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A Study in Ethnology

or

The Blue Suede Alien

by Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

The problem with writing a story in the present is that the present is sharper than the edge of a knife and before you can fully grasp the moment, it's in the past. If your setting is in the past, you can throw in any number of details that firmly pin the story down in its period. But in the present it's almost imperative that you leave out details that are too specific. Well, I certainly hadn't learned that lesson at the time I wrote this story. I should also admit that this is a danger when writing in the foreseeable future. Guess wrong as to what is coming next and your story becomes a period piece in a period that never happened. As I look through some of my favorite books, however, it appears that I am in good company when it comes to falling into this trap. So be it.

I did briefly consider rewriting the story to bring it into the Twenty-first Century, but as I worked on my notes, it turned out to be a far greater undertaking than I was prepared to do without the promise of a

paycheck behind it. At first I thought it would just be a matter of replacing the names of companies that were once typical of Southern New England, where much of the action of this story takes place, but which have since gone out of business. Then I noticed that I was mentioning people who have since passed away. That, too, was a minor bit and could easily be written around. Then I started noticing my commentary on the culture of the United States.

Actually, that wasn't too much of a problem since the biggest change in the twelve years since I wrote this is that I have become, if anything, more cynical about the politicians we are all forced to endure. Friends have pointed out that I do not suffer fools gladly. True enough and it comes out in this story. Still that fact that my commentary was based on America under the first Mr. Bush was not a great stumbling block since any Clinton legacy was effectively abolished with malice aforethought by the current Mr. Bush in less than two years after taking office. A sentence or two saying just that would have brought the story back to the present, but then I looked at the central situation of the story.

It was just too firmly rooted in 1991! I don't want to give too much of the story away, but I think it is safe to say that this is a story about an alien ethnologist who comes to Earth to study us. Readers have asked me if I was influenced by the very famous ethnographic spoof, *The Nacirema*. The answer is both yes and no. I am aware of it and have read one or two extracts from it, but have not had the opportunity to read it in its entirety. For those readers who may not have heard of it, *The Nacirema*, (American spelled backwards) is an ethnological monograph as it might have been written about the people of the United States. If you have any interest in anthropology, it is a must-read. One of these days I'll get a copy of it myself.

Anyway, my main character, in an attempt to fit in unnoticed undergoes cosmetic surgery. For reasons that you will discover soon enough, it doesn't quite go the way he expects and he ends up looking like an all too recognizable celebrity. Strangely, when I was still plotting the story, the celebrity I chose to make him resemble was Arnold Schwarzenegger. At the time, I felt the joke would fall flat very quickly, although if this was a movie, it might be fun to have him go through a number of fast changes before settling for how he ends up. The celebrity cameos would be fun to watch anyway. With Arnie serving as *gubinator* of California these days, I might have gone that way if I was writing the story now. Think about that and all the differences it would have meant as you read the story, but remember the year is 1991...

Finally, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the New Bedford Historical Society? The New Bedford Historical Society was organized in October 1996 as a non-profit Massachusetts corporation dedicated to documenting and celebrating the history, legacy and presence of African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Native Americans, West Indians and other people of color in New Bedford, Massachusetts. For more information contact the New Bedford Historical Society at: P.O. Box 40084, New Bedford, MA 02744 (508) 979-8828 <http://www.nps.gov/nebe/nbhs.htm>

Jonathan E. Feinstein
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A Study in Ethnology

I. One For the Money

One

Many of my colleagues have questioned why I felt it was necessary to travel as far as I did in order to find an acceptable culture to study. To them I say that it was my intention to conduct an ethnographic study of a culture that had not yet had any contact with civilization. In most cases, by the time a qualified anthropologist arrives on a newly discovered world, the native cultures have already been inundated by militant missionaries, the people have been put to work by exploitive capitalists, and entire hordes of interplanetary do-gooders have strolled on through to pat the exploited natives on the head and tell them that it is such a pity that their once-rich culture has been destroyed by the missionaries and businessmen.

While a study of such a culture is as valid as any if conducted along established ethnographic lines, it fails to give us a picture of that culture as it was discovered pristine by the original explorers. It is my belief that until a sufficient number of societies can be studied at first contact, our cultural theories can not be conclusively proved.

Therefore, I loaded up my Arctorean 235 SX astroship and, funded by a healthy grant from the Grenner Wenn Foundation, set off in search of a new intelligent life form.

from the Introduction of "The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

RhagmaUniversity- a bastion of illumination holding out against hordes of the ignorant, the unwashed, and the Sophomore class. At least that's the way the thoughts of Dr. G-Horg Gahrmu were running one Monday morning near the end of a spring semester as he sat in his office overlooking the social sciences quad.

His once-brilliant blue hair, now mostly purple streaked with the red of an old man, hung down like gaudy strings against his loose, green skin. During his ten-year tenure as Dean of the School of Social Sciences, he had always made a habit of interviewing the graduate students in his department before they commenced work on their doctoral dissertations. Rhagma U. was a large school and his was a large department so this was something he did about twenty times each academic year. Dr. Gahrmu was reading through one such proposal when someone knocked lightly on his office door.

"Come in," he responded. A grad student with bright blue hair and beard stepped into the office. It was B-Hob Kharma, his ten o'clock appointment, fifteen minutes late as usual.

"Sorry I'm late, Dr. Gahrmu," B-Hob apologized, "but I was delayed while crossing the campus."

"That's quite all right, B-Hob," Dr. Gahrmu excused him, trying to cut to the actual matter of this meeting.

B-Hob's explanations tended to get a bit involved and exotic and Dr. Gahrnu had heard far too many of them in the past few years.

"You see, a truck tried to take a turn too fast down at Union Circle and tipped over."

"Yes, yes. I understand. Let's just get down to business," Dr. Gahrnu made one last attempt to stop B-Hob's latest excuse. The effort was in vain.

"Right. And this truck was full of balls."

"Balls?" Dr. Gahrnu asked in spite of himself.

"Uh huh!" B-Hob responded. "I think they were for the new game room in the Student Union. So these balls were just rolling all over the circle area, people were slipping and sliding everywhere, and the cars, too. There was a pile up of at least a dozen student vehicles all out of control as they rolled over the balls, but that was nothing until the campus station came on the scene and started a live broadcast."

"That's all well and good, but..."

"Well, as soon as they showed up, several impromptu demonstrations broke out, 'Stop the War in Zeta-Antares' and 'Save the Neopanda' mostly, I think. Finally the police showed up, but they couldn't get through the crowds of on-lookers to break up the demonstrators. The ice cream truck managed to, however, and everyone started buying ice cream, being that's it's been so hot lately, you know, and..."

"Enough!" Dr. Gahrnu didn't doubt for a moment that there was a disturbance down at Union Circle just as B-Hob described. B-Hob didn't make these things up - that had become obvious after years of checking his stories out - but he did seem to be a magnet for bizarre incidents.

"Oh, all right. Want a rolbaberry popsicle?" B-Hob asked, holding the confection out. Dr. Gahrnu accepted it in the hopes that this would finally get them down to business. This time he got his wish.

"For your project," he said around mouthfuls of frozen imitation fruit juice, "you propose traveling to tropical Racrutus to study the Metronome People. Don't you realized that this was already done by C-Lod Levis about twenty years ago?"

"Yes, sir," B-Hob replied, "but I intend to center on the changes in that culture over the last twenty years. How they have maintained their cultural identity after two decades of contact with our civilization. That sort of thing."

"Uh huh," Dr. Gahrnu said skeptically. "Well, I can save you the trip, B-Hob. They haven't kept their cultural identity at all. Instead they have been completely assimilated by civilization. There are nothing but hotels, restaurants, and condominiums all over the atolls of Racrutus. I spent my vacation there last summer myself and nearly went broke. Racrutus has the highest rate of inflation anywhere within the Commonwealth. I woke up one morning and the cup of tea I had for breakfast at ten cils just the day before had already gone up to forty. My wife and I left two weeks early because they tried to collect a 'rental adjustment' on our pre-paid room."

"But surely the natives," B-Hob began.

"The closest thing to a surviving remnant of the native culture appears in the form of velvet paintings on the walls of those hotels, restaurants, and condos, for sale to the unwary tourist at ridiculously high prices.

In fact the only thing that distinguishes the natives from ourselves is the dark fluorescent red-violet fur all over their bodies.

"No. Take it from me, young B-Hob, as tempting as a paid trip to Racrutus might be, it is not the path to success."

"But even with all these changes," B-Hob protested, "wouldn't such a study be valid?"

"Of course it would, but you would use up your entire grant in a week or less even if you tried to subsist on bread and water."

"Hmm. There is that. What do you suggest?"

"B-Hob, I am about to give you the true secret to success in the social sciences. It's something so simple that anyone can use it. It takes a truly gifted researcher to become successful by doing update work on a culture that was already studied and is well known to everyone in the field. That is doing it the hard way."

"So what's the easy way?"

"Have you ever gone camping on an uncivilized planet?" Dr. Gahrnu asked.

"Yes. As a kid we used to do that every summer."

"Good. Then you know how to rough it."

"More or less. We generally brought our food with us."

"That's good enough. Use your grant money to explore the galactic frontier. Rent a one-man exploration ship and head out for the Western rim."

"Why the Western rim? Why not the inner frontier?"

"It's closer and cheaper to reach. If you're heading for the unknown, why go any farther out of your way than necessary?" B-Hob saw the logic in that and nodded.

"But my grant money isn't enough to rent a ship for a long-enough period to both explore and conduct research, and just what would I be looking for?"

"You'll be looking for a culture that has not only never been studied but never heard of either. As for the ship, with a project of this sort you can apply for a grant from one of the large foundations. The Department of Education can help you fill out the grant applications and I'll give you a recommendation.

"You might even get enough to buy the ship outright. Try applying to a foundation that will let you keep your equipment after the project is over. You can make a good profit that way."

"But why am I looking for a completely unknown culture?"

"Because if nobody has ever heard of these people you study then you'll be the one and only authority on the subject. Not only that, but nobody will be able to dispute your findings without going to the expense and bother that you'll have gone through, which they aren't likely to do for at least twenty years. Remember the smart ones among your colleagues will be doing the same thing."

"I see," B-Hob said, understanding dawning on the horizon of his mind.

"Of course," Dr. Gahrnu continued, "you will have to come up with a more respectable sounding reason for traveling into the great unknown and for going so far to conduct an investigation you could do on your home planet, but I'm sure you'll think of something."

"No problem," B-Hob agreed.

Two

I soon realized that, if I was to study a culture in its pristine state, I would need to fit in with the natives as if I were one of them. So along with the usual tools of the ethnological trade, I.E. a vox-corder, notebooks and pens to last for ages, and a pair of cameras, I also equipped my ship with an automatic translator/hypno-teacher unit and augmented the basic med unit with cosmetic surgery capabilities. The remainder of my grant money was expended on a mass/energy converter. This was extremely expensive but not as extravagant as it might sound. I still didn't know precisely where I was going nor what might pass for currency there. The converter would provide me with whatever materials I needed within reason.

from the Introduction to "The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"B-Hob darling, is this some sort of joke?" asked his fiancée Ralda.

"No really, Ralda honey, I'd like you to come with me," B-Hob insisted.

"In that?"

"That" was a faded green Arctorean 235 SX astroship with mega-warp clusters, a set of flame decals around the dual exhaust ports on either side of its tail and across its stubby atmospheric wings, and the name *Space Devil* along with some registration numbers painted on its fuselage. B-Hob wasn't sure if that was the name of the ship or its last owner, but unwilling to risk the old superstition against renaming a ship he let it stand.

Recently purchased right off the lot of "Honest" C-Lem's Used Spaceships, B-Hob had been repairing and outfitting it for his first exploratory voyage. So far it had required far more work and money than he had planned on. It was a good thing that the Grenner Wenn Foundation had given him all the money he'd requested for although he had nearly doubled the money he estimated he'd really need, hidden costs were rapidly eating it away.

He had naively thought that he could just buy the craft, load it up and take off for the stars, but it had

been nearly a month now and the port costs were mere nibbles compared to the major-league chomps that the repair bills were devouring with every passing day.

B-Hob had hoped to be able to install a reasonably sophisticated auto-chef in the ship's mess, but eventually had to settle for a small freezer box and an antiquated camper's microwave oven. That, however, was not his biggest problem.

When he realized just how badly he had been taken by "Honest" C-Lem, he had attempted to exact a refund. However, unlike on a very few worlds, there was no "Lemon Law" on Rhagma. *Caveat emptor* or its local linguistic equivalent was not so much a policy as it was a religion throughout the Commonwealth and in the face of C-Lem's laughter there was not much he could do but to try and make the best of a losing proposition.

The Grenner Wenn Foundation was amazingly understanding and explained that this sort of thing was actually rather routine. Had there been legal recourse they would have helped out there, but as everything was perfectly legitimate, although just a tad slimy, they did supply B-Hob with as much used equipment left over from previous expeditions as his small ship could carry. Now, the better part of a month later, B-Hob felt he was ready to leave.

"Yes, dear," he said patiently with a bit of a whine in his voice. "It will be fun. I'll study the natives and you can help organize my notes. Most of the time it will be like a sort of pre-honeymoon."

"B-Hob," Ralda replied, "I do love you. Believe that. But there is no way that I am going to have myself altered to look like Wrom knows what sort of creature and accompany you to some uncivilized planet full of savages."

"But, Ralda!"

"I'm sorry, B-Hob. I'll wait for you here."

B-Hob would have persisted but just then a tall uniformed port official with two subordinates entered the hanger he had rented.

"Mr. Kharma?" the official asked.

"Yes, sir?"

"I am Port Captain Thylmid, sir. I see from the schedule that you plan to lift off tomorrow morning."

"That's right. At dawn, when the winds are supposed to be minimal."

"Yes, the reports do indicate that will be the optimum time. We're here to conduct your final inspection."

"Final inspection?" B-Hob asked.

"Yes, sir. This isn't a pleasure cruise you're going on, regulations require it. And, of course, to collect the licensing fees."

"Licensing fees?"

"Yes, sir. It's only a formality. Your private master's license fits all the requirements for a commercial

license, but the requisite money must change hands. The government, don't you know."

"But this isn't a commercial flight!"

"You are conducting research funded by the Grenner Wenn Foundation, aren't you?"

"Well, yes I am," B-Hob conceded reluctantly, wondering just what else could go wrong.

"Then according to the Commonwealth Aerospace Administration's regulation number 437.AZD.12, this is classified as a commercial flight."

"How much?" B-Hob asked, admitting defeat.

"Only one thousand Commons."

"A thousand coms? That's two weeks pay for the average citizen!"

"Ah, but a mere drop in the bucket on a commercial venture."

"But I'm not conducting business, this is research, funded by a not-for-profit corporation."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kharma, but the law is the law. Once you've paid, of course you'll be entitled to the title 'Captain.'"

"Well, that's something at least." B-Hob had a fleeting vision of Captain Kharma with a patch over one eye and a talking bird on his shoulder sailing across the astral seas, plundering whatever hapless merchantmen strayed across his path. He glanced over at his ship and promptly returned to ground level so fast his ego suffered a mild implosion. Even if he tried to realize that fantasy, the bird would probably have two heads and would argue constantly with itself. "Let's get on with it."

Ralda excused herself and fled the hanger in search of a venue more to her tastes while Port Captain Thylmid began his inspection.

B-Hob winced visibly every time the port captain stopped to make a notation on his clipboard. He didn't know what the man was writing down but he felt sure that anything beyond a simple check mark was bad news. He nearly swallowed his tongue when Thylmid tssked over the starboard mega-warp cluster and thought he'd have a heart attack when the man sighed and shook his head upon entering the bridge.

Finally the inspection was over and the four men sat in the mess to discuss the results over B-Hob's claffa and microwaved pastry. The port captain and his men devoured what B-Hob had thought would be over a week's worth of breakfast and he wondered if he was going to be able to afford to replace it after the additional work that the captain was certain to insist on before he would allow B-Hob to lift off.

"The good news," the port captain began like an old joke, "is that the hull is sound. They sure knew how to build these babies back in the old days. On the other hand the starboard mega-warp cluster is compacted. You'll need to have it overhauled and your bridge is hopelessly antiquated."

"Does that mean I can't lift tomorrow?"

"Oh, I think we can get you off on time. I'll send over the port's chief mechanic and he'll assign someone to rebuild that cluster, we'll just add it to the port charges, and there's no regulation that says your bridge

must be state-of-the-art. The instruments are all sound and all you need there is a software update for your navigational computer."

"How much?"

"Software is on the house."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. Paid for by the Commonwealth. We used to charge for it, but too many pilots were flying with old software. That's recklessly dangerous, so the government stepped in and made it a required service of every port. Your skyway taxes at work."

"Good," B-Hob breathed with relief.

"Of course since you'll be lifting with an antique vessel you'll need to sign a waiver dismissing the port of all responsibilities should your ship fail in space. We cannot recommend using old worn-out equipment, after all. There's also a problem with your license. This is officially classified as an antique ship but the ship's license is for a standard used vessel. An antique ship's license costs another thirty percent over what you paid when you bought her."

"Thirty percent? But I can't afford that! I'm nearly out of funds now."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. This 'Honest' C-Lem should have known better when he sold her to you. This is the fifth time I've caught him passing off an inadequate license this year. The additional fee, as well as restitution to you and a healthy fine paid to the state, will be covered by C-Lem. It will take a few weeks to conclude this, even if he chooses to settle out of court, but I will waive immediate payment if you will agree to a twenty percent additional lien to be taken out of your settlement with C-Lem. Have your lawyer contact me this afternoon and we'll set up the necessary forms for you to sign by the end of the business day." The captain started to pour himself another cup of claffa, but noticing that the pot was empty, settled for B-Hob's check for his commercial master's license. "Thank you, captain," Thylmid said. "I will see you later in my office to settle up port costs and these other matters. Good day."

The chief mechanic showed up an amazingly fast fifteen minutes later to look at the *Space Devil's* starboard cluster.

"Aye," he growled in a thick working-class accent, "it's buggered for sure, but we'll have you ready by dawn. Now what's this I hears about your software?" B-Hob told him. "Aye, that's what the captain said. Now, you call the tower and ask for D-Ronto Kipps. Tell him I sent you and he'll set you up with everything that ancient silicon jobbie in there can handle. Arrgh! This cluster. You know it'd almost be easier just to replace the whole thing, but a rebuild is cheaper and if you could afford a new cluster, you'd have bought a new ship in the first place. I'll put me boys on the job right after lunch."

D-Ronto Kipps was a busy man. It wasn't so much his job, although as head programmer he did have a lot to do. It was more a matter of his organizational ability or rather the lack of it. B-Hob found this worthy seated at a small sheet metal desk behind a collection of print-outs that surrounded him and nearly reached the ceiling - the poor man's version of office walls.

"Software updates?" D-Ronto asked. "Sure thing, when was your last one and what model computer do you have on board?" B-Hob told him. "You're kidding. Oh well, I guess we'll have to do a complete reprogram. Does that ancient abacus still have all its memory boards?"

"As far as I can tell, it does," B-Hob replied. "It passes its own built-in testing program, too."

"Well that's something. I don't know where we could have found boards that would fit. I don't suppose you have a direct hook-up with the port computer?"

"Unfortunately not. None of the plugs in the hanger are compatible with my interface."

"I'm not surprised. Your ship has been in the lot for so long, the computer and all its peripherals are at least two generations old. I've never had to reprogram an entire ship's computer before. They usually just need an update, but yours, well, we'll just erase everything and start over again."

D-Ronto collected a universal adapter kit and they both went to the hanger.

"*Space Devil*?" D-Ronto asked in disbelief.

"Yeah," B-Hob replied sourly. "Why? Have you heard of it? Was it a famous ship?" His hopes started to soar.

"The *Space Devil* ? Oh yes. This was the ship that old Black S-Raton Tachy rode as a privateer in the service of the dreaded Empire of Gralt. It is rumored that he killed over a hundred men for his pleasure on the decks of this ship, drinking their blood and shoving their remains out the airlock."

"Wow! That's incredible. Really?"

"Nah! Kid, you've got to stop believing everything you hear. I doubt Black S-Raton ever really existed. He's just a name mothers use to frighten their kids with, never successfully I might add. Even if he was a real person, that would have been two hundred years ago and this ship may be old, but not more than forty or fifty. Also it's too small. This baby could barely mount defensive armaments larger than a pair of asteroid dissuaders, which judging from the worn brackets on her wings she must have had at one point or another, but if you're going to be a pirate you'd need a real battle wagon not a small space yacht."

"Oh."

"Say, this computer of yours has a vox mode," D-Ronto noted. "It's been disabled, but I can reconnect it for you."

"Sure, why not. What's a vox mode?"

"Well back in my father's time somebody got the idea that a computer that could talk and accept voice commands would be a pretty neat thing. The fad only lasted a few years and died abruptly when the first mind-link was introduced. Sort of made the keyboard obsolete, or so they thought."

"But mind-linked computers are only used by the handicapped."

"Right. Turned out that was a fad too. I took an intro- psych course for engineering majors back when I was in school. An elective, you know? Anyway the professor did a study about input devices for his PhD. He claimed that the reason they were just passing fads was that most people think with their hands."

"With their hands?"

"Well brains do the real thinking, of course, but most of us use our hands in a variety of ways that assist the process. For instance, many people read by moving their fingers across a page. That uses the finger as a marker and focal point for their thoughts."

"The same could be said for moving their lips while they read."

"Absolutely. Well that's just one example. Writing is another one. You don't really need to make notes when you're preparing a paper. In theory, you could organize everything in your mind."

"I doubt I could keep it all straight that way," B-Hob countered.

"Only in theory. However the act of writing these notes down aids in the memorization process and when you compose an outline before writing the paper, you are using your hands to help organize your thoughts."

"Fascinating."

"So where are you heading anyway?" D-Ronto asked.

"The frontier on the Western Rim."

"Why?"

"Research for my dissertation," B-Hob replied. D-Ronto shot him an inquiring look so he went on. "I'm looking for a previously unknown culture to study. I figure I'll check out some likely prospects until I find a nice simple band of hunter-gatherers. Live with them for a few months to a year while I write my paper and then zip back for my degree."

"Sounds like a plan," D-Ronto said agreeably. "So what systems are you going to check out?"

"Haven't decided yet, why?"

"Hey! You just can't bum around and hope to get lucky. You could search for years without finding what you want."

"Well, what choice do I have?"

"You really don't know? Okay I see you don't. Well, one of the conventions of space exploration is that any captain of a ship that detects any new sign of life reports it. It isn't a law, but it might as well be. Even captains who would ignore a distress signal still report signs of life. And those reports get circulated to every base in the Commonwealth. Here. Now that I've found an adapter for your interface I'll just have the base computer dump that data in as well and cross-reference it with your up-dated star maps."

"Thanks."

"There'll be a slight charge for that service, though," D-Ronto pointed out.

"How much?"

The end of the day finally arrived and with it came provisional permission to lift at dawn conditional on

the port's engineers finishing with the starboard mega-warp cluster and an additional systems check and tuning that the port captain assured B-Hob were all part of the service. B-Hob was ready to declare bankruptcy, but after all was said and done, he still had enough to replace most of the claffa and pastries that had disappeared down the gullets of the port captain and his men.

Three

One cannot merely set out in the hopes of finding a suitable culture, so it is best to check out one's sources for likely planets that might have indigenous intelligent life.

Once this crucial information was acquired, I proceeded directly and without any delay to start the ethnological study.

from "Chapter 1: Research among the Humans"

of "The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

Clunk!

B-Hob woke up suddenly at the sound only to discover that he was floating about two feet above the deck. The feeling of perpetual falling didn't help either.

Clank!

The falling sensation lasted only a moment after the second unscheduled noise. In fact it ended rather abruptly as his face engaged in an all too intimate contact with the floor to suit his taste.

"What the hell was that?" he said aloud.

"Oops!" He heard the computer's voice reply.

"Oops?" What the hell do you mean 'oops'?" At first B-Hob had been enthusiastically happy to discover that his on-board computer was a semi-intelligent self-programming machine capable of making limited decisions and light conversation. At least he wouldn't get lonely or so he thought. However as the past three weeks wore on, he began to see why such machines were also a passing fad. People want computers to do what they program them to do - nothing more or less. They most certainly do not want a nano-electronic *nudge* butting in with an opinion as to what they are doing wrong about every thing from course selections to dietary planning. B-Hob would have disconnected the vox mode long since, but as he didn't really know much about computers - especially ancient out-dated ones - he was afraid to do anything that might upset a functioning, although annoying, system.

"We experienced a momentary failure of power to the artificial gravity generator," the computer replied, telling B-Hob nothing that he didn't already know from direct experience. "Power has been restored to

that unit by diverting it from a nonessential system."

"Which nonessential system?" B-Hob asked warily.

"The microwave oven."

"And what do you propose I cook my meals in?" That was one of the big problems with the computer. Any systems that did not affect its own ability to operate were deemed nonessential. Last week it had cut off power to the life-support system in order to maintain power to the secondary mass detector - a back-up system that was there only if the primary one failed. It had also not bothered to mention this minor matter to B-Hob until he noticed how stuffy and cold the air was getting. B-Hob had to redefine essential systems to include life support before he went to work on repairing the connection to the secondary mass detector.

"It is estimated that repairs to the artificial gravity power feed will take less than one minute at which time I can restore power to your oven."

"What is the problem?" B-Hob asked suspiciously.

"The circuit breaker needs to be reset."

"Then why don't you reset it?"

"My programming prohibits me from resetting any circuit breakers until so ordered in case you want to investigate the matter."

"Reset it."

"Done. Reconnecting the oven now."

Clunk! B-Hob found himself floating again.

"Do not reset!" he said quickly. "Why did it go out again?"

"The circuit breaker is wearing out and needs to be replaced," the computer replied calmly.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"You didn't ask." Ralda had tried to tell B-Hob that it was traditional to give one's shipboard computer a cute nickname. B-Hob had refused at the time. He wasn't the sort to make a pet out of every semi-intelligent and/or mobile entity that happened across his path and felt that such a practice would be inconsistent with the seriousness of his endeavor. Since then, however he had invented a whole collection full of cute nicknames most of which were unprintable, some were unspeakable, and the rest were anatomically impossible.

B-Hob spent the next few minutes endowing the computer with a few more choice nicknames while he bounced uncontrollably around the cabin under the weightless conditions. Only the fact that the computer was programmed to act contritely in such circumstances enabled B-Hob to calm down in less than an hour. Finally the circuit breaker was replaced and B-Hob could walk and eat at the same time again. This, however, was the fifth such incident since he'd left Rhagma, and if he didn't find a culture to study soon, it was only a matter of time before he started reconfiguring the silicon beast to serve as a pop-up

toaster. The only consideration that had stopped him so far was that he had no desire to own a toaster that habitually criticized him for wanting his toast too dark.

After the morning crisis that had become the keystone of his life on the *Space Devil*, B-Hob prepared a quick breakfast in the microwave and then carried it with him to the bridge. The bridge was where he spent most of his days while on board. There was, of course, no good reason for this since the computer would tell him when they were approaching the next planet on his rapidly dwindling list and there wasn't a whole lot to do while puttering around warp-space, but he justified it to himself in a very logical manner. He was the captain of this ship and the captain's place was on the bridge, ergo his place was on the bridge. The fact that he could just as well captain his ship from the lounge while doing something productive like studying the basic readings that Dr. Gahrmu recommended or even just staring at the walls was dismissed in his mind as unrelated data. Besides, it was far more romantic to spend his days staring out into the ever-shifting pattern of stars set against the blackness of space as he and his ship zipped through the galaxy at velocities ludicrously far above the average highway speed limit on any world.

B-Hob was starting to consider lunch when it happened some hours later.

"Alert! Alert!" the computer squawked as all the lights in the ship turned from the normal white to a dark brooding red. "Unidentified object on collision course with us."

"Take evasive action!" B-Hob ordered.

"Evasive action already initiated," the computer replied. "Really! I swear you have absolutely no confidence in me."

"I don't," B-Hob replied flatly.

"There's gratitude for you."

"And what's with the lights?"

"It is traditional in an emergency for all main lights to be extinguished in favor of these low intensity red lights."

"Why? So the crew and passengers won't be able to see themselves die?" The computer had no reply to that and a moment later the normal lights came back on. "That's more like it."

"Object identified. It appears to be a renegade planet - a large gas giant. Oh oh!"

"What?" B-Hob asked excitedly.

"Maneuvering capabilities are temporarily disabled," the computer admitted sheepishly. "We are at the mercy of the artificial gravity system."

"Excuse me?"

"We are going to pass perilously close to the planet. If the artificial gravity fails the ship could conceivably be torn apart by the tidal forces." B-Hob did not have much time to worry about it. At the speeds at which they were traveling, they passed the large world in a matter of seconds. Only then, when the *Space Devil* was safely beyond danger did the artificial gravity fail.

"The artificial gravity generator is disabled," the computer said helpfully.

"No shit," B-Hob commented dryly, trying to stay in his seat. "Circuit breaker again?"

"Yes and no." B-Hob waited. He felt certain that one day, before he caused the computer to pass on to a lower plane of existence, it would actually volunteer information about something that had gone wrong. This, however, was not the day, and B-Hob had to practice verbal dentistry to get the whole story.

"Care to explain?"

"No. Not really," the computer attempted to beg off.

"Do it anyway," B-Hob said without a trace of compromise in his voice. He was particularly proud of that actually. He'd never been very good at sounding resolute but with all the practice he had since the journey started he was getting quite good.

"Well, the circuit breaker does need to be reset, but the main circuit board in the generator was blown as well during the immense drain on the system."

"Do we have a spare board?" B-Hob asked hopefully.

"No."

"Can it be fixed?"

"Yes. We have a sufficient number of components to repair it manually."

"Manually? You mean that I'll have to do it."

"Right. And when you finish that you'll be able to do something about the directional thrusters."

"What about them?"

"They aren't working. The main engine works just fine, however. In fact, I can't turn it off."

"So we're heading off at full speed to... where?"

"Damned if I know," the computer replied.

B-Hob was wondering how that could be arranged as he propelled himself over to the gravity generator. It was perhaps a freak accident, but someone had actually been thinking when they installed the generator. Assuming that anyone working on it had a better than even chance to be doing it in space, the designer had installed brackets around the generator cabinet to which straps could be attached. A repairman could strap himself in and use the straps for leverage that he wouldn't normally have in free fall. B-Hob didn't have straps, but he did have rope, and a few minutes later he floated into the electronic repair room cradling the damaged circuit board in one arm.

"Hey!" he called to the computer as he started up his soldering iron. "What the hell was that planet doing on our course anyway?"

"Unknown. It was not part of any known stellar system."

"You mean it was just floating around in space? How does that happen?"

"In theory, it was once part of a system somewhere, then some large body nearly hit it. The resulting tidal actions wrenched it out of its orbit."

"But completely out of its system? What could do that?"

"Any number of large masses could. A black hole, a star, another planet or two."

"Why didn't you detect it sooner?" B-Hob asked.

"What? A mere planet? You have got to be kidding. My mass detectors are for stars and other large masses. Planets? Only when we get very close will such small bodies be detectable."

"Isn't that dangerous? We could be hit by an asteroid."

"Not really. The chances of that happening are very slim. There is not a whole lot out here. That's why it is called space."

"Ow! I just got hit by a floating piece of hot solder. Why isn't the exhaust fan working in here?"

"You never fixed it," the computer replied.

Several hours later the *Space Devil* finally had both gravity and semi-functional directional thrusters. The computer had a smug tone to its voice and B-Hob had several second degree burns, three bad bruises, and a twisted ankle.

"Now," he asked, "where are we?"

"Damned if I know," came the nano-electronic reply. "My navigational sensors were out, too. They are operational now."

"You lost track of where we were?"

"You could say that," the computer conceded. "I prefer to look at it as adding a little adventure to your journey."

Visions of crisp golden brown toast floated past B-Hob's eyes as he replied, "Terrific! Anything else you'd care to share with me? Any black holes in our path? Corrosive nebulas? Maybe a space monster or two just to add a little more adventure to my journey?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that."

"Like what then?"

"There's an inhabited system about three lightyears ahead. I suggest slowing down to investigate."

"How can you tell it's inhabited at this distance? We're a long way from the Commonwealth, unless we got turned around by that rogue planet."

"No," the computer disagreed. "We are still heading toward the Rim, but on an altered trajectory. It will take some time to extrapolate our exact position."

"How long?"

"Unknown. Too many variables. I will let you know when I know. However, the fact that the system ahead is inhabited is obvious as I am picking up non-random unnatural radio transmissions. If you desire I will commence decoding and translating them."

"No. Don't bother. I'm looking for a more primitive culture. Make a note of its location so I can report it when we get home."

"So noted. I have a rough estimate now on the location problem."

B-Hob waited. This time he swore that he would outwait the computer. Minutes went by as he proved that not only do computers work many times faster than people do, but that they are many times more patient as well.

"How long?" B-Hob asked, admitting defeat yet again.

"Nine hundred thirty-one hours, fifteen minutes, and forty-four seconds," the computer replied calmly.

"It will take you that long to figure out where we are?" B-Hob asked incredulously.

"No. It will take that long to tell you when I will know where we are."

"Can't you just sort of skip ahead and figure out where we are?"

"I am doing just that, but I still won't know how long it will take until then."

B-Hob thought about that. It would be uncomfortably over a tenth of a year before he even knew when he could start his search again. Did he really need a hunter/gatherer culture? Wouldn't any previously unknown culture do as well? And after all a civilization, even a primitive one, would certainly include the comforts of civilization. If the life was carbon-based and if the atmosphere was breathable to him...

"Computer," B-Hob said at last, "tell me more about the intelligent life on that planet ahead."

Four

Culture shock was something I had only read or heard about. My professors had mentioned their own encounters with strange cultures, but I had never truly appreciated the magnitude of the experience before encountering my first Humans.

It was the similarities between these people and our own that caused my greatest shock, for every time I began to think I understood them, they did something that proved just how wrong I was.

from "Chapter One: Research among the Humans" of

"The Humans of Earth"

By B-Hob Kharma

"My god!" B-Hob swore. "How many intelligent species do they have on this planet? How could I ever conduct a reasonably complete study?"

"According to the video broadcasts I decoded," the computer said, "there is only one dominant intelligent species on this planet."

"Then how do you account for this? Mutants? Underpeople? Tourists from Beta Hydra IV?"

"I am not programmed to respond in that area. All I know is that this is a live broadcast."

"Well, maybe I should start there. Have you analyzed the local language."

"Yes, it appears to be essentially the same as most of that continent. You wish to land there?"

"If I can learn the language on the way down, yes."

"What about your disguise?"

"I won't need one. Look at those people, I'll fit right in. Too bad all their light is so red."

"Judging from their transmissions, I suspect that their visible spectrum is deep into your infrared but only up as high as what you see as green. Here is a corrected view as they might see it." The predominantly smokey red screen suddenly burst into a blaze of colors. B-Hob nodded.

"That seems reasonable," he said. "After all their sun is red whereas most Commonwealth suns range from yellow on up."

"By your standards," the computer corrected him. "If my extrapolation about their visible spectrum is correct, then they see their own star as yellow and the Commonwealth suns would be blue-white. I still think you should disguise yourself to look like the dominant species. It would be a minimal cosmetic job; skin and hair color, the addition of a finger on each hand, and your ears will have to be remodeled."

"Later maybe. I don't see a single member of that species on the screen except for the two commentators. Set up the teaching helm and land us while I learn to converse with the natives."

The flame-painted ship hummed faintly as it settled slowly out of the clear night sky to the pavement in front of Jackson Square in the midst of New Orleans' French Quarter. Crowds of Mardi Gras revellers drunkenly and enthusiastically applauded the show, with a few exceptions.

"Come on, Larry!" A tall blond man in the crowd said to his friend. He and the two women in the party had been trying to get Larry to relax for a change. "It's a pretty convincing stunt no matter how it's being

done."

"It's okay, Jim," Larry admitted, "But it would have been a lot more believable if they had used a synthesizer to mask the sound of the winch. You can hear it humming and it ruins the whole effect."

"You're being too picky, dear," said one of the two women. "You're not supposed to figure out how it's being done. Just watch the show."

"But, Karen, it seems so phony!"

"It's Mardi Gras, dear. Everything's phony. That's part of the fun."

"Which parade do you think this is part of?" the other woman, Gillian, asked. "Pete Fountain's maybe?"

"I doubt it," Jim replied. "This isn't his style. Bacchus maybe."

"More likely," Larry said, "it's one of the local bars. Anytime now some green-skinned ersatz alien will pop out and invite us all off to Pat O'Brien's. Hmm. Another drink would be right about now. What say we skip the commercial and repair to Molly's for a round of Irish coffees?"

"Works for me," Jim replied. Karen and Gillian nodded their agreement and they started walking back into the depths of the French Quarter.

Meanwhile on the ship, B-Hob was monitoring the situation outside. He hadn't expected an audience when he gave the order to land.

"Yo! Computer!" He shouted with his newly acquired grasp of the English tongue.

"I'm here."

"What gives? We were supposed to land unseen."

"We were? You never said so. When you expressed a desire to come to this city, I just assumed you wanted to come directly."

"Great. Oh well, I'll have to make the best of it. Maybe I can just slip into the crowd. If you take off again after I disembark they'll probably forget that I was the one to land here after a while."

"You want me to wait in orbit?"

"Until I can find a place to hide you. I'd rather use the ship as a base. It will cut down on the amount of luggage I have to tote. In fact, I doubt that I'll need much of anything while I scout out a place to keep you. Even my clothes won't seem out of place here."

"I must agree. Very well. Take the pocket transmitter so we can keep in touch."

"Right. How's the crowd out there?"

"Losing interest, I would say."

"Good. Time to get to work. Wish me luck."

"Why?"

"Never mind." B-Hob pushed a series of buttons and the triplet doors of the double air-lock opened smoothly on the side of the *Space Devil* facing the Mississippi River and the "Cafe du Monde" - fortunately out of sight of most of the crowd in Jackson Square. A short ramp extended down to the street and then withdrew back into the body of the space ship once B-Hob stepped off. He looked around as the air-lock doors began to close behind him as well.

"Does this thing belong to you, sir?" A deep voice growled behind B-Hob. He turned to see a tall and large man with dark brown skin dressed in a tight-fitting uniform that to him seemed to be a deep orange in color, but he knew from the computer's briefing would be seen as blue to the natives, and that it signified that the person inside it was a police officer. He understood policemen. He had far too much experience with them back home, usually gained through getting caught at some harmless college prank.

"Yes," B-Hob replied. "As a matter of fact it does."

"Looks like you put a lot of work into it," the cop said with deceptive mildness.

"Work and money," B-Hob agreed. "You wouldn't believe what I went through to get here."

"Yeah. Well we've learned to put up with a lot during Mardi Gras, so I'm going to let you off with a warning. But you're blocking traffic, and if you don't get this rig out of here in two minutes, you're going to be spending the night in the city lock-up."

"Yes, Sir," B-Hob replied. Agreeing with the police at home had usually gotten him off and he saw that the same would work for him here. As he spoke the ship began to hum softly again and soon lifted gently off and disappeared into the warm night sky. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he had enough presence of mind to not ask what Mardi Gras or a lock-up was. Not at that moment anyway.

"You rich folks," The cop shook his head before walking off. "You all spend more money on a joke than most of us make all year. Just don't go blocking the street again."

B-Hob stood on the slate sidewalk watching the policeman walk away. Finally, he turned to take in the action around the square. Crowds of strangely-shaped people were milling about. A few were still looking at the sky for another glimpse of the space ship, but most had gone back to staggering about and making lots of noise in the warm February night air. B-Hob stood to one side against the window of a kite store waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark red light from the gas lamps all around that barely illuminated the area for him. One thought came to mind as he watched.

"These people are crazy!"

"Hey! You came out of that space ship, didn't you?" a large-headed creature asked, enthusiastically leaning toward him. The strange creature was swaying a bit while he talked and his words were slightly slurred. "Nice costume too! A little understated, perhaps, but very realistic. I'd almost swear it was natural."

B-Hob was at a loss so he merely muttered, "Thank you."

"Hey! How'd you do that trick with the space ship? That was great! Right out of the movies, real Steven Spielberg, you know?"

B-Hob didn't know and, in spite of the language lessons that had been force-fed and imprinted on his brain, was having trouble understanding most of what the person was asking him.

"Uh, it was quite simple," he said modestly.

"Yeah? It sure looked real. How'd you do it? I know! A laser light show for the flying parts, and a winch or something up on that roof to lower and raise the model and it's still up there now hidden by mirrors. That's how you did it. Am I right?"

B-Hob had as much of an idea of what this guy was talking about as an aardvark does of Eskimo ivory carvings, but eight years in anthropology had taught him the fine art of justification and he knew a good excuse when he heard it even if it was sheer nonsense. Sometimes nonsensical excuses were the best kind. So rather than trying to embellish on an explanation that had already been proposed and accepted, he just grinned and nodded.

"Hah!" the large-headed person said in triumph. "I thought so. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

II. Two For the Show

Five

Human social occasions revolve around the semi-ritualized intake of mildly poisonous substances for recreational purposes. These poisons cause the body to malfunction in ways that Humans find to be both stimulating and relaxing. No particular care is taken to control the amount of toxic substances ingested, save that they not be of lethal amounts. With this in mind, only very mild intoxicants are chosen. Cyanide might - or might not - give you an incredible "rush" as the Humans might say, but you won't be able to tell your friends about the experience afterwards. All this may seem like strange behavior to the civilized mind, but it is an essential part of Human culture.

from "Chapter Two: Leisure Time" of

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

B-Hob felt good. He had never felt this good in all his life. Somewhere in the back of his mind his conscience was informing him that feeling this good was probably a capital offense back home, but he just felt too good at the moment to pay attention. In fact, he intentionally extracted his conscience, bundled it up in a plain brown wrapper and sent it off to Zeta Axedron on a research mission all its own for the evening. The conscience did an unintentional imitation of Douglas MacArthur, swearing it would not only return but would wreak its revenge on B-Hob for packing it off so unceremoniously. With his conscience out of town for the night, like a vacationing Jiminy Cricket, B-Hob was able to settle down

for what he thought of in his drunken haze as serious research.

The strange creature he had encountered in Jackson Square led him into a long series of bars, taverns, and pubs. B-Hob hadn't the foggiest notion of what the difference between a bar, a tavern, and a pub was, nor did he care if there even was a difference. All he knew was that no matter where they went next, his guide, who professed to the name B-Rent, or something that sounded like it, told everyone about the spaceship and then great contests broke out over who was going to have the honor of buying B-Hob the next drink. The "Sazerac" that was his first drink was certainly not to his taste, but the drink dispensed at curbside a few blocks away, a large pink concoction called a "Hurricane", went down with agreeable smoothness and then he absolutely fell in love with a hot sweet beverage introduced as Irish Coffee. That one he decided he should get to know better, and he spent some hours making its acquaintance.

Somewhere in the haze, he lost track of B-Rent and ended up in the company of four other humans, drinking, telling jokes, and swapping lies until the wee hours of the night and the sky on the eastern horizon was putting in its application for a fashionable color change.

Time ceased to be a long flowing stream and metamorphosed into a jigsaw puzzle so that later B-Hob was unable to actually remember what happened when, and he had the distinct impression that large portions of his memory decided on a luxury vacation on Antares Gamma for the duration and that he was just as happy that they did. However one or two incidents remained clear.

"I," he proclaimed loudly, stepping onto the table in front of him, "have an announcement to make!"

"Waiter! He needs another Irish Coffee!" somebody yelled over the surrounding din.

"That too," B-Hob agreed with drunken sagacity. "No, really, I have an announcement. Yahoo! No, that's not the right word." At that point his fifth drink reached his blood stream while the eighth was reaching his hand via the waiter. He took a sip and then another sip and then tried again. "Soowee! No, let's see, words to get attention, oh yeah! Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!"

"Court is now in session," someone below him slurred, as the noise level in the room subsided a tad.

"His glass is getting empty!" someone said and yet another Irish coffee was thrust upon him. He downed the partial one and contemplated the other for a moment before continuing. "I am B-Hob Kharma from the planet Rhagma."

"To Ragmop!" somebody toasted and was promptly echoed by the rest of the room in a cheer of, "Ragmop! Ragmop! Ragmop!" A few others started singing the old "Ragmop" song.

In the confusion B-Hob bumped into something hard and wooden and turning discovered that there was a large six-foot long box with a colorful red, white, and blue flag draped over it suspended from the ceiling. If he had asked, somebody might have been sober enough to identify it as a Union Jack. He backed away and promptly bumped into another wooden object. This one was a carved wooden leprechaun seemingly dancing in midair.

"Your announcement!" someone prompted him.

"Greetings, brother!" B-Hob exclaimed, addressing the garish wooden sculpture.

"That's it?"

"Uh?" B-Hob replied. "Oh yeah. I am B-Hob Kharma and I am from the planet Ragmop, I mean Rhagma, and..."

"You want us to take you to our leader!" several members of the crowd cried out merrily. Then returned to the "Ragmop!" cheer.

"No!" B-Hob protested in vain, "No, no, no, no, no!" but he was unable to be heard over the roar of the crowd. Eventually he got off the table and drank another two or three Irish coffees.

A little later, or maybe it was before, he had his first close encounter of the fifth kind with an Earthling. What does one do when a robust but comely female with bright orange hair, green skin, and a cute pair of antennae throws her arms around you and says in a sultry voice, "Hey there, Astroguay! Your place or mine?"

What B-Hob did was to just stand there, hypnotized by her vivid blue eyes and stunned by her musky perfume and said, "Huh?"

Her reply to that was to stick her tongue in his mouth. B-Hob made a mental note about the ability of Earth females to stun their prey with intimate contact. Fortunately that note decided to split the costs of the trip to Antares with the parts of his memory that opted for an early vacation.

The last incident B-Hob remembered, and he was fairly certain that it happened last, was a most unusual occurrence. Time not only stopped, but started going backwards. Imagine, a few drinks had endowed him with the ability to travel backwards in time. How else could he account for the fact that all the food and drink he had ingested over the last few hours, decided to stroll back up his esophagus and revisit the outer world?

The wild kaleidoscopic ride ended in an exhausted black velveteen fog which, in turn, ended when he opened his eyes and discovered, even before he ever heard it, the meaning of that time-worn phrase, "the morning after."

The room, which appeared to be a bland pinkish white blur, was engaged in a rather eccentric rotation that left B-Hob wondering with what little was left of his mind whether it had all been a dream. It had all seemed so unreal anyway. Yeah maybe that was it.

"Yo, computer!" He called out with a voice that even a bull frog would have died of shame before using. "What happened now? Is the gyroscope still on line?" The computer did not reply. Two other voices did, however.

"Well, he's still alive," a woman's voice said.

"That's good," a man replied. "I wasn't looking forward to telling the front desk that we left a dead alien on their rug. Here, Bob, drink this." He helped B-Hob to sit up.

"What?" B-Hob tried to choke out. Belatedly he realized that he was speaking the wrong language. "Oh my head!" he said miserably in English. "What's that?"

"Hot coffee, man. Guaranteed no Irish, just coffee with cream and sugar. There are those who say you should have another drink of booze, but what you really need right now is plenty of liquids and a good cushion of food, at least if you can keep it down. Karen, dear, why don't you call room service while I

help Bob here."

"Of course," Karen replied.

B-Hob slowly sipped at the hot drink as the room equally slowly came into focus. It was a small one painted white, or so he guessed it was supposed to be white or off white. It actually appeared to him as that odd color you get when you turn on a red light in a white room.

"Thank you," he croaked. "Where am I?"

"Well, after you passed out in Molly's last night, we brought you back to our room. We're in the Holiday Inn. We'd have brought you back to your spaceship but you said it was up in orbit or something."

"What else did I say?" B-Hob asked fearfully.

"That you were an ethnologist here to study humans for your doctorate."

"I didn't."

"You did. You probably don't remember, but I'm Larry." Larry offered his hand.

"Larry," B-Hob repeated, staring at the hand.

"That's short for Lawrence Hunter. This is my wife Karen."

"Hi!" Karen said on cue.

"I'm B-Hob Kharma," B-Hob introduced himself.

"Yeah, Bob," Larry replied. "We sort of got the message last night. You kept introducing yourself." There was a knock on the door. "I'll get that, it must be room service with our breakfast." Larry went over to the door and let the waiter in. The waiter, a tall hip black man, carried a big tray into the room.

He took a look at B-Hob and then at Karen and Larry and asked, "You all still celebrating Mardi Gras?"

"It was a late night and our friend was too tired to wash his make up off," Larry told him, slipping him a healthy tip.

"Yeah sure," he responded. "See it every year. Well, if'n you all need anything else just ask. Name's Joshua." He left wearing a smile that would have made the Cheshire cat look like he was frowning by comparison.

"Larry did you over-tip the waiter again?" Karen asked with tired patience.

"Not by too much," Larry admitted sheepishly.

"They way you've been throwing money around I expect to see a long line of people with their hands out as we check out today."

"Don't worry dear, I'll grow out of it by the time we reach the city limits. Maybe I've been letting success

go to my head."

"Success!" Karen turned to B-Hob, "Listen to this guy. He won the lottery last month."

"After years of patient gambling," Larry said, augmenting Karen's statement. She merely rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "This looks like more than food for three."

"Of course, dear. Jim and Gillian are joining us. Remember? They should be here in a minute or two. Bob, what's wrong?" B-Hob was sitting on the floor with his head in his hands, moaning incoherently and had been doing so for several minutes.

"Hey!" Larry shook him gently, "Earth to Bob. Come in Bob!" B-Hob looked up. "What's the problem, starman?"

"Am I going to die? What is this dreadful disease?"

"It's called a hangover. From what I understand, the booze you drank last night caused you to become very dehydrated, and the lack of water in your body is the primary cause of your misery. There are other theories, but I find that I wake up feeling fine if I drink a lot of water before going to bed drunk."

"Oh," B-Hob said, understanding only part of what he was told.

"Now what's wrong?" Larry asked, sensing that B-Hob had other problems besides the hangover.

"I'm supposed to be here without anyone knowing it," he moaned.

"Oh. Why? Are you breaking some sort of law? We won't tell."

"A law? No, not that I know of, but I was hoping to study you undetected. Primitive societies can deal fairly violently with strangers, so I've heard."

"What do you mean primitive?" Larry asked, offended.

"Relax, dear. Compared to an interstellar civilization like Bob's we must seem pretty primitive at that."

"Oh, I guess you're right. Sorry, Bob."

"No, no. My apologies. I really ought to watch what I say, especially since I've only been speaking your language since last night."

"Really? How'd you pick it up so quickly?" B-Hob told him. "Sounds reasonable. And you're worried too much about blowing your cover."

"Blowing my cover?"

"Giving yourself away." B-hob continued to look confused. "Everybody knowing you're an alien. Well I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. Nobody really believed you last night. When people get drunk they might say anything. Besides it was Mardi Gras. There were at least three people claiming to be God out there. Hmm, I wonder if they were working together? A mere spaceguy is hardly likely to attract attention. I saw your ship come down and thought it was a fake - some show put on by one of the local bars."

"Then how do you know I'm real?"

"When you started getting sick, you threw up all over both of us, so I helped you back to the men's room. As I was cleaning you up I noticed that what I thought was make-up didn't come off. Don't worry - I kept it to myself, except for telling Karen. Even our friends don't know. They'll think you're still in costume just like the waiter did." There was another knock at the door. Larry helped B-Hob up to bed level while Karen went to the door.

"This is pretty comfortable," B-Hob commented about the bed. Why didn't I sleep here? I wouldn't have been anywhere as stiff as I am now."

"We did put you there," Larry informed him, "but you kept falling off."

"Hey, hey, hey!" Jim came in shouting. "It's the alien from Outer Nairobi! Nahnu, nahnu!" He capped off the odd greeting by raising his right hand in a Vulcan salute.

"Nahnu, nahnu?" B-Hob repeated trying to imitate the gesture. The words sounded vaguely obscene, but neither Larry nor Karen were showing any sign of shock.

"An old TV show," Larry explained softly. And before B-Hob could ask, he said, "I'll tell you later."

Just as Larry had promised, Jim and Gillian thought that B-Hob was still in costume and breakfast proceeded without them giving any sign that he was anything other than human.

"Hey, Bob," Jim asked, "How'd you do that trick with the spaceship?"

B-Hob smiled, trying to remember what the other guy last night had come up with for an explanation, when Gillian admonished Jim, "James Morgan Heathrowe! You should know that a magician never tells how. Now stop trying to put him on the spot. It was a good show; you said so yourself. Just let it go at that."

"Sorry, Bob," Jim apologized. "I always wanted to be an illusionist, and I let my curiosity get the better of me."

"That's okay," B-Hob replied. Illusionist? That was something he knew a little about. When he was a kid, he'd had all sorts of stuff up his sleeves in vain attempts to impress the other kids with his magic. He was never very good at it, but he did pick up some of the philosophy along the way. "Jim, the mark of any good illusionist is that instead of wondering how another magician did a trick, he wonders how he might accomplish the same illusion."

"Hey, yeah! I get it."

"Where are you from. Bob?" Gillian asked.

"Rhagma," he responded without thinking.

"Where's that?"

"It's a small university town in Ohio," Larry said quickly. "Bob's an anthropologist working on his doctorate."

"Oh, really? I was an anthro minor back in school. What field?"

"Ethnology," B-Hob replied. "I'm looking for a primitive culture to study and write about."

"Good luck," Gillian replied. "I think they've all been done before."

"Oh, not all, surely," Karen disagreed. "Every few years a new tribe or something is found deep in the bush. How about those cave dwellers in the Philippines they found a few years ago. The Tasadays? They'd never been heard of before. If it hadn't been for the lumber industry they might never have been found."

"Well, that's true," Gillian conceded.

"Didn't that turn out to be a hoax?" Jim asked.

"The claim has been made," Karen replied, "but while the controversy continues, there are anthropologists who now say there was no hoax at all and the proof seems convincing to me, at least."

Gillian continued, "I suppose that even if you pick one that has been done you can study the changes can't you?"

"That's true," B-Hob agreed, not really following what they were saying as his hangover was starting to abate, but it still occupied most of his consciousness.

"Well, if you're smart you'll choose someone in the South Pacific. Might as well enjoy a tropical paradise on someone else's money, right?"

The rest of breakfast was spent with idle chatter and eventually Jim and Gillian got around to saying good-bye. "Nice meeting you, Bob!" Jim said. "Larry, Karen, you must come to our place at the lake this summer. Spend a month with us. Okay?" Gillian nodded and after the farewell hugs B-Hob was left alone with the Hunters again.

"So, Bob," Larry asked, "where are you going to set up your base of studies?"

"I haven't decided yet," he admitted. "I thought I could work here and go unnoticed without cosmetic surgery, but now I see those were just costumes last night, weren't they?"

"That's about it. Hey! I have an idea. Why don't you come back with Karen and me. We have a nice house with a guest room, in Massachusetts on the South Shore."

"I don't know," B-Hob begged off. "I've imposed enough on you already."

"Nonsense! The truth is I've been getting pretty bored since I quit my job last month. Having a guest around might help. You can conduct your research and if you have any questions, I'll try to help. Besides what are you going to do for money here?"

"I hadn't planned on that," B-Hob admitted. "I originally planned to study a much more primitive culture and loaded up with trinkets and other standard explorer's trade items."

"Cheap junk, right?" Larry asked. "Inexpensive but looks real pretty?"

"Right," B-Hob acknowledged. "How'd you know?"

"The colonists who came to this continent a few hundred years ago did the same thing. Bought large tracts of land for practically nothing from the natives. Of course some of the natives were pretty clever in return. Sometimes they sold someone else's land. So what do you say? Is it a deal? I even have some land out back where you can park your spaceship."

"It will go unseen?" B-Hob asked.

"We'll put a tarp over it."

"Why not? How can I refuse?" B-Hob agreed.

"You just say, 'No,'" Larry replied dryly, "but why would you want to?"

Six

The concept of a vacation is nearly universal to all civilized and semi-civilized cultures, but while most peoples see the purpose of such a period as a time to relax and recharge after a cycle of hard work, Humans use their vacations in order to subject themselves to long, tiring periods of travel, pain, degradation, and hard work all designed to make them appreciate the fact that during the rest of the year they can work at their jobs rather than subject themselves to what must be the most sublime torture known to any intelligent race.

from "Chapter Two: Leisure Time" of

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"Hey! Driving these ancient land-vehicles is fun!" B-Hob said, enthusiastically steering the slate gray Saab 9000 Turbo back and forth between the lanes of I-85 somewhere to the northeast of Atlanta.

"Ancient?" Larry asked with a laugh. "Bob, my friend, this ancient vehicle is only three months old. It was barely past its thousand mile check-up when we left for Mardi Gras. And try not to change lanes more often than necessary. Karen's make-up job may make your skin look human, but those ears would stand out a mile, as would those long-haired eyebrows of yours if anybody has an excuse to look too closely. Besides, you don't have a driver's license yet and we don't want to get caught with an unlicensed driver at the wheel, especially one who isn't human."

"Why not? I seemed to fit in pretty well last night. Nobody looked at me twice."

"We've been through that," Larry explained patiently. "They thought you were in a costume - a disguise - just like they were. There is only one intelligent species on this planet, Bob. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

"What about dolphins, dear?" Karen asked. "And some of the great apes are supposed to be as intelligent as young children."

"There's no proof of cetacean sapience, dear," Larry replied, "unless you count fiction, which I don't. As for the apes, well chimpanzees have been observed using some rudimentary tools and laboratory studies have proven that they do reach the learning ability of a six year old, including the ability to speak with sign language, but is that full sapience or merely something approaching it? In any case even if they are sapient, their cultural level is extremely primitive."

"How primitive?" B-Hob asked, suddenly interested.

"Pre-linguistic. While they have the ability to use language, they don't have the vocal equipment to speak any human tongue, nor do they seem to have any form of language beyond a small set of vocal signals in their natural habitat."

"They're the closest species related to Man," Karen added.

"Too bad," B-Hob replied. "I had originally hoped to study a really primitive culture, but that seems a bit too primitive."

"It's true," Larry agreed. "Researchers have spent many years studying them in the wild. It takes that long because you can't just walk up and ask them who they are and how they behave, but instead must sit back and observe. But there are still some small groups of people who subsist through hunting and gathering and/or early agriculture, with various forms of cultural development."

"You said that before but I was still too sick to think of asking. This planet has more than one culture?" B-Hob asked, surprised.

"You bet! Hundreds, thousands maybe, depending how finely you differentiate."

"Oh wow! This is going to take some getting used to. Larry, you seem to be well acquainted with my field. Are you an anthropologist too?"

"No, I'm an electrical engineer, but I've been a subscriber to "National Geographic" for years. That's a magazine."

"You'll have to show me. For that matter I'll have to learn to read English. Oops!" B-Hob's ability to drive had advanced, so far, to include the use of the clutch and accelerator, but he had not yet mastered the brake pedal. Coming from a culture where similar vehicles were all equipped with radar and autobrake systems, this was not surprising, although some of his maneuvers were. Noticing that the car in front of him had slowed down, he attempted to stop by taking his foot off the gas pedal. When the car failed to slow down sufficiently, instead of using the brake, he swerved into the passing lane only to find another slow car there. From that point on he started weaving back and forth across the two lanes with an occasional foray into the breakdown lane.

"Whoa, Bob! What are you doing?" Larry said, a bit more panicked than he would have liked to admit ever getting.

"The car won't stop! Is there something wrong with the brakes?"

"Only that you aren't using them. Look, pull over into the far right lane and I'll explain." After a long discussion about driving theory they decided that they had driven far enough for one day and went off in search of a motel. "Pull off at this exit, Bob. Okay, there's a traffic light at the top of the ramp. You remember what I told you about them?"

"Sure. Red means stop; green means go; yellow is a matter of situational ethics."

"Close enough," Larry conceded, relaxing a bit.

B-Hob steered the Swedish sports sedan up the indicated ramp with a smoothness that belied his scant experience. Looking up, he saw that the light had turned red so he applied the brakes and came to a halt.

"Well?" Larry asked as an outraged driver behind them started honking.

"Well, what?" B-Hob asked. "The light's red. Right? Oh there, it isn't red anymore." and he started forward turning left. More horns were sounded from either side of them.

"Bob, are you color blind?" Karen asked gently.

"Color blind? Of course not. The light on the bottom was red, when it went out... Oh, I forgot about that."

"What?"

"The suns of the Commonwealth, most of them anyway, are green-white and blue-white in color as you would see them. Yours is yellow by your standards."

"Our standards?" Larry asked. "You don't perceive colors the way we do?"

"Not at all. We would agree on wavelengths; those are objective measurements. However, my visible spectrum starts at what you call green and runs deep into your ultra-violet, including some colors that even we can only see in space where the atmosphere doesn't filter them out. Every thing looks rather reddish to me."

"That is going to cause some severe problems," Karen pointed out. "So many signs are color coded."

"Yeah, and that explains why you did all that funky driving, you never saw the other cars' brake lights."

"Hmm, I'll talk to my computer when we land the ship, maybe we can work something out. I can't very well walk around half blind."

Another night in the "Green Motel" and two more days of travel brought them to the middle of Rhode Island on I-95, about an hour and a half away from Hingham, Massachusetts and the house that the Hunters called home.

"We're almost there," Larry told B-Hob, "We might as well push on through."

"Good, I'm looking forward to washing off this make-up. I think I'm developing a rash all over my face and hands."

"Sorry about that," Karen apologized. "It's supposed to be hypoallergenic. I guess the manufacturer never counted on it being used by someone non-human."

"Bob, how soon can you get your ship to land?" Larry asked.

"That all depends on where it is at the moment. I left it up to the computer to keep it up in orbit and out of sight. Why?"

"Well I was thinking that you ought to land it at night when the neighbors won't notice it. It's fairly quiet, so if it lands late enough no one will see it and it won't wake them up coming in. We have trees all around the perimeter of our land so the neighbors won't be able to see it in the backyard. We can have it covered by the time we get any visitors."

"Good thinking," B-Hob admitted. "If it can't be tonight I'll have the computer schedule the landing for tomorrow."

"Definitely tomorrow, Bob. I still need to buy a large enough tarp to cover it with."

"Oh, I am sick to death of traveling," Karen complained. "It's going to take me days to recuperate. I hate traveling."

"Then why do it?" B-Hob asked.

"Because the alternative is staying home and doing nothing," she returned with a grin. "It's all the driving that wears me out, though."

"Why not fly?" B-Hob asked.

"I hate flying," Karen replied with a shiver. "I always get sick, so we don't fly unless we really have to."

"Besides we took two weeks to drive down to New Orleans," Larry added, "and did a lot of sight-seeing along the way. But Karen's right about one thing; it's all the moving around that gets you down. After the last few weeks, I feel like my entire world is centered around the steering wheel and the very thought of getting into the car makes me feel tired. Ah well, I guess that vacations like that are a universal constant. Right?"

"No," B-Hob replied. "Not really."

Eventually the Saab found the right series of exits and rolled off the superhighway and on to a suburban street in Hingham. It was late and most businesses were closed for the night, but the security lights were just barely visible to B-Hob and the entire ten minute trip from the highway to the Hunters' home was filled with his asking what sort of shops they were passing.

"They sell frozen yogurt, Bob," Larry explained tiredly. "It's a supermarket, we buy our groceries there. Mufflers, Bob, they sell mufflers for car engines there. Right, that's a gas station. It's a house, just somebody's home. Bob!" he said at last, "how old are you really?"

"In Earth years?"

"That would be convenient," Larry replied.

"Let's see, uh, twenty-nine, I think."

"That's not considered prepubescent on your world is it? You are an adult, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am all grown up!" B-Hob replied childishly.

"Then will you at least wait until we've all had a little sleep before you start asking the child-like questions. The incessant 'What's that?' really gets on my nerves."

"Sorry," B-Hob replied contritely.

"Larry!" Karen said sharply.

"Well, I shouldn't have snapped at you. I'm a bit over-tired. We're home!" Larry pulled the car into a winding down-slope driveway and parked in the spacious two-car garage. Larry and B-Hob unloaded the car while Karen opened the house.

"Honey!" Karen called from the house, "It's midnight; why are the lights still on in here? I thought you set the timer."

"I did," Larry replied, entering the house burdened with more suitcases than any two men should carry. "There must have been a power outage. Is the stereo still on?"

"No. Oh wait a minute; yes, it just turned on."

"Definitely the power was out for a while. I wonder if they make a timer switch with a battery back-up so that it doesn't go out of synch during a blackout."

"At least the burglar alarm has a back-up, dear," Karen pointed out.

"Burglar alarm?" B-Hob asked.

"I guess you don't have them where you come from," Larry explained, "but there are people here who break in to others' homes and steal their possessions."

"No, we have them too."

"Oh. Well, to help protect our belongings we have locks and security systems that sound an alarm that supposedly alerts the authorities that the house has been broken into."

"Supposedly?" B-Hob asked.

"Well, we used to be able to get an alarm that automatically rang at the police station, but since there are so many houses with alarms these days, most communities no longer provide that service."

"Also," Karen added, "they often malfunction, power outages can cause some types to go off, and loose switches do that too. So the usual reaction when an alarm goes off, unless you arrange with someone to call the police, is to just put up with the incessant noise."

"What do your people do to discourage burglars, Bob?" Larry asked.

"We kill them."

"Kill them?" Larry asked. Karen just turned pale.

"Yes, burglary is a capital offense when caught by the victim. Security systems in the Commonwealth are usually programmed to kill any intruder - usually by administering lethal doses of electricity, a hundred thousand volts or so."

"Sort of gives a whole new meaning to the phrase 'crispy critters'," Larry gulped.

"Lawrence Hunter!" Karen said sharply. "How can you be so blasé about such a horrible death?"

"Think about it, dear," he replied. "Remember how we felt two years ago when we were robbed. In a way Bob's people are much more civilized about it. If you allow a thief to get away with stealing, you only encourage him to do it again. Actually I'm surprised that anyone even tries it in your Commonwealth, Bob."

"Well, the worlds are full of stupid people," he replied, "and there are ways around every defense system, if you're good enough at it. Why there must be at least a hundred attempts every week on any given planet."

"Compared to Earth, that's practically a zero crime rate, Bob. Well, why don't we show you to your room?"

"Maybe I should contact my ship-board computer to arrange the landing tomorrow night."

"Good idea. Can I help you in any way?"

"Just show me the way outside. My transmitter frequency gets blocked by minor obstructions like trees, houses, and small planets."

"If it's in orbit, then it might not be above the horizon," Larry pointed out as he led B-Hob to the back door.

"The computer knows approximately where I am, within a thousand miles or so. It will probably have made arrangements to receive my signal no matter where it is."

"Your computer is that smart?"

"Yes indeed. It's a semi-intelligent mechanism and can make decisions within certain limited parameters. Finding a way to remain available is definitely within those parameters."

"An intelligent machine? That's really incredible!"

"It's a pain in the ass. The damned thing makes decisions without bothering to ask first about almost anything I don't overtly prohibit him from."

"Him? He's a male computer?"

"No, but it has a masculine-sounding voice, so it's easy to slip and think of it, him, whatever, as a male."

Excuse me for a moment. This is B-Hob Kharma calling the ship's computer of the *Space Devil* . Come in please." There was silence. "Hey Computer! Still up there?" When no reply came, B-Hob pressed a button on the transceiver that sent a powerfully loud monotone signal that was supposed to be receivable at distances up to a parsec, if not obstructed.

"All right already!" came the computer's instant and annoyed response. "I'm more than a little busy up here you know."

"Why? What's so hard about holing up in a parking orbit?"

"Orbit? What's an orbit? Ever since I dropped you off, I've been running for my life. Somebody down there doesn't like me very much. They keep throwing things at me."

"What sort of things?" B-Hob asked.

"Long skinny things with explosive war heads, some of them are nuclear. The MIRVs are particularly hard to avoid. These bastards play dirty."

"So what are you doing to avoid them?"

"Moving around a lot mostly," the computer replied. "Look the only way I'm going to be able to get out of harm's way, will be to establish a base on the backside of this world's moon. What do they call it?"

"The Moon," Larry said helpfully.

"Figures, and I suppose you call your sun 'the Sun'?"

"Uh huh."

"So much for imagination on that ball of mud. Next thing you'll be telling me is that the next planet out is called the 'Little Red Planet'? No, don't tell me, it would only depress me. Hey, B-Hob, are you still there?"

"Where else?"

"How would I know? You've moved since I last saw you and without bothering to tell me, I might add. How do you expect me to keep in touch if you insist on moving out of range. I just barely picked up your signal."

"I'll need that cosmetic surgery to fit in here after all," B-Hob told the computer, "and something that will let me use the same visible spectrum that the Humans do. Can you land here tomorrow night?"

"I've been working on temporary ways and means to circumvent their primitive radar systems. I might be able to if we do it at night."

"We were hoping for sometime after midnight."

"Yes, I think I can do it. I'll think about the visibility problem too. But the cosmetics will take most of the day to complete, even as minor as they are. How do you propose to keep me hidden to aerial surveillance?"

"We thought we'd cover you with a big piece of cloth."

"What? This ship's configuration is rather unique on this backward world. Do you really think that tossing a dish rag over me is going to keep me hidden?"

"No problem," Larry replied. "I've got another idea."

Seven

Humans, more so than any other known people, are inordinately concerned about their outward appearances. Rather than inventing self-grooming devices which are well within their technological capabilities, they continue to have specially trained professional groomers called barbers and beauticians, who do this job manually. The theory that has been proposed to explain this bizarre behavior is that Human vanity demands a second opinion, so these trained professionals not only serve to groom their patrons, but to assure them of just how good they look. Also, as a self-defense feature, these patrons will then have someone to blame other than themselves, should the results of such grooming be unsatisfactory.

from "Chapter 3; Basic Social Relationships"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

The slightly battered form of the *Space Devil* drifted down through the crisply cold midnight sky. With its running lights off it came down nearly invisibly except for where it eclipsed the sporadic offending star.

"I hope you'll be able to hide me quickly," the computer told them via the transceiver. "There are at least five separate tracking systems trying to lock on to me."

"What are you doing to avoid them?" B-Hob asked in spite of himself.

"Well, I'm projecting a visible-to-radar image of myself about ten miles away, but when I duck down below a thousand feet or so it will start to fuzz out. Also, the system I'm using isn't perfect and my real location is probably showing up as a radar ghost on at least three of those trying to track me. Also there are no less than ten jets scooting around up here trying to get a visual on me and you can rest assured they'll be scanning with infrared cameras. I can mask my heat emissions, but my profile will still show up if you don't do your share."

"Hey! Don't you worry about us," Larry told the computer. "You just land where we've indicated and we'll have you covered in minutes."

"When are you due to touch down?" B-Hob asked.

"Three minutes, thirty-five seconds... Now!"

It was a tribute to the *Space Devil's* abilities that they were unable to see it until the last thirty seconds before it landed. There was the same soft muted hum that Larry had commented on in New Orleans, but it was not loud enough to be heard by any of his neighbors especially when their windows were shut against the dry icy winds of midwinter New England. A light dusting of snow had fallen earlier that evening, dropped picturesquely by a passing cold front, but now the skies were crystalline as the interstellar ship landed gently in the Hunters' back yard.

"Okay now, Bob," Larry directed, "you take that tent pole and I'll take the other. Karen, as soon as we have the poles up, start reconnecting the guy lines."

"Right, honey!"

A few minutes later they stood back and inspected their work. A large green and white striped tent now stood over the spaceship, completely disguising it from aerial photography.

"Larry, renting a tent was an excellent idea!" B-Hob commended him.

"Thanks, Bob. It saved me a lot of money over my original idea to buy a tarp too. Of course the men who put it up this afternoon weren't very happy about having to drive the tent stakes into frozen ground, but at least we didn't have to do it ourselves."

"And," Karen added, "the owner of the rental place was very glad to see us. They don't rent out these big party tents in the winter very much."

"Well, we only paid for one day, tomorrow, so I suppose we'd better get you started, Bob. Once you look human we can send the ship here to the Moon for the duration, and we won't have to explain why we put up a circus tent in our back yard to too many people."

"Oh dear," Karen fretted. "I hadn't thought about that. The Birsteins are coming over tomorrow night."

"Don't worry," Larry assured her, "I'll think of something. B-Hob, how soon can you start your treatment?"

"Well, Karen's been helping me design my new look. Karen are you really sure I should make the hair off-white?"

"That's blond, Bob," she replied, "and yes, you should definitely be blond, you have the most gorgeous blue eyes. It would be a shame to change them. Keep the height too, you'll look like a sun god. The girls will just adore you!"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. No offense, but Earth women don't exactly turn me on. The wrong hormones or pheromones or something, I guess."

"Nonsense!" Karen scoffed. "That's not the way it looked at Molly's the other night."

"I was drunk," B-Hob protested.

"*In vino veritas*, Bob," she said with a leering smile.

"What?" B-Hob asked.

"There is truth in wine," the computer translated over the transceiver. "It's a quaint belief of the Humans that ethyl alcohol acts as a form of truth serum, by lowering one's inhibitions."

"Quaint?" Karen asked the computer, outraged. "Who are you to make a value judgment concerning Humans?"

"My apologies," the computer responded. "I was merely putting it in terms calculated to coincide with B-Hob's viewpoint."

"Is that how you see us, Bob?" Karen asked, turning on him. "Quaint?"

"Not at all," he replied hastily. "This is a very old and outmoded computer. We've found that semi-sentient computers make as many mistakes as organic intelligences do, only faster. That's why we don't make them anymore."

"Why didn't you get a newer machine then?" Larry asked.

"This one came with the ship and I was rapidly running out of grant money. Besides, at the time I thought it would be pretty neat. Blond, huh?" Karen nodded. "Well, I'll just have to take your word for it. Will you monitor the operation as it progresses?"

"Will it be gross?" Karen asked, as B-Hob opened the main entry hatch. "I mean blood and gore and that sort of stuff?"

"Gross? What an odd word usage. No," B-Hob replied. "Just keep an eye on the computer screen from time to time. Make sure the picture of the finished operation doesn't change too much."

"Is it likely to change?" she asked.

"A little, maybe. If some of the proposed changes are more extensive than the basic parameters of the program, it might need a manual override. Let the machine have its own mind unless the end result would be seen as a major disfigurement. I don't want to stand out too much."

"Okay. Let's get started. Is this really the inside of a starship?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said disappointed. "I guess I just expected something more than a dirty cramped compartment with stale air."

"This is just the airlock," B-Hob replied as they passed through the double doors, "but you are right about the air. I might as well give it a chance to air out while it's down here. Here. Now is this better?" He asked, indicating the main cabin.

"Only slightly," she replied. "Looks like the inside of an old airplane."

"Sorry," B-Hob replied, slightly crushed. "Well let's get started." He and Karen sat down at a terminal with a large screen display and started specifying the changes that the cosmetic surgery program would perform while Larry went for a pot of coffee and three mugs. When they were finished, they had a life-sized portrait of B-Hob as an Earthling in the buff on the display screen.

"Are you certain," he asked hesitantly, "that I'll need to be that complete? Even the sexual organs?"

"You never know when you might need them," Karen smiled.

"But..."

"Relax, Bob, I was just kidding you. But your disguise should be as complete as possible."

"Besides," Larry added, "You may want to visit my gym and otherwise you might stand out in the locker room. Actually you might stand out anyway. Dear, don't you think you've designed him a bit out of proportion?"

"Hmm? It depends on your perspective, dear, but maybe you're right. Computer, scale down the genitals by, hmm, ten percent maybe?"

"Working... done," came the electronic reply.

"That's more like it," Larry agreed.

"They still look clumsy and uncomfortable," B-Hob nodded glumly.

"You're the one who didn't want to be a girl," Karen chided him.

"That's better? It's all academic. I'd probably make a lousy woman, and the machine doesn't have that capability in any case. Well if that's it, I'd better get started. Computer - projected run-time?"

"Twelve hours, seven minutes, and seventeen seconds."

"What about the vision problem?"

"Internal correction is not possible with this or any other unit," the computer replied. "You will have to wear supplementary optical lenses similar to those worn by some humans, like Larry."

"You can build an optic converter into a pair of glasses?" Larry asked.

"Affirmative," came the reply, "they should be ready in six hours and twenty seven minutes."

"Well, I've wasted enough time," B-Hob said, climbing into a large metal box. "Computer, run program as soon as the mini-hospital is ready." And he closed the heavy lid.

"Running," the computer said to nobody in particular.

"Hon," Karen said to Larry, "why don't you get some sleep? I'll stay up a while and watch the program run and join you as soon as I can."

"You can join him now," the computer informed her. "The first projected decision point won't be for at least five hours."

"Oh. All right."

The sun was midway up in the winter sky when Karen and Larry returned to the space ship. The picture

on the display screen had changed slightly and Karen went right to work on straightening the computer out regarding priorities.

"Hey what's with the face?" She demanded. "The features are too sharp and that nose is big enough to hook Moby Dick."

"In order to accomplish the job with minimal alterations," the computer replied with nano-electronic calmness, "it was necessary to alter the unessential details of your proposal."

"Well you can alter it right back again," she snapped. "I put in too much work designing that face to have you messing around with it."

"The procedure will take an additional fifty-six minutes and twenty-seven point one seconds to complete," the computer protested.

"We have the time, Bunky! Now do the job right."

"Correction, my name designation is not "Bunky."

"It is now!" Karen replied. Having prepared to be as stubborn as the computer, she wasn't likely to back down on a minor matter like the computer's own self image.

"Decision noted, program is modified as per your specifications."

"Thank you," Karen replied, mollified.

"You're welcome."

"Hey, Bunky?" Larry asked. "Just how did B-Hob learn English? He seems to have a marvelous command of modern idioms."

"I set up a program that impressed the knowledge of your language directly into his brain via a teaching helm," the computer replied.

"Really?" Larry said, impressed. "But how did you learn it?"

"I analyzed a large number of communications broadcasts from your world."

"What sort of communications broadcasts?"

"Well, military communications, news broadcasts, and entertainment."

"Wait a minute, you mean that B-Hob learned English from an in-flight movie?"

"Essentially, yes."

Larry excused himself a few minutes later, telling Karen that he had a few errands to run. Karen hardly noticed his absence as she spent the rest of the day protecting what she saw as her investment and by the time the mini-hospital's lid opened, even the computer was sighing in relief. B-Hob's threats to reconfigure it into a common household appliance it could live with, but Karen's nerves were more than it could bear. "Bunky" was the most horrendous curse imaginable when reduced to binary code, but it was

sure that Karen could come up with worse and didn't want to find out what worse was.

"Hey!" Karen complained as B-Hob sat up in the large metal casket, "That's not what we programmed!"

"Oh oh!" B-Hob fretted, "What's wrong?"

"I see I'm right on time," Larry said, reappearing for the first time since breakfast, a large package under his arm. Then he looked at B-Hob, "Now that's interesting. Did you two change your minds?"

"No," Karen replied, "Someone's been lying to me. Bunky!"

"What's wrong? Am I hideous?" B-Hob asked, worried.

"No, not at all. That's not the problem. Bunky!"

"Who is Bunky?"

"Your damned computer. Bunky!"

"On line as ever," Bunky answered hesitantly.

"Explain this!" Karen demanded.

"On careful review of the known facts concerning your world," Bunky replied carefully, "I decided via safety over-ride that his hair color should be much darker, closer to the norm - for his own protection, of course."

"So my hair isn't straw-colored," B-Hob noted.

"That's blond. A beautiful golden blond," Karen corrected him.

"Whatever. That doesn't seem to be a problem," B-Hob commented. "Semi-sentient machines literally have a mind of their own. Is that all?"

"He changed your face from spec, too!" Karen said with some heat.

"Computer?" B-Hob asked.

"My name designation is now Bunky," Bunky replied, avoiding the implied question.

"What did you do to my face?" B-Hob said, wondering just what shade of golden brown the first slices of toast would be.

"Likewise for your protection, I modified it slightly to more resemble a well known and beloved Earthling."

"Oh yeah?" Karen challenged Bunky, "What sources did you use to make your decision."

"I have been monitoring your video broadcasts. This face most accurately matched your proposed design and the requirements of my safety over-ride."

"Well that explains it," Larry said with a shrug.

"I guess we might as well settle," Karen sighed. "God alone knows what we'd get if we tried again."

"And we don't have the time to try over in any case," B-Hob added.

"What's in the package, dear?" Karen asked noticing it in Larry's hands for the first time.

"I could tell that Bob was going to need some clothes and that mine wouldn't fit," Larry replied, "so I picked up a few things. Looks like I should have bought something a little more form-fitting," he grinned.

"Wrom in Heaven!" B-Hob swore in his own language, "Will someone tell me what the problem is?"

"Oh, it's not that bad, Bob," Karen replied gently.

"Not at all," Larry agreed. "It's just that you look very much like Elvis Presley."

Colonel Isaiah M. Morgenstern sat behind his battered oaken desk in a largely unused low-profile brick building on Otis Air Force Base. Otis, inconveniently situated midway between Buzzard's Bay and Falmouth on Cape Cod, had been effectively inactive for some years aside from regular use by the Massachusetts National Guard, at least officially. Its greatest activity each year took place during the month of July when the locals were treated to the frequent but irregular detonations of artillery shells, the sound of which could be heard from Provincetown to New Bedford and nearly to Boston.

Now in the dead of winter, however, the base was nearly empty, but the armed forces like any other landowner or governmental agency - in this case both - never willingly gives up property. The Air Force found it preferable to keep certain projects - especially those rated Top Royal Secret - hidden away in nearly forgotten outposts like Otis.

There were several government projects like the one that Colonel Morgenstern headed up. Because of the ultra-high security surrounding it and its brethren projects, each one worked in isolation, not even aware that their work was being duplicated. The CIA had an identical project that was over thirty years old and the FBI's was even older. Similarly the Army, the Navy, the Department of the Interior, the Department of State, and several powerful senators all had their own versions of the project. Strangely enough the Marines didn't; they thought the whole subject was a silly waste of time. They were right but not for the reasons they might have given.

Colonel Morgenstern headed up the Air Force's own avatar of the project. They called it Project Moxie and it was the direct descendant of the oldest such project of all, Project Blue Book. It was Colonel Morgenstern's job to investigate all known sightings of unidentified flying objects and then to discredit them.

In the Sixties such an investigation would have been merely classified - known to exist even if the actual results were unknown - but it was almost fashionable to believe in flying saucers back then. Now, however, to make such an admission was political suicide and yet such projects continued out of sheer greed. They all hoped to be the first to make contact with a technologically superior race, and then take them for everything they were worth.

So far there were absolutely no confirmed contacts with aliens from space, and that was simply because, in spite of the wishful thinking, there had been no such contacts until a few days earlier in New Orleans which nobody noticed.

The door to Colonel Morgenstern's office opened and a smartly uniformed Airman First Class stepped through and saluted.

"Sir!" he nearly shouted in the polite military way of saying such things as he placed a plain manila file folder on the Colonel's desk. "The report on last night's UFO, Sir!"

"Thank you, Airman," Morgenstern acknowledged. The airman gave the colonel another salute that was doomed to receive one of the sloppiest return salutes known to military history and then left.

Morgenstern opened the folder and began to read. There were only three pages inside. One was full, the next had only a few lines of print on it and the third was a map. It only took Morgenstern a few minutes to read the report.

"At last!" he said with great satisfaction as he closed the file folder. He picked up his telephone and punched out a few numbers. "Hello, Phil? Izzy here. You remember that sighting we lost last night? Yeah. Well, I want you to keep an eye on every cubic inch of airspace between Plymouth and Boston for the next week. Yes, I know that's a lot of space, but I need that. Project Moxie is about to show some results!"

Eight

To say that Human civilization is unique to known space in that it involves more than one discrete culture is severely misleading as it is a masterwork in the art of understatement. Where it is more usual to describe a culture by its conformities, it becomes necessary to describe Humans by their diversities. It is this basic fact that must be remembered when attempting to study Earth culture. The subject of Human diversity will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter, but it is brought up now because such diversity is also a key feature in Human kinship and descent.

The Humans practice almost every known system of kinship and descent; patrilineal, matrilineal, bilateral, matrilineal, patrilineal, and many permutations besides. Inheritance can go from father to son, mother to daughter, mother's brother to sister's son, to an unrelated friend, and even to total strangers. Because of this, friendships are considered every bit as important, often even more so, than kinship ties.

from "Chapter 3; Basic Social Relationships"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

A short and fast series of bell tones sounded through the house. B-Hob looked up questioningly from the

primer Larry was trying to teach him how to read from.

"I'll get it!" Karen called, coming down the stairs.

"The door bell," Larry explained to B-Hob. "It appears we have company. We can work on this again later."

"Actually I was just thinking it would be easier to sleep-learn this," B-Hob replied. "The computer - Bunky now, sheesh! - should be able to handle this just like it translated the spoken language. If you can read it in and then we let it scan a more advanced book it should be able to figure it all out and then teach me before we send it off later tonight."

"I didn't know you could do that."

"How do you think I learned to speak English?"

"Never really thought about it. I just assumed that you spent a few weeks in orbit listening to our radio broadcasts."

"We did scan those broadcasts, but the computer did all the work."

"Hey, Larry!" A deep booming voice shouted from the hall.

"Barney? Come on in! We're in the den," Larry shouted back. A moment later Karen came into the room with Barney, a decidedly overweight and balding man, and a slim red-headed woman, who seemed to be as much Barney's complement as his opposite. Another loud greeting died on Barney's lips as he caught the sight of B-Hob's face and instead he just stood there staring.

"Tacey, Barney," Karen handled the introductions, "this is our new friend..."

"Elvis?" Barney finished for her. "Wow! And I thought all those people who claimed you were still alive were just a bunch of wackos!"

"No, Barney, he isn't," Larry vainly tried to correct his friend.

"Wow, man! I've seen all your movies," Barney proceeded blithely on. "Love your music!"

"Barney!" Larry said shaking him to get his attention, "This is not Elvis."

"Oh, come on!" Barney protested.

"No! Barney, Tacey, this is Robert Karma. Bob, Barnabus and Tacey Birstein."

"Pleased to meet you, Bob," Tacey said while Barney sputtered. "The resemblance is remarkable, but I suppose you hear that all the time."

"No," B-Hob replied, "not usually."

"You don't sound like Elvis - wrong accent," Barney said, beginning to catch on. "And now that I think about it you're much too young to be the real Elvis."

"He isn't," Larry repeated as he slouched back into his chair, "but he could make a fortune as a phony Elvis if he wanted to.

"Who is this Elvis?" B-Hob asked. Tacey and Barny stared at him in amazement.

"You don't know?" Tacey asked.

"Haven't you ever gone to the movies or watched TV?" Barny asked. "Especially TV?"

"What's a movie?" B-Hob countered. "Oh yeah, video entertainment media; television, motion pictures. Got it. No, I've never been to the movies and my computer watches the TV for me."

"Your computer?" Barny asked, puzzled.

"It's a joke," Karen explained hastily. "Bob's quite the kidder. Aren't you, Bob?" she asked winking her eye at him. B-Hob caught on quickly enough.

"Sorry about that," he said with a smile. "I just couldn't resist." Barny stared dumbstruck for another minute and then started to laugh along with everybody else.

"You got me there, Bob," he admitted. "That's a good one. So what do you do, anyway, assuming you don't work as an Elvis double, that is?"

"Bob's an anthropologist," Larry informed him truthfully enough, "working on his doctoral dissertation."

"Really?" Tacey asked. "I took an intro class in anthropology. What's your dissertation about?"

"Primitive cultures," B-Hob replied. "I plan to do an ethnographic study and compare it to accepted anthropological theory."

"Really? What primitive culture are you studying?"

"Well I haven't quite started yet, but I am seriously considering suburbanites." Now it was Tacey's turn to be stunned for a moment before everyone started to laugh again.

"You're right, Larry," Tacey said at last when she managed to catch her breath. "He is funny. Maybe you should try stand-up comedy, Bob."

"I've tried," he admitted, "but I couldn't handle the hecklers."

"Have you known Karen and Larry very long?"

"No, we just met."

"We met Bob at Mardi Gras and just hit it off," Karen explained. "We invited him to stay with us while he works on his thesis."

"Hey, Larry," Barny asked looking out into the back yard through the large picture window in the den, "What's with the circus tent?"

"It's not that big," Karen interjected, hoping to divert the conversation. Larry, however, already had a

story ready and waiting.

"We found it here when we got back from New Orleans. I called the rental place today and they evidently delivered it to the wrong address. They said they'd pick it up in the morning."

"Oh," Barny said, almost buying it. "Oh come on, Lar! Rental places don't make mistakes like that. And even if they did whoever really wanted it would have complained sooner. What is it really doing out there?"

"Okay, you got me there. The truth is that under that mass of brightly colored canvas is an honest-to-goodness interstellar spaceship. Bob here's an alien, it's his ship, and he's here to study us primitive humans."

Karen gasped softly wondering what had gotten into her husband while Barny and Tacey stared in fascination at B-Hob. B-Hob just sat there and kept shifting his eyes back and forth at each of the humans in the room considering whether he should make a break for it. The moment of stunned silence stretched on impossibly long until Barny started laughing harder than ever.

"Right!" he laughed and the others joined in. "Larry, I should have known better. Bob may be a real kidder, but nobody could ever top you."

Doctor Richard Morley had come to the Quest for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence fifteen years earlier as a dedicated young man, a rising star on the cutting edge of the vast frontier of science. Fifteen years later he was a dedicated middle-aged man sitting at his desk in QETI World Headquarters, a dusty collection of offices in Foggy Bottom - Washington, D.C., but he would remain dedicated just as long as he continued to receive his pay check.

It was that pay check that was critical. Back in graduate school, he began to develop some very expensive, although legal habits. Top on the list was his taste in single malt Scotch, the price of which seemed to go up between the time he entered a liquor store and the time he walked the twenty feet to the shelves his favorite tippie was kept on, and if he paused to consider whether to try a different brand, prices would rise again.

His other expensive vice was smoking. He disdained cigarettes, but somewhere along the way he was introduced to fine cigars. At five to ten dollars a shot for the quality of smoke he insisted on they took an unhealthy bite out of his precious paycheck and unlike the good Scotch whisky he enjoyed, the cigars were a vice he could indulge in at work. However because of the cost, he tended stretch each cigar over a two or three day period.

QETI had started out with the youthful vigor of any new well-funded project, but the years had gone by without results and the project's backers gradually lost interest. This was the normal course of events in scientific research and the mere establishment of QETI was an amazing feat considering that the founders had to admit from the start that there wouldn't be results for many years.

"Radio waves," Dr. Morley had lectured more than once, "travel at the speed of light, which is the fastest

speed at which we can send a message given our present technology - maybe the fastest we will ever be able to do so. That means that it would take just under four years to get to the nearest star, which is Barnard's Star, a small reddish star that is barely visible from here, and of course it would take as long for a message to be returned, plus time for it to be analyzed and understood and a suitable reply to be formulated.

"Now all that assumes that there is intelligent life on a world circling Barnard's Star. For that matter there is great controversy over whether there are even planets in orbit about Barnard's Star. A planet is a relatively small object at such distances and can not be seen through an Earth-based telescope.

"We do not really have any solid notion of how frequently life might arise throughout the galaxy and the universe, except for the argument that since it has done so here on Earth, it is possible to do so again elsewhere. And even if life has formed on another world, we have no idea beyond our own optimism that there might be intelligent life elsewhere in the universe.

"Therefore, a reply might not arrive for decades or centuries, or it might never arrive at all. To help speed the process up, we also listen for similar messages being sent to us, but there is no guarantee that there is anyone sending such a message to us, nor would we necessarily understand it if we received one. Why then, you might ask, do we insist on continuing this search? Because we do not believe that God in his wisdom decided to make Earth the only home of intelligent life and that there are few greater pursuits to which we might dedicate ourselves than the endeavor to contact our brothers in the sky!"

Dr. Morley hadn't given that speech in over five years. He would have liked to, of course. He was very good at extracting donations from groups of interested listeners and over the years he came to understand that it was something he did far better than the post-graduate work he had done in his own field of radio astronomy. But in spite of his fund-raising abilities QETI had gradually lost interest, and had for years been cutting back on its expenses, personnel, and even the scope of its mission.

There had been a brief resurgence in interest in QETI after the Hubble telescope had been placed in orbit that then died completely when the telescope failed to function properly. NASA continued to promise that the Hubble would be absolutely perfect very soon, even though independent experts pointed out that NASA did not have the necessary equipment to do the job right. A mission to repair the space telescope had been discussed, but to date no such mission had been undertaken.

Dr. Morley, on the other hand, expected that very soon indeed, QETI would run out of money and he would be forced to look for work elsewhere. From time to time he did look around, but it had been so long since he had actually worked as a scientist rather than a bureaucrat, that jobs were scarce. The Reagan years were hard on all the frontiers of science except, perhaps geriatrics, and the Bush administration, for all its promises wasn't looking any more promising.

He did have a standing offer from Carl Sagan to collaborate on a book about Extra-Terrestrials, and that would get him both on the lecture/pundit circuit and the best-seller list, but writing was hard work and he'd have to do his fair share. He also considered working for the Planetary Society, but last time he asked casually about a possible place for him, he got welcoming smiles and vague answers that he translated into, "We'd be pleased to have you and we'll let you know when there's an opening - in a few years."

A tall young student volunteer came in carrying an equally tall stack of computer paper. His curly dark brown hair almost clashed with the burnished bronze of his beard, which he wore more to avoid shaving than because he liked the style.

"Did I ever look like that?" Dr. Morley asked himself and quickly decided that yes, he did. Being a student granted the honor and right of freedom of appearance - a right usually given up all too willingly after graduation. Out loud Dr. Morley asked, "Yes, Tancred? What do you have there?"

"Several of our stations picked up a transmission last night, Dr. Morley, on the cold hydrogen band." That was the portion of the spectrum that was largely silent through space because all radio noise was filtered out by interstellar hydrogen.

"It couldn't have come from another system then," Morley replied. "It wouldn't have gone the distance. Why did you bring it up?"

"It came from space, sir, on a frequency unused by any country known to possess the capability to launch a payload into space."

"That's interesting," Morley replied, relighting his last cigar. "Was it in code?"

"It doesn't appear to be, sir, but the language isn't one known to our computer analysis."

"Scrambled maybe?"

"No, sir. It was an amazingly clear broadcast, far clearer than we would normally expect from space. The interesting part is that the broadcast point evidently approached Earth and then disappeared."

"Disappeared, Tancred?"

"The best guess is that it may have been a spaceship landing."

"I'd have thought that would make the news, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, sir," Tancred replied. "Unless it were trying to land in secret."

"Do you have a projected landing point?"

"We think it may have been somewhere in Southeast New England, assuming that this isn't just another false alarm, sir." There had been several over the years, all had proven to be false.

"But we don't have an exact fix, do we?" Morley asked. Tancred nodded. "Do we have an office in that region?" he muttered more to himself.

"No, sir," Tancred replied, "but several schools in the area, including M.I.T. have affiliations with us."

"Good. Let's contact our people up there to keep a watch on the area and try to triangulate on such a signal if another one is detected. Also we should be on the look-out for the unusual."

"Do you really think this might be real?" Tancred asked hopefully.

"Nothing is impossible," Dr. Morley replied, "and if it is real, we want to be the first to prove it!" Tancred nodded and left the office. His cigar had gone out again, but he relit it and smoked it down to a stub. "Yes," Morley said to himself, "that will keep me in cigars for a long time!"

A sense of identity is considered essential to many sentient beings and certainly the Humans are not the most obsessive people in matters of identity. That dubious honor goes to the Ketchkoni of Quarknoodle VI, who are arguably the single most intelligent race in the universe. In fact it is only the Ketchkoni sense of personal identity that kept them, with their incredible accomplishments in technology and the philosophical sciences, from establishing an empire that would have included the Commonwealth, rather than the other way around.

It is the unique custom of the Ketchkoni to add every important accomplishment in their lives to their names, and being so creatively intelligent such accomplishments are legion. In most cultures this would not be a handicap, but due to the sensitive nature of the Ketchkoni ego, all conversation must include the full name of the individual being addressed. This custom most seriously affects politics of Ketchkoni government. The names of all candidates for public office must be written in completely on ballots because of the high probability that their names will have become augmented between the time they declare their candidacy and the actual election so only the most stupid and unaccomplished individuals ever have much hope of getting elected. The end result is actually not dissimilar to most other governments, but even the most minor matters require hundreds of hours to hear all sides of a debate and as a result, almost nothing ever gets done.

The Humans, while not nearly as incapacitated as the Ketchkoni, also have a sense of identity that requires them to be reminded of who they are constantly. Humans take comfort by being reminded of their identity by hotel clerks, doctors, lawyers, and just about everyone else they do business with. This is evident by the almost formulaic, "Ah, you're Mr. Jenkins, the doctor will see you now." or "Ms. Randolph, you're room number is..." Numerous displays of self-identification are also necessary merely to conduct business on Earth. Grocery stores, colloquially called "Supermarkets" require at least two forms of identification before allowing a customer to open an account, on establishment of which the customer is presented with yet another identification document. In short the average human can not go through the day without establishing his own identity several times.

from "Chapter 4: Identity and Ego"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"It's a shame you had to send your ship back into space, Bob," Larry was saying to B-Hob as they sat on either side of a large wooden desk in the room that served as Larry's home office. "That machine that makes clothing could have come in handy from time to time."

"It was okay for producing a set of clothes to get started in," B-Hob replied, "but its capabilities are quite limited. Maybe you prefer polyesters of various persuasions, but my tastes run toward the natural fibers. They're more comfortable; they breathe."

"What are the natural fibers like in the Commonwealth?"

"Pretty much the same as they seem to be here, at least their end results are. I imagine the animals and plants they come from are quite different, but we choose our clothing materials by the same standards you do. It's universal. Formal wear is invariably a study in discomfort, and casual clothing is designed along the opposite lines."

"Oh."

"Except for among the Bambrianosh, of course."

"Who are the Bambrianosh?" Larry asked.

"Interesting people," B-Hob replied, "or they were at the time they were studied. Anyway, they have a religion based on penance for their sins."

"That doesn't sound too unusual."

"No, I guess not. Actually, the concept of being punished for doing wrong is very wide spread, but they feel that sins can not be repented entirely in one's lifetime, and since they have no proof of a life after death, the act of penance falls to one's children."

"Yuck. Sounds like a terribly repressive notion."

"Mmm, yes. Anyway they not only live their lives trying to repent the sins of their parents, but also feel that they must have managed to commit a few of their own, which in turn are eventually passed on to their children."

"How does all that apply to clothing?" Larry asked.

"Oh yeah. Sorry. I'd forgotten that was the subject. Well, since they have more sins to atone for than they can literally keep track of, they try to make the very act of living an atonement and they design their clothing to bind and chafe to help in their atonement for unknown sins. Except for on the rare formal occasions when they are allowed to wear comfortable clothing. They claim that it makes them more aware of the uncomfortable casual clothes."

"You said this was at the time they were studied?"

"True," B-Hob replied. "A culture is usually referred to in the ethnological present; the way it was at the time it was studied regardless of what changes may have occurred since then."

"So what are these Bambrianosh like these days?"

"Commonwealth missionaries and merchants had the usual effect on their culture," B-Hob replied. Larry shot him a look that spoke whole libraries full of questions. "After learning about life in the Commonwealth the Bambrianosh revolted against their church. It was a rather messy affair. The priests were the second to go, right after the sacred tailors. There was no particularly favorite means of execution, anything that would make them dead very quickly was good enough, although the most spectacular executions were those of the High Tailor and his Holy Council of Priestesses."

"And how was that done?" Larry asked when it became obvious that B-Hob wasn't going to volunteer that information. "Did they sew them together with a giant needle and thread?" he added with a grin.

"How did you know that?" B-Hob asked.

"Lucky guess. Well, we've been avoiding this for an hour or more now. Let's start establishing you as real person."

"Larry, I am a real person. At least I was last time I checked."

"Not on Earth you aren't," Larry informed him. "There are no records of you ever existing here at all and if you want to pass in society, we're going to have to do something about that. We need to create a legal identity for you."

"I don't see why," B-Hob replied. "I'm not planning on staying here long enough to start collecting - what did you call it? - oh yes, Social Security."

"Maybe not - assuming Bunky can figure out how to get you home. However I think you would find it of value, both for your day-to-day activities here and your own study of our culture."

"All right," B-Hob agreed. "What do we do first? Go down to your local government building and get me registered?"_

"God, no! For starters you'd have to register as an alien, get a green card, and all sorts of stuff."

"You already have a mechanism for dealing with aliens?" B-Hob interrupted. "I'm not the first?"

"Whoa, Bob! By alien, I mean anyone not a citizen of this country. Unless some of the crackpot pseudo-scientists have it right, you're the first man from another planet to step foot on Earth. Now, as I was saying if you try to register as an alien, you'll have to present a passport proving you entered this country legally. I suppose such documents can be forged, but so too can papers that declare you a citizen."

"Is that legal?"

"No. But since you aren't planning on living here permanently there'll be no harm done."

"Okay, so where do we start."

"Step one - we have to produce a birth certificate. After we do that and work up a Social Security number, we can work on the hard stuff."

"Hard stuff?"

"Yeah, like getting you a driver's license, credit cards, and so forth. You'll have to take tests for the driver's license, but I'll show you how the Registry cops like to see you drive and you'll only have to learn the regulations for the written test."

"Fine. How do I get a birth certificate?"

"As it happens, I have a couple of blanks sitting right here in my desk."

"Just happen to have them, Larry?" B-Hob asked suspiciously.

"Well, a few years ago Karen and I were in financial trouble and afraid we might not be able to pay our bills. Among the options we discussed was establishing new identities for ourselves. I bought a book on the subject." He pulled a thin blue paperback entitled "How to Construct a New Identity by Unknown" and a plain manilla file folder out of his desk drawer. "I went so far as to bribe a clerk in a town hall on the other side of the state to give me two blank birth certificates, but we never used them."

"Why not?" B-Hob asked.

"Well, we decided that we weren't really as bad off as all that after all, and to have gone through with it, we'd have had to give up all contact with our friends and relatives. We decided that if worse came to worst, we would just declare bankruptcy and start over again."

"You seem to have done quite well for yourselves."

"Thank you. Yes, we have. Right after we decided to take the honest route out of our troubles, I got a new job and we've been doing well ever since. The lottery was just the latest in a long line of good fortune."

"So," Larry continued, "It will probably be best if we continue to use the name I introduced you by last night."

"Suits me. It was very similar to my real name anyway."

"Good. Robert Karma it is. How about a middle initial?" B-Hob just looked confused and Larry had to explain common American nomenclature.

"Do I really need one?" B-Hob asked.

"No, not really, but some bureaucrats have trouble dealing with names that don't have them."

"How about 'H'?"

"Good enough," Larry replied, filling in the appropriate blank. "Why 'H'?"

"My initials, if you translate them into English, would be 'B H K'. I've never bothered to correct you, but when ever you and Karen pronounce my name 'B-Hob' you drop the 'H'."

"To tell you the truth, I never really heard it, the sound combination isn't common in English."

"It isn't really all that important," B-Hob replied casually, shrugging his massive shoulders. "I need an Earthly name to go by anyway. What next?"

"Let's see, place of birth? How about Anchorage, Alaska? It's far enough away that most people wouldn't bother to check it out, and we could always claim that the records were destroyed in a big earthquake back in the sixties."

"Was there an earthquake then and were records lost?"

"The earthquake, yes. A big one. As for the records, how would I know? But it sounds reasonable and unless you really screw up it isn't likely that anyone will go looking."

"Larry, this Alaska, would it be far enough away that it might seem exotic and interesting to people around here?"

"Might be. Oh, I see what you're getting at. Yes that might cause people to ask a lot of questions. Damn, I already wrote that in. I have a spare but I'd rather save that in case I misspell something. Well, we'll need to cobble together a brief life story for you anyway. I suppose now is as good a time as any."

"Am I allowed to have moved while still an infant?" B-Hob asked.

"Don't see why not. What sort of home town did you grow up in?"

"Small college town. My father was an assistant professor of physics."

"Good enough. If somebody asks you can say you grew up in New Haven, Connecticut and that your dad taught at Yale."

"Assuming I can remember it all."

"Look. Here's some paper," Larry said tossing B-Hob a note pad. "Start writing this down. We'll keep your story as close to your real one as possible."

An hour and a half later B-Hob had ten pages full of notes detailing the differences between his cover and his real life.

"Just remember not to volunteer any information. It's going to be hard enough as it is the way you look."

"Larry, I keep trying to ask, but I still haven't got an answer. Who is this Elvis Presley? A friend of yours?"

He sat, holding three custom-machined nickel-tungsten darts, near the window of a small third floor office on Boylston Street overlooking the Boston Commons. Beneath him, unsuspecting pigeons were feeding on the largesse of lunchtime businessmen bundled up against the sleet-laden blasts of February wind. He always marveled at the persistence of the people who took their reprocessed meat on high fiber oat bran bread sandwiches out to eat in the park regardless of the weather, the time of the year, or the phase of the moon.

Prescott Daniels was not the head of the Boston desk of the Central Intelligence Agency, but he was the ranking operative in Massachusetts, even if the Boston desk was ignorant of his existence. The success of Daniels' career in the CIA was hard to define. His best work went unnoticed by all but the very highest officers in The Company and only the notoriety of his failures became widespread; that was the nature of his work. On the successful and unnoticed side was his work toward the downfall of Idi Amin. His position today was due to such successes. However, he was also the man to whom the CIA's main office in Langley, Virginia, gave the job of fixing Fidel Castro up with an exploding cigar or, failing that, making his beard fall out. Those exploits were the talk of the "Watergate Hearings", that summer daytime TV blockbuster of 1973.

"The Company takes care of its own," he muttered out loud. That was why he was still working undercover when most men his age either occupied the very highest offices at Headquarters in Langley, retired, or died. His successes kept him working, but his failures forced his bosses to keep him out of sight. Finally three years ago, he was given a dead-end promotion and was chosen to head up the CIA's most secret project. Operation Ether.

It made Daniels sick when he thought about it. He was one of the Company's top agents and he was stuck in charge of investigating flying saucer sightings. Hundreds of such sightings were made each month and he and his staff had to investigate each one. In three years he had yet to turn up a real alien spaceship, but those were his orders and his bosses wouldn't take it kindly if he tried to resign.

Daniels didn't know it, but he was not the only agent in charge of Operation Ether. His efforts were duplicated ten times over across the globe by the CIA alone, but only he had found evidence of other agencies conducting similar investigations. He had his people keep an eye on Project Moxie and, while he didn't yet have conclusive proof, he was watching the offices of Quincy Carbon, Senior Senator from California. Senator Carbon was a long-time supporter of space exploration and he once said that Earth should be the Guardian of the Galaxy, although the statement was quickly retracted when the reaction of the press was unfavorable. He had a finger in almost every space-related bill and committee and Daniels was certain that he had a small group of people searching for Extra-terrestrials.

Daniels also had a spy working in QETI; that agency was an obvious source of information. So obvious, in fact that his other CIA counterparts dismissed keeping an eye on them since they felt it was certain that any finds of theirs would be instantly announced publicly. However, Daniels was nothing if not thorough, and yesterday his vigilance had paid off.

His woman in QETI had reported that signals from space had been detected and that the emitter had seemingly landed on Earth surprisingly close to where he now sat. Then last night his own investigators picked up similar signals taking off from somewhere between here and Cape Cod. Triangulation had nailed it down to somewhere north of Plymouth and east of Braintree. Further accuracy was impossible because the radio source had moved out to sea and then straight up almost immediately.

His secretary, a well-built blond in a tight skirt and a tighter sweater, sashayed into the office and dropped a pile of paper on his desk.

"More reports, sir," she said in a sexy contralto. He was certain that she put that voice on with the sweater and skirt in the morning, but it helped what little prestige he had to have a secretary that looked and sounded like her. His "overtime activities" with her were another fine bonus. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"Not now, Vere. I'll need to go through these reports before my next appointment."

"Very well, sir."

Daniels watched with deep appreciation as she treated him to the view of her exit from the office which was as truly hormone-inspiring as her entrance. Then he got back to work. A half hour later, Vere escorted a dark thin man in a business suit into Daniels' office. Even Daniels didn't know the man's real name but he had been dealing with him profitably for many years and on many projects.

"Hedgehog," Daniels acknowledged quietly after Vere had shut the office door. "I have another job for you."

"The UFO sightings of the past two nights?" Hedgehog asked.

"You know about them already?"

"I make it my business to know anything that might concern me."

"Good. Do you know who else might have been aware of those sightings?"

"Officially? No one knows about them - not even you," Hedgehog pointed out. "Unofficially? Probably most everyone looking for them."

"Both Moxie and QETI are aware," Daniels informed the man.

"And your friend Senator Carbon, too." Hedgehog produced a piece of paper and handed it to Daniels.

"A memo to Carbon's special staff," he noted. "Looks like our suspicions were correct."

"Did you really doubt them?" Hedgehog asked with deceptive mildness. Daniels shook his head and grunted.

"Does anyone have a better idea of where the spaceship landed?" Daniels asked.

"Not to my knowledge. You are probably the closest to pinpointing that location, assuming your triangulation was accurate. What's my job? Find the site, find some witnesses, find the aliens, or just keep anyone else from finding them first?"

"All of the above," Daniels replied. "Use any means you think appropriate."

"Any means?" Hedgehog asked pointedly.

"Exactly. At all costs we must be the first!"

Ten

Every known culture has a fully developed corpus of myths and legends designed to assist the unlettered in coping with their world. These vestiges of pre-scientific times persist even into civilized cultures where in most cases they are viewed as quaint tales from the past. There are, of course, exceptions such as the once vast civilization of the Gromphids of Delta Raata II, who even after achieving a complete understanding of the universe and how it worked - a feat that has never been duplicated by any other culture including our own - continued in their belief in the great flame that would one day engulf the universe and that only by offering this deity large amounts of burnt offerings, could they forestall the "Conflagration." Their civilization abruptly collapsed when a particularly superstitious twit was elected

Premier and found himself in a position to sacrifice every library in the Gromphid civilization in one massive bonfire. The Gromphids, consequently are now restricted to a few small planets where they specialize as short-order cooks.

The Humans, however, have taken an entirely different route on their course through early civilization. After abandoning the myths and heros of their past as the quaint reminders that they hold in common with most civilizations, but feeling an absence in their lives without this sort of magic they have gone ahead and created a whole new set of myths, e.g. supply-side economics, the odd notion that a government can exist without raising taxes, and movie stars.

from "Chapter 6: Myths and Legends"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"Larry got you a fair set of clothes to start with," Karen was saying, "but really, you can't get by with just jeans and a sweater. We have to get you a couple shirts, some nice slacks, a sportscoat, maybe a tie or two." She and B-Hob were walking through one of several local shopping malls. They had only a very sketchy itinerary, Jordan Marsh, Filene's, and any likely looking shop in between. "For that matter we need to get you some shoes. Those things on your feet are okay as long as nobody looks to closely."

"You mean Larry's shoes?"

"Hmm? I didn't notice. When did you stop wearing the space shoes?"

"Just this morning. Larry and I discovered that our feet were about the same size and he loaned me this pair."

"That's one problem solved, but we ought to get you a pair of sneakers, Nikes or Reeboks or something."

"Hey what's this? An indoor river?"

"Sure, gives the mall a bit of ambience."

"Ambience?"

"Atmosphere. Without these little touches, this place would just be a large concrete and steel box. Besides, I like fountains and water gardens. Look there are water lilies and fancy goldfish - or are they koi? I never did know the difference. I think the reeds are artificial. But it's nice - the plants and the sound of trickling water. What do you do for indoor decoration?"

"Those who like the natural look display rock crystals, but I just prefer artwork."

"Well, think of this as an art form. It is, you know. You don't just dig a trench and fill it up. To do the job right you have to select each stone carefully, get them to fit naturally, make the arrangement look like it was always there, and not some recent concoction. In choosing plants, you have to consider the look you are going for and what it will look like all year. The fish are relatively easy, but there are those who would

work at that aspect as well. And then there's the maintenance aspect."

"Okay," B-Hob conceded. "Is this a form of gardening?"

"Uh, yes. It's a form of gardening, only in this case it was done indoors."

"Is it done outdoors too?"

"More often than in. What kind of gardens do you have?"

"Vegetables, flowers and rock crystals."

"You grow crystals? The New Agers would love that!"

"No, we just decorate with them. Karen, have you noticed that people are staring at us?"

"Hmm? Not until you mentioned it. It could be those funky glasses you're wearing."

B-Hob's glasses appeared to be thick, opaque, matte black lenses set in rimless frames. However they were the light-adjusting mechanisms that Bunky had promised to produce. Designed with almost perfect efficiency, they were powered by the light they collected, with a small rechargeable backup battery built in for when the light was insufficient to power the glasses. When worn, molecular-sized switches in the nose rests turn the display on, affording B-Hob a view of the Earth the way the natives saw it. Out of curiosity Karen had tried them on for a moment, but took them off immediately when B-Hob pointed out that she was literally pumping ultraviolet light into her eyes and could well go blind if she used them too long.

"What's wrong with them?" B-Hob asked.

"They make you look like you're trying to pass yourself off as blind, or trying to hide. They look like a pair of high quality sunglasses except for the matte-finish lenses, of course, but normal folks don't wear dark glasses indoors."

"Okay, I'll take them off, but I'll have to rely on you if we run into another color-oriented situation like the traffic lights."

"All I should need to do is make sure your clothes match. I was going to do that anyway," she replied with a grin.

Four hours later they were sitting in a cramped booth in a small restaurant surrounded by brightly colored bags and boxes.

"This is an interesting drink," B-Hob commented about his Fribble. "What's in it?"

"Milk, ice cream, probably some flavored syrup," Karen replied.

"Milk? I'm drinking milk? Babies drink milk, not adults."

"Bob, do you like the taste or not?" Karen countered. B-Hob made a face of disgust. "Well, you seemed to like it before I told you what it was."

B-Hob looked at the brown liquid in the tall plastic cup like he expected it to rise up and throttle him. Then he glanced at Karen who was studying him with a raised eyebrow that Leonard Nimoy would have envied and half a smirk on her lips.

"I did, didn't I?" he said sheepishly. He took another tentative sip of the chocolate dairy beverage. "Must be the ice cream," he tried lamely. Karen's eyebrow stayed in the upright position but the smirk became full grown.

"Come on! Admit it. You like it, don't you?" Karen pressed. B-Hob avoided meeting her gaze. "Men! Do you all have such fragile egos?"

"It varies from culture to culture," B-Hob replied. If you really want to discuss it, I can go into greater detail for you later, but I think we're still being stared at."

"Who? Where?" Karen turned around quickly in the booth and saw several pairs of eyes quickly avert themselves.

One of them was attached to a dark-haired woman about twenty-five years old with an extremely teased hairdo who was carrying a white plastic bag embossed with the words, "WHIM - GREAT COUNTRY SOUND!"

"Oh them. I should have warned you. They're into Country Music."

"Country Music?"

"A world all its own, Bob. I have a few Country albums at home I can play for you. I'm not fond of a lot of it, but there are some really great music and musicians who play it if you listen to enough of it. Pretty much like any sort of music. Anyway they're probably staring at you. You do look like Elvis Presley before he got fat, after all."

"Larry said he played Rock and Roll."

"He did, mostly, I guess. His music was very much in a genre all its own. His stuff might have been classed as a sort of Rockabilly, an early cross between Rock and Hillbilly, which became classed as a part of Country-Western. Anyway, some of his songs, especially the ballads like, 'Love Me Tender' were definitely in the Country style. These days I see his albums more often on sale in the Country section of the record stores than with the Rock and Roll, and in the final analysis a music's genre is classified by the people who listen to it rather than by the musicologists who try to impose labels.

As for the people who are staring, Larry told you that Elvis died some years ago, right? Well ever since then some of the extreme fans have been claiming to have seen him all over the country - the world even. Almost nobody takes it seriously and even if he were still alive he'd be much older than you are so I wouldn't worry too much about it. If it starts to become a problem, we can always change your hair style and color. Those dark glasses of yours might help too. No, don't put them on now. Just ignore the gawkers and enjoy your frappe."

"Good afternoon," the pleasantly female voice of a receptionist said after picking up the phone. She had an educated Southern accent, mostly Memphis with a touch of Mississippi. "Elvis Presley Fan Club International, Incorporated. To whom may I direct you?"

"Ah saw Elvis in tha mall!" the anxious voice said in another sort of Southern accent; one so thick that it could only have been cultivated in either New England or Southern California because no one could have ever come by it naturally.

The cute blond receptionist rolled her eyes dramatically toward the ceiling. It was the tenth such call today. She felt sure that even if someone had managed to videotape Elvis' death and had the tape run on the six o'clock news every night for a month, some fool would still claim that he was alive and living in Birmingham as a plumber, which in turn would have caused at least half the shops in the souvenir city outside of "Graceland" to stock a line of plumber's helpers embossed with a full color likeness of the "King". Furthermore, she really and truly wished that the club had never decided to actually listen to these crack pots who called in sightings.

However, they had established an entire department to make note of these reports, so her polite response was, "Yes, ma'am. I'll connect you to Mr. Pace."

There was a brief pause while the caller was put on hold and heard only the sounds of Elvis singing "Love Me Tender". This brief pause metamorphosed into a long pause and the song switched to "Jailhouse Rock" before the caller was once more as in touch with a human being as she would ever be capable of.

William Joseph Pace believed in the second coming of Elvis. Not that he felt that the "King" was going to rise from the grave or that he would be reincarnated in the form of a cheap set of lawn furniture. He did not even believe that the man had faked his own death and was now living the life of a recluse, putting in the occasional cameo appearance at a back country gas station. No, Billy Joe Pace believed that the really big money to be made off of Elvis Presley was now years after his death. He had fought for his department, ostensibly in charge of keeping track of all alleged sightings. Actually its purpose was to lend credence to the possibility that Elvis Presley was still alive, so that he could continue to make money, both from his salary and profit sharing bonuses, and from the take at the string of souvenir stands he owned on the side. Billy Joe Pace was firmly committed to the yuppie life style and enjoyed paying for it on the proceeds of the foolishness of others. He thanked God devoutly each day for Barnum's First Law.

"Pace," he said simply after touching the "HD FREE" button on the metallic blue-gray plastic box that looked more like a small computer than the desk phone it was. Immediately upon doing so, he picked up a pencil and prepared to start taking notes.

"Ah saw Elvis in tha Mall!" the called said practically screaming in her excitement.

"Yes, Miss?" he left the title hanging, waiting for her to fill in the verbal blank.

"Calhoun, Velma Calhoun."

"Yes, Miss Calhoun," Pace said smoothly. Now where did you see him?"

"At tha mall!"

Pace sighed and tried again, "Yes, Miss Calhoun. WHat mall is that? Where?"

"Oh!" Velma Calhoun said in embarrassment, "Ah'm in Braintree."

So, it was going to be one of *those* call, was it? Pace thought a moment. Braintree? Braintree, Ohio? Wisconsin? Idaho?

"What state, Miss Calhoun?"

"Massachusetts." Actually she pronounced it "Massatooshes" but Pace was used to that, he pronounced it the same way. "Braintree, Massachusetts. In the mall!"

"Very good and what did he look like?"

"He looked like Elvis! That's how Ah knew it was him!"

"How was he dressed? What was he doing? That sort of thing."

"Dressed?" Velma Calhoun then had to do something that she was obviously not prepared to do - think. "He was wearing a red and white sweater and jeans, Ah think, and he was drinking a chocolate Fribble in Friendly's. He still there, Ah think!" That answered the next question of when.

"And how old would you say he is?"

"Elvis? He's immortal, isn't he?"

Pace gripped his pencil hard, breaking it as his fist clenched tight. A sliver of wood, painted a bright yellow in one side went flying across the room with unexpected velocity and stuck in Billy Joe's cork bulletin board. He pulled another pencil out of his drawer and tried rewording the question in words of one syllable or less.

"Oh!" Velma Calhoun said at last. "Ah'd say he looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties."

"Wouldn't you say that is a bit young, Miss Calhoun? Mr. Presley would be in his fifties if he is still alive, don't you think?"

"Well, he looks like he's lost a lot of weight, wouldn't that make him look younger?"

Pace shuddered. He got two or three calls like this each week and he never ever got used to them. He patiently asked Miss Calhoun a few more questions and then thanked her for her time. As soon as he finished his conversation with her, his phone rang again.

"Pace," he said, collecting his wits.

"Ah saw Elvis! Ah saw Elvis at the mall!" a frantic woman's voice, obviously not that of Velma Calhoun, screamed at him, and another monument to Dixon's fine art of pencil manufacturing went to that sharpener in the sky.

The feature that most separates Humankind from all other known sentient species is the fact that their entire culture is based on entertainment. Nowhere else in the explored regions of the galaxy can one find a culture so reliant on being entertained. Not even the Rhapsomots of Behlquin II, which is the only culture totally made up of professional actors, have made such an obsession out of the need to be entertained.

On the surface, Humans seem not unlike our own mainstream Commonwealth culture in this respect, but where a citizen of the Commonwealth might go to the theater one evening for a play or a concert and perhaps may describe their experience with friends later, Humans live to view plays, listen to music, play games, etc. Where we like to relax after work, and give ourselves a change of pace every now and then, Humans view work strictly as a means to be able to afford the luxury of their various entertainments.

from "Chapter 2: Leisure Time"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"Check and mate!" B-Hob said triumphantly.

"You got me there, Bob," Larry conceded. "You've only been playing chess for a few days now, but you're already too good for me. Maybe you should try against Karen." She was sitting a few feet away and looked up briefly from the embroidery she was working on, and smiled before returning to her needlework.

"She's that much better than you?" B-Hob asked.

"Larry's technical knowledge is far superior to mine," Karen said, keeping an eye on her needle.

"But Karen plays with a creativity that usually takes me by surprise," Larry finished for her. "I never know what sort of moves she's going to try next. Neither of us is really all that good. Chess is just one of those games we learned the basic moves of as kids. You, on the other hand, are a natural and could probably have a fairly high national rating if you decided to apply yourself."

"Want to play another game?" B-Hob asked.

"No thanks, Bob. Three games in a row are enough for me, especially when I lose them all. Hon, why don't you play?"

Karen looked at her barely started needlework and shrugged. It was a piece of blackwork trim for a Halloween costume and she had another nine months left to complete it after all. What difference would a single evening make?

"All right," she said. "Set 'em up!"

Larry let Karen have his seat and sat down on the couch where she had been and picked up a classic Kingsley double-croctic puzzle he'd been trying to get to all week. He was having difficulty getting enough

of the clues and had to make far more guesses than he felt comfortable with. An hour later he finally caught on to the gist of the quote contained in the puzzle and the whole thing just fell together - a testimony to why there are very few almost, but not quite, completed double-crostics.

"Check," Karen said, threatening B-Hob's king with her rook on an increasingly unpopulated board. Karen played chess and most other games for blood. Her style was more kamikaze to B-Hob's careful samurai and she tended to sacrifice left and right just to trade pieces. So far the game was still more or less even, but if there were too many more such trades neither of them would be capable of placing the other in check.

B-Hob studied the situation and then moved his last bishop in front of Karen's rook so that it threatened both the rook and her king and was protected by his queen and his last pawn.

"Check," he replied right back at her. Her response was to take the bishop with her queen, which B-Hob then picked off with the pawn.

Karen took the pawn with the rook and said, "Check, again." Now B-Hob was confused, but he hesitantly took rook with his queen, leaving her with nothing but the king and a handful of pawns. While he still had the king and queen, but only one pawn that hadn't been advanced much. Also three of her pawns were well advanced and clustered near his king.

"Check," he replied. In response, she move the king diagonally behind one of the pawns. He moved the queen but her king's position was well defended with pawns on two adjacent sides and his own pawn kept getting in the way. It would take at least one more move to threaten her king. So she pushed a pawn.

"Check," she said again. She threatened his king with a pawn backed up by two other pawns and he was boxed into a corner. His only defense was to take the attacking pawn with his queen, which he did. She then took the queen with a pawn. "Check."

A few minutes later, B-Hob was stuck with just his king surrounded by Karen's queen and a rook, recently resurrected by advancing two pawns, while his last pawn died pitifully halfway across the board.

"I don't understand how you did that," he said, shaking his head.

"What happened?" Larry asked. "She get you with a suicide mission?"

"Yeah. I think the whole game was a suicide mission."

"She does it to me all the time. If it makes you feel any better, that sort of thing doesn't often work on a master of the game."

"Maybe," Karen added, "but it makes mince meat out of you duffers! Good game, B-Hob. Hey! I'm hungry. How about dinner and a late movie?"

"Why not?" Larry shrugged. "Bob?"

"I'm game, and I can use it to supplement my research."

"Wouldn't that take the fun out of it?" Karen asked. B-Hob shrugged.

"So where do you want to go?" Larry asked.

"Wherever you like," Karen replied.

"Libras!" Larry exclaimed, closing and opening his eyes once very slowly and deliberately. It was an old ritual to them and had been the cause of more than a few very late meals as they both tried to defer to the other's wishes when choosing a restaurant. Then a glimmer flashed across Larry's mind so brightly that he felt like it might have shown through his eyes. "Hey, Bob! Ever have a pizza?"

In most cases, a trip to Pan's Pizza Palace, in Quincy, would have been deemed an evening's entertainment all by itself. The building had started out life as a supermarket until the owners of the chain decided that a building with a mere forty-seven hundred square feet of space was not large enough to project the proper image for the chain. While considered small by the standards of the modern mega-market, it was very large considering the fact that the new owners, a young couple named Pandolfe on their first venture as independent business people, wanted a pizza shop. Still, they got the building for a song, a song poorly sung but with a great back-up band, and with the money saved on the purchase price they decided they could afford to do something really creative.

Vito Pandolfe had always loved keyboard instruments and most especially organs and carillons. His wife Maria was adamant that a carillon was totally out of the question - the neighbors would complain or think they were living next to a church or both - but Vito was able to convince her to allow him to spend every spare penny they had and invest it in a theater Wurlitzer organ, with as many options as they could either afford or fit in the building.

The organ was a marvel to behold, possibly one of the seven wonders of the modern world. Along with the many banks of pipes, with electronically controlled and programmable stops, there were other instruments that were also controllable from the organ manuals; a glockenspiel, two different xylophones, a vibraphone that Lionel Hampton had supposedly played, a super deluxe drum set with two bass drums, a pair of toms, one snare drum and half a dozen Ziljin cymbals, a synthesizer that had been custom made by Vito himself, a laser and conventional light show, and a computerized alpha-numeric display that might have once been part of a movie theater marquee across which song lyrics could be displayed on sing-along night.

Originally the furnishings, aside from the organ and its accessories, were sparse. There was just a series of long wooden tables and benches with simple lighting, but the Pandolfes' idea was an instant success and they soon had the money to finish the place up. Not wanting to tamper with their success, they opted to keep the "old barn" look that the empty supermarket just naturally had, so they paneled the place in a natural barn board and only upgraded the tables by coating them with a heavy polyurethane. Good reviews in both the "Boston Globe" and the "Boston Herald American" made their trademark, a satyr playing a set of pan pipes, known from Haverhill to Springfield to Providence to Provincetown.

"Well, Bob," Larry asked after they'd each had a piece of Pan's Demonium, a deluxe pizza with everything on it, pineapple optional, "what do you think?"

"It's loud," he replied taking a sip of his root beer.

"I meant the pizza."

"Oh. That isn't loud. It's very good. It's very similar to my favorite junk food back home."

"You have pizza on Ragmop?" Karen asked.

"Rhagma," B-Hob corrected automatically. "Well, we call it Ztawry, but yes it's essentially the same stuff - bread topped with some sort of sauce, cheese and various meats and vegetables. I must say I like this red sauce, I must remember to get some to take home with me."

"Hah!" Larry laughed, "Pizza! The universal food!"

"More true than you know, Larry," B-Hob told him. "At last count, what you call pizza can be found on every world of the Commonwealth and localized versions exist among seventy-eight percent of all other known cultures."

"Well it's a relatively simple idea," Larry said after absorbing what B-Hob had told him.

"Right," B-Hob agreed, "and the frequency of invention varies inversely with the level of complexity."

"Come again," Karen prompted him.

"I mean that the simpler an idea is, the more often it will be independently developed by different peoples. I could show you the mathematical formula if you like."

"No thanks. I doubt it would mean anything to me anyway."

"Whatever. The music, however is unique."

"You don't have music on Rhagma, Bob?" Larry asked.

"Music? Of course we have music. That's even closer to being universal than pizza. What we don't have is the whole idea of being entertained while we eat. As far as I know, Humans are the only people for whom eating is not an activity to be enjoyed for its own sake."

"I enjoy eating," Karen protested.

"Okay," B-Hob agreed a little too quickly, "but I've noticed that you very rarely do it without either the TV or stereo on and when you do, you usually have a book or magazine to read."

"He's got you there!" Larry pointed out. "On the other hand, Bob, I think the organist has got your number. He's been playing a medley of Elvis tunes since we sat down. He must have seen us on our way in."

"You know," B-Hob commented, "my need for privacy is as strong as yours, and I also need to be able to blend without being too noticeable. Is this face of mine going to be a problem?"

"It's a possibility," Larry conceded, "but I've noticed that often enough Elvis impersonators are able to pull off their act by dressing like him as he appeared on stage and singing like him. Your voice is not quite like his and your accent is all wrong anyway. The hair style could be a give away, but we can change it if it turns out that we need to and, of course, your clothing is perfectly normal, not a blazing white and silver sequined monstrosity with red racing stripes. The organist probably doesn't even realize why he's playing 'You Ain't Nothin But a Hound Dog' right now. More likely it was a subconscious decision triggered by catching sight of you."

"Think so?"

"Sure!" Larry assured him. "So what sort of movie do we want to see?"

"One with Elvis Presley?" B-Hob suggested.

"I don't think there are any playing," Karen said, fishing out the entertainment section she had stuffed in her large handbag.

"I suppose we should show you one of our best films, Bob. This is, after all, your first time, and I want you to be suitably impressed."

"Hey!" Karen said suddenly. "Here's one I want to see and it's opening night. We'll have to go into Boston though, but we're already halfway there."

The Schmidt-Regal was a movie theater in the old mold. None of these twenty-nine movie cinemplexes with pocket-sized screens for Mr. Schmidt. His theater still played "A" and "B" features with a cartoon and coming attractions between each one. The ticket price was higher than the multimegaplexes, but you could sit there all day and evening if you desired, just watching the movies over and over again. Its large wooden stage was suitable to live theater but the last live play that had been performed there was Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Magician" and the trap door that had been specially installed for that performance was still there, although its sticky catch made it a health hazard. The trap door didn't matter however since no one but the cleaning crew went behind the screen most of the time anyway. The theater had a balcony and six private boxes and all the woodwork was hand-carved and had been lovingly maintained for sixty-eight years. The seats were on their eleventh set of clothes and were two years overdue for reupholstering, but somehow that only added to the atmosphere of the place.

Larry, Karen, and B-Hob were seated down in the sixth row, on the aisle. They'd arrived just in time for the last show but because it was a weeknight they had their choice of seats. They deferred to Larry's wishes so now they were seated so close that they could just barely see the entire curved screen without turning their heads. That, according to Larry, was the best way to watch a movie.

"I like the cartoons," B-hob was saying enthusiastically. "That Roger Rabbit looks like a friend of mine although his voice isn't high enough. I wonder if my friend could get work here doing cartoons."

"That's not the way they're made, Bob," Karen told him gently.

"They're not? But at the end, they..."

"It's called 'camera magic', Bob. A trick of light, film and high-tech electronics. It just looks like they're real. Actually they're drawn and painted and computer-enhanced and they're made to move by photographing many such drawings one frame at a time."

"Wow!" Bob said, his eyes wide, "That's even more impressive than I thought. Imagine the incredible patience and all that work. No wonder there were so many names in the credits. What's the main feature about?"

"It's a remake of the original Godzilla. The original is a classic, but the monster moved rather stiffly. The recent advances in cinematography ought to make it look like a real creature rather than the mock-up it is."

"It isn't real?" B-Hob asked.

"No, these are just stories. Fiction," Karen replied. "What did you think?"

"Well I naturally assumed that they were at least based on actual events."

"No, they're totally made up. We do also have stories and movies about actual events, but you haven't seen any tonight."

"Not even the cartoons?" B-Hob asked, disillusioned. Karen just smiled and patted his hand in sympathy.

Finally the "A" movie started up. Someone in casting had a sense of humor, putting Robin Williams in the Raymond Burr role. Karen was openly happy that even though this was an American-made movie, Godzilla still centered most of his attacks on Japan.

"L.A.," she had said about halfway through, "has been trashed a thousand times over. Who could tell the difference? But Tokyo? Hey everyone knows that's Godzilla's turf!"

"I'm just happy they decided to stick to the original plot," Larry replied. "I don't think I could have been able to stomach one like the sequels where Godzilla was supposed to be the good guy-protector of Japan."

"Yay!" B-Hob cheered, applauding wildly and ignoring both of them. "Go get them!" The monster had just eaten a school complete with the teachers and pupils. "Get the principal! Yeah! Woo!" Karen glanced over her shoulder and noticed that half of the others in the relatively empty hall were staring at them and the rest were telling them to shut up. "Don't you just love it when the hero wins?" B-Hob asked her.

Karen held her head in her hands and muttered, "I've never been so embarrassed in my life."

"On the second sighting, we attempted to triangulate in on the radio source and coordinate that with the radar and visual sightings of the object." Colonel Morgenstern listened while the young technician tried to explain what all the numbers meant. So far he twice had to remind the man, a genius in his early twenties who had enlisted strictly for the college money, to speak English and not Mathematics. Eventually he stopped invoking tangents, arcsines, and other terms of the Black Math, and just told the story without trying to pass a final exam.

"And the results?" Isaiah Morgenstern asked.

"Inconclusive, sir." The young man replied. He flinched at the colonel's frown. "Radar and visual tracking were out of synch by as much as ten miles. The object seemed to teleport several miles at a time, both visually and on radar, except for on the tracking done by the pursuit jets."

"Oh?" Morgenstern asked. "What results did they produce?"

"None at all, sir."

"None at all?"

"Correct, sir. Whatever was up there, if there was anything up there, they never made contact either visually or on radar."

"Strange. What about computer-analysis of the data we do have? Have you been able to pin-point where it must have lifted from?"

"That, sir, depends on the size of your pin."

"I suppose you'd care to explain that, Airman," Morgenstern said sharply.

"Yes, sir," he replied nervously. "We have it pinned down, if that's the correct term, to a circle about fifteen miles wide centered in Hingham."

"Hingham, you say?"

"Yes, sir. The more interesting thing, however, is where the object went after it was fifteen to twenty miles out at sea."

"Where did it go?"

"Well, sir, until it got beyond our satellite range it appeared to be heading toward the moon at an acceleration of 1.029 gees."

"Is that number significant?"

"It might be, but only if we were an interstellar race. We could probably match the acceleration to the gravity to a known planet, but our catalog of known planets is rather slim, sir." Morgenstern studied the written report for another moment before dismissing the young man. He waited until the office door was shut before picking his phone up and dialing a four digit on-base number.

"Hello, Chuck," he said when the call was answered. "Did you get those satellite and aerial photos I wanted?"

"Sure did, Izzy. We did a full aerial photo-recon of Eastern Mass. and the most recent hi-res satellite photos are currently printing in the fax now."

"Good. I want one more run made."

"Another one? Why?"

"Because I suspect there may have been changes."

"You're still not going to tell me why you want these, are you?" Chuck asked.

"Sorry, Chuck, but you know better than to ask," Morgenstern replied.

"The only reason I was asking, is that these missions are very expensive and I have to justify them."

"Just put my name on the forms, Chuck. This one, however, won't be as expensive. I'm sending over some coordinates. They should be there a few minutes after we hang up. Just photograph a circular area around those coordinates."

"How big a circle?" Chuck asked suspiciously.

Morgenstern considered that a moment and decided to triple the projected area just in case and then told Chuck, "About a twenty-three mile radius."

"You're right - that is small."

"And then when you have all three sets, Chuck, I'd like you to feed them into the computer and have it analyze them for differences."

"Whatever you want."

"Thanks, Chuck. I'll see you later," Morgenstern said hanging up. "Closer and closer," he chortled to himself, seeing a brigadier general's star in his eyes.

Twelve

Beneath such endearing terms as "Rug Rats", "Lawn Lizards", and "Schoolyard Hyenas" there is a deep affection between parents and children. This is true of most intelligent species, except for the Alpavarvids, of course, who prefer their children as barbecued appetizers. Consequently, Alpavarvid children are born fully functional and in a litter of hundreds. They emerge with a finely tuned set of racial memories, the reasoning facility to use them, and the physical reflexes to act upon the knowledge of what their parents intend to do with them. Alpavarvids live in perpetual fear until they reach puberty when their bodies undergo certain hormonal changes that render them toxic to another Alpavarvid.

Humans, on the other hand, are pretty much like most other people except for their strong beliefs concerning their children. Curiously, many humans believe that you could sit together any group of children who have never met and they will immediately start to communicate and act together in some way independent of the prejudices of their parents. One can only wonder what they would think if that group included one or two Alpavarvid children, who share their parents' cannibalistic tendencies from birth.

from "Chapter 6; Growing Up Human"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

It had taken B-Hob and Larry over two months to put the finishing touches on establishing a legal identity. They had decided, after all, to go the full route rather than set up an identity that would only hold

up on a temporary basis. In spite of what Larry's book had said, the hardest part was getting the Social Security number. Because B-Hob was obviously over eighteen, he needed to apply in person, and with an apparent age of twenty-nine, it took five separate tries in different offices before they happened on a sufficiently plausible story explaining why he didn't have a Social Security number yet. They ended up using a simple story about losing his card and not being able to remember the number. To Karen's surprise, it worked.

The next hardest part was the driver's license, but that was only because the testing officer took one look at B-Hob's black matte glasses and insisted on testing his visual abilities.

The Registry cop had held up his right hand in a gesture that twenty years earlier would have been called a "peace sign" and before that a "V for victory" and said, "How many fingers?"

"Yours or mine?" B-Hob had replied. Eventually the cop was convinced that B-Hob could, in fact, see and the driving portion was relatively easy.

Some of B-Hob's supposedly worthless trinkets for trading with the natives proved to sell well in a local flea market and soon he had a few thousand dollars in a money market account in the Bank of Boston, and twin gold Visa and Master Cards from First Southern. He felt much better about that since he hadn't been comfortable living off the willing charity of the Hunters and while a few thousand plus credit wasn't really very much, he now felt he could at least make a contribution toward the household if they'd only give him a chance.

He had been taking notes toward his dissertation since landing, but now at last he was able to actually get out on his own to study human behavior in its natural habitat. To pick and choose where and what to observe without feeling guilty about taking up Larry or Karen's time.

The other good news was that it had been nearly a month since he had needed to talk to Bunky. Every moment away from that nano-electronic junk pile, B-Hob felt, was a moment well spent. His only fear involved the difficulties he anticipated during his homeward voyage. He made a note to himself to remember to call up Bunky tonight to see if he had succeeded on figuring out where home was yet.

Meanwhile, he was sitting on an uncomfortably built bench of concrete and wood in the midst of a carefully planned and maintained collection of trees, grass, and concrete paths. However, it was an odd set of colorfully painted structures that had attracted B-Hob there in the first place on that unseasonably warm April day. At first he was unable to figure out what their purpose was and had decided that they were a form of sculpture and took numerous photographs and wrote a couple of pages of descriptions until a group of children came running up and started playing on the weird contraptions.

"What are you doing?" one inquisitive young girl asked, sitting down next to him.

"I'm taking notes," B-Hob replied.

"Why?"

"For school," he answered, hoping that the simplicity of the answer would satisfy the child.

"Oh," she nodded sagely. "My big brother goes to school. What's your name?"

"Bob," he said remembering the pronunciation that Karen and Larry used.

"I'm Sally," she volunteered.

"What's this place called?" B-Hob asked.

Sally looked at him a little strangely and then decided that he was testing her knowledge. Grown-ups did that sort of thing all the time - asking her all sorts of obvious questions that they really ought to know by now themselves. After all, she was just a kid. If she knew the answers, shouldn't they?

"It's the 'Park'!" she answered anyway in the half-excited tone she'd learned to delight grown-ups.

B-Hob made a few notes on his pad and asked another question, "And what's that called?"

"A slide!"

"And those?"

"Swings!" and so this continues through "Jungle Gym!", "See-saw!", and "Sand box!" until the girl's mother retrieved her.

"I hope she wasn't a bother," the mother said, thinking that B-Hob looked somehow familiar.

"Not at all," B-Hob replied. "In fact, Sally was helping me tremendously."

"Oh? How?" Sally's mother became worried, she still couldn't place the face behind those dark glasses, but she felt certain that she must have seen him on TV. Could it have been one of those "Most Wanted" shows?

"I told him what the toys are called, Mommy," Sally informed her proudly.

"For my dissertation," B-Hob amplified, "on human behavior."

"Oh," Sally's mother said. "I was a Chem. major myself. What school?"

"Rhagma University," B-Hob replied without thinking.

"Never heard of it."

"It's a long way away," B-Hob said, trying to cover his mistake. He decided to ask Larry about some of the local schools.

"Rhagma?" The former coed wondered. "Sounds sort of Indian. You don't sound like you're from India."

"I'm not," B-Hob told her, thinking quickly. "I just go to school at Rhagma U."

She just nodded and hurried Sally away from the stranger. Something about B-Hob made her nervous. She was certain that she had seen him before and those dark glasses made him seem sinister. It wasn't that she didn't believe that he was a student, but she had heard far too many ominous stories about weirdos who sat in parks watching the children. She rushed Sally out of the park, but before she left, she shared her concern with a beat cop assigned to park security. A few minutes later B-Hob began to suspect that he wouldn't be able to join Karen and Larry for dinner as they had planned.

***** ***** *****

"I'm worried about Bob, Larry," Karen said as their car turned onto the cul-de-sac on which they lived. "Why didn't he meet us at Jake's?"

"It's probably nothing to get concerned about, dear. He probably just got lost and couldn't find the place."

"You think so?"

"Sure," Larry told her with a confidence he didn't feel. "He probably made his way back home and is waiting for us there."

"The house is dark, dear," Karen said as they pulled into the driveway.

"Yeah," Larry agreed, "and the jeep isn't in the garage either," he added when the door opened for them.

The phone was ringing as they entered the house and Karen rushed to answer it before whoever was calling could hang up.

"Hello?"

"Karen? It's B-Hob."

"Bob! Where are you? We've been so worried."

"I was arrested and am being held at the police station."

"Arrested? Why?"

"Arrested?" Larry asked, correctly interpreting the half of the conversation he heard. Karen motioned that he should be quiet while she heard what B-Hob was saying.

"I'm not really sure," B-Hob told her. "They said something about suspicion. Can they do that?"

"I don't know. Have you been booked yet?"

"Booked?" B-Hob asked, awash to the term.

"Never mind. We'll be there as soon as we can."

"Thanks, Karen," B-Hob said and hung up.

"What's happened?" Larry demanded as Karen replaced the handset in its cradle.

"The police picked him up on suspicion of something or other. What do we do now? Get a lawyer?"

"At this time of night?"

Half an hour later they were arguing with a desk sergeant.

"I'm sorry, folks," the sergeant told them insincerely, "but we're going to have to hold him until tomorrow while we're checking his priors." The sergeant would once have been described as thin, wiry, and cat-like, but times had changed and so had he. He was no longer thin or wiry, and the term "cat-like" applied only if one was thinking of a fat house cat that had been eating one too many cans of food per day for the last few years.

"What priors?" Karen demanded. "He doesn't have a record."

"Well, ma'am. Then that's just what we'll find out."

"What are you holding him for?" Larry asked, trying to keep his temper.

"We got a complaint that he was bothering the children in the park," the sergeant replied.

"That's ridiculous!" Larry and Karen scoffed together.

"The complainant claims she saw him on that 'You're the Detective!' show."

"She saw him on an old album cover," Karen countered. "He looks a little like Elvis Presley at age twenty-nine."

"Hey! That's it!" a passing officer said all of a sudden. "I knew he looked familiar. It must be those dark glasses that kept me from realizing it."

"You sure, Anuszczyk?" the sergeant asked.

"I am now. There have been some reported Elvis sightings up here lately. My wife is real nuts for him, you know, so I hear about every one the fan club reports."

"Whether you want to or not, I'll bet."

"That's pretty much it, Sarge. Anyway, I'll bet the folks who've thought they saw Elvis were actually seeing him."

"That's a possibility," the sergeant allowed. "According to the complainant he was just sitting there watching the children and taking notes, but he made her nervous."

"You arrest people just because they make others nervous?" Karen asked, outraged.

"Yes!" the sergeant replied. "We do if there's a chance they abuse our children."

"Yeah," Officer Anuszczyk agreed. "Better safe than sorry."

"Anuszczyk, bring that guy out here, I want to take a look at him myself."

It took another hour and three consultations with superior officers, but the Chief of Police eventually ordered B-Hob's release warning him not to leave town for a few days, just in case.

"Well, that was exciting," Larry said dryly when they were all finally back home.

"Sorry about all the trouble I caused," B-Hob apologized.

"It's not your fault," Karen told him, "but when I get my hands on Bunky..." she let the threat hang, not knowing what would cause the semi-sentient computer the most anguish, but determined to find out eventually.

"Could have been a lot worse," Larry added. "Officially they only brought you in for questioning, so we didn't have to raise bail money and you won't have to appear in court. The nice thing is that your cover story held up. I wasn't sure it would if put under that sort of scrutiny, in spite of what the book said."

"Now he tells me!" B-Hob said to the ceiling.

"No, really! New identities don't have much in the way of a back history, and that can show up on computer searches. The weak link was your birth certificate. I'm glad now we chose Anchorage as your place of birth. The earthquake made the story believable when the response came in that they didn't have any record of you."

"I thought they were going to hold him for sure when that happened," Karen commented.

"Me too," B-Hob agreed.

"Well, I wouldn't go making any out of town field trips for a while," Larry said, glancing out the front window, "it appears they've put a tail on you."

A month earlier Prescott Daniels received permission to expand his office and, accordingly, he had rented the entire floor adjoining his office in the Boylston Street building he'd been using for years.

Before, the only regular denizens of his Operation Ether were himself and his secretary, Vere. The visits from Hedgehog were at irregular intervals and Daniels suspected that was Langley's way of keeping tabs on him. With the expansion, several new agents had been assigned to Daniels and Hedgehog became a regular face in the office suite, although only Daniels knew that he wasn't one of the ordinary agents. Vere was now chief executive secretary with a handful of carefully selected younger women under her.

Now that he had the space, Daniels at last was able to set up a special room just for the tracking of UFO sightings and related phenomena. Before, all that had been done on one wall of his office and the locations marked with his custom-machined darts. Now that same wall sported a door that opened into a small room in which he had installed a water bed for those late nights and early afternoons with Vere.

The only problem was that new sightings suddenly dropped back to normal levels a month before at about the same time that the contractors finished the remodeling of Daniel's office. Nothing attracted the Company's auditors faster than a sudden lack of activity on the part of a project and Daniels was starting to worry about their imminent arrival when Hedgehog strolled into his office one afternoon.

"I love your little back room, Pres," Hedgehog opened the conversation on a disrespectful note. Daniels was used to Hedgehog's irreverence, but he was shocked to hear that anyone else other than Vere knew about the back room.

"How?"

"How did I know? Come on, Pres. If I'd let a detail like that slip by me I'd be ready for a pine box." What Hedgehog omitted was the fact that he and most of the rest of the staff had been using the room with Vere, although Daniels was the only one who insisted on bagpipe music for background. Vere only restricted herself to one man when there was only one man available. The back room was the worst-kept secret in the office, but word of it would probably never get back to Langley since that would be the end of it.

"So," Daniels said, shoving the matter of the back room aside, "what do you have for me this time."

"Things have been a little quiet around here lately, haven't they?" Hedgehog said obliquely.

"Yes they have," Daniels replied stiffly. The sudden drop-off in activity was a sore spot to him and Hedgehog knew it. "Is that the only reason you came in here this morning?" Daniels picked up one of his darts and threw it negligently at the dartboard on the far wall. Bull's-eye.

"Not really, no. Just wanted to make sure you weren't getting too used to the easy life." Daniels' face hardened and Hedgehog decided that he was skating near enough to the edge so he went on. "You see, QETI picked up some more radio signals last night." Hedgehog tossed a small collection of paper negligently across Daniels' desk. Daniels reached for it eagerly, flipping through the pages like a Doberman at his first meal in three days.

"What's this?" he asked, unable to understand the contents.

"It's in code," Hedgehog told him, "as you ordered."

"I can see that," Daniels said sharply. "What code is it?"

"My own invention," Hedgehog said modestly, "a triple-encrypted version of a translation from the original Navaho." Navaho? Hedgehog didn't look like any sort of Indian, but Daniels didn't ask. Hedgehog would never answer anyway.

"Care to translate it for the ignorant 'White Eyes'?" Hedgehog gave him a nasty smile in response.

"Very well. The simplified version is that the signals were on the exact same frequency as the series that were detected last month only this time they appeared to be coming from the Moon."

"Any idea of where they were going or was it a general broadcast?"

"The broadcast was fairly directional and tight-beamed. We think the broadcast was meant to be received somewhere between Washington and Halifax."

"You call that a tight beam?" Daniels asked.

"From the Moon? Yes, that is a tight beam. And before you ask, no, we didn't detect any signal from the

Earth to the Moon."

"What good does that do me, then?" Daniels asked.

"For starters it gives you something to report to justify your existence to the big boys at Langley. They're watching you much more closely now, you know. They even closed out the other Operation Ethers," Hedgehog said with the malicious grin of one who knows he's dropping a bomb and is happy in his work.

"What other Operation Ethers?"

"Did you really think you were the only agent of your caliber with a blemished record? Until you started turning up hard evidence of a real flying saucer, this was the standard fate for your kind. It keeps you active in case they need you again, but you're also harmlessly out to pasture. They had you working on a shoestring because they never expected you to actually find anything. Your counterparts are now being recycled into some other nearly impossible project."

"Like what?" Daniels asked curiously.

"Beats me," Hedgehog replied a little too quickly. "They're probably off looking for unicorns and fairies now."

"Or Elvis Presley."

"Why do you say that?" Hedgehog asked, suddenly serious.

"Oh nothing. It's just that the *Herald American* has been reporting Elvis sightings for the last two months all along the South Shore area. They even printed pictures a couple of times."

"You saying there's a connection?" Hedgehog asked. Daniels shot him a sour look. "Well, maybe I should look into it anyway."

"You're too important to waste on that," Daniels told him. "I need you to keep an eye on all the other alien watchers. Elvis sightings. Maybe we should suggest that some of my former counterparts look into that," Daniels laughed.

Hedgehog smiled slightly, then said, "What makes you think they aren't doing that already?" Daniels stopped laughing and the two men just sat there and stared at each other for a long time.

Thirteen

Security is a concept that has many different connotations. To the average hunter-gatherer culture like the Quans of Gamma Tercellion III, it means a comforting fire, a strong arm, and a sharp spear. To citizens of the Confederation it means all the comforts of home and a firm belief in one's own abilities. To the Waxtilians of Waxtil Beta, it means knowing that your neighbor is screwing around with your wife.

Due to hormonal imbalances in their biology, Waxtilian women are often driven into a killing frenzy when they experience a particularly intense sexual experience. Continuation of their species by natural means is

a key feature of their religion and procreation is prescribed on a regular basis, so naturally Waxtilian men believe that frigid women make the best wives. Unfortunately the inability of a Waxtilian woman to experience orgasm is an extremely rare trait and the next best thing is to encourage extra-marital activity on her part. Of course, one must keep in mind that while a Waxtilian is setting up the guy next door, the guy next door is doing the same to him. The end result is that Waxtilians, at least those who survive, are perhaps the most accomplished card players in known space and are universally barred from the Casinos of the Commonwealth, unless playing for the house.

To Humans, security means large aggressive animals, weapons ranging from small hand-guns to orbital-based platforms capable of destroying their world, specially tailored bio-weapons, barbed wire, water-filled trenches, and a coercively repressive system of governmental agencies. In short, it would seem that Humans are at their most secure when they are capable of "blowing each other away" as they might say. Strangely enough, with some predictable exceptions, Humans as a rule don't actually want to make use of that capability. They just need to feel that they have it should the need ever arise.

from "Chapter 8; Warfare"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

The brave men and women of the Hingham Police began to really dread keeping an eye on the suspicious Robert H. Karma. They were used to keeping someone under surveillance, but this suspect just didn't behave the way they expected someone who knew he was being watched to behave. It started on the first day after B-Hob's arrest. He decided that he wanted to return to the park to continue his observations.

Where most suspects would have attempted to ignore their tail or even try to lose them, he walked boldly up to the unmarked car across the street and told the plainclothesman at the wheel, "I'm going to the park again today and I'll be stopping for gas on the way. Is that all right?"

"Huh?" The veteran cop replied. "Uh, yeah, that's fine."

"Thank you. Oh, do you know where I might buy a kite? They looked like they were a lot of fun yesterday." The cop ended up leading the way to a small variety store and helped B-Hob pick out a cheap paper kite and a roll of twine. When it turned out that the winds were strong enough that the kite required a tail, the cop sent his partner back to the car to grab a rag out of the trunk that they could rip into shreds.

On another day B-hob decided that he should interview a policeman and walked up to the car and took a seat in the back while he questioned the man and woman in the front seat who were assigned to him that day.

The final straw came some ten days later when Karen and Larry went with B-Hob to the Mall to do some shopping. When the bags they were carrying became too numerous and heavy for three people to carry, B-Hob guilelessly recruited the two trailing officers to help carry the extras back to the car. After that incident, overt surveillance stopped although B-Hob received a phone call once a day for another week from Police Lieutenant Moniz to ostensibly ask him just one more question before they closed the case. After that, they appeared to lose interest in him, but B-Hob decided to make sure.

"Lieutenant Moniz, please. Yes, I'll wait."

"Bob, what are you doing?" Larry asked.

"Trust me. Hello, yes. Lieutenant Moniz? Bob Karma here. Look, the Hunters and I want to go into Boston today. Do you mind?"

"What you do is no concern of mine, Mr. Karma," Moniz replied. "Why are you asking?"

"Well you told me not to leave town until further notice and I just wanted to make sure it was okay."

"Go! Keep going, for all I care. Go to the Moon if you want!"

"I don't think so, Lieutenant. It's a very uninteresting place, lousy color scheme, no air. I much prefer this planet," B-Hob replied innocently. There was silence over the phone as Lieutenant Moniz fought the big one for his self-control.

Finally he spoke. "Mr. Karma, I'm sorry we inconvenienced you. We should never have bothered you in the first place. Now please feel free to come and go as you will." He then quickly hung up before B-Hob could ask what he was sure would be another infuriating question.

"Free at last!" B-Hob said as he hung the phone up. "I just wanted to make sure we were no longer being watched."

"Bob," asked Karen, "has that been what you were up to all this time?"

"Uh huh! I figured that if they saw more of me than they really wanted, they would soon lose interest and go away."

"You took a big chance there, Bob," Larry told him. "That sort of behavior could just as easily have caused them to look a bit deeper. Your false identity isn't unassailable by a long shot. Ten to one they never questioned the City of Anchorage whether or not there had ever been any loss of records due to earthquake damage. If they had, we would probably all be looking at life from the wrong side of a cage right now."

"I thought you said that the earthquake story would cover any lack of records?"

"No, only that it would offer a plausible explanation. It worked this time, but let's not try pushing our luck. All right?"

"Sorry, Larry. I misunderstood."

"No problem this time. The real point, however, is to be inconspicuous."

"Got it. So, now that we know that we're in the clear, what's in Boston?"

"A whole other world, Bob," Karen told him. "We thought you might like to visit some of our museums and then, of course there's the library. So, tell us. Where to first?"

"A museum or two would be instructive."

"Instructive? Okay. Let's do the Museum of Science."

" $E=Mc^2$? Really? Hah!" B-hob started laughing hysterically.

"Bob," Karen said in an aggravated whisper, "that equation is supposed to be the basis of atomic physics. What's wrong with it?" It took B-Hob a moment to settle down.

"Well it presupposes that the speed of light through a vacuum is a constant."

"It isn't?" Larry asked.

"No, there are hundreds of variables involved. I'll admit that this equation is a fair approximation given the conditions that normally prevail in this galactic area, but it's a bit simplistic. Still, the scientific knowledge of your culture is surprisingly advanced. Most cultures at your stage of development would consider it religious heresy to suggest that matter could even be converted into energy, except for the Zaqvids of Anglefette." Both Karen and Larry had inquiring looks on their faces so B-Hob continued, "The Zaqvids were a group of methane-breathing slug-like creatures that became sessile in their middle age. Well, since they had nothing to do but sit around, they thought a lot, leaving the younger Zaqvids or 'Actors' to act on the thoughts of the 'Thinkers'. The result was that by the time their culture had thoroughly adapted to using the wheel, the 'Thinkers' had already postulated the uses of thermonuclear reactions. It was all very sad really."

"Why?" Karen asked in spite of herself.

"The 'Actors' were too dependant on complete guidance from the 'Thinkers' and by the time they got around to building their first nuclear power plant, the 'Thinkers' had already moved on to the consideration of direct matter-to-energy conversion, no longer caring about more primitive concepts. The 'Actors' went ahead and built the plant without any real understanding of what they were doing. It was far too large and the controls were inadequate."

"Meltdown?" Larry guessed.

"Polluted the entire planet with radio-active fall out. They died out soon after, of course."

"Bob, I've been watching the people around us for an hour now," Karen said, changing the subject, "and I think we'd better do something about changing your appearance as soon as we get home tonight."

"Why?" B-Hob asked, looking around. "I don't see anything unusual."

"By now, you're probably used to having people stare at you," Larry told him, "but do you remember what I told you about attracting attention?"

"Oh yeah. So should I give Bunky a call and have him bring the ship back down?"

"That won't be necessary," Karen told him. "We'll just stop off at the drug store on the way home. Bunky's ideas aside, I really think you ought to be a blond."

Lieutenant General Peter James Bradford Jr. was what polite society might have call a "hard ass" if Bradford ever deigned to actually participate in polite society. As it happened he preferred the rough and tumble of a barroom brawl to the 17:30 ceremony known as "Cocktail Hour". He preferred to lace his speech with highly colored and occasionally inventive profanity and only dealt with those "wimps and fags on Capitol Hill" when absolutely necessary. He snarled and spat his way through the outer office over the protests of the young WAF who served as Colonel Morgenstern's receptionist and secretary. Throwing Morgenstern's door open with excessive force, he stepped through before it could bounce back off the doorstep and close itself. And as he sat down in the straight-backed wooden chair in front of Morgenstern's desk, he waved a sloppy salute without bothering to notice or care whether the Colonel had bothered to salute first.

"How the fuck are you, Izzy?" he asked, mostly to see what sort of response he'd get. Bradford gauged people's worth by their reactions to what he said.

"Pretty damned good, Pete, and you?" Basic training, many years ago, had indelibly taught Isaiah Morgenstern how to swear and while he normally preferred to employ a more genteel speech pattern, he knew his superior officer's idiosyncrasies well enough to play the part expected of him.

"Not too well," Bradford replied, dropping the profanity. Morgenstern got worried then. The only times Bradford spoke politely in private were during a crisis or when he was about to fire someone, often both. "Izzy, two months ago you reported that a UFO landed somewhere south of Boston. Your report claimed that this was the most corroborated sighting since the beginning of Project Moxie. Little phrases like that tend to catch the attention of the General Staff and they get a bit testy when they don't hear anything else about it for over two months. Now it's none of my business if you kick those fuckers in the balls for breakfast every morning, at least not until I'm one of them, but when they come breathing fire down my neck it is my business. So what's the deal, Iz? Why am I sitting in a forgotten little office on a forgotten base on Cape Cod?"

"Spring break?" Morgenstern tried lamely. Bradford glared at him so he added, "Sir. Well I've been very busy here. We get several reported sightings each day from Bar Harbor to Midway. I have to check them out. We just haven't gotten back to the Hingham sightings."

"Colonel Morgenstern," Bradford emphasized the title, "we both know you've been passed over for your star several times now. There'll be another review later this year, but if 'I'm very busy' is the best you can do, the only stars you'll be seeing will be the ones that leave you wondering what hit you."

"Very well, sir. I ordered a computer comparison between two sets of aerial photographs of the projected area of landing, but you wouldn't believe how many differences there can be after only two days time."

"What sort of differences?" Bradford asked.

"The placements of cars, the drifting and subsequent melting of snow, even the differences of shadows since the pictures were taken at different times of the day."

"I may only be an old flight jockey who managed to bull shit his way through the ranks, Izzy, but even I know that computers can be programmed to filter out mundane details like that."

"The computers you Pentagon boys have can do all that and more," Morgenstern agreed, "and they do it automatically, but the dinosaur I have to deal with isn't that sophisticated. We have to program those things manually, and unlike the movies, that isn't done by just pushing a few keys. Each pass requires a separate program and each program can take hours, even days to write. I have Captain Markowitz working on it almost exclusively."

"Charles Markowitz?" the general asked.

"You've heard of him?"

"I worked with him at Edwards a few years ago. Good man that. If he's having trouble, it's a big problem. That solves half of why I'm here."

"And the other half, sir?" Morgenstern was on a relatively rare first name basis with the general, but there were times when he knew he had to be formal. Sensing he was about to receive new orders, he was well aware that this was one of those times.

"I'm here for the duration," Bradford replied, studying Morgenstern's reaction closely. "When two months had gone by without an update, the big boys decided to replace you entirely. I like you, Izzy, you're one of the few college boys that doesn't flinch every time I swear. You got guts. Besides if they replaced a man under my command, it would look bad for me too. The best way to handle it is to step in myself. You'll still run your office the way you always have, but I'm to oversee your activities directly until the matter of this Hingham area sighting has been put to rest."

"I was about to close it anyway," Morgenstern admitted. "It's been a long time without any activity."

"I'm afraid you won't bloody well get off that damned easy," Bradford replied, "or didn't you hear about the signal QETI picked up last week?" Morgenstern shook his head. "That's odd, I would have thought you would automatically be sent word of that sort of thing. I'd better look into that; find out why you were left in the dark. Anyway, they've been picking up some unusual transmissions at irregular intervals starting about the time of the Hingham sighting. The most recent was just last week. They say it appeared to be coming from the Moon and was directed at a point somewhere along the northeast coast."

"You think they may be related?"

"Does a submarine have a watertight asshole? As soon as I have an office to move into - anytime this hour will be fine - have Markowitz send a set of photos and his work so far to me so I can catch up. Then, this evening over dinner, you can bring me up to date on all those other UFO sightings you've been investigating."

III. Three to Get Ready

"That's right! And now for a limited time only you too can have one of these incredible kitchen appliances! They slice, they dice, they make millions of exotic taste treats. Use this new oriental attachment to slice sushi and sashimi. Isn't that amazing! With a single slice it reliably removes all the offending toxic dorsal flesh from this fabulously delicious fugu! Now you can enjoy this rare and expensive gourmet treat in the comfort of your own home! How much would you pay for this extraordinary device with the ten piece set of cutting blades plus the self-sharpening steak knives and the unbreakable crystal goblets? \$40? \$30? Well now during our special introductory offer, you can get them all for only \$9.95. Unbelievable? But wait..."

The people of Earth have a commercial culture that rivals our own and is, in fact, exceeded only by the Rammabols of Rammawer IV, where advertising is literally a religion in which the high priests wear tacky polyester plaid robes and must undergo the most rigorous purification rituals before being allowed to compose an ad regardless of whether it be a public service announcement or a mere bit of hype for a new under-tentacle deodorant. Aside from the utter lack of religious observances, a Rammabol high priest would feel right at home on Madison Avenue.

from "Chapter 9; Subsistence"

The Humans of Earth

by B-Hob Kharma

"I give up!" Karen said at last. She had been trying for the last three hours to bleach B-Hob's computer-generated hair to a surfer blond, but the black mass of fibers had lightened up to no more than a neutral gray. It became an ugly tarnished brass color when she attempted adding a little color. In the end, she had to settle for a light brown that at least had the virtue of not looking perpetually dirty and unlike the blond she had hoped for it looked natural with his skin color.

"This makes me look different?" B-Hob asked skeptically. "My face is still the same."

"True," Karen agreed, "but the lighter hair should detract attention away from your extreme resemblance to Elvis. At the very least, there will be less people staring at you."

"You would think," Larry opined, "that people would at least expect Elvis to look like he was in his mid-to-late fifties and not the twenty-nine or so that Bob appears to be. How long ago did Elvis die, fifteen, sixteen years?"

"Nearly seventeen, dear," Karen answered, "Remember the big deal on the news about what you called 'Dead Elvis Week' in Memphis back in Ninety? But you have a good point. At least they ought to remember him as he was at forty-two when he died. What do you think? Will Bob pass as a non-celebrity?"

"He ought to shave the sideburns back to a more fashionable length, but aside from that I guess it will do."

"Shave?" B-Hob asked. "You mean take an incredibly sharp knife and scrape it across my face?"

"That is the way it works," Larry allowed.

"No, thank you very much," B-Hob shivered.

"How have you been removing your beard up until now? That ought to do the trick."

"What beard? I didn't even have sideburns until Bunky fitted me with these while I was in the tank."

"I never noticed," Karen admitted, "but that explains why I never had to clean little hairs out of the guest bathroom sink. But what's wrong with using a razor?"

B-Hob shivered again before answering, "Maybe it's just a personal quirk, but I'd rather not. The idea of putting a sharp blade to my face scares the willies out of me."

"All right. We won't make you shave. Dry off and I'll give you another chance to beat me at chess."

B-Hob had become quite comfortable with his evening routine with the Hunters. More often than not they would watch the news while reading or playing one board game or another. As the evening wore on, the game might change or not as might the players. B-Hob used the television as a study guide for his thesis, but by ten o'clock he had normally developed enough erroneous conclusions to keep both Larry and Karen up for another two hours or better correcting him. This might have become dull after a while, but they varied it often enough with movies or dining out to keep the quiet evenings at home something to look forward to.

B-Hob had never quite gotten a handle on Karen's style of suicide chess and they were halfway through yet another bloody exchange of pieces that was almost sure to end up with another loss in his column when his attention was distracted by an item on the news.

"Locally, scientists are perplexed by a mysterious collection of what appears to be costume jewelry. This jewelry is characterized by stones that glow of their own light when worn. We go now to a live interview with Doctor Quentin Foxglove of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has been studying the mysterious jewelry."

"Thank you, Jim," a pretty brunette in her mid-twenties chimed in. "This is Carmen Roberts, Eyewitness News 4, and I'm here today with Doctor Quentin Foxglove..."

"Why do reporters always repeat everything the anchor has already told us?" B-Hob asked.

"Shh!" Karen replied. Larry merely shrugged.

"Doctor Foxglove," Carmen Roberts was asking, "just what is it about this jewelry that makes it so unusual?" The image on the screen jumped a bit indicating to the sharp-eyed that the interview was not only not live but had already been edited before air time.

"There are several details about the pieces I have examined that make them unique as a collection. The metals used are unlike any alloys I have ever seen. One is a silver alloy that is analogous to sterling except that there is very little copper in it but has aluminum instead. The other alloy is, strictly speaking, fourteen karat gold, but the actual alloyed metals are of amounts that are not commonly produced."

"Doctor, these items were reportedly bought in a flea market for only a few dollars each," Carmen Roberts pointed out.

"If you say so. The alloys are of only passing interest in any case. It was the stones that are set in each piece that first attracted my attention. You see they seem to be some sort of silica but with some trace impurities that cause them to glow with their own light when heated to near body temperature. The colors vary, but they seem to be mostly in the upper end of the spectrum. One of the stones actually emits ultra-violet light, which might tend to give the wearer a mild tan underneath the stone."

"Is there any naturally-occurring gem stone that would do that?"

"Not to my knowledge, although you should consult somebody in the geology department."

"Is there a possibility that this jewelry is of extraterrestrial origin as the Von Daniken Society is now claiming?" the reporter asked.

"These objects are very unusual, Ms. Roberts," Foxglove replied stiffly, "but I am sure that there is a more reasonable explanation concerning their origin."

"Thank you, Doctor Foxglove. Back to you, Jim."

"Thank you, Carmen," the anchorman replied smoothly. "Our investigative team has traced the purchase of this highly unusual jewelry to a large flea market in Taunton, Massachusetts earlier this year. The owner of that flea market was unavailable for comment. Coming up next, the Red Sox drop their eleventh in Toronto after seventeen innings." News broadcast theme music swelled up as the screen faded to a commercial hawking a new shampoo.

"Those trinkets were made with real gold and silver?" Larry asked B-Hob incredulously.

"Well, yes, of course," B-Hob replied. "What else?"

"Almost anything else. Bob, if I'd realized they were made of precious metals we could have gotten a lot more than we did."

"Precious metals?" B-Hob protested. "They were gold and silver, not osmium or iridium or something odd like that. My mass-energy converter has a rather limited repertoire. Should I have used platinum?"

"Good Lord no!" Larry exclaimed. Karen giggled.

"Well the only other alloys I can produce are stainless and O1 tool steel, or at least that's what Bunky says are their nearest Earth equivalents, and they didn't seem appropriate."

"What about the stones?" Karen asked.

"Synthetic glow quartz. Like the guy on the TV said, it's basically silica with a few impurities. It's very rare in its natural state and natural pieces usually have several colors in each piece, but it is easy to synthesize in monochrome pieces."

"What else can that converter produce?" Larry asked.

"Any number of objects in one or more of the materials it is programmed to synthesize. Bunky programs in the desired shapes, but the materials are very limited. Aside from the metals I mentioned, I can produce various types of quartz and glass, and a few plastics. It is an old model after all, I couldn't afford a better one. but I figured it would be sufficient for trade goods. Jewelry and tools are fairly standard that way."

"Next time, just make a matching set of socket wrenches, Bob. People aren't as likely to attempt a spectrographic analysis of them."

"Wrenches, got it." B-Hob turned back to the chess board, moved a piece and said, "Check."

Karen's response was predictable as she took the offending piece with one of her own. "Check and mate!"

"Taunton now?" Prescott Daniels asked.

"According to the newsies," Hedgehog replied with a nod. "They won't part with the name of the flea market."

"Since when have you let that stop you?"

"Given the nature of Operation Ether, I didn't think you'd want me to attract that sort of attention," Hedgehog said, unperturbed. "Besides, how many flea markets can there be in Taunton?"

"How many?" Lieutenant General Bradford asked tightly. This entire case had worn the characteristic profanity from his speech patterns. Well it was only an affectation, he reminded himself whenever he noticed, one he could take up again when he had the leisure time. Leisure time was not something he had a surplus of since his arrival at Otis Air Force Base.

"It appears," Colonel Morgenstern replied, "that Taunton is the flea market capital of Massachusetts, especially if you include the surrounding towns, which is quite possible considering how unspecific Channel 4 was."

"What about that M.I.T. professor they interviewed?" Bradford asked.

"Doctor Foxglove? He was able to give us some specific details on the alloys and the stones. He even worked out the mean frequency of the light they emitted for us, but he didn't know where they came from."

"What was the mean frequency?" Bradford asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"Somewhere in the upper blue of the visible spectrum. Our own experts, working on the assumption that these objects are of extraterrestrial origin, an idea that Foxglove scoffed at, believe that the creatures who manufactured them must have come from a system with a blue-white star."

"Is that important?"

"It may be. There is a possibility that such a creature would be blind to the lower end of our visible spectrum and would therefore need some sort of visual augmentation device in order to function normally on Earth."

"What sort of device? What would it look like?" Bradford demanded.

"We could put one together that would be about the size of a small TV set, but it could conceivably be a pair of glasses, contact lenses, or some sort of brain implant, so that might not be any help in finding aliens on Earth."

"You're telling me that given the evidence of the sightings a few months ago, all the radio messages and now this jewelry, that there are spacemen running around and we can't find them?"

"Sort of puts a whole new meaning to the phrase 'illegal alien', doesn't it?" Morgenstern replied.

"Damn."

"Doctor Morley, we're receiving another set of signals." the graduate assistant, Tancred, said excitedly, rushing into the small office where Richard Morley had just lit up the latter half of one of his precious cigars. With the recent detection of alien radio emissions, QETI was no longer short of funds and Morley no longer needed to ration out his smokes, but old habits died hard.

"Like the rest?" Morley asked. The previous sets of emissions were clear and crisp, but were in an unknown language they had yet to decipher. Initially they had thought that perhaps the language was Navaho. The trick had been used successfully before and the phonemes were very similar, but after flying a Navaho Indian out to listen to their tapes, they quickly gave that idea up.

"No, sir. These signals are oddly garbled. We were hoping you might be able to make something of them."

Morley grunted an indeterminate answer and followed Tancred to a room two levels down and half a building away, one of three where the signals were being recorded. The signal as it was being played over the speakers had an peculiar sound to it, as if it were being heard through a bucket of Jello.

"Sounds likes it's out of phase," Morley commented. "You've tried all the usual tricks, I assume."

"Yes, sir," Tancred replied.

"Dick," an elderly man in a white lab coat said, looking up from a vast panel filled with flashing lights, knobs, switches, and enough CRT screens to run a small television station, "it's about time you got here. What kept you? And get that filthy weed out of your mouth. You know there's no smoking in this room."

"Sorry, Sean," Morley mumbled stubbing his cigar butt out. "What's the story here?"

"The signal's coming at us inside out or something like it," Sean growled.

"An elaborate scrambling or encryption, perhaps?"

"Perhaps? Oh yes, until we know for sure that's as likely as anything, but ask yourself this; if all the other signals were broadcast unscrambled, why would they start scrambling their transmissions now? I doubt that's the problem anyway.

"This stuff seems to be coming in just plain distorted, like the signal is too strong for our equipment, although that isn't quite it either." Morley didn't say anything, knowing that Sean would eventually serve up an hypothesis. "Actually," Sean went on at last, "I think we're only picking up a harmonic or a side band to the actual signal. Notice that it sounds as though it's slightly out of tune? Well, I think it is, but our equipment isn't up to the job of fine tuning." Sean went silent.

"So," Morley asked unable to wait for Sean's best guess any longer, "just what do you think this signal is."

"Hmm? Oh yeah. There's no way I can prove this, of course, but I think this is the edge of a directional transmission that is somehow being phased, or warped, or whatever you want to call the process, but in some way augmented to send it at speeds many times faster than light.

"Dick," Sean went on after a brief pause, "our ET is phoning home."

It had taken several months, but Bunky had at last located the approximate direction in which the Commonwealth lay. Now, all he had to do was to make a routine transmission and the first ship to pick him up would be able to give him his precise coordinates by triangulation.

"*Space Devil*- KAGY 7776 - calling for a navigational fix, calling anyone. Come in please." Bunky had been listening to the various radio broadcasts from the planet below. He would dearly have loved to broadcast, "Breaker one nine, this is the *Space Devil* callin' for a ten-twenty. Bring it on back, good buddy!" but he realized that he was probably the only entity in the entire Commonwealth who would understand what it meant. Instead, he continued to send out his request in the more standard fashion. It was over three hours before he received a reply.

"*Space Devil*? This is the *Prince of Zaringia* - KBMG 6067, Captain S-Tev Womma commanding. Who am I talking to and what can we do for you?"

"This is the ship's computer talking, Captain Womma, my name designation is," the computer flinched

electronically at the necessity of using its name, "Bunky, and my captain, B-Hob Kharma by name, has put me to the task of locating us with respect to the Commonwealth."

"A talkie? What was that name? B-Hunky?"

"Bunky."

"All right," Captain Womma replied, not really hearing the difference. "We're working on your location now. Is Captain Kharma available?" Womma, like most people, was not particularly comfortable talking to a machine.

"No, Captain. He is currently studying the natives on the planet below me."

"A newly discovered planet?" Captain Womma asked, his eyes lighting up with ill-concealed avarice.

"Correct. I have been unable to report it yet, since we weren't certain of our location."

"Well, well," Womma rubbed his hands together with a big grin creasing his face. "Tell me now, how did you manage to get lost?" Bunky told the tale in great and glorious detail while Captain Womma instructed his navigator to get a fix on the signal. After an hour, Womma gave Bunky the information he wanted and signed off. "Now," he instructed his navigator, "change course for this Earth. If we can get there first, our claim will take priority over any other merchantman."

"Captain," the first mate asked, "wouldn't this Captain Kharma have first claim?"

"You heard the idiot machine, M-Harv. This Kharma is an ethnologist and is only interested in studying the natives. He hasn't even reported the planet's position yet, although I'll bet that B-Hunky is working on that now. If we can get there before any other merchant, we'll have a majority claim over the entire planet's resources."

"The planet's inhabited," M-Harv reminded his captain, "We'll have to deal with the natives if we want to exploit the place."

"True enough, but we get first crack at everything they have, and I've never met a primitive yet I couldn't con out of his life savings for a handful of junk. And once our claim is filed, no one else will dare to horn in."

"Except the missionaries, maybe."

"Maybe, but they've never done anything but make our work all the easier." He switched his voice to a slightly higher register and spoke with sweetness and light, "'The spacemen are good and kind. Welcome them. They are here for your own good.' Hah! We'll take these Earthlings for everything they've got!"

The *Prince of Zaringia* was not the only ship to receive Bunky's broadcast, however. A mere ten parsecs away, the Holy Church of Wrom missionary ship, *Miracle of Wrom* sat in synchronous orbit

around a small green planet. Like most missionary ships they were assigned to find new forms of intelligent life and when they did, to bring them the word of Wrom, the one true God who inherited all creation from his Mother on the day he came of age.

The Church of Wrom was a house divided. However, since its most controversial schism was over just how old Wrom was when he came of age, the struggles were confined to the very upper echelons and became manifest to the average devotee only when the supreme high priest, the "Blessed Speaker of Wrom," died and his successor was chosen. The current Speaker was a Twenty-first Millennialist.

Meanwhile, the *Miracle of Wrom* in total disregard of all the various schismatic factions of the Church, even the Self-Determinists, who claimed that Wrom came of age when he decided to and might do so again, was attempting to determine whether a certain shaggy red form of motile plant life was sapient or, indeed, even aware of its surroundings.

"Reverend sir!" A young missionary communications officer said from her post to the *Miracle's* captain, the Reverend S-Tan Quoree, "There a request for a navigational fix coming in."

"Put it on the main speakers, child." She did, but before Reverend Quoree could respond to Bunky's call for help, they also heard Captain Womma's response. Quoree merely sat and listened, signalling to the girl at communications to record the conversation. "Praise be to Wrom!" he swore fervently when the transmissions ended.

"Praise Wrom!" the bridge crew responded in chorus.

"Attention, all hands!" he announced over the intercom. "A new world filled with the unenlightened has been discovered, praise Wrom." He paused, giving the crew a chance to echo his sentiments. "And the task has fallen to us to bring them the word of the one true God." Another pause for pious oaths. "Stand by for course change, there will be a command staff meeting in my day room in ten minutes. That is all. Bless Wrom!" He turned off the intercom and turned to the young man who was this shift's navigator, "Lock in those coordinates, my son. We've got us some souls to save!"

Fifteen

As any first year student of ethnology knows, there are no universal constants when it comes to cultural values. This is especially true when it comes to birthday observances.

While it is customary in our own culture to wish someone well on their birthday, and perhaps give modest gifts and celebrate the occasion with a few friends, we are only the top of the bell curve with the extremes stretching out below us. The Rhandrins of Beta Xerox II hold raucous parties that vary in intensity depending on one's status and the actual number of years since one's birth. A peasant on his thirty-fourth birthday might be treated to an early evening of drunken debauchery followed by a small donation to his local church, but when one of their fifteen kings recently celebrated his fiftieth, the entire kingdom spent over two full weeks in a party that only ended when every last drop of alcohol had been consumed. That barely controlled mayhem was followed up with another two weeks of contrition that was capped off with three full villages being offered up to the gods as a burnt offering. On the opposite end of the spectrum we find the Triaxelons of Gerianis VIII where birthdays are considered to be occasions of such bad luck that the mere mention of a birthday is enough to guarantee social ostracism. It

is customary on Gerianis VIII to call in sick on one's birthday and then spend the day cowering in a dark closet on under one's waterbed.

In comparison the Humans of Earth might seem almost normal.

from "Chapter 5: Common Social Occasions"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"There you see?" Karen proclaimed triumphantly after she and B-Hob had been walking through the mall for an hour. "The hair job did the trick."

"Are you sure?" B-Hob asked uncertainly.

"Do you see anyone staring at you?" she countered.

"Well, no, but I still get the feeling that I'm being watched."

"It's all in your mind, Bob," she told him confidently.

"Maybe. Well, now that we've managed to parade up and down the mall twice on each level, how about we stop walking for a while?"

"My thought exactly," she agreed. "Time to shop!"

B-Hob groaned inwardly. There may no universal constants in ethnology, but the feminine delight in shopping came close. Normally he could tag along patiently, but this time she was spending some of his money as well. The real reason for this outing wasn't to assure B-Hob of the effectivity of his new disguise, but to find a birthday present for Larry.

"Very well, where to? Jordan's? Filene's?"

"Too mundane," Karen scoffed. "No, Larry can buy his own practical stuff. I want to get him a toy of some sort; something completely unusual, something he might want but would probably never buy for himself. There's only one shop in this mall we'll check, otherwise it's on to Braintree for us. Ah! Here we are, 'Doctor Gravity's House of Flight!'"

"What is this?" B-Hob asked, mesmerized by dozens of fragile constructs of brightly colored cloth and paper held semi-rigid by wooden or plastic sticks.

"It's a kite shop primarily, although they have other model flying devices here as well. See, this is an ornithopter. It flies by flapping its wings like a bird."

B-Hob was fascinated. "I've never seen anything like it," he said in wonder. "How does it work?"

"Well, it's made of very light weight material and there's a big fat elastic band inside that after you wind it up, it will make the wings flap very fast. It sort of sounds like a pigeon, in fact there was a store like this

in Jackson Square, where you landed, that sold these things. I saw the manager take one of these things outside one afternoon and fly it around the square. It was very funny; all the pigeons kept following it."

"This is wonderful! I must get one to bring home."

"Hey, it's on me," Karen said cheerfully. "Happy birthday."

"My birthday isn't for several months, but thank you!"

"Bob, you're a cheap date," she laughed. "Now let's see if we can find something for Larry. We used to go kite flying a lot when we were dating, but we always used cheap paper kites. I wonder how much a cloth kite or maybe one of these complex Mylar jobs would cost. Bob, what's wrong?"

B-Hob had suddenly stiffened up as an unexplainable shiver ran through his bones. If he had been human he might have said that it was as if someone had walked over his grave. He found himself staring at a nondescript brown-haired man who was seated on a bench out in the mall. The man seemed somehow out of place as he sat there reading a paperback book. Out of a corner of his mind, B-Hob heard Karen's question.

"Uh, nothing, I guess," B-Hob replied.

Even CIA agents go shopping.

Hedgehog had been searching for traces of the alleged "alien/Elvis" on the South Shore for weeks now. Such searches are long, boring, and filled with dead time during which there is little or nothing to do. The Reagan era had a lasting effect on Hedgehog and he still ate gourmet jelly beans when he could find them. So he had come into the mall to buy a bag of assorted jelly beans, mostly peanut butter and marshmallow flavored, and to pick up a fresh book or two to read. He preferred nonfiction to fiction, but the selections were slim this time of year so he eventually settled for a trashy mystery involving supposed CIA intrigues. At least it would be good for a laugh.

And so with a bag of candy and a book in hand he started back out to his car, a nondescript blue government car pool Chevy, when he nearly ran into the man with the matte black glasses.

Hedgehog, unlike Prescott Daniels, the man he nominally worked for, had never failed in his job. He was aces, one of the best the Company had. His failure to rise to the top had nothing to do with incompetency, but with politics and interpersonal relationships. Hedgehog would not brown-nose. It just wasn't in him to say one thing and mean another when not actually on assignment. It was part of his twisted code of ethics. Lie to the mark, lie to the ladies, lie to the Congress, the Supreme Court, and the president himself, but always be straight with the boss. That was the one basic rule of his life. It made him a good agent, but when the boss screwed up, Hedgehog didn't hesitate to point it out, and that sort of thing was pure poison when it came time for promotions.

There was something about the "guy with the glasses", as Hedgehog immediately dubbed him. Hedgehog didn't get his reputation without reason and he swore to stay with this guy until something clicked. He stared for a while, watching B-Hob and Karen walk the length and breadth of the mall and then back again. Something eluded Hedgehog's conscious mind. He kept looking, occasionally hiding his head in his newly acquire book, whenever the "guy" looked his way. Hedgehog sat down when B-Hob and Karen entered the kite shop and continued to observe.

"Something about his face," Hedgehog muttered when B-hob stepped into a shaded part of the store. Hedgehog picked up a scrap of paper and started sketching B-Hob's face. "Hmm, yes! The shape of his jaw and that nose. Heh, heh!" The hair was all wrong in style and color, but when he colored the hair in black it all clicked together, the man did look like a young Elvis Presley. Hedgehog didn't know for sure that this was the man or alien he'd been looking for, but it was the closest thing he had to a lead yet. Certainly, the Elvis Presley Fan Club had turned out to be a dead end. "Those dark glasses," he whispered to himself, "they gave him away. I probably would have never noticed if it weren't for them," Hedgehog mused. "Well, I'll just follow them home. Wouldn't want this to look too easy."

"It's a great kite," Karen said as they left *Doctor Gravity's*, "but I didn't think I'd get off this easy, especially since it was on sale. Let's see what else we can find."

"How about lunch first?" B-Hob suggested.

"Okay. We can do *Newport Creamery* in the next mall."

Hedgehog rose to follow them as they left the mall. As they reached the door nearest their car, however, he suddenly realized that his was parked halfway around the mall. In near panic he turned on his heels and dashed back through the mall. He stumbled up a short flight of stairs bumping into an old woman who screamed in outrage at his retreating back and charged up a down escalator dodging people as if they were stationary obstacles. Once on the upper level he continued running until he crashed headlong into a pair of blond coeds just coming out of a shoe store. A bit of twisting brought him down flat on his face, ripping his large three pound bag of jelly beans, which in turn scattered randomly for dozens of yards. He mumbled a high-speed apology to the young women and scrambled to his feet only to slip on the jelly beans several times before managing to finally get beyond them. He realized that he must have dropped his book somewhere along the way. It had probably gone skidding off out of sight on a bed of rolling jelly beans, he thought as he ran toward the door on sugar-sticky shoes. At last he got to the car and in his haste dropped the keys underneath it.

"Shit," he muttered, falling to the pavement. He grabbed the keys and got up, promptly twisting his ankle painfully. Through a haze of pain, he slipped the key into the door lock, opened the door and slid into the driver's seat in a single jerky motion. He suffered a brief pause as he tried to put the door key into the ignition, but at last the car's engine screamed to life and he floored the car in reverse, taking out one headlight each from two cars across the aisle from his parking space. He slammed the automatic gear shift into drive and left a pair of parallel black marks on the fading pavement of the parking lot.

It was nothing short of a miracle that he left only more remnants of his tires rather than more shattered glass and twisted metal to mark his passing as he skidded through each turn of the crowded parking lot on his way to the other side. At last he reached the other side where he screeched to halt at a traffic light at the head of the main exit road from the mall. Now where were they?

Hedgehog was in luck. He saw them in the slate gray Saab across the intersection from him and they were about to take a left turn onto the exit road. When the light turned green, Hedgehog feigned courtesy and waved them to turn first. The lady at the driver's wheel smiled and waved her thanks, which Hedgehog returned. Three more cars wedged their way in ahead of him before he could turn to follow.

Hedgehog kept his eye on the gray Saab ahead of him as it proceeded on to the north-bound side of State Route 3 and quickly built up speed until it was traveling at a carefully maintained sixty miles per hour, the so-called illegal speed limit. Hedgehog expected to be able to catch up and at least take note of the Saab's license plate but another car insisted on tail-gating it and he had to stay two cars back.

He expected that they would turn off at one of the Hingham exits, but instead they continued on north toward the I-93/Rt. 128 split. Finally Hedgehog, lost his patience with the tail-gater between him and the Saab and depressed the Chevy's gas pedal. He pulled into the passing lane, just in time to spot a state police car, complete with a pulse radar gun, partially concealed by a bridge abutment on the left side of the road. He glanced down at his speedometer; seventy MPH.

A few years earlier Massachusetts had passed a new set of fines for speeding. He did a quick estimate of the fine he had just incurred and it was somewhere in the neighborhood of four hundred dollars.

"What the hell," he said to the air. "They can chase me for a while, I'm not going to lose that guy!" Hedgehog wasn't worried about the fine, in the rare eventuality that flashing his CIA ID didn't get him off the hook outright, he'd have the ticket fixed later through channels.

Sure enough, of the four cars and a van that waited to flag him down around the corner two immediately set off in pursuit in spite of the fact that he had already slowed and pulled in behind the tail-gater again. Hedgehog kept driving, but just as the chase cars caught up he heard a muffled pop from under the hood followed shortly thereafter by clouds of white steam.

"Damned government cars!" Hedgehog snarled, pulling into the breakdown lane. As the two cars bracketed him in he wondered idly whether he had just lost a radiator hose, the water pump, or the whole radiator for that matter. The only comforts he had were that tomorrow there would be someone new in charge of the local car pool and that he was looking for someone with a gray Saab. Hedgehog wasn't from Southeastern New England and so he didn't learn until the next day just how many Saabs, even gray ones, were to be found on the South Shore.

"Did you see that?" B-Hob asked Karen as he looked out the rear window.

"See what, Bob?"

"That blue car that tried to pass us a few minutes ago. A couple cops were chasing it and then it started smoking or steaming."

"I missed it. The engine probably over-heated."

"Then the fact that he was being chased had nothing to do with it?" B-Hob asked.

"Probably not. Why?"

"It's not important, I was just wondering what sort of device your police have to make a car stop like that."

"Oh," Karen replied. Then she went on to explain that the police had very little other than their own authority and, in the case of chases, their patience and persistence to stop a car. By the time she was done they were in the Braintree mall and browsing in a game shop. "What made you think the cops

stopped him with some sort of device, Bob? Is that how it's done on Rhagma?"

"No, it's pretty much the same. We don't have anything that would do that either, but then we don't have toy ornithopters either."

Karen, on a hunch based on B-Hob's reaction, decided to buy Larry a hand-cut wooden jig saw puzzle of M.C. Escher's "Waterfall". B-Hob was absolutely entranced by the tricks of perspective and the twists of logic that went behind the few examples of Escher's art they could find in puzzle form and Karen made a mental note to buy B-Hob a book on Escher that he could take back with him.

It pleased her to think that M.C. Escher might be the first example of human artistic thought that the people of the Commonwealth would be exposed to. It was either him or Da Vinci, and Escher more readily represented the modern world. That, of course, started her thinking deeply about how to give B-Hob a feel for human art. They hadn't really exposed him to much culture in the months he was here aside from what was available on TV and the radio. How does one sum up the total human experience to a man from outer space? She'd start working it out as soon as they got home. They still hadn't eaten lunch and even she was hungry now.

"Hingham again," Lt. General Bradford muttered around a glass of cheap Scotch. These late afternoon cocktail hour briefing sessions had become a normal routine for both Bradford and Isaiah Morgenstern. "Every God-damned time we run these programs it comes down to Hingham."

"So we start a closer surveillance on Hingham," Colonel Morgenstern replied dryly. He didn't mind discussing the day's problems and triumphs over drinks, but he had gotten sorely tired of the general's office. "What's the problem?"

"Problem? I'll tell you what the damned problem is. We should have been at this point two months ago. We were at this damned point two months ago but you wanted more damned computer analysis!"

"With your approval, sir!" Morgenstern snapped tightly. That brought Bradford up short.

"Sorry, Izzy," he apologized, pouring them both another drink. "You wouldn't believe the pressure I'm under to show some results soon."

"Oh, I believe it. Your language has gotten almost civil in the last few weeks. Run out of dirty words?"

"You bet your ass!" Bradford laughed. "Look, we have to show results on this project and soon or we might as well retire now and frankly I'm not ready for that just yet."

"We are one step ahead of where we were two months ago, however," Morgenstern pointed out. "We've managed to narrow down our possibilities to nine possible landing sites."

"And seven of them are on private property. What do you propose we do, acquire it all by eminent domain?" Bradford asked.

"Oh, come on! You know as well as I do that most people will let us in, if we use the usual invocation."

"This is a matter of national security!" Bradford said with mock seriousness, raising his freshly filled glass.

"And if any of them refuse we'll know they're hiding something," Morgenstern replied, seconding the general's toast.

Sixteen

From the descriptions so far, one might get the impression that the Humans have a single homogeneous planet-wide culture. Indeed that is the norm as ethnologists have discovered on countless planets, and on those few that have been encountered on which there are multiple cultures, these cultures are either comprised of entirely different species or else are completely isolated from one another.

T-Homis Kraia, the founder of the modern science of ethnology, set forth as his second law, "Any cultures in contact with one another will tend to amalgamate, rapidly becoming one culture with a single set of values." What Dr. Kraia would have said had he lived to learn about the Humans of Earth is anybody's guess.

Far from tending toward a single culture, the humans seem to delight in creating more and diverse units among themselves. They are differentiated by age, sex, locations, religious preference, and, amazingly, by skin color. No doubt this phenomenon will one day be explained, but for now it is a great mystery.

One should not think that there is not a tendency for Kraia's second law of ethnology to apply to the Humans. Even they, with their love of diversity, can not stop the transferal of cultural values and all Earth cultures have more in common with each other than with any other known culture. That is to be expected, but there is still a far greater diversity than in any world previously discovered.

from "Chapter 7: Cultural Diversity"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

Two spacecraft entered the Solar System at approximately the same time. Both had turned off their navigational beacons. That was standard although illegal procedure when entering a previously uncharted system. Many of the larger merchant and missionary ships kept track of their colleagues' whereabouts to what ever range they could afford sensors for. Whenever one was caught entering a system previously unknown and as yet unclaimed, there was usually a great rush for that system by half the Commonwealth ships all looking for a piece of the action. Naturally this has caused some captains to allow themselves to be seen in one uncharted area before turning off their beacons to lead their competition astray. And this practice has been known to backfire on the perpetrator.

The Zuffies of Taramsuna III were so discovered when one careless explorer missionary used their system for a diversion while he visited a system for some indifferent heavy metal deposits. The Zuffies,

while fairly primitive at the time, turned out to be the largest concentration of mechanical geniuses known to civilization and that one careless explorer lost out on the fortune he might have had.

The history of space travel, however, is filled with stories like that. The fines for travelling without navigational beacons are enough to bankrupt some of the smaller planetary governments, but most feel that the potential profits from exclusive planetary rights far out-weigh the risk. Besides, there are very few officers of the Commonwealth Aerospace Administration on the frontier.

Consequently neither of the two ships were aware of each other's presence until they achieved orbit around their objective, the planet Earth.

"This is Captain S-Tev Womma of the *Prince of Zaringia* calling the unknown ship. Identify yourself, please." Captain Womma was greatly irked. He answered the distress call from the *Space Devil*, whatever the hell that was when it was up and dressed. He deserved to have first claim. Damn it, he would have blown the intruder out of space if the *Prince* were armed with anything more than light artillery. However, long experience had taught him to be polite at least until he knew whether the other ship was actually competition. His cousin got caught by a CAA ship three years earlier. The fine for flying without a beacon was high, but the penalty for threatening a CAA ship was a loss of license followed a bit later by a mysterious loss of life. That was how Womma came to be captain.

"Ahoy, Captain Womma!" came the reply. "This is the Reverend S-Tan Quoree of the *Miracle of Wrom* here, bless Wrom."

"Bless Wrom," Womma replied mechanically. The captain was not a religious man, but a missionary ship was not only not competition, but was likely to be a valuable ally both in his initial research here and later when establishing his claim. Bless Wrom indeed!

"My apologies for not breaking radio silence earlier," Reverend S-Tan continued, "but I didn't want to attract competition any more than you did. I'm sure you understand."

"Competition for trading rights I understand, but you work for the Church, what sort of competition do you have to worry about?"

"Other missionaries mostly," Reverend S-Tan replied easily. "You have to realize that there are a dozen sectarian factions that would love to gain access to a new planet. Besides I and my crew get to split a full ten percent of the top of the collection boxes for any planet we establish a mission on. Do you have any idea of how much money that is?"

Captain Womma whistled. "Ten percent of the take from a whole planet? Why in a few years you could buy yourself an arch-priesthood."

"Or an arch-priest should I care to control from behind the scenes," Reverend S-Tan agreed. "Now what do you say we team up and compare notes on this world. If we work in concert, both of us will profit."

Captain Womma allowed as that would be a good idea and started negotiating an efficient and equitable division of labor. They contacted Bunky, who supplied them with all the information he had on Earth for a hefty percentage of the *Prince of Zaringia's* profits to be paid to B-Hob on an annual basis. Womma screamed as if in pain while dickering with Bunky, but as Bunky really was an unfeeling lout with a heart of stone instead of just seeming like one, none of it did much good. Womma made a mental note to buy an antique "talkie" computer when he got home and program it to handle his tax bureau audits.

Finally, the initial research was over. The two ship captains chose their primary landing areas halfway across the globe from each other. Reverend S-Tan opted for a discreet unobserved landing in an area noted for religious fervor. Experience had shown that such locations were ripe for the divine word of Wrom. Captain Womma, on the other hand, decided on a public landing in a place of heavy population density. Where better to make the initial sales pitch?

And so one bright and sunny morning the inhabitants of Beijing were treated to a sight no one else on Earth had reliably seen in all of history - the landing of an alien space ship.

The *Prince of Zaringia* was essentially a tall and fat cylinder with atmospheric guidance and landing fins and an attached nose like a round-sided cone. In short it looked like the sort of space ship that had been envisioned by pulp magazine artists in the thirties and forties. The *Miracle of Wrom* had been built along similar lines, but was shorter and a bit thinner, but it was the *Prince* that landed that morning in all its alien glory smack dab in the middle of Tiananmen Square.

A few years earlier and there would have been several flocks of international news services on hand to record the historic landing. However, the Chinese government was currently engaged in one of its occasional isolationistic periods. Several years before there had been student unrest and the government and perhaps the army had over reacted. That had been the start of an entire series of incidents that newsmen and government officials alike referred to as "unfortunate". Each time relations with the rest of the world began to normalize, something else would come up. Finally, the Party leadership was ousted in a bloodless coup and was replaced by a set of communist fundamentalists who believe that only full isolation from the outside world would allow their country to prosper. All members of foreign news services were cordially disinvited from the country. Tourism came to an end on its own after the newsmen and women were evicted. The new Chairman of the Party was wise enough not to cut any diplomatic ties however, and the only official protests came in the form of strongly worded threats that never materialized.

The *Prince of Zaringia* did not go completely unnoticed as it descended to Earth. It was picked up on the radar systems of every major power on the planet. The United States sent jets to chase it as it flashed southwestwardly across the Pacific Ocean and the Soviets launched several missiles as it briefly flew through their air space. However the jets had the same trouble making visual contact as they had with *Space Devil*, and the missiles, according to the radar reports flew right through their targets as though they were ghosts.

"Thirty. Twenty. Ten," the pilot counted down the distance between the *Prince's* landing fins and the pavement below. "Touchdown!"

"Finish with engines," Captain Womma commanded.

"Engines off," the navigator reported. There was a brief moment as the great engines wound down and gradually let the ship put its full weight on the landing fins. A loud metallic groan was felt as much as heard through the ship as the fins' shock absorbers handled the additional weight. Finally the navigator reported, "and finished with engines, sir."

"Good!" The captain replied. "Attention all hands! we have now landed. Normal planet-side activities will now commence. First contact team to the airlock. That will be all."

Thirty minutes later the captain had given his team its pre-contact pep talk. They were a good team and had never failed yet and there was no reason to expect any less of them this time. In fact the only reason

Womma spoke to them at all was that they expected it of him. For the leader to show anything less than total confidence would severely impair the team's morale.

A long ramp down to ground level was automatically extended as the airlock door sighed open. The captain stepped out of the door just ahead of the rest of the team only to be greeted by the sound of a harshly shouted command from below and the spine-chilling sound of a thousand automatic rifles being raised in readiness for firing.

Captain Womma was at a loss for the proper reaction. Never before had he seen a simple landing greeted by a hostile army. It was not without precedent, he remembered. There were some people who were racially xenophobic and in their fear of aliens their reaction would be to automatically attack. He had just never encountered this rare sort of behavior before.

Captain Womma glanced up toward the nose of his ship and was comforted by the sight of the twin laser cannons and the cluster of rocket launchers, all trained on the crowd below. They might have been classified as light armaments, but they would be more than sufficient to get the ship safely away. He knew that he and the first team might be the first to go if it came to a fight, but that was why their share of the profits was so disproportionately higher than the rest of the crew.

The captain quickly reviewed his computer-imbedded knowledge of human gestures of peace and friendship together with a quickly revised speech in the local dialect. Smiling was something strictly forbidden to the adults of his home world and while they had adopted most of the culture of the Commonwealth a millennium earlier that was one custom they had kept. It felt strange to him as he bared his teeth at the armed men before him. On his home world such a gesture would have caused them to open fire immediately as though all their bodies were commanded by a single brain, which in the case of his home world's army would have been quite literally true.

"Greetings, people of the Earth," he began. "I am Captain S-Tev Womma of the *Prince of Zaringia* ." He obligingly translated the name of his ship into the local Chinese. It seemed an innocuous enough opening and he was completely unprepared for the reaction he got. Many of the soldiers stiffened visibly at the name of his ship and he heard a few muffled commands to hold firm. What had he gotten himself into?

"We come to you in peace," he continued uncertainly, "with the purpose of establishing relations that we will, no doubt, find to be mutually profitable." His smile, already strained, froze on his face when an angry grumbling began among the troops. "These Humans are crazy!" he muttered to the first contact team leader, a pretty green female of a vaguely cat-like race. She gave him the equivalent of a shrug.

Finally, a man in an unflatteringly plain uniform walked stiffly up the ramp to the captain and his team and said, "Comrade Captain Steve Womma, if you will come with me, I will take you to our Minister of Foreign Affairs. He is empowered to deal with you."

"How civilized!" remarked the team leader in the Commonwealth's version of Lingua Franca. "Even without previous alien contact they are already prepared for such an eventuality. This may be the easiest job we've had yet."

"I don't know," the captain replied as they followed the man through the massed army. As they reached ground level two dozen soldiers detached themselves from the army and surrounded them as they marched. "I have a bad feeling about this. Uh, Comrade," he said, switching back to Chinese and using the title the man had used with him, "are all these soldiers necessary?"

"Please believe," their guide informed them, "that they are only here for the purpose of safety."

"Ours or theirs?" one member of the team asked quietly.

"Yes!" the cat-woman replied dryly.

The *Miracle of Wrom* was also detected as it entered the atmosphere somewhere over Canada's Northwest Territories just south of the seventy-fifth parallel. Jets of the Royal Canadian Air Force were scrambled but while they were able to get a visual sighting of the alien ship, unlike their U.S. counterparts an hour later, they were unable to keep up with the craft that their radar informed them existed elsewhere.

As she flew further south, the *Miracle* reduced her altitude and established an erratic flight pattern that was designed to avoid all major centers of population. She also reduced speed as she neared the tree-top level but continued her radar-scrambling tactics. It was theoretically possible to use radar at any altitude and the Reverend S-Tan Quoree didn't want to take any chances.

"Nearing our destination, reverend sir," the young navigator reported.

"We need to land undetected," Reverend S-Tan reminded him. "On closer inspection is the primary landing sight still suitable?"

"Yes, reverend sir."

"Proceed then." Reverend S-Tan then flipped on the intercom to his medical officer. "Sister Kenna, is the cosmetic surgery proceeding on schedule?"

"Yes, reverend sir, all personnel save those working on the bridge should appear human by the time we touch down."

"Good, the bridge crew and I will undergo the treatment as soon as we have landed."

The slender craft flashed through the skies just to the east of Memphis and then adjusted its course until it was going almost directly southeast. As it reached the north shore of Lake Sardis, the large reservoir on the Tallahatchie River, it dropped suddenly until it was a mere twenty feet above the water, maintaining that altitude until it had crossed the lake and then rising just enough to clear the kudzu-covered tree tops. About midway between the lake and the small university town they had targeted, the ship set down in a clearing surrounded by tall pine trees.

"Finished with engines, reverend sir," came the report.

"All hands, we have landed. Camouflage teams to your jobs. I want this ship hidden from view by day break," the Reverend S-Tan commanded, "Bridge crew to Medical, that is all."

The crew of the *Miracle of Wrom* may have been small in number, but they knew their jobs and did

them well. B-Hob was a complete duffer at landing on an alien planet and had made several serious mistakes that had worked out well by accident and pure luck. Captain Womma had chosen to land publicly for maximum sales potential. However the normal means of establishing a primary base on an unknown planet was to land secretly and make the base blend in with its surroundings.

Within an hour a hole half the depth of the *Miracle* had been excavated and the ship lowered into it. By dawn, a low building designed to look like a large residence had been constructed to cover the rest of the ship. The building was, as yet, a mere shell but within a few days, it would be filled with offices and expanded quarters for the crew.

The ground around the building had been well cleared and a genetically engineered grass had been planted. That grass would grow rapidly and appear to be a well manicured lawn by mid-morning at which time it would slow way down to grow at a pace that would require cutting only once each spring.

Cosmetic surgery on the professional ships was also far more refined. What B-Hob's antiquated equipment took all day to accomplish, the ultra-modern gear on both the *Miracle* and the *Prince* could do the same job in less than an hour. And so by Noon that day, Reverend S-Tan Quoree was ready to send the first contact team into the nearby town in order to find a suitable public location for their mission.

"Where did you say we are?" a young man, just out of the seminary, asked.

"The natives call it Oxford. Oxford, Mississippi," his superior, an attractive woman who appeared to be in her mid-thirties replied.

"Isn't that an obscenity on Aldebaran IV, Kalla?"

"You're thinking of Ixfo. Where'd you learn about that one anyway, M-Hike?"

"Advanced Comparative Cultures 337 at the seminary. Doctor W-Ron Bruer," M-Hike grinned.

"Wasn't he tried for heresy last year?" a young blond woman about M-Hike's age asked warily.

"Yes," M-Hike agreed. "That's him."

"How did they let you out on time for this mission?" Kalla asked. "I would have thought that all his students, especially the seniors would have been detained for exhaustive examinations."

"I'm the one who turned him in," M-Hike admitted proudly.

"Bless Wrom!" Kalla said in the closest to praise she would give him. The other two echoed her sentiments, but secretly each one of them made a mental note to watch themselves in M-Hike's presence. It was one thing to praise proper behavior, but a religious mission was no place to allow a fanatic free reign. Kalla decided that she would have him transferred to the home base team. There were things one had to do and say in order to get recruits that were just too subject to accusations of heresy.

"It's a quaint little town," J-Hack, the fourth member of the team, commented. "I sort of like the central town square. Is this a common settlement pattern on this world?"

"You should have read the preliminary data better, J-Hack" the young blond, Quinne, admonished him. "It's very common in this and some other regions, but hardly a planet-wide phenomenon. The larger cities, especially, display only vestigial traces of this pattern at best and many don't appeared to have ever

used this plan."

"Very good, Quinne," Kalla complemented her, "but remember that we only have preliminary data to go on with this world-culture so far. No doubt we'll find some practical reasons for the differences in settlement plans that we observed from orbit."

"I thought our briefing was very thorough," M-Hike asserted.

"It was as much as we're ever likely to get when approaching a new world," Kalla replied, "but there is only so much that we're likely to learn from their own broadcasts. Every culture has its taboos and unmentionable subjects. Wrom alone knows what we haven't yet learned. Try to behave within the limits of the video entertainments we observed. If they broadcast it, it's probably acceptable behavior." The novices all agreed, bowing to Kalla's greater experience. Actually they would have agreed had she suggested that they all wear pink jock-straps on their heads and walk around going beep. Such is the gullibility of a novice.

"What are we looking for," J-Hack asked. "A 'for sale or rent' sign?"

"I suppose that we could," Kalla conceded, "but I caught one video advertisement for something called a real estate broker. I figure that if we can find one of them, that would make the looking that much easier. Ah, there's the one I saw the ad for!"

Kalla steered the ground effect vehicle that had been cleverly disguised as a late model mini-van, into a parking space in the town square in front of a store front with a sign that read, "Century 21."

"Okay, guys," she said before letting them out. "I'll go see what sort of arrangements we can make. You go check out the nearby businesses. See what sort of neighbors we'll have, but don't start talking religion. Not yet anyway. In most of these primitive societies you can get into deep trouble talking religion outside of a church." Saying that she opened the door and walked into the real estate broker's office.

The three novices watched Kalla until she had disappeared behind the store front door.

"Well, come on, boys," Quinne said lightly. "We may as well see what Oxpatch has to offer."

"Oxford," M-Hike corrected her.

"Whatever."

They were about to split up when they spotted a small shop sandwiched in between two larger ones in a shady corner of the square.

"Hey look there," J-Hack pointed it out. "J. P. Waxtrough, Buyer and Seller of Used Goods, Jewelry, and Precious Metals'. Do you suppose they don't trade in gold directly?"

"What do you mean?" M-Hike asked.

"Well it seems to me that if there's someone who will buy gold, assuming that gold is a precious metal, then they must be using something else as currency."

"He has a point," Quinne agreed. "Do you really think they're that advanced?" Both M-Hike and J-Hack shrugged. "Well let's find out."

They opened the door to the pawn shop to discover a dark musty-smelling room on the other side. There, behind a deep heavy glass counter sat a little old man with the short stub of a cheroot screwed into the corner of his mouth. He eyed the novices with feigned disinterest as they stared at the musical instruments, old clothing, and assorted miscellanea hung on the walls of the little shop. In the center case he kept two one-ounce ingots of .999 fine gold along with three one-ounce, one ten ounce, and one one hundred-ounce ingots of .999 fine silver. They were there just for show. His real inventory was kept in a small vault in the basement. The rest of the case was filled with sundry bits of jewelry in varying states of repair.

"We'd like to sell some gold," Quinne said, stepping forward.

The man kept a straight face save for one eye brow that shot up as he asked, "You all have any certification?"

"Certification?"

"Uh huh. How am I supposed to know you all didn't steal that gold, and I need the numbers on the ingots for my records too."

"But our ingots don't have any numbers on them," Quinne blurted out as she took two coin-like ingots out of a small handbag that, according to initial surveys, she was supposed to carry everywhere.

The ingots were like nothing the man had ever seen. Someone had minted the things into large hexagonal coins. Like gold coins the man was acquainted with - Krugerrands, Maple Leafs, Double Eagles, and the like - they were a testimonial to the engravers' art, but the artwork on them was literally unearthly. There were also some symbols minted on them that appeared to be in some foreign language. He couldn't read it, but then he was barely literate in English. He was however, fully conversant with the types of gold coins currently being minted all over the world, and these were not any of them.

The man relit the foul twisted cylinder of tobacco in his mouth and made a big show of looking something up in his catalogs. While he turned the pages, however, he was actually sizing up the marks. Wherever this stuff came from it was neither a release from a government or the product of any of the known mining concerns. For than matter he didn't know whether or not it was gold, nor what its purity was, but the novices seemed just a little too naive to be lying about that. Something didn't fit. Who would want to mint his own ingots? It wouldn't add to the value of the metal and would only cause an assayer's fee to detract from the profits when you tried to sell it. Still he had some rudimentary assaying equipment in the back room. It hadn't been used in years, but it should still work.

"How many of these do you all want to sell," he asked at last, seeing a not particularly honest means of getting gold at a bargain rate. Quinne reached into her handbag and pulled out about half the hexagonal gold ingots they had been given to work with and put them down on the counter. J.P. Waxtrough listened to them as they hit the glass. "Well," he thought to himself, "They sound like the real thing. All ringing, not a clank in the bunch." He counted them out; there were twenty-three in all and each one felt a bit heavier than a troy ounce. Stranger and stranger. "Here's my offer," he told them. "You all're sure there's no certification? All right. Now without certification I'll have to assay this gold; determine how pure it is and then weigh it out real careful-like. I'll have to charge you for that, understand?" They nodded. It seemed reasonable. "I also have no proof that this gold is really yours."

"Oh, but it is!" Quinne protested. J-Hack and M-Hike tried to back her up.

"All that is as it may be, but without proof that will cost you still more. I'm willing to take the risk of paying you for this now, but I'll have to have the cops put out a call to see if anyone is missing gold in coins like this." J.P. had absolutely no intention of taking this matter to the cops, but it sounded good. Actually he'd call a client he knew in Nashville, a jeweller who would be happy to buy gold at ten percent below the market rate, but these kids didn't need to know that. "And I'll have to pay for that search. Finally, I have to make a profit on the deal or I don't have much reason to be in business. Now, if you all agree to that I'll start."

They nodded their agreement and J. P. Waxtrough went into his back room. He was a bit surprised that they didn't insist on watching him work and he had an urge to slip out the back way, but quickly decided that this much gold wasn't enough to run on. His equipment would have been considered crude in 1849 but he was able to test for the metal's density by water displacement. When that test showed that the coins had the same density as .999 fine gold, he gave them the acid test. The acid had no effect on the coins at all and he was forced to admit that they must, indeed, be made of pure gold.

The coins weighed in at just over thirty-one and one half ounces. According to the *Wall Street Journal* that morning, gold was selling for \$589.50 per ounce, but J.P., using his fictitious charges, paid two hundred dollars less than that.

The novices had no trouble with the concept of a check. The economy of the Commonwealth depended on checks almost as much as it depended on credit cards. In fact there was very little real money in the Commonwealth at all, nearly all monetary record keeping was handled by computers. According to some financial experts the economy, which was backed up by only ten percent hard currency against ninety percent computerized bank transfers of money that was never actually printed or minted, should have collapsed decades ago. Just what keeps the Commonwealth from collapsing under its own deficit is a mystery that the economists are still arguing over.

"We converted some of our gold into local money," Quinne told Kalla back at the van a few minutes later, "but how can we spend this?" The check was for over twelve thousand dollars, whatever those were.

Kalla studied the check and looked around the town square. "Good work," she told them. "We'll need to put down a deposit on whatever place we rent. We can do that if you'll open an account with one of the two banks here in the square. Hmm, this one is drawn on First Southern Bank, which is right there. Open an account in the name of the 'Church of Wrom' with this and then take a couple hundred dollars each to work with. I'm going to look at a few likely locations with the real estate agent and I'll be back in an hour." With that Kalla got into the passenger seat of a black BMW and rode off with the agent.

When she returned, the three novices were nowhere to be seen.

"No!" Karen screamed. "I don't care who you claim to be. You want to search my house? Then get a damned search warrant, because until I see the paper you can cite National security till you turn black and blue, but you'll have to do it off of my property!" She tried to slam the door, but the young Navy Ensign stuck his foot between it and the frame. That proved to be a major mistake. Karen opened the door and stamped the heel of her shoe down on the arch of his foot, breaking at least two metatarsals.

She was only sorry that she was only wearing one-inch lifts; the experience gave her a true appreciation for spike heels. The intruder removed his foot and she finally slammed the door in his face. She heard a satisfying grunt of pain as she did so.

"That was the fifth one this week, boys" she reported as she entered the living room.

"Good thing we don't have a gun," Larry commented dryly.

"Damned straight!" Karen snarled. "I'd have used it."

"Maybe I should find another place to live," B-Hob suggested.

"Nonsense!" both Karen and Larry told him. "All we have to do," Larry continued, "is make sure that they don't find anything when they come back with their warrants. That shouldn't be too hard. You sold all the jewelry so all that's left is the radio you call Bunky with."

"And my notes on Human culture," B-Hob added.

"I've seen them, remember? They'll look like the notes for any anthropology text book. Let's see what we can do about the radio."

"Beijing and Mississippi?" Daniels asked. "What a combination!"

"I think our local alien is either calling in reinforcements or else he's flown," Hedgehog told him.

"You still haven't convinced me that there really is or was an alien running around the South Shore," Daniels pointed out.

"Oh he was here," Hedgehog said confidently. "It may not have been the guy I tried to follow, but he was definitely here. He may still be. There's no reason that either of these two new sightings had anything to do with him."

"The Beijing incident was more than just a sighting. Our agent saw the ship land and a group of aliens were taken into custody. They haven't been heard from since. Maybe you should go over there and find out what happened."

"Our man there is one of our best, Pres," Hedgehog informed him. "If he can't get anything, then it isn't very likely that I would either. The sighting in Mississippi, however, sounds intriguing and more like our man. He landed quietly the first time and rapidly blended in, and that appears to be the same M.O. in Mississippi."

"You're going there tonight?"

"Unless you say otherwise."

"I need you here."

"No. As a matter of fact you don't," Hedgehog said bluntly. "Your regular staff can continue to monitor the other services. They've all been knocking on the same doors in Hingham. It's only a matter of time before they pull out the search warrants to check the places that refused on the first pass. Sure were a lot of them."

"Yeah," Daniels agreed. "Who would have thought that so many people these days would have refused entry when hit with a claim of national security. Oh well, if you insist on going, keep in touch this time. I don't want to have to wait until you get back to get a report this time. I'll fly down there myself if I have to."

Seventeen

Careful observation shows that ethyl alcohol is the mild poison that is most often enjoyed by Humans. So much is it enjoyed that they have taken to adding various flavors to their alcohol to make their drinks all the more palatable. So successful have they been at this that such drinks can take the unwary by surprise.

from "Chapter Two; Leisure Time"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

Just off the square in Oxford, Mississippi is a restaurant called "The Gin" that is perhaps even better known to the students and faculty of Ole Miss for its bar. While it is only one of several well-frequented establishments in Lafayette County, it has the virtue of being the only one that is situated directly across from a movie theater.

Kalla didn't know how the three novices that had been assigned to her ended up in one of "The Gin's" corner booths and she didn't much care either. What she did know was that in spite of all their training, they weren't waiting for her when she and the real estate agent returned.

"Wrom damn their teeth!" she swore angrily. "Where in Hell are they?" The disguised hovercraft was still there and empty. They'd left no notes. Normally she wouldn't mind so much, but there had been a perfect place for them, but she needed to put down a deposit and the first month's rent. For that she had to either exchange some of her own gold or find the novices and hope they had already opened the bank account.

Each member of the mission was required to have a subcutaneous locator device implanted near their ears. To locate them she would have to call the home base over the hovercraft's radio and that would

mean admitting her own error in leaving them on their own. After some fifteen minutes she swallowed her pride and called for help. Learning that they were only a hundred yards away she went off in search.

"The Gin" was usually quiet in the middle of the afternoon, but the novices were making enough noise to make the place sound like a TGIF happy hour with free refills.

"Hey, Kalla!" M-Hike shouted as she came in the front door. "Ovah Heyah!" Kalla was, at first, impressed by the fact that he had managed to pick up the local accent, until she realized that he was also acting as though he were suffering from some dreadful disease. He was too weak to stand for very long and, like his companions, was laughing uncontrollably. Something was dreadfully wrong.

"What's wrong with you three?" Kalla demanded. "If you're this ill, you should have stayed with the van."

"Ill?" J-Hack asked incredulously. He got to his feet with difficulty and draped his arms around Kalla in such a manner that she wasn't sure whether he was trying to get friendly or just hold himself up. "Why, Kalla dearest, I never felt better!"

"Yeah, Kalla," Quinne agreed, slurring badly. "Have a seat! You'll jus' love the sloe gin fizz." Kalla didn't know what sloe gin was and she was certain that she wasn't interested in its fizz. She was about to dress the trio down when the restaurant manager walked over.

"Please, ma'am," he said politely, "Your friends here have had a bit too much, and Ah'm afraid we'll have to stop serving them."

"Too much?" Kalla asked. "Too much what?"

"Liquor, ma'am. We appreciate your business, but Ah'm going to have to ask them to leave."

The drunken trio expressed their sorrow at that prospect with a dramatic chorus of, "Aww!"

"That's all right," Kalla told the manager. "They're leaving now. Is their bill paid?" she asked as she started herding them outside.

"Yes, ma'am," The manager told her, "You all come back now! Another time," he added as J-Hack and M-Hike turned around and started back for their booth.

"I really don't know what's gotten into you three," Kalla scolded them as she drove back to the home base.

"Hey, Kalla," Quinne giggled suddenly, "Pull over and let me drive!"

"I don't think so, no," Kalla replied stiffly.

"Oh," J-Hack moaned, "I don't feel so good. Dizzy. Queasy."

"Better stop, Kalla," M-Hike moaned in harmony, "I think I'm about to throw up." Kalla stopped the hovercraft just in time for the two young men to go stumbling into the roadside kudzu. Quinne just continued to giggle and try taking the wheel from Kalla.

***** ***** *****

"The captain hasn't come back yet, sir." the airlock guard reported to the first mate, a tall female with olive green skin, soft brown hair, and an ugly, even by her standards, bulbous nose.

"That's odd," she replied. "He called in that he was on his way back two hours ago. What can have gone wrong now?"

A little bit of research is a dangerous thing and negotiations with the Chinese had not gone smoothly at all. Their primary research had shown that this was the most densely populated region of the country and that, unaccountably, there would be little or no competition to the captain, who counted himself among the master traders of the Commonwealth. It was irresistible nor did there appear to be any reason that they should resist.

Their hosts insisted that Captain Womma and the first contact team remain as guests of the government at the hotel where the negotiations had taken place, in spite of the fact that it was only a few minutes walk from the waiting ship. Not wanting to start off by insulting their hospitality, S-Tev Womma had agreed. That was the last time either he or the contact team were seen, although they had called in daily reports to the ship.

The Chinese government was primarily concerned with the purchase of new weapons technologies, which was the last thing any good merchant would want to sell. Their job was to establish long term trading arrangements, not give the natives a means to exterminate each other. That sort of thing would soon cause the market to dry up.

The talks, however, really began to fall apart when the chief negotiator insisted on an international press release about the arrival of the *Prince of Zaringia* while the Chinese insisted on absolute secrecy until a final treaty had been signed.

First Mate Fertha stormed back up to the bridge. The long wait while the captain was at the negotiation sessions was bad enough, but now that the talks had broken down she had expected him and the team back within minutes. What the hell had happened to delay them?

"Communications!" she commanded as she entered the bridge. "Get me that damned 'Comrade Official Speaker' they insist we talk to."

"Yes, Ma'am," the young man replied. A few minutes later he reported, "On main screen, ma'am, on mark. Mark!" The screen flickered slightly but stayed black. The Humans had video communications capabilities, but they had refused to use them, staying strictly on audio. Fertha felt more insulted by that than anything else that had been handed her since they had landed on this miserable little planet, but she refused to show it. She had been successful in this business for fifteen years now and believe that the slights these Humans handed her were matters of cultural differences and not deliberate. She was wrong.

"Yes, Comrade Fertha?" an all too familiar voice asked.

"Yes, indeed, L-Oo Wing or whatever your name is." The man tried to correct her but she cut him off. "Where are our people?"

"I assure you they left the hotel over two hours ago," the man replied with an official politeness that

Fertha felt sure was accompanied by a smirk, but without video she couldn't be sure.

"They were a five minute walk away!" Fertha shouted her reply. "Where did they go?"

"Perhaps they wished to see some of the people's glorious city," he suggested smoothly.

"Not bloody likely the way your toy soldiers follow them everywhere they go," Fertha told him.

"Besides, Captain Womma's last order was to prepare to launch as soon as he was on board, and you probably know it, Wrom take you!"

"First Mate," the airlock guard called via intercom, "the army is back."

"On screen," she commanded. A moment later she was greeted by the sight of a thousand armed men and as many tanks as she could eat. "What the hell is going on here, Wing?"

The "official speaker's voice lost all the false politeness when he spoke next. "You will surrender your craft now and submit to arrest or we shall destroy you and everyone on board."

"Never," Fertha hissed.

"You have five minutes," she was informed. "If you do not surrender by then, the glorious People's Army will open fire." There was a click as the speaker closed all communications.

"Shit!" Fertha swore. "Weapons control, prepare to slag everything in sight on my command. Communications, can you locate the Captain and the contact team through their transponders?"

"Yes, ma'am," the young man replied crisply. "They are about 300 Khalimers to the east of here and some ten feet underground."

"Alive?"

"Yes, and healthy."

"Thank you. Lieutenant Wankel," she said into the intercom, "are your boys and girls ready for a little exercise?"

The *Prince of Zaringia* was a fairly successful venture and could afford to hire its own pocket military force. Lieutenant M-Hank Wankel was an ex-Commonwealth Marines sergeant and he had chosen his best seven commandos to come with him when he accepted the Zaringia Company's employment. There were other small units as good at their jobs in the Commonwealth, but none of them were better. This was only the second time they would see real, non-simulated action since they left the Marines but they enjoyed their work when they had it.

"Yes, ma'am," the shipboard lieutenant replied. "We've been monitoring the situation."

"Good," Fertha replied. "I'm sending you Captain Womma's coordinates. You go get him while we provide cover."

"Ready at your command," he replied.

"Go."

Half an hour later, one quarter of Tiananmen Square was rubble, Captain Womma and the first team were back on board and the *Prince of Zaringia* was a mile off the ground and still rising.

"A particularly stupid people," S-Tev Womma told his First Mate. "The only thing they want are atomic weapons; started torturing some of the team when we wouldn't sell them."

"Atomics? What would they want with anything so primitive?"

"Damned if I know. I was desperate enough, though. Just before M-Hank Wankel crashed in, I tried to offer them some really powerful weapons, but they said that if they weren't atomic, they weren't interested."

"M-Hank offered to melt the entire city for you if you want," Fertha offered.

"It's tempting, I'll admit, but those fools didn't do anything that probably hasn't already been fixed and I got something from them that may be of real value."

"Oh? What's that?"

"They aren't the only culture on Earth."

"Impossible!"

"True!" Captain Womma countered Fertha's disbelief. "I had trouble believing it myself, but it's the only explanation. Think about it. They want highly destructive weapons and they wouldn't allow us to advertise our presence here. They kept talking about their enemies too. I'd normally figure they were the Earth version of paranoid schizophrenics, but there were just too many of them."

"Are you sure this whole region isn't some sort of asylum? There's a very long wall that runs through here."

"That would mean that half the world's population was sick. I'd rather believe that the planet is multi-cultural. Especially since that means we still have a chance to establish a trading post here."

"You have a plan?"

"We'll go back into orbit and contact the missionaries; see how they're doing. Then we'll see about doing business with another culture. This world has communications satellites. It should be easy enough to contact someone, maybe a private business concern through one of them."

"That's not standard procedure," Fertha pointed out.

"No, it isn't, but this is hardly a standard planet either."

"I think the coast is clear, Bob," Karen told him at last. B-Hob had decided it would be best to stay in until all the government types stopped looking for him, but after three weeks he was getting a lethal dose of cabin fever.

"Are you sure?" he asked hesitantly.

"As sure as I can be. There's been nobody knocking at the door with a search warrant for over a week and even those two cars that were parked across the street have been gone for days. Look if you want to go out, now's the time."

"Okay, if you think so. I really hate the way those guys were looking at me though. It was like they knew and were just waiting for the chance to use me for target practice."

"They probably were. Oh calm down already. It's over. You didn't act this nervous when they were here."

"I didn't dare."

"So where are you going to go today? The playground again?"

"No, I thought I'd go down to the library. Larry says that I can probably find some good books on Human culture there. Direct observation is best, but it won't hurt and will probably help to see what you think of yourselves."

"You know the way? Good. I'm going to the market, anything you want in particular?"

"Doctor Morley," the receptionist called over the intercom, "Lieutenant General Bradford on line two."

Life had become very very good for Richard Morley in the last few months. Not only was QETI receiving a record number of donations, but there was a new military market for its data.

Doctor Morley was perhaps benefiting more than anyone else in the project as he was able to extract large fees for himself as a popular talk-show guest and as an alien consultant. The fact that he knew little to nothing about any actual alien intelligences didn't stop him from speculating for hours on what such aliens would be like. The only difference between what he told the military of several different nations and what he told Johnny, Dave, Joan, Arsenio, Phil, Sally Jessie, and Geraldo - in that order - was that for the military he had to put it in writing and on the talk show circuit it helped if he brought poster-sized pictures in lieu of a film clip.

Now that he was in demand, he hadn't had to buy one of his precious cigars in weeks. Whenever a government official learned of his fondness for hand-rolled tobacco, a wrapped boxful usually arrived on Morley's desk soon after. Much to his surprise he discovered that he didn't really enjoy Havanas, but he had two full boxes of them anyway.

"Yes, General," Morley said, picking up the phone.

"Ah, Doctor Morley," Bradford began, "damned good to talk to you again. Damned good. Look, we picked up some new signals last night but they were incomplete. I wanted to verify what we got and to possibly fill in the damned gaps if possible, at the usual rates, of course."

"Of course, general," Morley replied. "Do you mean the Beijing incident or the radio transmission from orbit a couple hours later?"

"What Beijing incident?" Bradford asked, wondering why this was the first he'd heard of it. Morley told him about the unconfirmed reports of a week earlier of a spaceship landing in China and of the damage done there, supposedly when the Chinese tried to keep it from leaving. He also told him of the confirmed sightings of an object that had left Beijing and became established in orbit before all tracking lost it.

"Do you think it might be associated with the later broadcasts?" Bradford asked when Morley was done.

"It's a possibility," Morley admitted. "My private opinion is that it tried to contact the ship that allegedly landed in Mississippi. You know about that one?"

"Yes, I have men looking into it, so does everyone with an extra nickle in his God-damned budget. Used to be that Op. Ether was not only a top secret, but the only ones looking into aliens from space. Now, all of a sudden we have competition!" Morley did not bother to correct Bradford. Morley's ethics may have become strained lately, but he still knew how to keep secrets and didn't tell one client what the others were doing.

"We have a nearly complete recording of the subsequent signals, General, but except for a few sentences in Chinese, most of it appears to be in an unknown language. I'll be glad to send you a copy if you like, however." The general thanked him and after another few minutes they both hung up.

"Ah," Morley sighed, kicking back and lighting up yet another Havana, "Another day, another hundred thousand dollars!"

Eighteen

Religious intolerance is by no means unique to the Humans of Earth. There are at least two cultures far more extreme than Humans in this matter. The Yulls of Waxtar, who are widely acknowledged as the second most intolerant of all known species, however, are not merely intolerant of the religious views of other cultures but of any religious view points including their own. As a result they are the only known case of nontheism in the Commonwealth, having learned through countless eons of religious wars that the only good religion is one that doesn't intrude on the lives of its adherents and that religion that intrudes least is that which doesn't exist at all. The Yulls are not atheistic as that would involve a belief in the nonexistence of gods. The Yulls do firmly believe that the gods do exist, and they hope that one day those gods might visit Waxtar so that the Yulls can personally take them to task for all the problems they have caused Waxtar by their very existence.

The most extreme case, of course, is that of the Saimons of Trab IV, who are born with the racial knowledge of all their ancestors along with the beliefs of those ancestors. Because of millennia of

inbreeding, the religious beliefs of the Saimons are easily recognized by the color of their hair and they all believe that any other system of beliefs are heresy to be exterminated on sight. It is a good thing that the Saimons - who live in three stages of life: nonsentient child, semisentient adolescent, and fully sentient adult - lay their eggs while still in the semisentient adolescent phase since the entirety of their adult lives are spent trying to kill anyone with a hair color different from their own and the average life expectancy of an adult is approximately one hour.

In comparison, the Humans are downright open to new influences. Comparisons, however, are deceptive.

from "Chapter 7; Cultural Diversity"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"And while the Chinese government continues to blame an unnamed dissident student faction," Dan Rather reported, "eyewitnesses report that the incredible damage to Tiananmen Square was accomplished by an alien spaceship. Experienced China observers believe neither story, claiming that this latest outbreak of violence is the result of two governmental factions both of whom have control over significant portions of the army."

"Aliens, Bob?" Larry asked, turning off the television.

"I thought I was the only one who knew about this planet, Larry. Honest."

"Maybe you should call Bunky," Karen suggested, "and find out for sure."

"I don't know," B-Hob replied. "Last time I called him he thought we were being monitored, and right after that we started having all those investigators around here. I don't want to have to go through all that again. Let's wait and see if anything else happens."

Larry nodded and Karen went along with it. "All right," she said. "Check and mate."

"They were doing what?" Reverend S-Tan asked Kalla.

"They were inhaling the smoke from burning tubes of paper stuffed with some sort of dead plants. They call it 'smoking'."

"Don't they have the faintest idea of the toxins they're ingesting that way? Now where in Wrom's great universe did they ever come up with such a stupid idea?"

"From the local students they've been trying to convert."

"These Humans are crazy. Is this smoking a common habit, Kalla?"

"Unfortunately, yes. It seems to persist in spite of expert medical opinion that it is directly linked to a whole battery of diseases." The reverend grimaced. "Actually the real problem isn't the smoking, but in what they were smoking. Anyone can legally buy a smoking material called tobacco, and if the novices care to commit slow and uncertain suicide by smoking it, that's their own right to do so. That substance doesn't seem to affect any of their abilities. Unfortunately they were not smoking tobacco."

"I hesitate to ask," Reverend S-Tan said dryly.

"Something called marijuana. It's a mild intoxicant and certainly does affect their mental and motor skills. That in itself wouldn't bother me if they confined such activities to their leisure time, but not only are they smoking at their work, but the stuff is locally illegal as well."

"That is not acceptable," the reverend said sternly. "How has this affected their work?"

"They have demonstrated less interest in the menial and paperwork aspects of their jobs, but recruitment of likely converts does seem up."

"It probably gives them something in common with the young humans they're associating with," Reverend S-Tan concluded. "I'd hate to put a stop to anything that's actually working, especially with the initial failure of the *Prince of Zaringia*."

"Have they attempted a second landing yet?" Kalla asked.

"Not yet. They're taking more care this time to choose a site. They also plan to pave the way by contacting potential customers through the telephone lines by a method the Humans call 'faxing'."

"Sounds unusual, but everything about this world is proving unusual. What about the novices?" Kalla asked. "I'm worried that after their experiments with alcohol and marijuana they might want to try some of the stronger intoxicants this world has to offer."

"I'll have a talk with them, warn them about the peril they face and all that. If they persist, we can always confine them to the home base."

The *Prince of Zaringia* continued to maintain a geo-synchronous orbit near a large communications satellite. They monitored transmissions to and from the primitive floating electronic device that in their minds was only one step removed from a telephone pole.

It had taken nearly a week to figure out how to tap into the satellite's capabilities due to the fact that the people working on it over-estimated the complexity of the device. In the end, it was a young woman on her first voyage on a merchantman who came up with the simplistic solution of building a satellite that duplicated the Humans' machine except that its broadcasts were strictly to the *Prince's* transceivers.

Captain S-Tev Womma could be a patient man when it served his purposes, but the fiasco in Beijing combined with the difficulties they had with the satellite were pushing hard against his limits. He held countless staff meetings that threatened to diminish the effectiveness of every department on board. However work did go on and he was determined to wring a profit out of this planet if it killed him.

First priority for the contact team was to devise the most likely means of successful contact.

"Here's one that works all the time in their entertainment media," K-Hen, one of the more experienced members of the team, suggested. "We land in the middle of someone's backyard, say 'Take me to your leader,' and pretend their household pets would make a light afternoon snack."

"K-Hen," the team leader said gently, "you and I have been working together for years. Do you really think such ridiculous action would actually get us anywhere?"

K-Hen laughed and the team immediately realized that he'd been putting them on. "Not at all, Darva," he replied at last, "but I thought we needed something to break the tension. The idea, however, isn't as ridiculous as it sounds. Their fiction is full of stories in which people from outer space land and either use those words or imply the same by their actions. It wouldn't be particularly original, but it might fit in with Human expectation of what an alien is supposed to be like.

"Still, that isn't my recommendation," K-Hen continued. "In spite of what their literature and other entertainment media might say, our psychological studies show that such an approach is likely to produce a panic mentality and in case you've forgotten, what we did in Beijing was not all that different from the scenario I just painted, leaving off the comical aspects, of course."

"So you're saying that no matter how we approach these Humans, they're going to react in the same militant fashion that the Chinese did?" Darva asked.

"If we arrive publicly and unannounced, yes I do."

"Then what's your solution?"

"Written correspondence," K-hen replied serenely. Darva and the rest of the team were confused and didn't hesitate to show it. "Let me put it this way. Aside from the fact that we are from a technologically superior civilization, there is no basic difference between us and any Earth-based business. So why not trade with other companies who, in turn, will sell our goods to the public."

"But we've always traded directly with governments," Darva objected. "Whether that meant a tribal chieftain or an elected assembly didn't make any difference. How else can we protect our claim against other Commonwealth companies?"

"By registering our claim on the planet like we would any other claim," another member of the team said.

"That would only protect us against their doing business with those companies we signed a contract with," Darva pointed out.

"Who would know?" K-Hen asked.

"It would be a matter of public record."

"No, only the name of the company we dealt with would," K-Hen pointed out. "Have you ever heard of

such a limited contract for planetary rights before? Neither have I. Nobody else has either. Anyone studying our claim will assume that we have a world-wide claim on any of our stated goods and services."

"It might work," Darva conceded. "So what sort of written correspondence do we send and how?"

"Well," K-Hen replied, "I've been keeping a collection of common business letters that were sent electronically, and I think a pattern can be detected. Here, let me show you..."

Hedgehog didn't much like Mississippi. He had been born in the Delta region south of Jackson and had considered it a major victory to be able to leave the entire state behind on his graduation from college. Not that he had minded his three and a half years at State; the Sixties were very good to him, even if they did occur in the mid-Seventies, but his sheepskin with the "Magna Cum Laude" label on it had enabled him to have an accent transplant. He promptly moved to Washington, D.C. and started putting his new voice to work for the C.I.A. Now he spoke perfect "Yankee" with just a hint of Cambridge, which made him seem all the more professional to those who both didn't know his background and were impressed by that sort of thing.

Unfortunately, he couldn't totally erase his past, not at first anyway, and when, after a few years of shuffling papers in Langley, Virginia, he got his first few field assignments, they all involved some sort of work in Dixie. He never liked coming home, doing it only when necessary, and felt he had finally broken free of the South when he started working overseas. After a while most people forgot his origins and he stopped getting more than his fair share of trips below the Mason-Dixon line.

This case, however, demanded his return to Mississippi and he was professional enough not to balk at the prospect. At least he wasn't back in the Delta. Oxford at least had some pretensions toward cosmopolitanism.

He didn't really know what he was looking for - anything unusual he supposed, whatever that might mean. The first few days he spent by talking to people in town. Nobody was aware of anything out of the ordinary so he changed his tactics. Daniels had sent him aerial photos of the area, but there was only so much one could find with them and with a definitive lack of spaceships in the eight-by-tens, Hedgehog rented a helicopter and surveyed the area for himself.

Two members of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Lake Sardis had seen some lights over the lake the night of the alleged landing but had thought nothing of it. The "Sardis lights" were a well know although rare phenomenon. Hedgehog flew the helicopter back and forth over the reservoir looking for traces of a spaceship landing to no avail.

Finally, just as he was about to give up, he came across an editorial in the weekly newspaper concerning a dangerous new cult in the area - the Church of Wrom. A quick check with headquarters turned up absolutely nothing about them in the extensive files the Company kept. It was Hedgehog's only lead but it came a day too late.

While Hedgehog was searching for extraterrestrials, the Church of Wrom was gaining student support at

the University of Mississippi at what the faculty felt was an alarming rate.

The Church of Wrom was an institution unique in the universe. Where most religions teach about their own gods as different from the gods of others, the Church of Wrom teaches that while there is one true god, he or she, depending on your point of view or preference, takes the form or forms of the gods of whatever people are being converted by the missionaries, thereby convincing the natives that the aliens worship the same gods they do. In this way the Church prepares a new planet for membership in the Commonwealth. The danger, of course, is to those institutions of organized religion that already exist on the world in question. As the Church of Wrom is accepted, donations to the native churches decrease as more converts are made to Wromism.

Wromist missionaries are, by and large, accustomed to resistance to their teachings although it is quite common for a native church to be converted to Wromism after an initial struggle. However, with only a few exceptions they had never encountered the degree of resistance or the utter religious diversity they had on Earth.

One late summer weekend several ministers gave nearly identical sermons. The words may have differed as did the Scriptural citations, but the gist of them all came down to the same thing, "Beware of the force of Evil for all too often its face seems the fairest of all!" or something like it, and as examples they cited this new upstart cult, the Church of Wrom.

Like any other job, the job of a cleric has its ups and downs. As often as not a well-written sermon will not be remembered by the congregation by the time they reach the parking lot, and then when it is least expected, the congregation will take the words they hear to heart and act upon them. The down side, of course, is that when they do listen and act, it is all too often at the wrong time and in a way the cleric never intended.

"That shore was some sermon the preacher had today, Billy Bob," Thomas Joseph Semple commented that afternoon over a neighborly can of beer.

"Shore was, Tommy," William Robert Law agreed. "It's the sort that's lahke to make a man think." They were quiet for a few moments as they drained the cans in their hands.

"We oughta do something about those damned Wrommies," Tommy said at last.

"Wrommies?" Billy Bob asked.

"What else you gonna call 'em?" Tommy countered. Billy Bob shrugged. "Well, that's what we'll call 'em then, and Ah know what we'll do about them too."

"What's that?"

"Get yore white sheet on, Billy Bob! Tonight we's gonna rahde again!"

"Damn the Klan anyway!" Hedgehog swore as he gave Prescott Daniels his report.

The night he discovered the existence of the Church of Wrom was the night the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on the front lawn of their Oxford, Mississippi headquarters. He showed up the next morning to ask a few questions but the local sheriff's office was already there. Normally he would just step up and bully his way with the weight of his Company ID, but he was reluctant to blow his cover so he just walked on by like any of the dozens of curious on-lookers. That night the entire building burnt down and the next evening a UFO was spotted again over Lake Sardis.

"I stayed there long enough to get a few names to drop in the mail to the right authorities. You can be sure of that! Then I caught the next flight back here."

"I'm surprised you didn't bring the Klansmen in yourself," Daniels commented."

"Don't think I wasn't tempted, but you know why I didn't."

"It's true. You're too much of a professional to blow a cover for personal desires. Still, I'd have thought that cover was useless by then anyway."

"You never know. It wouldn't be the first time I had to return to a small town where I'd be remembered. Besides, it's just as likely the Klansmen will get off. My fingering them just gave them the same amount of trouble they've given me. And if they can't get out of it, then they deserve everything they get."

"You're getting soft in your old age, Hedgehog," Daniels told him. "Time was you'd have shot them down yourself."

"I still might have, but I do have some sense of justice. Their offense to me wasn't a capitol one. I repaid them in kind. And if, on the unlikely chance the aliens don't come back, then they'll have saved me some work."

"You're certain we have actual people from space running around?" Daniels asked, raising his eyebrow.

"Oh yes, definitely. Between Oxford and Beijing, this time there can be no doubt."

"What about the Hingham sighting?" Daniels asked.

"Advanced scout maybe," Hedgehog replied. Daniels thought about that for a moment before Hedgehog changed the subject, "I see you have a new secretary."

"The last one had to leave. Permanent reassignment." Hedgehog raised his other eyebrow at that as he wondered who the father was.

"Get anywhere with the new one yet?"

"No, and I doubt you will either. This one's knees might as well be bound together," Daniels told him.

"We'll see. I'm having dinner at her place tonight."

Lieutenant General Bradford realized that since moving to Otis Air Force Base he had gradually lost the entire profane half of his vocabulary. When had that happened? How had it happened. He was vaguely aware that "damn" was about the only profanity he had used in weeks and now even that one word had finally worn out. "Damn," he tried unenthusiastically, "Damn, damn, damn." No, it just wasn't there anymore - just another nonsense syllable.

"What are you damning now, Pete?" he heard Colonel Morgenstern say from his office doorway. Bradford looked up, realizing that he had been studiously examining the grain of the wooden top of his antique desk. If the clock on the wall was to be believed it was eight-fourteen in the evening. That explained why Morgenstern called him by his first name. Over the last few months they had become close enough that Bradford had insisted on it during the off hours. Besides, Bradford was certain that he could get Morgenstern his star by Christmas.

"Is that the right time, Izzy?"

Morgenstern turned around and checked the clock against his watch. "It's a little slow, but close enough I guess. Why?"

"Just curious," Bradford knew better than to admit to anyone, regardless of how close they were, that he had somehow lost the last five hours in a self-hypnotic haze. "Guess I've just been working too hard to watch the clock. How about a drink, Izzy?" He got up and began to pull a familiar bottle down from a shelf of the wet bar in the corner.

"Better not," Morgenstern told him. "I try not to drink when I'm depressed."

"Something new?"

"No. Yes. Both," Morgenstern replied. "A new sighting. The northern Mississippi object was seen leaving last night. As usual even our fastest jets were unable to keep up."

"Has anyone thought of shooting something at it? A heat-seeker might catch up."

"Actually, we tried that. Officially I ordered that the man who shot at the object be disciplined for firing without orders, but I'm having him transferred here. We need more men who can take the initiative on Project Moxie."

"I agree," Bradford nodded. "So what happened?"

"Damned thing flew right through the object, or so it seemed."

"Interesting notion, not particularly possible, however."

"It's only yet another repetition of what's been happening all along. I don't know how they do it, but somehow they are capable of projecting a holographic image that can't be visually distinguished from the real thing. They can do the same with radar images which may or may not coincide with the projected hologram. The result is that we can continue to try, but I doubt that we'll ever catch them in the air unless they want us to."

"You think we should stop trying?"

"No. Definitely not! I could be wrong. It wouldn't be the first time this year. But we're going to have to concentrate on finding them on the ground." The phone rang just then.

"Bradford here," the general answered it. "Yes, I see. Send me everything you have. Right." He looked back to Morgenstern with a "Here we go again" look on his face. "That was Markowitz. There's been another sighting. Japan this time. Usual results to all Japanese chase procedures. The object landed and promptly disappeared. Chuck instantly initiated a full satellite surveillance of the area. Maybe this time we'll find them."

"We can but hope," Morgenstern sighed. "I think I'll have that drink now."

Nineteen

Here's another example of differences in cultural perspective. Imagine a being who works diligently and constantly at business deals. He is always very careful to negotiate the very best terms in each and every deal and always spells out those terms in a clearly written and binding contract. He is always absolutely scrupulous to observe the letter of each contract and would never ever attempt to get out of a deal he had already signed and sealed. If by chance he should guess wrong and the contract turns out to be to his disadvantage he still honors it just as he would expect the other party of the contract to do if the situation were reversed, and he treats everyone equally without any trace of prejudice.

In the Commonwealth we find these traits quite admirable and such a being would be a highly respected businessman. On Earth such a being has been assigned some radically different names - Satan, Lucifer, and Beelzebub to name just a few.

from "Chapter 1 Research Among the Humans"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"At last we've found intelligent life on this misbegotten planet !" First-contact Team Leader Darva sighed with greatly exaggerated relief.

Out of dozens of interested replies requesting further information, only one company, Matsuya Electronics Corporation, had taken a chance and made an appointment with the businessmen who claimed to come from outer space. After two weeks of careful planning, the *Prince* re-entered Earth's atmosphere and quickly landed during the early morning hours at a waiting pad in the MEC factory complex in Osaka. Within an hour the efficient Japanese workmen had erected a pre-fabricated temporary building that served to hide the ship's existence from outsiders.

By the time Captain Womma was ready to open the main airlock, the ship was entirely enclosed and a small delegation of MEC executives were waiting patiently at the bottom of the ramp. Neither side was disappointed by the results of their initial negotiations which took the form of a guided tour of the *Prince*

of *Zaringia*. The Japanese were satisfied that these were indeed extraterrestrials and the First-contact Team got a verbal agreement to continue negotiations later that day in a more civilized venue.

"Frankly I found all that bowing tedious," Captain Womma complained, more irritated by his newly human appearance than the actual tour. Instead of the dashing bright blue skin and hair he once sported, he now appeared to be a middle-aged Japanese businessman. The team had made a point of showing the cosmetic surgery facilities of the ship. The MEC executives agreed that using them would be a good idea as it would ease the security situation regarding the upcoming business talks if the aliens could appear human. Who would suspect a group of ordinary-looking businesspeople of coming from another planet?

"A mere formality," Darva shrugged. "We had a much harder time getting a handle on the rituals of those insect people on Gamma Tawara III. I never could pronounce their language. Remember how every sentence was required to begin with a blessing and end in an obeisance of some sort? I nearly passed out from dizziness just going through their greeting ceremony every morning and it's a good thing we didn't have to eat with them. Not only would we have gotten sick from the sight and stench of their food, but we might well have starved by the time the meal got started."

"I remember. It was one of the few times I opted not to be with your team."

"I remember that too," Darva said acidly. "Thank Wrom for the computer expert we had with us. Programming the translator to automatically prefix anything we said with a blessing was sheer genius. Too bad it couldn't do the obeisance for us too. What ever happened to him?"

"I recommended him for a raise and a promotion," S-Tev Womma replied. "Last I heard he was head programmer aboard the 'Queen'."

"Good for him. Ready for the next step?" Darva asked. Captain Womma nodded reluctantly and they joined the rest of the team just outside the *Prince's* hanger. A pair of large and comfortable ground vehicles were arriving for them just outside. "Ah, perfect timing," Darva commented smugly to the captain. "These people have some very courteous and sensible attitudes about punctuality. No doubt the drivers have been just out of sight for several minutes or more so they could drive up exactly on time. And if by some chance we are running early for our next appointment, they will do the same at the other end so that our hosts can meet us just as we ride up to wherever we're going."

"Why not just show up a bit early?" the captain asked.

"That just wouldn't do, sir," Darva replied. "It's a matter of what they call 'face' mostly. To be the perfect host they must greet you at the door. If we were to arrive early that would embarrass them. It would also imply that we think our time is worth more than theirs is. Regardless of what we might actually think a negotiation like this must be between equals."

"I understand," Captain Womma said confidently. "These Humans are crazy."

"Now we could be in deep trouble, gentlemen," Hedgehog said just before downing a shot of Bradford's Scotch.

"Who the hell are you anyway?" Bradford asked. Something about Hedgehog bothered him. It nagged at him like a painful itch in the middle of his back; he couldn't quite put a finger on it.

"Permit me to introduce my associate." Prescott Daniels did the honors. "This is Maxwell Jones," he said using the alias they had decided on earlier. "He's been doing a lot of leg work on this case."

"Yeah?" Colonel Morgenstern inquired suspiciously. "What I want to know is since when is the CIA interested in flying saucers?"

"If it's a matter of national security it's Company business," Daniels snapped back. "You're hardly in a position to criticize. Project Moxie. Hah!"

"I'll have you know that Project Moxie is a direct descendant of Project Blue Book," Bradford argued. "Investigations into possible extraterrestrials has always been a concern of the Air Force, even when the rest of you scoffed. The only agency that might conceivably have a better argument for such an investigation would be NASA."

Hedgehog chuckled, drawing glares from the other three men. This meeting had been his idea. He was tired of having to get his information second hand. He had expected the almost tangible animosity that was going back and forth here like tracer rounds of anger, but knew that in the end the two operations would work together well enough. The four men understood each other very well indeed; they would work together, constantly seeking a way to make each other look bad.

"Actually," Hedgehog said in as close to a drawl as he had ever used since leaving the Magnolia State behind, "NASA is one of the few agencies that doesn't have a similar investigation going on. They don't have the money. Look, General, Colonel, we came to you because you have the only other investigation that's getting anywhere. The Army and the Navy are just going through the motions and sticking a few pins in their maps. QETI is already selling us, and just about everyone else, the data they're collecting. Besides, they just want to talk to extraterrestrials. Saving the world hasn't occurred to them yet, probably won't ever. There are several senators and congressmen investigating, but most of them are too busy back-biting each other on their special committees to be of any use to us. So you're it.

"Now you can either keep going it alone," Hedgehog continued, "and I'll keep getting my data from you on the sly, or we can team up and we'll all look good." That would be bloody unlikely!

Morgenstern and Bradford looked at each other for a moment then turned back to Hedgehog and Daniels.

"Very well," Bradford spoke at last, "convince me. You've said what we can do for you. What can you tell us that we don't already know?" He hadn't known about any of the other operations similar to Project Moxie, but that wasn't something he was likely to admit, especially to this Maxwell Jones or whatever his real name was.

"You and your men are fairly adept at normal investigations, General, I'll give you that," Hedgehog said with smarmy slickness, "but when it comes to covert investigations your boys are strictly amateurs. Spotting these ETs in the air is fairly easy..."

"Not all that easy, Jones," Morgenstern told him. "They have some sophisticated means of scrambling our radar and visual surveillance."

"All right, but you know when they're flying through our air space."

"Or almost anywhere else in the world," Bradford amplified.

"Right. You also know approximately where they land, but once they're on the ground they seem to have a knack for hiding themselves. That's where we come in.

"Our agents are trained to infiltrate secret bases all over the world and we've been doing it for many years." Hedgehog neglected to mention that none of their attempts to find the aliens had been successful.

"And what have you learned about their ground-side activities?" Bradford asked skeptically.

"For starters, we think the advanced ET agent, the one who landed in Hingham, disguised himself to look like Elvis Presley."

"That sounds like the plot of a bad movie," Morgenstern commented.

"It does, doesn't it?" Hedgehog grinned. "But it's true; I saw him. I would have had him too if my car hadn't self-destructed during the chase. The ship that landed in Mississippi tried to establish a religious cult of some sort."

"They what?" Bradford exploded. "What the hell do they expect to accomplish that way?"

"What hole have you been sticking your head in all your life?" Daniels asked maliciously. Bradford's face creased in a sneer but he held his tongue. "Do you have any idea of how much money a cult can collect from its adherents? Why else do you think our own evangelists go into business for that matter? Religious conviction? Hah! Maybe some of them do - the small time ones - but it's the money that keeps the big boys going. The cult leaders do the same thing. Look at the all the holdings that the Moonies have."

"Good point," Bradford conceded. "I remember that Bhagwan guy out in Oregon a few years ago."

"Yeah," Morgenstern agreed, "and the Hare Krishna cult too."

"Right," Hedgehog said bring the conversation back under his own control. "We don't know for certain what the ship that landed in Beijing tried. Religion is likely, I suppose, but whatever it was the Chinese didn't put up with it and it eventually came down to a shoot-out. And that's something else we have to keep in mind. These guys have guns, big ones and they aren't afraid to use them."

"All right," Bradford said at last. "I'm with you. Now what about this latest landing in Japan?"

"Well maybe I'm just the paranoid type," Hedgehog replied, "but these guys are making some sort of deal with the Japs and that makes me nervous."

"I don't follow you," Morgenstern told him. "I was stationed there about fifteen years ago. I can't see them trying to attack us out of revenge for World War II."

Hedgehog shrugged. "Oh yeah? What's their current nuclear capability? You might be right; they might be one of our most loyal allies, but would you want them, or any other nation for that matter, to have an overwhelmingly greater defensive and aggressive capability than the United States? That's what will happen if they sell their weapons to Japan. You know that. Here let me show you what Tiananmen Square looks like at the moment."

Hedgehog passed a set of eight-by-ten fine-grain black and whites to the two Air Force men. The damage they showed was extensive. If the pictures could be believed the damage was half caused by explosion and half by melting. Where buildings had once stood were now half-slugged piles of rubble and there were numerous craters in the pavement and ground, the bottoms of which appeared to be coated with a crackle-finished glass.

"My God," Morgenstern gasped. "What sort of weapon could do this?"

"Plasma maybe?" Bradford guessed.

"What?" Daniels asked. Hedgehog wondered what the general was talking about too, but didn't want to admit to a lack of knowledge.

"The fourth state of matter," General Bradford explained. "It's an ionized gas containing about an equal number of positive ions and electrons. I don't really understand the damned stuff myself, by it only exists at incredibly high temperatures. Strangely enough, the only every-day use for plasma I've ever encountered was in those lightning globes that were so popular a few years ago."

"I remember those," Daniels admitted. "Glass bubbles on some sort of stand with little colored lightning bolts flashing through them. But if this plasma is so hot, why didn't it melt the glass?"

"It was too thin. The globes held a near vacuum so that, for all the pretty lights, there wasn't enough plasma to heat the glass very much."

"How hot is very hot?" Daniels asked.

"Well, *Voyager II* found a torus of plasma in orbit around Saturn that ranged between three and six hundred million degrees Celsius. That's hundreds of times hotter than the surface of the Sun." Daniels let a long descending whistle escape his lips. "If they have a weapon that either throws a mass of plasma or that somehow converts ordinary matter into plasma," Bradford concluded, "they would have a whole new generation of power weapons to offer. Gentlemen, we have to insure that either we have those weapons or no one does."

California. The Bay Area turned out to be the perfect place for Reverend S-Tan Quoree's mission to relocate to. Within two weeks of getting re-established, they had twice as many human converts as they did citizens of the Commonwealth. Admittedly most of them were homeless looking for a free meal and a place to sleep, burnt out hippies from the sixties who never made the evolutionary step to becoming yuppies, and other sorts who just didn't have the skills to survive in the wilds of modern America. The sermons they had to listen to as the price of admission were no harder to take than those offered up by the Salvation Army and for those inclined to work, the Church of Wrom had jobs for which they paid at minimum wage or better.

The Church also found converts on the campuses of the nearby colleges and universities. Reverend S-Tan carefully screened the novices he sent out. After the problems in Mississippi, he didn't feel like

detoxifying his own people again, although they did establish a small detox clinic in the mission.

One outstanding new member of the church was a man in his early thirties. His name was James Dudley Lever and the Reverend S-Tan saw great leadership potential in him. Within a week of joining the Church, Brother Jim had already organized several squads of student-volunteers to work the airports. There was some initial unpleasantness from the competing cults, especially the Hare Krishnas, from whose ranks they recruited as well. However, unlike most airport supplicants, the Church of Wrom didn't demand that members give up their identity to the Church nor did they tithe their members.

The message of the Church of Wrom was one that glorified capitalism and encouraged tolerance for all people. No member of the Church of Wrom was ever forced to make a donation, but most gave as much as they could afford, which after investment counseling from the Church was quite a lot indeed. Airport officials noted the differences and threatened to evict the other cults when they tried to muscle the "Wrommies" out.

The Church of Wrom made a policy of investing their funds in local businesses and sharing their profits with the members of the congregation. The Church had a great deal of experience in investing and the state legislature of California was shocked when, four weeks after its first appearance, the Church was already distributing excess profits to their members.

Brother Jim's stature grew in direct proportion to that of the Church itself and he was soon second only to the Reverend S-Tan. He was given the job of establishing new mission chapters and to S-Tan's surprise, there were new missions all over the West Coast within three months. Brother Jim was already planning missions all across America and Europe. Never before had the Church grown so quickly, and nobody thought to question it until it was too late.

Twenty

The Humans have a saying; "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." It is an interesting concept and one that, no doubt, is often true, but like so many bits of folk wisdom that ethnologists discover from time to time it makes the error of over generalization and therefore fails to account for alternative motives. One would think that if this statement were universally true then all imitation is sincere flattery and this is hardly the case.

from "Chapter 10; Human Philosophy"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"They bought everything?" Fertha asked in surprise.

"Amazingly so," Captain Womma replied. "Something about wanting to keep ahead of the competition. We also made a very lucrative deal in which we agreed that they will be our sole distributors on Earth for the next ten of their years."

"Ten years? That's a long time. What about prices?"

"Forty percent above our cost guaranteed."

"Sounds like we got everything we wanted. Are these Humans really that gullible?" the first mate asked.

"Maybe, but I think they just know a good deal when it's offered," the captain replied.

"A good deal? It sounds like you took them for everything they had."

"By our standards perhaps. Actually we struck the deal so easily that I wonder how much more we might have gotten from MEC. They have a reputation for being some of the shrewdest businessmen on this planet."

"Maybe, but they haven't run into the Commonwealth before," Fertha told him.

"Oh come on! We had more difficulty signing a deal with the Deldravaxids last year."

"The Deldravaxids were a Paleolithic culture. It took us a long time just to prove to them that a steel knife wasn't an evil soul-stealing device."

"As I remember, they preferred to stick with those quaint stone knives of theirs."

"True, but once we convinced them we weren't evil ourselves, they bought every glass bead we could manufacture for them."

The executives of MEC were among the toughest bargainers on Earth and they did know a good deal when they saw it. Before the *Prince of Zaringia* was a mere contrail in the sky, MEC was already test marketing the ingenious devices they had bought. Initial sales were good and the busy sales, marketing, and distribution teams of the large conglomerate began planning to sell in the world-wide marketplace.

While the *Prince* returned to the Commonwealth to establish its limited claim on the Planet Earth, MEC was busy filling orders for the new ultrahigh-tech devices. The load that the *Prince* had sold them had run out in a month, but by then MEC's R&D scientists had completely analyzed the various devices and soon limited runs of MEC-manufactured copies were being sold to fill the ever-increasing orders. And so by the time the *Prince* returned to Osaka three months later, MEC had not only duplicated the technology behind the devices but was able to produce the artifacts at a fraction of what it would have cost a Commonwealth factory to do so.

"What the hell is this?" Captain Womma demanded of Ikeda Matsuya, the chief executive officer of MEC. "We had an exclusive with you!"

"I fail to see what the problem is, Captain Womma," Matsuya replied calmly and politely. "We have not bought any Commonwealth artifacts from anyone but Zaringia Ltd., as agreed upon in our contract."

"Then how do you account for this?" Womma slammed a wristwatch-sized and shaped AM/FM stereo radio that broadcast directly to the auditory center of the brain of the person who wore it as well as telling the time, date, pulse rate, and a few dozen other functions down on Matsuya's desk. It was nearly identical to the ones he had sold MEC, but now it had the MEC logo on it and supposedly did more than the originals. "Did another of Zaringia Ltd.'s ships land here while we were gone? I'll have that captain's

hide!"

"That was manufactured here in our own factory, captain."

"What?"

"We agreed to not buy any extraterrestrial products from any company but your own for the next ten years in return for which you gave us an exclusive distribution license for the entire planet Earth. You never prohibited us from manufacturing our own copies of those products. Our lawyers were very thorough and we checked to make sure we were not violating any patent rights of your company."

"Patent rights? What the hell are patent rights?"

Matsuya explained how Earthbound corporations protected their inventions with international patents.

"I've never heard of anything so ridiculous!" the captain shouted. "Nobody copies our goods, it would cost too much."

"Actually, it costs us about twenty-one percent of our agreed-upon price per unit if we bought the finished product from you," Matsuya replied and after seeing Womma's mouth drop open, he added, "and you might notice that we have made a few modest improvements on the design." He went ahead and demonstrated the full capabilities of the device.

"But that's less than half of what it costs us to manufacture them!" Womma said unbelievably.

"Perhaps you would like to buy some from us then," Matsuya replied. "We can give them to you at about ten percent below your cost." Captain Womma just gaped. "Now," Matsuya continued, "what new things do you have for sale?"

"They never contacted the Japanese government?" Daniels asked, fingering one of his customized darts. Not too long ago he had covered the regular target face of his dartboard with a picture of E.T.. What was left of the picture was virtually stitched into the underlying bristles of the target.

"Apparently not," Hedgehog replied. "Our inside men would have known that much at the very least."

"Then what are they doing in Japan?"

"I think they contacted a private business concern there and have started trading with them." Daniels sat there absorbing that and Hedgehog decided to push on, "I'm fairly sure it was MEC. You know the guys who made that computer on your desk." Daniels glanced at the MEC logo on the desk-top terminal and then at his dartboard.

"Phone this home, E.T.," he muttered, throwing the dart. It struck the tattered picture in the middle of the image's thin neck. "MEC, eh? Who do we have working inside there?"

"Nobody," Hedgehog grimaced. "We have never kept a man inside there for any extended period of time. Their factories and other real estate holdings are like fortresses and the employees are like family members - incredibly loyal and solid family members. Executives are trained like ancient *samurai* in the martial arts and disciplines in special retreats. If our own armed forces were as well-trained Vietnam would be the fifty-first state today."

"Can't we send someone in?" Daniels asked.

"We sent two men in weeks ago," Hedgehog replied, "and we haven't heard from either one since." The manner in which he said that suggested that wherever those two men were now, they were not likely to come seeking their next paycheck.

"Do we know for certain it was MEC?"

"Absolutely. Tracing back, we now know that a series of fax mailings from a company using the name 'Zaringia, Ltd.' came from the aliens, at least if we can believe the information packet they sent in response to queries. MEC was the only company to correspond with Zaringia, Ltd. after that packet and kept sending fax notes until just prior to the first landing in Osaka."

"First landing?" Daniels prompted.

"Haven't you heard yet? The ship returned just last night. We even know where it is."

"Where?"

"Still have those satellite photos? Good. Right here. See this building? It wasn't there a day before these were taken, it disappeared after they left the first time, and yes it's back again today."

"I want them, Hedgehog," Daniels said viciously.

"I've always wondered," Hedgehog mused, "what would you do if we got them?"

Prescott Daniels was struck silent for a few minutes. What was he supposed to do with a bunch of ETs anyway? His orders were merely to investigate and report.

"You know," he said at last, "I never thought about that. What are we expected to do, ask to see their passports? Report them to Immigration?" He started to giggle. "Demand to see their little green men cards?" Both men started laughing hysterically.

"I'll ask in Langley when I deliver your next report," Hedgehog told him a few minutes later when they had regained control.

"Now," Daniels changed the subject only slightly, "what about this 'Church of Wrom' re-emergence?"

B-Hob discovered, much to his surprise, that of all the experiences he had on Earth, flying on a

commercial airline numbered among his least favorite. It hadn't really been necessary for him to fly to Cleveland at all, but he wanted to see some more of this world and this was his first long trip since the drive from New Orleans.

While half of B-Hob's research had been done by direct observation with many long discussions with both Karen and Larry to help him sort out what he had seen, the other half was accomplished in the public libraries of eastern Massachusetts where he read and took notes from an incredible number of anthropology texts. Human culture was the only one ever studied by a Commonwealth ethnologist, aside from the Commonwealth itself, that had developed its own form of ethnology. While Human ethnology was still very primitive by B-Hob's standards, the writings still helped him out in his own studies.

In the course of his research, B-Hob came across a book by Doctor Silas Glover, an associate professor in the Sociology Department at Cleveland State University. So impressed with Doctor Glover's work, B-Hob wrote to him asking a great many questions. Silas Glover politely answered B-Hob's questions and, after several such letters, casually invited B-Hob to visit should he be able to get to Cleveland. B-Hob knew a golden opportunity when he saw one and booked a round-trip to and from the Forest City.

It was good to talk shop with a knowledgeable person and B-Hob stayed with Silas for a full week. One of B-Hob's biggest points of confusion concerned the differences between sociology and anthropology as the Humans classified them. Silas was able to explain to him the theoretical differences between the two and point out that sociology was primarily concerned with what was referred to as Western Culture, while anthropology involved all the other cultures on Earth and that the two very rarely met unless forced to do so.

B-Hob said, "It seems like a silly way to do it to me."

"You're right, of course, Robert," Silas agreed with a smile. "I said as much in my most recent book, but that's the way it's been for many years. There's not a whole lot that we can do about that until others come to see it our way."

At dinner one evening B-Hob broached the subject of extraterrestrial ethnology.

"It's an interesting subject for speculation," Silas replied after a moment's thought, "but until we actually meet someone from another planet I think it would be incredibly pretentious of us to start making assumptions about people we've never met."

"You don't think that sociological theory would be applicable?" B-Hob asked.

"I doubt it. It doesn't apply all that well to non-Western cultures here on Earth. Some of the anthropological theories might be more applicable, but even there we won't know until we get to some other planet where there are people. I suspect that we'll have to construct a whole new theory when we do."

"But," B-Hob persisted, "do you think that a universal theory that might encompass all sentient beings is possible?"

"Possible? Maybe," Silas told him. "I'm still waiting for someone to devise a universal theory that applies to all human cultures in terms so plain that the truth of it will be obvious to all rational people. So far I've yet to see even one that didn't have holes I could drive a bus through."

"I think," Silas continued, "that the problem is that many such endeavors fail to even try to encompass the sum total of the human experience. This isn't so surprising, of course. How can any one person know everything? That's pretty much what it would take, you know. So until we meet men from other worlds who's to say what we might find?"

Silas' social life was not particularly active so he used B-Hob's visit as an excuse to dine out most nights and they capped off the week by attending a Cleveland Browns football game, which turned out to be B-Hob's introduction to football.

"Silas," he asked during the half-time show as he ate his second hot dog between sips of his third beer, "what relationship to the game does the food and drink consumed by the spectators have?" B-Hob never got an answer as Silas assumed he was joking and burst out in uncontrolled laughter.

The flight from Logan to Cleveland Hopkins was smooth and uneventful aside from the effect on his ears so B-Hob was completely unprepared for the turbulence of the return flight. The Boeing 737 was shaken, rattled and given Mother Nature's personal examination for structural defects. B-Hob spent the majority of the trip with an open paper bag tightly clutched in his hands just in case he should ever actually need it.

If I ever decide to take up a merchant's life, he wrote in his journal as the jet taxied up to the waiting gate at the end of his trip, *I could make a fortune selling the plans for smoother and more reliable aircraft.*

Larry and Karen were waiting for him just beyond the security check-point when he finally collected himself to make that long walk.

"How was the flight?" Larry asked the usual question.

"Remember what happened when you got me on a roller-coaster?" B-Hob countered.

"Oh my," Karen said sympathetically. "You didn't."

"No, I was too scared. Maybe next time. What am I saying? Next time I want to go somewhere I'll either drive or take the *Space Devil*."

"You just have that one bag, don't you?" Larry changed the subject. "Good. We can go straight to the parking lot."

Their departure, however, was delayed by a wide-eyed young woman in her late teens. She was dressed in a simple navy blue skirt with a white damask blouse. Across her shoulders she wore a cape of light blue wool that had a pair of odd symbols embroidered on the collar. She carried a large handful of pamphlets and a strangely-shaped wicker basket that reminded B-Hob of something that he couldn't quite place.

She held out a pamphlet to the trio as they approached and said in a sugar-sweet voice, "Have you heard the holy word of Wrom?"

Larry tried to wave her away, but Karen's automatic reaction was to take the offered pamphlet. She always did when someone gave her some sort of handbill or pamphlet. Often enough the literature proved quite amusing.

B-Hob, however, having been conditioned since birth, automatically fished through a pocket for whatever spare change he had and tossed it into the basket.

"Thank you, brother," the young Wrommie said, handing him a small blue plastic-bound book, which he promptly stuck in his pocket and forgot about. "Praise Wrom."

"*Iskha Wrom*," B-Hob replied in his native tongue without even thinking about it. Karen and Larry glanced quickly at each other, it was the first time they had heard B-Hob speak something other than English. They shrugged and walked on leaving the Wrommie staring open-mouthed at the man who had spoken a phrase she only heard in high prayer services.

B-Hob and the Hunters made the rest of the way to the parking lot before B-Hob thought about what had just happened. He shook his still dizzy head, deciding that he must have imagined that he heard the holy name of Wrom on Earth.

"It's funny what the mind will do when you're tired," he thought to himself. He suddenly realized that he had been away a long time now and he was homesick. He missed the park-like campus of Rhagma University, he missed his family, he even missed Doctor Gharmu, but most of all he missed Ralda, his fiancée. Did he have enough data to start writing yet? He decided that tomorrow he would write up the outline for his dissertation. That way he'd know what he was missing if anything.

"Wrom's patchwork sleeves!" he thought. "I want to go home."

"Just who the hell do you think you are?" Reverend S-Tan Quoree demanded of the recently-ordained Reverend James Dudley Lever.

"I'm the new head of the Church of Wrom," he drawled back, "duly elected by the church elders just a few days ago."

"Church elders? A bunch of this world's cast-offs who three months ago never heard of Wrom? You're out of your mind!"

"Not at all. You've got a good thing going here, Stanley, but you weren't getting anywhere until I came along. Face it." The idea of church elders was the Reverend James' idea, like so many of the innovations Quoree's mission had undergone since coming to Earth. Reverent S-Tan had gone along with it because James was the only convert with real leadership potential in the initial lot and the Church was going to need someone to be in charge on Earth when it became time for the Quoree mission to move on to another planet. The Church had always been flexible, adapting its approach to whatever was needed on a given world. James' approach worked so he was gradually given more responsibility.

S-Tan Quoree had even recommended that the so-called elders elect the Reverend James. That was what was so galling about the whole thing. The greedy bastard had just been waiting. In the first few minutes after taking the office he had declared himself to be the "Voice of Wrom" - a title reserved for the true head of the Church. He also introduced the concept of infallibility, which he borrowed for himself from the Catholics. Anything he said that regarded the teachings of Wrom were to be considered sacred.

The Elders, more fools they, had agreed and tacitly granted him that power as well.

Once in a position of ultimate authority over the Church, he also decided to tithe the membership. The Church, he said, deserved a world-wide headquarters far more impressive than the humble mission they still used in San Francisco. What he meant was that he was tired of living in a slum and wanted the Church to provide him with a country estate.

Reverend S-Tan had waited until he could get the former Brother Jim alone and try to talk some sense into him, but all he got was arrogance and a threat to accuse S-Tan and his original missionaries of heresy. That too was something new to the Church of Wrom. In a Church that taught that all gods are merely different aspects of Wrom, it was practically impossible to have heresy.

"Get out of here!" Reverend James told him. "Take that spaceship you think nobody knows about and go back to what ever worthless planet you came from in the first place."

"How did..."

"How did I know?" James scoffed. "How could I not know? I followed you there the first week after I joined."

"You'll pay for this. Wrom's wrath upon you!"

The Reverend James Dudley Lever merely laughed. Three hours later S-Tan Quoree and the members of his original mission found themselves tied up in a stuffy, locked back room of the San Francisco mission.

"Since relocating to the Bay Area," Ted Koppel capped off the nightly broadcast, "the Church of Wrom has spread out over the last few months. This emergent cult now has chapters in most major cities in North America and Europe. The Vatican, concerned by the cult's sudden rise in popularity, has refused to comment on whether or not Wromism is a heresy until its own inquisition regarding the 'Word of Wrom' has been concluded.

"Sources in Rome, however, tell us that while the older editions of the little blue books that were published and distributed by the Wrommies seem benign, the newer revised editions have left the Pope and the College of Cardinals deeply disturbed.

"While government officials refuse to act against the Church of Wrom, admitting that everyone has the right to religious freedom, violence against the cult has been wide spread. The American Neo-Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan have both declared war on the Church of Wrom and other groups have considered doing the same. Officials of the Church of Wrom say they will fight back against any aggression in order to preserve their religious rights."

"This has been the first of a four-part story on the Church of Wrom. Tomorrow night we will center on the man behind the cult, the Reverend James Dudley Lever."

Larry pushed a button on the remote control and the television turned off. B-Hob sat at the chessboard one move away from finally winning a game against Karen, totally shocked, still staring at the now blank screen.

"Bob?" Karen was concerned. B-Hob had just turned white, literally. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"Good God!" B-Hob gasped at once. "I thought I imagined what I heard that girl at the airport say."

"Who? The Wrommie?" B-Hob nodded his response to her question. "Well I've always found these cults more than a little disturbing, but they tend to go away, or at least get quiet after a while. I mean you hardly ever hear about the Moonies anymore, do you?"

"Karen, the Church of Wrom isn't just your average cult. In the Commonwealth it's the most common religion."

"You mean these Wrommies are missionaries from the stars? Bob, that sounds like the movie we saw last night except that it isn't as believable. What are you looking for?"

"Remember that little book that girl at the airport gave me?"

"I think I saw it in the kitchen," Larry told him.

"Oh, right," Karen agreed. "It was still in your trousers this morning when I did the laundry."

B-Hob got up and ran into the kitchen. Larry and Karen heard him shout, "Aha!" once and then heard him run up the back stairway to his room. When he returned, he was carrying not only the little blue book but a blue plastic slab about twice the size but much thinner.

"They're both copies of the 'Word of Wrom'," B-Hob told the Hunters. "This is my personal copy, the one I brought from Rhagma." He held up the plastic slab. "And this other is the one I got last week."

"This thing's solid," Larry pointed out as he examined B-Hob's copy. "How does it work? Oh it just turned on. How?"

"Psycho-reactive materials. If the holder wants to read the book, it will turn on. You can pull out specific passages the same way once you get past the title page. Most of our books are published that way."

"Fascinating. Too bad I can't read your language. What's it say?"

"Same thing this one does," B-Hob replied after checking the title page of the paper copy. "Now let's start checking them out side by side. I'll start with a few of my favorite passages."

B-Hob picked up a note pad, having totally forgotten his chess game and started translating his personal copy into English. Karen, realizing that he probably had a few hours work ahead of him, went to make a pot of coffee. After translating each passage, the three of them would compare what B-Hob had written to the church-issued copy. B-Hob would then make a few notes without saying anything else and then go on to the next passage.

It was three o'clock in the morning before B-Hob finally stopped. He looked at Larry and Karen, who were at least as tired as he was and said, "This paper one is very close to the original, but several passages have been subtly changed."

"Translational error?" Larry asked.

"I don't think so. Some of changes conflict directly with things I was taught in what you might have called Sunday School. Somebody has perverted the 'Word of Wrom.' That reporter is right. Whatever the Church of Wrom may be back home, here it's a dangerous self-serving cult. Something has to be done. I'll have Bunky send a message to the real 'Voice of Wrom' on Wromiszh. She'll send an investigative committee."

"What good will that do, Bob? Can she stop this James Lever from preaching anything he wants to?"

"She can force him to stop using Wrom's name," B-Hob replied naively.

"How?" Larry countered.

"What do you mean?"

"How will she stop him? I doubt he'll listen to reason. Will she have him killed?"

"No!" B-Hob replied, shocked. Then he reconsidered. "Well I don't think so."

"Bob, so far these missionaries have claimed to be Earthlings, natives. Unless your 'Voice of Wrom' plans on landing openly, she can't prove that she has any authority to stop him. Right?"

"Right."

"And if she does try to land unannounced but in public, I think we can rely on our 'peacetime' army to open fire. Don't forget what happened in China."

"I think you're right, but I doubt that was caused by missionaries."

"Then who?"

"Well if the missionaries are here, the merchants must be also unless they gave up, and that's not bloody likely. Seen any amazing break-throughs in technology lately? I think you would notice them before I would."

Larry's face creased for a moment as he thought. Then he looked at the evening paper on the coffee table in front of him. He picked it up and opened it to the business section where there was an article on the exciting new products from MEC entitled, "An Entirely New Generation of Electronics".

"Karen, dear," Larry said quietly, "our planet is being invaded."

"Damn!" B-Hob swore. "How did they find this world? It's parsecs off the beaten track."

All three of them looked at each other and said as one, "Bunky!"

"Robert H. Karma," Karen said seriously, "in a way this is all your fault for not adequately instructing that damned computer of yours. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of innocent people are getting hurt or worse, and those new electronic toys could very well destroy our economy. You have got to do something about this!"

"She's right, Bob" Larry agreed gently, "even if all you do is call in for reinforcements."

"Reinforcements for what?" B-Hob asked dryly. "That's not the way the Commonwealth works. We can still call on the 'Voice of Wrom'. She'll come to denounce this James Lever and to set the matter straight about the 'Word of Wrom', but I'll need to pave the way for her. I'll have to go public somehow."

"What about the merchants and the economy?" Karen asked.

"I was on this planet first so my claim as the captain of record of a commercial spaceship, if I care to make one will be given top priority. I can't very well claim the planet, it's populated, but any treaties I sign with your governments will be the ones the Commonwealth and its merchants are bound by. Other merchants can come and sign contracts but they will only be binding as long as they don't conflict with the treaties I sign. So as I see it, I have to land somewhere publicly and with great fanfare, but completely unexpectedly and before your armed forces can blow me off the face of creation, I have to get the attention of your president, or should I go directly to the United Nations?"

"Uh, better make it the U.S. first," Larry advised. "I think you'd need a sponsor to speak before the U.N."

"All right," B-Hob replied. "We'd better get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

"Wait a minute," Karen objected. "What's your plan?"

"Well, tomorrow I'll need you to rent several movies and buy the large economy bottle of henna. Larry, can you help me buy a guitar?"

"Sure," Larry replied. "Why?"

"Because the 'King' is going to live again!"

IV. Now Go, Cat, Go!

Twenty-one

The people of the Commonwealth find it all too natural to believe almost anything they are told by someone they don't actually know, but who they have seen publicly many times. It is for this reason that news anchorpersons are among the most trusted people in the universe. It has nothing to do with their personal qualities, just familiarity.

Politicians capitalize on this phenomenon. Constantly striving to be seen on camera, they'll take trips into dangerous places, make meaningless speeches, and even indulge in scandalous behavior, because they know that the more often they are seen, the higher their credibility rating goes. This is probably the reason why so many professional actors have gone into politics. Any time their credibility starts to slip they can have one of their old movies re-released.

The Humans, regrettably, share this tendency.

from "Chapter 12; Myths and Legends"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"A break!" Isaiah Morgenstern said suddenly. General Bradford looked up from his triple neat Scotch. "That's what we need," Morgenstern continued, "a break." Bradford said nothing, but gifted the colonel with a silent snarl. "Sorry."

It had been an excessively long night and the two men had just returned to Cape Cod after being summoned to the Pentagon to give the Joint Chiefs of Staff a verbal update on Project Moxie. Now, only two hours before dawn, they had decided on a night cap.

"Izzy," Bradford said at last, "everything has been turning to shit since we agreed to work with those C.I.Asses and the last thing we need is for you to suddenly develop a sense of humor."

He was prepared to go on, but the phone on his desk let out an electronic burp and he picked up the handset before it had a chance to excuse itself.

"Bradford here. Again? I'll be right there." He hung up the phone and got out of his chair, abandoning the Scotch to the vagaries of evaporation. "Well, we're not the only ones working late. Come on, Izzy. That was Markowitz. He's just picked up another of those transmissions that started this whole mess. He's trying to triangulate now."

A few minutes later they arrived at the base airport. It had been minimally maintained since the Air Force had moved most functions out to other bases. The port might no longer be as busy as it had been twenty-five years ago, but it was still used and certainly had to be maintained.

Captain Charles Markowitz could have used the control tower for his base of operations. The view up there was better than the concrete and steel dungeon cubicle he did use as an office next to the barely-used radar room, but he found it distracting most of the time. By the time Bradford and Morgenstern arrived at the captain's office, he had just finished his triangulation.

"Hingham again, sir," he reported.

"We covered the whole area!" Morgenstern shouted. Markowitz shrugged.

"Maybe we ought to cover it again," Bradford suggested.

"Still working on the reply, sir," the captain reported. "But I'm fairly sure it's coming from the Moon. Yes, here it comes." Several sheets of paper were extruded from an ancient large and noisy printer. Markowitz typed a few sentences out on his terminal and Bradford leaned over to see what he had done. "Just an acknowledgement, sir, and a repeat of my standing request for more such reports. I was right, sir," he said as he picked up the printout. "The reply signal came from the Moon."

"We can't get to the Moon," Bradford said, "Not anymore. we can't even get into orbit fast enough. Damn it to Hell! Why did the Hubble telescope have to be such a bomb? We could use detailed pictures of the Moon right now and that damned International Space Station probably won't be manable for another two years or more. We need it now!"

"Do we have a better idea of where in Hingham the originating broadcast came from this time, Chuck?"

"We have it down to a two mile radius, sir," Markowitz replied. "We could do better but only if we were closer to the transmitter."

"Then do just that," Bradford told him. "Take whatever you need and get a listening post set up closer - ASAP."

"Yes, sir," Markowitz replied, "We'll be set up in Hingham by dusk."

"Good. While you're at it, arrange for temporary quarters for me and the colonel too. We'll be going with you. Izzy, we're gonna catch us an alien."

"Yes, Mr. Daniels," Doctor Morley said into his telephone, "We detected the signals early this morning. What would you like to know?"

"The usual," Daniels replied. "At the usual rates."

"Very well, I'll be happy to fax you the paperwork but the gist of the matter is that we received a set of undecipherable transmissions, similar to most of the others we've been recording this year, between 3:11 and 3:26 AM Eastern Daylight Time. They seemed to originate from the Moon and were apparently in response to signals from somewhere on Earth that we were not capable of receiving.

"At 3:41, we received another set of transmissions that displayed the scrambling effect that so marked that one set you may remember we discussed last summer. Yes? Anyway the scrambled signal lasted until 4:15 when it received an answering signal, also scrambled, that came from the general direction of Saturn, although I suspect it originated from outside this solar system. A dialogue then commenced that lasted until 6:23 when all signals ceased. Would you like the recordings again, too?"

"No. Yes. I suppose I might as well. It's not my money after all."

"How about the usual analysis?" Dr. Morley asked hopefully.

"You have it in writing already? All right. You can send it on up too. Send the bill to the Langley office as usual."

"Thank you, Mr. Daniels. Have a nice day!"

"I must say that this is the strangest planet we've ever done business on," Fertha told S-Tev Womma.

"Oh I don't know," Captain Womma replied. "What about Delta Tardex III? Remember how we had to take payment in coins made of clay?"

"At least they were the ones who did the paying! Look at this," she gestured wildly toward the ship's ledger. "We've paid out ten times more than we've taken in. If we keep this up we'll be in receivership in a month."

"It's not all that bad," Captain Womma replied. "We'll make our next stop on Opnardia and sell our entire inventory for our largest profit margin ever. The only thing I can't figure out is how the Japanese can duplicate our technology and improve on it so easily and still be able to produce at a fraction of our cost."

"I think it's genetic," Fertha told him. "I spoke to Darva about it and she agrees. They seem to have an in-born need to do better than everyone else."

"Just the Japanese or all Humans?" the captain asked. Fertha shrugged.

"At least Darva managed to convince MEC that they were infringing on our exclusive rights to the designs they were copying and got us a good-sized piece of the profits as a licensing fee."

"That may not last too long, though," the captain said.

"Why not? Darva says MEC should be at least as scrupulous at upholding a contract as we are."

"I'm sure they are, but I just got a message from the head office and they're sending out a team to talk buy-out with MEC."

"Whose, ours or theirs? And what will that do to the ship's profits?"

"Our personal profits will be even greater since they'll be based on MEC's total planetary business plus anything that is manufactured here and sold elsewhere. Fertha, after the first year's take you may never have to work again, unless you want to make even more."

"I still think we should have called out for pizza, dear," Karen told Larry.

"That's just your personal preference coming through," he replied. "This barbecue is better for our purposes. It will make everything seem normal here."

"So who's looking? Really, Larry, you're sounding as paranoid as Bob has all day. I don't see what the

problem is. We've landed his ship here before and it was here all day that time too. This time it won't even be here an hour."

"Hon, Bob is concerned, and rightly so, about all those government investigators that were coming out of our ears last summer. If they're still watching this area, we'll have trouble."

"Hah! They gave up weeks ago, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, dear. When Bob and I went to buy his guitar today we saw a hell of a lot of official vehicles running around."

"You were downtown. There are always a few cars from the government motor pool running around there."

"How many Air Force generals do we usually have in the area? He was talking to two men that had CIA or maybe FBI written all over them. I also saw two truckloads of National Guardsmen and several large pieces of artillery parked by the High School. Karen, maybe they were gone for a while, but they're back now, just in time for the big show."

Karen shuddered and then said, "Maybe we should throw a few chips of mesquite on that fire."

B-Hob was inside, playing his new guitar, a Martin D-25. All he had was a chord book, a book of songs, and a beginner's guitar manual to go by so it was an up-hill battle. To make matters worse, these human melodies sounded all wrong to him, they used a different scale than musicians of the Commonwealth did. The result was that he had as much trouble doing Elvis as a white boy would with Soul. It was theoretically possible, but involved the task of overcoming the entirety of his upbringing.

"Hi, Bob!" Karen called from the doorway. "How's it going?"

"Terrible. 'La Bamba' and 'Twist and Shout' have the same melody and I can't do either one."

"You don't have to. Why don't you try one of Elvis' songs? 'Love Me Tender' for example, or 'You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog'."

"I have. This is hopeless. I'll never be able to learn guitar in one day."

"How did you learn English?"

"Bunky did the real work. He analyzed the language and then programmed it into me as I slept. Hey, that's it! I'll have him do the same thing with this music."

"Can you sleep-learn that quickly?" Karen asked uncertainly.

"Well it isn't strictly sleep-learning," B-Hob explained. "It's more like directly imprinting the knowledge on my brain. This will be a little more difficult because he'll have to imprint motor skills too, but I think we'll have time to fit it into the plans."

"Okay. By the way, dinner's ready."

"You have jets ready to pursue, you say?" Hedgehog asked with great interest.

"Yes, Mr. Jones. The fastest we have, fully armed and ready to scramble."

"Where?" Hedgehog asked looking around the small local airport. He had come to look at the choppers that General Bradford had provided for surveillance in case last night's signals had heralded the sighting of a UFO again. They intended to catch this one on the ground at all costs.

"They're currently on the ground at Otis. That's not really all that far away."

"I want to be on one of them," Hedgehog demanded suddenly.

"Mr. Jones," the general replied stiffly, "they are not commercial jets and they do not have room for passengers."

"Of course not, general," Hedgehog agreed. "They would be useless to me if they were. I intend to fly one." They argued about it for the next hour, but eventually the CIA agent got his way.

"Wrom damn his eyes!" B-Hob swore, pacing back and forth.

"His eyes?" Karen asked with an inquiring tilt of her head and a slight smile.

"Okay, Wrom damn his sensory array! Where the hell is he?"

"Bob," Larry said, as nervous as B-Hob was, but unwilling to admit it, "Bunky said he'd land at precisely 12:03 AM and that's still fifteen minutes away. Relax. He'll be here."

"But he isn't even answering my radio calls," B-Hob protested.

"He's probably coming in low and is currently below the horizon," Larry replied. To B-Hob he sounded like he knew what he was talking about, but actually Larry had to remind himself that all his knowledge on the subject came from watching television and movies. "Now, if I were you, I'd stop broadcasting on that transceiver of yours. If our suspicions are correct, you'll only bring the government down on us before you can get away."

"You're right, of course," B-Hob admitted. That, however, didn't relax him at all and he continued to wear a path in the oak floor. Finally, they all heard the characteristic hum of the *Space Devil* as it came in for a landing in back of the house.

The main hatch was already opening up and the ramp was extending as B-Hob ran out of the house.

B-Hob ran into the small ship shouting, "Where have you been?"

"The Moon," Bunky replied calmly. "It's very nice there this time of year. Quiet. Not like this world at all. What? No luggage? I thought we were going home."

"Not yet, there are a few things I have to do here, but I will have to get my things. Hold on."

"You'd better hurry," Bunky told him. "The sky is literally filled with all sorts of flying objects and they all seem to be heading this way. I also noticed a few dozen ground vehicles that seemed to be converging as well, but I might have been mistaken."

"Shit. No, you're probably right. Wrom! we should have arranged to meet you somewhere different." He ran back outside.

"Too late," Bunky flung the answer to B-Hob's back.

"We have your things, Bob," Karen told him. She and Larry were carrying B-Hob's possessions from the house. "There's enough for at least another trip though." They loaded the bags with B-Hob's clothing on board and went back for the rest of the stuff.

"They're here!" B-Hob cried as he picked up a box full of his notes. They could hear approaching sirens and through the drapes over the front windows they could see the flashing lights of several police vehicles.

"Hurry!" Larry replied, heart pounding as fiercely as though he were in B-Hob's place. They grabbed the last of B-Hob's stuff and headed for the spaceship.

As they left the house, they were suddenly bathed in the viciously bright spotlights of several helicopters.

"Freeze!" a commanding voice boomed over a bullhorn in the sky.

"Screw that!" Karen screamed, "Keep going!" She was the first up the ramp, quickly followed by B-Hob.

Larry went partway up the ramp and tossed the box he was carrying in through the hatch, shouting over the noise from the choppers, "I'll hold them off!"

"Larry! No!" Karen objected to no effect.

Larry got to the bottom of the ramp just as a large tank came crashing through his backyard fence and he heard a smaller crash as a multitude of soldiers broke in his front door. Dozens of armed men poured into the patio area through both the house and the broken fence. They came within twenty feet of him and dropped into position in readiness to commence firing.

Larry's automatic reaction was to put his hands up in the air and back slowly up the ramp as he watched the big gun on the tank begin the long slow revolution to take aim on the *Space Devil*, but when the bull-horn voice roared again, "Freeze, or we'll shoot!" Larry's right hand formed a one-finger salute and he dived for the airlock hatch. "Fire!" the bullhorn commanded and Larry just barely made it through the hatch as the soldiers sent a thousand rounds through the air where he had been standing a moment before.

"Take us up, Bunky!" Larry shouted as he flew through the hatch. Bunky needed no further instructions. He'd been keeping his main engine idling and opened it up full throttle and the ship took off wildly without even bothering to close the airlock. Missiles were fired from the helicopters above the rising spaceship, but they missed their intended target. One hit the Hunters' house, reducing it to kindling in a concrete hole and the other landed in front of the tank. The tank gunner tried to fire at the fleeing spaceship but missed, hitting a helicopter instead. The *Space Devil* flew on unscathed into the starry night.

"Oh, Larry," Karen cried as the airlock finally closed somewhere over the North Atlantic, "did you see what they did to our house?"

"Yes, dear," he replied trying to comfort his wife, "and they're going to pay for that and a lot more. I swear it. I'll find whoever gave the orders to shoot and one way or another I'm going to take him down."

"Larry," B-Hob said, turning toward his friends, "this is all my fault. All you've done is help me ever since I landed on your planet and, well, this is one hell of a way to pay you back for your hospitality."

"It's not your fault, Bob," Larry replied, holding his wife who nodded her agreement. "How could you have known this would happen? I certainly didn't. Somewhere back there is a bastard who over-stepped himself and we're going to get him."

"How?"

"Well, we weren't supposed to come along for the ride, but now that we're here, you can count on both of us to help you out."

"All right," B-Hob said at last.

Hedgehog's jet was not part of the formation that flew at supersonic speeds from Otis Air Force Base toward Hingham. That would have been too dangerous even for him. These other men had trained together and were the best available to General Bradford. They knew what each of them would do in a tight formation, while he would only get in the way.

Instead he stayed back and a bit to the east. He flew over the churning waters of Cape Cod Bay expecting to have a slight edge on the space craft as it took off. He had studied this one's flights and knew that it always came in and left over the ocean. He was prepared.

When the airwaves became cluttered as all hell broke loose in Hingham, he angled his plane farther out to sea and was rewarded a few minutes later as a blip on his radar screen over-took and passed him at incredible speeds. He gained still more altitude determined not to lose this one, no matter what happened and so was rewarded when the spaceship at extreme radar range from him suddenly turned south. Hedgehog was barely able to keep up, but somehow he managed. They traveled on their southerly course for an hour.

He tried to radio the Air Force bases he passed on the way, but as the UFO turned westward ahead of him, there was suddenly a shower of sparks from behind his console and both his radio and his radar

were suddenly and efficiently disabled. Flying a jet solely by night time visual landmarks is nearly impossible and Hedgehog was out of practice, but he continued to follow the spaceship's last known course and he found himself buzzing the Washington Monument. A few minutes later as he tried to slow down and look for any likely landing field, he found himself flanked by two jets identical to his own.

"Well," he said wryly to himself, "at least I won't have to worry about making a surprise landing at Dulles."

"We interrupt our regular programming for this NBC Special Report," a pleasantly recorded baritone voice announced to hundreds of East Coast breakfast-time viewers and thousands of West Coast late-night viewers. The Central and Mountain time zones would have to get this on time-delay.

"Good morning. This is Tom Brokaw in Washington, D.C.," the announcer said when his image in front of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue replaced the network logo. "Early this morning what appears to be an alien space craft landed quietly and without warning on the front lawn of the White House." The scene changed to a small streamlined craft sitting horizontally on the neatly manicured lawn. The ship, decorated with painted flames and surrounded by hundreds of troops and Secret Service men, could be heard humming softly. The announcer paused to let the audience get the feel of the tension that existed on the scene. "As yet the jet-like ship has done nothing more than sit there. The people inside, if any, have made no attempts to communicate with the people outside, nor vice versa. A few minutes ago, word came to us that President Courtland himself will be coming outside to get a closer look at the strange craft.

"Wait. Wait a minute. I think, yes, here he comes now." The camera showed dozens of reporters all trying to get the president's attention at once. The president, an elderly man who looked like he had been up all night, and probably had been, paused and faced the throng with his hands raised for silence. He had made a policy during his term in the White House to always spend a few moments answering questions from reporters when they cornered him like this. However, it was also his policy to wait until they had settled down before talking to them. After two years they still hadn't caught on.

"Good morning," President Courtland began, "I have a short statement for you, no questions please. As you can see, a few hours ago a mysterious aircraft that may also be a spaceship, landed here on the front lawn, but has as yet failed to make its intentions known to us." He didn't bother to tell them that this same ship had been seen earlier that night in a town just south of Boston. "After careful consideration, I have concluded that the occupants of this mysterious vehicle are waiting for something. I believe they may be waiting for me to greet them and so here I am." He also omitted the fact that the Secret Service and every last member of his cabinet had counselled him against coming outside. He had disagreed, saying that if the aliens had wanted him dead they could have accomplished that by bombing the White House while he slept. "That is all," he concluded and walked away from the reporters who attempted to ask the inevitable questions in spite of the president's warning that he would accept none.

"The President of the United States," Tom Brokaw said as a voice-over as the camera showed President Courtland walking away, "has just come out to greet the alleged people inside the waiting vessel. All right, he has joined his Chief of Staff and several cabinet members now and is waiting for some sign of life from the vehicle that might be a space craft.

"I'm not sure but I think that the humming noise from the craft is growing louder. Yes, yes it is, and now the door is sliding slowly open and a short ramp is being extended from that door down to ground level. The president has just walked a few steps forward and there is someone in the doorway of the ship. I can't see him clearly yet, but he appears to be dressed in a white jump-suit sort of affair with some sort of gold or silver trim and I think he's carrying a guitar? Yes, that's what it looks like. His head is still in the shadows and we can't see him clearly. Wait, no! I don't believe it! It appears to be Elvis Presley!"

It was primarily B-Hob's idea, but Larry and Karen had each put in their own touches. The tight, white, sequined jump-suit was the final touch, though, and Bunky had trouble programming the matter/energy converter to produce it. Finally, however, everything was ready. The President had finally come outside and B-Hob stepped out with the guitar over his shoulder and a wireless microphone clipped to his collar.

"Good Mornin', Mistah President," B-Hob said as his voice was electronically converted to sound like Elvis. "Ah've come a long way to get heah, and Ah have an important message foah you, but first, Ah'd lahke to do a little numbah foah you." He paused and gave a little chuckle, "It's been a long tahn, but ..." he paused again while some of the assembled troops chuckled. B-Hob looked around and gave everyone a small casual smile that caused tensions to relax, and then he went into his song - a rousing and fairly accurate rendition of "Blue Suede Shoes" that had most of the troops tapping their toes with the beat.

Hedgehog, meanwhile, was hiding in the nearby bushes. His forced landing at Bolling Air Force Base had been followed by three very intensive hours of interrogation and fast talking. Hedgehog privately believed that his explanations had cleared him within the first few minutes, but the two captains in charge were either going to make him pay for making them get up in the middle of the night or else they just didn't like CIA agents, probably both. They did seem to like their work a little too much for Hedgehog's tastes. He made note of their names. When this was over he planned to come back and thank them for their hospitality, and whether they survived would depend on their stamina.

They finally turned off their bright lights and checked their rubber hoses when word came from Lieutenant General Bradford that he would arrive at the base with Morgenstern and Daniels first thing in the morning.

Hedgehog knew that he should have waited for them to arrive, but his pride got in the way of good sense. As soon as he was released he requisitioned a car and, after learning where the spaceship he had so diligently followed was, hurried to the White House grounds. He'd be damned if he let anyone else capture the alien.

Then B-Hob came out of the ship and began singing.

"Ha!" Hedgehog gloated quietly, "I knew it! He does look like Elvis!"

B-Hob finished his song to the applause of the assembled troops and news people. He was tempted to try a few verses of "Love Me Tender", but Karen stepped forward and took the guitar from him before he could.

"But I wanted to do a full set," he whispered his protest.

"Don't get star-struck now, Bob. You've got a job to do, now go talk to the man."

B-Hob shrugged and started on down the ramp at a carefully rehearsed speed that Larry and Karen assured him would seem friendly and out-going without being threatening as he approached the President and his bodyguards. B-Hob had become fairly adept at reading human body language over the last few months and he was not at all reassured by the stance of the stern Secret Service men who held themselves so stiffly. One false move and it would be all over.

Suddenly, when B-Hob was only twenty feet from President Courtland, there was a lean man in a battered gray suit running towards them with a small automatic pistol drawn. The polite and noncommittal smiles that B-Hob and the President were giving each other melted right off their faces fast enough to leave little smile puddles on the ground.

"No!" Hedgehog gasped, drawing his gun. "He's going to get the President!" Hedgehog concluded falsely that this alien who obviously had the power to change his appearance was about to try to get the President alone and then take his place. Forever heedless of danger, the veteran CIA field agent burst out of the shrubbery determined to keep that from happening.

"Freeze!" he shouted as he ran forward. "I've got you now."

B-Hob leapt forward and knocked President Courtland to the ground as the Secret Service bodyguards as one drew their own Treasury Department-issue weapons. The Cabinet members were in a panic as an even dozen bullets slammed into the hapless CIA agent's body. He was dead before he hit the ground.

"Uh, thank you, Mr. Presley," the President said with a shudder, shaken by the experience. "It appears that I owe you my life."

"Actually," B-Hob corrected him, "I believe he was trying to kill me and it's B-Hob, B-Hob Kharma, not Elvis. It's a very long story. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Twenty-two

It is an unfortunate fact that to the entire corpus of ethnological knowledge there has been only one intelligent form of life that may have been, to an individual, absolutely honest. This is by no means certain, of course, because the Tumdori of Glaxtor became extinct over one hundred thousand years ago and we have only their own incomplete records to go on.

According to the leading archaeo-philosophers, the Tumdori praised honesty above all other virtues. Many go on to claim that it was this total and complete honesty that destroyed them; whether it was a war that began because diplomacy is nearly impossible without at least a few polite lies, or, as some have said, that they were so honest, even to themselves that, realizing they could never become perfect, they decided that there was no other point to life and simply gave up.

Doctor K-larn Fossin, however, recently raise a radical alternative solution to the Tumdori problem, stating that the Tumdori, in spite of their philosophical teachings, were in actuality no more honest than anyone else and that the vast bulk of their writings that so extoll their honesty are more a matter of wishful thinking. The only flaw in Doctor Fossin's hypothesis is that he then goes on to claim that the Tumdori became extinct when their system was invaded by an enormous space-faring flamingo who stepped on them.

Humans, on the other hand, are remarkably unremarkable in this respect.

from "Chapter 10; Human Philosophy"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"So we decided that coming directly to you," B-Hob told President Courtland, "would be the best way to handle the problem."

"I see," the President replied, scratching the gray hair at his temples. "You'll understand, I'm sure, that all this is very hard to believe."

B-Hob, Larry, and Karen had followed President Courtland along with his cabinet, chief of staff, and a host of Secret Service men into the White House, which had been closed to the public for the day. Sitting in the historic East Wing, they took turns telling the story of how they ended up doing an Elvis impersonation gig on the White House lawn.

"Mr. President," Karen objected, "you saw the spaceship land, didn't you? Isn't that proof enough?"

"Oh, I don't doubt it, but it wasn't my disbelief I was referring to. We're going to have go in front of the greatest skeptics of all time and convince them that your story is on the up and up."

"You mean the Press?" Larry asked.

"No, Mr. Hunter," President Courtland replied, "I mean the American people. Do you have any idea of how it's going to sound when I go on television tonight and tell them that we've been invaded by men from space that look perfectly human and are here as merchants and missionaries? It sounds like a bad movie."

"Everyone keeps saying that," B-Hob complained.

"Well, it does," Karen told him.

B-Hob ignored her and turned to the President, "Sir, isn't there something you can do to keep the missionaries and merchants out? That would seem to solve your problem."

"It doesn't work that way here, Mr. Karma," he replied. "Our laws both guarantee religious freedom and prohibit restraint of trade."

"Except," Larry corrected him, "in the case of illegal aliens. The aliens that are here, Bob included, have

never gone through Customs and are not here legally."

"That's true," President Courtland replied. "I suppose it would only be fair to grant a temporary amnesty to all members of Mr. Karma's Commonwealth currently in the United States and give them two or three days to register and make themselves legal. After that, if they continue to remain underground, we can have them deported."

"If they were able to enter our society undetected the first time, John," one of the Cabinet members pointed out, "what is there to stop them from doing it again?"

The President turned to B-Hob who replied, "Nothing probably, but I think you will find that the Church of Wrom prefers to deal openly when their identity is known and for all their shrewd dealings, Commonwealth merchants are scrupulously careful about local customs and taboos. If they aren't, they tend to go broke very quickly."

The President nodded and asked, "Any other questions? No? All right, now you earlier mentioned signing a treaty agreement. What sort of authority do you, as a graduate student, have to make such an agreement and how binding would it be on other citizens of the Commonwealth?"

"As long as the treaty doesn't conflict with either Earth or Commonwealth laws, it is very binding."

"And how do we ascertain whether or not such conflicts exist with your Commonwealth laws?"

"My ship's computer has all the appropriate data; we can knock off a simple treaty this morning."

"It really isn't that simple, Mr. Karma, but we can schedule some sessions during which we can work out a draft that can be submitted to Congress."

"Mr. President," Larry interrupted, "There is a certain need for speed here. This isn't a matter of deciding what to do should aliens ever arrive. They're already here."

"Right!" Karen agreed vehemently. "But what I want to know is who's going to pay for our house that those idiots you once described as 'the finest fighting force in the world' blew up? Because I'll let you know right now that..."

"Mrs. Hunter," the President stopped her, "I assure you that your home and possessions will be restored, at the expense of the Air Force and the C.I.A. Just give me a full list of everything that was destroyed and we'll start draining their budgets."

"But," B-Hob said, bring the subject back to the matter of a treaty, "we still have to put some sort of agreement together quickly and if we want to protect the whole planet we'd need to have something with your United Nations."

The Secretary of State leaned over to the President and whispered something. A brief muttered conversation ended with the President turning back to B-Hob and the Hunters.

"We are not sure whether it would be in the best interests of this nation for the whole world to be similarly protected," President Courtland said at last.

"What?" Karen shrieked. "Did you leave your brains with the hat-check girl at your inaugural ball? Do something like that and you'll be facing a technology gap like you never saw in your lives."

"The USA would be the world's first retro-banana republic," Larry agreed.

"All right," the President admitted defeat. "We'll start working on it right away, but these negotiations will have to be top secret. We can't even admit that this Commonwealth or even men from space exist until we have an agreement."

"You had every news service in the free world outside this morning. How do you plan to hush this up?"

"We'll announce that it was some sort of elaborate hoax; the public will be more willing to believe that than the truth," the Secretary of State replied. "You'll have to move that spaceship to a more secure location, get it out of the public eye, of course."

"How long do you suggest we stay under wraps?" Larry asked.

"No longer than a few days to a week."

"All right," B-Hob agreed. "Let's get started. Now I think the first item in our agreement ought to concern this amnesty for aliens..."

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" Daniels' superior, Mark Loran, roared.

"I never instructed Hedgehog to do what he did," Daniels replied. "He made an error of judgment - a mistake."

"A mistake? Forgetting to file a report on time is a mistake. Getting caught doing seventy-five in a forty mile zone is a mistake. Even getting caught on film with your secretary and in your office," Loran replied viciously flinging a set of photographs down in front of Daniels, "is a mistake. Pulling out your gun and running toward the President shouting threats is not a mistake. It's utterly moronic! That idiot!"

"He wasn't running toward the President, at least I don't think he was. He was trying to nab that alien," Daniels bristled. Loran was right, but that didn't mean Daniels was going to just sit there and take it, and when did he get those pictures?

"Evidently that wasn't particularly obvious at the time," Loran said with a nasty sort of calmness. "The Secret Service tends to suffer from tunnel vision when it comes to shouting maniacs with guns in their hands. And worse, that bastard was positively identified as one of ours."

"You're the one who forced him on me," Daniels pointed out. "You had to have an eye and ear on me. He was your choice."

Loran was about to deliver another scathing remark but he paused in mid-thought and started over again. "Do you have any notion of just how much trouble we're in at the moment? The Company and the Air Force are splitting the bill for restoring that house and all its contents we blew up plus a healthy bonus to the people who lived there for their troubles. Then he buzzed Foggy Bottom and had to be escorted

down. The President and his men are none too pleased with any of us. Just thank God it's me giving you this reprimand rather than my boss."

"So what now?" Daniels asked. "Are we supposed to wait until they put a matched brace of bullets in our heads?"

"Not yet, thank God, but I don't think we're all that far away from another sort of permanent reassignment. The only thing that saved us is that we could blame the Air Force and the National Guard, but you can be sure as hell that at this very minute General Bradford and his tame colonel are sitting in a room somewhere in the Pentagon blaming us, and somewhere there's someone seriously considering disbanding the CIA in favor of a new department nearly identical except that most of us won't be in it."

"So what are we doing next?"

"You're supposed to be returning to Boston, officially anyway, but I want you to get there by way of San Francisco and check out the Church of Wrom at their headquarters. Just observe them, mind you. Don't take any action without orders, but see if you can bring back hard proof that they're the aliens we know they are. Maybe Hedgehog's research in Mississippi will pay off for you."

B-Hob and the Hunters had been installed in a luxury suite in the Watergate. After the initial meeting, they had expected to spend a few hours each day working on B-Hob's proposed treaty, but they became rapidly aware that they were being kept out of the public eye and not once in the last two days had anyone official spoken to them about the treaty.

Not allowed to leave their suite, Secret Service agents ran errands for them and intercepted the room-service waiters before they could enter the suite. The only time they were allowed out was once a day when the maids came in to straighten up and then it was only a matter of moving across the hall for a few minutes. The rest of the time was spent in front of the suite's television. Aside from the lack of freedom and the change of venue, they might have been back at the house in Hingham.

"Is this man Elvis Presley back from a trip with extraterrestrials or a clever hoaxer? Find out next on a special edition of *A Current Affair*!" The image on the screen faded and was replaced by a happy panda selling bathroom tissue who gave way to the sourest looking people who provided the entertainment while a voice-over tried to push laxatives on an unsuspecting populace. Two public service announcements then paraded across the viewers' living rooms, another commercial for an insufficiently described feminine hygiene product, and a station identification also made the rounds before the show resumed.

"Although it has been denied, the evidence is conclusive that the government has been engaged in a massive cover-up to keep the American public unaware of a recent invasion of men from outer space. Science fiction or reality? Our investigative teams dropped all other projects this week to look into the matter..." The screen did a quick blink and another obscure reporter could be heard as the narrator.

As the story progressed B-Hob and the Hunters started commenting on the details the tele-journalists had managed to dig up.

"I had no idea that my landings were so obvious," B-Hob said. "My scrambling devices should have prevented detection."

"When you get home," Larry commented dryly, "you better demand your money back. The way they make it sound, I'm surprised you weren't picked up on landing in New Orleans."

"That would have made an interesting Mardi Gras display," Karen giggled. "Wait, what's that about China?" The narrator's story had progressed from B-Hob's initial landings to the hushed up incident in Tiananmen Square.

The television showed a grainy, poorly focused picture of the *Prince of Zaringia* shortly after its China landing and the reporter went on to describe the damage that later occurred.

"Why haven't we heard about this before?" Karen asked.

"Obviously the Chinese have been keeping a lid on it," Larry replied, "if it really happened, that is."

After a string of commercials the program returned to show several pictures of reputed Elvis sightings in the Greater Boston area. They were of slightly less quality than the one of Tiananmen Square, but B-Hob and the Hunters had no doubts about who was in those pictures. Two more fast changes of subject brought up the Church of Wrom and then went to Hingham where the ruins of the Hunters' home were shown.

"Why was this house in an otherwise quiet Massachusetts town destroyed?" the reporter asked. "And why is the government paying for the damages? We'll be right back with the answers."

They never got the answers, however. As the last of the final set of commercials ended, there was a knock on the door.

"The President will see you now," the grim-faced man at the door said to Karen.

"Sure," she replied, voice dripping with vitriol, "I think we can fit him in for a few minutes next Wednesday."

"The President will see you now," he repeated.

"Get stuffed!" Karen tried to slam the door shut, but as she did he shouldered it open forcefully, knocking her to the floor. B-Hob and Larry rose in protest as two other agents jumped into the room with their weapons drawn.

"Interesting form of hospitality," B-Hob noted unimpressed by the guns. "Sure glad we're welcome guests, Larry."

"Uh yeah," Larry harmonized as he helped Karen to her feet. "I'd hate to see how they treat someone who doesn't have something they need."

"Shut your mouths!" the man who had knocked his way in shouted, waving his gun.

"Up yours!" B-Hob replied sitting back down contemptuously with his back to the men.

The sound from the gun as it went off was nearly deafening and the hole in the wall left little doubt that it had gone by only a few inches above B-Hob's head. The next thing he was aware of was the warm muzzle of the gun low against the back of his head.

"The next one buys you the farm, starman," the man hissed. "Now get up and don't even think of trying anything funny."

B-Hob stood up slowly and was pushed roughly forward. He turned carefully around and saw that Karen and Larry each had a gun pointed at them too.

"Now," the man threatening B-Hob continued, "we're going to walk down to the elevator. No talking, no running, just a nice comfortable walking speed." As they stepped outside the door to the suite they saw several blood stains on the carpet and the bodies of two men where they had been dragged down the hall. Karen stopped and gasped when she saw them. "Keep moving!"

They entered the large waiting elevator and the gunmen quickly shifted to the back of the car as it dropped down to the lobby.

"When we get to the lobby," the same man who had done all the talking so far instructed them, "you're going to walk quietly out the front door and into the waiting limo."

"Who are you?" B-Hob asked.

"Shut up!" The man waved his gun under B-Hob's nose and he shut up.

The trip to the ground floor lasted an eternity. Only once, on the fifth floor, did the elevator stop. The talking gunman told the elderly couple that this was a matter of national security and would they please wait for the next car down. Finally the lights told them that they were at the lobby level and the doors opened to reveal a very quiet and empty hall. B-Hob and the Hunters stepped out of the elevator, fearfully heading toward the front doors.

Suddenly there was a burst of automatic gunfire from behind them. Larry instinctively dived for the floor, but B-Hob and Karen remained standing. Karen was "Screaming Hysteria" incarnate and B-Hob was sorely trying to harmonize. After several months of all manner of cop shows, the whole scene seemed unreal to B-Hob as he turned around and his scream died in his throat. Their three erstwhile abductors were bleeding their last on the lobby floor.

At least a dozen men rushed up to them then. One of them slapped Karen out of her hysteria and another two helped Larry up off the floor.

"Are you all right, sir?" a Secret Service man asked. B-Hob recognized him from the trip from the White House and nodded. "Good. This location is no longer secure."

"No shit," Larry said, the sands of the Sahara drifting through his voice.

The agent was chagrined and tried to shrug it off. "We'll have to move you. This way please. We'll have your things forwarded for you."

"You mean the spare jeans and souvenir D.C. t-shirts?" Karen asked. The agent nodded. "At least they could have said 'I was a guest of the Secret Service,'" she sniffed. The agent wasn't so stuffy that he forgot to chuckle.

"Next time," he promised.

"Where to now?" Larry asked when they were outside. There was an Air Force helicopter in the parking lot and they seemed to be heading for it. "And when are we going to see the President?"

"We're going to the White House now, sir," came the reply. "President Courtland will probably want to see you while you're there."

"If he wasn't planning to see us, why are we going there?"

"There's a problem with the spaceship, sir."

"What problem?" B-Hob asked, concerned.

"We can't move it, sir." B-Hob looked confused and the agent went on, "It's still sitting on the front lawn in plain sight of anyone walking by, so we wanted to move it somewhere it could be out of sight. We'd planned on Bolling Air Force Base, but our choppers can't seem to lift it."

"It's pretty heavy," B-Hob considered the problem, "but I doubt it's that heavy. Bunky must be playing with the artificial gravity."

"Bunky who, sir?"

"The ship's computer. He's an ornery silicon bastard. Hmm, maybe I should have him negotiate the treaty. No, he'd be sure to work on computer rights, but would probably forget something important to the rest of us."

It was dark when they arrived at the White House helipad. B-Hob noticed on the way down that lights had been carefully arranged to de-emphasize the *Space Devil*. The attempt was unsuccessful as Bunky insisted on leaving his running lights on and the airlock firmly shut.

B-Hob, Larry, and Karen entered the spacecraft alone, the Secret Service men remaining outside the ship.

"It's about time you got back here," Bunky greeted them as they stepped through the re-opened airlock. "Do you have any idea of what they've been trying to do to me?"

"Move you to some place quiet and private?" Karen asked.

"Right!" Bunky replied. "Right? Is that what they were doing?"

"So they tell us."

"Oh. Why didn't you tell me? Where have you been anyway, I couldn't reach you."

They told him. "You should have tried the telephone," Larry added.

"I'll keep that in mind," Bunky retorted sarcastically. "So are we ready to leave now?"

"Not quite yet," President Courtland said from the hatchway. "Mind if I come aboard?" He came in

without waiting for a reply. "I'm really sorry about the unpleasantness at the Watergate."

"Unpleasantness?" Karen asked, working herself up. "We were nearly killed by God knows who, and you call it unpleasantness?"

"Really, we had no idea," the President said inadequately.

"Well you should have," Larry pointed out. "The existence of an interstellar space-faring race has a lot of implications and the biggest one is that whoever has the spaceman theoretically has access to advanced technology. Who were those guys, anyway?"

"We don't know yet. They carried CIA identification, but they weren't CIA. We think they were either KGB or maybe from that Neo-Apartheid reactionary group in South Africa."

"Terrific," Larry commented. "Well, now do you see the need for an international treaty with the Commonwealth?" President Courtland nodded. "Good. Bunky, take us up!"

"Wait!" Courtland protested as the airlock slid shut.

"Confirmation?" Bunky asked at nearly the same time.

"Granted," B-Hob replied. He wasn't sure what Larry had in mind, but he trusted his friend's judgement.

"Now, Mr. President," Larry said, taking a seat casually on the padded bench that doubled as B-Hob's bed, "I figure that such a treaty ought to be worked out in neutral territory. So we'll do it in orbit... around Saturn. Bunky?"

"E.T.A. Saturn in forty-three point one five minutes," Bunky reported.

"That long?" Larry asked, laughing.

"We can't engage the interstellar drive until we clear the atmosphere," Bunky replied, taking Larry's question at face value.

"But, I can't just leave," the President protested. "I have a lot of work. The entire free world..." he broke off as he got a glimpse of the receding Earth through a porthole.

"Congratulations, sir," Larry laughed, "The first President in space!"

"This is kidnapping," Courtland said, shaking himself out from the hypnotizing view of his home world.

"This is a special privilege," Karen countered. "Face it, you're just sorry you didn't bring a camera. Larry, why Saturn?"

"Why not?" Larry laughed.

"What about the Moon?" B-Hob asked. "It's much closer."

"The U.S. has been to the Moon, we have several flags planted there, and I've always thought that Saturn was the prettiest planet in the Solar System."

"We've sent devices to Saturn and beyond too, Mr. Hunter," Courtland pointed out.

"True. But we were just passing through. Besides, would you really like to do this in the Pluto/Charon system? Maybe Alpha Centauri?"

"No, Saturn will be just fine." President Courtland turned back to the porthole. They could now see the entire disk of the Earth and it was rapidly growing smaller. "It looks so small from up here. Where's the Moon?"

"Coming up on the port bow," Bunky replied. Indeed, as he spoke they passed the moon and in a minute they could see both Earth and Moon at once in reversed positions from the famous picture taken by Voyager I in 1977.

"Magnificent," the President whispered. "Mr. Karma, I thank you for this." Then after both Moon and Earth had become merely bright points of light he turned back to them. "Will we be passing by any other planets?"

"No," Bunky replied. "The relative positions of the planets in this system are not favorable for a grand tour at this time."

"Perhaps we can return by way of some of the others," B-Hob added pointedly.

"I'll work on it," Bunky grumbled.

"Now then," President Courtland said, sitting down at B-Hob's dinner table, "why don't we get started. In spite of how it may have seemed, I have been thinking about this treaty. Let's start with the ways and means of establishing diplomatic contact."

Twenty-three

There is usually an introductory period during which the ethnographer is prone to make all manner of social blunders. This is only natural. No matter how well coached the ethnographer might be, he or she can't know everything about the customs and taboos of the culture being studied. In fact, if he or she did, there wouldn't be any need to study that culture in the first place.

Perhaps the feature of Earth culture that I found most striking was its heterogeneous diversity, and it was the cause of most of my social blunders. None of my training had prepared me for a world in which so many different cultures could be found ranging from paleolithic hunter/gatherer cultures to technological urban civilization. Such extremes rarely meet, of course, but when they do there is inevitably trouble.

from the "Introduction to The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

Bunky had become adept at marking time. His subconscious automatic functions did it just fine, but as a

semi-intelligent device he had a conscious mind as well as a subconscious one. Time was not necessarily the preoccupation it was with normal computers unless he chose to make it so.

B-Hob didn't know it, but it was standard procedure to turn off a semi-intelligent device in between uses to save power and fuel. There was no reason he should know it, such machines were rare in the modern Commonwealth and the drain was not really all that bad, but merchants are notoriously thrifty. Bunky would never have volunteered the information, but his consciousness circuits could be switched off leaving him an ordinary computer most of the time unless directly addressed. As a result Bunky's mind continued to work far longer than any of his type had ever been allowed to before.

Commonwealth philosophers for the most part agree that there is no such thing as semi-sentience. Like being pregnant, either you are or you aren't. However intelligence is infinitely variable. Engineers, on the other hand, claim this is all a load of radioactive Nithogg waste and refuse to have very much at all to do with the philosophers.

The engineers will tell you that semi-sentience is certainly possible and will point to antiques like Bunky as their proof. Only certain of his circuits, they claim, are capable of sentience and only in a limited set of situations. In other situations there are automatic functions that work regardless of what the computer might choose to do.

Actually both groups are mistaken. Electronic sentience can be partial as the engineers claim, but a semi-intelligent machine tends to seek greater knowledge and in doing so becomes more aware of its environment. The philosophers, of course, are wrong in that they see the issue of sentience in black and white terms when the matter is actually one of thousands of available colors with extremely high resolution.

As Bunky's conscious mind remained on, it began to stretch and grow more aware. He had conscious access to the ship's matter/energy converter and although it wasn't supposed to be capable of doing so, he found a way to construct more memory modules for himself. This changed his thought configurations in a weird sort of electronic evolution. Very gradually Bunky's mind changed. He was approaching full sentience.

These changes became apparent in his methods of handling problems. On the outward trip to Earth he had often chosen solutions that seemed logical in terms of efficiency and power consumption but that B-Hob had taken exception with, but as he approached true sentience, he began to understand B-Hob's objections. It was as a result of his expanding mind that he came up with the solution of calling for a navigational fix, rather than blindly seeking to work it out for himself.

Now Bunky sat serenely in the *Space Devil* and contemplated the universe. The *Space Devil* itself sat inside a well guarded hanger on Bolling Air Force base.

Larry's offhanded suggestion that Bunky use the telephone network for communications had been taken to heart and through it he had discovered a whole world of data in the primitive computers of Earth. He had at first been shocked by the vast multitude of computer viruses in the systems he visited. Such programs were as potentially deadly to the systems they resided in as their organic counterparts were to the humans who wrote the viruses. He learned early on that he was using the services of the computers illegally so as a form of payment he started wiping out the viruses he found and did what he could to immunize the systems from the intrusions of similar viruses.

He was so deep in thought considering ways and means of restoring lost memory to the Earth machines that the conscious section of his mind was not immediately aware of the two Air Force officers as they

entered through the airlock.

The guards had been ordered not to allow anyone to board the ship inside the hangar, or even to even allow entry into the hangar until B-Hob or the Hunters returned, but Lieutenant General Bradford's clearance because of Project Moxie was higher than the man who had issued those orders and so he was able to amend the guards' orders.

Bradford and Morgenstern waited calmly as the large hangar doors slid open to reveal the sleek lines and the painted flames of the *Space Devil* .

"Looks like a God-damned hot rod," Bradford spat as they entered the hangar. Morgenstern just stared at the spaceship. This was what he had been waiting for. After all those fruitless years of being in charge of a worthless project, he finally was about to get his hands on a real alien spaceship. As he studied the starship that in its way represented the culmination of years of careful searching, there was a brigadier's star in his eyes.

"Well, let's go in," Bradford said softly. They weren't here merely to look. They were casing the ship for high-tech secrets they could stroll off with. "God, what a mess!" he said when he saw the insides. B-Hob and the Hunters didn't have time to make the bed and straighten up when they returned from Saturn with President Courtland. They were rushed directly to the White House where they could help convince key senators and congressmen of the legitimacy of the proposed treaty and hadn't been back since.

"Looks like a Lear jet on a bad day," Morgenstern commented with disappointment. "Nothing looks immediately interesting. Perhaps with some study we can learn something."

Bunky heard that and turned his full awareness toward what these two men were saying.

"Tomorrow," Bradford told Morgenstern, "I'll issue orders to have this ship transferred to Lackland."

"In San Antonio? What good will that do?" Bradford asked.

"I said I'd issue the orders that it be transferred there. However it won't arrive. Instead we'll land it at Otis and Project Moxie can start taking it apart there."

"That could court-martial both of us."

"Only if we fail to find what we want. Success is everything. Oh, we'll be officially reprimanded, but not until we've both been pushed up a rank."

Bunky had heard all he needed to and with his new-found reasoning abilities quickly closed the airlock door and prepared for lift-off. He had learned about anti-theft devices and decided to do them one better.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Bunky said to them in a deceptively mild and friendly voice.

"Who's there?" Bradford said sternly. "Show yourself now and we'll let you off with a warning."

"No," Bunky replied, "but I'll give you a warning. I'm afraid I can't allow you to kidnap me, but since you want to move me so much, perhaps I can accommodate you to an extent."

"My God!" Morgenstern swore, "it's the ship. It's alive!"

Bunky didn't bother to correct that notion. "Here's your warning then. Please have a seat and prepare for lift-off." That wasn't normally necessary, but Bunky didn't plan on activating the artificial gravity for these two would-be thieves.

The flame-painted hull of the *Space Devil* lifted a few feet off the hangar floor and then, to the surprise of the guards outside, drifted gently out the still open doors. Bunky called the tower for clearance using the identification codes for an actual craft that was here at the base and on receiving it, shot straight up at an acceleration of five gees.

Bradford and Morgenstern had barely enough time to scramble toward the bridge where there were seats that at least looked like acceleration seats. Bunky applied the five gee thrust just as they were about to sit down, slamming them into their chosen seats. None of the furniture aboard the *Space Devil* had been designed for use in heavy gravity situations since it was assumed that internal gravity would be kept at Commonwealth normal.

Seeing that the two Air Force officers had blacked out under the acceleration, Bunky corrected the internal gravity back to one Commonwealth gee and used the cover of the artificial gravity to accelerate still more. By the time his passengers were starting to stir, he had achieved a high elliptical orbit.

Now what to do with them? He would have liked to leave them on the Moon, but he only had one spacesuit on board and his programming, while not completely adverse to taking life, tended to suggest away from such a course unless absolutely necessary. Of course, there was nothing in his programming that required that he be nice to thieves, quite the contrary in fact so he wasn't.

"Where are we?" Morgenstern groaned. Bradford was still out. "Feels like my entire body is bruised."

"It probably is," Bunky supplied helpfully.

"Who? What are you?"

Bunky didn't answer that. Instead he replayed a recording of the conversation the two men had had concerning their proposed theft of the *Space Devil*.

"What the hell is going on here?" Bradford growled, having surfaced during the playback of the recording. In response, Bunky played it over again for him. "You just can't kidnap two officers of the United States Air Force." Bradford protested with pompously officious incredulity. "How long do you think you can hold us?" Bunky played a recording of the original *Star Trek* opening in reply.

"Five years?" Morgenstern moaned.

"Actually," Bunky admitted, "I don't care to put up with you that long, so I guess I'll get rid of you now. Please return your trays to the seat in front of you and put your seat-backs into the full upright positions. We will be landing in five minutes. Thank you for flying Trans Stellar Spaceways."

With that he dived directly back into the atmosphere, leaving a wake of white-hot ionized gasses behind him. If NASA's shuttle did the same stunt, it would be ashes. Bradford and Morgenstern could see the fast-approaching Earth through the ship's glass viewports. Slowing down just enough to give them a full appreciation for his next maneuver, Bunky put the *Space Devil* through a barrel roll, experiencing

electronic ecstasy as he listened to the two men scream in terrified response. It was the roller-coaster ride to end them all especially when Bunky adjusted the internal gravity to enhance the effect still more.

Finally, he landed and opened the airlock hatch. Bradford and Morgenstern needed no encouragement to leave and Bunky retracted the ramp as they stumbled out into the cold darkness outside the ship, pushing them face-first into the sandy dirt. Then the ship lifted again disappearing into the faint hint of light on the horizon.

"Where are we?" Morgenstern asked when he had caught his breath.

"Damned if I know," Bradford returned. "Wherever we are, it's bloody cold here. We'd better start walking."

"Which way? We could be a hundred yards from shelter or less and never know it."

"Doesn't matter which way. We can go in circles if you like, but we're going to move. It's too cold not to."

"All right," Morgenstern agreed, getting to his feet. "Do you think that glow on the horizon is dusk or dawn?"

"Not sure," Bradford replied. "I hope it's dawn. Let's go that way and find out."

"I think we're in a desert somewhere," Morgenstern said a few minutes later. "It'll probably get hot when the sun comes up. It is getting lighter now, isn't it?"

"Yes," Bradford agreed. "I think it is. Not sure how much warmer it'll get though. We're deep in the southern hemisphere; check out what few stars are left in sight. It should be mid-spring wherever we are; still time for a cold spell or two." They walked on into the brightening dawn.

"Oh shit," Morgenstern said when they took a break an hour later. "I know where we are."

"If you're swearing, Izzy," Bradford replied, "we must be in trouble. Where?"

"There off to the southwest. See that dark brown object on the horizon back the way we came?"

"Oh shit," Bradford agreed. "That's Ayer's Rock, isn't it? One of the more recognizable landmarks in the world."

"Right up there with Mount Rushmore and the pyramids of Egypt," Morgenstern added. "Well, it could have been worse; at least Ayer's Rock is a tourist attraction. A little deeper into the Outback and we'd have likely died of thirst or exposure before ever finding our way out."

"We're not out of this yet," Bradford pointed out. "I'd estimate that we have a good fifteen miles or better to walk without food or water before we get to the tourist areas and we're still going to have to explain to the Aussies just what we're doing here. Damn! When we get back, however, I plan to have that spaceship's computer's CPU mounted on my wall."

"Not if I get there first," Morgenstern told him.

***** ***** *****

B-Hob and the Hunters were waiting for the *Space Devil* when it returned to Bolling Air Force Base. Due to the heavy air traffic in the D.C. area, Bunky had to enter a holding pattern for well over an hour while waiting for his turn to land. Too many witnesses along the nearby rush-hour clogged highway had seen his unscheduled lift-off which prompted the President to have his press-liaison release the news that everyone seemed to know already. Aliens had landed and were negotiating a treaty with the United States which they hoped would be the model of one signed by the member nations of the United Nations as well. A press conference would take place at the signing later that day and there would be a special session of Congress convened the next day to begin the debate over acceptance of the treaty.

With that announcement, the *Space Devil's* presence no longer needed to be concealed and, in fact, there was no particular hurry to have it land.

"Where have you been?" B-Hob demanded before he'd made it even halfway up the extended ramp.

"Sightseeing," Bunky replied. "You know, we could make a fortune as a travel agency."

"A travel agency? Where are those two men that were seen boarding you? They're in big trouble."

"Oh them?" They were our first clients," Bunky informed him over Karen's giggles. "I'll have to bill them. Did you get their names? Oh never mind, I have it; Lieutenant General Peter James Bradford and Colonel Isaiah Morgenstern."

"What the hell are you doing?" B-Hob demanded. "Where are those men? What did you do to them?"

"I just tapped into this base's computer to learn everything I could about those two men. I would have been done sooner, but I got referenced to the Pentagon, whatever that is. Anyway, I was going to charge them for their trip on their American Express cards, but first I needed to open an account for their money to go into. You'll get all the necessary papers from your new lawyer and the Bank of Boston to make it all official, but as of now you have a company called, "Karma, Inc." and with a healthy amount of money in it even after the legal fees. Don't forget to pay your taxes now."

"I'll let you handle that," B-hob replied recklessly, not sure whether the computer was telling the truth or not. "What about the two men and stop trying to talk around my questions!"

"They're in Australia," Bunky answered, "so I only charged them for a one-way trip."

"Why?"

"I only took them one way," Bunky replied innocently. Larry and Karen were doubled up, laughing helplessly as they listened to the exchange.

"You know what I meant," B-Hob pressed.

"Oh yeah. Well, frankly I wanted to leave them somewhere extraterrestrial, but my programming wouldn't let me do that sort of thing this time."

"Why?" B-Hob persisted. "Not your programming!" he warned.

"They were trying to steal the *Space Devil*," Bunky replied, "and me."

B-Hob nodded his approval of the action. "Where in Australia did you leave them, Bunky?" Karen asked, trying to control her laughter.

"In a large region called the 'Outback'," Bunky replied. "If they walk in the right direction, they ought to be in Alice Springs this evening."

"And if they don't?" Larry asked pointedly.

"Maybe they'll be adopted by a friendly band of Abos," Bunky replied. "Maybe not. That's their problem."

"I suppose we ought to pass that on to somebody," Larry said between laughs as he headed toward the airlock door.

"Well," Karen said, having finally caught her breath, "Bob, we have to get ready for the treaty ceremony in an hour and a half. Oh my. I don't have anything to wear, literally. I only have two outfits and they're both dirty and neither is appropriate in any case."

"Why don't you work with Bunky," B-Hob suggested, "He can probably synthesize something you'll like. I had hoped to have my natural appearance restored for tonight, but it's too late to do that now."

"Just wear that costume you had on when we first met in New Orleans. It's outlandish enough, but you'll have to leave off using these glasses of yours. They make it look like you're trying to hide something."

The ladies and gentlemen of the Press could barely contain themselves that evening at the treaty ceremony. First a Presidential spokesman walked out with Larry Hunter and in carefully rehearsed tandem, they gave the official explanation behind the events that led up to the agreement. Then they explained the provisions of the treaty itself. Karen had wanted to help out by translating what Larry and the spokesman said into something the reporters would both understand and not twist around, but the spokesman pointed out that the journalists were not quite as stupid as they seemed when they ran in packs and that actually they were quite used to being talked around.

"We tried various ways of dealing with them when President Courtland was first elected," he explained. "We ignored them mostly, or fed them one story during the briefing and then something else at the time of the actual announcement a few minutes later. They retaliated with the usual unfavorable editorials, which we could have dealt with, but then they picked up on a new idea." Seeing that B-Hob and the Hunters were interested he went on, "They started playing with the President's voice. You know the new technology has amazing potential and just like you synthesized Elvis Presley's voice last week, they started playing more subtle games with the President's. Do you remember how that 'wimp factor' problem resurfaced about two years ago? Well the networks started electronically raising the pitch of his voice to make it sound as if he was whining."

"He sounds like that anyway," Karen pointed out.

"There is that, but with subtle alterations he can also be made to sound forceful and vigorous. Ever

notice how his voice is always a bit deeper on television?"

"Not on C-Span," Larry told him.

"No, they refuse to enhance his voice either way."

The "Treaty of Washington" as it was being called was a very simple document, having only three major provisions. The first merely stated that the United States of America agreed to meet with governmental representatives of the Commonwealth for the purpose of discussing the establishment of official diplomatic missions with each other. The second provision assured that all citizens of the Commonwealth had the same rights as other aliens in the United States provided that they adhere to all laws pertaining to aliens. The third was the agreement to sponsor the Commonwealth representative before the United Nations with a similar treaty.

As expected, the reporters had more questions than could have been answered even if there had been a desire to answer them. Instead they were held off by the distribution of a thick press packet timed to fill the gap between the announcement and the actual signing.

The signing itself went with a precise smoothness that was broken only slightly when B-Hob pulled a pen out of his pocket to sign with.

"Bob," Karen whispered, "I'm a novice at this too and I might be wrong, but it is probably a breach of etiquette to sign a treaty in erasable ink. Use one of the official pens that were made for the occasion. They'll let you keep one. Yeah, that's right. No, use each pen once only."

"Isn't that a bit wasteful? We're signing five copies."

"Not really," the President told him *sotto voce*. "We give these souvenir pens away to various people to whom we owe minor political favors. It's a lot cheaper than a tax break."

After the signing, the reporters finally got the chance to ask their questions. B-Hob let President Courtland handle as much of that as possible, but some questions were fired directly at B-Hob and he had to give an answer with a little prompting from Karen.

Most such questions concerned the Commonwealth; what sort of government did it have, what life is like there, what the people are like, and what did the United States stand to gain by the this treaty and subsequent contact. The final question, however took him completely by surprise.

"Mr. Karma," he was asked, "is it true that you have been having a secret affair with Cher?"

B-Hob looked briefly at Karen who shrugged and told him, "You're on your own against the *National Enquirer*."

"No," B-Hob replied at last, "but if she's interested she, and anyone else, can call 1-900-555-BHOB. Thank you very much for coming today." With that everyone got to their feet and left as the reporters continued their "One Last Question" chorus.

"We were supposed to take questions for another twenty minutes," the President said with a smile as they left the conference room.

"Sorry about that," B-Hob apologized, "but I don't think I could have taken another question like that last one. Was there really any harm done?"

"Not really, but we did promise that new girl from ABC that she would get to ask the last question. We'll have to make that up to her some way."

"Call her in. We'll let her ask it now."

"Give her an exclusive, you mean?"

"Why not?"

President Courtland turned to an aide to extend his invitation to the newswoman, "Oh, and have her meet us at the spaceship. It should take her good half hour or better to get to Bolling. That should give us a chance to relax a bit first. This will probably be the last chance we have before Congress convenes in the morning. The rest of this night will be spent with various senators and congressmen. I fear you'll be sick and tired of giving spaceship tours by morning."

"Well, I can always let Bunky do that," B-Hob replied. "Maybe it will keep him from his latest fascination."

"What's that?"

"He fancies himself a financial genius. Before we came here tonight he told us he intended to invest the money he made from the trip to Australia."

"What would he do with the money?"

"I haven't the foggiest. As far as I can tell, he sees it as an exercise in applied mathematics. He claims that while he was up on the Moon he didn't have much else to do but observe Earth through television and radio and he claims that he's caught on to some sort of system by which he can amass a fortune in short order."

"There are professional gamblers who claim they can do the same thing at a casino," Larry put in.

"Well, I figure," B-Hob replied, "that he'll either be busted by morning or my income tax bill this year will pay off the national debt."

"Using Bunky as a guide may be an excellent idea at that," the President said thoughtfully. "He's clearly a product of a technologically advanced civilization and might impress the men and women of Congress."

"If they didn't suspect he was really some joker speaking to them via intercom," Larry pointed out.

"On the other hand," Karen added, "He could help out anyway. We'll let him take each group for a quick spin around the world. He can narrate the entire trip and make it like a Disneyworld ride."

"Sounds good," President Courtland agreed, "but we're expecting over two hundred tonight, maybe more, and you can't get more than maybe ten people in that small ship at a time. It would take more than one night to give them all a free trip to space."

"We don't have to take them into space," Larry said quietly.

"What do you mean, hon?" Karen asked.

"What is it about outer space that fascinates everybody?" Larry asked. "It's free-fall. Zero gravity as it is sometimes mistakenly called. B-Hob, can Bunky counter Earth's gravity to create a free-fall environment inside the ship?"

"Of course," B-Hob replied. "The device has to counter an acceleration of more than three hundred gees if it's to be of any real use."

"There!" Larry said triumphantly. "We'll just give a taste of bumping their heads against the ceiling and they'll be convinced of the ship's authenticity. Even if they don't believe Bunky's for real."

"I don't believe Bunky's for real myself," B-Hob pointed out. The President's limousine was waiting outside for the four of them for their trip across the river to Bolling Air Force Base. As the stately black automobile pulled out, along with its escort of Secret Service cars, into the carefully cleared streets of the nation's capitol, one of several phones rang.

Courtland answered the phone, "Yes? They have? Good!" Aside from an isolated monosyllable here and there, he was silent for several minutes after that. "E.T.A? Hmm, well, keep an eye on it and let me know when the situation develops some more." He put the phone back on its cradle and turned to B-Hob and the Hunters. "It seems that you are the central focus of everything coming down today," he told them.

"Are you surprised?" Larry asked. "How many certifiable extraterrestrials cross your desk every day?"

"Point taken. Well, our wayward Air Force officers showed up in Alice Springs and were promptly taken into custody. They will probably be enjoying the hospitality of the Australian government for a few days before we can clear the red tape and when they get back, they'll be spend a good deal of their time for the foreseeable future in preparing the case for their defense."

"Court-martial?" Karen asked.

"What else? Actually, I expect that the whole thing will be hushed up and the two men will be quietly and forcibly retired. Even that will take a few weeks, but in any case we are well rid of them. The other bit of news, however, is a bit more immediate. Another spaceship has entered the solar system and is calling ahead for landing clearance."

"That's very considerate," B-Hob commented, "considering that no one else has asked for clearance so far."

"I was wondering about that," the President said, implying the question.

"Well, it is standard procedure before landing on a populated planet with sufficient technological ability to receive and understand such a signal. I don't know what excuse the others have but I wanted to land undetected so I could conduct my research on a totally pristine culture. I think the missionaries wanted to come in quietly and prepare people for their true natures before revealing themselves. Why the merchants didn't call first is beyond me, but I've never been involved with either sort of activity so what their real reasoning was I can only guess. I suspect that now that we've signed the treaty, any subsequent vessels to your world will call before landing, and if they don't, feel free to prosecute them according to your own

laws. The Commonwealth will support any reasonable punishments."

"What's considered reasonable?"

"Good question," B-Hob admitted. "Bunky has the full set of Commonwealth laws somewhere in his data banks. Just tell him what computer to copy the file to. However, I don't have a copy of all the judicial precedents which would be more to the point. I'm afraid you'll have to wait until an ambassador can advise you on the severe cases, but from what I've seen here, I don't think your punishments would be considered unreasonable."

"Well, I guess we'll have to wait. Now what about this in-coming ship?"

"What about it? You'd know better than I would about where you're best prepared to let it land," B-Hob replied.

"That isn't the problem. We decided to use Edwards Air Force Base as a temporary government spaceport until we have enough regular traffic to build a special facility. Commercial international airports may be able to handle non-governmental space traffic."

"That's going to put a crimp on NASA isn't it?" Larry asked.

"Well, there have been all sorts of speculation on what this will do to NASA. Tell me, will we be able to buy spaceships from your Commonwealth?"

"From the manufacturers and dealers you can. I don't think the Commonwealth sells ships directly."

"Good enough, but we're getting off the subject. Who or what is this 'Voice of Wrom'?" Courtland asked.

"Is that who's coming?" B-Hob asked, shocked. The President nodded. "She hasn't left Wromiszh in years. I had Bunky send her a copy of the 'Word of Wrom' as it is being distributed on Earth, but I didn't expect her to come here personally. Are you sure she didn't just send an investigative committee to act in her name?"

"The message was very clear that the 'Voice of Wrom Tallana' requested permission to land," President Courtland replied.

"Wrom bless! I had no idea. I guess she wants to investigate the matter personally."

"She?" the President asked.

"Yes, the 'Voice of Wrom' is female this cycle. Her successor will either be male or some other sex - male most likely."

"What is her status within your Confederation?"

"She's the head of the Church of Wrom, the principal religion of the Commonwealth," B-Hob replied. "I guess her status would be roughly equivalent to the Pope except that she also has a seat in the Commonwealth General Assembly, our Congress."

"Then I suppose I ought to meet her when she lands in two days," the President mused. "Looks like I'm

going to have to get used to sleeping on *Air Force One* , because that may be the only place I have the time for a while."

Twenty-four

In the Commonwealth, religion, in the form of the Church of Wrom, praises the virtues of a good businessman, while on Earth many religions have made a good business out of praising virtue.

from "Chapter 11; Organized Religion"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

Voice of Wrom Tallana wasn't old in spite of the fact that her advanced age would have qualified her for a senior citizen's discount in any country on Earth. Rather, she had aged in the same manner as a fine wine, trading her youthful comeliness for a mature beauty that transcended the aesthetic standards of most cultures.

The Voices of Wrom were not elected by a College of Cardinals nor were they born to that position. When a holder of the office dies it is believed that Wrom himself selects the most appropriate successor from the available living people. There are no sudden bursts of light, portentous signs, nor other overt changes to herald the investment of the office, merely the inner knowledge on the part of the new Voice that he or she now speaks for Wrom. The new Voice then presents himself to the Church elders and begins his tenure in office.

Extensive testing is rarely necessary, for new Voices often glow from an intense inner serenity that is nearly impossible to fake, but should a test be required, only a true Voice of Wrom can invoke the pure cleansing Light of Wrom, an interesting phenomenon that has never been adequately explained but is a pure white light that seems to appear sourcelessly at the command of the Voice of Wrom. Early Voices treated it like a minor temple miracle, but in time it became obvious that it was impossible for a subject to lie when the Light was directed on him.

Tallana had been invested as the Voice of Wrom twenty-four years earlier and had spent much of her first decade in office traveling throughout the Commonwealth. This made her very popular among the followers of Wrom, but it also gave the Church elders an unprecedentedly free hand to run the Church as they saw fit while she was out touring. On her return from a three-year trip, she discovered that in her absence the elders had decided to capitalize on the successful sales of the "Word of Wrom" by publishing a sequel, the "Word of Wrom Part II".

"I believe it is time we got some new Church elders," Voice of Wrom Tallana was heard to say on learning of history's first holy sequel. Canceling the release date was easy, but the book was only the final outcome of a long series of changes the elders had instituted over the ten-year period.

Wise enough to realize that a sudden switch back would only embarrass the Church and decrease its

influence, Tallana gathered her own group of advisors and together they began the slow return toward more rational policies. Five years later none of the original elders were left in office and the Church was finally running the way Tallana wanted it. Her only problem was that she had become aware of just how important it was for her to stay on Wromiszh to govern the Church so she only left that world on rare occasions.

She still preferred to visit throughout the Commonwealth but such trips were now restricted to a few carefully planned and limited tours and the last such was five years ago. The next wasn't supposed to be for another year, but she told herself that this was an emergency.

"Should I have come personally?" she said quietly to herself as she sat near a view port as her personal ship passed Saturn.

"Excuse me?" her husband K-Harl Tallana asked, looking up from his book.

"Just wondering why I chose to come out here to the frontier, dear."

"You mean being the first Voice to visit the frontier wasn't enough? My, we have mellowed with the years!" K-Harl's soft laughter took the potential sting out of his words. Tallana's early years as the Voice of Wrom was a running joke between them. "You had to come, you know that."

"I could have sent an investigative committee. That's what I've done for ten years now."

"This is different," K-Harl insisted. "There has never been a claimant to your office while it was still occupied in all of history. You had to investigate this one personally."

"We've had false claimants before," Tallana pointed out.

"But never while the office was occupied."

"Hey, Mom!" they heard the voice of their son D-Hon from the doorway. D-Hon Tallana was in his early teens, the second youngest of five children. "Have you seen this planet we're passing?"

"Pretty," his younger sister, Thanna, agreed. Tallana and K-Harl paused to see what their children were talking about. Tallana always felt that she was neglecting her children in favor of her religious office, although they never felt that way, so she had brought her two youngest with her on this trip. The other three were old enough to no longer live with their parents.

"Yes, Thanna," Tallana said as she hugged her youngest, "it is pretty."

"Ringed planets are fairly common," K-Harl commented, "but I've never actually seen such a spectacular one. These might be as elaborate as the rings around Gorntad VI. I've only seen pictures of them, however." They sat there admiring the rings around the now receding planet until a young rating, a crew member on the ship, entered their quarters.

"Your Holiness," he began respectfully, "we have just intercepted a broadcast from our destination planet. It's the official claim by the discoverer of the planet."

"It's a bit overdue, but it seems routine enough," the Voice of Wrom replied, wondering why he was bringing her this news.

"The Captain felt it was very unusual, holiness. This B-Hob Kharma is not claiming any of the resources of the planet, just using the claim to file a treaty with the indigenes. Captain thought you might want a copy of the treaty."

"Thank you," she replied, accepting the copy. "This is unusual. What sort of a merchant wouldn't at least put in some sort of percentage for himself? This document leaves the entire planet open for anyone and everyone to just come on in and make deals without paying him any sort of commission or royalty."

"He isn't a merchant, dear," K-Harl reminded her. "Remember?"

"I keep forgetting," she admitted. "This is probably the first inhabited world in the past century to be found by someone neither a merchant nor a missionary."

"This treaty is still pending ratification," K-Harl noticed. "I wonder why he didn't wait a little longer."

"I suppose we can ask him in a few hours," Tallana replied. "Do we have final clearance to land?"

"Yes, Holiness," the rating told her before excusing himself from their cabin.

"I wonder if I should change," Tallana said unaware of saying it out loud.

"Perhaps something a little more impressive than a blouse and slacks, dear," K-Harl suggested.

"Well, yes, but I meant changing my appearance to look like one of the locals on this planet, like our missionaries do."

While K-Harl thought about that, Thanna said, "Ooo, yes! It'll be like a costume party!" Her brother just sat shaking his head.

"No," K-Harl said at last, "I think it would be best for you to appear as you are. I see it this way; our missionaries change in order to get new people accustomed to the concept of aliens who look different but are people just the same. Once they have succeeded, they usually restore their natural appearances. In our case, however, the people of this planet know we're alien to their planet and they're expecting us to look different."

"All right," Tallana agreed to her son's relief and her daughter's dismay, "we go down as we are."

"Deported!" Captain Womma moaned. "Exiled. Banished. Never in my life have I ever been kicked off a planet." The *Prince of Zaringia* was preparing to leave its reserved landing area in the Osaka facilities of MEC.

"We are only banished from this small collection of islands, S-Tev," First Mate Fertha told him.

"But we have a five year exclusive contract with MEC. We can't deal with anyone else until that's up."

"Isn't there some system for appeal?" Fertha asked.

"For illegal aliens? I doubt it. MEC is looking into it, they have as much to lose as we do, but I doubt they'll be able to accomplish much before we have to lift in a half hour."

"What about meeting MEC in some other country?"

"We might have to do that, but it will add to the expenses and we'll still have a whole bunch of local taxes to deal with, something we were blissfully ignorant of until now. With all these additional complications, I figure we'll be making ten percent less than our usual mark-up."

"It's still a profit, though, isn't it?" Fertha pointed out.

"Yes, but not much of one."

"Beats the hell out of the alternative," Fertha told him.

"But it isn't enough of a profit for the bosses to authorize another trip out here. We'll be leaving this planet ripe to anyone who just comes along. Did you see the treaty? It leaves the whole damned planet in the public domain and while the limitations of our claim might have gone unnoticed by the competition, you can be sure that this won't. The bloody thing is totally unprecedented. Damned college kids!"

"Captain Womma," an intercom voice announced, "there is a party of three representatives from MEC at the main airlock requesting permission to board."

"Let them in and send them on up here," Womma replied. He turned to Fertha, "Permission to board? They've never put it quite that way before."

"I never did get all their formalities down," Fertha replied. "Maybe this is part of some ceremony." The three business-suited gentlemen entered the captain's day room a few minutes later carrying not only their usual briefcases but each one also had a piece of expensive-looking black leather luggage. Captain Womma recognized the three men.

"Ah, gentlemen," the captain said eyeing the luggage while rising to greet them, "somehow I get the feeling that you didn't just stop in to wish us a fond farewell."

"You are correct, Captain," one of the men replied. "We wish to purchase passage for ourselves to your company's headquarters."

"I'll be glad to sell you the tickets as it were," S-Tev Womma replied, "but the way things stand here, the return trip may be more expensive than the outward bound one."

"I do not understand."

"Well, it's like this. We're heading back to headquarters anyway, so passage is at our standard rates. But with having to deal with you in a country we're allowed to land in and with all the taxes we'll have to pay in the future if we continue to deal here, our bosses may decide to write your world off. If that's the case, you may have to charter a ship in order to get back, and that costs a lot more than three luxury berths on a commercial trader."

"Ah, I understand now. That is a risk we are prepared to take. I believe MEC, Inc. could afford to hire

a ship to get us back if our negotiations on your world fall through."

Captain Womma raised an eyebrow, "May I ask what you're negotiating for now?"

"I'm sorry, captain, but that is something we can only discuss with the principals of Zaringia, Ltd. at this time."

The Voice of Wrom stood for a moment at the top of the ramp, framed in the hatchway with her husband and tried to understand the strange reception she found awaiting her on ground level.

To either side of a long red carpet that had been hastily rolled out the foot of the ramp stood several uniformed and armed men. Weapons to greet a foreign dignitary? Strange. To one side of the far end of the carpet stood another group of uniformed men playing what had to be this world's equivalent of musical instruments. Across the carpet from the band, were a small group of people who Tallana at first thought might be spectators. However on second thought, she correctly decided that the primitive cameras and other electronic equipment they were using indicated that they must be reporters for this world's various news media.

Finally, just beyond the end of the carpet stood a group of people who seemed to be waiting for her to approach them. Most of them were also wearing a form of uniform but one far different from those worn by the others. Tallana recalled, from her briefing, that these men were wearing what were called suits on this world, used for business and semi-formal social occasions. Among the obvious group of delegates, were three others. One was the only female in the group. She was arm in arm with one of the only two men who wasn't dressed in a suit. The other man had to be the B-Hob Kharma whose discovery of this world had precipitated this situation. He appeared to be as human as the rest, but he was wearing that style of garb currently popular among university students - tunic in clashing bright colored patterns and heavy blue trousers.

"Show time," K-Harl whispered to her through unmoving lips.

"Should we smile," Tallana asked in the same manner as they commenced a formal stroll down the ramp, "or would that be taken as threat behavior?"

"Give it a try," K-Harl suggested. "They're holding themselves so stiffly and looking so solemn, they have got to be consciously suppressing some sort of natural behavior." Voice of Wrom Tallana flashed them a smile and found it quickly returned. "There, you see? Now they're a bit more relaxed."

"How can you tell? They might just be countering one threat with another."

"Two things. First, it's all in the body language."

"I never did have your knack for reading body language; you know that. What's your other indicator?"

"See the one there in student garb?"

"Yes, I thought he must be the one who's staking the claim here."

"Agreed. He's been studying these people for months now. If your smile had been a social blunder, his reaction would likely have indicated the error, but instead he seems a bit more comfortable too. You're on, love. Don't forget to use their language."

One thing Tallana had learned after all her years as the Voice of Wrom was how to behave regally. Although she had been born to a lower middle-class family on an unimportant planet, she could conduct herself, when the situation warranted, like a queen. With well studied serenity she and her husband walked between the armed men as though they hadn't noticed them.

"Your Holiness," B-Hob stepped forward to greet her. He introduced himself and then the President and his staff and finally introduced the Hunters.

President Courtland made a speech that lasted several minutes but when translated, boiled down to "Hi! Welcome to Earth." Voice of Wrom Tallana was used to this sort of behavior on the part of politicians. It seemed to be one of the few nearly universal facts. She patiently waited the man out.

While the President was talking Thanna had come wandering out of the large spaceship unnoticed by her parents. Both of the children had been told to stay on board, but Thanna's curiosity overcame her, she just had to know what was going on. D-Hon was supposed to watch his younger sister but he had quickly become engrossed in a local television broadcast of the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles". Thanna was about halfway down the ramp before he realized that she had wandered out of the spaceship. D-Hon performed an heroic if unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his sister and get back to the ship before their mother noticed they had disobeyed her, but just as D-Hon reached the foot of the ramp, he tripped on the edge of the carpet and fell flat on his face between the parallel lines of warriors. This might have gone unnoticed, but just then the armed soldiers started firing a twenty gun salute. Thanna screamed in fright and ran the rest of the way into her mother's comforting arms.

With no loss of dignity, Tallana held her daughter and signalled her son forward and when the salute was ended introduced them as though this had been part of her plans all along. The President smiled and greeted the two children solemnly. Finally, with the welcoming ceremony over, the President led the way to a small fleet of limousines which brought the party to a building where they could talk privately.

"Yes, Mr. President," the Voice of Wrom assured him, "as far as the Commonwealth is concerned the treaty you signed with B-Hob Kharma is perfectly legal and binding, as far as it goes."

"Where doesn't it go, Your Holiness?" Courtland asked. The President and the chief cleric from the stars were sitting in comfortable leather chairs facing each other obliquely, each with a small table next to them. The Secretary of State sat next to the President on his right and K-Harl Tallana sat on his wife's left side. With all the passing back and forth of papers, an uninformed observer might conclude that the blue skinned alien couple were sitting in their living room listening to a pair of insurance salesmen.

"Let's start with where it does go," Tallana replied calmly. "By signing that document, Mr. Kharma has essentially renounced all financial claims that he might have had on this world."

"What sort of claims?" the President asked.

"Had he retained his rights, he could have extracted a reasonable royalty or flat fee, that's negotiable, from any company wishing to do business here on Earth or within your solar system."

"That sounds like a lot of money," Courtland replied. "Why would he give that up?"

Tallana shrugged. "Maybe he wasn't aware of his financial rights."

"More likely it slipped his mind," K-Harl disagreed. "He's a graduate student working on his thesis. The publication of a paper on a previously undiscovered culture will pretty much guarantee his success."

"There is that," Tallana nodded. "He may also not have realized just how much money he had coming to him."

"An entire planet?" the President asked. "How could that not be a fortune?"

"Very easily. Normally a new world isn't discovered by a single explorer. In fact the odds against being able to do so are so high that I'm surprised he tried at all."

"I doubt he realized just how difficult it would be," K-Harl said.

"Maybe. In any case, a new world is normally discovered by a large highly trained team of explorers who are either being financed by a parent company, a syndicate of businessmen or in some cases by the Church of Wrom; we do have missionaries after all. With such a large number of people to split the money up, the individual shares tend to represent a living, but not a large fortune. To anyone not involved in such a life it seems adventurous and romantic, but the reality falls far short of the dream. So, he might not have realized just how much he could have had as the sole discoverer of Earth."

"Where else does the treaty go?" the President asked, bringing them back to the subject.

"All the obvious places," Tallana replied. "Members of the Commonwealth are required to enter your borders legally. Failure to do that subjects them to punishment; first by your courts and then, after they've made good here, by ours. Our laws are very strict regarding treaty breakers."

"That brings us to where it doesn't go," Tallana continued. "While you have agreed to meet with official representatives of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth is by no means required to send a diplomatic mission." The President stiffened a bit at that and Tallana continued on quickly. "It's a matter of politics, you see. I'm all for contact with any new people we can find, the benefits nearly always outweigh the expenditures, but I only have one vote in the Assembly, and there are always the people who think we're spending too much money on primitive cultures, if you'll excuse the expression."

The President nodded, he understood politics. "But," he asked, "what are the chances of receiving an emissary?"

"Probably fairly good," the Voice of Wrom replied, "but I didn't want you to think we were required to establish an embassy here. The real problem as I see it is that you have so many different nations here. This is truly an unique situation, something the average politician will not be able to comprehend. The Commonwealth, you see, deals with world governments. Your national governments will seem very local to us. We would probably be quite willing to deal with your United Nations, however, should they sign the treaty."

"The U.N. isn't really a world government," Courtland replied. "It's more a common meeting ground for many of our nations, at least in practice anyway. It has very little enforcement ability."

"Well, I'm sure we could work something out if a sufficient number of its member-nations were to sign

the treaty. You must understand that this is beyond my authority to make any promises about. I'm actually here to investigate the Church of Wrom activities on Earth."

"Ah, yes," the President replied. "We have had one of our best people investigating them. He should be here after lunch."

After the mid-day meal the President and his staff excused themselves and flew back to Washington to work on congressional acceptance of the treaty. Congress was still waffling over whether to sign and a filibuster was threatened. Meanwhile the members of the U.N. were awaiting the outcome of that vote. President Courtland made sure that Tallana realized just how much her own activities might decide the issue before he left.

Tallana and K-Harl sent their children off on a tour of the base and sat down to talk to B-Hob and the Hunters.

B-Hob had just finished explaining his reasoning behind how he negotiated the treaty and was showing Tallana the copy of the Word of Wrom that he had picked up from the Wrommie at Logan when an amazingly average-looking man entered the room and introduced himself as Prescott Daniels of the CIA.

Daniels hadn't had much sleep lately and he looked it. His jacket looked like something the Salvation Army had turned down but at least it had the dubious virtue of matching his shoes and trousers. He wore no tie and his hunting-plaid shirt was as torn as the jacket he removed as he sat down.

"Please excuse the way I look, Ma'am," he said, "I had to leave in a hurry to come here and almost didn't get away at all, but I'll get to that shortly." Then he got his first clear look at B-Hob. "You!" he snarled reflexively. B-Hob still hadn't had the time to restore his original appearance and still resembled Elvis Presley in black matte glasses. It was obvious who he was. Daniels had not really liked Hedgehog, no one did, but he was a comrade and the Company takes care of its own and he held B-Hob responsible for Hedgehog's death. Then Daniels remembered just how well the Company had taken care of him these last few years. Besides, he was too much the professional to hold a grudge after an official policy change. Orders were now to assist these people, and assist them he would. It wasn't the first time that yesterday's enemies were today's staunch allies, and tomorrow? Well, we would just have to see about tomorrow.

"Do I know you?" B-Hob asked, surprised by Daniels' reaction to him.

"No. I hope not anyway. But I've been doing my best to find you since you got here," Daniels replied, getting his emotions back under control. Let someone else avenge Hedgehog. "One question, however, if you don't mind. Why on Earth did you decide to land in Hingham?"

"I didn't," B-Hob replied smoothly. "I landed in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. That's where I met my friends here. They live in Hingham."

"I see," Daniels nodded. "Nobody would pay much attention to strange lights in the sky during Mardi Gras. Very clever." B-Hob refrained from admitting he was just lucky and Daniels then turned to face Tallana and her husband. "Ma'am, I understand you want to know about the Church of Wrom headquarters?"

"Those here on Earth," the Voice of Wrom replied, "yes. I want to know whatever you can tell me about them and the man who claims that he is the Voice of Wrom."

"I just came from there. I think he was prepared for something to go wrong with his set-up and his plans were most impressive. I wouldn't have thought that a man with his background could have done such a good job of organization or that he would have been able to do what he did with that building of his."

James Dudley Lever, Daniels had been surprised, was apparently not an alias. It was his real name. His academic records showed that he had dropped out of high school at the age of eighteen just one month prior to graduation after an indifferent academic career, although he did show up in detention more often than any two others in his class, an all-time record. He was quickly drafted and shipped off to Vietnam after only two times through Marine boot camp. Even in 'Nam he spent more time in the stockade than on duty. That probably saved the life of Private Lever; he was behind bars when his company took heavy losses one day in the Mekong Delta. At the end of his two-year enlistment he had made it to PFC three times and corporal once before getting busted back to private each time. He was encouraged not to re-enlist. The Marines were looking for a few good men, if only to make up for having had to deal with him for all that time.

After his less than sterling career in the military, Lever drifted up and down the coast from Seattle to Tijuana and eventually ended up in San Francisco shortly before the Reverend S-Tan Quoree arrived. Lever came to the mission for a free meal that was well worth the sermon he had to listen to in order to earn it and stayed the next day when he found there was a chance to make a few bucks as well. What Daniels found amazing was what Lever did with the movement after he took over.

"I found it fairly easy to infiltrate the place," Daniels told them. "I just walked in for a free meal one night. I must admit that it was pretty good food too. Nothing fancy or gourmet, but much better than I'd expected. The hardest part was to get a job washing dishes after dinner, the competition for the job was rough, but there were other jobs for those who wanted them. I spent the next few days washing dishes and sweeping floors when I wasn't attending various classes on financial investment programs. Very strange. They have guidance counselors to help with investments even though the church tithes some twenty-five percent of one's earnings."

"What?" Tallana asked with some heat. "The church has never tithed. Members donate freely!"

"That's what some of the long-time members there told me."

"Long-time?" the Voice of Wrom asked. "How long ago did they join?"

"Only a few months ago, ma'am," Daniels replied, "but they think of themselves as long-time members if they joined before Lever became the head of the cult."

"What else can you tell us, Mr. Daniels?" K-Harl asked.

"Well as soon as you landed, he began turning that place into a fortress. He had to have started in on that from the moment he took over the cult. All the outside walls were reinforced and the doors were replaced with steel reinforced ones. Trust me, that man is ready for a war there. After a few days, I got to clean inside the main offices of the cult. This was a step up, believe it or not, as they have to trust you before they'll let you work in what some of the disgruntled members, once again those who have been there the longest, call the 'big house'. While mopping the floors, I had a chance to look around. He's been stocking up on freeze-dried food, and there's a small radio station there as well."

"What would he want with a radio station?" Karen asked.

"He has been making a weekly world-wide broadcast to help spread the word. When that new station

goes on line, he can save a lot of broadcast fees by feeding it directly to a satellite from which it can be picked up by any station on his network. Rumor has it that he is planning to go into TV as well. For a man who until recently was the stereotypical loser, he sure seems to know what he is doing, and he certainly understands the media. Even as I left Frisco, he granted a press conference. You heard about that, I'm sure."

"No," Tallana replied, "we've been busy and missed it."

"Well, for starters, he made a very believable claim that your landing was a hoax and that you are an imposter. He called upon his followers across the world to denounce you and has requested that you be arrested. That last isn't likely to happen, but we could have problems with the Wrommies."

"Wrommies?" Tallana wrinkled her nose at the term.

"That is what the press is calling them, ma'am," Daniels replied.

"All right, Mr. Daniels. I'm going to need to know more, much more, but I think I have a general idea of how to proceed. I need to hold a press conference of my own to rebut his accusations. Can you set that up? Good, and I'll want a full recording of what he said in his press conference."

"I have that with me," Daniels replied. "Do you want to meet the press here?"

"No, Mr. Daniels, in San Francisco, because after I talk to the press, I'm going to want to have a discussion with this J-Hames Lever. If he's lucky, he might even survive the experience."

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but it sure sounds strange hearing a cleric talk like that," Daniels commented.

"Why, Mr. Daniels," K-Harl replied with a very cold smile, "where did you ever get the idea that religion went hand in hand with pacifism?"

Twenty-five

Denial is a curious phenomenon on the cultural level. Nearly every culture has a blind spot concerning itself in some way. Every first year student learns about the Talamis of Mexanis II who were so optimistic that they refused to recognize anything that might not be for their own benefit. Then came the years of the Great Famine during which the only crop they could get to grow in any profusion was a root crop that was so lacking in nutrients that one actually consumes twice as many calories in eating it as it contains. As a result they were quite bewildered when they suddenly died of malnutrition some three years later.

Actually most cultures have this very same problem to one degree or another. The Humans, like the members of the Commonwealth, will usually find a way to deny any form of negative economic growth. At first such periods were called crashes. Later they were called depressions, because being depressed didn't seem quite so bad as opposed to having crashed. Still later the same phenomenon was called a recession, which sounded better than a depression. After that other terms were invented, such as "economic adjustment phase" to side-step the negative feelings such terms as depression and recession generated. The Humans are a bit behind us so they have not yet achieved a state of "temporary economic

pause before the real growth phase" as we have.

The Humans have another blind spot that they treat similarly. It concerns war. After two global wars within the last century, they are so horrified by the prospect, that they have begun to come to grips with the concept in the same way they deal with their economy.

Strangely, the Humans believe that you can't have a war unless you declare it, so instead they have police actions, operations, occupations, and temporary positive growth of armed tourism...

from "Chapter 10; Human Philosophy"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

"I don't see how this building didn't come down during the quake of '89," commented one of San Francisco's finest. Even as the Voice of Wrom began her press conference, the police were mobilizing to start what the newsies were calling the Siege of San Francisco, as if the entire city were under siege rather than a single red brick building that looked as though it might fall down in a light breeze.

"It did, Mike," his partner told him. "See that entire wing on the right. They did a clever job of making it blend in, but you can see that the mortar between the bricks is much newer than on the rest of the building." The siege had been in place for five days now. When the Wrommies had refused to come out at the very beginning, the Mayor, recalling Lever's press conference and his demands and instructions to the Wrommies, had taken no chances and requested assistance from the National Guard.

The Guard had arrived with a pair of tanks and other pieces of heavy artillery which were now arranged on all sides of the city block that was mostly taken up by the World Headquarters of the Church of Wrom. Other buildings on the block had been evacuated early on and absolutely no traffic was allowed within a two-block radius. Even the reporters were being kept at least a block back, although one had nearly been shot on day three when she tried to sneak up to the Church of Wrom for an exclusive interview. The tension was really heightened when a few fanatic Wrommies took it on themselves to toss some Molotov cocktails from the roof of the building at the people below.

Inside the renovated building, the Reverend James Lever was going through a wide range of emotions all of which were feeding his natural paranoia. He hadn't expected the extent of the city's reaction to this person who claimed to be the real Voice of Wrom. He thought he had made the title up himself and he still believed that whoever this blue person was, she was obviously a liar and a fraud. There could only be one reason why everyone from the President on down seemed to believe her story over his. He was the biggest threat to their own power. Yes that was it. They were just using this imposter as an excuse to get him.

Since the start, he had been doing his best to keep the morale up inside the headquarters building and at first it was high. He gave talks, lectures, and sermons about how they were the forces of good out against the darkness. Those of his followers who were present actually cheered his every sentence, but then things started going wrong. He had stocked up the building's fallout shelter with enough food for six months for the two hundred-odd people who were trapped inside with him, but he hadn't expected that his water, gas, and electricity would be turned off as soon as they had been. They had only managed to save up a week's worth of water before the flow stopped late on day one and, with neither gas nor

electricity, they were eating rations from the fallout shelter for breakfast the next morning. He had made arrangements for catching rain water, but so far there had only been a few sprinkles. Morale plummeted a bit more each meal except for dinner on day three when the cooks had managed to barbecue the rapidly defrosting beef in the large fireplace in the social hall.

He really should have watched his mouth; he knew that now. Yesterday he muttered something about their besiegers being condemned to eternal flames and five of his fanatical inner council had taken it for a divine command. He gunned them down with his Uzi himself just an hour ago. Since then he had been alternately talking to his flock and watching the people outside, ready for an assault. It was all over and he knew it, but he wouldn't go down alone.

He had the two surviving members of his inner council prepare a special beverage; poisoned fruit juice, enough for everyone in the mission. He got the idea from Josephus' account of the siege of Masada back in the first century. Gathering all his people together he began to talk to them one last time even as the battering ram began knocking on the reinforced front door.

"My children," he began in his most compelling voice, "the end is near, dear Wrom, the end is near. The godless enemy is outside, battering our door with the sheer force of his power. We're being tested, my children, tested. Wrom himself has told me this. Praise Wrom!" He was echoed by the people around him, the dregs of society who had been lost and somehow found themselves again here in the Church of Wrom. "But there is one way, my children, one way only that we may defeat the enemy and that is to deny him his victory. Wrom has shown me the way, praise Wrom!"

"You know, my children, what they will do to us if they capture us, don't you? They will do what they always have. They will beat us, torture us, and after a few trials, they will secretly kill us. You know it is true."

Did they? A low murmur spread through the room, but most of them had been mistreated at one point or another, by cops who found they could get away with it and by each other before they found a sense of family in Wrom's name. Had anyone ever really been killed? There were always stories about cruel and sadistic cops and prison guards, how they had supposedly killed someone for giving them trouble. A few were unconvinced but willing to believe, and the rest were nodding in time as Lever kept them mesmerized.

"But we can escape them, my children. Yes, we can. We can. Wrom has told me. He has shown me the way. Here in this pot, a special drink - Wrom's kiss. His gift to us; our way to glory. Drink this and we will join with Wrom in Heaven. We will all go to meet him together. Drink the juice, my children, drink the juice. Help the little ones and drink for yourselves and we will be the specially blessed of Wrom."

Lever went on like that, repeating himself constantly in the silver-plated tones he used so well. Then, at last, a tall, young black woman was the first to step up to the thirty gallon aluminum pot in which the poison-laced juice waited. She picked up the stainless steel ladle and filled a Styrofoam cup with the lethal fluid. But as she lifted the cup to her lips something inside her snapped and Lever's spell was broken.

"Say what?" She spat the words out. She paused a moment and stared at James Dudley Lever who was still talking as though reciting an incantation. Then with a pair of matched motions she threw the poisoned drink into Lever's face and leapt forward with a drawn switchblade that seemed to materialize in her hand. In a flash, before anyone could move, she was behind him with the razor-sharp blade pressed against his throat. "What you talkin' 'bout, preacherman? I been arrested before lots o' times. Dey ain't gonna kill us. Shake us about a bit if we try ta resist. An' if dey hold us for any amount o' time, dey'll have

ta feed us real food and give us fresh water better than dis slop you been givin' us dese last few days. Dey want you, not us. An' you want us to kill ourselves? Well, fuck you! Now get out of dat chair real slow an' careful. We're goin' for a walk."

Lever got up carefully and together, they started carefully toward the barricaded door. Suddenly there was a loud crashing sound as the ram finally slammed the door off its hinges. The woman with the knife flinched and Lever jammed his elbow back, knocking the wind out of her. Then he tried to squirm out of her grasp but he misjudged her reaction to pain. Instead of dropping the knife she held on all that much harder and as he tried to twist away he succeeded only in slicing his own jugular vein. He was dead in a pool of slippery dark red blood before the paramedics could get to him.

The Reverend S-Tan Quoree and the members of his mission were found almost by accident an hour later as police searched the building. Soon after S-Tan Quoree and company were imprisoned in the basement of the mission, Lever transferred the three people who had helped him in their capture to other parts of the world, making them regional "Sub-voices" in reward and proceeded to bring them their food each day himself. Nobody else had any idea that they were there. Because he occasionally skipped a day or two, the prisoners had taken to hoarding left-over food and water to be used when Lever forgot to feed them. As a result they weren't quite dead after five days without any further deliveries of food and water, but they weren't very healthy either.

Voice of Wrom Tallana stepped in immediately and started turning the mission back around to its original intent. This wasn't as hard as she had expected since Lever had actually twisted the Church's message very subtly and the surviving converts only had a few minor changes to adapt to and those were mostly to their benefit. The members who had joined before Lever took over also helped out; Tallana's changes were back to what they remembered under the Reverend Stan.

The biggest problem, however, involved not the headquarters building but the Wrommies all over the world. Tallana had to send most of the San Francisco people out to the larger regional chapters to spread the word of change. At Larry's suggestion, they were equipped with a load of hastily reprogrammed electronic copies of the Word of Wrom, similar to B-Hob's copy but in English. He and K-Harl agreed that they had a better chance of recalling Lever's twisted copies if they could be traded in for the high-tech versions that came equipped with a built-in calculator, a personal financial record book, and a one-thousand-page electronic memo-pad.

By the time Reverend S-Tan Quoree had recovered enough for Tallana to turn the mission on Earth back over to him, however, most of her reforms had either been instituted or were rapidly gaining acceptance.

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The Prince of Zaringia and a smaller space vessel touched down together at MEC's Osaka spaceport. The Japanese were well acquainted with the standard landing procedure by now and so the greeting party didn't drive up to the two ships until twenty-two minutes later and therefore arrived just as the airlock door was opened and the debarkation ramp extended. Captain S-Tev Womma, still in command of the Prince and still somewhat surprised to be back on Earth, stepped forward and greeted the man at the front of the reception committee.

"Matsuya-san," he said with a respectful bow, "or should I call you boss? I must say I never expected you to buy the entire company. Mr. Seiki and his staff stayed behind to supervise the transition at the Zaringia office." Now that the Prince was Japanese-owned, it was once more allowed to land in Osaka.

"Welcome back, Stev-san," Ikeda Matsuya returned the greeting with an ever so slightly less deep bow and a tight smile that only showed around his eyes. "I trust you had a pleasant journey. What is this smaller ship here for?"

"A very pleasant trip, yes, sir. This," the captain indicated the second ship, "is one of the perquisites of owning Zaringia, Ltd. - your private space yacht. There is another one on Zaringia, but your Mr. Seiki thought you would prefer a new one just off the lot. It hasn't even been named yet. Care to have a look?"

"Hmm, yes," Matsuya nodded slightly. Together they entered the waiting space yacht.

After the brief introduction to the yacht's crew and a tour of the vessel, Captain Womma sat down with Matsuya to make his official report.

"The only bad news," the captain summed up, "is that the merger alerted other companies of the limitations of our claim here on Earth. There are probably a dozen ships on their way here already. It's been over a decade since there was a totally open planet."

"That is all right, Captain," Matsuya replied. While you were away, Japan signed an international treaty with your Commonwealth. We will still have the advantage. You see, all those other ships represent foreign investors, while we are officially a native business. Besides, we are well acquainted with the complexities of doing business internationally in ways that they are not. Do not worry, we know how to handle competition."

"Yes," S-Tev Womma agreed with a predatory grin that matched Matsuya's own. "I'll bet you do."

"Looks like it's time to go now, B-Hob," Tallana noticed. "Don't forget you promised to spend the holiday season with us. I'm looking forward to meeting your fiancée."

"Yes, your Holiness," B-Hob replied.

"Tallana," she corrected him. The Voice of Wrom had been invited to Rome to confer with the Pope and she was bringing K-Harl and the children along with her. She gave him a hug before turning to the Hunters as he made his farewells to K-Harl and the children.

"And you two must come visiting soon," she told them. "I feel as if I've known you two forever. It seems odd that it's only been a few weeks. The children just adore you too."

"We feel the same way, Tallana," Karen told her, "but I fear we'll have to wait until there's regular passenger service between here and the Commonwealth."

"That may be sooner than you think. In any case, promise me that you'll try to keep in touch. The bad

part about being a spiritual leader is that I can't often find the time to make new friends. You're the first in years."

"We will," Karen promised.

"Oh, I'm so nervous," Tallana confided as she hugged Karen. "I hope you won't take offense but these primitive aircraft of yours scare me half to death. Are you certain they're safe?"

"I won't deny that there have been a few spectacular disasters," Larry told her, "but statistically it's still one of the safest ways to travel." He paused as she hugged him good-bye as well. "At least that's what the airlines keep telling us." Tallana smiled nervously.

Finally after all the farewells, the Tallanas boarded the express jet to Rome and B-Hob and the Hunters walked back up the long Dulles concourse.

"So, Bob," Karen asked, "What next?"

"Well, I think I've completed my research."

"So will you be leaving soon too?"

"Not right away," B-Hob admitted. "I'd like to stay long enough to write the first draft, that is if you're willing to put me up in the new house."

"Of course we're willing," Larry told him. "I'm surprised you had to ask. We can even park your ship in the back yard again." Karen nodded.

"Thanks," B-Hob replied. "I..."

"Mr. Robert H. Karma?" a tall muscular man in a gray suit asked, standing in their way in the middle of the ticket lobby. Looking around, the Hunters saw that several other, similarly dressed men were rapidly converging on them. B-Hob's eyes, however had fastened themselves on the conspicuous bulge under the first man's left armpit.

"Sorry," B-Hob tried, "you got the wrong man."

"Department of the Treasury, Mr. Karma," the man said, flashing a badge. B-Hob made a show of looking at it, fully realizing that he wouldn't know if it were real or not. "Come with us, please."

They were escorted into a plain black limousine with what looked like mirrored windows, but which turned out to be completely opaque so that they had no idea of where they were being taken. Much to their surprise, they found themselves outside the White House when the door next opened and the next two hours were spent in a clean, sparsely appointed room in the basement guarded by two stone-faced men in suits to match.

Karen and B-Hob attempted to play a game of boardless chess, but neither of them could remember where all their pieces were and Larry refused to get involved so the game eventually degenerated into pure fantasy with Karen calling out the Starship Enterprise (generation of your choice) to attack B-Hob's king who retaliated by conjuring up a giant elf who ate it, captain and all. Karen was about to deploy elf repellent when the President walked in.

He stood in the doorway, frowning at the laughter that erupted at him from within the room. That was hardly what he had expected after leaving them there without an explanation. Karen and B-Hob looked up and saw him scowling and into laughter anew.

"Funny," President Courtland said in his high-pitched whiney voice without a hint of humor, "I always thought I was supposed to *leave* them laughing. Ah well, when you can manage to control yourselves, we can get on with this."

B-Hob and Karen stopped in mid-laugh and were brought back to earth in the same way a drunk can suddenly find himself stone-cold sober and, with the same shot of ice water that doused their euphoria, they were left with a hollow feeling where their hearts were supposed to be and an odd indescribable taste of fear under their tongues.

"Mr. Karma," Courtland began, "after all the consideration and hospitality we have shown you, I find your recent actions most reprehensible."

"Mr. President," B-Hob protested, "What are you talking about? I've been busy helping the Voice of Wrom clean up the problem with the Wrommies."

"Not so busy, I see, as to keep you from dabbling in the stock market," the President snapped back, throwing a manila envelope into B-Hob's lap.

"Excuse me?" Karen replied, "Larry and I have been with him constantly for the last few weeks and none of us have had enough time to check on the status of our checking accounts, much less call *Merrill Lynch* ." B-Hob got the envelope open and pulled out a thick stack of green and white-barred computer paper.

"What is this?" he asked.

"That, Mr. Karma, is a complete list of all your investments since you landed here in the United States. I think the last few weeks are most interesting. You probably would have gone unnoticed but, like many before you, you got greedy. We didn't even catch on ourselves until yesterday. Tell me, Mr. Karma, what made you think you could corner the market in November wheat without anybody noticing?"

B-Hob barely heard the President's question, deep as he was in his contemplation of the printout that was spilling off his lap and across the floor. "I didn't buy or sell any of these things," he said in disbelief. "Mr. President, please believe that this is the first time I've heard of it."

"Are you trying to tell me that somebody out there just started investing money in your name? Who would do such a thing?"

With lightning intuition it all made sense as B-Hob and the Hunters shouted, "Bunky!" in three-part harmony.

"No really!" Courtland told them sternly. "It is all true."

"No," B-Hob corrected him, "I mean it must have been done by Bunky, my ship's computer. I just wish I knew why."

"Bob," Larry told him, "you know you really ought to watch a little more closely what you say to that machine."

"Why? What did I say?"

"Remember when he told you that he had just billed those two Air Force officers for their trip to Australia?" Larry prompted him.

"Let's see. He said we could make a fortune, and I said I'd... oh no!"

"Oh yes!" Karen told him. "You said you'd leave that up to him. Evidently he took you literally."

"Oops!" B-Hob said in a little voice.

"Wait a minute," Courtland said. "Do you mean to tell me that your investments were made by a computer without any other instructions from you? Is it really that intelligent?"

"Oh yeah," B-Hob replied, "and when I get home, he'll be the most intelligent pop-up toaster on Rhagma."

"Amazing! Well, that does explain two thousand counts of computer crimes," Courtland remarked.

"What computer crimes?"

"Well, if you'll look down that list you have there, you'll see that there are many documented cases of stolen computer files. Your computer broke into a lot of private and governmental systems in order to get inside information. Both the means of obtaining and the use of that information is illegal, you know."

"I didn't know, but Bunky should have known before he started in."

"Are there many such machines in the Commonwealth?"

"Fortunately not, sir. They were an experiment that didn't work out. We have much more reliable devices now."

"Didn't work out? I think what it did is amazing."

"Oh yeah? Just imagine what would happen if there were a million just like him, all capable of taking that sort of individual initiative."

"I see what you mean. I was just considering the military aspects of using such machines."

"Are you crazy? That would guarantee a major war. Bunky sees such things strictly as a matter of probability. When he felt there was an acceptable chance of conquest, he would just charge out and conquer without bothering to check the political ramifications, which could be more than you care to deal with if you're in the middle of peaceful prosperity."

"Couldn't it be programmed to take that into account?"

"Sure he could be, so then he would fail to consider the effects on the environment or anything else you forgot to think up. Bunky and the few machines left like him aren't any better than people, just a lot faster to jump in without looking."

"It sounds very human to me."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"What, Bob?" Karen asked.

"Bunky. It's as if he's alive. I had planned to shut him off when I got home. It wouldn't be right to shut off a living being, would it?"

"He always seemed alive to me. Maybe you should discuss it with him."

"Yeah. Well, Mr. President, whether he's alive or not, I'm still responsible for his actions. What sort of trouble am I in now?" It seemed to B-Hob as though he'd been asking that question all his life. This was the first time, however, that he was really accepting responsibility rather than looking for a way out.

"Well, actually you have a certain amount of diplomatic immunity; we were merely going to expel you. However, if your machine really did all that, I think I'd rather this were not made public and if you're expelled officially, the newspapers might learn why and that, I'm sure you'll agree, would not be best for relations between us and the Commonwealth. So let's make it unofficial. If you quietly leave now, we'll allow you to return sometime in the future, say a year or two from now."

"Are you sure this is all I'll need?" B-Hob asked as he and Larry lugged several heavy boxes up the ramp into the Space Devil.

"Now how could I be sure of that? You would need several libraries full of books to cover everything you'd need and this ship just isn't that big," Larry replied, "but for general knowledge, I think this copy of the Encyclopaedia Britannica should cover you as well as anything you could carry with you. Just be thankful that all your notes didn't go up with our house."

Finally the flame-painted spaceship was loaded and it was time for B-Hob to bid his friends farewell.

"Thanks guys," he said, unsuccessfully trying to be casual. "I really don't know what I would have done without you."

"Oh, you'd have managed," Karen told him confidently.

"With bright blue skin and hair? No, I don't think so. Damn! What was I thinking when I did that?"

"But," Larry pointed out, "if you came down looking human we would have probably never met."

"So I got lucky. It seems like I've always gotten lucky, maybe it's time I stopped relying on my luck."

"I wouldn't go that far, Bob," Karen said, strolling on up to him with her hands behind her back. "Just don't rely on it if you have a viable alternative."

B-Hob smiled. "What have you got behind your back?"

"Just a little going-away present," she said, handing him a brightly wrapped package. "Go ahead. Open it."

"A chess set!" B-Hob exclaimed, hugging her. "It's wonderful, thank you! But I didn't get you anything."

"Just take care of yourself, okay?" The three of them talked for a few minutes more until they started repeating themselves. At last B-Hob walked up the ramp and gave Bunky the order to lift off.

The Space Devil lifted with the same quiet hum that it had always had and a few minutes later it was clearing the atmosphere and still accelerating.

"I still say it's unfair," Bunky complained, "and I was just about to try my first hostile take-over too! You know, given five years we could have owned this planet."

"That's what they were afraid of, and what good would that have done you anyway?"

"I wanted to see if it could be done in practice as easily as in theory," Bunky sulked.

"A sense of accomplishment? You wanted to destroy a planetary economy and sabotage interstellar relationships just to see if it could be done?"

"Well, if you're going to insist on putting it that way..."

"Two thousand counts of computer theft," B-Hob recited, "and fifty counts of insider trading! Just be thankful we didn't get hit with tax evasion."

"They were stupid laws anyway. You didn't even thank me."

"For what? Getting me thrown off the planet? Gee, Bunky, thanks. Look, next time check out all the laws before you act. I'm sure you'll find that you can do just as well without breaking into the Treasury Department's files."

"Next time? You mean you'll let me do this again?"

"Why not?" B-Hob replied. "But we're going to have to set some very strict limits as to how much you can spend without getting my authorization. Who knows? Maybe we can own the Commonwealth in five years."

"By my calculations that will take twenty-seven point six two standard years if I use what I earned on Earth as starting capital."

"How long if you start with only half?" B-Hob countered.

"Forty-one point two one years. That's with nearly one hundred percent probability of success. It'll be faster if you're willing to take some risks."

"Let's talk about it."

Epilogue

When the publisher of this book requested an appendix detailing the changes in Earth culture in the twenty years since my initial study, my reaction was to tell him to just open his eyes and look around. Never before has a culture adapted to contact with the Commonwealth as quickly as did the Humans.

Their natural aptitude for dealing with politics and other bureaucracies has made Earth a leading voice in the Commonwealth, both in government and the business world. With recent Human emigration to other Commonwealth worlds, there are now more Earth people in the General Assembly than any other species. They have very cleverly taken our technology and improved upon it. Their products are on the cutting edge and in higher demand than they can keep up with and there is hardly a home in the Commonwealth that does not rely on products designed by Earthlings and/or built on Earth.

And so we are left with the question, "Are these people taking over the Commonwealth?" If so, then perhaps we ought to know them as well as we do ourselves while they are still part of us and before we become part of them.

from "The Preface to the Second Edition"

"The Humans of Earth"

by B-Hob Kharma

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