

IN OTHER WORDS

by Lisa Timpf

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TALL AND THIN, Mike Brownley grinned at his best friend Aubrey as he held the basketball. A quick fake to the left got Aubrey leaning, and Mike drove past for the layup.

“OK, you win this one,” Aubrey said grudgingly. “Ready for a break?”

Out of breath, Mike could only nod as he dropped into one of the white plastic chairs set up courtside just for this purpose.

“What would you give to be at those talks?” Mike asked after a few moments.

Their fathers, part of the Special Forces unit of the Confederation of Nations, were currently assigned to support the negotiations with the Galavians. The black-furred humanoid aliens had cruised into Earth’s solar system a month ago, and discussions had continued since.

“Wish I could have seen the pictures from their side,” Aubrey said with a grin. Familiar with the process both as a result of his own research and information gleaned from his dad, he knew that the first step in building a language database was to show images from each side’s planet and have individuals from each planet say out loud their word for that image. Aubrey was burning with curiosity about the images of their planet and culture that the Galavians would have provided.

“After the pictures, what comes next?” Mike asked. “I mean, I know you try to start with identifying each side’s words for the same object, but then what?”

“They’re using a special translation computer,” Aubrey explained. “After the computer identifies common words for the same objects, members of each side read literature, news stories, and so on so the computer can also develop a sense of how words are organized into sentences, how ideas are expressed. When they figure they have enough information, the computer starts translating live conversation. They use

an android linked to the computer for the face-to-face discussions; that makes it seem more personal.”

“How well do you think it will work?” Mike’s forehead furrowed.

“The computer has been shown to be reasonably accurate for Earth languages, but you’re talking about human thought patterns,” Aubrey said. “We hadn’t developed this technology yet when the Ptomians came five years ago, and everyone saw what happened then.”

Both boys were silent for a space, Aubrey thinking of his mother, a fighter pilot, who’d been a casualty in the last push by the aliens.

Concerned by the serious look on his friend’s face, Mike rose to his feet.

“Rematch?” Mike waved the ball in Aubrey’s direction.

Before Aubrey could respond, a commanding bark from Max, Aubrey’s yellow Labrador Retriever, brought both boys to attention. The dog, who had been lying patiently beside the backyard basketball court, was suddenly interested in something at the front of the house, and even the boys could now hear the hum of a hover car coming in for a landing in the driveway.

“That’ll be my dad,” Mike commented as he reached for his zip-up hoodie.

The two friends headed for the gate leading from the back yard.

Sure enough, there was the Brownleys’ silver hover car, sitting in front of Mike’s house. Dark-haired Rupert Brownley stuck an arm out of the driver’s side window to wave, while Aubrey’s dad Cole popped out of the passenger side. Just returning from work, both men still wore their military uniforms.

“Talks go well today?” asked Aubrey.

“Slow, but with the translation computer we’re making progress,” Cole said, absently running his hand through his crew-cut silver hair. “We were finished calibrating the languages a couple of days ago, so it’s coming along.” Cole’s face showed the strain of the day’s efforts. “The next two weeks will be critical,” he added. “We can’t afford the mistakes that set off the conflict with the Ptomians. We just don’t have the firepower left, nor can we afford the damage, frankly.”

Mike’s usually cheerful face was somber. He only needed to look at the skyline, recognize the gaps where the landmarks he’d known all his life were missing or damaged, to know the truth of those words.

“See you tomorrow,” he said to Aubrey with a nod as he hopped into the recently vacated passenger side of the sleek hover car.

The next day was a Saturday, but both Cole and Rupert had to work. There was no time to waste with the negotiations, and the heat from the media and the public was mounting. The sooner the two sides could come to agreement, the better.

When Rupert arrived to collect Cole, Mike clambered out of the hover car, lugging his paintball gear in a gym bag.

“Have fun, boys,” Cole called out as he boarded the vehicle. Clad in her uniform, Aubrey’s older sister, Jackie, had already climbed into the rear passenger side seat and was fiddling with her shoulder-length brown hair as she waited for liftoff. Working as a first-level runner at the talks, she too had to work this Saturday.

“We’ll be missing our third for paintball today,” Mike said with a shrug, gesturing toward Jackie, who was a crack shot. “May as well head over anyway and see who we can scare up.”

Aubrey watched the hover car lift, turn, and swing out of sight. The whole, long summer stretched ahead of them, and with all the tensions from the talks, it was clear there wouldn’t be a lot of family time in the near future. Cadets meetings had been suspended, too, with the leaders caught up in the negotiations. There’d be a lot of time to fill, Aubrey thought as he shouldered his gear bag.

He looked longingly at his family’s Goosewing II gold hover car as he walked beside Mike down the driveway. He’d just gotten his license a few weeks ago but with the fuel rationing still in place, taking transit made a lot more sense. Besides, their fathers were trying to set an example by car pooling to conserve fuel, so he and Mike ought to follow suit. Parking was always a hassle in the downtown section anyway.

Aubrey and Mike walked the short distance to the tube stop, paid their fare, and boarded. Not unusual for a Saturday morning, the tube was fairly full and they reluctantly squeezed in beside a young man who looked around their own age and close to Aubrey’s height, a good six inches shorter than Mike. The stranger was wearing a toque pulled low over his face, sunglasses—unusual for the somewhat overcast day—and a surgical mask, customary for someone in the crowded city who had a slight cough, as a courtesy to avoid infecting others.

Aubrey studied the stranger out of the corner of his eye, not wanting to stare. Odd. Now that he looked more closely, Aubrey noted that the stranger didn't just have his face shielded, he was completely covered head to toe—a scarf closed the gap between the surgical mask and his hoodie, and ill-fitting jeans covered his legs down to high-top runners. He also wore black leather gloves.

The stranger shifted position, and Aubrey let out a gasp. When the boy beside him moved, a gap opened up between the gloves and the hoodie, showing an arm covered with dense black fuzz. Aubrey elbowed Mike and jerked his head toward the stranger. Noting the same thing, Mike's left eyebrow shot up.

The stranger was one of the Galavians!

When Mike and Aubrey stood to get off the bus, the stranger rose too. Aubrey's heart beat faster. If they played this right, they might actually get to meet a Galavian, face to face!

Once they stepped onto the sidewalk, the stranger seemed uncertain which direction to go. Aubrey waited till the area around the tube stop had cleared, then stuck out his hand.

"I'm Aubrey," he said as the stranger slowly extended his own hand for a tentative greeting. "And we know who you are."

Half an hour later, Aubrey and Mike had company as they walked through the entrance of the paintball gym. The Galavian they'd met on the tube turned out to be Vrynx Vcznk, the son of the lead negotiator, Zmyd. Vrynx had decided to take an excursion from the compound where the Galavians were staying, hoping to learn more about Earth culture. He was cautious enough to wear a disguise, recognizing that not all Earth residents were receptive to dealing with the aliens.

After a brief explanation sketched out mainly through gestures and a few words, Vrynx indicated his desire to join Mike and Aubrey in their paintball game, noting that all Galavians were encouraged to become expert marksmen and markswomen from an early age. This encouragement, Aubrey and Mike gathered, had ramped up after the Galavians had suffered severe damage to their planet and population at the hands of a Ptomian invasion force.

Aubrey quickly handled the rental of the required gear for Vrynx, his mind racing as he and Mike assisted the Galavian in discretely suiting up.

Just as Aubrey and Mike made the final adjustments to Vrynx's gear, muscular Marcus Howerby, captain of the opposing team, strutted over.

"New player this week, I see," he said, sizing up Vrynx with a penetrating stare. "No matter. You'll still lose." He waved a hand dismissively as he turned to go.

"As I recall," Mike said with a sarcastic grin, "we won last week."

"Whatever," Marcus grunted. "We're ready whenever you are."

Two hours later, the boys walked out of the paintball facility, with Vrynx's street disguise firmly in place.

Aubrey's head was spinning. Not only had they won, they had thrashed Marcus and his two friends soundly, thanks to Vrynx, who had proven to be agile, quick-thinking, and deadly accurate. If all the Galavians could shoot like him, getting a treaty in place was all the more important.

"Weather is nice," Aubrey gestured to the sky. "We can walk back to the compound." He pointed to his feet. Vrynx had picked up many words in the English language, but he was far from fluent, so gestures and short phrases supported the communication process.

"Yes," Vrynx said simply. "I like that."

As they walked, signs of the Ptomian conflict were everywhere—stately trees shattered, houses with roofs blown off, abandoned storefronts.

Vrynx gestured to one of the shattered, boarded-up houses. "Our planet, damage like this also."

Aubrey and Mike nodded.

Near one of the parks that had somehow emerged from the war unharmed, a gray squirrel ran up a tree. Vrynx stopped and stared.

"Small," he muttered.

"Small?" Mike questioned. "Squirrel. Normal size for us."

"Our planet, much larger." With his hands, Vrynx sketched out an animal the size of a horse. "Fly from tree to tree. Sometimes, we ride."

Just then, Aubrey's phone buzzed. He pulled out the device, read the screen, and turned pale.

"What is it?" Mike asked.

"Message from Jackie," Aubrey said tersely. "There's trouble with the talks."

Vrynx looked directly at his two new friends. "I worry," he said. "Something wrong with words."

"Words?" Aubrey asked.

"Words not correct, sometimes," Vrynx said carefully. "I listen radio, TV, I learn some English. Machine make wrong words. Maybe problem."

Mike and Aubrey exchanged glances.

"Change of plan," Mike said. "We need to get to the negotiation chamber."

"I come, too," Vrynx sounded determined, and neither Mike nor Aubrey argued.

The three boys hurried as quickly as they could to the compound where the talks were being held. Outside the main gate, their progress was slowed as they worked their way past a crowd of protesters, who were holding signs with messages like, "No Talks Are Good Talks," and "Remember the Ptomians".

"It's the Earth First Alliance," Aubrey explained to Vrynx. "I'm sorry. Some people don't think we should negotiate with your people."

"Our planet, same issue," Vrynx said calmly.

"Don't they get it?" Mike snarled. "It was because we couldn't come to terms with the Ptomians that we ended up in a war."

Aubrey's shoulders tensed as a loud, angry buzz arose from the crowd. He crouched in a ready position, determined to defend his new friend if it came to that, then noticed that no-one was looking in their direction. Instead, they were looking up at the sky.

The stark, crisp lines of the Galavian space vessel, which had been orbiting so high up it was barely visible, were now distinct in the sky. Also distinct were a significant number of the Confederation's Cobra fighter jets, looking small as gnats beside the alien ship.

"We need to hurry," Aubrey muttered.

Pushing through the crowd, they worked their way to the building's ornate entrance, where the double doors bore the crest of the Confederation of Nations. For the sons of Cole Johnson and Rupert Brownley, both cadets in their own right, entry to the general area where the talks were being held was difficult but not impossible. Once inside the building, Vrynx took off his surgical mask and glasses to reveal his identity, and he was also allowed in.

"This way," Aubrey took the lead as the trio sped toward the viewing area.

When they arrived, it didn't take long to size up the situation. As each negotiating team made their comments in turn, the four-foot-high translation android in the middle of the table uttered a string of sounds in the other group's language.

As the talks continued, the body language of each side made it clear that anger and frustration were rising.

It took only ten minutes of this before it seemed some kind of physical conflict was brewing. Vrynx stood up suddenly.

"Different words," he said with absolute certainty. "Computer say different words."

"We need to tell someone," Aubrey said.

Before Aubrey finished talking, Vrynx was sprinting to the lower door, and from there, racing out into the chamber. Aubrey and Mike, stumbling in their haste, were right behind him.

Whenever he thought back on the events that followed, Aubrey marveled that he'd had the nerve to proceed despite the icy blue-eyed glare his father initially fixed on him. He also realized how incredibly lucky they were that the guards stationed around the room were disciplined enough to refrain from shooting when the three boys burst into the room unannounced.

While Vrynx talked urgently to his father, Aubrey and Mike told Cole, Rupert, and the other members of the Earth negotiation team about Vrynx's suspicions.

Fortunately, unshakeably calm Mbana, nicknamed Mab, had been selected as the chairperson for the proceedings. The tall, solidly-built Afro-Caribbean had seen a lot in his sixty years—including a five-year stint on the lunar colony—and was prepared to give the boys the benefit of the doubt. Ever observant, he too had noted the

increasing tension in the room and this, at least, would provide an explanation for why things were going so wrong, despite good intentions.

“I suggest we look into this matter,” he said. “Let’s declare a recess and get started again tomorrow.”

To avoid any risk of further misunderstanding, Vrynx translated this message for the Galavians. At the same time, the translation android interpreted what Mab had just said.

The Galavians turned as one to stare at the android.

“My idea right,” Vrynx said after a brief pause. “Computer said, ‘We have no common ground’—not what you said at all.”

Amid the hubbub that burst out in the chamber in two languages after that comment, Rupert and Cole exchanged glances.

“We need to get to the bottom of this,” Rupert snapped. “I’ll get my team started.”

Too anxious to go home, Aubrey and Mike hung out in the chambers while Rupert and Cole sped off into the labyrinth-like building. After some heated discussion with his father, Vrynx drifted over to join them.

“He ask our ship to move back into space,” Vrynx told Aubrey.

“If we can’t trust the computer, what now?” Mike asked worriedly.

“We need to work the old fashioned way,” Aubrey commented thoughtfully. “We’ve been relying on a machine to translate for us, but we may be better off making sure we truly understand each other.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re good at languages,” Mike snorted.

“Aubrey right,” said Vrynx. “Start at beginning. Truly understand. Better.”

“How did you pick up English, anyway?” Mike asked.

“Listen radio waves. My hobby,” Vrynx smiled.

“Oh, like a ham radio operator?” Mike said.

“You call me pig?”

“No, ham radio operator means someone who works with radios as a hobby,” Mike replied.

Vrynx's shoulders rose and fell in a sigh. "Many confusions," he said, raising his hand to his head.

It took Rupert's security team three hours to track down the details, but it soon became clear that the garbled translation was no accident.

"Looks like the work of the Earth First Alliance," Rupert explained to Cole and the other Earth leaders. "They hacked into the program and set it up to make the translation increasingly insulting and divisive."

"Their motivation is clear, then," Mab commented.

"More to it than that," Rupert said. "We've suspected for some time that the Alliance is actually linked to the Ptomians. They most of all would want to ensure the various other civilizations don't join forces."

"Why would anyone from Earth support the Ptomians, after what they did to us?" Mike's voice shook with anger.

"Everyone has their motivations," Cole explained. "Their families may have been threatened. They may have been promised things. We don't really know at this point."

"What we do know is that the talks have to start from the beginning—without machines this time, so we can be certain," Rupert said. "It'll need more manpower, and be slower, but it's the only way."

"Well, boys, looks like the cadet force will get put to work," Cole told Mike and Aubrey. "We'll need to cooperate with our guests at all levels, and that includes getting to know as much as we can about their culture."

Mike and Aubrey exchanged grins with Vrynx.

"You know what this means," Mike said, once the two were on their own.

"Not much spare time," Aubrey groaned, pretending to be upset.

"No, it means we have a new hobby, when we can find a few minutes," Mike said, pausing for effect. "Riding lessons."

"Whatever for?" Aubrey rolled his eyes.

"For when we get to see those giant flying squirrels in person."