

Episode I: Abduction

Jeffery Donaldson awoke screaming. Around him was bright white light and a low hissing sound, as if several people were shushing each other at once. Around him he could make out the faint shapes of steel tables and strange surgical implements. Fear swelled up in him again and he screamed once more.

Jeff sat bolt-upright in his bed, in his room, in his home. He was alone save only for his cat Asimov. He got up and made himself a cup of tea in order to try and dispel the dream. It seemed very real to him, one of those dreams where it is hard to know if you are dreaming or not.

“Asimov, You won’t believe what I was dreaming.” The soft, slightly vibrating, coat of the cat soothed him with its purring. “Well, old friend, it is only one o’clock. Lets get back to sleep.”

Jeffery Donaldson awoke screaming. Around him was a bright white light. But this time he could make out slightly humanoid shapes. And now, the hissing sounds seemed to be words. Somehow he could make out a conversation. It was like he heard the voice and then deep in his mind it was read to him as English.

“Ahh, He’s awake.”

“Good. Deal with him. We need him briefed before we reach Laron”

“What the hell?” The light was beginning to fade, or Jeff’s eye’s were adjusting to it. Either way, there were two humanoid figures standing near the door of the small room he was in.

He was laying on a bed in what seemed to be a medical ward of some sort.

“Crazy Dream” he said to himself in an attempt to dispel the fear within him. This time though he thought he’d ride it out and find out what it was like. At the very least he’d have something to talk about at work.

“Welcome,” the one figure said as it approached. “I am called Spakael.” Spakael was about 5 foot six, not unremarkable except for the shapes and patterns on its skin and head. Totally hairless Spakael looked like he could have been any alien from *Star Trek*. This was obvious to Jeff as he was a big science fiction fan, so such a dream was only natural, once he got past the initial shock of it.

“Hi,” Jeff replied The Alien looked a bit concerned.

“Focus on my face.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Build an image of my face in your mind. See my spots, my swept back ears, my yellow eyes. Focus.”

“I don’t understand”

“Focus!”

“I Am! Ahhh” Jeff was startled to hear the same guttural sounds coming from his own mouth. He knew what he wanted to say, but something entirely different came out.

“Good. You’ve got the processor working. It wasn’t activated earlier when you woke up unexpectedly. We had to put you back down.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Are you feeling up to walking yet? The surgery sometimes makes your people drowsy.”

“I’m fine. What are you talking about?”

“Walk with me.”

Jeff got out of bed and suddenly felt as if he were naked. The alien was in a military looking uniform, but Jeff could feel nothing against his skin. He looked down to see a white robe of light, perfect fabric. A futuristic hospital gown he guessed. This was getting cool.

The alien walked towards the door, and Jeff followed curious as to where this would take him.

“When you woke up the first time we had not programmed our language into the EPROM and so you could not understand what we were saying. We put you back to sleep and told your brain that you were back at home, safe in bed.”

“WHAT? I was dreaming and...”

“Focus” Spakael interrupted. “Focus on how we look and you will speak our language.”

"OK. Neat. Anyway, I was at home and my cat was there and everything."

"Yes, you would have thought that. The human brain is quite wonderful. We have yet to emulate it, but we know much about it. We merely told your brain you were home and it created the illusion for you, much better that we ever could have done on our own."

"You're trying to tell me that I'm not dreaming." Jeff shook his head in disbelief. There was no way he was talking to an alien for real. This was the result of too much pizza before bed and the Sci-Fi thriller he had rented that evening.

"Precisely. You are here for a very specific purpose, one for which your species is particularly suited." Spakael stopped in the hallway and turned to a door. Passing his hand over a blacklight panel the door slid away to reveal a very human looking room. It was a stark contrast to the metallic hallways he had been passing through up until now.

"Your quarters Mr. Donaldson. Designed for your Slatekian tastes."

"Slatekian? I'm Human!" They walked into the room which was quite spacious and very nice. Not unlike a room at one of the best hotels anywhere in the world.

"Actually, you're Slatekian. The name of your planet is Slatek, at least amongst the Galactic Community. You have clothes in the far room. I'll continue to explain as you get dressed."

Jeff went to the far room to find a bedroom with a uniform laid out for him to wear. He was quite impressed at the fit and tried to listen as he got dressed.

"Mr. Donaldson, First I'll explain what we have done to your brain."

"My brain???"

"Yes, we know an awful lot about your brain. Information taken from the Nabarites during our last border enforcement."

"I think there are too many aliens knowing a lot about my brain. Who are the Naborites?"

"Your culture refers to them as 'Greys' I believe. They spent many years exploring the human body, especially the brain. Their race is not conducive to work on other planets. Their bodies are too frail. But Slatekians are strong and capable. They had intended to use you as slaves. We repelled them."

"Thanks. My people would not be very happy about being slaves." He was really getting into this 'Alien' bit. And it was really neat the way his dream was trying to account for his dream. Wierd.

Spakael made a sound like laughter. "We did not repel the Naborite because we were helping you. Slatek is in our space. We were merely trying to enforce our borders. If anyone has the right to enslave Slatekians it is us."

This did not sound good. Not good at all.

"You were going to explain about my brain," Jeff said as he buttoned up his shirt.

"Yes. We have implanted three chips in your brain. The first is a language processor. That's the part that lets you speak to me in my own language and understand what I am saying to you. The second is the Language EPROM. This is an electronically programmable chip which houses the languages you will now be able to speak. It can be updated using an electromagnetic field so we don't have to open your head again. The control module is coated in a specific protein which allows your brain to grow into the interface node. Quite remarkable really."

"You said there were three."

"I'm getting to that. The third chip is an archival access processor. It uses subspace frequencies in order to access out historical archives. This will allow you full access to our entire history as if it were simply part of your own memory. Once you learn how to use it you won't know that you haven't always been with us since the beginning of time. It gives an interesting perspective on life as well having the memories of thousands of years at your every command."

"Interesting. But why would you put that kind of information in my head?"

"Slatekians are very gifted in two important ways which other races in this part of the galaxy are not. The first is tactics. Given equal technology there is no way that any race could ever conquer Slatek. The second is diplomacy. Given equal technology, there is no way that any race would even try to conquer Slatek."

"I see. But what of us Slatekians? Will we ever reach that point?"

"Eventually. Once you develop interstellar travel your people will become galactic citizens and subject to a totally different set of laws. Your people will no longer be classified as a subspecies which leaves you open to attack and slavery. We have been helping you within the laws of the Galactic Council. We cannot just give you technology, but we can sell it to you."

"Sell it? Like give us technology, in exchange for... What?" Jeff was feeling quite resplendent in his new uniform as he walked from his bedroom. Although he could not understand any of the signs and symbols, it still looked very nice and fit like a charm.

"We buy brains."

"WHAT?"

"Focus..."

"Sorry. What did you say?"

"Brains, minds. You! We 'recruit' from Slatek and in return we 'plant' technology into a series of minds. One of these minds will then 'invent' the technology we have given them. This allows us to teach your people without breaking any laws, or starting the kind of panic which would result if we were to just arrive one day. Our plan is that you will eventually come to us and we will welcome you as brother citizens. But that day is still a long way off."

"We're like pets."

"Sort of, in your definition of the term. Yes."

"Tell me how to use these chips in my head."

"Well all of the technology we have is activated by thought pictures. By focusing on my shape and special features you activate the Language Processor which looks for my race's image in the Language EPROM. If it finds it, it allows you to speak it. Sounds coming into your ear are processed through the Language processor as they come through the language center of your brain. So if you look at a person of any race, build an image of their particular characteristics in your mind, then you will be able to speak with them. Assuming they have been added to your EPROM."

"In order to add a language to the EPROM we merely send an EMF pulse with the encoded information through your head. EMF will not affect your biological material, but it will affect the Language EPROM when it is properly encoded.

"The Archives are opened by a symbol." Spakael drew a sign on a notepad. It looked like a *Palm Pilot* to Jeff who had been using electronic message pads since *Apple* released the first *Newton*. Was this just another technology which was 'bought' from an unknown benefactor?

"By focusing on this sign you can open the archives. Eventually they will seem like your own memories. Remember it and use it often. It will save us trying to fill you in all of the time. You will have the necessary knowledge to operate our ships, weapons and equipment. You will understand our history and our people, as well as that of the races we have contact with.

"Let's test the chip functions. I have purposely not told you the name of our race. Focus on the sign and think of the question as if you were trying to remember something from a long time ago."

Jeff focused on the intricate sign and thought about who these people were. He thought about the swept back ears and the yellow eyes. He focused on Spakael the way he had been while talking to him.

Not only did he 'remember' that these were the Sa'm-ChAut but he remembered information concerning their biology, mating habits, rites of passage and religion. This was in overview, but Jeff knew that a simple change in focus would bring a more complete picture of any particular facet of their people.

"You're the Sa'm-ChAut from the Garel System approximately two hundred and sixty five lightyears from Ear... um Slatek."

Spakael looked delighted. "Excellent. The chip is working well, and you have an excellent command of it. Now you're ready for a full briefing of the mission. Please come with me to the boardroom."

Jeff and Spakael, whom he now knew for sure was male, made their way to the boardroom. Jeff unlocked the entire ship floor plan in his mind and it felt like a building you hadn't been in for years, but still knew your way around. Entering the boardroom Jeff saw several other Se'm-ChAut, all dressed in variation of the uniform worn by Spakael and himself.

"Ahh, Mr Donaldson. So glad you could join us," said the large, and commanding gentleman at the head of the table. "I trust that you have gotten over your initial shock of your relocation."

"Yes, thank you Captain."

The Captain turned to Spakael in slight surprise.

"He's a Natural," Spakael answered.

"Have a seat and we'll begin. Lieutenant Aurora."

Jeff and Spakael found seats as an attractive female rose from the table and walked towards the far wall which lit up.

“As you know we have been missing three of the Maleka for some time now. We have been unable to locate them and they are very vulnerable in our plane of existence.”

Jeff thought about the word “Maleka”.

Maleka: Holy spirits manifested in the physical universe. Beings of great power they are normally encased in shrines due to their body’s inability to deal with the physical universe. The Maleka are normally catered to by priests who are granted great gifts of power by the Maleka. They stay in the physical universe for one thousand years before they are replaced by others. Their physical forms are unpredictable and take many shapes and sizes.

“New information leads us to believe that they may be on the planet Laron in the Shienack system. Unfortunately this planet is currently under Kadasha control.”

Kadasha: A bug like race from the Crab Nebula. Although seeming like a hive based insectoid race they are in fact individuals who work together with deadly efficiency. Their society is an unstable caste system which often sees uprisings attempted. Currently at war with the Se’m-ChAut. They look like a large Mantis. The brain is located in the rear torso away from attackers.

A display of a star system showed itself on the screen.

“We intend to land a small party on the planet lead by Commander Donaldson in order to locate and retrieve the Maleka. A single dropship should be able to get onto the planet undetected.”

The Display expanded to show a desolate desert. Rock outcroppings were common but essentially the planet was mostly devoid of moisture.

"As you can see, the planet is a wasteland. But it is important to note that there is a hidden colony of Se'm-ChAut who, if located, must help you as long as you make it clear as to what your mission is. Although they are a political faction, they will respect the religious nature of any attempt to rescue the Maleka. They are technologically impaired and prefer to live a simplified life. Because of this they have not had any electronic method for finding the Maleka. Our drop crew will be provided with infrared and UV sensor equipment in order to allow them to find life forms on the planet surface. Due to the nature of our relationship with the Kadasha the drop crew will be heavily armed."

"Excellent," the Captain responded as he rose from his seat. "Donaldson, you will work with Aurora and assemble to drop team. Dismissed." People started filing out of the room and Spakael whispered a "Good Luck" to Jeff as he walked by. Jeff and Lieutenant Aurora were alone in the board room.

"Commander Donaldson, shall we get started?" She sat in one of the available chairs and a crew roster appeared on the screen. At least he assumed it was a crew roster.

"Wait a minute. Commander?"

“Yes. Every Slatekian gets the rank of Commander when chipped. Also you’ll be leading the mission to the planet surface.”

“Commander. So we aren’t slaves?”

Aurora laughed, "No, you're not slaves. That was a fate devised by another race, something you probably already know about. You're a pet project by the Se'm-ChAut Government. They want to see you become galactic citizens, and allies very soon. But they must still play by the rules of the Council. As far as they're concerned your rank and insignia are a military experiment. Not unlike your sending lower life forms into space. We are "officially" testing your mental abilities. The fact is we already know how well you can command because there are many other Slatakians in the fleet. One is even an Admiral."

"Admiral eh. OK, I feel a lot better about this relationship then. I was worried that I was going to be a protocol droid or something."

"OK, Commander, lets get to work."

"I have an important question. How come I can speak and understand your language, but I cannot read it?"

"Reading is a different mental process. You can learn it, but we cannot chip it. Sound and spoken language is a linear process, vision is a parallel process. We could chip the symbols, but you would not always recognize them. You have to separate the symbol itself from the surrounding picture in order to understand it. That's why looking at someone is not enough to make you speak their language, you must develop a single picture in the mind in order to activate the switch. It is getting easier though isn't it."

"Much, thank you."

The two spent what seemed like hours pouring over crew records trying to determine exactly who was best suited for a mission of this type. Jeff began to recognize rank insignia and some specialities like “Weapons” and “Combat”. Jeff expected that there would be more to worry about from the enemy race than from the political faction. The Se’m-ChAut seemed to be more concerned about diplomacy with the faction than possible combat. Better safe than sorry.

Eventually they decided on five crew members. Primarily combat and weapons specialists. Also Jeff asked for the team to be heavily armed. But apparently there were some problems with the use of energy weapons due to the local sun disrupting the beam. Energy weapons were useless on the planet surface. Hand to hand weapons were issued, and lots of them. One never knew what they were going to run into, and Jeff had seen enough Sci-Fi movies to know that whatever they ran into wouldn’t likely be friendly. If your meeting is benevolent, you don’t have to use your weapons, but if things go badly, you can’t ask for them after the fact.

The Martial arts of the Se’m-ChAut were quite remarkable and it was a wonder to Jeff that they needed tactical and diplomatic help from Humanity. But he supposed that a fierce fighting race might lack other things.

Lieutenant Aurora gathered and briefed the drop crew as Jeff went to find something palatable. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until after the meeting. After the shock had begun to wear off. He made his way to the commissary and found that they had prepared an excellent meal for him in anticipation of his peckish nature. He kept forgetting that there were other Humans, Slatekians, in the Fleet.

He spent his meal time "remembering" the history of the Se'm-ChAut people. He was specifically focused on the various Humans in the Fleet, as well as the Fleet Structure. He made a decision to try and meet with Admiral Trosch in the future. It would be nice to hear English again. Although he could speak with the Se'm-ChAut, their language still sounded like Welsh combined with nails on a chalkboard.

He thought about what it would be like if this wasn't a dream. What if this was real? What if this was an opportunity for a new life? He could wake up in his bed, and go back to his job as a manager at the DMV, or he could live this life. Did it matter if it was real? It seemed real. And maybe it would be far more satisfying than "real" life. Maybe he made up everything that appeared in the "Archives" But did it matter? Here he was a Commander. An important person and part of a small number of Humans who were chosen for their skills. Here he was special. Here he would stay.

<!-- End Part I -->

Episode II: The Rescue

Although Jeff had been a great fan of roller coasters, nothing had quite prepared his stomach for the sensations of Planetfall. The way the drop ship accelerated, the way it bounced against the atmosphere, skipping like a rock on water. And then the fall to the planet surface, the thrusters kicking in to slow them down and settle them in the preferred landing spot. This was certainly not an enjoyable experience, but he thought it might be one to be repeated.

The surface of the planet was dry and cool, unlike deserts back home. He had expected the land to be hot, like the Maobi or the Sahara, but rather a cold wind blew across the land. He thought that they must be further from the local star than Earth was from Sol.

Jeff decided that he would try and alter the definitions in his head so that he could still think his own words, like “Earth” and have the processor translate the word as Slatek. He thought he’d test that when he got back, if he got back.

The six of them disembarked. Jeff had chosen Aurora and the four biggest, strongest, combat specialists on board. He pulled his *Palm Pilot* type unit from his belt pocket. There was a reading of major life forms in four areas. He thought that if they were only looking for three that maybe the smallest reading would be a good bet.

“Commander.”

“Yes Lieutenant Aurora.”

“Perhaps you haven’t tried to ‘remember’ the spectral analysis of the Maleka.”

Jeff looked back and found that there was something different about the Maleka energy field. Currently he couldn’t recall it exactly though. Must be the solar interference. The same one that negates energy weapons.

“Yes there is something. But we need a place to start. Let’s check on the nearest area of activity, and we can look beyond that.”

Each person boarded a low profile transportation device. It reminded Jeff of a Jet Ski crossed with a Japanese racing motorcycle. He began to realize more and more how much influence the Sa’m-ChAut had on Earth. Although the Anti-Magnetic levitation and sub plasma propulsion engines would work, the heavy weapons mounted on the front would not. He hypothesized that this was because the engines were internal and shielded, and perhaps impervious to the solar interference, whereas a weapon would expose the energy field to the atmosphere.

He wasn’t quite prepared for the speeds at which the speeder was capable and it took him a few tries to get going and under control. It seemed that his crew was used to new “recruits” as they didn’t even crack a smile at his early, and rather comical, attempts at steering the speeder.

Soon the six bikes were screaming across the desert floor closing the gap between the landing party and the blip on the screen. Jeff was amazed at the stealth of the bikes. There was no sound to the engines, and the Anti-Magnetic levitation unit caused no dust to be raised behind them.

Soon Jeff signalled for them to stop. Although they were still some distance from the location of the activity, he wanted to ensure that their approach would not be detected. The screen did not say what was there, or what type of life it was. Yet it showed a large, very bright, life form pattern.

They dismounted and travelled the rest of the way on foot. As they approached they found that there were in fact two blips on the screen. Both the same intensity, but separated by a few miles. They approached the closer one first.

They came over a rock outcropping, hoping to hide their investigation. Unfortunately there was nothing there.

“Nothing? Commander?”

“Lieutenant, look for yourself. There is a very strong life force reading here. There should be a few hundred, maybe a thousand people here. But there is nothing. Team, search the area, thoroughly.”

“Can I be of assistance?” A voice, an English voice, came from some far rocks. A man was sitting there. A Human man, dressed in dark robes, desert robes.

“English, You have no idea how good it is to hear English.”

“Ahh, my friend, I have probably been without hearing it much longer than you have.” I have been in this desert for some time seeking what you seek. I have come here to meditate on the Maleka in the hopes that they will reveal themselves that I may bring them to a place of safety.”

“You have adopted their religion as well, friend?”

“Not at all,” the old man laughed, “the Maleka powers are real regardless of whether you believe in the religion or not. They may be ‘Holy Spirits’ or just beings from another dimension, but they are very, very real, and powerful in their own way.”

“I’ve found something. It looks organic.”

“Excellent Ensign. Everyone get over and help Ensign Gedresh.” Jeff wanted to talk more with his brother human, and discover more about the Maleka and their powers. He didn’t have access to the Archives here and wondered what he needed to know.

“We’ve got them.” Aurora shouted. Jeff thought that was fast considering. He went over to investigate.

There were three living forms. One was a pinkish colour, about four, four and a half feet long with tentacles coming out of it along the outer edge. The other two were about a foot in size. One looked like an elaborate football, and the other an insect of some type. They seemed very excited. The old man rushed to see them.

"Oh Maleka, Forgive me for not finding you sooner in this desolate place." In a flurry of robes he dropped to the ground in supplication. The others were kneeling before the three creatures who had been hiding under a rock to avoid the sun. So strange.

"We have to return them to the ship and get them home as soon as possible," said Aurora excitedly.

"I think that will be difficult," shouted the man in the Se'm-ChAut language. He pointed back the way we had come. In the distance there was a huge wall of blackness. A sandstorm. Jeff checked his palm computer. It showed some caves off to towards the pole, in the vicinity of the other local life-form reading. Well it would be better odds than a sandstorm.

"What about these caves?" Jeff was shouting to the old man as the roar of the storm grew closer.

"That is the Se'm-ChAut colony. They will give us shelter. I have the passwords."

"Run Pole-ward. We have to get to these caves immediately. Lieutenant, how do we carry the Maleka?"

"Ask them. They are their own masters. They are psychic so you don't need to worry about translation."

Jeff turned to the three Maleka and before he could speak he felt a brushing. Like a feather dancing on his brain. He picked up the two smaller Maleka and stuffed them into his belt pouches, the third leapt to his back and wrapped the tentacles around him to make itself like a backpack. Jeff and the crew began to run.

The roar of the storm grew louder and louder as it approached the small group of humanoids running towards shelter. Although it was a few miles, Jeff knew that for the Se'm-ChAut it was not a great physical burden. For him it was death. His heart felt like it would explode. His lungs were drawing fire, not air. His head rang with blood. Fear gripped him.

Then he felt that feathery touch again. His speed increased, his heart rate became slow, steady and strong. His breathing was deep and rhythmic. Before long he began to outdistance the others. He, a Human, Slatekian, was suddenly the physical superior of the Se'm-ChAut. The Maleka were powering his body, improving it. He could feel it growing stronger as he ran. Soon there was no thought in him but shelter, even though he could hear the growlings in the wind.

He knew then that the storm was covering something else. Something large, something dangerous. He did not know what it was but it spurred him ever harder. With his new-found strength he quickly lost sight of the others and could see, growing in the distance, the caves they sought.

Jeff reached the cave mouth to find that it was not very deep. Rather it seemed to have a metallic back on it. He began to bang on the rear wall. Using the longblade he had brought in case of combat he continually

struck the metal wall screaming so that he could be heard. This was not a natural wall. Someone had put it there.

"Have you the password?" a voice queried from the distance.

"No, I have the Maleka. Open the door, a storm is coming."

"The Maleka. You lie. Rot in the storm."

Once more Jeff felt the Maleka touch his mind.

"Jemerin, Alarech, Semarash, Yad." With the words spoken the door began to open much to the guard's consternation. Jeff jumped through the opening and rolled to the floor. Suddenly several locust shaped spears were trained on him.

"How did you do that? Where is Jethal?"

"Is Jethal the old man I saw in the desert? He is coming with the rest of my crew. They are racing the storm." Jeff took the two smaller Maleka from his pouches and the larger one released its hold and moved to the floor. He saw a glaze come over the eyes of the guards and their entire demeanour changed.

"Thank you Commander, for rescuing the Sacred Spirits."

"Thank you for not killing me. There is another problem. There was a sound in the storm that was not the storm. It is hard to describe, but you may wish to be ready for anything."

Just then the others broke into the hallway from the desert. They were all speaking at once, but the word "Kadasha" was repeated several times.

"We need shelter deep in the caves. Time is short, that storm will be here soon," Jeff said to the obvious leader.

"No, you will stay here and fight. If not, then your rescue is for nothing. That storm is filled with Kadasha warriors. you'll need that longblade of yours in very short order."

Jeff called Aurora over to him.

"I need to know if I can remember what the Kadasha look like. I don't have access to the archives here. Do you know if their language was programmed into my EPROM?"

"Most likely, you would have had most of the races of the sector programmed in. Makes Diplomacy, and War easier for you. Try and focus."

Jeff tried to conjure the image of the brown and tan striped mantis creatures. He built the image as best he could and tried to form it to his language.

“Have I got it?”

“Yep, that sounds about right. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to try and stop this war.”

As the Kadasha were approaching Jeff made his way out of the cave and into a small alcove of rock to protect himself from the sand blast as it approached. He had an idea of what he wanted to do, but was a little frustrated knowing that he didn’t have access to the archives. He was flying by the seat of his pants, but if the Kadasha attacked in force, he was dead anyway and his mission would be a failure.

Jeff concentrated on the images that he knew were hiding in the storm and tried to evoke again the harsh sound of the Kadasha language. He waited in poised silence until he felt the first burn of sand on his cheek.

“Kadasha Almak, I come in peace, I come to Parlay.”

“Who are you, show yourself.”

Jeff had made contact. The sandstorm burst against the rock outcropping splashing out its fiery force. His skin burned in the sand, and he felt the sands begin to tear at his flesh. The Kadash, with their outer carapace, did not feel the storm and were curious about who would be out here, ready to face them in their own environment.

“I speak on behalf of this colony.” Jeff walked out into the storm protected only by his few clothes. He was counting on the strength the Maleka had given him to allow him to survive such an ordeal. Unfortunately surviving something did not mean it didn’t hurt. The Kadasha were quite shocked to see such a soft and pliable being braving the storm in order to talk peace.

“I wish that these people be left to live in peace. What quarrel have you with them?”

“They are Sa’m-ChAut, we are at war.” The monstrosity, which was obviously the leader, regarded Jeff with interest. **“War involves attack. Why should we allow them to live on one of our planets when we fight and die in space?”**

Jeff was beginning to feel optimistic. They were talking to him. Although he wished he had the knowledge of the archives available, he felt that there was a chance he would live to tell the story.

“These people are not Sa’m-ChAut, they are outcasts and rebels, they are not worthy of the name. Leave them to live in their exile, they want nothing but peace. They have moved here, away from the Sa’m-ChAut worlds, in order that they may pursue a technology free lifestyle and will never return to the Sa’m-ChAut lands. If they have any name, it is Laronian, and therefore you are brothers.”

The sand was tearing at his skin as Jeff shot out the final words. Although on the outside he was trying to look strong and diplomatic, inside he was screaming as the flesh burnt away from him. He was sure that there were places that were so covered with blood and sand as not to be recognizable. But this was why he was here, diplomacy.

“All right, we will leave them in peace and build relations with them as brothers. You have impressed us with your bravery and your strength. I can see the flesh being eaten from your bones, yet you stand and talk of peace.”

The Kadasha motioned and several of his fellows closed in around in order to create a protective wall that Jeff would no longer be pelted by the swirling sands. The leader continued though, curious as to Jeff and his species.

“You are not Sa’m-ChAut. Who are you and why are you here?”

“I am a Human from the planet Slatek, I have come with a small team of Sa’m-ChAut in order to rescue the lost Maleka and return them home. We are on a religious mission of peace and mercy.”

“Rescuing Maleka? A Human? Yet here you stand suffering the hell of the storm in order to protect a people who are not your own. You have won our respect. If you can promise the Sa’m-ChAut will leave this planet in peace, we will help you return to your ship with the Maleka.”

Jeff waited out the storm under the protection of the Kadasha. They spoke of Laron and its various lands and oceans. From the wastes of the desert to the lush forests of the poles, Laron was apparently a beautiful planet and one open to settlement.

Once the storm was over Aurora emerged to find the Kadasha standing, waiting. She began to run when Jeff stopped her.

“Hold Aurora, they will not harm you. They are here to negotiate a peace.”

“What? I find that hard to believe.”

“It is true. Send for the Magistrate and we’ll get this dealt with like civilized races.”

And they did. The Kadasha and their fellow Laronians not only came to a peace, but began to negotiate trade, education and a mostly harmonious existence on Laron. Jeff agreed to contact the Admiralty immediately upon reaching the ship and tell them that Laron was off limits. As a Slatekian Jeff would have some pull with the government.

As the drop team returned to their ship, Jeff was lost in thought. As his wounds had been healed by the Maleka, he had time to think about his new career; he thought about the people who were around him and the friends he was making. It had not been very long, but already the shadows of his old life were beginning

to fade away. Soon there would be no thought of the dull worlds he had left behind except maybe to visit one day.

Jeff laughed at the thought of showing up to his old workplace in a small starfighter, but let it go as he knew it was not worth doing. Earth was far away, and he thought never to look on that tiny marble again. Rather he looked forward to a good, hot shower and a warm, soft bed.

The Voyage

Morning came and Jeff realized that the one thing he really missed was Asimov. If he was going to begin a new career alone and away from the world he once new, he certainly deserved to have his cat with him. He questioned Spakael during the morning meal.

“Hey Jeff, how are you feeling this morning?” Spakael seemed chipper, but then again, they had completed their mission successfully. Also Jeff realized that the language didn't sound foreign but rather came naturally to him.

“Not too bad, but I am feeling a wee bit home sick. I was wondering if I could pick something up from home.”

“I don't know about that, I'll have to ask the Captain, but it is possible that he might be in the mood for a sail past Slatek now that we have finished our mission successfully.”

“Sail well if you could ask him, I'd like to pick up my cat. We've always been close and I would like something familiar around.”

“I can understand that. Besides, you've not been sailing yet.” Spakael grinned slightly as he thought of sailing in a distant way.

The entire technology of the NA3 StarCruiser was based on light. Light powered its engines, ran its computers and produced all of the required electricity which was needed for the ship's operation. Although he knew, technically, how it all worked, he thought he would ask Aurora to explain it all to him. It was as good an excuse as any to get to know her.

Jeff began to think that maybe there was more to it than just getting to know her; it was something to do. As a specialist aboard the *Phaze* he found out that most of his time was going to be filled with, nothing. Everyone was on duty shifts and he really hadn't had a chance to meet much of the crew other than Aurora and Spakael.

As Spakael had been kind enough to spend his morning petitioning the Captain to make a detour past Slatek, Jeff figured he would see if Aurora was particularly busy. Fortunately he met her in the hall and found she wasn't busy after all.

“Aurora, I have all of these technical documents in my head, but it is a bit overwhelming.”

“I bet, I haven't had the experience of being 'Hooked Up' yet, but I understand it can be difficult.”

“I would have thought that this kind of a data resource would have been just as valuable to you as it is to me.”

“Oh, definitely, but your brain is designed differently. Although the things that the Naborites did to your people was horrible, it has had a silver lining because we can give you this gift, whereas we cannot possess it.”

Jeff noticed that there seemed to be a bit of jealousy behind her voice. She tried to hide it well, but it still slipped past. She would love to have this kind of power. Jeff realized that within a few short hours he had been given what the native Sa'm-ChAut work years to achieve. It really didn't seem fair, but then he thought about the human lives that must have been sacrificed in order to gain this technology. He shuddered.

“I guess it is really a terrible irony that you work to learn what I have given to me. Yet how many of your people would have to die that you could also share in this gift? I don't know that I would have wanted it if I had known what price had been paid for its birth.”

A single tear ran down the side of Aurora's face. “You're right of course, I wouldn't trade the lives of my kinsmen for even one tenth of what our technology has given you. I'm sorry if I made you feel bad about it. I have to keep these things in perspective.”

Jeff reached out and held her by the shoulders. “Aurora, I know you mean well and have a good soul inside. How about you try and explain the drive technology on this ship and I'll learn it from you and not this little chip in my brain.”

“OK, that sounds good. I hate it when I run into new recruits who know everything. I feel like my years in the academy were a total waste.”

“No, I think they may have helped to make you who you are,” Jeff interjected as they began to walk down the hallway together. “I think that you are much more than your knowledge, you are a real person.”

“Not in the way you think. I'm still from a different planet you know. Maybe I can grow big and ugly with huge gnashing teeth like in your movies.” She reached out her arms and brought her fingers together like a large mouth in a parody of the monster movies she was referring to. They both began to laugh as they reached the first stop on Jeff's Drive Tour.

They stopped and looked out of the window. Arching down from above them was a huge wing. It arced gracefully from the center of the ship down and back, like an eagle in its downstroke. The outside frame was bright, white, gleaming metal, but inside of this shape was an orange glowing plate which seemed almost alive in its luminescence.

“What you are looking at is the Port Wing. This ship has three such wings, port, starboard and dorsal, each of which has two collectors. The collectors appear orange while they are activated as they are filled with a compressed gas in a vacuum. The panel is climate controlled to almost zero degrees.”

“Zero degrees? Oh you must mean Zero Degrees Kelvin.”

“Kelvin? Like the Kelvin Klein commercials you broadcast all over the galaxy?”

“No, something else. Please carry on.”

“Ok. Well anyway, the gas is very tight, very cold and in a vacuum, but as you can see it is in a clear container. When the gas is exposed to these conditions it gets, well, sticky. Photons get stuck in it in a way very similar to how your people use kevlar jackets to stop bullets.”

“Wait a minute, are you trying to tell me that you are actually catching light particles?”

“Precisely. See you don’t need that thing in your head, you’re smart enough as it is. The light gets stuck in the gas. The material is then vented out of the panels and into storage units and fuel cells for later use.”

“OK, but what about sailing, Spakael mentioned something about it.”

“Oh sailing, it is an amazing thing, but you want to know how it works. OK, so a photon hits the sticky stuff and it stops right?”

“OK, but does it just slow down or does it hit something that it sticks to, like fly paper or something?”

“You’re starting to get it, think about it a little bit more.”

Jeff thought about what he knew about physics from reading Asimov and Heinlein as a lad. He also then thought about solar wind and early Slatekian concepts of space travel.

“So the photon hitting this particular surface does not reflect so it cannot continue moving. The high speed of the particle though has energy in and of itself, so that energy, which we call Kinetic Energy, would then have to be absorbed by the panel’s chassis itself. Multiply that over a few million, billion photons and the ship will have to move as it absorbs the kinetic energy.”

“Exactly, so we can actually shut down all engines, in fact everything but life support and allow ourselves to drift in space. We even have smaller panels built into micro ships for solo sailing.” Aurora’s eyes went soft as she tried to describe the experience.

“Imagine speeding through space in a pod designed for maybe two or three people with no sound, no light, nothing but you and the entire universe. You can almost feel the solar wind at your back as you play with gravity wells and solar eddies. It is almost like being a real star creature or even a Maleka yourself.”

Just the description and the emotion welling from her gave Jeff a definite desire to give this a try. Floating through space, moving with the wind and nothing but life support and clear plasteel between you and the great void. Sailing was immediately added to his Neat-Stuff-To-Do list.

As they had been discussing the joys of sailing, Jeff and Aurora had been walking down into the bowels of the ship. Jeff wanted to see what the fuel cell processing was like and how it was going to work.

“Basically it is really simple. Unlike your spacecraft which are basically big, pointy explosives, this ship processes and runs on photon technology.”

“Neat. So you collect the photons and then do something to make them into power.”

“Sort of, actually you’ll laugh when you realize how long Slatek has had some of this technology.”

“I had a feeling that our potential wasn’t being met.” This statement drove Aurora into peals of laughter.

“I’m sorry Jeff,” she stammered trying to compose herself, “but the people in charge of your planet are quite useless. Even if we gave them a fully functional StarExplorer, they’d run it into the ocean or something and make a theme park out of it. We really do try to get them to advance, but everyone is so selfish that they can’t let the technology be used by anyone who might make it do something.”

“I know. I’ve seen some pretty neat stuff that just went away. If the smart people were running my planet, we’d already be up here.”

“No doubt,” she replied while turning into a large room filled with, what looked like old mortar shells. Thin wires hung from the ceiling and there were rows and rows of these shells stacked like an old armoury. “Are these what I think they are?” Jeff furrowed his brow trying to understand what he thought looked like a weapons dump.

“No. You probably think of these as some kind of large bullet. Amazing what Slatekians will try to kill each other with.” Aurora shook her head. “These are photon fuel cells.”

Aurora walked over to a wall with some strange looking controls, wires and tubing around what was obviously a filling station of some sort. She picked up one of the fuel cells and began the lesson on how they worked.

“Basically you are dealing with two different materials here; the fuel and the carrier. The carrier is the gas which you saw in the collection panels, the fuel is the photons which become trapped within it. Through a combination of magnetic fields and the very specific state of the gas we can collect and transport light.”

“Wow. Sorry, go on.”

“Yep, I thought you’d like that.” Jeff was becoming rather attracted to that wry smile. He thought that there were a few things he would have to look up about Sa’m-ChAut when he got back to his quarters.

“Anyway,” Aurora continued, “the gas will keep the photons trapped as long as the gas stays at 0.0012 degrees. We simply call it zero because it is only the technicians who worry about the decimals.”

Aurora took the fuel cell in her hands and opened up the side to reveal a clear, cylindrical tube in the center. It kind of looked like an old thermos, the ones with the glass in the middle and the casing outside that kept hot things hot and cold things cold. Made sense actually.

“OK, now the cells only open like this for maintenance, they aren’t any good as long term storage with the side open, but they do make a great demonstration piece.”

Aurora took the fuel cell and placed it point down in the filling station. “Although we have large holding tanks for the drives and other major systems, we keep fuel cells for backup, shuttles, pods and other small equipment which is not connected to the main grid. Here we attach this heavy hose to the back of the cell. Keep in mind that we are still dealing with both the fuel and the carrier.”

“So that hose is going to be damned cold is what you are telling me, right?”

“Only on the inside, if you are careful you can do this without gloves due to the nature of the insulated hose.” She attached the hose and pushed a green button on the panel beside her. Immediately the glowing orange “stuff” filled the glass container within. She detached the hose, and removed the cell.

“As you can see, the core of the cell is filled with the carrier and the fuel. Normally this panel is closed to avoid warming the material or causing injury.”

Jeff touched the outside casing and felt it was perfectly normal, but even still he could sense how cold that center tube was. The insulation technology was amazing.

“Impressed yet?”

“Impressed about two days ago. So how do you get the light to act like a fuel?”

“Next topic. So we have the stuff in here and the cell will keep it stable, but we want to separate them and use the light in the reactor. What do you know about the necessary conditions for this gas to hold the photons?”

“It needs to be in a vacuum and.. Cold, it needs to be cold. If you let it warm up then the gas won’t be sticky.”

“Exactly, this material which is a gas normally, reverts back to its normal state releasing the light. The cell fits into this cradle. The point connects to a fibre optic cable and the back to a gas vent. The cell then releases the temperature, the light runs out the fibre optic cable and the gas is vented out the back to be reused.”

Aurora placed the cell in the cradle and began the sequence to warm the cell core. “Cover your eyes” she said before completing the sequence. Jeff did so and was rewarded with a brilliant flash of light.

“Is it over?”

“Yep, takes a nanosecond. Now normally that hatch is closed and there is nothing to see but some lights and an all-clear sign, but it is no where near as impressive to the new tech.”

“I guess not” Jeff said as he stepped forward to better examine the fuel cell. It felt heavy, even empty, but then there was an awful lot of technology in there. He felt a little overwhelmed.

“So then what? Where does it go, how is it used?”

“Ahh, now that’s the clever bit. The central core is basically a huge sphere with a layer of electromagnets and a layer of photocells, not unlike your solar panels. The photons, which have returned to their excited state, blast around in the core hitting the photocells at high speed. This impact creates a charge which has electrical value and is attached to the main power grid. The electromagnets can help regulate the amount of power the core generates. If they go over a safe limit though, it would be the same as blowing a fuse, annoying, but not fatal.”

“Very cool. So the entire ship runs on solar power, but power you can actually store. The solar panels point to a light within, not without, yet it is the same light. That almost sounds like theology.”

“Actually it is part of our religion. The light outside is the same as the light inside. In fact everything we do is associated with light in one way or another. You’ll learn more of this as you study our ways and become more integrated into our society.”

“I’ll like that.” They both smiled at each other in a way that suddenly made the room a little too warm and a little uncomfortable.

“Well I really seem to be bugging you and Spakael too much. I’ve got to meet some more people on this ship. I can’t hang on you two like a lost puppy forever.”

“Well maybe not forever, but I don’t mind you hanging around at all. But you’re right, you need more friends, more interaction. I should discuss the possibility of a party soon. You deserve a welcoming party after you get grabbed from your home and shoved into danger. I’ll arrange it.”

“I appreciate that. If this is going to be my new home I really need to meet the neighbours.”

“Oh this isn’t your new home, this is a mission voyage. I can’t wait to see your face when we get back home.”

“Where is home then? I thought this was a long term, long distance ship. We are certainly a long way from anywhere from what I’ve seen on the charts.”

“Oh, with this ship we are never too far from anywhere within Sa’m-ChAut space. Although we use hydrogen plasma for sub-light travel, our long distance drive can get us anywhere fast.”

“What long distance drive?”

“Well you know how a laser works right?”

“Yeah,” said Jeff tentatively.

“Well your people have figured out how to piggy back information within a laser for long distance or very specific information transfer. Your laser games are based on the same technology. When you hit someone the computer knows who it is because your information is encoded in the beam. We basically do the same thing with our ship. Our drive creates a lased state behind us and we basically ride the wave.

“This uses up a lot of light though, which is why we are constantly processing photons for the storage tanks, fuel cells and something new one of your kinsmen had us develop; the Dub-El-Ey-Bat-Rie. It is a small cylinder which houses a mini power core. It has electrical nodes on both ends, can be recharged with light and for some reason is always painted black with a coppery band on one end. Anyway he apparently needed them for some things he brought from home.”

“Hmm, I might know what it is for. Speaking of home I’ve got to find Spakael. I asked him to see if the Captain would swing us past Slatek so I could get my cat and maybe a few things from home.”

“Oh, that would be nice, I am always interested in alien stuff.”

“Somehow I’m just not used to Humans being alien yet. Guess I haven’t been away long enough.” Jeff smiled and Aurora smiled back.

They genuinely liked each other’s company. This was very good for Jeff, he wasn’t sure he could handle this kind of change in his life if his first two contacts had hated him. Actually it was quite the opposite as both of his new friends had the potential to be much better friendships than any he had back home.

Reverie

Aurora Legamee sat in her quarters thinking about the previous few days. She found it hard to believe that this Slatekian could be so charming. Was it just the curiosity about another race or was there something to this feeling she was having.

This would never do. She was a professional. She had worked with other aliens, she was the second officer aboard the *Phase* and was working towards her own command. How could she allow herself to get giddy over this new recruit?

She stood up and crossed the room to the mirror on the wall. She was angry with herself. Always attacking each situation with a cool head there was no way she could let this interfere with her work or her duties as an officer. It was true that she was one of the people who had made initial contact and as such it was natural that she should befriend Jeff, but her feelings did not stop there.

Nope, now she was playing 'little miss social' and arranging a party for him. She knew she'd also be the one to introduce him around. She'd be his Date.

Aurora finished polishing her head and began to get dressed for her duty shift. She was working sleepcycle tonight on the bridge and the shift change always made her a little cranky. Maybe that was it, nothing more.

Unfortunately she couldn't help thinking about him as she dressed. The feel of the material against her skin, the uniform top sliding over her breasts.

NO! She gave her head a shake. Yes, he looked very suave and cool in his uniform; yes, he handled the situation on Loren very well and yes, he was very impressive when he first entered the War Room with Spakael, but this was silly. She was a Second Lieutenant in the Sa'm-ChAut StarForce and within months of a new promotion. She was Second Officer on an exploration vessel, these little things should not bother her, should not occupy her attention. She was thinking and acting like a school girl.

"Get a Grip Aurora," she said out loud. "OK now, back straight, insignia aligned, eyes forward; let's go to work."

With that she marched out of her quarters of a mind to attend to her duties with the utmost professionalism and to not think of this again until DayCycle.

Artifacts From Home

Well it was great that the Captain had let him get some of his things from home. Asimov sat purring in his lap as he looked at the piles of stuff he had grabbed but hadn't sorted yet. Maybe he would get some help later, but he was certainly glad to save a few things he couldn't live without.

Asimov looked up at him as Jeff had stopped scratching the fuzzy ears while lost in thought. There was certainly no reason to stop a good scratch as far as Asimov was concerned. Jeff stood up cradling the cat in one arm and walked over to look at some of his treasures.

Pictures, books, his laptop computer and multicoloured CDs made up the bulk of his collection. It was wonderful that he had access to all of this Sa'm-ChAut information, but there was a great deal of human stuff he wanted to be able to read too. After all, reading and having stuff dictated directly into your brain are two totally different experiences, and Jeff knew which one he liked best. But not everyone can appreciate the total book experience.

Leafing through some of the books so that he could hear the sound of the paper, Jeff thought that he would have to find out who to ask about shelves. The Sa'm ChAut didn't seem to use much in the way of storage shelves as so much of their information was stored in computer systems and other small components. Something as big and bulky as a book would seem, well archaic.

Jeff thought about that, archaic books. He tried to access information about previous forms of communication and thought about the shape and form of a book. Surprisingly there was an error returned.

"Odd," Jeff thought. He tried to access information on his various possessions which were piled in front of him. Some information came through about early space-faring Sa'm-ChAut culture, but nothing as specific as what he was looking for.

Jeff thought he would look up Slatek. After all, knowing what they know about him might help.

Jeff began to find some interesting information concerning the Slatek Act and that there were large gaps in his accessed information. As he tried to get around those gaps he was interrupted by a ringing at the door.

"Come in," Jeff called out.

The door opened and there stood Spakael with a rather myopic looking fellow who was certainly a foot shorter than Jeff's friend.

"Jeff, hope you don't mind but I brought by Orthaphis. He's our science engineer but has made a special hobby of Xenology. I thought he'd like to see your collection."

"No at all, come on in." Jeff rose to shake Orthaphis' hand. Orthaphis responded but was lost in another world, he was staring at Jeff's pile of belongings from Slatek.

"Oh, yes Jeff, I am very glad to meet you. Please, I am very anxious to see what you have brought from Slatek." With that Orthaphis walked right past Jeff and dropped to a seated position on the floor and began to examine each and every object meticulously.

"Yep, he'll be at that for a while now," Spakael explained. "He'll look at everything until he knows it by heart and then he'll start asking you questions about them, about home, religion, social structure, mating habits, everything."

"Hmm, I suppose I can understand," Jeff responded, "after all, I'm in a similar position. I'm still learning about you. Having this thing in my head is a little like trying to fit in by using an encyclopaedia instead of a phrasebook." Jeff had gotten used to the translation circuit expressing his ideas in ways that his new friends could understand and vice-versa. There was no reason to explain an 'encyclopaedia' or a 'phrasebook' as the language chip would use an appropriate term which his audience would understand.

"Yep, you know everything specifically, but don't have any experience with our society to work from. "

"Exactly. It's too bad because there are some specific things I wish I could find out instead of having all of this antiseptic information in my head. " Jeff looked over to see if he Orthaphis was listening. He wasn't. "For example every time I spend time with Aurora I keep thinking about 'Sa'm-ChAut Mating Rituals' whether I want to or not.

"Yep, I can understand that. I think that any humanoid male would think the same things when being around Aurora. But you might as well try to forget about her. She so focused on her career that she has no husbands at all. Imagine someone her age with no husbands."

Jeff thought about that and could see the common sociology in his head. Love was not considered an exclusive thing amongst the Sa'm-ChAut and it was not uncommon for any individual to have two or three wives or husbands. It wasn't like a communal marriage, but rather a set of individual loving relationships. The Sa'm-ChAut lived for a very long time by comparison to his people and it was not considered to be feasible to commit to lifelong exclusive marriages.