

Space Opera

By Alan Dean Foster

The biggest drawback in the gleaming functional desk, Commander Cleve reflected, was its damnably imperviousness. Since it was composed of diamondlike silicone plastic, his nails could only scrape futilely across the smooth surface, and at the moment, he was in the mood to mark something, On the other side of the desk, Lieutenant Vander-

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meer shifted slightly in his seat. He recognized the commander's mood and was uncomfortably aware of the convenient target he made for any localized mayhem the commander might choose to commit.

Cleve stopped trying to make an impression on the desk and looked up.

"I won't let that pipsqueak do it. I refuse!" "Yes sir," said Vandermeer.

Vandermeer was a fine lieutenant. He always said just the right thing.

"Exceptional stupidity requires foresight, .planning, and careful preparation to be properly effective. But this fellow. Himpel . . . Hurmal . . ." "Hinkel, sir."

"Yes, this Hinkel's talent for improvising really remarkable idiocy on the spur of the moment is astonishing. And I fear the Council may support it! Perhaps I shall simply join his sphere of insanity. It may be the only solution." "Yes sir." "What?"

"I... I mean, no sir."

Cleve sighed and slumped in his genuine starfox, red and silver hand-rubbed mahogany swivel chair. "It's not an unreasonable request, is it, Lieutenant? After all, this is the third expedition to Titan. It's not as if anything really newsworthy were happening. We're only here to set up a small life-support station for the next three expeditions. And for the miners. A few simple solidosemis, habitats, an oxy-conversion plant . . . stuff like that. Why bring along a big newscast crew with a caster as big as Hurkel?"

"Hinkel, sir. As I understand it, the ISA and Admiral Howard thought it would give us some excellent publicity, sir. What with the current furor over funding and all, a few dramatic location shots of exotic Titan and Saturn, added to Hinkel's prestige, should produce ratings that--"

"Ratings!" Cleve roared, purpling. "I'm deathly sick of hearing about Hickey's goddamn, God-awful, got-verstunken, gder... gef...1"

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"Easy, sir. You know what Dr. Galeth said about your blood pressure, particularly in a low-grav environment."

"Yes, Lieutenant, yes, yes. It's just that I cannot, I purely cannot, permit this man to interfere in any way with the negotiations. The Murrin are an utterly unfamiliar quantity. They could react in an infinitude of ways to anything we say, do, bint at, or even the way we walk. I cannot risk jeopardizing man's first meeting with an intelligent alien race for the sake of . . . of ratings." The last word was given the accent usually reserved for ultimate loathsomeness--most often senators who voted against ISA funding and apricots, to which the commander was violently allergic.

Bronislaw Hinkel chose that moment to present himself.

Vandermeer intercepted the diminutive telecaster at the door, blocking him from the commander's view.

"Ah, good morning, Peter! Is the commander busy?"

"Actually, sir, regulation four-two-six-el-ay governing watches between oh-nine-hundred and--"

"Oh, let him in, Lieutenant! Could anyone mistake that dulcet warbling, the pride of post-quickies, the cereal packed in total vacuum, and Channel Three?"

"Thank you, Emmett." Hinkel skipped adroitly past the lieutenant, who closed the door and wished for an attack of partial deafness. Cleve, however, appeared determined to remain civil. Perhaps, the lieutenant thought hopefully, the commander was rationing his daily quota of bile. Bronislaw Hinkel was a familiar figure to nearly a billion telecast addicts. An impressive figure who represented votes. Even now, off the air, every strand of his famous wavy gray hair knew its proper place. The short, brush mustache was trimmed and protruded just the correct distance above the strong lips. The dark brown eyes under the heavy salt-and-pepper brows imparted at once sincerity, knowledge, and comfort.

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"Well, what can I do for you this time, Mr. Hinkel?\*" Cleve said pleasantly. "As long as you brought the subject up, Emmett, there really are one or two things about the upcoming meeting that--"

Cleve interrupted, still calm. "Is there something wrong with the plans for the upcoming meeting, Mr. Hinkel?"

"Nothing that can't be corrected easily enough," said Hinkel, cheerfully. "How reassuring."

"Yes. Now Bess--that's my chief camerawoman, you know--"

"No, I didn't know."

"Uh. Well anyway, one thing she simply insists on is that we locate at least one crew between the Reykjavik and the alien. It's necessary in order for us to be able to properly document the full drama of your departure from the ship, and all. Ideally, of course, we'd need another crew similarly placed with respect to the alien ship. I don't suppose you'd okay that?" He ended on a hopeful note. "No, I'm afraid..."

"Well, don't let it trouble you, Commander! I have instructed my staff not to get underfoot in any way-- barring what needs to be done to perform required journalistic activity, of course."

"That's certainly a considerable relief to me, Mr. Hinkel. It means that you'll react favorably, quietly, when I--inform you that I cannot permit a crew to be stationed between the Reykjavik and the alien vessel. No . . . ." Cleve raised a hand to still the incipient protest, "... allow me to explain.

"If your crew assumes any position, at a respectable distance, between here and the Murrin ship, it could conceivably come into the line of fire from the Reykjavik's weaponry."

"The same situation your greeting party will be in, Commander."

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"Quite true. Those gentlemen, however, will be present because they are essential to the success of the operation." Cleve left the obvious correlation unsaid.

"Should you assume a position anywhere near the Reykjavik, any emergency maneuvering the ship would be impelled to perform would incinerate your crew instantly! As for newsmen's risks, I am compelled to remind you that you are along on this mission on sufferance. Your safety and well-being are solely my responsibility."

"Bull! First, I'm along because my reputation warrants it and Channel Three's worldwide facilities wangled it. And as to newsmen's risks, as you so quaintly put it, my crews and I have indeed faced far greater risks than this!"

"Nevertheless, I--"

"Okay, okay! Spare me the officialese. I'll have only two crews, both set up at a good distance from the Reykjavik, They'll manage with telephotos."

Hinkel reached into the leather case on his lap and pulled out a thick stack of brightly colored papers. "Now. Win Hunter, my chief writer, has come up with what I think are some really socko suggestions for the actual ceremony of contact. You know, greeting the mysterious aliens, and all. If you'd care to peruse them, I'm sure ..."

Cleve's chair was displaying marked evidence of a highly localized seismic disturbance. Vandermeer moved quickly forward.

"Um ... Commander, I was thinking ..."

"Relax, Lieutenant. I'm quite . . . quite all right," Cleve said, reaching out and gracefully accepting the proffered suggestions.

"One other thing, Emmett," Hinkel said. "When we film the actual moment of contact . . ."

The Commander sighed. He knew this would come up. "Sir, I fear that once the Murrin commander and his party leave their ship, I cannot permit additional filming to take place."

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It was Hinkel's turn to sit speechless. "Your equipment, both the portables and that ghastly heavy big job, bear an unfortunate likeness to ray projectors. Which, in a sense, they are. The Murrin are no doubt as unfamiliar with our technology as we are with theirs. Witness that insane assemblage of angles out on the plain. Yet it seems to carry them from star to star.

"Our exchange of language has been hampered by the lack of experience and trained people on our side. However, it is now sufficient to permit several things. One of these is this first official meeting, a big deal with the Murrin. Among the details they suggested be implemented was the obvious one of neither group carrying or presenting weapons."

"If that's the case," said Hinkel slyly, "then how do you explain your objection to our shooting angles by complaining that they'd interfere with your 'line of fire'?"

"As stated, neither group will display weaponry. At no time will the Reykjavik's lasers be in evidence. I'd bet that the Murrin ship is far better armed. The important thing is that no portable weapons be visible. For psychological and practical reasons."

"Granting all your reasoning, which I do not, isn't the import of this moment, the need to have everyone on earth a part of it, enough to outweigh a few ethereal maybes on your part?" "There are other reasons." "Name one!" Hinkel snapped. Cleve allowed his voice a bit more customary bark, and Vandermeer winced. "All right! Let's suppose— just suppose—that I permit you to telecast the whole business, from start to whatever finish, from close-in? We know little of Murrin technology. We know even less of their psychology and sociology, of what they might regard as proper and what they might interpret as offensive. Might they not be curious as to your functioning on the periphery of the encounter?"

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"Disregarding, for the moment, an infinitude of possibilities of alien reactions ranging from spirit-stealing, to unimaginable phobias, let's say that they perceive exactly what you and your crew are doing."

"If they're half as clever as you seem to think they are, they ought to," said Hinkel.

"So," said Cleve, leaning back and in his chair, "consider this. Telecasting or otherwise recording or broadcasting such a meeting could violate any number of formal taboos, rules of protocol, ambassadorial dignity. Need I go on? It's happened on Earth, before. Why couldn't it happen here, worse?"

"You mean," said Hinkel, "our broadcasting the meeting might insult them somehow?"

"I don't know, Hinkel. I don't know. Look, for the last time, please try to understand my position—our position." Vandermeer noticed that long grooves had appeared in the soft wood of the pencil the commander was holding.

"This is the first meeting between mankind and another intelligent race. From what my improvised linguist and philologist and part-time amateur xenologist tell me, that's not the case with the Murrin. Apparently they have encountered at least two other space-going races prior to finding us. You see? They have an established procedure for this! We don't. We'll be judged not only

according to how we act, but how we act in comparison to at least two other intelligent species. We haven't the same basis for establishing common ground that they have. If we only had one thing completely in common, everything else could proceed in logical sequence. But we don't. So we must take care to do the right thing at every second, until that first commonality is established. The most crucial moment in the human race's history, sir!"

"Precisely why it must be simulcast," said Hinkel. "Precisely why I cannot permit the risk of turning this into a circus!"

Hinkel was honestly shocked.

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"Circus! Do you have the infernal gall to sit there and call the 25th Hour—the highest-rated newscast for five consecutive years, winner of over a hundred prizes for journalistic excellence—a circus!"

"Goddamn it! I just said it, didn't I? Yes, and with a special vote for exceptional cretinism to the lead elephant!"

Hinkel rose with great dignity. "I see." His voice approached a verbal equivalent of zero Kelvin. "Thank you, Commander, for making your feelings in this matter perfectly clear. Good day."

He left.

Cleve snapped the abused pencil in two and threw the halves at the ceiling.

"Well, that tears it!" he said.

"I could instruct engineering not to allow his people transfer facilities for Earthside beaming, sir," offered Vandermeer hopefully.

Cleve rubbed both eyes, tiredly. "No, no ... let's not be so overt, Lieutenant. Let him contact his influential friends. If the idiots, dirtside, think he should be allowed to cover this meeting, they deserve whatever results result. I pray the Murrin react favorably. No, better they don't react at all! Now go away. Oh, here . . ." He handed Vandermeer the script Hinkel had given him. "I can do one thing. Find a Disposall, Lieutenant, and file this. Discreetly, of course." "Yes, sir."

The Murrin, as the scrambled videocasts revealed, were a large, ursoid race, clearly mammalian. They resembled the terran brown bear in a fortunate number of respects. Fortunate, because it alleviated Hinkel's first fear. Namely, that the extrasolar visitors would turn out to be ten-foot-wide spiders with slavering fangs and green eyes. Fuzzy aliens inspired little xenophobia.

The Murrin had been on the homeward leg of a normal exploring trip. They'd been examining the

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planets of the sol system one by one. While circumnavigating Saturn, they'd passed close to Titan while the Reykjavik was passing information toward Mars station. They had presented nothing but a friendly continence since the initial contact.

Still, Cleve reflected, there was no mistaking the cautious, defensive approach the aliens had used, coming in low over the horizon and with little warning. A carefully developed military tactic, using mountains as cover. While they might be all for exchanging dirty stories over a beer, they weren't quite ready to hail the terrans as long-lost lodge brothers.

Perhaps they were just naturally cautious. On the other hand, it was conceivable that someone had taken a potshot at one of them before. In any case, they'd dropped in on the Rey before anyone could have loaded even a blowgun. Which was just as well.

So the two ships squatted across the narrow valley from each other while the amateur linguists on the

;' Reykjavik and the professional ones on the alien ship tried to talk turkey with the help of several miles of electronic circuitry.

.> Being prepared for the chance of happening onto an-.;.i• other

intelligent race, the Murrin acquired basic English a good deal faster than the terrans could pick up just guttural Myll, The aliens had given every indication of \ being highly pleased at discovering another intelligent species (if a bit blase about the whole thing). Particularly in such an otherwise unpromising system, thought Cleve as he adjusted his exoskin.

Of course, outward manifestations of friendliness were exhibited by numerous terran carnivores-prior to making the kill. The Murrin might play buddy-buddy, but they weren't foolhardy, either. Besides their defensive approach, the lethal-looking objects which projected toward the Rey from the alien's midship line were excellent proof of that. The Key's single big industrial laser looked puny by comparison.

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The human party was assembled in the now airless lock, ready for surface EVA. They were composed of a select group of scientists, officers, and engineers. For purposes of negotiation, Cleve had been granted what amounted to emergency ambassadorial status by the Council.

There were three other members in the party. One interpreter, one chaplain (against Cleve's wishes), and one volunteer ensign whose sole assignment was to slam both hands together should the Murrin exhibit obvious signs of irrational bellicosity. Said action would trip several circuits, which would speed both groups rapidly on to the next plane of existence.

As expected, Hinkel's broadcast clearance had come through, along with a gruff statement from Admiralty which stopped just syllables short of being a reprimand.

The lieutenant at Cleve's side-not Vandermeer, who had been left in command of the ship-recited for the last time the short list of names. Subdued replies of "Here!" answered each. When that was completed, everything was completed. Cleve tried to think of something appropriate to say, failed, and led the men down the ramp to the surface.

A few might have wished for trumpets and dancing girls, but the natural setting was quite inspiring enough. Sharp hills rose on either side of the narrow vale. At the far end of the valley, the awesome bulk of Saturn was just rising. The acute angle at which they viewed the rings showed gold, speckled with black gaps. The planet itself was all rose and swirling butter clouds.

In the Saturnlight, the frozen atmosphere of Titan glittered ice-blue. Cleve dimmed his visor a grade. Millions of miles from home was no place to go snowblind. Here and there, lichens-of as yet unclassified varieties-and a few incredibly tough low scrubs poked up through the powdered crystals.

Language difficulties and the lack of proper struc-

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tures simplified the meeting arrangements. Whenever they felt ready (letting us work up to it, Cleve thought), the terrans were merely to leave their ship and proceed en masse to a point halfway between ships. There they would be met by a party from the alien craft.

Sooner than anyone expected, the halfway point was reached. For more than several minutes, nothing happened. For once, no one stared at the shining glory of Saturn. All eyes were fixed on the alien craft. Curious, Cleve switched over to the frequency Hinkel was using for his broadcast. He hurriedly switched it off. The man's style was definitely hypnotic. It was hard not to relax and pretend that he was an observer of what was about to happen, and not a prime mover.

The Murrin ship was bright yellow, twice as long as the Reykjavik, and bulked at least five times the mass. In similar tense situations, Cleve would have been moved to crack a joke, hoping to ease the tension. Now, he just swallowed. He doubted Columbus had joked, nor had Armstrong, nor Mallard.

Fear was not a factor. He was too consumed with curiosity. What would it actually be like to meet something that had matured under another sun? And intelligent, besides. What would be his reaction those first few seconds? Disgust? Terror? Worship? And what would provide that first, all-important commonality?

A port opened in the side of the alien ship. A single figure detached itself from the dark opening and moved rapidly toward them at a waddling gait. Cleve analyzed it and prayed that no one would be insane enough to laugh at the comical method of locomotion. Those same waddling feet might contain long, needle-sharp claws especially designed for chastising disrespectful inferiors. He had a sudden, horrible thought that the Murrin might be telepathic, but dismissed it almost as quickly. They'd given no indication

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of it, and, if they were, there was absolutely nothing that could be done about it.

Soon the alien was standing in front of him. He could have reached out and touched the maroon metal suit. Surprisingly, the creature was nearly a foot shorter than Cleve's six-two, but it was built far stockier. From inside a transparent plastic or glass helmet, two jet-black eyes stared up at him. No time like the present, he thought, and held out both hands palm up. The psychologists had told him this ought to express trust, friendship, and a hearty welcome. Cleve hoped so.

The alien reacted by removing a roll of paper-thin metal from a jacket pouch and slapping it in Cleve's outstretched right hand. It spoke rapidly over the preset wave-length.

"I am Crift, Apprentice-to-Talker." The commander noticed that Hinkel and one of his camera crews were slowly edging closer from the left. He silently damned Hinkel, the inventor of the camera, the film, the lens, and all channels two through sixty-eight.

The alien continued: "Captain Othine extends his regrets that he cannot join you for as yet," the alien hesitated for a moment, then continued: "for approximate timeparts yours, two, yes two. Crew and captain are absorbed entirely whole in crucial broadcast from home planet now by way of interstellar relay."

The ursoid then indicated the rolled metal, which Cleve had gripped unconsciously.

"The Dryah. Official greeting, us-to-you, it is. Extends friendship, hello, et ceteras. Also explanation in depth for awkward delay. Also apologies, in depth, appended. Okay? Must excuse I now, please, thank you, forgive."

The creature turned abruptly and headed at high speed back toward his ship. They stared dumbly after the departed alien until the vast craft swallowed the single dark opening in its

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side. One of the engineers, who had completely forgotten his assignment (which was to observe the details of the alien's suit), said, "Well!" He repeated it several times.

That was the signal for a mild explosion of intersuit communication, mostly inane. Cleve examined the roll of metal, found its function anything but esoteric. It was a simple scroll, in clean English block lettering. He read.

"Excuse me . . . make way, please . . . pardon us, there..."

Leading two sound men, a gaffer, and the camera, Hinkel was making his way toward Cleve. Now that the actual contact was completed the telecaster apparently felt perfectly at ease cutting in on the heretofore forbidden frequency.

He panted breathlessly, and needlessly, since his suit's self-regulating respiratory apparatus would not permit him to get out of breath. It sounded quite dramatic.

Halting in front of Cleve, he made an indecipherable gesture, in place of

having a microphone to wave under the commander's helmet.

"Commander Zachary S. Cleve, we are now both on intersystem hookup. Three billion humans are awaiting your first words at this historic moment. The presidents of all nations as well as the entire membership of the Council are awaiting the first results of mankind's initial face-to-face meeting with another intelligent race!"

Cleve finished the scroll and rolled it up. He looked absently at Hinkel. Then, very much to the surprise of the ship's officers in the party, he grinned a dis-armingly boyish grin.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. "As far as it has gone, the first contact with the race that call themselves the Murrin has been successful. They express then- hopes for long-term friendly association between species to our mutual benefit. Details will be ex-

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plained in a second meeting which will take place in about two hours. In addition, a common basis for understanding has been transmitted." He started to turn toward the Rey.

"Commander," said Hinkel. "We all saw that the Murrin sent only a single representative to meet your party. Is this their accepted procedure?"

"Why no, it is not," replied Cleve, his grin widen-big. "There appear to have been extenuating circumstances."

"Is that what the ship's commander said?" pressed Hinkel.

"Sort of, and it wasn't the ship's commander. It was an interpreter. An apprentice interpreter." The grin was charming.

Hinkel feigned surprise, then concern.

"That seems rather odd, Commander Cleve. Did they--it--give a reason for proceeding in such a manner?"

"Matter of fact, they did. One which you in particular, Mr. Hinkel, ought to understand and sympathize with. It seems they could not spare the time to meet with us just now because the entire crew is absorbed in taking in a broadcast from their home planet."

"Incredible! Think of it, ladies and gentlemen! A beamcast across light-years! Something important enough to draw them into postponing this delicate moment between species; important enough to be boosted at heaven knows what cost across trillions of miles of naked vacuum! Commander, did'the alien reveal the nature of this broadcast to you? And if so, are you at libery to repeat it?"

"I don't see why they'd mind," said Cleve. He was watching Hinkel, not the three bilhon pairs of eyes the camera represented.

"As near as I can make out, the commander of the alien vessel, his entire complement, the contact team, everyone, are deeply immersed in the two thousand four hundred and twenty-sixth episode, segment, or

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quadrant of something entitled 'At Nest With the Vortexes.'

"It would appear, ladies and gentlemen, that the human race has been temporarily pre-empted." And he turned and walked back to the ship.

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