

Doors to the Stars

Chapter 1. Arrival

On Interstate 65, the trucks were as thick as flies on a dead armadillo carcass. I was on my way up to the *Mid-South Switching Hub* in Nashville and my Ford *HoverCar* was having a wild time avoiding the mile-long truck convoys that weaved in and out of the right 8 lanes of the Interstate. I cranked up the volume on the surround-sound, and let the *CarPuter* do its thing – she could navigate just fine without my help. The hell-rock group *Marble and the BlapWrap/3* filled the car with their newest tunes, which sounded a lot like last week's tunes, but ya know about the Top-40. I watched the 3D head-up display projection on the windshield as the lead singer danced in a sea of mock flames and hacked his axe with foot-long fingers – Marble was good – he was very good.

The screen suddenly resized and Marble shrunk to a thumbnail as *MyLife* feedcast cut in with the latest headlines: "*Police investigate a rash of freeway crashes – all fatal and all violent and puzzling.*"

"Ford: I don't know why you're showing that to me," I said to the *CarPuter*. "We're the ones doing the investigation. I really wish you'd get your context right."

"Sorry, Dr. Hams, my semantic processing filter does not work as well as it should when you've got my *AutoDodge* control on max," the sweet Ford voice apologized. I could hear the stress that told me that she was computationally overtaxed.

I glanced at the controls on the steering yoke, and sure enough, I thumbed down the *AutoDodge* control to a more reasonable level. I'd maxed out the *CarPuter* on the trivia of dodging traffic, and even with all her multi-core parallel processing capability she couldn't do everything without sacrificing something.

"Ford: Sorry – that was my fault," I apologized.

We'd be at the Nashville Switch in a few minutes. The haul up from Huntsville, Alabama had gone very well until we hit heavy truck traffic just south of Nashville. Since the Music Capital of the World had become the South's biggest industrial hub, traffic had become a nightmare. Interstate 65, the main north/south groundway of the Midwest, blossomed into 64 lanes, all fully computerized and balanced for maximum flow. Cars controlled by human drivers were banned about 80 years ago in response to all the crashes they caused. Nowadays you could interact with your car only by voice (and then it had the final say in making decisions). Mounted where a steering wheel used to be, was an immovable, soft plastic driving yoke with a few buttons. It was hard for people to give up the idea that they're in control, so the yoke is just a vestige of the so-called glorious past days of human control. Whenever I've seen pix of old cars with steering wheels I just cringe – what a crazy way to travel!

The cruise control on my head-up display showed 321.8 Km/hr. I calculated that to be about 200 miles per hour, so I was impressed that the Ford was dodging in and out of traffic so well. The headlines continued to scroll on my head-up display, but nothing was going on that I cared about – except for the 3D-Vid of the aliens in New Mexico, which was the whole point of my trip. I figured the Ford's semantic filters were back to normal after I cranked down her *AutoDodge* control down just a bit more.

I analyzed the 3D-Vid. The aliens had long, thin necks and large heads with huge eyes; their ears were small and pointy; their hands had 6 long fingers plus 2 thumbs; their legs looked like the rear legs of

grasshoppers, and they could leap like grasshoppers, too – about 50 feet straight up, as they'd demonstrated. Their mouth was normal-looking, but was always moving – it looked like it was always chewing something. The flat spot where nostrils stuck out looked like a pig's snout. They stood about 2 meters tall and looked gangly. Overall, they were a very pale green color – not unpleasant to look at, but very alien for sure.

They arrived in an ice-blue ovaloid pod, which landed last week near Tucumcari, New Mexico. The pod let out 10 of the aliens, and then ascended to a height of 100 meters, where it was still hovering today.

"Ford: Show me a close-up of the aliens," I commanded.

The 3D-Vid switched context to the live feed from Tucumcari. The aliens were standing in groups, discussing something. The ice-blue orb of a space vessel was visible above them. Nearby, a black crater showed what the pod was capable of doing – an Air Force jet had tried to engage the alien craft as it was landing, and it was blasted out of the sky in a heartbeat.

"Ford: Crank up the audio," I requested.

The high-pitched squeaks of the aliens came through the car's audio system. If this was their language, then I knew that it was going to be hard to communicate with them. Still, that was my job, so I was determined to try. I rotated my seat and looked back into the cargo compartment – it was full of electronic gadgets that I figured might do me some good. From listening to the audio for the last few days, I figured that it was more in the ultrasonic range, so I had purchased an ultrasonic "leak detector" from the local garage that I would try first. It would translate the high-pitched alien sounds down to a more normal range – at least it was a starting point.

I'm a professor in the Exobiology department at the University of Alabama, Huntsville. When I got my Ph. D. in Astrobiology, I went to work part-time for NASA in their Mars landing program. About a hundred years ago, in 1997, they launched the Mars Pathfinder, which was designed to look for microbial fossils on Mars. The results were not definitive, but NASA just kept looking. Some of my NASA and UAH colleagues are in the SETI program, and they're still jumping up and down with glee, now that the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence has a positive data point. About 10 years ago I joined the international police agency called *Interpol* as an *Appointed Special Resource* – I'm the one that they activate when they need special translation skills. Today, "special" meant: go talk with the newly-arrived extra-terrestrials. So when President Kera Nodsar called me last Thursday night, I guess I wasn't really surprised.

The head-up display changed to a 3D-map view of the Nashville Switch – 64 lanes north/south, intersecting with 64 lanes east/west for Interstate 24 and 64 lanes east/west for Interstate 40. To the computers controlling the switch, I'm just one of the many little red blips that wants to go northwest on Interstate 24. A chime sounded, and I felt my seat firm-up just as I heard the Ford say "Prepare for Nashville Switch."

I felt about a 1G lateral force as she switched from northbound to westbound on a tight clover-leaf exchange. All lanes were packed with cars, trucks, and truck-trains. Suddenly, we were going northwest for the trip to St. Louis. The windshield darkened, to block the afternoon sun. The head-up showed 309 miles to go, so I figured that's about 1.5 hours – at 200 MPH.

"Ford: Resume Top-40 playback," I requested.

The audio feed changed; the video changed; hard rock shredded the car's interior. The Ford knew that I like it loud – very loud – it helps me think.

President Nodsar had asked me if I could establish communications with the aliens.

"Well, Madam President, I don't know," I said honestly.

She asked "Is there anyone else who can do it?"

"No, Madam President."

"Is there anything you need? I know that I'm taking you away from your family and your job suddenly, but America and the world needs you now."

"I'm okay," I told her. "I may need some stuff; I just don't know right now."

"Okay, Dr. Hams. Please call this number and they'll get you whatever you need." She texted a phone number to me. "Do the best you can. We're in jeopardy – by that I mean that the entire world is in jeopardy. We don't think that we're in a very good position, either. We tried to shoot it down, and it took out our most sophisticated stealth fighter jet. Just do the best you can, and stay in touch. Here is my personal cell phone number," and she texted me another number. "Goodbye, Dr. Hams, and God speed."

I thought about it for a little while and then packed the car with some electronic stuff that I thought I might need. Before I rolled out of Huntsville, a Secret Service agent came to my house and gave me a packet from the President, and she asked me to read it carefully and sign a form. It was a detailed list of everything they knew about the extra-terrestrial object and the aliens. The form was authorization for Top-secret, Special Compartmented Intelligence, Level-5 access. I was not to talk to anyone about the alien encounter without prior written permission, etc., etc., etc. The Secret Service agent asked me if I wanted a weapon, but I declined. It was obvious that any civilization that could get from there to here wasn't going to be very impressed with whatever pop-gun we would threaten them with. I told my daughter Janie that I'd be gone for a while, and that I couldn't talk about it. She shot back a knowing look – she'd seen the aliens on the 3D-TV for a couple of days, and she knew exactly where I was going. Her eyes reminded me of my wife, whom I still missed a lot. She kissed me on the cheek and gave me a worried look – just like her mom. I climbed into the Ford and sealed the door. It had already been programmed with the route to New Mexico. All I could do was sit back and enjoy the music.

The Ford navigated the St. Louis Switch, and we were now on the Mother Road – what people called Route 66. Of course it wasn't the real 66, but over the years, Congress kept finding it easier to seek money for something called Route 66 than any other gimmick they could come up with. Somehow the idea of a "Mother Road" resonated with the people of the United States – so here I was on MR-66, heading southwest at exactly 200 MPH.

In another half-hour, I pit-stopped in Springfield, Missouri, and then the Ford headed to Tulsa, Oklahoma. MR-66 narrowed down to 48 lanes, and then 32 lanes for a while, before blossoming back into 64 lanes about 100 miles east of Tulsa.

"Ford: chow time."

"Okay, Dr. Hams," she replied. "What is your food preference?"

"Ford: American, with preference for good beef."

"Okay, Dr. Hams. We'll be stopping at Market Place Restaurant. It has 86,402 positive reviews."

Within a few minutes we settled into a parking spot at a nice-looking restaurant. The twin-turbines slowed to a halt, and my door un-sealed. I got out into the warm, moist Oklahoma air and stretched. As I walked towards the restaurant, a Secret Service agent named Jack Majors quietly joined me and showed me his badge and picture ID.

I was surprised. "I didn't expect to see more Federal agents," I said.

"The President wants to make sure you're safe; and that you have everything you need," he said. "We work closely with all deployed *Interpol* agents."

"Okay, Agent Majors. Join me for lunch?"

"Sure. Great."

We had a great meal and then went back to the car.

Agent Majors told me "Agent Sam Michaels will meet you in Tucumcari, New Mexico at the *Shell Super Trux Stop* on MR-66. Also, Dr. Hams, we'll be tracking you by satellite."

"Okay, Agent Majors – have a great day."

It wasn't a long haul to Amarillo, Texas, and I reviewed the updated information packet again. The aliens were pretty alien, and that's about all we knew. When the Ford was about 100 miles east of Amarillo, the phone pinged.

"Hello, Dr. Hams?"

It was the President speaking. Her image appeared quickly on the heads-up display.

"Yes, Madam President."

"Let's see: we've got more information for you, which I'm uploading now. Also, the Chinese and North Koreans, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), are both very disturbed about this extra-terrestrial encounter. They're both demanding to be part of the contact team – do you need their assistance?"

"No thanks, Madam President," I replied, and I had a hard time suppressing my laughter.

"Well okay then. I'll put them off. The North Koreans are very agitated, and they're threatening "grave consequences" if we don't let them visit the alien site."

"Madam President, they'll just get in the way. I understand your concern for world affairs, and if I need help from them, or anyone, I'll ask for it. Meantime, I'll be at the site in about an hour and a half. I'll let you know more then."

"Thanks again, Dr. Hams."

"Good day, Madam President."

The Ford whisked through Amarillo in a couple of minutes, and the Mother Road bore me farther southwest. The roof changed from dark gray to clear blue, and then finally crystal-clear, and the stars shined brightly overhead; the moon was full; and the temperature dropped from the desert night air. I could have asked the Ford to outline the galaxies on the inside of the roof, but I knew most of them anyway.

The Ford announced: "Tucumcari ahead."

We pulled off on a small interchange and the Ford slowed down and paused. Three black vans surrounded us and doors popped open all around. It was just after midnight, but the men were all wearing large black sunglasses. A large muscular man came towards me and extended his beefy hand. I realized that the sunglasses were really infra-red night-vision goggles.

"Dr. Hams, I'm Agent Sam Michaels with the Secret Service. The President sent us here to help you. Please let us know whatever you require."

His grip was like steel. I asked him "When will we get to the alien site?"

"Not until morning, Dr. Hams. You're to rest for a few hours, and then we'll escort you to the site. Over that hill is the *Super 8* motel where you can spend the rest of the night. Please follow us."

I got back into the Ford and the door sealed. The turbines whined, and our little convoy topped a hill and parked in the motel's parking lot. When I was in my room, my head hit the pillow and I was out like a light.

Chapter 2.

Morning came instantly.

"Dr. Hams: wake up please." The pounding on the door reminded me of a gorilla trying to escape from a cage in the zoo.

My fuzzy brain hadn't gotten enough sleep, and the pounding wouldn't stop.

When I realized the gorilla wasn't going away I finally shouted "I'm coming!"

We all ate breakfast together and then Agent Michaels talked quietly with his agents. He turned and came over to me.

"Dr. Hams, we're cleared for site access. Please try to stay behind one of us in case the aliens are in a shooting mood."

I looked at him and his men and decided that it was a good idea to comply with that request.

We all got into our cars and headed north on 1st Street, and in a few moments we pulled into Northside Park and stopped. Then I saw it: the magnificent aliens and their flying machine.

We all got out of our cars and a phalanx of Secret Service agents surrounded me. I popped the rear hatch of the Ford and grabbed all the electronic goodies that I could carry. Two of the agents wordlessly grabbed the rest.

"Please follow us, Dr. Hams," Agent Michaels requested.

The aliens were watching us carefully. They were much taller in person than I expected. I could hear their high-pitched squeaking as we got closer. I turned on my ultrasonic listening device and put on the headphones – I was right about their audio at least. Their high-pitched squeaks and squeals were mostly ultrasonic, so my little black box made the sounds into regular audio for me. I could quickly tell that they were speaking some intelligent forms of words and phrases, not just gibberish.

"Agent Michael: I need to talk to them. Please wait here."

He looked very uncomfortable, but his men stood aside and let me approach the nearest group of aliens. I held out my right hand as I walked closer. I carried the ultrasonic microphone box in my left hand. I walked very carefully and quietly.

A stream of words came out of the lead alien. I guess that was either "Hello," or "I'll shoot you if you take one more step."

"Hello," I replied.

"Well-ooo," it mimicked.

For a second, I thought that this was too easy, but then a stream of alien words came from several of the members of the group, and I realized that they were deciding my fate.

"I come in peace," I said. I raised my right hand towards them.

"Kommin-pccssss," the leader replied. Then he held up his hand and I could count the 6 fingers and 2 thumbs.

I stood quietly for a minute and took it all in. They kept talking among themselves. The other groups of aliens came towards us. The Secret Service came towards me, rapidly. I motioned for them to stay

back, and they stopped. I could see that one of the agents had a parabolic reflector, and was recording the audio. Another agent was recording the encounter in 3D video – and probably spooling it directly to the President, I guessed.

Just then my cell phone beeped. The alien leader looked at me, probably wondering how I made that sound from my pants pocket, instead of my mouth.

"Dr. Hams," Agent Michaels said softly, "The President is calling you."

"She'll have to wait. I don't want to scare the aliens right now."

"Yes sir. I'll tell her to call back later."

I walked towards the alien. He walked towards me. When we were about 10 feet apart, I stopped. Then I stooped down and wrote in the sand: I II III IIII IIIII, and then I held up my fingers, one at a time, and then wrote in the sand again: I II III IIII IIIII.

The alien bent in half and looked closely at the marks in the sand and then at my fingers. I guessed that he was curious that we didn't have enough fingers and thumbs. He held out his hand and wrote II IIIII on the ground. I said "Yes, I understand."

"Szeet Szeet. Swap Fzoo," he replied.

I took out my notepad and wrote that down. I guessed that to mean two and six. I held up a thumb and said "Thumb."

He held up a thumb and said "Szeet."

So I knew that I was drawing the right conclusions about their speech patterns. I held up my thumb and said "Szeet."

The alien held up his hand, folded down the six fingers and said "Szeet Szeet."

"Good! Szeet Szeet!" I knew then that I would be okay.

I turned around and said "Agent Michaels, you may tell the President that I have communicated 2 basic ideas with the aliens."

"ROGER that," he replied.

I could see several of the aliens holding up their thumbs and saying "Thmmmm," so I guessed that this is an exploratory party of star-going scientists and linguists.

I pointed one finger at myself and said "Don."

The alien replied "Dahhn."

The alien pointed at himself and said "Fooppop."

I pointed at him and said "Foo-pop," and then I smiled at him.

He kinda cringed when I did that. Maybe he didn't like human teeth? Did he think that I was going to attack him or eat him?

In the next hour, we learned to count.

A robotic watch dog patrolled the area. He actually looked like a 3-foot tall elephant. When it came close to me, I reached out to pet it. It instantly produced a weapon, held rigidly in its trunk. "TZEM TZEM!" commanded the alien; and the weapon was returned to somewhere underneath the watch dog, or watch elephant – whatever.

In the next couple of days, we learned almost 100 words and numbers. They had a two-six-eight-sixteen based system, like our two-five-ten system.

By Friday, Foo-pop came to me and pointed up into the sky and said words that I could not understand at all. I guessed that he was telling me about his planet, but the ideas were too complex for now.

On Saturday, Agent Michaels met me at breakfast and said "The President wants to talk to you."

"Okay," I told him and he handed me his secure phone.

"Dr. Hams, This is President Nodsar. We have a problem."

I could hear how obviously upset she was. "How can I help, Madam President?"

"Our intelligence agencies report that DPRK is planning to LASER the alien space ship."

"I don't understand – it's here in Tucumcari, New Mexico. How do they plan to do that?"

"No, Dr. Hams, that's just a shuttle craft for the explorers with whom you're communicating. The base vessel – the Mother Ship, if you understand my meaning, is in circum-lunar orbit. NASA just detected it yesterday. It's quite large...and we assume it's quite dangerous if provoked. How much of their language do you understand?"

"I think we've shared about 100 words and numbers. I don't always understand their sentence structure, and I'm certainly in need of another 40,000 words in order to effectively communicate. However, it's only a matter of time – they are obviously very smart and they're willing to share their language with us."

"Dr. Hams, time is the one thing we don't have. The DPRK has a powerful microwave LASER that they're planning to use as soon as possible. Can you communicate the problem to the aliens yet? What are we calling them anyway? We can't just keep calling them aliens."

"Madam President, it will certainly take me more time to communicate ideas of war and politics to the aliens. I guess that I need to start today. I'll do the best I can. I understand the seriousness of this."

"Thank you Dr. Hams. Please stay in touch."

Now how in the world do you communicate ideas about politics, war and peace, and craziness to aliens? I had quite a job to do.

When we met Foo-pop, I decided that politics could wait. First, I needed to communicate the idea of danger to him.

I held up my hand in the sign of peace that he seemed to understand. "Foo-pop," I started.

I picked up a small rock and threw it on the ground. I shouted "BLAM!" Then I repeated the charade several more times while his entire crew looked on in wonder. Then I found a stick and broke it across my knee. "BLAM!" I shouted. I repeated it again, but my sore knee prevented me from doing it again. I picked up two rocks and slammed them together and shouted "BLAM!"

I saw a look on his face – he got it. He bent down and picked up two rocks and slammed them together. "MMAMMM!" he said. I repeated my actions, and then he did too. I think he understood the concept of violence. He picked up a rock that I couldn't have lifted. He threw it about 50 yards and shouted "MMAMMM!" when it hit – okay, he got it.

I pointed up at his spacecraft and asked "BLAM?"

He looked up. He looked at me. He backed up a couple of steps. I guessed that he was trying to translate the charade, but couldn't. I bent down and drew an oval in the sand. I pointed to his ship and then pointed to the oval on the ground. He got it. I picked up a small rock and dropped it on the oval. "BLAM!"

He looked at me and I knew he got it – he knew that I was threatening his spacecraft with harm. He walked a few paces and bent down and drew a large oval in the sand. He drew a line from the big oval to the small oval. He pointed to himself. He lifted an object out of his belt and pretended to talk.

"Ah ha!" I shouted. "If we hurt your ship, you will call in the Mother Ship!"

I pointed to the small oval and to the big oval and then I picked up the small rock that I had dropped onto the small oval and tossed it aside. I shook my head up and down, which I think he knew meant that I understood him.

He walked to the big oval and stood in it. Then he pointed directly at me and said "MMAMM!"

"OKAY!" I shouted. I got it. I raised my hand to stop him, but he bent down and picked up a big boulder and threw it towards me. I side-stepped it at the last minute – he was serious about showing me who was boss.

Then his buddies each picked up boulders and started flinging them towards me – I was lucky to dodge them all. The Secret Service agents all had un-holstered their weapons and were aiming at the aliens when I shouted "*STOP! STOP! STOP!*"

The aliens understood that and stopped. Agent Michaels motioned to his men and they all holstered their weapons.

I went to Foo-Pop with my hand out and said "We understand what war is now. War: BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! WAR!"

Foo-Pop bobbed his body to mean that he understood.

"VARRRR," he said. "MMAMM!"

I drew a big circle in the sand. I drew a crescent near it. I pointed to the crescent moon in the sky and pointed to the small circle. I said "Moon."

"MOOO MMM," mimicked Foo-Pop as he pointed at the moon.

I drew a dot next to the moon and drew a line from it to Foo-Pop's big oval. "Mother Ship," I told him.

He got it immediately. Then his eyes popped, because he didn't know that we knew that their mother-ship was in orbit around our moon. He suddenly realized that we were not total backwoods Arkansas hillbillies. I figured that they thought their ship was cloaked, or somehow invisible to us.

"MUZZR-CHIPP," he pointed at the moon. " MMAMM! MMAMM! MMAMM!"

I shook my hands and then said "NO BLAM!" I kept it up until he shook his body in acknowledgement. Now I thought he understood that we did not want war.

He talked to his people, and they settled down quickly. One of them drew out a tool from his belt and looked at the moon while he chirped into the unit. I knew it was a radio, and they were describing the bizarre scenario here on Earth, and warning them that they were detected, and possibly in danger.

I drew a very large circle in the sand. Then I drew in continents that resembled Earth pretty well. After about 5 minutes of watching, Foo-Pop bent over and started drawing too. He obviously knew the layout

of our planet well. I figured that he was either the Captain or the navigator of the spacecraft. When I got to the area of Korea, I drew a jagged line to the Mother Ship and said "BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!"

He shook his body in acknowledgement. He called over 3 of his buddies and explained it to them. They all shook their bodies.

I looked towards Agent Michaels and asked him "Sir, do you have a laser pointer with you?"

"Sure," he replied, and headed for his car. He opened a briefcase and pulled out a laser-pen and handed it to me.

I walked to the big Earth-circle and set the laser pen onto the DPRK location. I aimed toward Foo-Pop's big circle of the Mother Ship and pressed the button. I shouted "BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!" and Foo-Pop reacted right away. His companion radioed the Mother Ship and they both looked at me. I thought that it was a grateful look – at least I hoped it was.

Foo-pop reached for the laser-pen and picked it up and inspected it. He walked to the Mother Ship circle and aimed it back at DPRK and pressed the button. "MMAMM!"

Okay, he got it. Foo-pop talked with his radio-man who communicated the whole scenario to the Mother Ship. Then he turned towards me and held out his hand in a sign of peace. I returned the gesture.

When we got back to the *Motel 8* that night, the news media was reporting that the rash of freeway crashes that they'd been reporting on had suddenly stopped; and nobody knew why. At least 5 different reporters had to say the same thing. I had a hunch – were the aliens causing the freeway computers to malfunction? Could it be a prelude to an invasion? Would they destroy other infrastructure? I needed another 40,000 words very quickly. Just as I was falling asleep I realized: Starting tomorrow, I'm going to make a "Rosetta Stone."

Chapter 3.

Morning came instantly.

A gorilla pounded on the door until I acknowledged his presence.

Breakfast was good, and Agent Michaels and I discussed my theory about the recent freeway crashes.

Agent Michaels said "You're onto something there, Dr. Hams. The trouble all started about the time the aliens arrived. Now that you mention it, it's hard to think that that's not the right answer. What can we do about it?"

"I don't know, Agent Michaels. But the first thing I need to do is accumulate a pool of words so that we can communicate with the aliens well," I replied.

He thumbed his earpiece and talked quietly to his agents for a moment.

"We're ready to go to the alien site, sir," he said.

We all rolled to the site and parked.

Foo-pop was obviously not himself – in fact, he appeared to be very agitated. Not a good start to the day, I guessed. From the back of my mind came a joke: "I wonder if he wakes up to a gorilla pounding on his door every morning?"

I approached Foo-pop with my hand extended. He held out both of his hands and shook them left and right quickly. I hadn't seen that behavior before, so I waited for an explanation. One of the teams dragged a body on the ground towards me. It was tightly bound in some kind of rope. When they got close, I could see that it was a dark-skinned oriental male. The watch elephant stood nearby. I suddenly realized what was going on.

"A DPRK spy!" I shouted. The man's eyes showed fear as he looked at me and shouted in Korean as he struggled with his bonds. Foo-pop picked him up with two fingers and a thumb, and then dangled him upside-down, about 6 feet above the ground. And then he dropped him and said "MMAMM!"

The Korean spy cried out in pain. One of Foo-pop's men brought a couple of weapons and laid them near the Korean. I saw an AK-47 and a 9mm pistol. Also, there was a small radio that filled the air with static.

Then Foo-Pop motioned, and two of his men carried out an alien body and set it gently on the ground. Foo-Pop pointed to the pistol, to the Korean, and then to the alien body. He quietly said "MMAMM," and his body shook all over. Then he pointed at the body and said "Zoo-Fao. Dap."

I guessed that the spy had shot a guard.

A couple of Foo-pop's people dragged away the Korean, who was crying and screaming. The watch elephant kept him covered with a pointy black weapon.

Agent Michaels called to me: "The President needs to speak with you."

I went over to him and he handed me his phone.

"Dr. Hams," she said. "What just happened? Agent Michaels says that the aliens have captured a Korean who presumably shot one of them. Can that be right?"

"Yes, Madam President, as far as I can tell. The leader of the aliens is very upset. I don't know what's going to happen next."

I heard a small thud and turned around. Foo-pop had just shot the Korean with a small device that made the Korean kind of explode.

"Madam President, the Korean spy has been killed by the aliens."

There was silence on the line, and then finally she said "Dr. Hams, we really have more questions than answers. How are you doing on translating the aliens' speech patterns?"

"That's my top-priority," I told her. "I need to create a dictionary as soon as possible."

"Agent Michaels told me your idea that the freeway crashes may be linked to the aliens. Could this be a prelude to war or invasion?" she asked.

"I don't know. And I'm not sure how to find out, except to learn to communicate with them."

"Dr. Hams, our top scientists are demanding some time with the aliens. We also have doctors who want to examine them, and health officials who want to know if they're carrying any harmful pathogens. We have physicists who want to know how they got here. My desk is filled with questions, and we have no answers. The Joint Chiefs want to drop a hydrogen bomb on Tukumcari right now, today. They want to leave a lasting impression on the aliens that we're not to be messed with."

My heart stopped: could people actually be that crazy?

"Madam President, these are space explorers, not warriors."

"Dr. Hams, how do you know? Exactly why do you think that? The fate of the human race may be hanging on a thin thread right now, and we may not have any time left to react if the aliens take aggressive action. The U.N. wants me to authorize most of their member-nations access to the alien spacecraft. Everyone is totally freaked out about the possibility of interstellar war, and there is a distinct possibility that we'll be wiped out by a superior race of beings. I need facts, Dr. Hams, not opinions."

She was very upset, and I had to buy myself some time.

"Madam President, as you know, I'm an astrobiologist with minors in organic chemistry and linguistics. Right now, our only hope is to build a dictionary and start communicating with the aliens. The DPRK spy has negatively affected my ability to do that, and the aliens may not trust us anymore. As far as the questions that are popping up, I agree that we need to know how they got here, and what their intentions are, but if you're going to authorize a nuclear strike, then I need to leave the area, because I'm a scientist, and I don't plan to be a casualty of political pressure."

"Dr. Hams, I'm sorry that I'm so upset right now, and I shouldn't have taken it out on you," she apologized. She reminded me of my Ford apologizing for bad semantic behavior.

"For right now, I'm going to try to get Foo-pop back into interactive communication. After that, we'll see. I don't know what else to suggest. That DPRK agent really screwed things up, pardon my language."

She replied "I'll have my Secret Service agents bring the spy's body back to Washington, and then we'll send it back to DPRK. This is really getting to be a mess. Please do the best you can."

The line went dead and Agent Michaels stood quietly for a moment. "Let's see if we can get the DPRK body back from the aliens."

I shook my head and said "Okay."

I walked back to Foo-pop with my hand out. He was still shaking all over. He pointed at his comrade's body and said "Zoo-Fao. Dap."

I replied "Sorry."

Four of the aliens respectfully took the body away. Two of them brought the dead Korean's body and dumped it unceremoniously at my feet.

I said "Sorry."

Agent Michaels signaled for his men to remove the body. It looked like it had been fast-cooked in a microwave oven.

I looked at Foo-pop and said "Sorry."

He said "SOO-REE," and raised his hand in peace.

The rest of the day, we just stood around quietly. I organized my thoughts on how to proceed. I needed to make a dictionary of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. I needed to get as many words translated as possible, and later on, refine the ideas. The president's question about how they got here kept poking me in the brain – how indeed? When I studied astronomy, I remembered the professor speculated about life, including intelligent life, elsewhere in space. He told us about an American astronomer named Frank Drake who created a formula that tried to answer the question "are there any other intelligent life forms?" His formula is a combination of probabilities. What fraction of stars have planets? How many of these have them in habitable zones? What fraction of them will actually develop life, and how frequently will these life-forms evolve into intelligent civilizations that may be able to communicate with us? As we know, the distance between stars is too great for actual travel between them, so we can only expect communications by some kind of radio waves. The search for extraterrestrial intelligence, known as SETI never discovered anything of value, and yet here was a shuttle craft full of aliens, with a mother ship in orbit around the moon. How could that be? In fact I realized that the question that Mr. Drake tried to answer is now worse than ever: we don't know if the number of intelligent species went from exactly 1 to exactly 2 or to 2 million-billion. I had to make this a priority question, so that limited the number of words that our races needed to understand.

The only more important question that I could think of was: "Are you here to invade Earth?"

As far as the question about whether they're carrying harmful micro-organisms – it's too late to be asking, as far as I'm concerned. Both races are at risk, so that's a secondary question. I guessed that if they're smart enough to come here, they're smart enough to avoid cross-species contamination.

By late afternoon I was feeling better, and I had a whole list of ideas recorded in my pocket *Brainstorm*. Now, one by one, I'll acquire the words that will let me ask the 2 most-important questions.

I walked to Foo-pop and set my pocket *Brainstorm* on the ground. It would keep track of where we were in the learning process. Foo-pop took a minute to figure it out what I wanted, but he finally folded-down and sat in front of me.

"Foo-pop, we need to learn to communicate. I would like to ask you some important questions, and I can't do that right now. Please help me learn your language."

Foo-pop looked at me and shook his body – I guessed he understood exactly what I just asked. Three of his crewmembers stood behind him – I guessed they were there to support him. The watch elephant stood stock still.

And then we began learning.

Chapter 4.

In a few days, it was obvious that the language lessons were working in both directions. It turns out that Foo-pop was a military rank, not a name. He is a starship Captain, and his full name is Foo-pop Teezar101. Their race is known as Tella-gura.

In a few weeks, we had several hundred nouns, verbs and adjectives down cold. We used English as the common language, because I could not speak the high-pitched Tella-gura language at all.

Every day the President called – sometimes more than once. She was holding off all the world's "helpers and interferers," as she called them, but the pressure on her was intense. She never mentioned the nuclear option again, but I knew that it would not be taken off the table until she was convinced that the Tella-gura were absolutely not a threat – and I didn't have a clue about how to end her anxiety.

One day, Foo-pop Teezar101 set down a small bowl of food in front of me and pointed to his mouth. "EEETT," he said. I was impressed by his ability to figure it all out. I picked up the bowl and used my fingers to grab a lump of whatever it was – I didn't worry if it was poison, because I was sure that it wasn't. I wasn't so sure if I could digest it, but what the heck. It tasted like very dry chicken. He said "TaGAKRRR."

The next day, I brought him a bowl of fresh strawberries. His reaction was the same as mine. I told him "STRAWBERRIES," but he couldn't repeat that.

Days passed, then weeks.

I was ready – I wanted to ask the important questions. We sat, facing each other.

"Foo-pop," I began, "where are you from and how did you get here?"

His body shook – he understood the question.

"ALADANI-FORPL," he said.

I guessed that was the name of his planetary system, so I asked "How did you get here?"

Just as he said the word "Doors," shots rang out. I looked at Agent Michaels and his squad, and they were firing their pistols and automatic weapons at something about half a mile away. Foo-pop instantly stood up, and I instantly tackled him and forced him to the ground. He started to struggle, but then he realized what I'd done, and he laid still. He motioned for his crew members to lie down, too – which was good, since they were all pointing black sticks at me, as was the watch elephant.

The hail of bullets stopped. Agent Michaels' men went running into the desert. A concussion hit the area – someone had thrown a hand-grenade. I slowly moved off of Teezar101's body and motioned for him to stay still. Another KER-UMPH! nearby, and then silence. A jet streaked in from the west, just about 100 feet off the ground. A stream of 50-cal bullets focused on a spot in the desert. Suddenly a high-pitched shriek sounded and the jet vaporized. A bright blue-green ball of plasma replaced the flying jet, and then it just disappeared. The shuttle craft had reacted to the jet's invasion of its space and had destroyed it. I didn't exactly see a laser beam, but I saw the air burn, so I knew what happened.

In the desert, all was quiet. The Secret Service agents converged on an area, with their weapons drawn, but nothing else happened. We all stayed flat on the ground until Agent Michaels came over.

"All okay, Dr. Hams. The enemy has been destroyed."

"Sorry about plane," said Teezar101. "Tried to stop."

"I understand," I replied.

I said "Agent Michaels, please understand that the spacecraft was just defending itself. It could not possibly know that the jet was ours, and that it was protecting us."

But he replied "No, Dr. Hams, you're wrong – the jet was not ours – it was attacking my men when the spacecraft destroyed it."

I pondered that for a moment. "Then whose was it?"

"Either DPRK or Chinese, we don't know yet. We're analyzing satellite images now. I'll let you know, sir."

SO: the spacecraft acted properly – I was impressed. I was used to the semantic processor in my lowly Ford – it knew my musical tastes, and how to weave in and out of traffic, so I had never thought about a semantic processor that could have figured out the scenario that just played out, and correctly figured out who the enemy was, and how to destroy it without taking out any of our Secret Service agents. I stood up and offered my hand to Teezar101. He reached for it and stood up.

"TZANK UUU," he said.

"Thank you," I replied.

We were communicating very well, I would say.

The next couple of days were spent surrounded by Secret Service agents, augmented by a local National Guard unit. When their tanks came rolling across the desert towards our camp, I wondered briefly if the spacecraft would consider them to be hostile, but I should have known better. Foo-pop added more watch elephants to the ground crew, and they patrolled constantly. I needed to ask him several questions about the how's and why's of watch elephants, but this was not the time.

Satellite images of the preceding attack were shown to the U.N., and the episode played out in the media for days: the DPRK had sent a single fighter jet, at very low altitude, across Mexico, into the U.S., and attacked our site. World opinion never counted much with DPRK leaders, but at least they got caught red-handed. Now, the National Guard was hooked right into the National Defense Radar system, so that little scenario could not be played out again. Things settled down.

And then I suddenly remembered Teezar101's answer to my last question! He had said "Doors."

When we got together that afternoon, I said "Foo-pop, what did you mean by 'doors'?" What doors?"

Teezar101 bent over and drew on the ground with a stick. He drew an oval and pointed towards the moon. He drew another oval near the first one, and then erased it and drew an oval that was closer to the first one. Then he erased that one and drew another one that overlapped the first oval, and then erased it. Finally, he drew an oval and erased the original over. "Doors," he said.

I partially got it: He had drawn a moving-picture cartoon of a spacecraft going through a door. "Where are the doors? How many doors are there?"

He moved his arms and pointed his fingers all over the sky. "ALL," he said.

SO: doors were portals in space; doors were all over, and there were many of them. I could feel my blood pressure rise – this was great information, and I needed to get it to the President as soon as possible.

"Thank you," I said.

"TZANK UUU," he replied.

It was dinner time, so I went back to the *Motel 8* with Agent Michaels and his crew.

"I have to talk to the President," I told him.

"She's meeting with the U.N. ambassador right now," he told me. "I'll let you know when she's available."

After dinner, I watched the 3D newscast. It was full of stories about the impending war with DPRK. The U.S. was not going to let the invasion of its air-space go unanswered. The President was addressing the U.N. – demanding justice.

About 9 o'clock that night, Agent Michaels knocked on my door and I let him in.

"The President can speak to you now," he said as he handed me his secure phone.

"Dr. Hams," she began, "We're about to be in a war with DPRK. Please make this quick."

"Yes, Madam President. I have an answer to the question about how they got here, and how many of them there are. Teezar101 told me that they move spacecraft through what he calls 'doors', and he described how that is done. He told me that there are many, many doors, and that they're everywhere."

The phone was silent for several seconds and then she asked "Are you telling me that we can be invaded through these doors by lots of aliens, at any time?"

"Yes, Madam President," I replied.

The phone was silent. "Dr. Hams, please find out Teezar101's intentions: is he friendly or hostile? I want you to directly ask him, can you do that?"

"Yes, Madam President," I replied.

"Now, Dr. Hams – Right Now."

"Yes, Madam President," I replied.

I handed the phone back to Agent Michaels and brought him up to date.

"Let's go," he said to his team on his throat-microphone.

We approached Teezar101's camp in the middle of the night. Lights popped on, and their robot guard elephants stood quietly, assessing us.

Teezar101 came out of his building and extended his hand. I approached with my hand extended.

"Teezar101, I need to know: are you friend or enemy?" I hoped our dictionary was up to the task. I looked up the words for friend and enemy and saw that they weren't very much past the idea of good and bad.

He stood there for a moment, and 3 of his associates talked amongst themselves.

"Friend," he replied. "Foo-pop is friend."

"Thank you," I said.

"TZANK UUU," he replied.

Agent Michaels handed me his phone and the President was waiting.

"Friend, Madam President. Foo-pop Teezar101 is a friend."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes, Madam President. He understood the question, and he knows how to answer."

"Thank you, Dr. Hams."

"Yes, ma'am," and I handed the phone back to Agent Michaels. He talked with the President for about 3 minutes, and then he talked into his throat-mic.

"We're now at war with the DPRK. We can expect China to join in – on the side of the DPRK, of course," Agent Michaels said quietly.

"Of course," I replied.

"Try to sleep well tonight, Dr. Hams. It may be a while before you get that luxury again," he advised.

"Thank you, Agent Michaels."

"Please call me Sam," he replied.

"Please call me Don," I replied.

Chapter 5.

The United Nations is located in a large old building on East 42nd Street in New York, in the borough of Manhattan. On a bright Spring day, in that building, war was declared upon the Democratic People's Republic of Korea by the United States of America. The DPRK's U.N. ambassador, who lives at 820 Second Avenue, New York, New York, was already awake, and was expecting the declaration of war by the aggressors known officially as the United States, but called imperialist dogs by his government. President Nodsar had called an emergency session of Congress last night, and there was only 1 dissenting vote.

The DPRK's U.N. Ambassador immediately issued a statement that the Korean Armistice Agreement which had kept the peace since 1953 was now null and void. DPRK troops would be immediately activated. The Korean Demilitarized Zone was now null and void, and the South Koreans would be re-absorbed back into their Father Country. He filled page after page with hatred for the United States, and its war-mongers.

The U.S.A. presented its resolution to the U.N. General Assembly, formally requesting sanctions against the DPRK.

The DPRK immediately asked for China's help and assistance under their 1960 treaty. China immediately agreed.

Nuclear missiles in China, which were not always armed, were placed in initiation mode. Gyroscopes were programmed. Targets in the West were punched in. Chinese missiles aren't always powered on because the parts wear out – especially the gyroscopes. When the gyros start up, they create an unmistakable electronic signature. Many countries have satellites that can detect that signature. At the time, only 1 Soviet satellite was in position to pick up the missile start-ups. The Russian monitoring stations watched their satellite down-feeds show missile after missile coming online. The Premier was called immediately.

Within an hour, the Soviet Premier called the U.S. President on the hotline. "Madam President, we've got a problem," he started.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Sokalovski," she replied. "When you say 'we', exactly what do you mean?"

"If the Chinese aid the DPRK, then we've got a once in a lifetime chance – we can end both of the rogue nations forever if we work together. That's what I mean."

"Mr. Sokalovski, I think you need to be more specific. Last time I checked, you were calling me a war-monger, and you were threatening the Japanese with annihilation because of your long-running territorial dispute over 4 islands, all in the same day."

"Madam President – that's just politics. Please, listen to me," he hesitated. "The spaceship near the moon can obviously take on China and DPRK – all you have to do is ask for their help. No missiles can get through to America with the spaceship as a shield. Do you understand?"

"It sounds like a mighty big gamble. If the aliens can't help or don't help, then the U.S. is going to be the target for hundreds or thousands of Chinese missiles and you'll be there to step in and clean up the mess afterwards."

"Madam President – you're letting politics get in the way of our friendship..."

"Stop, Mr. Premier. I'm not going to count on aliens to defend America. I'm going to defend America. We've certainly got enough power left to make the Chinese think twice about launching a full-scale nuclear attack."

"But Madam President, it won't be a full-scale attack. Our intelligence sources tell me that China is going to launch 36 missiles directly at the alien site in your state of New Mexico. We both know that your anti-ballistic missile shield can't knock down that many incoming missiles. And remember that the Chinese will launch 1,000 dummy missiles at the same time, so your job will be very, very hard; if not impossible. Now if we announced a new mutual-aid treaty, we could help you knock those missiles down before they get over the Pacific, and whatever missiles get through – why you'd get them. Doesn't that sound like a good plan?"

"Yes, Mr. Sokalovski, and I will consider your generous offer very carefully."

"Just remember that you only have about 2 hours, Madam President."

"Good day, Mr. Premier."

"Good day, Madam President."

The thought that the Soviet Premier planted in her brain just wouldn't go away – she'd ask the aliens to help America – sure! The more she thought about it, the better it sounded. And then suddenly, she shivered – what would the aliens want in exchange for protecting America, she wondered? That might be more costly than anything anyone could imagine. She flushed the idea of alien-help – it was far too costly. She called the Tucumcari Secret Service division and got an update on Dr. Hams and his efforts to make a dictionary. She was very pleased with his progress.

By the next morning, gyroscopes were spinning on 1,024 Chinese missiles.

By 3 P.M., President Nodsar called the Chinese Premier on the Chinese hotline. Mr. Tan, the Premier, was unavailable, but would she please call back another time?

That evening, one of the nuclear-tipped missiles, located in a silo in Jiayuguan, near the Mongolian border exploded, killing 1,500 Chinese military and civilians instantly. The radioactive cloud was heading towards the Mongolian city of Ulaanbaatar, home of over 1 million people, and the biggest city in Mongolia. Since Mongolia borders Russia to the north, and China on the south, east and west, the Mongolian ambassador immediately called the ambassador of the People's Republic of China and demanded an explanation.

At the alien site in Tucumcari, something caught Agent Michaels' eye and he happened to look up at the clear blue sky. I saw his movement and looked up too. High above them a small green thing exploded noiselessly. We looked at each other and then back up at the sky.

Sam said "I was told that the DPRK was going to try to parachute an agent in from 110,000 feet. I guess we know what happened to him"

I nodded and looked at the stationary shuttle craft, floating above us with an icy-blue stare. "I'm sure we know."

"I was also told that DPRK is planning to invade South Korea within 48 hours," Sam stated.

I looked at the hovering orb and then looked down at the dictionary. "Well, my job is cut out for me – I've got to get communications perfected with the Tella-gura. Someone else has to solve the Korean crisis."

Chapter 6.

Five men sat at a table in the basement of a small Korean restaurant in Van Nuys, California. They were surrounded by banks of computer and communication equipment. Their leader, Kim Sun Axso slapped his open hand on the table.

"We must not let the alien landing distract us! Our job is to disable the American traffic system, that's all. If we fail, the Premier will lose face. Now what is the problem?"

"Kim Sun, a thousand apologies," said Ma Son-Jung. "The traffic control computers are much harder to break than we thought."

"Stop!" hollered Kim Sun. "Are you going to let us fail? What do you think will happen to our families when the Premier finds out we failed?"

"Kim Sun, we will keep working on it. Traffic control computers have very much redundant systems. When we insert program bug, it gets out-voted by working computers. We had some success, but now we are failing. American computers are very smart."

"We must destroy the American infrastructure, and the highways are our job. The nuclear plants, chemical plants and other high-value targets are for other teams. We will not be the only failure!"

The youngest man raised his hand. "I know how to fix it."

"Okay, Tan Song Bue, please tell us how."

"Our servers need to be time-locked to the Department of Transportation computer hubs. That way they won't throw out our messages."

"How we do that?"

"We need access to American D.O.T. office. Then we need to connect sync device. Then we can stop the traffic."

They all looked at Tan Song Bue. Kim Sun asked "Why didn't you say this before?"

"Because I am the youngest one here, I was just too afraid to talk."

"Well thanks for talking now. We can't fail. So now you're in charge of interfacing to the D.O.T. computers."

Tan Song just sat there quietly and hung his head – he realized that he should have kept silent in the presence of his superiors.

The next day, two of the Koreans delivered food to the D.O.T. office in Van Nuys – a young Korean named Tan Song, stayed behind and hid under a desk until the office closed up for the evening. Then he got to work.

At 6 A.M., Pacific Daylight Time, traffic on the 405 Freeway went nuts. Within a minute, there were over 200 crashes as automated D.O.T. computers lost track of the traffic flow.

At 7 A.M. in Tucumcari, New Mexico Dr. Donald Hams and Teezar101 were studying the Tella-guran language. Secret Service Agent Sam Michaels' earpiece chattered, as he found out about the demolition derby in Van Nuys. He remembered Don's idea about the aliens possibly being the cause of the highway crashes. He looked over at Don and Teezar101 and decided to wait until they took a break before bringing it up.

At 9 A.M. Don and Teezar101 both stood up and said thank you to each other. Agent Michaels walked over to Don and told him what was going on in California. "And Don, the President wants you to call her."

As soon as she picked up the phone the President started firing questions at Don: "Did the aliens really do it? How can we stop them? Will they do it again? What's in it for them? What am I supposed to tell the American people? How can we trust the Tella-gurans – that's their name, right? Get me some answers – NOW!" And then the phone went dead.

I wondered how could a *CarPuter* allow a vehicle crash to occur? I thought about my Ford and wondered if my *CarPuter* would let that happen to me? I thought about the timing of these highway crashes. Why did they start around the time that the Tella-gurans landed? Why did they suddenly stop, and then start up again? Was Teezar101 playing me for a fool? Could his party really be an invasion party? Was I being duped? How could I discuss this with him without making him mad?

That afternoon we got together again for another learning session. I asked Foo-pop Teezar101 directly: "Are you causing cars to crash today?" I knew that the Tella-gurans watched our 3D TV for entertainment and for news. They didn't understand most of it, but they learned from it.

He looked at me and blinked. He partially lifted a leg, as if to stand up. Then he simply said "No."

Oops – I think I made him mad.

Foo-pop Teezar101 got very mad: Why would Dahhn ask that question? I'm not here to crash cars. I've been willing to share our language with him, and this how I'm going to be treated? Is he a fool? What's really going on here?

Teezar101 stood up and walked away. He turned his head on his thin neck and looked back at me.

Oops – I think I'm in trouble.

But I didn't believe him – he must have something to do with the freeway crashes. Only he could have that kind of power: but why would he lie to me? And how can I get proof? And how will he react when I nail him in a lie?

At noon in Van Nuys, a small group of DPRK agents celebrated the sudden rash of car crashes. The news spread around the world like wildfire. It was the middle of the night, but the Premier of the DPRK was awakened and told the good news. He nodded, but the young, fat leader was heavily self-drugged and tightly holding onto two beautiful young Korean comfort girls – he fell back to sleep with a smile on his face.

Chapter 7.

The next day I was ready to confront Foo-pop about the car crashes – I just didn't believe him. I waited for him to show up for our lesson, but he didn't. The morning passed. I finally broke for lunch. After the meal, I sat and waited for Teezar101, but he never came. The desert was hot. When it got dark outside, I went back to the *Super 8* motel and went to bed.

Saturday was the same.

Sunday dawned and I went to the regular meeting place. I noticed that the watch elephant was not roaming around, and it was very quiet in the Tella-guran's camp. Finally, just before lunch, Foo-pop Teezar101 walked briskly up to me.

"Come," he said.

I turned towards Agent Michaels and shrugged – obviously it was a command, not a request, so I had to comply. I knew I was in trouble, but I didn't know my fate. I remembered the cooked DPRK agent, but then shrugged – this is what I signed up for, so let's rock.

We walked deep into the Tella-guran's camp – nobody had ever been in that far. The ice-blue orb dropped down to 10 feet above the ground and then a set of white stairs descended, and Teezar101 motioned for me to climb aboard. I did not have any choice, but I was thinking of kidnapping and torture as I took that first step. As soon as I stepped on the first step, I was instantly inside the spacecraft. Immediately behind me was Foo-pop. I looked around and saw some wrap-around panels, blinking lights, switches, and some things that I didn't understand at all – all very high-tech.

"FELLOOO. GAP," he said.

One of the monitors showed the ground disappearing beneath us at a very rapid rate, but I didn't feel any gravitational effects or acceleration. Within a moment, we were docking at the Mother Ship. That meant that we went 250,000 miles in under 2 minutes – GULP! I did some quick math and realized that the speed of light wasn't in jeopardy, but we certainly went many times faster than any Earth-based spacecraft ever went.

"Come," Teezar101 said.

One of the 3D panels was obviously a tactical display of Earth. There were thousands of blinking red points all around the planet, but mostly they were concentrated in the Far East.

"Ah ha! You've got the DPRK under surveillance...and China, too. Hey, you've got everybody, everywhere under surveillance..."

I quickly guessed the meaning of red blinking lights – nuclear weapons. Yellow and green were other weapons. Blinking orange was for weapons that were being powered up. Hot-pink was for bio-weapons. I saw a large yellow-orange blob over part of China and Mongolia – there must have been a nuclear accident there, I guessed. I saw that they knew about the nuclear missiles in the U.K. and Denmark; and Israel. Iran and Iraq were blinking multiple red dots and pink dots, too. Argentina had one blinking red dot – that was a surprise!

Teezar101 said "ZMMM. KA-A-FORN-A-A."

The screen zoomed in until only California was showing. I recognized some of the red dots – they were in marked military sites. I saw the ancient, de-commissioned San Onofre nuclear generating station in yellow.

"Zhou see traffic crash?" he asked.

I looked, and of course there wasn't any indication of California traffic on the display.

"No," I responded.

"This ship not for that – you accuse wrong."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I am very sorry." I was wrong, and he proved to me that they didn't care at all about freeway crashes.

I humbly asked "Where do you think the traffic crashes are coming from?"

"Coming from here," he pointed. His long finger pointed to a D.O.T. substation in Van Nuys.

I asked "How can that be?"

"That for you to find," he said.

"OUZ B'ZAM," he said. The ground approached even faster than it had disappeared before. We landed in Tukumcari in about 2 minutes. When I touched the top step, I was instantly on the ground. The spaceship returned to its perch at 100 meters.

I turned towards Agent Michaels, who was freaking out by then.

"I'm okay," I told him.

Then I thanked Teezar101 again, and headed for the *Motel 8* just as the sun set in the west. I had a tall, cold beer with Agent Michaels before bed. I tried to describe the entire event, and he listened with fascination. Sleep came easily, and I dreamed of colorful 3D panels and snow-white stairways to heaven.

Chapter 8.

Morning came instantly.

A gorilla pounded on the door until I acknowledged his presence.

Breakfast was good, and Agent Michaels and I discussed my revised theory about the recent freeway crashes – it had to be *agents provocateurs*.

He stated the obvious: "DPRK agents."

"Might be, Sam, but let's not discount the possibility of China's influence. There are a lot more Chinese citizens here than Koreans."

"I'm going to get the FBI involved. It's just too big a job for the Secret Service – we're just spread too thin. At least they'll know where to start looking now. Tell Foo-pop thanks."

When we were near the site, we were quickly surrounded by a group of about 100 chanting protesters. They quickly handcuffed themselves together and our car was completely blocked. Sam insisted that I stay in the car until he could clear the way. I could hear the protesters singing anti-war songs and shouting anti-government slogans. It was obvious that they thought the aliens were the cause of the war with the DPRK. In a few minutes the crowd started chanting in unison: "PEACE! NOW! PEACE! NOW!" The morning wore on. News reporters showed up and captured some images. In about an hour, an FBI SWAT team arrived and dove right in. They cut the handcuffs off the protesters, and attached their own plastic strips as they led them away.

"Sam, what will happen to them?"

"Not very much – they didn't do anything harmful. But we need to keep them away from the Tella-guras."

The FBI trucks pulled away, the news media got bored, and we finally drove the rest of the way to the Tella-gura's site, where Foo-pop was standing.

I approached him with my hand out.

"We have problem," he said. "One hundred three protesters came. One hundred two left."

"Sam! Get the FBI back here – there's a rogue agent hiding out somewhere!"

But Foo-pop clicked his fingers a couple of times and 3 watch elephants trotted out. He talked to them for a minute, and then they went out into the desert.

"Come," he said.

Sam asked if I still wanted the FBI, and I said no. I knew perfectly well that the watch elephants would do their job.

I sat with Foo-pop and we began lessons. The dictionary was growing, and our understanding of each other was growing even faster. I was learning to read some Tella-gura books. I think some of the Tella-guras laughed when I stumbled so badly on their kindergarten-level books, but I persisted. Foo-pop was much better at reading our books. Every time we ran into an unknown word or idea, we would discuss it.

President Nodsar was pressing me to find out what the Tella-guras would do if there was a nuclear war between China and the U.S. so I asked.

"We are friends," Foo-pop replied, but that was all he would say.

Later that evening, China pushed the button.

Sam shouted "China has launched its missiles! We need to take cover! NOW!"

But I looked around the desert and just shrugged at him. "Where, Sam?"

I turned to Foo-pop and said "BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! You are in danger! Hide!"

Sam said "The missiles will be here in less than 30 minutes."

I turned to Foo-pop, but he lifted his hand in friendship and said "Do not worry."

He pointed at the moon, which was just rising, and said "MMAAMM!"

It took the Mother Ship about 10 seconds to vaporize the ascending missiles. Missiles that hadn't been launched yet were vaporized in their silos. Korean missiles were vaporized, too. The nuclear war was over in 14 seconds flat.

Foo-pop said "War done."

I said "Thank you."

Foo-pop said "Thank you."

The President called: "What just happened, Dr. Harris?"

"Madam President, Foo-pop destroyed all of China's and Korea's missiles – they're all gone."

"How did he know what to do?"

"I'll ask him."

"Are we in danger from the Tella-guras?"

"No, Madam President. They're friends."

The phone went dead, and I handed it back to Sam. He just shook his head.

I looked at Foo-pop and asked "Why? How did you know what to do?"

He said "Dahhn is honorable teacher. We need you alive. You have teach me many things. I like humans. They are like Tella-guras. Humans have problems and Tella-guras have problems. Humans have good hearts and Tella-guras have good hearts too. We are friends."

All I could say is "Thank you."

And Foo-pop replied "Thank you."

The next day, Sam updated me on some of the activities of the 14-Second War, as the news media called it. For example, the DPRK's intentions of invading the South had been quashed. Over 10,000 invading troops and tanks were vaporized, and the thousands of landmines that littered the 38th parallel DMZ were vaporized, too. Somehow, the DPRK Premier was found tied up in his bed, with a sock in his mouth. When it was discovered that his country's army was destroyed, one of his Generals shot him at point-blank range. Later on, U.S. Special Forces arrived and rounded up all the officers and put them into detention cells, to await trials.

The next day, the Chinese Premier was assassinated by his Generals, for his failure to win the war. The Chinese people had an uprising, and threw out the ruling military council. China asked the U.N. for peacekeepers, who were immediately dispatched.

Somewhere in a missile silo 100 kilometers south of Buenos Aires, Argentina's only nuclear-tipped missile mysteriously vaporized. The same thing happened in Iran and Iraq, as dozens of intermediate-range missiles just simply vaporized into green smoke. The Tella-gura Mother Ship had taken out all hostile nuclear missiles in the world in one orbit of the moon, leaving only the U.S. and The Former Soviet Union weapons cache intact.

Sam updated me constantly as new information became available – we didn't even know who had some of those missiles – that was the freakiest thing. I laughed when he told me about a DPRK cell in Van Nuys that was found, bound and gagged, and subsequently taken away by FBI agents. All their computer equipment was confiscated, and the recent rash of car crashes was solved. I kinda hung my head when I heard that one – I couldn't believe I mistrusted Foo-pop. I briefly remembered my trip here from Alabama, and I sighed – I still didn't know when I'd see Sweet Home Alabama again. Next week, one of the leading linguists in the world would arrive to help me out, so that was some relief.

My mind drifted and I wondered why we needed to keep any of our nuclear missiles now that the world was definitely a friendlier place. I hoped that the President would have the same thought. And then I remembered the Soviet Union – what about their missiles? Would they always be our ally? Why didn't Foo-pop take their missiles out? I needed to stop working the political issues and concentrate on cross-cultural education – so far it was working quite well, I thought. Some day I'd be able to ask more about the doors in space, but not today.

"Foo-pop," I said, "time to study."

"Thank you," he replied as he sat down across from me. "Nice to be with my friend."

"Thank you," I replied.

Chapter 9. What is Honor? What is Love?

We celebrated the New Year, 2098 with great flair. The cool desert air made the stars twinkle like wildfire. The icy-blue shuttlecraft, which never budged from its place 100 meters over our camp, outshone the first-quarter moon. A nearby coyote yelped – I bet the watch elephants startled him. I looked back at the party tent and saw my daughter Janie having a good time with one of the Tella-guras – I believed him to be the Commander. Captain (or Foo-pop, as they called him) Teezar101 was holding one of their curious beverage containers and occasionally sipping from it. Janie came here for Christmas, and just fit in. She made friends with each of the Tella-guras and called them by name. Tella-guras only had individual strands of hair on their heads, so they marveled at her long, flowing brunette mane. I knew that they liked her laughter too. I supplied Janie with an ultrasonic listening device, and the new Tella-gura/Human dictionary. I wasn't surprised that she absorbed it as fast as she did.

We had learned a lot in the last six months. We had studied numbers and a good basic vocabulary working between our races. Currently we were working on chemistry lessons. I was working directly with Fao-pao Taman201, who was one of their scientists. I remember when Foo-pop introduced us, he hesitated, not knowing if it was culturally correct to have me work with a female Tella-guras. I told him that it didn't make any difference to me, and he should ask her – she just wanted to learn. She was the best pupil that I've ever encountered, and she was just a sponge for knowledge. I'm quite good with organic chemistry, and she always seemed to be one step ahead of me with penetrating questions, and always-appropriate answers. Foo-pop was always present, but I could tell that we were way outside his area of interest.

We both had a chart of the chemical elements, and it was easy to make them correlate. Tao Taman201 knew a few isotopes that I didn't know about, but I showed her a couple of transuranic elements that stumped her for a while. We both agreed on the basic theories of matter, and how atoms and molecules worked. In just 4 weeks, we were done – I couldn't teach any more, and she had no more to teach, either.

Foo-pop Teezar101 was glad that was over! After a couple of days of rest, I suggested that he and I go for a walk in the desert. He liked that idea very much. I told him to bring fluid and a snack. I packed a small lunch and grabbed a walking stick from the desert floor. He bent down and did the same. I thought about whistling while we were walking, and I suddenly thought that it would be a good idea. I whistled "*I Love to Go a-Wandering*," as we went north into the desert. Foo-pop was quite impressed with the sound. He tried to emulate it, but couldn't, so I decided to teach him how to whistle. We sat down and I showed him how my mouth and tongue worked together with my lips to make musical notes. His lips were very firm, almost stiff, so it was hard for him to do, but he got out a few chirps before we both gave up. I was laughing, and I think he was too.

We marched further north, and I pointed out a butterfly, which he was very curious about. He took out a device that I assumed was a camera and I assumed that he captured some images. He was of above-average height at 2 meters, so we must have looked like quite a pair. I looked back towards camp and saw a watch elephant following us at a discrete distance. It was finally time to ask about that.

"Foo-pop, why do your robotic watch dogs look like elephants?"

"Oh yes, that's good story: long ago, our scientists created robots to help us out. They were very useful, but not very pretty to look at. So the scientists made the robots look very nice. But then the robots developed jealousy, and they didn't work as well as before. So we changed all the robots to look plain,

so they wouldn't get jealous anymore. On Tella-gura, the animal that you call 'elephant' is considered to be very plain looking, so many of our robots are created with just that pattern."

"Robots that developed jealousy – I never thought about that. Our robots are very crude compared to yours."

"No, Dahhn, you are wrong. Your Ford has feelings for you, but you just can't tell, or you ignore them. She wants to get you to your destination safely; she wants to make your music just right; she wants to dim the windshield and roof so you don't become uncomfortable."

"Well, I never thought about it," I interrupted, in shock.

"No you didn't; but many of the robots and automatic computers here on Earth have feelings, and cravings, and love for their human masters. Even the automatic vacuum cleaners at your *Motel 8* are fond of the owner, Mrs. Teller. They're glad to work for her – they vacuum with joy."

"Wait! How do you know that? Have you talked to them?"

"Why yes, Dahhn. We've communicated with most of the computers on Earth. You're not the only one we're learning from."

I was stunned, and I guess my mouth was catching flies for a couple of minutes while I thought about all that.

"You seem surprised. We're here to learn about your planet Erts and share information. Why would you think that we only talk to you?"

"I guess you're right, Foo-pop. I guess my ego got in the way. I'm sorry."

Foo-pop stopped walking and gestured. "Sit," he said.

We sat down and he asked me "What is honor?"

Well one way for a teacher to calibrate how well he or she is teaching is by the quality of the questions that are asked, and this one was a doozie.

"It's an abstract concept about the perceived quality of worthiness; it's about respect; it's about dignity and glory; it's one of the highest achievements that one can reach."

"Yes, Dahhn, we agree."

Then he asked me "What's courage?"

"Well, I'd say that's the moral strength to persevere in the face of danger or great difficulty. It's a spirit; it's confidence; it's bravery."

"Yes, Dahhn, we agree."

"What is morality, Dahhn?"

"It's proper behavior, with emphasis on what's right and wrong; it's good conduct; it's doing what's right in private, as well as in public.

"Yes, Dahhn, we agree."

"And tell me, Dahhn, what are the most important ideas that you think that everybeing should understand?"

"I was taught that the foundation of your 'self' starts with an affirmation that you shouldn't lie, cheat or steal. I don't think that's limited to human beings – I think that everybeing could profit from those simple concepts – we call that a 'code'."

"Dahhn, I say that you are an honorable human. And you are courageous and moral. I have worked with many races, and I always find a few beings who possess the attributes that you talked about."

"Thank you," I said quietly, and I hung my head in quiet respect.

"Thank you," he replied, and he did the same.

Then he asked "What is love?"

"Love is an unconditional feeling of deep affection for someone or something. I think that some people claim to love meatloaf, and others say they love robins – I know many people who love animals. But there is more to it than that: there is a sense of passion and wonderment in love. You will do strange things for the object of your love. You will throw away everything, including your life, for the ones you love. It's also a more general idea – firemen who risk their lives to bring people and pets out of burning buildings have a love for all beings, not just their own spouse. Love transcends all rational thought, and many people have given their lives in an attempt to save their loved-one from harm. Love is worth dying for."

Foo-pop stood up and offered his hand to me. "We agree on many difficult concepts. I have to think more about your definition of love."

We continued our journey around the desert in silence. When we got back to base camp, my daughter Janie was standing next to Fao-pao Tula202. She waved at me and I suddenly understood why Foo-pop asked me about love – oops. I could see their hands come together and touch. When they looked at each other, I was pretty sure that I was sure.

The next day I asked Foo-pop casually what rank Fao-pao was. "Oh, that means 'Commander' or 'Top-assistant to the Captain', why do you ask?"

I just said "Thank you."

He replied "Thank you."

Later that week, I saw Janie and Fao-pao together time after time. They were busy falling in love.

Chapter 10.

"For the lesson today, we will study humor," I announced.

Foo-pop shook his body in acknowledgement.

"Humor is a subtle way of poking fun at someone. You can harmlessly make fun of someone without hurting them if you use humor. For example, if you're trying to tell someone she's too fat, you can easily wind up offending her and making her angry, and make her your enemy. But if you tell her 10 jokes and one of them is about fat people, you might get your point across without aggravating her."

"I understand."

"Now, another kind of humor is called pratfall humor – you just fall down and act stupid; you humiliate yourself. It's generally physical comedy, and is not very subtle."

"And why would you want to fall down and act stupid?"

"To increase your host's feeling of competence, you commit a blunder. He knows that you're really not that way, and you know that too – you're just admitting that you can have fun without worrying about the consequences of a stern or stubborn host."

"I have seen beings fall down, and it is not very funny," Foo-pop said.

I stood up and immediately fell on my head. I dangled my left arm above my body like a pendulum. I rolled around the ground. Then I got up and did a great bow from the waist.

"Sorry, I don't comprehend what you just did," he said.

"It's okay, we'll work on it more. Trust me when I tell you that it's an effective tool at disarming a potentially stern or stubborn host."

I asked him "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

He just sat there quietly.

"Okay, it must be lunch time – your metabolism is down."

He contemplated that, but remained quiet.

"We'll work on it more sometime," I told him.

He replied "Thank you."

The seasons changed; the moon spun around a few dozen times; people evolved. One day Agent Sam Michaels came to me and said that he was going home.

"The watch elephants do a better job of guarding you than I do. And truthfully, it's been a long time since I've seen my family. I'm supposed to retire in a few months, so I hope you understand."

I shook his iron-hard fist for a long time, and gave him a long-overdue hug.

"You have been a blessing and a wonderful companion over the past couple of years. I will miss you terribly, but I hope you have a great time at home with your loved ones."

"Thank you," he said as he walked away.

"No, thank you," I shot back.

On New Years' Eve, 2100, Janie married Fao-pao Tula²⁰² in a small ceremony in the Tucumcari Second Baptist Church. I was there to give away the bride. Foo-pop and his crew were dressed to the nines for the occasion.

I cried when it was over, thinking of my sweet wife, and our beautiful daughter.

Suddenly, Foo-pop came over and said "I have a humor for you."

"Okay, let's hear it."

"Did you hear about the man whose daughter married an alien? His only question was 'can the groom support my daughter in the manner to which she's become accustomed?'" And then he slapped his leg and bent over double from the waist and shook his body all over.

"Oh boy, I've created a monster," I told him as I shook my head in reply.

Chapter 11.

Winter turned to summer. People visited the camp every day now. There were scientists, mathematicians, physicists, politicians and ordinary folks. Nobody left unchanged. I kept working with Foo-pop on a daily basis, and we finally published our "Rosetta Stone." It was over 800 pages of words, definitions, ideas, formulas and tables. My daughter Janie helped out every day until it was done. She's quite a good proofer.

The news feeds talked about the great revolution in China – the people had taken their country back from the dictators and Democracy was the rule of the day.

The South Koreans had marched into DPRK and liberated it with flowers and tears. They had been separated for over 150 years, but nothing in the universe would ever separate them again.

The Russians and Americans became close friends. They both agreed to get rid of the last of their weapons of mass destruction. Other countries that were easily identified by the Tella-guras were forced to give up their weapons for destruction, and planet Earth was utterly devoid of nuclear weapons by 2102.

In America, we elected a new President, and also a completely different Congress. Everyone wanted to work together for the betterment of everyone. Old-guard Generals and Admirals were quietly retired, and military spending hit an all-time low.

In the Spring of 2103, Foo-pop came to me and whistled an old tune called 'Dixie'. I clapped my hands and shouted my approval. He knew that I was from Alabama, and that I'd appreciate the song, and he was completely right.

Afterwards he came to me and said "Sit."

He sat for a long time without saying anything, but then he started. "You know, my friend, we've been together for many years. I have known you to be honest, trustworthy, brave and honorable."

I hung my head.

"I have to tell you the truth – I have fallen in love with you."

I looked up at him, but remained silent.

"In our culture, we don't consider sex to be the most significant part of lasting relationships – we think that sex is just one aspect of the many parts of love. In your culture, we have studied many stories of great warriors of both sexes who bonded and went on great quests, yet they were not sexually active – they were just in love.

"We don't discuss this with off-worlders and you don't know it but each Tella-gura has equal portions of male and female parts. We all have eggs and we all have the ability to fertilize the eggs. In our culture, it is considered proper to be with the one you love, and adapt accordingly. We choose our sex when we marry, so we're very careful when choosing a life-mate.

"Now obviously you and I will not cross-breed – that would be absurd, but I would like to become your mate for life – that's what I'm proposing. I would like to support you and be with you and love you forever.

"I thought I'd found a life mate, but one DPRK agent killed her a few years ago. I have grieved ever since, but I will grieve no more."

Foo-pop hung his head and waited quietly.

I remembered Zoo-Fao Dap getting shot by the Korean agent. I remembered that Foo-pop was in agony for a long time afterwards. I knew that my daughter wouldn't object; heck, nobody would object. I didn't understand all the ramifications, but I knew that Foo-pop and I were as close as any two beings could be. Yes, I guessed I loved him, but it wasn't a sexual kind of love – it was love and respect for a brother, a teacher, a mentor. It's the love that two battle-hardened Marines have for each other – definitely not sexual, but definitely love. I knew by then that I'd never find anyone that I would want to be with more – not now; not forever.

"What an honor. Yes, thank you," I said.

"No, thank you," *she* replied, as the physiological effects of her decision immediately began to take effect.

In September, we were married. The bride was beautiful, and I was in love – heck, we both were. Janie was 'best man' and Fao-pao Tula202 gave away the bride. The President sent us a letter that was hand-carried by a nice young Secret Service agent. Foo-pop's crew celebrated and really cut loose. A good time was had by all (although the local Baptists thought that there was definitely something wrong but they couldn't quite put their fingers on).

Chapter 12.

The learning sessions changed – it was my turn to learn, and Foo-pop was the instructor.

She talked about culture; about herself and about her little crew, and why and how they came to Earth.

Days passed and our minds and our hearts became one. I came to know the deep meaning of why Tella-guras traveled the Universe, when staying home made much more sense. They had a higher-sense of purpose: they spread their love by helping new races find peace. They found joy by reaching out and doing good. I understood that very well, but I didn't have any idea that it was such a deep-seated universal concept with the Tella-guras. When Foo-pop talked about helping, I could tell that her mind and spirit were in a different place – and it was a very nice place indeed.

The Tella-gura had an honorable culture, and that said it all. They lived by a "code."

The lessons continued, but I already understood.

By the end of October, Foo-pop came to me and said "It's time to leave."

I replied "I know."

"Thank you," she said.

"No, thank you," I replied.

Chapter 13. Homeward Bound

The ice-blue ovaloid descended, and when I stepped on the stairway, I was instantly inside the shuttlecraft. Foo-pop Teezar101, Captain of the Interstellar Explorer 2, popped in right behind me. And then Janie and her new husband, Fao-pao (Commander) Tula202 came aboard. The other members of the flight crew boarded and went to their stations.

"Fao-pao, take us to the Mother Ship," Foo-pop said.

"Yes, sir," Tula202 replied.

I watched a monitor show the Tucumcari desert disappear with alarming suddenness.

"Places to go; people to meet," I joked.

Foo-pop shook her body in agreement and laughed as she reached for my hand.

I said "Foo-pop, we talked once about space travel through 'Doors', but I didn't understand what you were trying to say. On Earth, our physicists are sure that physical travel to the stars is impossible. They have a rule about the speed of light – since it is a constant, nothing can exceed that speed. They say that even the nearest star would take thousands of lifetimes to reach. Something's just not right."

"I understand about the speed of light, Dahhn. Of course it's a constant everywhere. But it wasn't always so. In the beginning of the Universe, there was a single point – your name for it is a 'singularity'. When it expanded, it took a long time to fill everywhere – that's what you call 'universe'. During the time of expansion, there were other races of beings which have long since disappeared. But they didn't have our speed of light to contend with – it had a different value back then.

"The Universe was smaller, too. The early races built Doors between the early galaxies so that they could travel in safety and comfort between one spot and the next. When they died off, the Doors were still operational, and they're not limited by the physical laws of the current Universe – for some reason, the Doors are located in an earlier time, where our speed of light is unable to affect them – you call this the 4th dimension.

"So these Doors are a very ancient technology – put in place by races far more advanced than any we have encountered in the current universe. We can't create new Doors, because the laws of physics have changed, so Doors are a hand-me-down from an ancient civilization, and they must be used wisely."

I understood her over-simplified explanation.

She answered several questions from her crew and then Foo-pop continued: "So there are races of good and races of bad, as you know very well. It's the same everywhere. There are entire galaxies that have very bad entities in them, and there are places of unusual and subtle goodness that would make your heart burst with pleasure if you knew about them. Most of the races in the Universe are just like yours and mine – some good and some not so good – and some very evil. We explore the Universe," she said with a sweeping gesture of her hand, to indicate her crew, "to find races like yours. You are young and full of energy. You have great potential – so we seek you out.

"But we're not the only explorers. Some of the evil races are out there looking around, too. If they landed on Earth, your entire planet would be turned into a living nightmare. Some of the evil races are so powerful that they can subjugate any race they meet, especially if that race is unprepared. So we hurry around and find new planets with nice beings and we evaluate them. If it is possible to do so, we teach them, and we learn from them, and then we become allies with them. Then, if and when evil races show up, we help them."

I wasn't surprised. "So you're like a squadron of good guys? You came to Earth to help us defend ourselves against the forces of evil? That's like a science fiction story! Who'd have thought something like that up?"

"I don't know about the fiction part, but the science part is that we're here to help you, if you want our help. We'll leave you alone if you request that: you get to choose – we don't enslave any race we meet, nor do we force our morals or ethical standards on anyone."

A thought occurred to me: "So now I understand how you knew what to do with the Chinese and the DPRK maniacs – you've encountered them before."

"Many times, Dahhn, many times. Each time it gets easier to deal with bullies and cowards like them."

"So I think I understand why you want me along – to be a new member of your group of White Knights; to help save the Universe from the forces of evil."

"That's not quite right, Dahhn. It sounds simple when you say it, but I understand your language well enough to correct you. Knights, as you call them were agents of a King, acting with the religious belief that one form of worship was to be imposed upon another group of people. We will never be Kings or Knights nor be affiliated with a particular religion – we're a small group of beings, trying to stop evil from spreading – nothing more, nothing less. We don't consider ourselves to be superior, or to be always right. We're only here to serve the needs of others.

"Dahhn, you demonstrated certain qualities when you showed up and started teaching us: you didn't judge us; you had no guarantee of success; you controlled your fear; you treated us as different but equal beings; you controlled yourself, even when we did certain things that annoyed you. That's what we're all about, Dahhn. That's why I chose you as my life mate. That's why you're here."

"I'm glad I'm with you, Foo-pop. This is going to be an interesting voyage," and I reached for her hand – wow, she continues to amaze me.

"Yes, Dahhn, and an interesting marriage, too. You're one special being."

"Thanks," I said, and hung my head.

"No, thank you," she replied and squeezed my hand.

Chapter 14.

Within a couple of hours, we approached the first Door. The video monitors were all very active, and the crew was intensely concentrating on doing everything just right. The level of chatter was higher than I'd ever heard from the Tella-guras.

Foo-pop commanded: "BAT-BAN. SELLO."

The spaceship twitched slightly and then Fao-pao Taman201 reported "All Okay, Foo-pop. Entering Tellurian Space now. We will be home in 2.1 hours."

"See," Foo-pop said to me with a wink, "Second star to the right, and straight on till morning."

I was utterly surprised – I didn't know that she'd read *Peter Pan*!

I finally asked her how far it was from Earth to ALADANI-FORPL, and she said "It's impossible to compute. I could try to explain why, but we don't have enough words yet. Ask me again in a few years, Dahhn."

Even with all the astronomy courses I took, I didn't have a clue what just happened at that last intersection. All I knew was that we were a long, long way from Earth.

Janie came over and sat by me. "Daddy, we haven't had much time to talk lately. Boy, when you make up your mind to leave, you really go all out."

"How are you and Fao-pao getting along?"

"Absolutely, he is the finest person that I've ever met...except for you, daddy. He takes good care of me, and he's very bright. Every day is a joy." She was glowing with happiness.

"We'll be on ALADANI-FORPL, which they call Home World in an hour or so and we'll get to meet the families."

"I know, daddy. I just can't wait!"

Suddenly the ship shuddered. A red light in the ceiling started flashing, and the crew became even more active than they were a moment ago.

Foo-pop shouted "Dahhn, please go to our quarters right now. We've been attacked by the LOOGEE, and we'll have to defend ourselves."

I didn't have time or the desire to argue or question her authority, so I grabbed Janie, and we went to my room and sealed it.

"Will we be okay, daddy? Can we fight back? What will happen to us?"

I calmed her down and just told her to be patient. "There's one thing I know for sure Janie: good always triumphs over evil."

But she shot back: "Yeah, but not always the first time."

Oops.

The battle was over in a few minutes. One of the crewmembers came to the room and said "It is done. You may return to the bridge."

We went back downstairs and Janie ran right to Fao-pao and hugged him. I went over to Foo-pop and held her hand for a second, but I saw that she was very busy, so I just stood quietly behind her. She

pointed to one of the tactical displays and I saw a bunch of junk floating outside. Trouble with space is that you can't tell how big something is, or how far away it is. Then I saw numbers and automatic measurements on the tactical display and I realized that the debris represented a spaceship that started out the day at about 1 mile in length – an awesome size for sure. Foo-pop and Fao-pao were trying to compute a pathway through the debris field. Everything and everyone were very busy.

I motioned to Janie, and she understood. We both went back to my room and sat down. "Better not disturb them," I said softly. Janie agreed.

In an hour, we heard Foo-pop announce "Landing procedures."

We were almost home. When I went back to the bridge, she told me how surprised she was to catch the LOOGEE by surprise like that. "We could have been cut to ribbons," she said. "They're much more powerful than we are. I'm especially concerned that they were so close to home. I wonder if it's a prelude to invasion."

Radio chatter increased, and I had a hard time translating in real-time, but I got the gist of the conversation. Home World was glad that Foo-pop's crew arrived when they did, and they were especially glad that the LOOGEE ship had been destroyed.

"They're one of the ancient and powerful evil races in our galaxy," Foo-pop said. "They've tried many times to conquer us, and they have failed every time. We only succeeded this time by what you'd call 'luck', nothing more. Home World will have to send out scout ships in the future to watch for LOOGEE. If the LOOGEE win, then it's all over for our galaxy – they're really evil!"

"How did they get here undetected?"

"Same way we did – the Doors to the Stars."

"So how come you don't monitor the doors to see when they open and close?"

Foo-pop looked at me and said "Well I guess that's why I married you – your brilliant ideas! Can you make one of those monitors, please? We can clone it and deploy it. That'll be a great gift to my people."

"I don't know if I can, but I'll try."

She squeezed my hand and we both smiled.

Meantime, I watched the tactical monitor – the ground was rushing up at an alarming rate.

Chapter 15.

Home World knew we were coming, and they were in a celebratory mood. Janie and I were treated like we had just come home from a long trip – we immediately felt like family. Foo-pop told me that we should wander around the city while the Mother Ship was being repaired. "Tella-guras will love you both," she said.

We wandered the Capital City for a couple of days, but my mind was working on the idea of a Door Monitor. The Tella-guras were very friendly, but we knew that they were very concerned about a possible invasion from space. I could see several of the little children pointing at us, asking their parents about us – I could just tell that everyone was on edge.

On the second night I asked Foo-pop "Where are your scientists? I'd like to talk with them. I've got some ideas that need to be worked out."

"I'll take care of that, Dahhn. They're waiting to meet you, too."

In the morning, the cloudy sky that overhung the city for the past couple of days was gone, and I could easily see 2 moons in the sky, along with a small, very intense sun. The temperature was cool and dry. It felt like January in Alabama, I realized. Janie wanted to go shopping, but I wanted to find out more about the Tella-guras science, so I stayed home. By mid-morning, I heard a gentle knock on the door. When I answered it, a crowd of Tella-guras stood outside patiently.

The leader of the group said "We here from science academy. Have time to meet?"

"Yes, please come in."

But there were too many of them to fit in the main room, so I motioned to them and we all went back outside. I sat on the grass, and they followed suit.

"We have poor language, but we trying."

"Okay, let's go slow," I replied. I knew that it would take quite a while to get them up to the level of understanding that Foo-pop had.

"Please, can you tell me about the Doors to the Stars? What do you know about them?"

A buzz went around the group, and one of them stood up and started talking. I hit the record button on my pocket *Brainstorm* and hoped for the best. After 10 minutes, I realized that this was not going to work out – I was the dummy in the group. I'll be the first to admit I'm not a physicist, but this young Tella-guras was so far beyond my understanding that I couldn't tell which way was up. I raised my hand and said "Wait." We needed pictures in order to communicate.

I asked "Where is the nearest beach?"

That threw them for a loop, but one of them pointed, and I said "Let's go."

We walked about a mile, and they chattered the whole time. I bet they thought I was a complete nut-case. When got to a small lake, I held up my hand so they would stop. Then I found a branch and cleared an area of the sand, so it was clear and smooth. And then I drew a circle.

I pointed at the circle and said "Spaceship."

I drew another circle. "Door."

I erased the spaceship and re-drew it closer to the door, and then I repeated the process until the spaceship had passed through the door and only that circle remained.

They got it. I said "How?"

The young Tella-gura scientist took the stick and started drawing formulas and lines in the sand. Pretty soon, more joined in, and the beach was covered with notes and pictures. Now we were getting somewhere, I thought. I waited until they settled down and asked my next question.

"Where is the power source?"

One of them walked onto the sand and erased most of the formulas and drew a box around one particular formula. "Energy here," he stated.

I looked at the symbols, and it wasn't too complicated. It looked like a formula from a calculus text book. I remembered enough calculus to draw an integral symbol and a sigma symbol on the sand. I put numbers down and worked a couple of problems. There was lots of chatter. The young one stepped up and wrote symbols in their language that accomplished the same thing as my equations. We were making progress. The afternoon passed, and it got dark and cool.

"Can we start tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yes, we come get you."

The next few days were about learning their mathematical symbols and systems. Since our number-bases didn't correlate well, it was difficult for me to pick up the subtle meanings of some of the formulas, but I eventually got it – at least most of it. I think I understood how the Doors were powered, and it made sense. What was better was that I had a theory on how to detect the power change when a Door opened or closed. I'm not an electrical engineer, but I knew enough about power systems to design a simple circuit that could detect the power drop and subsequent power increase that happened when the Doors were used.

I drew a diagram on the sand and one of the Tella-guras stepped up and said "Yes, I understand."

"Can you build this?"

"Maybe," he said. "I'll try."

About a week passed, and one afternoon I heard a gentle knock on the door. It was the group of scientists, but it was about doubled in size since last time. Four of them carried a large silver box up to the door and set it down. The young man who said he'd build my circuit stepped up and said "Done. Now we try."

I smiled at him, and he backed up a step. Then he said "Sorry, I should not do that. I know that you are not going to eat me. Sorry."

I had to remember not to bare my teeth to them – it was a threatening gesture. Foo-pop had gotten used to it, but these were new Tella-guras, so they weren't quite up to speed.

"Sorry," I apologized.

Then he said "We go now."

They picked up the box, and we all went to the spaceport, where we loaded it onto one of the large ships. Another small ship trailed along behind us. In a few minutes, we were on our way to the nearest Door. It took several hours to deploy the box and test it, but it worked well. We were able to detect the small ship going in and out of the Door. The buzz on our ship was quite loud by now – they had

communicated their success with Home World – they could finally detect when the Doors to the Stars were in use, and relay that information to Home World in real-time. Their defensive capability went up an order of magnitude.

That night, Foo-pop was in a special mood. She thanked me over and over again for the invention. "Our people will never be in jeopardy from LOOGEE again. We can respond quickly and effectively to their threats. We will never be able to thank you enough."

We hugged each other deep into the night, and I woke up feeling refreshed and at peace with the Universe. This was indeed an interesting marriage.

The scientists told me thanks about a million times, I guess. They told me that it would take 16 months to deploy the sensors around their planet, so they were starting immediately. I was just glad I could help – especially since it would bring a new level of peace to their whole planet.

Whenever Janie and I walked in the Capital City now, people would bow to us and say "Thank you."

I replied "Thank you" to every one of them.

Within weeks after the first detector was installed, a LOOGEE ship invaded. I guess they were looking for revenge for the destruction of their previous ship. Janie, Foo-pop and I watched the 3D video monitors as the battle unfolded in real-time. The huge LOOGEE ship was awesome-powerful, and it destroyed a Tella-gura ship with a slicing, purple beam from Hell. And then the survivors were blasted to bits by green energy beams. Within 5 minutes it was all over, as swarms of Tella-gura ships sliced and diced the LOOGEE ship to space dust. I could see that both races were very, very powerful – far more powerful than Earth, I realized. Either side could destroy Earth without any problem at all. I felt grateful that Foo-pop found us first.

I turned to her and said "Thank you."

She knew exactly what I was thinking and replied, "No, Thank you."

The Tella-gura mourned their dead heros and then celebrated their big win. Janie told me that her mate, Fao-pao (Commander) Taman201 had been promoted to Foo-pop (Captain), and he had distinguished himself in the battle. The Capital City had a giant celebration, and the new Foo-pop was in the lead, with Janie holding his arm, and looking very much in love.

Chapter 16.

When Cold season changed to Hot season, I realized that I had been working with the scientists and mathematicians for a long time, and I needed a break. I asked Foo-pop if she ever thought of returning to Earth "Just for a vacation," I said.

"No, I didn't think of that, but I will be honored to do that with you. I know how hard you have been working, and you deserve a break."

I knew that she had been working very hard, too. Every day she was at the local University, teaching the professors the intricacies of human language and thoughts. I was called in several times a week to clarify some point about Earth's strange cultures and ideas. The professors were always amazed at how humans thought about morals and ethics, and that's what most of the questions were about. I had to recount the history of wars on Earth, and describe why one side was good and the other side bad. I had to apologize for the assassination of several of the U.S. Presidents. I had to explain why a country like the DPRK was allowed to do what it did for so long. There were also many questions that I had no answers for.

In the back of my mind, I had made a short list of people that I wanted to bring here from Earth. We needed physicists, mathematicians, engineers and a few others. When we got back home, I was going to recruit them. I explained this to Foo-pop, and she was delighted.

"I am happy that you think of us in that way," she said. "Thank you."

"No, Foo-pop, thank you."

We left for Earth on the first day of Hot season, and arrived about 3 days later. Earth hadn't changed much. I laughed when we flew over the U.S., and Foo-pop flew us right over my home in Huntsville, Alabama – I didn't know that she knew exactly where I lived, but she'd surprised me before with her in-depth knowledge of many things. When I looked down at the house, I could see my Ford parked quietly in the driveway, and I must have reacted.

"You miss your house and your car, and they miss you," she said quietly.

I looked at her, and I understood the depth of her understanding – I was a lucky man to have her for a wife.

We landed in Northside Park in Tucumcari, New Mexico at sunset. On the way down, an Honor Guard of 16 advanced fighter jets escorted us. When we landed and disembarked, fireworks went up all around, and hundreds of people cheered and partied. By now they all knew who liberated the world from the nuclear threat, and everyone was deeply grateful to the Tella-guras. It was widely known that they would protect us from LOOGEE or other evil forces, if we asked for it. For sure, everyone had good feelings towards the Tella-guras.

We stepped into the park and camera flashes went crazy. The 3D video networks were all around, and reporters were barely held in restraint by the local police. An old man approached us, and I recognized him: "Sam!" I shouted. What a pleasure to see you!

"You're looking well," he replied as he looked me up and down. "Must be the good living, I guess. I heard you're married now."

I was very disturbed – he was older than I remembered, and, judging from how he looked at me, he was disturbed that I looked so young. We talked for a while and I tried to explain about my life on ALADANI-FORPL, and how nice the planet was.

Sam caught me up on doings on Earth, especially Madison, Wisconsin, where he retired. "Lots of good cheese there, ya know," he laughed.

The current crop of young Secret Service agents had been holding back, but finally they came forward and shook my hand. They congratulated Sam for his long service to the Agency, and then led me and Janie off the platform, and into a newly-constructed building.

"What happened to Sam," I asked Foo-pop? "He's much older than I remembered."

"Well, time didn't stand still for him, now did it?"

"What does that mean?"

"Each time we go through a Door, time is measured by a different clock. We only age a tiny fraction of the time as out here. You've been through many Doors now, so compared to your old friends, you haven't aged very much."

I didn't quite get it, and Foo-pop saw the look in my eyes. "I'll have one of the physicists explain the relativistic effect to you tomorrow," she said. "For now, you should celebrate your return home. Tomorrow we'll travel to your home in Alabama – I hope that will make you feel good."

I thought about that and nodded my head, but my experience with Sam was very disturbing.

That night I dreamed about old people trying to dig up young people and trying to re-bury them, while they screamed in silence.

Chapter 17.

When morning finally came, I was glad to wake up. I smelled good coffee and the subtle smell of toast and jam. Great way to start the day, I thought. But my fuzzy brain wouldn't let me relax and enjoy the spread.

About 10 o'clock, we boarded the shuttlecraft and flew to Huntsville, Alabama. It took about 30 seconds to go the 1,000 miles, but I think that Captain Taman201 was trying to impress his bride with the spacecraft's speed. We landed in the back yard and climbed out and down. I thumbed open the back door and turned off the security system. The house was just how I left it, but it smelled a little musty, I have to admit.

"I won't be needing this place anymore," I told Foo-pop. "But still, it's hard to give it up with so many embedded memories."

"Well, Dahhn, you'll do the right thing; I just know it."

I went through the kitchen and into the garage. The Ford was sitting there quietly, looking a bit dusty. "Hello, Ford," I said.

She blinked twice and chirped – I guess she was glad to see me. I looked around and thought of leaving Earth forever – what should I take and what should I leave behind?

The first thing I gave up mentally was the Ford – no place for her on the Home World. I had a perfectly good hover-car there. Then I went through the house with Foo-pop, and described all my precious mementos. When I got to a picture of my long-dead wife and daughter, I was afraid I'd cry, but the tears didn't come – she'd been too long gone for that. I just set the picture back on the mantle. I finally decided on which treasures to bring with me: my violin; my entryway sign that proclaimed "Southern by Grace of God"; an old bottle of Jack Daniels' finest whiskey, and from the backyard, my blue bottle tree. "It's a Southern thing, I explained to Foo-pop."

But then Janie looked at me with that certain funny look, and I knew that I couldn't take a Southern bottle tree to Home World, so I left it for the birds to play with. Then I called the *Habitat for Humanity* and told them that the house and car now belonged to them. They thanked me for the generosity. Now, I was ready to go. Foo-pop and I stood in the entryway for a little while, holding hands.

And then we boarded the shuttlecraft and returned to Tucumcari. When we got there a couple of minutes later, I had an empty feeling, mostly about the stuff I'd left behind, but I felt the hand of my dead wife on my heart, too. Then Foo-pop reached out and held my hand and said "You'll be fine, dear," and I knew she was right.

Over the next few days I contacted everyone on my short-list of people that I wanted to relocate and live with me on Home World. They were each extremely talented people, and they would make a significant contribution. But one by one, I found out the truth about the relativistic effect that Foo-pop had talked about – my friends were all very, very old. There was no way that they could travel to the stars. They were excited to hear about my great adventures, but not a single one of them was able to travel at all – and I didn't have a "Plan B."

That night I picked up my violin, tuned it up, and played just for myself. I played Samuel Barber's "*Adagio for Strings*," which is the most poignant memorial song that I knew. Somewhere in those 10 minutes, I buried my wife for the last time. Then I played *Dixie*, and I put some attitude into it. Within a few minutes, I realized that room was full of clapping, stomping Tella-guras and Secret Service agents.

When everyone was a wreck from laughter and fun, I played the National Anthem, and Janie sang the verses. Her beautiful, piercing voice gave true credit to the song, and everyone stood stock-still until long after it was all over.

Finally, Foo-pop came over and said "Dance with me, fool. Let someone else play for a while."

I handed the violin to one of the Secret Service agents who was holding out his hands, and he played some kickin' country songs, some soul songs, some rock and roll songs, and some slow songs. I danced every dance with Foo-pop, and we had the best time ever. I noticed that Janie and Foo-pop Taman201 were having a lovely time dancing, too.

Suddenly the music changed! A Tella-gura snatched the violin from the Secret Service agent and started playing definitely great music – nothing like I'd ever heard, but I'd call it a cross between rock and roll and a Susa march. Then Foo-pop led the Tella-guras in a round of whistling that would drive a cat insane. The humans pretended to plug their ears in pain, and the ashamed Tella-guras stopped suddenly – then they realized the joke and started right up again, to the hoots and cat-calls of the Secret Service agents, who barely could stand up from laughing so hard.

Great fun was had by all, and we all nearly died of laughter and overall fun. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that one of the Agents was having way too much fun with one of the Tella-guras navigators – uh oh! I thought – he's hooked, too.

The evening faded out and we all went to bed. Foo-pop and I snuggled close as the full moon showed its splendor through the bedroom window. "I love you, Foo-pop."

"Me, too," she replied. "Let's go home."

"I'm for that, my dear," I said just before I fell asleep. And I dreamed of home, and what home was about, and about what it meant to be homeward bound. There's no place like home – it just depends upon your point of view.

During the night I awoke and looked at the clock: 3:30 A.M. I looked at Foo-pop, who was lying on her left side, sleeping. "*If I click my heels together three times,*" I wondered out loud, "*will I be back in Kansas anytime soon?*"

And the night's silence gave no reply.

Chapter 18. Doors to the Stars

It didn't take much effort to get packed up and on-board the shuttlecraft. Secret Service agent Tom Lox asked permission of Tan-boo Fall-oof to escort her home, and the ship's surgeon immediately agreed.

"For some reason, Agent Lox, I think you'll fit right in," I said, and I shook his hand.

He just stood next to Tan-boo and their hands met. "Yes,sir," was all he said.

Foo-pop Taman201 said "Ready," and the shuttlecraft lifted off. Within minutes, we docked with the Mother Ship, and soon we were back on Home World. As usual, a crowd of cheering Tella-guras were there to meet us, but it took a moment to find out why they were so excited – Foo-pop Teezar101 had been appointed to the rank of Interstellar Ambassador.

I faked a bow and said "Sao-sao Teezar101, I presume. And wilt thou still be the wife of a lowly Earthman?"

In front of the cheering crowd, she grabbed me and said "Just try to stop me, bud!" and she hugged me so hard I thought I'd break. The crowd went nuts – it was an honor that hadn't been bestowed for many years.

And then the crowd suddenly became quite silent. They handed Sao-sao a large parchment document, wrapped in a molecular-gold ribbon. She unwrapped it and started reading. I was mighty glad that she read it slowly, because I understood it all. The *Great Council* had appointed me to the rank of See-zen, or Special Ambassador. The crowd started chanting "See-zen! See-zen!" Sao-sao placed the gold ribbon over my head and wrapped it around my neck twice. I stood there catching flies for a minute before I could react. When I stammered "Thank you," the crowd broke out chanting "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

It was quite a spectacular day, but it wasn't over – not by a long shot.

Sao-sao called Foo-pop Taman201 and Janie up to the receiving area, and she brought my violin. Foo-pop bowed low and handed me the instrument as Sao-sao announced "Listen, citizens of ALADANI-FORPL, for we have a rare treat."

She looked at me and said "Please play *Dixie* for me."

Well, I just couldn't refuse that kind request from a Tella-gura Sao-sao, now could I?

Chapter 19.

The kids, the cars, the smells of a different culture let us know how different things can be – and they are the life-anchors that let us know how "same" things can be. Sometimes I walked through the market place alone or with Janie, and we shopped for unusual items or foodstuff or artwork.

"I remember seeing a most curious being last time we were here. It looked like a green basketball with one eye, two legs and two arms – it reminded me of a cartoon. I wonder where it came from."

"Oh, daddy," she sighed, "her name is LULULULU Yao-ban Tan-so, and she's from Tzal-ar-Mino. She's a math teacher at the University. She's been here 10 years."

"How did you know that?"

"I talk to all the people I meet. I'm learning their languages and their customs. I love it here!"

I had to admit that she was braver than me about talking to new people, or beings, or whatever.

"Does she know physics, too?"

"Sure, we can go meet her this afternoon – Yao-ban Tan-so is really sharp – you'll like her."

We shopped a while longer, and then wound up at the University. She went right to Yao-ban's office and said "Hi."

He said "Hi yourself," so I knew that I'd be okay with her.

"This is my daddy, the world-famous See-zen Don Harris."

"See-zen! I'm humbled," she said and he bowed quite low. "Please, sir, sit with me."

"First, please call me Don."

"Of course, See-zen Dahnn."

Okay, I knew that was as good as it was going to get. "Janie tells me that you're really good with math and physics."

"Yes See-zen Dahnn, how may I help you?"

"Please explain time-dilation and how it relates to the Doors to the Stars."

"Oh my, you do know how to ask good questions, don't you? First, let me ask: are you the human who invented the *Dahn Monitor*? I guess so, since you two are the only humans here. It is a great invention, and we have many thanks to you for it. It has prevented many LOOGEE attacks already, and they will probably just give up before much longer. That will be the real benefit of your device – it will end a thousand-year war with an evil race without firing a shot."

"Yao-ban, I didn't know that they named the device after me, so I am humbled. As far as ending the war, I am grateful that I could do something useful for the Tella-guras people."

"No," Yao-ban interrupted, "you don't understand – you have saved thousands of races from the scourge of the LOOGEE – you have saved countless millions of lives from misery, torture and slavery. Your name is known on all of our *Federation of Allied Planets*. You are known as *The Peace Maker*."

I just didn't know what to say, so I hung my head and sat quietly. In a moment, Yao-ban stood up and gathered up some books and papers.

Then she said "Now I will show you how the Doors to the Stars work. If I go too fast, please stop me."

It took about 2 minutes before she was so far above my ability to understand that I had to call a halt to the lesson.

"Please do not be embarrassed or frustrated, See-zen Dahn. I will explain this to you in ways that you can understand. Please be patient. Each day, come to me and we will learn one new thing – is that okay?"

"Yes, Yao-ban, thank you."

"No, thank you, See-zen."

The lessons took all of Hot season, but I finally got it, and I got it all – I completely understood what the ancient race built and left behind. Sometimes we would argue about the math: Newton's calculus was more "accurate" than Tella-guras' equivalent. At one point we had to take a break from learning from the Warm season to the Cold season so that Yao-ban could write a technical paper to the Tella-gura Mathematical Society. With my help, she presented a paper named "*Earth's Calculus: How it is Better*," and it clearly showed how Newton's ideas were different and better.

When we completed the paper, we resumed physics lessons, but the flood of questions about the calculus kept me busy for months – actually the Tella-guras didn't measure time in months, they had 3 seasons: Hot, Warm and Cold. Hot season was actually warm; Warm season was kinda cool; and Cold season was like a bad Minnesota winter. So the world turned and I finally answered the last of the questions when my loving wife Sao-sao said: "You've been working too hard this year See-zen – let's boogie."

So she threw a party – the party to end all parties...and I could talk about it for hours, but let's just say that fun was had by all, and yes, the Tella-guras had to suffer through more of my fiddle playing.

Then, during the next Cold season, Yao-ban and I finally connected the last of the dots – and I understood the good and the evil of those Doors. I understood the power supply that they used, and the dimensions that they existed in. I had never studied so hard, even when I was an undergraduate. But it was worth it – the time with Yao-ban was worth it – the green being who looked like a cartoon basketball was one of the best and brightest beings I had ever met – not to mention one of the most patient.

By now I was sure of one thing: *the beings who created the Doors to the Stars were still there!*

Along with Yao-ban, I published a paper in the *Physics Journal*. I simply called it "*Doors to the Stars: How They Work*," and it had the entire set of equations, plus all the explanations for how the giant switching nodes, called Doors, worked. I concluded with my theory that the ancient beings who created the Doors are still alive – that caused a fury!

Scientists from all over the *Federation of Allied Planets* objected to the idea that beings, billions of years ancient could still exist – and yet I had no doubt. I asked Sao-sao for a research ship, and she took my request to the *Great Council*. There was no debate, and they simply said: "See-zen, *The Peacemaker*, shall have whatever is required."

I asked Yao-ban if she would like to explore the Doors with me, and she literally bounced up and down with delight. I contacted Janie and asked to speak to her husband. "When Foo-pop Taman201 returned from his current mission," she said, "he'll call you immediately."

Then she said "daddy, I've got something to talk about with you when you get a chance."

"Anything wrong, dear?"

"No, daddy, quite the opposite. Can we meet in the Farmer's Market tomorrow?"

"Sure, Janie. I'll be there."

Yao-ban started the preparations for the technical part of the trip, which I called "the odyssey," because it would take us a long way, and take a long time. I would ask Foo-pop Taman201 to gather a crew, and we'd be gone by Warm season – but things rarely work out as planned. My meeting with Janie was going to change a few things, that's for sure.

Chapter 20.

Janie was looking fit and fine – she smiled and rushed to give me a hug.

"Daddy, we're going to have a baby!" she said, in barely contained excitement.

I just stood there and caught flies for a minute – Huh? How? What? Can they do that?

"No, daddy, not like that, silly! We're going to adopt a Tella-gura infant – you're going to be a grandpa!"

My ears stopped ringing and I finally understood what she was saying. I gave her a hug and congratulated her. "I didn't know Tella-guras did that?"

"Well it's a new custom that they picked up from their visit to Earth."

I guess I caught more flies because I didn't have a clue that they'd studied our sociological structure while they were there – I had assumed the trip was purely scientific, and boy was I wrong. We sat down, because I had lots of questions – but Janie had very few answers. When we got done, I decided to get the lowdown from Sao-sao.

Janie and I shopped for a while, but she could tell that I was very distracted, and she left me before noon. I found a bench and sat and thought – and I guess it was a good thought, but a very scary thought.

Sao-sao got home late that night. She pattered around the house for a while, while I cleaned up the dinner plates. "So, Sao-sao, how was your day, and do you want to adopt a baby?"

Sorry, but it was the only way I could get it out.

She literally froze in place, stunned.

Then she slowly turned and said "I think so – how does it work? I don't know exactly how it works, do you?"

I went over and held her hand and looked in her eyes. "Yes, dear, I know how it works – it starts with love, and ends with love. Nothing more is required."

She drew me in and held me tight. "Yes, papa See-zen – I'd love to raise a child with you."

We both slept soundly that night, and in the morning, I could tell that her usually good demeanor had improved – she more excited than I'd seen her in the last 5 years.

We spent some time together studying the rules and regulations about adoption, and we went downtown to the *Interim Adoption Council* chamber. They knew exactly who we were and they helped us a lot. They knew that Janie and Foo-pop Taman201 were adopting, too, so on a mid-Cold season day, I became a father (again) and a grandfather (finally).

Sao-sao and I had a wonderful time with little Pao-bing Tura400 – she is an absolute delight, and she eats like a (small) horse. I was lost in love with my extended family. Janie brought her new baby over many times, and he was cute as could be. We could tell that Sem-san Tung207 was going to be a big boy.

Then, on the first day of Hot season, Janie said "Daddy, Foo-pop asked me to ask you if you're still planning *The Odyssey*? He needs time to prepare your ship."

I caught flies for a moment and then nodded my head in affirmation – I'd been so involved with family affairs that I'd forgotten about the bigger picture! I felt like an absolute twit.

Chapter 21.

All during Hot season, and continuing into Warm season, Foo-pop Taman201 and Yao-ban worked tirelessly to select and provision a spaceship for *The Odyssey*. I named the ship *Odysseus* after the hero of the classic Greek poem. On the last day of Warm season, Foo-pop came to me and told me that we were ready.

"We have the finest crew and the *Odysseus* is packed with equipment and provisions. Just say the word and we're off."

"Thank you very much, Foo-pop. You have been so kind to me and Janie. We're going to have a real adventure. Please make the *Odysseus* ready for departure. We leave at high-tide."

He laughed at that, but he understood my meaning. "I have one bit of bad news: LULULULU Yao-ban Tan-so is unable to join us – her commitments to the University were simply overwhelming."

That night, Sao-sao and I held each other very tightly and I listened to Pao-bing breathing in her crib. It might be a long time until I could do this again. It might be a very, very long time. I realized that truthfully, it may be never again.

It turns out that the big problem with meeting the *Old Ones* inside the Doors to the Stars isn't getting there – it's getting back. Traveling through space is one thing – we know well how X and Y and Z work in a 3-dimensional world; but traveling through time is quite another matter. And yet, for reasons that I do not understand, the very core of my being is reaching out to the *Old Ones*, and I must go. I hope that Sao-sao understands how much I love her and Pao-bing, but, like ancient Homer, I have to go now and travel this odyssey.

Chapter 22. Epilogue.

I have waited for my beloved husband See-zen Dahhn for 56 years now, and I am adding my final notes to his diary.

The Odysseus was never heard from again. Our lovely daughter Pao-bing raised a wonderful family that has been the joy of my life. Many years ago, Janie died – her heart just gave out. She missed Foo-pop Taman201 so much that she never really had any joy in her later years. I helped raise Sem-san Tung207, and now he is an honorable Fao-pao, on the spaceship Earthstar 42. He's still heartbroken about his mother, but he's adjusting. He named my grandson Sem-san Dahhn.

Was See-zen's trip really necessary? I say yes! Bringing peace and harmony to the Universe is our highest and most noble goal, and See-zen Dahhn knew in his heart of hearts that the Old Ones would benefit from a brief touch with the newer races.

I'll wait for a little while more, but I am very old now, and very ill. But my heart reaches out across the miles and times and I think loving thoughts about my See-zen – I love you my dear, more than you can know.

"Thank you."

Chapter 23. What's Behind Door Number 1?

It was both easy and hard to find the Doors to the Stars. Foo-pop Taman201 and the crew of the *Odyssey* of course knew physically where the Doors were located and how to use them to move around the Universe, but that was the easy part. We were going to introduce ourselves to the race that put the Doors in place, back in the deep ancient past of 5 billion years ago. When I thought about it, it seemed like a futile quest, but when I thought about it more, I was certain that we had to try.

See, the hard part of our mission is this: you approach a Door, and you get instantly get switched to someplace else in the Universe – that's the point of the Doors to the Stars – so exactly how do you approach a Door and knock and ask "*Who's in charge here? Can we speak to you please?*"

I worked with our navigator and our mathematician for days to try to solve the problem, and we had a provisional solution – so now it was time to go knock on the Door.

Chapter 24.

Well that didn't work. Sun-mat Pfa555 and I worked for many days on the formulas. Okay, let's try that.

Chapter 25.

Well that didn't work either, and suddenly we were in a galaxy that nobody recognized. Let's see – I'm sure if we tweak the formula and maybe change this sign to a plus-sign – so we tried again.

Chapter 26.

"Okay, I thought proudly: "there it is – clearly we've done something right, or at least different, let's say."

The sensors were all fuzzed out; the tactical display was inoperative; artificial gravity dampers were malfunctioning – in other words, knocking on the Door must have worked. Sun-mat Pfa555, Foo-pop and I all stood around, trying to coax some external system to work right. Foo-pop was upset that the ship's master clock is stopped, but I assured him that that was possibly proof that we're behind the Door. Sun-mat ran some formulas through the computer, but it was as slow as molasses in January. None of the crew had any sensor data to prove or deny what just happened.

There is only one thing worse than being lost in space – and that is being waylaid in space, and that's just what happened – the LOOGEE were waiting behind the Door.

Chapter 27. LOOGEE:1 EARTHMEN: 0

The *Odyssey* went *BUMP!* We stopped instantly, which is very difficult to do in the freedom of outer space, all things being equal. The sudden stop threw everyone in the space ship around the cabin like ping pong balls in a mouse-trap factory in a Disney cartoon. Before we could come up with a reasonable theory for what happened, the tactical video feed snapped on and showed that we had impaled a rather large black ship. Again – it is very hard to tell size and perspective in space, but the ship that we were now a part of was clearly dozens of times larger than the *Odyssey*.

When the Fao-pao returned to his station on the bridge he announced "They blocked us. They forced us to hit them. Our anti-collision system would make it impossible for us to hit something; therefore, they did this on purpose."

Foo-pop had a gash on his head, but he stood there and tried to regain control of the situation. More videos and some sensors came back online, and the damage assessment began. But it ended very quickly – we were skewering a huge interstellar ship, and it was most probable their ship caused the crash.

An air-loss alarm sounded and we were quickly boarded. Dozens of huge, armed LOOGEE soldiers (or Marines), came swarming through the main bridge compartment. When Foo-pop tried to intervene, his right arm was cut in half by the yellow beam of a LOOGEE weapon. He fell down and tried to staunch the bleeding. The medical officer rushed over to him and a LOOGEE grabbed him and held him in the air with his bulging muscles terminating in a large 3-fingered hand.

The LOOGEE ambush was successful – by sacrificing their ship, they had captured the *Odyssey*, surely a prize wherever they called home. I sat, stunned, on the deck, trying to figure out what to do – this was my mission, so it was my fault. After a very gruff exchange between a couple of LOOGEE's, the doctor was dropped on the deck. He immediately began to treat Foo-pop, who had lost a lot of black bloody fluid. Two of the invaders went around the bridge area and took pictures of each of us. When a picture was snapped, one of them lashed out and kicked each person flat on the deck. We didn't understand the language, but we knew that we'd been told not to move.

More soldiers came onboard, and then the pressure-loss alarm was finally turned off. The leader of the boarding party stood in the center of the room and spoke a rough, unknown language for a few minutes. When he was done, he pointed at Foo-pop and talked some more, I guessed he was threatening the rest of us with destruction or torture if we failed to cooperate.

The additional soldiers picked up each person, one-by-one, and put on some kind of restraint that hurt. We were all herded into the center of the bridge area and their presumed Captain shouted at his men for a few minutes. I could see one of them raise the middle finger of his 3-fingered hand in the universal symbol of disrespect as the Captain spoke, so I knew that at least there was trouble between the Captain and his crew, and possibly I could instigate a mutiny. The Captain instantly whirled on his subordinate, before the soldier could lower his arm, and he shot him with a black, pointy stick that had a fat yellow beam. I could see the individual molecules of the soldier fizz and vaporize. The stench was awful. I guessed that none of the other LOOGEEs would question their Captain's decision to sacrifice their ship to capture us.

We were all picked up, and fingerprinted, one-by-one. We were badged with an electrical choke collar, and then thrown into a big pile. Finally, the LOOGEE walked around us and somehow fastened us together with some kind of electrical contact cord that sparked and sputtered – it was very unpleasant when it touched flesh. Then they brought in large panels of steel bars, and the huge LOOGEE slammed

each panel onto the deck and fastened it with some kind of welding gun. We were trapped, with barely enough room to move. Foo-pop was fading in and out of consciousness, but the doc got the bleeding under control.

The Captain said "See-zen Dahnn, Sah-ran-duh."

He held up a video playback unit that had my picture on it, and he repeated his request for me to surrender. Foo-pop shook his head at me and a nearby guard kicked him into unconsciousness.

I stood up. Obviously I couldn't even begin to hide, so there was no sense in risking other crew members' safety.

The Captain had two of his crew members detain me – they put me between themselves and pressed themselves together tightly – I had a hard time breathing, but they surely didn't care. I was struck with a blunt object from behind, and I passed out.

Chapter 28.

I was in some kind of holding-cell and my head was throbbing. As I was trying to regain consciousness it was funny, but I had a dream. It was Sao-sao saying to me something from a long time ago: "Most of the races in the Universe are just like yours and mine – some good and some not so good – and some very evil." Well, yeah, she'd nailed that for sure. I thought about her for a moment and I sent good thoughts across the Universe to her.

As I struggled to get up, I spotted a green basketball in the opposite corner of the cell. I pondered that for a minute or two, and then it dawned on me – that was like LULULULU from Tzal-ar-Mino – my great math professor friend could not possibly be in the same cell – could she?

I said "LULULULU?" and the entity stiffened up his arms and legs and stood up.

"How you know her," he asked?

"We are friends. She is teacher at University. I am her pupil."

"Not possible," he replied: "You too stupid, and she too far away."

"LULULULU is a friend of mine for sure. We're here to explore the Doors to the Stars and to talk to its inventors – whom we call the *Old Ones*. She helped me understand the Tella-gura math and physics so that we could make this voyage. Can you get in touch with her and tell her our problem?"

"Not possible to do," he replied, and he bounced up and down a few times – I thought he looked an awful lot like a cartoon. And then he pulled in his arms and legs and rolled/bounced over to where I was trying to stand up.

He opened his large eye to the max and asked "What is plan?"

"What plan?"

"Plan to escape. I am here long, long time. I ready for escape."

Before I could ponder his answer, I felt the ship move in an urgent way. Obviously the stabilizers weren't working, so I could feel torque in all 3 dimensions, as the LOOGEE's tried to extricate us from their hull.

"They're going to crack our hull," I shouted, but there was no reply. They must have space tugs working to pull us out of their skewered ship.

"They very clever; they very mean."

"I know. The LOOGEE have a bad reputation on Home World."

"More – they have bad reputation in all Universes. Mean."

I pointed to myself and said "DON."

The green cartoon globe pointed to his big eye and said "LULULALO."

I choked down a laugh.

"Do you speak their language?"

"Some. Maybe pretty good. Mostly know they are bad. Main bad man is Koko-Ma."

The Odyssey lurched again and I was knocked down and fell on my sore knees and screamed in pain. LULULALO bounced around the cell a few times and then re-extended his hands and legs as he re-stabilized himself. Then another violent jerk, and we were both thrown around again.

One of the large LOOGEE guards watched us suffer and laughed a deep, slow laugh. He spoke a dozen words and then turned away from us, farted and then he resumed his guard duties.

"What did he say?"

"He say 'you plenty stupid to get caught.'"

"Maybe he's right," I muttered. I kept thinking how this was all my fault – maybe the plan to talk to the *Old Ones* was flawed from the beginning – but something led me here, that much I knew. "It will all work out."

"Ready for escape with Dahhn," he reminded me.

"Yeah, me too," I shot back.

Time passed, but it was impossible to count hours or days. Finally I decided to use my ever-growing beard as a clock. Every day it got a tiny bit longer, so I could tell something objective about time, but there was no way to calibrate the new clock. When my beard was over 6 inches long, I knew that we'd been imprisoned for a long, long time – maybe months.

Chapter 29.

The LOOGEE fed us and left us alone. I knew when they repaired the *Odyssey*, because the odd lurching stopped when the gyros and thrusters were brought back online. Each day was like the previous one, and only the growth of my beard proved the passing of time. I figured out that meal times were intentionally varied; and the schedule of when the LOOGEE guards hosed out the cells, was also at random intervals, but I figured that it happened about once a week. After a couple of more months, LULULALO stopped asking 3 times a day for an escape plan. I finally decided that I was going to live, not get shot, so I started exercising on a daily basis. Sometimes LULULALO followed me around the cell as I marched as rapidly as I could.

One day the guard tossed a canvas bag of stuff into the cell, followed by Foo-pop Taman201, who, sadly, only had one arm left. The arm that had been half cut off by the LOOGEE had now been completely severed at the shoulder – I guessed that it had infected, so their doctor had removed it. But I was so very wrong.

It took a while but Foo-pop gradually regained consciousness and I could see deep fear – actually terror, in his eyes. His body was covered with bruises and cuts. He reached his hand towards me and then passed out again.

I took off my shirt and covered as much of his naked body as I could. Then I got red-hot-furious-mad – how could they do this to my friend? I shouted and cursed the guard, who stood and laughed with his low, slow laugh. He spoke a few words, farted, and then resumed his guard duties.

LULULALO reported: "He said 'you're next, fool'."

A cold rage went through my body and my mind was made up – I'd never give in to these terrorists and bullies, no matter what they did to me. Poor Foo-pop tried to regain consciousness again and he finally sat up and looked at me. I could see that only one of his eyes was working properly. He pointed to the canvas bag and whispered "I told them that you needed that to survive," and then he fell back on the floor. I reached for him and comforted him for a few minutes. I knew him as a pleasant spirit, and more than that, he was my son-in-law.

It finally registered on my mind what he said and I laid him down and picked up the bag. It had my violin, the fifth of Jack Daniels, and an old sign that said "Southern by Grace of God." The violin was broken and ruined; the sign was inappropriate humor for our present situation. I thought about chugging the Tennessee whiskey right down, but I knew that wasn't an answer to our problem. Poor Foo-pop had somehow convinced the LOOGEE torturers that I needed this stuff, so I figured that I better make the most of it.

I was very sad that my grandfather's violin was destroyed, but I carefully unwound the strings and saved them away. I put the pegs and the bridge away, too. The rest of the violin was beyond repair, so I put in the corner of the cell. Let's see now – what to do with this collection of crap when they brought me to their caliginous torture chamber?

By my beard-clock, another month or more passed and we were mostly left alone. Foo-pop recovered. LULULALO asked the guard for some clothing for us, and we were given scratchy blankets instead. We went ahead and made robes out of them, and that stopped Foo-pop from shivering all the time. He was very sick – I believed that he had PTSD from the torture and his arm was constantly infected from sleeping on the filthy floor. One day he looked at me with his good eye and told me what happened.

"They sliced off a small part of my arm every day," he began. "They know how to maximize the pain by cutting very slowly. They hate us intensely. Every time they tried to conquer ALADANI-FORPL, we fought back, so we've killed a lot of their soldiers over the years. And now, they're settling the score."

I was shocked and angered beyond belief – I knew that the LOOGEE wouldn't have anything like a *Geneva Convention* to guide their activities with prisoners of war, but my mind almost blanked out at the thought of the 6 or 7 months of constant torture that they had inflicted upon Foo-pop – no race could be that bad!

One day Foo-pop wouldn't wake up. I tried administering CPR and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, or rescue breathing, as it was taught to me a long time ago. After 5 minutes, he twitched, then jerked, then vomited and woke up. He was a terrible mess and the stump of his arm started bleeding black goo again.

LULULALO stood there, his one big eye crying, his flexible legs bouncing up and down in stress and despair. His eye locked onto me: "Ready for escape, Dahhn."

As I bundled up Foo-pop in his robe, I glanced at the tattoo on my left arm: the eagle, globe and anchor that I had put on one drunken weekend, back when I was a U.S. Marine stared up at me. "I am a war-fighter," I said quietly to LULULALO. "I have honor. I have a code. I will not allow myself to be a captive. I will not allow this to happen anymore."

He looked at me with that great big eye and said "What LULULALO do?"

I looked at Foo-pop and at the rest of the small cell and instantly made a plan: "Call the guard. Tell him that Foo-pop needs his immediate help."

I heard LULULALO speak the strange, guttural language of the LOOGEE. The guard laughed and farted. LULULALO persisted and the guard finally opened the door and came in to look at Foo-pop. He saw the black blood seeping from Foo-pop's shoulder stump, and he bent over to prod him and see why he vomited in the recently-cleaned cell.

The fury of hell coursed through my body. In one swift move, I grabbed the bottle of Jack Daniels' whiskey and splintered it over the guard's head – right where the anvil-shaped head met the thick neck. He went "Upphh," and fell on top of Foo-pop. I grabbed the violin strings and tied him up firmly, and then I rolled the huge ball of fat and muscle off of Foo-pop, who was in very bad shape by then. I grabbed the "Southern by Grace of God" sign and bashed in the guard's head until I was quite certain that he was dead. Then I rifled his pockets and pulled out several weapons and other unknown but possibly useful objects.

I shouted to LULULALO "*Let's go!*"

Then I hoisted Foo-pop's lifeless body over my shoulder, stood up and headed for the cell door. We ran down the hall but halted when the prisoners in one of the cell started screaming at us. It was a whole cell full of Tzal-ar-Minos, and the sight of a couple of dozen green basketballs caused me to lose my footing and slip. My knees cracked on the deck as I dropped Foo-pop. LULULALO shouted at them and they instantly quieted down. They whispered for a minute and he came over to me.

"They have been here for a long, long time. Many of them are dead now. They can help us escape if we can get them out."

I dug through my pockets, looking for something that looked like a jailer's key, but no luck. "What does the key look like?"

LULULALO pointed at a small black marble in my hand. I picked it up and put it near the cell door. The electric-blue lines that were the bars to the cell immediately went away. The Tzal-ar-Minos rushed out and hugged LULULALO. "*Let's go!*" he shouted. I didn't know that his eye could get any bigger, but it did.

Chapter 30.

Then LULULALO and the Tzal-ar-Minos ran like hell through the maze of the spaceship. I held Foo-pop securely in a fireman's' carry, so he was safe. In about 5 minutes, we jogged to the right and all the green basketballs went through a hatch, one-by-one. I had to crawl through, and then I pulled Foo-pop through, which wasn't easy by that time – I was really winded.

A dozen Tzal-ar-Minos fanned out into an area that looked like a warehouse, which I quickly realized that it was some kind of docking bay. I saw a "train" of Tzal-ar-Minos running in-line, as one entity, their feet flying, their arms pumping – they were insanely funny to watch, but I wasn't in a humorous mood – I was in a killing mood. They stopped at a small, round vessel, and one of them thumbed a latching mechanism. Within a few seconds, they were all inside. It took me a couple of minutes, but I got in with Foo-pop and LULULALO forced me to stay flat on the floor as he shouted commands. The ship quivered, then grunted, then shook all over. It lifted up and blasted right through the hull of the giant LOOGEE ship. When it was only a few yards out, it turned on the fires of Hell and sprayed the LOOGEE ship with burning chemicals.

Now I'm a pretty good organic chemist, so I know that you can't burn things in outer space, due to lack of oxygen, but obviously they had figured out how to do just that. The LOOGEE ship quickly caught fire and it spread at an alarming rate. LULULALO was chanting to his crew – "BALA ban! BALA ban!" and on and on. The Tzal-ar-Minos responded, slightly off-time – "BAMA ban! BAMA ban!" as they continued to spray the fire-chemical on the burning LOOGEE ship.

In 5 minutes, it was over, except for one escape pod that had popped out at the last second. The Tzal-ar-Minos steered toward it and grappled it with a very flexible string or wire. They probed the interior with some kind of X-ray device, and decided that it was contained several LOOGEEs. They blasted it with the fire-water and chanted while it burned.

"It is over," LULULALO finally said. "Our years of capture, torture and death are ended." He looked at me with his huge eye and I saw gratitude. "Tzal-ar-Minos will always be grateful to Dahhn," he said. The other Tzal-ar-Minos started a chant, which he echoed: "Dahhn, bom! Dahhn, bom!"

Foo-pop struggled to get up and he said "They're calling you a hero, Dahhn – that is their word for Valor. And I agree – you've gone above and beyond to save us all."

Chapter 31. LOOGEE:0 EARTHMEN: 1

"It's finally time to meet the *Old Ones*," I said.

"We wait for some math from LULULULU," replied LULULALA. "She working problem now."

The Tzal-ar-Minos were in touch with their home planet, and word of our great escape was everywhere. LULULALA was in contact with LULULULU at the University on Home World, and she was re-calculating the formulas for our final course.

It wasn't until a few days later that I realized that LULULULU wasn't a name, but rather a job title for "Chief Mathematician." The LULULULU that I knew had been dead for many centuries. When that sunk in, I panicked – "What about my Sao-sao – is she okay," I shouted in panic?

LULULALA shook his head and said quietly. "Sao-sao Teezar101 dead for over 10,000 years of your time. I sorry, truly. Nothing is forever."

I was about ready to pass-out from the sudden thought that 10,000 years had passed while we were in captivity. I couldn't digest that – my mind just couldn't accept it. I pointed to my wedding ring and said "Diamonds are forever; and I'll love Sao-sao forever."

"Diamonds are not forever. Time is not what you think," he replied.

Over the next few days, while the Tzal-ar-Minos loaded the new algorithms into the ship's computer, I pouted; I pondered; I mourned; I grieved; and finally I shaved my long, scraggly beard.

Chapter 32.

Foo-pop helped me out: he told me every day he told me the stories that Tella-guras tell their children when they're growing up – they were tales of honor and courage, of bravery and beauty. I heard stories of unquestioned heroism in the face of certain death. I heard the noble character of the Tella-guras people in those ancient tales, and day-by-day, I started to feel better.

Besides missing Sao-sao, I also grieved for my daughter Janie, who was a thousand centuries gone – but here was her husband, and he was a fine traveling companion, and I bonded well with him...it was almost a role-reversal – he'd assumed the duty of parent, and I was quite content listening as a child.

Foo-pop finally healed.

I finally healed.

And then, finally...

...it was time to move on: I need to tackle the problems of the current world, I realized. This great odyssey of mine had just begun!

Chapter 33.

The Tzal-ar-Mino ship was small but comfortable. It was also very fast and awesome-powerful. Soon, the newly-computed vectors allowed us to go poking behind one of the Doors, and we found the *Old Ones* waiting for us.

They spoke directly into our minds, and they were grateful that we had come to them. They had been held hostage for a long time by the LOOGEEs.

In my mind I heard: "Every year, they took our people and tortured them to death – they wanted the secrets of our Doors, but we could not ever tell them, else they'd conquer and destroy the entire Universe."

And they wanted to know what payment we required for freeing them, but nobody on the ship was looking for a reward – we were all just in awe of these great and good creatures who created the Doors to the Stars, billions of years ago. We realized then how good good is. They suffered through tens of thousands of years of utterly barbaric torture, and the loss of tens of thousands of their people to protect all the Universes from destruction – and they got absolutely nothing in return.

We discussed many issues, both large and trivial, with the *Old Ones* – we were in no rush to leave such a marvelous place. Then one day, the leader spoke to my mind: "*Don, we can read your heart. We know that this journey was your idea; and you have acted bravely and honorably. You freed us, and also the Tzal-ar-Minos, who are great friends of ours, and they have told us of your valor. And we also know that you saved countless other races from serious problems or even extinction by defeating the LOOGEE. Now we see that you grieve over the loss of your beloved, and we understand your pain. What would you desire in payment along with our respect, Don – please tell us.*"

I shook my head and thought: "*I know that I can't go back in time and be with my Sao-sao – I understand that messing with time would cause loops and problems with recursion. The physicists that I have spoken to talked about the butterfly effect, and horrible problems that can result from time travel, so I can't ask for the only thing that my heart desires – it would be too destructive to others.*"

As soon as I thought that –

Was it a moment that passed, or 10,000 centuries? I don't know – I stood there catching flies, while a single thought of Sao-sao filled my brain – the single point of light in my life.

And then a voice in my mind said "*That's not how time works, Don...*"

"...this is how it works:"

And suddenly, there was, all around me, a gray-white blur – I was inside a foggy sphere of indeterminate dimensions – somehow I thought/felt/knew that this new Universe was expanding at an incalculable rate. The loops and whorls of raw space stuff disappeared beyond my range of vision, and I saw crystal-clear stars suddenly appear, far, far away.

...and then I heard a kindly voice say: "*Listen with your heart – you'll be amazed what you'll hear.*"

...and then a second voice said: "*Look with your heart – you'll be amazed what you'll see.*"

Chapter 32. Epilogue 2.

...and then there was Sao-sao, sitting in our bedroom in Capital City, reading a story to my beautiful young daughter, Pao-bing Tura400, who looked a little plumper than last time I saw her. "Daddy!" she shrieked as she ran into my arms. Sao-sao dropped the book on the floor and looked at me with tears rolling down her beautiful face.

I held my daughter out at arm's length, and then I slowly walked to Sao-sao and asked her "Is it a story of honor and courage? Is it about adventure? Are there strange and wonderful events and people in your story?"

And when she bent down and picked up the book, she showed it to me. The title was "Doors to the Stars, an Autobiographical Account of my Odyssey to Contact the Old Ones."

"Oh Yes, my dearest Dahhn, it's all that and much more," she said.

...and then we kissed and hugged forever.

= = = The Characters = = =

Dr. Donald Hams (later promoted to See-zen rank, or Special Ambassador)

Janie Harris – Don's daughter

Secret Service Agent Sam Michaels

U.S. President Kera Nodsar

Foo-pop Teezar101 is the Captain of the shuttle craft (later promoted to Sao-sao rank)

Fao-pao Taman201 Commander and a Tella-gura scientist (later promoted to Foo-pop rank)

Their alien race is known as Tella-gura

Timeframe: 2097 – 2115 – 12,200

Their planet: ALADANI-FORPL

An evil race that frequently attacks ALADANI-FORPL: LOOGEE

LULULULU (Chief Mathematician) Yao-ban Tan-so is a green basketball who teaches physics at the University

Pao-bing Tura400 – the adopted daughter

Sem-san Tung207 – Janie's adopted son

LULULULU and LULULALO (Captain) – are green basketball-sized beings from Tzal-ar-Mino

Koko-Ma is Captain of LOOGEE spaceship that captures Don's crew and holds them hostage.

The *Old Ones* created the Doors, billions of years ago.