

The Temporary Telepaths

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Novels by Ronald R. Johnson:

Small World

Eminent Domain

The Temporary Telepaths

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DEDICATION

To Nancy Giblin

for choosing me

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1 THE FLIGHT TO NAH-MÁY

I was standing in line at the spaceport and Zed joined me, breathless. “Sorry... the gate wouldn’t open... the retinal scanner didn’t work... I kept blinking... couldn’t help it... everybody behind me was yelling...”

Zed doesn’t travel well. He normally runs the office while I’m gone, but I needed him with me on this trip.

“Are you ready now?” I asked.

He was flustered but nodded.

I was used to commuting around our solar system, but space travel was new to Zed. And it didn’t help that we were going across the galaxy this time, side-by-side with creatures who didn’t look anything like us. There were a few humans, or at least people who could pass as human, but we were the minority. And the languages! I couldn’t believe the sounds they produced. Fortunately, the Universal Translator, which I wore like an earring, knew them all.

(Gurgle, gargle!): “Pinka, I said No!”

(Khhhhh!): “But Mommmm!”

(Vomit sound): “Get in line. We’ll miss our flight!”

The kid didn’t do it.

“I warned you!”

“Nooo! Nooooooooooooo!”

There was a vacuum-cleaner sound as the parent sucked her up and spit her out where she was supposed to be.

The guy ahead of me in line reminded me of a five-foot pile of pink jello, and he was talking to a ticket lady with fangs. To my ears, it sounded like so much bloop-blooping on one side and growling on the other. With the Universal Translator it came out this way:

Jello Man: “Excuse me, but your restrooms are not gel-friendly. I

almost fell in.”

Fang Lady: “Did you use the rail?”

Jello Man: “Well, I—”

Fang Lady: “You have to use the rail!”

Jello Man: “But why should I—”

Fang Lady: “Next!”

We stepped forward. A laser beam scanned Zed from head to foot, then did the same to me. The ticket lady glanced at the monitor without interest until she saw my name. “Ohhh!”

Our eyes met and she smiled, making her fangs more visible. “On your way to the trial?”

“Yes.”

“They tell me you’re quite a sensation back in Heliopolis.” She gave me a quick visual inspection and smiled again.

I didn’t get where I am by my looks, but that’s what people always notice. I thought it would be different out here.

“It’s about time you joined us at the galactic level,” she said.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Everyone’s talking about this case.”

“Yes. If my clients lose, it’ll be bad for all of us.”

“All of us solid-body types, you mean. The gentleman who just passed through here probably wouldn’t agree.”

“I suppose not. But it’s hard to get people to agree on anything anymore.”

“Except *that*, maybe.” She pushed some buttons. “Have a good flight, Mr. Lamont.”

As Zed and I started to leave, word passed through the crowd behind us, eliciting a series of belches, groans, and clicks which the Universal Translator interpreted as, “Lamont?”... “Did she say, ‘Lamont’?”... “Hey—that’s Tony Lamont!”

“We’re in the Big Time now,” whispered Zed.

I nodded. “Finally.”

“Heliopolis” is the name we gave our solar system centuries ago, after we began colonizing other worlds. We formed cities on the Moon, on Mars, and farther and farther outward, even floating around in the gaps between planets.

In the beginning, our legal system was disorganized. As disputes arose among members of these different settlements, people scratched their heads and tried to figure out who had the authority to adjudicate

them. Over time, the term “Heliopolis” took hold, but it never really meant what it sounded like. Literally, it signified that we humans had formed a big governmental unit (or ‘polis’) within the neighborhood of our particular sun (‘Helios’); but we’ve never actually been one single political entity. We’re just a bunch of scattered communities with widely different cultures that happen to have a common origin and a shared court system.

As Fang Lady mentioned, I was a well-known attorney with clients all over Heliopolis. And yes, I was also an eligible bachelor, six-foot-two with dark hair, thirty-five years old, and known for my “rakish good looks,” which the press corps was fond of emphasizing. I had practiced law for over ten years, and even though I was good, I never got a chance to argue a Galactic case.

Until now.

My clients were the Athoah (pronounced uh-THO-uh), a docile race that inhabited the planet Nah-Máy, on the other side of the Milky Way. They looked like sheep in human clothing. Everything they said sounded the same to me:

“Ba-a-a-a-a-a.”

The first time I teleconferenced them, I thought I had tuned in to a petting zoo by mistake. But the Universal Translator helped me out.

The leader introduced himself as “Vote-For-Me,” adding, “Just call me ‘Vote.’”

No two Athoan citizens have the same name. Parents wait several months to get acquainted with their kids so they can call them something relevant.

“You must’ve started your political life early,” I said.

“My father had high hopes for me,” Vote replied. “Being a member of the Leadership Team is a noble ambition in our world. We’re followers by nature. Our people respect anyone who can lead the way. Let me introduce my cabinet members. This is Wary-of-Monsters, our Minister of Defense. We call him ‘Wary.’”

He had penetrating eyes. “Do you find my name amusing, Mr. Lamont?”

“It is a bit surprising. Are you afraid of monsters?”

“Aren’t you?”

“That’s not the point, is it? I mean... you’re the Minister of Defense.”

“And who better?”

I didn’t quite understand his logic, but Vote spoke up. “This is None-of-Your-Business.”

“I suppose not, but you don’t have to be snippy about it.”

“I’m not sure what that means. I was introducing my next cabinet

member. His name is ‘None’: ‘None-of-Your-Business.’”

“Oh, I get it now. Hi, there. What’s *your* job?”

“I run our Office of Information,” None replied.

Again my face must have betrayed my thoughts, but at least None had a sense of humor. “I’ve always kept my cards close to my vest, as you humans say. I seem to have been born for the job.”

“Of informing the public?”

“Of telling them only what they need to know.”

Vote continued. “Here is our Minister of Health, Bend-Over.”

I sprayed my drink on that one. “Let me guess: when you were little, your parents gave you a rectal thermometer.”

The last guy had a chocolate-colored coat.

“You must’ve been the black sheep of your family,” I guessed, but he stuck his nose in the air.

“To be precise, I’m bronze.”

“And he’s highly respected among our people,” Vote added. “He won the title ‘Sexiest Bureaucrat Alive’ for the last three years.”

He was their Finance Minister. His name was Surely-You-Must-Be-Kidding, or “Surely” for short.

Vote smiled. “Every time I ask him for money, he points at his name plate.”

When the introductions were finished, Wary, the Minister of Defense, explained why they had contacted me. “An invasive species wants to enter Nah-Máy and the Galactic Council won’t let us defend ourselves.”

“So it’s a boundary dispute?”

“It’s an invasion. But the Council thinks otherwise.”

Vote took over. “Have you ever heard of a species called...” He paused. “I’ve been practicing their name, but I still can’t pronounce it. It’s rather embarrassing.”

They all joined in, and as a group they gave quite a performance. It began with a long, high-pitched “F”...

Ffffffffffffffffff

...which segued into an “ewww” as it quickly headed downward on the musical scale. The end result came out as:

Ffffffffffffffffffeeeeeewwwwwwwwwwwwwww

It sounded like air seeping out of a balloon.

They waited for my reaction.

“How do you spell that?” I asked.

Vote punched something into a keyboard and the name appeared as a subtitle. "Here's the English rendering, according to the Council."

The screen displayed it as "The Ffff'ewww."

"Who are they?"

"Interesting way of phrasing the question," said Wary. "I'm not convinced that they *are* a 'who.' They're slime, Mr. Lamont. They have no shape, no form, no bodies. They're an inky-black, oily substance. They're floating in space above our planet, trying to enter our atmosphere, and if they do, they'll pollute it."

"And pose a health threat," added Bend.

"We have a poison that's effective," continued Wary, "but as soon as we used it, the Galactic Council sent a Special Forces Unit to stop us. They served us with a summons to appear before a member of the Council."

"Why?"

"They say we exterminated members of an alien population."

"But it's just an oily substance!"

"That's the point at issue," Vote told me. "The invaders' legal counsel claims that they're a race of conscious beings."

"Sentient slime," I said. "Just what the galaxy needs."

"We must appear before a representative from the Council and explain our actions," he continued. "We don't have a legal system of our own, so we're out of our depth."

I was excited. I'd been stuck in Heliopolis for so long! And this case would be argued before a member of the Council. This was my big break.

"Who's representing the other side?"

"Someone named Vonda Sheffield," Vote replied. "Have you ever heard of her?"

All of their faces disappeared in that moment. All I could see was *her*. Long, wavy hair; eyes both alluring and intelligent. And that voice!

"Mr. Lamont?"

I didn't think I'd ever get the chance.

"Mr. Lamont!"

We had never met. She and I were from different worlds. Literally.

"Yeah," I told him. "I've heard of her."

Galactic Law is based primarily on a group of resolutions that were passed by the Galactic Council the first time they met over two hundred years ago. They never wrote any more legislation after that, which is a

good thing, in my opinion. Those initial resolutions (GCR-1 through 21) are treated as the Constitution and Bill of Rights for the Galactic League.

From an attorney's perspective, this means there's hardly any legislation to draw on. To practice law at the galactic level is to know the major precedents set in court cases throughout the Milky Way Galaxy, with particular emphasis on the ones that have been decided by members of the Council. The Council still exists, but they serve an administrative rather than a legislative function, and members of the Council also preside over court cases as needed.

As a litigator, I can make history if I'm lucky enough to argue an important case. Before the Athoah hired me, however, it was starting to seem as though I'd never reach the galactic level. Yes, there was always a chance that a precedent set in one of our cases in Heliopolis might have wider application for other solar systems, but I always wanted to get outside Heliopolis—to travel to places I'd never been, to meet creatures totally unlike me, and to win cases that people in other worlds would talk about for years to come. That was my one great passion!

In pursuit of that dream, I had spent my life studying the laws of other star systems and had kept up on all the latest rulings. For as long as I had been practicing law, the name "Vonda Sheffield" came up again and again in relation to landmark cases throughout the galaxy, and when I learned that she was a few years younger than me, I was amazed. When I heard she was from Earth, it depressed me to think how far I was behind her; but when I discovered she was actually Phrenarian, I didn't feel so bad. Phrenarians are known for their superior intelligence. After I learned that, I followed her career more closely and she became my inspiration. And the first time I saw her picture, I was smitten. *Someday*, I told myself, *I'll be out there, too. And maybe I'll get a chance to meet her.*

It was hard to be optimistic about that future encounter, however. My daydreams always ended the same way: with her peering down her nose at me and walking away. I couldn't blame her. She had every reason to be smug. She was Vonda Sheffield!

But now we were going to meet in the courtroom, and I was going to beat her at her own game. She was known for championing the underdog. That was her specialty: fighting for the rights of creatures who had no rights. In this case, however, either side could be viewed as the victim, and I was willing to bet that both the court of law and the court of public opinion would be on my clients' side. Why would anyone choose a pool of slime over a bunch of adorable talking sheep? But I wasn't taking any chances. I went back over the relevant cases and made sure I was well-armed.

I studied day after day, late into the night. Meanwhile, in my

imagination, I saw those beautiful eyes gazing back into mine... sneering... and turning away.

It was a long trip to Nah-Máy, even at light speed. On the ship, Zed complained about the cramped quarters and awful food, the crowds, the stench, but after he fell asleep I had a fascinating conversation with an Echavart sitting on the other side of me. Instead of hair, Echavarts have a bush growing out of the top of their head, and three different species nest in it. A couple of little creatures peeked out at me as we talked.

We were having a good time until he changed the subject. "So you're traveling to Nah-Máy. Are you going to observe the trial? I've been following the case closely."

I preferred not to tell him who I was. "It's certainly controversial," I said.

"And it's easy to understand why," he replied. "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but you humans—"

Oh boy, I thought. Here it comes.

"You're so... heliocentric."

Yep. Saw that coming.

"You act as though the galaxy revolves around *you*. It doesn't, you know."

"Of course not, but what does that have to do with the Athoah?"

"This case isn't about the Athoah. Not really. It's about your human intolerance of those who are different."

"Slime, you mean."

"Being slime isn't a moral failing."

"But invading someone's territory is," I said.

"You humans aren't angry at them for invading Nah-Máy; you're angry at them for being slime."

"And forcing their way in where they don't belong."

"Exactly why don't they belong? Because they're slime?"

"No. Because it's not their world."

"We allowed you humans into *our* world. Did *you* belong?"

We stopped talking. I never told him who I was.

Maybe I'm naive, but I don't think I'm heliocentric. Other species fascinate me. At the spaceport before we took off, I spotted a large Lurian family (no two Lurians have exactly the same multi-colored

patterns on their skin), and I paused to watch a twelve-legged Spaligan tap-dancing for money.

This was the life I had always dreamed of living. I was born to be part of this larger world.

In the media, though, I was being portrayed as insensitive to other species. The press corps reported—correctly—that in all my pretrial interviews I had consistently pronounced the creeping crud’s name as “the Few” rather than as “the Ffffffffeeeeeewwwww.” It had never occurred to me that that would be an issue. I didn’t see any problem with shortening their name. That just shows how little I knew about the public’s perception of this trial.

“Pronounced properly,” one pundit wrote, “the name has a lyrical quality. But Tony Lamont has no aesthetic appreciation.”

Readers’ comments on the article were even more blunt: “Tony Lamont is an arrogant [bleep].” (I didn’t need the Universal Translator to interpret that for me.) “He’s a cold, heartless [bleep] who only wants to make a name for himself. He should go back to Hell-opolis where he belongs.”

I had already handled a lot of controversial cases throughout our solar system. I was used to being abused by both the press and the public. It came with the job. But I wasn’t expecting so much sympathy for slime. In part, it was a symptom of the current social climate—everybody was so argumentative these days—but I knew it was also due to the work of my opponent. Vonda was a media expert. She had the press wrapped around her little finger, and they were eager to see her win this case.

It was because of her, actually, that I forced Zed to come along with me.

“You’ve heard the stories, right? How her male opponents make excuses for losing to her, claiming their judgment was clouded and they couldn’t think straight?”

Zed typed a search word and swiveled his computer monitor towards me. “Take a good look.”

“I know what she looks like.”

“Well, look again.”

I did. “She *is* beautiful.”

“No, she’s not. She’s just okay.”

“You should have your eyes examined.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my eyes,” he said. “She’s fine. She’s definitely your type. But she’s no Ludyana, that’s for sure.”

Ludy and I dated for a while, and all of our friends hoped it would last. It didn’t. She blamed my work. “The courtroom is your first love,” she insisted, “and nothing else comes close.”

I tried to make her see that it was more than that: I wanted to travel across the galaxy meeting new species and puzzling over complex social situations. She wanted me to settle down. I liked her. Even to this day, I can't say there was anything I *didn't* like about her. We just didn't gel.

"Ludy and I broke up a long time ago," I told Zed. "Get over it."

"All I'm saying is, There's nothing special about Vonda Sheffield. She's not a raving beauty or a siren or a sorceress or anything else. You don't have to worry about her."

"I won't—because you'll be there to remind me."

He sighed. "I'm a home body, Tony. I hate space travel!"

"I wouldn't ask you to come if I didn't need you, but I do. This is the most important case I've ever handled, and you've got to help me keep my sanity. Will you do it?"

"I guess so," he grumbled.

"Good! Now... I want you find out everything you can about her. I need to know what I'm up against."

Zed is my Information Man. He does a lot of my research for me. A few days after this conversation, he gave me his report on Vonda.

"What do you know about her?" he asked, and I chimed in:

"Biologically, she's Phrenarian, but her parents died and she was adopted by a British couple. She was a child prodigy: graduated from high school at the age of twelve, university at fifteen, law school at seventeen. Started as a junior member of the London law firm Morley, Kealding, and Weafer, and quickly did great things. She was already making history by the time she was twenty-one. A few years later she opened her own firm."

"And I suppose you know why she's so smart."

"Yes, the Phrenarian mind is superior to ours."

"Their brains are wired more efficiently than ours are," he said. "They can think more quickly than we can, and about multiple things at once. And they do it effortlessly."

"But there are different kinds of intelligence," I added. "And everybody's got a weakness."

"True, but hers aren't going to help you."

"Try me."

"Phrenarians don't make good engineers, mathematicians, mechanics, or accountants—nothing relevant, in other words. And I've got more bad news for you."

"Oh, good."

“Phrenarians are almost universally revered. I don’t mean respected. Their *enemies* respect them; everybody else gets a lump in their throat when they talk about them.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because of their high moral values. No matter who you compare them with, the Phrenarians are the smartest ones in the room, and yet they never use their superior intelligence for their own advantage. They instinctively do what’s right for all concerned. They’re team-builders and powerful negotiators because they have everyone’s best interest at heart.”

“Not competitive, then?”

“Not in the way that we humans are. They don’t want to win at others’ expense. But they do want to win—for everybody’s sake. The most famous Phrenarians have been peacemakers, actively working to bring mutual understanding to warring factions. Some have ruled other worlds and done so with an amazing insight into their subjects’ wants and needs. Others have been educators, getting into their students’ heads and explaining things to them in a way that no one else could. Whatever they choose to do, they do it brilliantly. They’re like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Mahatma Gandhi all rolled into one.”

“Okay, I get it,” I snapped. “Anything else?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

I wasn’t expecting such a negative report. “Got any good news?”

“Yeah.” He smiled. “Whatever it is that makes Phrenarians great, Vonda hasn’t got it. Her brain is superior to ours, but that’s all. The rest of what I told you? That’s not her. Not even close.”

“Why not?”

“You need to see this.”

He brought up a video on his computer. It was a clip from a recent episode of *BBC Tonight with Bebe Walton and Hugh Donley*. Bebe and Vonda were walking side-by-side on the grounds of Vonda’s cottage in the Cotswolds. The house was made of brownish stone with white-trimmed windows and a thatched roof. Outside was a typical English garden.

“This is from a special prime-time interview,” Zed explained. “Most of it’s about her career, all the cases she’s won, and so on, but I want you to see the last few minutes.”

They were inside the house now, having tea. Vonda was dressed casually but looked stunning.

“Your parents were Phrenarian,” said Bebe.

“Yes,” replied Vonda. “But I never knew them. They died when I was still an infant. They were best friends with my mum and dad—”

“You mean with the Sheffields, your adoptive parents.”

A flash of annoyance shone in Vonda's eyes. "The Sheffields *are* my parents."

After a moment's silence, the interviewer tried again. "How do you feel about your Phrenarian heritage?"

"Oh, I don't know, Bebe. My parents tried to raise me as a Phrenarian. I think they're probably disappointed with me. But I've never been impressed with that culture." She turned to the camera. "Sorry, Mum and Dad!"

"How can you not be impressed?" Bebe asked. "Your own birth parents died saving others in that tragic explosion on Lexus 6. Phrenarians are so noble, so giving!"

Vonda shrugged. "That's what they tell me. I don't know much about it."

"Why not? Don't you want to learn more?"

"Not really."

Bebe said nothing. She just gave Vonda her famous penetrating stare until Vonda broke the silence.

"Look, Bebe, there's a lot you don't know about that culture. It's based on traditions and rituals that haven't aged well. Nobody's born Phrenarian; they're born with Phrenarian *potential*. To actualize it, they have to go through all these rites of passage that, frankly, don't resonate with me."

"Then how do you self-identify?"

"I'm human," she said proudly. "And a Brit." Turning to the camera, she laughed, "God save the Queen!"

The interview faded out and Bebe was sitting with her co-host, Hugh Donley.

"Hmpf!" grunted Hugh. "Disappointing. I expected so much more from her. Seems a bit of a bubble-head, if you don't mind my saying so."

"No, no, Hugh. That young woman is extremely intelligent. And she has superior gifts that are largely untapped."

Hugh studied his co-host. "Why has she turned against her heritage? Do you have a theory?"

Bebe nodded. "A hunch. That's all it is."

"Do you care to share it?"

She looked directly at the camera. "I think she's running from something."

The screen went black and Zed turned to me. "The thing is, she's not one of them. She's good but not great. She's not fully Phrenarian. And until she goes through the rituals, she never will be."

I gazed off into space. "I wonder why she's avoiding it?"

Zed and I were both bleary-eyed when we reached the final spaceport. It had been a long trip, even for me. As we collected our luggage, we saw what looked like a sheep standing on his hind legs and wearing a shirt and pants. He was holding a sign written in a language we couldn't read.

“Are you waiting for us?” we asked.

His answer sounded like bleating, but the translator said, “Mr. Lamont?” When I nodded, he added, “Man, am I glad you found me. All you humans look alike!”

2 THE VILLAGE

The young man who greeted us was our pilot for the last leg of our trip. He flew us in a little four-seater spacecraft to our destination.

“We have a nice resort town on Nah-Máy,” he explained. “We like it, anyway. It’s kind of expensive, so not many of our own people go there, but everybody talks about it. Rolling hills, green grass, sunshine, blue skies—that’s paradise for us.”

“A lot like Earth,” Zed told him. “Or parts of it, at least. After the trip we’ve had, it sounds like just the place.”

We paused at a security checkpoint floating in space, then received permission to descend. Nah-Máy lived up to the pilot’s description. As we cruised over the main village, we saw several lines of grassy hills with a cluster of quaint cottages up and down each one.

“Not many people are here yet,” he said. “They’ll arrive within the next few days. Journalists, mostly, and aliens who’ve taken an interest in the trial. Of course, no one could get in without clearance—and I’m telling you, the security level is high. Our Minister of Defense is not fooling around!”

“I’m sure he’s not,” I replied. “He takes his job seriously.”

“There have been threats. You’ve probably heard about that.”

“Threats?”

“Not against you guys. Some foreign dignitary. I’ve never heard of him, but I don’t keep up on politics.”

“How safe are we?” Zed asked.

“If it were just our own security people, I’d worry,” the pilot admitted. “But the Galactic Council has a special military force stationed here to watch over things until the trial’s over. They’re very professional. You’ll be in good hands.”

He landed the spacecraft and taxied towards a group of well-dressed sheep standing upright like our pilot.

“That’s the Leadership Team,” he said as he stopped the shuttle and powered down the engine. “I’ll lower the ramp so you can get out. Watch your step!”

As we started down the ramp, we paused and looked around in amazement.

“Just like Earth!” Zed murmured.

Vote walked ahead of the others on his team and greeted me with his hands clasped in front of him, bowing.

“Ba-a-a-a-a-a!”

“Mr. Lamont!” said the translator. “It’s so good to meet you in person!”

“I’m glad to be here,” I told him. “This is my assistant, Zed Zirelli.”

The Athoan leader nodded slightly but did not bow. “Welcome to Nah-Máy, Mr. Zirelli.”

Zed took a deep breath and exhaled, smiling. “Thank you! It feels just like home.”

“Oh?” said Vote. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Neither was I,” Zed told him. “It’s a nice surprise.”

Vote reintroduced me to the rest of his leadership team: None-of-Your-Business, the Minister of Information; Bend-Over, the Minister of Health; and Surely-You-Must-Be-Kidding, the beautiful bronze Finance Minister. Through all these greetings, one other person stood apart from the group, eyeing me suspiciously.

“You remember our Minister of Defense, Wary-of-Monsters,” said the leader.

“How could I forget? It’s good to meet you face-to-face.”

His eyes were intense. “Did you see them?”

I turned to Vote and the others. “See who?”

With a tilt of his head, he motioned over his shoulder. “Them.”

Blocking the sun like a dark cloud was a black substance floating just outside Nah-Máy’s atmosphere.

“Is that—”

“Yes. You can well imagine the horror our people felt when they saw them for the first time.”

I took a good, long look at the blot in the sky, then lowered my eyes to meet his. “Must’ve been terrifying.”

We stared each other down.

The tension was so thick, it made everyone else uncomfortable. Vote suggested that we get into the vehicle that was waiting for us. Eager to escape, they all scrambled into the car, including Zed, and left me alone

with the Defense Minister.

His eyes were still on me. “Are you going to win this case, Mr. Lamont?”

I returned his gaze with equal intensity. He was a serious guy—no question.

“Yes,” I told him. “I am.”

He closed his eyes, nodded once, and motioned for me to get in.

Compared to the Defense Minister, the others on the team were quite casual. We sat on two long cushioned seats facing each other as the driver took us into the village.

“Nice car,” said None, the Minister of Information. “I’m surprised Surely signed off on it.”

“He didn’t,” replied Vote. “I took it from the Emergency Fund.”

Surely, the bronze Finance Minister, glared at him. “You’re killin’ me, Vote! You know that, right?”

Vote smiled. “This is a global emergency.”

“So we can afford to ride in luxury? I don’t get the connection.”

Bend, the Health Minister, turned to Zed and me. “If Surely had his way, we’d all be hoofing it.”

The others laughed, except Surely. And Wary-of-Monsters, who wasn’t in a laughing mood.

“How was your flight?” asked Bend.

Zed opened his mouth, but I shot him a warning glance. He sighed, and we answered in unison: “Fine.”

“We Athoah rarely travel,” Bend said. “We don’t like to stray far from the flock.”

Vote agreed. “I come here to The Village when I want to get away. It reminds me of simpler times, when we lived outdoors and grazed in the sunshine.”

“It’s become too commercialized for me,” said None. “A lot of people travel here from other parts of the galaxy now, and tourists bring innovations, like it or not. The restaurants used to serve the simple grass-based dishes that we Athoah like to eat, but now the menus are more... diverse.” He spoke that last word with a sneer.

Surely perked up. “There’s a little French nightclub in The Village. It’s called Pierre’s.”

Bend winked at Zed and me. “What happens at Pierre’s stays at Pierre’s, if you know what I mean.”

“I think we do,” I told him.

Vote turned to None and spoke sternly. “We’ve opened our doors to a wider community, and I see nothing wrong with that. We just need to make sure that it remains a quiet, peaceful place. That’s why tourists come here: because it’s quaint. We will certainly keep it that way.”

The Minister of Defense had stayed out of the conversation, but now he grunted, and Vote was annoyed. “What is it, Wary?”

“None’s right. Foreigners bring innovations: new menus, new devices—and new dangers. Our way of life is in jeopardy. You refuse to see that.”

There was an uncomfortable silence until our chauffeur pulled up to a cluster of buildings.

“Ah!” said Vote. “The Village! We’ll give you a tour!”

Strictly speaking, “The Village” comprised the entire landscape, including the cottages and villas along the grassy slopes that surrounded us; but we were now in the center of town. We got out of the car and Vote led us towards a domed building a few stories high and as big around as a city block.

“The trial will be held in this building,” he told us. “The public entrance is on the other side, but you will always enter the court here.”

The Athoan guard snapped to attention as we approached. “Relax, relax,” said Vote, but the guard glanced nervously at Wary. Turning sharply, he opened the door for us.

We walked down a long, dark corridor that eventually led to an indoor Amphitheater.

“This isn’t like any court of law I’ve ever seen,” I said.

“It isn’t one,” Vote told me. “We hold concerts and other public performances here. But it was the only venue large enough for the trial.”

We were standing at the bottom of it, looking up at the Gallery: rows and rows of seats, each higher than the one in front of it.

“People are coming from solar systems throughout the galaxy,” he explained.

Beside us were two large tables with chairs. As we faced the front, the table on the right was for my clients and me, and the one on the left was for Vonda and her team. In front of these tables was an open area, with the witness stand off to the right. But the big surprise was the Judge’s bench—or rather, the absence of one. In its place was a huge glass tank filled with water and large enough to house a good-sized sea creature.

“It’s salt water,” confided Surely. “We had to follow precise specifications. The Galactic Council said so. That solution’s so thick you

could ride on the surface without a floatation device.”

“What’s it for?” I asked. “Is the Judge an aquatic creature?”

“That’s what we wondered at first,” said Vote, “but then the breathing tubes arrived. We were told to leave everything in the crates just the way it came, and the Council’s technicians will assemble it all when they get here.”

“Why would an aquatic creature need breathing tubes?” I asked.

“We don’t understand it, either, but no one’s telling us anything.”

Zed and I glanced at each other. “Very strange,” I said.

An elevator took us up to the public entrance, and from there we stepped out into a municipal park called the Quad. It was flat, mostly grass, with an occasional bench or picnic table placed here and there. Winding walkways coming from various directions led to a fountain in the center of the Quad. It was a peaceful scene, or at least it used to be.

But off in one corner was a menacing metallic structure, blood red and towering over us.

“This sculpture arrived a couple of weeks ago,” Vote told us. “It’s a gift from an artist in the Bonari Belt. He says it represents our vulnerability.”

It was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. Although it was crouching, there were hinges in the joints and it seemed about to pounce on us. The face appeared to be screaming. The overall effect was quite disturbing.

“Very abstract,” I said, trying to be diplomatic.

“It’s called *Weeping Mother with Child*,” continued Vote. “It’s supposed to be a woman kneeling and holding an infant.”

“Okay. I can kind of...”

“Isn’t it hideous? We hate it, but we were too kind to refuse it. They meant it as a goodwill gesture, and we didn’t know how to say ‘No.’”

Wary spoke up. “I said ‘No.’ It’s a security breach. But I was overruled.”

“Wary thinks everything’s a threat,” Surely said. “He sees danger lurking around every corner.”

Wary explained. “We don’t know enough about the artist, for one thing. And I find it strange that this ‘Weeping Mother’ is hollow. There’s a trap door in the back, although I can’t get it unlocked. In principle, if someone could open it, they could also climb inside.”

“Who would want to?” asked Bend. He turned to me and added, “Wary never relaxes. I worry about him.”

“The joints work hydraulically,” Wary said, “which would give the

person inside tremendous strength, allowing him to lift an adult without exerting himself. And since the sculpture would stand over ten feet high if it rose from crouching position—”

“That would make it a monster!” interrupted Surely. “And we all know how Wary feels about monsters!”

“It’s virtually indestructible from the outside,” Wary continued. “For example, a blast from a laser gun would be deflected, injuring bystanders...”

“Why would anyone shoot a statue?” asked Vote. “Only Wary would think of that!”

“...and yet an explosion from the inside would send shrapnel to the farthest corners of the Quad.”

“Check it out!” drawled Surely. “That’s not a baby she’s carrying. It’s a bomb! Right, Wary?”

All the others laughed.

Wary couldn’t conceal his disgust. “Inside the sculpture are tubes filled with fluids, and those fluids are potentially explosive. But you see how difficult it is to make our people security-conscious. We are a trusting race—too trusting at times.” He turned and glared at *Weeping Mother* as though he wanted to tear her apart with his bare hands.

I walked over to None, the Minister of Information, and said, “All joking aside, this sculpture gives me an idea. Are there any Athoan couples in town who’ve had a baby recently?”

“I can find out,” he replied. “Why do you ask?”

I glanced back at the statue. “Because we’re going to arrange a photo-op.”

3 KIDDING?

The town center was surrounded by hills. Vote led us on a meandering path up one of them to a little cottage with rustic charm. “You’ll be staying here,” he told us. “As you can see, it’s a short walk from the courtroom. Meals will be in the Commissary, across the Quad from the Amphitheater.”

As we entered the cottage, we walked into a common room that had a sofa and cushioned chairs, with a kitchenette at the far end. To the right and left were separate bedrooms, each with its own bath. The porter had already brought up our bags from the space shuttle.

“Just like home!” murmured Zed.

Vote was pleased. “They’re simple accommodations, but we hope you’ll be comfortable.”

He led us back outside. “My staff and I will be close by, but you’ll have as much privacy as you wish. Guards will be stationed all around. No one from the Gallery will be allowed up here.”

“What about opposing counsel?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Ms. Sheffield? Over the crest of that hill.”

Very close, I thought. *Just an evening’s stroll.*

I caught Zed glaring at me.

“What!” I demanded.

He shook his head and turned away.

Once we were alone, I carried my bags to my room while Zed rummaged through the information packet on the kitchen counter. “Look at this,” he said. “Room service!”

“Really? You mean we don’t have to eat at the Commissary?”

“I guess not... except...” running his eyes down the menu, he added, “I’m having trouble finding anything edible.”

I picked up the phone. “Why don’t I order us both a nice leg of lamb?”

“Smart aleck,” he said.

The Commissary was a lodge-style cafeteria that offered meals for a wide variety of species. For two-legged creatures, there were tables with benches on either side. A small, partly-enclosed area was reserved for official personnel, including us. That was their way of shielding us from the public and the press.

Zed and I held up the line asking a lot of questions—even the Universal Translator couldn’t make out what the servers were saying—but somehow we managed to obtain food that appealed to us. As we headed for the nearest table in our closed-off section, we approached a man in a military officer’s uniform and asked if we could join him.

He stood up, smiling. “Zed? Zed Zirelli?”

“I don’t believe it!” Zed replied, putting down his tray and hurrying around the table.

They hugged and slapped each other on the back.

Zed turned to me. “Tony! This is my old army buddy, Brace Hardwick! Make that *Lieutenant* Hardwick now, of the Special Forces.”

Brace reached across the table and gripped my hand hard. “Good to meet you, Tony.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” I told him.

“I’m sure you have!” He and Zed laughed. “We got into a lot of trouble in those days. All off-duty, of course.”

“But look at you!” exclaimed Zed. “In command of galactic troops!”

He invited us to join him. As we ate, he told about his rise through the ranks.

“I’ve enjoyed working for the Alliance, but sometimes it’s challenging, to say the least. You wouldn’t believe all the tension around this trial. And it only increased when His Eminence got involved.”

“Who?”

“His Eminence,” he repeated. “The Inflated One.”

“Never heard of him.”

Brace was surprised. “The guy’s a media sensation.”

“Who is he?”

“A big bag of hot air.”

I glanced around. “Don’t let the press hear you say that.”

“No, he actually is. He’s got a special gland that allows him to inflate whenever he chooses. His torso puffs up into a big ball, six feet in diameter. He founded his own religion, and when he preaches, he floats over the crowd.”

Zed and I laughed. “Kidding?”

He shook his head. “Anyway, terrorists are after him, and that makes my job even harder.”

“What do they have against him?” we asked.

“They’ve been upset ever since he endorsed the Ruheena Accord.”

I turned to Zed, who shrugged.

“From that time on,” Brace continued, “he’s gotten threats. They say they’re going to pop him.”

We grinned. “Kidding *now*?”

He shook his head.

“What’s he coming here for?” we asked.

“He wants to mediate a settlement between the slime and the Athoah.”

I was angry. “What does he think *we’re* here to do?”

“It’s always about him,” said Brace. “He wants to be the one to negotiate a peace, so he’s coming to draw attention away from the trial and offer his own services as a mediator.”

“Doesn’t he respect the law?”

“He says he represents a Higher Law.”

“What can be higher than Galactic Law?”

Brace grinned. “They don’t call him ‘The Inflated One’ for nothing.”

“I don’t get it,” I confessed. “Why’s he so interested in this case?”

“Everybody is,” said Brace. “Species Advocates are split over it because some feel sorry for the Athoah and others are in favor of the slime. Environmentalists disagree because some of them view the slime as a pollutant and others think they should be a protected species. And on and on it goes. There’s no way to predict which side a person will be on—or why. But one thing you can count on: everyone has an opinion and they all feel strongly about it. And when there’s an issue everybody’s talking about, the Inflated One is sure to get involved. Which just makes things worse, because a lot of people idolize him. They travel light-years just to hear him speak and see him float around.”

Again we asked, “Kidding?” and again he shook his head. He continued:

“Creatures were already coming from all over the galaxy to watch the trial and put pressure on the Judge, but then His Eminence got involved and...” He sighed. “From a security standpoint, it’s been a nightmare.

We've only granted clearance to a fraction of the people who wanted to come."

"Is he that popular?"

"He's notorious. And his presence here will just add fuel to the fire."

This gave me a whole new perspective on the trial. "The Gallery! It's going to be packed with angry people!"

"This isn't Earth," Brace reminded me. "The Athoah rarely complain about anything, so their leaders aren't at all tolerant of that kind of behavior. And since this is their territory, we follow their rules. Yes, protestors are coming, and yes, they will do whatever they can to sway the verdict, but if they interfere with the trial in any way, we'll send them home."

"But the Gallery!" I insisted. "It'll be filled with people who are antagonistic to the Athoah."

"A lot of people are coming to support your clients, too, Tony. It's far from one-sided. Feelings are running high all around. And when His Eminence arrives, it'll just make everybody more upset than they already are. It goes without saying that Mr. Monsters is dead-set against the Inflated One coming."

"Who's that?"

"The Athoan Head of Security, Mr. Monsters."

We laughed, but Brace was serious.

"Have you ever called him that to his face?" I asked.

"No. Why?"

"Don't."

"At any rate," said Brace, "he's very upset about all the protestors coming, and he wanted us to deny clearance for His Eminence."

"Can you blame him?"

"No, but I also couldn't turn away a media superstar."

"Why not?"

He gave me a strange look. "Now are *you* kidding?"

I shook my head.

"There's a lot of you don't know about the Galactic Council," Brace told me. "Everything's political at this level."

He glanced in both directions, leaned across the table, and lowered his voice. "The Council is financially strapped, and they simply haven't got the troops to govern the whole galaxy. It's not just that we can't be everywhere at once; we can barely give proper military support to any sector where we're needed. It isn't the Special Forces that's holding the Alliance together. It's politics, pure and simple. The Council can't afford to be on the wrong side of any issue. If people revolt, we won't be able to stop them. And if one star system does, then another will, and another..."

“What are you telling me?”

“This trial is political through-and-through, Tony. There are strong feelings on both sides. The Judge’s decision will come down to one thing: which way is the wind blowing strongest right now?”

I didn’t say anything, but I was deeply disappointed. The days ahead were going to be ugly.

Brace must’ve read my mind. “Maybe we’ll get lucky!” he said. “The terrorists could pop the Inflated One before he gets here, and then we won’t have to worry about *him*, at least.”

I was shocked that a man in his position would make such a statement.

He smiled. “Kidding!”

4 THE REAL DEAL

We spent the next few days adjusting to Athoan time and preparing for the trial. I met frequently with my clients and prepped each of them for their performance on the witness stand, making sure they emphasized the points I wanted to make.

Every day more crowds arrived and were bussed up to the far hills on the edge of the village. One group tried to stage a demonstration and were immediately sent home.

“Security’s tight,” I said, and Zed nodded.

“Brace is determined to keep the peace. If he can get the point across now, it’ll be easier as the week goes on.”

We could feel the excitement building each time a shuttle landed and a new assemblage of creatures stepped out. This was going to be big.

On the day before the trial, I met the Athoan Minister of Information in the Quad outside the courthouse. Tourists were coming and going, snapping group selfies and posting them on social media.

“The press corps is here,” None told me.

“Good. Do you have a family ready?”

He nodded, inviting a young Athoan couple to join us. The woman was holding a little lamb in her arms.

“What’s your child’s name?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s much too early to tell,” she replied. “We need to learn her habits before we can name her accurately.”

“Perfect! Come with me.”

Leading them over to the press corps, I positioned them on the ledge of the fountain so that any pictures the journalists took of them would show the Few in the background.

There were about twenty journalists from a variety of species. One

was shaped like an octopus. Another had a face like a head of cauliflower that had gone bad. They snapped pictures as I spoke.

“When this young couple began their life together they had a bright future ahead of them, with only blue skies and sunshine on their horizon. Little did they know that their beautiful child would be born under such a dark, lurking threat.”

The journalists pushed and shoved each other, trying to get just the right angle.

I gestured towards the lamb in her mother’s arms. “This poor child has not yet been named, but when the time comes, I can only imagine what they’ll call her. ‘Born-Under-Dark-Skies’? ‘Danger-Overhead’? ‘What-Will-Become-of-Us’? It will largely depend on the Judge’s verdict. If he decides against the Athoah, they might call her any of those things. But if he chooses in their favor, this child may yet be called, ‘Blessed.’”

I stepped out of the way and let the journalists get creative. They told the young couple to turn and gaze fearfully into the sky. Some took close-up shots of the child’s innocent face. Others ordered the father to stand protectively over the mother and daughter, glaring up at the dark blotch in the sky.

None was impressed. “You know how to handle these people.”

“You just have to give them a story to tell,” I said. “They’ll do the rest.”

After several minutes of this, the journalists were distracted by something else. As a group, they ran to greet a young woman who had entered the Quad about twenty yards behind us.

“What’s happening?” asked None.

I smiled. “Vonda Sheffield has arrived.”

She was wearing a bright, form-fitting dress suit and had her hair loose. She looked better than I had imagined.

As the press corps hurried towards her, she shouted greetings to them: “Romlyn, I heard about your accident! Must’ve been frightful! Good to see you back on four legs again... Hello, Kitzar! I see you survived the Plautus Summit. I’d like to hear your thoughts about it sometime... Dorethia, hi! Didn’t know you were going to be here. Let’s catch up later!”

“They seem quite enamored with her,” said None.

“With good reason. She’s the real deal.”

“I’m not familiar with that expression.”

“She’s what everyone in our profession wishes they could be but can’t. She sets the standard.”

He stared at me, then at Vonda, then back at me again. “Should we be

concerned?”

I shook my head.

“But if she’s the real deal—”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Why not?”

I watched her, then turned back to him and smiled. “Because I’m the real deal, too.”

5 CLEVER LAD

DAY ONE

Opening Day of the trial came at last, and I felt like a kid on his way to the ball park. I dressed more carefully than normal, then called Zed over to my room to witness the putting on of the vestments. He watched proudly as I draped them over my clothes. Because vestments are necessary at the Galactic level, this was the visible symbol of how far we had come. He beamed as I regarded myself in the mirror. We shook hands and he slapped me on the back. “Go show ‘em how it’s done!”

The walk down to the Amphitheater was exhilarating as we noticed creatures of every kind descending the roads from the surrounding hills. Many were on foot, while others boarded buses and were shuttled down to the Quad.

Something flew swiftly towards us and paused in front of us at eye-level.

“What’s this?” I asked.

It was a rolled-up scroll, and it spoke to us in a male announcer’s voice: “Have you heard the news?”

I started to say, “What news?” but Zed elbowed me: “Don’t encourage him. Just keep walking.”

“The Inflated One is coming!” said the announcer.

“Oh, that.”

The scroll unrolled, and on its clean white page was a video of His Eminence.

“Hello!” his voice boomed. “I’m on my way to Nah-Máy. I hope to see you there!” He puffed up and floated away from the camera. “Together,” he shouted, “we’ll make history!”

The scroll rolled back up and flew past us. “Mark your calendar!”

I turned to Zed. “When’s he coming?”

“End of the week.”

“Maybe we can wrap this up before he gets here. Wouldn’t that surprise him!”

As we reached the special entrance around the back of the building, one of Brace’s men approached us. “Good afternoon, Mr. Lamont. Follow me, please.”

Tourists were gathered in a roped-off area, hoping to catch a glimpse of the major players as we arrived. They reacted as though we were celebrities, and many of them took pictures.

“Which one’s Lamont?” someone asked.

“Supposed to be the good-looking one, according to the humans I’ve talked to.”

“Define ‘good-looking.’”

Someone near them interrupted. “He’s the one in the robe! If you’re that clueless, why did you come?”

Once inside the building, we walked down the long corridor towards the main staging area. We could already hear the audience up in the Gallery, eagerly awaiting the start of the trial, and we followed the sound. As we were about to step out into the courtroom, I motioned for Zed to wait; then I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

I can’t believe it! I thought. *We’re finally here!*

I beamed at Zed, he grinned back, and we walked out together. A wave of excitement ran through the crowd as they spotted us. Creatures pulled out their phones to take pictures.

The Athoan Leadership Team was already seated at our table, and they stood to greet me. Vote and I bowed to each other.

I spoke first. “Good afternoon, sir! Our day in court has come.”

“May victory be ours,” he replied.

They had saved the last two chairs at the table for us, and we all sat down together. Zed was next to None, and I sat on the end. Vonda’s table was a short distance to my left, with a space of only a yard between us. She had not yet arrived.

The bailiff hurried towards me. He was a short, morose-looking creature with a beak. Every word he spoke sounded like some variation of “chick-pea”: “chickchickchick,” “pea-pea,” “chicka-chicka-pea-pea,” and so on. But the Universal Translator understood him.

“Counselor!” he snapped. “No one’s allowed to eat in the courtroom.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“Your clients are breaking the rule.”

I glanced down the line and they all looked back at me, chewing their cud.

“They’re ruminators,” I explained. “And this is their facility. You’re not going to tell them they can’t ruminate, are you?”

The bailiff lowered his voice. “They’re bringing their lunch back up and eating it a second time. It’s disgusting! And they’re in a court of law.”

I held eye-contact long enough to make sure I had his attention, then I repeated, very slowly: “They’re ruminators.”

He got the point. Turning away, he shouted over his shoulder, “Better not let the Judge catch them doing it. That’s all I’m saying.”

A collective gasp came up from the crowd as three women stepped quickly into view and headed for the table on my left. Cameras flashed and creatures strained to get a better look.

The bailiff rushed forward, yelling at the crowd in the Gallery:

“Cheeka-cheeka-cheeka-chickpea!”

“No cameras allowed in the courtroom!”

The tallest of the three women wore a vestment, but her demeanor would have singled her out as the leader no matter what she wore. She was a model of self-assurance. Her fabled long hair was tied tightly in the back, and she marched across the courtroom floor with a cadence that signaled she was now taking charge. After motioning for her companions to find seats at the table, she set down her tablet at the place closest to me and turned towards me with a smile.

I was already on my feet, and I stepped forward with my hand extended. “Ms. Sheffield? I’m Tony Lamont.”

“Tony!” she shouted, shaking my hand vigorously. “Splendid! At last we meet! Please call me ‘Vonda.’”

She was taller than I had imagined—almost as tall as me.

She introduced her assistant, Filomena Mullins. I motioned for Zed to join us and introduced him. Filomena’s face was perfectly round and very pretty, with dimples in her chubby cheeks. She and Zed took an immediate interest in each other and walked a few feet away to get acquainted.

“I’ve had my eye on you since *Hendra v. Coombs*,” Vonda told me.

“Are you serious? Vonda Sheffield knows who I am?”

She laughed. “What must you think of me! Do I come across as stuffy?”

“Not at all. But you have every right to be.”

“That was a nice bit of work,” she added, referring to the earlier case. “I knew you were one to watch after that. ‘Now there’s a clever lad,’ I said.”

I grinned and thought, *Vonda Sheffield just called me ‘a clever lad.’ Wait’ll I tell Zed!*

I glanced over at him and heard only some of what he was saying to Filomena: “cramped... stuffy... rotten food... nobody speaks English...”

To my surprise, Filomena wasn’t turned off. “That’s exactly how I felt my first time out!” she said. “I told Vonda I’d never travel with her again. It was horrid! But I learned some survival techniques. For example...”

As Vonda and I strolled into the center of the courtroom, I gestured towards the glass structure in front of us. “What’s this fish tank for?”

“I’ve heard rumors,” she replied. “We’ll find out soon enough if they’re true.”

“Is the Judge amphibian?”

She started to laugh but stopped herself. “No. Just eccentric.”

“What can you tell me about him?”

“He’s human. His great-great grandparents emigrated from Earth but he’s only visited our planet a few times. He was born and raised in the Exo-13 Colony.”

“Orbiting around Jupiter?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “He’s been a space cadet his whole life.”

Not sure how to interpret that remark, I searched her face and found the tiniest hint of mischief in her eyes.

We both turned towards Zed and Filomena, who were laughing uproariously. Zed was telling about how the crowd had pushed and shoved him at the spaceport.

“Next time you can guard against that,” said Filomena. “There’s a device that preserves your personal space. It creates a gentle force field around you and makes people keep their distance.”

“I wish I had known about that!”

“I’ll send you the link,” she promised.

I noticed the third woman sitting alone at Vonda’s table. Although she was humanoid, her face had markings that weren’t human. Her hair stood straight out of her head and she kept turning this way and that, as though startled by something. I asked Vonda about her.

“Her name is Tremela Torpah,” she replied. “We’ve been corresponding for months, but I met her for the first time last night.”

“Seems rather nervous,” I said.

“Mmm, yes, quite skittish. Easily distracted, too. But they say she’s a genius. I’ve taken her on as my consultant. She’s an expert on the Few.”

I was surprised. “Did you just call your clients...”

She smiled and nodded. “It’s preposterous how politicized their name has become. You’ve taken the heat from the press corps, but we really have no alternative, have we? This trial would be tedious if we pronounced it the way the press wants us to. And it’s not as though my

clients care. They don't even know they *have* a name! I've made it clear to the press corps that I don't want to hear any more rubbish about it. 'Tony Lamont calls them the Few and so do I,' I told them."

I was completely disarmed, and it must've showed, because she laughed. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

"Please! Tell me."

"You're just... not at all what I expected."

The look she gave me in response quickened my pulse, and she spoke in a low, intimate voice: "That's good, I hope."

We moved closer. "Very good."

Something happened in that moment as we gazed dreamily into each other's eyes. I could see that she liked me—a lot. I wasn't prepared for that.

"Do they object?" I asked.

She answered in a faraway voice. "Who?"

"The press."

"Why would they object?"

"You know... to calling your clients 'the Few.'"

Suddenly she came back to reality. "Oh, that!" She shook her head as though doing a mental reset. "I don't think they liked it, but no one pushed me on it."

"Of course not. You're a sacred cow to them."

"Oh, Tony!" she replied, laughing hard and placing her hand on my arm. "That's a good one. Me—sacred! If you only knew! You're such a riot!"

This was turning out better than I had imagined. She was so much friendlier than I could have hoped. So down-to-earth; so approachable.

We are going to learn so much from each other! I thought.

She stopped laughing and regarded me seriously. "That's such a lovely thing to say! You really mean that, don't you?" When I cocked my head, she added, "About learning from each other."

I stared at her and she realized what she had done. "Ohhhh... omigod... oh no... erm..."

"Vonda, are you—"

"No." She backed away. "I'm not. Not the least bit. Or I mean... I can't be!"

She seemed terrified. Without another word, she hurried back to her table, picked up her tablet, and took the seat farthest away from me.

Seeing her go, Filomena said, "It'll get better, Zed. Trust me."

He looked as though he wasn't sure about that, so she repeated, "Trust me!" Then she whispered, "And keep your pecker up."

As she left him to join Vonda back at their table, he watched her go and murmured, "I sure will!"

Noticing the expression on my face, he asked, "What's wrong with you?"

"All that research you did on Phrenarians," I said. "Are they telepathic?"

"Not that I know of."

"Can you find out, please? Right away?"

"Sure, Tony. But why?"

I glanced over at her and she looked away.

"Because Vonda Sheffield just read my mind."

6 SPACE CADET

“Cheeka pit!” cried the bailiff.

“All rise!” said the Universal Translator. “This is the case of *The Athoah v. the...*” He took a deep breath and drew out his pronunciation of “the Ffff’ewww” so long and carefully that some members of the audience applauded his performance. I glanced at Vonda but she turned away again.

The bailiff continued: “Court is now in session, the Honorable Ira Goofus presiding.”

The next sound we heard was a rhythmic *squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak* as the Judge came out of his chambers and scaled the stairs behind the tank of water. When he reached the top, we saw a skinny elderly man wearing a rubberized wet suit that even covered his head, leaving only his face exposed. Laughter filled the courtroom.

“Ridiculous!” he sneered. “Utterly ridiculous! That it should ever have come to this! That a court of law should ever be reduced to such measures!”

The place fell silent.

As the bailiff appeared beside him on the far ledge of the tank, the Judge turned to him. “You know what they used to call this galaxy, bailiff?”

“No, Judge.”

“The Milky Way.”

“Why’d they call it that, Judge?”

The old man’s eyes crossed and turned up towards his forehead. “Um... uh... hmmm... you know, that’s really not important. What matters is, we used to call it that—for centuries. As a boy, I called it that. But you’d better not call it the Milky Way anymore! You know why?”

“Why, Judge?”

“Because someone will be offended. ‘That’s heliocentric!’ they’ll say, and God forbid that we should be heliocentric!”

The creatures in the Gallery shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“I have no problem with accommodating other species,” he continued. “When we humans reached out to all these other parts of the galaxy, we did our best to make room for everyone else. But let’s be honest: if it weren’t for the human race—heliocentric though we may be—there wouldn’t be a Galactic Alliance. We humans are the ones who brought civilization to the rest of the galaxy, and now we’re not even supposed to mention that—like we’re ashamed of it!”

A creature in the Gallery shouted something. Security people grabbed him and led him out.

“Let that be a lesson to the rest of you,” warned the Judge. “This is *my* courtroom! So sit down and shut up—or leave!” He turned back to the bailiff. “The upshot of all this is that the galaxy no longer has a name, because we can’t agree on one. We can’t agree on anything anymore. What’s happened to us? We were once the greatest galaxy in the universe!”

“How do you figure that?” asked the bailiff. “We don’t know anything about other galaxies.”

“And we don’t need to,” the Judge replied. “Because we’re the greatest.”

“Oh.”

“But you know what’s eroding our morals, bailiff?”

“What’s that, Judge?”

“This.” He bit his lower lip, held up both hands, and fidgeted with his fingers. “You see them everywhere. Every species does it. They never put it down for one minute. Their phones! Their bleeping social media! None of it’s constructive. They’re always *against* something. And now they’ve all gathered around a single issue. And they’ve all come *here*!”

He glared at the Gallery. “Look at them! The whole miserable lot of them! They’ve come from everywhere and descended on my courtroom. You know who’s going to decide this case? I am! Not public opinion! Not the people in the audience! I, and I alone, will rule on this case. I will not be pressured, nor will I be swayed.”

Wagging his finger towards a special roped-off area of the auditorium, he addressed the journalists. “Until I have handed down my decision, the members of the press are not to have contact with any of the principal parties in this case, or with their legal counsel. I repeat: the members of the media are to have no contact with the Athoan leaders, the Few, or their attorneys until this case is settled. Is that clear?”

The press corps murmured amongst themselves. Vonda turned to them, shrugged, and shook her head.

“In addition, I have taken precautions against being unduly swayed by the attorneys on either side. Both of them are known to be eloquent, and one in particular has a reputation for blinding men with her feminine charms.”

Vonda looked disgusted.

“The solution is simple,” said the Judge. “I will not make my senses available for manipulation.”

Waving at the pool before him, he continued. “This is a sensory-deprivation tank. I will be floating here, oblivious to everything that’s happening in this room. I will neither see nor hear nor taste nor touch nor smell. An audio tube will scramble the sounds, depriving the attorney’s voices of their natural resonance and making them seem like robots. Audience reaction will be garbled. In this way, I will maintain complete impartiality and judge the case entirely on its merits. In this courtroom, Justice truly will be blind... and deaf.”

“And dumb,” whispered Zed.

Technicians came forward, attaching equipment to his body. “Separate tubes will provide me with oxygen and allow me to exhale. When necessary, I will speak through the exhalation tube.”

The technicians covered his face and hooked up his hoses, and their partners on the ground gave a thumbs up. The Judge waddled to the edge of the tank. Poles extending from his torso made his arms stick out at forty-five degrees from the rest of his body.

He spoke, and the voice that came out of the tube sounded like Donald Duck.

“Thissss is not a circussssss,” he spluttered. “It’s a court of jussstissss.”

To emphasize the point, he did a belly flop into the pool, spraying salt water in all directions.

7 OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS

“Counsel for the Athoah,” called the duck voice, “you may present your opening argument.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” At first I was disoriented. My speech was meant for him, but he wasn’t really there. I could address my remarks to the tank of salt water, but that would be silly. Instead, I strolled around the courtroom looking at no one in particular.

“When the Galactic Council was first convened two hundred years ago, its founding members wisely passed laws that laid the ground-rules for all future deliberations. Among those laws was GCR-12, which states that existing governments throughout the realm shall maintain their sovereignty even after they join the Alliance. They are free to govern themselves without restraint, the law says. Their participation in the Alliance does not mean that they have handed over their right to self-rule; it merely means that they are part of a larger community—a community that recognizes their sovereignty.

“Your Honor, this trial, and all that it represents, is contrary to GCR-12 and all that *it* represents.

“I have with me the leaders of the Athoah—the sovereign rulers of the planet Nah-Máy. Over the next two days I will show that these men are as benign a group of statesmen as you will find anywhere in the galaxy, and their constituency is as innocent and trusting as any society can be. They aren’t out to hurt anyone; they just want to live in peace. But they’re being threatened with infestation, and because they tried to defend themselves against this threat, the Galactic Council intervened. I will show that this intervention is not only illegal but unwarranted, given the parties involved.

“Yes, there are exceptions to the law, and the resolution to which I

refer makes clear what those exceptions are. To give an absurd example, let us imagine that my clients decided to invade another planet. As I will show, the Athoan disposition is such that they would never do that. They are not the least bit aggressive. But if they did invade another planet, and if their victims were unable to defend themselves and appealed to the Galactic Council, then there might be grounds for the Council to intervene. There *might* be, I say, depending on a number of factors, which are also spelled out in the law.

“But the case before us is not at all like that. In this instance, the Few are the invaders. They are the aggressors, not my clients. Nor have my clients appealed to the Council for help. No, Your Honor! In this case, the law has been turned on its head. The victims have been accused of wrongdoing and must now defend themselves not only against invasion but also against the charge of mass murder.

“Let us imagine a different case—one in which the Few are not an inky substance but are, instead, an army of humanoid invaders. If my clients had successfully repelled them, we would not be here having this discussion, because every planetary government has a right to defend its people from foreign invasion. But my clients are on trial because the Few are an unusual kind of invader.

“There have been local precedents set in recent years—not in Galactic courts but in the courts of planets within the Alliance—granting rights to species that are not able to think or communicate. A wave of sympathy for non-sentient species has been increasing throughout the galaxy. A number of cultures have voluntarily restricted the use of pesticides and have required their citizens to behave in friendly ways towards invasive species, treating them as though they were sentient and as though they had the rights of sentient beings. I emphasize again: no Galactic courts have made such rulings, but a number of planets within the Alliance have moved in that direction.

“The Galactic Council has wisely steered clear of this issue. Now is not the time for the Council to take a stand on it, especially at the expense of the Athoah, who are so innocent and trusting.

“Are the Athoah sovereign? That is the issue—the only real issue—in this case. Do these men have the right to protect their people from an infestation? That’s what’s at stake. And although the answer to that question is of utmost importance to my clients, it will also be of vital interest to communities throughout the galaxy. For if you decide, Your Honor, that the Athoah are not sovereign, then the message will go out to all the star systems throughout the realm that no one is truly free.”

There was some applause as I returned to my seat, and the bailiff reminded the Gallery that there was to be none of that.

The duck voice said, “Now we will hear from Counsel for the sli—” He corrected himself: “The Few.”

Vonda seemed sad. Our conversation had visibly altered her mood.

Approaching the tank of water, she spoke softly. “Your Honor, I congratulate you on your decision to float in a sensory-deprivation tank. Nothing could be more welcome to me as I try to explain what life is like for my clients. Can you feel your arms, Your Honor?”

“No,” replied the duck voice.

“Or your legs? Or anything at all?”

“No.”

“In fact, do you have any way of verifying that you have a body?”

He didn’t answer that.

“Floating weightless,” she said, “without any of the sensations that make you aware of your limbs or torso or even your head, you are now in a perfect position to imagine what it’s like to be the Few.”

The Gallery reacted with surprise to her pronunciation, but she waved her hand dismissively. “I have agreed with Counsel for the Athoah to call my clients ‘the Few.’ It will make our discussions easier, and my clients do not care what we call them. All they want is fair treatment.”

She turned back to the tank of water. “Your Honor, what you are experiencing right now is very much like what my clients have experienced from the day of their inception. Through no fault of their own, they are a formless mass floating in space. They have no body—no arms, no legs, no mouth with which to communicate their wishes—nor do they know what it’s like to have such features. But they have a mind and will of their own, with hopes and dreams just as vivid as you and I have. They have found ways to communicate, although their ways are different from ours.”

Turning to face the audience, she raised her voice. “In this vast galaxy, my clients truly are ‘the Few.’ Everyone here is a member of a species comprised of countless billions of individuals in communities spread across the galaxy. If something catastrophic were to happen to us or even to one of our planets, our species would live on. But my clients are ‘The Few.’ They are the only ones of their kind, as far as we know. If they are exterminated, their species will be entirely wiped out.”

“And good riddance,” muttered Wary. The rest of my clients laughed.

Vonda approached him. “We’ve made that mistake before. We humans have, at any rate. You Athoah are a gentle race, or so you say. Perhaps you’ve never faced anything like this.”

She walked over to me. “But we humans have. And I have vowed that we shall not make this mistake again.”

Turning back towards the tank of water, she continued. “Your Honor,

Mr. Lamont called my clients an infestation. I was tempted to object and ask you to strike that racial slur from the record, but I did not; for this is the crux of the matter. Over the next several days I will show the court how wrong he is, but until I have done so, let it be clear that there are two very different ideas at war against each other in this case. On the Athoan side there is a perception—or shall I say, misperception—of my clients as a mere substance: indeed, one that is harmful to the Athoah and to their world. On this view there is serious doubt about my clients' rationality. If it is conceded at all, it is trivialized. 'Perhaps the Few have some low level of intelligence,' they may say, 'but it is negligible and irrelevant, for they behave as a substance and not as a race of sentient beings.' That, Your Honor, is one view of the matter, a view that Mr. Lamont laid out quite clearly in his opening remarks.

"But there is an alternative view of my clients, and I will show the court that this other view is more accurate than Mr. Lamont's. On this view, the Few are a race of people, just as intelligent and benign as the Athoah, and just as sovereign. Their freedoms are protected by GCR-12 just as much as are the Athoah's."

Again she lifted her face towards the Gallery and spoke in an oratorical voice. "Their only crime—and crime it must be, since they're being held captive by the Council's Special Forces at this very hour—their crime, I say, is that they do not have a body. Search the galaxy and you will find creatures with a wide disparity of physical forms, and the Galactic Alliance does its best to welcome them all. But the Few do not have a body, and by some strange logic this also seems to imply that they do not have a mind. My clients do have a mind, Your Honor. They want something, and the Athoah do not want them to have it. I concede that the Athoah have a right to assert their will, too, but they are unwilling to listen to my clients or even to treat them as people capable of rational discourse.

"That is the real reason we are here. My clients are people—people unlike any you've ever met, perhaps, but people nonetheless. Mr. Lamont says that the issue is the right of the Athoan government, or of any government, to make its own decisions. I say that *this* is the issue: Are the Few *people*... or merely an infestation? If they are an infestation, then they have no rights, and the Athoah can do with them what they will; but if the Few are people, then they must be respected rather than poisoned."

She whirled on me angrily. "No, Mr. Lamont, the Athoah did not appeal to the Council for protection, nor did my clients. Since the Few have no way of speaking on their own behalf, others had to do it for them. I went before the Council as their advocate, with backing from

many others, and the Special Forces stepped in to protect them. But they also locked my clients up in a pen, which I did not expect. Neither of our clients are happy with the result; but what you claimed earlier is incorrect: this tribunal is very much in the spirit, if not the letter, of GCR-12.”

Returning to the water tank, she concluded: “Your Honor, you have told us that this will not be a circus; it will be a court of justice. I fervently hope that that is true. I implore you to give my clients the justice you have promised. Reconcile them with the Athoah, and set them free!”

The Gallery gave her a standing ovation, cheering so loudly that I could hardly hear the bailiff reprimanding them. It was all I could do not to join them. I had watched her online, but this was the first time I had seen her in person. What a powerful orator! I had never met anyone in the same league as her. Her mind was sharp, her words eloquent, and her diction superb. I myself had given a fine opening statement, but hers was a master performance. I knew that I would never electrify an audience as she had just done.

Zed whispered, “Get yourself under control, fan boy.”

“Is it that obvious?”

He nodded grimly.

That’s okay, I thought. I’m still going to win.

She turned and looked at me. And even though she seemed profoundly sad, she rolled her eyes, shook her head, and grinned.

8 IS SHE OR ISN'T SHE?

I cooked my own meal at our cottage that evening; I had a lot on my mind. Zed ate at the Commissary. When he returned, he came straight to my room and announced, "I just had dinner with Filomena, and here's what I learned about Vonda."

"Wow! You didn't waste any time."

"You told me you wanted to know right away."

"That's not what I meant. But go ahead and tell me what you learned during your dinner date with Filomena."

"Vonda's not telepathic. If she were, Filomena would know. They've been friends for years."

"Are you sure she's telling the truth?" I asked. "You two just met. If she's as loyal to Vonda as you are to me..."

"I couldn't swear to it, but my hunch is she was being honest. If Vonda's telepathic, Filomena doesn't know about it. And that's unlikely, given their relationship."

I nodded, slapped my knees, and stood up to walk him towards the door. "Thanks for letting me know."

"Why did you think she was?"

"Just something she said." I wanted him to leave so I could get back to work on the problem, but he was eager to talk.

"Filomena's a godsend. She's funny, great company, and very smart. We spent the whole dinner talking politics."

I was surprised. "Not your favorite subject."

"Usually not, but she's quite knowledgeable. Remember what Brace told us about the Galactic Alliance coming apart? Well, it's even worse than he described. The whole society is fragmenting, and nobody knows what to do about it."

“Really? What’s at issue?”

“Everything! That’s the problem. There aren’t just one or two hot-button topics. Everybody’s got an angle—and I don’t mean the politicians, I mean everybody! Every measly little creature with a phone or a tablet can broadcast their opinion, and they’re all in each other’s business. It doesn’t matter who you are, what role you play, or how good you are at what you do. If they don’t like you, they say so, and if they can get enough people to agree with them, you’re out of a job. They don’t want apologies; they want to ruin your reputation and rewrite history to make you the villain. Forget about justice, Tony. Public opinion is what drives policy now, and it’s becoming that way all across the galaxy. And this trial—”

I noticed something when he uttered those words. From the beginning of the conversation I had sensed Vonda listening, but now I felt her attention keenly focused.

“This trial is all about public opinion,” he said. “Everybody’s mind is made up and they’re really, really mad. They don’t think of it as anger; they think it’s righteous indignation. Remember when we used to believe we had to be nice to each other, even when we disagreed? Not anymore. On any day of the week, anywhere, without warning, people get upset about things and ‘rant’—and look out! Because somebody’s about to get the axe. This trial is one of the things that people are ranting about.”

I shook my head impatiently. “The Judge is floating in a sensory-deprivation tank. He’s not going to be swayed by public opinion.”

“‘Hear no evil, see no evil,’” quoted Zed. “He’s ignoring the obvious. Righteous indignation will determine the outcome of this trial. And Vonda Sheffield is the Queen of Righteous Indignation.”

What I heard next wasn’t a sound; it was a thought, just like any of my other thoughts, except that I heard it in Vonda’s voice instead of mine. It came out as a suppressed *Grrrrr!*

I laughed.

“Well, it’s true,” he said. “She doesn’t care what’s best for the Athoah. She’s fighting for the Few, and she wants to force your clients to let them in. It’s none of her business, Tony. The Few don’t know her. They didn’t hire her. She’s got financial support from wealthy ‘Forward-Lookers’ who share her political views, and they paid her to butt in. This whole thing is her fault.”

I was so busy listening for Vonda’s reaction that I didn’t respond.

“Sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“I know how much you admire her.”

I nodded and escorted him out. Since I knew she was eavesdropping,

I didn't want to admit anything.

He paused in the doorway. "It's a good thing she's *not* telepathic, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"Because if she were, then she'd know that you're in love with her."

Oh-oh, I thought.

I sensed her trying not to react.

"I'm not in love with her, Zed."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

As soon as he left, I decided to take action.

"Look," I said loudly, "I know you can read my mind. Stop skulking."

I'm not. I was just hoping it would go away if I denied it long enough.

"So you *are* telepathic."

No. I never have been until today.

"Starting when?"

You know when. You saw it happen. I shouldn't have been so transparent. And please stop talking out loud. I can read your thoughts whether you speak them or not, and it would be better if Zed didn't overhear you.

"He's my best friend. I've got nothing to hide from him."

He won't believe you. And if you keep it up, he'll think you're delusional.

I knew she was right.

Okay, I thought. *Can you hear me?*

Perfectly.

What's this all about? It's a Phrenarian thing, isn't it?

Yes. Filomena was partly right. Phrenarians aren't telepathic under normal conditions. But there's something I've never told her: Phrenarian women become telepathic for a very brief time, only once in their lives.

How brief?

Seven days. And they can only read the thoughts of one other person.

That made no sense to me. *Why do they become telepathic for seven days, with one person, and never again after that?*

It's an ancient rite of passage. All Phrenarian women go through it, apparently. I really, truly thought I could put it off forever.

You don't like being Phrenarian, do you?

I am NOT Phrenarian!

But you are, genetically, right? How can you brush it off?

I've done quite well so far. Until today.

I don't get it, I said. All of a sudden, for seven days, against your will, some ancient ritual forces you to be telepathic with one other person. Why? What's it for?

She searched for a way to tell me. Erm... welp...

Vonda, I can sense that you're embarrassed. But you're invading my thoughts, so I think I have a right to know.

Oh, you do, most definitely. I'm obligated to tell you, in fact. I simply can't decide how to begin.

Why don't you just dive in?

Right, then. She took a deep breath. But I think you should be sitting down when I tell you.

9 THE TRANSITION

It's a process called 'the Transition,' she explained. It's how Phrenarians mature.

You seem awfully mature already, I replied.

Not to be rude, but humans have lower standards than Phrenarians do.

Yeah, that's rude.

Technically, no one is fully Phrenarian until they've transitioned. They don't function at full capacity until they've done so.

Okay. What happens in the Transition?

It's an unusual sort of rite, she said. No one can become Phrenarian alone. They need a... a...

A buddy?

Erm... sure...

And I'm your buddy?

Well... I suppose you could call it that... After a moment's indecision, she launched in: The Transition is a mating ritual. This is how Phrenarian women choose their life partners.

My brain froze. Life partners?

Husbands, Tony. Phrenarians marry once, and it lasts forever. They don't divorce.

But... but...

When a female finds a suitable mate, she reaches out to him telepathically. Over the next seven days, they use that connection to learn about each other.

Whatever happened to 'dinner and a movie'?

There's no cause for alarm, because I refuse to go along with it. I'm not Phrenarian.

You don't seem to have a choice, I replied.

I'm not going to let them tell me what to do! And I'm not going to marry you.

Marriage is the least of our troubles, I said. We're on opposing sides of a high-profile case and we can read each other's minds. That's a problem, don't you think?

It's a major inconvenience, she admitted.

Oh, it's more than that. It's grounds for a mistrial.

The Judge doesn't have to know, she insisted.

Maybe not. But it goes deeper than that. What about confidentiality? You're going to hear everything my clients tell me, and everything I say in response. How ethical is that?

I could feel her waving her hand impatiently. I'll think about something else at those moments. Or hum a tune or something.

And strategically, I continued, you'll know my plans before I can execute them.

As you will know mine, she replied.

That doesn't bother you? You don't see the moral issues here?

She sighed. As you yourself noted, I have no control over it. Believe me, if I could make this go away, I'd do it in an instant.

I rubbed the back of my neck. How did it start? If you don't control it, what launched it?

I don't know, she said. I thought I could put it off indefinitely. I've succeeded so far. They warned me that Nature could take over if I waited too long, but I didn't believe them.

That just made me mad. So because you procrastinated... I paced, trying to calm myself down. Are you telling me that you put it off for so long that Nature took over—and I happened to be standing beside you when the time came?

I don't think it was exactly like that, she replied. I think it happened because you were there. Your presence prompted it.

Meaning what?

I'm not sure how the whole thing works, but it isn't random. Nature... or whatever... chose you because you seemed like a good candidate.

Is that you talking? Do you think I'm a good candidate?

Of course not! she protested. Do you think I took one look at you and wanted to marry you? Are you that full of yourself?

I'm not full of myself at all, I told her. I'm just trying to decipher what you meant about me being a good candidate.

What I meant was—and again I have to remind you I don't understand how all this works—but whatever it is biologically that gets the Transition started, it must've recognized you as a good fit, even

though I didn't... or don't, I should say.

We sat in silence for a while. What happens next? I asked.

I don't know.

Why not? Don't they prepare you?

There's a catechism. My parents made me go through it when I was twelve. A Phrenarian woman came to stay with us, and she tutored me.

And?

She hesitated.

And???

She sighed. I flunked.

How can you flunk catechism?

She refused to answer that.

I mean, didn't you think it might be important later?

I sensed her shaking her head. I told my mentor I was never going to do it.

Do you remember anything at all?

Yes. The logo.

The Transition has a logo?

She nodded. It's on the cover of all the training materials.

Are they available online? Can we order them?

No.

And I don't suppose you have those books anymore.

Why would I have saved them?

Oh, I don't know, I growled. Just in case you might not be able to avoid transitioning, and Nature picks some poor sap to go through it with you!

No, she said in an icy tone. I don't have them.

Super. What's the logo?

It's a geometrical figure. An upside-down cone.

By 'upside-down,' do you mean that the base is at the top and comes together in a point at the bottom?

No, the base is at the bottom.

Then that's a right-side-up cone, I told her.

Not if it's an ice cream cone.

I blinked a few times. You're not into geometry, are you?

No. But I'm very much into ice cream!

I put my head in my hands. Okay... what does the cone represent?

That was one of the questions on the final.

And the answer is?

I don't know. I flunked, remember?

This is a disaster! I thought. You roped me into this and now we're going to fail at it together!

I didn't rope you into this, she replied. We were both roped into it.

I paced again. Do you remember anything else?

There's a game, she said. We have to play it together, and what happens in the game is very important.

I stopped pacing. And I don't suppose you remember the rules.

But she wasn't listening. She was trying to think of what it was called. Duo-something. Duo... She snapped her fingers. Duokinesis! It means 'Double Movement.'

How do we play it?

We move things around together, she replied.

What kinds of things? Are we going to move furniture? And when we get it to one side of the room, are you going to tell me you want it against the other wall instead? Or do we have to chase kids around the house? 'Come back here, you little rascal, it's time for your bath'?

I don't know, she said. I just remember we have to move things around with our minds. And what happens in the game will set the stage for everything else.

So it's really important that we get it right, I replied. And is anyone going to explain the rules in advance?

I've already told you: I don't know.

I rubbed the back of my neck again. Worst case scenario: has anyone ever failed at transitioning?

Oh, yes.

And what happens?

It's horrid. They shrivel up inside. They're never the same again.

There were lots of things I wanted to say, but I just paced.

There's something else, she muttered. I've avoided telling you, but I feel I must warn you.

What could be worse than what you've already told me?

What we're doing right now is nothing compared to what's coming tomorrow. This isn't two-way telepathy we're doing. On the first day of the Transition, it's all one-sided.

What are you talking about?

I can read your thoughts, but you can't read mine. Not yet.

Sure I can! What is it I'm hearing, then?

Only what I want you to hear, she said. I know everything you're thinking, but you can only hear what I share with you. Tomorrow morning that will change. When you wake up, you'll hear everything going on in my head.

As it should be! I said. A level playing field.

Tony, Phrenarian brains are much more complex than human brains. You're going to be overwhelmed, and I don't even know how to prepare

you.

I can handle it.

Fine. You'll see for yourself. I'm going to bed.

One more thing, I said. Don't Phrenarians care about love? You and I don't even know each other, and we're supposed to spend the rest of our lives together! Where does love come into the picture?

Phrenarians don't base their relationships on romantic love, she replied. They make their choice and they stick with it. They usually do start out liking each other, however.

I like you, I admitted. But not that much!

Romantic love fades over time, she explained, but Phrenarian relationships are permanent. It works for them because...

Why are you holding back?

Because you're not going to like the answer.

Which is?

It works for them because they're Phrenarian.

Which I'm not, I thought.

Neither am I.

Why do you deny it? It's what you are.

Not in my heart, she said. Or in my mind. Or in any way that really matters. The few Phrenarians I've met have been almost superhumanly kind and caring and... and that's how their marriage works. They're good people—they're as kind to each other as they are towards everyone else—and in true Phrenarian fashion they work out any differences they may have. She paused. I'm not like that, Tony. Not even a little.

Well, at least it's in your DNA. That gives you a head start on me.

We sat quietly until I understood what she was telling me. So... if you don't consider yourself one of them, and I was born human, and this whole thing depends on us being Phrenarian, then how are we going to make it through the Transition? Especially since you flunked catechism?

She said nothing, and I whispered aloud, "We're not going to make it. We're going to fail the final... and shrivel up inside and..."

There was an awkward silence. I waited, but she didn't answer me. After a moment, she shrugged. Goodnight, Tony.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ronald R. Johnson has a PhD in Philosophy from Saint Louis University and has taught at Xavier University in Cincinnati and Spring Arbor University in Michigan (USA). He also writes serious non-fiction: his articles have been published in *The Congregationalist*, *The Way of St. Francis*, and a few philosophical journals; his books include *Customer Service and the Imitation of Christ* and *What Does God Do from 9 to 5?*

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