effort. Where are the others?”

“You came to rescue us?” Robert said in much astonishment. “But we only crashed yesterday. How could you have known?”

“You've been gone for five years, my friend,” Michael pointed out.

“Five years?” Robert asked, slowly walking over to the chair that looked like a big mouth ready to swallow him, and he plopped in. He rubbed his chin.

Michael extended his hand again, grabbing Robert's hand, introducing himself.

“Michael Bradley. Intelligence attachment, 4th Division.”

“Captain Robert Keltner,” Robert snapped out. “Call me Rob.”

“Michael.”

At that moment, Rob's image blinked out for a second with a horizontal line running down him and bouncing back and forth like an old black and white video accompanied by a buzzing noise. He just as suddenly reappeared.

“What happened?” Michael jerked to the edge of his bunk.

“What do you mean?” Rob said anxiously.

“For an instant, you were an old black and white video image.”

At that moment Rob totally disappeared and a voice came through the door,

“Michael, are you talking to someone or to yourself?” It was Old Man.

“Just talking in my sleep, Old Man. Hey! When are you going to let me out of here? I'm going buggers!”

There was no reply, only food slid in on a tray through a slot in the door. Michael grabbed it and started eating, not realizing he was so famished. After he ate, he lay back down on his bunk and went to sleep. Robert appeared in his dream in black and white, saying, “Michael, you've got to help me. Something's happened to me.”

He kept repeating the same thing several times.

Michael woke up and thought, even in my dreams I'm haunted by this ghost. Only

the thought of seeing the ghost in flickering black and white hinted at a technology of some kind, and this was bio-technology on this planet. That reminded him of an experiment back home at the Foundation. What he may be dealing with was a biological computer, viz., a real brain. What Michael did back then, as in the experiment, was to go into astral mode. It was called astral travel. He decided to repeat the experiment. First, he forced himself into a dream state. Secondly, he raised himself like a wooden board pivoting on its end. He looked back onto the bunk and saw his sleeping body. He looked around the room and there was Rob standing by the door. Rob motioned to him to follow.

No one spoke. They knew each other's thoughts. They slipped through the door, passing the crab guard and down the corridor. It seemed like endless turns down corridors and closed doors. Soon, they came to a great cavern covered by a geodesic dome. What Michael saw was shocking. There must have been a whole fleet of ships in different stages of growth growing within jelly-like pods. Looking around and studying these stages, Michael could see that each ship started with something like a pilot sitting in a chair. The chair and the environmental suit the pilot was wearing didn't have definite boundaries. It was as if the pilot wore the chair. There were corrugated tubes coming out of the pilot's headgear where the eyes, nose and mouth would be, and running back behind the chair were corrugated tubes from the head like braided hair going back into the jelly. The arms and legs of the suit were blended into the chair's arms and stand. The hands blended into a console. The general shape of the whole ensemble minus the console was that of a teardrop bursting out of the floor.

Rob motioned Michael over to one of the ships that looked almost finished. They went through the hull and into the cockpit. The pilot was completely tied into the ship.

Rob pointed to it and said, "This is me."

Now Michael knew what had become of the crew that had been shot down. He looked behind the pilot and saw two other similar pilots. There were two other men standing beside them.

"You brought him, Captain," one of them thought.

"Yes," thought Captain Keltner.

"This is horrendous!" thought Michael. "Why did I spend all that time teaching them how to build a ship when they were growing all these!"

Suddenly Old Man stood among them. Michael stared at his face. It was a little different. His nose and mouth were joined by corrugated pipes. His image flickered for an instant. Michael noticed it. Old Man noticed him noticing.

"There is a drain in the energy supply. We have to hurry," thought Old Man.

"What kind of inhumane monster are you!" thought Michael. "How could you do this to people?"

"I am not human, Michael, and it should be a question as to what is a person. Surely, I am also a person."

"Why spend all this time getting me to teach you how to build a space ship when it is obvious you already know how!"

"I was hoping you would help me solve a problem. How do you separate the pilot from the ship?" He paused. "Now we know how, but it is too late. We have one pilot and one ship on the way. You will need all these others to go with you, headed by Captain Keltner."

"What do you mean? You're letting this crew go?"

Old Man fizzled out for a second and came back on. His appearance now looked more like one of the pilots.

“You must take these with you when the ships are ready. You will need them. I must go now and make repairs.” Then he fizzled out.

Michael woke and saw Old Man sitting in his chair looking like his normal self.

“It amazes me, Michael,” he said, “the attraction between any two individuals of your species. Separate them in the most profound manner and they will find each other.”

“If only a dot dit dit dot on the prison wall,” said Michael.

“Come, now,” said Old Man. “The prison is of your own making. You can leave whenever you want. It is up to you.” He then abruptly disappeared.

“Wait!” Michael cried with an outreached hand. And in low tones, he said, “I want to ask more questions.”

“You must leave as soon as possible,” came the familiar voice out of the air. “The evil is breaking down the wall. I can't hold them back much longer.”

“What evil?” asked Michael. But there was no answer, only a dimming of the lights.

Michael wondered what all this meant. He walked over to the door and tried the latch. It was still locked. He knew that the latch was electrical and the lowering of the light might mean a power drainage. It had been evident in the building plant where the space ships were being grown. He lay down on his bunk and decided to try to return to that ship and see if he couldn't talk to Captain Keltner. He tried going into a trance once again. He noticed it took little effort. He was once again in the control room with the monstrous looking pilots.

“Captain?” he queried. “Can you speak? ... Captain?”

Captain Keltner stood beside him. “Michael, the cave you flew into ... it's a cave of darkness.”

“Yes, I know,” Michael said. “There was no light in there at all.”

“Well?” Captain Keltner tapped his foot impatiently, waiting for an answer.

“What do you mean?” Michael hesitated thinking of the time just before he crashed. “You mean that was the evil Old Man spoke of?”

“Yes, Michael. The Controller, whom you call Old Man, is using all the power he has available to keep out the evil beings that live in the cave. The generator will run down and there will be no more power. The barrier will break apart, and the evil will be released into the Universe, it will even consume the Earth.”

“Like a growing bacteria,” Michael said, completing the thought.

“My crew and I are dying. The generator is running down. There will not be enough to sustain us. You must find out how to get us out of here.”

“But where did the others come from? There are a thousand ships here at least.”

“He cloned us,” the captain said, turning into a black and white flat video that flickered off.

The lights grew dimmer and Michael thought of his door. He could probably open it now. That thought woke him. The light in his room was barely on, a phosphorescence that came from the walls and ceiling. Probably a back up of some sort. Of course, he realized, there never had been any light fixtures. He arose and went to the door and turned the latch. It opened. He saw the crabs, no higher than his waist, walking sluggishly. They too were running out of energy.

Michael went through doorways where he had not previously been allowed. Corridor after corridor, past labs and storerooms, he found himself in a large room of massive engines, large electrical coils spitting energy and sizzling the air with round currents like toroids traveling up and down the coils. The air smelled like ozone. The central coils came together in a cross of five beams. In the foundation Old Man lay spread-eagle with his hands and face connected to the beams that supported massive electrical coils. He looked like the pilots whose faces and hands were covered with connecting segmented tubes.

“What the – !” Michael gasped as he stared at the grotesque image.

He sensed a presence and swiveled on his heel to see Old Man standing beside him. He looked at the man in cross and back to Old Man.

“Why,” Michael asked, “who is that?” he pointed. “He's dressed like you. Is he ... ?”

“There are always repairs to be done,” Old Man said. “I need a device to project myself to many places at once. What you see on the beam is my corporeal self. ”

“I can understand that,” Michael said, “and I have a hunch that you are not real.”

“Oh, I'm real, all right.” Old Man rubbed Michael's face and then put out his arms and hands. “Touch me and see. You have guessed that my body is a projection. That is right, but I am real.”

“You're like one of those pilots the ships are growing out of?” Michael questioned.

“No, no,” Old Man said, waving his hand and looking to the side. “Much more complicated. I run this whole planet. I need to be several places at the same time. It is necessary to project myself with a gadget. That is all. Now, you must leave and let this

old man work.”

“Okay, you're in a hurry,” Michael said, “but I have so many questions.”

“We have a little time while your ship grows, but there is still an urgency. Your world is in danger if you leave here, and you do so want to leave. And I do know quite a lot about biology and the brain and what it can and can't do,” Old Man said, pointing his long bony finger at Michael.

“Forgive my inquisitiveness, but what in hell are you talking about? What will happen if I stay? And why will my world be in danger if I leave?”

Old Man stiffened, raising himself a little taller. He said, “There is an evil on this world. I'm sure you felt it when you were thrust out of their cave.”

“Yeah,” he said, thinking back to that time. “Yeah, there was this shocking and sickening feeling.”

“And the total darkness you felt?” Old Man added.

“Yeah ... yeah,” muttered Michael.

“My name is Gate Keeper, and Guardian and Evil Snatcher,” Old Man added with a stroke of his finger. “If you want to be kept safe, you must leave this planet. I can send you home, but only with an armada. The evil things will follow you, so you must have the armada for protection. If you stay here, you will die. ”

“So, if I stay here, my world is safe, but I die.”

“If you leave, you may be able to save your world. If you stay, you may be sacrificing yourself as well as your world.”

Michael though, can I trust this guy? “But you entombed my friends, my brothers!”

“It was too late for them,” Old Man looked apologetically to the side. Then

looking straight at Michael, he said, "It is not too late for you."

"I understand my situation," Michael said angrily, "but what about my comrades?"

"There was not much I could do with their flesh other than what you saw in the nursery. They were mangled and burned, but I saved their brains."

"Oh, you saved their brains!" said Michael sarcastically, shaking his head back and forth. "So why your treatment of me?"

"You are a special case, Michael. Your intelligence quota is high, I needed to study you for a while ... and also, I find an affinity with you."

"You find an affinity with me?" Michael's anger increased. "Well, I can't absorb all this kindness! Brains! Brains! Nothing left but brains! People at home eat brains! Do you eat brains? I am not absorbing this. There are lines, boundaries, barriers. There are no barriers out here in the hinterlands!"

"Michael! Your thumb is green!" said Old Man, pointing his long bony finger at Michael.

Michael felt dizzy and melted into a lotus position onto the floor with his legs crossed.

"I'm sorry Michael. I had to calm you down."

"Man! What did you do to me?"

"You had been programmed to collapse by your mentors back on Earth." Old Man put his hands to his hips. "You judge me to be harsh and unfeeling. What about those who taught you? Do you not remember how hard it was to learn how to increase your intelligence?"

"Too much," groaned Michael. "How did you know?"

“It radiates from you. You haven't yet learned to be invisible. Your mind is an open book, as your people put it.”

“Are there any more of these triggers to control me?”

“There are a few,” Old Man said, folding his arms. “It seems that you have been made into a veritable weapon of sorts.”

“That makes me feel a little ...”

“Lost?” completed Old Man.

“Yes.”

“It brings doubt to your mind?”

“Yes.”

“Stand.”

Michael stood.

“I have taken care of this world for ages. I don't mind taking care of another, or of another person. Here,” he said, stretching his hand towards Michael. “Let me free you of these controls.”

He put his hand on Michael's forehead and said something in an unknown language. Michael felt a great weight lifting off his shoulders.

“Now,” said Old Man. “Let me get you back to your apartment where you can rest.”

Old Man clapped his hands and a few crabs came and lifted Michael onto one of their backs. It had horny protrusions surrounding a depression into which Michael fit nicely. He was going to say goodbye, but Old Man's projection had disappeared. Michael said “Goodbye” out loud as if Old Man could hear. He wondered if he would get to see

Old Man again. He had this feeling he might not. The crabs scurried down the corridors towards Michael's apartment.

Chapter 5

Michael could not wait to get home. He could not sleep or eat. As the power drained from the lights, the dimming effect appeared like the setting of the sun. He waited until twilight to do anything. Indecision was always one of his weaknesses. When it was going to be too dark to see anything, he decided to leave. He left his apartment to get to his ship. He went down one long corridor after another, turning left this way and right that way until it was too dark to see anything. He maneuvered around a lot of unfriendly crabs snapping at him in their fear. Jumping above them and running along the walls near the ceiling at super fast speeds was the only way to avoid their claws.

Complete darkness came suddenly, and he was caught like a ninja in a corner. Resting for a moment to get his night vision more in focus, he heard a great rustling sound down the corridors. He saw the crabs racing away from the sound. He could sense their fear. They were usually organized like ants. At this moment, they were scurrying rapidly away as though from some danger.

Michael saw something black on black moving down the corridor towards him. He heard the crunching of crab shells. The sounds marched towards him in a steady rhythm. He could feel the hot breath and the growing fear in his mind. It was like a cloud covering his senses and like an iron fist squeezing his heart. Some of the crabs were trying to stop the onslaught, but they had little strength. He would have to run. If they were frightened, he had better not stay around. When he tried running, he panicked and couldn't move, so he jumped like a tight spring going haywire. He swung through an open door and jumped from floor to wall to floor to ceiling like a swarm of locusts.

Every place was crawling with giant black spiders, black glassy globes with spindly legs attached. They enjoyed killing the crabs. They were fast and could jump farther than he could. He had to resort to fighting some of them. The crabs attacked the spiders whenever they could to keep them away from him, but that wasn't enough. Their moves were as swift as he, and their feet were like black daggers. When on top of one, he found they were not hairy like normal spiders nor soft and punchy, but rather more metallic, and they could stand upright on two legs.

Michael reached a place where all the walls were glowing that soft phosphorescent green in his bedroom. He could now see the twelve black beady eyes, three rows of four in the faces of these things. Where mandibles might have been they had mouths full of white fangs. Michael hadn't fully lived until this moment when he had to fight his way to his ship. But when he got to the cavern a wall of spiders blocked his way.

Fighting the spiders was like a dream. As he swung around the corner of the corridor, the wall of spiders collapsed and as a group attacked him. His concentration became so sharp, produced by a dozen calculating savants in his brain, that the fighting to him was in slow motion. Each reaching out of a spider arm was whacked off by the blows of his feet and hands as he struggled to gain some distance down the corridor. He finally reached a ventilation shaft into which he scampered. They scurried in after him, but he was able to fend them off until he found an exit into where the fleet of ships lay. But they too were covered with crawling spiders, each one a foot taller than he.

Michael hesitated for a second, not knowing which way to turn. When he decided to fight his way to one of the ships, they had him. Their dagger feet pinned him against the wall, piercing the flesh of his arms and legs. His face was almost in the jaws of a

mouth full of fangs smelling of sulphuric gas.

“You fight well, hu-man,” the spider said.

Michael reeled his head back trying to get oxygen where there was none. He lasted for eight minutes while they carted him off, questioning him.

“Where do you come from? What are you doing here on our doomed world? Why was Omara helping you? What are these fleet of ships for?” came the questions one right after another until he passed out.

When he came to, he was stretched out with cords, tied to two sport beams facing the fleet of ships growing and glowing in the dark cavern. He could see the spiders everywhere, crawling over the ships as though they were looking for a way in, finally breaking the ships apart as though they were egg shells. He felt the cords with his fingers. They felt like silken steel threads. He saw Captain Keltner standing before him. The spiders seemed oblivious to him. Then he noticed the two other men beside him.

“Don't say anything,” thought the captain. “We don't want to draw attention, even though they can't see us.”

“Sorry you got caught,” said one of the others.

“We're almost ready to go,” said the captain within Michael's thoughts. “We came to comfort you as much as we can and try to be a source of information.”

“Yeah, well thanks,” thought Michael, feeling his bonds with his fingertips, seeing if he could break them some way, but every time he tried, they grew back as fast as he could break them. “Intelligent little things, these cords.”

“I'm afraid everything is alive on this planet,” thought the captain.

“Yeah,” thought Michael. “Even the building was grown, wasn't it?”

“Yes,” said one of the seconds.

“Tell me,” queried Michael, “how do you three communicate? Is it mental telepathy?”

“We're all connected,” answered the captain.

“How do you mean?”

“We're all wired together into the central nervous system,” answered one of the seconds again. “A living brain. His, in fact. He's the central processing unit.”

“Central nervous system?” Michael pondered. “Say, can you communicate with Old Man?”

“Yes, but he is rather busy at the moment trying to deal with the Squad.”

“You mean these spiders?”

“That's what he calls the original inhabitants of this planet, the Squad. An individual Squad is a Squaith.”

“Captain Nemo has his hands full,” thought Michael.

“Captain who?” thought the other three.

“Don't you read the classics?”

“Never had time,” they all related.

“One of the first science fiction characters back in the nineteenth century. His plans were always falling apart. He would build great things only to have them fail in the end, but he would go back into his secret hiding places and start over on something new and bigger. Well I liken our host to this Captain Nemo.”

Michael thought again of the communications along the central network. “Say, it would seem logical, you being part of the ship that you are the ship, and you

communicating with each other, your ships are communicating.”

“That's right,” all three agreed.

“Well, is my ship tied into the same line?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell if it's repaired enough to fly?”

“It will fly.”

“Will it fly through space?”

“It will fly through space, but it won't last long.”

“What about hyper-drive? Will it last long enough to get me back home?”

“We will have to calculate that ... yes, right before you jump out of hyperspace, then it will tear .” They all three looked a little sad.

Then one of the seconds spoke . “If we all contributed and melded our force fields around his ship, he should last the whole way.”

“Good! How long?”

“All the way to Earth.”

“No. How long before we are all ready to go?”

“Most of us will be ready in another Earth day.”

“How am I going to get down? How about communicating to my ship? Can it blast through these walls? There may be a laser beam that can be focused on these bands.”

“You can do that yourself. Remember, everything is alive here, and it won't be necessary to blast your way through. Doors and walls here are relative.”

“How's that?”

“Dig your fingers into the strands until your flesh is raw. When your nerves are in

contact with the strands, you can communicate with your ship as you are communicating with us.”

Their images started blinking.

“We have to go. The Squad is here.”

As soon as they blinked off, a huge Squaith, larger than the others stood before Michael. It's black head seemed to be the point of a large triangle that curved back towards its neck, having thorns along the sides as did its legs. The smell of sulfur became overwhelming. Michael coughed.

“For such a soft creature,” it breathed, “you fight well, but your mind is weak. It depends on tricks and a good deal of restructuring for you to be able to fight so well. We are born to the instincts you had to be trained for. It is not natural for your race to fight. Flight is your nature. You have to be trained to hate, to fight, to lie, to be bold, and to be an individual.”

“How do you know so much about us?” asked Michael, his curiosity getting the better of him, even overcoming his fear.

“Oh, it radiates from you. You are an open book for someone as advanced as me. It is strange how far along the evolutionary scale an ape like creature can advance in so short a time,” he said as he scrapped Michael's abdomen with its pointed foreleg, drawing blood, which the spider licked. Michael writhed in pain which made the spider chuckle.

While it was doing that, Michael jabbed his fingertips into the webbing that held his wrists. The black spider-like crab hissed.

“You will not be able to scratch your way out.”

Michael thought he could sense the thing smiling, even though it had no lips to smile with. Its jaw was, in a way, a continuous sardonic smile.

“You are a tender morsel,” it said. “But not much there. I may take you with me for a snack as we travel to your world. It will be a feast when we get there.”

Michael continued jabbing his fingers through the webbing that held his wrists to the posts, his face turned red and he yelled in pain and anger. Blood dripped from the webbing.

“On the other hand, you and your friends could join us in the feasting. You are strong willed and selfish. You will do anything to save your own life. You can feel the power that I wield. Power that flows out of the darkness, out of the abyss.

“Your world has grown strong. The people there are the survivors of many thousands of years of war. Your people are kin to us in that respect. We could become allies in conquering the galaxy, even in conquering the Universe.

“You are a fighter,” it hissed. “You can see how much control I have over you. As you fight, you can feel my power over you becoming stronger. Yes, you will become one of my lieutenants. Your will is increasingly bound by my own.”

As the spider talked to Michael, his ship was responding to his thoughts. Its engine had turned on, and it started rolling towards him. Walls opened before it. Light spread from its hull, growing stronger as it moved.

“Never!” Michael yelled, struggling against his bonds.

The spider only laughed, thinking Michael was becoming his as Michael gave way to his anger.

“You'll have to do a lot more to get me!” Michael cried out as a huge noise blasted

through the wall to his right.

It was his ship, parked right behind the spider, scorching it with such intense light and heat that it made it wither and cry out. It blinded Michael, but only for a moment. His second eyelids kicked in and acted as dark glasses. His eyes went black. Meanwhile, the spiders that were crawling over the broken ships scampered out of the cavern to find a dark place. Other ships started absorbing the light from Michael's ship and started blazing out light themselves. From the front of Michael's ship came a red laser beam and cut through the webbing that held his hands and feet. He dropped to his feet and ran for the hatch underneath the cockpit, shaking off what remained of his webbed bonds. Because of the restructuring of the ship to hold the new advances in technology, they had to move the cockpit forward, make it smaller and put the hatch underneath it. He crawled the small chute and climbed into his seat. It wrapped around him and they were off through the roof and through the mouth of a cavern and out into the darkness. It shrouded the planet like an evil web of fog and volcanic ash. The sun couldn't be seen until they got several miles into the atmosphere. Through Michael's visor he could see a whole fleet of stars following him.

“How many of you are there?” he asked.

“Only three hundred,” came Captain Keltner's voice. “The others didn't make it. They weren't complete yet.”

“Okay,” said Michael fighting back his feelings. “We'll do what we can. Follow me.”

Michael thought to turn around and destroy the venom coming out of the planet, but a voice interrupted.

“Don't turn back. They are too strong for you here. Your fight is to defend your home planet and your race.” It was Old Man.

“You still alive?” asked Michael.

“Yes. I am. Do you mind if I ride along with you? My time is at an end.”

“Sure,” said Michael, pleasantly surprised. “Have a seat, ah, if you can find one.”

“What's Michael?” came Captain Keltner's voice. “Why didn't we stand and fight? We can beat them.”

“Our place is home world, Captain. All I came here to do is to rescue you. If you want a fight, we'll get one soon enough by defending Earth. We don't seek revenge, only safety.”

“Okay. We're on your tail and on your trail, Home Leader.”

Chapter 6

Dirk took Old Man by the hand as they made their way into the gardens at the Foundation.

“I've decided, Old Man, that I'm going after him.”

“How you gonna do that seeing how you don't have a ship or a pilot's license? And you aren't part of the organization that sends pilots out there into those vast empty regions.”

They continued to walk under the trees, passing through the branches of a willow with yellow leaves.

“We'll have to steal one,” Dirk announced.

“Steal a ship?”

“Yeah.”

“And if you do,” Old Man scratched his head with the forefinger of his right hand, “how you going to fly it?”

“That's where you come in.” Dirk smiled at Old Man. “You have the right brain for it. You've been trained in those flight simulators. I'm pretty good but not as excellent as you, and since it uses brain power rather than dexterity, you are the chosen one.”

“The program hasn't gotten off the ground. How do we? I mean,” Old Man emphasized, “They used chimps at the start of the space program, now they send us off in these ships that go nowhere, and they don't really want to send us up as real pilots.”

“I think they do. That's what all this training is for.”

“Then why,” Old Man asked, “didn't they give us the funding to actually go out

there on test runs? There is a bigger faction that wants us to stay on the ground than those trying to get us to replace men as pilots.”

“You're probably right there. It's hard to get the funding. But maybe if we show them that it's viable, they will reconsider.”

They sat on a log near a small stream of recycled water that eventually formed a pond after rolling over a small waterfall.

Dirk thought for a moment. “We will have to tell them we're simply out to look at the ship as part of our training exercises.”

“We'd better be going then. You know they have timetables.”

It wasn't hard to get permission from the head office. They signed out and told them when they would be back.

Staff could get a plane within the hour to anywhere a project was connected to, and the Foundation was a branch of the Kennedy Space Center.

* * *

Old Man's stomach twinged as he sat looking out the jet window. He didn't mind flying so much as what was going to happen when they landed. Animals don't lie to each other or to humans. He had no need to lie, but obviously humans think they have such needs. He didn't like the idea of stealing a spaceship. He would go through regular channels, even if he had to wait. But what obligation did he have to these humans anyway? Dirk was simply his friend. Well, what do friends do for each other? Do they lie and steal? Of course we are only going to borrow the craft, he thought. No, to be a true friend, you have to be a friend to yourself first. I have mine integrity, he thought as he stepped up onto his mental soap box.

* * *

“I won't help you steal this craft.” Old Man turned to Dirk.

“Okay,” Dirk scowled. “Then help me fly the darned thing.”

“We must go through proper channels and convince someone that our cause is just.”

“You've been reading too many books.”

“You've been watching too much TV.”

Both of them knew all the arguments the other could lash out as they stared into each other's eyes. Knowing a friend sometimes saves arguments and a lot of talk.

“Okay. We'll ask first,” Dirk groaned. “But I won't take no for an answer.”

“Okay,” the orangutan said.

“Okay,” Dirk echoed.

They stared at each other for a few seconds before turning away: Old Man back to his window and Dirk back to his resolve. He knew he must get aboard a rescue craft and go after his dad. The separation was in millions of light years. It would take millions of generations of traveling space at lower than light speeds to even know whether his dad was dead or alive, except man could now travel through subspace using the principles of quantum mechanics, taking only months to travel the whole length of the galaxy. Dirk could almost be where his dad was using those principles, except for the years of practice he would need to do such a thing. Being there was only a thought, and he hadn't advanced to pure thought yet. He could, in spare moments, have the illusion of space and time erased for a split second, but when he tried to hold on to the vision before him, it vanished. Therefore, he needed the machine that would do it for him. Faith would bring

him that machine, and that faith was born out of an unselfish desire for the welfare of his dad. His one desire was to save his dad, and he would do it despite all obstacles.

* * *

Landing at the space center was uneventful. Getting into the space center was simply a matter of showing credentials. They were directed with some derision to the Operation Substitute office.

Dirk and Old Man made their way to Operations by way of a shuttle bus. When they were dropped off, the building looked like an old tin can that had been sawed in half and set on the tarmac. Over the door was painted Operation Substitute. Dirk thought this must be a joke.

“Shows how much money they really put into this thing,” Old Man said.

“Well, let's go in and see if we can get a ship.” Dirk exaggerated the last “p” with a puff of breath.

They went into the shack and found themselves in a barracks hallway with rooms on each side and an open area at the end where a single desk sat surrounded by numerous filing cabinets. A dinosaur of a computer sat on the desk with an actual electron tube monitor on top of the it. Behind the desk, there was an opened newspaper held up by fingers on each side. Dirk assumed there was a man behind it.

A voice behind the newspaper said, “What do you want? Did we send for you? I get no visitors unless they send me someone.” He shook the newspaper to get it to bend and then folded it neatly and sat it down beside the computer. “Don't see a good newspaper nowadays. You have to order them special.”

The man looked as if he belonged in an alley somewhere lying on a cardboard box,

a homeless critter who hadn't shaved or taken a bath in years. A thick red beard reached down to his chest. His hair, full and bushy, looked more brown than red. Abundant eyebrows crowned piercing eyes. One would expect him to smell of something other than dirt and oil like an old truck mechanic. Dirk and Old Man stared at an ample beer belly as he leaned back in his office chair.

“That's not a beer belly,” he said looking down. “It took me many a year to develop that. That's hara! Center of balance. Center of the Chi.” He looked back at them. “Now, what is it that you came here for? You got an ape pilot I presume and you want to test him. I thought you guys had simulators to test them on. What is it? You want a real plane? You probably know a real plane will be a lot different than a sim.”

“Not a plane,” Dirk corrected the guy. “Old Man here is a space pilot. That's what we came to you for.”

“Can't be a space pilot until you train on a plane. Train on a plane. That's the first step to goin' out into space. Train on a plane.”

“Sir.” Dirk shuffled his feet. “I'm afraid we don't have the luxury of time.”

“Got no time?” the man interrupted. “Got no time to train, then you got no time at all. You don't know the hazards of space,” he said as he pushed back his chair from the desk. “You got to know all the procedures without question. You have to become a computer program, an inhuman machine, ready at a moment's notice to know exactly what to do in any slight emergency. Any little thing that's out of alignment or any little thing that's broken can, like a small arc taken across the galaxy, expand into a huge catastrophe.”

“Sir,” Dirk said, a little irritated, “we don't have time because my dad is out there

somewhere among the stars stranded on a strange planet all the way across the galaxy.

We need a ship. Old Man here can fly it.” He thought his honesty would please Old Man.

“Now, now. You can't come in here and expect to get a ship. This is a school, not a space port. Why, all we have is ... hey! You're not Mike Bradley's son, are you?”

“Yes, he is,” Old Man muttered, slapping one hand on top of the other. “And you'd better take notice or take aim.” He scratched his head. “ ... or something like that.”

“You expect that ape to pilot a spaceship? You got to have a brilliant mind, a magnificent memory. You've got to excel above your class. An ape can't fly such a complicated device.”

“Hump!” Old Man replied to himself. “I wonder if this guy is intelligent,” and he waved his forefinger in the air. “Tell him what you came here to do. Come on now. You've got to be honest.”

“I ... I ... ” Dirk hesitated. “I came to steal a ship.”

The man laughed. “You can't even fly one! You can't even get near one, let alone steal it. Fly it?”

“Old Man here is expertly trained,” Dirk argued.

“You got to be a computer to drive one of these things!”

“He's a cyborg. He can't forget. It's impossible for him to forget. Everything he has ever learned ... it's like he's a computer running a computer program. All of the simulator has been downloaded into his brain implant. He's fast when you plug him in.”

“Do you have your papers in order?”

Dirk handed him his papers. The guy looked them over and then slapped them onto his desk. “You only have permission to drive this thing around the base, not take off.

You can't take off! They don't let apes take off! I can't train you that far.”

“But he is already trained to fly. He only needs real experience.”

“Step one first.” The guy stood, walked around the desk and offered his hand.

“Step one first, and then we can see what we can do. We'll see if you can get permission to fly. Step one, step two, etcetera!”

Dirk took his hand. “OK.”

The man said, “My name is Henry Ire. Your dad and I grew up together and went to the academy arm in arm.” Henry tried to put his arm around Dirk who shrugged it off. Henry, feeling rejected, straightened and became cold and businesslike. He led them out into the hall and opened a room.

“Here's an extra bunk. Used to belong to my secretary. Don't have one now. Cutbacks. Is he potty trained?”

Old Man rolled his eyes. “Pees in his pants I bet,” he said beneath his breath.

“Fully trained, I said,” Dirk exclaimed.

“Okay,” Henry said. “You settle in here. I'll go get things started.”

Dirk knew he didn't have time to go through the training sessions, but he would have to bide his time until he could move. He would steal a ship the first chance he got, make sure it was fast, that it would hold together, and fueled. That would be the hard part. An officer inspecting the ship was part of the training, making sure it didn't have enough fuel to reach orbit. They didn't fuel these ships for long flights, and the space scoopers were too slow. The fast ones used fuel packets, and there would be only one in any of the trainers. He would have to get his hands on ten packets. He would have to steal them. He thought about this as he lay on the upper bunk, ignoring Old Man who

was taking a nap below, but then he awoke .

“You going to eat anything?” He poked Dirk in the ribs using his long reach.

“Not hungry,” Dirk said.

“Well, I'm hungry, and you're responsible for me. If they see an ape wandering around the base looking for a canteen, I'm sure I'd wind up in a zoo somewhere.”

“All right.” Dirk rose up on his elbow. “Let's go outside and find canteen.”

“Follow me.” Old Man walked out the door with his hand in the air pointing it in the direction he was going.

“I thought you said you didn't know where the canteen is.” Dirk jumped down from his bunk and followed.

“Remember? I can't forget. I saw one as we drove here in the shuttle. In fact, I saw it from the air.”

“You are run by your stomach!” Dirk laughed.

“It's the law of the jungle. Need to survive.”

As they arrived at the canteen, a soldier walked out, noticed Old Man, and said, “They don't allow pets in there. Read the sign.”

“Good!” Old Man called back to the guy. “We have no pets anyway!”

The soldier jumped when he realized the orangutan was talking.

“He's my Old Man,” Dirk said. “He's a trained pilot.”

“Ventriloquist, eh?” said the soldier looking back.

“Naw,” said Old Man. “He's a real boy.”

“Damndest thing!” the soldier said as he walked away shaking his head.

They saw Henry as they went through the screen door. They ignored him and

picked up a couple of metal trays and got in line. A rough looking cook slopped food onto the trays ahead and said, "We don't serve apes in here, kiddo!"

"Well," responded Dirk, "you serve him don't you!" and pointed to Henry.

The cook laughed heartily and yelled, "Hey Henry! Your father just showed up!" The whole mess laughed.

The cook automatically filled Dirk's and Old Man's trays and they went down the line picking up some fruit juice and water. They walked over to where the "other ape" was sitting. Dirk sat there for a minute, hoping Henry would say something, but he stuck his face into his newspaper. Old Man enthusiastically started on his salad and slop, wondering what it was.

Henry spied the young boy staring at him (relatively young, anyway) and looked back at the sports page but couldn't concentrate. He finally put the paper down and picked up a chicken leg and gnawed on it. He growled, "Here is this upstart coming into my comfortable life and disturbing my routine. Now I have to throw you out or go to work." He glanced at the boy, and that gave Dirk permission to speak.

"Have you found out anything?" he asked timidly.

"What's there to find out? I said I would get things started for your training and I have."

"Forgive me, but I'm not here to be trained. Old Man here is."

Dirk picked at his slop which consisted of chicken pieces and gravy over some rice and noodles as though the cook couldn't make up his mind. There were beans in there too.

"You, the ape, it doesn't matter," Henry muttered.

“You said that you knew my father. Were you close? I mean, were you friends? Or were —”

“Didn't tell you about me, did he?” Henry said, shoveling mashed potatoes into his mouth.

Dirk watched the gravy running down the red beard. “No.”

“No wonder, what he did to me,” Henry glanced back in anger.

“What did he do?” Old Man asked.

“Got me stuck out here in this hell hole while he goes off gallivanting all over the universe. That's all.”

“Oh,” Dirk said timidly. “So it looks like you wouldn't mind if he got lost or left behind.”

“Never!” Henry yelled. “We don't leave anyone behind! That was our motto!”

“But you got left behind, obviously,” Old Man said. “So you blame it on him, and his relations get the brunt of it,” he said waving his hand through the air theatrically.

“You're damned right! Huh! Did that ape talk? Or am I going nuts?”

“Oh, he talks,” said Dirk. “All animals talk if you're willing to listen.”

“Yes, but I mean English. Damn!”

“Damnable thing,” Old Man repeated.

“I knew they taught them sign language!” Henry exclaimed, sliding his chair back and looking at the ape.

“As I said, he's a cyborg. He has implants that let him talk.”

“I had to talk or they would torture me,” Old Man grinned, showing his teeth.

Henry continued eating, sticking his head back into his newspaper.

“Talk to me tomorrow. I've had enough for tonight,” he said with his mouth full.

The three continued to eat. Night came and the stars shone. The crickets came out singing as the three walked back to the barracks shack in silence.

Dirk awoke with a nervous stomach wondering if there was any life in the other room. Should he stay in his room or see about taking a shower? He decided to chance it. Dropping down from the top bunk, Old Man came into view staring out the window. He left him there and peeked out the door. Down the hall was a sign of “Head” painted above a door. Walking down there and poking his nose in, he found the showers and toilets. He returned and picked up a change of clothes. Taking a shower, he felt like an intruder stealing something. After getting dressed, he looked around for Henry. He was nowhere to be found. Old Man walked up to him and said, “He went to the mess. Let's go. I'm hungry again.”

When they arrived at the mess, the cook recognized them and said, “Not you again! I told you we don't serve apes in this mess.”

“You served us last night!” Dirk said, raising his voice. “What's the difference?”

“Oh, I did?” said the cook scratching his fat belly and laughing. “Oh well, come on.”

Some joker, thought Dirk.

Getting their eggs (scrambled, like everything else) and bacon, toast, cereal and juice, they looked for Henry. He was sitting alone again, reading his newspaper. He had already finished his plate. They went to sit by him. He peeked around the corner of his newspaper and sighed.

“Good morning Henry,” Old Man said.

“Good morning ape,” Henry replied.

“He's an old man,” said Dirk, digging into his eggs. “He deserves some respect, so we called him Old Man.”

“Okay, Old Man, then,” Henry replied . He folded his paper and set it down.

“Listen,” he said, “I have a ship you can use, but it will take a little work to get it going. It's been sitting out there in the hangar for years. No one was interested in it until you showed up. After you're finished we'll head over there and you can help me get her going.”

“Okay!” They both said, smiling.

The two scarfed down their breakfast and all three headed out to the hangar where the star fighter awaited them. It was more than Dirk had hoped for. A real star fighter! He thought perhaps he would see a transport ship or shuttle craft, but this was better, a real star fighter, an ST500, the kind that was used in the last war with Scrandabul. It was long and sleek like a dart with four swept wings in the back. Behind the swept wings was the familiar appearance of a space bender with all its cooling tubes covering the several engines.

“Wow,” sparked Dirk. “Isn't this the type my dad flies?”

“It's an older version,” said Henry. “His is built for long distances. It has a cabin. This one doesn't. It's only for fighting.”

Dirk peered at the two seats in the cockpit. One in back of the other. He walked around to the rear, noticing the dark blast marks on the side. Several of the cooling tubes appeared to be rusted out. The engine crystals were cracked in places.

“She's seen some action.” Dirk wondered where they were going to get engine

crystals.

Henry turned toward him and read the expression on his face. “We can grow them ourselves right here on the base. They crack so often they need to be replaced after every three or four flights.”

“Say! That's great!” Dirk exclaimed. “When can we get started?”

“You can start dismantling the engine right now.” Henry wiped grease off his hands with a solvent rag. “Clean out those broken crystals. The tools are over there against the wall. You'll have to take all those cooling tubes off.”

So the work started. They spent several days taking off all the cooling tubes and drawing diagrams so they would know how to put it all back together. At least Dirk drew diagrams. Old Man remembered everything he did. When they got down to the crystals, it was more delicate work. A glass cooling tube encased each crystal and its primer. They stuck out from the main fuselage, cascading in circles from the rim to end with the longest tube in the center. The surrounding shield had to be taken off first. Removing the primers would break the crystals if you were unfamiliar with the process – which Dirk was, and he busted a couple that were practically new. Henry kept mostly to the crystal plant, drawing off the mercury as he grew the crystals.

The guns were another matter. They were a more familiar architecture. It was simple mechanics. Even Old Man could dismantle these, although some parts were rusted together. Repairing the holes in the sides took welding, not unlike crystal growing. Getting a smooth surface took several days to master.

All in all, Dirk and Old Man knew how to read manuals and follow diagrams, being expert lab rats, knowing how to put things together. But the unfamiliarity with the

subject at hand, making mistakes and getting frustrated brought on fatigue by the end of the day. It had the effect of increasing their appetite. As they got used to the work of lifting really heavy metal, they were able to whiz through it. The crystals themselves were very dense, almost like lead. That's what gave them the most trouble, or was it the fact that they had to use ancient tools and lifts? It seemed that the military kept to standard procedure in trying to preserve ancient traditions.

The day came when it was time to put all things together and back into place. Half the work was done and that gave them an excuse to celebrate. When they got the other half done, they had another celebration. It so happened that they finished their repairs on the 4th of July. By nightfall, there was a lot of celebrating going on around the base. Henry had left to be with some of his buddies, and this gave Dirk the opening he needed to obtain extra fuel packets for the ship. He thought security would be lax, and he could nab what he wanted with little interference. He also thought he would be able to send a message to his dad or at least to his dad's ship. That would use one fuel packet.

People looked at the boy and his ape with curiosity as they roamed the base on their way to the fuel depot. They weren't used to seeing an ape on board. Dirk and Old Man ran into too many guards who said, "This area is restricted," and they would have to dart back down dark alleys or climb over buildings to secure passage to the depot. When they got there, they found too many guards to get in through the gate or even near the gate. There was only one place they might be able to climb the fence where the shadow of a building gave them some cover, but they would have to back up a block and go around. When they arrived, a jeep filled with guards passed in front of the fence. Periodically, a spotlight cut right through the shadow. Once they had broken in, they had

to jump into a dumpster to avoid the spotlight. Then climbing out they had to duck down beside the dumpster to avoid the jeep. As Dirk waited, he thought of how he was going to get around the building, which was in the light from street lamps. Talking to Old Man about it, he suddenly found that he was alone. A hand grabbed his arm and pulled him into a hole in the wall. He jumped but was thankful it was the hand of an ape.

“How'd you get in here!” Dirk asked in a loud whisper.

“This place is screwed together,” he said. “I simply started taking the screws out and pushed the panel in.”

With Dirk inside, Old Man replaced the panel and secured a heavy wooden box against it.

“You brought a screwdriver?” Dirk asked.

“No. Used my thumbnail. It's pretty tough.”

Dirk took his flashlight out and turned it on. There were stacks upon stacks of fuel packets on pallets. Both he and Old Man had brought duffel bags they had secured from a nearby barracks. They stuffed these with the fuel packets. They both managed to pack 10 each into their bags. They slapped their hands together, giving each other a high five and left out the hole. Old Man replaced the screws and they were off being followed by a long white search beam.

Before they went back to the barracks, Dirk and Old Man stopped by the hangar and deposited the fuel packets in the fuselage of the star fighter. They gave each other a high five again and started out, but they bumped into Henry. He stood as a silhouette in the doorway. Fireworks flashed behind him.

“Going somewhere?” he asked, leaning against the door jamb, looking like a black

silhouette against the blue of the night sky.

Both of them gulped.

“We were admiring the craft,” said Old Man, showing his teeth in an aggressive grin.

“Yeah,” agreed Dirk, “just admiring the craft and tightening some screws we found loose. We were walking around the base and happened to stop here and found some loose screws.”

“I must have some loose screws,” Henry said, “letting you talk me into this training exercise. I should have booted you out.” He shifted his weight to one leg. “We weren't ready for any training exercise, nor were we supposed to be. It was a place of retirement for me for goofing off.” He jambed his forefinger into the palm of his other hand in anger. “It was either this or the brig.” Henry's eyes drifted towards the fireworks in the sky. “They gave me the choice and I took it. But now that we have an actual flying machine here, I'll take you in it.” He looked at Dirk and smiled. “I guess I owe that much to your dad. He got me into this, but he is the one who kept me out of the brig. He persuaded them to give me this thankless job. He had more clout.”

“Gosh,” Dirk exclaimed. “What happened?”

“Oh,” Henry rolled his eyes. “We had a little disagreement with the CO. Your dad eventually did some heavy apologizing, and I refused and felt betrayed. He got to fly again and I didn't. And that's that.”

“What was the disagreement about?” Dirk asked, pursuing something he thought important about his dad.

“I said that is that!” Henry said angrily.

“Okay,” Dirk shrugged. “See you back at the shack.”

“Wait a minute. Show me where you found those loose screws,” Henry said with a business-like air.

“They're over here,” Dirk said, pointing the way with his flashlight.

All three of them walked over to where the fuel cells were stored in the body of the craft. Henry examined the screws and the fit of the panel and said “Okay. I'll see ya back at the shack.”

Dirk and Old Man wiped the sweat off their brows thinking they had pulled one over on Henry and left. Henry, in the meantime, popped the screws, slid the panel over and found the stash of fuel cells. He knew they were unreachable from there, so he took them out, smiling all the while, and placed them in their proper place in the fore part of the engine. That took him three hours, but he was used to taking sleepers during the day. He felt good inside. He really loved Michael and was glad there was someone going after him. Even though he resented Michael being out there in space without him, he was still his best friend. Everyone else had given up sending out an expedition all the way across the galaxy for one man. They didn't want to spend any more money to explore that area with two ships already missing. Those that opposed it wanted the money for their own projects, and they outnumbered those intrepid explorer types.

Henry kept true to his word. He wouldn't allow them to go ten feet off the ground when they first started the training exercises. Dirk fumed as he watched Old Man and Henry flying around the base. If he could get in the star fighter himself, he would be off in a flash. But the next day he had a surprise. Henry let him fly in the back seat with Old Man in front. He wanted to tell Old Man to step on it. They would burst out of there and

be on their way, but he couldn't. He was held down by his word he had given to Henry. That night he argued with Henry to let him take the star fighter and search for his dad. Now it was Dirk that felt like growling, and he did. He actually growled. Old Man laughed at seeing a man growl like an animal.

“You want to be shot down?” Henry yelled. “That's exactly what would happen if you two sped off right now. There's a time for everything, and I say that now is not the time. I have to get permission from headquarters, and that may take some days to get.”

“We may not have days!” Dirk yelled back. “It's been months since he left, and no one has heard from him. He could die like the guys he went to rescue.”

“You're forgetting your physics young man. Time is very flexible in the wormhole that starship creates. Time flanges out a few months here on this end and a few months on the other end. It's perfectly unstable. We still have a couple of months before the window closes on your dad,” Henry explained.

“Okay, I know that,” Dirk apologized. “I'm anxious to get started. I can't just sit around here and wait.”

“You'll have to, at least for a couple more days,” Henry said, standing up and pacing the floor. “Hell! Don't you think I'm anxious? There's nobody else but you, kid that's going after him. He's my best friend. Don't you think I'm worried too!”

“Gosh, I didn't know you cared,” Dirk said sarcastically. “Listen! Son's have first dibs, you know, on worrying and all that.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, but you got to be careful or you will get your tail blown off.”

Dirk found a friend that night he didn't know he had. Henry even explained that the star fighter was all fueled and ready to go. He had even put in a year of rations stored in

every little cubbyhole he could find. Dirk went to bed that night, exhilarated and unable to sleep. The next few days were spent going over routines in flight procedures as Henry argued with the higher ups to get permission to run a tropospheric test on the star fighter. His luck came when a window was opened by a mechanical failure in one of the spaceships due to be launched. He told Dirk, "Someone up there loves you kid," making some reference to an unknown god in Heaven.

Early in the morning Dirk and Old Man found themselves in the cockpit of the star fighter getting directions from the flight tower and last minute instructions from Henry whom they now looked on as a savior. Their engines roared behind them. They taxied down the runway. Old Man was plugged into the ships computer. He pushed the little joy stick forward and the thrust pushed both pilots back into their seats. The ship rushed forward and traced a thin blue flame curving up into the atmosphere. They were on their way, and when they turned off their radio, there were men yelling at each other in the flight tower and a scramble of fighters left the tarmac to bring them back. But as they passed the moon, Old Man turned on the space bender and they disappeared into hyperspace.

Chapter 7

Michael noticed a new bleep on his scope. It was ahead of him instead of behind. He could see his small fleet of ships in one bunch on the bottom of the scope being followed by another fleet of little bleeps behind that. They were the spiders. He looked at the bleep ahead of him. The computer said in a soft feminine voice, "There is an incoming message."

"Put in on," he said.

"Dad, I'm coming to rescue you. I'm on my way. Do you read me?" came Dirk's voice through the subspace hum.

"Damn kid!" Michael exclaimed. "Computer, send this message: Dirk, is that you?"

There was a few seconds wait.

"Dad? You're alive! Thank God! I thought we had lost you." Tears welled up in Dirk's eyes. "Don't worry! I'm coming to get you. Did you find anyone alive?"

"Computer, send message: Dirk! Turn around. Get out of hyperspace. Make another trajectory. Turn around and head for home. I got thugs on my tail. Don't want you to get messed up in this."

A few more seconds elapsed and another message came in.

"Dad! Don't worry. I've got guns and a gunner extraordinaire. I'm driving a star fighter. Old Man is with me."

"Computer, send message: Dirk! Do as ordered. You can't fire in hyperspace. You'll blow yourself up. I need you at home. We'll fight there."

Another message came in.

“Can't do that. I'm expending enough fuel to make one stop and return.”

“Computer, send this message: Dirk! Do just that. Stop and return. I really need your guns back home. Wait for me directly outside the moon's orbit. You'll see a fleet coming with me. It's the fleet behind them that will need your attention.”

“Roger, will do.”

Dirk was disappointed, but he did as he was directed.

The kid's been reading too many comic books, thought Michael.

* * *

“Old Man?” asked Michael. “Did you, I mean, are you in two places at the same time? My son Dirk said that you were with him.”

“I am everywhere, Michael,” Old Man said mystically, “and time is an illusion.”

“I mean, are you sitting in my son's cockpit and in my cockpit?”

“I am sure,” Old Man said, “there is a little bit of me everywhere. It's a holographic universe. There is an overlap in consciousness since your son has entered into the picture.”

“Then you're not all there?” Michael smiled. “Forgive the pun.”

“I'm never all here.”

“Oh! I can never get a straight answer out of you!”

“Maybe you simply don't know my language yet.” Old Man laughed. “I sense the presence of an ape with your son.”

“Oh, of course! It must be one of his projects. A trained ape. They alter their intelligences, you know.”

“Perhaps augment is the right word. This one, though unaltered, I feel would be one of high intelligence.” Old Man had that far away look in his eyes. “He is an old soul. In fact, I feel he is not even from Earth.”

* * *

Dirk looked at his fuel gage. He would run out before he could reach Mars colony. He should have stayed in hyperspace until he found his dad and his fleet, whoever they were. Then he could have slid along their trajectory with only a little fuel. I'm sure, he thought, they are doing the same.

“What do you think, Old Man? Should we stop and wait for them or keep going? I think we can make it to Mars. That one broadcast cost us a whole fuel pack.”

“I have a better idea, Dirk. We can stop along here.” Old Man pointed to the star map on the console. “There we can pick up more fuel. It won't take long before we will be back home again.”

“What do you mean? How do you know about this part of the galaxy?” Dirk said, a little stunned.

“It is ... where I come from,” said Old Man with a big smile.

“What do you mean? Where you come from?” asked Dirk, thinking that his ape had gone bonkers. “Has something gone wrong with one of your chips? Do you need a replacement chip?”

“I imply nothing more. That is the place I was born. I had no intention of telling you. It doesn't matter now. We need to get you back home.”

Dirk gathered in the possibility that Old Man was telling the truth. He asked cautiously, “Do you mean to tell me that you are an alien?”

“Alien? And we've been friends all these years ... Dirk,” Old Man chided.

Dirk stared straight ahead and blinked several times. Old Man had always been at the Foundation since Dirk started working there. He had known him only as one of apes the doctors experimented on.

“Okay, yes, I am from another star. We came to your planet ages ago to study you. Some to study, some to live the simple life.”

“But what about evolution? That would mean not all apes evolved into what they are now,” said Dirk, puzzling over this sudden problem.

“We never evolved, Dirk. Your earth's gravitational field is of a low order of vibration. It affected our bodies. Made them ... hairy. It would do the same for most humanoid life forms ... Coming out of hyperspace.”

Before them was a bright sun and headed right for it. Dirk wasn't surprised by the intensity of the light, but that he could stand it. It wasn't hurting his eyes and felt engulfed by it. He caught his breath. He wasn't breathing air anymore but something different. He was breathing the light. His body was being filled with light. He started to glow, and then he, Old Man, and the ship were all as bright as the sun, yet he could make out individual forms. He was in a room with other forms. They were humanoid but didn't talk. They moved about doing things as though they could read each other's minds. Even he instinctively knew what was going on. Old Man was to stay and he would be going back to earth as though nothing had happened.

I am being brought into a room, Dirk reported to himself as though he were a journalist. I say goodbye to Old Man. He isn't hairy anymore. Where are my clothes? I don't feel naked. I am clothed with light. The light gets brighter and the forms turn into

desks, tables with all my equipment on them.

I am back in the lab, thought Dirk, at the institute. The light, there is all this light still.

After a moment Dirk got his bearings, and he noticed that the light was not coming from everywhere or from the forms in the room, but from the windows. There were great flashes of light filling the sky. Not making any sound, they swerved and danced all around the sky, each one of them as bright as the sun. He knew instinctively it was his dad and his fleet fighting the spiders. He watched without sunglasses. The light didn't hurt, and he could hear his dad speaking, giving orders to the members of his fleet of ships, or was it a fleet of suns?

* * *

Michael came out of hyperspace, and as soon as he did so his ship became one ball of energy bursting with light. He noticed that the other ships coming out of hyperspace were doing the same thing. There were about three hundred suns swarming over the earth. Then there came the black shadows. They started swarming and bouncing around trying to find some window in the atmosphere to enter, but when they tried, they were met with a sun ball and they would melt within its sphere of influence. They didn't back down or retreat. They swarmed and bounced from one window to the next, but the suns wouldn't let them enter Earth's atmosphere. One by one they disappeared until only one giant dark shadow remained. It fled back into hyperspace out beyond the moon. No one cared where it went, no one chased after it. But then attention was turned towards Earth

itself.

* * *

Martha sat quietly in the group home for the elderly, coloring in her coloring book. With one hand she played with her gray hair, pulling out the curls her daughter had so carefully set and with the other hand made the images of family members, trees, and houses glow with life using her crayons. She contorted the wrinkles in her face trying to make each image just perfect then noticed lights outside and heard children laughing. She went to the open door, looked out, opened the screen and walked out onto the porch. It might have been a meteor shower. She loved meteor showers. But these lights were huge, bigger than anything she had ever experienced. Children came out of their houses and started dancing in the streets laughing and singing songs of joy as only children can. Martha started laughing, too. It was as though the sun had split into pieces and was dancing all over the sky. She was amazed that the sun didn't hurt her eyes as on other days. She ran back into the house to get her friend Jeff, but she found him on the back porch laughing, looking at the sky.

A special bulletin came on the radio. Everyone was to stay in their houses or in their places of work. No one was to go outside, and then it turned into a buzz and a whisper of background noise.

* * *

Dirk wasn't the same anymore. He didn't have to walk very far when he found himself at his destination. He took his chimpanzee Centauri out of his cage and holding hand, they went outside to watch the fireworks or the several suns bouncing around in the sky. They didn't say anything, but were filled with joy. Mike appeared behind them

and then they all three sat down on a grassy mound of earth near the lake to watch the lights. They saw a man run screaming near the highway across the lake. He was on fire, or he was running with a brilliant white light surrounding him. He disappeared within the light which faded away. After a few moments, one of the workers from the institute came running out of the building yelling that it was the end of the world. He caught fire also and disappeared. They conjectured it was from the lights in the sky. Centauri said it was because they were afraid, and that made them get “all fired up” and disappear. And thinking of disappearing, he asked, “Where is Old Man?”

“He went home,” Dirk replied, looking up at the lights. “He's there, there in the light.”

“Is he in Heaven?” asked Centauri.

“There isn't such a place,” Mike replied.

“There may be, Mike,” said Dirk, remembering the place where he left the old orangatan. “You could say he is in the Heavens.” Then he rehearsed the events of trying to rescue their dad to Mike.

* * *

Michael found that he had no control over his ship. He tried everything. He started ripping wires out of the console, but they simply grew back.

“It has a mind of its own!” he exclaimed to Old Man. “What can I do? Help me! It's killing people!”

“Michael,” said Old Man calmly. “This ship is not an inanimate object. It has been

given intelligence. Maybe you can talk to it.”

“What's its name? O-211?”

“Just talk to it.”

“Hey, you, star fighter O-211, stop killing people!”

The slaughter went on.

“It's not working! This can't be happening!”

Neither Michael nor Old Man could move or react because they were tied into the ship. Their arms and feet and faces stretched into the consoles of the ship.

“Is that the way you talk to people, Michael?” Old Man asked over the intercom.

“Yeah, yes, that's what I do. That's called talking.”

Old Man continued in a soft voice. “Do you tell people what to do or do you try to *talk* to them?”

“Everything is out of control! I can't stop it!” Michael yelled.

“Can you stop it?” Old Man said slowly and cryptically.

“You're doing this!” Michael accused.

“Can intelligence and darkness coexist?”

“Killing people is darkness, isn't it?”

“What is intelligence?” Old Man asked the ultimate question.

“How the hell do I know? I've got to stop this killing!”

“Can you do it alone, Michael?” came the soft voice.

“I can't do it!”

“Alone?”

“No! I can't do it alone!” Michael realized. He thought of praying, and then he

thought a moment. He spoke into the microphone. “Guys, can you help me? Report. Are all the ships killing people? We have to stop this.”

“Micro-Burst leader, I thought you were doing this. We are only following your lead. You gave no parameters. Over?” came Captain Keltner's voice

Light continued to spread over the Earth, burning out cities and towns and picking out individuals running to burn up, or causing cars and trucks to crash into each other. People found themselves in traffic jams on all the freeways, and in many places piles of cars were on fire. Cities were burning all over the Earth. Earthquakes started swallowing cities and towns of all nations. The Earth was in a cataclysm. It reeled to and fro like a drunken man.

“Captain, give the order to stop the killing!” Michael yelled into the microphone.

“We don't recognize that order, Pale Leader,” said the captain.

“What? What good is talking then?” Michael said, feeling very wretched. He thought and thought of what he could do. He didn't come up with anything. He decided to give in. What could he do?

“Why are you doing this, Old Man?” he asked.

“Have you lost all your training, Michael? What do you care what is happening? Remember to be objective. Go in closer. Look at the children.”

Michael went in for a closer look. Everywhere he went he saw children in the streets and in parks, in school playgrounds, on farms, everywhere, all around the world, in the cities and in the wilderness, all of them dancing and laughing. There was joy on the Earth. There was light in their faces. Then a thought came to him. The children were happy, but most of the adults weren't.

“Light. They need more light. Captain Keltner,” he called into the microphone, “Pour on the light. Give them more light.”

That, the other ships understood. They all came together and formed one mass, it seemed, a critical mass, and they all turned into a ball of light. Another sun of extraordinary brilliance orbited the Earth, warming it. The Earth seemed to sigh as all the rocks stopped rending. All the mountains stopped heaving. All the oceans stopped splashing beyond their bounds. Everything settled down, and where there were fires, it rained heavily, putting them out. People came outside after the rains and took deep breaths of fresh air.

* * *

Michael sat on the green turf next to his sons with his arms around his knees and wondered how he got there. He looked at the chimpanzee with them. Everyone sat staring at the little man-made lake, staring into the mirror image of the up-side-down city with its tall towers. They could hear children's laughter floating in the air, coming from somewhere beyond sight. He looked around for the old man who was with him in the ship. He didn't see him. “Where's Old Man?” he asked, feeling numb and absent-minded.

Dirk said, “Oh, he went home, up there in the Heavens. I just told Mike.” He felt numb as though he were forgetting something.

“Oh,” responded Michael. “He was a funny old thing. Odd philosophy.”

“Yeah,” said Dirk. “I always thought he was an ape.”

“Oh? Did you know him?” asked Michael scratching his head. “He looked almost human.”

“Yeah,” said Dirk. “He thought he was human or humanoid anyway.”

“He thought a lot, I think,” interjected Centauri, not noticing Mike and Dirk's father. He just stared out into space.

“He's an ape, Dad,” said Mike as though his dad had always been there.

“What?” Michael asked, screwing up his face. “I think we're talking about two different people here. There was an old man of very ancient age. Maybe in a dream ... ”

Mike wondered what was going on. He asked his father, “What are you two talking about? How did you get here so fast? You just show up not telling us where you've been or what you've been up to.”

Michael remembered vaguely that he had been lost, but his memory seemed to fade away. All he knew was now. He was with his sons and one of their monkeys.

“Huh?” Michael asked.

“What happened to you?” Mike asked his dad, shaking his head, not getting any response from anyone. “What were all those lights?”

“Some odd atmospheric phenomenon,” Dirk answered. “What do you think Centauri?”

“I think,” responded Centauri, “the Earth just got happy.” Centauri remembered everything.

(The two boys and their father sat on the grassy knoll discussing the weather with Centauri, everyone forgetting about Michael being lost across the other side of the galaxy and the fight with the spiders in the upper atmosphere.

Somewhere in a star overlooking the Earth an old man and a naked ape smiled at each other as they viewed the little group through a crystalline machine. One said to the

other, “Forgetfulness is such a happy state. Better for them and for us.”)

The End