

Earth Now

There was always the gentle hum of the engines and a subtle movement of air. Nothing you would even notice had there been the most minimal distraction.

Harni lay on the bed with her eyes closed thinking about the future. The white noise of the ship had seeped into her consciousness and tried to mesmerize her. Irritated, she felt her muscles beginning to tighten and her breathing grew more rapid. Taking several slow deep breaths she released the tension and returned to her previous thoughts.

A hundred years since she had left the academy and become a council ambassador. A hundred years in space onboard a star ship surrounded by these subtle sensations. Yet only now, as her tour of duty was coming to an end had she began to notice her environment more; had started to experience it for what it was, a fragile box floating in a sea of nothingness - an inner space in outer space.

Below her somewhere the white noise was being manufactured. Somewhere in engineering, the hum, the vibration, the endlessly shifting air, was being generated and circulated about the ship by some huge fan system.

Of course this was only speculation on her part because Harni had never even visited engineering. She knew it had to be there, beneath her somewhere. She had met engineers in the dining area but it had never occurred to her to visit with them - she had been negligent in such matters. Her youth could be blamed for such omissions. At three hundred years of age she was one of the youngest ambassadors ever to attain that position; most ambassadors didn't even make it into space until their four hundredth year, she had done it in half that time. Nevertheless, she had never really attempted to understand the parts of the ship's system that existed largely for her benefit. No, her youth could not be blamed in total for such omissions. At least part of the indifference lay in her own character.

Life had been a series of fast tracks for her. At an early age she had become aware of her own nimble mind, a child who radiated promise, and more - a child with ambition. And with

that self awareness she had set out to construct an identity; to build a persona that would turn heads and command attention. Carefully and astutely she had used all her talents to their maximum, putting out for display every positive trait she possessed. And it had worked. Heads had turned, notice was taken.

Her strategy had always been to put herself in line for those important career opportunities that periodically emerge, the opportunities that, if taken, isolate the wheat from the chaff, and form the indicators of excellence that pad the resume of the successful.

There had been some peers at the academy who had competed with her for a while. They, unlike her, had arrived at the learning center already empowered with prestige borrowed from their ancestors, comfortable in the knowledge that they had, in fact, already arrived at the place Harni was struggling to reach. But their breeding, their innate comfort at being in those hallowed halls of learning - a comfort based upon their life long expectations that they would one day arrive here, did not prepare them for competition with Harni's ambition. That ambition would overcome because she had one thing they lacked, one thing they didn't understand. She was hungry for the chance to succeed. Hungry in a way that only the needy know - a feeling so deep, so real, you felt it in your gut.

Thuban, an old society that had been through turmoil and near devastation and pulled back from the brink just in time, had supported her flowering. The society that had transformed itself from its own ashes gave Harni the power to fly - to succeed against odds that would have been impossible, even in her own great grandfathers time.

The emergence of Relations Theory on Thuban had transformed its patriarchal culture to a more balanced society and permitted a more gentle and rational mind-set, a mind-set that was heavily influenced by female opinion, and therefore welcoming of female players. In this environment Harni had come of age, flourishing with the opportunity Thuban culture had given women. Using every opportunity to realize her dreams, she had eventually made it into that elite core of Council ambassadors, indeed, she was the unannounced, but generally accepted star of the ambassadorial service.

As the first phase of her life was drawing to a close, however, Harni was having more frequent thoughts about those things she had largely regarded as more peripheral to her. The work of others, like the people in engineering that sustained her lifestyle, had never really featured in her thinking. She took them for granted, didn't care to think about all that effort they exerted for her, and now that these thoughts were beginning to intrude she was sensing some discomfort. At some level, the idea that a whole community virtually existed for her benefit was remarkably disquieting to her. In her own mind, her star did not shine so brightly these days. Having arrived at her dream center she was now becoming aware of those who were part of her dream, and with those thoughts, she was compelled to wonder whether this was their dream too.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up.

"Computer"

The wall facing her flickered and became a screen.

"Recognizing Harni, Ambassador, Council representative 11459, how may I help you, ambassador?"

The male voice of the computer was even and soothing, entirely suited to this inner space in outer space.

"Time to destination?" Harni asked.

"We will arrive at the destination point in three days, four hours and sixteen minutes."

Harni stood up and stretched. Gathering up her long black hair she swung it behind her head, and reaching for her gown lying on a chair by the bed she slipped it on. Walking to the window, she gazed at the endless black outside. A permanent night broke only by the pinpoint lights of the receding stars.

As a child she had sat on the stone wall at the end of her parent's garden mesmerized by the magnitude of the night sky. With the quiet whispers of the open countryside all about her, she had wondered what it would be like to be out there amongst the stars, submerged in the endless blackness of space and night. She had thought then that the stars would be closer, brighter. That from out there she would be able to see into each solar system by the light of these distant suns. That the universe would be opened up to her - if she was out there. As she grew older, the dream had intensified and taken form. Her parents, farming folk, had never dreamed such dreams.

They would watch the small child on the garden wall from the window of their cottage, and speculate about the thoughts that were running through their daughter's head. When she finally confronted them with her dream, fully formed, they realized that their ideas about her nighttime speculations had been nowhere near the mark.

Like decent parents anywhere, they had put aside their limited visions, and over many years of hard work they did all they could to support their only child's aspirations. When Harni left to attend the academy, they had not traveled with her, neither did they visit her there. While they kept in touch on an almost weekly basis, they had no desire to enter that world. They would not have felt comfortable in the city. Certainly that discomfort would have been intensified by the prestigious learning center where only the most brilliant minds of Thuban gathered. Despite this, they never once conveyed their discomfort to Harni about the world she had chosen for herself. They knew she would come back to them when the time was right - when the biological clock that ticks in all persons tugged at her, and ambitious thoughts turned to ones of home and family.

Harni could sense that clock now. Although the life of an ambassador still held excitement for her, and she still loved the travel and the endless fascination of meeting new peoples and exploring new cultures, she knew the time had arrived to go home. The clock that wouldn't be denied or ignored was telling her that she was entering the mating phase, soon she would go back and choose.

"Computer, give me background on planet Earth."

"Earth is the third planet from its sun and forms one of nine planets in the solar system. It is the only planet capable of supporting intelligent life. The whole system lies within the Milky Way at 30,000 light years from its center. The planet itself is unremarkable, as is the solar system."

"The inhabitants, tell me what we know"

"The people of Earth seem to have appeared quite soon after the first land animals. Evolution to intelligent humanoid form would appear to have been very rapid. Some of the incoming data would seem to indicate a rather interesting phenomenon."

"Explain."

"The incoming data contains information derived from current broadcast signals."

"Is it some kind of beacon?"

"Not exactly, the signals appear to be planetary communications, audio and video signals."

"Interplanetary communications?"

"That would be logical."

"Are we being obtuse?"

"The data is not clear. Fiction and fact are clearly intermingled in these signals."

"What is this interesting phenomena then?"

"It appears that the humans may have a relatively short life span."

"What would you consider a short life-span?"

"I am talking about a hundred years."

"That would make them children in our terms."

"Most definitely."

"Where did we get the term human?"

"Probably derived from the term humanoid. It is a name the species affords itself. It came from the computer banks on board Discovery."

The Discovery was a survey vessel currently orbiting Earth's only moon. Its search antenna was switched on and was continuing to record data. There was evidence that a Level Two Scan had been initiated which suggested the crew had identified something they deemed worthy of investigation. Survey ships were usually staffed by two, sometimes three surveyors. Most times these surveyors were physical scientists of one description or another, at least one of them would have a background that included biology. Policy dictated that if the initial scan revealed evidence of intelligent life forms the survey was aborted. For reasons yet to be determined the survey team had left Discovery despite evidence of habitation in the vicinity of the moon they were orbiting, no doubt this oversight had been influenced by a previous survey's log. That survey, ten thousand years earlier, had revealed no intelligent life forms. Evidence of primitive humanoid life had been found, but the evolutionary data suggested most of those life forms had died out a considerable time before the original survey team had arrived. While the planet had been classified

as having potential for future intelligent life forms, an observation based upon finding primitive tools and some evidence of social organization amongst the surviving species, the logs written at the time showed that the survey team did not anticipate very rapid evolution. The final log entry recommended a routine follow-up survey. Discovery had arrived two thousand years late for the eight thousand year cycle that was defined as routine.

The presence of unsophisticated cultures would not necessarily have impeded their survey. The team would have simply cloaked themselves and their shuttle to avoid detection and gone about their business. Survey reports frequently identified such events. When that happened the information was entered into the council's central computer banks, and the planet was targeted for an ambassadorial visitation prior to the next routine survey.

The data that Discovery's on board computer was continuing to record clearly showed a level of sophistication beyond primitive development. What had happened to the Discovery's crew after it arrived at their destination was a mystery. Why they hadn't turned around and left the area when they realized that it was populated was still to be explained. The facts were simply this. Discovery lay in orbit around Earth's moon, there was no one on board, and the shuttle was missing. Harni had been directed to investigate.