

**KUKULKAN**  
by SARAH K. CASTLE

*Illustration by Vincent Di Fate*

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What people seldom fully grasp is that contact with aleins may involve things truly ... alien.

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“Our third winner is Pascual Teotalco. Mr. Teotalco is an American of Guatemalan descent working on a BS in astronomy at Vanderbilt. He is the first of his family to attend university. His intriguing proposal for the Fox Foundation’s Message to the Stars Contest draws on his Mayan heritage.” Dr. Leinster’s voice filled the auditorium at the Arecibo Radio Observatory.

Crossing the stage, Pascual squinted at the few dim figures seated in the audience. He hoped Dr. Giocacci, the Arecibo student internship coordinator, was out there. He suspected his proposal was chosen mainly to add cultural color to Foundation’s pool of winners. Fine with him. He’d entered their contest mainly to win the free trip to Arecibo and to meet the internship selection committee in person.

“Good afternoon, I’m honored to be here. Thank you for taking time to listen to our ideas on how to hail extraterrestrials. I know you all have full research agendas studying things currently *known* to exist outside our solar system and would like to get back to work, so I’ll be quick.”

This drew some chuckles from the audience. Pascual smiled and began, determined to keep his promise to be quick. He’d practiced the presentation six times before making this trip, timing himself to finish in exactly fifteen minutes. Knowing the protocol and sticking to it were important to making a professional impression.

The message he sent into space today was nowhere near as important as the one he hoped to convey to the internship committee. He’d placed his future in their hands. If he wasn’t good enough for the Arecibo internship, he would be a good Mayan boy and move back home to Florida. He’d get credentials to teach

high school science in West Palm Beach and live in the Mayan refugee community he'd come from. He loved astronomy, but he owed it to his family to start making money as soon as possible after graduation.

If he was accepted to Arecibo for the summer, then he would apply to Berkeley's astronomy program and work toward a PhD. Such a prestigious internship would convince his parents he was good enough to make a living as an astronomer. Right now, he needed to convince this audience.

"The beauty of my message is its simplicity and the inclusion of a critical mathematical concept: zero."

He progressed to his first slide, a photograph of stones and short sticks arranged in groups on a wooden deck. "Since ancient times, Mayans used sticks and stones, or dots and lines, to express any integer from one to nineteen. One stone was equal to one unit, and one stick was equal to five units. They expressed and manipulated numbers in the exact same way that we do today, using a place-value number system."

Advancing the slide, the delicate spiral face of a seashell filled the screen. "My Mayan ancestors, and the Olmecs who came before them, recognized the computational utility of zero, which they denoted as a shell. They used it both as an empty place indicator in a string of other integers and as a number in itself, used to indicate the absence of value."

"This discovery was made in Central America more than a thousand years before the Arabic numbering system that we use today was developed and came into use in Europe. Europeans studying our ancient documents were surprised to learn that Mayans and their predecessors used the concept of zero, allowing them to count to, and perform mathematical operations on numbers reaching to billions."

Pascual advanced to a photograph of an ancient calendar round carved into a stone stele. "And count they did, they counted days, observed the sky, and developed accurate solar and ceremonial calendars. We continue to count today. Our Long Count is 5,129 years long. It defines the current cycle of creation. This cycle will end on December 8, 2012, just five years from now. A rumor is spreading that we Mayans believe the world will end on this day, but you shouldn't worry! It's just the beginning of a new cycle. Go home tonight, sacrifice a chicken, and you'll get through it just fine." He wasn't joking, but he smiled at the audience to let them know it was okay to laugh.

“I proposed we send a message to the stars highlighting our understanding of zero. Just as the Europeans interpreted the knowledge of zero as a sign of higher-level mathematical thinking among the ancient Mayas, so might an alien culture be waiting for a similar signal from us. My message is simple and graphic. Not knowing how ET thinks or interprets radio waves, our message should be as simple as possible.”

The next slide showed a string of dots and dashes in a line. The same sequence was arranged into a matrix in the center of the slide.

“The high and low frequency signals, I hope, will be interpreted as dashes and dots. When arranged in a prime factor matrix five places wide and twenty-three places tall, the frequencies arrange the dots within a field of dashes to form a diamond with an X drawn through it. This shape serves as a geometric visual break. It also has cultural significance to Mayan and Aztec people. The overlapping diamond and X pattern is frequently found in Mayan artwork and architecture. It represents the diamond pattern found on the backs of local rattlesnakes and symbolizes Kukulcan, known to the Aztecs as Quetzalcoatl, the feathered snake god who brought writing and mathematics to Mesoamerica.”

“Below that, the symbols arrange to form an oval, which represents zero in many place-based numbering systems. At the bottom of the matrix, on successive lines, the length of the Long Count is written out to five places using the vigesimal, or base-twenty, place system used by the Maya. It will demonstrate our knowledge of zero and numerical place systems.”

Pascual glanced at his watch and smiled. He’d spoken for fourteen minutes and thirty seconds.

His final slide showed the words “Thank you” in English and in his native Q’anjob’al. “In the three minutes this message is repeated, Mayans will speak to the stars after observing them for millennia. Thank you for this opportunity. Are there any questions, please?”

The dim auditorium was silent. Pascual looked over at his cowinners, who were still seated on the lit stage. The boy from Cornell squinted at him quizzically. His third grade classmates used to look at him that way when he amazed his teachers by quickly conducting long divisions in his head.

Dr. Leinster took the podium from Pascual. “Well, the Fox Foundation has certainly sent us a diverse selection of messages. Don’t think I’ve ever seen sticks and stones on a slide in this auditorium before! Thanks for that Mr. Teotalco.”

The small audience broke into a quick round of applause. Pascual's heart sank. They thought it stupid, maybe charming, but ultimately stupid. He sat next to the others as the applause wound down, but one person continued after the others had quit. Pascual searched the room and saw a woman with curly hair seated toward the back.

"Bravo, Mr. Teotalco! Thank you for your interesting proposal." Her voice filled the large room.

"Yes, well, all three winner's presentations have broadened our horizons today. Now we'll head over to the control room and send 'em out." Dr. Leinster gestured for the contest winners to follow him off stage.

As they filed from the room, the woman waited to walk out next to Pascual.

"Don't listen to him, he doesn't mean anything by it. He spends too much time with his data and not enough with people. Your idea is fresh, and your presentation was concise and interesting," she whispered as they rubbed shoulders in the aisle.

"Thank you, Ms.?"

"Dr. Anna Giocacci. You will hear from me soon, Mr. Teotalco." She smiled, shook his hand, and headed off down the hallway in the opposite direction.

Yes! Pascual pumped his fist for joy. He could make it as an astronomer! He watched Giocacci disappear around the corner at the end of the hall. He had to run to catch up with Dr. Leinster and the other contest winners.

In the control room, they stood among desks mounted with multiple computer monitors as the first message transmitted. Pascual's mind buzzed. The internship would strengthen his already solid application to Berkeley. He wanted a full research assistantship, based on academic merit alone, no minority-focused scholarship this time. It was now within his reach. The more he thought about it, though, his emotions scrambled. Graduate work would mean at least four years at Berkeley, away from his Q'anjob'al Mayan community and family in West Palm Beach. The four years at Vanderbilt already set him apart from his sisters and high school friends.

"Pascual, here goes your message." Dr. Leinster said.

Pascual nodded at him. If he tried to speak, his voice would surely crack. At this moment, Papa was picking oranges in a Florida grove. Mama was probably hemming someone else's pants. He sat in the control room of the world's largest radio telescope, speaking to the universe in Q'anjob'al. It felt futile and a little frightening, like trying to tell Papa about supernovae or explaining his belief in traditional day-keeping and divination to a fellow astronomy student. He was moving farther into a hybrid world, and it was lonely.

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A Cheorka diplomat usually worked alone. But this mission was different in so many ways, the Universal Council decided to send a clutch. Their ship arrived in Earth orbit, shielded from detection by its plasmonic skin. The end of his preparation time rapidly approaching, Aranead again watched the five-thousand-year-old recordings of the Earth mammals made by the reconnaissance team. He'd been honored with the initial contact on this tragic planet and studied hard to do it justice. His three clutchmates watched recordings of Earth's more familiar creatures. They croaked softly together at the group sensorium on the opposite side of the ship's main nesting. They were pulling away from him already, and it hurt. Any one of them could have been chosen for the first contact, but his study, comparing mammalian husbandry techniques across cultures, put his name first on every Council member's tongue for this mission.

He couldn't help overhearing his siblings.

"They look like the Avidia of Alrai, in miniature." Wa'akon said quietly.

Aranead turned and looked at their screen. It showed a black, feathered being perched on a rock next to an ocean. Its sinuous neck and long, sturdy beak did look Avidian.

"It watches the water so intently, but doesn't smell the fish! We can smell them on the recording, but it just stares." Chika said, and the other two clucked in agreement.

"Look at its eyes! There's nothing but instinct, a vulnerable animal's primitive will to survive." Deekor chirped.

The creature finally comprehended the smell and its meaning. It pulled its head back, curving the neck into a graceful S-shape. Its pupils dilated for the hunt, and it crouched to take off. It launched; the clutch squawked.

Aranead forced his attention back to his own sensorium. The hairless mammals on the screen had dressed themselves in feathers, apparently to imitate the Cheorka recon team. Aranead's skin ached at the thought of so many feathers plucked. The creature's monotone speech, made with rubbery lips, sounded blurry to him. They sounded and smelled like livestock, but they didn't act like them.

"The recon team did an excellent job." Wa'akon approached behind him. "It's sobering to watch the archosaur tapes, to see what's left of them on this poor planet. Studying *them* will be instructive, but to spend so much time with these stumbling little creatures, interpreting their mumbles and growls, it must have been very difficult."

"It was, and will continue to be, difficult. It's time to face it. We can't ignore our responsibility any longer." Aranead turned to face Wa'akon, annoyed. Wa'akon was second to hatch. If she hadn't spent those years fishing on Cancri, her experience might have equaled Aranead's, and she could have been chosen for this honor.

"Mammalian intelligence, I can't imagine it." Wa'akon returned the aggressive gaze.

"We must imagine it, and we need to respect it as peer to our own. We should have stayed after the recon mission. The Earth creatures were clearly self-aware and took some teachings from the recon team. An archosaurid race at that developmental stage would have been fostered."

"They would have been fostered by a physically similar race. Who would foster mammals? The Universal Council debated this for over five thousand years, since the recon mission returned. Now the mammals call for us. We have no choice but to respond. We will invite them to Council, as we would any other race."

"It's going to be different. It's as if we killed the Avidia on their nursery planet, and the mice crawled from their dens and took over the world. It's as if the khulon..."

"That is what we did, broodmate. If you would have given our responsibility to the recon team then, perhaps you would pass it to me now?"

Aranead's hardened upper lip pulled back from his teeth and he used force of will to push it back down. Wa'akon was trying to help. If he passed this task to

the second hatched, he would shame the lineage.

“You’re worried about controlling your instincts, aren’t you?” Wa’akon raised her feathered crest to a point.

“Of course I am.”

“The instinct to feed?”

Aranead felt his crest start to fall and caught it. “Yes, that’s it.” He hoped Wa’akon hadn’t seen his disappointment. She obviously didn’t want to discuss the other instinct Aranead would need to control.

“Practice, then. Deekor! Chika! Aranead will practice the Contact Ceremony for us!”

Aranead’s skin prickled. They wouldn’t talk to him about how this mission would be different, only how it would be the same. Fluffing his breast feathers, he took a deep breath. The ceremony would be his salvation, his guide. Practice would help. Adherence to ceremony brought the Cheorka through millions of years with their culture intact. It would get him through the next couple of days.

He began the song. The meaning of the whistles, buzzes, and burrs would be lost on any but Cheorka, but the dance could convey meaning. Tucking his wings close to his body, he placed each foot rhythmically, walking a straight line to the first corner. There, he extended his neck to the right, toward the ground, and nodded, warbling and miming feeding. He turned sixty degrees to the right and walked an equal length straight ahead. There, he stopped, facing left, and spread his arms, extending fingers from his wing’s leading edges. The one sharpened talon on each hand poked forward twice as he shrieked and mimed defense. He hopped to spin one hundred twenty degrees to the right, and then repeated these two sequences twice to surround the imaginary nest.

He pictured the nest in his mind and tried to imbue each movement of his body with the care and teaching, defense and protection intended by each vertex of the dance. But when he imagined the nest full of mammals, it fell apart. He stamped his feet and turned toward his clutch, who were nodding their heads in time with the song.

“How will they understand? They gestate their young inside their bodies, and then carry them along after they’re born.”

Wa'akon turned her head to one side. "We don't know that they will. What comes after the dance will be more important to their understanding. But until you see how they react, you must stick to the ceremony. They should at least recognize the pattern and its ritual aspect. For now, as when you are on Earth, you must follow and complete the dance."

Aranead nodded. This dance had inspired terror in beings across the universe over millions of years. The pebble-skinned Krokos of Centauri, the scaly Deenos of Cancri, the feathered Avidia of Alrai, all of them, and thousands more since, had submitted to the creed of the Cheorka and joined the Universal Council. The message, coming from the most feared predator in the universe, was very effective.

He would follow the prescribed ceremony. It had worked so many times before. Surely, something in it would help him on this battered planet.

Aranead danced with careful steps back from the final vertex of the pattern, to a place along the midline of one side. He snaked his head low, dropped his wings almost to the ground, and stalked straight to the center of the shape outlined in the first part of the dance. There, he mimed picking at the ground with his right hand and slashing with the left hand's single talon. He opened his mouth wide to show the full extent of Cheorka dentition, tossed the invisible morsel in, and bit down. Pick, slash, bite. Then he continued straight out of the nest and swung his wings forward, hands low and facing upward. Again, he imbued each gape of mouth and sweep of wing with their intended meanings of offering and acceptance.

Aranead could not imagine how creatures who carry their young for so long would interpret this last part, or how they would react when they learned its meaning. The ceremony, he thought. When all else fails, fall back on the ceremony. He was clearly on his own for what came after.

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"Shh, watch, watch him!" Tomás whispered, grabbing Pascual by the wrist.

A roadrunner stalked a small rattlesnake through the mesquite not ten meters away. Pascual and his uncle sat in white plastic lawn chairs next to Tomás's trailer outside Nogales. It was a warm, still afternoon in January. They sat outside to enjoy the sun. Tomás squeezed his wrist so hard, Pascual thought it would crack.

The bird circled and feinted as the snake stood on its coiled tail, keeping its guard up while trying to retreat under a mesquite bush. After a while, the exhausted snake lowered its head to crawl off. The roadrunner charged. The snake lifted its head just as the bird bit down on its tail above the rattles. With a powerful swing of its neck, the roadrunner whipped the snake over its shoulder and smacked it hard on the rocky ground. It continued the beating until the snake was dead. The bird began to swallow the still twitching body before running off, half the snake hanging out of its mouth.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” Pascual spoke under his breath.

“Welcome to Sonora, city boy. You don’t even curse in Q’anjob’al anymore?”

Uncle Tomás didn’t speak anything but, so Pascual switched, “Uncle, I’ve been at Berkeley for four years. The only Q’anjob’al I’ve heard has been over the cell phone.”

“I can tell; you’re searching for words right now. How will you remember the language when you live in Puerto Rico?”

“It’ll be easier for me to visit home from Puerto Rico, a two hour flight. I’ll have the money to fly home.”

“When we go back to Guatemala, people won’t trust you if you speak that way. They’ll think you’re trying to pass as ladino.”

Pascual shifted, uncomfortable, the plastic chair flexing beneath him. “When will we go back to Guatemala? Mama and Papa have been planning to go back ever since they got to Florida, twenty-seven years ago!”

“It will be safe for us again this winter, when the new Long Count begins. The earth will shake and change. Only people who are right in their hearts will be left. Then we will go home.”

“So I get my dream job just months before the world ends, great.”

Tomás squinted at him from under the brim of his sweat-stained straw cowboy hat, lips pursed. “If the job is so good, it will continue when the New Count starts. You may still be in it if you’re right with your family and the Mundo. Maybe that’s the question we should ask: Will Pascual be able to stay in the clear light, with his ancestors and the Mundo, at his Puerto Rico job?”

It was time for the divination. Pascual could feel it in the stillness of the air, hear it in Tomás silence. He thought about all the questions he could ask, but the one Tomás posed summed it up.

“Do me the favor, Uncle. Ask that question for me.”

Tomás nodded and took his hat off. He summoned the ancestors and the Mundo, the earthly world, by naming them in murmured prayer. He listed the sacred shrines and streams, the volcanoes and lakes of his pilgrimages. He borrowed the breath of the mist at the rising sun and the powers of the different kinds of lightning. The words flowed through Pascual’s mind. He rocked and nodded with their rhythm.

On finishing the prayer, Tomás opened his *baraj*, the leather bag that held the tools of the day-keeper’s trade. He sifted the seeds and crystals in the bag through his fingers, then pulled out a handful and blew on it.

“I now borrow the breath of this day. On this great and holy Wednesday, Seven Came, I take hold of these seeds and crystals to ask a question, a favor.”

On a small plastic table between them, Tomás sorted dried corn kernels and tiny quartz crystals into almost two-dozen small piles. He arranged the piles into four rows.

Tomás began to count. Starting with Seven Came, he called each pile by consecutive number and the name of a Day Lord as ordered by the ancient divinatory calendar. His hand jerked slightly over the third pile.

“Nine K’anil, the deal is ripe, ready for the picking.” He continued the count, resting his fingers on the next pile while saying its day name and number. “Ten Toj, and my blood speaks again, a tingling in my right hand. There is a debt owed to the Mundo, a big one!” He counted on. “Now, it is the Lord of Thirteen E’ who speaks, you are guided on this road and will walk there in clear light.” Tomás kept counting, but his blood did not speak again.

“Hmm, the answer is not entirely clear to me. Come here, Lord Thirteen E’. Will Pascual be able to stay right in the ways of his ancestors at this new job?” Tomás touched the seeds lightly and waited for the answer. “My blood speaks, this time in my thigh. Thirteen, the highest number of E’, tells me you are strongly guided to take this road, but you must work hard to stay Maya in your heart.”

“How can I do that, Uncle? I know I should call my parents more often. I’ll try to get home for the feast days, but sometimes my work schedule will keep me from it.”

“Those things are good. I think also you need to pray every day in Q’anjob’al. Each morning, greet the day by its sacred name, so you will always know your place in the divinatory calendar. Keep Maya symbols around you. Keep pictures of the temples, observatories, and artwork of our homeland at home and at work.”

Tomás closed his eyes and let his fingers hover over the pile he’d counted as Ten Toj. “Yes, the ancestors already know. You will walk in the clear light as a Mayan man at this job, if you keep out of their debt by doing these things. The high number with Lord Toj still makes me worry that the debt is not just to the ancestors, but to the Mundo, that all the earth has a stake in you. Such a high number suggests that there will be a death.”

The concern in Tomás’s eyes chilled Pascual, despite the warmth of the morning. Would it be his mother or father? His sisters? Himself?

Tomás nodded, recognizing Pascual’s fear. “We’ll make an offering today. I think it will take a chicken, and you should leave me two dollars for candles to light at the statue of San Felipe of the Sacred Heart.”

As they walked around the trailer to the chicken coop, Tomás asked, “What will you do at this job, anyway?”

“Watch the night sky, just like Kukulcan taught. I’ll be looking for near-earth asteroids with the most powerful radar on earth, finding things that could become meteors, arrow stars.”

Tomás nodded, “It’s good to know about bad omens. You call me first when you see them.” Tomás unlatched the coop. “Your Mama cried when she told me you got this job.”

“She cried when I told her. She said it was because she was happy for me.”

Tomás grabbed a big white chicken and handed it to Pascual while he got the knife from the shed.

“Use this board to rest its neck.”

Pascual grabbed the chicken and held it upside down. He always hated this part. The chickens get so still and peaceful when they're hung by the legs. Tomás handed him the knife. Pascual rested the chicken's neck and breast on the two-by-six board lain across saw horses next to the coop. Tomás began praying, offering the chicken as payment to the Mundo on Pascual's behalf.

Pascual raised the knife. The chicken twitched in his hand. He turned away as he brought the knife down. The chicken squawked. Its body started to thrash. Pascual tried to pull the body free of the head and felt the two parts still connected under the knife. Eyes still squeezed shut, he sawed at the neck's muscle and bone, feeling the chicken's blood hot on his hand. The knife handle got slippery with it. The wings beat strongly; Pascual finally had to look down at it. His hand and the knife were a mess of white feathers stuck together with red blood.

"Why won't it die?" he shouted, and coughed to cover his retching.

Tomás grabbed the chicken, then the knife, and finished the job.

He clucked his tongue around the Q'anjob'al words, "City boy."

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Pascual got on I-10 at Tucson. It would be three days driving to get home to Florida. The sun set in the rearview mirror. Uncle Tomás's divination rested his mind about his decision to take the job. But the visit overall had unsettled him. He'd been a teenager the last time he helped someone harvest their garden or put on a feast with his family. He knew his parents expected him to come home and live near them in Florida or in Guatemala, someday. Would it be twenty-seven years worth of somedays? As a student at Berkeley he still thought of himself as a visitor to the academic world. Taking the job at Arecibo, he would be making a home there.

He turned on the radio. The President was giving her State of The Union address. She said America needed to stop being mercenaries for the Saudi and Iraqi governments. Continuing the never-ending peacekeeping missions was draining the economy. The payment in oil still wasn't enough to feed demand. Every American would need to make some changes, some sacrifices, to end the dependence on foreign oil. Only through sacrifices could we regain the ability to choose our own futures, she said.

She was right. Pascual wished he could stay longer than a week at home, but his starting date at Arecibo was set. He wanted an anchor in his community

and culture before the strong current of his life carried him off to his chosen future at Arecibo.

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The clutch went over the glyphs, developed by the Cheorka diplomatic corps and approved by the Universal Council, for the initial communication with the humans. When they finished, the clutch was quiet for a few minutes. Aranead noticed their crests drooped around their faces. It was almost time for him to leave. He kept his crest at an alert point. It was an honor, he reminded himself, an honor. His stomach rumbled.

“On this planet of all places, it’s probably a bad idea to show up hungry,” he said, and they all laughed. “Let’s have our last meal together, and I’ll leave with a full stomach.”

Every diplomatic ship carried livestock. The food habitat dominated the dining area, to provide the khulon room to move around. Aranead leaned over the cage to pick out a meal. The older ones had grown fat enough to eat. They were almost half a meter tall and covered with short silky hair. A younger one swung from the grate covering the top of the habitat. Aranead gently pushed the tiny pink hands off the bar and heard the creature thump, then scurry across the habitat’s sand-covered floor. A nice, fat one looked up with dull eyes. It started a nervous shuffle toward a corner. Something about the creature’s desire to hide whetted his appetite. The clutch squawked. Aranead grabbed the khulon with both hands just as it turned to run. His fingers locked around its torso.

Slashing its throat with a sharpened talon, Aranead said a prayer of thanks, then bit its head off and offered one leg each to Chika and Deekor. Licking blood from his fingers, he saw that some had dripped to the floor. He bent to lick it clean and saw a second fat khulon in the cage. It dug into the bedding in the corner. The little primate was too stupid to know its legs kicked frantically in plain sight as it dug. It was important not to start hungry today. Aranead grabbed both legs with one hand and pulled. Pick, slash, bite. He gave the other half to Wa’akon.

When the time came, Aranead boarded the shuttle ship, crest up. Wa’akon followed him in, and they stood together at the control console.

“You must succeed. By bringing them to Council, we clear the consciences of all Cheorka. And darkness only knows what those mammals will do if left on their own.” Wa’akon scratched at the floor with her feet. “I was one who thought your mammal study inconsequential when you did it, and now it brings our clutch this

honor.”

Aranead nodded, noticing Wa’akon openly staring at the drawer with the wooden handle. It was an invitation to speak about its contents.

“I admit, I meant the study to be inconsequential. If I’d known the message from Earth was coming, and that I’d be chosen for this, I’d have fished on Cancri instead.” The feathers of his crest drooped over his eyes. “I am afraid, Wa’akon. I’ve overseen many sacrifices, but never...” he finished the sentence with a hiss.

“I’m afraid for you, my broody. We enforce and audit, but Cheorka don’t carry out the law or submit to it ourselves. Our mission is unique, and the honor brought will be equaled with sadness. When the time comes, know your clutch fears with you. There is no shame in fear. But you must succeed.” As she spoke, Wa’akon dragged her fingers gently through the feathers at Aranead’s neck. Aranead accepted the preening and cooed like a hatchling until it was time to begin the routine.

In taking flight, the plasmonic skin of Aranead’s shuttle redirected a wide range of electromagnetic radiation around the egg-shaped hull, rendering it invisible to both the human eye and radar. With a more advanced saurid culture, he would have traveled visible to the first contact. Then more of the population would become aware of the visit before he landed. With these creatures, so strange but familiar in the most disturbing way, he did not want to be met with too large a crowd. He would appear at the facility that sent the message and deal first with the people there. The images they’d obtained of the transmitter’s location suggested it was not densely populated.

As he fell toward Earth, he thought about the part of this mission he feared the most, the only part that could not be rehearsed. The island chain came into view. He hummed the Contact Song over and over, knowing this mission would end in silence eventually.

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Pascual arrived back at Arecibo at lunchtime. As the afternoon heat faded, the rich smell of the jungle surrounding the giant dish filled his nostrils. Puerto Rico’s lush greenery was so different from the swampy thicket of Florida. He imagined the jungle here would be similar to Guatemala’s; it was close to the same latitude. After almost a year, Arecibo had begun to feel like a home in some ways. He had a comfortable apartment in town. The jungle reminded him of his parents describing their once and future homeland. It could be uncomfortable when

Puerto Ricans assumed he was Mexican and began to speak quickly in Spanish. In social situations, he could explain that Spanish was not his native language, but in more casual interactions, people often thought him rude.

His colleagues treated him with respect. Pascual's work ethic and attention to detail were excellent. So much so, he felt it alienated the less prolific research associates, the ones who liked to joke, in his presence, about ethnic diversity hires. The jokes spurred Pascual to work harder. So hard he hadn't been home to Florida yet. He decided not to leave Arecibo until he'd drafted his first paper.

Pascual headed for the picnic area outside the cafeteria for a quick meal. The chicken asopao served here was delicious. He could practically taste the succulent chili and onions. The chicken would be so tender from the slow simmering, it would melt in his mouth.

"Evening, Janet," Pascual greeted the graduate student sitting by the cafeteria door. Janet looked up, smiling, but then her face went blank. Pascual wondered if he had said something wrong until the low frequency rumble shook his bones. His legs collapsed and he fell to the ground. He struggled against the vibration to get up. About twenty people sat stock still at the picnic tables, staring at the parking lot, where a metallic egg-shape, about five meters tall, rested.

Stunned, Pascual saw his car, among others, crushed beneath it. The hatch silently slid open. A huge creature stepped out and landed on stocky bird-like feet. The skin on its muscular legs was blue and pebbly. The black feathers on its torso and haunches were iridescent in the sunlight. It stretched as if it had been cooped up too long. Five giant fingers, one with an oversized talon, flexed from the middle of each wing. It stretched its long, thick neck skyward. The blue skin there had a crossed diamond pattern repeated in black lines from the feathered nape to the base of its skull. Long red feathers stood up on the crest of its head, like a woodpecker's.

There were whimpers from the picnic area. Pascual saw people, fallen off the benches, cringing and crawling away backward on their hands and knees. The creature dropped its powerful jaw, opening its mouth to display giant, sharpened teeth. Its head swayed back and forth on the long neck. It began to sing. Trills, clicks, and warbles vibrated in Pascual's skull. His colleagues scrambled and ran for the forest, but he could not take his eyes off the brilliant snake-necked creature.

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Aranead saw the mammals scatter and run. They were twice as big as khulons. His eyebrow plumes shot up. He felt which way the wind would take their scent and instinctively turned to start a downwind course. He imagined ripping their limbs off as they squirmed and screamed. This instinct was so long repressed he did not have a method to defuse it.

*Restart the dance, you fool, restart the dance. The ceremony will hold you.*

He sang the Contact Song at top volume, watching the ground where he placed each foot as he danced. Nothing could be more familiar. Every Cheorka practiced this dance from hatching. Diplomacy was in their blood. Aranead felt the song move his body through each step, swoop, and stretch he made.

\* \* \* \*

Pascual watched in wonder as the beast began to dance. There was a pattern in the noises it made. Its movements were repeated and rhythmic. It was trying to communicate. Every muscle and bone in his body shook when the creature's feet hit ground, but his thoughts snapped into clarity.

His call was being answered. That simple message, built from a lexicon of numbers and symbols rooted so deeply in the past, was being returned from an unimaginable future. The plumed serpent had given humans the language of mathematics to communicate between the terrestrial and celestial worlds. Had it come now to teach something new? More excited than frightened, Pascual reasoned with himself. This was no serpent. It looked more like a partially feathered *Tyrannosaurus rex* with sturdy wings and hands. And if it was Kukulcan, it was early. It was only August 2012.

The alien walked a pattern on the ground, turning precise angles at regular distances. It was a diamond! The alien was dancing along a diamond path! The creature repeated the sequence four times, and then changed direction. It crossed the shape formed by its previous path and pantomimed a hunt, which ended in a small thing being eaten, then seemed to shrug with its arms out.

Pascual remembered the roadrunner. It had been so cunning, so quick and deadly. If this creature, who had the skills to travel across the universe, wanted to eat him, there was no sense in trying to run or hide. The alien kept dancing, though it looked toward Pascual's fleeing coworkers. It was too much. Pascual began to scream.

"Kukulcan! Kukulcan! Quetzalcoatl!"

\* \* \* \*

Aranead finally stood still, relieved. He finished the ceremony and it had worked, for him anyway. He'd had to do it twice before returning to his senses. Still not quite trusting himself, he kept his eyes closed. The sight of the fleeing primates might tempt him again. A series of repeated sounds broke the silence. There were consonant clusters and glottal stops that sounded almost like Cheorka. A lone human stood not fifty meters away, shouting at him. It was trying to communicate with repeated sounds. The ceremony had worked for them, too. The communication would start here. Aranead jumped to the ship's hatch to retrieve the message sphere.

\* \* \* \*

The creature looked directly at him and then jumped back into the hatch it had come from. Maybe it had been insulted and was leaving. An alien arrives, and people scatter into the forest like deer. Outraged at his colleague's conduct, Pascual ran toward the ship, yelling, "No, No, Kukulkan! Stay!"

If these aliens were Kukulkan's historical basis, no one would ever mistake him for a Mexican again. The world would open their eyes to the Guatemalan government's persecution of the modern Mayan people. He got as close to the ship as he dared, watching the hatch above him.

The ship's surface was dimpled. Looking closer, Pascual saw it was covered in a thin, gray honeycomb. Each cell was etched with thread-thin loops of chatoyant wire. It occurred to Pascual that no one had seen or heard this starship until the moment it appeared. What must these creatures know about the nature of light, space, and time? A starship. It was possible this ship could take him this afternoon to settle the argument of the origin of asteroid 2005 CR37's structural complexity. What other arguments could be settled with the technology inside this ship? It couldn't just leave. It couldn't.

"Kukulkan!" he shouted in frustration. He swore the name had gotten the alien's attention before.

The giant head appeared in the hatchway. The plumes on the top of its head fell forward when it looked down at him. It turned its head a little, the way birds do when they look at things close up. Pascual imagined the big teeth clamping down on both his legs and being whipped to the ground.

He could not be afraid. Too much was at stake.

Its mouth was so big. He realized he'd been stepping backward. Gathering courage, he tried again to speak the only name he could place on this creature.

“Ku, Ku, Ku...”

The creature hopped lightly down from the hatch, landing five meters from Pascual. Its hawklike feet were thick with muscle. He had to calm down. Closing his eyes, he counted days.

“One Quej, two K'anil, three Toj...” He continued through the twenty day names. Familiar as childhood, it calmed his mind.

When he looked at the alien again, it nodded, then began to reach toward him. The long, blue fingers slowly got closer. Black feathers brushed the ground. The single talon was huge and sharp. Pulled back from the hand, it looked poised to strike. Pascual's heart accelerated. He remembered the other instruction Kukulcan gave to the ancient Mayas. He'd taught that the gods required human sacrifice. The world blurred, then went black.

\* \* \* \*

The Earth creatures were better prepared than he'd expected. They kept a diplomat at their radio transmitter. They must have been expecting an answer. The small human was obviously well trained. He was persistent. He repeated a simple message, careful to avoid misunderstanding. He'd approached the ship as though he wanted to come aboard. It would be easier for him to see the message sphere inside where the light was better. Aranead could set the sphere on the floor near the hatch. The human could sit there to watch it. He looked out and saw it still there, making those sounds.

They looked so much like khulon, though this one's actions showed an obvious self-awareness never seen in Cheorka livestock. He could control himself. He would bring it aboard. He glanced toward the door of the shuttle's dining area to reassure himself that it was closed, then hopped from the hatch to face the human. He reached toward the little creature, slowly. He kept his talon drawn back from his palm to reassure that he didn't intend to use it.

The man fell to the ground unconscious. Aranead chuffed. He'd seen this reaction before on other planets, with other creatures. The mammal's sympathetic nervous system apparently worked the same as every other sentient

creature's. He gently picked the human up and jumped aboard. Aranead laid the human near the message sphere. Then he took a place across the room, behind the control console, to reduce any perceived threat. As he waited for the human to regain consciousness, he couldn't stop looking at the drawer with the wooden handle. The handle was unique on the ship, the wood carved to look like an outstretched Cheorka hand. The drawer held the ceremonial blade. If all went well, he would take that hand soon. The thought made every feather on his back stand up.

\* \* \* \*

Pascual became aware of stiff lumps pressing into his shoulders and back. He lay on a floor covered in a rough woven mat. An acrid smell, like rotting papaya, filled the air. The alien stood behind what looked like an altar, across the wide room from him. Pascual's body went tense with dread. He rolled to hands and knees and sprang to a crouch.

The creature flicked a finger once at the side of its neck. It opened its mouth, but the lips did not move when it said, "I am Aranead, of the Cheorka, representing the Universal Council. Your name, please?" It spoke in American English, with pauses just a little too long between the words.

Pascual took a full minute to catch his breath. Then he pointed to his heart and said, "Pass-qual."

Aranead flicked at his neck again, raised his eye plumes and repeated, "Rass-qual." His lips weren't quite flexible enough to make the "p" sound. He gestured toward a spherical screen, as wide as Pascual was tall.

Pascual looked at the screen and a silent moving picture began. The pictures were line drawings, like a cartoon. A blue planet surrounded by the darkness of space resolved on the screen. Brown and green continents massed in familiar shapes, but their locations seemed wrong. The view zoomed past the planet into space, where two giant spherical ships engaged in a slow-motion battle. Each would fire what looked like a laser at a meteoroid near the other. The meteoroid would then sail slowly toward the opposing ship, sometimes hitting it and causing massive damage. The ships themselves did not move. One meteoroid sailed past the opposing ship and toward the planet. It hit in the ocean near a broad arm of land. Dust and vapor rose to cover the planet's surface.

The sequence on the screen accelerated. In an instant, the dust cloud disappeared. Blotches of dark green grew and shrank repeatedly on the land's tan

surface. Pascual realized the shifting colors were forests and savannahs, growing, then dying off. They shifted and traded places on the landscape so quickly they looked fluid. More slowly, the seas retreated, revealing the location of the meteor strike: the Yucatan Peninsula. The giant oval crater had weathered and was mostly buried.

The rapid change to the landscape then stilled. Thick jungle covered what remained of the crater. The view zoomed in to the Yucatan's Gulf Coast. An egg-shaped ship, just like the one he now sat in, descended from the sky toward a cleared patch in the jungle. Figures, just dark flecks from this height, crowded a plaza between two stone pyramids. The figures resolved into human beings as the ship and the view drew closer. A shiver raced up Pascual's spine. His people's history was being flashed before his eyes. The screen faded to black.

"Ah!" Pascual cried out. He desperately wanted to see what came next. It couldn't be over yet. He turned to see the alien's hands hovering over the altar. It stared intently at its surface and then raised its bright green eyes to meet Pascual's.

\* \* \* \*

Pascual made a noise. Aranead looked up from the computer screen. He'd imaged and modeled the human, to include him in the next set of glyphs. The human stared at him wide-eyed. He was very impatient; the history glyphs must have just completed and already he wanted more. Things were moving along much faster than Aranead expected. This mammal was a quicker study than reptilians he'd worked with in the past.

The human would have to wait just a few minutes longer. Aranead raised his hand, slash talon stretched forward. Pascual screamed and curled up against the wall, and Aranead felt guilty. The creature was not a saurid, who could at least chance escape in a fight with a Cheorka. It was a little mammal. Of course it would be terrified at the slightest gesture. While the computer finished rendering the glyphs, Pascual stayed curled against the wall, trembling.

"Rasqual, Rasqual," he cooed, pointing to the screen. The sound visibly soothed the human. He sat up and looked at the screen again. Aranead watched Pascual's reactions. This part would be more difficult.

The screen showed the Universal Council chambers, a giant ovular room with a large multilevel stage in one quarter and a gallery extending from floor to ceiling on the remaining walls. The view zoomed in to show the individual boxes

along the top row, the observer's gallery. Each box held seven beings from the planet depicted by a globe hovering in front of it. Some boxes were filled with a variety of species, others contained just one. Pascual made short, sharp "huh" noises as he saw the alien beings there. Most were saurid, though there were reptilians among the observing planet's representatives. Aranead wondered if the human noticed the total lack of mammals. Was that why he had wrapped his arms protectively around his body? He was ashamed to find himself wishing the little mammal would panic. If it was hopeless, he could justify returning to the clutch. But Pascual remained still and calm.

An empty box was shown close up. Earth was recognizable hovering before it. Pascual's model faded in, sitting in one of the seats. The rest of the seats were filled in with generic line drawings of Earth humans.

He turned the translator back on by flicking the switch embedded in the base of his neck.

"Representative, your planet is invited to observe at the Universal Council. After observation you may choose to accept the charter and join as full members. As members, the Council's technologies and libraries will be available to you. Commerce with other members will be encouraged and regulated by Council treaties. The charter chiefly requires that war on your planet be abandoned as a method of diplomacy. You must also agree not to wage war against any other planet, Council member or otherwise."

Pascual began to shake and bark. Water leaked from his eyes and ran down his face. Aranead didn't know the meaning of it.

"Do you understand me?"

"I do. I understand." He spoke while gasping for breath. "But I'm not the one to make this decision. You should meet with our leaders and tell them these things."

"You will take me to them?" Aranead pulled up a globe on their screens. The feathers on his back lay down a little. The wooden drawer handle still reached for him. He was glad to step away from it for a little while. "Point to the location and we will go there now."

\* \* \* \*

Involuntary giggles shook Pascual's body as the tension left him. The alien

didn't want a sacrifice; he wanted to be taken to the leader!

With deep breaths, Pascual worked to regain his composure. "We need to let them know we are coming."

Aranead nodded, but didn't say anything. Apparently, the alien expected he would immediately arrange a meeting with the president or the State Department or somebody. Maybe he could call them? He grabbed his cell phone off his belt and flipped it open with no idea how to call the White House. Staring at the phone, he remembered another call he needed to make first. He dialed home.

Because it was the middle of the day, no one was there and the answering machine picked up.

"Mama, Papa, turn on the television to see the news. I'm with the alien. We're going to Washington. I'm safe. I'll call again after I leave him with the president." He spoke in Q'anjob'al.

Then he browsed for the White House phone number and called it. He got an automated message. They listed many options, all of them directed to tourists and visitors. Pascual listened through the entire list, praying the last choice would be *To Speak to An Operator*. It wasn't.

He flipped the phone shut and looked at Aranead, who asked, "What was the language?"

"Q'anjob'al, my native language. But I speak English when I'm not at home."

The red feathers that lay flat over Aranead's eyes stood forward. The alien scrutinized him, perhaps realizing Pascual was not the man he needed for this job.

"Home is where your clutch lives. Your clutch is not here?" Aranead gestured with a wing to the door.

"My clutch? Um, no, it's my family. Mother, father, and sisters, they live in a different place."

"Live? Live in a different place?" Aranead cocked his head.

"Yes. Maybe, as you are here now, without your ... clutch, so I am away from my family. They work, eat, and sleep far from here."

“My clutch is far away, but I can sense them completely at any time using the sensorium.” His long claw pointed to the alcove behind him.

Pascual held out the cell phone, “I can hear and speak to my family with this, sometimes.” Nervous energy drained, his arms felt heavy. He stared at the phone. It was smaller than the palm of his hand and his family was often not home when he called. A low-frequency coo penetrated his body as a light vibration. It felt good, comforting. He looked at Aranead. The feathers on the crest of its head tipped down to one side. Pascual understood it meant to comfort.

“It is ... sad to be away,” Aranead said and cooed again.

Pascual said, “Yes,” wishing he could coo back. “But now, we must contact the President.” He moved to look out the still open hatch.

The people who’d fled to the forest had moved to its edge and now stared at the egg ship. A news crew had arrived and was setting up cameras. A woman with a microphone spoke with Dr. Leinster.

Pascual shouted, “Hey! Over here!”

Every person in sight yelled and pointed. The news camera, hastily hefted to a shoulder, aimed at him.

“It wants to meet the president. We will leave here to go to the White House soon. Tell President Stewart we are on our way.” He shouted as loud as he could. The newswoman moved closer with her microphone.

“You can hear me?” Pascual shouted.

The woman nodded, “Loud and clear! Keep talking! What’s your name? What’s going on in there?”

“I am Pascual Teotalco. Please contact the president immediately! It wants to meet with her now! Is she in Washington?”

The newswoman chopped her hand toward her crew; one man was on the phone already.

Pascual summarized what he’d seen so far until the crewman approached the newswoman.

“The president’s office says the visitor is welcome to meet with the president. They beg you not to land at the White House. Have him put it down on the National Mall. The president will communicate with him there.”

After he’d closed the hatch, Aranead pointed to the control console. “Please, point to the location.”

Pascual looked at the place on the wall where the open hatch had been. Once closed, there was no outline to mark it. The rotten papaya smell was heavier in the air, and Pascual fought the fear tightening his stomach. This creature is kind. It brings only an invitation, he reminded himself.

“Please, Pascual, we need the location to begin traveling.” Aranead extended his slash talon to beckon, then seemed to reconsider. He curled that finger into his palm and gestured with his whole hand. “Do not be afraid. I would not hurt you.”

Pascual nodded, stood up straighter, and walked to Aranead. They stood together, not at an altar, but at a control panel covered in switches surrounding a round screen. North and South America were shown, as if photographed from space. He could point to any place, take Aranead to anyone, and tell him this was the president, an important world leader who would make decisions for them all. For a few seconds, he considered pointing to Guatemala. He’d have to take him to Guatemala City, to meet the president who persecuted his family. The alien would sense something was wrong if he took him to a Mayan village, especially after seeing the buildings and technology at Arecibo. No, taking him to the American president was the only thing to do.

He pointed to North America’s east coast. The view zoomed in. Pascual touched the screen to zoom even further until he could point to the Mall in Washington, D.C.

“When will we leave?”

\* \* \* \*

“We’re already underway,” Aranead said. “Pascual, there are things we should discuss, diplomat to diplomat, before I meet your president.”

“I’m not a diplomat. I’m an astronomer, a scientist who investigates the universe.”

Aranead nodded in a forward to back circular motion. "Did the diplomat run into the forest during the ceremony?"

"Ah, yes, I think he did."

"Why didn't you run?"

"You looked familiar to me. My culture, the Mayans, descended from the people you visited so long ago. Some of us still live in the place where the meteor hit. We have stories and pictures of a god who looked like you: Kukulcan. Later people called him Quetzalcoatl. I was fascinated when I saw you. I thought you were this god."

Aranead clucked softly. "To those who met us back then, the Cheorka were gods. Some in the Universal Council still regard us so. We prefer to think of ourselves as coordinators and caretakers. We hold the universe's conscious beings together; keep peace, seed, and nurture young races." Aranead clucked again. "Just as some treat the Cheorka as gods, I will treat you as a diplomat: because you act like one. I have several questions. I assume your answers will represent only your own opinion."

"I'll answer what I can."

"We assumed, because of the message you sent, Earth is ready to join the universal community. Is it correct?"

Pascual frowned, "I couldn't guess. We'd sent messages before and gotten no answer. It's a surprise to get an answer to this one. I think we'll need time to consider joining anything."

"The benefits are greater than you can imagine, and the cost is moderate."

"Cost?"

"It is the same as we taught on our first visit to this planet."

Pascual's eyes widened. His jaw worked slowly up and down, but he said nothing.

Aranead cocked his head at Pascual's silence, "Do you not still practice sacrifice?"

“Well, yes, some people do. It isn’t common.”

“How many Earth men a year are offered?”

“None. No men. Those of us who sacrifice offer livestock.”

“How can livestock be a sacrifice? Aren’t they eaten? All creatures kill for food.”

“They are killed in a ceremonial way. The blood is offered to the gods.”

“The Universal Council demands the blood must be your own, of conscious creatures. It’s been decided that one hundred and twenty humans a year should be offered from Earth, twenty from each of your six populated continents. The Charter provides guidelines for how these people should be selected and the Cheorka would audit each offering.”

“Why do you need human sacrifice? It will be a very difficult decision for us. Most human cultures hold life sacred. I don’t think many would agree to send innocent people to be killed.”

“But isn’t that what war is? Fewer people will be lost to sacrifice than if you continue to war.”

Pascual thought on this. He’d been eighteen the year the second Gulf War began. Many of his classmates enlisted so they could get money to go to college. Pascual had worked hard to win a scholarship so he wouldn’t have to go. They weren’t exactly innocent in those days, but they were somewhat naive.

Aranead continued. “The Universal Council’s Charter holds that life is sacred. It also acknowledges that life and growth require death. When the two aren’t equal, imbalances occur in technological cultures. When life must be offered voluntarily, it highlights its value. The decision to create a life becomes as important as the decision to take one away.”

Pascual shook his head. “It will take years for the people of Earth to debate and decide this issue. Observation at your council and descriptions of the technologies we could share will help us decide.”

“Before any human can observe at Council, there must be a sacrifice.”

Pascual stepped back from Aranead, panic tensing every muscle.

“No, my friend, you could not offer yourself. We require it be a leader. Perhaps your president?”

Pascual’s legs wobbled. He grabbed the control console’s edge. “It will be her choice, won’t it, to offer herself or not?”

“Of course, it has to be. If she declines, we will visit other world leaders to offer them the opportunity.”

“It will take time for anyone to decide.”

“Time is offered. We have found, in past first contacts, the continent offering the first sacrifice enjoys prestige among the others for many years afterward.”

“It’s lucky, then, that the American president gets this opportunity first.” Pascual nodded slowly.

“It is lucky you met me, and that you take me to her. It wasn’t luck that allowed you to approach me first, it was courage.”

“Maybe, maybe it was courage, but it felt more like fate to me.”

\* \* \* \*

Aranead considered the meaning of the word fate in his own language. He found it similar to the agencies that chose him for this mission.

“We are of the same clutch, Pascual.”

“What do you mean?”

“We are related in our service to fate, but we can determine some parts of the path before us. I want to offer you a place on the observing team. It is my right to appoint one of the members.”

“I could go to the Council? I could visit the libraries and speak to the scientists myself?”

“If you accept.”

“How long does it take to get there, and to get back?”

“About two years, relative time, each way.”

“Would I be able to use the sensorium, to keep in touch with my family?”

“No,” Aranead chuckled, “Humans will have to invent their own sensorium, one matched to your own senses. You would be able to exchange sound and image files.”

“How long would I have to stay?”

“As long as you like. It’s of no use to the Council to have observers who don’t wish to be there.”

“I need to think about it. It’s a long time to be away from home. When do you need my answer?”

“When I ask you for it.”

Aranead breathed deeply and took the carved hand. Opening the drawer, he removed a long blade from the cradle inside. It was slightly longer than the width of his neck. The handle was wrapped in pink leather.

“The Cheorka offer a rare symbol of good faith to Earth mammals. I am chosen to be sacrificed to gain your trust. My blood on this knife will signal that I have chosen an observer. My clutch is in orbit now, waiting for the answer. If you let my blood, it will signal your respect for me and your willingness to honor other races’ traditions. It would make a positive start on Earth’s relations with the Universal Council.”

“I don’t know if I could do it. I’ve never killed anything bigger than a chicken.”

“Can you hold this blade?” Aranead held the sword out to Pascual.

The man did not reach for it. He shook his head and asked, “Aren’t you afraid?”

Aranead breathed in, expanding his breast fully. “Of course I am. Cheorka are accustomed to taking life, but it is rare we ourselves have to offer it.”

“Why do you have to offer it this time?”

Aranead cocked his head to look at Pascual with both eyes and was quiet for a while. “Do you remember the glyphs and recordings I showed you earlier? You may have noticed that all the creatures in the Council chambers were saurid, similar to Cheorka, or reptilian.”

Pascual remembered the creatures who occupied the Council seats in the video. There were none with fur, none resembling humans at all.

“Pascual, the humans of Earth, alone, represent mammalian intelligence in the universe. On every other world, saurids or reptiles evolved into consciousness and higher intelligence. The meteoroid hit Earth at a critical time in archosaurid development here. Mammals were given an advantage that allowed them to develop in a way found nowhere else in the universe.”

“Cheorka threw that meteoroid. My lineage threw it and remembered through a song sung for millions of years. The time has arrived for us to make amends to Earth’s conscious beings and to the universe. This nursery’s destruction opened our minds to the senselessness of war. The Long Peace started here has lasted sixty-five million years. The Universal Council and the Cheorka both are in debt to the humans of Earth.”

Pascual was speechless. Observing at the Universal Council would mean living among creatures from the worst human nightmares, like the Cheorka. He’d already traveled far from his upbringing as a Catholic Mayan in Florida. This would be a much longer and stranger journey.

“It isn’t required that you perform my sacrifice. I can let my own blood and your decision to observe at Council will remain your own. If you don’t wish to go, you can appoint another person in your place.”

Aranead balanced the sword in one hand, swung it toward himself, and drew it in front of his own neck. The feathers at his nape stood on end. He practiced the motion several times, until it was fluid and natural. Pascual watched the pantomime, feeling helpless as a child.

\* \* \* \*

President Laura Stewart’s face filled a huge screen mounted on the back of a flatbed truck parked near Aranead’s ship.

“Pascual, could you exit the ship before me? It will signal that I am not threatening.”

Pascual nodded, went to the hatch, and stopped. “I can’t. It’s too far for me to jump down.”

“I will pick you up.” Aranead reached for him. Pascual winced as the giant hands came close.

Aranead picked him up with both hands, clearing his mind of the khulon he’d picked up in almost this same way not so long ago. Pascual stared at the slash talons, and then closed his eyes. When his feet left the floor, he grabbed onto the two huge fingers just below his chest. They stepped to the grass, and Aranead set Pascual down.

“Welcome to our city, our country. My name is Laura Stewart, President of the United States of America. How should I address you?”

“You may call me Aranead, diplomat of the Cheorka.”

Pascual remained standing as Aranead explained the offer and its price to the president. She had many questions. Most interesting to her was that if she refused, Aranead would make his request to leaders of other continents. Finally, she asked for time to consider, and Aranead agreed.

\* \* \* \*

As the screen darkened, Pascual sat down, breathing in the smell of crushed grass. The gathered news crews cautiously stayed shouting distance away. The police were setting up a line in front of them. He could hear their questions, but didn’t want to speak right now. Aranead came to stand next to him.

“When you stand so close, I’m reminded you could crush me with one foot.” Pascual smiled up at Aranead.

“And I am reminded I would not crush you.” Aranead looked around at the throng of reporters and onlookers filling the Mall’s grassy expanse. The long steps up to a large, white-domed building in the near distance were filled with people.

“Those devices carried by the people closest to us, they take and transmit sounds and images?”

“Through them, everyone in the world is watching us.” Pascual answered, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

Aranead crouched down next to him, bare blue legs standing out next to the black feathers on his haunches. Pascual scooted closer and placed his hand on Aranead’s toe. The skin felt soft and pebbly. They sat together, watching the crowd.

Four monks in saffron robes broke out from the line of reporters and crossed the grass toward them.

The oldest monk approached them most closely and spoke. “I am certain that the Dalai Lama would offer his life for this purpose. Please give us time to contact him and make the arrangements.”

“The offer will be considered by my clutch. They will make the decision as to whether this person meets our requirements as a leader. I will note that this offer was the first.”

The monks bowed. “We will contact him right away.” They backed away and disappeared into the crowd. The police line was completed as they passed.

Pascual wondered how long they would have to wait. Would he and Aranead sit here for days, or weeks? He looked around. It was his first time in Washington, D.C., and the buildings’ scale surprised him. They were huge.

“The steps leading up to the Capitol building, they look like the pyramids my ancestors built.”

“They are similar to what I saw in the old pictures.”

“If I accept your offer to become an observer, will I be able to see your pictures, the ones you took when you visited so long ago?”

“Of course.” Even sitting down, Aranead looked over the crowd. “Is there a terrace at the top of those stairs?”

“I would guess so...” Pascual broke off, an electric chill spread through his body as he realized what his friend was thinking about.

“Aranead, diplomat of the Cheorka,” the president’s voice boomed from the

truck-mounted screen, “and my fellow Americans, I have often spoken of sacrifice and counseled you on the sacrifices that we all must make. Today, I am faced with a decision involving the ultimate meaning of the word. Our great country has done more than any other to advance the world toward the future. My sacrifice would follow in that tradition.”

Aranead stood to face the screen, and Pascual backed away from him.

The president continued, “However, my advisors recommend I do not make this decision in haste. We must gather more information about the Cheorka and Universal Council before I make any commitment. We urge you, Aranead, to remain in the United States, as our guest, as we deliberate.”

A sudden boom caused the crowd to crouch and cringe. Four fighter jets passed close overhead. Aranead watched them as they circled the airspace above his shuttle. He could see the human pilot’s helmeted heads in each cockpit as well as he could see the faces of the people gathered on the Capitol steps. It was clear they would restrict him from traveling. He spoke to the crowd of reporters.

“I’m here to deliver my message to all Earth’s continents. Our offer is not exclusive to this political entity. A leader from any continent can appoint a member to Earth’s observing team upon their own sacrifice. My diplomatic clutch waits in orbit now to verify and audit these sacrifices. You will propose each sacrifice to them and complete it only when the clutch deems it acceptable.”

A black-suited man pushed his way out of the crowd of reporters and shouted, “Senor! The president of Venezuela would offer his life for this purpose! As ambassador, I’m delegated to complete whatever application...”

He was interrupted by an Asian man, shouting, “The Republic of China will offer a life! It is the largest nation on Earth!”

Aranead faced the president. “The Universal Council offers Earth membership in good will and with good faith. To demonstrate good faith to all Earth humans, I will sacrifice myself here today. I appoint Mr. Pascual Teotalco, my only Earth advisor, to fill one of the seats, if he chooses to accept it. I offer him the honor of conducting my sacrifice. If you will not let the blood, Pascual, I beg you to accompany me as I let it myself.”

\* \* \* \*

Aranead turned from the president and went to the shuttle to retrieve the

sword. Through the hatch, Pascual saw Aranead step, for just a moment, into the sensorium behind the control console. He was actually going to do it, sacrifice himself here, right now. Pascual jerked his gaze back to the screen. The president's eyes had gone wide, and she spoke off microphone to someone on her right. The crowd continued to shout offers. It sounded like every country on Earth had an ambassador in the crowd.

Aranead jumped down from the hatch and returned to Pascual's side, feathered chest moving in and out rapidly. The giant predator from the stars feared his own death as much as any human would.

The president spoke, "Please, sir, could I request that an American perform the sacrifice? It would be symbolic for us." Two men dressed in dark suits and sunglasses stepped forward from the rear end of the truck bearing the screen.

Pascual stared at the president in disbelief, then stepped forward, "I am an American, Ms. President, a Mayan American."

Aranead stretched his hand out to Pascual. At the same time he tossed his head toward the crowd, offering Pascual the option of walking away. Pascual saw the chance given. Raising his arms, he rejected it, inviting the huge hand to grab him. Aranead picked him up with one hand and held him to his chest, cradling him with his wing. The sword looked the size of a kitchen knife in his other hand. They walked down the mall, the crowd separating before them, then up the Capitol steps to the terrace. Aranead's toe talons clicked on the white marble as the crowd backed off, leaving them alone.

"I will do this, my friend; there will be no honor lost for you." Aranead lay down on the stone at the top of the stairs and raised the knife. His feathered arm blocked Pascual's view of the crowd filling the mall. Aranead's pupils dilated, as wide and black as Pascual had seen them yet. The raised arm trembled and paused for what seemed like many minutes. Finally, the knife began to fall. Pascual closed his eyes.

The blade clattered on stone.

There was no blood. Aranead's entire body trembled. His arm had fallen across his chest and the knife lay on the marble next to him.

"Rass-qual," Aranead spoke, not through the translator, but in his own voice. His mouth hung open, showing the spiky teeth lining his jaw. Terror jerked Pascual's gut. He grabbed the blade off the ground. It was slightly heavier than the

pickax he'd used over the summers he'd worked the groves with Papa.

As Uncle Tomás had taught him, he murmured a prayer to the sacred mountains of Guatemala, asking for the favor in their names. The same moment of fear and hesitation he always felt before cutting a chicken's neck came over him. He had to push past it. He could not say good-bye. Pascual swung the blade over his right shoulder and brought it down hard on Aranead's neck. As his father taught him, he kept momentum and swung twice more, each blow harder than the last, until the blade rang on stone.

The blood coursed over Pascual's arms. Aranead's face twitched. Pascual opened his mouth to say he was sorry, to say it while Aranead could still perhaps hear. Before any words could come out, he realized that Aranead wasn't sorry. He shouldn't be either.

\* \* \* \*

The three Cheorka sat on the floor, their abandoned perches at their backs. They sat on the floor as a courtesy to Pascual. If they'd sat on the perches, their talons would grip the padded bars at eye level. He had to gather his wits. They were diplomats, like Aranead. They weren't going to disembowel him or rip his arms off. He shook his head, suppressing the ancient prey-panic rising within him. They only wanted his attention.

"Will you come to observe at the Universal Council? We are eager to announce the first member of the Earth's delegation." The one named Wa'akon spoke.

Pascual found his voice. "I would like to call home, please, to consult with my family, my clutch." He reached for his phone. His hands were still covered with Aranead's blood.

"Wa'akon, is there a way to clean my hands?"

The three Cheorka looked at each other, their red crest feathers rising up. The one named Deekor said, "You would not lick them clean? It would not harm you. It is good blood, very honorable."

Pascual's stomach turned at the thought. It was important that he demonstrate trust in them and respect for their customs. The idea wouldn't have repulsed his ancestors, but they had been gone for a thousand years. The Cheorka stared at him now, their irises noticeably narrowed, crests raised.

“It would not poison,” said Wa’akon.

Pascual thought of his first American barbeque. Dr. Colby had invited his new graduate students home for hamburgers. Pascual was walking through the kitchen after dinner when he saw the professor’s wife throw away six cooked hamburger patties.

“Mrs. Colby, you couldn’t share them with your neighbors?”

“Honey, we hardly know our neighbors!” She’d laughed and continued washing dishes.

He wasn’t sure what disturbed him more, wasting good food or not knowing your neighbors. The quality of his respect for the Colbys was changed in that moment, in a way that made it difficult to connect with his advisor.

The Cheorkas’ crests lay down as Pascual put one finger in his mouth and cleaned it with his tongue. He tried to think of Mexican blood sausages he’d eaten, but it tasted nothing like that. It was thick and slippery. He gagged on the first swallows, and then licked quickly as he could. If he vomited, it would probably be an insult. As he licked away the last spot of alien blood, he knew himself changed. Maybe now he was an American, like he told the president. But he felt more Mayan, in some ancient sense, than he ever had before. He didn’t need to call his parents before he made the decision. He would call them after.

“I didn’t have time to ask Aranead; did you understand the message I sent?”

Wa’akon opened her eyes and nodded. “When we last visited, we placed receivers in the debris belt around your sun. All signals in the likely frequency ranges were transmitted to us. In yours, we recognized the number sequence. We’d seen a similar sequence in a message sent earlier. It was the other two components of your message that prompted us to come again. The diamond pattern caught our attention first. The approximate count of Earth days since our last visit, given in the base-twenty system that we use, convinced us.”

Wa’akon ran her talon along Deekor’s neck, tracing the chain of diamonds outlined there. Pascual felt the air, stirred by the long feathers on Wa’akon’s forearm, brush his face.

The Cheork named Chika spoke, “In your message, we saw that you

remembered us. After more than five thousand years, you remembered. It indicates a mature and cohesive civilization.”

“Why did you choose 5,129 years? How did you know we’d be ready?”

The Cheorka exchanged looks. “We did not choose it. The number has no significance to us.”

The statement resonated through out Pascual’s body. The skills brought by the aliens so long ago had only been a start. They were tools his ancestors used to create a body of knowledge, calendars, and a method of prophecy that held their own truths.

“I accept the seat on the observing team, to honor Aranead’s sacrifice. But before I go, I need to...” His voice cracked. How would he tell Mama? Could he stand to look Papa in eye and say good-bye? They might never see Guatemala together now. He wondered if they realized how far he’d strayed from home over these last few years. Now they would know. He couldn’t imagine how observing at the Universal Council would change him, but he knew he would no longer be a Mayan or an American. He would simply be from Earth. There was some joy in that, but a full measure of sadness, too.