

The Last Walk
by J. Brian Clarke

PART ONE
THE INVITATION

Ottrah.

My name is Ottrah. I am from Aelak.

My species is ancient compared to the mammalian humanoids of the other Aelak, which is called Earth. I was seventy-three years old, barely out of adolescence and the youngest aboard the Green and Plenty, when we sideshifted into their continuum. Because of my youth, I was chosen to make first contact. At my age, I was told, humans are already nearing the end of their short lives. It would be imprudent to intimidate them with what they might perceive to be an individual of superior age and wisdom.

I vividly remember the moment I stepped out of the daughter craft on to the soil of that strange alternate. The faded blue sky, the ugly structures of their space launching facilities, the unpleasant odors of primitive technology, the noise, and above all the incredible number of humans, combined to momentarily shock me into inanity. Although I had no problem with their simple language, my opening words were clumsy.

"You are Degruton," I remember saying to the male who stepped forward from the crowd. There was a female with him. Their hands were tightly joined.

"Yes." I sensed his nervousness.

"You expected us."

"I--think so."

"That is good. The circle is complete."

It was not my intention to be obtuse, and his consequent confusion worried me. I am not sure of my next words, other than I tried to explain that in the same manner Degruton sideshifted his ship into my continuum and diverted the asteroid which would have impacted my world sixty five million years ago, we did the same in his continuum--except we made sure the asteroid continued its course to impact.

The reaction of the male and his mate was that strange noise they call laughter, which I now understand is a human reaction to irony.

Frederick Degruton

As the scientist responsible for the development of shift dispersion, I suppose I should have expected it. Having this strange being as my guest during her stay on Earth, was the inevitable outcome of my fiddling with the dimensions which led to our ability to translate in time as well as across continua.

The media reported the Aelak was meeting with the Secretary General at a secret location, and it was logical enough to be accepted. There were the usual editorial cartoons showing a flustered S.G. in the company of a dinosaur, although the depiction of Ottrah as a streamlined T-Rex was about as unlikely as his excellency being shown as a woolly mammoth.

The current fashion fad of a rainbow-hued cape topped by a broad brimmed sombrero, turned out to be an adequate disguise when Ottrah was ushered into to my apartment in

Orlando. She was accompanied by my love and conscience, Gail Sovergarde. The three security escorts who brought them to my door were more likely to have attracted attention, although if I was asked (I was not), I was ready to explain that my taller guest was a visiting dignitary from the Lagos Institute of Planetary Physics.

With hat and cape removed, Ottrah was exactly as I first saw her when she stepped out of her shimmering bubble at the Cape. A slender humanoid two meters plus in height, she was clad in a gray form-fitting garment which left only the face exposed.

It was a face I shall not forget.

Large golden eyes with nictitating membranes, vertical nostril slits, a wide lipless mouth with no chin, and greenish skin with a faintly visible texture, combined into a whole both terrible and fascinating. I felt my heart thump as I said lamely, "I am honored you chose to come to my home."

The Aelak turned to Gail. "Your mate is nervous." Although the mouth moved (writhed?) in synchronization with the words, the voice was a mechanical contralto without inflection. I wondered if it was artificial, although there was no visible sign how it was done

"A lot of things make my mate nervous," Gail said as she sank into my easy chair and crossed her slender legs. "Isn't that right, Freddy?"

Ottrah chose an upright chair and folded herself down onto it. Although that strange head was now lower than mine, it did not make her less intimidating. "Degruton, I am here to persuade you and your mate to return with me to Aelak."

"Er--oh?"

The events of this remarkable day were moving too fast for me. Starting with Ottrah's arrival at the Cape, the manner Gail and I were ignored as Ottrah was driven away in an official limousine, my increasing anger as my phoned demands for an explanation always got the response 'we will get back to you', and finally the Deputy S.G.'s call in which I was calmly informed, 'The alien and Ms Sovergarde will be brought to your apartment at nineteen hundred hours this evening. Please make sure you are there.'

Alright, so I was here.

So was the most remarkable visitor in recorded human history.

And all I could do was complain, "What is going on?"

I do not know what I would have done with my life if Gail Sovergarde was not part of it. A media personality who was known on millions of home screens, we met when she interviewed me on air about my work on shift dispersion. By the time my team perfected S.D., she and I shared an apartment. She was with me aboard the converted Mars bulk carrier Francis Bacon when we shifted to a parallel continuum and diverted the asteroid which in our continuum impacted Earth at the end of the Cretaceous and destroyed the dinosaurs. We remained in that other continuum, time-shifting in one hundred thousand year increments as the dinosaurs continued to evolve. We prudently returned to our own time and space when the dinosaur descendants entered their industrial revolution--long before they had the technology to detect our orbiting ship.

That they would eventually develop S.D. themselves and shift here to satisfy their curiosity as to how life would develop on a post-impact Aelak, perhaps should have been anticipated. Now they were here, in a ship resembling a gigantic soap bubble, which fifty days after it entered orbit above our world, exuded a smaller bubble which descended to the Cape and disgorged the being who now sat in my apartment.

Ottrah waited patiently as Gail explained;

"Freddy, I am just as much in the dark. After you dropped me at the network, I pulled in every string I could think of, and for my efforts got no more than I have already reported from the Cape. I was still sulking when a smarmy bureaucrat called and told I was about to be picked up and brought here. When I got into the limo and saw who was in the back seat--"

"It was I," said our guest, misunderstanding the nuances of human speech. "I informed your leaders I am here to converse with the human responsible for the asteroid diversion which saved my species from extinction. Although I sensed your leaders were displeased, they agreed to provide appropriate transportation."

Gail asked, "Why am I along? It is not that I object, but--"

"Pair bonding is an important characteristic of your species, is it not? You are a trained observer, are you not? Together with your mate's talents as a scientist, we deduced a duality greater than its parts."

I swallowed, slid a hand into my pocket and pinched my thigh hard enough to make me wince. I did not wake up, so I presumed I was already awake. "Why do you want us to go to your world?"

"I am not allowed to divulge that information. I can assure you no harm will come to you and your mate, also that you can return to Earth any time you wish."

"Do our leaders know of this?"

"They have been informed."

"They agreed?"

"They did."

I could not resist it. "They were--ah--displeased?"

"I deduced they were not pleased."

What Ottrah deduced, I knew, and it was immensely satisfying. I did not doubt the S.G. and his cohorts anticipated a profitable relationship with a species which had high technology when our ancestors were still scratching pictures on cave walls. Instead, they were told to stand aside while one scientist and his reporter girl friend were invited home for tea. It had a delicious irony which made me feel good even as I considered the invitation. I turned to Gail.

"Do you want to go?"

She grinned fondly at me. "Freddy, I'm a journalist. Remember?"

Gail Sovergarde

The limo would not come for us until the next morning. So when Freddy and I went to bed, Ottrah remained in the living room. I do not know if she slept, or even needed to. I do know I woke up several times, each time conscious of Freddy's soft snoring and the murmur of the TV through the

partly open bedroom door. I crept in once to see what Ottrah had on the tube. It was a major news network (fortunately not my own), which while I watched, switched from a soccer riot in Liverpool to a gushing commentary from the World Beauty Pageant in Kiev. As I sneaked back to bed, I prayed our guest would not judge our species by such unsavory items of violence and mindlessness.

Freddy and I had done our best to coax information out of Ottrah--about Aelak, her life there, and why were we wanted on that other Earth. She would not be drawn, insisting we must have no preconceptions. So the evening ended with the two of us doing most of the talking while Ottrah listened. She showed great interest in the parallel courses of human scientific and technical development since the invention of the printing press, and especially since the industrial revolution. Freddy's use of the word 'exponential' to describe the growth of human knowledge during the past couple of centuries, produced the only display of emotion on that alien face--a mottling of the greenish skin, a hissing of indrawn breath, and the strange comment;

"It is what we feared--and hoped."

Ottrah was just as uncommunicative next morning, as she allowed me to redrape her in the garish costume, and we followed the security escorts (there were only two this time) to a waiting limo. Somehow I was not surprised the vehicle already contained a passenger.

"Good morning," greeted the Secretary General.

Freddy and I politely responded, while Ottrah said nothing. She just stared at the passing scene while the limousine and escort vehicles headed for the local government tower and a waiting helijet.

Freddy ventured tentatively, "Sir, it was not my idea. I mean, for Ottrah to want Ms Sovergarde and me."

"I am aware of that, Doctor Degruton."

Martin Chauson was frequently compared to the late and great German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. He was similarly a big man, with a personality to match. I had interviewed him several times, always impressed by his clarity of thought and speech.

This time my reporter's eye noted the way he fiddled with his tie, and looked everywhere except at our alien guest. His Excellency was definitely unsure of himself. But knowing the value of patience, I waited. So, bless his heart, did Freddy.

Finally, as the limo descended into the tower's parking garage, the S.G. roused himself. "I must talk to you two in private."

That interested our alien guest, who turned away from the window. "From this moment I will not listen. Please inform me when the privacy is ended."

Chauson's mouth dropped and he turned red. "I--uh--" I braced for the inevitable explosion, instead was surprised as the consummate diplomat reasserted himself with a gracious, "Thank you, Ottrah."

But he waited until we were in the V.I.P. elevator and rising toward the sixtieth floor. "The green snark wore red sneakers and exploded through eighteen stanzas of Gadrump's thirteenth symphony," he said.

I almost choked and Freddy pretended to stifle a sneeze. Ottrah's non-reaction did not prove anything of course, but it seemed to satisfy the S.G.

"I will say this just once. Whether I like it or not, and I assure you I don't, it is entirely possible you two hold the future of the human race in your hands. So whatever happens, don't blow it!" He took a deep breath, expelled it with a sigh which was almost a groan. "What are the Aelaks intentions? Do they intend to conquer us, make friends with us, or preserve us as specimens in a planetary zoo? What makes you two so special? What the hell do they want?"

The elevator began to slow. "Look, listen, and say as little as possible. Our next meeting will probably be your debriefing, so please don't be away too long."

On that somewhat plaintive request, the elevator doors opened to a sky-lit lobby with a view of an idling helijet beyond large windows. Armed guards were everywhere. As we walked toward the door which opened to the helipad, Ottrah asked,

"Is it permissible to resume listening?"

This time the S.G. did not bat an eye. "Of course. And I thank you again for your consideration." He hesitated, held out a hand. "Good journey, Ottrah."

A slender, three-fingered hand reached out and touched the human one. It was just a touch. Neither clasped.

"Goodbye," Ottrah said. "We will not meet again."

"On the contrary, I look forward to--"

"It is the way of things," Ottrah said as she turned and strode to the waiting heli. Freddy and I almost had to run to keep up with her. As the machine lifted, I looked down and saw the S.G. standing where we left him, braced against the wind from the whirling blades. Despite the guards, he was a lonely figure.

I thought of Ottrah's remark about not meeting again, and prayed she referred only to herself.

Frederick Degruton

With remarkable lack of fuss, we were escorted to Ottrah's ship. The shining curvature of the ten meter bubble reminded me of a fun house mirror, reflecting distorted images of buildings, structures and sky. It was surreal enough for a bad dream.

At least I did not need to pinch myself this time.

"I must prepare for departure," Ottrah said, and walked into the bubble. No door opened. It flowed around her like the meniscus of a gigantic water drop.

Friend and former colleague Doug Gruinne of the World Space Organization shook my hand, then turned and hugged Gail. "We have known each other each other a long time," the W.S.O. director said unsteadily. "Make sure our relationship lasts a few more years, OK?"

"We intend to," I rejoined solemnly as I took Gail's arm. "Ready?"

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "As much as I will ever be."

We stepped into the bubble.

One moment we were in the Florida sunshine, the next we were--

In a womb?

I do not know how else to describe it. It was full of flowing surfaces which reached out to enfold and suspend me in absolute comfort. Illumination was a warm, orange-yellow with no visible source. All I could see of Gail and Ottrah were their faces. Their bodies were quivering shadows, as if seen through a semi-transparent jell.

Ottrah said, "Do not be alarmed. This daughter craft loves you and will protect you."

Gail gasped, "It's alive?"

"Not in the sense you know life. But neither is it an inanimate thing, like one of your machines. Soon it will rejoin its substance to the Green and Plenty, and we will be on our way."

"The Green and--is that the big ship you left in orbit?"

"The terms big and small are inappropriate. They are the same."

The light dimmed.

"We have lifted," Ottrah announced.

There was no acceleration, no humming of unleashed power, yet I believed her. I think I went to sleep, or at least I sensed no passage of time until the light brightened. The walls had fallen away and we were in a much bigger space. Several Aelak faces were suspended about us in a kind of random montage. One of the faces spoke.

"Are these the humans we sought?"

"The male is called Degruton," Ottrah replied. "The other is his mate Sovergarde."

The one said in an emotionless baritone, "I am Hovarr. You are welcome among us." Something indefinable suggested great age and authority. "You will sleep again, and remain so until we arrive at Aelak."

I felt the beginning of drowsiness, but roused myself as Gail's hand slid into mine. I wanted to look at her, but my head was too comfortable to move. I sought to frame a question, but Gail forestalled me.

"H--how long until we get there?"

"The journey will take sixteen days."

"We need--"

"You will require neither nourishment or elimination. My ship will provide for your bodily needs."

How can a ship--?

I dreamed I was in the care of a friendly giant who fed, clothed and bathed me. Although the giant had a vaguely reptilian look, he was not in the least fearsome. In any case there was a girl on his other knee, a bright little thing who shared his affection. Yet our big friend could not entirely shield us from a darkness which pressed in from somewhere beyond our ken. It was as if the walls of our happy place had hairline cracks, which in some undefined future would widen and let in the darkness.

It was the little girl who finally roused me from the dream. "Wake up Freddy."

I blinked. Gail's head hovered a few inches from mine. Beyond, was Ottrah. Again Gail shook my shoulder. "We must leave now."

I licked dry lips. "Where--?"

"We are in the little ship, on Aelak."

Ottrah drifted toward the concavity of a wall. "Please

follow," she said. The concavity enveloped her and she vanished.

We stumbled after her, and found ourselves on wet grass below a gray sky. We were in a clearing surrounded by magnificent trees which resembled Douglas fir interspersed with gigantic redwoods. A gentle rain was cool on our skin, and the air smelled of growing things. I took a deep breath and looked around. Parked at the edge of the clearing was a vehicle which looked like a turtle shell with windows. Beyond the trees, an enormous needle tapered up into cloud. Ottrah saw what I was looking at.

"We do not like tall structures. That is the only one on the planet."

"What is it?", Gail asked.

"A memorial for the benefit of those who will come after we are gone."

"Where are you going?"

"It is why you are here. Within a few centuries, my species will be extinct."

Ottrah

As I drove them to Homeplace, Degruton commented on the quietness of the conveyance.

"We abandoned internal combustion many eons ago," I told him as I remembered with distaste the polluting conveyances which swarmed their world. "All our power needs are served by the fusion of hydrogen."

"Even this vehicle?"

"I understand your concern. I assure you the drive system is sealed and entirely reliable. In any case, it is quite new."

"New?"

"It was grown less than two centuries ago."

That seemed to impress the humans even more than the fact the conveyance was powered by a form of energy they had only learned to apply in space and in huge ground installations. It was strange to me that the principle of cold fusion was dismissed by most of their scientists, while they pursued the inefficiencies of magnetic confinement or laser implosion.

I refused to further discuss the impending demise of my species, so the humans remained silent as they gazed with the curiosity of the young at the passing terrain. At the point where the road passed near the shore of the Great Sea, the male expressed surprise at the vessel pulling out of a nearby harbour. "You have fusion--yet still use sails?"

I think my answer confused him. "Such ships are aesthetically pleasing," I told him.

"It is beautiful," the female agreed as her mate frowned. She turned to me. "Only a few square riggers remain on our world. Most of them are anchored museums."

We turned inland. A small group of creatures bounded across the road in front of us, and disappeared toward the open country beyond the forest. "As Earth has reptiles," I explained, "Aelak has mammals. We value them."

"For food?", the male asked.

I tried not to show my distaste. "We do not eat meat."

We passed an agricultural station, where automats were already harvesting the crop. I slowed the conveyance so the humans could watch the process. "Our food needs are served

by many such stations."

"How big is your population?"

Although I knew Degruton was edging back to The Subject, I decided to answer him. "We are approximately fifteen million."

"On the whole planet?"

"That is so."

He made a sighing noise which I recognized as an expression of astonishment. "No wonder you have--" He hesitated. "I presume there were more of you in the past?"

I did not answer, and fortunately their attention was diverted as we crested the final rise and descended toward Homeplace.

I am aware that by human standards our capital is little more than a large village. Yet here the first Prime Eleven convened, and successive Elevens ever since. As I guided the conveyance through streets which wound between dwellings and groves of trees, I was comforted by the fact humans have a sense of beauty. The rain had ceased and the sun shone through clouds as we circuited a garden in which flowers had arranged themselves in patterns to delight the eye. Although several citizens were abroad, they politely ignored the humans as we emerged from the conveyance at the House of Eleven. This is Homeplace's largest structure, with three levels which are almost invisible behind the vines which cloak its walls.

After I left the humans in the room prepared for them, I went to the Hall of Eleven in the heart of the building. The Hall's crystal roof, sensitive to the mental emanations of those within, radiated somber colors ranging from blue through dark red to green. Facing each other in solemn conclave, the one thousand one hundred and eighteenth Prime Eleven was in session.

Hovarr, who had previously descended in a second daughter craft, raised his head. "They are comfortable?"

"As much as can be expected," I said.

The old one, who rarely left his beloved Green and Plenty, acknowledged with a faint smile. "I know what it is to be away from home. Do you think they will be amenable?"

"I do not know. They are a strange species, prone to extremes of mood. It is their curse, I do believe."

"And perhaps our hope."

I inclined my head. "Is the Eleven ready for them now?"

"More than they are for us, I suspect," Hovarr replied as he looked around at the other elders. They could have rejoined their minds with his, but I sensed he discouraged it. Instead,

"Bring the humans to us."

Gail Sovergarde

Our room was soothing, almost soporific in its effect on us. As we stood there, Freddy asked wonderingly, "How do they do it? Is it something in the air?"

It was a question neither of us could answer. Relaxation was certainly implied by the dark woods, the irregularly shaped and spaced windows which let in a gentle light, the flowering plants which grew out of the walls, floor, and even hung from the ceiling. Still holding hands, we lowered ourselves onto a couch formed from a tight weave of leaves and branches which yielded to our shapes. It was

astonishingly comfortable.

"Tired?", I asked.

"Just relaxed."

"It is all so seductive, isn't it?"

"I admit I wouldn't mind--" I felt him stiffen. "I won't let it!"

I felt the couch flex as Freddy jumped to his feet. He looked startled.

"What is it?"

"It helped me up!"

Suspecting but not daring to believe, I got up myself. Almost instantly I felt a gentle rolling shove, and without effort I was on my own feet.

We both looked at the couch. It looked--there is no other way to put it--smug.

To hell with it, I thought, and sat down again. Freddy tentatively lowered himself next to me. The couch lovingly recontoured itself to us.

I took a deep breath. "We have to talk."

He sighed. "I suppose."

"Is this just for our benefit, or is the whole planet like this?"

Freddy put an arm around my shoulders. The couch adjusted so we pressed against each other. It was nice. "We are in a new reality," he said.

"Which means?"

"I have not the faintest idea. But to have spaceships and plants behave like--" He hesitated.

"Pets?"

He said wistfully, "I remember my mother talked to her begonias."

I forced myself to be practical. "Ottrah told us we are here because her people are becoming extinct. To me, that suggests a falling birthrate."

"She avoided the subject, but I'd bet my life on it."

"OK, assume that is true. Are we talking about a disease, a genetic problem, or simply that they don't want to reproduce? And what do we have to do with it anyway?"

Freddy mused, "The Aelak population is shrinking, we humans are teeming. Quite a contrast."

"Do you think they want to learn from us?"

"Learn what? If they average one point nine babies per couple and we humans two point one, what does it mean other than a statistic? Reproductive behavior is more than lines on a chart!"

It was such an unusual outburst from my physicist, I think my mouth dropped open as I twisted in his arm and stared at him. "Freddy, you surprise me."

He blushed. "Sometimes I surprise me, too. I suppose--" He hesitated, then the words came with a rush. "Gail, I should have said this a long time ago. You have taught me there is a lot more to life than shift dispersion!"

Freddy was not the romantic type, and was always awkward when he tried to express his feelings. But what he said was so superior to even 'I love you', I could not help the tears coming to my eyes. "Freddy dear--"

The door opened and Ottrah came in. Although I still could not read the expressions on her alien face, I sensed a quiet expectancy. "The Eleven is ready for you," she said.

But as we followed her, I was not sure Freddy and I

were ready for the Eleven.

Frederick Degruton

Although I judged they were all as tall or taller than Ottrah, they looked like gnomes as they huddled in a circle under a dome which glowed with an unnerving varying light. Ottrah gestured to two stools placed in the center of the circle. "Please."

Gail held tight to my arm as we walked between two of the gnomes. As we sat back-to-back, eleven heads raised and eleven backs straightened. The tension in the air, which to my taught nerves was like repressed lightning, abruptly relaxed and the dome's shifting monochromes brightened into subtle, shimmering color.

One of them spoke. "In the presence of the humans, we will use vocal communication." A pair of golden eyes gazed at us. "We have met before."

My chest felt tight. "You are Hovarr. From the ship."

"As I know you have been told, no harm will come to you. So please--" Behind the emotionless quality of the voice was a silent plea. "--communicate with us."

Gail and I exchanged a quick glance. "Yes," she said.

It was a strange confrontation in which I could not get over the impression we were dealing with a single entity rather than a group of eleven. Although they spoke in random order, it was if they quoted from a single script. Sentences were rarely completed by a single individual, as one took up from another with hardly a break. Only Ottrah, who stood quietly to one side of this remarkable room, seemed separate.

Hovarr was the first to speak. There were no preliminaries, just a repeat of the devastating statement, "The Aelak race is dying."

Neither Gail or I said anything. We just sat and waited.

"Twelve centuries ago we were at our optimum population of nearly three hundred million, which we had maintained for eons. Then our numbers began to decrease, gradually at first and then at an increasing rate--until today we are fifteen million."

"Attrition," I said. "You are not replacing those who die."

Eleven heads nodded in acknowledgement.

"Why is it happening?"

The answer was overwhelmingly ambiguous. "It is the way of things."

I felt Gail's back stiffen. "Will you please explain that?"

"By your human standards, our progress from our animal origins was inordinately slow. Yet it was always steady, without the frequent dark ages which set back progress on your world. Twelve centuries ago, it was determined we had finally attained the perfection our species sought since the dawn of intelligence. Our lives are rich and long, our culture serves our physical and spiritual needs, and we are in harmony with the natural world. We--"

"--are on top of the mountain," I interrupted.

A puzzled silence. The light through the dome became erratic, gray. "The relevance is unclear."

I gestured. "There is no way to go except down."

"Ah. An analog.

"Exactly."

"But at the top of a mountain, is there not another option--which is to remain at the top and not go down?"

He/it/they were leading me, I was sure of it. I was also sure they knew the argument as much as I did, so I framed my response with care. "That implies a cultural stasis, which is an impossibility. A culture is a living thing which much evolve."

"Or--?"

"Or it dies."

"As we are dying?"

It seemed too easy.

Gail Sovergarde

I later agreed with Freddy the Aelaks were probing us, using obvious arguments to do so. They recognized our reactions in ways neither of us understood, even although we were a different species--or perhaps because we were a different species. Through it all, the central question remained.

What did they want?

No one stopped us asking that question, although everyone evaded the answer. Ottrah, who remained our companion and guide during the next few days, simply told us to be patient.

We were allowed to wander where we wished, even to enter their dwellings. Doors and windows existed only as protection from the elements, while Locks, bars, and the accoutrements humans use to keep strangers out and prisoners in, were unknown here. That we did not enter unannounced into Aelak homes was more a measure of our human sensitivity than of theirs, although with Ottrah along it was not so bad. Being 'friends of a friend' brought us into contact with many of the local Aelaks during their daily lives.

Although their language was a liquid chirruping which sounded (according to Freddy) like 'a whistle blowing under water', they spoke to us with the same toneless English. I asked how it was done, and Ottrah described an unfathomable process involving the ingestion of tailored molecules. Terms such as 'nanotechnology' and 'organic computers' whirled around in my head as I decided to accept the explanation and concentrate instead on the physical aspects of their lives.

Just about everything they used, including their homes, public buildings and spaceships, were grown rather than assembled. It was nanotechnology, Freddy confirmed, but at a level which made human developments in the field comparable to a horse-drawn cart against a starship (he said). The vegetarian Aelaks rarely used refrigeration, although there was a central refrigerated depot which served their infrequent needs. Every home had a kind of electric hotplate on which they created a delicious variety of stews. Freddy told me the town's electrical power came from a fusion generator the size of an office desk. There was no equivalent of television which, when I described it to our hosts, they found amusing. Neither were there radios in the accepted sense. It was hardly necessary in a society in which communication was mind-to-mind.

It was not telepathy. It was again the ubiquitous

nanotechnology which put the equivalent of a multi-band transmitter/receiver inside every skull.

The children were charming, although there were so few. It was comforting to note that the youngest I met, a male equivalent in development to a human four-year old although he was hatched thirteen years ago, was as noisy and cantankerous as any human child. I sympathized with the quiet desperation of his parents, as he would not make up his mind if he preferred Freddy's lap or mine, or which of his wooden toys he wanted to show us. His cry was a peculiar wailing which sounded like an amorous cat.

This was not a consumer driven society. High tech toys were unknown, even with the older children--who were educated by their parents, later by selected tutors. Other than mated couples and their direct offspring, 'family' was a foreign concept. As soon as the young attained adulthood, they departed to other communities to lead independent lives. They were never pushed. They just--went.

I asked Ottrah if she was ever curious about her parents, or they about her. Her response was to wonder why humans thought it so important. "Perhaps it is because on your crowded world, you remain huddled for mutual protection."

I smothered a heated response when I realized her comment was without malice. They are different, I insisted to myself. They are different!

Twice more we were summoned into the presence of the Eleven, each time to accomplish--it seemed to me--a further restatement of the obvious. They knew their species faced extinction, that their society was in a stasis which itself is a form of death, and that their birthrate, symptom or cause, needed to be revitalized. They still spoke with eleven voices, although Freddy and I were now convinced they were linked as a single entity. Hovarr was always the first and last to speak, and of the eleven he was the only one who chose to speak to us apart from the link.

"We puzzle you," he observed on one occasion. He studied our reaction for a moment, then added with gentle amusement,

"It is the way of things."

Hovarr

As individuals die, so must a species. It is a necessary ingredient of a universe in which the only constant is change, in which cycles are bounded by the inevitabilities of birth, death, creation and destruction. Even the stars are born and must die.

For eons, we accepted that principle as inviolate.

So perhaps it was a mistake to allow contact with the humans. But it is done, and now we are faced with a reality which confounds the ancient precepts.

When we of the Eleven pondered the dilemma, we initially surmised we were overreacting to a philosophy born of a different species in a different continuum. Yet as we considered the similarity of that continuum and its physical laws to ours, even to the identical constellations in the skies of the human world, we realized our rationalization could not explain why we are withering toward oblivion while humans are colonizing other planetary bodies of their solar system and have launched themselves toward the stars.

Despite the sixty five million years which have passed since our two worlds schismed toward different futures, we and they share a common origin. Their atoms and ours were there when the primordial Aelak/Earth condensed from the material orbiting the proto-star which became the sun, when life was generated within the chemistry of the first oceans, and when our mutual ancestors ventured on to the dry land. It was only when the asteroid missed/impacted--

Tranquil acceptance of the rules of existence, which the human language inadequately translates as 'the way of things', is fundamental to our Aelak philosophy of life. It is why it required such a difficult mind-twist for me to even begin to understand the contradictions introduced by that strange species of the alternate Aelak.

Most puzzling is their attitude to the end of life. While we Aelak accept final termination with equanimity, humans regard it as an enemy which must be subdued (despite their belief in a post-termination continuance). Yet although our lives are long compared with theirs and the existence of our species incomparably longer, the rules must surely be the same--from a beginning, through growth and fruition, finally to an end.

It is that last component of the eternal trilogy humans do not accept, either for themselves or their species. From their elaborate medical technology which seeks to extend the life of individuals, through to their space technology which at immense material cost seeks racial immortality by spreading their seed to the stars, it is as if they struggle up a mountain which has no peak--always striving, never to arrive.

It is a strange concept.

For an Aelak, such striving against the natural order is an aberration. Our world is more than just the planet on which we live, it is an extension of ourselves. We exist with it, flow with it and cannot live apart from it. Although we have learned to navigate in space and transfer to other continua, such alien environments can never be our home. Our discovery of the human Earth was more the outcome of an interesting intellectual exercise, than of any urge to explore the unknown. Indeed, I now regret the philosophical morass into which our curiosity has led us.

Gail Sovergarde

On one of our trips into the countryside, Ottrah stopped the vehicle at the side of the road and walked us past a grove of trees to a patch of scrub where a carnivore was feeding. The beast was a nightmare combination of cougar and crocodile appropriately called 'fast-tooth', which existed in hunter-prey symbiosis with the herds of grazing mammals inhabiting the grasslands. It had teeth, claws and powerful hind legs which propelled it like an armored kangaroo.

The creature lifted its fanged head, eyed us balefully and emitted a coughing grunt. Then, as if it decided we were insignificant, it lowered its head and tore off another chunk of still warm flesh.

Our host led us closer. I was distinctly uneasy as we halted only meters from the gory tableau. Aware of a watchful eye, I whispered nervously, "Are we safe?"

"Do not be alarmed. I had to make sure it sees you. Now it is appropriately imprinted, it and its kind cannot harm humans."

"I don't understand."

"On Aelak, all living things share a link which I suspect is much depleted on your world."

It did not occur to me to question that astonishing revelation. I remembered an image from my childhood, of huge flocks of birds changing direction in flight as if they were a single entity. If humans were no longer part of such a link, it seemed lesser creatures had enough smarts to keep it. Still lost in a fog of wonderment, I was hardly aware of Freddy's touch on my arm and his awed; "I think we have just been introduced."

When we returned to the vehicle, there was a frail, elderly Aelak leaning against it. Freddy and I had met this former member of the Eleven during our wanderings around Homeplace, and he was always polite and cooperative despite the veneration everyone seemed to have for him. His eyes were a faded yellow, his skin loose and covered with unhealthy blotches. He looked exhausted and his voice quavered.

"Greetings, Ottrah."

"Greetings, Genni. You have walked a long way."

"The use of a conveyance is inappropriate."

"I see." A hesitation. "You do not intend to return?"

"That also would be inappropriate."

"Then allow me to assist." Ottrah took the old one's arm and began to lead him in the direction from which we just came. "There is a feeding fast-tooth not far from here."

"That is fortuitous."

Ottrah turned to Freddy and me. "Please accompany us."

I had a uneasy feeling about this. I turned to Freddy, and he placed a finger against my lips. "Perhaps later," he whispered.

So we followed the two Aelaks back along the trail to where the fast-tooth was resting after its meal. Tiny bat-like creatures were gnawing at what was left of its prey, while others flitted in and around the fearsome fangs of the hunter's open jaws.

The beast continued to ignore us, as with Ottrah's assistance Genni lowered himself to the ground and leaned against the trunk of an ancient, toppled tree. "This is good," the old one said with a grateful sigh while he looked at the satiated carnivore, "It is evident our friend can afford to wait a little while."

The fast-tooth decided to noticed us. It heaved itself erect like a man-sized frog with body armor and steel-trap jaws. Its hind legs looked powerful enough to--

I shivered.

"It will remain until needed," Ottrah said.

The old head nodded and drooped. "It is the way of things."

Suddenly I understood. I lifted a hand in protest.

"No--"

Ottrah pushed down the hand. Firmly. "You must accept. It is part of what we are."

"It's barbaric!"

Even as I regretted the outburst, Genni raised his head and smiled. Not so long ago I would not have recognized that writhing of the lipless mouth as a smile, but I had learned. "I have breathed nearly five centuries, which is far more than your short human span. So why are you offended?"

"Because it is not right!", Freddy retorted angrily, "especially with that--that--" His words failed as he gestured at the interested fast-tooth.

"It will keep me company during the few hours which remain of my life, after which it will properly process my remains. It is the termination I choose, unlike your distasteful human custom of allowing the body to rot in a box under the ground."

"But we like to honor our--" I bit my lip.

Ottrah said, "You humans honor the dead, which to us seems pointless. We honor the dying, so they know they are being honored."

I heard Freddy take in a deep breath, but he forced back whatever he was about to say.

Genni's eyes were almost closed. "Go now," he whispered. Again his head drooped.

Meanwhile, its eyes still firmly fixed on us, the fast-tooth flattened to the ground. Trying to dispel from my mind the totally inappropriate image of a puppy waiting for its dinner, I reluctantly followed Ottrah and Freddy away from this place of waiting death. It was hard not to look back, harder still not to think of that nice old Aelak reduced to something fit only for those tiny, flying scavengers.

I recalled Genni's remark about rotting in a box under the ground, and decided I would be cremated.

Frederick Degruton

Although I found it difficult to believe the fast-tooth would wait until Genni was dead, Ottrah penetrated my scientific skepticism and convinced me the beast would not act as long as the least spark of life remained in that tired old body--although what obscure sense could determine the proper moment, was beyond me. Logic on this other Earth operated according to its own peculiar rules.

I did suspect it was not by accident we met Genni when we did. Ottrah confirmed my suspicion during the drive back to Homeplace.

"It is necessary you understand we do not regard death as you do."

"We already know that," Gail said. "I just cannot understand why we had to be exposed to such a--" She waved an irritable hand. "--sad demonstration."

"You thought it was sad?"

"It was not happy!," my girl snapped.

"I admit I did not anticipate the presence of the fast-tooth. But as Genni pointed out, it was fortuitous."

"If it had not been there--"

"We would have waited of course."

I felt divorced from events, as if I was watching characters in a not very good play. Even Ottrah's casual treatment of Genni's imminent demise seemed like a line transposed from another script. Then I thought of the writer's adage 'Show, don't tell', and it occurred to me what Ottrah and the dying Aelak were doing.

Gail and I had been shown.

It was obvious we humans and our relentless search for practical immortality, were a total antithesis of the fatalistic Aelak acceptance of 'the way of things'. Although I knew most Aelaks were unaffected by the presence of two humans and the alien philosophy we represented, I was also aware Gail and I had not been brought here merely to witness one dying Aelak's part in a grand inevitability.

Ottrah, Hovarr and even old Genni (or why were we invited to witness his last walk), were using us as a lever to move a mountain.

PART TWO THE OPTIONS

Ottrah

My mate was not allowed to meet the humans until just before we embarked on the Green and Plenty. Apumin is more adventurous than I, prone to make decisions without consideration of possible consequences. So when the time came for him to be told, I took great care to explain my part in the first of the Three Options, with particular emphasis on its hazards. Yet Apumin was not discouraged. He was not even discouraged by the prospect of decades in an alien environment, with all the risks associated with a primitive mechanical technology.

When I reminded him our compatibility was based on mated life on our own beautiful world, and may not survive the stresses which will be imposed upon us and the young, his response lifted my hopes.

"You know that, and now so do I. But the survival of our kind is a great cause. How can I not be part of it?"

"There are the other options."

"True. But are their chances any better than this?"

"I do not think so," I replied sadly.

He enfolded me, as we were both enfolded by the Green and Plenty, and I knew Apumin's love would serve us well.

* * *

Frederick Degruton and the First Option

I never expected to see Geraldine Fuchs again. She had commanded the Francis Bacon, when we sideshifted the converted freighter into the other continuum and diverted the asteroid which in our continuum impacted Earth sixty-five million years ago. Gerry was later appointed second in command aboard Earth's first starship, and was already on her way toward the second planet of Epsilon Eridani when Ottrah's visit made history at the Cape.

The Gaea Messenger was barely beyond Pluto's orbit when the Green and Plenty caught up and rendezvoused. Gerry met us at the air lock as Gail, Ottrah, Apumin and I entered the command module of the five hundred meter starship. Gerry embraced Gail and me, then extended her hand to the two Aelaks, who politely returned the touch. "As you can imagine, signals from Earth have dealt with little else since Ottrah landed at the Cape."

"Is everything ready for transfer?", Gail asked.

"A stasis chamber has been prepared. The eggs can be

stored indefinitely."

"We prefer to hatch the first ten as soon as possible," Ottrah said. "The others will follow at intervals over a period of years. We must be careful."

"Not to worry, we have skilled people here. In any case--" Gerry smiled. "It will be fascinating to watch the joint development of human and Aelak children. Our first baby arrived a couple of days ago, and at least half a dozen other women will become mothers before the year is through."

I prayed her enthusiasm was representative. The three hundred colonists--who planned to be two thousand when their descendants arrived on the new world nearly a century from now--would have to adjust to the presence of up to half a hundred slow-growing Aelak youngsters who would be barely into young adulthood when the current human baby was a grandparent. I hoped Ottrah and Apumin would conceive and hatch a few of their own, if only to keep them diverted as their other charges became less dependant. Although Aelak babies require nurturing for an inordinate time by human standards, Gail and I had already experienced their natural charm. I suspected there would be no lack of surrogate parents among the humans.

I was not so sure about the two adults. The Aelak dependance on the planet of their birth is the result of millions of years of slow evolution. Even their semi-living spaceships cannot function for more than a few months away from close orbit above the mother world. So although Ottrah and her mate seemed confident newly-hatched youngsters would become conditioned to the new reality, I could not rid myself of the feeling my Aelak friends would succumb long before the expiration of a normal Aelak lifespan--perhaps even before Gaea Messenger reached the new world.

But I kept my doubts to myself as Gerry introduced us to Captain Sokolov and the other bridge officers, and then supervised the transfer of the precious eggs from the huge bubble which had attached itself to the end of the starship's extended air lock.

I was sorry Hovarr refused to leave the Green and Plenty. He also discouraged human visitors. I suppose he feared further contamination from the race whose ideas had already upended much of what had been inviolate. I was aware his expectations for any of the Three Options were even grimmer than mine, although his active support indicated they were something more than zero. I wondered what transpired between him and Ottrah before she left his ship for the last time.

It would be nothing we humans would recognize as a tearful parting--

Despite the fact they were father and daughter.

Gail Sovergarde and the Second Option

If Hovarr understood my tears as we departed the Eridani-bound starship, he did not acknowledge it. He did allow a holographic image of the huge complex of spheres and struts as we pulled away and it vanished in the dark, then listened without comment as Freddy and I discussed what was uppermost in our minds. It was just minutes before the Green and Plenty enfolded us in sleep.

"What are their chances?"

Freddy's face, suspended close to mine, mirrored my

concern. "Good I'd say. For the youngsters anyway."

"What about Ottrah and Apumin?"

A shrug of barely discernable shoulders. "They will have the hatchlings to keep them occupied, plus fellow voyagers to stimulate their interest in other things."

"I wonder how well they will get along with the colonists."

"They did with us, and you and I were not trained for compatibility."

"I suppose--" I began doubtfully.

A slow smile. "Fifty kids. Think about that."

"I would rather not, thank you. In any case--" It was then I understood the smile. "Oh, I get it. You're saying they will cram more experience into a few decades than most Aelaks in half a millennium." I allowed my own smile. "Come to think of it, it will be a pretty full life."

As I said, Hovarr did not comment. But as I drifted off to sleep, I am sure I saw an almost human satisfaction on those aged dinosaur features.

Compared with Ottrah's arrival at the Cape, our arrival was anticlimactic. As soon as we were in orbit, the Green and Plenty exuded a daughter craft which took Freddy, me and our precious cargo down to the same precise landing point at which Ottrah's daughter craft landed, released us into a light rain, then lifted and vanished into the overcast.

Hovarr and his ship were in a hurry to get home.

We were immediately driven to a preprepared hatching facility. A few weeks later, along with fifty bleating infant dinosaurs and the five young couples who would be the first of a series of surrogate parents, Freddy and I were flown to the southern Alberta ranch which was to be the closely guarded home of Earth's own colony of Aelaks.

Like the first and third options, the Second Option was a gamble. The fifty Aelak youngsters would not only be isolated from others of their kind, they would be raised by humans--as humans. In a century or so, presuming all or even only a few survived to young adulthood, they would be transported to Aelak to become the seeds of a new renaissance.

It was the theory anyway.

Whether or not it succeeded would depend to a large extent on the Third Option.

Hovarr

Home is a light in the endless dark.

Many times has my Green and Plenty returned me to Aelak with the joy of a traveller returning home from a long and difficult journey. This time however, because of my part in conceiving the Three Options and my direct participation in two of them, the joy was tempered with sadness.

When Ottrah and her mate entered the unaesthetic complex which is the human starship, I felt a loss which was unexpected. It has, after all, been many decades since my responsibility for her ceased. I surmise it is because of my contact with humans, who throughout their short lives retain an emotional attachment to their biological offspring. Yet despite the regret, I also found myself wishing Ottrah well. Although I foresee a less than normal lifespan under the

alien conditions in which she has chosen to exist, perhaps Ottrah and her mate will survive long enough to ensure the stability and future of the young ones. It comforts me to know that even if the other two options fail, and we Aelaks of the home world complete our long fall into oblivion, our species may continue to survive under another sun.

When the human male and his mate departed to their Earth with the second fifty of embryonic Aelaks, my doubts were of small account compared with the terrible urge which pulled us home. We had been away too long, and even as the daughter craft re-merged with my Green and Plenty, we sideshifted to our continuum and sped home with little thought for the Second Option.

Perhaps it will succeed, perhaps it will not. But should it succeed? I had doubts when I agreed to the option, and the doubts remain. From the moment they are hatched, fifty young Aelaks will be indoctrinated by beings not of their species, on a world not their own. Although the human male and female persuaded me the fifty could be the seed of a renaissance on Aelak, I consider it more likely they will be rejected as aberrations and forced to live in isolation, or perhaps repatriated back to the human Earth.

Of course there are many factors of uncertainty, among them being the existence of the Third Option--

Frederick Degruton and the Third Option

Our charges are a racially mixed group of fifty orphans from institutions all over the Earth. Selection was a long and laborious process, with demands which kept Gail and I from thinking too much of the fifty Aelak babies left behind at the Alberta ranch.

Whether we liked it or not (and we did not), Option Two was no longer our responsibility.

The Option Three children are bright, eager to learn, and without ties either of place or blood. Gail, myself and two other couples are their guardians and teachers. It took a lot of squeezing to get us all aboard the re-fitted Francis Bacon, but somehow we managed it and shifted to the other continuum and the Earth known as Aelak.

Although this is now our permanent home, neither Gail or I are entirely terminated from our previous professions. I do not doubt her reports will someday receive major coverage in Earth's media, and my instincts as a scientist are well served by study of the incredible accomplishments of Aelak science.

But our main task remains, which is to create a viable human community here on this other Earth. Although we are isolated in our enclave a few kilometers from Homeplace, time will see a gradual easing of the isolation as our growing youngsters intermingle with Aelaks and experience their lifestyle.

Will friendships endure as human children mature into adults while their Aelak friends remain relatively unchanged? Can Aelak conservatism be modified by exposure to the hopeful exuberance of human children and adolescents, or will it be the other way around? When the human children reach adulthood, will they remain and raise their own families here, or will they choose to return to a world they hardly remember? What will be the effect when the human-

raised Aelaks of the Second Option are introduced into the mix?

Finally, is it conceivable Aelaks of this world will someday meet others of their kind from the stars, even hear legends about a great teacher whose name was Ottrah?

I like to think so, although I will not live to see it.

PART THREE
THE HOMECOMING

Gail Sovergarde

Years later--

I just listened to the notes Freddy dictated so long ago, and could not help smiling as he ended with that oh, so logical last line.

How could he have known?

How could any of us have known?

I really do not care how it was done, although I assume it was via our food, or perhaps we ingested the nanites as we breathed. I do know I did not even begin to suspect our longevity until one of the children came to me and asked, "Why don't you grow older like us kids? Aren't grownups also supposed to grow older?"

During the first few years there never seemed enough time to worry about getting older. It took a child's innocent remark to bring me to the realization I had stopped aging. I was forty-one years old when the colony was established, Freddy a couple of years older, and John, Zhuang, Marc and Janine in their late twenties. Five years later, when twelve-year old Candice asked that question, I still did not have a single gray hair and was as fit as I had ever been. Freddy was equally healthy, and still (and happily) as susceptible to my physical charms as during those giddy days so long ago when we first set up house together.

Even our four colleagues were still--young.

I took my startling news to Zhuang Jianyu, the physician of our group. To my surprise, she was not surprised. "I wondered when someone would notice. When I discovered the nanites during a routine blood test, the Eleven asked me to keep it to myself."

I sat down. I had to. "Why did they do it?"

"I got the impression it is because they prefer not to have to deal with successive human generations during an Aelak lifetime. By the way, the children will remain unaffected until they have passed through adolescence, after which their rate of aging will slow until they remain more or less in adult physical prime."

I took a deep breath. "How--long--"

A shrug. "The nanites are self-replicating, so there is no reason why they can't continue their thing indefinitely. Who knows, we might live forever."

Forever.

Well, perhaps not quite that long. After all, the Aelak population has stabilized and even begun to show signs of a new vigor. We assume it is because of the Third Option humans among them, not to mention the not inconsiderable

contribution from the imported Aelaks of the Second Option.

Perhaps, someday, we might even know what happened to the Aelaks of the First Option.

Twelve weeks later--

'Someday' is here!

Fourteen hours ago, nearly four centuries after I last saw the starship at the start of its multi-generation voyage, the Gaea Messenger sideshifted into our continuum and assumed orbit over Aelak. It released a featureless, ovoid-shaped shuttle which decelerated, descended and landed on the outskirts of Homeplace with as little fuss as an Aelak bubble craft. Unlike one of those semi-living constructs, it had a door which hinged down and became a short ramp. A woman emerged, smiled at the gathering crowd, then walked directly to Freddy and me with both hands outstretched. She looked vaguely familiar.

"Gail Sovergarde and Frederick Degruton, I presume," she said quaintly. Her smile broadened. "My name is Nina Sokolov. I am Geraldine Fuchs' daughter."

Although Freddy and I have a lot of years behind us, we are not unflappable. "You can't be--"

"There is no exclusivity on life extension, especially when you can work with someone who has forgotten more about biotechnology than any of us ever knew." Nina gestured behind her as an elderly Aelak, stooped and frail, emerged haltingly from the shuttle.

A teacher.

An old friend.

Ottrah has returned home to take her last walk.