

A mugging in 1998 South Central LA leads a young man on an unlikely journey aboard a Zephenidian Hunter ship. Will he find a way to avoid becoming dinner to these lupine aliens?

This is the revised 2015 edition

Warning: This story contains scenes of extreme violence. Reader discretion is advised.

## **The Jaws of the Wolf**

By

Gregg Abbott

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The engine groaned and shuddered, before dying in a grinding wail. “No!” I screamed as I gave the key another turn. The engine strained again, then coughed. Another turn of the key resulted in naught but a sick buzz. It was very clear that this car was not going anywhere. “Could you have died in some place other than the fucking ghetto!” I yelled. It was obvious that this car was dead, having succumbed to the ravages of age and past abuse. From my stereo, a song about a “piece of shit car,” played from an old cassette tape, which I had recorded from the Doctor Demento show, a year or two ago. I cursed Adam Sandler’s song for seemingly having

jinxed my car to an early grave. A curl of smoke rose from under the vehicle's hood, slowly spinning in a slow dance, before a breeze sent it dispersing over the street. I turned the key to the off position, which cut off the stereo, before removing the key from the ignition.

Dusk shrouded the dingy street in shadow. A smattering of trash spun around as it was carried along the nearby sidewalk in an eddy of wind. Two story buildings lined the street. Across from where I was parked, an alleyway seemed to disappear into a black void. I glanced through the driver's side window, catching sight of a boarded up liquor store, a possible victim of the riots several years before. A meat market was across the alley from the liquor store though it was closed. Further down the street was a shady looking service garage, which might have been a chop shop, where stolen automobiles could be dismantled for parts. Graffiti blighted the facades, advertising the local gang presence in large wide spray-painted scribbles.

A black man, dressed in a filthy, tattered, heavy coat, and pants which had more holes than pants, wandered slowly down the street. He stopped at a rubbish bin near a bus bench, and began rummaging for aluminum cans. Three youths in dark baggy clothing ran down the street, and as they passed the transient, one of them shoved him hard against the wall, then continued on. The transient staggered, before yelling in a badly slurred voice, "Fuck you, assholes!" at the group whilst flipping them the middle finger.

This was South Central Los Angeles, possibly Watts, though I was a bit unsure since I was lost. I had worked nearly three hours of overtime, at my job as a paper pusher at a freight transportation firm, in North Hollywood. Severe traffic had hampered my drive home. Having attempted to take a detour off of the freeway, road construction further diverted me deeper into the run-down neighborhoods. Making matters worse, my car was old, and almost falling apart. I meant to buy another car, eventually, but I wanted to get as much mileage from this mobile piece of detritus, as I could. In hindsight, this was a bad move. Now I had to find a way to get home alive, without being mugged, or worse.

I've never considered myself racist, however I avoided the more impoverished high crime areas like the plague. My family was upper-middle class, and despite what I saw as a dead end office job, I was still upper-middle class as far as the demographics were concerned. Despite having grown up near the beach, I'd never surfed, and rarely ever swam in the ocean. I was a geek, if any label was put on me. Star Trek, Babylon 5, and Stargate SG-1, were my favorite television shows. My apartment was a shrine to science fiction, with bookcases full of novels, as

well as VHS tapes, most of which were taped off the TV. I was still debating whether I wanted to buy a DVD player, as I had been putting this off until more titles came out in that format.

The driver-side door handle was loose and rattled as I jiggled it. There was a trick to opening it, but the exact alignment seemed to vary with each attempt, for no rhyme or reason. It finally caught, and the door opened with a loud creak and scrape of rusty hinges. I slowly exited the vehicle, being mindful of my surroundings. Fortunately, the street appeared deserted, save for the transient who continued to mutter to himself as he wandered further down the street. My car was a 1983 Honda Civic, abused overused, repainted, tortured, and possibly blown up, but it had served me faithfully and relatively trouble-free for eight years. It was dark gray, with areas of bare metal showing, and numerous dings and dents on it. The hood was bent upward in the middle, leaving several gaps large enough to insert a hand. Part of the windshield on the passenger's side had a large crack snaking across it. Almost all the car's damage had been present when I had bought it for \$400. This had turned out to be quite a deal, for the car required little servicing, and ran reliable, until tonight. As I stood back, and gave my car another glance, I felt that whatever was wrong, probably could be fixed, however, at this point, I probably should just let this eyesore go.

Police sirens wailed in the distance. There was a strong sense, that I was somewhere where I didn't belong. My heart pounded as I fixed my gaze on every nearby shadow, which appeared to slowly deepen as dusk wore on. Fortunately, the street still appeared deserted. The transient had wandered off looking for more cans, and the gang of youths was nowhere to be seen. The gloomy alleyway, which ran along the side of the liquor store, became slightly less ominous, as a nearby streetlight switched on. Partially hidden in the shadows of the alley, but now partially illuminated by the street light, was the blue handset logo of a pay phone. *That's my ticket, provided it still worked*, I thought as I hurried across the street, toward the alley. As I ran, I fumbled with my wallet to retrieve the slip of paper which had the phone number for the AAA Auto Club, so I could have my car towed, as well as get a ride out of this nightmare. My license with my name, Kenneth Rudich flashed by as I looked in the plastic card-holder for the folded piece of paper.

"Your wallet or your life whitey!" shouted a voice behind me. I turned and saw a pair of young African American men in their late teens or early twenties. The youth nearest to me was wearing an unbuttoned baggy leather jacket, with the stock of a handgun protruding from a

pocket. The other man wore an old, tattered, black Raiders T-shirt, with its helmet and crossed cutlass logo. He brandished his weapon.

The youth wearing the jacket approached me, his hand on the stock of his pistol. "We wouldn't mind the keys to your ride as well." He began to finger his gun as he stopped about ten feet from me. "Toss 'em over."

I tried to think of what to say, and managed to utter, "My car is dead."

"We don't fucking care," said the man with the drawn gun. "Just toss your fuckin' wallet and keys to my friend here, and we all can get going our merry ways."

There wasn't that much money in my wallet, and I knew I could cancel my credit and ATM cards once I got home, but it was the annoyance factor of having to get a new drivers license, and cancel and replace my cards. As for my car, it was probably going to be junked anyways, and I might have given it to them had they asked nicely. Still holding my wallet, I reached into my pocket with my other hand, grabbed my car keys, then slowly pulled them out. I tossed them five feet in front of me, then mentally prepared myself to part with my wallet. The youths did not approach any closer, which relieved me somewhat, since I did not want to end up roughed up, or beaten. However, this indignity did not sit well with me, and I wished I could have pulled a communicator, or touched a comm badge and shouted "Emergency Energize" and left the two human slimes staring blankly at the side of the liquor store where I used to be. Unfortunately, reality took precedence. There was little choice, either resist or mouth-off and get a gut-load of lead, or toss them my wallet, and possibly still ending up dead. It was not too uncommon for a mugger to kill a cooperating victim to eliminate witnesses especially in the age of three-strikes laws. Of course had they intended to kill me, why were they holding me at gunpoint? They could just as easily killed me, then looted my corpse like something out of a role playing game.

A strange humming whine made me almost jump. For a moment, I thought, or rather hoped, that the sound was from an approaching truck, despite the fact that no engine I've heard, made such a sound. As the hum rose in pitch and volume, a blue-green glow enveloped the nearest mugger, forming a hazy cylinder of light, which extended from the ground, to about three or four feet above his head. Blazing light appeared around the cylinder, about chest height, where it spread, and divided, into two rings, one moving upward, over the man's head, the other sweeping downward, toward his feet. The mugger's form began to shimmer and dissolve, like

something out of Star Trek. He screamed, his voice reverberating oddly. “What the fuck!” He lunged at me, but struck the inside of the cylinder which flashed and rippled, as he fell back onto his posterior. The man became a translucent shimmering form. His voice had a distant hollow sound, as he cried out, “What the fuck! Help!” The blazing lights reached the extent of the cylinder, as the man vanished into the field. The bands reversed and converged. Oddly, the mugger could still be heard carrying on, though his voice was indistinct, a faint, hollow reverberating echo. “Oh my god, what the fuck!” The resonating hum began to fall in pitch as the bands of light converged. The lights met, merged, then faded. The energy field remained for about a second longer, before it, too, dissipated, along with the hum.

With my vision still spotty from that light show, I began to worry that my fantasy life was beginning to intrude on my perception of reality. I had seen with my own eyes, someone who was apparently beamed away, like something out of Star Trek. Before I could explore this further in my mind, the man who was brandishing the gun regained his composure. He leveled the weapon at me again. “What the fuck did you do to him! You fucking alien Star Trek Mutha fucka! You is dead meat, whitey Martian fuck!”

Fantasy life, or no, the truth was apparent. There was only one assailant now, a rather agitated paranoid assailant. Whether I had seen a person actually get transported away, or whether this was a figment of my fantasy life, the reality was, one of the muggers was missing. There was indeed only a single assailant standing in front of me. His face was screwed up in a fit of rage. All I could think, to do, was try to play the whole situation, cool. “Him? There's no one else here.”

The remaining thug seemed momentarily confused. “Martian fuck, you have five seconds to bring my bro back!” the man screamed. “Now!”

The air suddenly began to take on a slight milky cyan tinge, as the same strange whining hum filled the air. A bright ring of light formed around me at about chest high, split, and began to diverge. Startled, the gang member jumped back and fired. The gunshots sounded oddly hollow and distorted as the bullets flashed against the energy field, and ricocheted away. A second, dimmer ring formed, and split, then a third formed. The effect resembled waves of light, which flowed along the wall of the energy field. The street took on a murky shimmer, as it began to dissolve into the haze. I dropped my wallet, extended both arms, and raised my middle fingers in a gesture of defiance, as everything melted into the energy field. There was no sensation of

being taken apart molecule by molecule, instead, there was a slight tingle and a sensation of a downward movement, as the gravity seemed to ebb. The floor felt frictionless, so I held still so I wouldn't slip. The rings of energy began to converge, and the sensation changed to an upward motion. An indistinct room sparkled and wavered into view. The bands converged and vanished, and the energy field faded, along with the hum. The first thing I noticed, was that the air was cool and smelled like the inside of a dog kennel.

I was standing on a ten-foot wide disk in an alcove with stained metal walls. Ahead, was a large control console, with two chairs on the other side, facing me. Behind the console, was a large open doorway, with a corridor beyond. To my left was another open door, with a warehouse or cargo hold beyond, filled with all manner of crates and containers. To my right was a makeshift cage made from metal rods welded to the floor and ceiling, with a latched gate providing access. The walls and floor were bare metal, which was pitted and stained with rust and age. The ceiling was crisscrossed with exposed conduits, and small light panels provided illumination. There was only one theme here, functionality with little aesthetics, for everything tended to be straight lines.

Standing at the console were three creatures which looked like bipedal anthropomorphic wolves, without tails. Their faces were lupine muzzles with whiskers, brown eyes with no white visible, and large pointed ears. They spoke to one another in a harsh, guttural, language which sounded like dogs trying to speak German, or Klingon.

I nervously watched the creatures argue about something. Their jaws were large, and their teeth resembled those of dogs or wolves. Their bodies were proportioned somewhat like a humanoid, though the arms appeared slightly longer. Their hands were large, furred, and somewhat human-like, though the digits were tipped with sturdy claws. Their fur was gray with touches of white, brown and black and appeared thick and coarse, like that of a German Shepherd or similar dog. Under the arms, the fur hung long, and had jewelry and other trinkets affixed to some of the strands, possibly denoting rank or social status. One of them wore what appeared to be a pair of knee-length, beige, padded shorts, and a similarly padded vest with numerous pockets. The other two wore nothing. They were obviously male, each with a prominent penile sheath, and a scrotum.

The wolf-alien, with the padded attire, stood behind the console. He was nearly seven feet tall. The two remaining aliens were shorter, but were still a fair bit taller than me. One of

them was slumped against the wall next to the console, with the other one tending to a small bloody wound on its shoulder. The cause of the wound, the young man from the alleyway, was laying in a heap on the filthy floor, groaning in agony. He rolled onto his back, revealing a smoking hole, about two inches across, on his jacket, just under the collar. He screamed, contorted, then muttered.

The taller wolf-alien seemed agitated, first barking at the one tending to the injured individual, before shouting something at the console. "*TahVush Kha Tu Chuthnu!*" The creature fidgeted a bit, then shouted more urgently, "*TahVush Kha Tu Chuthnu!*" A synthetic voice issued from a speaker on the console, barking some meaningless gibberish. The creature turned to the other, who was still tending the other alien's injuries, and barked an unintelligible command. The other creature grabbed a long pole, tipped with a short scythe-like blade, then turned toward the injured one, and spoke. The injured alien slowly and unsteadily got to his feet, and staggered through the door, into the adjoining passage. I remained on the transporter disk, dazed, not totally sure I was comprehending my surroundings properly.

The alien approached me while brandishing the weapon. I held my hands out to show I was unarmed, as I took a couple of steps to the edge of the transporter alcove. This was literally a first contact situation. I coughed, cleared my throat, before speaking. "My name is Ken Rudich. I, ah, I come in peace." The creature didn't speak, but gazed at me, before brandishing the hooked spear again, with both hands. I continued to stand with both hands out, palms up. "I, ah, I mean you no harm." The creature reached the hooked blade behind me, and I felt the point jab painfully into my back. I jumped off of the transporter disk, as I yelped, then shouted, "Hey, watch it! Us humans are fragile." I felt my back where I was jabbed, and fingered a deep wet scratch, then looked at my fingers which were now smeared with blood. The creature grabbed my arm, roughly, with its large hand, and pulled me forcefully to the makeshift cage. It was then, that I realized that the cage was occupied by a skinny Asian man, who was huddled in the far corner, attempting to wedge himself against the inclined wall. The alien unlatched the gate, shoved me inside, then latched it closed. As the creature walked back toward the console, I inspected the latch, and saw that there was no obvious lock. Though working the latch would be easy, escape would be nearly impossible, with these creatures present.

The alien at the console adjusted something on the panel and pressed a few buttons. A low thrum came from the floor, and it increased till I could feel a slight vibration under my feet.

The transporter field formed and the rings diverged, accompanied by the familiar rising hum. A faint agonized howl sounded, but it was oddly distorted. The rings reached the extent of the chamber, and converged. This time the scream sounded more distinct. There was something, which was in a great deal of pain, materializing in the alcove. A smoky shimmer formed, and a slumped human figure began to take shape. Leaf litter and grass also formed, some of which flickered with flame. The rings met and the fields dissipated, and the hum faded. The vibrations from the floor subsided. The wolf-scent was obliterated by the smell of a brush fire, and the sickly stench of burning flesh. A middle aged man, wearing a uniform, and a fire helmet, was writhing and screaming, his face and arms covered with horrendous burns.

The alien, who sat at the console, barked something into the communicator panel. A low rumble sounded from beneath the floor, and the room began to rock and shake. It was slow, and gentle for a few moments, before increasing in intensity. I grabbed the bars of the cage as I feared that the vibrations would shake the room apart. The shaking and shuddering continued to increase, as I maintained my grip on the metal rods. The burned man on the transporter disk, continued to writhe, before sliding out of the alcove, screaming and flailing. The shuddering continued to slowly intensify for the next several minutes. The two alien wolves had taken their seats, and were holding onto the console, as well. After what might have been a good ten minutes or so, there was one last lurch, then the sound died down to a low subdued hum.

*Why are these aliens bringing us aboard*, I thought, now almost certain that I was on a spaceship. I still had no idea whether these aliens were benign, or hostile, though much didn't sit right for me. They displayed little regard for their human passengers, allowing two seriously injured humans to slide around, as the ship engaged its main engines. One of the aliens had jabbed me with a hooked spear type weapon, making me worry, momentary, about alien tetanus.

These creatures appeared to be some kind of sentient lupine carnivore species. A horrible thought, that these aliens came to earth to hunt and procure prey, was foremost on my mind. I didn't want to jump to any conclusions based on any prejudices, but everything about this situation felt wrong. Anal probes were definitely the least of my worries.

The gang member slowly struggled to his feet, less injured than I realized, likely saved by his jacket. He looked around, then fixed his gaze on his pistol, which was laying under the console. The naked wolf-alien grabbed the hook-bladed weapon from the floor and walked over to where the man stood. There was no overt reaction from the man, who glanced at the alien,

then his weapon. The wolf alien grabbed the man by the shoulder, placed the hook at the man's groin, and jerked the weapon upward with great force. The man's pants tore loudly, as he screamed. Blood sprayed across the floor. After one more jerk, the hook slid up through the man's abdomen, tearing through flesh, and popping the jacket's buttons. Pink loops of intestine spilled out onto the floor. This was not something I wanted to see, as I gulped at a wash of bitterness, which bubbled up from my throat. After a moment of hyperventilating, I risked a quick glance, and regretted it. The gang member was still twitching in a pool of blood, feebly clawing at his exposed organs. Killed like an animal. Seeing my previous misgivings confirmed, I shivered. *Are we going to be FOOD?* I turned to the skinny man, who was still huddled in the corner of the cage. He seemed relatively young, possibly from India, and obviously scared out of his mind. I asked, "Do you know what's going on here?"

"No Inglis." said the man, signifying that he couldn't speak English or was too terrified to try.

A scream sounded near the transporter alcove. Both aliens were dragging the poor burned man across the floor, causing extreme torment. One of the aliens grabbed the human's right arm in his teeth, and began to chew, spattering the floor with more blood. The human shrieked in a voice I've never heard a person make before, a shriek of pure mortal agony. He contorted in pain as the other alien grabbed the man's other arm, and they began to pull him apart. It was like watching a pair of wild dogs dismember a living antelope. "No!" I screamed as I grabbed the bars. "No, goddammit! Stop this!" The Indian man had bounded to his feet as well, and lunged at the bars of the cage shouting in his native language, along with several shouts of "No!" The burned human was still alive, but his arms were chewed off at the elbows. The alien, who was wearing the padded shorts, and vest, grabbed the dying man, by the legs, and dragged him through the door, leaving twin trails of blood, like crimson train tracks.

I felt numb, like I was watching a horror movie, but I could smell the blood, and feel the chill of the cold air, as well as the dread in my heart. The full sensory overload was nearly too much for me. I stared through the bars, watching the remaining alien securing the straps of a holster over its shoulders and around its hip. From a compartment, behind the console, the alien grabbed a large pistol and shoved it into the holster. The alien approached the gate of the cage, and stared in at me, then looked at the young man, who retreated to the far corner, again. Taking this man's cue, I decided to back away, as well, hoping to delay the inevitable, though I feared it

would only be a brief reprieve.

I squeezed into the space under the wall's incline, and felt the pitted metal. This did seem to be an old ship and probably not well cared for, at least not in this area. I traced a nail along a crack. The crack was straight and had other scratch marks near it. Peering at the marks, it was obviously writing, much of which, was in English. Most of the more legible tracings, were etched into the metal with sharp instruments, possibly geometry compasses, and knives. Faded marker, chipped nail polish, and bits and spots of ball point pen ink, also provided testament to the multitude of people who have been taken by these creatures, and likely brutally killed.

Amelia, E-something. It was hard making it out, as rust nearly obliterated parts of it. "This can't fucking be," I mumbled as I brushed my hand at the pitted metal. It looked like a signature. Amelia E-something which ended in a T?? It was etched into the metal. There was more written above the name, scratched into the wall with the same instrument. I really hoped, whoever wrote that message, got a chance to use that implement on one of his or her captors. After many moments of studying the writing, while rubbing the worst of the rust off the wall, I made out the following message.

We crashed on a . . . near . . . .

We survived, but we . . . no fresh water.

A . . . light took us to . . . hell. Wolf men are eating us.

Fred was killed. I'm next. God help us all.

Below the message, was the apparent signature. Amelia E-something-t, Ear-something-t, Earhart! I couldn't vouch for its authenticity. Why someone would do such a prank in this dire situation, totally escaped me. Speculations of her fate had run rampant, and had been featured in numerous science fiction TV shows and in conspiracy theories. If this message was authentic, this would mean that she was indeed abducted by aliens, though her fate was probably far more horrible than anyone could imagine.

A metallic click made me nearly jump. I looked up to see the wolf alien opening the gate, before charging at the Asian man. He cowered in the corner, to no avail. The wolf alien grabbed the man's arms with its large clawed hands, and dragged him, kicking and screaming toward the gate. As I watched, in horror, I caught the glint of black metal under the console – the gangster's

pistol. I had no way of knowing if the gun was loaded, but any chance to escape would be better than nothing. I'd be dead regardless. Going down fighting, would probably be far less painful, and far more dignified, than being slaughtered like a pig. I slowly got to my feet, and circled the wolf alien, trying to keep the creature's back toward me. The creature was distracted, as the young man struggled and fought for his life. Once I knew that the alien's attention was totally focused on his quarry, I lunged from the cage and dove toward the console. My intention, was to perform a roll, like the kind often done on TV shows. Instead, I landed hard on my belly, sliding through the pools of blood and viscera. I ducked at the last instant, to avoid hitting my head on the bottom of the control console. A searing, white-hot blast, flashed against the floor, near my elbow, causing a nearby mass of congealed blood, and part of a stomach, to erupt in a sizzling spatter. I grabbed the pistol, rolled onto my back, and fired repeatedly, until the weapon clicked. The creature yelped, then slumped to the floor, with several bullet holes in its chest, and face, each oozing rivulets of deep red blood. The young man collapsed on top of the alien, having been hit in his neck and chest, as well. Anger welled up inside me, and I screamed in rage. "I will fucking kill you all! I'll toss all you mother fuckers out the airlock!" I struggled to my feet, nearly slipping in the blood, and walked to where the man was laying on the dead alien. He weakly reached a hand toward me. I reached down, and he grasped my hand in his.

He spoke, but I couldn't understand the words, but it seemed to be a blessing, or his thanking me for freeing him from this nightmare, or both. His mouth formed into a smile as his eyes rolled back into his head, before he released his grip.

I still felt horrible for having accidentally killed the man. "I will avenge us all." I whispered to him. "I'm sorry for shooting you. My revenge is your revenge." The gang member's torn body was still laying in a pool of his own blood and entrails, near the console. I looked down at him and whispered, "Even you deserve better than this, I will avenge you, too."

I tossed the pistol aside and pulled the alien's side-arm from its fingers. It was larger and heavier than the gangster's weapon. It appeared to be some kind of laser, phaser, or disruptor. The weapon had a long stock with a trigger, but no trigger guard. The body was angular, and the long barrel terminated in several projections around the tip. A slider control on the main body of the weapon, was apparently a power level selector. I did not know what the settings meant, but since that was the setting the creature was using to try to kill me, I decided that the setting was adequate. Besides, I had no desire to create a hull breach and end up sniffing space, which might

not be particularly pleasant, either.

I hurried out of the doorway into a short, narrow corridor. A similar doorway, across the corridor, lead to another cargo hold, filled with more crates and boxes. To my right, at the end of the passage, was a ladder, leading down. The other end of the corridor ended at a wall with an air vent, or a service tunnel, with a rusted grate covering it. I approached the ladder, and peered down at the deck, below. A wolf-alien walked by, below me, appearing similar to the others, except that its arm fur was braided. I surmised that the arm fur might have had similar significance to the hair on the heads of humans, and was styled in much the same way. Two more of those creatures strode by, beneath me. Descending the ladder would likely be suicide, even with the alien pistol I was gripping in my hand. I turned toward the vent cover, on the opposite end. It appeared to be badly rusted, almost crumbling. I reached my hand toward it, and grabbed the grate. There was some give, as a small torrent of orange dust, cascaded from the metal, but it held fast. I turned and mule-kicked the grate. With a loud clatter and a shower of fine rust, it broke apart. The vent was narrow but not overly cramped, so I crawled inside.

The air, which issued from the vent, was cool, and had none of the doggy smell that permeated the rest of this vessel. The passage was short, leading to a vertical shaft, a mere ten feet or so from the entrance. Looking down, I could make out a few ladder rungs, before they disappeared in the wall of darkness, below. On either side of the rungs were bundles of cables and conduits. I listened for any signs of anyone, or anything, moving around inside the shaft, but all was quiet, save for a slight rumbling, presumably the ship's engines. No alarms sounded, which meant that for the moment, I was safe.

I swung my legs down, into the black abyss, below, and felt for one of the rungs. Once I found purchase, I slowly backed down the ladder, while maintaining my grip on the weapon. As I cautiously felt my way down the shaft, I noticed vague outlines of shapes. There were small dots of light, which shone from what might have been status panels. After climbing down several feet, my foot swung into empty space. Feeling around with my foot, I found another rung, and I slowly lowered myself to a horizontal tunnel, below me. I stopped, and thought about the situation, and felt a sense of dread. *One of the aliens is going to find the mess in the transporter room, and raise the alarm, I thought. I really should have shoved the gun into the hand of one of the dead humans.* It was too late for me to go back, without risking getting caught, and slaughtered.

My gut instinct, was to continue down at least one more level, which I heeded. As I continued my descent, I became more uneasy at the fact that I still heard no alarms. Since these were wolf-evolved aliens, the alarms could have, very well, been ultrasonic. Display screens or word of mouth, might also have been used to raise the alarm. I knew I couldn't make assumptions, and that time was not on my side.

I came to the next horizontal passage, and felt curiosity take hold of me. I had to balance expediency with, at least, getting some sense of what I was up against. Besides, I had no plan to speak of, and that was something I very desperately needed. I slowly crouched, feeling for the floor of the passage, then pushed myself onto my belly, as I crawled forward.

To either side of me were thick bundles of cables and above me were conduits. It was quite dark inside the passage, though I could see some details and shadows, due to a series of tiny lights on the wall. As I crawled ahead, about twenty feet or so, I came upon a partition which extended into the crawlspace a few inches. At the partition or junction, the cables entered one side, and emerged on the other side. A slot, along the upper edge of the partition, and a groove around it, suggested that this was where a door could slide in place to seal the section in the event of a hull breach. Moving past the partition, another few dozen feet, I came upon another junction. Some distance beyond, there was a four-way intersection, then another set of junctions. After passing another intersection, I noticed a faint light up ahead. I cautiously crawled toward the light, and noticed a closed grate.

The grate was only about 25 inches or so high, and appeared to be situated high up on a wall, near the ceiling. Peering through the slats, I looked down upon a dingy room, with tables and benches, with a few computer displays. On the far wall, was a large view screen, or window. This appeared to be a combination dining area and briefing room. The view screen showed a broken tunnel of green and blue mist, swirling by in a rush of color. *Hyperspace* I thought. "We have HYPERSPACE!" I shouted, becoming for a moment, an excited fan boy, before biting my tongue. Excitement had overwhelmed me, and I fought for self control, fearing I might get caught. Someone, at least, had found a way to propel a ship through some kind of warp or null space, even if the creatures doing so wanted to eat me. This made me feel hopeful that there was a way for humanity to eventually colonize other planets in other star systems. This also brought a new reality to me. We were heading away from earth at a fantastic speed, and the longer that drive drove, the less likely I'd ever see my home, again. This was a marvel of technology, a true

wonder that these creatures were using, and now my mission was becoming increasingly clear. I had to destroy or disable it, even if I had to blow myself up in the process.

I backed away from the grate, then turned back into the passageway, listening intently for any signs of alarm or pursuit. As I made my way toward the vertical shaft, I thought, *Where would I find the hyperdrive?* Most of what I've read in novels, or seen on TV and movies, suggested that the drive would likely be on the lowermost deck. I know that if I at least headed in the right general direction, I should be able to bump into it, since a drive capable of ripping a ship across the galaxy at significant faster than light speeds, should be something fairly large, and impossible to miss. Of course, this was merely an assumption on my part. *For all I know, it could just be a baseball sized glowing orb located under one of the toilets in a common lavatory,* I mused. I cautiously crawled through the passage, listening intently, but heard nothing. *They ought to have found the bodies by now.* I was becoming increasingly worried.

As far as finding the ship's FTL drive, I felt that my first assumption was more reasonable, so I decided to head down. After crawling back through what might have been over a football field length of access tunnels, I reached the vertical shaft. Still clutching the weapon, I clambered onto the rungs, and began to hurry downward. The alarm wailed!

I was in trouble, and knew it. Speed was of the essence. I tried to hurry, causing me to lose my grip on the gun, which clattered on the floor, below. As I hurried down, I slipped, and lost my footing, nearly falling the last ten feet or so. The landing was jarring, nearly twisting my ankle, as my foot landed on the gun. I reached down to retrieve the weapon, then, looked around to get my bearings. There were a number of tunnels leading from the shaft, at floor level, but they seemed very small and cramped. My gut feeling, was that these tunnels ran under the engine room's floor, and would be pretty much useless. About six feet up, was a horizontal duct, which gave me a better vibe. I climbed a few rungs, and entered the passageway, hoping my instincts were correct.

I held the gun at the ready, just in case any of the aliens entered the passage. As I pushed forward, I felt and heard the low thrum of the engine, despite the alarm still sounding in the distance. The passage seemed to grow warmer, as I crawled forward. The thrum pulsed, like there was something alive, or very important, nearby. The passageway ended at a three-way intersection, with a grate ahead of me. Peering through the grate, the view was blocked by some miscellaneous equipment or machinery. The left passage felt promising, so I shimmied along to

the left, which eventually began to curve right. Moving as quickly as I could, I soon came upon another vent. Peering through the grate, I could see the “Honey Pot.”

Through the slats of the vent, was a huge room, likely filling the entire lowermost deck of the vessel. Complex control consoles ran along the walls, with large status displays full of graphs, diagrams, and scrolling alien script, in strategic locations throughout the room. Most of the room was occupied by an immense tubular object which was almost the length of a football field, and was a good seven feet thick. Much of the tube was composed of a clear glass-like material, with a luminous cyan plasma pulsing through it. The tube ran through several large metal structures, which served to anchor it to the deck, as well as being places for additional consoles and displays. Coils and other components were visible through the glass. The room thrummed in time with the plasma flow, and heat bathed my face. If this wasn't the heart of the ship's hyperdrive system, nothing was. *Now, how to destroy it without blowing up the entire ship?*

A large bipedal wolf walked in front of the grate, turned its back toward me, and checked a display, before poking at a control panel. I watched the creature work for a moment, while fingering the gun. *Fuck it, he dies.* Carefully, I placed the barrel against a gap in the slats, and took aim. My hand slowly tightened around the trigger. A lance of energy tore into the creature's back, setting its fur on fire. It howled in pain as it collapsed, screaming and thrashing about. Now for the drive. I had absolutely no idea what would happen, if I destroyed the drive while the ship was in hyperspace. It might drop back into normal space. On the other hand, it might phase out of the universe into oblivion, or eat pure antimatter creating a new Big Bang. *Maybe the computers knows how to handle it, if I...* I pondered. *Cut the fuel, or some other lines powering this machine?* From the ceiling, conduits, and cables, snaked to various points on the drive. I took aim at a plump hose, and fired. The beam sliced through the conduit sending a plume of hissing vapor. Something flashed, and the vapor exploded, sending a plume of flame swinging through the room. An alien wolf, wielding a pistol, charged into view, but was caught in the face by the torrent of flames, which swept by, as the severed hose whipped around uncontrollably like a dying snake. The sight was ugly, as the creature's fur ignited, and its face melted off its skull. The scream, as the creature clawed at its exposed skull, sent shivers up my spine.

A new alarm, a harsh buzz-buzz-buzz, sounded, as the pulsing hum from the engine

began to slow. There was a lurch, and shudder, as the drive began to emit a falling whine. The plasma stream began to slow, and dim, changing to a slightly deeper green. There was nothing for me to do, but wait. I was tempted to take more potshots at the hyperdrive, but I felt that this would be unwise. The ship was definitely slowing, so I waited. Several alien wolves charged into view. One of the aliens began to work the nearby console, which sparked, and sputtered. The other two attacked the flames with devices which resembled miniature megaphones. As the shaking continued, one of the creatures turned toward the vent, noticed me, then charged. With a quick squeeze of the weapon's trigger, the alien's face flash-fried to a smoking charred mass. The other two creatures turned, glanced at me, then ran in opposite directions.

The shuddering continued for a good ten minutes, as I huddled in the vent, clutching the weapon. There was a sense of victory. I had killed three of the wolf aliens, four, if I counted the one who burned in the flames.

With a lurch, the floor steadied, and the engine noise died out. The alarm continued to buzz. There was a commotion, as a dozen lupine aliens charged into the room on the other side of the hyperdrive. I could only see their legs, as they walked digitigrade around the drive. A few moments after their arrival, the plume of flame abruptly died, as the fuel was shut off. The creatures barked and yapped angrily as they fanned out in a search pattern.

I took a few breaths, as I craned my neck to get a better view of the front of the engine room. One of the wolf-aliens stepped around the drive, wielding a heavy rifle. *Don't want to get shot, or eaten, maybe take as many of these, with me, as I can.* The hyperdrive was likely not seriously damaged. "Could I blow it up?" I mumbled. I carefully took aim at a nice juicy area where a series of coils were visible under the glass, and fired. The blast flashed from the glass, leaving a minor discoloration. I held the weapon steady as I fired again, and again, before moving it slightly with each shot. The glass held fast with each shot, becoming increasingly discolored. A crack appeared, so I targeted it, and continued to fire. Clawed feet clicked on the hard floor. They were mere seconds from the vent. There was a loud pop, and a torrent of green flame erupted from the drive. A gray shape charged in front of the vent. I was torn between continuing my assault on the drive, and retreating into the vent. "One more shot," I said to myself, as I fired, twice, into the opening, blasting several of the coils. The wolf turned, as I speared it in the gut with another blast. Arcs of energy jumped and played along the hyperdrive, and several of the consoles exploded like small bombs. I turned around inside the shaft, and

quickly crawled to the main junction. Looking back, there seemed to be no sign of pursuit. It was then, that I realized, I had dropped the alien weapon.

*Blam!* A bright flash illuminated the duct. The entire ship seemed to heave and shake, like it was coming apart. A shock wave blasted through the passage, followed by an intense screaming wind, which threatened to drag me back toward the engine room. It was obvious what was happening. *Hull breach!* I frantically fought against the wind, fearing that a door might slide shut, cutting off my escape. Visions of vacuum exposure scenes from various movies, made me shudder. I wasn't exactly sure what would happen to me in a vacuum, but thoughts of my eyes bugging out, or freezing solid, while I sucked on a void sandwich, drove me onward. There was a hiss behind me, and the wind abruptly stopped. Looking back, I saw that a door had slid across the passage, and sealed the breach. I was safe for now, but for how long?

I retraced my route. The passage was darker, now, since most of the lights were out, and the few which remained, flickered uncertainly. Once my hand felt the edge of the passage, I carefully turned and dropped to the bottom of the vertical shaft. Being able to finally stand, I took the opportunity to stretch. The shadows were pitch dark, and danced around, as the lights flickered and sputtered, weakly. I slowly sagged into a sitting position, with my back against the far corner of the shaft, and caught my breath. The alarms continued to wail and buzz for a time, before the harsh buzzing alarm abruptly stopped. I listened intently for any sign of movement, but all was quiet, save for the a remaining alarm. No one was in the shaft. Of course it was possible, even likely, that they knew where I was, and either had all exits guarded, or sealed, or were planning to flush me into space. The ship should be on full alert, considering the amount of damage I had done. *Is the ship running out of crew?* I must have killed nearly twenty of the aliens, both directly, and indirectly. *Could everyone be dead? What now?* Life support was still working, but for how long? What would I have to eat? "Would I have to resort to eating the crew, and the hu--" I stopped that thought as the horror of what I was about to say, became apparent. "Either the survivors are going to kill me, or I will die out here, all alone." I had no idea how far from earth, I was. *Will I ever see earth again? This ship will be my tomb.* I didn't like this possibility, but it seemed inevitable. Hunting down any remaining crew members, could provide a bit of a diversion, but this would be complicated by the fact that I had lost the gun. *Maybe I can find a new gun? Maybe I can go back to the top level and see if the gang member's weapon is still there.* I had no idea how long I sat in the dark, pondering my fate, since I was

never big on wearing watches. Resting my back against the wall, I ran my fingers along a nearby molded metal rung. There was surprisingly little dust, probably due to the hull breach I had caused. The wailing alarm abruptly stopped. The quiet began to close in on me. It was like a tomb. It was dark, a bit chilly, and utterly silent.

A strange, eerie, scraping, creak, sounded, like a whale singing in the depths, lasting a good ten seconds or so, then all was quiet again. A few moments later, a low metallic moan filled the ship. *Is this what a spaceship sounds like, when the engines are off? Uneven cooling? Or was it the damage I had wrought upon it.* The silence continued for a while. I could hide here, possibly as long as I wanted, well, until life support failed. A horrible possibility entered my mind. What if they sent a distress call? More wolves could arrive, and with that, a much more horrible death. Waiting in this interstellar tomb, was not an option.

I scrambled to my feet, and climbed up the ladder rungs, which was much slower going, then my earlier descent. I reached the passage, where I thought I might find the dining room area, that I had seen earlier. Entering the passage, I crawled quickly, driven by curiosity. I suspected, the dining area would be less well guarded, than the top level. It might, also, allow me to get my bearings, possibly to figure out what I was up against. I rushed past the various junctions, and through an intersection. The crawl seemed to take longer, than I remembered, as I traversed the entire length of the ship. Ahead, a light shone, then flickered. As I crawled as fast as I could, I noticed the vent grate, slowly swinging by a corner. I stopped, several feet from the exit, and peered into the room. The floor was littered with broken glass, metal widgets which might have been utensils, and other debris. The view screen no longer showed the mists, but inky black space speckled with stars. The hyperdrive was dead.

“*Chuthnu!*” It was both audible, as well as in my mind. “*Chuthnu!*”

I slowly backed away from the grate.

“Don't be alarmed.” It sounded like barking gibberish, but it also got into my head, making me understand what it was saying, like it was in English.

I was caught between wanting to speak to the creature, and desiring to retreat back into the bowels of the ship's access tunnels. “What do you want!” I shouted. “I know you want to eat me, but I won't let you. Go away!”

A wolf-alien strode to the back of the galley, in front of the viewport. The creature appeared a good seven feet tall, gray fur, with few markings, with a fringe of fur hanging from

under its arms. It wore a pair of knee length shorts which appeared to be made from some kind of light beige leather, and a padded vest with numerous pockets, made from a similar material. The handles of numerous tools could be seen poking from several of the pockets. A black headband was visible on its forehead, running just under its large pointed ears. Dangling from its belt, was a black rectangular device, with a couple of red and blue lights blinking on its surface.

The creature seemed familiar, though it could have just been the clothes it wore. I wanted to turn and flee through the vent shaft, but the fact that the creature spoke to me, made me hesitate. I turned back toward the vent grate, and yelled, “Why can I understand you!” Why are you fucking with my head! I'm going to kill you all, goddammit!”

“You're doing quite a good job at that, already!” The creature growled. “You've killed about half of us so far. You killed Juchuk in the processing room, and you destroyed the entire engineering deck, killing over fifteen crew members.”

I shouted, “So you are the negotiator, to discuss terms for my surrender! I will not surrender!”

“If I'm caught speaking to you, I'd be executed!” barked the creature. “Your species is not supposed to be sentient. The *Establishment of Prukak* says that *chuthnu* are non-sentient, but you're obviously sapient. I can actually speak to you. I am speaking to you, and doing so is punishable by execution.” The creature took a step forward, and waved its hand toward me. “Come out. We don't have much time.”

I did not trust this wolf alien, at all. “You just want your last meal, before life support fails. I'm not falling for it.”

“You have the right to not trust me.” The creature fidgeted, then motioned toward himself. “I'm not going to hurt you.”

The creature was definitely familiar. This was almost certainly one of the creatures who was in the transporter room, when I was brought aboard. “You....are.” I began to feel angry, like I wanted to charge at the alien to kill it with my bare hands. “I saw you fucking kill...”

“Yes, I gutted your friend.” The creature looked down at its feet for a moment. “Yes, I helped chew off the arms of the other *chuthnu*. Many others, I have slaughtered in the past. The hunt, and predatory instincts, run deep in my species. I became a part of this because I thought *H'Khara Chu* desired this, from me. The *Establishment* must pay. If I can't make them pay, then *Hhrff Ukh Paharkh* should serve as an example.”

This was a lot for me to digest. There was something about the hunt, and *H'Khara Chu*, which seemed to translate as “The gods of the hunt.” Then, there was this *Establishment* thing, which might have been their government. The term “*Chuthnu*” seemed to be their word for humans, though used in the sense of a prey species. *Why is he speaking to me, and risking death?* “Why should I trust you. I watched you *eat* a man *alive!*”

“You have no choice,” the wolf said with a sense of urgency. “The alternative is for you to stay in the service ducts. You'd be safe from the rest of my crew. Everyone is rather occupied, at the moment. Unfortunately, this ship is crippled in enemy territory. Plasma cannon fire does not discriminate. The hull would split open, either crushing you, or sending you into space. Your choice, trust me, and you might live, or stay up there and wait for the ship to be blown apart.”

This was a tough call. “Okay, suppose I do go along with you. How would you get me past the other wolf-people, who'd want to eat me?”

The creature growled again. “*Chuthnu*, you had just blown a house-sized hole in this ship. They're quite busy trying to figure out how to deal with the fact that the entire engineering deck is gone. The ship is stranded. The hyperdrive is destroyed. And, with the diminished crew, tasks have been spread out, very thin.”

I was very reluctant, but I felt that this was my best hope for survival. “Okay, you win,” I kicked the grate, which fell with a loud clang, then I turned and backed out of the duct. As I slid my feet over the side, and eased myself to the floor, I felt naked, vulnerable, since I had lost the alien firearm. The alien stood on the other side of the room, in front of the large viewport, watching me. I worried that I might have looked like a fine steak, to him. I turned and nervously looked at the large lupine alien. “Ah, if you are seriously going to help, then let's get out of here.”

The alien walked past me to a double door, below the vent. The doors parted, and the creature beckoned me to follow. Pulsing red light lit the corridors. Flames and sparks spat out from the wreckage of a door panel. The wolf peered over his shoulder, as I followed about ten feet behind him. “I was the one who brought you here. I wasn't even authorized to do so. I'm.” He stopped, and turned to face me. I stopped as well, to maintain distance. “I'm, I'm sorry. I hope you're unhurt. I'll do what I can.”

“I hope you're being sincere,” I said.

“I'm not diseased, and I'm not going to hurt you.” The creature beckoned me. “You need to stay closer, or I'd be unable to protect you, if someone showed up. Now, I hope there is a working escape pod.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” I asked, nervously. “We might not make it off this wreck after all?”

“This is a very old ship. Some parts have been replaced over the years, like weapons, engines, shields, but escape pods were considered low priority.”

“Figures.” I sighed. “Sounds like something our military might do. 'Yeah, let's replace the guns, the hull and add more gizmos, but we'll keep the old dead lifeboats so a training accident can send a thousand screaming crewmen into the depths.'”

“Our species seem to have much in common.” The wolf alien grinned, slightly, showing his fangs.

“Yeah, but at least we don't eat sentient creatures.”

The wolf alien beckoned again. I nervously approached, as the creature turned and proceeded down the corridor. The corridor turned right. As I followed the alien, I noticed a sealed hatchway with a blue glowing button next to it. “This one appears to be the only working pod in this part of the ship,” the wolf-alien said. He pressed the button and the hatch opened up, and outward. The interior of the pod was bathed in a red glow, and the air smelled stale. Through the hatch, the interior resembled that of a small train car, with three pairs of seats. The alien ducked through the hatchway, and waved for me to follow. Inside, the pod was cramped, with status displays and control clusters restricting movement. To my right, was a viewport, which was dark and gray, possibly because it was obstructed by the inside of the ship's hull. I reluctantly sat in the front seat, next to the alien. The creature poked at a small control cluster, and checked a display. A sick grinding noise filled the pod, then the lights flickered out, plunging everything into darkness. The lights flickered back on, again, and the sound subsided. “We can't afford to search for another pod. We'll have to risk it.”

“Wait--” I protested.

The creature hit a large button. The pod lurched to the left, then forward, pushing me into the seat. After ten seconds, the force cut abruptly, causing a sensation of free fall. I gripped the seat to keep myself from floating, and began to feel nauseous. Peering through the small viewport, the stars shone brightly and steady in the inky darkness. A small section of hull

plating, with two short beams jutting from it, tumbled away. The view slowly panned around, and centered on a wedge shaped vessel, with a single engine pod, or nacelle, underneath, which was angled, downward. A cloud of expelled atmosphere, water vapor, and debris, surrounded the ship. I noticed that the bottom of the ship, in front of the engine pod was torn ragged, and was partially inside out. A green plume or flame, spewed from the opening, where it had burned or vaporized parts of the engine pod. I was in awe at my handiwork, as I watched the engine nacelle slowly twist and sway on its damaged support, like the boom of a wounded crane. "I did *that*? Damn." A gray shape stiffly tumbled through the debris, apparently a wolf-alien corpse. A green flicker in the corner of the viewport, caught my attention. In the distance, was a greenish dot, moving rapidly against the stars, trailing a green streak. "What's that?"

"It's them." said the wolf-alien. "The enemy. The enemy who will be your savior."

"I don't understand." The streak continued to approach, though it seemed to be decelerating. "More wolves?" I asked. "A different species?"

"The ship has exited hyperspace," the creature said, as he checked a display screen. "They're in...they're dumping velocity, matching our relative speed."

I turned to try to make eye contact with the alien, who responded by looking down, toward his lap. "Level with me, goddammit! What's going to happen to me." I longed for home, wanting to return to my old mundane life of dealing with freight manifests. I've never thought of myself as a xenophobe. Under more favorable circumstances, I would have loved to travel the stars. Seeing people being torn to shreds, and butchered alive, was just too much for me. Traveling with friends, though the galaxy, would have been awesome. Instead, I was sharing a confined space with a creature who had butchered people, alive, in front of me.

"I know you don't trust me," said the wolf-alien. "You'd be a fool to trust me. Don't worry. You won't have me to worry about much longer."

I didn't know what the alien meant by that, but it did sound rather ominous. "What do you mean?" The streak shone brightly as it continued to approach. It flashed once more, revealing an angular swept-winged spaceship, which was less than a third the size of the crippled vessel. Three intense blue-hot flares emerged from beneath the warship's nose, speeding toward the wolf-ship. The impact blazed brightly, spewing small fragments of hull in all directions. The crippled ship spewed an orange beam, which struck and spread across some kind of shield surrounding the smaller vessel. The other ship retaliated by firing a beam of its own. Its beam

was brighter, and where it contacted, it dug a deep glowing tear into the hull. Geysers of internal atmosphere erupted along the wolf-vessel's length. More specks sailed from the wreckage, which were likely bodies. The small ship strafed past, firing its beam, like a linear cutting torch, this time at the juncture of the engine pod, cleanly cutting it loose. The nacelle slowly tumbled away, spewing sparks and fuel.

"I, ah, neglected to mention," said the wolf-creature, who was still being evasive about the whole enemy-friend thing. "Your little stunt, also, destroyed our shield generators."

"I could have probably guessed by now," I said.

From the rear of the small warship came two more flare-like torpedoes, which struck the front of the wolf-alien ship. They burned their way inside, then exploded, turning the entire forward and lower portion of the crippled ship, into a splintered mess of tangled debris. The small ship slowed to a relative stop beneath the front end of the crippled ship, and waited.

The stricken ship launched a flare-like torpedo of its own, at the stationary vessel. The torpedo hit, flaring brightly, rocking the smaller vessel, possibly doing some damage. The smaller ship answered with twin laser-like beams, and a trio of torpedoes. The beams converged in the open belly of the crippled ship as the torpedoes flared as they entered the wound. The entire ship came apart at the seams, sending pieces flying in all directions. Clouds of expanding air and fuel created a dense blue-gray fog in the icy cold of space. The escape pod rocked gently from the small shockwave of vapor and debris.

The wolf-alien allowed himself to rise from his seat. "My job is done. You will be safe now." The creature pulled himself past me. The fur of his arms brushed against my face, as he floated by. His fur was actually quite soft, and his canine musk was actually quite mild. The creature was a killer, though, and I had to keep that fact in mind. I was still worried about what the alien said, about his job being done.

"What?" I asked. "What are you planning?" I scrambled from my seat, finding myself flailing in the weightlessness.

The wolf pulled himself to the side hatch, and turned to me. "I can't live with what I've done. Killing a sentient species for no reason is wrong no matter how you justify it. I'm sorry, I have to go."

"Go where?" I asked, as my hand found a handhold, which I gripped tightly.

"There is no airlock," explained the wolf-alien. "You need to follow my instructions

precisely.”

I felt a creeping cold in the pit of my stomach. “What? What the fuck are you saying?”

“I’m going to vent the pod.” The wolf alien reached for the controls on the side of the hatch.

I stammered, “You, you, you’re going to expose us to, ah,”

“Keep breathing, especially exhale, don’t hold your breath,” he instructed, as he tapped at the door controls. “There is a glowing amber button near the hatchway. Hit it once I’m out.”

I yelled, “You can’t do this!”

“The enemy is actually your friend.” He reached his free hand to mine, and gently clasped it, gripping my hand firmly. His hairless palm was warm against my skin, and his claws were thick and blunt. He released my hand and said, “May whatever gods you believe in, guide you. Now, hold onto something.”

The creature hit the button. With a loud roaring hiss, the hatch opened into blackness. The creature spun once around, banging his head loudly on the doorway, before tumbling into the void. The air turned to fog as it rushed out into the maw of oblivion. As I grabbed the back of the nearest seat with my free hand, the roar diminished to a whisper. Stifling silence began to close around me. My heart pounded in my ears as I gasped and choked, feeling, to my horror, that no air moved in my throat. I closed my eyes as they began to feel as if they were going to freeze solid. As I gasped again, I felt a cold bubbling sensation on my tongue and in my mouth. My skin began to tingle with cold pinpricks. I opened my eyes to a squint, then launched toward the amber button, screaming silently. The button depressed under my hand. The door silently closed. Pressure began to push against my eardrums, so I instinctively wiggled my jaw to try to equalize it. The pinpricks began to subside. A soft hiss sounded, which increased in volume, as the cold sensations in my eyes and mouth began to wane. As I gasped, I could feel the comforting sensation of air, being drawn into my lungs. I opened my eyes, and looked around, then down at my hands, which appeared slightly puffy. Feeling a little tickle under my nose, I rubbed it with my hand, then looked down, and saw that my fingers were covered with blood. The hiss slowly subsided. Sighing with relief, I eased myself into the seat next to the hatchway, and felt as my body slowly rose, lazily, from the seat cushion. I put my head into my hands as my body came to rest, half wedged between the seats. The wolf-alien was gone. He risked my life to end his, but he wanted me to live. *Why? Why did he go out like that?* I asked myself. To

me, it seemed like his act was pure cowardice.

The pod shuddered softly and creaked. To my horror, the walls began to break apart, with the roar of escaping air. “No!” I screamed, before noticing a blue-green haze, and bands of light, rather than the inky void. The hiss subsided a second later, and to my relief, I could still breathe. A strange reverberating hum filled the air. The bands moved, and the energy field sparkled. As the bands moved, and reversed, a room began to take shape, as gravity began to assert itself. The rings fully converged, before fading, along with the energy field and the hum.

I found myself sitting on one of the escape pod's seats, surrounded by wreckage. Struggling to my feet, I walked, unsteadily past the twisted junk to the edge of a glass disk. Ahead, was a white gleaming console, with subtle curves. The walls were shiny, clean, and appeared very new, or well maintained, and the floor was shiny and practically spotless. At the console, stood a creature. It was almost as tall as the wolf-aliens, but was more lanky in build. Its face was a short broad muzzle, with dense bushy whiskers, and small rounded ears. Its eyes were a deep brown, with little white showing. The creature's hands had five digits tipped with blunt claws, but the fingers were slightly webbed. Short, thick fur, of a deep chocolate brown, covered the creature's body, with beige on its chest and abdomen. As it strode in front of the console, I noticed that its feet were bare, with outspread webbed toes. A two-foot long, tapered tail, swung behind its legs. The overall appearance was that of an oversized otter. It wore little, except a pair of shorts, with a cutout for its tail, and a vest made of straps, with pockets. It also wore a black box similar to what the wolf alien had worn, along with a similar headband.

The creature snorted and its translator did its work, “Welcome aboard.” As she (a feeling that the translator imparted) spoke, I noticed that she also had prominent canine teeth. Though her fangs were a bit smaller than those of the wolf aliens. I still felt somewhat uneasy.

I mumbled, “Are you going to eat me, too?”

She chortled. “You have nothing to fear from me, or any of my crew.” She rested a hand on the back of the console, and continued to watch me.

“So, you're probably more fish eaters, I'm guessing.”

She took a step away from the console. “Sometimes. We have a varied diet, but it doesn't include sapient species. You're safe.”

I sighed. “Thank you.” Looking behind me, I saw the mass of mangled wreckage on the transporter pad. That wolf alien had deserved a better fate. Had I delayed him another thirty

seconds or so, he could have been on the pad, as well. The wolf-creature was a murderous predator, but I still felt for him, to some extent. “That ah, wolf-alien on the escape pod. Were you able to, ah... rescue.”

“I'm sorry about your friend.” She lowered her head, slightly. “I feel partly responsible. We let our guard down, believing that they would surrender, but instead they fired and caused some minor damage. We had to make sure our teleporter system was operable before we could attempt a rescue. Maybe it was for the better. He obviously couldn't live with himself.”

I sighed. “Yeah. Don't know what you could have done to help him.” I stepped down from the transporter disk, onto the dark glossy deck. Feeling my nose, I noticed that it was still sticky with blood. “He vented the air. He, he exposed me to vacuum, and now my nose is all bloody. Will I be okay?”

The creature studied me intensely with her deep brown, almond-shaped eyes. “You'll be fine, and you're safe.”

Feeling more comfortable with this strange otter alien, I slowly approached the console. “He was so full of shame of himself, and at his entire species.” I rested my hand on the smooth white metal, and looked down at my feet. *That wolf creature was a killer, but he saved me. He did what he could to bring me here.* I felt that I could have done more to have stopped him from killing himself. Glancing back at the transporter pad, a large cylindrical mass of twisted metal wreckage, appearing to have been cut at the edge of the disk by a giant lathe, occupied most of the alcove. “I believe he wanted to right as many of his wrongs as he could, by rescuing me, then ah, blowing himself into space.”

“You should mourn his passing and celebrate what you and him shared.” She watched me intensely. “You're going to be okay.” The console beeped. The otter alien walked to the front of the console and pressed a button. There was a moment of alien chitchat, which I couldn't make out, other than her reply of “Affirmative.”

The deck began to vibrate slightly, accompanied by a distant roar, like that of a rocket engine. “Are there other crew members?” I asked.

“Four others,” she replied as he sat down in the seat. “Two are on the bridge. Our medic, is in the infirmary, and one other, in the engine room. We're putting some distance between us and the debris, before engaging the hyperdrive. You might want to take a seat.” She motioned to an empty chair, next to hers. I stepped around the console, and cautiously sat down in the seat

next to the otter-alien. The console appeared insanely complex, with buttons, indicator lights, and display screens, like something out of Star Trek. The alien script on and around the various controls, disappointed me, since I wanted to learn how this marvel of technology worked. “This is...” I stammered. “Ah, beautiful.”

The otter turned to me, and chortled. “I’m glad, you have an appreciation of technology.” She checked something on the console.

As I sat, I became acutely aware at how tacky and disgusting my clothes were, from having slid through blood and organs. “Sorry, if I smell like shit.”

She turned and grinned slightly. “In light of what you’ve been through, I expected worse.” She glanced at a display on her console. “Okay, hold tight, beginning borderspatial insertion in, 3, 2, 1, mark.”

The transition to hyperspace was nearly as bumpy as it was on the wolf ship, but the engine was less noisy. I held on to the front of the transporter console, as the ship rocked and shook. I turned to the otter-alien and asked, “So, what...who are you?”

She answered while fiddling with a device on her hip. “I’m Captain Uchara Chimmur. We call ourselves Chakharan.” She paused for a moment, as the ship’s shaking continued to intensify. “The few Humans, who know about us, often call us ‘Lutrians,’ due to our resemblance to a type of animal found on your planet.

“So Captain Uch, ah, Uchara, ah...why aren’t you on the bridge, with the rest of your crew?” I stammered.

“It’s my duty as captain to greet all my guests.” She turned to me, and grinned toothily. “Besides, it’s not every day you meet someone who infiltrated and brought down such a notorious vessel, with no training whatsoever, as far as I know.” The shaking continued to increase in intensity, then the ship lurched abruptly, and the turbulence subsided.

“What was so special about that ship?” I asked.

“You’ve crippled a Zephenidian ship called the *KillerDeath*, a vessel which has been a thorn in our side for at least 70 of your years. It has conducted many raids against your planet. This ship was so successful, that it became the basis of much of the Zephenidian fleet.

I remembered the message scratched on the wall, of the wolf ship. “Ah, I found a message scrawled on a wall, inside a holding pen, on that ship. It was signed by a famous aviator, who disappeared about sixty years ago.”

The otter alien turned away, abruptly, then lowered her gaze. As she slowly turned back to face me, her eyes seemed to have teared up, slightly. “Trust me. You don't want to...” She trailed off, then nodded. “Maybe you deserve to know.”

My mind jumped to a horrible conclusion. “You're allies with them?”

“No!” she snapped. “Just hear me out. Suppose a large heavily armed ship was to enter your system. Maybe a ship, or an actual hunter pack. They come out of hyperspace, and rapidly approach your planet. By the time we intercept, they're too close. Any weapons fire, and your people would have a potential fireworks show. Every telescope would be trained on this event. Photos of a starship the size of a sports pitch, would be all over your media. We can't have that.”

“Why not?” I asked. “Let earth see the big bad wolf ship.”

The Lutrian chortled again. “To continue your little analogy, all your little, ah, pigs are gonna think their house is about to get blown down.”

The creature's knowledge of earth culture was both refreshing, as well as unnerving. “How, ah...”

“What are we supposed to do, when we're stuck nearly a thousand light years from home, guarding your little planet. But, to continue. Zephenidian ships come in. If we shoot, your people might see it, and missed shots might strike your planet's surface, causing more mayhem. Our hands would be tied. They'd force us to negotiate, basically demand that we give them a few....apes, in exchanged for a peaceful departure. We'd usually give them fugitives and criminals, mostly from parts of your planet with poor record keeping. We'd also give them disaster victims, and those who are trapped where they would die, regardless, and probably would never be found. So yes, about sixty of your years ago, there was an increasing number of Zephenidian raids on your planet. It's possible, maybe likely, that the person you describe was captured in a raid. We never keep records, and we wipe all ship logs.” She grimaced, then growled. “You've ever had a situation where you didn't realize just how bad something sounded, until you tried to explain it to someone else?”

Keeping humans in the dark, by sacrificing random people, to appease an enemy, was what this amounted, to. As I tried to make sense of the full scope of the matter, all I could say, was, “Oh dear.”

The otter got to her feet, stomped toward the door, then turned to face me, again. “I've always wanted to end this practice, but, now I feel like a murderer. What we're doing is wrong!

We've been sacrificing members of your species in order to keep you ignorant about the fact that there are other sentient life forms out there. We just don't have enough ships to adequately defend your planet. With more and better ships, we could force enemies out of hyperspace, at a safe distance, for us to engage them. We just don't have the resources."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. That whole situation sounded, to me, like a huge messed up Prime Directive situation from an old Star Trek episode. Playing this out in my head. I watched as Jean-Luc Picard, very grudgingly, proceeded to appease an enemy, to uphold the Directive. James T. Kirk would, probably, have had none of this, blowing the wolf ship up, and letting the debris rain all over the planet. I looked down into my lap, as I played some of the scenarios out in my head. "I, ah, I don't really blame you. It's wrong, but I understand why."

"Thank you, human," the otter said, as she paced near the door.

"Maybe with this *KillerDeath* thing destroyed, things can return to normal, and you won't have to throw more people to the wolves."

"I wish this was true, but there are several ships that come by from time to time. Humans will still die."

There was the matter of my own capture. "Ah, but, why was I taken, I'm not a fugitive, and I wasn't about to be killed, only mugged."

She stopped, and looked down for a moment. "We employ small scanner-drones with optical cloaks, and sensor arrays directed at your planet. A scanner-drone was hovering near where you were attacked. The *KillerDeath* was in orbit, waiting for us to provide teleport coordinates for potential prey. I gave them the coordinates of the assailants, but they either accidentally, or purposely, took you instead." She sighed. "I thought, being a little careless, maybe having a witness see someone get teleported away, might help to end this practice, once and for all. This will most likely end my career. I'd certainly be reprimanded. There might even be legal repercussions. I think this whole practice, to use a Terran colloquialism, totally sucks." She walked toward the door again, than beckoned me. "Come, Human, I got something to show you." The door slid open, as she stepped toward the doorway.

I got to my feet, and followed her, through the door of the transporter room, and down a corridor. At the end of the corridor, was a cockpit-like bridge. There were two seats, and a wrap-around control console. A third, slightly raised seat, occupied the back of the cockpit. Two Lutrians sat at the seats at the console. The viewport showed a kind of tunnel of green and blue

mist, flowing past in a starless void.

The Lutrian, who sat at the right side of the cockpit, turned toward me, and cracked a toothy grin. “If you weren't Human, I'd so want to ravish you, right now.”

The Lutrian captain was standing beside me. She said, “Hush, don't make him uncomfortable.”

I was a bit dumbfounded, but I had to ask. “Ah, why does my being human matter?”

She put her hand on my shoulder, leaned toward me, and whispered, “He's talking about sex.”

“I, I kinda figured that,” I giggled. “I mean, I don't think I would, I, I mean, it's just.”

“That's my point,” said the Lutrian in the right-hand seat. “Humans generally don't cross species.”

\* \* \* \*

The trip back to earth, took over two hours, in part, due to Uchara Chimmur insistence on conducting a quick patrol. My own gut feeling, was that she purposely delayed my homecoming to help ease me out of that nightmare aboard the Zephenidian ship. I learned a lot about the Lutrians, and some of the other species, both friendly, and hostile. There were bits of history and science, that I learned as well. The Lutrians had a lot of personal stories, which they shared with me. I was surprised at how quickly I got used to their translator devices. These creatures were alien, basically sapient talking otters. But after a short time, they didn't seem so alien, anymore.

“... you'd call it high school,” said the Lutrian who sat in the seat at the left side of the cockpit. He turned back to the console to check his instruments for a moment, before turning back to me. “One of my crushes, ultimately, became my primary mate. She works at the Terra Luna facility, working with some of the expatriates, helping them adjust.”

“None of my high school crushes ever went anywhere.” I stood in the back of the cockpit next to Captain Uchara, who was seated in the captain's chair. “And I didn't have any same-sex crushes. All girls. Never been into guys. There's someone at work who I'm interested in, but I've yet to ask her out.”

A flashing light, and a soft beeping tone, sounded from the console. The Lutrian to my right, glanced at an indicator, then turned off the alarm. “We're entering the inner system.”

Captain Uchara said, “Drop us into realspace for our final approach.” She turned toward

me. “You'll want to hold onto something.”

The ship shook and rocked as it returned to normal space. I held onto the seats in front of me, to keep my balance. The mists and energies streamed past, though stars were visible. Earth, appearing slightly distorted, slowly drew nearer. The screen flashed, and the mists were gone. Earth shown brightly on the view port, and was no longer distorted. I gazed at the blue, whites, greens, and browns, as my home slowly grew on the screen. The view slowly veered away, and the small, whitish-gray sphere drifted into view.

“Wait,” I said. “I'm from that blue thing we were heading for, not that ugly rock.”

The Lutrian captain turned to me and said, “I'm sorry. You've seen too much. You know too much. Your return to your planet would interfere with its culture and...”

This definitely killed the mood of the past few hours. “Don't give me that *Star Trek* shit!” I yelled. “My absence will disrupt more lives than if I am returned, and I kept my mouth shut. Even if I did speak, no one would believe me. I promise, I won't talk about this to anyone. You even mentioned that you wanted to spread a little ‘cultural contamination’ yourself so this wolf problem could end.”

“We have a base,” she continued, “located about a kilometer or so beneath the surface of your moon on its far side, called Terra Luna. It's actually a very nice place. Several Humans make there homes there.”

I sighed, as I spoke to the otter who sat to my left. “I guess I'd be one of those expats your wife would be helping.” There was a moment of ambivalence. I could live among the Lutrians, and other species. There would be computers, and other technologies, that would beg to be explored. However, I would have to give up everything I knew. I'd be cut off from my friends and family, possibly, permanently. The awesome time would quickly turn into loneliness, and longing for home. “Look, this place sounds tempting. I'd love to see that place, but I belong on earth. I got friends. I got family. I'm not a transient who might be overlooked. There would be missing persons reports, manhunts, possibly arrests of innocent people.”

The Lutrian captain put her hand on my shoulder and ran her claws along my back. “Human, I like you. It's my fault, you ended up here.” She addressed the other two crew members. “What I'm about to do would be rather difficult to explain as an accident. I'm about to violate direct orders. If either of you don't agree with it, I can take it from here, and arrange for you to safely leave the ship.”

Both of the aliens at the console, turned, and grinned, showing the tips of their fangs. The one who sat to the right, said, "We'll get you home, Human. You didn't ask or deserve to be captured by the Zephenidians."

"Thanks," I said, as the view panned back toward earth. I could hear a soft rumble, from the rear of the ship. Soon, I would be back among humans. There would no more Lutrians, no more of those Zephenidian wolf fucks. Teleporters and hyperdrives, would return to the realm of science fiction.

"Come with me," said the Lutrian, rousing me from my train of thought. "The small hyperdrive of this ship limits its teleporter range. We have to go in, teleport you down, and leave before we're detected."

I followed the Lutrian captain through the corridor, to the familiar door to the teleport room. As we entered, I noticed that someone had pushed the escape pod remains off of the pad. She stepped over to the console, and began working its controls. "Since we're not going to Terra Luna, I think I can divulge a bit of information, which might interest you."

"Okay," I said, as I stood on the other side of the transporter console, facing her.

"The Zephenidian who helped you escape," she said as she seemed lost in thought for a moment. "He's in our infirmary being treated for a concussion, and some minor barotrampa."

I was both angry for her deception, but also happy that the Zephenidian had survived. "I, ah, why did you lie to me about his death?"

"Human, go to the pad," she instructed. "Time is short."

As I backed toward the disk, I yelled, "Answer me, please!"

"It was his request. He didn't want to face you. He was scared." She looked back down at the console. "He assumed you would be going to Terra Luna with him, and knew he could hide in the facility, among the small resident Zephenidian population. He planned to eventually seek you out, once he was ready.

I breathed heavily, before saying, "Okay, I think I understand."

She peered at a display on the console. "Entering low orbit." Prepare for teleport."

"You know where I was abducted, from?" I asked. "Just beam me to the nearest coastline. I need to take a swim and get this blood off of me." I felt my shirt which was crusty and stiff from dried blood and pieces of flesh. "Shit, I think I'm wearing someone's intestines."

"I found a place to set you down. The teleport might be a bit rough?"

“Rough? What do you mean?” I asked as I pushed some remaining loose wreckage away from the center of the disk with my foot.

She looked up at me for a moment. “There's a couple of moments to spare. Are you okay with me, ah, approaching you?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, since I wasn't sure what she meant.

She got to her feet and hurried around the console and rushed to the pad, throwing her arms around me. I felt her push her nose hard against my neck, as she quietly said, “I'm sorry. My mistake could have killed you. I hope you forgive me, and see any administrative action taken against me, as punishment enough.”

Though startled by her abrupt embrace, I didn't recoil from her. There was a certain kinship I had begun to feel toward these creatures. They just didn't seem so alien, anymore. As I buried my face into her chest, I slowly inhaled, catching scents that were familiar. There was a very slight canine musk, mixed with something which smelled very similar to cinnamon. Her fur, though short, was dense and very soft. As I brought my arms around her to complete the embrace, I expected that her thin frame would feel boney. Instead, she felt surprisingly muscular. She responded by wetly nibbling the right side of my neck. I didn't recoil from her affection, though I did feel that she was going a bit too far. “I forgive you.” I whispered. “And thank you, and ah...” Feeling some of the caked on blood, and bits of flesh, crumbling into her pelt, I mumbled, “I ah, think I messed up your fur.”

She gave me a gentle playful nip on my neck, which startled me, before she released me. The floor began to shudder with more intensity, which was her cue to hurry back to the transporter console, where she sat down. After peering at a display for a few moments, her hand darted to a button. “Bring us in closer!” she shouted into the intercom. “We need to make sure he's set down unobserved.” She continued to squint at the screen, while making adjustments to the console. “There's a large life form here, so adjusting the teleport coordinates. Hmm, okay, we're good. It's not human.”

“What's going on?” I asked.

She continued to peer at the scanner while working the console. She growled. “That's ugly. Who would do this?”

“Do what?” I asked, as I continued to stand in the center of the transporter disk.”

“You're fine. It's just that some...we're losing our stealth. Goodbye!”

“Wait!” The room shimmered, as a blazing ring of light formed, at about chest high, split, and diverged. As the waves of light spread across my field of vision, the room dissolved, and faded into blackness, as the gravity ebbed. The sound was odd, like a distant hiss or roar, which grew louder, as the light waves slowed and reversed. Indistinct shapes shimmered into being, around me. A pool of cyan light, illuminated, what appeared to be sand, with the glint of water, and moonlight. The rings converged, and the energy field faded, along with the hum. Sand shifted under my feet, causing me to nearly stumble.

“I’m home!” I shouted, my voice drowned out by the roar of a large breaking wave. “It’s over. I’m home.” Hills rose to the east, dotted with lights from the various homes and street lamps. Over the hills, the sky took on a faint orange hue. To the west, a line of pearl formed, as another large wave tumbled into a seething stretch of turbulent foam. The moon shone brightly to the west, creating a dance of sparkling light over the ocean.

Watching the sea, a wave crashed into foam, jostling a gray mass. A three-foot long, metal shaft was embedded in the form. From the top of the shaft, a four-foot long length of white nylon rope, dangled from it, into the swirling surf. I watched the gray form bob slightly, as another spent wave splashed around it. Curiosity got the better of me, as I quickly ran out into the surf. As the chilly water rose to my waist, I pushed myself further out, and ducked into the surf, allowing an incoming wave to wash some of the blood, gunk, and goo, from my clothing. It took me several moments to realize that the gray mass was a young bottlenose dolphin, maybe five or six feet long, with a spear embedded in its flank. The full horror became apparent, as the dolphin’s tail moved feebly. It was caught on a small sand bar, which probably kept it from drowning. The tail jerked, and the fins quivered, before the creature rolled onto its side. “Who would do this?” Anger welled up in me, and I feared I would scream. I wanted to look for the person who shot this dolphin, but knew that this would be futile. The dolphin might have been shot hours ago, and possibly miles away. As I watched the creature’s body rock, as another wave washed past, I remembered what my wolfish friend had said. *“Our species seem to have much in common.”*

My response was clear, *“Yes, my friend, we do have much in common. Too much in common.”*

\* \* \* \*

I saved my document, then closed out of my pirated copy of Microsoft Word, as I mused over the events, from ten years ago. No one would ever know that I had destroyed an alien spaceship, back in August of 1998, nor would anyone believe me. Sometimes, thinking about this, made me giddy. The fact that I accidentally killed a young man, during my escape, did help keep me grounded, but I still felt like some kind of hero character, at times. I kept wanting to talk about what had happened, but I've always bitten my tongue. The otter alien had asked me to never speak of the incident, and I was not going to let her down.

The whole situation, after that night, had turned into a huge fucking mess. A few days after my little misadventure, police officers had knocked on my door, and took me in for questioning. There was the disappearance of a black youth, and his friend fingered me as a kidnapper. I decided to play dumb, since they would have never believed the truth. Fortunately, the other guy's story became more fanciful. When he had begun describing the alien transporter, and when he had accused me of being an alien, I was exonerated, while he was tried and convicted of second degree murder. This was very unfair, in my opinion, but there was nothing I could have done, not without risking being charged, and convicted of the crime, myself.

I stuck with my current job, despite the fact that there was little room for advancement. The coworker, who I had fancied, she was uninterested, and later left the company. There were one or two other love interests, since, but they went nowhere as well.

There was a bit of longing, I admit. There were times I wished I had taken the Lutrian aliens up on their offer, and stayed with them. Compared to what I experienced that night, everything else just seemed so mundane. I admit, I became one of those, ah, furies as they call themselves. No one would ever know, that, for one night, I lived the fantasy for real. I sighed as I turned back to my monitor, and clicked on the Firefox web browser shortcut. Once the browser loaded, I selected Furafinity from my bookmarks. Unfortunately, the page timed out, not even displaying its usual mascot image. I sighed again. That site had been down more often, than it's been up, for weeks.

There was a local furry con coming up in the next month or two, with its theme being steampunk. Though I've been a fixture at the local science fiction convention scene for decades, I've never attended a furry con, before. I felt that fursuits, or costumes which many attendees wore, were a pale imitation of what I had seen and experienced. Of course, the same could be said for any other science fiction convention, considering I had been on two interstellar space

vessels, that night. Despite that, I had attended Loscon every year, without fail, since 1994. I guess it's hard not to feel a bit jaded, with what I had experienced. I was nearly eaten alive, which made it difficult for me to accept those who had such fantasies. I was propositioned by a giant sentient otter, and the ship's captain, also an otter-alien, did not hold back with being a bit overly affectionate with me. What was that term for interspecies sex? Was it, Risha-something or other? Furries had the term “yiff” for that kind of thing, a term which was, thankfully, losing favor.

I felt that this experience had changed me a great deal. I became more optimistic about humanity's future, suspecting that great things were on the horizon. My own perception of aesthetics and attraction had broadened, considerably. Though I was still, technically, heterosexual, I no longer, fully, identified with that label. Having talked to alien creatures, like one might talk to next door neighbors, was definitely the icing on the cake. Come to think of it, if those Lutrians, or Chakharians, whatever they called themselves, visited, and one of them had propositioned me, again, I'd be afraid, but I'd probably be willing, regardless of gender.

Life's been okay, since that August night, ten years ago. Uchara Chimmur risked destroying her life and career to get me home. I felt I owed her, and her crew, for all that they had done for me. *How could I ever make it up to them?* I thought. As far as I knew, the Lutrians were still out there, guarding earth from alien attacks. The time would come, when they would make official contact. I longed for that day, and hoped that I'd still be around, when that day comes.