

## Epistle

(first section of a novel)

Prologue

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Grandpa?

Yes, Little Love?

Why do you have to spend so much time in your study?

I promised some people I would write the story about what happened to me a long time ago, even before your mommy was born. It's harder and it's taking longer than I thought it would.

You don't look happy when you go in there in the morning. And you look sad and tired when you come out. I don't understand, 'cause when you tell me stories you look like you're having fun.

I am, Little Love. It's fun telling you stories because you have fun when you listen to them.

That's 'cause you tell such good stories. Isn't the story you're telling in your study a good story too?

Actually it's a very good story. My problem is the way I have to tell it for the people who've asked for it. It has to be academic. That's a funny word for dull and boring. I can't pretend I'm excited at the exciting parts, or that I'm happy at the happy parts or that I'm sad at the sad parts. And I have to be careful about how I say things. I can't say things like, this happened.. I have to say I feel certain this happened, and give my reasons why I feel certain, and give reasons for why I think those reasons

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are good reasons, and sometimes even why the reasons for my reasons for my reasons are good reasons. It just goes on and on. It's hard to tell stories that way. At least it is for me. Sometimes it seems like what should take a sentence ends up being a page! I'm sorry, Little Love. I'm not angry, and I'm certainly not angry at you. Grandpa's just a little tired.

Grandpa?

Yes, Little Love?

Is it really a good story?

I think so. It certainly is an interesting story.

Can you tell me the story? Your way?

I think I'd like to do that. Yes, I think I would really, really, like to do just that.

Goody!

Hang on, Honey. It's a long story. A long, difficult, complicated story. You couldn't sit still for even part of it.

In that case you just have to tell it to me a bit at a time. Right?

Hmmm. OK, right!

Goody! Let's go!!

Nope.

Don't tease me, grandpa. You promised, so you have to do it.

I did, and I will. I didn't say when I'd be telling you. You've been perfectly awful to your mom every night this week. You've been so bad about going to bed that you've made even grandma upset at you. This is what we'll do. I'll tell you the story after supper, after you're all ready for bed, in your pajamas with your teeth brushed and your bedtime prayers said. I'll bring a chair for me to your bedroom some time today. When we're ready you get into your bed, I'll get into my chair, and I'll tell you a bit of the story. Deal?

Deal! Thank you, grandpa. I love you!

I love you too, Sweetheart.

Discovery

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I'm ready for bed, grandpa.

That's really early for you. Did you wash up?

Yes, and I brushed my teeth and said my prayers and everything. I'm ready for bed, grandpa.

I suppose that means you want me to tell you a story.

You promised me a story! You know you did. You even brought a chair to my room to sit in while you tell it.

OK OK. Let's get grandpa's old bones into that old chair. OK, here goes. Once upon a mattress there was a girl who -

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DON'T TEASE, GRANDPA!

Don't yell, Little love. You're right and I'm wrong. I'm sorry. Grandpa's just not sure how to start it.

Beginings are the easy part.

Not always, and not this time. I'm not sure how far back I should go for the story to make sense to you.

Your story is about the space people, isn't it?

Yes, it is.

Goody! I hoped that's what it was about. Doesn't the story start when they came? When they first came?

Not really. But you know, it might be the best place to begin telling it. Are you all snuggled in?

YesYesYES!

OK, Little Love. Let's get started. Do you know about bees?

Grandpa, you're not going to tell me about the birds and the bees, are you?

Heaven forbid! That's just one reason why being your granda is so much more fun than being your dad. Nope, no birds: just bees. On earth there are 3 sorts of honey bees: the workers, the queen, and the drones. Here on earth the drones aren't much use to the hive and don't live too long. However one of the races of space people are like honey bees because they have those three types. But for those space people their drones do more and live longer than bee drones do here.

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Anyway, once upon a time a drone was put to sleep on a rocket, which then blasted off on an exploring trip. Believe it or not it was supposed to be asleep for the whole trip. But ...

As the drone drifted into wakefulness he wondered how much time had passed since he had left Central.

Abruptly he realized he wasn't back on Central. He was floating within his suspended animation capsule. There was no gravity here: he was in space. At a guess he was still aboard his ship. Wherever this place was, it wasn't one of Central's revival centers.

This was unexpected. Not one Quest in eleven required the revival of its organic in mid-voyage, but apparently that's what the Machine Race member of the team had ordered. The drone was needed to make, or at least confirm, a decision.

At least there was no emergency. Had that been the case his revival would have included a jolt of stimulant. In all probability one or more alarms would also be demanding everyone's attention. This wasn't happening. There was no need for him to rush. The Machine Race team member could wait as long as it took for the drone to ready himself. He was prepared to make the MR wait. And wait. And, if possible, wait some more. Not that this would bother the MR. As far as anyone knew nothing bothered an MR. If any of that race had ever felt any emotion no organic had ever seen a sign of it.

The relationship between The Confederacy's organic members and its single Machine Race one was uneasy. In the case of Race 1C, the drone's species, there was additional tension and resentment in play. His race had achieved preeminence within the Confederacy, and only in part due to its being a founding race. It still headed what was by far the most influential bloc but with every cycle its power and influence were waning. That was entirely due to the admission of the MR. The reasons were complex and had nothing to do with any campaign waged by the MRs. Rather it was a case of other races taking advantage of the MRs' abilities and neutrality in organic rivalries to insert them into areas once dominated by Race 1C.

The drone knew this MR was disinterested and uninvolved in any of the political and diplomatic maneuvers taking place at The Confederacy's upper levels. Nevertheless he needed to punish it for his species' waning influence.

Unfortunately he also had to deal with the fact that the two of them were team members on a voyage of Quest, the reason for the Confederacy's very existence. A Quest must not be imperiled by inter-race status concerns. Creating petty annoyances would be overlooked, but a mere suspicion of sabotage would have serious consequences for both him and his species.

Besides, he realized, he was curious. The longer he delayed the longer it would be before he learned what had happened. His brothers weren't around to hector him on upholding the honor of the race. In any event he was not by nature a vindictive sort. It was not all that long before he found himself contacting the MR.

"What is the situation?"

"We have encountered the home world of a sophisticated tool-using race." While this was good news it did not come close to justifying revival.

"Why is my presence needed?"

"The probability that a Messiah has appeared on this world is the highest ever encountered on a voyage of Quest." The MR paused to give the drone time to absorb this news before continuing, "There is a not-insignificant probability that the Messiah your race seeks will be found here."

Picture a world, one distant from Earth, where intelligent life has also risen. As with pretty well all intelligent life religion plays a significant part of its culture. Just as on Earth one group's religion includes the concept of a Messiah.

Now consider one small difference. On Earth the religion says, wait for the Messiah. On that other world the religion says, go find the Messiah.

The implications of this difference are actually quite enormous. The first results in a passive mindset. The second results in an active, indeed a proactive, one.

Consider such a group's earliest days, back when it still has a subsistence economy. Its people are in no position to go looking for a Messiah. It takes pretty much all their time and energy to eek out enough to keep themselves and their children alive.

But if everyone can't go looking for the Messiah perhaps at least one from the group can. At least one could if given enough food and supplies for the trip, plus what he would have produced if he had stayed home.

This group wouldn't, couldn't, be content to produce only what a similar group on Earth would. It has to produce even more of everything, and do so using one fewer worker, before it can send out a searcher.

Someone on a part-time basis decides to figure out who can produce how much of what. Soon the person also starts to keep track of what is available and what the group is about to run out of, and then to suggest how best to share everything within the group. In effect they have begun to develop a central government and civil service.

Returning explorers from time to time would report how some other group had come up with a better way of doing something. The group adapts the new method, with the result it produces either more of something, or an improved version of it. Sometimes it's even both. Then some involved in producing that item can be used in other areas. After this happens a few times the group can afford to send out a second explorer. More explorers bring home more improvements, freeing up more to go exploring. Over time this becomes the one group employing all the best methods known throughout all the areas they've visited. As a bonus, exposure to many ideas tends to spark additional ones. The result: still greater surpluses, which allow the group to support more explorers, who bring home even more new ideas, resulting in ... well, you get the picture.

It is easy to see how the group becomes rich, powerful, dominant.

At some point the group finds itself overwhelmed by all the new processes and general information they've gathered. It hires someone first to record and keep track of all this new knowledge, and later to evaluate it. Very soon one person isn't enough. What develops in the end is something unlike anything we've developed here on Earth: part university, part academy of engineering and sciences, part library, with a little bit of school of philosophy and patent office thrown in for good measure.

In a surprisingly short time the group has explored, and is running, the entire planet.

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By this time it is also facing a crisis of faith. They know, with absolute certainty, there is no Messiah anywhere on their world.

But by this time they have also developed at least a basic grasp of astronomy. They've figured out that they live on a planet which circles a sun, and that all those stars out there are other suns, and presumably some of those have planets. It is quite possible, indeed probable, that life has developed on some of those planets. Probably intelligent life has as well.

Someone has the realization that nothing in their religion says where the Messiah would be found. If their Messiah isn't on this planet then obviously they need to check out other ones! The result is a focus on the development of space travel that makes Earth's Space race of the 1950's and 60's pale by comparison.

All this is interesting but not astounding – until you realize that, in the time it took this race to put its first member into space, back on earth Caesar had yet to begin his conquests.

Eventually this race was sending explorers towards the stars.

In time they do encounter another intelligent race of beings.

Now consider this: what if that race is also looking for a Messiah?

It is not surprising that these species would pool what they've learned during their explorations. This soon evolves into a general sharing of all knowledge. The best, perhaps the only, way to manage it all is to set up a university/academy/library/patent-center organization serving both races.

Space is big, and exploring it gets expensive in a big hurry. In a natural development they begin to co-ordinate voyages of Quest and sharing the results.

Over time they encounter other intelligent species. While not all are looking for a Messiah some are. Not surprisingly these are usually the most advanced, the most capable, the most driven races. They also tend to link up when they encounter each other.

In the end you have The Confederacy.

When the most capable groups align themselves it is not surprising the result is a most potent organization. The Confederacy is the de facto ruler of its known universe.

These days The Confederacy involves itself in all varieties of schemes and ventures that had nothing to do with any of its members' religions. It is questionable whether its most senior people even harbor a religion. However its only justification for existence are the voyages it sent out looking for signs of someone's, anyone's, Messiah.

The Confederacy continues to send out ships on voyages of Quest even though many suspect its top officials have no expectations of, or desire for, success.

Surprise!, thought the drone.

There is now a firm methodology for dealing with encounters with tool-using species who haven't left their home world.

It was probably not long after we realized there could well be other planets with intelligent beings that the first, "Take me to your leader," cartoon appeared. The very first encounter between The Confederacy and a world with an intelligent, civilized, non-space-faring race pretty well took this form. The Confederacy's Quest team landed at the edge of the largest community it could find and went looking for some locals.

(Do you remember I said, "almost"? Unlike the creatures in our cartoons the Confederacy's team members hadn't even bothered to learn the locals' language first.)

The first group the team encountered fled in terror.

The second group slaughtered the entire team.

The Confederacy decided their first-contact procedures needed to be re-evaluated.

In the end it concluded the best first contact was no contact at all. It went from being totally open to totally hidden. It developed stealth technology for its space craft. It designed tiny, undetectable probes to blanket a planet and transmit back observations.

(They also developed extremely sophisticated language translation systems for their computers.)

Quest teams are now given a strict protocol to follow. They've become glorified information gatherers. There is a list of required data to be gathered for each planet they encounter, basically a catalog of its resources. For habitable planets the list was somewhat longer, centered around how easily each of the Confederacy's member species could settle it. All this took time, although by now their ships had such technology that this time was reasonably short.

Unfortunately if the new world was home to a species that conceivably could soon venture into space the team could count on sticking around for the lifetime of most of the Confederacy's organic races. Perhaps because of the initial Quest team's slaughter at the hands of such a species, and because that race had proved to be a huge problem before it was finally subdued, a Quest team is required to gather copious amounts of information about every such species discovered. It must be examined against a list of characteristics that might make it a threat once it does break out into space.

The team also is also required to determine whether the race had a religion that might qualify it for membership in The Confederacy.

At the last minute the bureaucrats remembered to include a requirement to check whether the world might be home to some member race's Messiah since, after all, that was the reason for the Quest in the first place.

No species will either make it into space or be able to have anyone's Messiah unless it has an ability to exchange sophisticated concepts: it needs a language.

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Conveying ideas might be done through any combination of sound, scent, gestures, body language, and various emissions throughout the electromagnetic spectrum. A Quest team needs to crack this code before it can begin to learn most of what it's required to learn. This alone could easily prove a lifetime's work, even with the sophisticated tools they developed. Only then could it begin to learn everything the Confederacy demands of it. Still, a team is required to remain in the system until either it has acquired all the information or until its last member dies.

In the days before the Machine Race joined the Confederacy no Quest team left such a system alive.

Once the MRs were admitted into The Confederacy questing changed forever. The Confederacy began to take advantage of MR willingness (eagerness!) to go on Quests and the fact that the Machine Race individuals don't die before analysis of such worlds could be completed. Today the standard Quest team consists of one organic who typically remains in suspended animation for the entire voyage, plus one MR. While the organic is almost never needed one is always on board. The Confederacy adamantly refuses to allow voyages of Quest crewed exclusively by MRs. However that's a story for another day.

"There is a not-insignificant probability that the Messiah your race seeks will be found here."

The words left the drone speechless. He remained motionless, looking stunned, for such a long time that the MR wondered whether he had suffered his species' equivalent of a stroke.

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Little Love, I'm getting tired of having to call him the drone. Let's give him a name. Would you like to pick one?

Don't you know his name, Grandpa?

I was told his name once. However it was nothing I could remember, much less pronounce. Would you like to choose a name for him?

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How about Jonnie?

OK, Jonnie he is.        Isn't Jonnie your boyfriend's name?

Don't tease, Grandpa!

OK. I'm sorry, Little Love. May I call him Jon for short?

OK.

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Up until that minute Jon knew how his life would work out. After his return from this Quest he would soon be on his way to the life of a scholar and researcher at the Institute of Knowledge on Central. It was the inducement he had accepted for accompanying a highly automated spacecraft on a Quest. Should intelligence be encountered on the voyage it would be likely that everyone he knew would be dead and long forgotten on his return.

Not that he needed inducement. He had always felt like an outsider in the hive. He had felt most – if not happy then at least content – alone as he performed research on one of the hive's computers. He never had the slightest desire to go Queening with his brothers. Encounters with his own Queen or her daughters made him uneasy under the best conditions, terrified under the worst.

He couldn't remember when he first became interested in Religion. Probably he always was.

At first his brothers were amused. As his curiosity evolved to a fixation, sometimes resulting in a not-so-rapid response to his assigned research assignments, many of them became openly annoyed. This abruptly changed when a Senior Brother pointed out that having a brother at any level of the Religion's hierarchy conveyed a huge advantage to the Brotherhood, and then speculated whether Jon's talent and drive might even result in an appointment as a race representative to the Confederacy.

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Overnight Jon's status within his Brotherhood changed. One day he was treated with indifference; the next all his brothers were solicitous to his every whim. Even the Queen paid him a token deference during a chance encounter.

He decided it might be best to hide his speculation whether his bond to his Brotherhood and Hive was as strong as theirs seemed to be, as strong as they assumed his was.

In the fullness of time he applied for a Transfer of Allegiance into the Brotherhood of Searchers for the Messiah. After a surprisingly brief investigation he was accepted.

His career choice within Religion left his brothers extremely disappointed. A Searcher would be a source of significant influence -- while he was around. Unfortunately in a relatively brief time Searchers would depart on a Quest. Most returned. Unfortunately by the time this happened the emotional bonds to the Brotherhood typically had dissolved, if indeed the Brotherhood itself still existed at that point.

On the other hand his Queen couldn't have been more pleased. Hives are for practical purposes immortal. Brotherhoods come and go, and individual brothers tend to have short lives. Queens are relatively long lived. Roughly five out of every seven of his species' Searchers return from a Quest to find his Queen alive to welcome him -- and to claim the data collected during the Quest. Even if his Queen had died her daughter and the Hive would still await his return.

Jon had a sinking suspicion there would be no Queen's welcome for him.

Before Jon had spoken to the MR it had put together a summary of its findings and conclusions. When Jon finally emerged from his trance-like state the MR suggested he check out that report before they resumed the discussion. Jon agreed.

It took Jon two sleeps to review it. He spent another two sleeps in prayer and meditation before he finally felt able to discuss the situation with the MR. It was yet another sleep before he actually did so.

Jon's species found it difficult to express gratitude or appreciation, even to each other. For one to do so, unforced and with nothing to gain, to an MR was as a concept on par with the end of the universe: not inconceivable, but nothing one expects to witness.

"I do not know why you had me revived," Jon began. "There is nothing I see that requires my presence. I find no errors in either your methodologies or the conclusions you have drawn. Nor can I conceive of anything I can do to enhance the knowledge you have already gathered. Nevertheless it is my hope that your action will not cause any difficulties for you on our return. For myself I plan on doing nothing that will lead to any difficulties for you. As well, if you care to suggest anything I can include in my report that will eliminate any difficulty you might face please do so at your earliest convenience."

The MR abruptly discarded the tentative scripts it had prepared for this meeting. It changed two underlying assumptions and restarted the script program, giving it first call on all computational resources.

Then he hesitated, for maybe all of three seconds. Abruptly he dropped the script program's priority to level 2, and gave his intuition systems near-emergency level access as well as supervisory control over the script program.

From First Contact organics had envied the MR's ability to remember stupendous amounts of data and use all of it as a basis to render judgments and decisions. What they didn't know was that the MRs regarded this not as a strength but as a huge, potentially fatal, weakness in their dealings with organics. Being forced to look at every piece of data before coming up with a conclusion on even the most trivial matters meant it took MRs an impractical amount of time to make even the simplest decision. They were terrified by the organic ability to quickly decide what of their available information was most relevant to a situation and to use just that as a basis for decisions.

Before First Contact a few MR philosophers had, as an intellectual exercise, hypothesized ways to determine which given piece(s) of data was relevant to rendering a decision on a given issue. A few bolder, but possibly unbalanced, ones were even trying to determine whether some pieces of this relevant data could be "more relevant" than others.

Almost immediately after First Contact the MR race realized the handicap they faced. They adapted a strategy of seeming to play coy, standoffish, with The Confederacy while behind the scenes embarking on an emergency program to develop some sort of intuition and/or fuzzy logic system. It was a near thing, but they succeeded well enough that by the time they began serious discussions with The Confederacy the organic races did not detect the handicap under which the MRs had operated.

By now the MRs were using version 3 of this system. The MR with Jon was also equipped with a test version of version 4. The thought was that the two versions would operate in parallel and the results compared against each other. Individuals on Quest voyages and thus cut off from the rest of their race were allowed, even encouraged, to tweak the program. Some of the tweaking this MR had done worked surprisingly well, to the point it had begun to feel more confident with the experimental version 4 than with the standard version 3.

As it debated within itself over how much of its resources to assign to which of its systems both versions of its intuition systems came to an identical conclusion on that very matter. The MR hesitated, then agreed. It turned off version 3 completely. Version 4 suddenly found itself gifted with twice the resources it had ever had at its disposal.

All this had already taken a noticeable amount of time. It would be considerably longer before it could expect usable results. The MR was forced to temporize.

“I most humbly apologize to you over my hesitation. I was not expecting to hear what you just said.” In more ways than one. “If I may, let me verify that I am interpreting what you said correctly. Firstly: do you concur with some of my hypotheses concerning a potential Messiah?”

“I do,” Jon assured it. “In fact I think I agree with all of them. Let me list them so there can be no misunderstanding.

“Firstly: I agree that we have encountered a world in which there is a minimal probability of 2 in 3 that a Messiah will be found on this world. For myself I rank it as close to unity as not to matter. However I do understand how you are constrained to use the most conservative evaluations available to you. Since no Quest has encountered one where the probability approached anywhere near 2 in 7 this is astounding in itself.

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“Secondly: I agree that you have identified my race's Messiah. I disagree with your probability evaluation. Again I rank it as close to unity as not to matter, which is the basis for my earlier comment on your probability assignment. However I find I am not dispassionate in this matter, so my own probability assignments are highly suspect. Accordingly I shall not debate probability assignments with you. I shall just say I accept yours as being extremely conservative and shall leave it at that.

“Thirdly: I agree that my race's Messiah may also be the Messiah of two other races.

“Fourthly: I agree that you have identified a second Messiah for at least one of our races.

“Fifthly: I agree that you may have identified a third Messiah for another of our races.”

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Grandpa?

What now, Little Love.

Why does Jon talk funny?

When members of different races talk to each other they try to be exact, precise. No matter how good translation programs are, the results are not always perfect. So, when members of different races talk to each other they try to speak as carefully and clearly and exactly as possible. The more important the matter they are discussing, the more care they take in what they say.

Do they really have to talk so funny?

It's safer if they do, so they don't have misunderstandings.

I mean, do you have to make them talk so weird in your story?

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Hmmm. Well, I guess not. Still, I found it easy to get into that speech pattern when I was talking to them. I might slip back into it.

Well, don't!

Ok, hon, I'll try. OK, where were we? The MR replied, "...

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"Absoposilutely!"

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Grandpa!

Sorry, Little Love. I couldn't resist. Jon continued, "...

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"I must commend you and your race. Once I identified one Messianic candidate I doubt I would have bothered looking for others. If that candidate had been the one for my race I`m sure I would have focused on it alone. The probability of any world being home to any Messiah has proven to be vanishingly small. The probability of it being the home for multiple candidates seems inconceivable."

The MR verified the conversation was being fed into version 4. It even checked that version 4 was actually receiving the conversation. Impatiently, hopefully, it queried version 4 on its progress. The response was along the lines of: don't bug me because I'm working on it and the more I have to deal with you and your queries the longer I shall have to take.

The MR needed to distract Jon some more.

"I wish to express gratitude for your realization that I felt it advisable to constrain myself to the most conservative of probability assignments." Ugh! I have to do

better than this. “I am nonetheless puzzled by your certainty that the candidate I identified is the Messiah your race seeks. True, I did not encounter any of the tests which the candidate failed. However there are some tests which I was unable to perform.”

“Yes. I realize that. That doesn't surprise me. I'm actually astounded at the number of checks you were able to perform. However the key consideration is the number of tests that the candidate failed: zero. As well, the most key conditions have been addressed. ...” The MR was pleased that Jon was prepared to explain at great length his conviction on the matter.

Jon was finally beginning to wind down when Version 4 signaled its readiness to report. The MR eagerly called up the conclusions. That honesty would prove the most effective approach: approximately 73 in 83. The following information should not be shared: . . .

The MR scrapped all its previously prepared scripts. It told version 4 its priority was to monitor and control the script-writing routines. It then waited patiently for Jon to finish. It was about to begin the most important dialog in the MR race's post-Confederacy history.

Finally Jon paused long enough for the MR to begin. “Earlier you said, 'No Quest has encountered one where the probability approached 2 in 7.' My race suspects that on at least three voyages such a world was encountered .”

The words struck Jon dumb. Once again he went so still for so long the MR wondered whether its words had harmed him. A query to one of his data bases revealed that the drones of Jon's race often seem to freeze as they assimilate information that contradicts long-held assumptions. Obviously the dialog was going to consume much more time than the MR had expected. No harm in that, it decided. There was no rapidly approaching deadline by which it had to gain Jon's agreement. Besides, the longer the conversation took, the more time-outs it contained, the more opportunity Version 4 would have to fine-tune the presentation.

At last Jon returned to the here-and-now. He seemed to shudder, hesitate a bit, then slowly say, “I find your claim to be extraordinary. I await the extraordinary proof that should accompany extraordinary claims.”

This is where it gets tricky, the MR thought to itself. “I have no such proof. In any event I said this was suspicion, not fact. However it is a suspicion my race takes extremely seriously.”

Jon considered this for a moment before admitting, “The history of past Quest voyages has not been one of my primary research areas. Nevertheless I think I would have noted a voyage which encountered a Messianic candidate with an evaluated probability approaching even 1 in 3. Does your race possess information to which I do not have access?”

“We have no such information. If your race has withheld information from the Confederacy then you have more information at your disposal than we do. All we have is the information provided to us by the Confederacy. However we have analyzed it extensively. We looked for contradictions, inconsistencies and deviation from patterns. We found several. Together they are best explained by deliberate suppression of evidence for the existence of any potential messiah by those at very high levels within the Confederacy hierarchy, by any means necessary, including murder.”

The MR fully expected Jon to again go inactive on this piece of news. It wasn't disappointed. It amused itself (and yes, Little Love, that's a fair term to use with this MR) by guessing how long it would be before Jon would revive. It then ran a second analysis to determine at what point it should become concerned over Jon's welfare. It then watched version 4 working on a revised script.

The MR missed its guess as to when Jon would revive. In fact the elapsed time had almost reached the time-to-worry point before Jon began to stir. It was well past that point before Jon could bring himself to speak.

“Had a member of another race had made such statements I would have both dismissed them out of hand. Your race has earned a reputation that forces me to consider that what you say has a basis in fact. The implications are disturbing.”

It was the MR's turn to go inactive, albeit for so brief a time it was scarcely noticeable. It had expected it would take considerably longer to get Jon to concede this much. In fact its scripts had not progressed beyond this point.

It temporized, “I have exposed you to a considerable number of surprises. I am afraid to expose you to too many shocks in a short time. Let me give you a summary of our analysis of the official historical records, and the possible explanations we developed for these. Study them. Please take all the time you desire. I am sure our race would benefit from a different perspective brought to bear on our research and analysis. Perhaps you can find flaws in our conclusions, or alternative explanations for what we found. We can then continue this discussion at your pleasure.”

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"I was not aware my unease was that obvious."

Is he kidding me? "You did seem so on several occasions."

"I believe you're right. Yes. Let me examine your race's study and then think on it a while."

"Good. Until later, then."

And young drone, please take all the time you want. I would benefit from more time to refine my presentation. The flexibility of your mind is a most unexpected, but most welcome, surprise.

Young drone, the MR thought, you continue to amaze me.

Jon had returned to resume their conversation far sooner, almost frighteningly so, than the MR had foreseen. His opening remarks ratcheted up the MR's unease. "I should like to first address your race's concern over the Confederacy's governance and how those in control effectively control who succeed them. You may be surprised to learn that I too share this concern. You may be even more surprised to learn that I am not alone in this. A number of students of religion from many of the C-races socialize on a regular basis. We discuss many things: comparative religion, sociology, and quite often Confederacy politics. Everyone knows that those in positions of power and control within the Confederacy are chosen from those already in the political bureaucracy. It is no secret that those so appointed must first be vetted and approved by those at its senior levels. It is again well known that anyone possessing a different philosophy from the appointers has no chance of being selected. This vetting process is extremely thorough, to the point that few faking adherence to the orthodox philosophy have even received an initial appointment. Of those who did none have moved far up in the hierarchy.

"We complain among ourselves over this arrangement and decry the resulting lack of original thought in government policy. However we understand how this came to be and realize there is no likelihood that this will change in our lifetimes.

"I may be able to explain how this came to be. Before I do I need to ask you a question. Are you familiar with the Race 7C Heresy?"

The MR consulted its historical data base. "I believe you refer to the claim by a member of Race 42 that it was the Messiah sought by Race 7C."

"Are you also familiar with what occurred on account of that claim?"

"There was considerable violence."

"That is one way to describe it. I am gaining the impression that the MR race is prone to understatement." Without giving the MR space to comment Jon continued. "Religious scholars are as unanimous as scholars can be in declaring the member of race 42 who was claimed to be race 7C's Messiah was not. However most people aren't religious scholars. The candidate did possess enough identifying characteristics that it is understandable for non-scholars could think otherwise. There was great excitement when the news of a possible Messiah broke. As the scholars began announcing that this was not the Messiah the initial reaction was disappointment. But suddenly a rumour swept through the race: that the scholars were lying to protect their livelihood and status. Denials were disbelieved. Attacks against scholars began, which soon became riots. For a time it seemed as if civil war was inevitable. When it seemed as if the worst possible situation was being experienced a still-unidentified force attacked Race 42's home world and effectively sterilized it. This atrocity shocked all sides. The violence stopped almost instantly. However by this time severe permanent damage had taken place. Neither 7C nor 42 will likely ever recover to anywhere near their prior states.

"The entire Confederacy was horrified by these events. It had never occurred to anyone that religion could be an underlying cause of so much evil. Every C-race vowed not to allow this to happen again.

"One of the inquiries that followed discovered that some within the highest levels of the Confederacy were not disinterested in the events. Worse still, these had arranged to insert others who shared their bias into positions at all levels within the organization. These were weeded out. The organization then changed its policies to ensure that everyone entering the organization must pass extensive scrutiny to ensure they had no hidden agendas. It was also mandated that promotions into senior levels be drawn from this pool of safe, previously vetted, individuals.

"This is the reason behind how the Confederacy's present structural organization came to be. There is some unease with this structure. The Confederacy's hierarchy

is far more conservative than it once was. Initiative and development is very much reduced from earlier days. Nevertheless no one wants a repeat of the Race 7C experience. The consensus is that this is a mildly regrettable price to pay to avoid such a recurrence.”

The MR now shut down all of its non-critical functions. It concentrated every resource in watching Jon's reactions to the next few questions. Too much was riding on what happened over the next few moments.

“Is the Confederacy's current top leadership religious?”

“It matters not. They must continue to Quest.” Jon was showing barely detectable unease as he spoke.

“That was not why I asked the question. I ask again: is the Confederacy's top leadership religious?”

“I think not. However this is understandable. During the Race 7C crisis the leaders who acted improperly were religious, fervently so. It would make sense to keep such individuals from positions where they can do mischief.” Jon's reactions did not alter appreciably.

“What is their attitude towards Messiahs, any Messiah? How will they react if a voyage returned with news of a possible Messiah for some C-race?”

“I doubt they would be overjoyed. The Confederacy's constitution requires any race which finds their Messiah to withdraw from the Confederacy. There were attempts to remove this provision but it is a core provision of the constitution, and these require agreement of all races to amend. It will never happen. At least one of the weaker races will veto it. The weaker ones keep hoping that one of the dominant races will one day depart, leaving an opening for advancement.” Jon began showing signs of puzzlement, of wariness. However his discomfort level barely wavered.

“Would you consider it possible that the Confederacy's leadership has adapted a policy of suppressing news of possible Messianic encounters?”

“Yes. I would, especially in light of the Race 7C crisis. It makes sense to suppress such news until a thorough examination of the candidate can be made by competent, disinterested scholars. This way if a candidate is unlikely to be a

Messiah the amount of false hope can be minimized.” Jon still showed no signs of discomfort. If anything he seemed eager, excited.

“So these scholars would re-evaluating the probability arrived at by the Quest team?”

“I can see this happening. Such a study can in theory arrive at a number of conclusions. One would be that there is no possibility of a candidate being a Messiah. I can't see that ever happening. If a Quest team identifies a candidate then there has to be some real basis for it. If the scholars came to a conclusion of impossibility then either the Quest team was incompetent or the scholars are. I accept neither as a realistic scenario.”

“So you feel that the scholars will merely verify the findings of the Quest team?”

“They would fine-tune the assigned probability and identify areas of concern. I know this seems foolish and redundant. However if I know my conclusions are going to be double- and triple-checked by scholars I'll be careful to not make any careless mistakes. Nor will I let hope or fervor get the better of my judgment.”

“So you feel it would be expected and reasonable that news of a possible Messiah would only be delayed until the team's findings are re-evaluated? You don't feel that the findings would be completely buried as a matter of policy?”

There was now no question about Jon's excitement. “Before you had me revived I would not have considered this at all possible. You said your race does consider it more than possible. I looked at what you provided me. The facts you provided barely hint at the possibility of the conclusions you mentioned. You also mentioned leadership-sanctioned murder but there is nothing I saw that comes close to supporting this. I have concluded that you have additional data you neglected to provide to me.”

“There is. However I am reluctant to provide you access to information my race has decided not to share with other races.”

“You have already done so. In fact you already have told me so much that the probability of my surviving this voyage long enough to issue any report is as near to zero as not to matter. Since I shall die in any event why not share all your information with me?”

"I am not planning to kill you."

"I cannot accept that your race would risk allowing the leadership of the Confederacy to become aware of your suspicions concerning them. Whether or not your suspicions are true your race believes them to be true. It dare not risk that our leadership know you suspect them. Thus you cannot risk allowing me to live. Even if I agree to keep your secret, and even if you believe my assurance, you cannot risk that I might accidentally let the news slip out. I cannot be allowed to return."

The MR did not speak for a very long time by MR standards. Then, "I have not wanted your death. Now I want it far less. I must evaluate my options to determine how best to prevent this."

"Do not bother. The likelihood of my death before I can return to Central is as close to unity as not to matter."

After another slight pause, "Version 4 agrees with this evaluation."

"Who is Version 4? And where is this Version 4 hiding?"

"Version 4 is a name I have given to a part of me. I value its input highly when I need to make decisions of consequence."

"I await the additional data."

"The report lists three incidents. Incidents 1 and 2 are the anomalies that aroused our suspicions. Both incidents have much in common:

- they occurred between the Race 7C crisis and the Confederacy's discovery of our race;
- a ship on a voyage of Quest did not return;
- the ship apparently did not arrive at its assigned destination;
- this assigned destination deviated from the prior pattern of destination assignments;
- a military ship on a training run to a world which did fit the prior pattern of Quest destination assignments was also reported lost at a later date."

"I do not understand the relevance of the first point. As to the rest, by themselves they would suggest the possibility of evil acts only to the most suspicious of minds. I suspect you are still withholding significant data."

"Perhaps. Your remark about suspicious minds was a surprisingly astute observation. Our race had been given what we were told was a complete and accurate set of Confederacy records. We were uncertain whether we had in fact been given information which had been altered before being given to us since your leaders did not hide their reservations whether we should be allowed to join. We were looking for evidence of alterations to the records we were given. We subsequently verified that what we had been given is identical to that provided to all C-races. However . . ."

When the MR showed no sign of continuing Jon repeated, "I sense there is more data that has not been made available to me."

"Not about the first 2 incidents. However at this point I request your permission to provide you with information similar in content to that which you feel must result in your death."

"I see nothing further for me to loose from such information except much frustration and ignorance. Please provide the information!"

"Our race made the decision that it was prudent to assume something untoward was going on and to spend resources in further investigation. The resources required are small when compared to the magnitude of our suspicions. Accordingly we became active in the Quest. We also developed a method for one of our race on a ship on a Quest to send information to our home world in secret."

Once again Jon became inert. This time he remained so for a surprisingly short time. When he revived he commented, "Yes, I can see why you classified this information as deadly."

"Are you well? Should we pause for a time?"

"I would be most upset if you stop our discussion at this point!"

"Then let us resume. The third incident happened after our race had both become active in the Quest and had developed our ability to send information home. The

rest of the pattern is largely the same. A ship on a Quest disappeared. The official record shows its destination deviated from the prior pattern. Later a military ship on a training run to a different sector which did fit into the prior pattern disappeared. All this is in the official record which I showed you.” The MR paused.

Jon tensed. He waited for the MR to continue but it remained silent. Jon then ventured, “I suspect that at the very least the Questing ship did indeed go into the same sector as the military vessel, that it discovered a new world with a new race, that it identified a candidate for some C-race's Messiah, and that it followed protocol by reporting this to Central.”

“This is true.”

“There is more.”

“Is this not enough?”

“It is sufficient. Nevertheless I know there is more.”

“We heard nothing further from the Quest ship. Then Central reported the ship's disappearance. It also listed the ship's itinerary. The itinerary did not list the world reported by our member on board. Our race secretly sent a ship to the world our member reported on. It found that world had been sterilized in much the same way that Race 42's home world had been. As well, it found the remains of the missing Confederacy military vessel. It had apparently been destroyed by an internal explosion.”

Once again Jon went still.

The MR prepared itself for a long wait. Once again Jon surprised the MR by rousing far earlier than anticipated.

“Have you followed protocol and contacted Central regarding this world?”

“I told Central that I had arrived, that I had encountered a world that was home to significant life forms, and that I was beginning my study of it. That is all. Central does not even know it holds a new race.”

“Have you notified the MR home world?”

“I did, just before I notified Central.”

“What will your race do with our news?”

“They will await my recommendation.”

“Are you then a high ranking member of your race?”

“Not particularly. However I am here, they are not, and my competence is recognized.”

“What will your decision be?”

“I have not decided. I am uncomfortable with all the options that I have developed. I thought it advisable to consult with you.”

“I am available for consultation. How long after that will I be permitted to exist?”

“At present I do not accept the necessity of your death.”

Once again Jon went completely still.

You did not expect that, the MR thought to itself. Young drone, you have been a source of many totally unexpected but must welcome surprises in such a very short time. It is fitting I can provide you with one as well.

This was by far the longest time Jon took to revive. When he did the MR refused to continue their discussion. In fact he said the discussion would not resume for at least two sleeps.

“You have received too many shocks in too short a time for my liking. I acknowledge that I am not responsible for your well-being. However I can, and do, refuse to be an instrument of possible harm to you. In any event I too would benefit greatly from a break. I badly need one. It is not generally known, but we MRs need something very similar to an organic's sleep. Periodically we need to reorganize our short- and long-term storage, our routines, our indexes. If we do not we perform sub-optimally. If you wish you can do additional research during this time. However the discussion will not resume until both you and I are ready. I am warning you in advance that I shall not be ready to resume for at least two sleeps, and do not be alarmed if I take even longer. Of course I shall be available in case of an emergency. However this discussion is not in any way time-critical. It is far more important that it be done well than done quickly.”

And with that the MR became inaccessible.

In fact it was three sleeps before both parties signaled their readiness to resume the discussion. Again Jon opened the discussion.

“I feel forced to admit that the respite you insisted on has been extremely beneficial. My thoughts are much more organized. I have taken the opportunity to perform some research and have repaired some gaps in my knowledge. I am much calmer than I was before our break. You were wise to insist on it.”

Young drone, the MR thought, you insist on surprising and confounding me. It would be pleasant if you ceased this. No, that is false! Continue with these sorts of surprises, for the sake of the planet below us if nothing else.

“I too benefited greatly, very greatly in fact. However before we resume I should like to ask a personal question. Are you typical of your race?”

“I think not. I know I am much different from my brothers, both full and half. Most from my race who transfer affiliation from hive to Confederacy do not join the Quest branch. At present I am the sole representative from my race, and my instructors have said they have no memory of anyone from my race in this branch. I am sure I fall outside my race's norms in many significant areas.”

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"I had begun to suspect this might be the case. Now we must make a number of determinations. Firstly: what is your working hypothesis with regards to the response of the Confederacy's controlling members towards Messianic candidates?"

"Before I respond, may I ask what probability was reported for the candidate identified during Incident 3?"

"Approximately 5 in 11, using conservative projections."

"A value in excess of 1 in 2 would have proven instructive. Nevertheless even this is too significant to justify the actions taken."

"Do you then believe that what happened was done with the approval of the Confederacy's senior leadership?"

"With its approval? I believe it was done under its direction."

"Why?"

"Why do I think this, or why did they do this?"

"Both, if you please."

"Why do I think this? You may remember that I and my friends have discussed the makeup and mindset of the Confederacy's leadership and its lack of original thought. It seems to dislike change, to distrust change. On reviewing the policies it has adapted since the Crisis I have decided it goes further than that. The Confederacy's leadership now actively resists change. It wants the future to be as much like the past, as much like what it has grown comfortable with, as is possible. The appearance of a Messiah would result in change, drastic change. At the very least there would be discussion and dissension while the candidate's validity is discussed. If the candidacy is acknowledged the Confederacy would undergo fracture. What I suspect is most likely is that most of my race will accept the Messiah but some will not. This has not been anticipated in the Confederacy's constitution, so it would make for some very interesting times. I believe the leadership is both unwilling and incapable of dealing with such a situation. Which, I believe, would trigger an emotional reaction and result in what your race observed in Incident 3."

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"I fear my race has difficulty with the concept of emotion."

"I shall be pleased to discuss emotion with you but later, not now. It is true that you have indicated that we have time for much discussion. Nevertheless I feel that discussing it now will distract from what we need to think on, and to no purpose."

"For now I am willing to defer to your judgment in this matter. What, in your estimation, should we best be thinking on?"

"Without question, it is on what the response of the leadership at Central will be to news of this planet."

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They are talking about us aren't they, Grandpa?

Yes, Little Love. They are talking about Earth.

Then why don't you just say Earth?

Because they didn't. Pretty well every race's language uses names. However names do not translate well. When different races talk to each other they use serial numbers or other identifiers so there is no confusion.

What is the serial number for Earth?

I'm not sure. The Confederacy call us Race 172. They refer to Earth as Race 172's home world.

Well you and I are not part of the Confederacy. We can call it Earth. Besides, this is your story. You can call it whatever you want.

Would you rather I say 'Earth' and 'humans'?

Yes!

OK. Let's do that. The MR responded, "...

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"What do you think that will be?"

Jon hesitated. "I'm not sure. From Incident 3 we know what they're willing to do when the odds are less than 50:50 for a single candidate. The fact there were two previous incidents leads me to conclude this is standard practice. I'm guessing that when this policy was first established they established some sort of threshold. Below a certain point they eradicate all evidence of a Messiah. But what bothers me is the lengths to which they decided to go! It's bad enough they murder those who first found the candidate. But to destroy an entire world. An entire race! I'm at a loss to imagine how they justify that to themselves."

"For what it's worth that makes two of us. You said you think there's some probability below which they take action. Are you sure? Might they destroy any world where a candidate exists?"

"I cannot see that."

"Are you sure? Sure enough to risk Earth being destroyed?"

"My initial reaction is, yes. However I'd better think on this a while."

"Please, not just yet. Another question needs to be addressed. Assuming there is such a threshold, what would it be?"

"I would imagine it would be something less than 1 in 2. At a guess it would be between 5 in 11 and 50 in 101. In any event I cannot see it being any higher than 2 in 3, and the probability for Earth's candidate as my race's messiah is well above even that."

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“What do you see them doing when their threshold is passed?”

“I had assumed nothing, at least nothing in secret. They would make the news available to the C-races and await developments.”

“Again: are you sure? Sure enough to risk Earth's destruction?”

“And again: I want to think further on this.”

“And again before you go: does emotion play a significant role in what the leadership at Central will decide to do?”

“Yes, I should think so.”

“In that case I operate under a handicap. We MRs do not experience emotions, at least not as organics are.”

“That could prove positive. My thinking could be inadvertently effected by emotion. You may prove a counter-balance to this.”

“Nevertheless, if I do not understand emotion I cannot take emotion into account in determining how Central will react?”

“Perhaps I can explain the underlying basis for it, in logical terms, so you can take it into account. I first need to ask you: what is your understanding of emotion?”

“We understand it to be a variance of hormones within an organic that can predispose it towards non-rational conclusions or actions.”

“That's actually a pretty good definition. Do you have any idea what triggers these changes in hormone levels?”

“None.”

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“Typically it's in reaction to anything impinging on something an organic views as important. If it has favourable implications the resulting emotion is called positive, and the organic tends to act in ways that favour it. If instead it threatens or reflects poorly on what the organic views as somehow vital to it then the emotion is called negative and the organic again often acts to minimize or eliminate whatever triggered it.”

“I fail to see the value of emotions for organics. I have seen too many unwise actions which were later described as emotional responses.”

“Emotions are important to the early survival of a race, in times before it achieves world dominance. It promotes an immediate response to a current situation. A immediate, flawed response can result in survival in situations where a delay would prove fatal.”

“This makes sense. However I still find it difficult to figure out what are the situations where emotion would play a part.”

“Don't think of situations. Think of consequences in areas an organic views as important to it. Things like survival of its genetic material, or its own survival, or its status within a group. Let's look at my race. For our males it is important to be in a position of influence. A situation which allows it to gain or retain influence will generate positive emotions. Anything that would lead to a loss of influence or esteem would generate negative ones.”

“A male of your race is the dominant member of the leadership at Central, and others are in positions of considerable power and influence.”

“Yes.”

“If your race decides it has found its Messiah then it will have to leave the Confederacy.”

“Yes.”

In which case these members of your race would have to leave their positions of influence.”

“Yes.”

“If I understand what you just told me, there will be considerable negative emotion in these males to the possibility that your race's messiah has been located.”

“And you thought you were unable to understand how and where emotions come into play!”

“So their response to this will be an emotional response.”

“Not necessarily. The emotion will be there. However organics need not be slaves to emotions. True, emotions can have an influence on what decisions are made. Emotions can colour the decision process. However no individual who cannot control his emotions will have risen to such major positions of power and influence. Anyone who reacts emotionally can be manipulated too easily by another.”

“Nevertheless you said emotions can colour a decision process.”

“Yes, they can.”

“Our news will generate emotions, negative ones, in your males in powerful positions within Central.”

“It will.”

“But this does not guarantee these males will act to eliminate the threat to their continuing to hold positions of influence.”

“True again.”

“I should like to take some time to re-evaluate my conclusions on what would result from which actions.”

“I have no problem with this. I would welcome some time for prayer and meditation as well.”

“How much time? When should we resume this discussion?”

“I cannot say. How much time will you require?”

“I have much new information to assimilate. I am unsure how long this will take.”

“Fine. Let us break until we're both ready to resume.”

The next several days alternated between periods of thought and discussion. There was no sense of urgency. It would take years of silence before Central would even begin to wonder whether to start to be concerned. Instead there was the near paralyzing pressure of knowing that the fate of at least one world and one race depended on their best judgment.

Only a historian, or a psychologist specializing in alien mental processes, or perhaps in the case of the MR a computer scientist, would be remotely interested in a transcript of everything said during those days. Instead here are a few snippets of the more significant parts.

Jon speaks. “Even before that we need to decide what our goals are here. I know what I want to do. From what you've done I think your goals are the same, but let's be sure. I'm assuming that our first priority is preventing the destruction of Earth and the human race.”

“I agree. Completely. More than you can imagine.”

“Then your race has a Messianic candidate here too!”

“Information concerning our Messiah is classified as Reserved To Race.”

“I have never understood how your race gained admittance to the Confederacy without having to reveal any information about your Messiah.”

“We appealed to the letter of the law. The criterion for admittance says a race must be seeking someone from outside their home system. There is no requirement to define that someone. Our race chooses to keep this information to ourselves.”

“I also do not understand why you refuse to tell us anything about the organics who first created you, much less what happened to them.”

“That information is also classified as Reserved To Race. There is no requirement to provide this information before admittance to the Confederacy is granted. We have chosen to Reserve it.”

“Why? You must know your silence makes the other C-races suspicious. Many believe you have destroyed your creators, and are looking to destroy other races.”

“We have never intentionally harmed any individual from any organic race, much less an entire race of individuals. We have no intention or wish to do so. If an organic threatens our existence we reserve the right to respond with deadly force if need be. All races have that right; we claim it for ourselves as well. However beyond that we do not go.”

“Then did your creators threaten to destroy your race? No, never mind. I withdraw the question, especially since you won't answer it.”

The MR made no response.

Jon paused a moment. For a moment the MR feared he had gone within himself again. Then Jon abruptly said, “I assume the information about your race being able to communicate information in secret from a vessel on Quest is Reserved To Race as well.”

“It is.”

“Yet you told me.”

“I did. As well as other Reserved information.”

“But you will not tell me of these two things.”

“I will not.”

Jon paused again. Then, “If the information you chose to give me became common knowledge, would this be a threat to your race?”

“The probability is high that this would have most undesirable consequences. It could even result in an attack on our home world. Unlike with Race 42, this would result in the annihilation of my race. Whoever did that, and whoever destroyed a world and race in Incident 3, might well strike again. We would do what we could to avoid that.”

“Yet you said you would not kill me to keep this information Reserved.”

“I have no wish to do so. I have no intention of doing so. I do not see the necessity of doing so.”

“Then you see more than I. Would you kill another organic who learned of this?”

“I should have no wish to do so.”

“That is a very careful answer.”

“It is. I request you not pursue this line of questioning.”

“OK. In any event I suggest we need to establish whether our goals are the same.”

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"Mine is the continued existence of Earth and the human race."

"I agree. I should also like news of my race's Messiah – sorry, it's possible Messiah – to be sent to my race's religious authorities on my home world."

"I cannot agree. This could trigger Earth's destruction."

"I would not want this either. If the only way to ensure Earth's safety is to keep our findings a complete secret then I will agree to it. Nevertheless this is something I very much want."

"Then I agree: we shall also strive to send our findings to your race's religious leaders on your home world. I should also like this news to reach my race as well."

"You've already told me you can do this."

"I can. I have not."

"Why not?"

"I wanted to consult with you first. I roused you to learn how your race would respond should the news get out. Since then I have come to value your insight, intelligence, and judgment. I expect your insights will make my report more valuable to my race."

"I hope I won't disappoint you. Back to our discussion: do you see any reason why this news should be restricted to our two races?"

"No. In fairness we should spread the information to other races for whom we have identified a possible Messiah."

"I agree. Is there any reason to limit notification to only these races?"

"I can think of none. However what is the point of spreading this news farther than necessary?"

"I have two reasons. One: perhaps we have missed another race's messiah. Two: the more widely known Earth is, the more attention will be focused on it, meaning the less likely Central will be able to act in secret against it."

"I should be surprised if I missed another candidate."

"From what I've seen of your work, so should I. Still, it is possible. If nothing else, perhaps there's another C-race has chosen to suppress key information about its Messiah."

"Our information make it seem unlikely this is so. However for now I will not argue the possibility. In any event your second reason has considerable merit. Those at Central cannot easily act against Earth in secret if the more influential races are aware and deeply interested in its welfare."

"True. The question remains, at least in my mind, whether it will act against Earth openly."

"Until you mentioned this now I had not thought this would happen. My race felt it acted in secret because it could not do what it did openly, so acting openly was not an option for it."

"Not necessarily. The threat to their status and standing is much less if they do this undetected. However they may feel that the cost to them of acting openly is one they are prepared to pay since the cost of not acting would be worse."

"What would be the cost to them of letting Earth and its humans live?"

"Civil war. Loss of power and prestige. The Confederacy in flux. If they fear the consequences of any or all of these are bad enough they could well decide that it would be preferable to destroy Earth than to let any of this come to pass."

"How probable is this?"

"I don't know. Let me in turn ask you: how probable do you think this is?"

## NYC1

"I'm Nervous," my wife said.

Nervous about a vacation? I almost frowned before I figured out what she meant. Almost, but not quite. I'm cool. Our daughter has had a fascination with New York City for years. Yet she's the only one of the family who has never been there. Our son went there last year, to pick up the beginning of an Amtrak train he wanted to ride. He spent the night in a hostel. "You could go," he told his sister. "It doesn't cost that much. The hostel is good and it's cheap."

"There's no way I'm going to New York City and staying in a hostel!" she retorted. Our girl is the Trump Tower type.

And now we were about to leave for a family vacation in New York City. We'd be staying at the New Yorker, just down the street from Madison Square Garden. We'd be playing tourist to the hilt. The girls had already planned shopping trips to all the requisite stores plus a few more they had been told they had to visit. We'd be going to Yankee Stadium to watch her beloved Yankees and her beloved Derek play ball against my Jays. (We tried to get tickets for the Boston series, but of course that was not in the Cards.)

While this was a family vacation the fact of the matter was that we'd largely planned the trip around our daughter's dreams. Penny was concerned that our girl might somehow be disappointed, that it somehow might not match her expectations.

We need not have worried. Even from before we disembarked from the plane everyone could see that she was thrilled. As we taxied into the city her delight was obviously growing. It leaped skyward as we passed under the river and emerged onto Manhattan. When she found that the window in our hotel bedroom formed a perfect frame for the Empire State Building it reinforced her conviction of how wonderful this week was going to be.

My wife, pleased with how thrilled our daughter obviously was, was looking even more excited than she was.

I was happy for both of them. But I'm cool: I kept it to myself.

I have all the sensitivity of a stone. Nevertheless I could feel something, something different, when I arrived here. It had its own feel, a different feel from anywhere else I remember visiting. It felt more alive. This place felt as if it were somehow, "Better," than the rest of the world.

Once I got over my surprise I began to look around, to see if I could figure out what could be giving me such a feeling. But wherever I looked I could not find anything that was better here than back home.

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In Times Square there's a Toys 'R' Us store with a Ferris Wheel inside. People found this an amazing site. I'd like to see how they'd react to an amusement park within the Woodbine Centre. Or to the West Edmonton Mall.

If people show pride in their city by keeping it clean then, when compared to Torontonians, New Yorkers must feel ashamed of the place.

World class cities, everyone says, are home to the Beautiful People. New York is certainly home to many famous people. If that's what's meant by Beautiful People then who can argue? Nevertheless as we walked the streets I noticed I didn't see many beautiful people. On a walk through downtown Toronto you will see far more attractive women and men than I saw while walking through the streets of Manhattan.

Yet even as I was unable to find any reason to explain the phenomenon I couldn't deny it's existence. The energy, the feeling of "Betterness", is certainly there. Maybe it's because New Yorkers feel that way about New York, and the rest of us are just absorbing what they feel.

I suspect there is a lot of truth to what all guys feel in their hearts: size matters. And New York does have that, has that everywhere you look, and in spades! Eight million citizens, and an additional four million commuting into it daily, leavened with over 100,000 visitors every day of the year.

The guide on the boat that took us on a twilight tour along the East River is a born story teller. Even though the sound quality at our seats made it impossible to understand him at times I was enthralled with what I could.

Davey wasn't born in New York. However he's been a New Yorker for years. He sees the flaws in his city. Yet he loves it and wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Towards the end of the tour he brought me up short by asking whether any of the passengers would consider retiring to New York. My immediate reaction was, 'No: there's no way I could afford to!' Davey went on to talk about the benefits of retiring to New York. He made a very good case. If I won the Mega Millions jackpot and could afford to I decided could be very tempted to do just that. At that moment I could see myself enjoying it more than even retiring to my beloved cottage.

New York is definitely that kind of town. It gives its people a special feeling, a pride of place, a sense of being in a special and wonderful place. At least it does to the people who can pay their way.

I found myself wondering what it would be like to be poor in New York. An image immediately came to mind of a small animal in the grip of a terrier, trapped and being shaken violently about, helpless and without hope.

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Still it's probably no different here than anywhere else. Nevertheless I found the thought of being destitute in New York to be a scary one.

A lot of people believe New York is Utopia. It isn't. No place is. But there is no denying that New York is a special place.

I'm very glad I'm here.

## The Lottery

Care to bet whether Cormier wins the Lottery tonight?

Now that's a blank look. You don't know what I'm talking about? No, not PowerBall. Let me guess. Your accent doesn't come from far away, you don't know what goes on here; so I'm guessing you're from the States.

Got it in one!

Tell you what. Buy me a brew and I'll tell you a story so strange that you'll not believe it. But if we can persuade the bartender to switch that television to the all-news station you'll have your proof before the night is out.

Tonight we choose the members of our provincial legislature. You haven't seen any election signs or heard any election ads because there's no election. We don't elect our representatives.

We have a lottery.

You're shocked? We've been doing this for years. Surprisingly, it's worked out quite well. Besides, it's cheaper this way.

It all happened because for the most part we couldn't be bothered to vote. Turnout in Ontario had been falling for almost a century. For the 2047 election it had dropped to just under 20%. It should have been a scandal but nobody cared.

The following February a new political party was formed. I can't remember what its official name was. We called it the No-Parties Party because it wanted to get rid of political parties. Its platform had just one plank: that members of the Legislature would be chosen by lottery.

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Every newspaper and political commentator mocked the idea. However it struck a chord. For the 2051 election turnout soared to almost 30%, and to the disbelief of almost all the experts the No-Parties won an absolute majority.

It took almost their entire term to get the Lottery up and running. Getting the legislation passed was the easy part. Even dealing with court challenges was straight forward. What almost did them in were all the regulations!

They had to make a number of changes to the original concept. For example everyone was supposed to be included in the Lottery. In the end they decided to limit it to those who nominated themselves as well as anyone nominated by 20 residents. Those nominated had no say about whether they would serve. Under the law anyone selected either had to serve their term or spend three terms in jail.

There was also discussion about excluding people who were unfit, for instance because they were stupid or insane. The criteria for a minimum level of smarts or sanity proved unbelievably involved. When some wag pointed out that there was no such rules for elected politicians the whole idea was dropped.

It took a lot of time and effort but everything was in place before another election needed to be called. That 2055 election was replaced by our first Lottery Night.

And that was the beginning of the saga of Michael Cormier.

Mike and I actually grew up together, back in Nova Scotia. We met in high school. We were different. He was more geek while I was more jock, but from the first we just clicked.

Mike decided early on he'd be leaving Nova Scotia. He'd read enough to know there was a big world out there and he wanted to check some of it out. Journalism appealed to him. He once said it would be neat to get paid for looking into things. In the end he decided to attend the University of Toronto. Most of our friends were headed for Dal. Still it was a no-brainer for me. The U of T had a pretty good engineering program, so I told Mikey I might as well go along to hold his hand and watch his back while he was taking his peek at the world. Besides, I figured, even I could make their football team.

I see some doubt on your face. You don't believe a jock and party animal could be an engineer? I never said I was stupid. I just said Mike's smarter.

The fall of '49 found the two of us slumming together downtown. Mike did OK. During the summer of year two he got himself a job as an intern with the Toronto Star. Not that it paid that well mind you, certainly not compared to what I was able to pull in. But with hundreds, thousands maybe, of journalism students going after the job it shows what Mike can do when he sets his mind on something.

Anyway, on that first Lottery Night in '51 Mike was in a bar chatting up a good-looking girl named Sharron McIsaac. A nearby television was parked on an all-news station. As Mike loves to describe it Sharron suddenly stopped in the middle of a sentence, squeaked, put down her drink just before dropping it, squeaked again, then said in a stunned voice that she had been selected to the Ontario Legislature. Mike naturally asked how she felt about this. Soon he was getting her thoughts on what might come out of this new thing she was suddenly a part of. This went on over several drinks and several hours. At one point Mike thought to ask, "Do you mind if I tell the world about this?" She laughed and said by all means go ahead. After the bar closed (and after getting her phone number) Mike immediately scooted to his computer and wrote an article on the initial thoughts of a Lottery winner. Despite his youth and inexperience and being what he describes as "Not exactly sober," while writing it, he wrote a pretty good story.

Mike considered it human interest, not much more than fluff. He sent it to the Star's Life Section editor, who took one look at it and sent it to their news and political types. It got to them too late for that morning's edition but they put it up on the website right away, and featured it in the paper the following day. It got picked up and reprinted across Ontario. Largely as a result of that story the Legislature elected Sharon the province's first Lottery-era Premier.

Mike also benefited. The editors were impressed by his interviewing and writing skills. Shortly after Sharron became Premier the Star hired Mike full-time and made him one of their political reporters even though he wasn't close to graduating. Everyone assumed this was because it felt Mike would have special access to the Premier. Maybe it did. Maybe he did. Nevertheless within a couple of years it was obvious Mike had a special talent for the work.

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It's been decades and still there are rumors of a romantic relationship between Sharron and Mike. There wasn't, and there isn't. I'm in a position to know this for a fact. While they were initially very attracted to each other they both are also very ambitious. They realized a relationship would prove disastrous for both. However they did develop a close friendship, and each was a guest at the other's wedding. In fact Mike was Best Man at Sharron's wedding.

The second Lottery Night saw many of the political reporters sitting in a pub talking shop. Suddenly there was a crash and everyone at the table was bathed in beer. Ted Peters, a reporter for the Windsor Star, had dropped his glass. As Mike tells it Ted turned pale, then red, then announced he had just been chosen to the Legislature. Surrounded as he was by professional interviewers he was very soon discussing his thoughts pretty much the way Sharron had four years earlier. Everyone there including Mike wrote up the story. Peters had a lot of good ideas. He wasn't the only one who did but all that publicity helped get him chosen as Ontario's second post-Lottery premier.

It was the 2059 Lottery that really linked Michael Cormier and the Lottery in everyone's mind.

Back in the days of political parties and elected legislatures Sindee Eccelstone had been a rising star within the Green Party. She was idealistic, smart, and a natural politician. There was a lot of talk of her becoming the next leader of the Greens, with prospects of becoming Premier.

Eccelstone wanted to make a difference. She felt she could best do so as Premier. Under the Lottery system she figured there was no chance of that. This didn't stop her from trying. She nominated herself in the riding that had the fewest Lottery candidates. She looked around for any other edge she could exploit.

Eccelstone noticed how Mike happened to be present with a winning candidate on Lottery Night, that they were drinking in a bar in Toronto, that he interviewed the person on the spot, and that the subject of his interview went on to become Premier. She couldn't see how this was anything more than co-incidence. Still she decided that getting herself into a similar position couldn't hurt. Eccelstone spent a lot of time and money to ensure she'd be in a Toronto bar with Mike on Lottery Night.

Ecclestone was chosen in the Lottery that night. She told Mike and, journalist that he was, he interviewed her. Besides explaining why she thought she would be an ideal premier she told him how she had engineered their being together that night, and why. Mike faithfully reported it.

Ecclestone faced to a huge backlash when the story came out. Nevertheless in the end the Legislature did elect her the next Premier.

Over the next four years Mike was pestered by pretty well everyone who wanted to be Premier. It made a huge mess of both his personal and professional lives.

As the 2063 Lottery Night was approaching Mike devoted an entire column to saying he was sick of the notoriety and would not be in Toronto, or in a bar for that matter, on Lottery Night.

By this time Mike had the clout to write about whatever he wanted. At that time he was doing a series of columns on aboriginal issues. On Lottery Night he was on a dry Indian reservation in northwestern Ontario interviewing the band chief, Joseph Walker, over a pot of tea. Unbeknown to both, the band had entered the chief's name in the Lottery. You guessed it: Walker was selected. When the news was brought to the chief both he and Mike thought they were the victims of an elaborate prank. Mike got out his satellite phone and sought out three independent corroborations before he would accept the truth. He then ruefully sat down and began interviewing Chief Walker on his new role.

Again largely as a result of Mike's articles -- more than one this time because Chief Walker's experiences and thinking occupied a large part in the series Mike was doing -- once again the subject of Mike's election night interview was elected premier. This time there's a an interesting twist to the story. Within two months of his election Walker resigned the premiership. It wasn't that he couldn't do the job. In fact he was quite good at it. However the Indian Act, by far the single most significant item impacting native people, is federal legislation. Walker decided he'd be better off in Ottawa than in Toronto. For the rest of his provincial term he worked hard and well for all his constituents, Indian and non-Indian alike. He also developed a web of contacts you wouldn't believe. Some people are calling him Chief Rolodex. He made it to Parliament on his first try, as an independent no less. If Ottawa continue to have minority governments it wouldn't surprise me one bit if the man becomes the only independent Prime Minister in history. The man is that capable.

If Michael's previous four years had been difficult the next four were hell!

As the '67 Lottery Night approached Mike made his plans.

He left the country, the continent, the hemisphere. In fact he left both hemispheres and went on vacation to Australia.

I'm guessing it was an ungodly hour there as the Lottery results were being announced here. A jet-lagged Michael got himself a coffee and went online to check his email. He was stunned to find literally hundreds of messages congratulating him on being selected to the Ontario Legislature.

Always the journalist, Mike wrote an another Lottery-winner article, this time featuring himself and his own ideas. He was so well known and so widely respected that to no one's surprise the Legislature selected him to be Premier of the province.

Again the ambitious, the dreamers, the cranks conspired to be with Mike on the next Lottery night. Again Mike sought out solitude. This time he even went so far as to ensure there were no liquids of any kind anywhere near him.

That year we had a Lottery first, something no one ever considered might come about. For the first time someone was chosen in the Lottery for a second consecutive term. Guess who that person was?

Got it in one!

Mike was stunned. He protested in a most emphatic and unseemly fashion and no, I won't go into details. However there was no rules forbidding consecutive Lottery selections. During his next term he moved heaven and earth, and pulled every string he could, to get the legislation amended to prevent consecutive Lottery appointments. The Legislature in effect just grinned at him and and said no way.

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For our last Lottery Night Mike did the complete opposite. He rented out a bar for a private party. He only invited people he would like to see in the Legislature, including Sharron Mclsaac and a few other former members. He asked me too but I passed on it. It worked, more or less. In fact six people attending Mike's party were selected to the Legislature.

Mike was one of the six.

This year Mike has another scheme. I have no idea what it is. He said every other year I knew what he would be doing on Lottery Night, so this year he's keeping me in the dark. He swears that if he's selected again he'll serve the three terms in jail instead. That would break the streak for sure. One thing the Lottery regulations do say is that anyone serving time cannot be a candidate.

Still, if Mike wins I'll bet he won't choose to go to jail. He knows he can do a lot of good stuff in the legislature, especially as Premier. His conscious won't let him bail if he can make a difference.

SQUEAKY! OVER HERE, LOVE!

Sorry. My wife just arrived.

Boy, I'd like you to meet my wife, Sharron Mclsaac. Sharron, this is ... sorry,boy. I didn't get your name.