

Chapter 1

Wednesday, January 2, 2002

Home Planet

MQ was fully-reclined in the blockhouse, looking through the digital displays covering the glass wall. Beyond that window, the powerful transmission tower dominated the landscape. Easily the tallest structure on the planet, the tower was even taller than the intermixed machines needed for air scrubbing.

MQ's body was spread full-length on the chair-like device that allowed him to arch his back as much as possible while still in the nearly full-stretched position. It was more like lying down than sitting. But his head was high enough to clearly see the projected displays and the outside scene all the way down to the horizon.

Cool drops of salt water dripped from the life-support machine, landing just below his eyes, sliding slowly down his skin, a gentle cascade of water to wet him as he worked.

He felt a voice, surely SJ, so he removed his concentration from the tower to receive the full message. He liked the feel of SJ's soft voice.

"Our opportunity is approaching. Are all power sources reasonable? Sources reasonable?"

"Power is reasonable," said MQ. He paused to give SJ a chance to feel his confirming message. "But is it really worth it? Worth it?"

"We must try," said SJ. "Our vehicle is decelerating at the target star. Soon our vehicle will be ready to receive us. Receive us."

Someone else might be listening. This was taking a chance. Although the Great Minds encouraged discussion, this was not the place for it. Caution was best.

"The tower is ready to transmit. Too bad it won't be on our shift. Our shift," said MQ.

He waited for a reply from SJ, but he might have missed it. The digital displays were taking some of his concentration now. He felt her voice, but he missed the first few words.

"..... get back to the water soon. Next shift gets the glory. The glory."

The next shift would transmit the data. But no one was making claims for success quite yet. It was an untested method, and the plans needed for construction of an adequate receiver module aboard the spacecraft were complex. Yet without the receiver module, the spacecraft would be totally without life. The chances of the plans getting through in this transmission were minimal. And the chances that the receiver module could be constructed in time were even more remote. But they had to try.

Outside the window, the tower was tilted slightly from the vertical. It was aligned precisely with the target star and its now-arriving vehicle. This structure was the first major project of new technology since the launch itself.

To be out of the water this long was difficult. These creatures were much better at thinking than building. It took thousands of them working in seamless teamwork to accomplish a task like this. You no more than sat down than it was time to relinquish your position to the next shift. Then it was back to the water. But if you wanted something bad enough, it was possible. They wanted this bad enough.

"That's about all we can do. Can do," said SJ. To MQ, the feel of her voice was worth all of the effort.

"It's time," replied MQ. "The transmitter is ready. And we did it. It won't be instantaneous, but it's a lot faster than the speed of light. Of light."

"Yes, it's time to go," said SJ. "The next shift will send the message. And our vehicle's machines will get to make their own decisions. Own decisions."

MQ leaned back. That put him in a near-horizontal position, looking straight up. The digital displays extended to the top of the rounded dome that formed the ceiling.

"See you again. You again." Said MQ. He wanted to believe that.

"Yes, maybe. Yes, maybe."