

Homeward, Beyond the Stars

by Jim Schicatano

His eyes, glazed and despondent, fixated on the bare, metallic floor beneath him; in them was revealed a growing hopelessness of the situation. He swallowed hard, attempting to alleviate his parched throat of the rough, irritating condition that had developed since his capture, and then licked his lips. He concentrated on controlling his erratic breath, which had rendered him light-headed and bewildered. Seated on a padded surface that folded out from the metallic sides of the ship, his trembling hands folded nervously before him, he glanced up at his captor who stood above him. Finally, in a sharp, bitter tone that revealed his suppressed anger, he asked, "Am I to continue to be held here against my will?"

The alien was turned away from the captured Earthling, focusing his attention, instead, on piloting the spaceship through space. His concentration alternated between the control panel that he towered over, and the large viewport at the front of the ship, which revealed the vastness of the space before them.

The alien replied without turning to face the questioner. "I have already explained to you, Eddie, that your abduction and subsequent confinement here are beyond my control. I am only following specific orders . . ."

"Orders! Orders from whom?"

"You will be told everything, I assure you."

"You realize that I'm a prisoner here. A prisoner that's done nothing wrong!"

Sensing Ed's growing anxiety, the alien turned to face him. His expression remained impassive; the tone of his voice was dreary. "We are all prisoners here. You... I... The rest of the crew... We are all just serving our sentence." Turning as if he had not anticipated a reply, he returned his attention to the piloting of the ship.

"Sentence for what? What have I done?"

"I do regret that. You have done nothing, yet you do play such a major role in all of this." The alien grew silent for a moment, his eyes fixated on the streaking colors of light that shot by the viewport without cessation. He glanced down at the control panel before him and

sighed before replying, "But you are the consequence of my actions – and that, I am displeased to say, is enough to justify your relocation to another planet. I am truly sorry for your abduction, but you must accept the inevitable. We are no longer allowed the luxury of choice. Now, please remain silent, I have a difficult maneuver to perform."

Ed West examined the pilot's compartment in which he was held. The compartment was tubular, save for the floor, and its sides consisted of a milky-metallic material that resembled pewter.

The transparent viewport dominated the anterior of the spaceship, stretching from the circular ceiling, which he estimated to be nine or ten feet high, to the metallic floor. It revealed a panoramic view of space – a spectacular array of lights encompassing the entire spectrum of the rainbow shot by them as they traveled well beyond the speed of light.

Graphical analyses, scanning devices, visual apparatuses, countless buttons, gauges, and knobs populated the computerized control panels that lined both sides of the compartment.

Had it not been for the bleakness of his situation, he might have found the monotonous blinking, humming, beeping, and flashing of the computer panels, and the visually striking, wondrous phenomenon of passing through the space appeasing.

Helplessness gripped him as he scrutinized the only visible exit from the compartment. The impenetrable, opaque, metallic door, residing just ten feet from where he remained nervously seated, dominated the posterior of the compartment – a formidable impasse that had already proved to be unyielding to his efforts to pass beyond it. Only his captor knew the operation the thick, foreboding piece of metal that confined him. And the captor's attention remained diligently focused on the task before him.

The alien's name was Theyman. He was a tall, handsome, Caucasian man who appeared completely human. His hair was mostly gray, and short with natural curl. No facial hair was present on the smooth skin of his masculine, rugged face and Ed estimated his age to be in the mid-forties. His outfit perplexed Ed – but not because it was alien in origin. On the contrary, Theyman's attire consisted of a simple gray sweatshirt, faded blue jeans, athletic socks and white high-top sneakers.

In his American clothing, Theyman resembled a trim, well proportioned, highly athletic coach whose younger years may have consisted of throwing touchdowns, hitting homeruns, and sinking jump shots. He possessed such an All-American look and exhibited such a human

demeanor that, at first, Ed found it difficult to accept his captor's alien origin. Nonetheless, the events that had transpired since the moment of his capture convinced him that his first impression had been completely erroneous.

Physical resistance to Theyman had already proven futile, as Ed West discovered when he rushed him from behind and was instantly repelled by an unseen field of energy that encircled the alien. He was knocked unconscious for an unknown period of time before Theyman awakened him.

Theyman stood silently in the center of the compartment facing the main viewport. Guiding the ship through a hyperspace jump, he operated a podium-like structure that extended up from the main control panel. The control panel was a rectangular piece of equipment roughly ten feet by four feet, covered in countless buttons, gauges, and knobs. It was situated directly in the center of the compartment and appeared physically disconnected from the computer panels that lined the sides of the ship.

Deciding Theyman had been granted enough time to perform the maneuvers, Ed, growing increasingly agitated, broke the unbearably long silence.

"Just what were your actions? What did you do that justifies my being punished?"

"It is a long and somewhat weary story, Eddie," Theyman mumbled as he continued to concentrate on his maneuver.

"Will you please stop addressing me as Eddie! I'm thirty years old and should be called Ed – or in your case, Mr. West."

"Whatever you say."

"Look, I've been here for days and I demand to know what's going on. I don't care how long this story of yours is, I want to know what's happening."

"First, Ed West, I must say that your sense of time is surprisingly inadequate for someone of such remarkable abilities. I understand the apprehension and the anger that have clouded your judgment since your capture. Nevertheless, you have been aboard this vessel for only ten hours and – I must add – have been a complete nuisance for every second of the period."

"A nuisance! I've been kidnapped for crying out loud! How do you expect me to act?"

"I had hoped your reaction would have been rational. Nonetheless, I suppose it is time for my explanation."

"I'm waiting."

"Yes. The maneuver has been successfully completed and so I would like to start at the beginning. Please allow me to place this craft in automatic pilot first . . ." He pressed several buttons and turned several knobs before he turned to give his full attention to Ed.

"There. Now, what is it you wish to know?"

"Your explanation for my captivity!" Ed cried out in exasperation.

Theyman cordially nodded before seating himself in the chair beside the podium. Now facing Ed West, he folded his hands before him, planted both feet squarely on the floor, cleared his throat, paused momentarily, sighed, and began.

"I suppose it began over half of a century ago – Earth time, mind you. It was then that one of our interstellar, deep space probes returned to our home planet with information that showed abundant life on Earth. The tremendous euphoria that enveloped our world is still clear in my mind today (Ed suddenly realized that he had greatly underestimated Theyman's age). You must understand that we had launched hundreds of these interstellar probes over the course of decades. Each one was programmed to travel to several different nearby stars until it found life forms on one of the planets orbiting the stars. But despite the analysis of hundreds of planets, we had never encountered a world that could sustain our life or had evolved life itself.

"Our worlds are unique, it appears. Only a few of the worlds that we have recorded could sustain life as we know it. Most are harsh, barren wastelands where our chances for survival are meager. Of those, only our two worlds have produced life. Life, it seems, is much more rare than we had previously assumed.

"Anyway, the primary purpose of these probes was to explore our region of the galaxy and find new lifeforms. But the secondary purpose of the probes was to find planets that were fit for colonization. After Earth was discovered and the initial euphoria dissipated, a serious discussion commenced on how best to contact your planet and make ourselves known. Hope was running quite high at the time, you see, and our population was eager to make contact with your world. Our leaders, however, decided to move cautiously – an appropriate response in retrospect, considering the xenophobic nature of Earthlings.

"Months passed, committees were created to study the data, consider the problems, and form a solution. After nearly a year – our time – it was decided to launch a clandestine, manned probe, consisting mostly of scientists to study Earthlings and learn more about them. That seemed rational enough, but it would delay formal contact with Earth for several more years. A large segment of the population opposed that decision, arguing, instead, that direct immediate contact was the only logical approach to dealing with Earth. Overpopulation was becoming an increasing problem and the delay would only be detrimental . . ."

"Wait a minute!" Ed interrupted. Theyman's ability to summarize the events leading up to Ed's capture was succinct – perhaps too succinct. The pace of the unfolding story moved too quickly and Ed West wanted to question Theyman before his captor continued.

"I'm sorry, is there a problem?"

"Yes, several if you don't mind! You're moving too fast, for one thing. And I have a question."

"By all means," Theyman cordially replied.

"You say there was – there is – an overpopulation problem on your world?"

"Correct."

"And you say that the people on your planet were euphoric when Earth was discovered?"

"Again, correct."

"All right, then. What was basis of the euphoria?"

"I told you. You were the only intelligent life found in this section of the galaxy. Naturally . . . "

"No," Ed shook his head in disagreement. Now displaying confidence, and the demeanor of one who is in command of the discussion, he challenged Theyman. "There's something you're leaving out. Your planet wasn't euphoric because intelligent life was discovered. Your planet was euphoric because they finally found another planet that could support your life. Right?"

"Yes," Theyman replied. He appeared unfazed by the interrogation.

"And why would such a mission to Earth take on such high priority? Let me tell YOU why! Because you now found a planet that not only supported your life but also contained beings intelligent enough to

serve you! Isn't that correct?"

Theyman grew silent.

"This has nothing to do with contacting us for some benevolent exchange of goods or ideas, does it? Your planet was plotting all along to invade Earth and subjugate the human race – at least what would be left of it once you 'corrected' OUR overpopulation. Am I right?"

"You are very perceptive," Theyman acknowledged. "Of course, that is not surprising."

"And you were on that clandestine mission, weren't you? You and the rest of the crew aboard this spacecraft landed on Earth and captured me and others to take home to your planet. Is that correct?"

"No." Theyman's maintained his stolid countenance. "That is where you are wrong. Now allow me to continue. That clandestine mission occurred decades ago and, yes, I was on it. But our mission was not to apprehend any humans. It was to explore your world and understand your people.

"But now you have me getting ahead of myself. There is something you must understand about our species. We have the ability to transform ourselves – at great expense of our energy – into other beings. What you see before you appears to be a human being. But I assure you, that in my original form I look nothing like you."

Ed West gazed with curiosity at Theyman. In all physical aspects, his captor did in fact appear human. Even his gestures and speech displayed unmistakable human qualities. Suddenly, he found himself unsuccessfully speculating how Theyman appeared in his natural form.

"You mean you can transform yourself into anything? Anything at all?"

Theyman shook his head. "There are many limits, I assure you. And we have paid a high price. You see, as we explored other planets we attempted to transform ourselves into a totally new species, that should have – at least in theory – been able to sustain an existence on that planet. That would simplify planetary exploration, since we would be able to explore most everywhere. But in reality, such transformations seldom succeed; our success rate has been surprisingly and disappointingly low. The scientific basis for our failure is beyond your means of comprehension, and since it is also irrelevant to our mission I won't expand on it further. Let me just add that Earth is one of those few worlds where our transformation does succeed and we can assume the shape of the indigenous species and survive."

Theyman paused for a moment, awaiting Ed's reply. He wondered how the human would regard his story. Would it pique his curiosity as he hoped? Or would Ed West exhibit the distrusting, rebellious posture that is so common among the Earth species?

With growing interest, Ed responded, "So you and your friends assumed the shape of human beings and began exploring the Earth, contacting unsuspecting humans for study." He paused momentarily, his eyes pulled back from Theyman, darting about the floor in concentration, as he attempted to piece together the puzzle. "And I suppose that after you became familiar with our species you returned home to deliver your report to your authorities."

"You are somewhat correct, however, once again, you are getting ahead of yourself. As I have said, that was decades ago and there is much more to the story... Wait a minute." For reasons unclear to Ed, Theyman suddenly diverted his attention to the podium, abruptly sprang from his seat, quickly scrutinized the control panel, and began to make adjustments. "If you will excuse me, it is time for another jump. I will be but a moment."

As Theyman focused his full attention on the control panel before him, Ed West used the moments of silence to ponder the situation. His destiny remained uncertain, as did his usefulness to Theyman. He had initially assumed that the ship was transporting them back to Theyman's home planet where an eager alien world awaited their return for some unidentified purpose. But even that initial assertion had been clouded by doubt. Where were they heading? What was their mission? And what could have happened to that crew of transmutating aliens decades ago that involved him now? There were so many questions that Ed needed answered and he grew anxious for Theyman to finish his duties and return to the story.

After making the appropriate adjustments, Theyman turned to Ed once again, seated himself, cleared his throat and continued.

"Now. As you have conjectured, I was on that first clandestine mission. Our directives were to assume the physical characteristics of human beings, disperse over the globe, learn the multitude of cultures and inherent nature of Earthlings, and, in general, study the species. The government's – OUR government's – public relations campaign succeeded and my home world's population accepted the 'Go Slow' strategy. With tremendous euphoria, a crew of highly qualified, eager scientists – the most brilliant of our world – was selected, and the mission commenced. And then – as your so-called 'Murphy's Law' mandates – something went wrong. As our spaceship approached your world, problems with the guidance system developed. Without the

technical ability to safely land our ship, we were at the mercy of the Earth's gravity. And to make a horrifying story short, we crash-landed."

"Where?"

"In the Gobi desert. Nearly half the crew had been lost, as was most of our supplies and equipment. We survivors quickly destroyed what remained of our spaceship to hide our true origin. We were incapable of contacting our home world to notify them of our dire situation. But we were not allowed to contact them, anyway, for fear of being discovered. That is, of course, the risk you take when you are on a secret mission. Since we were expected to remain on Earth for one of your Earth years, and it would take months for us to return home, we could not hope for a rescue mission to arrive for two to three years."

"Then what did you do?"

"We agreed that we should complete our mission, anyway. So we assumed human forms and began dispersing out all over the world – learning, studying, and comprehending the human race. Two and half years later a rescue ship arrived. The remaining crewmembers and I were eager to return home with our information. But – But not before committing a mistake that would forever alter the plans of my world . . . "

Once again, without warning and for no apparent reason to Ed, Theyman abruptly turned his attention elsewhere, this time directing it at the entrance behind Ed. "Come," Theyman called out.

The huge, metal door slid aside and another being, who also appeared completely human, entered the room. Although Theyman had stated that others were aboard the ship, it was the first person Ed had seen, other than Theyman.

The man had assumed an Asian body. Diminutive in stature, with dark, short, black hair and a finely combed goatee, the man gazed suspiciously at Ed for several moments before addressing Theyman.

"Sir . . ."

"Yes?" Theyman responded impatiently.

"We continue to have problems with some of the Earthlings." The tone with which he addressed Theyman led Ed to believe that his personal captor held some position of superiority.

"Which ones?"

"Boris Kercheynyev and Bernard Nicholls are the primary sources of

disturbance. I seek your permission to sedate them.”

“That would be regrettable. I want them to fully understand our situation before we arrive. Has rational explanation been attempted?”

“Yes sir. But, as you know, Earthlings are seldom rational. They have been restrained to calm them but it has had little effect.”

“You have my permission to sedate them.”

“Thank you, sir.” He bowed slightly before departing.

“Boris Kercheynyev!” Ed gasped in surprise.

“Yes, he is also on board.”

“He’s one of the world’s leading writers!”

“True.”

“And Bernard Nicholls? The name rings a bell.”

“He is the author – or should I say, your discoverer – of the Hyperdrive Equation.”

“That’s incredible! You have two of the most brilliant people in the world aboard this ship.”

“We have others, also. Antoinette Roget, a brilliant chemist, is aboard, as is Samuel Powers, a Nobel Prize winning Mathematician. We also have Abdullah Cadral, the African leader who united sub-Sahara Africa, and Leonid Stivinsky, the world’s leading Nuclear Physicist. There are many others, possessing names you would probably not recognize. But each one is brilliant in the field they have entered. All are extraordinary men – there’s just one woman – of accomplishment. Our progenies consist of homogeneous generations, sexually speaking. The next generation will consist almost entirely of women.”

“You’ve stolen the greatest minds on Earth! What do you intend to do with them?”

“The fact that they are the greatest minds on Earth should come as no great surprise. And the fact that we are including them on our journey is no surprise, either. Like you, they MUST be included on our voyage.”

“Why?”

"We are collecting our children, Eddie. The time has come and we can no longer allow them to influence Earth's development any longer."

"Your children? You don't mean that literally, do you?"

Still seated and facing Ed, Theyman bit his lip before taking a long deep breath. His expression remained stolid but Ed sensed a growing feeling of embarrassment in his captor. He spoke softly, in almost a whisper. "What do you think we did on Earth for those two and a half years? The tragic circumstance of our crash landing made us virtual prisoners on your planet. The challenges of survival were very difficult – emotionally and sexually. Well, there we were, after our initial parting, alone on an alien world, possessing the physical characteristics and needs of Earthlings, surrounded by humans everywhere we traveled. It was inevitable."

"You mean you mated with us!"

Showing a renewed sense of dignity and confidence, he proudly answered, "Yes, and we have produced the most brilliant generation of human beings your planet has ever known."

"I can't believe it," Ed replied, shaking his head in skepticism. "How can I believe anything you say?" He grew silent for a moment before adding, "And what does any of this have to do with me?"

It was Theyman's turn to shake his head in disappointment. He rose from his seat, leaned up against the podium structure, and ran his fingers through his hair. In a half-whisper, he uttered, "Why don't you understand by now? You know of the events that transpired over three decades ago, yet are you unable to extrapolate the possibilities into a theory? I will forgive you this time but let it be duly noted that I am, once again, disappointed in your ability to reason. Frankly, I expected better."

"What are you talking about? You don't mean . . . You're my father?"

"Yes, Eddie, you are my son."

"I don't believe you."

"Nevertheless, I'm telling you the truth. But right now, we face another problem. We are traveling through a region of much debris, which will prolong our journey, since we will not be able to travel in hyperspace." Theyman stood at the podium once again, staring out the main viewport and studying the scattered chunks of rock in the space ahead of them. "This will take some careful maneuvering."

"I thought this thing was on autopilot," Ed grumbled.

"Nothing is perfect," Theyman replied.

"Can we be destroyed?"

"Not likely. Even a direct hit by one of those rocks would probably not be enough to damage our ship. Our deflector shields provide us with ample protection. However, it is always best to be cautious."

"Where does all this debris come from? We're nowhere near a star."

"We are passing through the fringes of the Thorian system. What you see ahead of you is debris similar to your system's Kyper Belt."

"I'm not familiar with that."

"It is not important. Please return to your seat. We will continue with our discussion after I pilot the ship through the belt."

Ed West obediently returned to his seat and began contemplating his predicament. The alien who had captured him, and some of the most ingenious and creative minds on Earth, had just claimed to be his father. Initially, Ed considered the alien's claim to be something of a test. By fabricating such an outrageous claim, Theyman could observe Ed's reaction to an unexpected stimulus. Psychologically, it also allowed Theyman to maintain his position of dominance over Ed by keeping the Earthling off-balance and in a state of constant agitation.

But there were other factors he began to consider which could support Theyman's claim. Ed West had never known his father. His mother had always maintained that he was killed shortly after their only child's birth. The events leading to his death had always been shrouded in mystery, and there were rumors – albeit, no tangible evidence – of some government involvement. But if Theyman's story about the earlier mission was true then his claim of fatherhood could also be true.

There were other points that added validity to his story. The geniuses that were apprehended from Earth were all about Ed West's age – in their early thirties. And although Theyman was entirely gray, Ed could see some resemblance between them. The eyes, the chin, and the overall shape of their heads were similar (But Theyman was broader, more muscular, and larger, so the similarity was not perfect. Ed was built wiry, his body appearing nearly emaciated from illness. Dark circles never lightened under his diffident eyes). The final factor that weighed in Theyman's favor was both the simplest, yet the most unnerving. It was a feeling that Ed possessed. Something inside him,

some forgotten knowledge buried deep within his psyche was beginning to resurface. It gnawed at him. It trickled upward, slowly emptying into the back of his mind. It was telling him, leading him, reminding him. Was Theyman his father? Was this what his instinct was saying?

"I apologize for the interruption," Theyman said, suspending Ed's thoughts as he reseated himself again behind the podium. "We have successfully transversed the area and I am returning all my attention to you. As I have said, I am your father. I hope you accept this now, Eddie, because it is the truth and you have very little choice BUT to accept it. It would certainly make things easier for us in the years ahead."

"Years? What do you mean, years?"

"I simply mean . . . "

"Look, I admit I never knew my father. And you might have been on Earth during the time I was conceived. But how can you be so sure that I'm your son? It could be anyone."

"I loved Trish dearly," Theyman continued, ignoring Ed's protests. "When I returned to Earth and discovered that she was dead, well... It was devastating."

"Funny, you don't look devastated."

"My species does not visibly express our feelings like Earthlings. We seldom smile or frown. We seldom laugh or cry."

"So I've noticed."

"We may possess wooden expressions but that does not mean that we do not feel emotions. What began as an observation on human nature grew unexpectedly into love. And you were the product of that love."

"I don't believe you."

Theyman no longer seemed to be addressing Ed. As he continued his story he appeared to be talking to himself, allowing his mind to drift back deep into his memory. "We dispersed, transversed the entire Earth, and studied the people with the intention of better understanding the human race and learning what it would take to subjugate them. Instead we learned of the brilliance of humanity, the warmth and love contained in the human heart, the spirit, the artistry, and that incredible instinct for survival.

"Human love fascinates me. The intense feelings that each of you share is unlike any emotion we possess on our world. Such displays of

affection are strongly discouraged and swiftly ceased. But on Earth each of us was alone on an alien world. And for the first time we allowed the emotions within us to take root and flourish. Throughout your planet each of us fell in love with a human being, married, and bore children. The experience was... ” he paused momentarily, searching for the correct word, before saying, “Fulfilling.”

Still displaying the aura of disbelief, Ed challenged him once again. “Wouldn’t you be repulsed by the appearance of an alien race? Certainly your definition of ‘beauty’ could not include a human.”

“Very perceptive. But you see on our planet ‘beauty’ does not take on the same connotation as yours. We fall in love – if you can call it that – with someone who is most compatible. Compatibility is the most important aspect of relations between the sexes on my world. Inferior outward appearance would be seen as nothing more than . . . well, how your world might react to a bad habit; it can be tolerated. But the love I felt for your mother was real, Eddie, and in some mysterious, compelling way we were very compatible with each other.”

“That’s pretty unlikely. The probability of our races being compatible is quite small. The characteristics you seek in a female on your planet would probably not be inherent in the women of Earth. We are from different worlds, Theyman. The odds against compatibility are overwhelming.”

“Really? We are beings from a world where emotions are suppressed and we landed on a planet where emotional expression is a coveted attribute of the native species. The experience WAS unsettling at first. But after we began to express the emotions and convictions that had long been suppressed, our inner-selves began to emerge. It was addictive! When I talked to your mother, it was the first time in my life that someone actually LISTENED to what I said. And I realized that despite the overpopulation of our world, what we suffered from was loneliness. Ironic, isn’t it? It was so reassuring to know that someone could be there for you – that your entire life, everything you feel or sense, could be expressed without question. It was consoling, Eddie. It was love!”

“You’re confusing love with emotional needs. Just because you were emotionally secure with my mother did not mean you loved her. Love and want are two different things.”

“Really? I’m not so sure of that.”

“Enough with my mother!” Ed cried out, lunging from his seat. He abruptly turned to face the metal door – the symbol of that which imprisoned him. He clenched his fist, pounded on the door, and

exclaimed, "Damn you!" But he quickly restrained himself from any further display of outrage, knowing that such manifestation would only prove useless. Moments later, he dropped his head in dismay, extended his right arm, and leaned against the door, trying to regain his composure. Suppressing his anger once again, he softly but firmly declared, "I don't want to talk about her anymore. It was difficult enough to lose her once without you reminding me of her."

"As you wish," Theyman softly replied, secretly embarrassed for not knowing the protocol when dealing with such a delicate subject as the death of one's mother.

"What about you?" Ed asked, turning to face Theyman.

"What about me?"

"It's time we talk about you."

"I will answer whatever you ask, but please be seated." Theyman gestured to Ed's seat. Ed was frustrated and reluctant to continue the conversation. His only thoughts were to return to Earth and to end this nightmare. But seeing no other available option at the moment, he complied. "Now, what do you wish to know?"

Ed took a deep breath before beginning. "Let's start with your world. What's it like on your planet?"

"It is very different from Earth. We have our plant life, animals, and oceans, of course. But our culture differs greatly from yours."

"And the differences are?"

"How can I explain this to you? Well, if I may be so forward, I find your planet to be populated with beings that put a premium on financial, material, and emotional gains. Money and possessions are of prime importance on your planet. Love is also given high priority. Your adolescent years truly epitomize this. Teenagers are seemingly desperate for someone to love, value material possessions much more than they should, and begin planning for a future in which financial rewards are gained.

"I have already mentioned that our definition of love is quite different from yours and that compatibility is deemed more important than what you call love. For example, our female 'beauty' contests have absolutely nothing to do with physical appearance. In one phase of the contest, they are all given questions to answer and are required to deliver speeches on various subjects. The winner is the female who can persuade the most judges to agree with her positions.

In this sense, the ability to debate and be a popular contestant is more important. In another phase of the contest each female discusses their likes and dislikes, their life experiences, their hobbies and views on culture. This gives us a view of their personality and is an important aspect of the contest.

“Remember, I said compatibility is given a high priority in our culture. The audience’s ability to ‘connect’ or relate to the contestant is important. So while your male culture would view a beauty contest and dream of making love to the female contestants, our male audience would view the contest and envision what the rest of their life would be like with each contestant – not in a sexual sense – but in a compatible sense. In other words, whom they would get along with best. This also makes for happier marriages on our planet. And the last aspect of the contest, perhaps more than any other feature I can relate to you, truly defines our culture. In this phase the contestant explains to the audience her current and future projects.”

“Projects?”

“Ah, the defining difference between us. Whereas your society seems driven by money and love, our society is driven by what you would call innovation. The purpose of life in our society is not to find internal happiness, or to make lots of money. It is to be innovative and find ways to produce things that benefit society. It is your capitalism without the desire for more capital.”

“But how can you have a capitalist society if the goal is not to become rich?”

“You will not be able to understand this because you were not raised in our culture. But we are taught from birth that we will be judged by how we improve our society. So you see, great sums of money are not the driving force in our world. It is what you have done for others – the enhancement of society – that is deemed the greatest contribution.”

“That’s very idealistic. In some ways I envy you.”

“Please save your envy for a more deserving race. We do not always live up to our creed. The stealing of innovative ideas is far too common on our world. It would be comparable to humans stealing money or material goods on Earth. So you see, we are different from you in what we deem to be our greatest priority, but like you, we sometimes go to great lengths to achieve our priority – including violating the law. For example, you have laws forbidding stealing and we have laws forbidding stealing ideas. The laws are there to protect the innocent citizens who are victims, yet violation of the law has been increasing

for decades. And on both our worlds, the taking of a victim's life – or murder – to conceal the facts of the crime is becoming increasingly common. And of course, all of this leads us to Earth.”

“How?”

“Since we value innovative ideas, our leaders are often chosen on the basis of the worth of their ideas to society. About a century ago, your time, a male on our planet ran for Supreme Counselor (that is the world's highest elected leader) on the theory that the cause of the increase of murder and violence, and the stealing of ideas, was the overpopulation of our planet. The increased interaction of our citizens – which is a natural consequence of population growth – increased the opportunities to plagiarize. The temptation to steal was growing, he concluded, and the population explosion was the reason. His name was Shimall, and he proposed a massive search throughout the galaxy to discover planets that could support our life. Those planets would then be targeted for colonization. He was a sharp debater and a gifted salesman, and the public enthusiastically embraced his theory. The inhabitants of our world delivered him the largest victory margin of any election ever held, and the boldest ‘project’ our planet had ever conceived was about to begin.”

Theyman suddenly rose from his seat, casually walked toward a square opening in the side of the wall opposite Ed, and began pressing buttons beside it.

“Would you like something to drink, Eddie?”

“Sure.”

Within seconds, he returned to his chair and handed Ed a clear glass cup containing a milky, green beverage.

“What is it?”

“Just drink it, you'll like it.”

The liquid emitted no aroma so Ed sipped it suspiciously. To his surprise, it was a delicious drink that tasted almost tropical in nature.

“Not bad,” he commented.

“What do you think of my story so far?”

“If I can believe what you're saying, the story is very interesting. You're not so different from us.”

Theyman sipped his drink before continuing. "Actually we are very different. I'm only telling you about us in a way that you will be able to relate to us. Our beauty contests really aren't beauty contests. And our elections aren't like your democracies. There's the Naphu period in each of our lives that you would never understand. And every generation experiences a similar Naphu that comes without warning – called the Naphum. But let's get back to Shimall.

"It was a noteworthy era in the history of our planet. The entire population seemed driven toward this great world-saving mission. We began focusing our personal projects toward this goal. New theories on space flight and innovations in technology spewed forth from our citizens. We advanced rapidly in our technical capabilities. In relatively little time, faster spaceships and probes were designed and launched to search the galaxy for hospitable planets . . ."

"Did you have much technology before this?"

"Oh, you can well imagine! Remember, projects were deemed more valuable when they somehow enhanced society. Better video screens (like your television), better communication equipment, more convenient, high-tech dwellings, and millions of other technical advancements were produced each year. We were becoming a society dedicated to pampering each other – diminishing each other's workload. And those who proposed or designed the more lavishing inventions drew more respect from the citizens of our world."

Ed quickly recognized that such pampering could be detrimental to a society. "Perhaps, your world isn't as idealistic as I had first believed."

"It gets worse. The probes were being launched at a rate of ten to twenty a year. Years elapsed, and an eager population awaited their return. During those years, Shimall passed away and our world found itself needing a new leader. A popular and longtime leader of our Zendeb region decided to enter the race for Supreme Counselor and quickly gathered strong political support. His name was Tashbin and his campaign centered on a single issue: the subjugation of alien races. Now at first this might seem like a bold new step for our world, but a closer look reveals this movement had been gathering momentum ever since the first probe was launched.

"Let me take you back a bit further in our history. Some three of your centuries ago our greatest author penned a classic tale of speculative literature that was instantly deemed required reading by our centers of learning. In the novel, our world contacts an alien race. Following a period of difficulty, our worlds begin sharing knowledge and theories, all for the betterment of both societies. Tolerance was

given great priority in that piece of fiction, and the intellectual establishment instantly embraced that novel as the blueprint of action for any future contacts with aliens. Subjugating an alien race for our personal benefit was virtual heresy at the time! No one on our world could even consider such a thing. But social attitudes change and today that classic novel is no longer required reading on our world. In some intellectual quarters, it is considered a naive work of fiction and our youth are discouraged from reading it.

Theyman took another sip of his drink before continuing. "That was three centuries ago and today our society has swung in the opposite direction. Overpopulation led to the belief that we should begin emigration to other worlds. Probes were launched in search of habitable planets. We knew that contact with an alien culture was inevitable so we began to speculate what they would be like? Would the aliens of this distant world be friends or foes? What if the alien race was inherently inferior? Couldn't we best help them by having them work for us, allow them to learn slowly, and reward them with our riches? This is an argument used on your world when you allow citizens of foreign countries to work for you at lower wages. From your perspective, both the employer and the employee benefit from such an arrangement. From our perspective, our world and their world would benefit, too.

Ed interrupted, "You mean hire them? Like we do with foreigners?"

"Exactly. That way they could learn our language, we could train them and educate them, and they would earn wealth from us by performing menial duties – duties which many citizens on our world would no longer do."

"That makes perfect sense. And it does seem mutually beneficial, as long as you don't abuse them."

Theyman nodded in agreement. "We felt that way initially but there WERE problems with that argument. Despite the myriad of possible outcomes, the intellectual elite on our world foresaw two basic and historically likely scenarios.

"Let's use Earth as an example, although, at the time, the discussions were speculative. There would come a time, after we trained you and shared our technology with you, when Earthlings would grow opposed to working for us. They would demand their absolute freedom and be allowed to develop at their own pace. This can best be illustrated by the United State's revolution with the British Empire – an illustration that resulted in war. Despite our superior technology, a war between our worlds would not be an easy victory for us. We would be fighting on alien terrain, interstellar supply routes would have to

be maintained (they are very costly), and the entire population of Earth would need to be conquered before victory could be claimed. And of course the greatest tragedy would be the death of our soldiers. Such a war would not serve our purpose. I can assure you that even on our world where emotional expression is suppressed, the thought of our soldiers dying to retain our stronghold on Earth would be too difficult for our planet to endure. After the first wave of casualties returned home, the citizens would begin the debate. And the argument of simply finding another uninhabited world would certainly carry the day.

“The other likely scenario was even more disturbing. Earthlings would work hard at their own development while we would soon become complacent, and at some point you might actually surpass our capabilities and achievements. I suppose the losers of your Second World War best illustrate this. Both Germany and Japan were forced to work hard and be innovative in order to close the gap created between them and the United States after their surrender. Meanwhile, the United States experienced an unprecedented period of prosperity and dominance, and soon grew complacent – assuming their economic superiority would never be challenged. That was an erroneous conclusion, however, and after some time those two nations that had been defeated just decades earlier became economic powers once again. Our world would not allow that to happen. Soon trade relations would worsen between Earth and us, and a military solution could not be ruled out.

“After much debate, certain unsettling ideas were gathering support. It had virtually become an accepted fact that any contact with an inferior world would pose great problems for us in the long run. Our actions at the initial moment of our contact would therefore be critical to the future. Subjugation was then mentioned. At first our leaders and intellectual elite derided it, but popular support grew when the alternatives were mentioned. If we were to inevitably war with the alien world, as both suppositions illustrated, then the war should come early, before the aliens could develop the technology to effectively combat us. A quick, decisive, military strike to a world like your Earth would be best for us. You would have neither the time nor the ability to develop the weapons to stop us.

“Subjugation, which had once been viewed as unthinkable on our world, was finally embraced as the only alternative.” Theyman paused a moment before sipping his drink once again. He stared at his son, awaiting a response.

Ed rose from his seat, shaking his head in disbelief. Whether he realized it or not, he was displaying the actions of a man who

believed the story just related to him. Ironically, he declared, "I can't believe it! You were once a peaceful people, driven by purpose. How could such thoughts evolve like that?"

"I just explained it to you. That which we deem moral is never rejected in a single day. But through a series of arguments both logical and emotional we soon find society embracing that which would have once been unconscionable."

"The military conquest of those who are inferior."

"Exactly."

Ed shook his head in bewilderment. He had just been told the spectacular history of an alien world. Yet, the evolution of the alien's views of interstellar contact did parallel man's actions on Earth – in particular when dealing with societies that were technically and militarily weaker.

Even the greatest civilizations that had ever ruled the Earth were wary when dealing with other cultures. Too often it was the stronger civilization that feared the weaker. The religions, rituals, laws, customs, arts, and values that distinguished each society only perpetuated the myth that the other people were not only different, but also somehow less human. Slavery and forced assimilation removed those cultural differences; annihilation made them but a memory. The dominant civilization conquered with military superiority then dispersed their growing population over the newly gained land. They acquired the mineral resources to expand their wealth, the fertile land to feed their hungry population, and the rivers and streams to quench their thirst.

The galaxy, it appeared, was no different. Why should a world jeopardize its own future by trying to reach an agreement with inferior aliens? Why should it risk the lives of its soldiers? A quick decisive military strike was a policy that posed the least threat to the dominant world; politically, it was the solution that was preferred by the multitudes. To the beings of Theyman's home planet – a world wrought by overpopulation – it made little sense to establish trade and cultural exchanges with Earth. The Earthling's society was infinitely inferior to their world; their culture was not worth examination. Trade links might have proved mutually beneficial in time, but it was not commerce they required but land for expansion. Colonization had assumed an aura of almost religious significance on Theyman's world. It had become their savior, the final solution to the problems that threatened them; without colonization, his world would die. The Earth was there for the taking and the human race could pose little resistance.

The endless cycle of contact, exploitation, and domination now traversed the vastness and emptiness of space, propagating its atrocities like a fatal virus into the countless stars that comprised the Milky Way Galaxy. And while Theyman's home world held the upper hand for now, Ed West could not help but wonder what the future held for them. Perhaps someday they would be deemed the inferior race by another alien world. It might only be then that they would accept the responsibility for their actions and feel remorse for so casually conquering the Earth.

Ed continued, "And so you and your scientists were sent to Earth thirty years ago. And you sought the most effective way to conquer humanity."

"Yes, but we crash-landed, altering our plans. Each of us fell in love with your world and your people. Eventually, we bore children. As anticipated, a rescue ship arrived two and a half years later. We transformed into our original bodies and returned to our home world. Then the story takes a turn for the worse.

"We were greeted with a fantastic worldwide celebration during the first days of our return. An eager world awaited our strategy for the simplest destruction of Earth. But we... We were no longer willing to assist them." Theyman suddenly ceased his narration, directing his attention away from Ed. Instead he stared with glazed, tired eyes at the floor, as he ran his fingers through his curly, gray hair. He possessed the look of a man who was consumed by some inner guilt. And

Ed recognized for the first time the pain his captor endured, the burden he carried which gnawed at his very soul, and the diametrically opposed feelings of patriotism toward his world and his personal convictions of justice and morality.

His quivering lips and feeble voice displayed his fatigue and despondency. And his voice trembled as he continued. "We spoke of our admiration of Earth and its people. But we were unable to convince them that you were worth saving. It was a matter of our world's survival versus yours, and the decision was no longer debatable. Our portraits as heroes soon turned to that of villains and traitors. Then they discovered our legacy – several dozen children that we bore who possessed the genes of Earthlings and the superior genes of our species. We were instantly sentenced to life imprisonment – no trial, no hearing, no hope of ever seeing freedom. The gland that our species possess, which allows us to transform into different life forms, was surgically removed – after we had been forced to assume the human bodies we once possessed. It was supposed to be an additional, ironic punishment for us – trapped for the remainder of our lives in the

bodies of the inferior species that we had loved so much. We had betrayed our planet for the salvation of Earth. Time passed and our anxious world waited for our hybrid Earth children to reach adulthood. Their worst fears were realized. We had produced a generation of geniuses and achievers that would greatly enhance Earth's scientific and technological abilities. Their existence would make the subjugation of Earth much more difficult."

"Why didn't they attack immediately, rather than wait until we grew older?"

"Something else occurred which I'll discuss later. Anyway, they could not allow your generation of geniuses to influence Earth any longer. So they removed us from prison and sent us to your world. Military ships escorted us on our journey. We waited in orbit while the military dispatched clandestine landing parties to various spots on Earth. They abducted our old lovers and the products of our love, joined us together on this spaceship, and sent us on our way to our new home. There we will begin a new life together – in exile on a new world."

A dismal silence enveloped the pilot's compartment and Ed was suddenly drawn to the viewport. The sweeping passing of space seemed to symbolize the uncertainty that he now faced. He stared dispassionately at the stars before him. Somewhere among those countless points of light – at a place where no human being had ever traveled – lie their destination. His imagination, already stretched to the limits of his capability by the story he had just been told, was unable to conjure images of the unknown world. And he anticipated the worst.

"There are no settlements on this world – are there?"

"No. It is a desolate chunk of rock, with little water and meager plant life. Temperatures plummet well below freezing at night and climb to unbearable temperatures during the day. The dry, dusty, gusts of wind know no end. No animal life exists there and we were not allowed to transport any. We will live off the supplies aboard our ship for about twenty days before they are exhausted – and that includes rationing. After that we will be forced to search for edible plants and drinkable water."

Ed slowly closed his sullen, tired eyes, dropped his face to his hands, and shook his head in acknowledged defeat. "My God! What have you sentenced us to?"

"A life of struggle and hardship . . ."

"And certain death."

"No," Theyman disagreed with conviction. His reply had been said in such a confident manner that it quickly drew Ed's attention. He instantly glanced up at him, searching his dark, indifferent eyes for some spark of hope that would enlighten their way among the darkness that had engulfed their future. Did he possess a plan? Could he possibly have conceived a strategy that held a plausible solution to the predicament they faced? Theyman continued, "I wholeheartedly disagree with you on that point, my son. In fact, I anticipate quite the opposite."

"You think we'll survive? You have a plan, then?"

"A plan? No. But we will do more than survive, Eddie. We will prosper."

Ed's hopes were instantly dashed by Theyman's casual rebuttal and ridiculous assertion. Barring some further information that Theyman alone possessed, Ed was beginning to view his captor as a madman. "How can you say that? You just said the planet was virtually unlivable. How do you expect us to survive?"

"Both of our species are survivors. On this ship, we carry one hundred and thirty-two of the best minds of our world and yours. Together, we will conquer this wasteland of a world and build a civilization the galaxy will envy."

"What?" Ed gasped incredulously. "How did you jump to that conclusion?"

But Theyman's attention had drifted from their conversation. He stared beyond his son, beyond the wall behind him, to another place and time that had kindled glowing sensations which he had never before experienced. These emotions touched him, shaped him, and elevated him to a level of awareness that had given him new life. He recalled the time he had spent on Earth with an almost idealistic romanticism. He selfishly clung to that memory, never allowing it to desert the otherwise dreary thoughts of his mind. In a passionate tone (at least as passionate as he appeared capable of displaying) he remarked, "What a glorious world Earth is! What fantastic things you Earthlings are capable of..."

"What?"

"I remember the architecture of Earth . . ."

"Our buildings?"

"Those glorious structures where you worship God could only be

designed by a race whose architects sensed life itself. The masterful designs of those building far exceed anything our world has ever constructed. The Cathedrals, the Mosques, the Temples, even the secular skyscrapers! Nothing of such elegant construction exists on our planet. Your buildings are designed to appease the eye, to warm the heart, to evoke emotions. And they succeed! On our world, aesthetics are generally disregarded in favor of practicality. What we have ignored!”

Returning to the problem at hand, Ed asked, “How does any of this inspire confidence in our survival.”

“You are a curious and wonderful race, Eddie,” he replied, as he returned his attention to his son. “I can virtually foresee the future of our peoples now that we are forced to survive together. Our practicality, our drive to create that which is most desired, and our technical knowledge, combined with your emotions, your ability to survive, your love, your optimism – and yes, even your buildings. Together we will forge a new race – a race that will draw from the superior aspects of each species, while negating the inferior ones. A race that will survive a cruel and horrible beginning. But a race that will be superior to its component species.”

“I don’t understand your confidence. We may not even get along. You may look human and you may be trapped in human form but that won’t change our view that you are an alien race – different from us. If there’s one ugly aspect of humanity, it’s our prejudice.”

“You needn’t worry about that. By the time you assume leadership of our group your human prejudices will be but a memory.”

“Me?”

“Of course. You are my son. It is only natural.”

“Then you ARE leading this mission. You’re the one in charge.”

“Correct. I have assumed command for now but once we arrive on our new world, you will assume your rightful position – as was instructed.”

“But I’m not a leader. I’m nobody compared to the humans you’ve captured. You’re talking about Earth’s best minds assembled here. They are geniuses at Physics, Mathematics, Biology, Politics, and Literature. I’m a County Clerk, Theyman. That’s my occupation – a paper-pusher, a rubber-stamper. I’m a bureaucrat for crying out loud. I’ve never achieved the honors these men and women have. And I never will.”

"My son, you are the brightest of them all."

"That's very flattering, but I don't believe you. There's no evidence of that."

"Eddie, within each man lays a potential which is seldom tapped. Roget, Nicholls, Cadral, and the others were fortunate to find their talents at a young age – young enough to have made a large impact on your world before the age of thirty-five. We like to believe that it is our genes that have propelled them to an early glory. Nevertheless, you are one of the few of our offspring that has not come to succeed at that level. There are reasons for this – your health for one . . ."

"Yes," Ed replied despondently.

"That is all behind you now. When you entered this ship we cured your condition while you were asleep. It was painless. But you can rest assured that you are cured."

Ed sprang from his chair at the sounds of those words he had resigned himself that he would never hear. He stood over Theyman, searching his stolid expression for some sign of a cruel hoax. Theyman looked up at his son but said nothing. "I'm cured?" Ed asked him in disbelief.

"Yes," Theyman nodded. "You will never need to spend another hour being hooked up to that crude machine. Everything is functioning normal now."

He turned from Theyman, his eyes cast downward as he faced the door. He stood in silence, consumed in skepticism, overwrought with emotion. Claspng his hands together he placed them on the top of his head, which he dropped down toward the floor. Was it true? Had this alien claiming to be his father really cured him of the condition that had plagued him throughout his life? His voice was consumed with emotion, stammering as he asked in a near-whisper, "My God, am I really healed?"

"Yes," Theyman reassured him.

Ed turned to face Theyman, dropping his arms to his sides. His heart raced in jubilation, his mind was overwhelmed in relief. A great weight, which had burdened his soul, had been removed. He let out a heavy sigh of exultation.

"Thank you. My God," he extended his hand to Theyman who reciprocated, "I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I never thought I would see this day. I can never repay you . . ."

"Oh yes, you will. When we arrive at the planet, you will assume the leadership role that I have promised you . . ."

Ed abruptly pulled away from his father. "How can you talk about that when I'm here thanking God for my health? Don't you people have any compassion? Don't you...?"

"There is no more time, Eddie. Yes, we are filled with compassion for you people. We are saving your planet, after all! But we must move ahead with our plans. We will have very little time once we arrive at our destination. You must accept the leadership role that we have been required to give you."

"Required?"

"Yes, required. We are playing by my planet's rules now. Besides your people would not accept our leadership. You would revolt – that's your cynical nature. However, by allowing an Earthling to lead us will assure peaceful cooperation between our species."

"But I can't do it!"

"Yes, you will!"

"Theyman, listen to me." Ed calmed himself, hoping to logically discuss the problem between them. "I have no talent for this. I'm not a leader. Please, there are plenty of better men on board than me. Men much wiser and more intelligent than myself. We'll die under my leadership."

"You're wrong."

"Here I am finally healed, and now I'm facing a future that's even worse! I expected this day to be the most important in my life. The day I could be normal like everyone else. And instead, here you are – the man that cured me – forcing me to lead us to certain death. There is no future to look forward to. Don't you understand that?"

Theyman shook his head in disappointment. "No future? You are to become the father of a new world . . ."

"Oh, come on!"

Theyman continued, "Generations from now our offspring will revere your name. Cities will be named after you. Your portrait will be placed on our currency. Your statue will stand tall and proud at the entrance to our future Capitol. You will forever be recognized as the Father of the greatest civilization the galaxy will ever know. You will decide the name of our great world. You will see us through the

hardships that lie ahead. Believe in yourself, Eddie. Turn to me for guidance if you must, but remember always that you will make the final decisions – and we will abide by them. We believe in you and your ability. Now that you are healthy, you are the perfect and ultimate blending of our two species. You – my son – will tame a world.”

Eddie turned away from him once again. Maintaining his silence for several lingering moments, he pondered the situation. Was he capable of leading a bold, new world? Could he really rally the people aboard the ship – men, and a woman, who seemed so intellectually superior to him? And what of Earth? How long would it be before the invasion?

Showing renewed strength, he abruptly turned to his father. “I’m only one voice, Theyman. So I can only speak for myself. But I know that my feelings will be shared by the other Earthlings on this ship when I say that we should turn back and fight your world now.”

“What?” Theyman gasped in surprise.

“If our world is as important to you as you say it is then you’ll see my point and help us. These are the best minds on Earth. They can be helpful when the invasion begins. I know we’re outgunned and outmanned. But we would all prefer to die fighting for our world than to be exiled to some rock in space.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying.” With each passing second, his confidence soared, driven by his resolve to save Earth and alter the situation they faced. “You just said that I’m in charge. Well, I’ve just made my first command decision. I don’t know if this ship of yours is armed but I order you to turn it around and return to Earth immediately. From there we can contact the nations of the world and they’ll construct a coordinated defense. At the very least, we can remove the element of surprise. That’ll help . . .”

“I see I’ve convinced you of your ability to lead, which is good. But what you are suggesting can’t be done.”

“Why not? I thought I was in charge.”

“The defense of Earth is already guaranteed, Eddie. However, you will probably not live to see that day. But through you it will happen.”

“You’re talking in riddles!”

“Several points: This ship is unarmed and would provide no defense. Secondly, we are being ‘escorted’ by one of my world’s Class ‘A’

Battleships. There is no returning to Earth, my world has seen to that. Thirdly, Earth needs no defense at the moment.”

“But I thought the invasion would begin once we were removed.”

“Yes, that might have been the original plan. But remember earlier when you asked me why my world didn’t launch an invasion once we recognized that we had produced a race of geniuses?”

“Yes.”

“A fortuitous turn of events saved Earth. Another planet was discovered.”

“Habitable?”

Theyman nodded. “In this entire region of the galaxy, only our two worlds and this new world can sustain our type of life – only three out of hundreds of recorded worlds. Or, perhaps more correctly, I will say there are only three worlds where living would pose no serious challenge. There are other worlds that hold potential for habitation – like the one we are approaching – but they pose a substantial struggle for those who would choose to live there. We have become pampered over the centuries, and few of us would choose to live such a difficult life. Anyway, emigration has already begun to this newly discovered planet. There is plenty of food and water, the weather is beautiful, and there is no dominant species to deal with – as in the case of Earth. They are currently leaving by the thousands and have been for many years. You can see that even our world prefers peace. Why invade Earth and risk loss of life when an uninhabited planet will serve the same purpose?”

“Then Earth is safe?”

“For now. It will take at least a century before this new world will also experience overpopulation. At that time, an invasion of Earth may once again commence.”

“But by that time, maybe Earth will surpass your planet technologically. Maybe we’ll have our own colonies.”

“That’s not very likely. Your world will probably continue its preoccupation with itself. Money, which should be directed toward space exploration and technological advancement, is wasted on superfluous personal items, the vast bureaucracies that you create, wasteful wars, and various expenditures that have nothing to do with space. Interplanetary travel is a condition that is achieved only through centuries of continued scientific advancements. It must be a

priority. It is not something that can be achieved within a century – not even by your world.”

“You underestimate us, Theyman. We committed ourselves to landing on the moon and were successful within a decade.”

“And I believe you are underestimating the difficulty of interstellar travel. Having the Hyperdrive Equation is a starting point – making it work will take decades. Still, let us assume you are correct. If in a hundred years your world will seek out the stars, what do you think our world will be doing at that time? Remember, we have already achieved a goal that will take you – if you are correct – a century to accomplish. By that time my world will have developed technology beyond your comprehension.”

“Then there is no hope for Earth.”

“There is only one chance – one small spark of hope.”

“You don’t mean us?”

“Exactly. The new world, which we will conquer together, is Earth’s only hope.”

Visibly discouraged, Ed rose from his seat, approached the podium, and glanced out the viewport. He tapped his fingers along the podium’s cool metallic surface, sighing as he collected his thoughts. He had long since accepted Theyman’s claim to be his father and he believed that there was a failed mission some thirty years earlier which led to an offspring of geniuses. Theyman’s classification of him as a genius somewhat troubled him and he felt he had achieved command of their group because of nepotism rather than any ability he possessed. But the mysterious world whose technical superiority now threatened Earth was firmly cemented in his belief. Essentially, Ed West had come to believe all that was related to him by Theyman. The story he was told was, in his opinion, too fantastic to be anything but the truth. Yet, it all somehow seemed so unreal to him.

“That’s ridiculous. We’ll be expending all our energy and knowledge just trying to survive. What chance do we have? We don’t even possess a ship. It’ll take us decades to develop the scientific infrastructure that will ALLOW us to manufacture a ship. Like Earth, we’ll always be behind them technically. And in the near future, I expect us to spend every waking moment struggling for survival.”

“Once again, my son, you are in error. You forget that my world lost some of its best minds when it sent us into exile. And your world lost ALL of its best minds. On this ship, we possess the technical

knowledge nearly equal to my own world. And now we also have a purpose and a project. Remember, my people are driven by such noteworthy goals. Back home, the urgency to subjugate Earth has been assuaged. No doubt, the majority of projects now under production pertain to colonization not subjugation. So there is time – not a lot, but some, nonetheless. Also remember that we are defending Earth, not trying to defeat my world. We do not have to beat them, only hold them to a stalemate. As the death toll of our soldiers mounts, public opinion back home will change. It is very difficult to invade and conquer; it is much easier to defend your world and prevent total defeat.”

“I don’t see how it’s possible.”

“You above all else on this ship must be wholly convinced by this argument. If you – our leader – waver at all in our quest, then there is no hope for any of this to be achieved. Learn this my son: You are no longer in your county office shuffling papers. What you believe and decide now is paramount. The future of the Earth and our new world hinges on your decisions.” Without warning, Theyman turned toward the controls on the podium. “Just a moment,” he announced.

Ed West returned to his seat, feeling the overwhelming magnitude of that which had just been placed in his responsibility. He felt neither capable nor optimistic about guaranteeing the survival of his fellow exiles. He had never been appointed to administer anything before, let alone a whole new world. But now the future of Earth weighed in the balance and he felt a growing patriotic obligation to succeed in their quest – regardless of the impossibility of their success.

“That was our final jump,” Theyman declared. “We are in the system of our new home.”

Ed rose and stared out the main viewport at the multitude of stars before them. “Is our planet visible?”

Theyman pointed to a small, yellow, glowing light that lay directly before them. “That, my son, is our new world – your world. In a mere few centuries, it will be the envy of the galaxy.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“There is much to do. We will be arriving there in less than four hours. Before then, however, you will tour our ship and meet with your fellow Earthlings. Most of them are still rebelling against their abduction and we are counting on you to alleviate their apprehension and anger. You must convince them of what I have told you. And you must persuade them to cooperate with us in our cause to save Earth.”

"That'll be difficult."

"Nonetheless, it must be done. Whether they choose to accept their captivity here is inconsequential since it is beyond all of our abilities to do otherwise. But they MUST choose to accept our endeavor. And it must be you – a fellow Earthling – who will explain our situation and proposal to them."

"The first thing I have to do is convince them to accept YOU – and your species. And that will be very difficult. We aren't accustomed to dealing with such stone-faced individuals. I assume you don't have much of a sense of humor, either."

"On the contrary. Our world is inundated by comedians. Remember, humor is pleasure – and we are committed to pleasing each other. It benefits a society when its citizens are happy."

Ed revealed a faint smile. "Makes perfect sense to me."

Theyman raised his arm and gestured to the door. "Let's meet your fellow Earthlings."

Displaying both confidence and determination, Theyman led Ed to the exit. He waved his hand before a small hole beside the door that Ed had overlooked. The door smoothly slid open."

"Nice trick," Ed noted with raised eyebrows. "You'll have to teach me about your spaceship. I've always been intrigued by technology."

"You will have to be authorized before you can access most parts of this ship. But you needn't worry. You will learn this and much, much more before we are finished." He motioned to Ed to depart the compartment before him, but not before displaying, for the first time, a facial emotion.

Noticing his father's feeble attempt at a smile, Ed remarked, "Well, you people do possess emotions. What brought this on?"

"I was thinking," Theyman replied as he followed his son through the exit.

"About what?"

With a confident twinkle in his eyes, and a hint of conceit in his voice, he answered, "The future, my son. Our future."