

## DOCTOR ALIEN

by Rajnar Vajra

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*Illustration by John Allemand*

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Fixing an abnormality is hard enough when you know what's normal—and a whole lot harder when you don't!

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Funny thing about emotions. While they can be blended ten thousand ways, the basic ingredients are so very limited. Example? Fear. In my case, I'm terrified of performing a fairly ordinary human activity: public speaking. And here I was, about to step into a situation outside all human experience, yet I felt *exactly* the kind of sick fluttering in my stomach I get every time I'm pressured into addressing my fellow psychiatrists at an APA convention.

Of course the door in front of me, the inner portal, opened in the direction I least expected, sliding straight downward into a previously hidden slot in the floor. How much more intimidating, I asked myself, can this get? Then I realized that in this setting, the top wasn't necessarily the top.

I'd been warned the thermostat here would be set lower than I'd find comfortable—at least my hosts-to-be had conveyed that much—so I wasn't surprised to find the airlock chilly after it had pressurized and I'd stripped down to my hooded smartsuit; but as that inner door descended, whoa! A shock of coldness slapped my face, numbed my cheeks, made my eyes water, and stuffed my nostrils with tiny icicles. No problem. My smartsuit reacted and buried wires radiated warmth. I patted my chest pocket to make sure the photo of my wife and son hadn't overpowered the valence zipper and fallen out, gave my vacuum gear tucked into the airlock's safety netting a longing glance, picked up my case, then cautiously stepped into the alien space station.

Still light as fluff, I tiptoed over the blue "neutral" band acting as a kind of foyer and pushed through a filmy decontamination membrane. I took one

step out onto dark, rubbery matting and *thud*. The large case I'd been toting by its carrying strap was snatched from my hand and hit the floor, hard. I nearly joined it. Normal gravity would've been a shock after eight hours of mostly the micro kind, and suddenly I weighed half again my weight on Earth, a nice trick since the station wasn't spinning. The Tsf had been specific for once about the weight increase to expect, but honestly, I hadn't believed synthetic gravity would change so fast. And despite a crash course in Tsf Trader culture, I hadn't imagined Trader headquarters in our solar system would smell like burnt vanilla beans or be as noisy as a plague of cicadas.

My ignorance wasn't NASA's fault. These aliens hadn't revealed much about this station. And until now, no woman, man, bug, animal, or plant from Earth had ever been invited here into the parent ship, although it had been right in our backyard, orbiting the moon for the last three years.

But I sighed with relief because no one greeted me. Among Traders, any welcome visitor was supposed to stroll into a Tsf dwelling as if they owned it. Should one of them have been waiting by the entrance, even holding out a Hawaiian lei, it would've meant I wasn't wanted, conceivably a fatal condition for a human dealing with this species. Unless said human had, say, a loaded bazooka. Some enterprising thieves had learned that the hardest way.

My case, unscathed, automatically unfolded into a multipurpose acceleration couch, slower than when I'd seen it demoed at the Kennedy Space Center, and began following me like a faithful basset when I ignored the implied invitation and staggered forward.

The room before me was an extremely long and rectangular box, rather tunnellike and mostly ivory colored, with blue and russet equipment or perhaps furniture laid along the floor in tidy linear patterns, everything fastened in place with bolts that could've supported the Golden Gate Bridge. I glanced up. The high ceiling held more equipment in similar patterns and with identical bolts. Interesting, I'd never thought of gravity control as a means to squeeze more use out of a room. Wall panels glowed, casting a bright, faintly pinkish illumination. I hoped my upgraded DM, its icon curled around my right ring finger, was functioning properly and recording every detail; I'd studied pictures of several Earthside Trading Posts, and they'd looked nothing like this. But then, they'd been set up for human aesthetics.

I counted a dozen Tsf fifty yards ahead and was grateful to have a moment to adjust to their appearance before having to interact. They were

more grotesque in the flesh than in photographs, which is saying something.

None were taller than me, most several inches shorter, but each took up more floor space due to having ten outer legs plus three central, somewhat hidden ones directly supporting the “gondola” containing their circulatory pump, cranium, and digestive mechanisms. They resembled neither spiders nor octopi. The jointless outer limbs were thin but muscular and descended in a smooth arc. Halfway down each one, a thick bundle of cilia wriggled, reminding me of those fiber-optic threads used for hokey Christmas trees. According to our science gurus, sensory organs tipped the medium-sized hairs while the longest ones were used as hands and fingers. The shortest and most numerous ones, only an inch or so long, made clicking sounds as they changed position, the Tsf way of speaking. I was the only person in the room wearing clothes.

So far everything was going by the book, line by paragraph. Sure enough, I could breathe the air, handle the gravity, and keep my lunch down. My only real problem, aside from anxiety enough for two cowards and the dissociative numbing to be expected in such a surreal situation, was that my mission still made no sense to me. I told myself that more experienced human heads than mine knew what they were doing.

It wasn't until I'd lumbered halfway to my alien hosts that my confidence in the experts nosedived. They'd told me, with a certainty only possible for people who planned to remain safe at home, that the Tsf would ignore my presence until I initiated conversation, but now, most of the medium-length hairs in the room pointed straight at me. And the clicking chatter sped up, evidently, every Tsf talking at once—foolish me, I'd thought they were loud before. Sounded like a thousand car mechanics ratcheting away. Next time, I promised myself, earplugs. Better yet, no next time.

My case-couch nudged the back of my knees, but I still didn't take the hint. I certainly felt the extra eighty-six pounds I carried at the moment, but I keep myself very fit, I *have* to, so I didn't need the support. Yet. But I stopped anyway. My hosts were turning back and forth in place, a dozen slow-motion ballerinas, while their sensory cilia kept themselves aimed at me with the steadiness of telescope clock-drives. My anxiety blasted off without so much as a countdown while my buck-fifty weight made me feel horribly weak. For the first time in my life, I had a visceral sense of what it might be like to be morbidly obese. Which was humbling, since I'd *treated* obese people and had pretended to understand them. But there's nothing like terror to deflect mere humiliation, and what scared the shame out of me

was the two Tsf barreling my way in high-gravity-defying leaps.

They stopped nearby, distant enough so that I didn't quite panic and make a futile break for the airlock, but close enough to me to learn that they smelled like curry, which implied the burnt-vanilla odor wasn't coming off them. Each was distinct enough in shape and coloration for me to easily tell them apart, but all their fingers, their longest cilia, were lavender, so if my information was correct, they were both males at the moment. The smaller alien held a Tsf interpreter: a device shaped like a doughnut with bicycle spokes. The larger Tsf clicked away and the machine provided a running translation in a version of English that meandered from obsolete to bizarre, with frequent side trips to stuffy and obscure. Plenty of slang, most of it antique. Traders, I guessed, had done the cliché thing and had been monitoring our radio and TV transmissions. For at least a century.

"Our regrets and apologies," the largest one chattered. "Our bad. We never intended such staring rudeness. Here's lies the skinny: each of us, unknown to each other, was so hot to see it happen. As true as I am called Deal-of-ten-lifetimes, which you know I am, and my comrade is known as Best-offer, which you know he is, we all hang our gondolas in shame."

Hot to see *what* happen? And while Deal's words were disarming, the tenor voice the translator used for him sounded cold, almost sullen; I tried not to read anything into it. Still, as far as my fundamental expectations went, I was back on semi-solid ground. Deal's oblique introductions fit what I'd been told was the Tsf sense of propriety. The idea was that we were already familiars, making a straightforward exchange of names inappropriate.

Of course, NASA had already told them my name, but I was supposed to not-introduce myself anyway. I usually go by "Al" or "Doc" but had been told to use the official moniker for this first greeting. "As certain as my name is Doctor Alanso J. Morganson, I noticed no rudeness whatsoever." I hoped their culture had no taboos against the paler sort of lie. "Um, if I may ask, what were you hoping to see?"

"You may indeed ask. Anything and always. Curiosity, as Traders say, brushes wisdom." Again, the words were friendly if eccentric, but the tone came across otherwise. Deal, in a gesture lost on me, lifted a leg and lightly swept its tip across my forehead. Considering Tsf abilities, he could've poked a hole through my skull just as easily. "We believed you'd be altering your size to make yourself more comfy in this gravity field."

"My size?"

“Isn’t a human of your profession referred to as a ‘shrink’?”

“Ah. We seem to have a slight misunderstanding. What’re supposed to shrink, if I do my job right, are my patient’s emotional problems.” Didn’t seem wise to tell these walking craniums that the term was short for “headshrinker.”

“Go figure. Our bad, again.”

I lowered my voice. “Is my patient somewhere in this room?”

That got a reaction; Deal shuddered all over. “Awkward,” he said. “We Traders maintain stable emotional orbits and suffer no mental flaws.”

“Sorry, I thought—wait! You mean my patient isn’t a Trader?”

“Most assuredly correct. In fact, if you will forgive me for expressing it so harshly in your terms: no way, Jose.”

That “Jose” threw me. Why would they suddenly use my middle name?

“Doctor, I wonder if our interpreting machine is functioning with full propriety.” I was wondering that myself. “It seemed you referred to your patients in the singular.”

Uh-oh. “I’ve got more than one?”

“It is a unique happenstance, but we have recently collected a triad of beings, no two alike, and all unfamiliar to Traders. We cannot comprehend their behaviors nor have yet ascertained their points of origin.”

Three aliens utterly alien to these aliens. Oh—my—God. I’d never remembered to ask what NASA had asked in trade for my services, but hadn’t much cared since I wouldn’t be earning it. But now it dawned on me with that classic sinking feeling that if I screwed up here by doing some actual harm, my failure could jeopardize Tsf-human relations. And with three total unknowns, how could I even guess what would harm?

I tried to sound calm. “Please tell me more.”

“We have little to relate. We rescued two of your patients from damaged starcraft, the third was a chucknoland found on a world similar to

your Mars.”

“I’m sorry. What’s a chucknoland?”

Deal hesitated. “Our translator has failed? Let me elaborate. I refer to a being forced to abandon their vessel who attempts to thrive beyond civilization.”

I snapped my fingers and every Trader in the room clicked loudly. Had I made a faux pas? Or were they were all just saying, “bless you”?

“Sorry about the snap, didn’t mean anything by it. And I don’t know where the translator came up with chucknoland, but I think you mean a castaway.”

“Then we have attained a bitchin’ mutual understanding. Now, I must sound a klaxon. Shortly, within six of your minutes if we comprehend your temporal and counting systems, and we do, we must make all Trader occupants of this station four and three fifths times heavier for five and two thirteenth minutes.”

That news upset me and not because of the picky fractions. The Tsf had informed Earth about the periodic gravity boosts, but wouldn’t say how much or for how long. My handlers had guessed light and short. They’d had no idea why the aliens weren’t more forthcoming.

“Dig this,” Deal continued, “our muscles would soon atrophy and our skeletal fibers de-mineralize in this wimpy gravity without frequent relief.”

“Why not stay heavy all the time?”

“If only. That would be prohibitively energy expensive since each added dollop of gravity requires exponentially more power.” His translator coated the statement with condescension. “May I show you to your stateroom where we can send you real-time images of your patients while you remain immune from increased weight? Or would you prefer to see them directly? Or would you care to leave our parent ship and forget everything the Master Traders have employed you to do?”

“I keep getting the impression you don’t think I’m up for it.” If so, Deal and I were in perfect agreement.

“I *think* you are wasting your time and mine. The finest Tsf minds are focused on these problems; what could a human possibly add? But my

thoughts are weightless since I'm not in charge. So, of the three options I offered, and I do recommend the final choice, what's your cup of tea?"

So much for the famous Trader politeness, but the question was good. And so was another: could I handle the upcoming change? I'd trained on a scaled-up centrifuge, a carnival ride designed by sadists as I'd described it to my wife, working up to three minutes at 7g, which jacked my 172 lbs to about 1,200, double what my NASA coaches claimed would be "worst case" conditions. I was the only mental-care professional on their short list who could handle anything approaching that—ironic considering my condition—so I got hired. By hired I mean drafted.

But since the gravity here was already too strong for my comfort, the coming increase would leave me nearly as heavy as during my training and for almost twice as long. Even with a smartsuit cum g-suit, inflating as needed to keep blood from pooling away from my brain, the experience sounded ghastly. Also I'd "grayed-out" more than once during my carnival rides, temporarily becoming colorblind. What if color provided important clues concerning my patients?

What was I thinking? *My patients?* Was I really moronic enough to continue with this farce? I'd had no idea how I was supposed to provide therapy to Traders, and we knew a *little* about Traders. This would be a shot in the dark, blindfolded. Anyone with the intelligence of a squirrel on up would've chosen Deal's third option, pled incompetence, and bowed out fast.

I just couldn't bring myself to do it, not yet. Deal's contempt had invoked what my wife calls my "stubborn edges." Foolish, I know, but sometimes I'm a fool. Still, I didn't have to be stupid and squished. I opened my mouth to accept the stateroom invitation and then had two nasty thoughts. What if one or more of the mystery aliens was in some sort of crisis and lack of proximity hid important cues? Also, it might be useful to learn how well I could operate under the extreme condition.

"I'll visit your guests in person. Could you let me know a minute or so before you turn on the heavy?"

"You bet your bippy. If you desire to experience failure, please follow me."

Strange. Deal's hostility went against everything I'd heard about Traders. Also, what was a "bippy," and why would I want to bet it?

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A large sheet of transparent material separated the large room and its two occupants from the rest of the station. That seemed a good thing, not only because one of said occupants appeared dangerous as hell, but because the yellow-brown smog tinting the room's atmosphere didn't look like anything I'd care to inhale.

"I suppose," I said, "the big one's my patient?"

Deal waved a few legs around. "Yes, the other is a mechanical entity whose only function, to our knowledge, is disposing of the organic entity's wastes, a useful task since the organic refuses to utilize our lavatory facilities."

"A sanitation robot."

"An apt if redundant description. From its increasing torpidity, we believe its power is failing. Soon we will remove it and attempt to restore its mojo."

The machine resembled R2-D2 from the antique *StarWars* movies so much, I would've laughed if the thing next to it wasn't so frightening.

My patient stood eight or nine feet tall, face like a tiger, but with steely spikes jutting from its scalp. A punk predator. The larger spikes on its back implied defense against something I didn't care to imagine. It had six limbs not counting its long flat tail, four of which served as arms with six-fingered hands, and an upright body that seemed equally feline and reptilian. No clothes, but short brown fur with variegated green stripes; no obvious sexual organs. Claws eased out of the fingers, gleaming metallicly. The tiger-lizard stared at me with yellow, yellow eyes, then became anything but still, jumping every which way while providing a soothing accompaniment of God-awful howls and screeches.

"What's the gravity in there?" I asked.

"Presently, no different than out here."

Yikes. Jumping that high under these circumstances was impressive. And alarming. The phrase "bouncing off the walls" popped into my head, which annoyed me; thinking in clichés in here could lead to a clichéd and utterly inaccurate diagnosis. Even with the glassy barrier in the way, the noise rattled my teeth and drowned out the distant clacking from the main

room. My latest responsibility drooled.

I turned toward Deal, to my right. Best-offer flanked me on my other side. “You sure,” I shouted to be heard over the racket, “this ... individual is intelligent?”

The tiger abruptly quieted down; otherwise, I would’ve missed the translation. “Our guest,” Deal said, “is seldom this exuberant and may have been excited by seeing you.” Right, the way a lion gets excited by a gazelle. “We found him or her or it alone except for the robot in a damaged spacecraft with appointments and controls obviously designed for this specific species under microgravity conditions.”

“Why only under microgravity?”

“If the craft were logically oriented on a solid planetary surface, the controls would remain out of his, her, or its reach unless he, she, or it, constantly performed acrobatics big time. As you see, our guest has the requisite chops, but we feel such bouncing would be impractical for operating that ship’s form of complex manually-controlled navigation system.”

“I suppose. Speaking of impractical, can we agree to use, um, ‘her’ as the pronoun?”

Deal and Best-offer exchanged a series of clacks that weren’t translated. “A consistent gender-defining term would be groovy with us in the interests of efficiency, always bearing in mind that we dare not conclude childbearing abilities due to an absence of well-hung attributes. Consider my own presently subtle genitalia.”

That little speech seemed to rattle around in my head for a minute before it dropped into the comprehension chute. “Have you been able to communicate with her at all?”

“You are uptight that you may be in a first-contact situation rather than a therapeutic one, where we have no basis of communication?”

“Well, yes.” Deal understood me better than I’d expected.

He waved a leg expressively, or at least gracefully since I had no idea what the gesture expressed. “Chill out, Doctor, although in another of your cases your fears may just possibly have merit. We have deciphered this patient’s language—logically, it must be hers—by the usual means, and

have had similar success with the third patient you will see, but neither has been willing or able to speak with us. This is one reason we suspected emotional impairment in both cases, likely due to trauma, which impelled my superiors to request human assistance.” The tone implied, “Bad idea.”

Deal’s clacking quieted as though turning confidential. I had to concentrate to catch the translation, which also grew quieter. “Your species reputedly suffers an astonishing array of such impairments, so our Council of Masters foolishly believes you must be the galaxy’s foremost experts in the field. No offense projected.”

I fought back a grin. “None taken. But what *is* the usual means for figuring out an alien language?”

“You don’t know?”

The superior tone galled me. “It’s not the sort of problem we’ve had to deal with yet.”

“So primitive, and yet I am here to answer your every question. The technique involves activating and studying an instructional protocol imbedded in the alien vessel’s data-management system. Of course we rely on our own data controller for initial deciphering.”

“Huh. Why would anyone put language lessons on their own ship’s computer?”

Deal tapped one leg against the floor, I’d bet impatiently. “Most starfaring species capable of even rudimentary foresight will anticipate spacecraft failures and possible rescue by helpful but unknown aliens. Therefore they make it easy to open communications.”

I shook my head. “Easy? How’s it even possible?”

Deal’s tapping sped up. “If I must educate you, such instruction, usually visual, is typically activated when the potential rescuer demonstrates ignorance of the damaged vessel’s operating systems.”

“You mean when someone starts pushing buttons at random?”

“If you mean ‘buttons’ in a figurative sense, Doctor. Instruction most often commences with simple counting of objects to reveal the numeration symbols and number base involved. Then the mathematical operators are defined through their operations, again demonstrated visually, which leads

to an array of prepositions and predicates. From there, context supplies an expanding field of comprehension with ever more complex axioms. Often live actors or animations of living beings act out various—”

My patient emitted a particularly loud screech and began chewing on her own tail. I lost track of Deal’s spiel although I’d already gotten the gist, but I noticed when he wound down.

“So to get back to my question, you haven’t been able—”

“To communicate with her, no. Our exchanges have been limited to one success: by offering a variety of nutritional substances, solid and liquid, we have learned to feed her.” I got the impression Deal was embarrassed by their failure to do more. “Likewise, we have not yet found sufficient navigational cues in her starship’s data array to identify her home world.”

“Hmm. Maybe they don’t necessarily want strangers knowing where they live.”

“Spot on, although obvious. I have also been ordered to mention that this one has recently begun displaying an attribute we’ve never encountered before. My superiors think it best for you to see this for yourself and draw your own conclusions before we offer our more sophisticated ones.”

“Okay. What I need to take a stab at this job is some idea of what constitutes normal behavior for this species. If you found language lessons in movie format on her spacecraft, did you find any other visual recordings?”

Deal rubbed three legs together. “Gnarly logic, I must admit, and the answer is yes. A series of such recordings await you in your stateroom, frequency-shifted for the limited human optical range. Would you care to go there now, or would you prefer misunderstanding another of your patients?”

Mainly, I wanted to stop seeing patient one. She scared me. “Let’s move on to the next. I’d like an overview.”

“Righteous. But I must warn you, as you demanded, that a therapeutic gravity bump is due in one minute.”

I nodded and lay down on my self-propelled furniture. “Thanks.” Now I’d find out just how therapeutic my acceleration couch was. I gazed at my Data Manager icon and muttered an activation phrase. The luminous ring

uncurled and floated upward, expanding into a virtual touchscreen displaying a fisheye view of the area. My two flanking Traders neglected to gasp or at least click in wonder at this demonstration of human technology. But then, they couldn't see it. I reached up and pushed the target cursor onto the distorted image of Deal then poked a finger through the impalpable enter button. It was a relief to let my hand drop since my arm was getting very heavy.

"Lead on, please," I said as my weight relentlessly increased. I ignored the prompt for continuance and after a moment the touchscreen shrank, curled, and resumed its post around my ring finger. "This contraption will follow you now." So I hoped. The new CPU element of my Data Manager was far more advanced than any upgrade you'd find at Electronics-R-Us, and its increased features gave it more scope for errors.

Deal backed away, and, glory be, my craft rolled along behind him. Without turning, the Trader moved in a dead straight line down the middle of the hallway, a trickier feat for someone without a ring of eyes. My back support, which had felt delightfully comfortable when I lay down, morphing to match my contours, felt harder every second.

The smartsuit tightened around my legs and I helped by tensing my leg muscles; the brain, like Dracula, needs its blood. But everything was starting to ache. And I had nearly five minutes of weighing over 1,000 pounds to go.

"Do you remain in vibrant health?" Deal asked, the tone sounding bored.

"Yes," I lied in a choked voice. It's hard to breathe in high-g, let alone talk; the diaphragm tends to clench as part of an overall Support-the-Spine-At-All-Costs instinct, a kind of hyper-Valsalva effort. I imagine one could experience something similar by lying supine with a hundred-pound Olympic weight or three on one's tummy. How, I wondered, did those rare unfortunates on the far end of the obese bell-curve manage? I've heard of cases where people weighed more than I did right now.

"Sadly for you, our science isn't yet capable of isolating individuals from the surrounding gravity without limiting their spatial movements."

"I just ... wish ... we could ... control ... gravity ... at all."

"Do you? Then why didn't your government require that information as payment for your ... expertise?" The translator did a fine job of expressing

sarcasm.

I would've let my jaw drop except I wasn't sure I could close it again.  
"You'd ... trade—"

"Trading is what we do. Goods, services, information, anything. *If* you can deliver, and even you must know how probable that is. But bide! Look behind you. Your first patient is performing the unique maneuver I mentioned."

"Walk back, please. Can't turn my head."

"You are tragically weak." Deal stepped around me and returned to the transparent shield. My go-cart spun around and followed. When it stopped, I ordered my DM to put the couch into voice-controlled mode. Although by then, I didn't have much voice to work with.

"Turn. Clockwise. Don't mean you, Deal. Stop. Still not you, Deal. Raise head."

After all this hassle, I saw no change in my punk tiger at first. Then, slowly, its coloration intensified and kept getting increasingly vivid. The claws and spikes turned luminous, and the golden eyes blazed enough to resemble searchlights.

"What?" I croaked.

"Keep your peepers peeled, Doctor. Truly, I've never seen her perform this feat nearly so powerfully. She keeps improving at this and doubtless even a primitive will find the results totally rad."

Rad? Short for radish? Or radium? And nothing happened except I began losing my battle to stay calm, and on two fronts. One was my growing irritation with Deal. The other and more immediate concern was air. I kept assuring myself that I was getting enough but didn't find me convincing. And sure enough, just then my peripheral vision flickered and went out and the blindness gradually crept its way inward. Which is why I thought my eyes were playing tricks when my patient became a ghostly shape, losing all color and most of her solidity. I could see right through her.

"There!" the Trader announced, clicking with extra force. "Isn't that special?"

“What—ah! That feels *good*.” One point five g was easy now. My chest hurt, but it was lovely to breathe again. The tiger reappeared, but cloaked in no more than her initial glory. “What happened?”

“We resumed operating gravity.”

“I mean, what happened to my patient?”

“Consider that for yourself while we mosey to your next appointment.”

I hadn't a clue, and that statement applied to this entire fiasco. What the hell was I doing? I hated to admit that Deal was right, but I really was useless here. And still, my pride wouldn't let me call it quits. When I got home, I'd be sure to buy *The Complete Idiot's Guide To Idiocy*, if such a book existed. It's not that I wasn't doing splendidly on my own, but it's always good to sharpen one's game.

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We didn't have to “mosey” far, which was nice since my leg muscles trembled when I got off my couch and stood up. Patient two appeared comfortingly simian if you overlooked trivial details such as six arms, two thick legs in front and a scrawny one in back, mottled turquoise hair, and two pairs of surplus eyes. I guessed this one was male, judging by the way its tunic-like wrapping bulged in the front crotch area, and Deal agreed to use the masculine gender but grumbled that appearances among aliens not only could be deceptive, but usually were. At least I was no longer the only clothed person in this nudist colony.

I couldn't begin to interpret the ape's behavior. He stood calmly as he stared at us with the top two eyes, the brown and green one, while all six of his hands moved incessantly, flicking sideways as if pushing aside some little nuisance or flipping up and down at random. If this was some form of sign language, why didn't he stop and wait for some return gestures? And if the only signs were those of desperation, why was he obviously more focused on his hands than on us? The constant motion reminded me of water flowing down a steep streambed, cascading over the larger rocks. It also reminded me of something else I'd seen. I couldn't say what....

“This being is the one we found on an otherwise uninhabited planet and whose language we have been unable to unfurl through no fault of our own,” Deal said. His clicking had a stiffer and more precise cadence than usual, reminiscent of marching band snare rhythms. “The only spacecraft we could find was a miniature spiraling lander such as many alien voyagers

use in emergencies.” Voyagers, I thought, who didn’t get dizzy.

“No Berlitz lessons available, I take it?”

“Minimal electronics, but a sizable cache of consumables.”

“Does he stop gesturing when he eats?”

“No, but if you insist on hassling me with irrelevant questions, his paw motions diminish by one third because he requires two paws to handle his nourishment. And he constantly rotates the pair he uses.”

I observed the castaway for a few more minutes but learned nothing except that his gesturing became hypnotic after a while. I was surprised the Traders, with their super technology, hadn’t been able to spot the starship he’d evidently had to abandon, assuming it was orbiting the world where he’d been rescued. Then again, without knowing the starship’s shape, albedo, composition, or orbital distance, perhaps it wouldn’t be easy to find.

Where *had* I seen hand movements like that before?

“Will I have time to see my next patient before the next gravity change?” I asked.

“Surely. Follow me.”

Deal’s body posture had changed the instant I mentioned visiting patient three, and when I glanced over at Best-offer, he’d changed similarly. Both Tsf had pulled their legs in closer to their gondolas and stood taller. Their new positions struck me as defensive, but I didn’t have quite enough arrogance to trust my ability to decipher an extraterrestrial body language.

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Still, something about my final patient clearly had a big impact on my tour guides. It—and we agreed that “it” was the bon mot in this case—sure had an impact on me. The two previous rescued souls had seemed highly exotic, but alike enough to terrestrial life so that I could compare them to Earth animals. I could relate. This new one was something else. Alien in the spookiest sense.

For one thing, it was flat enough to ooze out from under a door or a rock, practically two-dimensional. Talk about your flat affect. For another, it was unbelievably slow, creeping across the room with all the haste of a

tired slug. It wasn't nearly as pretty as a slug, not with all those translucent, twisted protrusions placed seemingly at random on that nearly shadow-thin gray body; not with so many rotten-cucumber-green claws or hooks, most scattered over the protrusions, some projecting directly from its torso, the universe's ugliest picture hangers. Small discolorations that could've been sensory organs or ulcers completed the ensemble, and I'm embarrassed to admit that the sight of my patient left me nauseated.

On impulse, I decided to take a chance and turned toward Deal. "What makes this specimen more important to you than the others?"

The Trader went rigid. If I'd guessed right, this might help my reputation here, which just might prevent my stock from plummeting to zero point nothing when—not if—I failed at my main job. But Deal wasn't clicking and I started worrying. Then Best-offer spoke up, which startled me since he hadn't thrown a word in my direction until now.

"As my esteemed associate remains muted from his shock and disappointment, I will assume his diplomatic duties on the basis of a brief stewardship." The translator device used a deep, raspy tone for Best-offer's voice. "Is that hunky-dory with you?"

"Um. Sure. Why's he shocked and disappointed?"

"I am honor bound not to spill the beans. Unless you have something worthwhile to trade for the legumes in question?"

At least I was consistent: I didn't understand anyone or anything on this station. But I had the feeling I'd just missed something significant. "I—just tell me about this alien."

"Super. We found the dude adrift on the galactic attenuation adjacent to your planetary system. His ship, an organic-electronic, had been trashed by a collision and most of its atmosphere had flown the co-op."

"The coop?"

"Whatever. The surviving data organisms, after some sweet-talkin', provided language instruction and some general information, but were too whacked to do their thing with navigation, life support, propulsion, and repair. We checked out the traces of atmosphere. Unique."

"How so?"

“No trace of water vapor. Every intelligent life form we had previously encountered in our travels requires some amount of dihydrogen monoxide. There may be clever crystals or sentient flames hangin’ out somewhere, but we have never consciously crossed their paths.”

“So I imagine you’re keeping my patient dry in there?”

“Duh. Water is almost certainly toxic for an entity adapted to such an arid atmosphere.”

Interesting, but were my hosts evading my original question? “And the importance of this species?”

Best-offer didn’t go mute, but he spoke slowly as though weighing each click. “The ship’s data organisms were royally screwed, Doctor. Aside from the abstract visual patterns automatically generated when we triggered the language lesson sequence, we could glom on to only one distinct image: a star map with a heap of color-coded connecting lines.”

“I don’t—wait. You figure you’ve stumbled onto some galactic empire?”

“Not close and no cigar. We doubt it’s coincidental that we use very similar maps.”

“Oh. Another species of traders?”

On my other side, Deal returned to life. “From the map and the starship’s cargo,” he said, “we are confident they operate much as we do.”

“A rival.”

“Conceivably. But frankly, dear Doctor, we don’t give a damn because that’s not the big deal. Will you bite?”

“Will I what?”

“Are you hearing, language, or attention impaired? To rephrase, are you *interested?*”

Couldn’t help it, I laughed. “Okay, I’ll bite.”

“Their star map, however rotated, didn’t match the configurations of our galaxy. Our guest, we believe, is a visitor from another.” Now his clicks

came fast and loud. “I doubt you have the capacity to understand, but the trading possibilities are awesome. And a ship from even a relatively near island universe, perforce, likely utilizes propulsion techniques far in advance of ours and perhaps communication techniques equally advanced, although these issues are uncertain considering the time scale commensurate with your patient’s movements.”

Strange to think of the Tsf faster-than-light drive being second rate to anyone’s. My NASA advisors would’ve chewed off their own legs for a practical *near* light-speed drive.

I gazed at my patient with new eyes. How could a creature that moved like cold syrup, however technologically advanced, do business with faster folks? At least it wouldn’t make any hasty bargains. “Do you know which galaxy the map shows?”

“We are working on that, but the project is complex since the image is limited and the map supplies no directional cues such as the position of what you humans call the Great Attractor.”

I had a thought. “It must’ve taken forever for the language instruction sequence to finish.”

“Hardly, the program was interactive. The student set the pace, and our student, this station’s data controller, is a quick study.”

Damn. If it weren’t for that interactivity, I’d have some notion of how fast this fellow *should* be operating. Still, I saw another possible angle. “Did the instruction include audio?”

Deal lifted several legs in sequence, another gesture that was lost on me. “You wish to know if we can produce the creature’s actual speech.”

“Right.”

“An obvious question and the answer is yes, with the assistance of our translator doohickey.”

“Have you tried setting your translator to speak *very* slowly?”

“Certainly. And we have essayed communication in written form. Assuming our guest digs this particular language—and why provide language instruction otherwise?—it hasn’t responded to us. Nor has it eaten, although we’ve offered it a variety of dehydrated substances. Thus

we suspect some mental or emotional defect, perhaps stress induced, which may also account for its remarkably torpid movements.”

Following an old and bad habit, I tried to gnaw on a knuckle but tasted smartsuit instead. “I’m going to have to, um, chew on all this for a while. Could you take me to my cabin now? I’d like to see those movies you found on my first patient’s ship.”

“Groovy. Walk this way.”

\* \* \* \*

The décor in my room was a bit loud. Literally. The Traders had arranged a fancy virtual Earth environment with all the comforts of home—if your home is set on the edge of a precipice with a view of a giant waterfall on one side and a forest on the other. All it needs for perfect corniness, I thought, is a unicorn and a rainbow. Then I looked more closely and by gum, found a rainbow lurking in the mist ahead. It was the waterfall, of course, that was so noisy.

But it felt like heaven when I stepped inside and the weight of a world seemed to drop off my shoulders. At first, Earth gravity felt trivial, as though I might float to the cloud-spattered ceiling. The room had been adjusted for human occupancy, or at least Inuit occupancy since it was no warmer than the rest of the station. Deal showed me how to summon a bed, which I wouldn’t need thanks to my faithful couch. Likewise a chair, likewise unnecessary. And he explained how to access the “pantry” and a bathroom, which I definitely needed. This last required stepping off the precipice onto apparently empty air, and I was grateful that Best-offer demonstrated because otherwise I might’ve stalled until my bladder ruptured.

From inside, the open entrance to my stateroom was a rectangular phantom, visible through the virtuality, but I couldn’t see an inkling of the actual walls. I was even more impressed by the bathroom when I excused myself to honor my kidneys. This room, too, had no door, but since I couldn’t see the Traders waiting ten feet away, I told myself the environmental illusion gave me privacy. Everything from toilet to shower had been cloned from some four-star hotel. I opened a wrapped mini-bar of soap to wash my hands, stared into the mirror above the sink, and wasn’t pleased with the face looking back, the tight lips and tighter jaw, the sunken eyes, that little bulge between the eyebrows.

Snap diagnosis: this subject feels an overwhelming sense of futility.

I didn't need a mirror to gather that. Even before I'd learned that NASA had so badly misunderstood what the Tsf expected me to do, I'd known this mission was absurd. How could I even begin to evaluate extraterrestrial problems? Despite all my training and experience, I barely understand my fellow humans.

To be honest with myself, I'd accepted this assignment out of curiosity and pride. I'd wanted to be the first on my block to see the parent ship and to visit with aliens on their station. I'd been attracted to the adventure despite my fears, and the publicity wouldn't hurt my business. But now that I was here and both the challenge and possible rewards were vastly more extensive than I'd thought, that face looking back at me was bad news. So what if I only had a microscopic chance for success? With my current outlook, I had no chance at all. Accurate diagnosis requires open-minded, clear-eyed observation on the part of the diagnostician, and constantly telling myself the job was impossible narrowed my perception and created a self-fulfilling assessment. If I wasn't going to pack up and go home, I needed a change of attitude.

I took a breath in and slowly exhaled, visualizing my certainty of failure dissipating in the frigid air. I repeated the procedure ten times. Mining just *one* useful insight about any of my patients would make me a winner. Suspend judgment and look, I told myself. For once, I listened. Returning to the party, it felt as though my personal magnetic poles had flipped.

An unfamiliar Tsf, not-introduced to me as Great-bargain, was waiting with my usual playmates in the main room, but he left after passing me a little coppery disk. Best-offer silently demonstrated how to use the thing, which proved to be a combo image projector and data-storage unit with virtual user interface. The menu presented a long list written in a Tsf script composed of Braille-like dots. Each item, Deal assured me, represented a video retrieved from my first patient's starship. I selected one haphazardly, and the menu screen displayed five tiger-lizards engaged in assembling something mechanical and intricate while a snarly voice apparently provided commentary. None of these engineers jumped around, howled, or performed a semi-vanishing act. Something really did seem wrong with my patient.

I had a question but Deal beat me to the punch: "Have you assembled a theory as to how your initial patient renders herself insubstantial?"

"Not really. But I have the impression she has to make herself *more* substantial before she can ... thin out."

“An obvious observation, but at least you are following our line of thought on the subject. I doubt you will arrive at the correct destination. Now we will abandon you to your futile research. The pantry is stocked with human foods, both solid and liquid.”

“I appreciate your hospitality.” No sense in returning the rudeness.

“Courtesy is the parent to trade. Call out if you require anything.”

“Thanks. I will.”

My guides departed and I tried to think.

Two things we'd learned about Traders: they took verbal contracts very seriously, and they believed in the principle of mutual benefit. While they'd haggle and leave their customers responsible for understanding the details of any transaction, they weren't deceitful and never tried to cheat or gain unfair advantage. So it seemed at least theoretically possible for me to earn something incredible for the human race. All I needed was a miracle. I'd no idea what the Earth authorities had actually requested for my services, but surely, artificial gravity was worth far more. Did anyone back home even know that the Tsf would trade in knowledge? Was it possible the reason we'd learned so little about them and this station was simply that we hadn't offered to trade anything for detailed information?

I shook my head and turned my attention to the little disk in my hand. Impressive technology. Yes, an ordinary DM can appear to produce similar effects, but that's an illusion. The glow around the finger, the touchscreen, the responding voice if initiated, all are subjective. It's not my field, but I know how it's done:

After a customer provides blood samples, the “router-router,” a tiny piezoelectric capsule wrapped in a gene-modified stem-cell matrix, is surgically implanted near the customer's spine and attached to several multifidus muscles and the crura, which allows the capsule to be powered by simply breathing. Stem-cell filaments grow, seek out the spinal cord, and merge with it. That part is permanent without risky surgery. Then, the system operates by wirelessly networking the person's nervous system with an external CPU; in my case, a fist-sized CPU buried in my couch. The result: an interactive computer that's essentially a controlled-hallucination generator. And if several people have DMs and desire it, they can share hallucinations.

*This* disk was powered by God knows what, worked God knows how, and any seeing being could make popcorn and watch the movies it projected. I shook my head. No sense in getting bogged down in minor mysteries when bigger ones were more important. I didn't have any popcorn, but I sat down and loaded a video anyway.

\* \* \* \*

Four documentaries later—or soap operas for all I knew—I stood and paced around the room, or rather around the couch since I still wasn't comfortable stepping onto apparently empty air. I'd seen enough punk tigers to make up for a lifetime of having seen none. Thin ones, chubby ones, exceptionally muscular ones who probably spent hours in gyms pumping something heavier than iron. Maybe thorium.

Perhaps from too extensive a stay in microgravity, my patient appeared scrawny compared to most of the brutes I'd seen, but not uniquely so. And yet, and yet ... something was different about her, and I couldn't figure out what.

Sure, her peers didn't jet around like punctured balloons, but that wasn't it. I expected their behavior to be different than hers. While the Tsf had placed her in environmental isolation for her own good, she might not see it that way; simply being imprisoned could affect any being's psychology. And speaking of stress-induced quirks, I'd been traumatized by the big squeeze earlier and hated the idea of leaving this haven, but damn it, I needed to observe my patient again and compare....

I grinned because, having confirmed I was an idiot, it seemed better to be the grinning kind. Why leave my cozy cliffside retreat when I could study her right here? I called my DM into touchscreen format and played back that first encounter with patient one. Good recording: clear and seamlessly tiled although the subject had been shot from the low angle of the lenses set into my couch. When she jumped high enough, her head popped out of frame. The videos I'd watched earlier hadn't showed any tiger-lizards from so close up.

And the answer was right in front of me, I *knew* it, but couldn't see it.

"Dr. Morganson?" The voice seemed to come from nowhere, but it sounded deep and raspy.

"Best-offer?"

“Got it in one. What’s happenin’? Your life-signs are wiggling out a bit.”

Seemed odd not to hear any clicks beforehand. And I felt uneasy about being so closely monitored. “I’m fine, just getting slightly frustrated.”

“Stay cool. But there’s been a change in your second patient. I could flip video your way, but would you care to check it out live?”

“When’s the next gravity surge?”

“We’ll wait until you complete your examination before applying therapeutic force. We observed how bummed out you got last time.”

“Thanks, but won’t that hurt your health?”

“Our health will keep. If you can dig it, Deal-of-a-lifetime will meet you in the Arcade of Healing. Even-steven and Trader-joe shall join you ASAP. They’re non-shrinking doctors.”

Even Steven? Trader Joe? Had the Tsf selected such names simply to make me comfortable? If so, it wasn’t working. “Okay. I’m leaving right now.”

\* \* \* \*

Best-offer was right about patient two; the simian had certainly changed. He’d lost perhaps a third of his hair, and where his mottled skin was exposed, it resembled freshly plucked poultry. Diseased poultry. He’d stopped the incessant hand twitching; his lowest two eyes, the only ones open, looked as if they’d been whitewashed; and the way he sat slumped on his tripod legs practically screamed of despair through the body-language barrier.

“How long has he been like this?” I asked Deal.

“I am unsure of the precise time interval, but ahoy! Here come the medicos.”

The “medicos” were both currently female—green-tinged cilia—and they streaked down the hallway, arriving in seconds. Even without prompting I might’ve guessed these were doctors. No white coats or tongue depressors, but they had that harried, behind-schedule look. Each toted an arsenal of small but complex-looking devices. Diagnostic, I assumed.

“Trader-joe,” Deal asked the newcomer slightly in front, “when did this patient suffer a state-change?”

Trader-joe also carried a translator, so I got his answer in stereo. “In human time, nine minutes and eight-thirteenth seconds from when you finished asking me the question.”

Huh. The Tsf all seemed to have built-in chronographs and a savant’s ability to instantly convert their time units into ours. For some reason, that notion struck me as highly relevant, and for an instant, I wobbled on the threshold of remembering exactly where I’d seen hand movements similar to the ones my patient had stopped making. The second medic, Even-steven, addressed me before I could fix the memory.

“We waited to learn if the aberration would resolve itself before subjecting this subject to the potential trauma of direct evaluation.”

“So you’ll examine him now?”

“Only with your permission, Doctor. He is your patient. If you wish us to proceed and to accompany us, you must don your vacuum suit. His atmosphere contains enough chlorine to discomfort a human to death.”

“I think we should act immediately, so please go ahead without me.”

Both doctors moved to lean against the subtle barrier separating the patient’s space from ours, and they seemed to slowly melt through and into the room. The three-legged simian didn’t react, even when Trader-joe and Even-steven unfolded their machines and began attaching clamps and probes to and in him. Unipolar depression or possibly bipolar disorder, I thought, then reminded myself to distrust my instincts. But damn it, it looked like some form of depression.

“Cheese it,” Best-offer said, barely clicking. “The cops.”

I didn’t get the cheese reference but the “cops” became obvious when two more Tsf joined us in the corridor. These two were the largest Traders I’d seen. They moved nearly in unison and neither was introduced to me, not even off-handedly. They halted behind Deal and lurked there, watching everything with presumably steely sensory organs.

“Why the company?” I whispered to Best-offer, but Deal answered.

“My whimsical associate misstated the role of the individuals who have joined us. These are Masters of Propriety here strictly to make sure our doctors follow established protocol in what is clearly a medical emergency. Should this subject kick the bucket, we might find it desirable to have evidence of our good faith attempts to preserve him.”

Right. If Traders ever located his species, they wouldn't want to alienate, so to speak, a potential trading partner. So no experimental neck-tourniquets. But the “cops” reminded me of just how deadly the Tsf could be.

Two years ago, a year after the Traders had put this station into circumlunar orbit and opened up Trading Posts near Beijing, Delhi, and Manhattan, there'd been an incident unreported in any human news media. I'd only found out about it myself two weeks ago. Some crime syndicate had tried to rob the Manhattan Trading Post, which was understandable considering all those exotic treasures just sitting there on all those shelves. This Post, like the others, was only open an hour at a time, three times a day. During those hours, its environment was adjusted for human comfort. At all other times, the environment was set to duplicate conditions on the Tsf's high-gravity home world. Which, from what I now knew, implied that it was more practical to increase gravity on a planet than on a space station.

The heist was perfectly organized, executed, and timed, and the eight hooded men who rushed into the open-for-business Post carried the most reliable and powerful automatic weaponry any mob could afford.

Until that moment, the Traders had seemed harmless, self-effacing, friendly, and unarmed. It hadn't occurred to many humans that ambulatory beings who'd evolved in high-gravity would not only be strong and tough, they'd also have reaction-times like oiled lightning. Maintaining balance under multiple gees, even with multiple legs, requires super-quick reactions because everything falls *fast*. And if you want to avoid a predator, or catch prey, or even catch a ball...

To make a long and gory story just gory, the three Tsf present in the Post moved like rockets and tore the eight men to bloody paste, bones and all. I watched the Trader recording of the event, which they released to the US Justice Department, who hot-potatoed it to the FBI, evidently with instructions to bury it deep and only decant it for intimidating psychiatrists. I'm fairly sure one of the Tsf got hit with a bullet or two, but it didn't even slow her down.

Yes, the Traders could've simply disarmed the bad guys, captured

them, and turned them over to our police; and it says something about Tsf psychology that when presented with a clear threat, they obliterated it. Another point of interest was the method the Tsf used to clean up the mess: they released a cloud of blue gas. When it dissipated, the Post was spotless and only the carnage was gone.

I needed a distraction. “Why do you think,” I asked Deal, “your medical tests will be meaningful on a life form so unfamiliar?”

“The data now being collected can be compared to the data we gathered immediately after we rescued this individual. We expect to find significance, but aren’t counting on it.”

“I—good Lord! *Counting on it*. That’s the key!”

For a few seconds, Deal kept as still as the security personnel behind us. Then he clicked, “I fear our translator has failed. I failed to grasp the import of your last few statements.”

“My fault. I’m just—I think I know what my patient was doing with his hands before.” I had to fight off a childhood tendency to stutter. “Do you know what an abacus is?”

“Only if you refer to the counting frame referred to as a *suanpan* in China, a *soroban* in Japan, a—”

His condescension no longer bothered me. “That’s the thing.”

“What about it?”

“Years ago, I visited a school in Tokyo where students were trained to perform all sorts of arithmetic calculations on, um, sorobans and do them in seconds.”

“I still await enlightenment.”

“Not for long. When the students got really proficient, their teachers took their sorobans away. After all those years of intensive practice, the students could visualize the beads perfectly, and I watched a roomful of kids multiplying four digit numbers, fast and accurately, on imaginary abacuses.”

“That what you talkin’ ‘bout.” The voice sounded worried. “You believe your patient was employing a similar technique. A curious notion, but what

problem would require three separate counting frames?”

I nodded, relieved that Deal hadn't stomped on the idea. “You told me you'd only found his landing craft, so I'm guessing he was somehow keeping track of his main spaceship and trying to give you the coordinates. It would take three, right? Finally he gave up.”

Deal stiffened and I thought he was going to clam up on me again. “An improbable theory although it conforms to all known facts. But even given the numbers, how could we determine the zero point to which the coordinates relate?”

“I don't know. Or maybe I do. You found him on a planet? If I were him, I'd have used the spot where you found me as the reference point. Either that or the planet's center.”

“You foolishly assume he has unprecedented powers of spatial and temporal orientation. Please bide while I discuss this matter with my superiors.”

I expected Deal to go off to find these superiors, but he stood right there, clicking like a Geiger counter over plutonium. The Tsf way of speaking carried quite a distance because I couldn't see the Traders who began clicking back in return. The interpreting device ignored all this byplay, but Deal gave me a summary in his own sweet way.

“Here is our plan: We will play back earlier recordings of this being, magnify the image of his moving hands, and deduce the bead arrangements of the counting frames he was visualizing, and the three continual sets of results.” He made it sound as though the idea was his. “Then we need only vary dimensional axes and numeration systems until his results become meaningful and consistent in relationship to a moving object. If one of the logical zero points such as galactic center proves correct, a few sets of solutions will allow us to plot his ship's course or orbit. If this is successful, we will then retrieve his spacecraft. Personally, I very much doubt any of this will succeed.”

I had to admit that the Traders had evidently caught my insight and run with it farther than I could, all the way to the goal posts if everything worked out. “I have another idea. Do you have or could you build anything resembling an abacus?”

“Why?”

“I’ll have to show you.”

Deal hesitated. “The project seems unnecessary. But I have been ordered to obey your whims. Certainly we have wires and beads. Hang loose, this won’t take long.”

Deal leaped away, leaving me alone with Best-offer and two grim shadows until the medicos finished their research and squeezed back into the passageway. Without waiting for me to ask, Trader-joe began rattling off—it sounded like rattling—test results, all expressed in human measurements but too fast for me to follow. I interrupted to ask some questions, but just then Deal returned, passed me an improvised abacus, and everyone who wasn’t already silent became so and watched to see what would happen.

I glanced at the toy in my hand. It had once been a Tsf translator, but the spokes had been ripped out, the frame bent rectangular and restrung with fifteen parallel wires. Each wire held fifteen hollow glass beads, all emerald green except for the black top two. Fast work, putting this together.

I hoped my patient would see it and realize that we’d caught on, but first I had to catch his attention; he seemed to have withdrawn a light-year into himself. So I stood in front of him and waved the impromptu abacus like a madman. Slowly, his eyes focused on it. I flipped a few beads, and all his eyes popped open, colors instantly replacing what had resembled cataracts. I’d never seen such a rapid, spectacular transformation. In that instant, he jumped to his feet, all three of them, practically radiating joy and health. I could’ve sworn his hair was already growing back on his bare spots. He pointed to the abacus and Deal took it and pushed it through the isolation membrane into his hands. The simian held it so that we could see the emerald beads and hid three of them under a hand.

Deal made an especially forceful click. “Base twelve, it seems,” he said, no pleasure in the tone. “Other possibilities exist, but this may save us time. Would you care to return to your stateroom now, Doctor?”

“Oh. Sure. Guess I’ve been holding up your gravity therapy.”

“You think? But apparently the Masters have found a champion in you. Come, I will accompany you to lightness.” Deal’s legs practically dragged as we moved along but his partner seemed to skip.

“Doctor, you da man,” Best-offer click-whispered to me.

\* \* \* \*

My room hadn't changed, but I had. "Deal-of-ten-lifetimes," I said, standing between Deal and the doorway, a joke if he wanted to leave. "You clearly have a problem with me, and I want to know what it is."

"I will tell you, if you insist."

Best-offer, who'd entered behind me, hopped onto my couch without asking my permission and rode it to its usual spot. I had the feeling he found this confrontation vastly entertaining.

"Here's me," I said, "insisting."

"Very well. I chose to wager against your success, which required a large amount of exchange credit to show any significant profit."

I stared at him for a second. "Let's see if I understand you. You made a bet that I'd fail and had to bet a pile because the local bookies were betting the same way."

"In essence, yes."

"I, on the other hands," Best-offer volunteered, "wagered against the odds, risking little and earning much exchange. Deal-of-a-lifetime should've hedged his bet with a side wager."

Deal shook a leg at his partner. "Thanks for nothing, friend of friends. Your advice is as tardy as it is obvious."

I held up my hands. "Okay. We've cleared the air. So how about we stop bickering and make the best of things?"

"I see no reason why we can't all just get along," Deal said, his artificial voice expressing resignation. "I was only trying to ensure a positive outcome. For me, that is."

"You weren't exactly encouraging."

"Gave it my best shot. Now, my smug associate and I have duties and must leave you alone to enjoy your victory. I will not underestimate you again."

The pair hurried off and I realized I was ravenous. So I unpacked

some half-frozen krill-protein sandwiches on true whole-grain bread, and to wash them down, a chocolate soymilk drink—my couch’s built-in refrigerator wasn’t bothering to run. The stateroom pantry was stuffed with human snacks, but they were all high-glycemic-load items crammed with sugar and saturated fats. As biologists learned nearly a century ago, every meal counts. Since I was living on borrowed time and wanted to make it a long-term loan, I couldn’t afford treats that would stimulate a cascade of inflammatory agents. But those damn chocolate-chip macadamia cookies in the pantry almost burned a hole in my will power.

Frankly, I felt damn good. Not only had I taken a large step toward solving patient two’s problem, I’d earned my first gold star from my hosts. Moreover, I had a new hope. Perhaps I didn’t stand a chance of resolving alien neuroses, but what if one or both of my other patients had a more ... mechanical sort of difficulty, the sort of thing only a technological primitive such as yours truly could spot?

Then I had to laugh at myself. From Doctor I-think-I-can’t, I’d turned into a wild-eyed optimist when my success had really been the dumbest sort of luck. If I hadn’t visited that school in Tokyo, I wouldn’t have had a clue, and my chances for similar victories, realistically, were none to nil. But Deal’s mention of magnifying the image of hands had given me a notion....

I hadn’t wanted anyone who was monitoring this room to think I was talking to myself, but I’d reached the point of needing someone to bounce ideas off of, someone without hidden agendas. That left me one choice.

Putting my old DM into vocal-interaction mode had been fun because of a popular fantasy livewidget I’d downloaded and customized, ostensibly to entertain my son whose DM was, naturally, on my family-and-friends list. I’d say the codeword “Aladdin,” see and feel a lamp in my hands, rub the thing, and watch smoke rise up and congeal into Carl Jung. The system I now used had been designed originally for the military, and I doubted it would accept any fun control mods such as Aladdin or my wife’s favorite, One Ring.

But my NASA handlers had waxed enthusiastic about its having new “bells and whistles” and then, perhaps suspecting that psychiatrists don’t recognize metaphors, they explained that they referred to improved cognition and pattern-comprehension rather than to any annoying musical accompaniment. Also, my unit came with a choice of four designer personalities: Diana, David, Dane, and Doris. I’d had two weeks to get to know them all and to learn the control procedures.

“Diana, Diana, Diana,” I said quickly, the redundancy preventing accidental activation should some living Diana drop by. Right now, I didn’t want David’s philosophical ramblings, or Dane’s jokes, or Doris’s constant concern for my well-being.

“How can I help you, AI?” The alto voice, adjusted to my preference, sounded friendly but businesslike.

“Last time I was in this room, I watched some videos that the Tsf had retrieved from an alien spaceship. As I understand it, you’re recording everything happening around me, so I assume you recorded the recordings?”

“If your rising inflection indicates a query, my answer is yes.”

“Great. When I say ‘go,’ please display random images of the aliens from those videos one at a time—just one image per second and on only half your screen, um, the left side. On the other half, show me the first patient I saw today, the one similar to the video aliens.”

“Do you wish to see your patient in real time or from my memory?”

I blinked twice. “How could you display my patient in real time?”

“I am receiving a feed from the parent ship.”

“Huh. Real time, then. Go.”

The virtual screen appeared, as did the images I’d requested. “Stay with this grouping,” I ordered after a minute. “Zoom in on the leftmost alien until it’s the same size as the one on the right and put its actions on a ten-second loop.”

I’d chosen that particular tiger because its body posture matched my client’s. I watched it reach out to adjust a complicated mechanism on a black stand and then watched the whole thing again three times. Damn. The two aliens had individual variations, plenty of them, but I saw no fundamental physical difference between my patient and, presumably, a healthy tiger-lizard. Yet I knew I was missing *something*.

Suddenly, a big difference. My patient started her intensifying routine. Only this time, she kept it up so long and became so vivid that I half expected her to burst into flame. Tyger, tyger, burning bright...

“Deal,” I shouted, “if you can hear me, I’m heading out to patient one. I think something’s gone wrong with this one, too.”

I sprinted out my doorway, not thinking, and then the extra eighty-odd pounds hit me. I yelped from a horrible twinge in my right knee. That leg gave out and I slammed into the floor as if some steroid-bulked-up pro wrestler had thrown me down. I’d felt at least one rib crack and for far too long, I couldn’t breathe. But I finally managed to gasp in a little air and struggled to my hands and knees, intending to crawl toward the hospital corridor if I couldn’t stand. I was no longer proud of myself.

The DM screen reformed before me; I’d forgotten to close it, but Diana had minimized it while I’d been moving. An instant later, my couch tapped me on the ass. Dr. Dignity here. I glanced at the screen and forgot everything else. The left-side tiger kept adjusting that same machine every ten seconds; but on the right, my patient’s room contained one robot and no patient.

To my far left, past the screen, Deal skidded into view, reached me in two giant bounds, and used four legs to set me on my feet. He’d only needed one, I’m sure, but the extras made the hoisting gentler on me. “Are you injured?” he asked, a bit late to earn his EMT merit badge, but it was strange to hear him express any concern for me. “We saw you fall.”

“I’m all right.” At least I could stand on my own. And breathe, sort of. “But look!” I pointed to the screen.

Yes, the kind of fool that would dash from one gravity field into a much heavier one is just the sort to point at a virtual object only visible in his head.

“Sorry,” I said. “You can’t see what I’m seeing because—”

“Au contraire. Your data management system and ours have linked. Mine is showing me what yours is showing you.”

“Oh.”

“Plus, the original feed is ours, so I already knew of your patient’s absence.” Now his words were smugger than his tone.

“Maybe she just ... thinned out to the point of invisibility?”

I could’ve sworn the translator prefaced his response with a brief

raspberry. “We scanned her room for life signs. We doubt she has ceased processing gasses, ceased making even the slightest sounds of organic involuntary activities, ceased radiating and absorbing anything on the practical electromagnetic spectrum, stopped—”

Now *that* was the Deal I’d grown so fond of. “I get it. She’s gone.”

“Also, we found ... traces of her elsewhere. You stand askew, are you certain your fall did not damage you?”

I shrugged and the tiny motion hurt my ribs. “Maybe a little.”

“Then return to your stateroom and recuperate; there’s naught you can do at the moment to aid in searching for the ding-a-ling.”

“Did you say ‘ding-a-ling’?” If that was obsolete slang for a mental case, it made no sense to me.

“Yes. Perhaps this translator provided an inapt metonymy.”

“Let’s just move on.”

“Done. If you need assistance in healing, our medical team trembles from readiness.”

I envisioned overeager “medicos” inserting their probes into me. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine. Wait! Why should you have to *search*? Don’t you have ... sensors or something that can locate her?”

Deal brushed his gondola with a leg in a thoughtful, jaw-rubbing kind of way. “They have, many times. But when we arrive, she has already relocated.”

“Good God. Teleportation?”

“We believe she becomes tenuous enough to pass through walls, explaining her escape.”

I just stared at him and after a moment he continued. “Frankly, we are surprised she can absorb our atmosphere. Yet she travels with great vigor.”

“Have you tried pinning her down with gravity?”

“You betcha. With no success. Don’t assess her capacities by

measuring yours. Before I rejoin the search for our rolling stone...”

He paused until I caught on and said, “That one works.”

“...may I assist you to your room?”

We all need someone we can lean on.

\* \* \* \*

My body hurt less the instant I entered my cabin. Deal galloped away, and I lay down on my couch, which as usual had tailed me in. The screen automatically reformed directly over my head because of my supine position, but I barely glanced at it.

How, I wondered, did the Tsf even recognize an alien distress signal? Was some kind of super-science aetheric siren the usual ploy? And on reflection, it seemed implausible that the Tsf had located three unknown, stranded aliens within a short period of time—Deal had claimed they’d all been recovered recently. He’d also referred to this triple play as a “unique happenstance,” but wasn’t it far more likely that all the victims had been involved in a single accident? Perhaps they weren’t unknown to each other and had been meeting to arrange a trade deal and something had gone wrong. Or gone sour.

Three travelers. One, judging by the strange star maps, from a distance even the Tsf couldn’t reach; one capable of complex three-part running calculations; one who could drift through walls. All three appearing to surpass the usual three-dimensional limitations. A possible connection?

A spasm of honesty made me admit that all this speculation was largely my attempt to forget there was a crazed tiger-lizard wandering the ship. Get a grip, Al, I warned myself. You may be on to something, but it has nothing to do with why you were hired.

But if a trade deal *had* melted down like the standard TV drug deal, maybe patient one was seeking the others, and not to cheer them up. I sat up too fast and my ribs let me know. After a second, the screen reappeared but it showed nothing new.

“Diana, Diana, Diana. Can you communicate with Deal-of-a-lifetime through the ship’s DM?”

“Yes. What do you desire to communicate?”

“Tell him patients two and three may be in danger from the first one.”

Deal’s audio response came almost instantly. “Doctor, we already guard them. Rest yourself! Over and out.”

And a Roger Wilco to you too.

With that urgency off my mind, I thought of another kind of distraction, but a potentially useful one: studying Diana’s video of patient three, the squeaky wheel who moved too slowly to squeak. “Diane, close all current images and show me what you’ve got on that flat alien with all those hook things.”

And there it was in all its repulsive glory. Its body design didn’t seem functional. How could it possibly use those twisted, almost two-dimensional protrusions as limbs? For the first time, I noticed how it ... ambulated: by slowly rocking forward on its lowest protrusions rather like someone in a potato-sack race determined to lose.

“My problem,” I said, complaining out loud, “is that this thing is *too* alien. I’ve got nothing to relate it to, let alone compare it to. So how am I supposed—”

The question was rhetorical but Diana interrupted. “Physically, it relates well to tardigrades.”

That stopped me in mid rant. “What the hell is a tardigrade?”

“An animal. Tiny, segmented and invertebrate. Phylum Tardigrada.”

“From what planet?” Maybe the Tsf had supplied this information to human xenobiologists.

Something in her programming made Diana sound a tad disapproving. “From Earth, discovered in 1773. People trained in biological sciences should be aware of them.” Make that disapproving plus snooty. “Under conditions lethal for virtually all other species including hard vacuum, drought, and temperatures near absolute zero, tardigrades can survive by entering an extreme state of suspended animation called a *tun*. In this condition, they are nearly indestructible.”

“Huh. You learn something new every decade. Detailed pictures, please, with more info below in a fast crawl.”

I watched a parade of these weird little guys, most resembling a cross between a caterpillar and the contents of a tackle box, and the crawl mentioned that they were nicknamed “water bears,” and “moss piglets,” which didn’t quite convince me the things were adorable and cuddly. When I read details about the *tun* state, I felt my eyes widen. Then I burst out laughing and couldn’t stop despite the rib pain. If patient three’s resemblance to tardigrades was more than skin-deep, and I had the strongest hunch it was, the Traders had made an incredible blunder. Admittedly, I was basing a lot on appearances. But what struck my funny bone so hard was how easily I could perform a second miracle “cure” if I was right. Hell, I could do it with both hands tied behind my back.

I stopped laughing when the lights went out along with the gravity. My virtual hideaway became as black as a subterranean cave, and I instinctively anchored myself by grabbing the first couch-strap my scrabbling hands could find. I was scared and it didn’t help that in utter darkness, it felt like I was falling. Something was wrong—unless the Tsf enforced a weird sort of curfew.

“Use your DTB,” I said to Diana, faking bravado, “let there be light.” And there was light, but it wasn’t good.

Even in my own home, having my civilian genie light my path, say, to the bathroom at night to avoid waking my wife, direct-to-brain illumination makes me edgy. After all, when a DM uses its DTB interface to provide the illusion of seeing, it’s actually replaying visual patterns that have previously entered the eyes rather than present reality. So on my way to the toilet, the floor can appear perfectly clear of obstructions and then I can trip over my wife’s shoes, or the wife herself if she happens to feel her own call of the bladder. It’s a character flaw, I’m sure, but invisible objects and people tend to creep me out.

But in this case, my fancy-schmancy DM was only partly relying on my senses for information. Electromagnetic eyes and ears along with more ordinary lenses studded this couch like a dog collar. Calling up this unit’s DTB vision without adding particulars gave me the *entire* optical recording. So when my stateroom turned visible, it looked bizarre and out of focus, the former virtual landscape superimposed over a moiré pattern of fine white lines projected onto gray walls, which shimmered with hints of colors beyond my visual spectrum. Dizzying.

Then I felt myself sink into the couch again, deeper than before, and the ceiling brightened a little with genuine light, which provided yet another

layer of optic stimulation. Everything seemed to vibrate. Between the sudden weight and the visual weirdness, I lay down before I had to fall down.

“Diana, shut off your DTB *now*. Thanks. Much better.” The cabin had become simple but was still unfamiliar. Minus the faux landscape, it was far roomier than I’d thought, a cube about fourteen feet per side, which gave it a surprisingly high ceiling. “Okay, now tell me what the *hell* is going on?”

“My link with the parent ship’s data controller has been severed, therefore I can only report on events prior to the disconnection.”

Enhanced conversational abilities, my sore ass. “So what happened?”

“Your feline client, in attenuated form, passed through the area housing the station’s master CPU, generating an electromagnetic interaction. At that point, the controller went offline.”

That didn’t sound good. The parent ship was so huge that it seemed unlikely my tiger-lizard would’ve accidentally stumbled across the controller. Which suggested deliberate sabotage....

A Tsf appeared in my doorway, and it took me a moment to recognize Deal in the dimness. He wasn’t carrying a translator, so I gathered that system, too, was dependent on the master. Deal made his usual noises anyway, and I told him that I couldn’t understand what he was saying, which I doubted he understood.

“Do you wish for me to act as an interpreter?” Diana asked.

“What? Do you suddenly ... read clicks?”

“I have gathered sufficient information through your previous communications with the Tsf to provide adequate two-way translation.”

I mentally withdrew my nasty comment about Diana’s conversational skills. “Great! But how will he hear you?”

“He, too, has an internal DM, but unlike myself, his retains some autonomy even when disconnected from its controller. And while I cannot establish a conventional wireless connection because our frequencies are too disparate, our present proximity allows transmission via induction.”

“I get it. No long-distance calls. What did Deal say?”

“His remark was addressed to me rather than you. He asked if I’d gathered sufficient information to provide adequate two-way translation, and if I could use induction to transmit—”

“Stop!” I partly withdrew my withdrawal. “Please just tell him—”

“Your exchange will proceed more rapidly if you simply speak, disregarding my role in the process.”

The Diana personality reminded me of my first secretary. She, too, had been brusque, organized, and subtly scornful. “Fine. Deal-of-ten-lifetimes, I’m glad to see you.”

“Most understandable,” he replied via Diana. “I truly apologize for how long it took us to activate emergency energies. And I apologize more deeply that we can no longer isolate this room and have been forced to apply a degree of gravity to the entire station that you surely find onerous. This is the minimum we need to maintain our physical integrity on a long-term basis.”

I’d meant that I was glad to see *him*, but decided to let it go. “What do you mean, ‘long-term’?”

“Several of your hours, but it should not come to that. We seek your escaped patient with full diligence now and refined technique. Once we secure her and render her harmless, we will take our data controller out of self-protective mode. It will then re-coagulate and all systems will return to functionality. I suggest you find patience and remain here where you will be safe from potential violence.”

Diana’s interpretations weren’t nearly as colorful as those of the Tsf translator, but they’d given me a sickening premonition about what Deal intended. Evidently, I wasn’t the only one to suspect sabotage, and I’d seen how Traders reacted to an actual threat. They hadn’t even needed weapons to kill the thugs who’d tried to rob them in New York. Government analysts, who’d studied the massacre video in slow-motion, lucky them, had concluded that Tsf skin and certain fascial membranes could harden tremendously, turning limbs into triangular clubs or, with maximum tension, something very like knives.

My patient had become *personanongrata*, and soon would lose her persona status. I opened my mouth to ask Deal if his people might

consider an alternative to lethal force, but the doorway was empty.

\* \* \* \*

I felt way too heavy. From the pressure on my back, I estimated my present weight at three hundred fifty pounds. Maybe more. Thanks to this and my rib woes, breathing wasn't fun. I tried shifting position to give my diaphragm a bit more freedom, but nothing helped. Then I remembered just how well stocked this couch was.

"Diana. Get me a pain pill, really strong, and some liquid to wash it down. Um, I'd better do my swallowing sitting up, so lift my back up, please."

As I was hoisted into position, smartfoam arms handed me a pill and a small, straw-pierced container. The quick-dissolving pill felt like lead going down, and the liquid nearly choked me. But after only a minute or two, the agony in my chest began to drain away.

That's when I noticed the odor: part floral, part grassy. Not at all a scent I'd associate with a large predator. So when my striped client coalesced into visibility, I wasn't exactly prepared. The tyger eyed me for a moment, then screeched so loudly, I'd thought my eardrums had had it. What was it about me that got her so agitated? She jumped upward, banging her head on the ceiling as hard as a pile driver, and then hung there, suspended by her skull-spikes, until her weight in the new gravity pulled her free. Quite comical, really, but I wasn't chortling. She landed lightly on her feet and jumped again, but only high enough to brush the holes she'd left earlier.

Her huge body seemed to take up all the space in my cabin, and for the first time in my life, I was so damn terrified that I couldn't move or even yell. Something in the back of my heart begged me to spend my last moments remembering and appreciating my wife and son while I had the chance, but the only cogent thought in my head was a terrible regret that I'd failed to share my guess about patient three with Deal.

My visitor leaped sideways. I saw that this time, she'd be landing directly on me, surely crushing me despite my cushion. But as she fell, my couch, or rather my DM controlling the couch, acted. Four thick pillars of smartfoam, two above my shoulders and two below my feet, erupted from the mattress, catching my patient in midair at her chest and thighs.

She screeched, quietly for once, and it sounded oddly like a squeal

of delight. For a moment neither of us even blinked as she gazed straight down into my eyes, her body suspended above mine but extending almost to the doorway. Then her claws slowly emerged. My body remained petrified with mortal fear, but my mind seemed to sputter, then catch, like one of those old gasoline engines; suddenly I blazed with insights, my thoughts rocketing along at an unbelievable rate.

At close range, I could see that only the final two-thirds of her claws were shiny. They seemed plated with actual metal. If this was natural, wouldn't a being with internal electroplating abilities have to be able to generate at least a mild charge? If she'd been holding any charge while drifting through the ship's master controller in some incorporeal form ... well, even the best shielding would be useless against direct penetration. And just maybe, this alien's ability to go intangible was also related to...

Lightly swinging one paw, my patient raked her claws down my torso, slicing through my smartsuit and the skin below, from my left nipple almost to my pubic bone. I didn't feel the claws sink in very deeply, but the cuts were long and the pain excruciating.

I yelled and my attacker added insult to injury by drooling onto my face; some of it fell into my open mouth.

An avalanche of nastiness. As I choked on hot coppery saliva and blood gushed from my wounds, sparks shot up from my torn smartsuit and its heating units failed. Some detached, observing part of my mind speculated on exactly what would win the race to kill me: bleeding out, getting my head bitten off, poison if tyger spit was toxic, or simply freezing to death.

Maybe the sparks scared her or she hated the scent of human blood. Whatever the reason, my patient stared at me for a second longer while doing her intensifying trick, burning bright despite the surrounding dimness. Then she jumped away, yowling, and leaped out of the room.

Feeling tremendous relief and damn uncomfortable, I swiped a hand across my chin before the alien saliva could freeze on. I glanced at my soggy hand, and just like that, I knew. None of the many tiger-lizards I'd seen in the videos had drooled. *That's* what I'd seen without seeing. And I knew precisely what it meant. I should've figured it out hours ago.

\* \* \* \*

Bleeding, chilled to the marrow, and crushed by my own nearly

doubled weight, I desperately wanted to stay put and try to patch myself up. But I couldn't wait this out. The Traders were about to make a grotesque mistake, one that could never be undone. I pulled the torn ends of my clothing together, doing some weightlifting just moving my arms, and pressed the material down over as much of my wound as possible.

"Deal!" Squished by my own bodyweight, I couldn't manage much of shout. "Best-offer? Anyone? I need to talk to someone!" I listened and didn't hear the tap-tapping sounds of approaching Traders. No good.

"Diana, reshape this mattress so it covers me, neck to toes." That should hold in my body heat. "Meanwhile, get this crate rolling down the hall toward the hospital corridor. Now!"

The were-foam neglected to shape-shift and my carriage didn't budge an inch. "Diana? Diana, Diana, Diana. Damn it, what's up? Get this bastard moving."

"I cannot at this time. My CPU regulates your protective garment; the two form a unitary system."

"So?"

"The damage to your smartsuit has evoked a safety protocol requiring a full diagnostic assessment, which will be complete in ten minutes and twelve seconds. Meanwhile, as a further safety measure, some of my functions have been disabled including control of your couch. I am currently seeking a workaround."

"Oh, shit. *Ten* minutes?"

"And four seconds now. I may find a workaround earlier."

"I can't wait that long. Don't suppose someone packed crutches or a walker in this stupid loveseat?"

"That would have been redundant since the couch itself possesses mobility."

I kept my response to myself and levered myself upright as carefully as possible, but my wounds reopened, giving my belly and legs a fresh coat of blood. Just standing was a massive effort and as for getting enough oxygen, forget about it. I tried to use techniques I'd learned at NASA's training center, taking in only a modest amount of air at a time, and

expanding my lower ribs in all directions at once, “three-dimensional” breathing. Thanks to my former injury, happy day, knives seemed to stab into my chest every time I inhaled.

I fought down panic and a growing urge to hyperventilate, which would only make matters worse.

Taking tiny, shuffling steps and leaving a little river of blood to mark my trail, I made it to the hallway. By then, my legs shook with exhaustion and I had to support myself against the walls to keep moving. I kept telling myself, just one more step, just one more...

The dim lighting to either side appeared to pulse in sync with my heartbeat. I glanced back and was horrified by how short a distance I’d come. And fuming because all this effort shouldn’t have been necessary. Why in God’s name didn’t the Traders post a guard for *me*?

Maybe they had. In my mind’s eye, I saw the tyger arrive as something less than a mist and drift through my wall while two oblivious soldiers played the Tsf equivalent of gin rummy outside my room. I saw my patient dashing past them, her claws dripping and red, and the guards chasing her until she faded from visibility.

It all seemed so real until I felt an extra coldness on my spine and realized that my eyes were closed and I was sitting, feet splayed out in front of me, back supported by the wall behind me. Scared alert, I forced my eyes open. I’d slipped into a dream without knowing it. How strong had that pill been? Or was the effect due to blood loss?

There was no way I could get back on my feet, but I kept trying and kept slipping back down. I had no breath left for even a groan let alone a yell and kept hoping someone would show up. No one appeared. I suppose they were all searching for my patient, minds fixed entirely on killing her.

Then I had as much inspiration as a dying man could hope for. I snapped my fingers.

Back in my intern days, I’d flirted with becoming a neurosurgeon and my resident advisor had me practicing surgical techniques on cadavers daily for a year, even after my most grueling shifts. The experience turned me off to anything involving sutures, but all that gripping gave me strong hands. So while I felt weak as a newborn possum, my snap was loud and clear. And it must’ve carried just fine because from a great distance, I

heard what sounded like a million snaps in return.

I closed my eyes and when I opened them, Deal was bounding toward me with one of the medicos, Trader-joe, coming in a close second. In my fuzzy state, they seemed more like cartoons than living creatures, and I giggled upon imagining a screech of brakes when they came to a stop. My analgesic had kicked into fourth gear.

Deal splayed out his legs to lower himself to my level. "Doctor, you are impaired." Impaired. Right. "You must allow Trader-joe to evaluate the damage." He shifted aside and my new personal physician took over.

Should be Trader-*josephina*, I told myself, and the thought struck me as infinitely witty.

I have to admit she was competent, precise, and gentle, but her sensory cilia tickled when she pressed them against various parts of my anatomy. I got the impression she had built-in stethoscopes.

"You have the following injuries," she reported. "Three shallow, parallel cuts traversing from your thorax to your abdomen." I raised a mental eyebrow, in a humorous way, at Diana's fussy syntax. "Also two cracked thoracic bones, many exhausted muscles, and an increasing degree of hypothermia." Shouldn't that be a *decreasing* degree? I snickered again at my cleverness.

She continued. "The hypothermia must be addressed, but none of your injuries are intrinsically life-threatening. Still, you have lost and continue to lose your vital nutrient-carrying liquid at a fatal rate."

Deal started clicking, but he wasn't talking to me; maybe he'd noticed just how impaired I'd become. "How could the doctor have sustained such damage?"

"From the size and spacing of his cuts, I am certain our furred guest was responsible."

Deal shook three limbs at the medic. "You are mistaken. When I left the human previously, the furred one had already been discovered in section three. Since then, our entire security staff formed a wide perimeter and has been gradually closing in, posting sentries with sensitive detectors in every room should she attempt evasion through walls."

"I state the facts and have no responsibility to explain them. But you

must have suspected my services could be needed when we heard the doctor's distress signal, or you would not have brought me here."

"The cuts are facts, your conclusions otherwise."

Trader-joe rose up. "If you feel better qualified than—"

"Stop," I said as forcefully as I could, barely a whisper, which was as good as a shout with Diana doing the translating. The argument seized up nicely. "Maybe my patient can ... throw her magnetism or something. The doctor's right, she sliced me." I smiled to show that I bore no one in the universe any ill will.

Deal had gone very still. "I fail to understand how that is possible, but she will do no more slicing. We do not permit one guest to harm another. And her life was already forfeited by the previous damage she caused."

"You really don't understand. She isn't—oh, shit, she's *rightbehindyou!*"

My pill-induced euphoria popped like a bubble. My tyger stood, growling quietly, shifting her weight from side to side, turning her golden gaze on each of us in turn. Deal leaped at her so fast, it should've made a sonic boom.

She reacted almost instantly but still too late. Deal latched onto one of her arms by wrapping the end of a single leg around her wrist. I hadn't realized his limbs were so flexible.

The scene turned surreal. The tiger-lizard towered over the Tsf and looked to be twice as massive and ten times as powerful. But though she desperately tugged on her trapped arm and flailed at her captor with her three others and one leg, she couldn't budge him, lift him, hurt him, or get away. What I saw appeared physically impossible, even with Tsf muscles, until I looked down and saw three of Deal's legs splayed out and sunk far into the rubbery flooring material. He'd evidently turned his feet into stakes and anchored himself solidly. But damn, he only needed *one* limb to hold her.

When I looked up again, the Trader had become a living nightmare.

Four of his legs were raised high and angled toward the tyger's chest, their leading halves narrowed and hardened into organic swords. His entire body radiated tension and deadliness. For the first time, I saw a Tsf

gondola clearly. It wasn't the blubbery, octopus-like head I'd imagined but more like a purple wrecking ball with crocodile skin, and had at least five ugly mouths, some vertical and others horizontal, one with three-inch fangs. My patient began making a noise like the keening of a housecat in terrible distress. Her body kept brightening and dimming a little, but didn't fade to mist. Something about the contact blocked her abilities.

God knows how I did it. I wasn't aware of making any particular effort although I heard myself grunt, but I was on my feet, grabbing one of Deal's improvised sword-arms, not too near the tip. Might as well have been trying to pull down a bolted-in steel beam. Could've done chin-ups on the damn thing had I the strength.

"Wait!" I panted. "She doesn't mean ... harm." My voice was probably too weak to be audible even without the keening, but Diana would get my point across.

Using a spare leg, the Trader gently pushed me away. "You are unwell and thus confused."

"No. You promised. Not to underestimate me. Look. Even now. She's keeping her claws in."

In the background, Trader-joe sounded like a frantic chicken except clicking not clucking.

Deal lowered his blades very slightly. "This much is true. And unexplained. If she means no ill, why did she cut you?"

"Didn't mean to. See her fur? Not even an inch thick. I think she was only trying to ... groom me. Bet she got interested in me—" I had to pause to catch my breath. "—because I'm the closest thing ... she's seen to one of her own people. In a while. Damn. I'm not being clear. She's only a ... toddler, Deal, barely more than a baby. Still drools. Can't use a potty."

"An astonishing theory, but experience contradicts it. Disabling our primary controller cannot have been accidental. Our safeguards are such that no fledgling could have disabled them. And you cannot believe that her finding our control center was coincidental."

"Why not? On my planet, unlikely accidents ... happen all the time. But maybe something about your DM ... or the place where you keep it ... attracted her. Besides, *you* offered proof she's immature."

“I did not.”

“You said the controls in the spaceship ... where you found her ... were set too high for her to reach. Without jumping. Word to the wise. Her parents may be ... on the large side.”

Deal’s swords stayed just as sharp, but some of the tension went out of him. “You raise reasonable doubts. So now I am sorry, but she is too dangerous to release, yet cannot be constrained by any means known to us.”

Without warning, my vision blurred and the hallway seemed to dim. Bad news. It was clear what Deal had meant: he might feel regretful, but was still planning to kill my patient. It was up to me to save her, and I had a good idea how. But now I was running out of time....

I took as deep a breath as I could and willed the darkness away. “We can confine her. Can’t you see? She’d fade out now if she could. All you have to do is hold her until...”

To my horror, everything went black and I felt myself falling. “Diana. The robot. Tell him.” I wasn’t sure I’d gotten the words out. I prayed I had and that Diana had enough bells or whistles to understand. Then I was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Clouds drifted high above me when I opened my eyes, and a waterfall roar tickled my ears. Yes. I was in my stateroom, lying on my back, warm, comfortable, and feeling blissfully light. Sleepily, I glanced down at my body. The smartsuit was whole and obviously working. My skin beneath felt a little tight where I’d been cut, but pain free. I tugged on the valence zipper, opening the fabric just far enough to see the uppermost part of my wounds. The separated skin had been glued together. Nice.

Then memory flooded in and my heart seemed to lurch.

Deal’s question seemed to come from nowhere. “How the heck did you know?”

“Deal-of-ten-lifetimes? I recognize your—the voice your translator uses for you.” Which was obviously working again since “heck” has gone the way of the stegosaur. “And I hear your clicks so you must be in here, but I don’t see you.”

The Trader seemed to step right out of the landscape. “My bad. I’ve been here so long and kept so still, the controller blended me into the virtuality.”

“Oh. How’s my client? The striped one?”

“Most excellent. Back in her room and we are providing her appropriate care. But how did you know the robot would restrain her temporal mass-shifting abilities?”

Relief is such an underappreciated emotion. My tyger was alive! Grinning from eyebrow to eyebrow, I opened my mouth to ask what the hell “temporal mass-shifting” meant but then thought better of it. It was time to start working for my own species. Seemed reasonable to expect the Traders to pay me more if they respected me more. Remuneration commensurate with reputation, as Diana might’ve phrased it. So I needed some pondering time.

“If you don’t mind,” I said, levering myself off the couch. “I’ll tell you after a short visit to the bathroom.”

“Be my guest, which you are.”

Felt a bit light-headed but otherwise fine as I walked past Deal, and moving must’ve oiled my brain-cells because I had my answer before I’d reached the bathroom doorway. Deal’s people figured that the tygers possessed some extra-dimensional aspect that would allow them to withdraw their own substance from their future selves and concentrate it in the present moment. Then, when they’d caught up to that future, their bodies attenuated enough to move through solids. In a weird way, I suppose they could be considered time-travelers. Or time-borrowers. Handy talent if you make your living by stalking and pouncing. And ... yes! Maybe it even explained why my tyger cub got left behind.

I flushed the Earth-style toilet for realism, although I doubted Deal could hear it over the waterfall noise, and returned to the couch.

“How?” Deal prompted, in case I’d forgotten the question.

“Nothing to it. Once I realized that my patient was a toddler, the robot’s role became obvious.” Time to make hindsight and guesswork look like brilliance. “Here’s what I think happened: my client was traveling with only one adult. When the spaceship became disabled, the grownup had to

use his or her time-phasing ability to seek help.” How, I wondered, does a disembodied body move itself? “Are you with me so far?”

“I have not departed. How could this person seek help?”

Improvise, AI, improvise. “I’m thinking an adult, but not a child, could move their entire bodies back through their timeline to the planet they left from. Or remain ... nebulous long enough to reach a civilized world.”

“Possibly. Or the adult might find another computer-controlled starship since these beings may indeed be cyber-tropic, as our master controller learned to our regret. But please explain your understanding of the robot.”

Good thing he didn’t ask me to explain “cyber-tropic.” “Easy. If you had to abandon a child, even temporarily, wouldn’t you make sure she was fed and kept clean? And if that child could walk through walls into vacuum and get lost, or killed after the mass-exchange thing wore off, wouldn’t you make sure she’d stay put? I’d say you underestimated that robot far more than you underestimated me. And I’ll bet momma or pappa is going to show up here when they find baby gone—uh, presuming you posted a star map in their spaceship showing where you took her?”

“Of course we did. And it may enhance trade when they learn we have not slaughtered their progeny. Most excellently reasoned.”

“There’s more,” I said. “You told me my patient didn’t start her vanishing act until recently. Isn’t that when the robot began losing power?”

“So simple! Yet we failed to dig it. Alien doctor, you are a wonder.”

I studied him for a moment. “You’re not angry any more about losing that bet?”

“I might be bummed out if I hadn’t placed a whopping new wager on your continued success before the odds changed. Thanks to you, I am now glutted with exchange credit.”

“Look, maybe it’s just the translator, but you don’t *sound* all that happy.”

“That is because I must give you some sad news.”

Uh-oh. “Tell me.”

“When we found you, you were near exsanguination and required far more blood than your body could hustle up. Our medics took samples and gave you a transfusion.”

“You mean transfusion.”

“How are hyper-nuclear processes involved in this?”

“Never mind, go on.”

“I regret to report that your blood has been severely contaminated. We believe your patient was the disease vector although her claws are currently free of the contaminant.” Deal’s body practically drooped. “We dared not attempt to rid you of the infection because the organisms involved, which appear to be synthetic, are unknown to us. Also, samples were unaffected by our finest antibiotics and antivirals. We fear disastrous consequences for your health in the near future and suggest you hasten back to your own medics, who may be of more assistance. Again, my most sincere regrets. It has been an unexpected pleasure knowing you, and quite profitable. Please have a good death, and I must congratulate you again. Your successes have been phenomenal. As you people say ‘two out of three ain’t bad.’”

This relief thing, I could get addicted. Keeping a straight face I said, “Actually, three out of three is better.”

“You understand your *third* patient’s needs? You blow me away. In fact, you qualify for whatever is the grandest compliment among humans. I am asking my DM to search out the appropriate phrase.”

“Can’t wait to hear it.”

“So what is your solution to the final problem?”

Okay AI, I told myself, grab every inch of credit you can steal and pretend your victories weren’t part luck, part Trader insight, and the rest Diana’s doing. “Solution indeed. As it happens, we’ve got tiny creatures back home with a strong resemblance to your flat guy. If the similarity means anything, here’s how you fix it: just add water.”

“I don’t understand. We found it in an atmosphere devoid of moisture.”

“That’s the point. You described its starship as ‘trashed,’ right? On Earth, the miniature look-alikes go into a special dormant mode when the environment turns hostile. They dry up, and in that state they can endure almost anything. I bet the DM on Mr. Flat’s inter-galaxy cruiser dehydrated the vessel after the accident to save its life. So hydrate the poor fellow, but slowly in case I’m wrong.

I laughed. “And don’t worry about my blood. I’ve got a condition called leukopenia, which means my bone marrow can’t make enough white blood cells to fight off infection, and the disease, as my doctors put it, hasn’t responded to conventional treatments. So those little biomechanical bugs you found in my blood are all that’s keeping me alive—them and an unpleasant amount of clean living.”

“Cool. I’m pleased as punch. As to patient three, I have relayed your instructions and technicians are already following them. I am delighted to report that patient three already appears to be inflating. And I have garnered that ultimate human statement of admiration: Doctor, you are the bomb.”

I stood near the airlock and fidgeted. Every Tsf I’d met, and many I hadn’t, waited to see me off, and no one had brought up the delicate subject of remuneration. I wasn’t even sure what to ask for or how. A crazy idea had gotten into my head and, like a bad houseguest, wouldn’t leave.

Perhaps Deal read my mind. “Before you depart in glory, Doctor, have you decided on your fee or will you cling to Earth’s initial bargain of simple trade goods?”

Oh hell, everyone said the Tsf were dead honest. “I’m not sure because I don’t know how much I’ve earned or how much the things I want are worth.”

“The solution is simple. Tell us what you want and we will assess their value against your performed services. I suggest you not be penny wise and Euro foolish as your saying goes.”

“Okay. Gravity control, as you suggested?”

“Done. That technique plus the original trade goods still leaves us mucho in your debt due to the unprecedented opportunities you’ve opened up.”

“Really?” I took a breath. Shoot for the stars, Al. “Then I’ve got a big

one: faster-than-light propulsion.”

He waved a leg. “Too big. FTL entails not only technology but astrophysical information still unknown to human science. And it involves a small risk to us. Eventually your kind may become trading competition.”

“I understand.” It had been so much to ask for that I was surprised at feeling a pang of disappointment. How greedy could I be? Wasn’t the secret of generated gravity enough for a day’s work? And the thought of someone in my soft field bringing home the hard-science bacon tickled me immensely.

“But your surplus,” Deal continued, “will make a handsome down payment.”

“What?”

“Should you choose to earn the balance, we have a proposition. We will set up a clinic with various controllable environments, provide you a staff of various useful beings, and bring you only the most interesting patients. Certainly, you can treat your human patients there. If you do a fraction as well as you did here, your species will soon be flying high and fast.”

“You plan to add my services to your ... trading portfolio?”

“Right on.”

A fantastic offer, a thrilling offer. But I saw a personal pitfall ahead that could make me one miserable shrink, namely helping the human race at the cost of losing my family. “Where,” I asked slowly, “would this clinic be located? Could I bring my wife and son along, or at least have them visit frequently?”

“They could visit with ease. Why not set it up on Earth near your residence to maximize your convenience? Does the proposition appeal?”

Psychiatrist to the stars.

“Appeal? My God, yes.” I was flying so high and fast myself that I forgot the one cautionary note about dealing with Traders: make *sure* you understand every detail of a transaction. I didn’t ask what Deal meant by “staff of useful beings” and the thought of my neighbors’ reactions to such an institution on their turf never crossed my mind. But I wouldn’t discover my mistakes this day.

I smiled. "I can't promise anything close to this success rate, but I'd love to try."

"Then this could well be the start of a symbiotic friendship."