

Radical Acceptance

by David W. Goldman

“**Y**our problem, Mr. Karolev,” said the otter, “is angels.”
I wasn’t sure that I had heard him correctly over the hot tub’s burbling. “Angels?”

He nodded his smooth brown head. “I don’t specifically mean, of course, your *personal* problem.”

“Ah.” As I watched him duck his head underwater for a long moment, I wondered what specifically he *did* mean.

He came up for air, shaking the water from his head with a quick up-and-down jerk. The spray missed me by inches. His sleek body rolled twice, just below the water’s surface, before he settled back onto the fiberglass bench opposite me.

If two years ago you’d told me that I would be sitting in a backyard tub high above Malibu, chatting with a six-legged, tenor-voiced river otter from outer space, you would have been pitching me a bad screenplay. Tonight, though, it was just a Tuesday evening business meeting.

“It’s angels, Mr. Karolev, that stand between humanity and the rest of galactic civilization. Of all your people’s memes, angels are the most destructive you’ve invented.”

“Call me Jack.” I had assumed that I’d been invited over to discuss a business proposition. But if one of Earth’s dozen visiting otters—their species had its own name, of course, but it was very long and involved a lot of gasps and whistles; they were the ones who had suggested we just call them “otters”—wanted to talk philosophy, who was I to complain?

I asked, “Your people don’t go in for religion, then?”

His brief high-pitched chittering was an otter’s version of a chuckle. “Oh, you wouldn’t *believe* some of the religions out there! Why, among the species of the Yowsh domain alone there are over four thousand highly-subscribed belief systems—everything from absolute solipsism to a pantheon of a million omnipotent, if largely apathetic, deities.” He reached for a walnut from the large glass bowl perched on the edge of the tub; he balanced the nut upon his chest. “No, no shortage of gods and believers anywhere in this galaxy.” With another forepaw he grabbed the nutcracker from beside the bowl and cracked open the walnut. I figured he was just being polite, since he then scooped the whole nut into his mouth, shell and all.

I looked past the munching otter to the sunset, its pinks and oranges spreading wide over the Pacific far below us. I’d heard that he had purchased this house outright, with cash from the sale of some sort of otter power technology to a South American government. Though that might just have been a rumor started by Isolationists.

“How about you?” I asked. “What do you believe?”

He’d been reaching for another nut; now his arm froze and his deep brown, pupil-less eyes zeroed in on my own. “Some,” he said without a trace of his former amusement, “would consider that an insultingly personal question.”

Uh-oh. I held up a dripping hand. “Hey, no offense intended. If

I—”

But then he chittered, and slapped the nutcracker down onto the water—sending a chlorinated splash across my face, right into my mouth. “Sorry,” he said, still chittering. “But I wish you could have seen your expression!”

I coughed several times. Real jokers, these space otters; there were plenty of stories about their very *alien* sense of humor. Last year, though, I’d made some discreet inquiries of a few of the otters’ human staff (strictly business—I’m a producer, after all, and the otters are your quintessential Small But Influential Market); it turns out that the otters’ number one viewing preference is slapstick—Keaton, early Chaplin, the Three Stooges. Go spend an hour watching Earth otters in your local zoo, then tell me you’re surprised.

He cracked another walnut and popped it into his mouth. “My own people,” he said, his voice somehow unaffected by his vigorous chewing, “never invented a god meme. Just didn’t occur to anyone, apparently.”

I frowned. Yet another area where the otters doubtless looked down at us as superstitious primitives.

He seemed able to read my expression. “Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “We’ve got creation myths, tricksters, an afterlife—the whole ball of wax. Just didn’t come up with gods.”

“Or angels?”

He grinned. Otters don’t have individual teeth; just thick upper and lower plates with convoluted surfaces. It looked like his mouth was filled by a pair of dingy yellow hooves.

My curiosity had been piqued. “No gods,” I asked, “but there’s an afterlife? So who decides whether you go to heaven or hell?”

He shook his head. “Hell didn’t occur to us, either. After dying, everybody just gets reborn, more or less. In a better world.”

“Clouds and harps? Warriors and mead?”

“More like a really big water park. Also lots of food and copulation.”

I lifted my bottle of Perrier from the plastic holder that was suction-cupped to the tub’s inside wall, took a sip. The sunset had progressed into a streaky lilac phase. On either side of us a stand of pines shielded the otter’s property from his neighbors; silhouetted branches waved up and down in a soft breeze.

He slipped his head under again, then swam two fast, tight circles around the tub, avoiding me by inches. As he surfaced and settled back onto his bench, he twisted his head over his shoulder—*way* over his shoulder—toward the sunset. And said, “You haven’t asked what you want to ask.”

What he meant by that, I didn’t have a clue. But negotiating from a position of ignorance was nothing new for me. I took another sip of Perrier and waited.

“I’ve seen all your shows,” he continued. “And the new pilot, too.”

“What! How did—” Only one network had a copy of the pilot, and they certainly wouldn’t be leaking it just as we started negotiations.

He ignored my outburst. “You’re no Utopian, Jack. In fact, I doubt there’s anything we’ve told your people that you assume is necessarily true. Since we arrived, what have you produced? Let’s see...” He ticked them off on his stubby webbed fingers. “A movie where a fledgling human space empire gets into a shooting war with a devious alien federation. A remake of a mini-series in which extraterrestrials bearing gifts to Earth turn out to have a nefarious secret agenda. And a sitcom whose well-meaning but bumbling immigrants keep accidentally blowing up their suburban neighbors with inappropriate technology.” His head remained turned toward the sunset. “All in all, a body of work that any Isolationist would be proud of.”

I slid my Perrier back into the holder, and waited.

“But now,” he went on, “there’s this new series of yours. Plucky human explorers and entrepreneurs finding their way in a galaxy full of diverse species with diverse motivations. Carving out trading niches, forming tentative alliances; sometimes coming out ahead, sometimes not.” He finally turned back to peer at me over his whiskered snout. “What do you think, Jack? Are you the only Optimistic Skeptic in Hollywood? Is anybody going to pick up your new show?”

I snorted. “Hollywood doesn’t care what I believe. It’s viewers that matter.”

He grinned again.

I finally caught on. “This is why you invited me here tonight? You want to back my series?”

The otter just kept staring at me, his eyes blank as two brown marbles. “You still haven’t asked. This is the first time you’ve ever been alone with one of us. Don’t you want to ask why we’ve come to Earth?”

The conversation was spinning past me like a merry-go-round. I grabbed the latest passing horse and tried to hold on.

“And if I ask, I suppose you’ll tell me the truth?”

He shrugged, the shoulders of his three forelegs breaking the surface of the water. Which, it occurred to me, was about as credible a response as he could give to that sort of question.

When the otters first showed up in Earth orbit, they came with a plausible story. The nearest members of galactic civilization had picked up our early radio and television broadcasts, deciphered them. After a couple of decades the otters, chosen for their relative similarities to humans, were dispatched to contact us—to study our world and report back on our suitability for admission to polite interstellar society.

Like I said, plausible. But then, what else would you expect from creatures who'd been listening in on a century of our radio and television broadcasts?

"Come on," said the otter. "Just ask me."

"Fine." I shifted my position so that a pair of the tub's jets massaged my shoulder blades. Then I stared back into those eerie eyes. "Why did you come to Earth?"

He leaned against the tub's side. He regarded me for a moment. Finally, in a very serious voice, he said, "*Babylon 5*."

For at least five seconds his expression remained impassive. Then he broke into a hoof-mouthed grin.

Disgusted, I reached for my Perrier.

"No, no," he protested, waving two of his paws at me. "I'm serious! Four years of loose ends and unresolved character arcs, and then what do they do? Take the final season to *cable*! Can you imagine how *frustrating* that was for me?" He spread his paws wide in supplication. "Visiting Earth was my only option."

I didn't really want to waste more time on this, but he had annoyed me. "You couldn't have watched it on the BBC?"

"Channel 4," he corrected. He shook his head. "The last season was delayed."

"Australia, then."

"Wrong hemisphere. Our ship was approaching from the other direction."

"Fine." I toasted him with my bottle. "You crossed countless parsecs of cold vacuum to rent a DVD. Whatever."

He chittered. "Don't be like that. Look—on the trip here we each took responsibility for monitoring and summarizing different genres from the incoming broadcast stream. One of us handled news, for example. Somebody else covered drama."

"Let me guess. You did science fiction."

“Exactly. You can learn a lot about a species from its dreams and nightmares.”

Despite myself, I was starting to suspect that he really was being honest now—no matter how uselessly. “What else did you monitor, besides sci-fi?”

“Horror films. Fantasy series. Political campaign ads.”

Assuming he was still telling the truth, I wondered how much further he would go. “Okay,” I said, “now that we’ve established your *personal* motivation for landing on my planet, how about your people’s collective purpose? And I hope you won’t claim that you all came To Serve Man.”

His snout dipped beneath the bubbly water’s surface, then tilted upward to geyser an elongated mouthful of water vertically into the air, in what I took to be delight. “No, Jack—you won’t find any cookbooks on *our* ship.”

“You’ve read that story!”

“Story?” He shook his head. “*Twilight Zone*.” He paused then, and helped himself to another walnut. He chewed noisily as his eyelids slid halfway shut; he seemed to be studying me. He gave a little nod, finally, and said, “We’ve been telling the truth. Our team is here to study your world and report back, and to prepare humanity for joining the galactic community.”

Disappointed with his pat response, I let my head fall back against the tub’s edge. Above me most of the sky had gone deep blue; the horizon still glowed indigo and purple.

But there was something about what he had just said. “Prepare us?” I asked. “You mean by explaining how your society works? By giving us new technology?”

He nodded. “Adding to humanity’s knowledge is the first phase of preparation, yes.”

A shiver passed up my spine that had nothing to do with hot tub

jets. Maybe the Isolationists had it right, after all.

“There’s a second phase?”

He tossed a walnut into the air, caught it in his mouth. “Let’s talk about angels,” he said.

After all the deals I’d negotiated in my career, I knew non-nonchalance when I heard it. We had finally arrived at the actual starting point of tonight’s discussion.

I thought back to his earlier comment. “Destructive,” I quoted. “Isn’t that what you called them?”

He shook his head. “It’s the *concept* of angels that’s destructive. I mean your current pop-culture version of angels—creatures lesser than God, but greater than man. Beings who are *almost* perfectly moral and good. It’s a very old meme, one that’s infected most human religions. In some it emerges in the form of supernatural beings; in others you can see it in the original humans themselves, before a fall from grace.”

He ducked his snout for a swallow of water, then continued. “As a mere human, obviously you could never measure up to God, whether in knowledge, wisdom, power, or patience. But angels, they’re not God. People compare themselves to angels all the time—and always come up short. *I should have been more forgiving!* you berate yourself: *I should have been more like an angel. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t help myself!* Unlike an angel.”

He was reminding me of a religious show I’d surfed past a few nights earlier. “An angel? Or do you mean a saint?”

His snout lifted, as if he were sniffing my words. “Saints! Even better! What’s a saint, after all? A rare human who achieves angelic stature. In many of your religions, when a saint dies he even ascends to heaven, to serve God directly—he literally *becomes* an angel.”

“So what’s wrong with that? The saint provides an example for

the rest of us, a model.”

“Ah, but how many can ever match that model? And what do you tell yourself when you fail, as you’re virtually guaranteed to do every time you’re tested? *I should have behaved better—well, I guess I’m no saint!* It doesn’t take many times to prove to yourself that saints, like angels, are simply a different breed from you. And then, unless you are truly unusual, you quite logically *give up*. You settle for being *fairly* moral. For trying *reasonably* hard. You feel guilt over past mistakes, but it doesn’t occur to you to try and rectify them. After all, it’s not like you’re some sort of *saint*.”

I frowned. “So you’re saying—what? That our moral development is stunted because we can imagine something better to strive toward? That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

He let himself slide off the bench into the water, where he just floated near the bottom for several seconds. Why had he invited me here, really? Did he want me to air his bizarre argument in my show?

Shaking off the water as he retook his position, he asked, “Have you ever seen the movie *Lord of the Flies*? The story of how, in the absence of external forces, humans will inevitably revert to their innate savagery and evil?”

I nodded, wondering where he was headed now.

He slapped the water with his paw, hard, splashing us both. “That’s exactly backwards!” He sounded genuinely angry, his voice squeaking up an octave by the end of his sentence. “It’s the precise opposite of your actual phylogeny!”

“Our what?”

He lowered his snout to look directly at me. “Your development as a species. The history of each of your cultures. And the process that you, as individuals, repeat in your personal development.” He dropped his mouth to the water’s surface and blew bubbles for a

few seconds, apparently collecting his thoughts. Then he looked up again. “The message of movies like that is that humans will always be failed angels. But you’re *not!* You’re actually incredibly *successful*. But not angels—you’re incredibly successful *apes!* Apes who all by yourselves—without any guidance from either benevolent gods or sponsoring aliens—figured out language and agriculture and metal-working and love and morality and vaudeville. If *Lord of the Flies* told the *real* story of your species, it would show a shipwreck of illiterate savages struggling together to survive, then going on to invent epic poetry and Art Deco.”

“Also beating their children. And occasionally massacring each other.”

“Yes, yes, of course! You’re *evolving monkeys!* What do you expect? Not everyone progresses at the same rate. For every forward step there are other steps backwards, or sideways—at the individual level, random influences will always dominate. But, *as a species*, look how far you’ve come!”

I didn’t know what to say. I lifted my water bottle to my lips, but at some point I’d apparently finished its contents, or accidentally spilled them into the tub.

I studied him, this hyper-advanced space alien come to prepare my world for entrance into the greater galactic community. He lolled before me in the deepening darkness, half floating, two of his short arms pressed against the side of the tub. His snout pointed directly at me, nose twitching and head still pushed forward by the vehemence of his argument. Beads of water speckled his slick fur.

I said, “So humanity is, what, the galactic poster child for self-actualization?”

His head tipped back and he chattered loud and long. “Hardly,” he said, his voice as unaffected by his still-chirping laughter as it had been by his earlier walnut-crunching. “How do you suppose

any sentient species develops?” He shook his head, and then settled back into stillness. Once more he gazed at me over his long snout. “Unfortunately,” he said, “the development of your particular species seems to have gotten stuck. Its moral development, I mean.”

It took me a few seconds to work that out. Then I said, “You’re talking about angels again.”

He nodded. “In your present condition, we can’t recommend allowing your species out of this solar system.”

“What?!” Now *I* was angry. “As long as humanity is *stuck* on angels, we’re not morally mature enough to join your society? We’re not *good enough* for you?” I pushed myself upright on the slippery bench, so that I was looking downward toward his sprawled form. “That’s what you’re saying?”

He held up a paw. “To the contrary,” he said, slowly shaking his head. “It’s *we* who aren’t ready for *you*.”

I stared.

“Look at your Utopians,” he said. “They’ve already cast my people as the messengers of the gods, bringing light and hope to the world. Can you imagine what will happen to them once your species starts interacting with the rest of the galaxy? They’ll be the worst kind of suckers, patsies to the first fast-talking amoeba that gets its pseudopods on them. Before you know it they’ll group themselves into feuding cults, each crazily loyal to its own alien race of perfect beings. Next step: interstellar Crusades—with all the rest of us caught in the crossfire.

“Or,” he continued, “how about the Isolationists? To them we’re *false* angels. They reject our offered technology, our culture. *No thanks*, they tell us. *We’ll stick to the human way*. So where does that lead? Either to a dead-end existence stuck on your birth planet, or else to an independent human space empire. The first would be unfortunate for humanity—not really a problem, though,

for the rest of us. But a growing, antagonistic human dominion? Eventually you'll collide with the rest of the galaxy. At first the conflicts will be economic, which is disruptive enough. But sooner or later, guaranteed, we're talking out-and-out war."

The sky had grown quite dark by now. It pressed down on me, as if someone were trying to smother the Earth with an immense pillow.

"You're not just guessing, are you?" I asked. "We're not the first race you've encountered that believed in something like angels."

He sighed. "If your people don't get past this meme soon, there's going to be a fleet of big, ugly warships embargoing your planet."

I stared at him. "Embargoing...?"

"Oh, you'll still be able to launch Earth-orbiting satellites. But manned flight beyond your atmosphere—that will be discouraged. Quite, ah, *rigorously* discouraged."

I pictured spacecraft exploding and falling ablaze back to Earth; the images left me chilled despite the heat of the water in which I sat. This would be humanity's fate? To remain forever imprisoned on our one small world, while throughout the rest of the galaxy other civilizations flourished and grew?

His face held no expression that I could read. *If your people don't get past this meme soon*, he'd said.

I asked, "What's *soon*?"

He shrugged. "Not up to me. Twenty-five years, maybe? Fifty, tops."

I couldn't speak. *Fifty years* to change our race's basic understanding of human nature. Or else.

Once again he seemed to appreciate the thought behind my expression. "Actually, that's plenty of time. Once every human truly understands how much humanity has already accomplished all on its own, how all of your ethics are the product of massive, ongoing

self-improvement rather than a fall from unattainable grace, the rest will come quickly. Utopianism and Isolationism will both lose their meaning; humanity will recognize itself as simply the new kid among a galaxy of peers.”

For a second he had me. But then I shook my head. “Great. So you put out a press release. You get people like me to spread the word. Then poof—the entire world changes its fundamental beliefs. Uh-huh.”

He splashed some water onto his upper chest and started combing through the fur with his paw. “Some of your psychotherapists have a term, *radical acceptance*. Patients have to accept themselves as they truly are, not as they wish they were. Really, deeply, completely accept their actual nature. Once they’ve done that, it’s remarkable how quickly they can finally alter longstanding dysfunctional behaviors.”

“So that’s your Phase Two? We bombard the world with anti-angel, pro-monkey propaganda until everyone achieves this ‘radical acceptance’?”

He paused in his grooming. “Propaganda?” He cocked his head, as if he were surprised by my question. “No, Jack. Our techniques of memetic engineering have progressed a little farther than that. I’m not talking about some media campaign.”

“Then *what*? And then why the hell have you been telling *me* all of this, if you’re not asking me to help broadcast your message?”

“Ah.” His snout bobbed up and down. “My apologies for any confusion.” He dipped his head to take a mouthful of water, which he proceeded to gargle for a few seconds before swallowing. “I invited you here tonight because your new pilot indicated to me that you are someone who has already, if incompletely, come to accept humanity’s true nature. Which qualifies you as a subject for the initial field testing of our memetic treatment. Safety and dosage

trials, you understand?”

By now the only thing that could astound me was my earlier belief that I somehow had the slightest control over tonight’s conversation.

“A *subject*,” I repeated.

He nodded. “Once we’ve established the proper dose and ensured there are no side effects, we’ll be ready to fully deploy the treatment. We figure two years for complete coverage. Not specifically for the deployment itself, you understand. But my people have ethical constraints—we must take as much time as needed to ensure that all subjects are fully informed. As I’ve done with you this evening.”

I thought about it. “And the alternative to your treatment is a planetary embargo?”

He nodded again.

Maybe he was just toying with me, making up this entire story of warships and self-esteem treatments merely to be entertained by my reactions. Maybe in another minute an otter camera crew would jump out from under the hot tub and welcome me to Pan-Galactic Candid Camera.

But my gut said that he was telling the truth. And you don’t last as many years in this business as I have without a perceptive gut.

Even if it were all true, though, why should *I* be the otters’ guinea pig? What did the ultimate future of humanity matter to *me*? But that question answered itself; I hadn’t produced a historical, or even a Western, for years—deep down, it had never been humanity’s *past* that fired my imagination.

I took a deep breath, let it out. “Okay,” I told the otter. “I’ll do it. Do you want me to sign something?”

His head tilted to one side. “Excuse me?”

“You know, like in the hospital. Informed consent before a procedure, right?”

He stared at me for a few seconds. “Consent?” He shook his head, bemused. “*Before* a procedure?”

My eyes went wide. Wildly I scanned my surroundings. “You mean you’ve *already*—!” It was too dark to see more than a foot beyond the tub in any direction. “This *treatment*, how...?”

Calmly, he pointed to the bubbling surface of the tub’s water. “Actually,” he said, “you’re soaking in it.”

Horrified, I lifted a handful of the water into the air, let it pour from my palm. And then—like the terrified ape I was—I leapt out of the tub, landing half-crouched on the cool grass. I scrabbled for my towel, began frantically rubbing at my torso.

I was shivering something fierce, and not just because of the cold breeze that blew in from the ocean.

“Oh, come now, Jack,” said the otter. “Calm yourself. You’ve been in here over an hour—you’ve already absorbed a maximal dose.”

My rubbing slowed, ceased. Still holding the towel, my hand dropped to my side. The breeze blew over me; I felt goose bumps lift along my arms and chest.

“The treatment,” he said, “will need another half-hour or so to complete its finer adjustments. But you won’t mind, I hope, if I ask you a few questions now. Just a quick safety and efficacy screen, yes?”

I wrapped myself in the towel. I was ready to turn my back on him, march back to the house for my clothes, and drive away.

But then I recalled those exploding, falling spacecraft.

Besides, I *had* given him my permission. Even if it hadn’t occurred to him to wait for it.

The otter must have taken my silence for assent. “Good,” he said. “So, how do you feel? Any queasiness? Respiratory difficulty? Alterations in fundamental belief systems?”

My adrenaline surged all over again. Taking a quick inventory, I

inhaled deeply, exhaled. Wiggled my fingers and toes. Tried my best, despite my resurgent panic, to observe my emotional responses as I pictured the faces of recent Presidential candidates. As best I could determine, everything still seemed to behave just as I remembered. Admittedly, at the moment Isolationism did strike me as a bit less obviously idiotic than usual—but under the present circumstances I figured that didn't count. So I told him, "No problems."

"Good." In the darkness, walnuts rattled. "Now, please try to imagine a species superior to yours. Not smarter, or stronger, or more experienced. But *morally* superior. Can you do that?"

"Sure."

"*What?*" A quick scratching sound—very much like that of nutcracker teeth slipping across a rough husk—was followed by a soft, walnut-sized splash. "*Innately* your moral superiors?" he squeaked.

"Oh." I wondered whether otter night vision could detect my shrug. "No, not innately. Actually, I was trying to imagine humanity a hundred years from now."

His breath whistled as he released it. "Ah. Well, yes, fine. But how about a non-human species? My people, for example?"

I snorted. "Hardly."

"Good. Very good."

I waited. The hot tub bubbled; pine branches rustled.

Had I offended him with my last answer? I said, "Please, go on with your questions."

"Oh, I'm done. Do be sure to phone, though, if any problems arise over the next few days."

I didn't like the sound of this. "Problems?"

"Physical symptoms, emotional issues, whatever. But don't worry—there won't be any. I just have to say that."

I couldn't believe his smugness. "So that's it? No brain scans? No

electrodes measuring my subconscious responses to suggestive images? No DNA sequence analysis? You're not going to *check your work?*"

"Really, Jack, you watch too much television." I imagined him waving a forepaw to dismiss my concerns. "We *have* been doing this sort of thing for a rather long time, you know." Water splashed in the dark; a few drops sprayed against my cheek. "You're welcome," said the otter, "to tub a while longer if you like. It really can be very relaxing."

"Thanks," I said. "But I think I've been soaked enough for one night."

There was further splashing, and then his voice came from the near side of the tub. "Actually, I was hoping you could stay just a bit longer. You're now someone who can answer a question for me."

"Right. As if I—" Then I caught up with what he'd just said. "What do you mean, *now?* As in, now that you've reprogrammed my *mind?*"

"Merely the slightest rebalancing of your pre-existing belief system. Really." He spoke with a dentist's tone of calm reassurance. "Please. It's an important question. And you do look rather chilly." As I hesitated, he added, "Relax—the water won't do anything else to you."

Warships, I reminded myself. *Humanity embargoed*. I sighed, then dropped my towel and climbed back into the tub.

The water sloshed noisily from my entry; I couldn't hear or see where he was. "Does this thing have a light?" I asked.

A button clicked, and the tub filled with an eerie, pale green illumination. The otter was floating on his back toward the bench across from me, his head hidden within his torso's shadow.

While he made himself comfortable, I asked, "So how many people have you tested your treatment on, so far?"

“Actually,” he said, “you’re the first.”

I wished he had mentioned that detail a bit earlier. “Ah,” I replied, hoping that his smug confidence in the treatment’s lack of side effects was well justified. “And how many do you plan on using, altogether, for these safety tests?”

“Including you?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.” He paused, as if calculating. “One,” he said.

He chattered briefly as I stared, open-mouthed. He spread his three arms—apologetically?—and said, “Standard procedure for these situations. Locate an appropriate native, let him experience the treatment, then have him decide.”

“Decide?”

He reached for a walnut. “I did *say* that I had a question for you.”

“What—” But I cut myself off, suddenly realizing how he was once again jerking me around. The whole evening had been like this—before I had a chance to process whatever we’d just discussed, he’d distract me with yet another new idea. It was actually a negotiating tactic that I recognized; I just wasn’t used to seeing it from the receiving end.

I held up my hand. “Don’t say another word. I want a few minutes to think, all right?”

For a couple of seconds he just stared over his snout at me. Then he gave a little nod, and turned his attention to the nut resting on his chest.

I took a deep breath, released it slowly. Okay, then—for the first time, tonight’s conversation would follow *my* timetable.

I let my head fall back against the tub, and stared upward at the few dozen stars that had managed to overcome the ubiquitous city-glow. Wisps of steam rose beside me like pale green wraiths.

I tried to sift my brain for evidence of the otter’s tampering. I had

never believed in literal angels—at least, I didn't *think* I ever had. But did I really view people as *failed* angels? Well, every morning I certainly shook my head at the human stupidity and viciousness evident in half the headlines in the *Times*. Not to mention ninety percent of the articles in *Variety*.

Now, though, I found myself thinking about the *other* news stories. The ones about people risking their lives to help strangers. About researchers achieving amazing breakthroughs. About novelists, sculptors, or athletes inspiring their audiences to look beyond what they'd always accepted as human limits. Not bad, I thought, for a bunch of monkeys. Maybe the otter's words had brought me to this point, or maybe it really was just some chemicals in a hot tub, but suddenly I felt a rush of unaccustomed *pride* in my species.

But how about aliens? Since my childhood reading of comics and science fiction, I'd always assumed that aliens from outer space would be vastly superior to us in their understanding of the universe—and, yes, in their wisdom and morality. When the otters actually did arrive, their descriptions of a longstanding, peaceful, multicultural civilization spoke to a level of sanity that I had never really believed within humanity's grasp.

Now the otter intended for me to get over this admiration. And as I tried to recall my previous feelings, I realized the degree of his success.

Sure, the aliens had been around longer than us, so of course their *technology* was more advanced. But that didn't make them *wiser* than us, or even smarter. And while they had reportedly solved profound social problems that still plagued humanity—poverty, war, tyranny—it now struck me that as increasing numbers of otter-treated humans started paying attention to those *other* news stories, we'd soon prove no less

competent at getting along amongst ourselves.

I glanced over at the otter, who was idly juggling a walnut back and forth between his paws and snout. And realized that I could guess what he was going to ask me to *decide*.

I said, “You haven’t been completely honest with me, have you? About your plans.”

He snatched the nut from the air with his mouth, but didn’t chew. Silent, he faced me. The tub’s light glinted off his eyes.

“Why me?” I asked.

Still saying nothing, he crunched a few times, then swallowed. With a slow nod he acknowledged the assumption behind my questions. “Like I said, you were already close to accepting humanity’s place in the universe. But also you’re someone who’s comfortable thinking about interstellar civilizations—albeit fictional ones. And your career requires that you understand the motivations and desires of many kinds of people.”

“A unique combination, am I?”

“Not really.” He plucked a bit of walnut shell from his fur. “But you were located conveniently near me, and within our delegation I do have a certain influence.” He paused for a second, then broke into a big grin. “Also, I’m a big fan of your sitcom. That episode with the neutron bomb? Priceless!”

I had to smile. But the night was getting late. “Go ahead,” I said. “Ask me your question.”

He raised a webbed finger. “First,” he said, “you should know that we’ll be leaving Earth in a month.”

“*Leaving?* All of you?”

Nodding, he said, “We’ve learned what we need to learn about your world, and we’ve laid the necessary groundwork for future interactions.”

“But—what about those two years of fully informing the populace

about your treatment?”

He gave a three-shouldered shrug. “Nothing we can’t handle remotely.”

“You’ll be staying in touch, then?”

“No,” he said. “Not after those first couple of years. Next it will be *your* people’s turn to come contact *us*.”

“Unless we’re embargoed, of course.”

For a few seconds he didn’t say anything. The breeze rustled my hair; the otter’s slick fur glistened in the tub’s flickering light.

Finally he said, “Well, so what do you think? Should we deploy our treatment or not?”

There it was, then. The question I’d guessed was coming. The question I’d been dreading.

“It’s really up to me? You’ll follow my recommendation, however I decide?”

A nod. “That’s the procedure. Unless you’d rather we asked someone else?”

I was certainly tempted to pass on this responsibility. But only in the same way I’d be tempted to pass on an exciting but daring new script, knowing that someone else would produce it—and knowing that I’d regret that decision for the rest of my career.

But his words did raise a new concern for me.

“My role in this—will anybody ever find out?”

“Only if you decide to go public. In which case we’ll back you up, if you want us to.”

I shook my head, relieved. At least there’d be no lynch mobs in my near future.

My decision, I knew, should be easy. Humanity had gotten itself stuck; the otters’ elixir would give us the nudge we needed to get past our species-wide inferiority complex, and allow us to finally live up to our potential. Life on Earth would improve immeasurably;

humanity would be accepted into interstellar civilization. A no-lose proposition if ever there had been one.

Of course, humanity would never know whether we could have done it all on our own. Maybe I could convince the otters to keep quiet for now about their treatment, but someday the truth would emerge. How would *that* revelation affect humanity's self-esteem?

I turned to the otter. "Other worlds have been through this, right? How has it worked out for them, learning that they needed alien assistance to get past their limitations?"

He shrugged. "Even here on your planet, there are cultures that wouldn't have a problem with that. Not everyone is John Wayne, you know."

I supposed that was true. But with the newfound pride I'd just begun feeling for my species, it rankled me that we wouldn't get the chance to manage this last step by ourselves. Not that the image of humanity being forcibly prevented from leaving our solar system sat terribly well with me, either.

I wasn't getting any closer to a decision. Then it occurred to me that I was approaching my choice as if it were a *plot* problem. What if I instead thought about it as, say, a *marketing* challenge? I had a great property on my hands, after all; what I needed to do now was help the audience learn to properly desire and appreciate what I had to offer. And—I realized with growing excitement—there was a tried-and-true method for accomplishing *that*:

I needed to attract a Small But Influential Market.

I pushed away from the tub's wall until I sat upright on the edge of the bench. The breeze was cold across my dripping chest as I asked, "This business of informing everybody about your treatment—how strict are you guys about that?"

His snout lifted as he tried to sniff out where I was headed. "Well," he said slowly, "I suppose we might have some *latitude*—" he

waggled a paw from side to side—“in that regard.”

I leaned toward him. “What if I asked you to deploy your treatment—but only on, say, one percent of humanity? Scattered all over the world?”

He cocked his head. “Randomly?”

“Not entirely.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “The political capitals.”

I waved away that idea. “No. Toronto, Sydney, Bombay, Tokyo, Rome, L.A....the *entertainment* capitals. But, yes, the remainder chosen randomly, all over the globe. Could you do that?”

“And not inform anyone about what we’d done?”

I waited.

He let go of the wall. Floating on his back, suddenly he applauded loudly with all six paws.

But his voice dripped with sarcasm. “Oh, bravo, Mr. Karolev! So we’re supposed to give you tens of millions of unknowing teachers and prophets—”

“Trendsetters,” I suggested.

“—and from that starting point, humanity is going to raise *itself* to maturity?”

“If we’re capable of accomplishing that, yes. If your evolving-monkey meme can out-compete our angels.”

“And you’re not worried,” he asked, his skepticism obvious, “about those rugged individualists among you? They won’t be upset when they someday learn of our role in humanity’s development?”

I shrugged. “Over the long haul, you can’t sell people something they don’t actually want. If we end up bettering ourselves, who cares whether the initial impetus came from Mahatma Gandhi, Gene Roddenberry, or you guys?”

He floated there, most of his legs slowly treading water. Then he shook his head, and in a tone of deep disappointment said, “Well,

congratulations, Mr. Karolev. You've come up with one I've never heard before." He shook his head again. "Really, that's quite some pitch."

His reaction had leached away my former excitement. But I wasn't ready to drop this. "You *did* say you would follow my recommendations, right?"

He dismissed my question with a wave of a stubby arm. "Somehow," he said, "I don't seem to recall telling you to make up your own rules."

"But my idea—"

He stopped me with a peremptory paw—and then broke into a huge grin. "You really can be a sucker sometimes, can't you?" The hooves of his mouth glowed brightly in the tub's green light. "I *love* your idea! And I'm sure that my colleagues will, too." He paddled over and stuck out a paw. "Jack," he said, "you're brilliant! You've got yourself a deal."

I stared at his offered paw. Then—with more self-control than I'd realized I possessed—I restrained myself from hauling him up by his multiple armpits and shaking that nut-chomping grin off his pointy snout.

We shook hands. And then I let myself fall back against the side of the tub, spent.

He swam awhile, splashing quietly. After a minute or two he settled back onto the opposite bench. The nutcracker crunched, and the familiar chewing began. A few more seconds passed. Then he said, "You know, since you're here anyway...well, I had this idea for an episode of your show..."

From time to time I nodded, half-listening as his high voice rose and fell against the night's steady breeze.

Mostly, though, I was looking up at the stars.

It struck me that we were beaming an awful lot of programming

out to all those worlds. Somewhere there had to be sponsors who'd like a piece of that.



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