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Prologue

'The resistance level is much higher, Captain.'

'Yes, we're down to interplanetary mode. When travelling within crowded planetary systems, intergalactic or even interstellar modes are much too dangerous.'

'We must be getting close, Sir.'

'We are, Cadet Alpha. Your English is good, congratulations.'

'Thank you, Sir, the ban on any other language has been a good incentive.'

The Captain chuckled.

'Look at that, Sir!'

'That's Saturn and her frosty rings.'

'How many times have you been to the planet called Earth, Sir?'

'This is the third time. The first time I was, like you, a cadet. But this is the first time we will be showing ourselves.'

'Will it be dangerous?'

'Tricky maybe, but not dangerous. I studied British history at university: their law forbids assault and imprisonment without due process. As long as we keep calm we'll be all right.'

'But why are we showing ourselves?'

'The Chief Elder says, and I agree, that it is unlawful to take without giving. We have taken for a long time, now it is time to give.'

'But they don't know we've been taking!'

'That is irrelevant: the law will not be mocked.'

'Sorry, Sir!'

'Don't be sorry. It is good to speak your mind, for in doing so thoughts can be refined. It is one Universe and an insular tribal attitude is inappropriate. Look, do you see that bright spot in front of us?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Well that's it; that's the Earth.'

'It's coming up pretty fast!'

'Yes, it's time for approach mode.'

The Cadet watched fascinated as the Earth grew slowly and revealed its beauty.

'It's amazing, Sir, a jewel without a rival! How did we find it in the first place?'

'Many years ago our most renowned Chief Elder told us where to look.'

'How did he know?'

'He knew. That is all we know!'

Chapter One

Visitors from a distant planet unexpectedly arrived. These people had enormous power and our puny defensive systems they neutralised with ease. They told us repeatedly that they'd come in peace and would quickly leave once they had observed our current modes of government and philosophy. The Military who first interviewed them were incredulous and found it difficult to believe, as no space vehicle had been revealed. They explained that they weren't permitted to expose their craft. We didn't believe them and they patiently repeated their story, but never were there any hints of violence. There were no laws that set down rules of how they might be treated, so they were housed like any immigrants who entered by illegal means. On the morning when the news first broke, the Government treated the matter as a fanciful rumour and awaited confirmation, but the Prime Minister, who was at a European summit, called a Cabinet meeting and rushed home.

The Aliens were strangely similar to the human form but their eyes had something special: a deep pool-like tranquillity. Clearly their intellectual and perceptive abilities were of a most advanced nature. Yet they behaved with disarming modesty. They made no complaints about the Spartan nature of their quarters, nor did they make demands or seek a meeting with authority. They merely awaited events.

The media rush was almost instant, but when the TV icons interviewed these beings they simply could not match their intellect. Aggressive questioning had no impact and rebounded upon the questioner. Interest grew, as did respect. Still, many felt that they were simply frauds, and fears of an Alien takeover persisted. The rumour that the small research group were just the herald of a harsh invasion gathered pace. On the streets special-edition newspapers whipped up tensions. The Share Index plummeted and the Stock Exchange closed trading.

By midday opposition leaders and the popular press were demanding action. Their campaign bordered on the hysterical

and the Prime Minister Bob Shaw, a square-framed Baldwin-like figure, booked airtime on all the TV channels. This time he would ask the questions!

*

At 6.30pm the cameras beamed in on the familiar Downing Street scene and right on time the Prime Minister and the Alien leader took their seats – easy chairs placed on either side of the ornate fireplace. The PM was not one you'd call well dressed. His suit always looked as if it needed pressing, but a discerning eye might guess that, even if it had been newly pressed, it would still have had the familiar office-worn appearance.

The Alien's tall trim frame was suited as if by Savile Row. Nothing stood out, although he didn't quite look British. When he removed his tinted glasses though, his eyes betrayed his special nature.

*

'May I first welcome you on behalf of Her Majesty and the peoples of this island, and may I apologise for this tardy official greeting.' The Prime Minister's words were measured and calm.

'You are most gracious, Prime Minister,' the Alien acknowledged easily.

Shaw was shocked but was too good a 'pro' to show it. The urbanity of this being was amazing.

'Sir, Your English is so *English* that I'm tempted to ask what UK university you attended.'

The Alien laughed easily.

'That is a compliment, Prime Minister, and I do like your English sense of humour!'

'May I ask your name? For I must confess no one was able to tell me. In fact I don't think we enquired! As you may imagine, we were rather taken by surprise!'

'I must apologise for we did arrive unannounced!' The Alien smiled disarmingly. 'Now, my name – I am the leader of a small band of ten. You can call me Captain. My own name is of little matter.'

'Well, Captain, you will be aware that many of our citizens are anxious that your visit may be the herald of a larger force. They clamour for assurances and I must say that I understand their

fears. Sir, can we be reassured? And, Sir, where is your spacecraft? No one has reported a sighting!’

‘I appreciate your candour, Prime Minister. I can only say that your fears are groundless.’ The captain smiled. ‘Sir, few of our citizens are anxious to leave their planet paradise for what is, to say the very least, a long and tedious, if not uncertain, journey. We may have mastered many of Creation’s laws but not them all! Now, you asked about our spacecraft: it is close, should we need to be evacuated, but is protected by an invisibility screen and fitted with a high-pitched sound to repel living creatures. We are forbidden to cause harm or injury and, as our craft is specially protected, even touching it can be dangerous!’ The Alien smiled again.

Shaw was amazed: this man, creature, or whatever he was, could grace the high table at any Oxford college.

‘Well, Captain, you have answered my questions. Thank you, your word is good enough for me.’

‘Prime Minister, your great financial City says it for me: “My word is my bond.”’

‘How, Sir, do you know our language and our customs so well? To me, your grasp of things is quite uncanny.’

‘Over many ages we developed a facility for near to instant assimilation. It is really not so difficult as it seems. A lake that is completely still allows a perfect reflection. So it is with the mind. Let’s put it another way. While you have developed the computer, quite miraculously, we have developed aids that advance the felicity of the mind. We didn’t show ourselves immediately but gave ourselves a little time to watch and listen. “Cramming” is the word I think you use! Sir, we have come to your planet to learn, and hopefully to be of use.’ The Alien smiled benignly but gave no further explanation.

Shaw also smiled but thought it prudent not to follow up. Instead he asked another question.

‘You referred to your “Planet Paradise”: are the terrain and climate similar to here?’

‘Remarkably similar. Life forms such as us need rather special conditions, so it’s not surprising therefore that conditions are alike. Though we lead a much more simple life.’

Prime Minister Shaw nodded pensively. Questions were crowding his mind, but being prime-time coverage he was circumspect. The main aim was to calm the agitation in the

people. The arrival of beings from another planet was momentous; even so, it was business as usual. This he saw to be a premier duty. That said, there was a unique opportunity to learn from these remarkable beings. Had we the capacity though? That was the question.

In the meantime Shaw kept his questions simple and straightforward. Did they like the food? Were their sleeping habits similar? Were their family customs similar?

The Alien's answers were completely disarming. Indeed this was exactly what the PM wanted. The people would be reassured. These Visitors didn't pose a threat and we should treat them as honoured guests. Tomorrow it would be business as usual! That was his hope, but he had been in public life too long to be complacent. There would be trouble. It was inevitable and it would need his every ounce of subtlety to thwart the wreckers.

The Prime Minister's probing continued to emphasise the brevity of the Aliens' stay and their lack of aggression. Indeed the nation stood to gain much from the knowledge the Visitors were so generously sharing. It was good diplomatic stuff. 'Repeat your message three times', his father had told him. 'If you're lucky, they might get it on the third hearing!'

*

When Shaw was perfectly sure all recording apparatus was disconnected, he leaned across to his visitor.

'Now we can talk!' he said quietly.

The Alien smiled knowingly. Clearly he understood the political subtlety.

'I hope it is convenient for you to dine with us this evening. My wife is busy preparing things and we trust the food will be to your liking. If not, we would fully understand, of course. So there's no need to suffer in the cause of diplomacy!'

The Visitor laughed lightly

'Mr Shaw, I am honoured, not least by the trust you're showing in this creature from another world. But then, this is Britain!' The Visitor's smile widened.

'Poor old Britain, assailed by never-ending rules and regulations – not to mention the tyranny of the PC vigilantes. Sorry, I'm assailing you with obscurities!'

'No, I understand. Your democracy is feeding the popular will with all that it demands, instead of what it needs.'

‘Good Lord! How do you know such things? And how have you mastered the English language so completely?’

‘This isn’t the first mission to your planet, but it’s the first to declare itself. We’ve had ample time to study your customs.’

‘Even so, you facility is remarkable. I think it’s time to go upstairs to the flat. My wife will be waiting.’