

zheewa

a novel by

Joe Sweeney

zheewa

by Joe Sweeney

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For more information about *zheewa*, please visit:

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Author's Note:

The book was written and published using the Sans Serif font to support the special characters used in the zheewa language. Unfortunately, that font is not supported by Kindle. The special characters have been replaced by an underscore (_) during the conversion process.

Chapter 1

A bright spot appears over my head, piercing the darkness, expanding with my consciousness. It's almost like I'm being pulled head first through a fish-eye lens from a dark room into a lighted one. As my awareness comes into focus, I sense that I'm lying on my back in a hospital bed. At least, that's my impression. It has that hospital smell and feel and sound.

I take a deep breath and smell isopropyl alcohol with an undertone of musk. The odd, pungent odor sharpens my focus. I roll my head to the right and wince against the bright sunshine coming in through a large window. Rolling my head to the left reveals a wall. I can hear from over my head the beep-beep-beep of instrumentation and, from the direction of my feet, the sound of chatter through an open door.

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I bring my hands up to my chest and roll my body onto my right side, grunting as I attempt to push myself into a sitting position. My arms don't cooperate fully and my head spins from the effort, but I manage. I'm exhausted and sit with my head drooping.

I hear running footsteps and the voices become louder. A pair of legs dressed in earth tone pants enters my field of vision. The voices continue as the legs bend, arms and torso come into view, and finally...

I gasp and begin choking on a bit of saliva that's in the wrong place at that moment. More footsteps and louder voices increase in intensity as they approach. I sense others on either side of me. Several pairs of hands hold me upright. I'm able to catch my breath, but I keep my gaze averted. This is partly because I'm still too weak to keep my head up, and partly because I don't want confirmation of what I just saw.

Chapter 1

A glass of water is placed to my lips, and I drink deeply. My gaze rises to see that face again, looking back at me. The voice is soft and unintelligible, and the expression on its face is unreadable. I almost choke on the water, so the glass is pulled away.

I feel myself staring. It appears to be close to 6 feet tall and a bit on the spindly side. Its head is vaguely cat-like – furry skin, triangular ears, large eyes, but no nose. There are slits, almost like gills, under the jaw that flaps slightly when it talks. The fur is very fine and silky with a light green tint, not like a cat's fur but more like the fuzz on a peach. The ears don't extend beyond the top of its head; instead, they kind of flow up from the side of the face and level out like a cat with its ears back. Its "paws" appear to have articulated fingers and thumbs just like mine, despite the fur, the pad, and the short claws – three fingers, though; sort of elf-like. I get a little giddy and begin repeating a

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sing-song of the words "elf-cats" in my head, over and over.

I blink several times and start falling forward. I feel the arms around me again, gently laying me down on my back. Soft, melodious sounds are in my head. It's very comforting, and soon I'm fast asleep.

* * *

I dream that I am a mouse in a maze. The corridors are dark and endless. Lightning flashes and illuminates the gloom around me. The roof is made of glass and through it I can see a raging storm with clouds shaped like cat faces. The bolts turn into paws that try to bat me around through the glass. I run back into the gloom, zigzagging through the labyrinth, looking for a way out but not wanting to find one for fear of the cats outside. The wind gusts and the walls crumble. The floor turns to quicksand. My feet are stuck and I cannot run. Another swipe from a cat cloud sets the floor

Chapter 1

spinning. The quicksand thins out and becomes an inverted maelstrom, the updraft pulling me up and out of the world I knew.

Chapter 2

A burst of light through the window awoke Sean Eagan. He peeked through heavy-lidded eyes and saw a cloud-shrouded full moon shining through my window. It looks just like the moon he remembered. A flash of lightning and a low rumble of distant thunder were all that was left of a storm. Perhaps he had only dreaming of elf-cats.

He sat up in the bed and looked around the small room. Against the right wall beside the bed was a single-drawer nightstand. To his left in the opposite corner along the back wall sat a reclining chair with an overhead reading lamp. Other than the bed chair and stand, there was no other furniture.

Opening the drawer of the nightstand, he stared at the contents: his wallet, keys, cell phone, tablet and MP3 player. He flipped open his cell phone to check the time, but

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saw nothing; there was no signal. He jangled his keys and then picked up his wallet. It contained his driver's license, credit cards and some cash – not much more. He put his wallet down and picked up his tablet computer.

After the tablet powered up, he noticed the date – May 18, 2011. Opening the diary application, he pulled the stylus out of its storage slot and began writing.

Dear Diary: This is going to be one of those entries that make sense now but won't when I read it later. I must be hallucinating or something. I vaguely remember the accident. I seem to be in a strange room. Maybe it's a hospital because it smells like one. I feel fine, but I'm very tired. Maybe they have me on drugs and I really am hallucinating.

Chapter 2

Sean turned off the tablet and put it away. He then lay back down in the bed and cuddled up next to the cool of the wall.

Chapter 3

Sean Eagan lay curled up in his favorite position on his left side, huddled against the wall in a semi-fetal position with his left leg pulled up knee to chest, but his right leg extended and the toes tucked between the wall and the bed. His hands were clasped and held close to his chest and his forearms were pressed against the wall. His face was turned so that it was also tucked between the wall and the bed. He felt the coolness of the wall against his right cheek. He smiled a contented and comfortable smile.

As he began to wake up, it dawned on him that the wall was curved slightly; he fit against it too well. The wall also had a very strange feel to it, sort of like a semi-hard, spongy material with a little bit of give. It didn't feel like either wallboard or plaster and lath.

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Sean pondered the odd sensation of it, and wondered if it was the product of his early morning semi-dream state. Bits and pieces of his earlier dream floated around in his head until one of the cat-faced clouds looked directly at him, talking in a soft and unintelligible voice. He recognized the face as the same one that offered him water some indistinct time in the past.

Sean rolled onto his back, fully awake now and with an odd sense of *déjà vu*. He could smell isopropyl alcohol with an undertone of musk. The room was lit by sunshine streaming through a window. He could hear the beep-beep-beep of instrumentation overhead and the sound of chatter through an open door.

He rolled onto his right side, swung his feet off the bed, and pushed himself into a sitting position. The effort caused his head to swim a little, but a few deep, regular breaths cleared it up.

Chapter 3

The large picture window was now in front of him, built into a curved wall. There was no shade or curtain, and Sean could see a few buildings, green grass and flowers. The wall itself was a very light green and the bed sheets were imprinted with what looked like an impressionistic flowerbed.

Sean caught a motion out of the corner of his eye, and he turned to see several of the elf-cats from his dreams come into the room. His heart pounded as he tried to make sense of these strange creatures. They struck him as feminine, but he couldn't tell whether they were male or female. For the most part, they appeared to be sexless. There was one with a belly that bulged as if she might be pregnant. Another one was hunched over, its fur looking wrinkly and grayish – perhaps an elder.

Most of them huddled into a corner and watched while one knelt in front of him and looked directly into his eyes.

“joore lizheewa ɹ”

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Sean watched the lips move and heard the vaguely lyrical sounds, but it was nonsense to his ears. He noticed that the gills under its jawbone flapped slightly when it talked.

“joore lizheewa ʒ”

Sean thought that sounded the same, but he wasn't sure.

“I don't understand,” he said, shaking his head.

It turned to one of the others standing nearby and said “rizheewa liivuuja-jath rathuwa-jooonii d lizheewa riwaaalethi ʒ”

“b” the other replied and left the room. It returned a few minutes later wheeling a cart. The top of the cart had a few glasses filled with a variety of different colored liquids. The one who had been kneeling stood up, sat beside him on the bed. The cart was wheeled into the vacated spot.

Sean looked about uncertainly. Several pairs of eyes looked back with open

Chapter 3

curiosity. The one sitting next to him picked up one of the glasses and drank from it.

Sean turned his attention to the cart. They must have brought a selection because they weren't sure what he would like. Aromas from sour to sweet and colors from bright to dark assailed his senses. The textures ranged from smooth to gritty and from thin to viscous. He picked up each one in turn, swirled the liquid in the glass and sniffed at it. Running his tongue across his lips, Sean selected one that had smelled good and took a cautious sip. He spat it out quickly, nearly spilling the glass in his haste to put it down again. The liquid didn't taste anything at all like it smelled.

The others looked on quietly. Sean had no idea what they were thinking. Had he offended them somehow? Or were they silently offering encouragement and support? Something tickled his mind, a sensation of reassurance. Were they trying to reassure him? He didn't know. The situation was

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downright alien because of the similarities. Here he was on a bed in a room. In front of him was a cart with glasses of liquid. If these beings had been human, even if from a different country, he would not have felt so out of place. The incongruity of the similar setting and accouterments, combined with these strange, unreadable inhabitants, made him feel off-balance and uncertain.

Sean selected another glass and brought it to his lips. This one was more palatable, and he started drinking more deeply. The one next to him touched his hand. He realized that it might not be wise to drink too much too fast, not knowing how long his system had been without food or how it would react to strange foods. Sean put the glass down and licked his lips.

The cart was rolled out of the room. The one next to him stood up and gently tugged his elbow. Sean lay back down on the bed, and the curious creatures left.

Chapter 4

Dear Diary: I look at the entry from the other morning and it makes more sense than what happened yesterday. I have no idea where I am, or who these strange beings are. Is it possible that I'm having a lucid dream? It's like I'm in a science fiction show.

You're not in Kansas anymore, Sean thought as he stared out of the bedroom window. The scenery outside was all wrong for a hospital. The setting was too rural, too quiet and too peaceful.

Sean walked over to the window, opened it and took a deep breath. The air was too fresh. Where were the smog and the noise? There was no sign of cars, buses and trucks spewing exhaust into the air. He could not hear any horns honking or people shouting.

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Not that he really missed it all that much. The noise and smells bothered him. The constant jostling of the crowds made him feel anxious. The incessant news of this nation fighting with that nation made him feel fearful.

The peace and tranquility of this place were a welcome respite, despite the oddness of it all. Except for the unusual people and foods, this was exactly the kind of place he dreamed about as he lay awake in bed at night.

In fact, Sean realized, this place is didn't look much different from his home in Lenox, Massachusetts. The quiet serenity brought up ancient memories of a simpler life as a child; a time when could escape into the woods, away from the isolation at home and the turmoil at school.

Chapter 5

Dear Diary: It doesn't feel like it's been a week since my last entry. I spend most of my time in bed sleeping or in the chair staring out of the window. I hardly have energy for anything else.

Sean felt strong enough this morning for a little exploring. He got up and walked to the door, where he found himself at one end of a hallway that curved the same as the bedroom wall. On his left was an archway that led into a larger room.

One of the strange creatures approached him through the archway, nudging his elbow with one hand and gesturing down the hall with the other.

"lizheewa goo luuwaa rizheewa j" it said.

Sean studied the being. It was definitely feminine in appearance. He decided to think of them as "she" rather than

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"it". It was less creepy that way. She was a bit taller than his 5' 9" and very slender. The vague humanoid form and a few similar features were the extent of any similarity.

She led him counter-clockwise down the curved hall. On the right side, they passed two more bedrooms after his before reaching what looked like a bathroom. In this room, she showed him a closet with clothes and how to operate what were clearly a sink and a bath with a shower. There was no sign of a toilet.

Exiting the bathroom, they continued circling past a short hall that led outside, a supply closet, and three more bedrooms.

The end of the hall opened into a very odd-shaped area that looked like a living room and kitchen combined. Directly ahead of him was a sitting area with a variety of cushions and chairs, some of which were occupied by a handful of the beings.

The wall on the right was mostly window, anchored on both ends by doors

Chapter 5

leading outside. Through the glass he could see a large, park-like area surrounded by other structures. He saw trees and green grass, some flowers and rocks, and mountains in the distance. The sun was shining between white clouds in a blue sky. It could have been a typical summer's day on Earth.

When Sean looked back into the room, his guide led him along the inside of the curved hallway wall. There was a large, freestanding kitchen counter in the center and the back half of the semi-circle appeared to be a kitchen. She showed him where the drinks were kept in a refrigerator-like device and glasses in a cabinet. Other equipment in the room looked like it was meant to prepare food. She ignored the equipment; Sean figured he was not meant to know how to use it right now. It was just as well; he doubted he could figure it out.

They had come full circle, and she led him back into his room. Sean sat down

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gratefully in a chair, exhausted from such little effort. He sat for a few minutes after she left, trying to make sense of where he was and how he got here. He felt like he was in a dream and hoped that he would wake up soon.

Despondently, he climbed into bed and lay on his side, staring out the window. His mind continued its relentless puzzling. Would a dream feel this real? He couldn't remember one ever being so real and full of detail. The smells, the sounds, the tastes – everything he touched seemed real.

Rolling onto his back in the bed, Sean placed his open palms on his chest just below his collarbones and closed his eyes in meditation.

In his mind's eye, he pictured the mouth of his cave just below the brow of a hill. He paused at the entrance long enough to clear his mind and to summon his spirit guide. Coyote had been with him for a very long time. Sean thanked Coyote for his

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presence and guidance. They entered the cave and descended into the darkness, following a winding path more by feel than by sight. They stopped short after a few minutes, sensing the edge of a chasm. Without hesitating, they jumped off the edge and plunged into the depths. The walls became luminescent. Blurry images gradually took the shape of friends and family. The faces were young at first, and then gradually aged and slowly decayed. The bones turned to dust and the dust began to swirl – gently at first, but with increasing fervor. There was a sudden blast and the dust began to settle into a different pattern that took the shape of elfish cats. The glow of the walls faded and they found themselves standing on the edge of the chasm – Sean and his spirit guide followed the winding path back to the cave entrance. He stood and breathed the energy from his memory of the wall images. He allowed the energy to flow in from the top of his head

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and out through the bottom of his feet,
allowing it to fill his body and being.

There was a message in the vision;
Sean was sure of that. Figuring out the
message was the tricky part.

Chapter 6

Dear Diary: Even though none of this makes any sense, I don't know what else to do. I can see no sign of the real world. I must be in a coma and dreaming that I'm in this place. For now, all I can do is go along with it and hope I find something that will show me the way home.

Sean opened his eyes to see one of the elf-cats peering at the instruments over his head. She looked down at him and then at a device in one of her hands.

“rijoore lizheewa ɹ” she said, and then turned and walked out of the room.

Sean scratched his head and stared at the ceiling, puzzling over the same questions that had plagued him yesterday. Where was he? How did he get here? Who were these strange people? The last thing he remembered before waking up in this place

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was the window on the opposite side of the bus becoming the ceiling.

The bus had been making a left turn when a car ran the light and wedged itself under the left side. The force of the impact, combined with the centrifugal effect from the turn, had been enough to topple the bus. Sean had been seated on the right side looking out the window when he heard the impact and felt the bus start to tilt. He turned his head toward the sound, eyes wide as his world began to roll over.

He must have been knocked unconscious. But that still didn't explain where he was. Perhaps he was still unconscious and experiencing a bad dream. Was this what people in a coma experienced?

Sean pondered the accident as he lay in bed. As an editor of science textbooks, he had a fair grasp of physics. A bus had far too much mass to be affected in that manner by something as small as a car, yet it toppled

Chapter 6

anyway. What factors could have caused it to happen? He recalled seeing the streetlight; it was changing from yellow to red. The bus had sped up to make the light, so the driver was taking the turn a bit faster than he should have. The car that hit them must have had just the right aerodynamic configuration – a low front bumper and a wedge-shaped profile – that would allow it to get under the bus and act as a lever. The car must have been traveling awfully fast to have enough force upon impact to affect the bus in such a way. Stranger things had happened.

Sighing, Sean got out of bed and walked over to the doorway. He stared down the hall for a while, and then into the living room, watching the house residents go about their business. He wasn't quite up to an excursion, so he turned and surveyed his room. There was a tray of glasses on the nightstand, and they appeared to be filled with the few liquids he was able to tolerate.

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He reached over to the nightstand and took a sip from one of the glasses. Then he pulled open the drawer and picked up the reader and MP3 player. Sean got up from the bed and sat in the chair. Putting on the earphones, he selected Enya from the artist list. Her soothing voice and Celtic rhythms always helped settle his mind. He then turned on his tablet, started his e-book editing program, and selected the textbook he was currently working on. Pulling the stylus from its slot and using it as a guide, he began reading the text, mouthing the words as he went. He found that mouthing the words helped him focus on the spelling and grammar.

Sean woke up still in the chair. He had no idea what time of day it was, but he could see that it was dark outside. He set his tablet and MP3 player on the floor and then walked over to the bed, taking another drink before climbing in and falling fast asleep.

Chapter 7

Dear Diary: It's strange how similar yet different everything is. Maybe I'm only imagining that the people and food are different. Some kind of delusional fantasy.

Sean was feeling stronger today, and decided it was time to venture out. The first order of business was a shower. He wandered down the hall to the bathroom. It was vacant, so he walked in and looked around. There was a hamper for dirty clothes and a closet with clean clothes and towels. He picked some clothes and a towel and set them on the sink.

He then turned his attention to the shower. After some experimenting with the fixtures, he was able to get the water running, but could not get hot water. Shedding his clothes and dropping them into the hamper, he stepped into the shower. He looked around for soap, but couldn't find

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any. Instead, he rubbed himself down with his hands. After turning off the water, he reached out and grabbed the towel, hoping that no could see him through the doorway.

Dried and dressed, Sean walked into the living room. Half a dozen strange faces looked up at him from where they were seated. Sean nodded and continued walking to the kitchen. He was able to find the glasses with just a little bit of hunting. Sean helped himself to half a glass of juice from the refrigerator, but could not figure out what to do with the glass now that he was done.

He had turned in place a second time, trying to decide what to do and beginning to feel dizzy in the process, when one of the – people – from the living room appeared next to him and put a hand on his arm. She took the glass from his hand and put it into a slot next to the refrigerator. Sean wondered if it was some kind of recycler for the glass or maybe a dishwasher.

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She noticed, or sensed, that he was a bit disoriented, and led him back to his room. Sean gratefully sat down in the chair, smiling and waving as she left. He picked up his gadgets from the floor and checked the battery levels. More than half left still. He thought about listening to some music, but then decided against it. There was no way to know when he'd be able to recharge the battery; it would be best to conserve it. Besides, his morning adventure had tired him more than he thought it would. What he wanted most of all at the moment was to lie down in his own bed. He settled for the bed in this room.

Sean dreamed that he was swimming in an ocean. Every few feet he swam, the water changed color, consistency and smell. He was reminded of the selection of juice drinks. His world started turning upside down, and when he looked up he saw a giant mouth. He was poured out with the water into the mouth and down the throat. Sean

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washed ashore at the edge of a swamp, where he saw an alligator watching him. The alligator turned and began swimming deeper into the swamp, pausing long enough for Sean to start following. The swamp was murky and dark, and it seemed like they had traveled for a long time. Sean had no idea where they were headed and began to tremble with fear. He closed his eyes and tried to remember what he could about Alligator. It took only a moment's reflection before Sean knew what message Alligator had for him. Sean would regain personal power only through quiet, inner peace. He must be wary of dangerous emotions lurking below the surface. But most of all, he must suspend his judgment of what was happening to him; wisdom would eventually come in this unknown world in which he found himself. Once he'd made that decision, the swamp began to clear and Sean could see a tree-studded bank. Alligator made a turn and was gone, leaving Sean alone. Sean

Chapter 7

climbed up the bank and worked his way through the line of trees to a clearing. In the middle of the clearing was his room, sans the walls and ceiling. He climbed into bed and fell into a deep sleep.

The sound of voices woke him up. Sean sat up and wiped the sleep out of his eyes. He walked over to the window and looked up at the sky. The sun was high and it was partly cloudy. His stomach grumbled. Sean adjusted the clothes he was wearing and left his bedroom.

The house residents were all seated in the living room, deeply immersed in food and conversation. Their animated discussion had a singsong quality, flowing melodically in soft harmony. Sean attempted to slip past them and to the kitchen, but he knew from the silence that they had noticed him. Peering out of the corner of his eye, he could see them looking. It was only for a moment; they soon returned to what they were doing.

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Sean felt relieved. All he wanted to do was to get something to eat and return to the bedroom. On a shelf in the refrigerator sat a plate with a sampling of fruits, berries and nuts. He stared at it, trying to decide if it was meant for a special occasion or not.

One of the zheewa touched his arm and then reached past him for the plate. Pulling it out of the refrigerator, she motioned as if to give it to him. After he took it from her, she nudged his elbow and guided him back to the bedroom.

She left the room. Sean sat down on the chair and put the plate in his lap. He picked at the food without enthusiasm. There was no way to know what would taste good and what would not, what would cause him to gag and what would not. He brought each one to his lips one at a time, sniffing it and touching it with the tip of his tongue. He repeated the process with his nose pinched closed, remembering studies that had shown a person could not taste the difference

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between an apple and an onion without their sense of smell. Sean didn't believe it at the time, but now that he was faced with an array of strange foods, he'd be able to test that theory. As with the juices, he was able to swallow some of the foods if he couldn't smell them.

His appetite waned quickly after having eaten very little. Sean carried the tray to the kitchen and put it back in the refrigerator. After helping himself to a glass of juice, he returned to the bedroom.

Chapter 8

Dear Diary: This is a strange place. It has a bathroom with a shower but no toilet. It has a kitchen with a refrigerator and stove, but the food is weird. It has a living room with couches and chairs, but no humans. Yet, even with all that, I'm not feeling anxious. I can't explain it. The things that normally cause me stress are missing. That's probably what it is. No stress factors, no anxiety. I just haven't figured out yet what I should be stressing about. What does anger and hatred look like in this dream world anyway?

One of the elf-cats walked into his room, just as she had every day for the past several days. His hosts had been very friendly and seemed only mildly curious. Not that he would know how their curiosity would manifest. He thought he could sense emotions, but he had yet to figure out how

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to read their expressions. There was not much he could do but watch and wait until he could learn enough to start talking to them.

“joore lizheewa ɹ” she said, looking at him.

Sean didn't answer. She turned her attention to the panel on the wall over his head. She looked at him again and made an odd facial expression that he couldn't understand.

“rizheewa ziwaalethi d_” she said and then left the room.

As near as he could guess, she was a doctor of sorts and he was in a clinic, of sorts. All that he could deduce from his observations was that the house also served as a clinic. Beyond that, he still had no clue where he was.

The sound of the front door closing aroused Sean from his reverie. He opened his eyes and took a moment before sitting up. Reaching over to the night table, he

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opened the drawer and looked longingly at his belongings. He picked up each in turn, wishing that he could play some music or read a book. He decided not to use them today. Already, the batter power on both registered at much less than half. It would be best to conserve the power until he could figure out how to recharge them.

Sean wandered into the hall and looked into the room next to his. The one he thought of as pregnant was lying on the bed and the doctor was examining her. Sean wandered down the hall to the next room, where the old one lay quietly on her bed. Sean thought of her as an old one because her fur was far thinner and more faded than the others, and because she moved like an old person.

At the end of the hall, Sean peaked into the bathroom to make sure it was vacant before entering. He selected a change of clothes and a towel and placed them on

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the sink where he could reach them easily from the shower stall.

This was his least favorite part of the day. The bathroom consisted of a sink and a shower, and, like the bedrooms, lacked a door. The shower had a sunken floor and no curtain. The stall was designed in such a way that not much of the spray from the nozzle would get out of the stall; any that did was soaked up by the floor. Sean quickly stepped into the shower stall, removed his clothes, and tossed them into the hamper. Finding the one spot that limited his exposure to the bathroom doorway, he turned on the water and cringed as the lukewarm spray came down on him.

He closed his eyes, sighed, and gently relieved himself into the drain, his stream merging with the one from above. Even so, he wasn't finished. This was the worst part of all. He repositioned his body and squatted over the drain. What evacuated from his bowels was more liquid than solid, thanks to

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his current diet. That was actually a positive, because he wasn't sure how he'd get any solids to go down the drain. When he was finished, he straightened and, lacking a wash cloth, "washed" himself with his hands, finishing off by rubbing them together vigorously under the water to remove anything he might have gotten on them.

He turned off the water and grabbed the towel. After drying himself, he tossed it into the hamper and grabbed the clothes. They were generically designed to fit a wide range of body types. Since he had no clothes of his own, these would have to do. He dressed and left the bathroom.

Sean continued into the main room and looked toward the kitchen where another was stocking the cupboards. The other did not look like anyone he'd seen before, but Sean could not say for certain. He was still learning to tell them apart and was not even close to recognizing the differences among them.

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“rijoore lizheewa g” the one said as Sean walked into the kitchen. Sean repeated the phrase as best he could and hoped that he correctly guessed it to be a greeting.

Sean assisted with putting away the “groceries,” which consisted of juices, fruits, vegetables and grains. There was no meat, bread or dairy. He’d tried everything and found very few items that both tasted and smelled palatable. By plugging his nose, though, he could at least eat what tasted good.

“rijoore lizheewa g” the other said again when they were done, and then she left the house.

Sean poured a drink and wandered over to the picture window at the front of the main room. He watched as a few people walked along the sidewalk inspecting the landscape of each house in turn. The people repaired where minor work was needed and made notes where more extensive work was required. The one that had just delivered the

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groceries pulled a few bags out of a truck-like vehicle and entered another house without knocking. At different house farther down the road, he could see a bunch of small ones, probably children, playing in the yard.

Sean shook his head in despondence. Everyone looked alike – he could barely tell one from another. Yet, every one of them seemed to be engaged in normal, human activities. And that was actually the strangest part of it all. Sure, they didn't look human, but he could close his eyes and imagine he was visiting a foreign country.

Chapter 9

Dear Diary: These beings do the same things humans do. At least, they do as far as I can tell. I haven't been out of the house so I don't know what's going on in the rest of the world.

As Sean stood staring out the living room window, a vehicle stopped in front of the house. One got out and walked towards the house. She stopped on the sidewalk just as the doctor walked into view. At least he could recognize the doctor, but that was only because she generally wore the same outfit and he recognized her clothing.

The two talked with animation as they strolled up the sidewalk and into the house. Once inside, they both greeted him.

“lizheewa goo luuwaa rizheewa ɟ” the doctor said, motioning toward the couch and nudging his elbow.

zheewa

All three walked to the center of the room. Sean and the doctor sat on the couch, while the other pulled a chair around so she could sit facing him.

“rizheewa zhawu d_” she said, pointing to herself. Then, turning and pointing to the doctor, she said: “zizheewa jaari d_”

“zhawu d_” she repeated, pointing to herself and pausing. “jaari d_” she said, pointing to the doctor and pausing.

Ah, Sean thought. She must be telling me their names. He pointed to the new one and then the doctor, trying his best to repeat the names: “Zhahwud. Jayrid.”

zhawu nodded and, pointing to herself and the doctor in turn, said: “zhawu luuwaa jaari d_”

“Zhahwuh looway Jayrid?” Sean repeated. He noticed that the first one’s name didn’t end in the “d” sound this time.

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zhawu next pointed first to the doctor, then to herself, saying: "jaari luuwaa zhawu d?"

"Jayrih looway Zhahwud?" Sean repeated, noticing the doctor's name without the "d" this time.

zhawu repeated the whole process.

"zhawu d_" she said, pointing to herself and pausing. Sean though he could hear a faint hesitation before the last d-like sound.

"jaari d_" she said, pointing to the doctor and pausing. Yes, there was definitely a faint hesitation before that last sound.

"zhawu luuwaa jaari d_" she said, pointing to herself and then the doctor before pausing.

"jaari luuwaa zhawu d_" she said, pointing to the doctor and then herself.

Sean thought about what he'd just seen and heard. It seemed like she made the "d" sound only when she finished a sentence. Could that be the same as a

zheewa

period, marking the end of a sentence? Then there were the longer sentences in which she seemed to be talking about both of them at the same time. Maybe "looway" meant "and"?

Sean pointed to the new person and said: "Zhahwuh d," being careful to make the "d" sound separately.

Sean turned and pointed to the doctor: "Jayrih d."

Pointing to the new person and then the doctor, he said: "Zhahwuh looway Jayrih d."

Finally, he pointed to the doctor and then the new person, saying: "Jayrih looway Zhahwuh d."

He felt a soothing feeling in his mind. Maybe they were pleased.

"Zhahwuh and Jayrih," Sean said in his own language, pointing first to zhawu and then to jaari.

"zhawu an d_ jaari j _" zhawu said, stumbling over the word "and." Sean sensed

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her confusion, and the sentence ended with a different sound - "j" Did that indicate a question?

zhawu pointed to Sean and said: "j"
She must want to know his name.

He pointed to himself and said:
"Sean."

zhawu made several unsuccessful attempts to repeat his name. He opened his mouth to show the position of his tongue, and then closed his teeth with his lips open and repeated his name.

zhawu opened her mouth and positioned her tongue. Sean noticed that she didn't have individual teeth; it looked more like a solid, unbroken molar on top and one on the bottom. She closed her teeth, keeping her thin lips open, and tried again.

"zha j"

"Close enough," Sean said with a smile. "zhah."

* * *

zheewa

Sean's grasp of the language remained minimal at best, even after several weeks. zhawu, on the other hand, was learning English at a remarkable pace. Apparently, her many skills included an intuitive understanding of communication.

At least he had learned the names of the people in the house, as well as those that appeared on a regular basis. There was jaari the doctor, of course. Her current patients, aside from himself, were wuuta the pregnant woman and ziroo the old one. The one who stocked the kitchen was jeero, the housekeeper was loori and liizi was the groundskeeper. zhawu was also staying in the house.

Most of the communication between Sean and zhawu involved gestures to indicate the meaning of sounds. It was easy with physical objects; they had worked out early that making sounds while pointing to an object meant those sounds were the word

Chapter 9

for the object. Higher concepts took a lot more time. Relationships, for example, were difficult to explain. As far as Sean could tell, the doctor owned the house. She lived here and her patients stayed in the various rooms until they were healed or died.

Physiological differences proved impossible to understand. Sean had spent an entire day in conversation with the doctor, using zhawu as an interpreter. A big part of the problem was his embarrassment when it came to talking about sex in general and his genitals in particular. Another part of the problem was that they appeared to be sexless. How can you express the concept of male and female to a being that was neither?

After many weeks of lessons, Sean and zhawu managed to develop a decent vocabulary of gestures to fill in the gaps. Despite zhawu's impressive understanding of the English language, there were sounds her people could not make. Since they didn't

zheewa

have a nose, the letters "m" and "n" were impossible. Their gills passed air through the vocal chords when they spoke, so whispering was out of the question, too, as well as the unvoiced consonants: p, t, c, k, q, f, s and x. It was like working with half an alphabet.

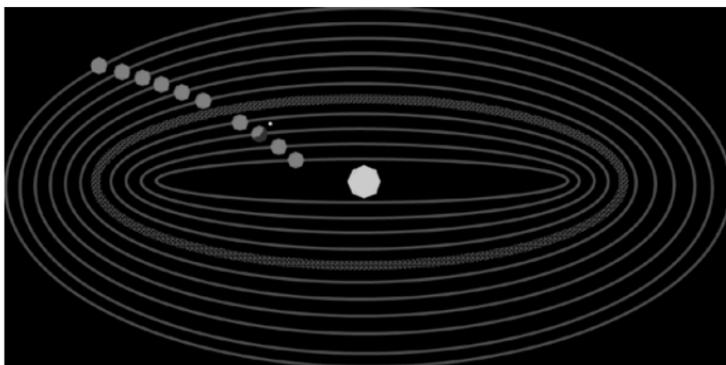
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Dear Diary: This is beginning to feel too real to be a dream or fantasy. It's been three weeks now, and the experiences have been too detailed. But if it's not a dream, then what is it? Where am I? Have I been abducted by a UFO?

Sean entered the living room and sat on the couch next to zhawu for today's lesson. On the coffee table were four large posters with strange lettering on them. The first poster had a large, solid yellow circle in the middle of 10 red circles of increasing diameter. On each of the 10 circles was another circle, each one a different size. The third circle was in two shades of blue, while all the others were solid gray, and it was inside a red circle of its own. Between the fourth and fifth was a scattering of even smaller shapes that filled the gap like a belt. The picture looked like a star system that

zheewa

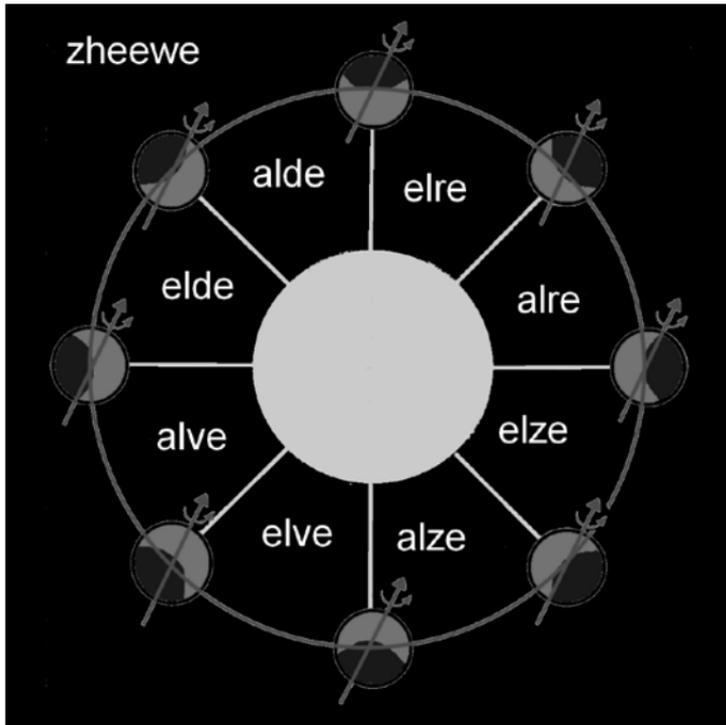
was almost identical to the solar system, with the red circles indicating orbits and the filled circles representing the star, its planets, and what was likely a moon circling the third planet.



The second poster had the same large, solid yellow circle in the middle and was surrounded by eight smaller circles, evenly spaced and filled with two shades of blue – the lighter blue always facing the center circle. A red line passed at an angle through each of the smaller circles and was topped with what appeared to be an arrow pointing in a counter-clockwise direction. If his assumption about the first poster was

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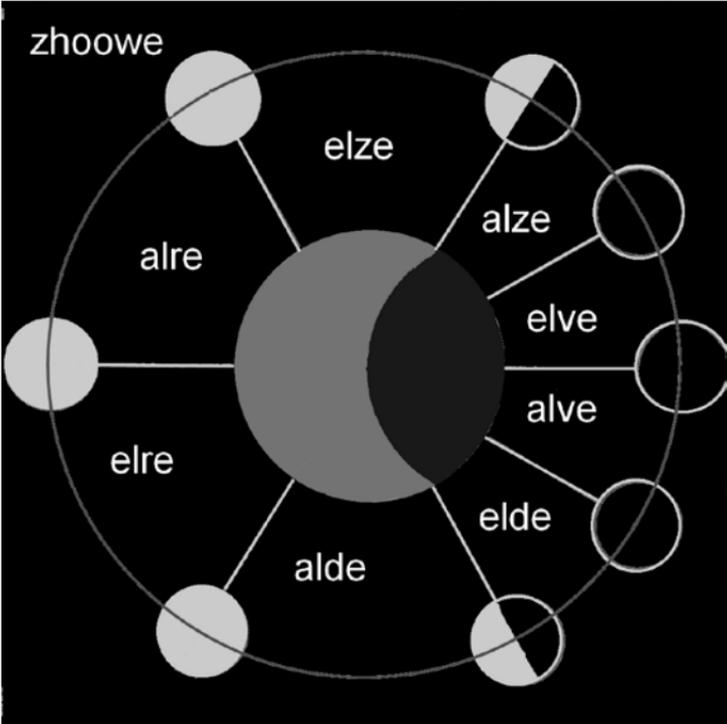
correct, then this one would represent their planet in orbit around their sun.



The third poster had the solid blue circle in the middle with eight smaller circles around it. The smaller circles were not evenly spaced. Three of the smaller circles were solid yellow and were spaced along the light blue side of the center circle. Three of

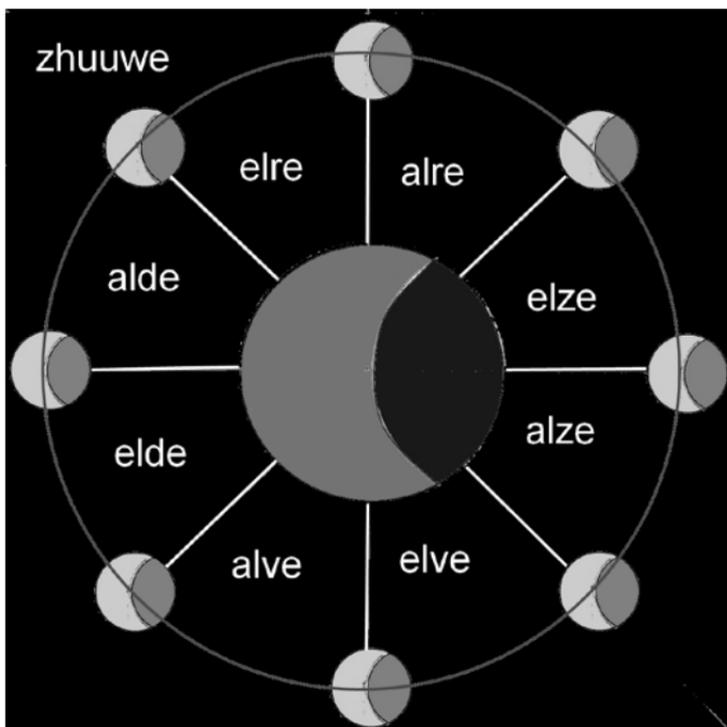
zheewa

them were yellow and unfilled, and spaced along the dark blue side. The remaining two small circles were half solid yellow and straddled both ends of the line between the light and dark blue, and the solid portion of the small yellow circle always faced in the direction of the light blue. This, it seemed, was their star in orbit around the planet. Since that was ridiculous based on what Sean knew of astronomy, then perhaps this represented the perception a person on the surface would have of the star traveling through the sky during the day.



zheewa

Sean gulped as he looked at the last poster. It reminded him a lot of the Earth and its Moon. The same solid circle in two shades of blue was in the middle, with eight evenly spaced smaller circles surrounding it. The smaller circles were light yellow on one side and dark gray on the other. All of the circles had the lighter side facing the same direction. The star in the center of the planetary system was probably the light source.



After Sean was done studying the posters, zhawu picked up the first one and walked over to the window, beckoning Sean to follow. Sean walked over and stood beside her.

“zhuu d_” she said, pointing to the large solid yellow circle on the poster.

“Zhue.” Sean repeated, pointing to the same spot on the poster. The consonant at

zheewa

the beginning sounded like the "s" in "pleasure" and was followed with a long "u" sound. He did not make the "d" sound at the end, knowing it was a sentence stop and not part of the word.

zhawu pointed out the window to the sun in the sky and repeated the word.

"Zhue." Sean repeated the word and her gesture. "Sun." He had planned to say "star," but the word "sun" just slipped out. A star was something you looked at in the night sky, while a sun was something in the daytime sky.

zhawu watched Sean's mouth as he carefully enunciated the word "sun."

"zu d_" she finally managed.

"zhee d_" she said, pointing this time to the third planet from the star. The word had the same consonant at the beginning and was followed by a long "e" sound. She then motioned towards the outside with her open hand palm down and repeated the word.

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Sean looked puzzled, so zhawu repeated the gestures and the word.

Sean thought back to their first introductions. She had pointed to each person in turn and said her name. And during their vocabulary lessons, she would point to an object and say its name. When she used the word zhee, she pointed to the planet on the poster, but used her open palm when indicating the outdoors. The pointing finger clearly meant "one." Perhaps the open palm meant "all"? When she indicated the outdoors, she might mean "all" of what you see, which could mean the planet.

Sean repeated the word and gestures, and then said: "Earth." He didn't know where he was, or where the Earth was, but this was the closest association he could make in his mind. This world belonged to these people, so in a sense it was their "Earth" as much as Earth belonged to humans. Perhaps, also, it was a bit of wishful thinking on his part.

zheewa

“erth d_” she repeated, surprisingly close to the way Sean had pronounced it. The “th” had the hard sound of the word “the” rather than the soft sound of the word “with.”

Next, instead of pointing to the moon around the third planet on the poster, she turned her open palm towards her and said: “zheewa d_”

Sean looked puzzled again.

“zhawu d_” she said, pointing to herself with a finger. Then, she opened her hand so that her open palm was towards her and said: “zheewa d_”

If open palm meant “all,” the pointing to herself could mean “all” of the people. In that case, zheewa would translate to “Earth people.”

On that assumption, Sean pointed to her and said her name, and then turned his open palm and said: “Zheewa.” Turning his palm toward himself, he said: “Human.”

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What she said sounded like "ue-a" – a long "u" followed by a short "a".

She finally pointed to the moon on the poster and said: "zhoo d?" It was the same consonant again followed by along "o" sound. She repeated the sound, this time pointing in a haphazard direction to the sky without looking where she was pointing. It made sense to Sean that she was indicating something that was normally in the sky but was not there at the moment.

Sean repeated the word and gestures, and then said: "Moon."

As he expected, her response was just the long "o" sound, since she could not pronounce either the "m" or the "n."

Sean followed her back and they both sat down on the couch. What followed was a long lesson in her world's calendars. Apparently, they followed one of three different calendars depending on what they were doing. The "orbiting" object was represented by the eight small circles around

zheewa

the central large circle and determined the calendar type. Each "orbit" had four major divisions, each of which was then divided in half. That made sense to Sean for two reasons. First, the calendar he was accustomed to used the number four quite a bit: four seasons, four weeks in a month, and so on. Second, the zheewa had four digits on each of two hands. Their numbering system, if they used positional notation, was likely in base eight.

The second poster of their world orbiting their sun (zhee orbiting zhuu) was the calendar for seasons and was called zheewe. Sean was able to identify the winter and summer solstices, as well as the spring and autumn equinoxes. However, it took him a while to understand what she defined as a season and the beginning of the year. Their seasons started on a cross-quarter day and peaked on the day of the solstice or equinox. On an Earth calendar, a season started on the day of either the solstice or the equinox.

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The Spring Equinox marked the start of spring on Earth, but their spring started at the midpoint between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, which would be the pagan holiday of Beltane. The period before the peak was called "Early Spring" and the period after "Late Spring." In a way, that made some sense to Sean, because it always seemed like the seasons started early anyway. There was usually snow on the ground before the Winter Solstice, flowers blooming before the Spring Equinox, hot weather before the Summer Solstice, and cooling off before the Autumnal Equinox.

zhawu erased a mark on the poster, then re-drew the mark in the same spot. She pointed to the mark, and then indicated with her palm up in the general direction of the outside. It was Sean's guess that she was telling him the current season, which was Early Summer.

zheewa

Starting with Early Spring, zhawu pointed to each season in turn, then stopped. She repeated the process.

If he understood her correctly, she was trying to tell him that they started their year on the first day of Early Spring. This bothered Sean because it was not a fixed day; it shifted inconsistently between two different days each year. An Earth calendar always started a new year after a set number of days, adjusted approximately every four years by a day to account for the accumulated shortfall.

The third poster reversed the sun and their world (zhuu orbiting zhee). This was called zhuuwe, the day calendar. The four major divisions were marked by sunrise, noon, sunset and midnight. The solid yellow circles on the light blue side were daytime, while the unfilled yellow circles on the dark blue side were nighttime. The half-filled yellow circles were for sunrise and sunset.

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zhawu pointed to a mark on the poster that indicated the current time was Late Morning.

Sean could not understand how they could use this calendar to mark the passing of a day. He must be missing something. The amount of sunlight was never the same from one day to the next. Daytime was about two minutes longer or shorter depending on which equinox you were approaching. Sunrise and sunset were not constants. An Earth day was determined by a precise number of hours, minutes and seconds. Sure, it was short by almost four minutes compared to the actual spin of the Earth, thus requiring an occasional leap day, but at least time could be measured accurately. Events could be scheduled precisely, and you could easily calculate the amount of time between events.

Sean shook his head and looked at the fourth poster depicting the moon orbiting their world (zhoo orbiting zhee). This one

zheewa

was called zhoowe, and represented the phases of the moon, roughly marking off a month. The four major divisions were marked by the new moon, first quarter, full moon and last quarter. Based on the location of the mark, he would guess they were late into the fourth week and approaching a new moon.

Sean closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Each of the three calendars seemed to be separate; there did not appear to be any attempt to coordinate among them. Of course, he could be wrong. He could be missing something. He may not have learned all there is to know. That must be it. This was a strange world, after all – no matter how much it reminded him of Earth. In fact, if he interpreted the symbols correctly, their planet and its moon were orbiting and spinning in the opposite direction of the Earth and Moon!

Sean opened his eyes to see zhawu watching him closely. He smiled, and then

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turned his attention back to the zhuuwe, the day calendar. He used his thumbnail to mark divisions in the Late Morning portion, creating smaller segments, hoping she would grasp the idea of hours and minutes. After studying the marks for a moment, she actually nodded. He'd never seen her do that before; she must have picked it up from him.

She walked over to the living room wall opposite the kitchen and pointed to something hanging there. Sean walked over and looked at it. Funny, he'd never given it a second look before. It was a physical representation of the zhuuwe poster, although much more realistic. The center actually looked like a planet. One large continent shaped almost like a doughnut, tapered at the top and with an accent mark, occupied most of the southern hemisphere. The rest of the planet consisted of a blue-green ocean and no sign of polar ice caps. The right side of the planet was darkened,

zheewa

while part of the left side appeared to be in daylight. A red track circled the planet, representing the path of the sun. The track passed through eight circles, identical in coloring as the poster, and in the same positions. A ninth lit circle was on the track, with a ray of light that went from the sun to a spot on the planet. Sean noticed that the circle was moving very slowly. If he watched long enough, he could detect minute movement. Currently, it was in what he thought of as mid-morning, which would be about the end of Late Morning or Early Midday by zheewa reckoning.

zhawu took the clock off the wall and allowed Sean to inspect the back. The planet portion was partially lit, and it appeared that the size of the lit portion could be adjusted. The light area on the clock was currently larger than the dark area, which Sean guessed must mean the days were longer than the nights. That meant it must be summer and close to the solstice, if he

Chapter 10

judged the length of the day correctly. The clock was hung back on the wall, and Sean took a closer look at the face. Each of the eight divisions was further divided into four. That must be an hour for them. They counted 32 hours in a day. And it seemed that all of the divisions, right down to each hour, could be re-adjusted as the day lengthened or shortened.

This was madness. Even the length of an hour changed from day to day. There did not appear to be minutes or seconds. Sean closed his eyes briefly as he sighed. When he looked again at zhawu, she nodded and seemed to smile. Her open palm was up and her arm made a motion in the direction of her room. He had learned that was her signal that she was done for the day.

Sean sank gratefully into his bed, closing his eyes and mind again to this strange place.

Chapter 11

Dear Diary: How is it possible that this world and its solar system are so similar to Earth? It's things like this that convince me I'm really home but seeing the world through some kind of drug-induced distortion.

Sean opened his bed table drawer and stared at the contents. In addition to the personal items he had when he arrived here, there were several new items: a blade he used as a straight razor to shave his face, a makeshift tooth brush and floss, and the local equivalents of paper and pencil.

Sean pulled out the paper and pencil. His astronomy and calendar lesson of yesterday got him to thinking – he wanted a human calendar to hang on his wall. Perhaps it would help to make this place feel more like home.

Using the back of his tablet as a writing surface, he carefully drew a grid with

zheewa

seven columns and five rows, labeling the columns with the three-letter abbreviations for the days of the week.

He tapped his pencil as he thought. There was a celebration planned for the Summer Solstice, so that meant June 21st was not far off. He recalled a full moon on his first night here, and the moon had been full last night as well. He had consulted his moon phase table last night before going to bed. The May and June full moons occurred on the 17th and 15th, respectively, assuming 2011 for the current year. That would make today June 16th, 2011.

May had a Friday the 13th, which meant the first was on a Sunday. Sean labeled the sheet "May" and quickly filled in the dates for the month, making note of the date for the full moon. Taking a second sheet, he drew another grid and filled in the dates for June. Just as he finished July, he looked up to see zhawu standing in his

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doorway with another zheewa carrying a shoulder bag.

Standing up, Sean said: "rijoore lizheewa"

"rijoore lizheewa g" zhawu replied.
"dii-a-lekt gud d"

Sean smiled at what sounded almost like a stutter at the end of her sentence. And, after much practice, she was able to make a "k" sound, although it sounded more like she was choking on a fur ball.

zhawu pointed to the other with her:
"veera d ee-lek-trik tek d"

"An electronics technician?" Sean could feel his hopes rise. "Can she recharge my batteries?"

A look that Sean recognized as puzzlement flitted across her face. After a moment, zhawu nodded. Sean retrieved his tablet and MP3 player from the drawer and eagerly handed them to the tech. veera promptly sat down on the floor near the wall, set the electronic items beside her, and

zheewa

began to remove the contents of the shoulder bag.

She immediately hooked up the tablet to a meter and began taking measurements from every opening. After taking readings using several different meters, she started rummaging through a collection of small objects shaped like flat boxes. She selected one and started tinkering with it using what looked like a tiny awl. She then attached a clip to it using two wires, and then attached the clip to the dock connector and handed the whole assembly to Sean.

Sean eagerly activated the tablet and checked the charging status. The battery was charging! He turned it on and ran it through a series of diagnostics while veera turned her attention to the MP3 player. She soon had another device attached to it and charging its battery. She handed it to Sean, who eagerly set aside his tablet. He plugged one end of his earphones into the player, the other end in his ears, and selected a song.

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He felt as though he would burst with joy when the sultry voice of Debelah Morgan enticed him to Dance with Me.

He opened his eyes and saw that he had an audience. In addition to zhawu and veera already in the room, jaari and wuuta were standing in the doorway. The shared joy among them was a palpable presence. He soon found himself in the middle of a very passionate group hug. Sean began to feel self-conscious, and the zheewa immediately stepped away.

veera packed her bag, gave Sean a quick hug, and left. zhawu and jaari remained in the room. Sean could tell they wanted to talk.

“joy luuwaa luv ʒ” she said in a mix of English and zheewa.

“Yes,” Sean said, simultaneously nodding and looking at the floor. He felt embarrassed from his public display earlier.

“ʒ”

zheewa

Sean recognized that sound to mean a question, most likely about dancing and music, and how it related to his feelings of joy and love. He was at a loss to explain. How could he possibly tell her what music did to him? How the melody and beat electrified his body even as the lyrics opened his mind, creating a conduit that freed his spirit? How dancing was his expression of the joy and love he felt as he communed with the fundamental energies of the universe? And, above all, how this feeling helped him forget the hurt and anger he always carried with him – a result of how separate and alone he felt even when among his own kind?

zhawu placed her hand on his forearm. Sean looked into her eyes and thought he saw understanding. She nodded and attempted a smile. Sean smiled back with relief. Maybe she did understand.

“bo-dee good ɹ” zhawu asked after a moment.

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Sean kept his answers short. He and zhawu were slowly building a vocabulary of English words she could speak.

"Body tired," he said. Then putting a hand over his stomach, he said: "Ache."

zhawu spoke a few words to jaari who, in turn, consulted the monitor over his bed. They talked a few minutes more before zhawu turned back to Sean.

"diet good b_" she said, shaking her head. Sean recognized the end sound in the sentence as the one used for a false statement.

"Yeah, you can say that again," Sean said more to himself than to the others.

zhawu then did something rather strange. She pinched her skin, and then pinched his.

"a-like d_" she said

"Alike?" Sean repeated.

zhawu nodded. jaari took out a small device that looked like a magnifying glass. She placed it over zhawu's arm, fiddled with

zheewa

the handle, and then looked through the lens. She straightened up and motioned for Sean to look.

Sean looked and was surprised by what he saw. The magnifying glass worked more like a microscope. He was able to see zhawu's cell structure at an amazing level of detail.

jaari repeated the process over Sean's arm. When he looked, he could not tell the difference between his cells and zhawu's. But then, biology wasn't his specialty.

"a-like d_" zhawu repeated.

"We are alike?"

zhawu nodded.

"Huh," Sean said. Did she mean that their DNA was similar? What were the odds that he and the zheewa would be alike at that level? The logical conclusion would be that they had evolved on the same planet. In light of this, and combined with the astronomical similarities, it seemed likely he was on Earth. But not on any Earth he

Chapter 11

recognized. He was missing something, and it nagged at the edge of his thoughts.

“o-kay ɹ” zhawu asked.

“Okay,” Sean sighed.

Chapter 12

Dear Diary: I feel like I'm making a connection with these people. I still don't understand their language, but I feel close. I know that sounds strange. It's like what I imagined it was supposed to feel like at home with my parents, just like in the TV shows I used to watch.

This is becoming tiresome, Sean thought to himself as he put away his tablet, rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. *Today, I will take a walk outside.*

He was restless after so much rest, and was feeling well enough to do some serious exploring today – outside this time. He had his fill of the few rooms in which he'd been recuperating for the past week or so.

Sitting in the middle of his bed with legs crossed and eyes closed, Sean meditated on the outdoors. He allowed his thoughts to drift with the wind along the

zheewa

ground and through the trees. He could feel the warmth of the sun on his face, and smell the fresh spring air. His mind was free, and he felt the joy of flying with Eagle as his spirit guide.

The ground passed at a dizzying rate below him. Soon he passed the coast and was out at sea. The tang of the salt air tickled his nose, comforting his mind, body and spirit.

The feeling grew, and he became aware of others sharing in the joy. Sean opened his eyes to see jaari sitting on the bed next to him and watching intently. zhawu was also in the room, standing beside jaari. Her eyes were closed and her head was tilted up slightly. Her hand rested on jaari's shoulder.

"j" she said, touching her forehead.

Sean recognized the sound that indicated a question. He uncrossed his legs and draped them over the edge of the bed, rubbing circulation back into them. He

Chapter 13

looked up at zhawu. How could he explain that he was meditating? He had no idea how to express the concept.

“luv ɹ” zhawu asked.

Sean stared at her. Did she just say “love”?

zhawu made a slight motion that Sean recognized from his long lessons with her; she was trying to think of how to interpret what she had just said.

“luv ɹ” zhawu repeated, this time placing her hand over his heart.

“Yes,” Sean said, nodding and smiling. “Love.”

Both zhawu and jaari continued to stare at him. He could feel their curiosity. It was odd how she could practically sense what he meant when he focused on something he felt strongly about. It was almost like...

His eyes locked with zhawu’s. Telepathy? No, that didn’t seem right; it was more like a two-way communication of

zheewa

feelings, emotions. Were they a race of empathes? That would explain a lot.

“luv b” jaari repeated.

Sean noted the slight difference in the way jaari ended her sentence from zhawu a few minutes earlier. There was about half a dozen different sounds they used to end a sentence, sort of like punctuation.

On impulse, he stood up and held out both hands, palms up. zhawu and jaari each took a hand, and joined hands with each other. Sean closed his eyes and entered a light meditative state, reaching out to them in his mind. He felt an instant connection. Sean visualized seeking guidance from a spirit guide and how he used the guide to explore answers to questions by focusing on his connection to the guide and to this other world. The connection itself was, in essence, a connection to life (and love) itself.

After a few moments, Sean opened his eyes and let his hands drop, breaking his

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connection with the zheewa. zhawu and jaari both nodded. He could sense their pleasure.

Sean looked down at the floor and shuffled his feet, feeling a little embarrassed. They left the room, allowing him the privacy of his morning routine.

After showering and dressing, Sean stopped at the front window in the living room to gauge the weather. The sun was hiding behind a few clouds and it looked like it had rained earlier.

The house itself sat on the inside of a large, circular drive. Sean was standing near one of the doors that opened to the drive. A third door in the back opened into a park-like area where the residents of the circle gathered and socialized.

He decided to explore the park and headed for the back door. At least he called it the back door. Once outdoors, Sean paused and took a deep breath as he surveyed his surroundings.

zheewa

He turned right and began walking. Very soon, he arrived at the house where small ones played in a yard. He stopped to watch. Except for the physical differences, they could be a bunch of human children engaged in play. Well, actually not quite. They didn't seem to be wearing clothes. And the longer he watched, the more Sean realized there was something different about the way they were playing. But he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

An odd mix of smells caught his attention, so Sean continued walking. He stopped a few doors down at the source of the smells. Sean felt like a peeping Tom staring at the house, but what he saw surprised him. It looked like a restaurant; he could see people seated on the back patio and in the living room, eating. The smells began to overwhelm him, and Sean had to move on. He still hadn't gotten used to their foods.

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As he circled, he passed more houses that looked like they doubled as places of business. One house looked like a clothing store. Another looked like a grooming salon. Sean wasn't sure if the word "house" was the right one. If these buildings were anything like jaari's, then the owners not only lived in them but operated a business as well. It must be quite a convenience to live where you work.

Sean stopped to watch the gardeners working in one of the yards. One of the adults was directing several younger ones; they looked to be about 10 years old, as near as he could guess by their size.

He was struck by a thought about the children, and nearly walked right past the doctor's house as he came full circle. The group that was playing was about the size of preschool kids. Anywhere else he'd seen children, they were older and working with adults.

zheewa

More than that, the preschool children were not engaged in aggressive play. That's what had struck him as odd. There was no shoving or pushing. He could not sense any taunting, not that he could know for sure. With any group of human children, there was bound to be conflict, yet Sean got the impression that there was none at all with these children.

Chapter 13

Dear Diary: I must be missing something. People fight and argue; that's just the way of things. But these people don't. All of them look like they're happy and having fun. It's exactly how I fantasized Earth should be – a utopian culture. This can't be real. I'm afraid to wake up from this, whatever it is. I don't want to go back to all that ugliness.

The quiet of the house was shattered by pain. Sean felt it and heard it at the same time. He looked up from the text he was studying and cocked his head to listen. The pain came again. Sean put down his tablet and leapt out of the chair. He stopped in the hallway just outside of his bedroom door, scanning the living room and kitchen.

There she was! wuuta was lying on the floor near the back door, clutching her belly. Sean rushed over and knelt down

zheewa

beside her. She wasn't breathing. He couldn't find a pulse. Wait, don't panic! They only breathe when speaking. Do they even have a pulse? Do they have a circulatory system?

Her neck gills fluttered and she screamed again. She curled up and held her belly tighter. She was wearing a simple gown, so Sean felt less self-conscious as he placed one hand on her belly. He placed his other hand behind her head. In this way, he could cradle her in an effort to provide comfort and, at the same time, attempted to use his Reiki skills to encourage energy flow.

She seemed to relax a little, but pain still emanated from her and filled the house. Sean closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and called on his spirit guide. Focusing on the source of the pain in her belly and guided by the spirit world, he followed the path and formed a sympathetic attachment. The trick was to honor and bless the pain,

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which in turn would pass on the more important message: why it existed.

Sean began to hum in harmony with the vibration of the pain. As he fine-tuned his connection, he could feel her relax even more. He sensed another life – the baby. It was in distress and needed to be birthed.

His humming became stronger and deeper. Hands on his shoulder distracted him. Looking up, he could see zhawu, jaari and many others. zhawu and jaari rested a hand on each of his shoulders, while the rest held hands. All had eyes closed and faces uplifted. They were humming along with him and the sound resonated, merging sympathetically and synergistically with the pain.

jaari looked at him briefly and then at zhawu.

“do it b” zhawu said softly, encouragingly.

Sean nodded. The humming continued, strengthening the path and

zheewa

moving energy into the baby. Sean could feel the love and support of the others as he directed the energy to where it was needed, following the path indicated by his spirit guide.

wuuta sighed, relaxing. Her legs parted and Sean saw movement under her gown. jaari knelt down and lifted the garment. She directed her humming and cupped her hands underneath the emerging – baby? It looked more like a pod, elongated from its passage through the birth canal. No arms, no legs, no head.

It rested on top of jaari's forearms. Someone else had placed a pan on the floor below. Sean noticed movement beneath the skin of the seed-like pod. It split, and liquid began seeping out. As the crack widened, more liquid poured out and into the pan. The skin of the pod fell away to reveal the baby, including arms, legs and head. jaari set the baby down into the pan. The short, fine fur

Chapter 13

on the baby looked engorged, as if each follicle had soaked up some of the liquid.

A collective sigh filled the room. wuuta placed a hand on his forearm. He could feel her relief and contentment. The baby would be fine.

Sean took a deep breath and tried to still his shaking. He felt both stunned and amazed. He had just delivered his first baby, and it wasn't human!

Chapter 14

Dear Diary: Delivering that baby yesterday sure made this world feel a lot more real to me. The connection with these people was amazing. I've worked so hard on Earth studying Reiki and Shamanism, taking dance lessons, hoping it would all help me feel some kind of connection with people. And it's happening here! It's a dream come true. If it weren't for this nagging stomach-ache my life would be perfect.

Sean studied the vocabulary list he'd started. Teaching zhawu English was turning out to be a fun challenge for Sean. It was a good thing American English had so many words with similar meanings. So far, he had a simple list that covered enough of the common situations that he felt confident in basic conversations. As for the rest, well, zhawu was able to recognize and interpret most of it, even if she couldn't pronounce it.

zheewa

He put down the tablet and turned his attention to his clothes. There wasn't much of a selection in the bathroom closet; the others in the house must have purchased their own clothing. No, not purchased; they didn't seem to have money here. Obtained would be a better word. The others obtained their own clothes based on individual taste. Perhaps he could obtain some at the clothing store nearby.

"re-dee ɹ" zhawu asked.

Sean was sitting in the living room, idly staring at the clock on the wall. Mid-summer officially arrived early midday today. On the Earth calendar, it would be 11:16am Mountain Daylight Time on June 20, 2011, and it would mark the start of summer, not the middle.

"Ready," Sean replied as he stood up. "New clothes?"

"o-kay b" zhawu said.

They walked out the front door and turned left. They followed the outer, circular

Chapter 14

drive to the clothing house a few doors down. The proprietor looked as if she was getting ready to leave, but beckoned to them as they walked through the door. zhawu exchanged a few words with her, and then she walked up to Sean.

“zhuutha b” she said, pointing to herself. She then indicated the tables and racks in the room, palm up.

Sean looked around the room, not knowing where to start. A hunter green shirt caught his attention. He walked over to it and picked it up, holding it up to guess its fit. zhuutha gently took it and held it up against him. She uttered some sounds and handed it back to him, motioning to another room. Sean looked at zhawu, who mimed putting clothes on.

When he returned with the shirt on, zhuutha approached him with scissors, needles and thread in hand. She spent several minutes cutting and sewing, and

zheewa

soon the shirt fit much better. zhuutha put away her tools and supplies.

zhawu and zhuutha continued talking as they led Sean out of the house. zhuutha closed the door without a second look. Sean knew it had no lock. It made him uncomfortable to think that the house would be left unprotected and unguarded. Not that anyone had a need to steal anything. There wasn't such a concept as stealing as far as Sean could tell. No one seemed to pay for anything –like this new shirt he was wearing. He felt strange walking out without paying for it.

The gathering to honor mid-summer was being held in a nearby neighborhood. They soon arrived at an intersection, a short length of road that connected the circle they were on with another. Sean noticed a vehicle approaching and stopped. zhawu, however, kept right on walking through the intersection. She called a greeting to the driver, who had stopped so they could cross.

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Sean edged into the intersection, watching the car and expecting to be honked at or run over at any moment. The driver remained stopped, and did not resume motion until both he and zhawu were safely across. Had he been on Earth, the driver would not have been nearly so patient.

As they walked through the neighborhood, Sean noticed it was not laid out in the same circular pattern as the one in which the doctor lived. There were a lot of interior paths here, as opposed to the one he was used to. The deeper into the neighborhood they moved, the more it appeared that the buildings enclosed by the paths became smaller. At the center, a large number of ramadas also formed a pattern of large to small. Sean would have to see if zhawu could get him an aerial view; this neighborhood reminded him very strongly of the Ba'ila and Mokoulek African settlements. He had read an article about how the people had modeled the architecture using fractals.

zheewa

Quite a few zheewa had already gathered. The sound of music and the smell of food mingled in the air, along with the chatter of various groups who were scattered among the tables. zhawu called a greeting and turned suddenly to head for a specific group. As Sean hurried to catch up, he passed close by two zheewa sitting by themselves at a table. He could see that the fur on their skin was engorged just as the baby's had been, and they were rubbing against each other in a gentle manner.

Sean touched zhawu's arm. She stopped and looked where he was pointing. She thought for a moment, and then said:

"kree-ate bay-bee d."

"They're creating babies?" Sean exclaimed. "They're having sex in public?"

zhawu tilted her head and smiled. Sean got the strong impression she was amused by his reaction. He followed her as she continued toward her friends, all the while looking around frantically hoping not to

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see more zheewa having sex. He did notice that most of them were not even clothed.

When they arrived at the group, zhawu barely had time to introduce him before silence descended. Everyone turned to face the center and knelt down, holding hands with their nearest neighbor. They looked down to the ground and began a quiet chant. It was a bit discordant at first, but gradually they began to harmonize. The strength of the hundreds of voices in unison grew as they turned their heads to the sky. Sean could feel the power of their song. It reminded him of the dance clubs he used to frequent on Saturday nights, with the music so loud and the bass so strong it literally vibrated the floor. He thought he could feel the ground shake with their conviction. They soon peaked and the chant gradually became softer as they turned their heads back to the ground, eventually fading out altogether. After sitting in silence for a moment, there was a collective intake of

zheewa

breath, hands were released, and everyone began standing.

Sean thought he could feel a difference in the crowd. Everyone seemed more relaxed, content and connected. The conversation and music soon started up again. zhawu turned to him, extended a hand palm up, and nodded once.

“go j” she said. Sean took that to mean he should feel free to mingle.

The beat of the music was compelling, so he wandered in that direction. He came to a large area where several zheewa were dancing. On one side was half a dozen who looked like the band. The zheewa who were not dancing kept a respectful distance, allowing the dancers plenty of room. Even the dancers themselves showed respect for each other.

Sean noticed his foot tapping to the beat. The band was playing an energetic song, and the dancers were moving around in a frenzied fashion. Listening carefully, he

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began counting out the beat: one, two, three, four and one, two three, four and one, two, three. Definitely a cha-cha. Caught up in the music and the count, Sean began moving side to side in a triple-step, rock-step pattern. Triple-step to the left, rock-step back; triple-step to the right, rock-step forward.

A few of the dancers closest to him noticed his movement and stopped to watch. They tried to mimic the steps, but weren't quite getting the hang of it. They signaled Sean to join them, and he soon had a crowd as he walked through the basic cha-cha step. The band obliged by continuing the same piece of music, with variations, as he taught the zheewa. He wasn't successful in getting them to understand that it was really a partner dance, so he wound up with a large cha-cha line dance instead.

Sean was exhausted by the time the song finally ended and the music changed to a different beat. He moved away from the

zheewa

dance floor and found a seat at a nearby table.

It started to rain as he sat and watched. Sean ran for cover, but the zheewa did a very strange thing. Instead, they stood in the rain and seemed to be rejoicing in it. They didn't seem to mind getting wet.

The rain didn't last for long, and then he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see jaari; he knew it was her because he recognized the clothes. She put a hand under his arm and they walked together back home.

Chapter 15

Dear Diary: The festival yesterday was amazing. This can't be real – it's too perfect. Even if these people had figured out how to live in peace, life happens. Accidents and natural disasters are part of life. Why hasn't anything like that happened?

A loud crack of lightning awoke Sean from a deep sleep. He felt a brief sense of panic as he recalled the dream he had the first night there.

Relax, he told himself. Breathe.

A wave of pain passed over him. This was not the same as when wuuta gave birth. It felt fuller and more forlorn – a distant pain, not from inside the house.

Lights came on in the living room and Sean could hear the sound of frantic activity coming through his door. He got up to look out and saw zhawu and jaari with what looked like backpacks.

zheewa

“go with b” zhawu said to him. The “th” had a hard sound as in “the,” but Sean had no trouble understanding her. She wanted him to go with her.

jaari handed him a backpack as he came into the living room. As soon as he put it on, they were out the door. The other two were also carrying some kind of cases in each hand. Outside, flashes of lightning revealed a van waiting in the rain for them. They piled in and the van took off.

As with the zheewa, the differences Sean noticed about the van were as disconcerting because of the similarities. Seats, doors, windows, and what sounded like a motor. It was similar to any other van he’d ever been in. Looking at the driver’s seat, however, he didn’t see anything that looked like an ignition or directional signals. In fact, the dashboard seemed to be missing a lot of instruments he would have expected. And the motor didn’t sound like internal combustion. It had more of the whine of an

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electric car. In fact, there was a noticeable lack of air pollution, now that Sean thought about it. Any time he'd been outdoors, the air was always clean and fresh.

Sean could see out the front windshield from where he sat. The horizon had a glow that looked like it was on fire. As they got closer, he saw that he was not wrong. A large building had been struck by lightning and was in flames. The van stopped and everyone climbed out. Sean grabbed all he could and followed jaari. She tapped him on the arm to get his attention, emptied the contents of her bag, and then pointed to the other bags. Sean got the message; she needed the rest of the bags and cases to be emptied of their contents.

As Sean set to work, more zheewa joined the group. Under jaari's direction, they put together what seemed to be a triage table under a canopy. It reminded Sean a lot of the show MASH he used to

zheewa

watch. They had set up a mobile surgery on the grass.

Two more zheewa showed up, carrying another between them. They placed the unconscious form on the portable table.

“go with b” jaari said, pointing to Sean and then to the other two.

Sean obediently followed, and spent the next several hours digging through the collapsing building for injured zheewa.

Hundreds were moving around clearing debris and shoring up the building where they could to protect the rescuers.

Throughout it all, Sean could feel the weight of the pain upon him, more oppressive even than the dark clouds and warm, humid summer air.

* * *

The brightening of the sky told Sean that dawn had come. Sean could see that between the zheewa and fire, the building

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had been completely razed. A quick survey of the area revealed that all the injured had been moved safely away. Sean took this free moment to catch his breath. As he looked around again, he noticed that a small town had grown up overnight. He could see dozens of canopies from where he stood. Most of them were like jaari's, set up with a triage table holding an injured zheewa. Food was being prepared at many of the others, with zheewa carrying food to the surgery canopies.

Sean arrived back at jaari's canopy just as two vans pulled up. zhawu jumped out of one and began packing up. While Sean helped, jaari supervised two others as they moved an injured zheewa into the other van. He could see that it looked a lot like an ambulance; there were four beds inside, two on each wall. After strapping the injured one in, the other two stepped forward and sat in the driver and passenger seats. jaari climbed into the back and closed it behind her.

zheewa

Sean and zhawu finished loading the van and climbed aboard. They were dropped off at the house before jaari arrived. Most likely, she was picking up other patients. zhawu went straight to the kitchen and returned with two bags. She beckoned Sean, and he followed her to his room. Handing him a bag, she point to the bed and said:

“bed other d_”

The bed would be needed by one of the patients. Sean took the bag and put all his belongings into it. He finished just as jaari arrived in the ambulance. Standing in the living room, he watched as patients were brought in and placed in the empty room, as well as his and wuuta’s. A fourth patient was brought into the back, Sean figured she would be occupying zhawu’s room.

wuuta and her baby must have moved out of the house already to make room for the injured from the accident. He and zhawu would probably have to move out as well. Where would he go? How would he survive?

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He still had a lot to learn about living in this society. He had no idea when, if ever, he would be able to return to his own world.

zhawu noticed his anxiety, and patted his arm to calm him down. She directed him to lie down on the couch, and then she laid down on the other. As he dozed off, it occurred to him why the zheewa had so little aggressive tendencies – their ability to feel each other’s emotions was an excellent deterrent.

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Sean opened his eyes slowly against the bright morning sun. zhawu was still sound asleep on the other couch. He could hear someone moving around in one of the patient rooms; that must be jaari seeing to the patients.

The smell of smoke in his clothes was strong. He got up to shower and change into fresh clothes, and then returned to the kitchen for a bite to eat. zhawu had just finished a glass of juice and was rinsing it in the sink.

“rijoore lizheewa g” she said.

“Good morning,” Sean replied automatically.

Despite all the sleep he had gotten, he was still feeling a bit numb. It wasn't so much the effort of rescuing people from the burning building as it was the effort of blocking the emotions. The zheewa worked

zheewa

efficiently and with purpose, but Sean could feel the constant undertone of pain, worry and fear. It was mentally exhausting.

And, on top of that, he wasn't sure where he'd be living after today. jaari had her hands full with a house full of patients; she didn't have the time or space to take care of him anymore.

While zhawu showered and dressed, Sean stood staring out the front window. Sighing deeply, he felt a sense of sadness descend upon him. This world looked so much like Earth, but it wasn't. The strange beings living here accepted him so far. What was going to happen when he had to make his own way?

A touch on his arm caused Sean to turn around. zhawu and jaari were both standing there. zhawu was holding her bag in one hand and Sean's in the other.

"g" jaari said as she hugged him.

zhawu smiled and handed Sean his bag.

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“lizheewa goo luuwaa rizheewa ɟ”
zhawu said, opening the door and stepping out of the house.

Sean hesitated before following her. Where would she take him? With a sigh and one last look into the living room, Sean left the house. zhawu led him past the neighborhood in which the solstice festival was held, beyond which was another neighborhood. She followed the outer circle until she reached a large house. Sean was not surprised when she walked right in without knocking; the zheewa had a very open society.

The living room and kitchen areas were about twice the size as the ones in jaari’s house, with a lot more places to sit. There were more than half a dozen zheewa in various states of repose. Some were eating and some were not; most were undressed. On either side of the living/kitchen area were two long halls, just

zheewa

as in jaari's house, except they were longer and had more rooms attached.

"rijoore lizheewa g" one of them hollered from the kitchen, waving a hand like a madman. She handed off something to one of the others and made a mad rush across the room. They hugged and then chatted for several minutes. Eventually, they turned their attention to Sean.

"zha d_" zhawu said, pointing to Sean. Turning to the other, she said: "thuuro d_" As usual, the "th" had the hard sound as in the word "the."

thuuro raised her hand and, pointing to herself, said: "thuuro d_" Pointing to Sean, she said: "zha d_"

Sean raised his hand and repeated the gestures, pointing to himself first, then thuuro, and said: "Sean. Thoo-rah."

zhawu smiled and nodded. thuuro took Sean's bag with one hand and linked arms with him.

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“lizheewa goo luuwaa rizheewa ?”
thuuro said, and led Sean towards one of the hallways. As they approached what seemed to be an empty room, she signaled to zhawu in the next room. zhawu entered the room indicated as thuuro continued into the closer one. thuuro placed Sean’s bag on the floor. Unlinking arms, she held her arm out, palm up, to the room.

“My room?” Sean asked.

thuuro looked at him with a blank expression. zhawu saved her from needing to respond by entering the room.

“zha liv d_” zhawu said, duplicating thuuro’s palm-up gesture.

“Okay,” Sean said, nodding.

thuuro patted his arm and left.

“okay ʒ” zhawu asked.

“Not okay,” Sean said, shaking his head. “How do I pay?” He needed to settle this once and for all. He’d not seen anyone pay for anything, but that didn’t mean that

zheewa

some form of exchange or other wasn't taking place.

It was zhawu's turn to shake her head. Sean took a deep breath and thought for a minute. Then, he put up two fingers and made the sign for something to drink.

"b" zhawu said, and walked to the kitchen to get two drinks.

While she was gone, he pulled out his pencil and paper. Taking one sheet of paper, he carefully tore it into eight pieces and wrote the zheewa symbol for the number one on each. He then placed the paper and slips on the bed, keeping the pencil in his hand.

zhawu returned with two glasses. Sean took them and set them on the dresser.

"Watch," he said.

With exaggerated movements, Sean took a blank sheet of paper from the bed and sat down in the chair. After making a show of thinking hard and writing on the

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paper, he put the paper back on the bed and took two of the marked slips.

“Work,” he said, pointing to the paper he just wrote on. Then he pointed to the slips of paper in his hand and said: “Paid.”

Sean turned to the dresser, placed one of the slips on it and took one of the drinks.

“Buy,” he said.

He turned to zhawu. *That’s her bemused look, I think, Sean thought.*

zhawu walked over to the bed, picked up the remaining slips and ripped them up. Then, she walked over to the dresser and ripped up the slip of paper Sean had placed there. She then picked up the other glass and drank it.

“Hm,” Sean said. “I don’t have to work?”

“work b_” she said, shaking her head in agreement that he didn’t have to. “okay j”

“Okay.”

Chapter 17

Dear Diary: My head is still spinning for the events of the past few days. The fire, moving out of the hospital and into this place. I think it's an apartment house. I can't believe I don't have to do anything.

Sean put down his tablet. There was no point in finishing the book edits; there wasn't a single other human on the planet to even discuss it with, let alone his supervising editor. He just didn't know what else to do. It passed the time and that was all. There wasn't even anything new to learn; he'd edited dozens of books on this topic over the years, and the difference was usually either the expository style of the other or just a new way of thinking about the same old thing. He should talk to his supervisor about moving out of the classic texts and into more current topics.

zheewa

He glanced at his makeshift calendar. Today was the Fourth of July. Well, there certainly wouldn't be any fireworks tonight to celebrate independence. Nor would there be a discussion with his supervisor.

His stomach growled. Looking at the clock on his tablet, he saw that it was after lunch. What he wouldn't give for a hot dog with the works. There was nothing like the smell of meat on the grill and an ice-cold beer in the hand.

Getting up from his chair, Sean walked to the kitchen for a canteen of water. Perhaps a walk outside would help. Fresh air and sunshine could do wonders.

It is definitely summer, Sean thought as he trudged along the outer circle of his new neighborhood. I should have gotten an earlier start.

The sun was hot and the air was humid. It felt like a midsummer's day in western Massachusetts, where he had grown up. All that was missing was the pollution.

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The sound of hammering and power tools caught his attention. Sean had been blithely following the sidewalk, paying no attention to his surroundings. Now he looked up in the direction of the sound. He was approaching an intersection, and on the other side were a few dozen zheewa working on a building.

Sean crossed the intersection for a closer look, and stood watching for a while. It was a tall structure, limited to one story just like every other building he'd seen. They seemed to have no desire or need to build up. There was no indication as to what the building was going to be, but it would be large.

He squinted and took a few steps closer for a better look. About half of the zheewa working on it were the size of teenagers. They were in groups of two or three with an adult, and it looked like the adult was demonstrating how to use the

zheewa

tools. Perhaps the youngsters were apprentices.

This fascinated Sean. He firmly believed that education on Earth had taken a wrong turn by expecting every child to complete formal schooling. Some were not cut out for it, being better suited to a trade education. The increase in dropout rate was a clear signal, at least, that something different needed to be done.

One of the adults saw him and beckoned him over. She greeted him enthusiastically, tugging at his elbow and showing him around. The outer walls seemed to be complete and the workers inside were just preparing to finish the interior. Sean could see the frame of the walls with the exterior already mounted. He watched as they attached a panel and then tested it with some equipment. It looked as if they were testing it for an electric current in a similar manner that veera had with his tablet and

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MP3 player. There was no sign of electrical wire.

Sean was led over to a table covered with paper. Some of them looked like blueprints, depicting various stages of the building. Other papers appeared to be a calendar. Sean picked up one of the sheets and studied it. It looked like a zhoowe, or moon, calendar, except that it was in a linear format instead of the usual circular one. Each day was divided into its eight parts, and each part had notes in it. He found the day that had the markings for today, as near as he could recall it. A line was drawn through previous days.

His tour guide pointed to the date markings for the first of the days that was not crossed out, and then swept his hand behind him, palm out. She then point to the notes, and indicated the room, sweeping with her hand palm up. Sean guessed that she meant that is was today's date and the notes indicated what they were working on.

zheewa

He nodded, feigning comprehension. She mimicked his nod, and then led him out.

Sean left the building and crossed back over to the circle and continued his walk. Before long, he could hear music coming from one of the houses ahead. He stopped to look. The house appeared to be mostly living room with very little furniture. Several zheewa were dancing to the music.

One of them noticed Sean standing outside and ran to the door, calling to him.

“zha g” she said, running up to him and putting a hand on his arm. Indicating herself with her other hand, she said:

“rezhuu g”

Sean acknowledged her in the zheewa fashion by raising his hand, palm towards her, and repeating her name.

“lizheewa goo luuwaa rizheewa ɹ” she said, pulling lightly on his arm.

As soon as he entered the house, the music stopped and the rest of the zheewa gathered around him, all of them talking

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excitedly. The one that brought him in quieted them down and then placed herself in front of him. She started moving back and forth and side to side.

"j" she asked, looking at him as she continued moving around.

It took Sean a moment to realized she was trying to do the cha-cha step he had shown a bunch of them at the celebration a few weeks ago.

Sean put his hand on her arm and said: "b" It seemed strange to make that simple sound, but he knew they used it the same way he would use "yes" or "okay."

He showed them the step again, going over it very slowly. The syncopated step for the first count was not always easy to get. Sean tried to pair them up and was able to get them to move in a synchronized manner, but they did not quite get the concepts of lead and follow. Still, it was a lot of fun and the afternoon went quickly.

zheewa

Just as Sean was getting ready to leave, one of them brought him over to a clock on the wall. It was similar to the one in jaari's house. She pointed to the current time, and then traveled around the clock with her finger until it came back around to just after lunch, which was late midday according to their reckoning. She tapped the spot a few times, then danced a few steps.

It seemed they wanted him back tomorrow. That was fine by him. In fact, he would bring his music and teach them something other than cha-cha.

"Okay," Sean said. "b"

"b"

* * *

Sean spent the night counting in zheewa so that he'd be ready. He only knew up to eight, but that should be sufficient for ballroom dancing. Their words for the first four numbers reminded him a bit of the

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musical scale, which helped him to remember: deh, reh, zeh, veh. The second four numbers, five through eight, were dah, rah, zah and vah.

The next morning, Sean walked into zhawu's room with his MP3 player.

"Electrical tech?" he asked.

"veera b" she said. Then, pointing to his device: "broke j"

"Uh, no," Sean shook his head. He started a song and turned the volume all the way up. Sean cupped his ear, and she nodded. Holding one of the ear buds up and away from him, he swept the room with his arm, palm up.

She shook her head. She didn't understand him. He walked over to her bedroom door and pointed the ear bud out to the room and repeated his gesture, encompassing others who were sitting in the living room. He cupped his ear again.

She nodded, comprehension dawning.

zheewa

“Uh, rezhuu house,” Sean said.
“zhuuwe alre.” He was pretty sure that meant late midday, which would be just after lunch.

zhawu picked her words carefully: “we eet b rezhuu avter b”

“Yes, rezhuu’s house after we eat lunch.”

“Oh, and I was wondering why everyone stood out in the rain and got soaking wet at the festival.”

“j” she asked.

They had moved into the kitchen and were preparing lunch.

“Sorry. Stand in rain at festival?” Sean repeated slowly, signing a few of the words and mimicking their actions during the storm.

“Raan iz vuud,” she answered. “Dreek with zki.”

Sean had a random thought about zombies, and had to stifle a chuckle. Zombies couldn’t make the “s” sound either,

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and their dialog in books was often written with a "z" instead. Besides, thinking about rotting zombies was not a good idea when trying to choke down lunch.

"Rain is food?" he repeated. "You drink it with your skin?"

"b"

"Ah. But what about the shower?"

"Zhower vor drii zeeazon."

"The dry season? Oh, you mean when it's not raining?"

"b" She then pointed to him and asked, "zhower j"

"Well, we shower to clean the dirt off."

"j"

"Hmm. Well..." Sean looked around. He walked to the back door and picked up some dirt from the ground. When he returned to the kitchen, Sean sprinkled it onto the table.

"Dirty," he said. Cupping one hand at the edge of the table, Sean used his other hand to wipe the dirt into his cupped hand.

zheewa

He then walked over to the disposal and brushed the dirt into it.

“b” zhawu said.

Sean smiled.

* * *

veera was already at rezhuu’s house when zhawu and Sean arrived. Sean handed her his MP3 player. She took it over to where she had set up some equipment. The other zheewa gathered around her excitedly as she connected the player. After a few minutes, she stepped back and signaled to Sean.

Ah, where to start? Sean asked himself. *How about a rumba?*

He searched through his rumba play list for something with a strong, clear beat.

That’s a good one. Sean selected Smooth Operator by Sade. He started the song and adjusted the volume. He turned to see the zheewa excitedly trying out their cha-cha steps.

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“b_” he said loudly, stifling a laugh and making the sound roughly equivalent for “no.”

The zheewa stopped and looked at him. He cupped his hand to his ear and listened for the beat. At the right moment, he began chanting in time to the song, counting out the beats:

“deh, reh, zeh, veh, deh, reh, zeh, veh” Sean emphasized each beat by lightly clapping his hands. The zheewa were soon following along.

Sean paused the music and stepped to the middle of the room. With exaggerated movements, he counted again while following the pattern for a basic rumba step: forward with his left foot on deh and reh, to the side with his right foot on zeh, feet together on veh, backward with his right foot on deh and reh, to the side with his left foot on zeh, and feet together on veh. Sean repeated the pattern several more times, going very slow at first until the zheewa

zheewa

caught on. Gradually, he sped up until they were dancing at the speed of the song.

Sean started the music, and immediately the zheewa started dancing the new step.

“b” he said.

They stopped and looked at him. Again, he cupped his ear and listened to the beat. On the one beat, he began the count again, stressing the one beat as the start of the count. He started the steps after a few counts to four. The zheewa had a natural rhythmic sense. In no time at all, they were all dancing in time.

It was a lot of work teaching aliens to dance ballroom. Sean decided to keep it simple and teach only the basic step in a few more dances: waltz, foxtrot, and single-time east coast swing. Getting them to partner up for lead and follow would be a tremendous challenge, given his lack of proper vocabulary. He had only marginal success yesterday with lead and follow in the cha-

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cha, and practically none today with all the new dances he'd taught them.

All in all, though, it was a lot of fun. The afternoon passed quickly. Well, technically the rest of late midday and most of early evening. rezhuu extracted a promise for him to return the next day for more music and dancing. It looked as if he had a new career – dance instructor.

Upon leaving the house, zhawu stopped him with a hand on his arm. Palm towards him, she indicated the way back home. With her palm towards herself, she indicated another direction. Sean nodded, assuming she had other errands and that he was to return home.

“Okay,” he said.

“b”

* * *

Sean smiled to himself as he walked home.

zheewa

What an ideal place! he thought.

In the time since he'd moved out of jaari's hospital, Sean felt like he was living in a utopia. For the first time in his life, he could choose what he wanted to do for work, or not work at all! It's not that he didn't enjoy editing science books. It was a great job, but he often wished he could take time off from that and do something else without having to worry about food or rent. The zheewa culture had no concept of money. They all did what they wanted to do. Food, clothing and shelter – even medical care – were all free!

On top of that, the zheewa were a very peaceful, easy-going people. Sean had seen no signs of violence or criminal behavior at all. They always treated each other respectfully and pleasantly. There was no anger or hatred or vengeance.

This was turning out to be a great place to live.

Chapter 18

Sean consulted his calendar. Today was the beginning of autumn according to the zheewa calendar. He and zhawu would be going to the festival. It seemed strange to him to be celebrating so early. He always associated autumn with September and October and the turning of the leaves.

“Why don’t you have any animals?” Sean asked as they walked to the park. In the time he’d been here, Sean had yet to see any species of animal, be it dog or cat. Not even bees, for that matter. How did their plants pollinate if they didn’t have bees?

“J”

“Animals,” Sean enunciated carefully, realizing a lot of the letters were actually unpronounceable for her.

He was at a loss to explain. In some ways, this was more difficult than explaining the difference between male and female.

zheewa

Sean stopped near a plant. He picked up a rock and put it next to a leaf.

“No” he said, shaking his head. He repeated the process by putting the rock next to himself and then next to her.

Sean then indicated the plant and himself.

“No” he said, again shaking his head.

With the plant leaf next her, he asked, “Are you like the plant?”

Finally, he laid his arm next to hers and asked, “Are you like me?”

zhawu touched his arm and shook her head. “b_” she said.

Touching the plant and nodding, she said, “b”.

“Huh,” he said. “No animal life.”

For the rest of the walk to the park, Sean described and mimed several different animals as best he could. She didn’t seem to recognize any of them.

* * *

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The festival wasn't so overwhelming now that Sean was more accustomed to the way of the zheewa. He spent more time exploring. This festival, as with the last one, was geared towards celebration, which involved a lot of talking, cooking, eating and dancing.

As he wandered around, he noticed clothing booths among the tables and grills. Sean walked up to one of them to see what they had to offer. Most of the goods seemed to be accessories; rings, bracelets, scarves and so on.

The colors of one article in particular caught his eye. It had definite Southwestern earth tones. The piece was the color of sand and trimmed with a very light green, almost a sage. And it was flecked with tiny spots and short, thin streaks of light rose.

Sean picked it up for a closer look. It was almost like a cross between a toga and a sari, and the material felt very smooth. He

zheewa

couldn't even begin to figure out how to put it on.

One of the zheewa stopped and held out her hand. Sean hastily handed her the garment, thinking he'd violated some custom. She put it down on the booth, reached for his shirt and started pulling it over his head. Sean wiggled his arms out of the sleeves, but stopped her when she reached for his pants. She picked up the garment, looped one piece around an arm and another around his waist. When she finished, she stepped back and looked at him. She seemed pleased. After a quick pat on his arm, she wandered off to talk with a group that was standing nearby.

Sean remained standing where he was for a moment. There was no mirror to see how he looked. And although he knew he didn't have to pay for it, a gnawing guilt inside still prevented him from walking away from the booth with the toga on.

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Eventually, Sean summoned the courage to move on. The rest of the day was uneventful. He spent most of his time just watching. He didn't like much of the food, and couldn't speak the language well enough for even simple conversation. He'd spent enough time at the dance studio already and had no desire for conversation anyway.

Shortly after midday, about the middle of late midday by zheewa reckoning, silence descended upon the crowd. In a repeat performance of the solstice event, everyone turned to face the center and knelt to the ground, holding hands with their nearest neighbor. They looked to the ground and began to chant, the strength of the voices growing as they turned their heads to the sky. Sean closed his eyes and allowed the sound to wash over him, carrying him along its path to the heavens. He could feel himself being lifted and united with God. The chant reached a peak and gradually became softer as they turned their heads back toward the

zheewa

ground. A moment of silence, a collective intake of breath, and they were done.

In a daze, Sean stumbled to the nearest tree and sat down, leaning back against the sturdy trunk. He'd been plagued with headaches lately, and now his head was swimming. It felt like a sinus infection headache, the kind in which the pain causes the whole world to swim and your mind to be blinded.

Sean felt the bark of the tree under his hands. Shamanism taught him that strength could be found anywhere. Rocks were a particularly powerful source of pure strength. A tree, especially if it were older, possessed the strength of connection. This particular tree was an elder, and he could feel himself becoming more grounded.

Sean took a moment to ponder the scene around him. If he closed his eyes, the scents and sounds around him were the same as with any gathering of people. He could almost imagine he were at a barbecue,

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with the buzz of conversation, the bark of laughter, the sound of music, the smell of food cooking over an open flame. No meat, unfortunately. That would have completed the sensation. Not that he had much of an appetite lately.

Sean opened his eyes part way and watched through the slits between his lids. He could almost convince himself that he was home. The bipedal beings at this gathering were close enough in shape, sans detail, that they looked and moved like humans.

He opened his eyes the rest of the way and stood up, paying more attention to the people around him. As usual, everyone was in various states of dress and undress. One or two couples were mating. He shuddered at that. Didn't they have any sense of privacy? Despite their lack of inhibition, he still could not tell the difference between male and female. There were no obvious signs. All of the naked ones looked

zheewa

physically identical, barring differences in height, weight and coloring. It seemed unlikely that only one gender walked around unclothed. Even surreptitious glances at the mating couples showed no sign of what he would consider sexual intercourse.

The sun was low in the sky, and the crowd was beginning to disperse. Sean walked himself back home, thinking about family reunions and company picnics. He hadn't been to a family reunion in years because all he had were aunts, uncles and cousins.

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Dear Diary: Everyone is so friendly; it's beginning to get on my nerves. It doesn't feel like I'm making friends. I'm used to the conflict.

Sean looked up from his book at the sound of the front door opening. He was sitting in a chair in the living room, annotating his calendar. zhawu and another walked in. zhawu was recognizable only because she constantly wore a particular piece of clothing for Sean's sake. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to tell her apart from anyone else. Sean had yet to pick up on the nuances that distinguished one from the other. He could see differences in height and weight, as well as slight differences in skin tone, but that was the extent of it.

The two sat on the couch next to him. In the usual zheewa way, she first said his name and then the other.

zheewa

“zha g reeva g”

They always introduced new people this way. The motion of the hand as it moved was like a drawing in, as if the new person were being invited into the group. He always felt a sense of welcoming that accompanied the gesture.

“Reevah,” Sean said, palm towards her in greeting.

“zha g”

“reeva zi-e-tizt b” zhawu said.

“Zietizt? Oh, scientist! Reevah is a scientist.”

zhawu nodded. reeva was carrying a device, and laid it on the coffee table so Sean could see it. It looked a lot like his tablet. She activated the device, and Sean saw on the screen what looked like an airplane on a runway. He was surprised; he'd seen no sign that they even knew about flight. Most zheewa lived where they worked and walked to wherever they needed to go. Ground vehicles were used primarily for

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transporting materials and goods, or for emergency purposes. He'd never once seen an airplane in the sky.

Sean watched in fascination as the airplane lifted off. There was no sign of engine exhaust and no way to tell what they used for propulsion. All the vehicles he'd seen so far were electric, but he couldn't imagine how they used electric motors to propel a prop-less airplane. The scene cut to the "airplane" landing on the moon. This was an even bigger shock. They were far more technologically advanced than he knew. He was looking at something more than an airplane; it was a spacecraft.

The back of the spacecraft opened and a small rover rolled out. Was this an unmanned mission? He was unable to judge size without references, but the craft did not look large enough to hold a crew. And there were no windows. Even human spacecraft had windows so the occupants could look outside.

zheewa

As the rover moved along the surface, Sean noticed buildings on the horizon. This was too much. They had a moon base? As the rover moved closer, Sean realized that the assumption he'd made was terribly wrong. Even with the lifeless feel of the moon, he could tell that the buildings were lifeless as well. Gaping holes pockmarked the buildings. The edges looked burned – probably the result of a high-powered laser. The base must have been attacked and everyone killed.

The rover passed through an open airlock and into a large room. Sean choked as he caught his breath at what he saw. A human-shaped, space-suited figure lay on the floor wearing a cracked helmet. The camera on the rover zoomed in for a closer look. A patch on the arm looked similar to the one used by the crew of the International Space Station. He could make out stripes representing the nations involved. At the end of the arm, clutched in

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a gloved hand, was a frame containing a photo of a very human-looking couple.

Sean's mind reeled. A moon base! Humans on the moon. His people on the moon. The last shuttle flight would have been last week. NASA's plans after that were for a manned mission to Mars. At least, the funding had been approved. He wasn't aware of any plans for a moon base.

A light touch on his forearm brought him back to the here and now.

"okay ɹ" zhawu asked.

"No," Sean said, shaking his head.

"Not okay."

A glass of water appeared out of nowhere. Sean drank it down and wiped the dribbling water from his mouth with a sleeve. Taking a deep breath, he nodded for reeva to continue. reeva tapped the controls and several more scenes appeared on the screen. No doubt about it, this was a human moon base, built sometime after...

"Stop!" Sean said. "Back up!"

zheewa

zhawu sensed his meaning, and exchanged a few words with veera. The scenes move backwards in slow motion.

“There! Stop!”

The scene stopped. reeva manipulated the controls and zoomed in on the spot where Sean was pointing. A calendar hung on the wall. reeva zoomed in even more. The calendar was open to November 2032. Twenty-one years after his time. Sean nodded and passed his hand over the screen. He’d seen enough.

reeva tapped the controls again and a large number appeared with the word “zheewe” next to it. Sean recognized that word to mean roughly “Earth Calendar.” zhawu stood up and pointed to the clock. Her finger followed the edge round and round, forward in time. Did the number represent the age of the structure?

Sean picked up his pencil and a piece of paper. He copied the numbers from the scene, translating them into the numerals he

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was familiar with: 1,671,531,200. He then set to work, converting the base 8 number to base 10. It took some time and a few sheets of paper, but eventually he arrived at a result: 250,000,000. Two hundred fifty million. Was that how old the moon base was? 250 million years old? How was that possible?

He looked at zhawu, who nodded. She then pointed back to the screen. reeva had called up an image of their planet from space. He recognized the patterns of the continents from the posters zhawu had shown him a few months ago, when he had first arrived. Sean likened it to a misshapen "o" with an accent mark above it.

reeva tapped a control and the image began to shift. The continents were changing form and moving. The number sitting in a lower corner was getting smaller. When it reached zero, the continents stopped moving.

zheewa

Sean stared at it. Something about it looked strangely familiar. reeva handed him the device so he could get a closer look. Suddenly, it all clicked into place. He rotated the device, and now the continents were in their proper configuration.

Sean couldn't believe his eyes. He was looking at Earth.

Chapter 20

Dear Diary: I don't even know what to think or feel anymore. How could this have happened?

Sean had finally settled into a routine; it was his way of ignoring how alone he felt. In many ways, his life now was not much different from his life before. His schedule was set and he had work to do, and even though the parameters had changed the task was the same: continue to exist.

The morning sun began to light his room. One of these days he'd see about getting curtains. It would be a few hours yet before the rest of the household had showered, eaten, and left for work. He rolled over to face the wall and pulled the covers over his head.

When the house was quiet once again, Sean ventured out of his room. thuuro was cleaning the public rooms. zhawu was sitting

zheewa

in the living room working on her tablet computer. He greeted them both as he walked through to the kitchen for his liquid breakfast. Most of the zheewa foods were fruits and vegetables, not the sort of thing he cared for at this time of day. One of the juices was vaguely milk-like. He found that if he ground up a nut-like thing and mixed it with the milk-juice, he got something very much like a frothy malt. It even had a slight chocolate taste, although he suspected it was more wishing on his part than anything. But it stopped the grumble in his stomach.

Returning to his room, he sat in the chair and pulled out his tablet. He studied what he'd written yesterday morning, frowning at the tablet and tapping his fingers idly on its edge.

What was that sequence of steps my instructor had shown me? It was a new sequence, and I hadn't had time to practice it before...

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Putting down his tablet and getting up from the chair, he walked to a corner of the room and assumed a waltz frame. Using small steps, he moved through two basic boxes and then attempted the sequence. He got about halfway through before stopping short at the bed. Even though this room was larger than the one at the doctor's place, it was still not large enough to waltz in.

Returning to the corner, he started again, this time with even smaller steps. It was not easy to get into the rhythm of a waltz with such tiny steps. rezhuu had offered to let him move into her dance studio house; perhaps he would consider it more seriously. She had plenty of space to practice.

I almost have it! In his mind, Sean could see himself finishing the sequence with his instructor, but the actual steps involved remained hidden.

He opened his eyes to see zhawu standing in the doorway. She had a few

zheewa

short sticks in her hand; Sean had managed to ask her about getting them a few days ago. He pointed to his bed and returned to the corner.

She put the sticks on the bed and followed Sean back to the corner where they assumed a dance frame. These occasional morning practice sessions helped both of them; zhawu was becoming an accomplished follower, and it helped Sean to remember details from his dance lessons.

"That's it!" he said as they finished the sequence. He picked up his tablet and tapped in some hasty notes with the stylus.

"about erth ɹ" she asked.

"Hm? Oh, no, I'm fine."

"ɹ" she repeated, placing a hand on his arm.

"Really, please, I'd rather not talk about it right now."

zhawu nodded once, and then left him alone. He really did not want to talk about

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Earth. He had a life here now, and his routine.

Except that he did want to talk about it and was disappointed that she didn't press him on it. Isn't that what friends were for? They were supposed to care enough to make you talk things out and then help you feel better about it.

* * *

Lunchtime was quieter than usual. Both zhawu and thuuro had left on errands, so Sean had the house to himself. Lunch was usually a vegetable sandwich. Something green that looked like thick lettuce served as bread. He chopped up some of the vegetables, rolled them up in the lettuce, and then poured a little of one of the juices on it like dressing. It was palatable.

Glancing out the window, Sean could see that a low-pressure system had moved into town during the morning. It didn't

zheewa

appear as if it was raining, but he grabbed a hooded poncho just in case, along with the sticks zhawu had brought him, before leaving the house. Apparently, the zheewa had never invented the umbrella. Just as well, he thought. If the wind picked up, an umbrella didn't help much anyway.

The walk to the dance studio turned out to be rather pleasant. It had rained earlier, so the ground was damp and he could smell the after-rain scents. They were not quite the same as the ones he remembered, particularly the smell of creosote in the damp desert air. It was funny the strong sensations that could be evoked from the memory of a scent!

He reckoned that it took him a little longer today than usual because of the enjoyable walk, but the zheewa at the studio never minded. They always greeted him pleasantly and eagerly.

Today, he would try to pair them up and teach them lead and follow. First, Sean

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went to the clothes closet, pulled out a bathrobe tie and handed it to one of the zheewa. Picking out another zheewa, he positioned himself so that they faced each other. Sean placed her left hand on his right shoulder and his right hand on her left shoulder. He then placed the stick so that it was along their crossed arms and stepped closer to his partner so that the stick remained held in place from the ends being pressed against their shoulders. Sean signaled to the zheewa with the tie, making wrapping motions around the crossed arms and stick.

Once the stick was tied in place, Sean took his partner's right hand in his left and raised it to just above shoulder level. This was going to be the tricky part.

"Waltz," he said.

Sean's partner tried to start dancing, but he held her firmly in place. She stopped. He put his left foot directly in front of her right.

zheewa

“dah” he said, pushing his left foot against her right and moving his upper body forward. With the stick in place, the two movements had the desired effect – she moved, taking a backward step with her right foot.

“reh” he said, pulling her shoulder to the right with his right hand and pushing at the instep of her left foot with his right foot. She took the side step.

“zeh” He brought my feet together, and she did the same.

“vah” This time, she had anticipated the step and began to move forward on her left foot. Sean waited long enough for her to be stopped, then took a step back on his right foot, moving his upper body and pulling her along.

They finished the last two steps: side and together. Once again, she anticipated and began a second box. Sean waited, holding her in place, and moved only when

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he was ready. Hopefully, she was getting the idea that she should only step when he did.

They walked through a few more box steps. When Sean thought she had the idea, he signaled to start the music. A waltz began playing and Sean counted out to six a few times before leading her into a box step.

When the song was done, Sean's partner spent several minutes in conversation with the others. The rest of the afternoon was spent with the zheewa practicing and him coaching. It proved to be even more exhausting than teaching them the steps had been. Lead and follow was a concept, and concepts were difficult enough even when everyone spoke the same language.

* * *

A fine mist hung in the air as Sean walked home from the studio. It was like a light fog and reminded him of early

zheewa

September mornings in Massachusetts and first period Phys Ed class with shirts against skins soccer matches. The fog was so thick sometimes that they could barely see the other end of the field. His mind drifted among the memories, his feet automatically following the well-known path that took him home.

It wasn't easy avoiding the crowd at dinner. All the boarders returned home specifically for the evening meal. Sean was usually too tired and hungry from the afternoon dance lessons to wait until the meal was done, or to be bothered going somewhere else. At home, at least, they were familiar with his food preferences, and thuuro always made sure to stock what he liked.

Sean walked into the house to a round of greetings. He smiled and waved, and then went into the bathroom to wash up. When he returned to the living room, his favorite chair was empty and waiting for him.

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thuuro enjoyed preparing the evening meal and serving everyone. She brought Sean his fruit and berry salad. He sat there with it and waited while the rest were served. thuuro finally got her meal and joined them, finding a spot on the floor.

Meals were very informal. Some used utensils, while others used their fingers. Sean could tell that what mattered most to the zheewa was the shared time together. He could feel it; their emotional interconnectedness filled the room. Some days it felt good and he felt like he was part of a family. It was a strange feeling; one he wasn't accustomed to, being an only child and not close to his parents. Plus he'd never lived with anyone after moving out of his parent's house.

After-dinner conversation often included a game of language lessons. It was more like charades, with Sean on one team and the zheewa on the other. They enjoyed acting out for him and giving him hints. Sean

zheewa

didn't learn much of the language, but he was getting very good at pantomiming.

Tonight was no different. One of the zheewa knelt on the floor, looked down, and began to chant. She moved through the entire ritual of honor.

"The festival!" Sean guessed. "It's your chant to the gods."

zhawu nodded and smiled. She'd learned enough English that she could interpret most of his words; the rest was guesswork based on what she felt of his emotions. She turned to the zheewa who had acted out the ritual and exchanged a few words. Turning back to Sean, she held her palm towards him and then swept it back in the direction of the actor, making the sign for "copy."

It took Sean a moment to figure it out. Palm toward him, combined with a sweeping motion, meant his race, not him in particular. Sweeping the hand back in an off-hand manner indicated something that

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existed but was not necessarily visible at the moment. She had motioned in the general direction of the actor; could she have meant that she wanted to know a human ritual?

That would make sense. Now all he had to do was think of something. Sean signaled to them to wait a moment, and ran into his bedroom for a pencil and a piece of paper. When he returned, Sean brought a picture he'd quickly sketched of Jesus hanging on the cross. He put the paper in zhawu's hand and raised her arm. She understood what he wanted and kept the paper held high. Sean knelt down in front of her, clasped his hands, looked up at the cross, and mimed prayer. At the start of the prayer, he put as much feeling of angst as he could into his mind. As he prayed, Sean allowed that to be replaced by joy.

"go-d ɿ luv ɿ" she asked when Sean had finished and took the paper from her.

"Yes," he said. "God."

zheewa

Hopefully, they either didn't notice or were politely ignoring his discomfort. Sean wasn't raised religious. He wasn't even sure he believed in God. He did believe in a higher power, but that was something his parents never understood. Sean's beliefs just widened the rift between them.

After the after-dinner conversation was Sean's favorite time. He could retire to his room and hide away from the world as he had always done. It had taken some time, but he had managed to manipulate this new life to a point of predictability. His life was now as safe and comfortable as he could make it.

Sean pulled his tablet out of the drawer. He wished he'd been carrying the keyboard attachment. This particular tablet came with a stylus, and had an application that allowed him to write directly onto the screen using the old Graffiti shorthand developed by Palm for the early PDA's. It was a trade-off; the keyboard was too bulky

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to carry around, but writing in shorthand was slow.

Sean decided that a great way to pass the time would be to try and re-write the classics. Opening the file titled *Moby Dick*, he studied the table of contents carefully. He'd only read the book once for English class when he was in college, so his recollection of it was sketchy at best. This table of contents he'd written last night seemed to cover the main points as he remembered them.

Sean opened the first chapter and wrote the first sentence: Call me Ishmael.

He stopped, tapping his stylus on the tablet. That was the first line, but what happened after that? Ishmael meets Queequeg in the first chapter, and there's a strange scene in which Queequeg puts his shoes on while under a bed. But who are these two characters? What is it they do? At some point, they serve on the whaling ship Pequod under Captain Ahab, which is

zheewa

ultimately destroyed by the great, white whale.

Perhaps some character sketches and an outline of the plot, Sean said to himself.

He was so busy reconstructing *Moby Dick* that he didn't notice zhawu in the doorway. Sean looked up when she tapped on the doorframe.

"b e d ɹ" she asked.

Sean smiled. No matter how much she practiced, she still paused after the "b" and "d" sounds as if they were the ends of a sentence.

"Soon," he said. "I want to finish this first."

"o-kay ɹ" she asked.

"I'm okay. Still have the headache."

Their painkillers didn't seem to work for him, and he'd used up the last of his travel-sized bottle of Ibuprofen a while ago.

"b-elly ɹ"

"A little queasy, but I'll be okay. Thanks." Sean longed for some Pepto

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Bismol. His guts were in constant turmoil, and everything he ate passed right through and out again.

“b” she said. zhawu often used the sound for “yes” to mean “okay” also.

“tok beevor veztiva ɟ”

“Our talk before the festival?” Sean asked.

“b”

Sean thought back. What was it they had talked about?

“Animals,” he said.

“b”

Sean sighed. This was going to be another long discussion. He started by miming cat and mouse, how a cat would hunt, catch, and eat the mouse. He followed up with more examples – bears eating fish, lions eating zebras, and wolves eating elk – and explained the concept of carnivores.

Expanding on those examples, Sean then talked about herbivores and finally omnivores.

zheewa

“Omnivore,” Sean said, passing his open palm over himself. “Humans are omnivores – we eat plants and animals.”

“wy ʒ”

“Why?” Sean was more surprised at her use of the word than he was at the question itself. He’d never heard her use that one before.

“Oh, hmm. Protein, I guess. Animals are a better source of proteins than plants.”

“ʒ”

Sean was exhausted by the time he finished explaining proteins, carbohydrates and fats – the essentials of the human diet.

“jaari ʒ” she asked, signing to clarify that she wanted to know if jaari knew about his dietary needs.

“No,” Sean said, shaking his head.

“d” she replied.

It was Sean’s turn to question. That was a sound he’d never heard before. He knew the sounds for yes, no, question/suggestion and greeting/farewell.

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zhawu led him through a quick language lesson on the sounds for fact, theory and opinion.

It was her opinion that Sean should tell jaari about his dietary needs.

* * *

The remains of the sunset were shining through his window when zhawu finally left. He was too exhausted from their conversation to read or write, so he lay in his bed and watched the sun go down.

The zheewa kept strange hours. Unfailingly, most of them rose at sunrise and went to bed at sunset, no matter how long the day. At least, Sean thought that was strange. He was used to having an alarm clock wake him up at the same time every day, whether the sun was up or not. And he couldn't remember the last time he went to bed before dark.

zheewa

Well, another hour or so and I can take my shower. Sean had gotten into the habit of showering after everyone was asleep so that he could have privacy. The zheewa didn't eliminate waste in the same manner as humans. He was embarrassed enough about using public restrooms on Earth; using one with no door among so many who were so different was even worse. It was a challenge to find discreet moments to eliminate.

After taking a lukewarm shower, Sean climbed into bed and picked up his tablet to read. Reading helped to tire his mind enough so he could fall asleep. Most of the time, it worked well. Sometimes, though, he would find a book that was so engrossing that he couldn't put it down no matter how tired he became. One of two things would happen then; either he'd fall asleep in the middle of a chapter or he'd finish the book. Either way, he was always left with only a few hours to sleep.

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Sean scanned his library. He had a few hundred titles in electronic form. That should last him a while if he paced himself. At the rate of an hour or two a night, the books would last him about a year and a half before he'd have to start re-reading them again.

He decided on *Foundation* by Isaac Asimov and opened the first chapter. He got through part 1 before calling it a night, but his mind couldn't stop thinking about the oddity of it all. When Sean had first read the book as a teenager, he couldn't conceive of a time so far into the future that a galactic empire had already existed for 20,000 years. Yet, here he was more than 10,000 times that further into the future. No galactic empire, just a whole new race of beings ruling the Earth.

The first part of the book also introduced the main plot thread of the entire series: Seldon's Plan. As a teenager, Sean had been an atheist with a strong interest in

zheewa

science. The idea that a logical plan could exist, based loosely on gas laws and the ability to predict actions of a large enough population, appealed to him on both fronts. He liked to imagine that the follies and foibles of mankind were leading humanity on a path that would ultimately result in a more compassionate society, just as Seldon's Plan predicted a healthier Second Galactic Empire.

Back at the tender age of 17, Sean had already become a cynic. Seventeen additional years of experience since then had only taught him to isolate himself more completely. Here, at least, 250 million years later among the zheewa, he had finally escaped from all he hated about the world. Safe at last.

As Sean dozed off, it occurred to him that he had once again filled his life with distractions so he wouldn't have to think about how he was feeling.

Chapter 21

Dear Diary: What the hell am I doing here?

Sean woke up in a foul mood. He couldn't stop thinking about that moon base and all those dead people; all the dead hopes and dreams.

Sean wondered how things would have been different if he'd been there. It sounded crazy, even to him. How can one man change the world? Could he have done more, been more outgoing? He didn't have to be such an introvert, after all. Would that have made a difference?

His housemates could tell something was bothering him. They were bending over backwards to be nice to him. zhawu tried several times to talk to Sean about it, but he couldn't. He didn't have the words for what he was feeling inside.

zheewa

Sean spent the afternoon class just watching, providing pointers whenever they asked. He could see that they were having a lot of fun.

Why can't I have fun like that?

Sean discovered he had to be careful about the music he selected. Anything that was too harsh or jangly bothered them. Take Thriller by Michael Jackson, for example. It was a great cha-cha, but that Van Halen guitar solo was too harsh for them. Or Rockin' Pneumonia by Johnny Rivers. It was a great west coast swing, but the piano was too jangly and hurt their ears. They really liked heavy drums, though. If only he had something to control the base and treble, he had some good Phil Collins he was sure they'd love.

I wonder what it's like to ballroom dance on the moon? Sean mused as he watched. It would be a challenge with one-sixth the gravity. Rise and fall in the waltz

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would be a high rise and a slow fall. They would probably have to play the music at super slow speed so the dancers could keep time.

* * *

Labor Day weekend – the last official weekend of the summer as Sean knew it. Were there once families on the moon? Did they picnic and barbecue? Did they take a long weekend to relax and unwind? They wouldn't be able to travel back to Earth to visit family for the weekend – the round trip alone would be a little more than six days.

Sean had started taking weekends off, not teaching dance class on Saturday and Sunday. The zheewa were funny people. They didn't seem to mind at all that he worked five days and took off two days. He wasn't sure if they take time off. Or even worked regular hours. Or even really worked, for that matter. They seemed to

zheewa

enjoy everything they did. They didn't act like it was work. What they did was what they did; it was the shared experiences they valued most.

Sean remembered reading a quote a while ago: "We're so busy being a human doing that we forget to be a human being."

That's me, he thought. A human doing. All by myself. Doing it alone. No wife, no kids. Doing my work and wishing I could be a writer.

* * *

Sean's latest challenge was to choreograph a team to do a synchronized dance routine at the fall equinox festival in two weeks. He was not finding it very successful so far. The zheewa were great at teamwork when the need was clear, like at the fire a few months ago. Mostly, he just watched them prance around to the music making up their own steps, though. It was

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too much effort to keep them on track, and Sean was wondering why he even bothered.

Did the moon base have a dance floor? What kind of entertainment facilities did they have? Basketball court? Movie theater? Sean was sure they'd need something for exercise and to take their minds off of work. A hydroponic garden? It would be a lot cheaper to grow their food, and the physical labor would be beneficial. Maybe everyone shared in the task of caring for the garden. Maybe everyone had a family farm, like the early days before industrialization. Back to basics and a simpler life.

Sean sighed. He wasn't getting through to them. It was time to call it a day.

Kicking at the dirt and wrapped up in his own thoughts, Sean barely heard someone crying out as he walked home. He looked up and glanced around in confusion. At first, he couldn't see the source of the noise. After a few more cries, he saw her – a

zheewa

zheewa gardener had fallen out of a tree she'd been cutting.

Sean wanted to rush to her side and help her. He wanted to be a Good Samaritan. But he was suddenly overcome with fear. All he could think of was what if it was a trick? What if it was a ruse to get him close so he could be beaten and robbed?

Sean took another route home and ran as fast as he could, heading straight to his room. zhawu started to follow him but she must have changed her mind. Everyone stayed away and gave Sean space.

He couldn't stop thinking about her, lying on the ground below the tree, crying in pain. Why didn't he stop to help? Why couldn't he be a good person and do the right thing? This was not Earth. Not the one he knew. They were not humans. They didn't feel isolated and insecure and afraid all the time. Most of all, they would never intentionally hurt anyone. Why had he suddenly become so afraid?

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For the first time ever in his adult life, Sean cried like a baby. He couldn't stop himself. He buried his head in his pillow to muffle the sounds. He could sense zhawu hovering near the doorway, but she never once intruded.

* * *

It was becoming harder for Sean to get out of bed. He often woke up feeling like he hadn't slept at all. And he kept dreaming about the people on the moon base. In every single dream, he was standing on the surface of the moon watching the base under attack. In his hand was a controller and he knew that he could flip a switch and stop the attack. His fingers were frozen on the switch. He wanted to flip it, but he was too afraid. What if it was a trick? What if it was a ruse to get him close so he could be beaten and robbed? The dreams always ended the same way. Something would fall nearby, and he

zheewa

could hear someone crying out. When he turned to look, it was a zheewa. She looked up at him with pain and anguish, and in his mind he could hear her asking: "Why must you stand so distant?"

Why is it that I stand so distant?

There must be something wrong with me.

* * *

The days were starting to cool off and there was often a morning fog. Sean started taking long walks in it. Sometimes it would be so thick that he couldn't see more than a few feet in front of him. It was an effective cover.

The thick fog reminded him of a short story by Larry Niven, *For a Foggy Night*, from the book *All the Myriad Ways*. The basic plot line was that fog was really the effect of alternate world lines merging. Walk through it and you'd find yourself in another world entirely.

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Is that what happened to him? Did he cross through to another Earth – an Earth 250 million years in the future? No, that would imply that time was not a constant across all worlds. Besides, there was no fog when the car hit the bus. It was a sunny day and late in the afternoon.

* * *

Sean stopped at the new building they'd been working on. It was finally finished. A few zheewa saw him standing outside, just looking at it. They invited him in.

The building was an artists' studio. There was one very large room with a bunch of easels, weaving racks, pottery wheels, welding tools and other modes of creativity scattered around the center. The walls had panels jutting out about five feet to increase the display area, and were already about a third of the way filled with paintings, rugs,

zheewa

pottery and sculptures. Sean never realized the zheewa were so creative. He'd never seen this side of them before. Maybe this weekend he'd come back and spend some more time. Right now, he wasn't in the mood, and he had his dance class to get to.

* * *

His dance troupe was happy to see him, just as they were every day. It didn't seem to matter that he didn't show up yesterday. Why did he continue to bother? They were having their fun, and many of them were going out to the childcare centers to teach the children the dances. Others were organizing more dance studios. Ballroom dancing had become all the rage.

* * *

According to Sean's makeshift calendar, tonight was the 45th anniversary

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of the original *Star Trek* series. Right down to the day of the week. If his tablet clock were correct, the show would be starting in just a few minutes. Sean wasn't even alive when it first aired. He was born two years before the first movie. He grew up on *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*. What he liked about the show was that a lot of the episodes were a commentary on current issues. It was obvious for some, not so obvious for others. But if you watched close enough you could pick it out. What he liked most, though, was the vision of a future in which humanity had finally gotten past all of their silly squabbles. Sean could relate to that. On his Earth, he had watched as the world followed its path to hell in a hand basket. *I should be thankful to be here, in this future*, he thought, *with all of that foolishness left in the past.*

Was the moon base mankind's attempt to bring Gene Roddenberry's dream to life? Did all nations work together to build

zheewa

it, just as they had cooperated with the International Space Station? Sean couldn't imagine them succeeding otherwise. But something must have happened. Aliens, maybe? He didn't know. He had missed it all. He could have been part of it. He should have been part of it.

* * *

"I give up!" Sean muttered and walked out of the dance studio. "Their clock is driving me up a wall!"

The zheewa didn't keep precise time. How could they get anything done that way? He would arrive to the dance studio; some would be there already and others would show up late. They didn't seem to care.

Sean grudgingly made the walk home, and then stormed through the living room and straight into his bedroom, wishing he could slam his door. He could feel their eyes on him and he wished they would just leave

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him alone. If only they would stop being so sympathetic all the time. He could feel it, the sorrow and pity they felt for him.

Sean sat down hard on the bed, breathing hard. He felt so angry! Turning to his nightstand, he opened the drawer and poked through his belongings. Nothing was missing, so far. Didn't they understand that he had valuable and irreplaceable things? Anyone could walk in and take his stuff.

zhawu stood in the doorway, watching him with those sympathetic and consoling eyes, so full of concern and caring. Sean wanted to throw up.

"I didn't ask for this!" he yelled at her. "I didn't ask to be shipped off 250 million years into the future."

Sean stood up to throw the MP3 player in his hand at her, but the room started to spin and he collapsed to the floor.

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It was déjà vu all over again. The smell of isopropyl alcohol with an undertone of musk told him he was back at jaari's house. She was leaning over him and studying the panel on the wall. He tried to sit up, but her gentle touch on his forearm was more than enough to keep him down. His head spun and he felt like he was going to pass out.

When he opened his eyes again, zhawu was sitting on the edge of his bed holding his hand.

"Too peaceful," he said. "Not real."

"j"

"Conflict... makes... us... stronger," Sean said, taking deep breaths between words.

"b" zhawu said, shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head.

zheewa

“Yeah,” Sean said, smiling weakly.

“Not zheewa.”

* * *

It was several days before Sean was strong enough to move from the bed. zhawu and jaari supported him as he walked to the living room and lay down on the couch.

Much to his surprise, the two of them had organized a surprise party for him. His friends began arriving one at a time and wished him well.

wuuta showed up with her baby. Sean could not believe how big the infant had grown. It didn't seem like it was months ago that he had helped deliver the baby.

koori, liizi, jeero – all had taken time out of their work day to spend some time with him. Sean was happy to see his old friends.

rezhuu and the old dance group showed up and put on a special

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performance. veera had arrived with them, carrying the equipment from the dance studio and setting it up in jaari's living room.

thuuro stopped by also, with many of the residents Sean had shared a home with. They played several rounds of charades for his amusement.

The one friend missing was ziroo, the old woman who was at the doctor's house when Sean first arrived. She had passed away a few weeks ago.

It was only after all his friends visited that Sean understood the purpose of the day's events. They were saying goodbye. He was leaving and he hadn't even known – realized – until now. But the zheewa had. And they all came in peace and love to his departure.

Closing his eyes and smiling, Sean exhaled his last breath.

About the Author

Joe Sweeney is an independent publisher and author. His most popular title, *Hands-On Design Patterns for Visual Basic*, is a culmination of nearly thirty years programming experience. He has three collections of short stories covering science fiction, fantasy, and general fiction.