

Procyon-4 (Draft Manuscript)
A Procyon 2054 Story
Tim Cinead

Hap Lufkin looked up from his screen box at the shimmering pile of glowing leaves that had just opened the door to his kitchen. Two humanoids entered his kitchen with limbs that were ruffled and covered with autumn leaves, or perhaps sea kelp. The flapping bits were encased in some kind of glowing yellow energy and lines of static seemed to be rolling upwards from their leaf-covered elephant feet to their torsos. They were perhaps seven feet tall and though they were stocky they stepped gracefully across the linoleum. Hap couldn't believe his eyes.

He switched off the screen box and looked at his watch. March 20, 2056. 7:24 am. He was wearing a pair of plaid boxer shorts and a dark blue terrycloth robe; there was half a cup of hot coffee on the table. His bare feet were on the table and his slippers were on the floor in front of his chair. *That makes sense*, he thought. *I'm not dreaming*. He lifted his feet from off the kitchen table and put them in his slippers, placing his hands flat on his thighs.

The two shaggy creatures looked briefly at the kitchen utensils by twisting their heads around smoothly. They had no faces to speak of but two small black eyes were apparent, like lumps of shiny coal. The smell of a forest floor after a rain was unmistakable as they moved. It was also a bit mushroomy. They ducked their heads and walked towards Hap through the little doorway to the dining room without making a rustling sound.

Hap, a CIA agent with twenty odd years of experience in the field, instinctively thought of where his third favorite pistol was located: in the middle drawer of the china cabinet. He calculated mentally what sort of diversion he could make to obtain it if necessary. He could splash hot coffee on one, tip the table, and open the drawer before they could...*what exactly? How does a leaf monster attack you? Smother you in a pile of leaves? Sit on you?* He imagined holding the pistol at them and then pulling the trigger, aiming for the dense center of their bodies...Or perhaps the eyes.

The two creatures, who were now less than ten feet from Hap, stopped suddenly. One put its arms up and touched the ceiling. The other one opened his arms with his palms facing up as if to indicate

that he came in peace. Hap abandoned the evasive maneuver gratefully and stood up, spreading his hands in the same fashion as the second creature. *What the hell is going on?* Kept running through his mind, obscuring more tactical thoughts.

The creature who had put its arms in the air now lowered them and reached into the overlapping leaves near where its hip might be. It brought out a small cylindrical device, like a fat wand, with a number of strange glyphs on the side. *Metallic alloy*, thought Hap. *Wait! Is that writing? That's not English!* The device terminated in a small golden sphere that was mounted in some sort of talon. *Is it a weapon? Shit! It's now or never.* But Hap, despite his training, couldn't bring himself to assault the strange guests. He wanted to know why they were here.

The creature manipulated a three-lobed glyph on the side of the device and a sound became audible in the kitchen. It sounded like a very soothing wind punctuated by a beautifully toned bell. Hap half expected to pass out and wake up in a hospital bed but he did not. He listened to the bell. The tone was rich and sonorous but the resonance was being interrupted by some kind of rhythm that reminded Hap of Morse code. *Dash Dot Dash Dash Dot Dash Dash Dash Dot Dot Dot Dash.*

"The Iris!" he shouted suddenly. The deeply set eyes of the leaf-covered creatures peered at him curiously.

The Solar Iris had been sending a message into interstellar space for about two months now. It was an enormous solar array that captured and beamed energy to the lunar space station, but it also featured an Iris that could block the transmission of light towards a particular star. It had been invented by a team of scientists who were employed by the CIA to solve the problem of how to send an encoded message to Procyon, a star just over eleven light years away.

Wait, that's not right. Procyon can't have received the message yet. But coming out of the gold-tipped wand that the swamp thing was holding was an unmistakable interpretation of the message they had programmed the Iris to send. A sensation crept through his chest that felt like walking out of the office and seeing that his car had been stolen. *Our message was intercepted.* Hap's heart skipped a beat and he swallowed. *Are the leaf people from Orion?*

Shit.

*

In 2041, some fifteen years after NASA had come under the auspices of the CIA, a poorly encrypted transmission was intercepted from a cloaked space vessel in orbit around one of the moons of Jupiter. When it was determined that the message was extraterrestrial in origin jurisdiction passed to the CIA. After decrypting it, the team alerted the CIA Director, John Pistis. He had shared the Top Secret information with Hap, Director of Contingency Planning (called internally the *Game Changers*- the department that dealt with new intelligence that could fundamentally change the role of the CIA in the world). Hap had organized a search for the vessel and discovered that it had departed. But they found traces of the ship's presence in scientific data. On a sunny morning in Langley, Hap had discussed these with John.

"What have you got, Hap?" asked John, drinking from an enormous blue ceramic mug of black coffee that could hold five cups at once.

"Two photographs and the passage of a steerable vessel through the heliopause." Hap spoke succinctly trying not to waste time. He pulled photographs from a manila envelope.

"What's the heliopause?" asked John honestly while he examined the two photographs.

"It's the edge of the solar winds...the electromagnetic shell of the solar system that is generated by the sun. Once you pass the heliopause you aren't in the solar system anymore- you're in interstellar space."

John nodded but he couldn't find the space ship in the photographs in front of him. He flipped one of them over but there was nothing on the other side. He put it down and sipped his coffee. "What am I looking at here?"

Hap pointed to a blurry place in front of the planet of Jupiter. Pink clouds were visible on the planet but the edges of the clouds did not match up with those around them. "We believe the ship is bending light to appear invisible in front of Jupiter."

John took off his glasses and looked at the blurry spot in both photographs. Then he closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his

nose. "Hap, I'll be honest. This looks like a chromatic aberration. These instruments are sensitive..."

"It's not chromatic. We simulated it. It's a solid object and light is bending around it. What's more, it has an unnatural shape. It is a rectangular prism."

"What?"

"It's shaped like a box that is longer than it is wide."

"Oh, right," said John as he raised his eyebrows with his eyes still closed. "Anything else?"

"I don't have a graphic for you but we have a couple of probes that record changes in the heliopause. The difference in signal between two of them confirms that one of them picked up a definite object passing through the heliopause, an object that interacts with the electromagnetic field. We think it has something to do with their engines."

John opened his eyes. "It's not an asteroid?"

Hap shook his head gravely. "*Not* an asteroid. It's a ship. It sent an encrypted communication that we decrypted. It was cloaked and it sent transmissions from our solar system to somewhere else."

"That's a big deal, Hap," said John, nodding and looking at the table solemnly. "We just need to be sure this doesn't turn into another Roswell." Then he met Hap's gaze.

Hap was dumb-founded. "John, have you even looked at the Roswell file?"

John looked briefly at Hap and then sipped his coffee, smelling the bold roast. "No," he said casually. "What's it say?"

"It happened. There was an alien space craft made of metallic alloys that we hadn't invented yet. The alloys were isotopically traced to Procyon." John's left eye twitched slightly. Hap went on. "That's about eleven light years from Earth. It's a star...with a *planet*..."

John nodded as if he understood. But it was clear he had no idea what he was getting into. He didn't even seem to fathom what they were actually talking about.

"There were bodies. Little grey men. They were all dead. We have them stored somewhere, probably in formaldehyde."

"You've seen them?" John asked suddenly.

"No, but I read the file. It's all in there. Damnit John, you need to see that file. This is happening!"

John nodded grimly. He picked up his giant coffee cup and smelled the Arabian beans. "I'll level with you Hap. I'm retiring later this year. More for the grandkids and for Helen than for me. But I'm going to need you to take point on this. I just--"

Hap groaned. "Would you stop with that shit, John? You've been planning to retire for five years! But you are *not retired*. You are the Director of the CIA for crying out loud!" He paused, expecting a response but John was silent, so he raised his voice. "There are cloaked aliens transmitting secret messages! This is bigger than the oil wars. This is bigger than the United fucking Nations! This is bigger than... *anything* we've done before."

John looked Hap in the eye and nodded, as grimly as ever. Then he cleared his throat and began to do his job. "Listen, Hap. I know what you're saying but let me be straight. I don't know what you know. If you want me to be the Director on this fine- then give me the intel. What are we up against here? What does it all mean?"

Hap nodded as if John were playing a convincing role. "The aliens in that ship," he said tapping the blurry clouds on the photograph, "are not alone. The technologies they are employing to hide themselves in space, the signature of piercing the heliopause, the data they are transmitting, and then disappearing...They are trying to avoid *other* aliens. The sophistication of the encryption is low. That's a good sign. That means we might not be as far behind them technologically as we are assuming. They have space travel, fine. But we have better encryption. So that's something we can use against them."

"How do we know they are against us?"

Hap stared with his mouth open at the black letters "CIA" emblazoned on the gigantic coffee mug. "They are encrypting their data, John. Everyone knows that means that they have secrets to hide. Secrets usually mean somebody is getting ready to whack somebody." He was becoming exasperated. "Anyway, think about it. It's not us they are worried about." He paused to let John sip his coffee thoughtfully. The coffee just didn't seem to work this morning.

"Who are they worried about?" Asked John carefully.

Hap went on. "Other *aliens*." John looked at him completely perplexed, so he reiterated. "Over a hundred years ago a ship made of advanced alloys crashed in New Mexico. But it was uncloaked and had little grey men in it. Now there is a ship flying cloaked around Jupiter and sending secret messages. There are obviously more than one alien species at work here."

John straightened up in his chair and put his glasses back on. The angles were finally beginning to look familiar. He was getting a handle on himself. The coffee was good. "You said the grey aliens are from..."

"Procyon," suggested Hap.

John nodded. "Procyon. You said it was a star," he said, proving that he had been listening. "Any ideas where the cloaked ship is from?"

"Based on movement through the heliopause our best guess is that the cloaked ship came from the direction of Orion's Belt, but that assumes they took the shortest route."

"Is that anywhere near Procyon?"

"Orion's belt?" asked Hap, annoyed. "No, Procyon is in Canis Minor."

John nodded again but had no idea what this meant. "Can we check isotopes from the data on the cloaked ship? Like we did for the crash?" he asked hopefully.

"Nope. All we got is those two," indicating the photographs, "a divot-like reflection in the geomagnetic field of Jupiter, and the signature through the heliopause."

John repeated the words *through the heliopause* as Hap spoke them. It wasn't much to go on, but they never had much to go on. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose again. "Well shit, Hap. What are we going to do?"

Hap was calm. "We play it like we played China and the UN."

"...when you were a double-agent?"

Hap nodded confidently.

John nodded too and then a fascinated look of deep confusion spread over his face. "How are you going to bamboozle aliens we've never met?"

"We need to signal Procyon. It's our best chance of getting help against the cloaked ship. We don't know what we're even up against, John. We don't even know if the cloaked ship has been tapping our comms. This is beyond Top Secret. This is..."

"What?" probed John, really concerned about what Hap had meant to say.

"This is the *survival* of our *species*, John. We've *got* to do this right. And we've got to do it *quick*."

John sighed heavily and then folded his hands in front of him. "No one is trained for this, Hap." The burden of leadership wore heavily on the shoulders of his faded grey suit jacket. He was tired. The coffee wasn't helping as much as it should.

"That's the least of our worries," answered Hap. "We need to figure out how to communicate with the little grey men."

*

Following standard CIA procedure, Hap had organized a think tank composed of intellectuals that might have a useful perspective on the situation. They rigged a hypothetical study that had academics studying precisely the circumstances that the CIA was faced with and asked them to come up with various solutions, performing a cost-benefit-contingency analysis for each option. The group's membership included mathematicians, computer programmers, exo-biologists, astrophysicists, archeo-astronomers, anthropologists, diplomats, and

military reconnaissance veterans. After weighing the options, and considering the lack of evidence that an invasion was coming, they decided to first build a perimeter of networked nanobot sensors, called Sol-Intel, to watch the solar system for cloaked ships. The bots were self-organizing and were designed to be undetectable by the best radar systems. They would look for electromagnetic field disturbances, trails through the heliopause, and thermal emitters.

Building Sol-Intel was enormously costly, due to the energy requirements of constructing and distributing the nanobots, but this could be partially defrayed by harvesting solar energy in space and transmitting it to a lunar station, where construction would occur in microgravity. The solar array could also be used to signal Procyon by selectively opening and closing a giant shutter- the Solar Iris.

It was a good plan, so it was funded and the Iris was built. It was completed in 2053 and testing commenced. Considering the distances involved, it was decided to begin transmitting a signal even before Sol-Intel was in place. The Iris began transmitting in early 2054.

The signal they chose was neutral in content and as simple as possible: a repeated numeric count. The dashes were represented by the Iris closing and blocking the light from the Sun to Procyon for 24 hours, the time it takes the Earth to revolve once on its own axis. The dots were represented by the Iris opening and releasing light to Procyon for 24 hours. It took 12 days to send the message once. Then there was a two or three day interval during which the Iris opened and closed every 6 hours- a blinking flash. Under this arrangement, the Solar Iris could send two messages per month and 24 messages per year. It was hoped that the aliens on Procyon would notice the blinking star and send a message back somehow...or send ships to investigate.

*

The leaf monster holding the gold-tipped wand peered at Hap curiously as he listened to the message.

Dash Dot Dash Dash Dot Dash Dash Dash Dot Dot Dot Dash

To stall for time, Hap pretended to listen carefully, as if he had never heard the message before. He had to find the angle. He had to get the upper hand...

Whoever intercepted the message, these leaf monsters, must have been somewhere between Procyon and our solar system within the last two months. That implies that they were nearby already and perhaps collecting intel, thought Hap. And that implies that they do not come in peace. Still, they haven't attacked me yet.

Wait...why me? Why are they in my house? This perplexed Hap to such a degree that he lost track of everything else, including paying attention to the two aliens standing in his house. There was nothing in the solar message related to Hap or his house. *How did they know to come to my house unless they have already been watching us? Shit.*

Now Hap knew he was in trouble. He needed to alert the CIA as soon as possible. But first he needed to get away from the leafy things.

They were watching him patiently, waiting for him to respond to the recording they had brought him. Hap didn't know what they expected him to do. The glyphs on the wand suggested that speaking slowly and loudly, as if to a tourist, would not be helpful. *I need to get on their side somehow, thought Hap. Besides, I'm not really certain that they have hostile intentions. I mean...they're just standing there. What is it they want? Think, Hap!* A breeze blew through the open kitchen door and began ruffling the ruffles of the creatures. They tittered to one another as if this was a great delight.

The one holding the wand turned off the recording and put it back in the midst of his glowing kelp pocket. The other one looked at Hap and made a gesture that seemed to say *Come with us* and then the two aliens turned around and walked out of the kitchen door.

"Wait!" said Hap. *Maybe I can convince them to come to HQ. Then we'll at least have hostages to study...* He half-jogged to the kitchen, stopping where the door was opened. The second creature had turned around and was facing Hap. He gestured again for him to follow them.

Hap ran to put on his shoes, hurrying as fast possible. He jammed a foot halfway into a leather shoe by the foyer and fumbled with the brown laces, cursing. He couldn't get his fingers to work the strings and anyway his foot wasn't all the way inside. *This is taking too long!* He picked up the other shoe and threw it across the room where it struck the television. He kicked the shoe off his foot and strode frantically to the kitchen table to put his slippers on. He picked up his coffee cup and ran back to the kitchen door. *The pistol!* It was in the

china cabinet drawer but he saw that the aliens were no longer waiting for him. Leaving the door open, he leapt outside and around the corner with his robe on to look for them.

Shit! I've lost them. Where'd they go? Oh the guys are never going to believe this...

As Hap Lufkin took a sip of coffee, he heard a sound that was so high-pitched he could barely hear it. It was like the sound he sometimes heard when a very old type of television was switched on. *The leaf monsters!* He turned his head around trying to find the source of the sound. Rising from the street behind his car was a disc-shaped flying saucer, about fifty feet across. He ran to it and waved his arms frantically as it ascended, but there were no windows. As he was watching, he saw the ship cloak itself and disappear, the blurred, wavy colors of the clouds coming into focus where it once had been. Then he heard the high-pitched sound drift off and he knew they had gone. *No!*

Hap sipped his coffee and wondered what to do. *I guess I should call in.*

Turning around in his slippers, he heard a static sound like an old video receiver that had lost its signal. It had emitted from a short grey humanoid, perhaps four and a half feet tall, holding a photograph of the Solar Iris. The static sound was coming from its lipless mouth. The alien was trying to get Hap's attention.

Now I'm definitely dreaming, he thought. *Another alien? Why do they all know where I live?* He looked at the photograph. There was no doubt that it was the Solar Iris. And the picture was obviously shot from space. From the direction of Procyon, to be precise, because the Iris was centered on the orb of the sun. But the sun was much larger than the Iris in the photograph. *It isn't blocking the sun. That means that the photograph was taken close to the Iris.*

The little grey alien made a chirping sound and then turned to walk around the garage. Hap followed closely. *I wish I had my phone!* There at the side of the house was a little motorcycle, except it didn't have wheels. Instead, it had large round wheel wells filled with a kind of bluish light illuminating a strange pattern of textured silver metal. The seat was white and glossy with triangular ridges for grip, but made from a material Hap had never seen before. The body was dull brushed silver metal and the handlebars were the same material as the seat, but tiny and black. There were purple and red tassels streaming from

the ends of the thin handlebars, giving it the appearance of being a children's toy bike. The alien placed the photograph on top of the motorcycle's seat, which was only large enough for a small boy to sit on, and then motioned to Hap to get on board.

That thing? No way. It's too small. Suddenly, the world seemed very strange to Hap. Just this morning he had been reading about the construction of the new dormitory facilities on the moon using Biosphere VII technologies that scrubbed waste water with nanobots. That had seemed fantastic enough, but then he had encountered a pair of aliens that smelled like a fungus-rich rain forest and they had left without him, which seemed impossible. *Don't they know it takes time to put my shoes on?* At almost the same moment a little grey alien was trying to get him to take a ride to who-knows-where on a motorcycle that was built for toddlers with terrible taste in tassels.

Tassels?

Hap Lufkin sipped his coffee and looked at the little static-speaking alien. Its eyes were large and oblong. They were deep and murky and a definite light of intelligence shone within them. Looking at it, he felt his mood change subtly. The bright little points of light in its eyes shifted something inside of him. He felt more at ease, as if he was sitting in front of a fireplace with a cool glass of scotch. *Damn, I feel good today,* he thought. He looked at his open kitchen door. He looked at his slippers and his robe and he laughed out loud.

The grey alien jumped back startled and emitted a loud hiss of static. Then it recovered and pointed at the photograph of the Solar Iris. Hap had a sensation like *An alien is offering you a ride on a tiny motorcycle. For all you know aliens have already invaded the world and we just never knew it. Are you really going to pass this chance?*

Hap picked up the photograph slowly and tapped his chest and then the picture with his finger. "You want me to go there? Sure, ok. I want to go. Can you make sure I don't fall off of this thing?" *How am I going to breathe in space?*

The alien sputtered a few sentences worth of static and then made a wheezing clock-like sound. The wheel-less motorcycle lit up and the sound of two turbines filled the yard for about three seconds before their high-pitched spinning became inaudible as they spun up to speed. A rush of cold air came out of the wheel wells and the motorcycle lifted itself up until it was about three feet off the ground.

This brought the seat level with the alien's face. *That's too high for him. He must mean it for me. What is he going to ride?*

Disbelieving himself, Hap handed his cup of coffee to the little grey alien carefully, so as to avoid touching its skin. Then he took the photograph of the Solar Iris and tucked it between his robe and his naked chest. He straddled the motorcycle and held on to the little handlebars that were barely large enough to wrap two fingers around. *Am I really going to ride this thing? I need my phone.* He thought about what a great photograph he could take riding an alien motorcycle and smiled. With his feet still on terra firma, he looked at the grey alien. *How does this work?* He wondered.

You just hold on and I will do the rest. This was a thought that appeared in Hap's head. It was a voice sort of. It had timber and inflection. The grey alien handed Hap's cup of coffee back to him.

Hap took the coffee and the word *telepathic* appeared in his brain. He was about to say something when the alien made another sound like a diseased cuckoo clock and the motorcycle lifted his feet off the ground gently. This, however, frightened the shit out of Hap who was not expecting it. He felt more anxious than he had before pulling the trigger on the World Conglomerate Bank President's husband when he was a rookie.

He grabbed on to the toy handlebars to steady himself and spilled coffee while doing so, but he recovered, balancing easily. *I hope it doesn't stain the seat.* The word *Ready* appeared in his mind and he nodded without realizing it.

Then a sound that could only be described as *Kram-zoing* came out of the grey alien and the motorcycle shot upwards so quickly that Hap's ears popped twice in quick succession. *Holy shit! I can't breathe up here!* He thought to himself. Then he tried to project this thought down to the grey alien with a sense of great urgency. He took a great gulp of air to prepare himself to be launched into space and when he had done so the motorcycle slowed down. It came to a halt above the surface of the earth and hovered.

Hap looked down nervously holding on to one handlebar because his cup was in the other. *Screw the coffee, Hap!* He put it between his thighs and held on to both handlebars. The houses below were about the size of his index finger nail and he couldn't even tell which one was

his. Behind him he heard the sound of an electric door opening. He tried to turn and face it but he was afraid to let go of the handlebars.

In the next moment, the sound of the air around him was diminished as if he had covered his head with a paper bag. This was because he had been engulfed by a flying vessel that was much larger than the toy hovercycle he was now riding. He saw the sides of the cargo bay pass on either side of him. They were metallic grey and burnished in complex repeating patterns.

When the ship had finished engulfing him, the hovercraft set him down gently, alone on a rather large deck dotted with metal crates. Near him, he saw a dozen small hovercycles, like the one he had arrived on, and several larger ones. He stood up. *Couldn't they have given me the big one?*

Welcome sojourner, Hap heard inside his head. This voice was stronger and more authoritative than the one near his garage. A brief titter of static erupted in the cargo bay. Four little grey aliens with white smocks were motioning to him at the edge of the bay. He went to them and followed them down a hallway with bare metallic walls. They passed through a white door where he sipped his coffee and discovered that it was cold. They went down another hallway and through a brown door that opened into an atrium. It was an orchard filled with fruit trees growing from a richly soiled floor covered in leaf litter. He saw apples, pears, plums, and peaches on the trees. *Please enjoy refreshing nourishment*, said the voice in his head.

"Refreshing nourishment?" Hap said aloud to himself. He heard a sound like the rustling of leaves and swiveled to look behind him, spilling his coffee on the leaves. *The Orions! It's a trap!* But when he turned around, it was just a green door opening into the atrium. A small grey alien with a large bald head stepped into the atrium wearing a green and brown smock.

Snacks, said a softer and more friendly voice. He noticed that none of the greys had any shoes. The alien's eyes were huge black orbs with intense bright sparks burning deeply within. *Are you quite comfortable?*

"What the hell is going on?" asked Hap, suddenly feeling like a zoo animal in a cage. *Act aggressive. Get the upper-hand*, he thought to himself.

A few different channels of static voices pierced the atrium and then went silent. Hap was in the atrium facing the grey who had just addressed him. Behind him were the four guards who had escorted him, though they were apparently unarmed. *I wish I had my pistol*, thought Hap to himself.

Why? came the softer voice into his head. *Do you wish to kill us?* Asked the authoritative voice almost immediately afterwards.

"Ok, you know what? I'm not *quite comfortable* now," said Hap loudly. He thrust his coffee cup towards the green-and-brown smocked alien threateningly, a gesture that seemed to him both necessary and ridiculous. The level of static rose in the room and Hap discerned that they were talking to one another. "Ok, that right there. That hissing sound. I don't like that." He raised his voice and waved his cup at the four conversing greys in the white smocks.

The static stopped suddenly and was replaced by the sound of more leaves rustling. He glanced to his left and saw a new group of four greys come through the green door. They were wearing black smocks that had pink inverted triangles on the front. *Guards*. Four more came through a brown door on his right. All eight of them were carrying menacing rods with wide metal prongs. *Uh oh*, he thought and sipped his coffee. He was considering how many of them he could wallop before getting stung, or stabbed, or whatever those things did, but the guards did not advance. They remained at the edges of the orchard and remained silent.

Hap noticed that there was a small round window that looked outside. It had just caught his attention that the blue sky had swiftly changed into a black one. Before he had a chance to mention this he heard the soothing voice in his head again. *I am sorry that you are uncomfortable. We want very much for you to be comfortable. Perhaps you would like to sit down alone for awhile? Then when you are ready to talk we can-*

"Stop talking in my head, damnit!" yelled Hap angrily. The eight greys immediately convened a semi-circle around Hap, but they did not speak. He waited to see how they would use the prongs. *They're like children...I could take out three or four with a couple of kicks*, he mused.

There was a pause and then the reply came. *Unfortunately, it is the only way to communicate with you.*

"If you can put thoughts in my head then you must know English. So why can't you just speak English?" He looked menacingly at the grey alien he was talking to. It appeared perfectly calm. It was still and did not open its thin line of a mouth. The two reptile-like slits for nostrils were the most prominent feature on its face after the wide and very bright eyes. They looked as bright as if the moon were reflecting off a pond. Hap looked at them more and more deeply. He felt something loosen in his abdomen and he realized that he had been anxious since the hovercycle ride. The anxiety was like a knot that was unraveling itself, unwinding the tension in him. He felt calmer. He felt better.

I am sorry. My vocals chords cannot perform the same function that yours do. I cannot speak English. Please forgive me. I did not know I would be meeting a Soltran in my lifetime.

Hap shifted his weight uncomfortably and sipped his cold coffee again. *Soltran?* He felt stupid for not realizing that there would be limitations to communicating with the greys. He assessed the tactical situation like a field agent. He had gained the upper-hand by making the alien apologize. He was effectively surrounded but he did not feel threatened. In fact, he felt surprisingly calm considering the proximity of the eight prong-rods. But he was also aware that he was jeopardizing the most important recon mission of his career. His stomach felt slightly hollow and queasy and he realized he was hungry. The leaf monsters had walked into his kitchen before he had bothered to eat breakfast. He glanced at his watch and remembered that he had a meeting with the think tank girls at ten. *Shit, I never called in! Nobody knows I'm here. How the hell am I going to get out of here?*

Where would you like to go? Came the calm reply.

Hap grabbed the thick dark hair on the side of his head and squeezed his eye lids together tightly. Then he took a breath and tried to relax. *Get the intel, then get out.* "Alright look. You're right. It's not fair for me to demand that you speak English. However, where I come from it is pretty damn rude to read someone else's thoughts. So there's that. It's also rude to reply to them...there. In their head, I mean... where they are thinking them...the thoughts." He said this as if it should be very plain and yet it was obvious that his first contact with an alien species had not gone as well as one might hope because he, Hap Lufkin, was being rude. He thought about the French companies he had handled during the crisis of '38. They were always talking about

how Americans didn't have any manners. For the first time in his life, he started to see things from the French point-of-view. *Damn. Maybe Americans really are the rude-*

Pardon me, came the voice gently interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes?" asked Hap, looking up at the alien and taking note of the presence of the other twelve aliens who were being completely still and silent. He wished there were birds in the trees of the atrium to break the silence. The silence was awkward. The stars in the space window were not moving.

How do I know when I may communicate if I'm not allowed to read your thoughts or reply to them? The question was asked very patiently.

"Yeah, that's a good...uh- question. Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot here. I meant for this to be a good meeting. You know? I was just...with the flying motorcycle and the...yeah those leaf monsters." He scratched his head and looked at the ground, wondering how to smooth things over with the aliens who had picked him up. He had a lot of questions about that. *How did they know where I lived?*

We visited three other people first. But don't worry, I read their thoughts and worked our way to you without revealing ourselves to them. They are still unaware of our existence.

Hap opened his mouth and then felt his stomach grumble again. He looked at a ripe peach hanging from a tree and then back at the alien.

Help yourself. They are all for you.

"Thanks," said Hap. He stepped out of the semi-circle of guards, an excellent tactical victory, in his opinion, and picked two peaches, three plums, and an apple from a cluster of trees. He placed these in the over-sized pockets of his robe. "Right, so I'd like to eat some of these nourishing refreshments and sit down, like you suggested. I have a lot to think about here, as I'm sure you realize."

Yes, of course. Follow me. The alien turned around and as he did so the green door he had come through began to open. It made the sound of rustling leaves as it did so. Hap looked at the other aliens in

the room. They were all watching him silently. He realized then that grey aliens do not blink. At least, not that he had seen.

Do snakes blink? He wondered.

He followed the green-and-brown smocked alien through the door and was relieved that the guards did not escort them. *A much better tactical situation.* He really hadn't meant to anger the aliens but it was extremely disconcerting to have one's thoughts read and...then Hap realized that the alien was probably reading his thoughts right now and he should exercise operational security so as not to compromise his- and then again. *Alright Hap. No one is trained for this and that's why it's you. It's better this way. You're close to the source. You don't have to rely on anybody else. It's all you...just try to keep it together.*

Hap tried to clear his mind of thoughts so he sipped his coffee again. It was cold and disgusting but something about the familiarity of it comforted him. He began to wonder if the alien could warm it up for him. *Maybe with one of those wands the leaf people had.* He heard the sound of rustling leaves and saw that the curving hallway they had been walking down was terminating in a small room that for all intents and purposes was a brick-paved patio near a rose garden with wicker chairs and a small glass-and-iron table. *The only thing missing is an old orange cat.* The alien placed his hands gently on the back of the left chair as a gesture for Hap to sit there. Then he walked to the chair on the other side of the table, sat down, and crossed his hands in front of him. His big black eyes were even brighter in this room and it was all Hap could do to keep from staring at them. Conscious of wanting to remain aloof he looked at his coffee cup as he sat down.

Do you have any questions you would like to ask me? Or would you prefer to be alone now? The alien did not move, blink, or gesture as it "spoke". It was very disconcerting as it made the entire scene seem like something out of a horror film.

Hap cleared his throat and selected a peach from his pocket. He rubbed it on his terrycloth lapel, breathed on it warmly, and then rubbed it again. The peach fuzz looked tousled. After this, he realized that he had never done this with a peach before. *Why did I just do that?*

Because you are uncomfortable and you wish to have time to consider a novel situation while performing a task that reminds you of your typical life.

Hap bit into the peach so that he wouldn't need to speak right away. It was not under-ripe, which pleased him. He realized that the alien was right. *Remember operational security...aloof.*

The alien cocked his head slightly by about three degrees. It was an infinitely small gesture yet it was such a change from the absolute stillness that it startled Hap and sent a chill down his spine. *I am sorry this is disconcerting for you. Would it be better if we did not face each other when we communicated? You could look out towards the garden there and we could still speak with one another.*

Hap shifted his weight in his chair. He wanted to present himself in a more diplomatic and confident light, but the alien already had every advantage because he was reading Hap's thoughts. *I wonder if he can read memories. That would be a real-*

Yes.

"What?" said Hap suddenly. He wasn't sure if that was a response by the alien or if he had thought it himself.

The answer is yes. I can read your memory. But it is not strictly accurate to call me a he.

"Oh, umm, sorry about that. I couldn't tell."

You couldn't tell that I was genderless?

"Genderless? Oh, I thought that you meant you were a fe- ah, well, um, nevermind."

We are neither male nor female. Is that strange to you?

Hap considered this for a moment. It was strange but only because it was something he wasn't used to. In fact, he knew that there were animals on Earth that were the same way. And even animals that could change their gender in certain circumstances. So he decided that *No, it's not strange. I just wasn't expecting it.* He then opened his mouth to say this when the answer came from the alien.

There are lot of things you do not know, Mr. Lufkin. But I am happy to answer questions. Please understand that we are here to help. We came in response to your message. The alien uncocked his

head from where he...or it...had cocked it earlier. Hap wasn't so startled this time.

He took a bite from his peach and thought about what sort of questions he had for this alien. *This is it. This is the intel I need.* He concentrated on the details of the mission. He did have questions, that's for sure. He wanted help...but it wasn't so much help...it was understanding. Hap wanted to know if Earth was in danger because of aliens. He wanted to know-

Yes and no. It is a complicated question, Mr. Lufkin.

Hap realized that the alien had addressed him twice in the honorific and he didn't even know its name. He straightened up and somewhat disbelieving the situation he wiped his right hand on his robe because it had peach juice on it, and then stuck it out to shake hands with the alien. "May I ask what your name is?" he said hopefully. "I apologize that I didn't ask earlier."

The alien looked without expression at Hap's hand and did not unfold his own. *I'm sorry, Mr. Lufkin. It is best if we do not have touch. There is the risk of...disease...between...species.*

Hap retracted his hand and nodded bravely. "Good point. Good-umm, thinking. Sorry about that. Right. Well, so here's a question I'd like to ask..." He thought he had a question that he hadn't asked yet and then he realized it was the question about danger that the alien had said was complicated. Hap replayed the events to himself...he had asked for its name and it hadn't replied because of the awkward handshake. Having remembered where in the conversation they were, Hap looked out across the rose garden and chewed his peach. He began to think about how to get the information that he really needed as efficiently as possible. The alien was clearly willing to help and Hap didn't know how long this interview opportunity would last, so he'd better not spoil the-

Would you like to give me a name? asked the alien, interrupting his thoughts.

"What's that? Oh, umm. You don't have a name already?"

I do have a name. But it is not likely that you can use it because it is in the language that you do not like to hear. Also, you can't

understand it because it is spoken at a very high frequency that your organs are not capable of sufficiently parsing.

Hap looked intently at a yellow rose bush. *My organs cannot parse...* he tried to catalog all the details that were being revealed to him about the differences between the species, but behind the bright yellow blooms was a large rectangular window that looked out into space. *We are in space!* thought Hap. He observed a meandering path that worked its way through the rose garden and led to a wooden bench that faced the large space window. He looked forward to sitting there soon. *Space*, he thought wistfully. It was the first time he had left Earth's atmosphere but it was a dream of his since childhood. He had told his parents he wanted to be an astronaut and that was why he eventually went into the CIA as they were in charge of space technology from the '20s on. *I'm definitely not going to make my ten o'clock*, he chuckled to himself.

Shaking his head to clear his meandering thoughts he remembered that the alien had asked him for a name that he could pronounce. He wondered about this briefly but decided that it wasn't fair to give someone a name if you didn't know them. It was too much like foreign language class when each of the students chose a name that didn't suit them. "Ok, so can you tell me something about yourself? On Earth we give names to identify somebody's unique characteristics."

The alien cocked its head again. *That's not true. Most of the names on Earth are arbitrary or traditional.*

Hap considered this and realized the alien was right. *So that's a trait*, he thought. *He's smart...and telepathic...and he doesn't tolerate falsehood...And they've been observing us.*

And I'm really not a He, said the alien in Hap's head.

Right, sorry about that, Hap thought to himself. *He's basically the opposite of John. It'd be funny to call him John though. Heh. But that would-*

Why would it be funny to give me the opposite name that characterizes my traits? Came the question probingly.

Well not funny, really. More ironic replied Hap in his head, back on guard trying to remain casual and conversational.

Yes, those are two very different things. Precision of language will help facilitate good relations between us, Mr. Lufkin.

“Ok,” said Hap, feeling like a troublesome school child. “Alright, I should like to call you Grey because you’re grey. How does that work?” He smiled as he suggested it.

That is a terrible idea. Hap’s smile disappeared. It doesn’t distinguish me from any others on this ship. They are all also grey.

“I see. Yes, you’re right.” Hap thought for a bit longer. “How about One? Because you’re the first grey I contacted.” He finished sucking on the peach pit and placed it in on the glass table.

The alien looked down at the table where Hap had just placed his peach pit. Then it turned the chair and looked out at the rose bushes along with Hap. *It is not significant that I am the first grey you have contacted.*

Well, it’s significant to me, Hap thought to himself instantly. But then he realized the alien would have heard it, so he let it stand as his reply. He was getting better at this telepathy stuff.

Yes, it is significant to you and to me, but not to anyone else. Is this name what you will call me only for situations where you and I will be conversing? Or will you also use the name when addressing me as part of a group?

Hap could see that the issue of a name was very important to the alien. He wanted the name to be appropriate in all the situations that it would be used. *That’s reasonable,* Hap realized, though he hadn’t considered it as important until now. After this, he began to think more carefully about the possible names he could give this alien. *The encounter is significant to me and to him, but not to anyone else. But what is significant about this name to everyone who will hear it? I suppose...it’s the first alien that will have an English name in the history of Earth! That’s quite something...* “How about Adam?”

This is the name of the first man in your Judeo-Christian mythology.

“Yes, that’s right. I thought it was appropriate because it indicates that you are the first.” *Man they have been studying us for a long time. They even know about Jesus.*

I am aware of what it indicates. This is a better name but I must ask why you persist in addressing me as a male. Why do you only consider male names?

This stopped Hap in his tracks. “Well, because you...well, I see what you mean. Why do I identify you as a male even though you have no gender, right? I mean, that makes sense...you don’t want to be compartmentalized...so maybe you want a genderless name? Like Sam or Pat?”

The alien was silent for a moment. The first time that a response had not come instantly. Then he...or it, rather, said in an extremely patient and understanding voice *Linguistically speaking, a name establishes not only the identity but the function of the entity it describes. Would you agree?*

“Sure, yeah. Ok, so what is your function?”

I am a communicator, an empathizer, and a coordinator. These did not sound like valid job titles to Hap. My function is to assist you in understanding the consequences of your actions and facilitate good relationships between our peoples.

Hap nodded enthusiastically. “Right, so you’re a pacifist. You’re like...Gandhi or...”

Mohandas Gandhi was a man came the reply dully.

“Right, so you want a genderless peacemaking name...” Hap put his hand on his chin and felt the stubble there. He had forgotten to shave before leaving the house.

Not a genderless name. A female name.

“A female name? Well, why would you want a female name?”

I perform a feminine function.

“A feminine function? What? Like...communicating? And...coordinating?” His voice became slower as he spoke. “And

understanding the consequences of my actions...and facilitating good relationships...Huh." *I guess that really is a feminine function* Hap thought. *Who would have thought that the aliens were feminists?*

There was no response from the alien to this thought and Hap observed the silence somewhat awkwardly. He was starting to feel like a real jack-ass, like the time he told a deaf joke to the agent who had a deaf husband. To cover himself he suggested another name. "How about Eve? She was the mother of all humanity."

That is not true came the laconic reply.

"What? Of course she was."

Do you mean mythologically or genetically?

"I mean-" and then Hap stopped to think about this. He decided the alien was probably right. But he decided to withdraw the name and try something else. "How about a Greek name? Do you prefer Greek mythology?"

I do not have a preference for any of your mythologies. They are equally interesting.

Something about the word interesting bothered Hap, but he was trying to get through the part of the interview where he came up with a name to call the alien so he let this go as well. "Athena? Hera? How about Alexander...a?" This last word he attempted to feminize as an afterthought.

Alexan-der-a is not a Greek- the reply began and then Hap heard the hissing static sound briefly, as if the alien was swearing in her own tongue. Then, after a brief pause the alien resumed transmitting thoughts. *I can see that perhaps it would be best if I told you what to call me. It would serve to avoid future...complications.*

Hap took this comment as a personal attack on his capacity to adequately name somebody in his native tongue, but he nodded quietly.

Please call me Esther.

"Esther? Why Esther?" Hap asked with surprise. He really had no idea.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, Esther went before the Babylonian king to intercede on behalf of her people. I perform a similar function on your behalf so this name suits me well. Also, it is easy for you to remember and say.

Intercede on my behalf... thought Hap to himself slowly. *What does she mean by that?*

Earlier you asked me whether humanity was in danger. I told you that it was complicated. The probability of danger to humanity is greatest from within but the danger from without is not inconsiderable. I, Esther, will attempt to reconcile both of these threats on behalf of Mr. Lufkin and his world.

Hap nodded appreciatively without really knowing what he was appreciating. "What...I would like...to know...is what you mean by that," said Hap stupidly.

The alien continued. *Yes, that is good. You are beginning to understand that you are ignorant of a great many things. In particular, the majority of humanity is ignorant of the existence of life outside of Sol. You are beginning to change that, Mr. Lufkin. Do you see?*

"Yes, I think so. I am the first one to contact your and it is my mission to inform the CIA of what I found. You know that I suppose?"

Not only the CIA, Mr. Lufkin. Everyone has a right to know.

"Well, in the CIA...we believe that...everyone-" he was speaking very slowly because he didn't want to reveal too much but as he considered what was worth revealing he was already revealing it. So he was trying not to think too much while speaking but this was counter-productive to communicating what he wanted to say.

Fortunately, the alien replied. *Mr. Lufkin, you do not believe me.*

"What's that? No, of course I do."

No, you cannot. Please do not try to mislead me. It is very silly to assume that I don't already know everything that you know.

"Everything? But..."

Yes, everything. She continued by reading his thoughts to him. And now you would like to know how I can know everything that you know so I will tell you. You see, Mr. Lufkin, telepathy is not accomplished the same way as vocalization. There is no packet of information being transmitted through the distance between us. No, it is quite the opposite. I induce your neural activity directly by the manipulation of mine. This means that I must also be aware of your neural activity in order to manipulate it. In becoming so aware, I become aware of the density of all your neural connections, and thereby I know everything that is stored in your brain. I even know which things you are most fond of thinking.

"Everything?" Hap repeated, stupefied.

I know things that you have not remembered for many years. Then there was a pause. Does that frighten you?

Hap was silent for a long moment. *We're not trained for this, Hap*, he remembered John had said. He hadn't taken it seriously but it really was the biggest obstacle now that they had contacted the greys. Thinking of John reminded him of his mission objectives. He assessed the situation and decided that he had already given up the entire mission by allowing himself to be kidnapped and brought aboard-

You were not kidnapped, Mr. Lufkin. You signaled us to come.

"I signaled you to...well, I wanted to...uh..." No matter what he could think of to say it all pointed to the fact that the alien already knew everything inside his noggin. That thought was so disconcerting and so undermining that Hap began to realize that there was nothing he could do about it. It had already happened. He needed to form a contingency for the sake of the mission! But as he began to consider this he decided he needed to know what the limitations were...*where are the angles?*

Mr. Lufkin, please calm down. We are not enemies. You would be best served by trusting me and thinking of us as friends.

"Yes! Of course we are friends. That's why I signaled you, actually. I wanted to make friends! So we could-" And here Hap stopped short because although Esther already knew the details of his mission, which was to gather intelligence about the existence of other alien species without committing to an alliance with the wrong species, it seemed wrong to admit this and speak it...or think it...aloud.

Would you like to hear a joke? asked Esther suddenly.

This derailed Hap's paranoid line of thinking and he nodded.

What's brown and wobbles?

"I don't know."

A pleebixritin.

This non-sensical response was followed by a cascade of static. Hap was dumbfounded. "What?"

A pleebixritin. It's a type of insect that feeds on flowers on Procyon-4. The joke is a pun on the words "brown and wobbles" with their other potential meaning of "brow nand wob-bles", which of course meant nothing remotely humorous to Hap.

"That's a terrible joke," he said honestly.

No, it's quite humorous to any Procyoni.

Then Hap had an idea and he seized upon it gratefully. "But I am not a Procyoni, Esther. Did you forget? Hah!"

The alien did not respond initially and then slowly said *Yes, I must have forgotten. That was perspicacious of you.*

"That was...what?"

Perspicacious. It means observant. I purposely used a word that you didn't know. Did you forget that I can read your mind? Hah! The tone of this thought was a reflection of what Hap had just said.

Hap was unimpressed. Now Esther was playing mind games with him...literally inside his mind. Then the rather obvious notion came to him that he was never going to be able to one-up a mind-reading Coordinator from Procyon-4 and he might as well stop trying. He looked at his watch. It was nearly 9:30am. *I'm definitely going to miss that meeting.* He looked out the window and saw the moon pass by. He saw the lunar base with the solar collectors and the large dish that funneled the beam from the Solar Iris into organo-electric batteries. He had been very interested to read about their construction which involved

being grown in the solid waste of the construction crew. The mission zoomed into focus. "We need help, Esther."

Yes, you do.

"We are worried about the cloaked ship that was orbiting Jupiter. We intercepted an encrypted--"

Yes, I know.

"Well, what...do we need to...how should we address this threat?"

Mr. Lufkin, there are a great many things I could say in response to that question but few of them are what you would like to hear. Because I wish to be sensitive to your present situation, I want to begin by-

"What do you mean by my present situation?" He said hotly. *She's negotiating now.*

Please understand, I don't mean you specifically. I mean humanity.

Hap considered this but it wasn't compelling. "If you're insulting humanity then you are insulting me too!" he said just as hotly.

Yes, that would be true if I was insulting humanity. However, I am not. This, in fact, is part of the problem that is encompassed by your present situation. Humanity does not know what the situation is. At all. Esther paused to let the gravity of this sink into Hap's beleaguered brain box. Would you like to respond on that point?

Hap had just been feeling that he did very much want to respond on that point and was somewhat irked when Esther detected this. But he was pleased that he now had an opportunity to say something so he said "You say that humanity is ignorant..." he began, and tapped his index finger against the glass table as if making a point.

Completely, said Esther.

"About *what* are we ignorant?" asked Hap poignantly.

Esther cocked her head again, catching Hap's attention. Her eyes were even brighter and shinier than before. *You are ignorant of your place in the universe, Mr. Lufkin. If you will trust that I am your friend then I can begin to lead you out of that ignorance. But if you persist in considering me a threat we will not progress very quickly. Do you understand?*

Hap suddenly felt like he was having a conversation with his ex-wife Meralda¹ and the notion crossed his mind that Esther was using his memories of her to suggest a conciliatory emotional state. *Meralda was the only one who could always win an argument with me* thought Hap wistfully.

We aren't arguing, Mr. Lufkin. It would be better if you considered me as a peer who wishes to instruct you on matters about which you have no knowledge. A helpful friend.

Hap sighed and rubbed his neck. *There's not enough coffee in John's cup to prepare somebody for a joint psychotherapy-diplomacy meeting with a pint-sized telepathic alien that never blinks.* Having thought this very distinctly so that Esther would be certain to have understood, he felt better. "Ok, I believe I'm ready. Lay it on me. The end of the ignorance." He closed his eyes to listen closely.

That will require much more time than we presently have. However, I believe we have made significant progress. For now, I will leave you alone with your thoughts. That means that you are free to think without worrying that I am watching your thoughts.

Maybe I shouldn't have called her pint-sized. "Well, why can't I have that all the time? That's a basic right in my country."

There are no basic rights in your country, Mr. Lufkin. Stop trying to mislead me. Good bye for now.

Esther stood up, gazed slowly at the peach pit and the plum pit on the glass table, and then left the meeting room. Forty seconds later an alien wearing a black smock with an inverted white triangle entered the patio and used metal tongs to pick up the fruit pits, placing them onto a platter. This platter, made of black porcelain, was set down on the glass table next to Hap. He pulled a plum pit out of his mouth that

¹ This is short for Esmeralda because she hated the first syllable, which gave her the initials EEL after she married. She preferred MEL.

he had been storing in his cheek and placed it on the platter. The alien left him alone.

*

After collecting his thoughts and checking his pockets instinctively for his phone several times before realizing he didn't have it, Hap went for a walk through the rose garden in space. It was really a delightful place but he didn't understand why the aliens mimicked Earth scenery. *Don't they have scenery of their own? Or is their whole world just metallic grey?* He tried to imagine the grey beings living on a grey planet full of grey metallic corridors and sitting absolutely still and silent on grey cubes...except when they made that terrible hissing static sound. He shuddered to remember it. *Maybe they used grey flatware to pierce gelatinous grey cubes along the diagonal and place them in their thin-lipped little mouths. I wonder how they reproduce...* He walked around the rose garden enjoying the rich perfume and then sat down on the bench facing the space window. It felt good to think in privacy...if she was really giving him some. He looked at the tremendously bright and beautiful stars. *Space...* he thought again. *A lifetime dream finally achieved...and under such unexpected circumstances...* He tried to relax and enjoy the victory. In the next moment, the full weight of the significance of what had just occurred settled into his brain.

Where the hell are they taking me?!

Hap ran to the door and touched it, knocked on it, searched around it for a control box, and even tried mimicking the sound of rustling leaves by forcing air through his closed teeth. But it did not open. He tried thinking very loudly *Help! Open the door please!* But this had no effect. Then he shouted "It doesn't make for very hospitable relations to trap me in a prison cell!" After a second he amended this with "No matter how pleasant!"

A couple of hours later Hap had calmed down and was weighing contingencies when the sound of rustling leaves alerted him to the presence of Esther. Well, it might have been any of them. He couldn't tell the difference except for their smocks. Esther wore a green and brown linen smock without any triangles on the front. *She's the only one who wears those colors,* he thought. *The Coordinator uniform, I guess.* He pulled his robe closed over his chest.

Hello Mr. Lufkin. I trust you are well?

"As a matter of fact, I am not. I tried to open the door earlier and I couldn't. It made me feel trapped and uncomfortable. Was that your intention, Esther?" He stood up and faced her with his hands in his robe pockets, trying his best to act like an offended guest.

The doors onboard the ship open telepathically, Mr. Lufkin. I apologize that they are not well suited for your species. If you would prefer, we can move you to a room without a door. Would you prefer the atrium, perhaps? It was designed for your satisfaction. There is also a designated place for relieving your bladder and colon.

"My bladder and colon? That's...gross!" He felt like a scientific specimen by the use of the names of these organs.

I am aware that you find your waste disgusting. Nevertheless, it must be provided for. Please follow me.

Hap followed Esther out of the patio room and back down the hallway. He noticed for the first time that there was art on the walls. But it wasn't Earth art. Oh no. It was *alien art*. At it least it looked like art. They were symmetric patterns of colored pixels arranged in fractal spirals, zig-zags, and overlapping rings. Some expressed differences in color density while others seemed more concerned with varying the complexities of the patterns. They were mesmerizing. "Did you make these, Esther?" he asked.

Those are not art but I can show you a screen that will show you our art, if you like. Those are quotations from famous writers.

"Oh writers, eh?" *How the hell do you read a bunch of colored dots? "From Procyon-4?"*

We read them easily because it is our written language. The quotes on the left side of the hallway are from Procyon-4. On the right from elsewhere.

"Elsewhere...where?"

Elsewhere- other star systems.

Hap stopped walking down the hallway and looked at the last quote on the right. It was predominantly purple and black with bright areas of red, yellow, and green. The bright areas made small clusters

of what looked like cherries growing on a dog body while the purple and black looked like a sort of blurry swirling vortex. "Where's this from?"

Elpion-7. It reminds one that in all the universes, in all the unities beyond the universes, all who have eyes have eyes that speak.

"What? Eyes that speak? Is that like a different sort of mind reading?"

It is not telepathy no. It is literal. When you observe the eyes of another species you recognize yourself in them. That is the exterior meaning of the quote.

"You recognize yourself in the eyes of the other...hmm. Why didn't he just say that?"

It is not by a male. It was said that way because it was considered the most poetic way to present a basic universal truth. Then Esther turned towards Hap, who was still admiring the beautiful shape of the quote on the wall. He noticed this and faced her. *You have never written a poem, Mr. Lufkin. May I ask you a personal question?*

"Sure, go ahead, I guess. But don't you already know the answer?"

I am aware of the contents of your brain but that is not the sum of what makes you a living being. Besides, the purpose of asking a question is not simply to obtain information. It is also useful for having an experience of relationship.

"What do you mean by an experience of relationship?"

I mean that by standing here and talking about the meaning of a poetic verse written in a star system you have never heard of we are experiencing a relationship with one another. I, the small grey alien named Esther, and you, the tall pale human named Hap. Asking you a personal question is a continuation of that relationship.

This seemed obvious after Esther pointed it out, but he found it annoying that she considered their relationship so structured. "What's the question?"

How do you think it is possible for you to understand poetry that another species has written if you have never yourself written a poem?

This took Hap off-guard. He had never been the literary sort although he read and digested large amounts of operational information. In fact, the topic of poetry was a sore subject for him. Meralda had tried to instill an appreciate for poetry in him by bringing him to a poetry reading in Brooklyn one weeknight. It had been full of middle class mumbo-jumbo and afterwards he had used it as justification to tell her never to bring it up again. *Now that I think about it, that was the beginning of the end...* Esther was still waiting patiently for Hap's answer and he remembered that he was expected to participate in this "relationship experience" with Esther. He gave it some thought and came up with an answer. "I think it is possible for me to understand it because even though I have not written a poem I am conscious of the capacity for writing poetry and so I can intuit what it must be like for another species to write poetry."

That is an excellent answer, Mr. Lufkin. Thank you for participating.

Hap felt like he was being congratulated for raising his hand in class but he let this feeling go and turned back toward the door to the atrium. *What if I asked Esther a personal question? But what do I want to know...?* As they walked through the door, he saw that some of the fruit trees had been removed and a table with empty porcelain dishes on it, two chairs, and a bed had been installed. Looking in the back corner he saw for the first time the outhouse they had built for him. It had a wooden door with a crescent moon carved in it. *Well, that's quaint.*

We sincerely hope you will be more comfortable here. If you ever need anything, please do not hesitate to press the green button on this panel here. It will arouse an attendant who will bring me to you.

"Esther?" asked Hap suddenly. "Can I ask you a question?"

Esther walked to the table and sat down beneath the plum trees. She folded her hands as before and waited for Hap to sit down. Then she nodded.

"Are all grey aliens telepathic like you?"

Not like me, no. I am specially trained to fulfill my function as a coordinator between our species. It is prescient of you to recognize this fact.

Hap felt genuinely proud of himself. He hadn't actually known but there was something about the way the other aliens had acted that made him suspect that not all of them were as intelligent as Esther seemed to be. Her eyes were brighter. She carried herself more astutely. He began to feel a great deal of respect for Esther. Despite all the rude things Hap had said and thought she had patiently brought him out of his paranoia and tried her best to make him feel comfortable. It seemed like a good time to get down to work, to understand how the mission had changed. "Where are you taking me on this space ship?"

You do not trust that I will tell you the truth. But I want you to trust me so I will tell you the answer. We are taking you wherever you wish to go.

"Anywhere in the universe?"

That would not be wise. There are many places in the universe that are not hospitable to human life.

"But to any star system that is hospitable?"

Perhaps I should be more specific. We are taking you wherever you wish to go that does not jeopardize either your safety or our relationship.

"But I haven't told you where I wish to go and you have already begun traveling. Where are we going?"

To show you something I wish for you to see.

"What is that?"

If it does not make you too uncomfortable I would like it to be a surprise. It will be better that way. Remember that relationship is based on trust.

This last sentence annoyed Hap. "Ok, I'll wait for you to tell me when the surprise is ready. But let me ask you this. Where do you suggest that I go?"

That is an excellent question, Mr. Lufkin. I suggest that you come to Procyon-4.

The notion of this began as a bubble somewhere in his innards and then it grew very rapidly and rushed through his chest and throat as the reality of it crashed through his brain. "WHY YES! That is exactly where I want to go...only...how long will it take? Procyon is 11 light years away."

Yes. Humanity is ignorant of many things. Interstellar travel is included in this. But don't worry, you will soon understand the technology of existing between the stars.

"Between the stars?"

It is a quote from a Procyon-4 poet whose name translates to English as Wilting Cherry Blossoms by the Lake. It is an exterior reference to interstellar travel as a means of self-discovery and an interior reference to both the composition of matter and the state of being alive.

Hap began to feel very excited about learning as much as he could about Procyon culture. It seemed much more interesting to learn about Procyon culture than all the nation states he had studied for work. The idea of traveling to distant stars for self-discovery seemed backwards to him initially, but as he considered his global travels he realized how true it must be. "Esther, I think I understand. Between the stars means that I am away from my home planet and on my way to a different planet. It forces me to compare people and culture from different star systems...and so I learn more about my own."

Yes, that is good. Consider also that when you are on Procyon-4 you will represent all of Earth's culture to our people. Going between the stars means that you have to decide how to represent yourself and your culture to a different people. It is a big responsibility but one that opens the heart.

Opens the heart? "Do you talk about the heart as the center of emotions on Procyon-4? Or did you say that for my benefit?"

You believe that little grey aliens are all brains and technology. That is very different from the truth. The little grey aliens developed

their brains and technology last. Only after they had understood their emotions and their place in the universe.

Hap suddenly felt his own heart filling up as if it were becoming swollen with some new emotion. It was as if he recognized himself in Esther in some inherent way, but he couldn't quite wrap his mind around it. The emotion took him suddenly, filling his chest with bizarre celebrations. He wondered what it meant. *Aliens with emotions? With...feelings...?* These concepts had never occurred to him in the meeting rooms of the CIA. Then, it had only been about the mission, about the details. About the concrete facts and the way to play them. "What do you think your place in the universe is?" asked Hap.

The place of my species is to live on Procyon-4. My place is to facilitate the relationship between my species and your species.

"What do you mean that your people's place is to live? Isn't that a tautology? You're meant to live because you're already alive?"

The verb to live has many meanings in English, Mr. Lufkin. It is the same on Procyon-4. I mean it in all the ways that you could possibly mean it. To exist, yes. But to thrive. To wonder why. To participate. To learn and to make connections with other forms of life. To appreciate. To enjoy the appreciation. To recognize the enjoyment of appreciation and to offer it freely to other forms of life. All this and more. Isn't that what it means to live, Mr. Lufkin?

"I have not spent much time considering what it means to live, Esther," admitted Hap.

That is a very big difference between my people and your people, Mr. Lufkin. It is not too much to say that it is the main difference between us.

Hap considered this seriously but it was a bit too much for him to really comprehend. "Perhaps you're right," is all he said.

What is the purpose of the CIA? asked Esther suddenly.

During his time alone Hap had anticipated this question. He knew that Esther already knew what he thought about the CIA because she could read his mind. But he also thought that she would ask him at some point, if for no other reason than to make a point. Now, the time had come. *Alright, let's participate in the experience of relationship,*

thought Hap to Esther. "The purpose of the CIA is to ensure the opportunity for Americans to live free from oppression and tyranny."

With all due respect, doesn't that seem ludicrous to you, Mr. Lufkin?

"Ludicrous how?"

The means employed are counter to the stated goal. The consequences are the opposite of your intended result. That is obvious to you at some level but you are not ready to admit it.

"Esther, let me say that if we wish to participate in the experience of relationship it will not work well for you to tell me what I think. I know what I think. And although you think you know what I think, it's really me who is doing the thinking. And I can't do that thinking if you are always telling me what I am already thinking or about to think."

Esther was quiet for a few seconds and then did something surprising. She blinked. A milky white film ascended over both her enormous bright-dark eyes, and then it descended again. Hap wondered at it briefly before she spoke. *What is the purpose of the CIA, Mr. Lufkin? I believe that was the question we were discussing?*

"Yes, and I told you my answer."

But it is not the answer you really believe. I don't need to be telepathic to know that, Mr. Lufkin. I can see it in your eyes.

This up-ended Hap's scheme. He had been trained in the CIA how to defeat a polygraph test by putting his mind into a neutral state and putting aside any analysis of what he was saying. This allowed his brain to say things that were not true without his body betraying that they were not true. Hap had hoped that if he maintained a lie that he claimed he believed in that Esther would not be able to convince him otherwise. *That will give me the edge I need to meet her at her own game*, he had thought to himself when he was alone. But now it wasn't working. "What do you see in my eyes?" he asked, stalling for time.

Esther stood up and left the room by the brown door. As she did so she said *When you are ready to have a conversation as friends I will be ready also. In the meantime, please make yourself comfortable and*

think carefully about whether you are ready to go to Procyon-4. I will come for your answer in approximately two hours.

Hap tried to protest but the rustling leaves left him talking to himself. The door to the rose garden was left open. He used the outhouse, which smelled of red cedar, and then went to the rose garden room. He walked the meandering path that led to the space window and sat down on the little bench. He knew he would go to Procyon-4. There was no way he was going to miss the chance to see another world. But Esther was right. If he was going to visit an alien planet he was going to need to trust her like a friend. She was all he had going into that mission. *The intel is going to be solid gold.*

*

Two hours later, Esther walked the path through the rose garden and joined Hap at the space window. The ship was turning and Hap could see Earth coming into view. It was the familiar blue and white ball that he had seen so many times before in photographs and videos. But there was absolutely nothing to compare with the beauty and majesty of seeing it for himself...of feeling the distances involved.

Gently, Esther's telepathic voice came into Hap's brain. *This is what I wanted to show you.*

She was right. It was a wonderful surprise. He also understood that she meant it as an opportunity for him to say goodbye before they left for Procyon. He looked at his home planet for a long time and then sighed. "I'm ready, Esther."

She was silent for a moment and then said *Mr. Lufkin, before we go to Procyon-4, there is something you need to understand.*

"What is it?" he asked, still looking at Earth through the window.

That planet there is in danger.

"Yes, I know. That's why we signaled you. We--"

And the biggest danger to that planet is not the aliens.

"It isn't?"

No.

“What is the biggest danger to Earth?” he asked, seriously.

The CIA.

This thought began as a tiny particle of hot energy in one corner of his brain and then exploded like chain lightning. “What the hell do you mean?” He felt a surge of hot anger through his limbs and he had the sudden desire to ring Esther’s neck, but he kept his hands in his robe pockets and fumed.

Please remain calm and I will tell you what I mean.

“Yeah? Well, start talking. Because I’ve worked for that agency my whole life and I’ll you what-“

Please remain calm. Anger undermines reasonability.

Hap balled his hands into fists inside his robe pockets as tightly as he could, but then he relaxed them. He sat down on the bench facing Earth and he breathed. He waited for Esther to explain herself and finally she did.

Mr. Lufkin, the fact that you have worked for the agency for much of your life in no way qualifies the work that the agency does. It is difficult for you to accept that the work you are doing is not for the benefit of-

“Not for the benefit?!” Hap shouted at her suddenly and she recoiled, sliding to the edge of the bench. *There! She was frightened.*

I was not frightened, Mr. Lufkin. I was disarming your anger by granting you more space. Please try to remain reasonable or things will not go very well.

Hap nodded, remembering that he needed to actually *be* her friend, since she would know if he didn’t think of her that way. He tried to rationalize his position. “Our work has made more peace on Earth than we have had in a thousand years, and if you think that-“

Mr. Lufkin, what is the purpose of the CIA?

Hap closed his eyes. “To protect the interests of the American people and-“

Mr. Lufkin. What is the purpose of the CIA?

Hap shook his head. *I'm not going to get around this, am I?*

No, Mr. Lufkin, you are not. Before we go to Procyon-4, you need to learn to be honest with me...in order to be honest with yourself.

"Don't you already know?"

But you need to know. And you need to participate.

"What do I need to know?"

Tell me what the purpose of the CIA actually is and I will tell you what you need to know.

Hap folded his hands and then unfolded them and then closed his eyes and then opened him. He put his hands behind his head and then sighed, and then inhaled, and then sighed. *I can't believe I am doing this.* After a few moments to steady himself, he spoke the words. *"World domination."*

There was a long silence during which Hap felt like a traitor. Then Esther said *The biggest threat to that planet is world domination, Mr. Lufkin.*

Hap was quiet for a long time. Deep in his heart, he knew that she was right. But he didn't want to believe in that. He didn't want to accept it. But there she was, a life-sized (though diminutive) grey alien from Procyon-4 who had access to interstellar travel, cloaking technology, and telepathy. And she was telling him that the CIA was the worst thing in the world. *Good God...where did I go wrong?* He placed his head in his hands and wondered if Esther was just using her telepathy to break him down...but he also knew that that was fanciful. She had done everything right. She had been patient and understanding and even supportive. He had trusted her enough to say it...to get passage to Procyon...to see for himself. So there it was. *World domination. What a stupid idea.* After a few moments, he said *"Esther...You said that the main difference between our species is that ours does not know how to live..."*

Yes, that is quite true.

“How does your species know how to live?”

The best way for you to understand my species is to go between the stars, Mr. Lufkin. Are you ready?

“Yes, I think I am. What will happen?”

We will open a portal through the dark matter nerves of the Milky Way, and we will travel them. During the passage, you will feel very disoriented, and perhaps afraid, the first time. But it gets easier. When we emerge, you will see a world inhabited by a species you know very little about.

“How do you open the wormhole?”

We use our knowledge of energy, time, and space.

“Will I see anything?”

No, you will not see it because this window will not face it . But you will feel it. It would be best if you remained sitting.

“When will we go?”

Whenever you are ready to go through the wormhole.

*

Chapter 2 in the Procyon 2054 Series: Through the Wormhole...