

# One

The cold breeze didn't interfere with Favuxo's concentration, since he didn't have a physical form as he looked up into Cadopek's dark night sky. He was concentrating on something so small and distant as to be almost invisible. He was too far away from it for any of its features to be distinguishable, though his distance was his own choice.

Favuxo knew almost everything about the universe which shone down from the sky above him. After the experience he'd accumulated in his nearly ten billion years of life, and with telepathic access to all of the combined knowledge of his species, he could give a detailed description of each of the star systems. Due to his vast knowledge, it had been an enormous number of years since he'd last spent time gazing upward. He considered it inexcusably wasteful to stare into something he already knew.

The point of light in the sky on which Favuxo had locked his gaze at that moment was the one that he knew the least about, since it had existed for only fifty years. The brilliant sparkle was the reflection of sunlight off of a space station. With a thought, Favuxo placed himself inside the station. As usual, he chose to be an observer rather than generate a physical form for himself.

The favuxian examined his new surroundings carefully, cataloging the locations of items in his mind even though he knew the basic details of the station from the experiences of other members of his species. He noted the table and chairs in what was apparently a meeting room. He noted the smooth finish of the curved walls, indicative of extravagance in cadopeken culture. Looking out a window to his left he noted a cadopeken space ship, approximately three hundred meters in length. This was what he intended to examine all along, though he'd busied himself with observing other items first. He'd chosen to make this visit because he knew the ship was about to begin a one hundred and fifty year journey, with the destination of that journey being the planet Earth.

Distracted and disturbed, Favuxo's gaze slid slowly away from the spacecraft and out towards the void of deep space. His mind retracted into itself while he looked out into the infinite expanse. He thought that perhaps, if he looked far enough out, he might more clearly see himself reflected.

A large crowd had gathered in the room behind Favuxo, bringing him out of his meditation. A single cadopeken sat down at a table in front of the crowd. Favuxo recognized the cadopeken as Rezoaniel, the world government's leader. Rezoaniel touched a key on a small pad in front of him, which produced a low buzzing sound to inform the crowd that he was about to speak. Along with the hundreds of cadopekens around him, Favuxo listened intently.

"I am here at this great occasion to make a promise," Rezoaniel began, his voice indicating a guarded enthusiasm. "Almost everyone agrees that this mission will be the greatest accomplishment of Cadopek to date. For that reason, we've gone over every detail of the voyage countless times. I am here today to promise the people of Cadopek that if there is intelligent life on the planet, as evidence suggests, then we *will* discover it." He paused briefly to suggest a

slight change in subject. "As you're all aware, this crew is making a great sacrifice in order to make this long journey for us. Although they will not age significantly, because of their near-light speed, everything they know will be three hundred years past upon their return. Few of their loved ones will be alive." Rezoaniel looked up from the data pad that he had been reading, and surveyed the crowd. His last comment had drawn many curious expressions.

"I can tell that many of you have noticed that I said that few of us will remain alive," he continued, "rather than none of us. It is my pleasure to take this momentous occasion and add to it another dimension. Earlier today, I received the final report confirming that the so-called 'miracle fluid' is entirely safe, and will be released to the public immediately." These words brought about an anxious stirring and a noticeable rise in the noise level of the cavernous room. "Upon hearing the news," Rezoaniel resumed, "I was as excited as you now are. Immediately I ordered that eight hundred units of the fluid be placed on my shuttle so that I might bring it here with me. It is my pleasure to present this quantity to our mission leader."

Several cadopekens emerged from the back of the room and placed a large box on the table. Another, who Favuxo assumed to be the mission leader, came forward to claim the box. "I am honored to accept this gift on behalf of the crew," he said. "However, we will not need nearly this much."

Rezoaniel's face formed an amused expression that one could best describe as a smile. "You are to save this until you reach the destination planet, and then you are to give what you do not need for yourselves to the alien species on behalf of Cadopek. We hope that this gift will help our first contact with these life forms, which are undoubtedly very different from ourselves, go more smoothly. One should never hesitate to make a gesture of good will when first contacting strange creatures." Rezoaniel paused for a moment, and then concluded his speech. "May the future be a place where all intelligent creatures share their technology and their medicine in peaceful cooperation." From the crowd came sounds roughly equivalent to applause.

Consulting the favuxian collective consciousness, Favuxo learned that the "miracle fluid" would enable any living being to change into a cloud of living and thinking energy. Although the transformed beings could maintain their energy state for periods of only a day or two, and would still require food and water, most experts expected the invention to more than double the cadopeken life span. It would greatly reduce the stress on both the body and the mind.

As it viewed the momentous occasion taking place high above the surface of Cadopek, Favuxo's mind was in a state of severe stress. Although Favuxo was trying desperately to concentrate on the proceedings, he found his mind wandering again and again to another gathering -- the meeting of the favuxian species that was about to take place in an uninhabited area of the planet. His fellow favuxians were to finalize preparations for his Inabilin.

At the appointed time, Favuxo placed himself at the location the Elder had chosen as the meeting place. Loud, indistinguishable murmuring filled the room. Hundreds of favuxians, all in cadopeken forms, moved slowly about in the confining space attempting not to bump into one another. When the Elder spoke, all sound and movement ceased at once.

"This final pre Inabilin meeting now begins." The Elder paused for a brief moment, surveying the room with one of his eyes. "We are here, of course, because Favuxo has chosen to become a cadopeken. First, we must complete preparations for the ceremony. Has the committee chosen a city?"

A favuxian somewhere deep in the crowd spoke: "Yes, Elder. Favuxo will live his mortal life in Denocal."

"Excellent. Has the information collection machine been activated?"

"Yes Elder," a different favuxian responded. "It has been set to record the next century and a half. We are therefore prepared to obey the regulation, by staying away from Cadopek until Favuxo has concluded his voyage."

The Elder' s central eye raised itself up and swiveled about three hundred and sixty degrees, as though the Elder believed that an object in the room might remind him of something that he had forgotten. "Very well. I will proceed with the formalities. Favuxo, do you formally agree that the preparation for your Inabilin has been adequate so that the favuxian species will be able to perform it properly for you?"

"Yes." Nothing more than that single word was expected, and Favuxo had nothing else to provide.

The Elder nodded slightly in approval. "Do you also formally reaffirm your commitment to the contract that you, like every other favuxian, agreed to shortly after creation -- stating that you will undergo the Inabilin at the conclusion of the ten billionth year of your life, be transformed by it into a mortal, live a normal mortal life span, and then become dead?"

Favuxo paused, the uneasiness he'd been feeling before now growing within him. He opened his mouth for a moment as though he were about to speak, then closed it. Finally he opened it again and gave the only response he knew how to give: "Yes."

A disturbed expression came over the Elder' s face as he watched Favuxo. For a few moments, three of his eyes bored into Favuxo' s, but then they abruptly turned away and the Elder spoke in another direction. "Fringend, you are the one assigned to watch over Favuxo until the Inabilin." Fringend gave a small nod to acknowledge his responsibility. The Elder turned back towards Favuxo. "Finally, before concluding this meeting and allowing us to all get back to our separate tasks, I ask Favuxo to share with us any thoughts he may have about this great occasion."

"It has occurred to me," he began, "that someone from a lower species might see this meeting as preparation for my funeral ceremony. It speaks highly of our way of life and our commitment to order that we can accept death as the meaningful and positive thing that it is. Even here we let no signs of chaos intrude." The uneasiness within him seeped out through his words, though he intended them to please the Elder.

Tension rose in the room, invisibly and imperceptibly. Only the Elder and Favuxo knew what was behind the words. "Quite true," the Elder responded. "your words are wise. This

gathering is now concluded. All of us will meet here once more, one hundred and fifty years from now, when Favuxo will see the Inabilin transform him into a mortal... into a cadopeken. Meanwhile Favuxo will make his voyage, briefly visiting every planet on which he has spent a significant length of time. As we all know so well, one must give life a final inspection before departing, in order to reassure one' s self that one has lived life to the fullest."

## Two

Given the number of planets he'd deemed significant enough to revisit, Favuxo calculated that he could spend just under six hours on each planet. With this in mind he set out to fulfill his final pre Inabilin obligation.

Each moment passed so slowly that Favuxo came to feel he would never be able to reach the end of his hundred and fifty year journey. He found that he was unsure exactly what it was that he was expected to be observing. He felt a sense of loss as he saw each planet for the last time, but not loss in the sense of missing the planet... the loss he felt was the loss of his opportunity to find the unknown something he sought which he felt that planet might have been able to tell him if only he knew how to listen.

One hundred planets had passed before him when Favuxo realized that he found his journey not only boring, but also entirely pointless. Looking around, Favuxo saw a planet that he had visited slightly more than a billion years earlier. The beings scurrying about the city were the descendants of the single cell life forms he had observed then. Despite this, he found that he did not care about their lives. He felt no deeply binding connection between himself and these people. What he sought had nothing to do with them, he was sure.

Etched into his memory was what the Elder had so many times recited to favuxians in his situation: "One must give life a final inspection before departing," the Elder would say, "in order to reassure one' s self that one has lived life to the fullest." Favuxo' s journey was not reassuring him of the grandeur of his life, but rather was causing him to experience a sense of regret. Surveying the city around him, Favuxo wondered if his life had been no more than a series of observations. He wondered if he himself was no more than a collection of facts.

Favuxo paused and contemplated a particular thought which had been bothering him, a question he was unable to answer. He knew how the Elder created him out of the nothingness, and he knew that after ten billion years he was to be returned to it. His unanswered question was simple, and he spoke it aloud: "What do I gain from the long wait?"

For many years the thought that his life was without a true and guiding purpose had been buried deep in Favuxo's mind. Only the daily rigors of collecting knowledge for the benefit of the favuxian species had separated him from such thoughts. He'd pushed them out of his way by telling himself that favuxian meaning is inherent in the collection of knowledge. He told himself, as so many others had told him, that knowledge is by its very nature desirable... knowledge compels its own worth. Now Favuxo asked himself how or why this can be true, and if the collection of knowledge might not be such a meaningful activity as he'd thought.

Hundreds of favuxian voices echoed inside of Favuxo' s mind. They repeated their message to him over and over again: "The Elder gives meaning to whatever he wishes. He has deemed knowledge as the favuxian goal. His wisdom is unquestionable." The explanation no longer satisfied Favuxo.

Frustrated, Favuxo projected a strong thought outward, towards the rest of his species: "What is the meaning of the Elder, and what is it about his nature that makes it wrong to question him?"

Fringend, the favuxian to whom the Elder had designated the responsibility of watching over Favuxo until the Inabilin, halted the question before it could reach any others. He joined Favuxo, in physical form, on the planet that he was observing. "It seems that everyone asks the same sort of questions as he approaches the Inabilin. No one ever seems to realize what dangerous questions they are to ask."

Fringend' sudden appearance startled Favuxo, as he had forgotten that someone was observing him. He collected himself quickly, and responded. "Isn't it more dangerous to live a lie?"

Standing motionless a few feet above the ground, Fringend stared curiously down at Favuxo. "Why do you think the inferior life forms came into existence, when perfection had already been achieved?"

Not expecting the question, Favuxo tried to remember what the Elder had told him on the subject. "It has always been the way of things, to move away from the perfect and towards the chaos that will culminate with the end of this universe -- and the end of all favuxian life. You know this as well as I do."

"Indeed I do. The Elder was the first, and so the most perfect. He arranged matters so that every favuxian has a purpose, as a small but significant part of a greater continuum. He is that continuum. We cannot entirely rid ourselves of chaos, but the Elder uses the Inabilin to put the chaos to good use. Through the Inabilin, the Elder uses mortal life to declare the meaningfulness of favuxian life. The gift of the Inabilin is freedom from time, and thus from the imperfections associated with time." Fringend paused. He knew Favuxo had already heard talks very similar to this one, and had even given such talks to other favuxians, but he felt it his duty to remind Favuxo by repeating it at this difficult time. And yet he wished to be brief, for he didn't consider himself up to the task of defending it as well as the Elder might. After a few moments of consideration he continued. "For a life to be meaningful, it of course must have a meaningful conclusion. The Elder can arrange this because he is a point unto himself... he is a meaning no one can question, from which there is no outside. Anyone who tries to question this does not understand it."

Fringend disappeared, leaving Favuxo again alone with his thoughts. Favuxo continued to observe various planets, indifferent to what he saw. As the planets and the years paraded by, Favuxo wondered if he had long ago sealed his fate, via the very lack of realization that he was sealing it.

# Three

One hundred and forty nine years and eight months after his journey had begun, Favuxo watched as the cadopeken space ship set down on the planet Earth. He'd chosen to make Earth the last stop of his journey in order to observe the event.

A large flat grassy area surrounded the ship. It was not a runway or landing platform, but served just as well as one. The cadopeken crew flowed out into the bright sunlight, following their mission leader. A large crowd of humans headed by sixty world leaders was there to greet the cadopekens.

The cadopeken leader stepped out in front of the crowd and held above his head a vial of the red fluid that Rezoaniel had presented to him before their journey had begun. While Favuxo and the Earth crowd watched curiously, the cadopeken injected a small amount of the substance into his bloodstream.

The body of the cadopeken leader collapsed inward upon itself. The implosion continued until the cadopeken's entire physical form had condensed into a ball the size of an atom, then the matter then exploded outward ten feet. Several cadopekens were knocked to the ground by the minor shockwave produced by the transformation. Their leader was then a stable cloud of energy with small amounts of visible matter still clinging to it through some unknown force. The bits of matter surrounded the area where the cadopeken leader's body had been, illuminating the newly creating being with a shimmering yellowish cloud.

For a few brief moments, thirty thousand human and cadopeken faces froze in identical expressions of fear and disbelief. Quickly, however, the majority of the humans began to back away from the energy cloud that was the cadopeken leader. Although a few individuals pushed forward to get a better look at the being, the giant mass of bodies withdrew by a distance of about twenty meters, as though anticipating some sort of danger.

A cadopeken crew member entered the ship and reemerged with a completely filled vial of the fluid. He handed it and a syringe to the nearest Earth representative. The woman held the vial high above her head, perhaps to let those nearby see it better. The material splintered the bright sunlight, creating a rainbow of colors on the woman's forehead. She lowered the vial to eye level, then for several moments stared into it. To Favuxo it looked as though she were deep in thought. To the humans it must have looked like she were holding a bomb, considering the clearance they began to give her as they recognized the look in her eyes. After a few moments, she poured a small amount of the fluid into the syringe as she had seen the cadopeken do, and quickly injected the fluid into her bloodstream. Within seconds, the woman transformed into a brilliantly sparkling energy cloud, yellowish in color, identical to that of the cadopeken leader.

Changing back into human form, the woman encouraged others to make use of the fluid. The vast majority had no interest, but a minority found themselves irresistibly drawn towards the opportunity to gain the mysterious power.

The events he had witnessed so far intrigued Favuxo, yet his vast experience told him that little else of interest was likely to happen for a while. In every first contact where he'd been present, or which he'd learned about from the collective consciousness, the first few days consisted of numerous failed attempts at communication. It was always later that major public unrest and occasional violent protests arose. It was the potential chaos that interested Favuxo, not the two equally inept non-telepathic species attempting to speak to each other.

Favuxo placed himself in an unoccupied hotel room not far away from the scene. Changing into a physical form for the first time in a long while, he found the bed to be quite comfortable. A television sat on a small shelf nearby, and he turned it on to the news. In order to judge how the humans would receive the cadopekens long term, he wanted to use the television to gauge the general reaction of the population to their arrival.

Favuxo was surprised to find that the situation intrigued him. He supposed that his interest stemmed mainly from the fact that he was soon to become a cadopeken, and what he was watching was sure to become an immortal part of cadopeken history. Also, in his existence Favuxo had been present at only seventy-nine first contacts. The knowledge that he carried of all the others at which favuxians had been present served as a poor substitute for experiencing the situations in person.

Favuxo thought for a few moments about the emotions he was experiencing, and then decided that he was not prepared to deal with such emotional attachment at that moment. He chose to discard it. He pushed it out of his mind.

On the television screen an old, formally dressed man with pale pink skin shuffled a few papers and then spoke. Favuxo listened intently.

"Everyone knows of the alien flying saucers that many people claim have been visiting Earth for nearly a century," the man began. "The top story today is the first officially confirmed contact of humanity with an alien species. People at the scene are still trying to figure out exactly what has transpired. Eyewitnesses report that after the aliens came out of their space ship, one of them held up a vial of blood colored fluid to the crowd, injected itself with it, and then transformed into a yellowish cloud."

The man paused for a moment, perhaps replaying in his own mind what he had said. He then continued: "We will, of course, soon have pictures and live video coverage to confirm all of this, so please stay tuned. Sources also say that aliens brought another vial out of the ship and gave it to the Premier of Syria. She injected herself with the substance, turned into an energy cloud being, then reverted to her normal human form and encouraged others to use it. A significant number have done so, as aliens brought a large quantity out of their ship. Although no official count has been taken as of yet, it is estimated that about nine hundred and fifty of the thirty thousand people in the crowd now have the ability to turn themselves into yellowish clouds of energy..." The voice trailed off. The expression on the face of the news anchor, although still stoic, betrayed that he felt he was acting out a part in an Orson Welles production of *The War of the Worlds*.

Favuxo changed the channel, finding a more up to date report. He found a channel which had a reporter at the scene, and Favuxo noticed something going on behind the reporter. The man seemed to be explaining the situation.

"- of the alien species has hurled a deadly ball of energy into the crowd after a human fired a gunshot at the alien. Nine people have died as a result of the alien' s blast, and twelve people are seriously wounded. The human who fired the shot is now in police custody, as she was not one of those harmed." The reporter paused and a man with shoulder length blond hair joined him. His eyes were a solid dark blue, and his face showed the beginning signs of middle age.

"Joining me now is one of the leading military scientists of the United States of America, Dr. Leonard L. Gonelo. Doctor, how can the police protect the citizens of San Carlos? Obviously, it' ll be hard for authorities to detain a being capable of killing large groups of people with a single thought."

Dr. Gonelo paused and tilted his head slightly upward before speaking, as though hoping to defer the question to God. "Can' t lock up something that can go through walls. That' ll mean we' vgotta kill it. It looks as if our guns aren' workin' on it, since the bullet fired a few minutes ago didn' t seem to hurt the thing. Luckily, I think a magnet of the right type could interfere with the energy patterns enough so it won' t be able to go back again into the energy state whereby thoughts can happen. I' vgotta talk to some other people about it, but it oughta be possible. If everybody works together really hard, we can make some kinda magnetized bullets that we could shoot outta guns. ' Course, if the rest of those things get dangerous, I really got no idea how much good we can do."

Favuxo turned off the television and went back to the scene, disturbed that he'd miscalculated. He was no longer with a physical form.

Oriented around the approximate center of the energy cloud that was the cadopeken leader, Favuxo surveyed the crowd. The situation had calmed somewhat, in the sense that the violence had been transformed into verbal warfare. Despite the fact that they played no role in the deaths, some of the spectators were voicing their opinion that the humans who could now become energy beings at any time were no longer truly humans.

A human energy being, in physical form at that moment, screamed a conflicting opinion: "You have no right to treat us this way just because we used the fluid. There isn' t anything evil about being able to change to energy!"

One of the people in the crowd let out a desperate, almost insane cry: "The aliens have taken over their bodies! Those may be human bodies at the moment, but even when they aren' t in energy form, their souls are alien!"

Another person quickly joined in. "We' ll never let them take over the world! They won' t escape here alive, will they?!" The woman paused for a moment, glancing at the faces of the people around her. "Will they??!!!"

Favuxo doubted that anything interesting could come out of this trading of insults, but he soon found himself to be once again in error when several humans changed into energy form and hurled blasts of energy at their challengers. The blasts caught a number bystanders as well, killing them instantly.

The guilty energy beings left the scene quickly. Most of the remaining energy humans left with them. Favuxo speculated they were fearing that people would blame them for what the others had done.

In an attempt to satisfy his ever increasing curiosity, Favuxo placed himself back in the hotel room. It was no longer unoccupied, so he quickly chose a room in another area of the city.

The new room was not as luxurious as the first, but Favuxo cared only that it had a television. As he turned it on, a paper taped to the top of it caught Favuxo's eye. It read: "Property of the Blue Sky Motel -- do not remove under penalty of death".

Favuxo discovered that reporters were still going over the recent events and trying to get an up to date death count. Finally, after going through the entire dial, he found a channel on which it seemed that a woman was about to conduct an interview. The interviewee was a man somewhere about the age of forty. He was visibly nervous, with his hands clenched and his body rocking slowly from one side to the other. The interviewer, in contrast, had an aura of calm professionalism about herself. She turned to face the camera and began to speak.

"I have with me now the police chief of San Carlos, Alfred Boeing. Chief, what are you doing to protect the citizens of San Carlos from the energy creatures already in their midst?"

After a few moments of nervous silence, Boeing responded: "I've decided that as soon as possible, every person in this city will be issued a gun and twenty of those magnet bullets Dr. Gonelo mentioned. Nothin' be allowed in or out of the city until all of those creatures are neutralized."

"Chief, is it absolutely necessary to use guns?"

"Miss, guns have combated crime for hundreds of years. Doesn't it make sense to use the most experienced and effective tool at our disposal? What'd you got in mind? You think we should try throwing these magnetic things at them and hope they don't get outta the way and blast us?!!!"

The reporter paused, reformulating her strategy. "You said everyone gets a gun. Does that include children?"

"It's especially important for children to be able to protect themselves. People just have got to remember that one of those monsters can come in through the wall of a house and get off an energy blast at a child way before any adult can get into the room."

The reporter asked no more questions, perhaps deciding that the police chief was providing an unquestionably positive service.

Favuxo, having heard all that he wanted to hear, turned off the television and stopped for a moment to rest. He remembered the last time he'd rested. It'd been almost a millennium since then. It'd been less than one ten millionth of his life.

## Four

Favuxo's life had been mostly a series of observations made for the benefit of the favuxian collective consciousness. In his billions of years of existence, he had considered only a very small number of the situations that he had come across to be truly intriguing. One such situation had been two million millennia ago, when he had witnessed the sudden and mysterious transformation of a galaxy into an intelligent life form. Another was what he was busily observing on Earth. He'd conceded that he could not deny his interest. It struck him as only natural that what happened to the cadopekens would interest him, since they were the species he would soon join; yet, for some reason he also found it interesting to ponder how the humans would deal with a danger for which they were so completely unprepared. Favuxo thought that the fact that the energy beings didn't intend to be a danger ought to complicate matters even more, although he doubted that it would for the humans.

Having in his mind all of the knowledge which favuxians had accumulated about them, Favuxo thought of himself as quite an expert on humans. He thought that he could understand a human better than a human could. He concluded that when faced with any totally new experience, most humans would try to ignore it. If that were not possible, they would attack it. Only a very few would rush to embrace it. Using this assumption, Favuxo decided that even if cadopeken science had never developed the red fluid, the cadopekens would still have been too much of a threat to the routine for the humans to allow them to live. All that remained, according to his deductions, was for each energy being to make an appearance somewhere in the city and be killed by whoever would be around. He saw very little possibility of anything else occurring, and calculated that the crisis would be over within a few days.

Favuxo decided that enough time had gone by that the humans surely would have distributed the guns and bullets. Prepared to observe his prediction coming true, and yet somewhere in the back of his mind expecting the unexpected, he oriented himself around the middle of a busy street. Several cars passed through him, then the traffic ground to a halt.

The evening sun blazed just above the horizon, casting a multitude of colors across the sky. A blinding glint of sunlight reflected off of each car as it moved slowly past. Behind, on the sidewalk, pedestrians shielded their eyes with their hands. They looked not only ahead of them, but periodically in all directions. Favuxo could recognize both fear and anticipation in their faces.

Favuxo had come to view this scene with no reason to expect anything interesting would occur, and yet he felt something would. In his ten billion years he'd become proficient at anticipating the actions of life forms, and something deep within him told him that the humans were at a point of critical stress and that this was a likely juncture.

For a while more interested in his own thoughts than in the world around him, Favuxo refocused himself on the situation when an energy being came out through the wall of a nearby building. It moved into the street, through several cars. Pedestrians and motorists alike were shouting and reaching for their weapons. Dozens ejected their deadly cargo at the same moment, the bullets convening upon the energy being in the middle of the street and dissipating the being into the air, unto nothing. The human life, or perhaps cadopeken life, was destroyed instantly.

The bullets continued on their various trajectories, embedding themselves deep into whatever was in their way. Screams filled the crisp evening air, as the bullets hit a dozen pedestrians on each side of the street, as well as several motorists.

Favuxo watched for a while, at once fascinated and terrified. He did not fully understand why, but he found in himself a strong desire to leave the place, to go far away from the Earth and its inhabitants. Perhaps, he thought, these deaths frightened him because in the faces of the dying beings he saw reflected his own fears of the Inabilin.

His journey complete, and the Inabilin being less than a month away, favuxians (including Favuxo himself) were again allowed to visit Cadopek. Focusing his mind on preparing for the Inabilin, Favuxo placed himself inside the cadopeken capital city.

## Five

The sight astonished Favuxo. The landscape around him bore no resemblance to the thriving capital city of his memory. Rubble covered the soil where the towering cone of commerce had once been. The giant central world government building was reduced to scraps of scattered metal. If he'd not recognized some of the pieces of the rubble, Favuxo would have suspected that he'd placed himself on the wrong planet. Looking outward toward the horizon he took in the desolate expanse, apparently devoid of complex life.

Cadopeken remains littered the soil around him, only partially covered by dirt and debris. Scattered among the cadopeken skeletons were those of other animals, all apparently having died at approximately the same time. The lifeless world's silence brought about an emotion in Favuxo stronger than he had ever experienced.

Once the initial shock began to wear off and he could think more clearly, Favuxo went in search of the machine which had been set up to provide him with up to date knowledge of his chosen species. From the machine he would learn what apocalyptic fate had engulfed the planet.

The dry, calm data on the screen told the story. By one hundred and forty nine years before Favuxo had discovered the destruction, about half of the cadopekens had become energy beings. They'd been unable to control themselves, and without truly intending to do so had killed millions with their energy blasts. The non energy cadopekens saw no choice but to destroy them. According to the machine's readout, the cadopekens so destroyed the planet with their energy disrupting weapons that an irreversible process was started which brought about a climate change

destroying not only what was left of the cadopeken species, but also destroying almost all other life on the planet.

Favuxo looked up for a moment, out at the sea of dirt and rubble and bones. The shortsightedness of the decaying cadopekens strewn about him had transformed the world around him, which had once teemed with life, into an ocean of death. He found that, however illogical the thought might be, he wished that he could go back in time to die with those about him.

As it seemed to have become his worst enemy, Favuxo turned his thoughts to the concept of time. He reflected on what he knew of it with the desperate irrational hope that he might find some way to defeat it.

Even favuxians knew nothing of how to control time. From the deficiency stemmed the favuxian fear of death, as favuxians generally believed that time would come to an end (approach an end, as an end could not exist without time) in the same way as, looking back, it began (or approached a beginning). The Inabilin provided a favuxian with the greatest possible measure of control, by establishing a known end. Fate had abruptly ripped the slight comfort of the strict ritual away from Favuxo. What remained of the calm his billions of years of preparation had given him disappeared, replaced by the depressing realization that he too was subject to the cruelly unpredictable nature of the universe. He was not the manipulator of the universe, nor was he a detached observer of the universe... he was reminded now that he an object within the universe whose fate would be determined by that context which he could never step outside of.

The whole of the favuxian collective consciousness took note of the thoughts that they were receiving from Favuxo, and called an immediate meeting at Favux. More precisely, the meeting was at the location where that quasar had been billions upon billions of years before... where at the time of this meeting there was nothing at all. The Elder set up a grand meeting room on the favuxian mental plane, however, with room enough for every living favuxian. The Elder telepathically addressed the invisible crowd.

"Favuxo choose to undergo the Inabilin on the planet Cadopek. We must now alter this plan, since every member of the species he planned to join on the planet has perished. Due to the close proximity to the scheduled time of the Inabilin, we must consider all aspects of the situation carefully to decide if it would be proper to award Favuxo a million year extension of life in order to decide upon a new species."

The collective consciousness paused in deep thought. Favuxo found himself cut off -- the Elder had deemed his thoughts on the matter to be unimportant. He could not suppress his panic. For what seemed to him like an eternity, he waited in this panicked state to hear what was to become of him.

After several seconds the Elder reincorporated Favuxo, and transmitted to him the will of the species: "There is agreement. Like all favuxians, Favuxo pledged shortly after his creation that he would undergo the Inabilin at the conclusion of his ten billionth year of life. The contract is inflexible, whatever the circumstances. Order must be maintained no matter the cost to the individual. The Inabilin is the one thing in this universe that is a constant, the one thing that is forever binding and unquestionably meaningful. To delay the Inabilin would call into question its

validity, and through that spread uncertainty into all aspects of favuxian life. We cannot risk allowing the eighteen billion year old foundation of this society to crumble because of such a trivial matter as this."

"But, Elder," Favuxo interrupted, "I cannot choose another species so quickly!"

The mind of the Elder stared at him curiously for a moment, as though trying to grasp how Favuxo could have failed to understand the situation. "You will not choose another species. You will become a cadopeken on the planet Earth, where some still remain alive."

Fringend (the favuxian who had all along been observing Favuxo) interrupted. "Elder, there are too few cadopekens on Earth. It will be impossible for him to blend in. They will know that he is not one of them." Fringend paused, altering his strategy. "As well, you have said many times that you wish to give every opportunity to live a mortal life span of normal length, and it appears that the humans will kill off the last of the cadopekens very soon."

The Elder considered the predicament carefully, and then announced his verdict to Favuxo. "Since it will be more in keeping with the ideals of the Inabilin, by allowing you to live a natural life span and be accepted as a member of the species, you will become a human."

The imaginary meeting room vanished as quickly as it had appeared, with all of its former occupants going back to their respective tasks in different parts of the universe. Favuxo found himself entirely alone, ignored. He understood that the decision was final, and that preparation for the Inabilin would begin immediately on Earth.

It was on this day that, after ten billion years, Favuxo first truly understood that the objective of the Inabilin was simply to kill him. Never before had he allowed himself to think of it in quite that way. This new realization was unsettling to him. He could not understand how the mountain of calm and certainty that he had built up pebble after pebble over ten billion years could have disappeared in an instant. He found that he had devoted his life to the planning of his death, only to have even that planning proven useless.

Favuxo knew that it would be best to try to stop thinking. He knew that all the choices in his life had been made already, that everything remaining for him to do would be required of him. During the days remaining until the Inabilin, he knew that he should spend his time on Earth trying to discover something interesting that he could do with his short time as a human.

Upon returning to Earth, Favuxo learned that the energy beings and the guns intended for use against them were wreaking havoc around the world. Favuxo had expected the humans to form large search parties to comb every square inch of the planet to exterminate their enemies. Instead, most human beings sat in front of their television sets with unwaveringly calm and vacant expressions. He wondered if becoming a human would help him to understand that at all.

Observing the situation, Favuxo wondered if what had occurred on Cadopek had been similar. It was still incomprehensible to him that a species he had so respected could have done such a thing to itself, but he could imagine what things might be like on Earth if instead of about a thousand of them there were millions of energy beings, as there had been on Cadopek.

Favuxo passed a week wandering the Earth aimlessly, without a physical form. He planed to enjoy his formless existence until the last moment, when it would finally be ripped away from him. The fateful moment was moving ever closer, and there was nothing Favuxo could do to get away. Despite his ten billion years of preparation, he found himself to be unready. He found himself counting off the seconds he had remaining. In an attempt to calm himself, he placed himself far away, deep in empty space. He attempted to collect his thoughts and draw on his vast experience in order to prepare himself for the inevitable.

## Six

Favuxo had been to many Inabilins in his lifetime. The first was still the most vivid in his memory. Thinking about the first Inabilin had always made Favuxo feel ashamed both of and for the subject. Now, however, the memory brought about a different and more complicated reaction which he could best describe as a combination of compassion and dread. Favuxo looked back into his memory, and saw his future.

Every favuxian (excepting the Elder, of course) had known from creation that he would have only ten billion years to live. Most chose to ignore this, since the universe itself was not even close to that age. When the prescribed date of the first Inabilin finally approached, the Elder saw to it that the preparations went smoothly. It was as though the Elder was the only one who truly believed that the day would arrive. Even the subject himself, Fedold, seemed disinterested all throughout the process.

A few hours before the Inabilin, Fedold sent out thoughts that caused the Elder to block them and hold a long conversation with him. Favuxo could tell by that point that he was no longer at ease. As the Inabilin was about to begin, Fedold challenged the Elder in front of the entire favuxian species. Favuxo had perfectly preserved the confrontation within his mind:

"I have come to a decision," Fedold declared for all to hear. "I do not choose to die right now, Elder. I want to live."

The Elder appeared taken aback by this protest, as though he had not expected it. "You are simply experiencing momentary nervousness, it is natural. You will feel better when the Inabilin is done."

"No, Elder. I am being rational."

"If you had considered the Inabilin to be such a terrible thing," the Elder reasoned, "you would have protested against it long ago."

"I... couldn' t," Fedold stammered. "It was too distant. I didn' t truly understand that everything inside of time, no matter how distant it may be, eventually arrives in the present. Perhaps no one can really understand until it' s too late."

The Elder appeared to have become very uncomfortable, and yet his determination did not waver. "Child, it was I who decided when to create you, and so it is I who will decide

when your time as a favuxian is finished. Would you truly prefer the alternative? Would you like a random, chaotic, uncertain death dictated by the longevity of the universe? What meaning does such a death contain? Is it not better to have certainty, and time to prepare for the end?"

"I simply need more time, Elder! I must live the full potential of my life -- I have so many things left to do!"

The Elder's face was grim. For a brief moment there was a look of uncertainty in his eyes; however, it vanished as quickly as it had come. "You have had ten billion years to prepare for this moment. Your wishes must be sacrificed in order to prevent a web of uncertainty in which we might all be entangled. Now you will enter the body that we have provided for you. Since you will not enter it willingly, I will force you into it. Soon you will be thankful."

Fedold did his best to escape, but the much stronger will of the Elder forced him into the mortal body that was to be his for as long as it would endure.

## Seven

Reacting instinctively to his increasing fear, Favuxo let out a cry for help. The Elder halted his cry. When the Elder appeared before him, the commanding presence quickly restored calm within Favuxo's mind.

"Why is it that you fear the Inabilin?" The Elder's voice carried a note of genuine concern. "Your time has come. You should eagerly await your life's reward."

It took all of Favuxo's strength of will to avoid begging for forgiveness when faced with the commanding presence of the Elder. "Elder, I wish to live."

The Elder, in human form presumably in order to practice for the ceremony, paused for a few moments. An aura of calm surrounded him. He gazed sadly into Favuxo's eyes, perhaps seeing something disturbing in them that he had seen many times before. "One who wishes to live forever is one who will die discontented and unprepared. You have been under stress, Favuxo. It has been a challenge for you, to come to terms with the chaos caused by the extinction of your chosen species. Until you are your normal self again, I must prevent you from making this mistake. What you are attempting to do, by avoiding the Inabilin, would only plunge your life deeper into chaos."

Favuxo collected himself, gaining strength and determination. "Why should I throw away that life by undergoing the Inabilin? You're far past the age, so tell me, if you so admire the Inabilin and its goals, why haven't you sacrificed yourself?"

Although he didn't move, the Elder seemed to become more distant. "You know as well as I that I cannot allow the chaos which would be caused by my death. I must maintain continuity in favuxian life, whatever the cost to myself may be."

"Elder..." Favuxo was cut off before he could continue.

"You must undergo the Inabilin in my place, Favuxo. Where I cannot go, you must take my place in experiencing the brief joys of life as a mortal and the freedom from the unknown, unplanned, meaningless death that will come with the end of this universe. Embrace your opportunity, Favuxo. You must set a positive example for those younger than yourself. They will soon find themselves in this same situation." The Elder looked deeply into Favuxo's eyes, searching for understanding. He found only resignation, but that seemed to satisfy him just as well. "I will leave now, and place you in the Earth city of San Carlos. It has been decided that you will live your mortal life there."

For a reason he did not consciously understand, Favuxo's thoughts turned to his childhood habit of spending millennia waiting for stars to nova. At the time, the great explosion would make the thousands of years of waiting seem worthwhile to him. Later in life he had come to understand the view his elders had always taken, which was that there were far more productive things he could do with his time. He had devoted almost all of his time to collecting information about different species for the benefit of the favuxian collective consciousness. Still, he often yearned to be able to stay in one spot, carefree for thousands of years, to see the brilliant explosion of light or anything else which might be similarly rewarding in its beauty. The desire burned more fiercely than ever within Favuxo, as he approached his end.

Favuxo walked a few feet and leaned against the wall of a large warehouse building. He felt energy draining from him, a tiredness more deflating than he had ever known. He slid slowly down the wall of the warehouse and crouched there, unmoving, for several minutes. At that point he eliminated his physical form and transferred his location to a place far away from everything. He desired nothing other than the opportunity to rest peacefully forever. Somewhere deep in the void of space, Favuxo awaited a sequence of events that he knew himself to be incapable of altering.

## Eight

"Rise, Favuxo. The Inabilin has begun."

Favuxo, placed back in the physical form of a human, opened his eyes to see the Elder standing over him. Thousands of human forms, which he knew to actually be favuxians, stood in a large circle around him. The whole of the favuxian species had already assembled, prepared to watch him enter the body of a human.

Fear began to grow again within Favuxo. Panicked, he tried to leave his physical form and escape to a far away galaxy, even though he knew that the Elder would keep him in place exactly as he was.

As Favuxo watched, the crowd parted in one spot to make room for several favuxians to bring a single human inside the circle. The face of the human was contorted into a grotesque expression. The human jerked its head about and let out the cries of an injured animal. Favuxo stared at it, examining it as carefully as he could at such a distance. It was male, average height,

slightly above average weight, and bald. Its skin was a medium dark brown, the same color as its eyes. It looked to be about thirty to forty years old. Favuxo knew that he would live in that body for as long as it would last.

The group of favuxians dropped the human onto the ground near Favuxo, and then dissolved themselves back into the crowd. The will of the Elder prevented the human body from any further noise or movement. Several favuxians quickly made minor surgical changes to the appearance of the human, in order to avoid any problems that might arise if Favuxo were to meet someone who had known the person.

Favuxo stared at this scene he'd witnessed dozens of times before, and found a new terror in it. He feared the moment when he would go inside the body. He knew that he would not be able to make himself do it.

Standing between Favuxo and the human, the Elder addressed the crowd. The speech was familiar, as it was almost unchanged from those used at previous Inabilins.

"This is the defining moment in the life of one of us. It is both the end and the beginning of his life." The Elder paused for several seconds to add emphasis. "From the moment of creation, each favuxian prepares himself for the Inabilin. It is the goal of life -- it is the ultimate point towards which we work. The Inabilin takes a long and full life, and through finality gives it unquestionable importance. After ten billion years of sacrificing himself to the cause of expanding favuxian knowledge, one of us has reached his reward. While he could have turned his back on us in selfishness, he sensed the greater meaning that the collection and sharing of knowledge gave to his life. In exchange for his commitment to us, we give him the one thing that will make him truly complete."

The Elder paused again, for a longer time than before. It appeared that he wanted to allow time for the importance of the occasion to sink in. Favuxo wondered if the Elder was also trying to give him time to get control of himself, so that he could do what would be required of him. Finally, the Elder resumed his speech. "We are gathered here today on the planet Earth because it is the choice of Favuxo to live and die as a human. In accordance with his wishes, we have secured a human body for his use. For as long as this body lasts, Favuxo will live on. He will know the innocent and carefree ways of mortals. When the body ceases to function, Favuxo will experience the mercifully quick and predictable death of mortal species. At that point his life will exist only in our memories, but the memories will be of a well lived, thoroughly meaningful life." The Elder turned away from the crowd and towards Favuxo, though he was still speaking to the crowd. "Favuxo will now leave his current form and enter the human body which has been provided, beginning his life anew as a human."

Favuxo remained where he was, frozen in place by his fear. Without lifting his head to look at the Elder, he protested meekly. "I can' t. I won' t."

The Elder came towards him, reached down, lifted up Favuxo' s chin with his hand, and fixed his gaze on a point just behind Favuxo' s eyes. To Favuxo the Elder seemed sad -- regretful, yet firmly set in his ways. "You must do it. All of us understand that recent events have been

difficult for you. You will be better soon, once the Inabilin is complete and you have achieved what all favuxians so anxiously await."

Favuxo tried to say more, tried to respond, but the Elder cut him off. The Elder had determined that he would not speak again. Forced out of physical form, he found himself slowly drifting towards the human. He did all that he could to resist, but the Elder's will was far stronger than his own. He entered the mind of the human, and knew then that it was impossible to ever escape. His mind was to be intertwined with the material brain for as long as it would endure.

The mind of the human lingered, mingling with Favuxo's for a few milliseconds. Favuxo could sense a strong emotion in it. He knew it to be either terror or anger, but he could not be sure which. They are so similar.

## Nine

Favuxo was entirely alone, more alone than he'd ever been. He was lying in the gutter at the side of a small road. No humans were within sight, and for the first time he could not sense the comforting presence of the rest of his species. Favuxo no longer had access to the thoughts of other favuxians, but he knew they must feel ashamed of him, that he had tried to protest against the Inabilin -- against the Elder.

Standing up and stretching his body, Favuxo found it disconcerting to imagine that he would spend the rest of his time inside such a confining vessel. He found it even more unsettling to imagine what a short amount of time it would be.

The idea of death was foreign to Favuxo. Until the Inabilin had been near, he'd never taken it seriously. Death was always that which happened to others, he never really understood that it would eventually happen to him. Perhaps because the Elder had so conditioned him, Favuxo's thoughts immediately turned to what the Elder had said about death: "Those who fear their own death should calm themselves. By its very nature, death cannot exist. Life approaches death, but can never reach it. Death is the end of life, and is therefore impossible without life. If something is impossible to reach, who can say that it exists?" The thoughts of the Elder no longer calmed Favuxo. He'd come to view them as nothing more than manufactured dogma of one who cared about nothing more than maintaining the calm of others.

Favuxo's goal, as a mortal, was to delay death for as long as possible. His stomach told him that in order to do so he would need to find food. Searching his pockets, he found that his species had provided him with enough money to last a month, or maybe two at the most. After that he would need to find employment.

It was easy enough for Favuxo to locate a fast food place. Once inside he randomly chose to order a chicken sandwich and a sprite, not knowing of anything in particular that he might find more or less offensive than anything else. He'd never before eaten human food. As a favuxian, he'd eaten only a few times before deciding that food was of no interest to him.

Favuxo sat down next to a middle aged man whose face was buried in food, and attempted to start a conversation: "Hello. There... there sure are a lot of buildings around here that have burned to the ground, aren' t there?"

The man glanced up from his meal. "Energy blasts do occasionally set things on fire, ya know."

"I' m not from here... I mean, I'm just passing through town. Do you know of any cheap motels near here?"

"There' s a place called the Blue Sky Motel. Turn to the left whenya go out the door here, and keep going ' til the second street on the right. You can' t miss it." The man looked down at his meal again for a moment, and then back up at Favuxo. "My niece owns the place."

Favuxo found it strange that the man had no difficulty accepting him as another human. As he adjusted to this, he slowly became confident that he could act convincingly as a human; however, he still didn't believe that he understood what it was to be human.

The sky was slowly darkening, the sun nearly ready to dip below the horizon. Favuxo felt himself rapidly growing tired. He knew that as a human he'd require large amounts of rest each and every night, so he walked slowly in the direction of the Blue Sky Motel.

The motel room that Favuxo checked into looked nearly identical to the last room that he'd briefly inhabited on Earth. Partly out of boredom and partly out of habit, he turned on the television and searched for news stations. He found all the stations seemed to be news stations, featuring live coverage of rubble and dead bodies from various areas of the world. Favuxo realized then, watching the pictures of the destruction, that he no longer cared about what happened to the planet Earth. It puzzled him that he could lose interest in a situation when thrust into the middle of it. Favuxo turned the television off and, out of exhaustion, collapsed on the bed into a deep and dreamless sleep.

## Ten

Favuxo awoke just as the last bit of the sun finally rose into full view above the eastern horizon. He felt refreshed, as though he were starting a new life -- and he knew that he was. What surprised him was that he was experiencing a pleasant feeling -- a sort of relief -- despite knowing that he would soon die, would never again be able to leave his body, and would never again communicate with another favuxian. He supposed that the new experiences, the totally new way of life that he was gaining, had temporarily blocked out all that he had lost. For the first time since his youth, he was increasing his understanding rather than simply increasing his knowledge.

The view of the sunrise from the window of his motel room had caught his attention. He realized that although he'd often been at locations on planets where it was the beginning of the day, he'd never enjoyed a sunrise. It seemed ironic to Favuxo that, after longing for billions of years to see stars explode, he could find it fascinating to watch a star coming back into his view

after being blocked out by a planet for several hours. After all, it would burn without change for billions more years.

Startled by a noise in the room in which he thought himself to be alone, Favuxo turned around to see a cadopeken standing behind him. He assumed that it had come through the wall and then changed into physical form, just as he had once been able to do -- just as he had been able to do the day before.

The cadopeken spoke out loud to itself in its native language, its face displaying surprise. "Where is the weapon of this one? Why has it not killed me?"

Favuxo responded: "I don' t have a weapon," he said. He was unprepared for this strange occurrence and, before he could stop himself, he had responded in cadopeken language. Favuxo immediately realized, of course, that this was a language that as a human he should not have known how to speak. The cadopeken backed into the wall, startled, but recovered quickly enough.

"How is it that you know our language?" it asked.

Favuxo was unsure how he should respond. He knew that his provided false identity as an unemployed former auto worker would be of no use to him. As hard as he thought, he could come up with no reasonable explanation for his knowledge of cadopeken language.

"You' ve no doubt forgotten how to speak it now," suggested the cadopeken, apparently amused by Favuxo' s long pause. "You must not be a human, but rather someone disguised as a human. Humans do not have the technology to have visited Cadopek and studied our people."

"I am a human now," Favuxo explained, not expecting his story to be believed, "but I was until recently a member of a species of no physical form, much like you have partially become. Individuals of my species have observed Cadopek constantly since long before the beginnings of your species. I had telepathic access to the knowledge collected about cadopekens. This is how I learned your language. I recently reached the age at which it is customary among my people to become a member of a mortal species."

"What news can you bring me? What has happened on Cadopek in the last century and a half?" The cadopeken seemed genuinely eager to hear what Favuxo knew about the planet, almost convincing Favuxo that he had believed the story that Favuxo had told him. Favuxo was unsure if it would be wiser to continue to tell the truth or to invent a more pleasant lie at this point. The cadopeken could never know the difference. He would undoubtedly not live to return to Cadopek.

In trying to think of what to say, Favuxo found that he felt so uncomfortable creating lies that he had no real choice. "When I last visited," he began, "I discovered that the planet had been reduced to rubble. All cadopekens were dead, with their corpses scattered across the landscape." Favuxo knew as he finished saying this that he ought to have been far less direct about the matter, and that the cadopeken no doubt thought him to be a cold, heartless being. He wished to go back and change his words, but knew that he could not. Instead, he continued: "Your species

destroyed itself in a conflict between energy beings and non energy beings, a larger scale version of what we see here on Earth."

The cadopeken vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving Favuxo to focus his gaze upon the wall. He waited, hoping that the cadopeken would reappear. It would not.

When Favuxo left the Blue Sky motel that morning, he chose to take a long walk around the city in order to familiarize himself with his new surroundings. Block after block he saw burnt remains of buildings, along with scattered human bodies. About half of the bodies he saw appeared to have been killed by energy blasts. The other half were riddled with bullet wounds.

Favuxo found that he could understand, even if not agree with, the human reasoning for destroying all of the energy beings. It had been in his mind all the time while he had been talking to the cadopeken that at any moment, if angered, it could have ended his existence. Thinking back on the situation, he could see that the logical thing to do (wishing to protect his life) would have been to run away and escape from the energy being, or kill it if he had possessed a weapon. Flight or fight were the only options open to a being trapped in such a vulnerable body.

Sometime slightly after noon, Favuxo entered a fast food place. He didn't feel especially hungry, but his body had somehow lead him there anyhow.

While standing in the long line, Favuxo' s thoughts again turned to death. He had not thought that his situation in life could change how he viewed death -- he thought death after all to be a very constant thing. Yet, despite that, it no longer frightened him so much as before. In facing death, Favuxo could no longer rationalize calling it an enemy. He no longer wished to control it, or to make it predictable. He'd begun to understand that his desire to control it had instead allowed it to control him, just as it was controlling so many of the humans. Death was not Favuxo' s enemy to be conquered, it was not his wild animal to be tamed.

"May I take your order?"

Startled out of his meditation, Favuxo realized that he had arrived at the front of the line. "A double whopper meal, please, with fries and a coke."

"Would you like to super size that?"

He thought about it, carefully. "Yes."

As he sat down to eat, it came into Favuxo' s mind for the first time that death cannot matter as much as life. He'd derived his fear of death from the fact that death would end his life; yet now he wondered how it could be possible for avoiding the end of something to be more important than that something itself. He concluded that the end cannot outweigh the totality. Favuxo thought again of what the Elder had said, but from a different perspective: "By its very nature, death cannot exist. Life approaches death, but can never reach it. Death is the end of life, and is therefore impossible without life. If something is impossible to reach, who can say that it exists?"

As he ate, Favuxo watched the television. He was beginning to enjoy the program when the picture disappeared for a moment and was then replaced by a drab news studio: "We interrupt this program for breaking news... Just a few moments ago, a group of heroic citizens trapped several dozen energy beings that were holding a meeting in a small park here in San Carlos. The citizens closed in around the beings, and we believe that all of the creatures were destroyed. Although most of these valiant citizens lost their lives to the bullets coming from the opposite side of the circle, this is another large reduction in the numbers of the energy beings. United Nations sources are confident that the entire infestation will be eradicated by the end of next week." The picture of the anchor person faded away, but the message remained.

Favuxo set out again to continue his exploration of San Carlos. As he walked, he began to notice a beauty in the city previously hidden to his senses. The bluish-gray sky seemed dazzling that afternoon, and the sounds of passing cars were oddly comforting.

"Beautiful," he muttered aloud. "Beautiful city."

Unbeknownst to Favuxo, a young man had been walking along only a few feet behind him. "What did you say?" the man inquired.

"Oh. I didn't notice anyone was around. I was just talking to myself, commenting on the beauty of this city."

"That's what I thought I heard, but it seemed a rather unlikely thing for a person to be saying. You aren't from around here, are you?"

"No."

"Where are you from? I'd like to be sure to stay as far away from there as possible, if it makes San Carlos seem beautiful by comparison."

Favuxo remembered that he was supposed to be from Detroit, but he still did not feel comfortable using the false identity provided for him. "I'm from some place... far away. It doesn't matter."

The man looked curiously at Favuxo for a moment, as though suspecting that an interesting story might lie behind the face, and then spoke one final comment: "Huh." He walked away, leaving Favuxo to continue his exploration alone.

Favuxo did not stop to eat dinner, and thought nothing of it until his stomach began to protest during the late evening. Despite the growling sound his stomach was emitting, he suppressed his hunger by telling himself that he would eat something later that night. He wanted to see as much of the city as possible before retiring. He wanted to familiarize himself with his surroundings -- he wanted to understand them. Other types of hunger would need to be satisfied before the physical hunger.

Pausing to admire it, Favuxo saw that the sunset was even more brilliant than the sunrise at which he had marveled that morning. He realized again that he previously never would have

found it interesting. Such simple things had never given him pleasure. More precisely, he now understood, he had never before given himself pleasure when viewing such simple things.

Favuxo turned a corner and found himself on a small, dead end road. Exhausted from his day of walking, he sat down and rested on the edge of a lawn. He had not anticipated such tiredness, being in only his second day as a human. It was immensely frustrating to him that such a simple thing as changing his location had become so strenuous, although he also found that there was much in the universe which could not be seen at his more familiar pace.

Looking up, Favuxo observed that the sun had completely set and the sky was darkening. The planets Venus and Jupiter were visible, but no stars. He inspected each planet for a few moments. They were different from what they had been a few days earlier. They were more distant, more mysterious, more fascinating.

Above the distant roar of automobiles, Favuxo could make out the constant beat of cicadas all around him. They formed an invisible yet still tangible mass, enveloping him. After he'd been sitting for a few minutes he heard a louder sound directly behind him: "Meow?" it asked.

Favuxo turned to look at the visitor, picked it up, and then spoke to it softly. "Do you ever look at the sky, cat? When there's no bird, no movement at all? The stillness of it..." He paused for a long while, in thought. "I have to go, cat. I have to continue searching, even though I've no idea what I'm searching for. Perhaps that doesn't matter anyhow... perhaps the search is what matters, perhaps the search is what I'm searching for."

After a few moments more, Favuxo set the cat gently down on the damp grass and began to walk away, back towards the bright lights of the busier streets. The cat meowed at him again. He turned around to look back at it. "You think I should stay here, don't you? A part of me wants to. I have a strange premonition that danger, or death, is out there. Fate always waits just ahead, just out of view, at the edge of the darkness." Favuxo knelt down and petted the cat for a minute more, then stood again. "My destiny was set long ago. Whatever it is, I must go meet it. You belong here, I belong somewhere else."

Hoping that there would be a motel somewhere nearby, Favuxo began to walk. Many of the streets were strangely quiet, but he eventually came to an especially brightly lit area where he could hear human voices. Looking towards the source of the light and noise, he saw a pile of charred automobiles and human remains blocking the street. A half dozen people were dragging bodies to the side of the road and forming a large mound out of the dead.

Favuxo walked over to the pile of bodies, and stood there watching the people work. If they recognized his existence, they gave no sign of it. One of the workers spoke loudly: "Hey, Brian! You got here before I did. Did the people kill the energy being when they fired all these bullets?"

"Nobody stuck around to tell me, and I hear it don't leave no mess when you shoot an energy being."

There was a period of silence lasting perhaps five seconds before the other spoke again. "Sure wish it worked that way with people. I'd be home by now." He thought for a brief moment. "Sure seems like a waste if they didn't kill the thing. All these bodies..."

Another worker interrupted: "If they didn't kill it, maybe the problem was that all these people got in the way."

Stretching his tired body, Favuxo looked in both directions. From where he was standing, he saw no motels. It had become very dark outside of that small circle of street lights, so he could not see very far.

Favuxo was about to continue his search when he saw an energy being come through the wall of the building next to him, no more than five feet away. He noticed it at the same time as several other humans, and they began to shout... they began reaching for their guns.

Favuxo observed that his body was stationed on a direct line between the energy being and the group of workers. In that instant, Favuxo entirely understood his situation. He knew there was no time for escape. The people and their weapons had a mission to accomplish, and they would not endanger it for the sake of his life.

The guns ejected their bullets in unison. The energy being, recognizing its situation but not willing to accept it, wildly projected a ball of energy out of itself. As the energy being died an instant, painless death, the unguided energy ball struck the mound of human remains and set a small but rapidly expanding fire of cloth and flesh among them. A dozen bullets became lodged inside of Favuxo. He stood staring straight ahead for a moment, then collapsed into the now burning pile of bodies he'd been standing above. Although he appeared to be, he was not quite dead.

As the pain and fire washed over him, Favuxo reflected upon his life. The events of the last several months changed as he thought about them. He no longer felt angry, upset, or depressed about what had happened to him. It was all for the best, that he be taught a lesson by the universe before his time ran out. Once it had caused him grief to realize that he, like all others, was subject to the unpredictable nature of the universe. That idea changed since he'd become a human, becoming something somehow comforting to him.

Thinking of them now, as an outsider, Favuxo thought favuxians to be a foolish species. Hoping that unlike all other favuxians the Elder could hear his thoughts even now, Favuxo addressed him: "Elder, realize what misguided creatures you favuxians are. You yourself are especially foolish, having been the architect of such a society. You spend your lives in constant fear of losing control. You fear death so much that you feel you must kill yourselves. By creating a structured life to give the illusion of importance, you miss the true importance of life. You miss the experience of life itself."

Favuxo briefly wondered if the Elder had any idea of what the true value of the Inabilin had been for him -- how being a mortal had made things clearer. Soon, Favuxo was no longer able to wonder.

**Ten Billion Years by Paul Knierim**  
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Favuxo's blackened, flaming arm briefly rises up above the pile, and then falls back silently into the blaze which illuminates the night. A few minutes later, what remains is a glowing mound of indistinguishable ash. It cools quickly, becoming invisible in the blackness of the night.