

Karl Dandenell
425 Camden Road
Alameda CA 94501

Member, SFFWA
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An Alien Warmth

by Karl Schlosser

“Something in the insect seems to be alien to the habits, morals, and psychology of this world, as if it had come from some other planet: more monstrous, more energetic, more insensate, more atrocious, more infernal than our own.”

Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949)

I raised myself onto my rear footpads, then knocked loudly on the front door with a holding claw. I was so cold, I barely felt the vibration in the heavy ironwood. Frigid wind gusted behind me, shaking a line of brightly colored flags. The squares of blue, white, red, green, and yellow fabric shook violently, catching the attention of my left eye. My right eye remained firmly focused on the door.

“Hey,” called a male voice from within. “Mike’s back!” The door opened, releasing a much-welcome wave of warm, dry air. “Couldn’t you find—” The Terran stopped as soon as he saw me framed in the doorway. His pupils widened, and a glass of beer dropped from his fingers. I caught it with an upper footpad.

“Thank you for the offer,” I said, “but carbonation is detrimental/dangerous to my hindgut.” I returned the glass. “It’s too cold for *Chiff!Tikk!On* here. May I enter?”

The man looked at the glass, then took several steps backward. “Uh, Davidson? Someone’s at the door.”

Another voice: “So let him in already! It’s colder than a witch’s tit tonight!”

I squeezed through the door and pushed past the frightened human, keeping my antennae tucked close. The Terran backed away. I closed the door behind me, shook off some snow, and stripped off my footgloves and thermal socks, hanging them on nearby wall pegs. I dropped my panniers on the floor.

Davidson stepped into the room and the other human quickly retreated to the other room. “Well!” Davidson said. “This is a bit of surprise, *Ma!Chuff*.” His tongue clicked in a decent approximation of the honorific.

“My apologies,” I said, settling onto all four footpads. “I would have arrived sooner/more timely, but the storm is worse than projected.” I flicked my mandibles politely. “Your pronunciation is good, for an offworlder.” As far as I could see, he wasn’t wearing a translator.

“Wouldn’t be the first time I heard your language, *Ma!Chuff*.” Davidson ran a hand through long black hair, tucking it behind his ears. His hands were quite large. In fact, his entire frame was at least 20 percent larger than the median human male. He smelled of sawdust, cooking oil, and sweat. I found the combination jarring, like discordant music. “What are you doing in the neighborhood?” he continued.

“Her Majesty has ordered a new art installation for the Terran embassy, so I am collecting novel sensory input for Her consideration.”

Davidson crossed his arms and leaned back on one foot. “Really! Didn’t think you folks went in for that sort of thing.” He looked me up and down with open suspicion. “Well, you’re probably freezing, so you might as well have some apple cider while we figure this out.” He

turned and headed toward another room, which exuded enticing odors and blessed heat. My exoskeleton was nearly creaking with the cold.

A dozen human tourists sat in the lounge, taking advantage of the fire. Many held large mugs of mulled wine, judging by sharp tang of cloves and cinnamon. Their conversation muted as I approached. One older woman put a hand to her mouth and whispered to her companion, wondering if I were warrior caste. Fat chance, lady. The smallest one is twice my size, and you rarely see one and live to tell the tale.

One male, a broad-shouldered specimen with long arms, puffed up his chest in a menacing display common among simians. I ignored him and concentrated on the more important issue of the cider. The glasses were too small, so I took three and found myself a patch of rug near the fireplace. The humans pushed their chairs back to give me room. (The open flame bothered me on an instinctive level, so I let my defense ganglion suppress the fear reaction so I could enjoy the heat.)

The cider turned out to be quite good. Terran sugar compounds were one of the better things to come out of the war. As I dipped my proboscis into a second glass, the tourists whispered among themselves. One woman said I had ruined her vacation.

I clicked my mandibles in confusion/frustration: the invaders are so irrational, we may never understand them, or let alone assimilate their species as we have others. Human communications modes are more limited than those of newly hatched larvae, and the monkeys recognize no overriding authority, yet they managed to built starships and conquer our world.

Despite the fact that we had agreed to a surrender and a formal peace treaty many orbits ago, the monkeys still suspect we harbor some desire to crush their soft bodies in our mandibles and steal their females. It doesn't make any sense: most of us are neuter sisters.

Then again, the humans' very strangeness fascinated me, which is one of the reason I volunteered to come to this polar wasteland. The other reason was a data seed intercepted by *Chiff!Tikk!On* customs workers.

Davidson pushed open a set of double doors on one side of the room, revealing a long wooden table set with platters of food. "Dinner's ready, folks," he said. He turned toward me. "I just got a crate of fresh oranges in my last shipment from Earth. I'm sure everyone else will give you first dibs, *Ma!Chuff!*" The tourists agreed with nervous laughs, then moved quickly to snatch up bread and cheeses, neither of which held any interest for me.

I waited for everyone else to find a place before tucking myself next to a bookcase. *What a waste of resources*, I thought. Chemical information transfer was a million times more efficient than paper.

Davidson had set a bowl of fruit and an empty plate on the floor. I appreciated the courtesy; we *Chiff!Tikk!On* have never had any use for chairs.

Our host took up a position where everyone could hear him. "As you can see, we have an extra guest this evening. Warmth and shelter, *Ma!Chuff!*" He tucked his elbows and gave Respectful Acknowledgement.

One of the Terrans raised his glass in the air and said, "*L'Chayim!*" His mate, judging by her pheromones, quickly yanked his arm down in a most disapproving manner. "What?" he whispered to her. "I shouldn't be polite to the bug?"

“Apparently,” Davison continued, “*Ma!Chuff* will be joining us for a *brief* time as she collects some pictures of the local flora and fauna.” There were a few glances in my direction. I sliced an orange into eight perfect segments with a foreclaw and scraped out the pulp.

“I would have called ahead for a reservation,” I said with my external voicebox while my mandibles worked the orange, “but your location is outside the communications net.” I tilted my head into Mild Disapproval. “You are effectively isolated here.”

“That’s the idea,” Davidson said. “Nice and quiet.”

“Still, it is most unsafe.” Everyone knows that the Nest is strongest in proximity to Her Majesty. That’s why the capital’s population hovered around four billion, give or take a few grubs.

One woman raised her hand and said, “Excuse me, but what does it mean by ‘unsafe’?”

“What *she* means,” Davidson corrected, “is that there are some carnivores in the surrounding woods. They are less intelligent than their city cousins, and I’ve learned from experience they can get nasty when spooked.” He stepped over to a shelf and pulled down a slim book. “Your datapad can’t access the net out here. Here’s some hard copy if you’d like to review the tourist bulletin.”

She stepped forward and took the booklet, looking a little guilty. I tasted the fear scent in the room, the Terran equivalent of *I knew I should have read the damn form before signing*.

“One more thing,” Davidson said. “Some of you probably know that one of the last large battles of the war was fought near here. Every now and then I stumble over a bit of leftover ordinance that requires disposal. In fact, one of my recent guests sent me a packet in this week’s

supply drop. Inside was a very nice thank you note and a photo. Mr. Sanchez has quite an eye. I really appreciated the contrast between the ice crystals and the antipersonnel mine.”

There was a little nervous laughter. “Of course,” he continued, “he didn’t realize what he’d seen; he probably thought it was an interesting rock. More than likely, the mine’s deactivated, but I’m going to take care of it tomorrow when the snow lets up.”

One male looked up from his salad of greens. “Have you defused a lot of those things successfully?”

Davidson wagged his fingers. “Haven’t lost one yet.”

More laughter followed. It was amazing how these simians communicated with such limited modes. If I were telling the story, I would add layers of semantic pheromones to punch it up a bit.

The rest of the meal passed without incident. Davidson fixed himself a plate of food and took it to the kitchen. I finished off several sour melons, and even exchanged a few words with a female named Masako. She was smaller than me by half a meter, her gray hair cut in a pleasing complex pattern. She told me that she had originally come to *Chiff!Tikk!On* to study the Ancestor Stones in the Eastern Desert.

“The Stones are tall and treacherous,” I said. “Even the most careful climber may not survive the ascent.”

“Oh, no, *Ma!Chuff*,” she said and gave a short laugh. “My climbing days are over, at least until I qualify for full rejuvenation treatments. Besides, my artist’s visa is most specific. I can take images, but Your Majesty won’t permit any tactile or VR recording.”

I gripped footpads together in Necessary Apology. “Regrettably, your species/mammal form cannot experience Ancestor smell/tastes/thoughts correctly because of, ah, certain physiological restrictions. Visual spectrum is a reasonable compromise.”

“I only wish to capture the beauty of the stones and share them other humans.”

“Good luck,” I said, and excused myself to the lounge to be closer to the fire. My brief trek through the snow had really taken a lot of out of me. After a time, I heard the humans finish their meal and head toward their sleeping chambers. Davidson entered the room, moving with near silence on the rug. His footsteps wasted no energy, and like someone trained in the killing arts. If I hadn’t smelled him, he might have surprised me.

He took two steps, then stopped. “*Ma! Chuff?*”

My defense ganglion was not rated for full combat, but I shifted it into standby mode nonetheless. Wouldn’t do to dismember my host before I learned what I needed. “Do you require the room, Davidson?”

“Not at all.” He stepped closer, then knelt on the floor, bringing his face to the level of my eyes. “But I’ve been thinking about what to do with you.”

It almost sound like a threat. “Could you be more specific?”

“No insult to you or your caste, but this is an awkward situation for me. The civil—the guests are uncomfortable with your presence.”

Too bad. “What can be done?”

“The storm should break in a day or so, and then you can be about your business. Meantime, there’s an unfinished storage room in the basement. You can dig yourself a little burrow if you like.”

“Show me.” I rose and gathered my things.

He led me down a set of stairs into a dusty closet stacked with dried foods, spare blankets, and other supplies. I tested the soil. “This will be sufficient.”

“Well, I’ll let you get settled in, then.” He started up the stairs, paused. “Oh, is that your whole kit?”

“Everything/completeness,” I said, and patted my panniers.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he said. “I’d say sleep well, but you don’t really sleep, do you?” He smiled and left.

I closed the door behind him. It had no lock on my side, so I put a few pebbles near the door’s sweep to alert me should anyone open it. Then I proceeded to scoop out a shallow rest chamber. Once settled into the soil, I released an egg case which would produce a few dozen surveillance mites. These short-lived creatures were fairly dumb, but they possessed tailored chemoreceptors and specialized memory cells like my own. When they hatched later in the evening, they’d move through the house recording everything of interest. By morning, they would return with their observations.

Our records about Davidson were oddly incomplete. He had arrived during the early occupation, a retired soldier who lived off his pension and the money he earned from this inn. A few weeks ago, a routine customs inspection of a tourist’s luggage had turned up a data seed. It was damaged, inert, and therefore represented no real value to the Terrans. The tourist, a human art dealer, claimed he had purchased the seed in the bazaar. Since this was impossible, I had arranged for a private discussion with would-be smuggler. The terrified human soon admitted that he had stolen the data seed from Davidson.

One of Her Majesty’s political drones had ordered an inquiry into the matter, and assigned the task to my caste. I gladly volunteered. There is no higher honor than serving Her

Majesty, even if your service sometimes means death. (Her Majesty does not accept failure; she personally decapitated and ate half her military advisors after our first loss to the Terrans.)

I inspected the room carefully, and found no data seeds. Then I put on my upper and lower jackets and went outside to empty my hindgut. It was *cold*. I could feel my spiracles struggling to compensate. I did my business as quickly as I could, re-sealed my lower jackets, then decided to call it a night. When there is no work, you rested.

When the *Chiff!Tikk!On* rest, we process the input from our various ganglia. In our pre-technical days, an Archivist caste would tap certain members of the nest to add to Her Majesty's memories. It became easier for us once we created data seeds, RNA-based memory encoded in resin. Now, important members of the Nest could leave behind accurate databases and limited personality subroutines that survived the death of their authors.

As a rare autonomous member of the Nest, my field records are especially valuable to Her Majesty. I took a backup of my current memories, encrypted it with my caste's private key, and tucked it all away for safekeeping. Then, wrapping blankets tightly about myself, I slipped into repose.

The night passed quietly enough. About an hour before dawn, my mites came home to mother. One of them was missing its sensory cluster, but its database appeared intact, so I ingested it along with the others. Since it would take some time to integrate their findings, I went upstairs to check on the humans. Only Davidson was up and about, fixing himself an enormous meal in the kitchen.

"Morning, Mistress Bug," he said, pouring himself coffee.

I gave the most perfunctory of bows, indicating Start of Daily Labor. “You’re up early,” I remarked.

“No earlier than usual,” he said, spooning up some eggs. “This is the best time to practice.”

“Practice?”

“Religious practice. A hundred prostrations and two hundred mantras before breakfast every day.” His hands strayed toward a small lump under his shirt. His lips moved silently.

“Speaking of breakfast/sustenance,” I said, “Could I trouble you for some honey and warm water in equal proportion?”

Davidson nodded and pushed himself away from the table. He spooned honey into a bowl and pour in water from a steaming kettle. “Now you sound like some kind of bee.”

I flicked my mandibles in agreement. “Eusocial beings are superior; it is a curiosity that they did not become the dominant species on Earth.”

“Just lucky, I guess,” Davidson said. He sipped his coffee for a moment. “You coming with me this morning?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“It’s still pretty damn cold out there. It might be better if you didn’t.”

Without thinking, I released a correction scent. “My task has firm deadlines, Davidson. Her Majesty does not approve of failure.”

He wrinkled his nose. “No, I don’t imagine that She does.” He put his coffee cup in the sink. “I’ll meet you out front.”

By the time I had strapped on my panniers, Davidson was outside, checking a line of flags that stretched between the main building and a garden shed. On closer inspection, I noted

that each square of fabric contained writing and a drawing. My linguistic ganglion drew a blank, although my database identified the seated figure. “Is that a form of Buddha?” I indicated the seated figure fluttering in the wind.

“That’s *Avalokitesvara*, better known as *Chenrezi* in Tibet. He is an incarnation of Buddha’s compassion. And these—“ he traced his fingers along a line of flowing script — “are prayers written in Tibetan. As the flags unravel, the prayers are released into the world. *Om Ah Hung Benzra Guru Pema Siddhi Hung.*”

“You are a Buddhist, I take it,” I said.

“I’m only a student.” He nodded and put on snow goggles. “Let’s go.”

We headed north at a fast clip, Davidson following an existing trail. He carried a rather large pack, and a wicked-looking knife. His gear was used, but well-maintained. And there was a smell about him I couldn’t identify, some type of chemical volatile.

I let my antennae unfold to their full length and tried unsuccessfully to ignore the cold. Ice crunched under my footgloves, and Davidson’s breath steamed out of him. My own spiracles constricted to their smallest size and elongated to compensate for the ridiculous temperature.

No hive could exist in the open here, I decided. Even buried deep underground, it would take too many resources to maintain an optimum environment. There were good reasons Her Majesty could trace her gene line back to the tropical latitudes.

For the next hour, my mission ganglion compiled the data from the surveillance mites. Their descriptions of the inn matched the drawings we had on file. I also learned the smells and tastes of all the guests, none of whom had been in contact with a data seed in the last 27 days. (human skin cells replaced themselves off after that).

The only anomaly was the damaged mite. It had slipped under the door to Davidson’s chamber, and encountered what appeared to be a tiny version of a drone worker. The recording

stopped abruptly at that point. I flagged the mite as defective and quarantined its input for further analysis.

While my mission ganglion analyzed the remaining data, I worked on my cover story: pausing from time to time in front of an appealing tree, or rock formation, or the occasional set of animal tracks. Then I would taste the air and soil, and let my mission database store an image. Davidson waited for me to catch up to him. After a while, he said. “Looking for something in particular?”

“Not really,” I responded. “Although I’ll know it when I see it.”

“*That* sounds like an artist.” He pursed his lips. “You’re not using a camera, are you?”

“My caste contains wide-spectrum sensory organs and redundant data storage.” I pointed to my antennae, independent eyes, and chemoreceptor patches on my thorax. “*Chiff!Tikk!On* artwork engages the audience on more than just the visual level. It’s a complex esthetic experience, to say the least.”

“Apparently.” Davidson said, then consulted a piece of paper and altered our path. “This way.”

We walked another half hour, and the weak sunlight raised the temperature somewhere below the freezing point of water. Davidson had slowed his pace by now, following the twisted line of a stream.

“Are we there yet?” I asked.

He looked back and grinned. Bits of frost clung to his beard. “Where would that be, *Ma!Chuff?*”

“Your destination, of course!” I stretched and rubbed alternate footpads together.

“I thought you were looking for inspiration. Isn’t the journey more important than the destination?”

“True.” My antennae wriggled in Corrected Information. “It’s also true that it’s far too *cold.*”

He jerked his head back toward the inn. “I hate to see you suffer, *Ma!Chuff.* You can follow our trail back to the inn easily enough.”

“I have my orders.”

“Suit yourself,” Davidson said. He checked a compass on his wrist. “This way.” He cut to the left, around the blasted remains of an ironwood tree.

Judging by its size, the tree had probably lived more than two hundred years before being cut down by tactical explosives. The Terrans had waged such a messy war. The Nest was still repairing the damage from the space-based bombardment.

“We have a winner!”

I stopped. “Successful identification?”

“Over here,” Davidson said.

I crept closer and rotated an eye in his direction. “Where?”

He slowly bent his knees and pointed. “One of those rocks is not like the other, *Ma!Chuff.*”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Actually, my mission ganglion had already found the anti-personnel mine’s specs. Built by Lockheed-Martin-Boeing, it possessed a nice balance of high-yield explosives and stealth materials. Very good for killing soldiers and civilians alike.

“There’s a little hillock back that way,” he said, keeping his eye on the AP mine. “You should keep out of its sensor range until I dismantle it.”

“Is it active/functional?” I asked with genuine concern. Terran soldiers had carried friendly transponders that allowed them to handle these devices. They didn’t always work as advertised.

“I’m going to treat it like a rattlesnake.”

“How does that—“

“Just go over there, please.” Davidson said firmly.

I raised my foreclaw in Imperative Received, then made my way to the hillock. Moving with almost glacial slowness, Davidson removed tools and materials from his pack and set to work.

A few minutes passed, then he flung himself onto the snow next to me. “Fire in the hole!”

My defense ganglion instantly flattened me into the ice, pulling back sensitive antennae and turning my eyes away from the explosion. A muffled *boom* reached us, followed by a shower of ice particles and frozen dirt. Davidson scrambled to his feet. “Better hang back, *Ma!Chuff.*”

“No argument from me.” I wiped slush from my mandibles. Extending my antennae, I heard Davidson scraping away soil.

Rising to full height, I moved out of the shelter of the hillock into biting wind. Davidson knelt at the center of a neat crater, passing a scanner over the soil. “Looks pretty good, *Ma!Chuff.* I think we got it all.” The scanner beeped twice. He switched it off and returned it to his pack. Then he lifted his goggles and bent closer to the ground, squinting. He used his fingers to scrape away more of the soil. When he cleared away the dirt, he lifted the dull green shape of a data seed, which he wrapped in a cloth and stowed away in his backpack.

“Are you finished?” I asked.

“Just cleaning up,” he said, standing and wiping the dirt from his gloves. He slung his pack over his shoulders and pulled his goggles into place.

“What did you put in your pack?”

“Just a stone,” he said, watching me with an intensity that I found disquieting. His head turned fractionally. “I’m collecting them for a meditation garden.” His left hand floated toward a small external pocket in his backpack.

My defense ganglion gave conflicting signals: *interest/threat-proximal-threat-distal threat*.

“Stay where you are, *Ma!Chuff!*” Davidson’s knife appeared in his right hand.

Threat threat proximal threat response: my defense ganglion shoved my central ganglion aside. I jumped forward, opened my mandibles and extended my foreclaws.

Davidson’s knife sailed past my right antennae (too close!). He pulled out a large pistol.

I reached for him—and crashed into ground as something seized my left rear tibia. I emitted a sharp stream of alarm/combat pheromones.

I rolled onto my back as my lower footpads flailed at my assailant (which my database ganglion recognized as a *white spider*). It was smaller than me, but immensely strong and fast. It had speared me with a hunting claw, holding me while it unlimbered its fangs to deliver a poisonous bite. (My database ganglion informed me that I had a 20 percent chance of surviving the initial injection, with proper medical attention.) Then I noticed Davidson’s knife sticking out of the spider’s primary eye. The spider reared up, and its hunting claw exploded into chitin and haemolymph. A second shot from Davidson’s pistol opened a wide hole in the spider’s abdomen. Still, the stupid thing kept trying to bite me.

My own claws severed another leg. Davidson sprinted behind the spider and emptied the ammunition clip into the head/thorax, destroying its primitive brain. It collapsed in a messy heap on top of me.

I heard Davidson reload his weapon and saw him move very, very slowly until he had a clear shot at my head. My defense ganglion screamed in frustration:
trapped/immobile/damage/threat.

Holding the weapon pointed away from me, he said, "I asked you not to move, *Ma!Chuff*. I was trying to paralyze the spider, but you spoiled my aim." He sighed. "Now what I am going to do?"

"I don't understand the question/interrogatory/communication," I slurred. The defense ganglion was interfering with my language ganglion. Probably considered it a waste of resources at this point.

"Can you walk?" he asked quietly.

"Unknown. Probably not."

"Then we have a problem," he said. He moved closer, but kept out of reach of my claws. "I can go back to the inn for help, but something else might find you before I get back. And you might freeze as well."

"High probability," I said. While I felt no pain, I knew that my left tibia was broken. I was also bleeding from the spider's barbed claw.

"On the other hand," he said. "If I try to extricate you, your reflexes might take my head off." He took a deep breath and sighed. "I guess there isn't much of a choice." He stood and holstered his pistol.

After a few attempts, it became apparent that I couldn't navigate the frozen ground with my broken leg. I was also, as I pointed out, too large to carry. Davidson thought for a few minutes, then hunted around for an immature ironwood tree. He broke off a dozen of the thinner branches, then used his knife to cut and shape them into a frame. He lashed these together with the straps of my panniers, tying the whole thing to his own pack.

With surprisingly gentle hands, he lifted me onto the crude sled and started the long walk back to the inn.

"So why don't you have wings?" he said after the first mile.

"If I needed wings to fulfill my caste functions, then I'd have them," I replied a bit testily. Even with Davidson's survival blanket covering me, I felt numb in all my extremities. If my voicebox had teeth, they'd be chattering.

"What exactly is your caste, *Ma!Chuff?*"

"We serve Her Majesty by gathering data," I said.

"You're a spy."

"The proper term is Those Who Extend the Knowledge of the Nest."

Davidson laughed. "Like I said, a spy."

I tucked my antennae closer and tried to ignore the wind. My central ganglion assessed the situation, then began shutting down unnecessary functions to save energy. This only helped so much. Bowing to the inevitable, I ran another backup, and abandoned consciousness.

I woke to warmth and the smell of melting beeswax and intense incense: cedar, sage, and some sort of resin. Davidson busied himself next to a military-grade heater/stove. More odors

resolved themselves: leather, wood ash, soap. We were back at the inn, apparently in Davidson's chamber. He was stirring a pot of something warm and sweet.

My defense ganglion reported that my leg was no longer bleeding. A clean bandage and splint covered the break. "Thank you," I said, my voicebox a little shaky.

"You're quite welcome, Mistress Spy." He set a large, steaming bowl before me. It smelled *wonderful*. "How's the leg?"

"Better." I indicated the bowl. "This is unfamiliar/unknown."

"Mead," Davidson said. He filled a mug for himself. "Good for what ails you."

I dipped my proboscis into the liquid, sampled a bit, then ran it past my database, which identified the source as clover honey. "The alcohol is useless to me, but it's a pleasant taste."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Davidson said. He sat on the floor nearby. "Looks like your mission is Charlie Foxtrot, *Ma!Chuff*."

"The injury will adversely affect my task," I agreed.

"Perhaps I can help."

That surprised me. "Why?"

"You came here looking for something, and if you don't find it, they'll probably kill you. I don't want that to happen. Besides," he added, "I have nothing to hide."

"But you were a soldier," I pointed out. "Your function was killing the enemy. Not that there's anything wrong with that," I added.

"But there is, *Ma!Chuff*." Davidson took a drink. "I committed many wrongful actions when I was in the Marines. Now I'm trying to come to terms with my own karma."

I had conflicting definitions of karma in my database, and told him as much.

“Well, it’s complicated,” he said. “Like a lot of people, I came out of the rejuvenation tank needing a lot of therapy. Three months floating in emptiness will do that to you.” He set down his mug.

“There was a monk named Pemba who used to visit me at the VA hospital. His grandparents had fled Tibet after the Chinese invasion. They lost everything, and lived in poverty for two generations. Despite that, Pemba was the happiest, most peaceful person I’d ever met.”

“I came home to Earth when a lot of my men didn’t. Pemba helped me deal with my survivor’s guilt. It was my karma, he said.”

“The irony is that I died in the tank. It happens, sometimes, and Tibetan Buddhists consider death and rebirth in the rejuv tank a special form of reincarnation. It’s a gift of precious human birth, Pemba told me, a chance to make amends for the wrongful actions I committed in my previous life. So I took Refuge Vows and came back to *Chiff!Tikk!On* to follow the Dharma.” Davidson touched the lump under his shirt and mouthed, *Om Mani Padme Hum*.

My mission ganglion reminded me of something. “You said you have nothing to hide, Davidson. If that’s true, what are you doing with the data seeds?”

“Excuse me?”

I pointed to the backpack sitting next to his altar. “The green pear-shaped object you picked up after you detonated the mine.”

“These?” Davidson slid open a drawer under his mattress and drew out a bag. Inside were a dozen data seeds, clean and whole. “I thought they were the *Chiff!Tikk!On* equivalent of amber. They remind me of the wish-granting gem depicted in certain Tibetan paintings, so I thought they’d be perfect for a meditation garden.”

“We call them data seeds. They are part of the Nest’s collective memory, Davidson,” I said. “They have no value to you or the other Terran.”

“What other Terran?” he said.

I told him how customs had found the data seed, omitting my subsequent interrogation of the human.

Davidson nodded. “I remember that guy. Wallace something. I was cleaning some of the seeds in the shed when he came back from a walk. He wanted to buy one for his gallery, but I turned him down.”

“He helped himself,” I reported.

“Apparently.” Davidson pushed the bag toward me. “Here, take them. I’ll be right back.” He left the room.

I ran our conversation through multiple semantic filters, looking for inconsistencies. As far as I could tell, Davidson was telling the truth. He was no thief. At least, not in this context.

When Davidson returned, I noticed a small, stick-like creature clinging to his shoulder.

“What is *that*?” My database couldn’t identify the species, although it appeared very familiar.

“This is a Chinese mantis. Her name is Lian; she was a gift from my teacher.”

My antennae extended toward the creature. Sure enough, it matched the image from the damaged surveillance mite. “Is it a predatory species?”

He sat down in front of me. “Just other insects.”

And surveillance mites, I thought. One more mystery solved.

“So what are you going to do?” Davidson asked.

I moved my antennae in the pattern of Important Communication. “As far as I know, you did not intend harm to the Nest. By bringing back these seeds, my caste will be rewarded. So you’ve done me a favor, Davidson.” I felt no debt to him; rather, I now recognized his potential as a resource for the Nest.

My mission ganglion queried my combat ganglion and offered up the results. It would take less than 30 days to design and breed enough cold-hardened warriors to mount a successful raid on Davidson’s inn. They could bring the humans back to the Nest for root-level interrogation, and remove any evidence of their actions with explosive devices thoughtfully left behind by the Terran military.

“When I return to the capital,” I said, “I’ll recommend that Her Majesty allow you to go about your business without interference.” *We can always come back*, I thought.

“That’s a relief,” he said. “I was worried that you might have me deported, or worse.” Davidson’s mantis cleaned herself, then crawled down his shoulder and danced across the floor. “How are you getting back?” Davidson continued, watching as mantis crept toward me.

“In two days, my vehicle will land at a rendezvous point nearby and wait for my signal.”

“You’re welcome to stay in my room until then,” he said and turned his attention the heater/stove. “It’s warm, and Lian is probably better company than the tourists.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, and extended a claw toward the mantis. It jumped back.

“Davidson,” I said, “please reassure your companion that I have no plans to eat her.”

He laughed. “I will.” He added more warm mead to my bowl. “Warmth and shelter, *Ma!Chuff*,” he said.

“*L'Chayim!*”

THE END