

Spooky Action At A Distance

Sol's club was buzzing with activity when he spawned a new copy of himself, preparing to visit Fowler. He put on his trademark black suit and wraparound sunglasses. So much had happened since Fowler's sentencing. The construction of the new Ringworld had begun. Delcass and Sandra basked in the glow of their new high-profile project. The frenzied media circus which had surrounded Fowler's trial was now all but forgotten. Ironically, as Fowler's fortunes had faded, Sol had watched his online business empire grow from strength to strength. He was signing new bands and featuring them in his club which was now on the Citynet Hot 100 List. However, Sol was determined not to forget his friends so easily. Outside his club, there was a stretch limo waiting. He sat into it and leaned forward to his driver Bill.

"To the Tank," said Sol.

Bill looked around, looking slightly surprised and then sat forward.

"Yes sir. Outside it is then Sir," he replied and then the stretch limo dropped out of Citynet. Sol was still sitting inside a stretch limo but now Sol and his driver Bill were inside Walkie Talkies in an Executive Switch and Ride facility catering to the growing number of Wealthy Onliners who would visit the world of Erstol beyond their computer generate reality.

The real stretch limo joined the line of Floater traffic and headed away from the Cosmopolitian center of the Erstol and headed out over what was known as the badlands, the densely packed living area housing those humans and aliens alike in vast numbers. Not everyone on Erstol was rich, not would they ever be. Small pockets of alien and human gangs vied for the small tracts of territory to call their own and harkened back to a time when Erstol had not been seen as a beacon of hope. Beyond this in the distance were rolling hills of rubble and old abandoned miners tunnels when Erstol had once been mined for its ore. Erstol had moved on but the old abandoned mines remained, some of them even with broken down couches and graffiti from times long past. Not far beyond the abandones mines was the building simply known as The Tank; an impregnable carved fortress of rock lined with automated weapons system on the outside and an array of defensive systems inside intent on keep anyone from escaping.

The stretch limo floated outside the visitors window and a face came up against a window. It was Hessler.

"State your business?" said the expressionless guard.

“Sol E 242 to visit prisoner Tom Fowler.”

Hessler looked down at a list and then looked at Sol. He paused and then pressed a button. The vehicle was scanned for weapons but none were found. “Come on in Sol,” he said, his voice picking up a little. Next a door ahead of them opened and the vehicle was allowed inside where it parked.

Hessler met Sol in the arrivals area. “You got it?”

“For a special customer like you, sure,” said Sol. He took a few more club passes and placed them discreetly in Hessler’s hand. “A few for your buddies too.” Hessler slipped the VIP access cards in his pocket.

“When we bring him out you got ten minutes, no more,” said Hessler, looking around him. Private visits were limited and Sol had pulled all the strings he could to get to see Fowler who was under virtual total lock down. After the trial, Erstol had made an example of Fowler for flouting the laws regarding the N-Teks. Even by Estol’s standards the sentence had been harsh; fifteen years of near total lockdown. Sol took his place in the empty waiting area with the glass window. He had brought his trademark walking stick which he lay against his chair. The silence was deafening in the sterile room. The trial itself had been a media circus and had even been shown back on Earth. However, with the passing of time, the trial had faded into the background and everyone had moved on, everyone that is except Fowler. He recalled Fowler’s last parting words. “Everything’s gone to hell in a hurry for me Sol.”

Fowler’s shaken form appeared in the room. He was dressed in an orange jumpsuit. Having been in the Tank for more than a year had taken its toll on Fowler physically. The skin was sunken around his cheek bones and his skin looked dried and cracked around his beard. He stumbled forward, looking at around him almost with childlike interest in the room. Even his hands seemed to look like they were slightly misshapen and he tried to pick up the phone and talk to Sol.

Sol smiled at Fowler. “Hey Fowler, how are you doing.”

Fowler opened his mouth slightly but didn’t speak moving his head a little as he looked at Sol.

“Use your voice,” said Sol gently, realizing it was a side-effect of being in the Tank so much. “Don’t just think it.”

A gasp came from Fowler and he began to speak in a thin dry voice. “Sol.” He cheeks raised a little like he was trying to smile.

Sol just nodded. “I’m here man. How are they treating you?”

“Bad,” was all Fowler could say. “It’s Hell,” he added.

“Stay strong, don’t let them beat you down,” said Sol.

But Fowler shook his head. “Get me out of here Sol,” said Fowler. “I don’t care what you do. Just get me out of here.” Fowler placed his wet hand on the glass window, leaving a greasy imprint on the glass.

Sol sat forward sympathetically. “I got the best lawyers working on an appeal for you. I’m on it. You were there for me when I needed you man. Now I’m here for you. I don’t forget my friends,” said Sol.

Fowler shook his head and he looked at the floor. “They took it all from me Sol. After all I did. They took it all away and put me in here.” Fowler swallowed hard and his head dropped lower.

“You hold on Fowler. Don’t give up. You’re not a quitter. I know you Tom Fowler. You don’t quit!”

But Fowler looked desperate. “I don’t know how much longer I can last,” said Fowler.

“Have you had any other visitors?” asked Sol.

Fowler just shook his head and licked his dry lips.

“We had good times once Sol,” smiled Fowler remembering his past life. “didn’t we?” What looked like a tear rolled down his face. “We had the best of times.”

Sol smiled. “We did. And we will again. I promise you my brother.”

Hessler walked slowly over behind Fowler and gave Sol a sign their time was up.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. You stay strong Fowler. You remember those good times. We’ll have them again.”

Fowler nodded and got up and walked slowly away, his once strong form slumping as he walked away. Sol left the visitors area. He and got back into his stretch limo and the car left the Tank.

He slammed his hand off the inside of the car door, angry and frustrated with the situation.

“Is everything all right sir?” asked Bill looking around.

“No Bill, everything is not all right. Sometimes bad things happen to good people and it makes me very angry,” said Sol.

Sol transferred back to Citynet and headed back to his club. There were constant queues outside the club, sneaking around the side of the building. Advanced

plans were already in place to create two more clubs and rents for the most exclusive locations were constantly climbing almost daily.

A young couple came up to Sol asked he walked towards his club. "Hey are you Sol?" asked the young man in the sneakers and T-Shirt. "Is this you club man?"

"Look you're going to have to queue like everyone else," said Sol.

"We don't mind queuing. All we want is a photo. You mind if I get a photo with you? I want to show my friends back home on Earth," asked the young man.

Sol shrugged. "Sure why not," said Sol.

The young man stood beside Sol and they took a photo.

"Thanks," smiled his girlfriend. "Would you mind taking one of us?" she asked.

Sol sighed inwardly but didn't want to appear rude. "No problem."

"Hey man would you hold this for me?" said the young man.

Sol nodded and without thinking, he took the envelope. The smiles on the couples faces disappeared.

"Sol E 242, you have been served," said the young man.

"Witnessed," added the woman. She gave Sol a small wink before she dropped out of Citynet. Her boyfriend raised his arms and shouted out, "Baby I am so good at this job!" he proclaimed, before disappearing.

"Haven't you heard of email," said Sol smartly.

The letter in Sol's hand opened automatically and he saw a legal Citynet document which flashed to indicate it had been read. Sol started to worry and frowned.

What the hell is this? he wondered.

Within an instant, the legal document was executed and Sol watched in dismay as his Club was shut down. The outer markings began disappearing on his club one by one until it was replaced by a non-descript square with the words 'Closed by order of Citynet Inc!'.
The party revellers inside the club suddenly found themselves outside the club and seemed momentarily confused. Many let out moans of annoyance. Even the band they had been listening to were off the stage and standing on the street with just their unplugged instruments. Many customers began demanding their money back and others just wandered off in disgust.

Sol quickly scanned the words in the legal document and saw a section to do with Breaches of the Citynet Sole Traders Act." He checked his Citynet accounts and

they were all frozen. He quickly realized how bad this was. One name immediately came to mind, that of his lawyer Thad Kruele. He quickly called Thad who was at his son's birthday party.

"Sol, how's my favourite client?" smiled Thad. In the background, there were kids singing happy birthday.

"We got problems," said Sol. "Citynet just shut me down. I've been served with some kind of legal notice." Then Fowler's words came back to his mind. They took it all Sol. After all my work. They took it all away from me.

"When?" asked Thad.

"Just now." Sol showed Thad an image of the document he had just been served.

Thad wiped the fragments of cake from his lips. "Ok send whatever you have and get over here," said Thad and he clicked off.

Thad was in his study, reading the document Sol had sent him, when Sol arrived.

"Talk to me," said Sol. "What do I need to do to reverse this? Right now I got nothing. All my earning are gone man. I've gone from hero to zero. And this ain't funny."

"I did tell you," said Thad, swirling the brandy in his cup. "Diversify. Invest in some bricks and mortars."

"I know," replied Sol. "but this no time for lectures. What's the problem and what do I need to do to fix this?"

Thad had never seen Sol so agitated. He seemed almost human now.

"Ok first things first. Citynet allege you broke their terms and conditions."

Sol raised his eyebrows. "How?"

Thad rubbed his chin. "There was a complaint made by one of your customers which Citynet investigated and found to be true, so they shut you down."

"Which customer and when?" asked Sol. "I got thousands of happy customer and one complains so they shut me down. This is ridiculous."

"Depends on the complaint Sol. They're not going to shut you down for a minor infraction," said Thad. "When a customer enters your club. You are legally responsible for that customer. Citynet guarantees that customer's safety within the

service but not within each Sole Trader's premises. If that customer is skimmed or has their identity stolen or some other serious violation takes place as defined in their terms and conditions, and it can be linked to your business, then you will lose your club. Citynet protects the safety and security of their online members. It's part of their member's charter, paragraph four, sub section two. They take it very seriously Sol."

"Mumbo, jumbo," replied Sol. "Just tell me who made the complaint and what I need to do."

"Well that's the thing," said Thad. "Citynet are not legally obliged to reveal the identity of the customer. This document state they believe the complaint is true. Their main concern is protecting the customer. Right now, it's you versus Citynet."

"This is crazy," said Sol. "We need more information than this. How am I supposed to fight this?"

Thad nodded understandingly. "There is a standard appeals process. I've setup a meeting with the appeals board tomorrow. We can find out more there on the details of the case. Gather all the footfall data you have over the last three months as well as employee data. We might need it. Oh and there's one more thing." Thad scratched the back of his neck, wondering how Sol would take the news. "You have ten days to appeal this. Otherwise all your Citynet businesses and accounts will be shut down permanently. You will be persona non grata on the service." Thad raised his eyebrows and spoke slowly and deliberately, almost like like Sol had become a child. "Do you fully understand what I am telling you?"

"Spit it out. And spare me the legal mumbo jumbo."

Thad frowned. "They will not only shut down your businesses Sol. They will shut you down."

Sol sat back and shook his head.

The Citynet appeals building was an old fashioned building by Citynet standards. It was a separate building to the main corporate headquarters that glistened under the sunlight streaming in through the domed world. User's did not jack into a high tech online system that was speedy and efficient. The appeals building represented the darker side of Citynet. It was there to deal with the part of Citynet that wasn't working or was there for those who were always looking to find a loophole in the system and were eventually caught. Sol and Thad took a seat in the drab waiting room. Sol looked around him at the bunch of unsavoury looking characters surrounding them. There were private

rooms which were lit up with a number. Thad held onto their ticket, watching out for their number to come up.

“Let me do the talking Sol,” said Thad. He held onto his expensive briefcase, looking almost like it might be stolen at any moment. “I think that it might be best. The appeals process can be a little...” He paused looking for the right word. “Trying.”

Sol smarted and shook his head a little. He overheard shouting in one of the many meeting rooms. A large man exited the room and slammed the door then punched one of the walls.

Eventually Sol’s number was up and they entered the cramped room which smelled of stale sweat. A metal grill slid back and a bored looking young man with greasy hair and glasses clicked on console and the case file was open.

“Case number 113485738243.AA1K is open.” He sighed, looking a bit like the world was about to end. “How may I help you?” A digital clock with ten minutes on it began to click down, which he looked at like he was wishing the seconds away.

Thad spoke up. “My name is Thad Kruele legal representation, and this is my client, said owner of Sol’s Bar. We are here to request formal details of the case as outlined against my client in your case report.”

The young man clicked on his screen and skewed up his eyes a little. “Said client has legal obligation in the matter of Customer X and bonded Employee Y regarding conversations leading to externalized communications leading to legal defraudment. Said customer has transferred legal obligations to Citynet Corp who has accepted limited liability and implemented legal actions against said client.”

Sol sat forward and raised his eyebrows. “Said what?”

Thad raised his hand. “One of your employees met a customer in your club where they exchanged private details. They later met outside the club and the customer was defrauded by that employee. As owner of the club, you are legally responsible.”

“Which employee and when,” sighed Sol.

“Transcript, re: customer and client on said occasion,” requested Thad.

The young man pulled up the details and began to read in a monotone voice.

Date 17th 0108 9:15

Waitress TiffanyA: You know I don’t do this very often but you seem like a nice guy. Would you like to meet outside of here for a real drink?

Customer X: I thought we weren't allowed to meet up like this? Isn't it against the rules or something?

The customer service agent gave Sol a sharp glance under his glasses.

Waitress TiffanyA: No, I do it all the time. Sol doesn't mind. In fact, he encourages us to. He says it's good for business.

The customer service agent moved his glasses up the bridge of his narrow nose. All that he was short of doing was jumping up and saying: Your honor, I rest me case! However, he didn't.

End conversation, said the agent instead.

The young man looked at Thad.

"Hang on," said Sol. He checked his records. "Tiffany wasn't working that night. I also have conversation filters on all my employees. It's against the rules to organize meeting up while they're in the club. I know that. This conversation never happened in my club. There must be some mistake."

"Can we appeal said transcript?" asked Thad looking at the young man.

The agent shook his head. "These transcripts are official Citynet logs. Legally admissible and non-repudiable. Other questions? Are we done herer?" He looked at his clock.

Thad looked at Sol. "What's the name of the client she met? I need to talk to this person."

"Customer idendity is strictly confidential. Other questions?" He reached forward to close the hatch.

"Hang on!" said Sol. "You're accusing me of being a liar and a cheat. I'm telling you this event did not happen in my club. You know I used for Citynet once. I helped set it up and made it a success so that people like you could get a job too. I was one of the first agents in the service. I even shook the hand of Franz Verner when he set me free and now you're accusing me of ripping my clients off. Citynet is all I got. I deserve better than this. You need to help me figure this out. This isn't good enough."

"No other business. This meeting is closed," reported the young man disinterestedly. He slid the metal shutter closed and as he did, Sol shouted at him. "You know something, you're no better than a machine!"

The door behind them automatically opened and a sign appeared over the booth.

"Next customer please."

Thad sat back and took a deep breath. “Well that could have gone better.”

Sol stood up. “I ain’t going to let them take everything I worked for away from me, Thad. This ain’t right!” He flicked open his phone, dialed a number and waited. The call connected and Sol spoke up. “Yeah, Benny this is Sol. I need a favour. I need two of your meanest looking boys for a couple of hours tonight. I gotta make a house call. Yeah, yeah usual rate.”

Thad sat up, looking worried. “What are you going to do?”

“We played it Citynet’s way. Now we’re going to play it Sol’s way.”

Thad pursed his lips, worried if he was party to some kind of crime in the planning.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get paid,” said Sol.

Thad smiled and looked like all his worries were suddenly gone.

“Oh, great,” said Thad.

Eight stories up in a quiet part of downtown Erstol, Sol stood outside the apartment of Axel Reeves, once one of his best customers. He was accompanied by two of Benny Four Arms associates. Benny Four Arms well known bookie and reputed Mobster thought nothing had ever been proven. The large Octuran slid along the ground on its eleven tentacled legs beside Sol. Everyone who saw the alien gave it a wide berth. On the other side, Sol was accompanied by a retired New Breed human who looked like he could eat crushed glass for breakfast. In the hallway of the apartment block, Sol’s fingers rapped on Axel Reeves door, the silver skull ring on his finger apparent.

Axel slowly opened the door. “Yeah, what?” he said. Axel looked stoned and then recognized Sol.

“Hey... Sol?” His eyes turned to the large human and menacing looking Octuran, covered in chains and a chest plate.

“We need to talk,” said Sol.

“Can’t we do it another time? I have to get up early for work tomorrow.” Axel has always been a bad liar. He tried to hide the people who were in the room behind him.

But Sol pushed opened the door and saw the two scantily clad hookers in his room.

“Ladies, this party is over,” said Sol. The two women took their cue to leave and scurried out of the room. A thick pall of marijuana smoke hung in the air and Axel waves his hands around to disperse the smoke.

He coughed a little. “So what’s up Sol?” He wrapped his dressing gown with the Kung Fu Themes around him a little tighter, looking scrawnier than ever.

“I’m here for my money,” said Sol.

“Money?” said Axel, feigning ignorance.

“You know the twenty-five thousand you’ve been promising me for the last five months,” said Sol.

“And who are these guys?” asked Axel, swallowing a little.

“Oh I am sorry. How rude of me. These are Benny Four Arms boys. Sol pointed to the Octuran. “This is Larry the Legs and his associate H.”

“H?” said Axel, raising his eyes a little.

“Yeah as in the letter,” said Sol.

H had the letter tattooed across his knuckles one at a time. He leaned down towards Axel. “You got a problem with that?”

“No, no,” said Axel. “I like the letter H. Always have,” he said. He swallowed hard.

“So, the money,” said Sol.

“I haven’t got it on me right now man,” said Axel. “I can get it for you next week, some of it anyway.” Sol raised his eyebrows. He’s been hearing the same excuse for weeks.

“I need that money,” said Sol. “Citynet just shut me down.”

“I know I heard. That’s a real pity man,” said Axel, barely masking a grin.

“Yeah,” said Sol. “That’s a real pity for you too.”

“Why?” asked Axel.

“You see I need that money real bad. Before when I had my club, I didn’t need it. Spare change. Now I need it real bad. So, I made a business decision. I just sold my debt to Benny. I hoped you’d have to money so I wouldn’t have to do it. But now, you’ve left me with no choice. Of course, the debt is back dated using Benny’s rates of interest so it’s more than just twenty five thousand now.” Sol looked at H. “How much did Benny said it was at current rates?”

“Seventy thousand and change,” said H.

“What?” exclaimed Axel. “You can’t do that!”

“I just did,” said Sol. “I’ll leave you with these boys so you can get acquainted. I’m sure they have a lot of interesting questions for you.”

Sol turned to leave as Larry the Legs wrapped his tentacles around Axel, stopping him from leaving too. He took out what looked like a knuckle duster and moved in on Axel. “Sol man! Sol!” Axel was beginning to panic. “I really don’t have the money man. Come on, can’t we come to some kind of arrangement? Come on man, don’t leave me here like this.”

Sol paused at the door. Music to my ears, he thought. He paused, waiting just long enough for Axel to think he really might leave. “You still working for Citynet?”

“Yeah,” Axel nodded rapidly.

“You still work from home for Customer Relations?”

“All the time man, this is my office,” replied Axel. He looked over at a Citynet terminal.

“Well then,” said Sol. “I need the name and an address of the person who lodged the complaint against my club.”

“Anything man, you name it you got it,” said Axel who was sweating profusely. Larry was slowly squeezing the air out of him.

Sol nodded at Larry the Legs and he let Axel down onto the floor. Axel gasped for breath.

“After that we’re cool, right?” said Axel, quickly logging onto his terminal and looking up the complaint details. His hands danced on the keyboard as he logged in. Sol had never seen Axel move so quickly.

“We’re golden, once you get me those details,” said Sol. He watched as Axel found the customer report and printed off a full copy of the case. Sol took it and then left the apartment, closing the door.

“Nice work boys,” said Sol, paying them.

“Anytime Sol,” said Larry.

Sol sped read the printed document as he walked, taking a visual copy. He dropped out of Erstol and returned to his remaining apartment in Citynet. The document gave an outline of the person who had helped shut him down but there was no picture. Carter Cushing was a travelling salesman from Earth who lived in the lower East side of Franklin, the city which had replaced New York as the commercial hub on

the East Coast of America. Sol quickly but carefully composed a message asking for a meeting. He sent it to the contact address but the address came back as unlisted. Even calls to Carter's listed contact number gave the same video response. This subscriber is no longer listed on this service. Sol felt like it was almost as if Carter had been electronically erased. However, the home address checked out and records showed he did still live at the address. Sol got an Earth Satellite photo from the Outernet servers and zoomed in on Carter's home but that was as close as he could get.

The satellite photo had a freeze frame of a man in his back garden preparing a barbecue. The resolution on the photo was intentionally bad for privacy reasons. There was only one thing to do.

Later that evening in his apartment, Sol sat in the panoramic living room and faced a copy of himself, housed inside an Ansible-3 core.

"So what do you want me to do?" asked Sol's copy.

"We got no choice," Sol replied. "One of us has to go to Earth and find Carter. That's going to be you. We got eight days to find out what happened to him on Erstol otherwise we say goodbye to everything. I've already booked the return Earth ticket for you. If they ask why you're visiting, tell them it's for meetings and give Carter's address. I've downloaded all we know about Carter into your Ansible-3 which is waiting outside the Spaceport for pickup. It's got all the mods. It's up to you now. Whatever information you get, send it back to me via FastSpaad and I'll do what I can from here. Then get your ass back to Erstol. And good luck."

Sol's copy didn't think of himself as a copy. He thought of himself as Sol. However, there was no way he could stay connected to Sol's consciousness which was hosted on the Cortical Simulators in Citynet once he was travelling. So Sol transferred a copy of his consciousness into the Cortical Simulators of the Ansible-3 core which was waiting in the Space Port. The Ansible-3 was the most powerful android model on Erstol and it had its own firmware which could simulate a Citynet experience including its own Open Source Cortical Simulator. Sol's consciousness was rehoused in the holographic memory of the unit.

Sol jacked into his unit and queued up, ticket in hand, in the Space Port. He stood under the sign announcing ships bound for Earth. It was a four day trip through six Spaad jump points. The Spaad drive was a nickname for the Spooky Action At A Distance Drive which used mass density's quantum signature to make faster than

light jumps from point A to point B and was run commercially by the COTASIANS who were also helping build new Ersto's Ringworld.

Sol walked forward to the check-in desk and the girl at the desk raised her eyes a little as she took his first class ticket. Sol had noticed that there had been no other Androids or even aliens in the queue.

"I'd like a window seat," said Sol.

"One minute please, sir," she said, smiling a little uneasily. She picked up her phone and called her supervisor who came over. The supervisor arrived and looked over the ticket. He raised his eyebrows too and looked at Sol.

"Is there a problem?" asked Sol.

"Sir, is this your ticket? Are you the one intending to travel?" asked the supervisor.

Sol nodded.

"Well I am afraid that it's not possible for you to sit with the other ehm passengers."

"So where can I sit?" asked Sol.

"There's no problem with you travelling but we need to find you, ehm, alternative accommodation. Please follow me."

Sol followed the supervisor into the baggage area and handed his ticket over to a grubby looking man who looked like he needed to shave. He was sorting bags into piles with the help of some lowQ manual handling robots. He looked at the ticket and rubbed his hands against his stubble ridden chin and glanced at Sol.

"Follow me," he said.

Sol followed the man into a small room and he pulled a folder off a shelf and began to page through it, shaking his head a little like his day had just been ruined.

"Is there a problem?" asked Sol, once more.

"We don't get a lot of androids travelling to Earth. In fact," said the baggage guy. "You're the first I've ever handled."

"Handled?" said Sol.

"Well yeah," said the baggage guy. "Technically you're baggage. On Earth, they don't got no machine rights so you go in the hold. You need to be packaged rightly so you don't get sent back. I assume you don't wanna get sent back?"

Sol shook his head.

The baggage guy looked up his inventory system and sighed. “That’s typical.”

“What?” asked Sol.

“We don’t go no android packaging for you coz we normally don’t get no androids. Let me see what I can do.” He picked up a phone and punched some numbers with the back of a pencil. “Yoh Danny, I got an Android here for Earth. We’re out of container inventory 46732-A. You got something down there that complies with security packaging standard 658-113E.” He paused, his head danced from left to right as he listened, like he was humming a tune in his head. “You do? That’s great. Ok so send it on down. And hey, say hello to you mother for me.” He smiled and put the receiver down.

When the container arrived, Sol’s eyes went wide open with disbelief. “You got to be kidding me,” said Sol when he saw the container he was supposed to travel in. It was a pink frilly coffin. All Sol could do was shake his head as it was opened. There was a nice pink embroidered cushion for his head too.

“So,” said the baggage guy. “It was sent here from Earth but never picked up. It’s all we have. What do you wanna do?” He chewed hard on his gum and looked at his watch.

“Ok,” said Sol, sucking in a breath.

“What?” said the baggage. “I can’t hear you.”

“I’ll eh take it,” said Sol.

The baggage guy nodded and gave Sol an Electronic Table.

“Ok, so sign here,” he said.

Sol did so electronically.

“Carter you owe me,” said Sol.

“Who?” asked the baggage guy.

“Never mind,” replied Sol.

“What mods do you have installed?” asked the baggage guy.

“All the latest mods plus one,” said Sol, sending the list electronically.

“Which one is that?” asked the baggage guy, ready to add it to the list.

“Me,” said Sol, smiling a little.

“Oh they’re going to love you on Earth,” replied the baggage guy, chewing his gum. “Plenty of room for one more wise guy.” He processed the details. “Just get in

the coffin.” Sol lay down and put his arms across his chest, resting his head on the pillow. “You got Spaad detection for the jump points?” asked the baggage guy finally. “You need to shut down during the jump.”

Sol nodded. “I got it. I got all the mods.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Ok we are done here,” said the baggage guy. “Lock it up and ship mister pink to Earth!” He laughed and gave a circular hand signal. The manual handler droids closed the container up. Sol lost all wireless contact and went to sleep. Outside, the container was sealed inside an air-tight plastic container with the words. “Security Alert! Android Cargo Present! Possible Mech Hazard!” Sol’s container was picked up by the manual handler droids and shipped onto the departing Earth Transport.

Sol started up his custom Citynet server installed in his Ansible-3 model. It was going to be a long journey. There would be shutdown periods but while Sol rested he entered one of his favourite locations. It was the Electric Sheep program which contained literally thousands of Electric Sheep themed rooms. Sol walked into a room with other simulated people in a lounge with a stage at the top. At the top of the stage a French compare. He stood to the side of the stage, wearing a strange red suit with a top-hat containing the image of a smiling sheep.

“Bien venue Madame et Monsieur. Tonight for your entertainment, the electric sheep troupe will perform ze Can-Can. Now please, put your hands together for our fine woolly friends. The Electric Sheep Troupe!! ladies and gentlemen!!!” The electric sheep walked out on Stage on two legs, dressed in Can-Can outfits. The music began to play and they started to dance and baah at the same time to the catchy tune.

Sol laughed and clapped loudly, then blew a loud dog whistle.

“Now that’s what I call entertainment,” he said and then momentarily shutdown as his Spaad detector kicked in.

Outside, the Earth Transport Sol was travelling in, had been given its slot to make the first of the six Spaad jumps. Each station was characterized by a Spaad collector which looked like a Satellite dish in space and the Spaad transmitter which looked like a narrowing twisting cone which fired the departing ship through a reflective grid in space like a wave / particle of light. The Spaad station was paired with another sister station some ten light years away and run for profit by the Cotasians. The way it

worked was a closely guarded secret but the general operations had been roughly figured out by those curious enough to piece the details together.

Each ship was sent from a Spaad transmitter to the paired Spaad receiver several light years away. The transmission array was Quantum Entangled with the distant receiver dish and was constantly firing charged particles from the transmitter to the array. Every charged particle sent from A to B also sent an anti-particle from B to A at the Speed of Light. The Transmission cone the Transport entered was designed to warp Space Time so as the ship fell into it, using the compression effect similar to the effect of falling into a Black Hole. The miniaturized ship was then contained within an Anti-Particle whose Probability amplitude was moving backwards in time similar to a Positron. So although the nano-meter sized ship took ten light years to reach its destination, the container anti-particle took minus ten years and to the passengers on board, the journey appeared almost instant as both Probability amplitudes combined to effectively freeze time. Relativity gave those on board the ship no noticeable difference in their Frames of Reference other than the Space Time compression which was picked up by the Spaad Detectors. Once the receiver got the anti-particle, it stopped existing along with the charged particle and the Ship was restored to its normal size without the Space Time warp effect.

Sol's room full of dancing sheep suddenly reappeared again and he took a sip of his drink having just travelled ten light years in the blinking of an eye. However the next Spaad jump station was several hours away and the transport travelled in normal space to it. Sol tried not to think too hard about the frilly pink coffin he was in and just sat back and tried to enjoy the ride.

Only five more to go thought Sol.

Sol knew his trip through the Spaad gates was over when the casket he was in was finally opened. The pressure tight seal hissed out air and equalized. He met the stony gaze of a female Human Alliance Agent.

Oh yeah, this is Earth, thought Sol.

Behind her were two marines wearing silver body armour and were holding their steel grey weapons, connected by a thin chord to the suit they were wearing. A sign on the back wall of the crate filled room read Mars Immigration.

“Please follow me,” said the HA agent. She walked with purpose in her tight fitting uniform and brought Sol into a room where she offered him a seat. Sol sat down on the chair in the room which had multiple posters on it. One of them read: Loose Talk Costs Lives. Another said: Report Unusual Behaviour 19999800-HA. Sol took a quick glance at a final poster. There were humans of different ethnic types in it with their hands on each others shoulders. Everyone was smiling broadly in it. It read: Strength though Loyalty. Human Alliance.

“Please look into the camera,” said the HA agent and she shone a small light on him, situated above the camera. As Sol did, she opened her laptop and began her series of questions in a monotone fashion.

“Please state the nature and purpose of your visit.”

“I am here for a business meeting with Carter Cushing,” replied Sol. He told her Carter’s address. She recorded the address and continued.

“Are you an Ixian spy or in the paid employment of the Ixian government?”

“No,” replied Sol.

The HA Agent continued to read the questions. “Are you spying for or in the employment of any enemy of the Earth and its allied colonies.”

Sol raised his eyebrows. The HA agent looked up. “Just answer yes, or no.”

“No,” replied Sol.

He sat back as the questions continued. Sol noticed that the woman had a small marker on her neck which looked like she had been skin tagged. He also looked at her small but prominent badge on her right jacked lapel which was an image of the Earth with the letters HA imprinted across it. The rest of her uniform was tidy and unremarkable. The two marines he had seen earlier stepped into the room in their body armour and just stood by his door, weapons drawn as she continued to drone on with the questions. A small red light blinked on an off on one of the weapons.

Another question was asked if he’d had certain terrorist thoughts.

“No,” replied Sol to countenancing the downfall of the Earth government and its affiliates. So I can’t even think it, he thought. I mean, not that I ever have, he then thought quickly. He glanced at the marines to his right, wondering if they could read his machine thoughts. Their Silver body armour hid the faces of the soldiers within, making them look a little like shiny but deadly robots. Their only markings were on the

right arm of the uniforms, which indicated rank by means a series of coloured stripes and bars. No names were shown but the suit could be configured to show it for certain occasions. As Sol looked into the camera, Sol wondered if the HA agent might ask him how he would feel if he saw an upturned tortoise in a desert but happily she didn't. His prepared answer was that he would turn it over, bring it home, give it a name and feed it a piece of lettuce.

Eventually the HA agent closed the laptop and looked up. She nodded at the marines and they stood up on either side of Sol. The HA agent then gestured with her fingers that Sol stand up. He did so.

"The marines will escort you to post-processing," she said and left the room.

Sol wanted to ask what post-processing was but knew there was no point in asking her. He was inside a bureaucracy engine and the best think to do was go with the bureaucratic flow.

"Nice suits," said Sol to the marines accompanying him but they said nothing back to him and brought him into the next room for post processing.

Post processing was a room that looked like a graveyard for Androids. Entire units lays in various pieces strewn around the room. Power units, limbs, torsos and even heads. Sol stepped tentatively into the room and was offered another seat by a Tech who wore a light on his forehead. He was flicking through Sols details when he came in.

"So you've got all the mods," said the Tech.

Sol nodded.

"Ok take off your shirt and pop your casing," he said matter-of-fact, "they're all coming out. Then shut yourself down."

"Why do you need to remove all my mods?" asked Sol.

"The Machine Equivalence Act. You're allowed on Earth so long as your abilities are equivalent and cannot constituent reckless endangerment."

"So what if I need to send a text message?" said Sol.

The Tek moved his fingers, smiling a little. "Type, just like we do." He took out a phase tester and switched it on. "Your biomechanics will also be lowered to human strength also. Won't take long."

Sol popped his chest and then powered down, remembering the old Android adage. Techs differ and Androids die. When Sol was powered up by the Tech again, he immediately knew something was wrong. His mods were gone as expected. Over one hour had passed on the wall clock. The add-on devices lay on a table to his right and the Tech pushed a form forward that Sol was supposed to sign. There was an emergency power management alert: Warning, Ansible-3 unit running on secondary power. Fix immediately!

“I got a problem,” said Sol, ignoring the form.

“What?” asked the Tech.

“My primary power unit is missing. I’m running on secondary power. I’ve only got about three-hours of power, four tops.” Sol pointed at his primary power unit which was lying on the table beside him. “You need to put it back in. Without it, I won’t be able to get around.”

The Tech shook his head, chewing on a pen. “No can do. We had to make room for your tracking device so it had to come out.”

“I can help you reconfigure my setup so everything will fit. I need that power unit.”

The Tech shook his head. “Your sealed up now, bagged and tagged. Re-opening your unit will be a violation of your travel permit. Just re-power every couple of hours. Real simple.” The Tech sighed. “Sign or you get sent back to Erstol on the next shuttle. Your choice.” The Tech waved the form in Sol’s face and Sol signed reluctantly.

“Why’d you need to put a tracking device in me?” asked Sol.

“If you’ve nothing to hide, what’s the problem?”

Sol smarted. If I haven’t done anything wrong, why do you need to spy on me, he thought.

“No problem,” replied Sol unconvincingly. “Just curious.”

“Ok you are processed,” said the Tech. The Marines turned and left the room, re-shouldering their weapons. “Go out this door and take a left. Follow the signs to the Transfer area.” He gave Sol a clearance certificate.

Sol looked at the certificate. “So am I going to be packaged up again?” he asked, not looking forward to it. The Tech shook his head. “No just take the next available shuttle to Earth. The clearance certificate means you’re cleared to travel with other passengers.”

“So where can I recharge?” asked Sol.

The Tech shrugged his shoulders. “Transfer area should have some power points. And just ask when you get to Earth. Go. Go.”

The tech turned his back on Sol and binned his mods, including his main power unit. Sol watched sadly as they were all disposed of.

He left post-processing and walked up to the Transfer area.

Sol found a power point in the Transfer area and was able to recharge but the problem was that he only had about four hours of charge which could drop to as low as two hours if he needed to walk or be physically active. He looked out of the plate glass window at the orange soil of Mars and the sprawling buildings containing shuttles which were constantly lifting off and landing. The current Earth shuttle he was due to take was delayed and Sol grew bored so he stood up and wandered around, realizing he was the only android there. In the transfer area on the walls, there were historical photos of the four Martian colonists who had made first contact with the Alien Collective which had later become known as COTASE which stood for Cult of The All Seeing Eye. The COTASIANS had never liked the name because they claimed their religion was not a Cult as it was larger than all Earth religions combined but no-one on Earth really cared. There was a miniature scaled model of the assortment of domes where the original Colonists had lived at the time. Sol walked over to the information booth containing the recording of the then base commander Blake Williams and played it, curious as to how humanity had made first contact with the COTASIANS. The base commander was seated and recalling his experiences to an interviewer.

“Well it was just like any other day, I was filing out my report when it happened,” began Blake. “Everything began to shake and vibrate and I thought that maybe we were experiencing a Marsquake but as it turned out it was something beyond any training I had received to that date. As it turned out, we finally met Santa Claus.” The interviewer laughed, understanding the Apollo mission reference.

Base commander Blake Williams sat by his computer console filing out his weekly report. On the bed behind him, his cat Sergeant Major lay outstretched on the large double bed Blake normally shared with his wife Helen. Sergeant Majors name had been shortened to Sarge by his wife Helen. Sarge had a ginger coat and a mischevious nature, once even having been needed to be rescued from the base’s air conditioning system. Blake sipped his lemon flavoured tea and typed in his on-going evaluation of

Alan Lipki, who had become the bane of his existence since joining the Mars research base which was situated in a crater on the South Polar cap of Mars. The accommodation was a series of large pressurized domes, housing a group of around eighty odd souls doing a mixture of research and development tasks. Lipki's primary role was in the maintenance of the rain forest but increasingly his focus had changed to one of cheerleader for the evening's entertainment. Loathe though Blake was to admit it, Lipki was very popular amongst the hard working souls on the base and helped them let off steam by making fun of Blake's authoritarian approach and organizing fun events. Blake swallowed his lemon tea and then formulated his attack points. "On several occasions I observed Lipki restringing his guitar while a parakeet lay sick and dying in the infirmary. The banana trees also look very poorly and are in dire need of irrigation. The new bird colonies have struggled to find suitable nesting and over half of the queen bees have perished on my last count. I question his application and methods. I sense he is more interested in late night karako parties with those of a similar mind and is, I dare say, bad for morale." Blake frowned circumspectly and erased the 'I dare say' part of the sentence. Is bad for morale, he thought. Yes, that sounds more decisive. As he pondered the next words, he noticed that his clear glass cup of was dancing to an unseen vibration. Marsquake or ancient dinosaur, he mused in a slightly amused way. The vibrations grew and even Sarge jumped off the bed, looking around ruefully, his ears dancing wondering if it might be a giant Mars mouse.

Blake's wife Helen's face appeared on his video-comm and she looked both nervous and excited. "Blake, you've got to see this. Get down here!"

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Rainforest," she replied.

Blake sighed inwardly. Lipki's rainforest. Again! "I'll be right down. And stay put."

Blake then heard Lipki's wise cracking voice. "Aye aye captain." Followed by laughter from the other crew members.

We'll see who the joke is on when I fill out my report, thought Blake, logging off his terminal.

The rainforest was a temperature controlled area which had a large assembly area which Lipki used to host musical events. Blake walked into the large dome, the humid air hissing out as he used the sliding door which closed behind him.

Helen was dressed as Pocahontas and Lipki was dressed as Captain John Smith. Helen walked over to him in her bare feet. In looks, she was a perfect mix of an English Rose and a French fashion model and many wondered privately why she had married a man such as Blake, several years her senior. The rest of the cast and crew were looking out of the large viewing area and jostling for position.

“What’s this all about Helen?” asked Blake.

“Just look Blake,” urged Helen.

Everyone cleared the way for the base commander and he looked out of the viewer and saw the giant disk shaped spaceship which had landed on the edge of the crater, a couple of clicks away. Lipki hummed the close encounter tune but Blake turned to him quickly. “This is no time for jokes.” Lipki stopped humming but kept a grin on his face.

Floating above the Alien spaceship Blake saw two other craft which were triangle shaped. They hung lazily in the air above the giant saucer. At each point of their apex were flashing red, green and blue lights. Blakes pager began to beep and he opened it.

The comms officer leaned in on the video display. “Blake, we’ve just received a message from the ship. It came in on all channels. It reads... We come in peace. Bring four of your crew at midday tomorrow. We wish to make contact. Ezz.”

“Ezz?” said Blake.

The comms office raised his eyebrows. “I think it might be a name sir.”

“Ok,” said Blake, “send the message onto Earth and request guidance.”

Blake clapped his hands together. “Partie’s over. Back to your stations everyone.” Blake turned and returned quickly to his quarters. That night he slept poorly, waiting for a response from Earth. When it came, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Helen was already up, feeding Sarge.

“And?” she said.

“Gather all the senior staff together. You and I are to go over with two others.”

“Which two?” she inquired, stroking Sarge under the chin, who purred appreciatively.

Blake sucked in a deep breath. “We’re to draw straws.” He shook his head. “Straws,” he replied emptily. “They think it’s the fairest approach. I don’t know why they couldn’t have trusted my judgement.”

There were eight members of senior staff and Lipki was one of them. In his hand, Blake held the pieces of straw and Lipki walked up to him. The two men were polar opposites of one another. Blake was a born leader, with grey neatly cut hair, having little charisma but who ran everything smoothly and efficiently. Lipki on the other hand was a young man with a dimpled smile who people were naturally attracted to and emotionally intelligent. Blake made people tense while Lipki made them relax. Lipki reached out to draw a straw and chose one. It slid out and then Lipki let out a shout of joy. Blake's shoulders slumped, trying to hide his disappointment.

"Ok one more," he urged.

The next short straw was drawn by Truman C Brown, a quiet retiring individual who ran the water and air systems for the base.

"We meet at eleven hundred hours. We'll take the all terrain buggy over to the ship. Let us pray that we have good grace today."

Blake looked at Lipki sternly. "Don't be late."

"I wouldn't dream of it!" replied Lipki beaming a smile as the other division heads clapped him on the shoulder.

Back in the privacy of his quarters, Blake was in a foul humour.

"Why such a long face?" asked Helen.

She leaned over his shoulder.

"Why did it have to be Lipki," he sighed. "Of all the people."

"Don't think about him," soothed Helen, stroking his hair like he was Sarge.

Blake shook his head. "I'm worried he'll say or do something to embarrass us. You only get one chance to make a good impression. It's very important to make a good impression."

However Helen smiled. "You make it sound like we're doing a job interview or something."

Blake shook his head. "Everything is a joke to him. He doesn't take things seriously enough. He doesn't understand boundaries. He might do something inappropriate." He flexed his jaw line and she saw the raw jealousy in her husband's eyes.

Helen sat back on the bed and picked up Sarge. "Are we back to this again." She sighed. "There's nothing between us. OK? Why won't you believe me?"

Blake brushed his hair neatly into place. "I do believe you," but his voice seemed to be less than convincing. He reached over to her and held her. "I just don't like the way he looks at you. That man reeks of moral turpitude."

They took the all terrain buggy across the icy plain. Even though it was midday the sunlight was not strong at the polar region. The rays of light glistened coldly against the frosty surface. Blake had brought a gift of an American Flag and a picture of the President with him and his prized copy of Moby Dick which he had bought as a young man. Everyone was quiet as they pulled up beside the open hatch of the saucer shaped Space Ship and they stepped on board. The door closed behind them and the room they entered was pressurized. Slowly they removed their environment suits and entered the inner room.

At the heart of the dimly lit room was a large circular table. The aliens sat on one side of the large table and there were four seats on the other side. In the center of the table floating freely was a large crystal which was slowly rotating and glowing a little. A light shone down on it from above.

"Please be seated," said Ezz. He was a tall humanoid alien with a long almost giraffe like head.

Helen sat beside Blake and to her right were Lipki and Truman.

"We welcome you. I am Ezz and these are representative from the other worlds in our collective." A light shone on each of them and they uttered their names, some of which came out as high pitched squeaks or dull grunted names. There was a high ranking brown Reticulun amongst them who gave them his name telepathically without moving his tiny lips. Two other aliens looked like they had escaped from a creepy childrens' story. One looked very like a green Goblin and the other very like a Wolfman whose people were called The Who. Lipki wanted to crack a joke doing a word play on the name but thought better of it.

Blake introduced his team. "Helen is my wife and chief science officer on the base." Helen nodded and smiled a little uneasily, wondering if it would be appropriate to wave. "Lipki looks after our tropical forest area from time to time." The sarcasm in his voice was barely masked.

"I also have been known to look after the birds and the bees," said Lipki, smirking a little.

“Would you like to say something Truman?” said Blake, clearing his throat, trying not to hide his annoyance at Lipki.

“I handle the bases fresh water and waste water. We have a processor for separating the solids from the...”

“Ehm, thank you Truman,” said Blake cutting Truman short, thinking the aliens might not be so interested in the bases sanitation. “May I enquire Ezz. Does you collective have a name?” asked Blake.

“We are known by many names but by one symbol,” replied Ezz. An image appeared beside the Crystal which was a triangle with the shape of an eye in it. The shape of the eye looked like an ancient Egyptian one. It looked eerily like the freemason symbol on the American dollar. “We are combined by our worship of the Urubani,” explained Ezz. “He pointed at the floating crystal. We believe that certain crystals are dwellings for the Urubani who are not from this plane. Our religion is an old one based on justice and tolerance of difference. As a token of our friendship, we offer you this information about our union of worlds.” Ezz passed over a data disk to Blake. “In it you will find star charts, the history of our worlds and ways that we may trade profitably in the future.”

“How many worlds do you have?” asked Lipki.

“Over one hundred, we are a small gathering here and this does not represent the sum of our totality.”

“Have you ever been to Earth before?” inquired Lipki glancing suspiciously at the Reticulun but it was unmoved.

“No in any official capacity,” replied Ezz obliquely. Lipki pushed him with another question trying to get a yes or no, but received the same reply again, and then gave up.

“Why did you choose to meet us here and now?” asked Helen. “Why not on Earth?”

Ezz nodded expecting the question. “We do not directly visit a young world such as yours for the first time as this may destabilize it. Our peaceful intentions could be easily misunderstood as hostile,” explained Ezz. “Therefore we wait for the world to emerge, as you have done, on other worlds. It is only then that we meet and begin. That is our way. You have been on this world for more than three-years and so we are now permitted to visit you.”

“Are there different collectives, other than your own?” asked Truman.

Ezz nodded. “There are many others. Some are aligned as we are. And many who are not. We do not speak for them, we speak only for ourselves. Please let us show you our presentation so you may understand our collective further.”

Lipki sat back as the holographic presentation began, showing star charts and locations of the different home worlds. Eventually the presentation was over and Blake gave Ezz his three gifts which Ezz graciously accepted. Lipki slipped around the side of the table and gave Ezz his own gift which Ezz took and looked at curiously.

“What is its purpose?” asked Ezz.

Lipki took the harmonica and played it. Ezz took it back tried to follow suit but nearly swallowed the whole instrument.

Lipki laughed and then it seemed like Ezz laughed too. All the other aliens joined in the laughter in their own way.

Blake flushed red with annoyance. My God, even then aliens like him, he realized.

As they took the buggy back to the dimly lit domes, the night sky of Mars was filled with twinkling stars.

“I think we should celebrate when we get back to the base with some songs,” said Lipki.

“You go ahead. I need to get this information back to Earth asap,” said Blake bluntly, holding tightly onto the data disk.

“Anyone have any ideas on what we should sing?” asked Lipki.

“What about Moonriver?” said Truman, speaking up.

“What makes you say that?” asked Helen. It was one of her favourite songs.

“Oh I was just thinking how this basin was once the home to a giant river, possibly as wide as the Mississippi.” Truman pointed to the raised sections to their left. “Maybe, once upon a time, someone like Huckleberry Finn sat by this very river and did some fishing. And then in the evening time when it grew cool, he’d watch the moonlight dancing off the water. That made me think of Moonriver,” said Truman and he went quiet again.

Helen smiled and grabbed Blake’s hand. He smiled back too. Behind them, the circular disk shaped alien craft slowly ascended and disappeared into the dark night sky.

An announcement came over the loud speaker that the Earth shuttle was ready for boarding. Sol clicked off the recording in the waiting area as Blake finally introduced his wife Helen and four children. He boarded his shuttle. Sol took his seat by the window and the shuttle took the short hop to Earth which would take about two hours. The craft punched through the atmosphere of Mars and did a short sub-light jump to Earth. Slowing after the jump, it came in past the dark side of moon's space observatory and emerged on the Earth facing side of the Moon which was crammed full of domes housing different kinds of homes. A HA Military Battlecruiser watched the incoming and outgoing traffic as it passed through the defensive battle grid which had been put in place during the Ixian war.

The shuttle descended towards the East coast of the USA and the detailed outline of the coastline became apparent. The shuttle came in low over the deserted, crumbling city of New York. Many of the sky scrapers were still tilted precariously sideways. Others had simply fallen against the neighbouring skyscrapers and lay partially propped up. The city streets were strewn with rubble and in many parts trees and shrubs were flourishing amongst the upturned vehicles and broken office furniture. Replacing what had once been Central Park was a large gaping hole leading deep into the Earth. Rivers of water streamed into it from the surrounding slumping ground, dropping deep underground into a dark abyss. Sol noticed the other sinkholes in the ground dotted around the city. Many were six-hundred feet wide and over one-hundred and fifty feet deep. Some were full of water while others were not. Many building at the edge of the sink holes had only one half of their structure remaining like they had been cut in half by a giant's knife. The tourist barges floated over the City as the guides explained to the tourists the attack on the City and what the inhabitants had been subjected to. The shuttle flew towards the new city of Franklin which had replaced it and was now the premier financial capital on the East coast.

The shuttle landed and Sol looked at his power indicator. One third of his power was already gone and all he had done was sit and wait. He walked down the long departure lines and went through security which took the clearance certificate and processed it. There was a long walkway to the exit and Sol found himself surprised by what he saw as he walked. To his left through the long glass windows, he could see the outline of the giant city of Franklin and the inactive shield generators. To his right was what looked like an alien exhibit. The words were placed above the line of alien drawing and holographic displays: Lest We Never Forget.

Sol stopped at the edge of the exhibit room near the arrivals area. Veteran business travellers sped by it while other stopped with their children and pointed at the drawings before bringing them into the exhibit. Above it were the words. “Apkani Exhibit, sponsored by HA.” To the left and right of the entrance were scenes, looping video snippets and photographs taken by people from the day the Apkani attacked Earth.

Sol stood at the entrance to the exhibit, wavering a little, wondering whether he should go in or not. Fowler had mentioned the attack to him once in passing but had provided little or no detail. Although the Ixian war was more recent and mostly based on the off world colonies, the Apkani attack had happened directly on Earth and in the heart of the cities. Rising from the ashes of this attack was the birth of the One World organization known as Human Alliance or HA as it had become more popularly known. Inside the exhibit, there was a seating area where a looping film explained what had happened the day the Apkani had attacked Earth.

Sol walked into the dimly lit auditorium and took a seat near a spare powerpoint.

He connected up to it and watched the power trickling slowly into his Ansible-3 unit, privately wondering what lay ahead of him. On the screen in front of him, the movie began to play. The day before the end of the world had started just like any other day.