Escape From Deep Time

Part I: Crisis

By Gary Raham

Diary Entry: Personal, Neesha Olifee, 5/05/2142

Landra,

Sit down if you're not already because I'm going to fry your circuits with something Jon showed me. Yeah, yeah, I know this is the same brother that put MaxiGoo on my chair in the flight simulator, but I can tell when Mr. Neuron's really rattled. He may be a genius, but he's still got Grand Prairie grass stems poking out of his pants pockets.

I'm creeped out about what he found. Who knows *where* he found it—probably locked up behind a seal someone labeled with a "Keep-Out-This-Means-You" sign. The thing isn't all that spesh technologically—but it was from the capsule, 'cause I've seen other examples of the box it was in—and the box material IS spesh—like God-how-did-they-make-that spesh. Anyway, what plopped out of the box after we broke the seals is a kind of alien version of a holocube—and you wouldn't believe what we saw…

Let me talk us both through this one fact at a time.

Fact: The MacDonnell Range capsule (MRC) is 800 million years old—verified by a bazillion isotope tests since it was found in 2081.

Fact: The contents of that capsule lead astronomers to find the L5 Artifact a few months later: a freaking hollowed out asteroid built by who knows what. The Canadian Coalition classified most of the stuff in the MRC TOP SECRET so that only a handful of scientists actually got to see what was in there—and then only bits and pieces.

Fact: CanCoal nearly bankrupted itself getting an expedition to L5—that sweet little gravitational Earth-moon parking spot. That torqued a lot of people who thought the money should have gone to help all those flood and quake victims, but maybe we can find something that will keep that SinoPact warlord's finger off the destruct button.

Fact: CanCoal searched around like crazy, not just for scientists, but also for science family TEAMS. They sang some psychobabble about how the family dynamic improved productivity, stability, survivability, blah, blah, blah—just vented gas, I'm sure.

Fact: If you want Jon to figure out something, tell him he can't do it or it's a secret.

I don't know exactly what Jon did or even where he did it. I don't want to know. But he brought me this holocube today—and like I say, it seems to be what he says it is: something found INSIDE the MRC 61 years ago.

Landra, the holocube shows Jon and me standing next to that capsule. It looks newer than yesterday's ZipTrain token. There's an empty pit in front of us. Jon is waving to someone in the holocube with his left arm, but instead of a hand on the end of it he's got some sort of mechanical claw.

Jon made a joke about it while my jaw was hanging down like a sandbag. I don't remember the joke, but I caught him later looking at his left hand and flexing his fingers. His face looked the color of a toad's belly.

Something else, Landra: in the holocube I'm as tall as Jon, not a couple of inches shorter. We look OLDER in the cube.

I don't believe in Easter bunnies, tooth fairies, or honest politicians, Landra, not to mention practical time travel—but what's a girl to think? If CanCoal thought there were some kind of time travel device at L5 it would explain the hurry-up. Who knows what somebody might do making dog tracks through the past?

We're docking with the artifact at L5 tomorrow. I'm scared, Landra. I don't mind telling you that. I wish you were here. I wish I had never seen that holocube. Do I tell Mom and Dad? Will it make any difference what I do—or have I already done it in some wacked out alternate future?

How will Jon lose his hand? What happened to that OTHER Jon and me?

First Contact

Log Entry, Personal: Jon Olifee, Landing party 3, 5-06-2142

I have to admit, I would have loved to have been at the other end of a spycam to see how this planetoid/artifact was engineered. It makes our translunar retread shuttle look like a Pre-school extra credit project. The docking port has the circumference of a soccer stadium. It's made of some amber, self-healing polymer that will probably be the techno discovery of the century—if CanCoal geek masters can figure out how to reproduce it.

The shuttle AI visually recorded a micrometeorite impact yesterday. The pit it made sort of bubbled and blistered like warm bread dough and then smoothed out within an hour, eventually turning back into the hardened stuff that's been breaking all our drill tips. Most of the project engineers either got an immediate case of pop eye, droop jaw or both, or began babbling and gesturing to the closest geek master that could still talk.

And speaking of spycams, I managed to fog the lenses of CanCoal's FlyEyes while sis and I were "playing" in free fall. Although I hate playing the dud, adults pay a lot less attention when you look like a doofus with polyfoam between your ears. I'd like a few minutes to react to whatever we find behind this docking port before the super duds in command central can do something too stupid.

I figure Mom and Dad will have that control pad puzzle figured out before long. Their neurons still seem to fire pretty fast for 30 somethings. I bet with all those right triangles in the panel there will be some Fibonacci series that will open the port. It seems like someone—or something—with pretty high-powered neurons of their own are testing our smarts. They must not want any monkeys leaving banana peels on their carpets.

I have to say, this refurbished asteroid is a piece of work. It's a rough cylinder about 1,600 meters long by 540 meters in diameter—about as big as the rock that turned off the lights for the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. But its mass is way too light—unless about 80 percent of it is hollowed out. And there're some odd gravitational patterns nobody has figured out—which makes me think about a certain holocube that I know about and the things it implies. And the more I look at this left hand of mine, the more I'm getting attached to it—and the more I want to stay attached to it!

More later. I think we just found the door chime to this place. Thank God my space suit is equipped with a toilet.

Sentient Life Form Observatory, Reference 365.32.791

"The organics have arrived, Prime, ahead of projections. What should we do now?" the OMC5 asked. Indicator lights blinked across the mech's display panel and the whir of its servos stopped as it came to rest before Caretaker Prime, First Executive Post Organic of the Sentient Life Form Observatory, Planetary System 3054, Tenori Catalog 3A135.

Prime didn't respond immediately, but took a moment to scan the rocky blue planet in all the frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum, as he had done so many times over the billennia. He started with the short frequencies; whose energies threatened to turn his sensors to slag, then worked his way into the long reds and longer still infrareds. The planet glowed there with a fever. Its biosphere had reached a rare and exotic state rarely achieved in this universe. It had produced a self-aware species. Of course, that was why it was, most likely, doomed…unless he and the other Caretakers could help—as his long dead makers, the Tenori, had planned.

Finally, Prime said "Monitor the main contingent that docked aft of the engines. Seal sensitive areas without revealing your presence. I will personally check on the smaller group trying to dock near the wormhole interface. They could cause the most unintentional harm," he added, accessing his reference files headed 'Apparently illogical and/or inconsistent behavior among intelligent organic life forms, I-1A.'

"Current behavior models for this species project that the unstable political activities planetside could lead to erratic and potentially lethal behavior," said the OMC5.

"I'm aware of that," said Prime. "We'll continue with Scenario Alpha until I direct otherwise." Caretaker Prime wished his old organic Tenori mentor were still alive to back him up on that decision, but he had to rely on the last simulation created before he had died. And that Hapsut sim had told him to trust his own observations and subconscious urgings, so he would. As the oldest and most complex Post Organic, he had far more interconnections in his neural matrix than any C5. He would see how the organics reacted when they discovered they were not the only lights in the "cogniverse." He would see how they treated their intellectual peers. That would tell him something about their odds of accepting help and rising above and surviving their organic limitations and primate politics.

OMC5 broke contact with him and resumed managing operations with his staff. Prime observed the vessel of the small party he had assigned to himself as they attempted to dock with the old Tenori living habitat.

Prime had many memories associated with that particular area. He had been built and activated there 803,253,015 local solar revolutions ago. Prime remembered his first glimmer of self awareness looking at an image of a much younger world through the viewing terminal in Hapsut's private chamber—a world with more ice than liquid water, but one that harbored that peculiar organic complexity called life. From what Prime had seen to that point, life usually consisted of green slime suspended in tepid water.

"See that beautiful new world, my young Prime?" Hapsut had said. "It will be your job to watch over it when I'm gone. It reminds me of home. It would be a travesty to lose this world, too." Hapsut had whistled softly then, partly as a result of his terminal illness, but partly it was a behavior Prime had learned to tag with the term "resignation"—a word describing an emotional state Prime could identify but not clearly translate into post organic terms. At that point, he knew nothing about the tortuous path life has to take in order to progress from slime to something one can talk to. He knew nothing about the many paths to extinction that all life forms traveled.

"I had so hoped I would live long enough to speak to another intelligence before I died, Prime, but that will not happen," continued Hapsut. "Enjoy the experience in my place, if you can. Life is so rare in this old universe and intelligent life is a rare jewel indeed."

Prime remembered his puzzlement at that conversation. He had been given a directive to "watch over" a world—and by extension its complement of organic life—with an implication to protect it without gross intervention—that much was clear, but he wasn't sure how he would "enjoy" the process any more than he could enjoy gas expanding—although that can sometimes be interesting. In fact, "enjoyment" seemed like one of those organic responses to stimulation foreign to his own post-organic nature. Prime had expected the directive to become clear eventually. Perhaps it still would.

Prime had understood the metaphor of intelligent life being a rare jewel much better after hundreds of millions of years of observation. At one point seventy million years ago, after eons of watching various organic life forms bumble into more and more complex configurations in response to the energetic thrashings of the planet, Prime had

thought some species of dinosaur—perhaps a Troodon—would become the self-aware ambassador Hapsut had longed for. By that time Prime was beginning to look forward to another conversation with an organic life form. While such exchanges sometimes waned in logical consistency they often waxed in novelty, and now and then provided a rare insight of one sort or another.

Unfortunately, an asteroid unexpectedly snuffed that prospect during a unique combination of events Prime would rather forget. Much later, he thought a conversation with a dolphin or whale might develop, but aquatic forms rarely made the full transition to sentience. Here, apes confiscated that particular niche in the last few million years. Prime had been surprised at that. He had assumed—based on the path Tenori evolution had taken—that an avian-like intelligence would prevail. He could easily imagine that even Hapsut would have blinked slowly at such news and begun to preen himself as he usually did on those rare occasions when he had revealed nervous excitement.

Caretaker Prime watched through the monitors at the docking port as four primates exited their rather crude craft in inflated body coverings of some kind. There appeared to be two adults and two juveniles. Why would juveniles be present? Prime searched his scenario variation templates. Most models predicted some mixture of adult males and females exploring new and potentially dangerous territory, with male behavior dominant. As he watched the two juveniles bouncing off the walls with all four limbs akimbo in the low gravitational field of the docking area, he rapidly scanned the 1% of scenarios involving human children. Meanwhile, the two adults had gained access to the main corridor and decoded the first set of algorithms to the archives and the nearby wormhole gateway. Prime began moving to the elevator in case he had to physically

intervene should they set off defensive drones not programmed for much deliberation before they acted.

After millennia of routine and rather predictable activity, Prime found that he had to engage banks of long unused neural capacity. Absently, he wondered if he might be "enjoying himself."