

## ALL SEATED ON THE GROUND

by Connie Willis

Connie Willis first appeared in Asimov's in 1982 with two award-winning stories: "Fire Watch" and "A Letter from the Clearys," and she's been an Asimov's writer (and award winner) ever since, with such stories as "Even the Queen" (April 1992), "The Last of the Winnebagos" (July 1988), and "The Winds of Marble Arch" (October/ November 1999). She's also written a number of Christmas stories for us, including this one about aliens, Christmas carols, Victoria's Secret, and church choirs. She's an expert on that last topic, having sung in church choirs, learned all the verses to "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night" and "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," and chaperoned middle-school choirs on more trips to the mall than she likes to remember. Connie's most recent collection, *The Winds of Marble Arch and Other Stories*, was published by Subterranean Press last August. She is currently at work on her next novel, *All Clear*.

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I'd always said that if and when the aliens actually landed, it would be a let-down. I mean, after *War of the Worlds*, *Close Encounters*, and *E.T.*, there was no way they could live up to the image in the public's mind, good or bad.

I'd also said that they would look nothing like the aliens of the movies, and that they would *not* have come to A) kill us, B) take over our planet and enslave us, C) save us from ourselves a la *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, or D) have sex with Earthwomen. I mean, I realize it's hard to find someone nice, but would aliens really come thousands of light-years just to find a date? Plus, it seemed just as likely they'd be attracted to wart hogs. Or yucca. Or air-conditioning units.

I've also always thought A) and B) were highly unlikely since imperialist invader types would probably be too busy invading their next-door neighbors and being invaded by other invader types to have time to go after an out-of-the-way place like Earth, and as to C), I'm wary of people or aliens who say they've come to save you, as witness Reverend Thresher. And it seemed to me that aliens who were capable of building the spaceships necessary to cross all those light-years would necessarily have complex civilizations and therefore motives for coming more complicated than merely incinerating Washington or phoning home.

What had *never* occurred to me was that the aliens would arrive, and

we still wouldn't know what those motives were after almost nine months of talking to them.

Now I'm not talking about an arrival where the UFO swoops down in the Southwest in the middle of nowhere, mutilates a few cows, makes a crop circle or two, abducts an *extremely* unreliable and unintelligent-sounding person, probes them in embarrassing places, and takes off again. I'd never believed the aliens would do that either, and they didn't, although they did land in the southwest, sort of.

They landed their spaceship in Denver, in the middle of the DU campus, and marched—well, actually marched is the wrong word; the Altair's method of locomotion is somewhere between a glide and a waddle—straight up to the front door of University Hall in classic "Take me to your leader" fashion.

And that was it. They (there were six of them) didn't say, "Take us to your leader!" or "One small step for aliens, one giant leap for alienkind," or even, "Earthmen, hand over your females." Or your planet. They just stood there.

And stood there. Police cars surrounded them, lights flashing. TV news crews and reporters pointed cameras at them. F-16's roared overhead, snapping pictures of their spaceship and trying to determine whether A) it had a force field, or B) weaponry, and C) they could blow it up (they couldn't). Half the city fled to the mountains in terror, creating an enormous traffic jam on I-70, and the other half drove by the campus to see what was going on, creating an enormous traffic jam on Evans.

The aliens, who by now had been dubbed the Altairi because an astronomy professor at DU had announced they were from the star Altair in the constellation Aquila (they weren't), didn't react to any of this, which apparently convinced the president of DU they weren't going to blow up the place a la *Independence Day*. He came out and welcomed them to Earth and to DU.

They continued to stand there. The mayor came and welcomed them to Earth and to Denver. The governor came and welcomed them to Earth and to Colorado, assured everyone it was perfectly safe to visit the state, and implied the Altairi were just the latest in a long line of tourists who had come from all over to see the magnificent Rockies, though that seemed unlikely since they were facing the other way, and they didn't turn around, even when the governor walked past them to point at Pike's Peak. They just stood there, facing University Hall.

They continued to stand there for the next three weeks, through an endless series of welcoming speeches by scientists, State Department officials, foreign dignitaries, and church and business leaders, and an assortment of weather, including a late April snowstorm that broke branches and power lines. If it hadn't been for the expressions on their faces, everybody would have assumed the Altairi were plants.

But no plant ever glared like that. It was a look of utter, withering disapproval. The first time I saw it in person, I thought, oh, my God, it's Aunt Judith.

She was actually my father's aunt, and she used to come over once a month or so, dressed in a suit, a hat, and white gloves, and sit on the edge of a chair and glare at us, a glare that drove my mother into paroxysms of cleaning and baking whenever she found out Aunt Judith was coming. Not that Aunt Judith criticized Mom's housekeeping or her cooking. She didn't. She didn't even make a face when she sipped the coffee Mom served her or draw a white gloved finger along the mantelpiece, looking for dust. She didn't have to. Sitting there in stony silence while my mother desperately tried to make conversation, her entire manner indicated disapproval. It was perfectly clear from that glare of hers that she considered us untidy, ill-mannered, ignorant, and utterly beneath contempt.

Since she never said what it was that displeased her (except for the occasional, "Properly brought-up children do not speak unless spoken to"), my mother frantically polished silverware, baked petits four, wrestled my sister Tracy and me into starched pinafores and patent-leather shoes and ordered us to thank Aunt Judith nicely for our birthday presents (a card with a dollar bill in it), and scrubbed and dusted the entire house to within an inch of its life. She even redecorated the entire living room, but nothing did any good. Aunt Judith still radiated disdain.

It would wilt even the strongest person. My mother frequently had to lie down with a cold cloth on her forehead after a visit from Aunt Judith, and the Altairi had the same effect on the dignitaries and scientists and politicians who came to see them. After the first time, the governor refused to meet with them again, and the president, whose polls were already in the low twenties and who couldn't afford any more pictures of irate citizens, refused to meet with them at all.

Instead he appointed a bipartisan commission, consisting of representatives from the Pentagon, the State Department, Homeland Security, the House, the Senate, and FEMA, to study them and find a way

to communicate with them, and then, after that was a bust, a second commission consisting of experts in astronomy, anthropology, exobiology, and communications, and then a third, consisting of whoever they were able to recruit and who had anything resembling a theory about the Altairi or how to communicate with them, which is where I come in. I'd written a series of newspaper columns on aliens both before and after the Altairi arrived. (I'd also written columns on tourists, driving-with-cellphones, the traffic on I-70, the difficulty of finding any nice men to date, and my Aunt Judith.)

I was recruited in late November to replace one of the language experts, who quit "to spend more time with his wife and family." I was picked by the chair of the commission, Dr. Morthman, (who clearly didn't realize that my columns were meant to be humorous), but it didn't matter, since he had no intention of listening to me, or to anyone else on the commission, which at that point consisted of three linguists, two anthropologists, a cosmologist, a meteorologist, a botanist (in case they were plants after all), experts in primate, avian, and insect behavior (in case they were one of the above), an Egyptologist (in case they turned out to have built the Pyramids), an animal psychic, an Air Force colonel, a JAG lawyer, an expert in foreign customs, an expert in non-verbal communications, a weapons expert, Dr. Morthman (who as far as I could see, wasn't an expert in anything), and, because of our proximity to Colorado Springs, the head of the One True Way Maxichurch, Reverend Thresher, who was convinced the Altairi were a herald of the End Times. "There is a reason God had them land here," he said. I wanted to ask him why, if that was the case, they hadn't landed in Colorado Springs, but he wasn't a good listener either.

The only progress these people and their predecessors had made by the time I joined the commission was to get the Altairi to follow them various places, like in out of the weather and into the various labs that had been set up in University Hall for studying them, although when I saw the videotapes, it wasn't at all clear they were responding to anything the commission said or did. It looked to me like following Dr. Morthman and the others was their own idea, particularly since at nine o'clock every night they turned and glided/waddled back outside and disappeared into their ship.

The first time they did that, everyone panicked, thinking they were leaving. "Aliens Depart. Are They Fed Up?" the evening news logo read, a conclusion which I felt was due to their effect on people rather than any solid evidence. I mean, they could have gone home to watch Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, but even after they re-emerged the next morning, the theory persisted that there was some sort of deadline, that if we didn't succeed in communicating with them within a fixed amount of time, the

planet would be reduced to ash. Aunt Judith had always made me feel exactly the same way, that if I didn't measure up, I was toast.

But I never did measure up, and nothing in particular happened, except she stopped sending me birthday cards with a dollar in them, and I figured if the Altairi hadn't obliterated us after a few conversations with Reverend Thresher (he was constantly reading them passages from Scripture and trying to convert them), they weren't going to.

But it didn't look like they were going to tell us what they were doing here, either. The commission had tried speaking to them in nearly every language, including Farsi, Navajo code-talk, and Cockney slang. They had played them music, drummed, written out greetings, given them several Power Point presentations, text-messaged them, and showed them the Rosetta Stone. They'd also tried Ameslan and pantomime, though it was obvious the Altairi could hear. Whenever someone spoke to them or offered them a gift (or prayed over them), their expression of disapproval deepened to one of utter contempt. Just like Aunt Judith.

By the time I joined the commission, it had reached the same state of desperation my mother had when she redecorated the living room and had decided to try to impress the Altairi by taking them to see the sights of Denver and Colorado, in the hope they'd react favorably.

"It won't work," I said. "My mother put up new drapes *and* wallpaper, and it didn't have any effect at all," but Dr. Morthman didn't listen.

We took them to the Denver Museum of Art and Rocky Mountain National Park and the Garden of the Gods and a Broncos game. They just stood there, sending out waves of disapproval.

Dr. Morthman was undeterred. "Tomorrow we'll take them to the Denver Zoo."

"Is that a good idea?" I asked. "I mean, I'd hate to give them ideas," but Dr. Morthman didn't listen.

Luckily, the Altairi didn't react to anything at the zoo, or to the Christmas lights at Civic Center or to the Nutcracker ballet. And then we went to the mall.

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By that point, the commission had dwindled down to seventeen

people (two of the linguists and the animal psychic had quit), but it was still a large enough group of observers that the Altairi ran the risk of being trampled in the crowd. Most of the members, however, had stopped going on the field trips, saying they were “pursuing alternate lines of research” that didn’t require direct observation, which meant they couldn’t stand to be glared at the whole way there and back in the van.

So the day we went to the mall, there were only Dr. Morthman, the aroma expert Dr. Wakamura, Reverend Thresher, and I. We didn’t even have any press with us. When the Altairi’d first arrived, they were all over the TV networks and CNN, but after a few weeks of the aliens doing nothing, the networks had shifted to showing more exciting scenes from *Alien*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *Men in Black II*, and then completely lost interest and gone back to Paris Hilton and stranded whales. The only photographer with us was Leo, the teenager Dr. Morthman had hired to videotape our outings, and as soon as we got inside the mall, he said, “Do you think it’d be okay if I ducked out to buy my girlfriend’s Christmas present before we start filming? I mean, face it, they’re just going to stand there.”

He was right. The Altairi glide-waddled the length of several stores and then stopped, glaring impartially at The Sharper Image and Gap window displays and the crowds who stopped to gawk at the six of them and who then, intimidated by their expressions, averted their eyes and hurried on.

The mall was jammed with couples loaded down with shopping bags, parents pushing strollers, children, and a mob of middle-school girls in green choir robes apparently waiting to sing. The malls invited school and church choirs to come and perform this time of year in the food court. The girls were giggling and chattering, a toddler was shrieking, “I don’t *want* to!”, Julie Andrews was singing *Joy to the World* on the piped-in Muzak, and Reverend Thresher was pointing at the panty-, bra-, and wing-clad mannequins in the window of Victoria’s Secret and saying, “Look at that! Sinful!”

“This way,” Dr. Morthman, ahead of the Altairi, said, waving his arm like the leader of a wagon train. “I want them to see Santa Claus,” and I stepped to the side to get around a trio of teenage boys walking side by side who’d cut me off from the Altairi.

There was a sudden gasp, and the mall went quiet except for the Muzak. “What—?” Dr. Morthman said sharply, and I pushed past the

teenage boys to see what had happened.

The Altairi were sitting calmly in the middle of the space between the stores, glaring. Fascinated shoppers had formed a circle around them, and a man in a suit who looked like the manager of the mall was hurrying up, demanding, "What's going on here?"

"This is wonderful," Dr. Morthman said. "I knew they'd respond if we just took them enough places." He turned to me. "You were behind them, Miss Yates. What made them sit down?"

"I don't know," I said. "I couldn't see them from where I was. Did—?"

"Go find Leo," he ordered. "He'll have it on tape."

I wasn't so sure of that, but I went to look for him. He was just coming out of Victoria's Secret, carrying a small bright pink bag. "Meg, what happened?" he asked.

"The Altairi sat down," I said.

"Why?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. I take it you weren't filming them?"

"No, I told you, I had to buy my girlfriend—jeez, Dr. Morthman will kill me." He jammed the pink bag in his jeans pocket. "I didn't think—"

"Well, start filming now," I said, "and I'll go see if I can find somebody who caught it on their cellphone camera." With all these people taking their kids to see Santa, there was bound to be someone with a camera. I started working my way around the circle of staring spectators, keeping away from Dr. Morthman, who was telling the mall manager he needed to cordon off this end of the mall and everyone in it.

"Everyone in it?" the manager gulped.

"Yes, it's essential. The Altairi are obviously responding to something they saw or heard—"

"Or smelled," Dr. Wakamura put in.

"And until we know what it was, we can't allow anyone to leave," Dr.

Morthman said. "It's the key to our being able to communicate with them."

"But it's only two weeks till Christmas," the mall manager said. "I can't just shut off—"

"You obviously don't realize that the fate of the planet may be at stake," Dr. Morthman said.

I hoped not, especially since no one seemed to have caught the event on film, though they all had their cell phones out and pointed at the Altairi now, in spite of their glares. I looked across the circle, searching for a likely parent or grandparent who might have—

The choir. One of the girls' parents was bound to have brought a videocamera along. I hurried over to the troop of green-robed girls. "Excuse me," I said to them, "I'm with the Altairi—"

Mistake. The girls instantly began bombarding me with questions. "Why are they sitting down?"

"Why don't they talk?"

"Why are they always so mad?"

"Are we going to get to sing? We didn't get to sing yet."

"They said we had to stay here. How long? We're supposed to sing over at Flatirons Mall at six o'clock."

"Are they going to get inside us and pop out of our stomachs?"

"Did any of your parents bring a videocamera?" I tried to shout over their questions, and when that failed, "I need to talk to your choir director."

"Mr. Ledbetter?"

"Are you his girlfriend?"

"No," I said, trying to spot someone who looked like a choir director type. "Where is he?"

"Over there," one of them said, pointing at a tall, skinny man in slacks and a blazer. "Are you going out with Mr. Ledbetter?"



“No,” I said, trying to work my way over to him.

“Why not? He’s really nice.”

“Do *you* have a boyfriend?”

“No,” I said as I reached him. “Mr. Ledbetter? I’m Meg Yates. I’m with the commission studying the Altairi—”

“You’re just the person I want to talk to Meg,” he said.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you how long it’s going to be,” I said. “The girls told me you have another singing engagement at six o’clock.”

“We do, and I’ve got a rehearsal tonight, but that isn’t what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend, Mr. Ledbetter.”

I took advantage of the interruption to say, “I was wondering if anyone with your choir happened to record what just happened on a videocamera or a—”

“Probably. Belinda,” he said to the one who’d told him I didn’t have a boyfriend, “go get your mother.” She took off through the crowd. “Her mom started recording when we left the church. And if she didn’t happen to catch it, Kaneesha’s mom probably did. Or Chelsea’s dad.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I said. “Our cameraman didn’t get it on film, and we need it to see what triggered their action.”

“What made them sit down, you mean?” he said. “You don’t need a video. I know what it was. The song.”

“What song?” I said. “A choir wasn’t singing when we came in, and anyway, the Altairi have already been exposed to music. They didn’t react to it at all.”

“What kind of music? Those notes from *Close Encounters*?”

“Yes,” I said defensively, “and Beethoven and Debussy and Charles Ives. A whole assortment of composers.”

“But instrumental music, not vocals, right? I’m talking about a song.

One of the Christmas carols on the piped-in Muzak. I saw them sit down. They were definitely—”

“Mr. Ledbetter, you wanted my mom?” Belinda said, dragging over a large woman with a videocam.

“Yes,” he said. “Mrs. Carlson, I need to see the video you shot of the choir today. From when we got to the mall.”

She obligingly found the place and handed it to him. He fast-forwarded a minute. “Oh, good, you got it,” he said, rewound, and held the camera so I could see the little screen. “Watch.”

The screen showed the bus with “First Presbyterian Church” on its side, the girls getting off, the girls filing in the mall, the girls gathering in front of Crate and Barrel, giggling and chattering, though the sound was too low to hear what they were saying. “Can you turn the volume up?” Mr. Ledbetter said to Mrs. Carlson, and she pushed a button.

The voices of the girls came on: “Mr. Ledbetter, can we go to the food court afterward for a pretzel?”

“Mr. Ledbetter, I don’t want to stand next to Heidi.”

“Mr. Ledbetter, I left my lip gloss on the bus.”

“Mr. Ledbetter—”

The Altairi aren’t going to be on this, I thought. Wait, there, past the green-robbled girls, was Dr. Morthman and Leo with his videocamera and then the Altairi. They were just glimpses, though, not a clear view. “I’m afraid—” I said.

“Shh,” Mr. Ledbetter said, pushing down on the volume button again, “listen.”

He had cranked the volume all the way up. I could hear Reverend Thresher saying, “Look at that! It’s absolutely disgusting!”

“Can you hear the Muzak, Meg?” Mr. Ledbetter asked.

“Sort of,” I said. “What is that?”

“Joy to the World,” he said, holding it so I could see. Mrs. Carlson

must have moved to get a better shot of the Altairi because there was no one blocking the view of them as they followed Dr. Morthman. I tried to see if they were glaring at anything in particular—the strollers or the Christmas decorations or the Victoria's Secret mannequins or the sign for the restrooms—but if they were, I couldn't tell.

"This way," Dr. Morthman said on the tape, "I want them to see Santa Claus."

"Okay, it's right about here," Mr. Ledbetter said. "Listen."

"While shepherds watched..." the Muzak choir sang tinnily.

I could hear Reverend Thresher saying, "Blasphemous!" and one of the girls asking, "Mr. Ledbetter, after we sing can we go to McDonald's?" and the Altairi abruptly collapsed onto the floor with a floomphing motion, like a crinolined Scarlett O'Hara sitting down suddenly. "Did you hear what they were singing?" Mr. Ledbetter said.

"No—"

"All seated on the ground." Here," he said, rewinding. "Listen."

He played it again. I watched the Altairi, focusing on picking out the sound of the Muzak through the rest of the noise. "While shepherds watched their flocks by night," the choir sang, "all seated on the ground."

He was right. The Altairi sat down the instant the word "seated" ended. I looked at him.

"See?" he said happily. "The song said to sit down and they sat. I happened to notice it because I was singing along with the Muzak. It's a bad habit of mine. The girls tease me about it."

But why would the Altairi respond to the words in a Christmas carol when they hadn't responded to anything else we'd said to them over the last nine months? "Can I borrow this videotape?" I asked. "I need to show it to the rest of the commission."

"Sure," he said and asked Mrs. Carlson.

"I don't know," she said reluctantly. "I have tapes of every single one of Belinda's performances."

“She’ll make a copy and get the original back to you,” Mr. Ledbetter told her. “Isn’t that right, Meg?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Great,” he said. “You can send the tape to me, and I’ll see to it Belinda gets it. Will that work?” he asked Mrs. Carlson.

She nodded, popped the tape out, and handed it to me. “Thank you,” I said and hurried back over to Dr. Morthman, who was still arguing with the mall manager.

“You can’t just close the entire mall,” the manager was saying. “This is the biggest profit period of the year—”

“Dr. Morthman,” I said, “I have a tape here of the Altairi sitting down. It was taken by—”

“Not now,” he said. “I need you to go tell Leo to film everything the Altairi might have seen.”

“But he’s taping the Altairi,” I said. “What if they do something else?” but he wasn’t listening.

“Tell him we need a video-record of everything they might have responded to, the stores, the shoppers, the Christmas decorations, everything. And then call the police department and tell them to cordon off the parking lot. Tell them no one’s to leave.”

“Cordon off—!” the mall manager said. “You can’t hold all these people here!”

“All these people need to be moved out of this end of the mall and into an area where they can be questioned,” Dr. Morthman said.

“Questioned?” the mall manager, almost apoplectic, said.

“Yes, one of them may have seen what triggered their action—”

“Someone did,” I said. “I was just talking to—”

He wasn’t listening. “We’ll need names, contact information, and depositions from all of them,” he said to the mall manager. “And they’ll need to be tested for infectious diseases. The Altairi may be sitting down

because they don't feel well."

"Dr. Morthman, they aren't sick," I said. "They—"

"Not *now*," he said. "Did you tell Leo?"

I gave up. "I'll do it now," I said and went over to where Leo was filming the Altairi and told him what Dr. Morthman wanted him to do.

"What if the Altairi do something?" he said, looking at them sitting there glaring. He sighed. "I suppose he's right. They don't look like they're going to move anytime soon." He swung his camera around and started filming the Victoria's Secret window. "How long do you think we'll be stuck here?"

I told him what Dr. Morthman had said.

"Jeez, he's going to question all these people?" he said, moving to the Williams-Sonoma window. "I had somewhere to go tonight."

*All* these people have somewhere to go tonight, I thought, looking at the crowd—mothers with babies in strollers, little kids, elderly couples, teenagers. Including fifty middle-school girls who were supposed to be at another performance an hour from now. And it wasn't the choir director's fault Dr. Morthman wouldn't listen.

"We'll need a room large enough to hold everyone," Dr. Morthman was saying, "and adjoining rooms for interrogating them," and the mall manager was shouting, "This is a *mall*, not Guantanamo!"

I backed carefully away from Dr. Morthman and the mall manager and then worked my way through the crowd to where the choir director was standing, surrounded by his students. "But, Mr. Ledbetter," one of them was saying, "we'll come right back, and the pretzel place is right over there."

"Mr. Ledbetter, could I speak to you for a moment?" I said.

"Sure. Shoo," he said to the girls.

"But, Mr. Ledbetter—"

He ignored them. "What did the commission think of the Christmas carol theory?" he asked me.

"I haven't had a chance to ask them. Listen, in another five minutes they're going to lock down this entire mall."

"But I—"

"I know, you've got another performance and if you're going to leave, you'd better do it right now. I'd go that way," I said, pointing to the east door.

"*Thank* you," he said earnestly, "but won't you get into trouble—?"

"If I need your choir's depositions, I'll call you," I said. "What's your number?"

"Belinda, give me a pen and something to write on," he said. She handed him a pen and began rummaging in her backpack.

"Never mind," he said, "there isn't time." He grabbed my hand and wrote the number on my palm.

"You said we aren't allowed to write on ourselves," Belinda said.

"You're not," he said. "I really appreciate this, Meg."

"Go," I said, looking anxiously over at Dr. Morthman. If they didn't go in the next thirty seconds, they'd never make it, and there was no way he could round up fifty middle-school girls in that short a time. Or even make himself heard.

"Ladies," he said, and raised his hands, as if he were going to direct a choir. "Line up." And to my astonishment, they instantly obeyed him, forming themselves silently into a line and walking quickly toward the east door with no giggling, no "Mr. Ledbetter—?" My opinion of him went up sharply.

I pushed quickly back through the crowd to where Dr. Morthman and the mall manager were still arguing. Leo had moved farther down the mall to film the Verizon Wireless store and away from the east door. Good. I rejoined Dr. Morthman, moving to his right side so if he turned to look at me, he couldn't see the door.

"But what about *bathrooms*?" the manager was yelling. "The mall doesn't have nearly enough bathrooms for all these people."

The choir was nearly out the door. I watched till the last one

disappeared, followed by Mr. Ledbetter.

“We’ll get in portable toilets. Ms. Yates, arrange for Portapotties to be brought in,” Dr. Morthman said, turning to me, and it was obvious he had no idea I’d ever been gone. “And get Homeland Security on the phone.”

“Homeland Security!” the manager wailed. “Do you know what it’ll do to business when the media gets hold—” He stopped and looked over at the crowd around the Altairi.

There was a collective gasp from them and then a hush. Someone must have turned the Muzak off at some point because there was no sound at all in the mall. “What—? Let me through,” Dr. Morthman said, breaking the silence. He pushed his way through the circle of shoppers to see what was happening.

I followed in his wake. The Altairi were slowly standing up, a motion somewhat like a string being pulled taut. “Thank goodness,” the mall manager said, sounding infinitely relieved. “Now that that’s over, I assume I can reopen the mall.”

Dr. Morthman shook his head. “This may be the prelude to another action, or the response to a second stimulus. Leo, I want to see the video of what was happening right before they began to stand up.”

“I didn’t get it,” Leo said.

“Didn’t *get* it?”

“You told me to tape the stuff in the mall,” he said, but Dr. Morthman wasn’t listening. He was watching the Altairi, who had turned around and were slowly glide-waddling back toward the east door.

“Go after them” he ordered Leo. “Don’t let them out of your sight, and get it on tape this time.” He turned to me. “You stay here and see if the mall has surveillance tapes. And get all these people’s names and contact information in case we need to question them.”

“Before you go, you need to know—”

“Not *now*. The Altairi are leaving. And there’s no telling where they’ll go next,” he said, and took off after them. “See if anyone caught the incident on a videocamera.”

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As it turned out, the Altairi went only as far as the van we'd brought them to the mall in, where they waited, glaring, to be transported back to DU. When I got back, they were in the main lab with Dr. Wakamura. I'd been at the mall nearly four hours, taking down names and phone numbers from Christmas shoppers who said things like, "I've been here six hours with two toddlers. Six hours!" and "I'll have you know I missed my grandson's Christmas concert." I was glad I'd helped Mr. Ledbetter and his seventh-grade girls sneak out. They'd never have made it to the other mall in time.

When I was finished taking names and abuse, I went to ask the mall manager about surveillance tapes, expecting more abuse, but he was so glad to have his mall open again, he turned them over immediately. "Do these tapes have audio?" I asked him, and when he said no, "You wouldn't also have a tape of the Christmas music you play, would you?"

I was almost certain he wouldn't—Muzak is usually piped in—but to my surprise he said yes and handed over a CD. I stuck it and the tapes in my bag, drove back to DU and went to the main lab to find Dr. Morthman. I found Dr. Wakamura instead, squirting assorted food court smells—corn dog, popcorn, sushi—at the Altairi to see if any of them made them sit down. "I'm convinced they were responding to one of the mall's aromas," he said.

"Actually, I think they may have—"

"It's just a question of finding the right one," he said, squirting pizza at them. They glared.

"Where's Dr. Morthman?"

"Next door," he said, squirting essence of funnel cake. "He's meeting with the rest of the commission."

I winced and went next door. "We need to look at the floor coverings in the mall," Dr. Short was saying. "The Altairi may well have been responding to the difference between wood and stone."

"And we need to take air samples," Dr. Jarvis said. "They may have been responding to something poisonous to them in our atmosphere."

"Something poisonous?" Reverend Thresher said. "Something



blasphemous, you mean! Angels in filthy underwear! The Altairi obviously refused to go any farther into that den of iniquity, and they sat down in protest. Even aliens know sin when they see it.”

“I don’t agree, Dr. Jarvis,” Dr. Short said, ignoring Reverend Thresher. “Why would the air in the mall have a different composition from the air in a museum or a sports arena? We’re looking for variables here. What about sounds? Could they be a factor?”

“Yes,” I said. “The Altairi were—”

“Did you get the surveillance tapes, Miss Yates?” Dr. Morthman cut in. “Go through and cue them up to the point just before the Altairi sat down. I want to see what they were looking at.”

“It wasn’t what they were looking at,” I said. “It was—”

“And call the mall and get samples of their floor coverings,” he said. “You were saying, Dr. Short?”

\* \* \* \*

I left the surveillance tapes and the lists of shoppers on Dr. Morthman’s desk, and then went down to the audio lab, found a CD player, and listened to the songs: “Here Comes Santa Claus,” “White Christmas,” “Joy to the World”—

Here it was. “While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground, the angel of the Lord came down, and glory shone around.” Could the Altairi have thought the song was talking about the descent of their spaceship? Or were they responding to something else entirely, and the timing was simply coincidental?

There was only one way to find out. I went back to the main lab, where Dr. Wakamura was sticking lighted candles under the Altairi’s noses. “Good grief, what is that?” I asked, wrinkling my nose.

“Bayberry magnolia,” he said.

“It’s awful.”

“You should smell sandalwood violet,” he said. “They were right next to Candle in the Wind when they sat down. They may have been responding to a scent from the store.”

“Any response?” I said, thinking their expressions, for once, looked entirely appropriate.

“No, not even to spruce watermelon, which smelled *very* alien. Did Dr. Morthman find any clues on the security tapes?” he asked hopefully.

“He hasn’t looked at them yet,” I said. “When you’re done here, I’ll be glad to escort the Altairi back to their ship.”

“Would you?” he said gratefully. “I’d really appreciate it. They look exactly like my mother-in-law. Can you take them now?”

“Yes,” I said and went over to the Altairi and motioned them to follow me, hoping they wouldn’t veer off and go back to their ship since it was nearly nine o’clock. They didn’t. They followed me down the hall and into the audio lab. “I just want to try something,” I said and played them “While Shepherds Watched.”

“While shepherds watched their flocks,” the choir sang. I watched the Altairi’s unchanging faces. Mr. Ledbetter was wrong, I thought. They must have been responding to something else. They’re not even listening.

“...by night, all seated...”

The Altairi sat down.

I’ve got to call Mr. Ledbetter, I thought. I switched off the CD and punched in the number he’d written on my hand. “Hi, this is Calvin Ledbetter,” his recorded voice said. “Sorry I can’t come to the phone right now,” and I remembered too late he’d said he had a rehearsal. “If you’re calling about a rehearsal, the schedule is as follows: Thursday, Mile-High Women’s Chorus, eight PM, Montview Methodist, Friday, chancel choir, eleven AM, First Presbyterian, Denver Symphony, two PM—” It was obvious he wasn’t home. And that he was far too busy to worry about the Altairi.

I hung up and looked over at them. They were still sitting down, and it occurred to me that playing them the song might have been a bad idea, since I had no idea what had made them stand back up. It hadn’t been the Muzak because it had been turned off, and if the stimulus had been something in the mall, we could be here all night. After a few minutes, though, they stood up, doing that odd pulled-string thing, and glared at me. “While shepherds watched their flocks by night,” I said to them, “all

seated on the ground.”

They continued to stand.

“*Seated* on the ground,” I repeated. “*Seated*. Sit!”

No response at all.

I played the song again. They sat down right on cue. Which still didn't prove they were doing what the words told them to do. They could be responding to the mere sound of singing. The mall had been noisy when they first walked in. “While Shepherds Watched” might have been the first song they'd been able to hear, and they'd sit down whenever they heard singing. I waited till they stood up again and then played the two preceding tracks. They didn't respond to Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas” or to Julie Andrews singing “Joy to the World.” Or to the breaks between songs. There wasn't even any indication they were aware anyone was singing.

“While shepherds watched their flocks by-y night...” the choir began. I tried to stay still and keep my face impassive, in case they were responding to nonverbal cues I was giving them. “...ah-all seated—”

They sat down at exactly the same place, so it was definitely those particular words. Or the voices singing them. Or the particular configuration of notes. Or the rhythm. Or the frequencies of the notes.

Whatever it was, I couldn't figure it out tonight. It was nearly ten o'clock. I needed to get the Altairi back to their spaceship. I waited for them to stand up and then led them, glaring, out to their ship, and went back to my apartment.

The message light on my answering machine was flashing. It was probably Dr. Morthman, wanting me to go back to the mall and take air samples. I hit play. “Hi, this is Mr. Ledbetter,” the choir director's voice said. “From the mall, remember? I need to talk to you about something.” He gave me his cell phone number and repeated his home phone, “in case it washed off. I should be home by eleven. Till then, whatever you do, *don't* let your alien guys listen to any more Christmas carols.”

\* \* \* \*

There was no answer at either of the numbers. He turns his cell phone off during rehearsals, I thought. I looked at my watch. It was ten-fifteen. I grabbed the yellow pages, looked up the address of Montview

Methodist, and took off for the church, detouring past the Altairi's ship to make sure it was still there and hadn't begun sprouting guns from its ports or flashing ominous lights. It hadn't. It was its usual Sphinx-like self, which reassured me. A little.

It took me twenty minutes to reach the church. I hope rehearsal isn't over and I've missed him, I thought, but there were lots of cars in the parking lot, and light still shone through the stained-glass windows. The front doors, however, were locked.

I went around to the side door. It was unlocked, and I could hear singing from somewhere inside. I followed the sound down a darkened hall.

The song abruptly stopped, in the middle of a word. I waited a minute, listening, and when it didn't start up again, began trying doors. The first three were locked, but the fourth opened onto the sanctuary. The women's choir was up at the very front, facing Mr. Ledbetter, whose back was to me. "Top of page ten," he was saying.

Thank goodness he's still here, I thought, slipping in the back.

"From 'O hear the angel voices,'" he said, nodded to the organist, and raised his baton.

"Wait, where do we take a breath?" one of the women asked. "After 'voices'?"

"No, after divine," he said, consulting the music in front of him on the music stand, "and then at the bottom of page thirteen."

Another woman said, "Can you play the alto line for us? From 'fall on your knees'?"

This was obviously going to take a while, and I couldn't afford to wait. I started up the aisle toward them, and the entire choir looked up from their music and glared at me. Mr. Ledbetter turned around, and his face lit up. He turned to the women again, said, "I'll be right back," and sprinted down the aisle to me. "Meg," he said, reaching me. "Hi. What—?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I got your message, and—"

"You're not interrupting. Really. We were almost done anyway."

"What did you mean, don't play them any more Christmas carols? I

didn't get your message till after I'd played them some of the other songs from the mall—"

"And what happened?"

"Nothing, but on your message you said—"

"Which songs?"

"'Joy to the World' and—"

"All four verses?"

"No, only two. That's all that were on the CD. The first one and the one about 'wonders of his love.'"

"One and four," he said, staring past me, his lips moving rapidly as if he were running through the lyrics. "Those should be okay—"

"What do you mean? Why did you leave that message?"

"Because if the Altairi were responding literally to the words in 'While Shepherds Watched,' Christmas carols are full of dangerous—"

"Dangerous—?"

"Yes. Look at 'We Three Kings of Orient Are.' You didn't play them that, did you?"

"No, just 'Joy to the World' and 'White Christmas.'"

"Mr. Ledbetter," one of the women called from the front of the church. "How long are you going to be?"

"I'll be right there," he said. He turned back to me. "How much of 'While Shepherds Watched' did you play them?"

"Just the part up to 'all seated on the ground.'"

"Not the other verses?"

"No. What—?"

"Mr. Ledbetter," the same woman said impatiently, "some of us have

to leave.”

“I’ll be right there,” he called to her, and to me, “Give me five minutes,” and sprinted back up the aisle.

I sat down in a back pew, picked up a hymnal, and tried to find “We Three Kings.” That was easier said than done. The hymns were numbered, but they didn’t seem to be in any particular order. I turned to the back, looking for an index.

“But we still haven’t gone over ‘Saviour of the Heathen, Come,’” a young, pretty redhead said.

“We’ll go over it Saturday night,” Mr. Ledbetter said.

The index didn’t tell me where “We Three Kings” was either. It had rows of numbers—5.6.6.5. and 8.8.7.D.—with a column of strange words below them—Laban, Hursley, Olive’s Brow, Arizona—like some sort of code. Could the Altairi be responding to some sort of cipher embedded in the carol like in *The Da Vinci Code*? I hoped not.

“When are we supposed to be there?” the women were asking.

“Seven,” Mr. Ledbetter said.

“But that won’t give us enough time to run over ‘Saviour of the Heathen Come,’ will it?”

“And what about ‘Santa Claus Is Coming to Town’?” the redhead asked. “We don’t have the second soprano part.”

I abandoned the index and began looking through the hymns. If I couldn’t figure out a simple hymnal, how could I hope to figure out a completely alien race’s communications? *If* they were trying to communicate. They might have been sitting down to listen to the music, like you’d stop to look at a flower. Or maybe their feet just hurt.

“What kind of shoes are we supposed to wear?” the choir was asking.

“Comfortable,” Mr. Ledbetter said. “You’re going to be on your feet a long time.”

I continued to search through the hymnal. Here was “What Child Is This?” I had to be on the right track. “Bring a Torch, Jeannette Isabella...” It

had to be here somewhere. “On Christmas Night, All People Sing—”

They were finally gathering up their things and leaving. “See you Saturday,” he said, herding them out the door, all except for the pretty redhead, who buttonholed him at the door to say, “I was wondering if you could stay and go over the second soprano part with me again. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

“I can’t tonight,” he said. She turned and glared at me, and I knew *exactly* what that glare meant.

“Remind me and we’ll run through it Saturday night,” he said, shut the door on her, and sat down next to me. “Sorry, big performance Saturday. Now, about the aliens. Where were we?”

“‘We Three Kings.’ You said the words were dangerous.”

“Oh, right.” He took the hymnal from me, flipped expertly to the right page, pointed. “Verse four. ‘Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying’—I assume you don’t want the Altairi locking themselves in a stone-cold tomb.”

“No,” I said fervently. “You said ‘Joy to the World’ was bad, too. What does it have in it?”

“Sorrow, sins, thorns infesting the ground.”

“You think they’re doing whatever the hymns tell them? That they’re treating them like orders to be followed?”

“I don’t know, but if they are, there are all kinds of things in Christmas carols you don’t want them doing: running around on rooftops, bringing torches, killing babies—”

“Killing *babies*?” I said. “What carol is that in?”

“The Coventry Carol,” he said flipping to another page. “The verse about Herod. See?” he pointed to the words. “‘Charged he hath this day ... all children young to slay.’”

“Oh, my gosh, that carol was one of the ones from the mall. It was on the CD,” I said. “I’m so glad I came to see you.”

“So am I,” he said, and smiled at me.

"You asked me how much of 'While Shepherds Watched,' I'd played them," I said. "Is there child-slaying in that, too?"

"No, but verse two has got 'fear' and 'mighty dread' in it, and 'seized their troubled minds.'"

"I definitely don't want the Altairi to do that," I said, "but now I don't know *what* to do. We've been trying to establish communications with the Altairi for nine months, and that song was the first thing they've ever responded to. If I can't play them Christmas carols—"

"I didn't say that. We just need to make sure the ones you play them don't have any mayhem in them. You said you had a CD of the music they were playing in the mall?"

"Yes. That's what I played them."

"Mr. Ledbetter?" a voice said tentatively, and a balding man in a clerical collar leaned in the door. "How much longer will you be? I need to lock up."

"Oh, sorry, Reverend McIntyre," he said and stood up. "We'll get out of your way." He ran up the aisle, grabbed his music, and came back. "You'll be at the aches, right?" he said to Reverend McIntyre.

The aches? You must have misunderstood what he said, I thought.

"I'm not sure," Reverend McIntyre said. "My handle's pretty rusty."

Handle? What were they talking about?

"Especially 'The Hallelujah Chorus.' It's been years since I last sang it."

Oh, Handel, not handle.

"I'm rehearsing it with First Pres's choir at eleven tomorrow if you want to come and run through it with us."

"I just may do that."

"Great," Mr. Ledbetter said. "Good night." He led me out of the sanctuary. "Where's your car parked?"



“Out in front.”

“Good. Mine, too.” He opened the side door. “You can follow me to my apartment.”

I had a sudden blinding vision of Aunt Judith glaring disapprovingly at me and saying, “A nice young lady *never* goes to a gentleman’s apartment alone.”

“You did say you brought the music from the mall with you, didn’t you?” he asked.

Which is what you get for jumping to conclusions, I thought, following him to his apartment and wondering if he was going out with the redheaded second soprano.

“On the way over I was thinking about all this,” he said when we got to his apartment building, “and I think the first thing we need to do is figure out exactly which element or elements of ‘all seated on the ground’ they’re responding to, the notes—I know you said they’d been exposed to music before, but it could be this particular configuration of notes—or words.”

I told him about reciting the lyrics to them.

“Okay, then, the next thing we do is see if it’s the accompaniment,” he said, unlocking the door. “Or the tempo. Or the key.”

“The key?” I said, looking down at the keys in his hand.

“Yeah, have you ever seen *Jumpin’ Jack Flash*?”

“No.”

“Great movie. Whoopi Goldberg. In it, the key to the spy’s code is the key. Literally. B flat. ‘While Shepherds Watched’ is in the key of C, but ‘Joy to the World’ is in D. That may be why they didn’t respond to it. Or they may only respond to the sound of certain instruments. What Beethoven did they listen to?”

“The Ninth Symphony.”

He frowned. “Then that’s unlikely, but there might be a guitar or blocks or something in the ‘While Shepherds Watched,’ accompaniment. We’ll see. Come on in,” he said, opening the door and immediately vanishing into

the bedroom. "There's soda in the fridge," he called back to me. "Go ahead and sit down."

That was easier said than done. The couch, chair, and coffee table were all covered with CDs, music, and clothes. "Sorry," he said, coming back in with a laptop. He set it down on top of a stack of books and moved a pile of laundry from the chair so I could sit down. "December's a bad month. And this year, in addition to my usual five thousand concerts and church services and cantata performances, I'm directing aches."

I hadn't misheard him before. "Aches?" I said.

"Yeah. A-C-H-E-S. The All-City Holiday Ecumenical Sing. ACHES. Or, as my seventh-grade girls call it, Aches and Pains. It's a giant concert—well, not actually a concert because everybody sings, even the audience. But all the city singing groups and church choirs participate." He moved a stack of LPs off the couch and onto the floor and sat down across from me. "Denver has it every year. At the convention center. Have you ever been to a Sing?" he said, and when I shook my head, "It's pretty impressive. Last year three thousand people and forty-four choirs participated."

"And you're directing?"

"Yeah. Actually, it's a much easier job than directing my church choirs. Or my seventh-grade girls' glee. And it's kind of fun. It used to be the All-City *Messiah*, you know, a whole bunch of people getting together to sing Handel's *Messiah*, but then they had a request from the Unitarians to include some Solstice songs, and it kind of snowballed from there. Now we do Hanukkah songs and 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' and 'The Seven Nights of Kwanzaa,' along with Christmas carols and selections from the *Messiah*. Which, by the way, we can't let the Altairi listen to either."

"Is there children-slaying in that, too?"

"Head-breaking. 'Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron,' and 'dash them in pieces.' There's also wounding, bruising, cutting, deriding, and laughing to scorn."

"Actually, the Altairi already know all about scorn," I said.

"But hopefully not about shaking nations. And covering the earth with darkness," he said. "Okay," he opened his laptop, "the first thing I'm going to do is scan in the song. Then I'll remove the accompaniment so we can

play them just the vocals.”

“What can I do?”

“You,” he said, disappearing into the other room again and returning with a foot-high stack of sheet music and music books which he dumped in my lap, “can make a list of all the songs we don’t want the Altairi to hear.”

I nodded and started through *The Holly Jolly Book of Christmas Songs*. It was amazing how many carols, which I’d always thought were about peace and good will, had violent lyrics. “Coventry Carol” wasn’t the only one with child-slaying in it. “Christmas Day is Come” did, too, along with references to sin, strife, and militants. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” had strife, too, and envy and quarrels. “The Holly and the Ivy” had bones, blood, and bears, and “Good King Wenceslas” talked about cruelty, bringing people flesh, freezing their blood, and heart failure.

“I had no idea Christmas carols were so grim,” I said.

“You should hear Easter,” Mr. Ledbetter said. “While you’re looking, see if you can find any songs with the word ‘seated’ in them so we can see if it’s the word they’re responding to.”

I nodded and went back to reading lyrics. In “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” everyone was standing, not seated, plus it had fear, trembling, and a line about giving oneself for heavenly food. “The First Noel” had “blood,” and the shepherds were lying, not sitting.

What Christmas song has “seated” in it? I thought, trying to remember. Wasn’t there something in “Jingle Bells” about Miss Somebody or other being seated by someone’s side?

There was, and in “Wassail, Wassail,” there was a line about a-sitting by the fire, but not “seated.”

I kept looking. The non-religious Christmas songs were almost as bad as the carols. Even a children’s song like “I’m Getting’ Nuttin’ for Christmas” gaily discussed smashing bats over people’s heads, and there seemed to be an entire genre of “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer”-type songs: “Grandma’s Killer Fruitcake,” “I Came Upon a Roadkill Deer,” and “Grandpa’s Gonna Sue the Pants Off Santa.”

And even when the lyrics weren’t violent, they had phrases in them like “rule o’er all the earth” and “over us all to reign,” which the Altairi might

take as an invitation to global conquest.

There have to be some carols that are harmless, I thought, and looked up “Away in a Manger” in the index (which *The Holly Jolly Book*, unlike the hymnal, did have.) “...lay down his sweet head ... the stars in the sky...” No mayhem here, I thought. I can definitely add this to the list. “Love ... blessings ... ‘and take us to heaven to live with thee there.” A harmless enough line, but it might mean something entirely different to the Altairi. I didn’t want to find myself on a spaceship heading back to Aquila or wherever it was they came from.

We worked till almost three in the morning, by which time we had separate recordings of the vocals, accompaniment, and notes (played by Mr. Ledbetter on the piano, guitar, and flute and recorded by me) of “all seated on the ground,” a list, albeit rather short, of songs the Altairi could safely hear, and another, even shorter list of ones with “seated,” “sit,” or “sitting” in them.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Ledbetter,” I said, putting on my coat.

“Calvin,” he said.

“Calvin. Anyway, thank you. I really appreciate this. I’ll let you know the results of my playing the songs for them.”

“Are you kidding, Meg?” he said. “I want to be there when you do this.”

“But I thought—don’t you have to rehearse with the choirs for your ACHES thing?” I said, remembering the heavy schedule he’d left on his answering machine.

“Yes, and I have to rehearse with the symphony, and with the chancel choir and the kindergarten choir and the handbell choir for the Christmas Eve service—”

“Oh, and I’ve kept you up so late,” I said. “I’m really sorry.”

“Choir directors never sleep in December,” he said lightly, “and what I was going to say was that I’m free in between rehearsals and till eleven tomorrow morning. How early can you get the Altairi?”

“They usually come out of their ship around seven, but some of the other commission members may want to work with them.”

“And face those bright shiny faces before they’ve had their coffee? My bet is you’ll have the Altairi all to yourself.”

He was probably right. I remembered Dr. Jarvis saying he had to work himself up to seeing the Altairi over the course of the day. “They look just like my fifth-grade teacher,” he’d said.

“Are you sure *you* want to face them first thing in the morning?” I asked him. “The Altairi’s glares—”

“Are nothing compared to the glare of a soprano who didn’t get the solo she wanted. Don’t worry, I can handle the Altairi,” he said. “I can’t wait to find out what it is the Altairi are responding to.”

\* \* \* \*

What we found out was nothing.

Calvin had been right. There was no one else waiting outside University Hall when the Altairi appeared. I hustled them into the audio lab, locked the door, and called Calvin, and he came right over, bearing Starbucks coffee and an armload of CDs.

“Yikes!” he said when he saw the Altairi standing over by the speakers. “I was wrong about the soprano. This is more a seventh-grader’s, ‘No, you can’t text-message during the choir concert, or wear face glitter,’ glare.”

I shook my head. “It’s an Aunt Judith glare.”

“I’m very glad we decided not to play them the part about dashing people’s heads into pieces,” he said. “Are you sure they didn’t come to Earth to kill everybody?”

“No,” I said. “That’s why we have to establish communications with them.”

“Right,” he said, and proceeded to play the accompaniment we’d recorded the night before. Nothing, and nothing when he played the notes with piano, guitar, and flute, but when he played the vocal part by itself, the Altairi promptly sat down.

“Definitely the words,” he said, and when we played them “Jingle

Bells,” they sat down again at “seated by my side,” which seemed to confirm it.

But when he played them the first part of “Sit Down, You’re Rocking the Boat,” from *Guys and Dolls* and “Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay,” they didn’t sit down for either one.

“Which means it’s the word ‘seated,’” I said.

“Or they only respond to Christmas songs,” he said. “Do you have some other carol we can play them?”

“Not with ‘seated,’” I said. “‘All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth,’ has ‘sitting’ in it.”

We played it for them. No response, but when he played “We Need A Little Christmas,” from the musical *Mame*, the Altairi sat down the moment the recording reached the word “sitting.”

Calvin cut off the rest of the phrase, since we didn’t want Altairi sitting on our shoulders, and looked at me. “So why did they respond to this ‘sitting’ and not the one in ‘All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth’?”

I was tempted to say, “Because “‘All I Want for Christmas’ is an absolutely terrible song,” but I didn’t. “The voices?” I suggested.

“Maybe,” he said and shuffled through the CDs till he found a recording of the same song by the Statler Brothers. The Altairi sat down at exactly the same place.

So not the voices. And not Christmas. When Calvin played them the opening number from *1776*, they sat down again as the Continental Congress sang orders to John Adams to “sit down.” And it wasn’t the verb “to sit.” When we played them “The Hanukkah Song,” they spun solemnly in place.

“Okay, so we’ve established it’s ecumenical,” Calvin said. “Thank goodness,” I said, thinking of Reverend Thresher and what he’d say if he found out they’d responded to a Christmas carol, but when we played them a Solstice song with the phrase, “the earth turns round again,” they just stood there and glared.

“Words beginning with S?” I said.

“Maybe.” He played them, in rapid succession, “The Snow Lay on the Ground,” “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” and “Suzy Snowflake.” Nothing.

At ten forty-five Calvin left to go to his choir rehearsal. “It’s at First Presbyterian, if you want to meet me there at two,” he said, “and we can go over to my apartment from there. I want to run an analysis on the frequency patterns of the phrases they responded to.”

“Okay,” I said, and delivered the Altairi to Dr. Wakamura, who wanted to squirt them with perfumes from the Crabtree and Evelyn store. I left them glaring at him and went up to Dr. Morthman’s office. He wasn’t there. “He went to the mall to collect paint samples,” Dr. Jarvis said.

I called him on his cell phone. “Dr. Morthman, I’ve run some tests,” I said, “and the Altairi are—”

“Not now. I’m waiting for an important call from the ACS,” he said and hung up.

I went back to the audio lab and listened to the Cambridge Boys’ Choir, Barbra Streisand, and Barenaked Ladies Christmas albums, trying to find songs with variations of “sit” and “spin” in them and no bloodshed. I also looked up instances of “turn.” They hadn’t responded to “turns” in the Solstice song, but I wasn’t sure that proved anything. They hadn’t responded to “sitting” in “All I Want for Christmas” either.

At two I went to meet Calvin at Trinity Episcopal. They weren’t done rehearsing yet, and it didn’t sound like they would be for some time. Calvin kept starting and stopping the choir and saying, “Basses, you’re coming in two beats early, and altos, on ‘singing,’ that’s an A flat. Let’s take it again, from the top of page eight.”

They went over the section four more times, with no discernible improvement, before Calvin said, “Okay, that’s it. I’ll see you all Saturday night.”

“We are *never* going to get that entrance right,” several of the choir members muttered as they gathered up their music, and the balding minister from the other night, Reverend McIntyre, looked totally discouraged.

“Maybe I shouldn’t sing after all,” he told Calvin.

“Yes, you should,” Calvin said and put his hand on Reverend McIntyre’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. It’ll all come together. You’ll see.”

“Do you really believe that?” I asked Calvin after Reverend McIntyre had gone out.

He laughed. “I know it’s hard to believe listening to them now. I never think they’re going to be able to do it, but somehow, no matter how awful they sound in rehearsal, they always manage to pull it off. It’s enough to restore your faith in humanity.” He frowned. “I thought you were going to come over, and we were going to look at frequency patterns.”

“We are,” I said. “Why?”

He pointed behind me. The Altairi were standing there with Reverend McIntyre. “I found them outside,” he said, smiling. “I was afraid they might be lost.”

“Oh, dear, they must have followed me. I’m so sorry,” I said though he didn’t seem particularly intimidated by them. I said as much.

“I’m not,” he said. “They don’t look nearly as annoyed as my congregation does when they don’t approve of my sermon.”

“I’d better take them back,” I said to Calvin.

“No, as long as they’re here, we might as well take them over to my apartment and try some more songs on them. We need more data.”

I somehow squeezed all six of them into my car and took them over to Calvin’s apartment, and he analyzed frequency patterns while I played some more songs for them. It definitely wasn’t the quality of the songs or the singers they were responding to. They wouldn’t sit down for Willie Nelson’s “Pretty Paper” and then did for a hideous falsetto children’s recording of “Little Miss Muffet” from the 1940s.

It wasn’t the words’ meaning, either. When I played them “*Adeste Fideles*” in Latin, they sat down when the choir sang, “*tibi sit gloria.*”

“Which proves they’re taking what they hear literally,” Calvin said when I took him into the kitchen out of earshot of the Altairi to tell him.

“Yes, which means we’ve got to make sure they don’t hear any words which have double meanings,” I said. “We can’t even play them ‘Deck the



Halls,' for fear they might deck someone.”

“And we definitely can’t play them ‘laid in a manger,’” he said, grinning.

“It’s not funny,” I said. “At this rate, we aren’t going to be able to play them *anything*.”

“There must be some songs—”

“*What?*” I said in frustration. “‘I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm,’ has hearts on fire, ‘Christmastide’ might bring on a tsunami, and ‘be born in us today’ sounds like a scene out of *Alien*.”

“I know,” he said. “Don’t worry, we’ll find something. Here, I’ll help you.” He cleared off the kitchen table, brought in the stacks of sheet music, albums, and CDs, and sat me down across from him. “I’ll find songs and you check the lyrics.”

We started through them. “No ... no ... what about ‘I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day’?”

“No,” I said, looking up the lyrics. “It’s got ‘hate,’ ‘dead,’ and ‘despair.’”

“Cheery,” he said. There was a pause while we looked through more music. “John Lennon’s ‘Happy Xmas?’ “

I shook my head. “‘War,’ also ‘fights’ and ‘fear.’”

Another pause, and then he said, “‘All I want for Christmas is you.’”

I looked up at him, startled. “What did you say?”

“‘All I Want for Christmas Is You,’” he repeated. “Song title. Mariah Carey song.”

“Oh.” I looked up the lyrics. “I think it might be okay. I don’t see any murder or mayhem,” but he was shaking his head.

“On second thought, I don’t think we’d better. Love can be even more dangerous than war.”

I looked into the living room where the Altairi stood glaring through the door at me. “I seriously doubt they’re here to steal Earthwomen.”

“Yeah, but we wouldn’t want to give anybody any ideas.”

“No,” I said. “We definitely wouldn’t want to do that.”

We went back to searching for songs. “How about ‘I’ll Be Home for Christmas’?” he said, holding up a Patti Page album.

“I’ll Be Home” passed muster, but the Altairi didn’t respond to it, or to Ed Ames singing “Ballad of the Christmas Donkey” or Miss Piggy singing “Santa Baby.”

There didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to their responses. The keys weren’t the same, or the notes, or the voices. They responded to the Andrews Sisters, but not to Randy Travis, and it wasn’t the voices either, because they responded to Julie Andrews’ “Awake, Awake, Ye Drowsy Souls.” When we played them her “Silver Bells,” they didn’t laugh (which didn’t really surprise me) or bustle, but when the song got to the part about the traffic lights blinking red and green, all six of them blinked their eyes. Yet when we played them her, “Rise Up Shepherd, and Follow,” they just sat there.

“Try her ‘Christmas Waltz,’” I said, looking at the album cover.

He shook his head. “It’s got love in it, too. You *did* say you didn’t have a boyfriend, didn’t you?”

“That’s right,” I said, “and I have no intention of dating the Altairi.”

“Good,” he said. “Can you think of any other songs with ‘blink’ in them?”

\* \* \* \*

By the time he left to rehearse with the symphony, we didn’t know any more than when we started. I took the Altairi back to Dr. Wakamura, who didn’t seem all that happy to see them, tried to find a song with “blink” in it, to no avail, had lunch, and went back over to Calvin’s apartment.

He was already there, working. I started through the sheet music. “What about ‘Good Christian Men, Rejoice’?” I said. “It’s got ‘bow’ in it,” and the phone rang.

Calvin answered it. “What is it, Belinda?” he said, listened a moment,

and then said, "Turn on the TV," and handed me the remote.

I switched on the television. Marvin the Martian was telling Bugs Bunny he planned to incinerate the earth. "CNN," Calvin said. "It's on forty."

I punched in the channel and then was sorry. Reverend Thresher was standing in the audio lab in front of a mob of reporters, saying, "—happy to announce that we have found the answer to the Altairi's actions in the mall two days ago. Christmas carols were playing over the sound system in the mall—"

"Oh, no," I said.

"I thought the surveillance tapes didn't have any sound," Calvin said.

"They don't. Someone else in the mall must have had a videocam."

"—and when the Altairi heard those holy songs," Reverend Thresher was saying, "they were overcome by the truth of their message, by the power of God's blessed word—"

"Oh, no," Calvin said.

"—and they sank to the ground in repentance for their sins."

"They did not," I said. "They sat down."

"For the past nine months, scientists have been seeking to discover the reason why the Altairi came to our planet. They should have turned to our Blessed Savior instead, for it is in Him that all answers lie. Why have the Altairi come here? To be saved! They've come to be born again, as we shall demonstrate." He held up a CD of Christmas carols.

"Oh, *no!*" we both said. I grabbed for my cell phone.

"Like the wise men of old," Reverend Thresher was saying, "they have come seeking Christ, which proves that Christianity is the only true religion."

Dr. Morthman took forever to answer his phone. When he did, I said, "Dr. Morthman, you mustn't let the Altairi listen to any Christmas carols—"

"I can't talk now," he said. "We're in the middle of a press conference," and hung up.

“Dr. Morthman—” I hit redial.

“There’s no time for that,” Calvin, who’d snatched up his keys and my coat, said. “Come on, we’ll take my car,” and as we racketed downstairs, “There were a lot of reporters there, and he just said something that will make every Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Wiccan, and non-evangelical Christian on the planet go ballistic. If we’re lucky, he’ll still be answering questions when we get there.”

“And if we’re not?”

“The Altairi will be out seizing troubled minds, and we’ll have a holy war on our hands.”

\* \* \* \*

We almost made it. There were, as Calvin had predicted, a *lot* of questions, particularly after Reverend Thresher stated that the Altairi agreed with him on abortion, gay marriage, and the necessity of electing Republicans to all political offices.

But the clamoring reporters clogging the steps, the door, and the hall made it nearly impossible to get through, and by the time we reached the audio lab, Reverend Thresher was pointing proudly to the Altairi kneeling on the other side of the one-way mirror and telling the reporters, “As you can see, their hearing the Christmas message has made them kneel in repentance—”

“Oh, no, they must be listening to ‘O Holy Night,’” I said, “or ‘As With Gladness Men of Old,’”

“What did you play them?” Calvin demanded. He pointed at the kneeling Altairi.

“The One True Way Maxichurch Christmas CD,” Reverend Thresher said proudly, holding up the case, which the reporters obligingly snapped, filmed, and downloaded to their iPods. “*Christmas Carols for True Christians.*”

“No, no, what *song*?”

“Do the individual carols hold a special significance for them?” the

reporters were shouting, and “What carol were they listening to in the mall?” and “Have they been baptized, Reverend Thresher?” while I tried to tell Dr. Morthman, “You’ve got to turn the music off.”

“Off?” Dr. Morthman said, yelling to be heard over the reporters. “Just when we’re finally making progress communicating with the Altairi?”

“You *have* to tell us which songs you’ve played!” Calvin shouted.

“Who are *you*?” Reverend Thresher demanded.

“He’s with me,” I said, and to Dr. Morthman, “You have to turn it off right now. Some of the carols are dangerous.”

“*Dangerous*?” he bellowed, and the reporters’ attention swiveled to us.

“What do you mean, dangerous?” they asked.

“I mean dangerous,” Calvin said. “The Altairi aren’t repenting of anything. They’re—”

“How dare you accuse the Altairi of not being born again?” Reverend Thresher said. “I saw them respond to the hymnwriter’s inspiring words with my own eyes, saw them fall on their knees—”

“They responded to ‘Silver Bells,’ too,” I said, “and to ‘The Hanukkah Song.’”

“The ‘Hanukkah Song’?” the reporters said and began pelting us with questions again. “Does that mean they’re Jewish?” “Orthodox or Reformed?” “What’s their response to Hindu chants?” “What about the Mormon Tabernacle Choir? Do they respond to that?”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with religion,” Calvin said. “The Altairi are responding to the literal meaning of certain words in the songs. Some of the words they’re listening to right now could be dangerous—”

“Blasphemy!” Reverend Thresher bellowed. “How could the blessed Christmas message be dangerous?”

“‘Christmas Day is Come,’ tells them to slay young children,” I said, “and the lyrics of other carols have blood and war and stars raining fire.”

That's why you've got to turn off the music right now."

"Too late," Calvin said and pointed through the one-way mirror.

The Altairi weren't there. "Where are they?" the reporters began shouting. "Where did they go?" and Reverend Thresher and Dr. Morthman both turned to me and demanded to know what I'd done with them.

"Leave her alone. She doesn't know where they are any more than you do," Calvin said in his choir director voice.

The effect on the room was the same as it had been on his seventh graders. Dr. Morthman let go of me, and the reporters shut up. "Now, what song were you playing?" Calvin said to Reverend Thresher.

"'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen,'" Reverend Thresher said, "but it's one of the oldest and most beloved Christmas carols. It's ridiculous to think hearing it could endanger anyone—"

"Is 'God Rest Ye' why they left?" the reporters were shouting, and "What are the words? Is there any war in it? Or children-slaying?"

"'God rest ye merry, gentlemen,'" I muttered under my breath, trying to remember the lyrics, "'let nothing you dismay....'"

"Where did they go?" the reporters clamored.

"...oh, tidings of comfort and joy," I murmured. I glanced over at Calvin. He was doing the same thing I was. "...to save us all ... when we are gone..."

"Where do you think they've gone?" a reporter called out.

Calvin looked at me. "Astray," he said grimly.

\* \* \* \*

The Altairi weren't in the other labs, in any of the other buildings on campus, or in their ship. Or at least no one had seen the ramp to it come down and them go inside. No one had seen them crossing the campus either, or on the surrounding streets.

"I hold you entirely responsible for this, Miss Yates," Dr. Morthman said. "Send out an APB," he told the police. "And put out a Megan Alert."

“That’s for when a child’s been kidnapped,” I said. “The Altairi haven’t—”

“We don’t know that,” he snapped. He turned back to the police officer. “And call the FBI.”

The police officer turned to Calvin. “Dr. Morthman said you said the aliens were responding to the words, ‘gone astray.’ Were there any other words in the song that are dangerous?”

“Sa—” I began.

“No,” Calvin said, and while Dr. Morthman was telling the officer to call Homeland Security and tell them to declare a Code Red, he hustled me down the sidewalk and behind the Altairi’s ship.

“Why did you tell them that?” I demanded. “What about ‘scorn’? What about ‘Satan’s power’?”

“Shh,” he whispered. “He’s already calling Homeland Security. We don’t want him to call out the Air Force. And the nukes,” he said. “And there’s no time to explain things to them. We’ve got to find the Altairi.”

“Do you have any idea where they could have gone?”

“No. At least their ship’s still here,” he said, looking over at it.

I wasn’t sure that meant anything, considering the Altairi had been able to get out of a lab with a locked door. I said as much, and Calvin agreed. “‘Gone astray’ may not even be what they were responding to. They may be off looking for a manger or shepherds. And there are different versions. *Christmas Carols for True Christians* may have used an older one.”

“In which case we need to go back to the lab and find out exactly what it was they heard,” I said, my heart sinking. Dr. Morthman was likely to have me arrested.

Apparently Calvin had reached the same conclusion because he said, “We can’t go back in there. It’s too risky, and we’ve got to find the Altairi before Reverend Thresher does. There’s no telling what he’ll play them next.”

“But how—?”

“If they did go astray, then they may still be in the area. You go get your car and check the streets north of the campus, and I’ll do south. Do you have your cell phone?”

“Yes, but I don’t have a car. Mine’s at your apartment. We came over in yours, remember?”

“What about the van you use to take the Altairi places in?”

“But won’t that be awfully noticeable?”

“They’re looking for six alien son of a bitch, not in a van,” he said, “and besides, if you find them, you’ll need something to put them in.”

“You’re right,” I said and took off for the faculty parking lot, hoping Dr. Morthman hadn’t had the same idea.

He hadn’t. The parking lot was deserted. I slid the van’s back door open, half-hoping this was the Altairi’s idea of astray, but they weren’t inside, or on any of the streets for an area two miles north of DU. I drove up University Boulevard and then slowly up and down the side streets, terrified I’d find them squished on the pavement.

It was starting to get dark. I called Calvin. “No sign of them,” I told him. “Maybe they went back to the mall. I’m going to go over there and—”

“No, don’t do that,” he said. “Dr. Morthman and the FBI are there. I’m watching it on CNN. They’re searching Victoria’s Secret. Besides, the Altairi aren’t there.”

“How do you know?”

“Because they’re here at my apartment.”

“They are?” I said, weak with relief. “Where did you find them?”

He didn’t answer me. “Don’t take any major streets on your way over here,” he said. “And park in the alley.”

“Why? What have they done?” I asked, but he’d already hung up.

\* \* \* \*



The Altairi were standing in the middle of Calvin's living room when I got there. "I came back here to check on alternate lyrics for 'God Rest Ye' and found them waiting for me," Calvin explained. "Did you park in the alley?"

"Yes, at the other end of the block. What have they done?" I repeated, almost afraid to ask.

"Nothing. At least nothing that's been on CNN," he said, gesturing at the TV, which was showing the police searching the candle store. He had the sound turned down, but across the bottom of the screen was the logo, "Aliens AWOL."

"Then why all the secrecy?"

"Because we can't afford to let them find the Altairi till we've figured out why they're doing what they're doing. Next time it might not be as harmless as going astray. And we can't go to your apartment. Morthman knows where you live. We're going to have to hole up here. Did you tell anybody you were working with me?"

I tried to think. I'd attempted to tell Dr. Morthman about Calvin when I got back from the mall, but I hadn't gotten far enough to tell him Calvin's name, and when Reverend Thresher had demanded, "Who are you?" all I'd said was, "He's with me."

"I didn't tell anybody your name," I said.

"Good," he said. "And I'm pretty sure nobody saw the Altairi coming here."

"But how can you be sure? Your neighbors—"

"Because the Altairi were waiting for me inside," he said. "Right where they are now. So either they can pick locks, walk through walls, or teleport. My money's on teleportation. And it's obvious the commission doesn't have any idea where they are," he said, pointing at the TV, where a mugshot-like photo of the Altairi was displayed, with "Have you seen these aliens?" and a phone number to call across their midsections. "And luckily, I went to the grocery store and stocked up the other day so I wouldn't have to go shopping in between all my concerts."

"Your concerts! And the All-City Sing! I forgot all about them," I said,

stricken with guilt. “Weren’t you supposed to have a rehearsal tonight?”

“I canceled it,” he said, “and I can cancel the one tomorrow morning if I have to. The Sing’s not till tomorrow night. We’ve got plenty of time to figure this out.”

If they don’t find us first, I thought, looking at the TV, where they were searching the food court. Once they realized they couldn’t find the Altairi anywhere, they’d notice I was missing, too, and start looking for us. And the reporters today, unlike Leo, had all been videotaping. If they put Calvin’s picture on TV with a number to call, one of his church choir members or his seventh graders would be certain to call in and identify him.

Which meant we’d better work fast. I picked up the list of songs and actions we’d compiled. “Where do you want to start?” I asked Calvin, who was going through a stack of LPs.

“*Not* with ‘Frosty the Snowman,’” he said. “I don’t think I can stand any more chasing here and there.”

“How about, ‘I Wonder as I Wander’?”

“Very funny,” he said. “Since we know they respond to ‘kneeling,’ why don’t we start with that?”

“Okay.” We played them “fall on your knees” and “come adore on bended knee” and “whose forms are bending low,” some of which they responded to and some of which they didn’t, for no reason we could see.

“‘The First Noel’ has ‘full reverently upon their knee’ in it,” I said, and Calvin started toward the bedroom to look for it.

He stopped as he passed in front of the TV. “I think you’d better come look at this,” he said and turned it up.

“The Altairi were not at the mall, as we had hoped,” Dr. Morthman was saying, “and it has just come to our attention that a member of our commission is also missing, Margaret Yates.” Video of the scene at the lab came on behind Dr. Morthman and the reporter, with me shouting for him to shut the music off. Any second a picture of Calvin would appear, demanding to know which carol they were playing.

I grabbed up my phone and called Dr. Morthman, hoping against hope they couldn’t trace cell phone calls and that he’d answer even though

he was on TV.

He did, and the camera blessedly zoomed in on him so only a tiny piece of the video remained visible. “Where are you calling from?” he demanded. “Did you find the Altairi?”

“No,” I said, “but I think I have an idea where they might be.”

“Where?” Dr. Morthman said.

“I don’t think they’ve gone astray. I think they may be responding to one of the other words in the song. ‘Rest’ or possibly—”

“I knew it,” Reverend Thresher said, shoving in front of Dr. Morthman. “They were responding to the words, ‘Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day.’ They’ve gone to church. They’re at the One True Way right this minute.”

It wasn’t what I had in mind, but at least a photo of the One True Way Maxichurch was better than one of Calvin. “That should give us at least two hours. His church is way down in Colorado Springs,” I said, turning the TV back down. I went back to playing songs to the Altairi and logging their responses and non-responses, but half an hour later when Calvin went in the bedroom to look for a Louis Armstrong CD, he stopped in front of the TV again and frowned.

“What happened?” I said, dumping the pile of sheet music on my lap on the couch beside me and sidling past the Altairi to get to him. “Didn’t they take the bait?”

“Oh, they took it, all right,” he said and turned up the TV.

“We believe the Altairi are in Bethlehem,” Dr. Morthman was saying. He was standing in front of a departures board at DIA.

“*Bethlehem?*” I said.

“It’s mentioned in the lyrics twice,” Calvin said. “At least if they’re off in Israel it gives us more time.”

“It also gives us an international incident,” I said. “In the Middle East, no less. I’ve got to call Dr. Morthman,” but he must have turned his cell phone off, and I couldn’t get through to the lab.

“You could call Reverend Thresher,” Calvin said, pointing to the TV screen.

Reverend Thresher was surrounded by reporters as he got into his Lexus. “I’m on my way to the Altairi right now, and tonight we will hold a Praise Worship Service, and you’ll be able to hear their Christian witness and the Christmas carols that first brought them to the Lord—”

Calvin switched the TV off. “It’s a sixteen hour flight to Bethlehem,” he said encouragingly. “It surely won’t take us that long to figure this out.”

The phone rang. Calvin shot me a glance and then picked it up. “Hello, Mr. Steinberg,” he said. “Didn’t you get my message? I canceled tonight’s rehearsal.” He listened awhile. “If you’re worried about your entrance on page twelve, we’ll run over it before the Sing.” He listened some more. “It’ll all come together. It always does.”

I hoped that would be true of our solving the puzzle of the Altairi. If it wasn’t, we’d be charged with kidnapping. Or starting a religious war. But both were better than letting Reverend Thresher play them “slowly dying” and “thorns infest the ground.” Which meant we’d better figure out what the Altairi were responding to, and fast. We played them Dolly Parton and Manhattan Transfer and the Barbershop Choir of Toledo and Dean Martin.

Which was a bad idea. I’d had almost no sleep the last two days, and I found myself nodding off after the first few bars. I sat up straight and tried to concentrate on the Altairi, but it was no use. The next thing I knew, my head was on Calvin’s shoulder, and he was saying, “Meg? Meg? Do the Altairi sleep?”

“Sleep?” I said, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. “I’m sorry, I must have dozed off. What time is it?”

“A little after four.”

“In the *morning*?”

“Yes. Do the Altairi sleep?”

“Yes, at least we think so. Their brain patterns alter, and they don’t respond to stimuli, but then again, they *never* respond.”

“Are there visible signs that they’re asleep? Do they close their eyes or lie down?”

“No, they sort of droop over, like flowers that haven’t been watered. And their glares diminish a little. Why?”

“I have something I want to try. Go back to sleep.”

“No, that’s okay,” I said, suppressing a yawn. “If anybody needs to sleep, it’s you. I’ve kept you up the last two nights, and you’ve got to direct your Sing thing. I’ll take over and you go—”

He shook his head. “I’m fine. I told you, I never get any sleep this time of year.”

“So what’s this idea you want to try?”

“I want to play them the first verse of ‘Silent Night.’”

“Sleep in heavenly peace,” I said.

“Right, and no other action verbs, *and* I’ve got at least fifty versions of it. Johnny Cash, Kate Smith, Britney Spears—”

“Do we have time to play them fifty different versions?” I asked, looking over at the TV. A split screen showed a map of Israel and the outside of the One True Way Maxichurch. When I turned the volume up, a reporter’s voice said, “Inside, thousands of members are awaiting the appearance of the Altairi, whom Reverend Thresher expects at any minute. A twenty-four hour High-Powered Prayer Vigil—”

I turned it back down. “I guess we do. You were saying?”

“‘Silent Night’ is a song everybody—Gene Autry, Madonna, Burl Ives—has recorded. Different voices, different accompaniments, different keys. We can see which versions they respond to—”

“And which ones they don’t,” I said, “and that may give us a clue to what they’re responding to.”

“Exactly,” he said, opening a CD case. He stuck it in the player and hit Track 4. “Here goes.”

The voice of Elvis Presley singing, “Silent night, holy night,” filled the room. Calvin came back over to the couch and sat down next to me. When Elvis got to “tender and mild,” we both leaned forward expectantly, watching

the Altairi. "Sleep in heavenly peace," Elvis crooned, but the Altairi were still stiffly upright. They remained that way through the repeated "sleep in heavenly peace." And through Alvin the Chipmunks' solo of it. And Celine Dion's.

"Their glares don't appear to be diminishing," Calvin said. "If anything, they seem to be getting worse."

They were. "You'd better play them Judy Garland," I said.

He did, and Dolly Parton and Harry Belafonte. "What if they don't respond to any of them?" I asked.

"Then we try something else. I've also got twenty-six versions of 'Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.'" He grinned at me. "I'm kidding. I do, however, have nine different versions of 'Baby It's Cold Outside.'"

"For use on second sopranos?"

"No," he said. "Shh, I love this version. Nat King Cole."

I shh-ed and listened, wondering how the Altairi could resist falling asleep. Nat King Cole's voice was even more relaxing than Dean Martin's. I leaned back against the couch. "All is calm, all..."

I must have fallen asleep again because the next thing I knew the music had stopped, and it was daylight outside. I looked at my watch. It said two PM. The Altairi were standing in the exact same spot they'd been in before, glaring, and Calvin was sitting hunched forward on a kitchen chair, his chin in his hand, watching them and looking worried.

"Did something happen?" I glanced over at the TV. Reverend Thresher was talking. The logo read, "Thresher Launches Galaxywide Christian Crusade." At least it didn't say, "Air Strikes in Middle East."

Calvin was slowly shaking his head.

"Wasn't there any response to 'Silent Night'?" I asked.

"No, there was," he said. "You responded to the version by Nat King Cole."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry. I meant the Altairi. They didn't respond to any of the 'Silent Nights'?"

“No, they responded,” he said, “but just to one version.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?” I asked. “Now we can analyze what it was that was different about it that they were responding to. Which version was it?”

Instead of answering, he walked over to the CD player and hit play. A loud chorus of nasal female voices began belting out, “Silent night, holy night,” shouting to be heard over a cacophony of clinks and clacks. “What is that?” I asked.

“The Broadway chorus of the musical *42nd Street* singing and tap-dancing to ‘Silent Night.’ They recorded it for a special Broadway Christmas charity project.”

I looked over at the Altairi, thinking maybe Calvin was wrong and they hadn’t really fallen asleep, but in spite of the din, they had sagged limply over, their heads nearly touching the ground, looking almost peaceful. Their glares had faded from full-bore Aunt Judith to only mildly disapproving.

I listened to the *42nd Street* chorines tapping and belting out “Silent Night” at the top of their lungs some more. “It is kind of appealing,” I said, “especially the part where they shout out ‘Mother and child!’”

“I know,” he said. “I’d like it played at our wedding. And obviously the Altairi share our good taste. But aside from that, I’m not sure *what* it tells us.”

“That the Altairi like show tunes?” I suggested.

“God forbid. Think what Reverend Thresher would do with that,” he said. “Besides, they didn’t respond to ‘Sit Down, You’re Rocking the Boat.’”

“No, but they did to that song from ‘Mame.’”

“And to the one from *1776*,” he said, “but not to *The Music Man* or *Rent*,” he said frustratedly. “Which puts us right back where we started. I have no clue what they’re responding to!”

“I know,” I said. “I’m so sorry. I should never have gotten you involved in this. You have your ACHES thing to direct.”

"It doesn't start till seven," he said, rummaging through a stack of LPs, "which means we've got another four hours to work. If we could just find another 'Silent Night' they'll respond to, we might be able to figure out what in God's name they're doing. What the hell happened to that *Star Wars Christmas* album?"

"Stop," I said, "this is ridiculous." I took the albums out of his hands. "You're exhausted, and you've got a big job to do. You can't direct all those people on no sleep. This can wait."

"But—"

"People think better after a nap," I said firmly. "You'll wake up, and the solution will be perfectly obvious."

"And if it isn't?"

"Then you'll go direct your choir, and—"

"Choirs," he said thoughtfully.

"Or All-City Sing or Aches and Pains or whatever you call it, and I'll stay here and play the Altairi some more 'Silent Nights' till you get back and—"

"'Sit Down, John' was sung by the chorus," he said, looking past me at the drooping Altairi. "And so was 'While Shepherds Watched.' And the *42nd Street* 'Silent Night' was the only one that wasn't a solo." He grabbed my shoulders. "They're all choruses. That's why they didn't respond to Julie Andrews singing 'Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow,' or to Stubby Kaye singing 'Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat.' They only respond to groups of voices."

I shook my head. "You forgot 'Awake, Awake, Ye Drowsy Souls.'"

"Oh," he said, his face falling, "you're right. Wait!" He lunged for the Julie Andrews CD and stuck it in the recorder. "I think Julie Andrews sings the verse and then a chorus comes in. Listen."

He was right. The chorus had sung "Awake, awake."

"Who sang the 'Joy to the World' you played them on the CD from the mall?" Calvin asked.



“Just Julie Andrews,” I said. “And Brenda Lee sang ‘Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.’”

“And Johnny Mathis sang ‘Angels from the Realms of Glory,’” he said happily. “But the Hanukkah song, which they did respond to, was sung by the...” he read it off the CD case, “the Shalom Singers. That’s got to be it.” He began looking through the LPs again.

“What are you looking for?” I asked.

“The Mormon Tabernacle Choir,” he said. “They’ve *got* to have recorded ‘Silent Night.’ We’ll play it for the Altairi, and if they fall asleep, we’ll know we’re on the right track—”

“But they’re already asleep,” I pointed out, gesturing to where they stood looking like a week-old flower arrangement. “How—?”

He was already digging again. He brought up a Cambridge Boys’ Choir album, pulled the LP out, and read the label, muttering, “I know it’s on here ... here it is.” He put it on, and a chorus of sweet boys’ voices sang, “‘Christians Awake, Salute the Happy Morn.’”

The Altairi straightened immediately and glared at us. “You were right,” I said softly, but he wasn’t listening. He had the LP off the turntable and was reading the label again, muttering, “Come on, you have to have done ‘Silent Night.’ Everyone does ‘Silent Night.’” He flipped the LP over, said, “I *knew* it,” popped it back on the turntable, and dropped the needle expertly. “...and mild,” the boys’ angelic voices sang, “‘sleep...’”

The Altairi drooped over before the word was even out. “That’s definitely it!” I said. “That’s the common denominator.”

He shook his head. “We need more data. It could just be a coincidence. We need to find a choral version of ‘Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow.’ And ‘Sit Down, You’re Rocking the Boat.’ Where did you put *Guys and Dolls*?”

“But that was a solo.”

“The first part, the part we played them was a solo. Later on all the gamblers come in. We should have played them the whole song.”

“We couldn’t, remember?” I said, handing it to him. “Remember the

parts about dragging you under and drowning, not to mention gambling and drinking?”

“Oh, right,” he said. He put headphones on, listened, and then unplugged them. “Sit Down...” a chorus of men’s voices sang lustily, and the Altairi sat down.

We played choir versions of “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth” and “Rise Up, Shepherds, and Follow.” The Altairi sat down and stood up. “You’re right,” he said after the Altairi knelt to the Platters singing “The First Noel.” “It’s the common denominator, all right. But why?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Maybe they can’t understand things said to them by fewer voices than a choir. That would explain why there are six of them. Maybe each one only hears certain frequencies, which singly are meaningless, but with six of them—”

He shook his head. “You’re forgetting the Andrews Sisters. And Barenaked Ladies. And even if it is the choir aspect they’re responding to, it still doesn’t tell us what they’re doing here.”

“But now we know how to get them to tell us,” I said, grabbing up *The Holly Jolly Book of Christmas Songs*. “Can you find a choir version of ‘Adeste Fideles’ in English?”

“I think so,” he said. “Why?”

“Because it’s got ‘we greet thee’ in it,” I said, running my fingers down the lyrics of “Good Christian Men, Rejoice.”

“And there’s ‘Watchman, Tell Us of the Night,’” he said. “And ‘great glad tidings tell.’ They’re bound to respond to one of them.”

But they didn’t. Peter, Paul, and Mary ordered the Altairi to “go tell” (we blanked out the “on the mountain part”), but either the Altairi didn’t like folk music, or the Andrews Sisters had been a fluke.

Or we had jumped to conclusions. When we tried the same song again, this time by the Boston Commons Choir, there was still no response. And none to choral versions of “Deck the Halls” (“while I tell”) or “Jolly Old St. Nicholas” (“don’t you tell a single soul” minus “don’t” and “a single soul”). Or to “The Friendly Beasts,” even though all six verses had “tell” in them.

Calvin thought the tense might be the problem and played parts of “Little St. Nick” (“tale” and “told”) and “The Carol of the Bells” (“telling”), but to no avail. “Maybe the word’s the problem,” I said. “Maybe they just don’t know the word ‘tell,’” but they didn’t respond to “say” or to “saying” and “said,” to “messages” or to “proclaim.”

“We must have been wrong about the choir thing,” Calvin said, but that wasn’t it either. While he was in the bedroom putting his tux on for the Sing, I played them snatches of “Angel’s We Have Heard on High” and “Up on the Rooftop” from the Barenaked Ladies CD, and they knelt and jumped right on cue.

“Maybe they think Earth’s a gym and this is an exercise class,” Calvin said, coming in as they were leaping to the St. Paul’s Cathedral Choir singing “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” “I don’t suppose the word ‘calling’ had any effect on them.”

“No,” I said, tying his bow tie, “and ‘I’m offering this simple phrase’ didn’t either. Has it occurred to you that the music might not be having any effect at all, and they just happen to be sitting and leaping and kneeling at the same time as the words are being sung?”

“No,” he said. “There’s a connection. If there wasn’t, they wouldn’t look so irritated that we haven’t been able to figure it out yet.”

He was right. Their glares had, if anything, intensified, and their very posture radiated disapproval.

“We need more data, that’s all,” he said, going to get his black shoes. “As soon as I get back, we’ll—” He stopped.

“What is it?”

“You’d better look at this,” he said, pointing at the TV. The screen was showing a photo of the ship. All the lights were on, and exhaust was coming out of assorted side vents. Calvin grabbed the remote and turned it up.

“It is now believed that the Altairi have returned to their ship and are preparing to depart,” the newscaster said. I glanced over at the Altairi. They were still standing there. “Analysis of the ignition cycle indicates that takeoff will be in less than six hours.”

“What do we do now?” I asked Calvin.

“We figure this out. You heard them. We’ve got six hours till blast-off.”

“But the Sing—”

He handed me my coat. “We know it’s got *something* to do with choirs, and I’ve got every kind you could want. We’ll take the Altairi to the convention center and hope we think of something on the way.”

\* \* \* \*

We didn’t think of anything on the way. “Maybe I should take them back to their ship,” I said, pulling into the parking lot. “What if I cause them to get left behind?”

“They are *not* E.T.,” he said.

I parked at the service entrance, got out, and started to slide the back door of the van open. “No, leave them there,” Calvin said. “We’ve got to find a place to put them before we take them in. Lock the car.”

I did, even though I doubted if it would do any good, and followed Calvin through a side door marked “Choirs Only” and through a maze of corridors lined with rooms marked, “St. Peter’s Boys Choir,” “Red Hat Glee Club,” “Denver Gay Men’s Chorus,” “Sweet Adelines Show Chorus,” “Mile High Jazz Singers.” There was a hubbub in the front of the building, and when we crossed the main corridor, we could see people in gold and green and black robes milling around talking.

Calvin opened several doors one after the other, ducked inside the rooms, shutting the door after him, and then re-emerged, shaking his head. “We can’t let the Altairi hear the *Messiah*, and you can still hear the noise from the auditorium,” he said. “We need someplace soundproof.”

“Or farther away,” I said, leading the way down the corridor and turning down a side hall. And running smack into his seventh graders coming out of one of the meeting rooms. Mrs. Carlson was videotaping them, and another mother was attempting to line them up to go in, but as soon as they saw Calvin, they clustered around him saying, “Mr. Ledbetter, where have you been? We thought you weren’t coming,” and “Mr. Ledbetter, Mrs. Carlson says we have to turn our cell phones off, but can’t we just have them on vibrate?” and “Mr. Ledbetter, Shelby and I were supposed to go in together, but she says she wants to be partners with Danika.”

Calvin ignored them. “Kaneesha, could you hear any of the groups rehearsing when you were in getting dressed?”

“Why?” Belinda asked. “Did we miss the call to go in?”

“Could you, Kaneesha?” he persisted.

“A little bit,” she said.

“That won’t work then,” he said to me. “I’ll go check the room at the end. Wait here.” He sprinted along the hall.

“You were at the mall that day,” Belinda said accusingly to me. “Are you and Mr. Ledbetter going out?”

We may all be going out together—with a bang—if we don’t figure out what the Altairi are doing, I thought. “No,” I said.

“Are you hooking up?” Chelsea asked.

“Chelsea!” Mrs. Carlson said, horrified.

“Well, are you?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be lining up?” I asked.

Calvin came back at a dead run. “It should work,” he said to me. “It seems fairly soundproof.”

“Why does it have to be soundproof?” Chelsea asked.

“I bet it’s so nobody can hear them making out,” Belinda said, and Chelsea began making smooching noises.

“Time to go in, ladies,” he said in his director’s voice, “line up,” and he really was amazing. They immediately formed pairs and began making a line.

“Wait till everybody’s gone into the auditorium,” he said, pulling me aside, “and then go get them and bring them in. I’ll do a few minutes’ intro of the orchestra and the organizing committee so the Altairi won’t hear any songs while you’re getting them to the room. There’s a table you can use to barricade the door so nobody can get in.”

“And what if the Altairi try to leave?” I asked. “A barricade won’t stop them, you know.”

“Call me on my cell phone, and I’ll tell the audience there’s a fire drill or something. Okay? I’ll make this as short as I can.” He grinned. “No ‘Twelve Days of Christmas.’ Don’t worry, Meg. We’ll figure this out.”

“I *told* you she was his girlfriend.”

“*Is* she, Mr. Ledbetter?”

“Let’s go, ladies,” he said and led them down the hall and into the auditorium. Just as the auditorium doors shut on the last stragglers, my cell phone rang. It was Dr. Morthman, calling to say, “You can stop looking. The Altairi are in their ship.”

“How do you know? Have you seen them?” I asked, thinking, I knew I shouldn’t have left them in the car.

“No, but the ship’s begun the ignition process, and it’s going faster than NASA previously estimated. They’re now saying it’s no more than four hours to takeoff. Where are you?”

“On my way back,” I said, trying not to sound like I was running out to the parking lot and unlocking the van, which, thank goodness, was at least still there and intact.

“Well, hurry it up,” Dr. Morthman snapped. “The press is here. You’re going to have to explain to them exactly how you let the Altairi get away.” I pulled open the van’s door. The Altairi weren’t inside. Oh, no. “I blame this entire debacle on you,” Dr. Morthman said. “If there are international repercussions—”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” I said, hung up, and turned to run around to the driver’s side.

And collided with the Altairi, who had apparently been standing behind me the entire time. “Don’t scare me like that,” I said. “Now come on,” and led them rapidly into the convention center, past the shut doors of the auditorium, where I could hear talking but not singing, thank goodness, and along the long hall to the room Calvin had indicated.

It was empty except for the table Calvin had mentioned. I herded the Altairi inside and then tipped the table on its side, pushed it in front of the

door, wedging it under the doorknob, and then leaned my ear against the door to see if I could hear any sound from the auditorium, but Calvin had been right. I couldn't hear anything, and they should have started by now.

And now what? With takeoff only four hours away, I needed to take advantage of every second, but there was nothing in the room I could use—no piano or CD player or LPs. We should have used his seventh graders' dressing room, I thought. They'd at least have had ipods or something.

But even if I played the Altairi hundreds of Christmas carols being sung by a choir, and they responded to them all—bowing, decking halls, dashing through snow in a one-horse open sleigh, following yonder star—I'd still be no closer to figuring out why they were here or why they'd decided to leave. Or why they'd taken the very loud tap-dancing chorus of *42nd Street* singing "Sleep in heavenly peace" as a direct order. If they even know what the word "sleep"—or "seated" or "spin" or "blink"—meant.

Calvin had surmised they could only hear words sung to them with more than one voice, but that couldn't be it. Someone hearing a word for the first time would have no idea what it meant, and they'd never heard "all seated on the ground" till that day in the mall. They had to have heard the word before to have known what it meant, and they'd only have heard it spoken. Which meant they could hear spoken words as well as sung ones.

They could have read the words, I thought, remembering the Rosetta Stone and the dictionaries Dr. Short had given them. But even if they'd somehow taught themselves to read English, they wouldn't know how it was pronounced. They wouldn't have recognized it when they heard it spoken. The only way they could do that was by hearing the spoken word. Which meant they'd been listening to and understanding every word we'd said for the past nine months. Including Calvin's and my conversations about them slaying babies and destroying the planet. No wonder they were leaving.

But if they understood us, then that meant one of two things—they were either unwilling to talk to us or were incapable of speaking. Had their sitting down and their other responses been an attempt at sign language?

No, that couldn't be it either. They could have responded just as easily to a spoken "sit" and done it months earlier. And if they were trying to communicate, wouldn't they have given Calvin and me some hint we were on the right—or the wrong—track instead of just standing there with that we-are-not-amused glare? And I didn't believe for a moment those expressions were an accident of nature. I knew disapproval when I saw it.

I'd watched Aunt Judith too many years not to—

Aunt Judith. I took my cell phone out of my pocket and called my sister Tracy. "Tell me everything you can remember about Aunt Judith," I said when she answered.

"Has something happened to her?" she said, sounding alarmed. "When I talked to her last week she—"

"Last week?" I said. "You mean Aunt Judith's still *alive*?"

"Well, she was last week when we had lunch."

"*Lunch*? With Aunt Judith? Are we talking about the same person? Dad's Aunt Judith? The Gorgon?"

"Yes, only she's not a Gorgon. She's actually very nice when you get to know her."

"Aunt Judith," I said, "the one who always glared disapprovingly at everybody?"

"Yes, only she hasn't glared at me in years. As I say, when you get to know her—"

"And exactly how did you do that?"

"I thanked her for my birthday present."

"And—?" I said. "That can't have been all. Mom always made both of us thank her nicely for our presents."

"I know, but they weren't proper thank yous. 'A prompt handwritten note expressing gratitude is the only proper form of thanks,'" Tracy said, obviously quoting. "I was in high school, and we had to write a thank-you letter to someone for class. She'd just sent me my birthday card with the dollar in it, so I wrote her, and the next day she called and gave me this long lecture about the importance of good manners and how shocking it was that no one followed the most basic rules of etiquette any more and how she was delighted to see that at least one young person knew how to behave, and then she asked me if I'd like to go see *Les Miz* with her, and I bought a copy of Emily Post, and we've gotten along great ever since. She sent Evan and me a sterling silver fish slice when we got married."



“For which you sent her a hand-written thank-you note,” I said absently. Aunt Judith had been glaring because we were boorish and unmannered. Was that why the Altairi looked so disapproving, because they were waiting for the equivalent of a hand-written thank-you note from us?

If that was the case, we were doomed. Rules of etiquette are notoriously illogical and culture-specific, and there was no intergalactic Emily Post for me to consult. And I had, oh, God, less than two hours till lift-off.

“Tell me exactly what she said that day she called you,” I said, unwilling to give up the idea that she was somehow the key.

“It was eight years ago—”

“I know. Try to remember.”

“Okay ... there was a lot of stuff about gloves and how I shouldn’t wear white shoes after Labor Day and how I shouldn’t cross my legs. ‘Well-bred young ladies sit with their ankles crossed.’”

Had the Altairi’s sitting down in the mall been an etiquette lesson in the proper way to sit? It seemed unlikely, but so did Aunt Judith’s refusal to speak to people because of the color of their shoes on certain calendar dates.

“...and she said if I got married, I needed to send out engraved invitations,” Tracy said. “Which I did. I think that’s why she gave us the fish slice.”

“I don’t care about the fish slice. What did she say about your thank-you note?”

“She said, ‘Well, it’s about time, Tracy. I’d nearly given up hope of anyone in your family showing any signs of civilized behavior.’”

Civilized behavior. That was it. The Altairi, like Aunt Judith sitting in our living room glaring, had been waiting for a sign that we were civilized. And singing—correction, *group* singing—was that sign. But was it an arbitrary rule of etiquette, like white shoes and engraved invitations, or was it a symbol of something else?

I thought of Calvin telling his chattering seventh graders to line up,

and the milling giggling, chaotic muddle of girls coming together in an organized, beautifully behaved, *civilized* line.

Coming together. That was the civilized behavior the Altairi had been waiting for a sign of. And they'd seen precious little of it in the nine months they'd been here: the disorganized commission with members quitting and those who were left not listening to anyone; that awful rehearsal where the basses couldn't get the entrance right to save them; the harried shoppers in the mall, dragging their screaming children after them. The piped-in choir singing "While Shepherds Watched" might have been the first indication they'd seen—correction, heard—that we were capable of getting along with each other at all.

No wonder they'd sat down right there in the middle of the mall. They must have thought, like Aunt Judith, "Well, it's about time!" But then why hadn't they done the equivalent of calling and asking us to go see *Les Miz*?

Maybe they hadn't been sure that what they'd seen—correction, heard—was what they thought it was. They'd never *seen* people sing, except for Calvin and those pathetic basses. They'd seen no signs we were capable of singing beautifully in harmony.

But "While Shepherds Watched" had convinced them it might be possible, which was why they'd followed us around and why they'd sat and slept and gone astray whenever they heard more than one voice, hoping we'd get the hint, waiting for further proof.

In which case we should be in the auditorium, listening to the Sing, instead of in this soundproof room. Especially since the fact that their ship was getting ready to take off indicated they'd given up and decided they were mistaken after all. "Come on," I said to the Altairi and stood up. "I need to show you something." I shoved the table away from the door, and opened it.

On Calvin. "Oh, good, you're here," I said. "I—why aren't you in there directing?"

"I announced an intermission so I could tell you something. I think I've got it, the thing the Altairi have been responding to," he said, grabbing me by the arms, "the reason they reacted to Christmas songs. I thought of it while I was directing 'Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.' What do nearly all Christmas songs have in them?"

"I don't know," I said. "Chestnuts? Santa Claus? Bells?"

“Close,” he said. “Choirs.”

Choirs? “We already knew they responded to songs sung by choirs,” I said, confused.

“Not just to songs sung by choirs. Songs *about* choirs. Christmas carols being sung by the choir, angel choirs, children’s choirs, wassailers, carolers, strike the harp and join the *chorus*,” he said. “The angels in ‘Angels We Have Heard on High’ are sweetly singing o’er the plains. In ‘It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,’ all the world gives back the song they sing. They’re all about singing,” he said excitedly. “‘That glorious song of old,’ ‘whom angels greet with anthems sweet.’” Look,” he flipped through the pages of his music, pointing out phrases, “‘oh, hear the angel voices,’ ‘as men of old have sung,’ ‘whom shepherds guard and angels sing,’ ‘let men their songs employ.’ There are references to singing in songs by Randy Travis, the ‘Peanuts’ kids, Paul McCartney, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. It wasn’t just that ‘While Shepherds Watched’ was sung by a choir. It was that it was a song *about* choirs singing. And not just singing, but what they’re singing.” He thrust the song in front of me, pointing to the last verse. “‘Goodwill, henceforth from heaven to men.’ That’s what they’ve been trying to communicate to us.”

I shook my head. “It’s what they’ve been waiting for us to communicate to them. Just like Aunt Judith.”

“Aunt Judith?”

“I’ll explain later. Right now we’ve got to prove we’re civilized before the Altairi leave.”

“And how do we do that?”

“We sing to them, or rather, the All-City Holiday Ecumenical Sing does.”

“What do we sing?”

I wasn’t sure it mattered. I was pretty certain what they were looking for was proof we could cooperate and work together in harmony, and in that case, “Mele Kalikimaka” would work as well as “The Peace Carol.” But it wouldn’t hurt to make things as clear to them as we could. And it would be nice if it was also something that Reverend Thresher couldn’t use as

ammunition for his Galaxywide Christian Crusade.

“We need to sing something that will convince the Altairi we’re a civilized species,” I said, “something that conveys goodwill and peace. Especially peace. And not religion, if that’s possible.”

“How much time have we got to write it?” Calvin asked. “And we’ll have to get copies made—”

My cell phone rang. The screen showed it was Dr. Morthman. “Hang on,” I said, hitting talk. “I should be able to tell you in a second. Hello?”

“Where *are* you?” Dr. Morthman shouted. “The ship’s beginning its final ignition cycle.”

I whirled around to make sure the Altairi were still there. They were, thank goodness, and still glaring. “How long does the final cycle take?” I asked.

“They don’t know,” Dr. Morthman said, “ten minutes at the outside. If you don’t get here immediately—”

I hung up.

“Well?” Calvin said. “How much time have we got?”

“None,” I said.

“Then we’ll have to use something we’ve already got,” he said and began riffling through his sheaf of music, “and something people know the harmony to. Civilized ... civilized ... I think...” He found what he was looking for and scanned it. “...Yeah, if I change a couple of words, this should do the trick. Do you think the Altairi understand Latin?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them.”

“We’ll just do the first two lines. Wait five minutes—”

“Five minutes—?”

“So I can brief everybody on the changes. Then bring the Altairi in.”

“Okay,” I said, and he took off at a run for the auditorium.

\* \* \* \*

There was an expectant buzz in the audience when we came through the double doors, and the ranks of choirs arrayed around the stage, a sea of maroon and gold and green and purple robes, began whispering to each other behind their music.

Calvin had apparently just finished his briefing. Some of the choirs and the audience were busily scribbling notes on their music, and passing pencils, and asking each other questions. The orchestra, on one side of the stage, was warming up in a jumbled cacophony of screeches and hoots and blats.

On the other side, the sopranos of the Mile-High Women's Chorus were apparently filling the altos in on my interrupting rehearsal the other night, because they all turned to glare at me. "I think it's ridiculous that we can't sing the words we know," an elderly woman wearing gloves and a hat with a veil said to her companion.

Her companion nodded. "If you ask me, they're carrying this entire ecumenical thing too far. I mean, humans are one thing, but *aliens*?"

There's no way this is going to work, I thought, looking over at Calvin's seventh graders, who were leaning over the backs of each other's chairs, giggling and chewing gum. Belinda was text-messaging someone on her cell phone, and Kaneesha was listening to her iPod. Chelsea had her hand up and was calling, "Mr. Ledbetter! Mr. Ledbetter, Shelby took my music."

Over in the orchestra, the percussionist was practicing crashing his cymbals. It's hopeless, I thought, looking over at the glaring Altairi. There's no way we can convince them we're sentient, let alone civilized.

My cell phone rang. And that's it, the straw that's going to break the camel's back, I thought, fumbling for it. Now everyone, even the musician with the cymbals, was glaring at me. "How rude!" the elderly woman in the white gloves said.

"The ship's started its countdown!" Dr. Morthman bellowed in my ear.

I hit "end" and turned the phone off. "Hurry," I mouthed to Calvin, and he nodded and stepped up on the dais.

He tapped the music stand with his baton, and the entire auditorium fell silent. "*Adeste Fideles*," he said, and everyone opened their music.

“*Adeste Fideles*?” What’s he doing? I thought. “O come, all ye faithful” isn’t what we need. I ran mentally through the lyrics: “Come ye to Bethlehem ... come let us adore him...” No, no, not religious!

But it was too late. Calvin had already spread his hands out, palms up, and lifted them, and everyone was getting to their feet. He nodded to the orchestra, and they began playing the introduction to “*Adeste Fideles*.”

I turned to look at the Altairi. They were glaring even more condemningly than usual. I moved between them and the doors.

The symphony was reaching the end of the introduction. Calvin glanced at me. I smiled, I hoped encouragingly, and held up crossed fingers. He nodded and then raised his baton again and brought it down.

“Have you ever been to a Sing?” Calvin had said. “It’s pretty impressive.” There had to be nearly four thousand people in that auditorium, all of them singing in perfect harmony, and if they’d been singing “The Chipmunks Song,” it would still have been awe-inspiring. But the words they were singing couldn’t have been more perfect if Calvin and I had written them to order. “Sing, earthly choirs,” they trilled, “sing in exultation. Sing, to the citizens of heaven above,” and the Altairi glide-waddled up the aisle to the stage and sat down at Calvin’s feet.

I ducked outside to the hall and called Dr. Morthman. “What’s happening with the ship?” I asked him.

“Where *are* you?” he demanded. “I thought you said you were on your way over here.”

“There’s a lot of traffic,” I said. “What’s the ship doing?”

“It’s aborted its ignition sequence and shut down its lights,” he said.

Good, I thought. That means what we’re doing is working.

“It’s just sitting there on the ground.”

“How appropriate,” I murmured.

“What do you mean by that?” he said accusingly. “Spectrum analysis shows the Altairi aren’t in their ship. You’ve got them, don’t you? Where are you and what have you done to them? If—”

I hung up, switched off my phone, and went back inside. They'd finished "*Adeste Fideles*" and were singing "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." The Altairi were still sitting at Calvin's feet. "...Reconciled," the assemblage sang, "Joyful, all ye nations rise," and the Altairi rose.

And rose, till they were a good two feet above the aisle. There was a collective gasp, and everyone stopped singing and stared at them floating there.

No, don't stop, I thought, and hurried forward, but Calvin had it under control. He turned a glare worthy of Aunt Judith on his seventh-grade girls, and they swallowed hard and started singing again, and after a moment everyone else recovered themselves and joined in to finish the verse.

When the song ended, Calvin turned and mouthed at me, "What do I do next?"

"Keep singing," I mouthed back.

"Singing what?"

I shrugged him an "I don't know," and mouthed, "What about this?" and pointed at the fourth song on the program.

He grinned, turned back to his choirs, and announced, "We will now sing, 'There's a Song in the Air.'"

There was a rustle of pages, and they began singing. I eyed the Altairi warily, looking for a lessening in elevation, but they continued to hover, and when the choir reached, "and the beautiful sing," it seemed to me their glares became slightly less fierce.

"And that song from afar has swept over the earth," the assemblage sang, and the auditorium doors burst open and Dr. Morthman, Reverend Thresher, and dozens of FBI agents and police and reporters and cameramen came rushing in. "Stay where you are," one of the FBI agents shouted.

"Blasphemous!" Reverend Thresher roared. "Look at this! Witches, homosexuals, liberals!"

"Arrest that young woman," Dr. Morthman said, pointing at me, "and the young man directing—" He stopped and gaped at the Altairi hovering

above the stage. Flashes went off, reporters talked into microphones, and Reverend Thresher positioned himself squarely in front of one of the cameras and clasped his hands. "Oh, Lord," he shouted, "drive Satan's demons out of the Altairi!"

"No!" I shouted to Calvin's seventh graders, "don't stop singing," but they already had. I looked desperately at Calvin. "Keep directing!" I said, but the police were already moving forward to handcuff him, stepping cautiously around the Altairi, who were drifting earthward like slowly leaking balloons.

"And teach these sinners here the error of their ways," Reverend Thresher was intoning.

"You can't do this, Dr. Morthman," I said desperately. "The Altairi—"

He grabbed my arm and dragged me to one of the police officers. "I want both of them charged with kidnapping," he said, "and I want her charged with conspiracy. She's responsible for this entire—" He stopped and stared past me.

I turned around. The Altairi were standing directly behind me, glaring. The police officer, who'd been about to clamp handcuffs on me, let go of my wrist and backed away, and so did the reporters and the FBI.

"Your excellencies," Dr. Morthman said, taking several steps back, "I want you to know the commission had nothing to do with this. We knew nothing about it. It's entirely this young woman's fault. She..."

"We acknowledge your greetings," the Altairi in the center said, bowing to me, "and greet you in return."

A murmur of surprise rumbled through the auditorium, and Dr. Morthman stammered, "Y-you speak English?"

"Of course," I said and bowed to the Altairi. "It's nice to finally be able to communicate with you."

"We welcome you into the company of citizens of the heavens," the one on the end said, "and reciprocate your offers of good will, peace on earth, and chestnuts."

"We assure you that we come bearing gifts as well," the Altairus on the other end said.



“It’s a miracle!” Reverend Thresher shouted. “The Lord has healed them! He has unlocked their lips!” He dropped to his knees and began to pray. “Oh, Lord, we know it is our prayers which have brought this miracle about—”

Dr. Morthman bounded forward. “Your excellencies, allow me to be the first to welcome you to our humble planet,” he said, extending his hand. “On behalf of the government of the—”

The Altairi ignored him. “We had begun to think we had erred in our assessment of your world,” the one who’d spoken before said to me, and the one next to her? him? said, “We doubted your species was fully sentient.”

“I know,” I said. “I doubt it myself sometimes.”

“We also doubted you understood the concept of accord,” the one on the other end said, and turned and glared pointedly at Calvin’s wrists.

“I think you’d better unhandcuff Mr. Ledbetter,” I said to Dr. Morthman.

“Of course, of course,” he said, motioning to the police officer. “Explain to them it was all a little misunderstanding,” he whispered to me, and the Altairi turned to glare at him and then at the police officer.

When Calvin was out of the handcuffs, the one on the end said, “As the men of old, we are with gladness to be proved wrong.”

So are we, I thought. “We’re delighted to welcome you to our planet,” I said.

“Now if you’ll accompany me back to DU,” Dr. Morthman cut in, “we’ll arrange for you to go to Washington to meet with the president and—”

The Altairi began to glare again. Oh, no, I thought, and looked frantically at Calvin.

“We have not yet finished greeting the delegation, Dr. Morthman,” Calvin said. He turned to the Altairi. “We would like to sing you the rest of our greeting songs.”

“We wish to hear them,” the Altairi in the center said, and the six of them immediately turned, walked back up the aisle, and sat down.

“I think it would be a good idea if you sat down, too,” I said to Dr. Morthman and the FBI agents.

“Can some of you share your music with them?” Calvin said to the people in the last row. “And help them find the right place?”

“I have no intention of singing with witches and homo—” Reverend Thresher said indignantly, and the Altairi all turned to glare at him. He sat down, and an elderly man in a yarmulke handed him his music.

“What do we do about the words to the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’?” Calvin whispered to me, and the Altairi stood up and walked back down the aisle to us.

“There is no need to alter your joyful songs. We wish to hear them with the native words,” the one in the center said.

“We have a great interest in your planet’s myths and superstitions,” the one on the end said, “the child in the manger, the lighting of the Kwanzaa menorah, the bringing of toys and teeth to children. We are eager to learn more.”

“We have many questions,” the next one in line said. “If the child was born in a desert land, then how can King Herod have taken the children on a sleigh ride?”

“Sleigh ride?” Dr. Morthman said, and Calvin looked inquiringly at me.

“All children young to sleigh,” I whispered.

“Also, if holly is jolly, then why does it bark?” the one on the other end said. “And, Mr. Ledbetter, is Ms. Yates your girlfriend?”

“There will be time for questions, negotiations, and gifts when the greetings have been completed,” the second Altairus on the left, the one who hadn’t said anything up till then, said, and I realized he must be the leader. Or the choir director, I thought. When he spoke, the Altairi instantly formed themselves into pairs, walked back up the aisle, and sat down.

I picked up Calvin’s baton and handed it to him. “What do you think we should sing first?” he asked me.

“All I want for Christmas is you,” I said.

“Really? I was thinking maybe we should start with ‘Angels We Have Heard on High’ or—”

“That wasn’t a song title,” I said.

“Oh,” he said and turned to the Altairi. “The answer to your question is yes.”

“These are tidings of great joy,” the one in the center said.

“There shall be many mistletoeings,” the one on the end added. The second Altairus on the left glared at them.

“I think we’d better sing,” I said, and squeezed into the first row, between Reverend McIntyre and an African-American woman in a turban and dashiki.

Calvin stepped onto the podium. “The Hallelujah Chorus,” Calvin said, and there was a shuffling of pages as people found their music. The woman next to me held out her music to me so we could share and whispered, “It’s considered proper etiquette to stand up for this. In honor of King George the Third. He’s supposed to have stood up the first time he heard it.”

“Actually,” Reverend McIntyre whispered to me, “he may merely have been startled out of a sound sleep, but rising out of respect and admiration is still an appropriate response.”

I nodded. Calvin raised his baton, and the entire auditorium, except for the Altairi, rose as one and began to sing. And if I’d thought *Adeste Fideles* sounded wonderful, the “Hallelujah Chorus” was absolutely breathtaking, and suddenly all those lyrics about glorious songs of old and anthems sweet and repeating the sounding joy suddenly made sense. “And the whole world give back the song,” I thought, “which now the angels sing.” And apparently the Altairi were as overwhelmed by the music as I was. After the fifth “Hallelujah!” they rose into the air like they’d done before. And rose. And rose, till they floated giddily just below the high domed ceiling.

I knew just how they felt.

\* \* \* \*

It was definitely a communications breakthrough. The Altairi haven’t

stopped talking since the All-City Sing, though we're not actually much farther along than we were before. They're much better at asking questions than answering them. They did finally tell us where they came from—the star Alsafi in the constellation Draco. But since the meaning of Altair is “the flying one” (and Alsafi means “cooking tripod”) everyone still calls them the Altairi.

They also told us why they turned up at Calvin's apartment and kept following me (“We glimpsed interesting possibilities of accord between you and Mr. Ledbetter”) and explained, more or less, how their spaceship works, which the Air Force has found extremely interesting. But we still don't know why they came here. Or what they want. The only thing they've told us specifically was that they wanted to have Dr. Morthman and Reverend Thresher removed from the commission, and to have Dr. Wakamura put in charge. It turns out they like being squirted, at least as much as they like anything we do. They still glare.

So does Aunt Judith. She called me the day after the All-Community Sing to tell me she'd seen me on CNN and thought I'd done a nice job saving the planet, but what on earth was I wearing? Didn't I know one was supposed to dress up for a concert? I told her everything that had happened was all thanks to her, and she glared at me (I could feel it, even over the phone) and hung up.

But she must not be too mad. When she heard I was engaged, she called my sister Tracy and told her she expected to be invited to the wedding shower. My mother is cleaning like mad.

I wonder if the Altairi will give us a fish slice. Or a birthday card with a dollar in it. Or faster-than-light travel.