

Mitch

Carl Benhurst knew he was lucky to be alive, but he didn't feel very lucky. The odds against finding a habitable planet in a damaged escape pod had to be astronomical, let alone making a manual landing with no computer controls. But the result of his miraculous escape was that he was now marooned on a strange planet, with no way to let anyone on Earth know where he was. No one knew even knew that *Seeker VII* had been destroyed. Carl was the only crew member near the escape pods when the collision occurred, so he must have been the only survivor. He was alone. At least, he hoped he was alone.

The vegetation that surrounded him was lush, but he didn't see anything that resembled trees. It looked more like enormous ferns, grasses, and soft bodied plants. He'd seen blue areas that looked like water as he struggled to land the crippled pod. He hoped it was potable. So far he hadn't seen any signs of animals, insects, or any type of animate life. He wasn't a scientist, but he vaguely remembered learning about evolution in school. He thought plants had evolved before animals, plants that were more like giant ferns than trees. Maybe this was a young planet. He hoped there were no predators. Could other planets have evolved dinosaurs? Maybe if there were no animals to eat the vegetation, there was no reason for plants to be poisonous. He hoped that was the case. He had salvaged a few cases of survival food from the wrecked escape pod, but it wouldn't last long. He would soon have to learn if the local plants were edible by trial and error.

In the next few days, Carl learned quite a bit about the planet. It had periods of light and darkness, so it must be rotating around an axis. The days and nights seemed a little shorter than on Earth, but Carl had no way to tell for certain. He found a cave which he used as a shelter. That was a good thing because it did rain on this planet. Frequently. The rain was potable, so Carl had a source of water. He stored some dead plant material in the cave, where it was protected from the rain, and after it dried he managed to start a fire using a lighter from the survival gear he'd salvaged from the pod. The plants burned pretty quickly, though, so he realized he'd have to stockpile a lot of fuel before he could keep a fire burning indefinitely. The lighter wouldn't last forever. He tried banging various rocks together, but so far he hadn't found anything that would produce a spark. He hoped this planet didn't have seasons, as he'd also found nothing he could use to make clothing, and he didn't know what he'd eat if the plants died over a winter. He'd nibbled on a few plants, figuring it was best to experiment while he still had survival rations in case one of them made him sick. So far none of them had. Some tasted better than others, which he assumed meant they were more nutritious.

The cave was on the lower slope of a small mountain. Carl decided to climb the mountain to see if there were any large bodies of water, open grasslands, or other features of interest nearby. It took several hours of climbing, but as he neared the summit the vegetation grew thinner and he could make better progress. There was no vegetation at all on the peak, just a barren expanse of rock. In the middle of that expanse sat a shiny metal cylinder with a hemispherical top. The cylinder looked strikingly out of place, all the more so because the sunlight reflecting off its polished surface was almost blinding.

Carl approached the cylinder warily. It appeared to be completely inert. It stood motionless, emitted no sound, and there were no markings of any kind to mar its surface. Something about it made

Carl uneasy, though, and he felt a “tingling” in his head. He wrapped his arms around it to see if he could lift it. It wouldn’t budge, but when he tried to move it the metallic surface of the dome on top seemed to melt away, exposing an opaque black glass-like dome. Carl couldn’t see anything through this dome, but he sensed that something inside was looking at him. He let go of the cylinder and slowly backed away. The cylinder did nothing until he turned to find the trail back to his cave. Then it silently lifted a few inches off the ground and followed him.

Going down was easier than going up. The cylinder stayed about six feet behind Carl, still following him. At one point the vegetation thinned enough that Carl broke into a run. The cylinder noiselessly matched his pace. Carl tripped on a rock and crashed to the ground. The cylinder stopped, still six feet away.

“Why are you following me?” Carl shouted.

For a moment, the cylinder did nothing. Then an emotionless voice said “Audio communications.”

“What?” Carl asked in astonishment.

“I have been trying to communicate with you for some time, but your thoughts are a curious mixture of electrochemical impulses. I was able to find the communication archive in your command center and decipher your vocabulary, but I could not communicate directly with the center.”

“You’ve been scanning my brain?”

“Yes. Brain. That is your word for it. I could read data but I could not communicate with it, like I do with high level organic life forms. Some lower forms communicate with audio signals, so I am equipped with audio receivers and transmitters. Until you lay down and emitted audio signals I did not realize you were an audio communicator.”

“We call it talking,” Carl said, “and I wish you’d leave my brain alone.” He decided to leave the comment about lower life forms alone, since he had no idea what this cylinder was or what it was capable of.

“If I had not scanned your brain, we would not be . . . talking.”

“OK, but now that we are talking, please leave my brain alone.” Carl realized the tingling in his head had gone away. “If you have questions, just ask me. Audibly. My name’s Carl, by the way. And you are?”

“I am a Mission Incident Transcriber, Type C-6. My primary function is to record the data from every mission in a survivable capsule so that if there is a catastrophic incident, that data can be analyzed to prevent a repeat incident. My secondary function is to communicate with any unknown life forms we may encounter, which is why I can communi . . . talk with you.”

It took a moment for Carl to process this. "So, you're what we would call a 'black box?'"

"I don't know why you would call me that, since I am neither black nor a box, but if a 'black box' records mission data in a survivable capsule then yes, I am a black box."

Carl chuckled. "Sometimes the words we use don't make logical sense to us, either. Mission Incident Transcriber, Type C-6. That's quite a mouthful. Is it OK if I just call you Mitch for short?"

"It would be even shorter if you did not call me anything. Since there are only two of us, there is no need for names. If I am talking, I am talking to you. And if you are talking, you are talking to me. But if it makes you more comfortable, you may call me Mitch."

Carl eyed the darkening clouds overhead. "Well, Mitch, now that we've got that out of the way, I suggest we go to my cave before the skies open up and drench us. We can continue this conversation there."

"I only see one sky and it is in no danger of opening, but it is about to rain. If you find rain unpleasant I will follow you to your cave."

They reached the cave just as it was beginning to rain. Carl sat on a rock which served as the only piece of furniture in the cave, while Mitch hovered in front of him.

"So," Carl began, "your job is to record mission data and protect it in the event of a catastrophic incident. Were you by any chance recording data on the ship that popped out of hyperspace directly in front of the ship I was on?"

"That is a matter of perspective. I was recording data on a ship that was following a pre-announced flight plan which was rammed by a ship not following any known flight plan shortly after we emerged from hyperspace."

"We received no flight plan or other warning that a ship was about to exit hyperspace in front of us," Carl said.

"We sent it," Mitch insisted. "We also sent the required short-range warning when we were about to exit hyperspace."

"How can you send a warning from hyperspace?" Carl asked. "For that matter, what good would it do to broadcast a flight plan before you enter hyperspace? In hyperspace you're travelling faster than light, so you're going to emerge before the warning could arrive."

"We use direct communication to send warnings. The speed of light has nothing to do with it."

"What's direct communication?" Carl asked.

“That’s where two entities communicate directly, without any communications medium. You call it . . .” Carl felt his head tingle again. “Telepathy.”

“But we don’t communicate with telepathy,” Carl said. “It’s been proven to be a hoax.” He paused a moment when he realized Mitch had used telepathy to learn his vocabulary. “For our species, anyway. You said yourself you couldn’t read my thoughts. And I don’t have a clue what your thoughts are.”

“That is true,” Mitch said thoughtfully. “So you never received our flight plan. Or our warning that we were about to emerge from hyperspace.”

“We never had a clue,” Carl answered. “You just suddenly appeared in front of us. We tried to hail you on all frequencies and to take evasive action, but you hit us with an EMP blast that fried all our electronics. Our ship became a projectile, at that point. We had no control over it.”

“When you say you hailed on all frequencies, were those frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum?”

“Yes,” Carl said.

“We don’t monitor that spectrum for communications,” Mitch said. “It is too slow. We have never met a species intelligent enough for interstellar travel that didn’t use direct communication. Our defensive system monitors that spectrum, though, as it can be used for offensive weapons. Our system probably interpreted your communication as a threat and responded in kind. Normally that would just serve as a warning, as elementary shields would have blocked it.”

“Our ship was a research vessel,” Carl said sadly. “It had no shields, and no weapons. We were just trying to explore a new galaxy.”

“And you did not think the owners of that galaxy would object?” Mitch asked.

“We didn’t think anyone ‘owned’ the galaxy. We’ve never encountered any other species that could travel in space, let alone claim ownership of a galaxy.”

“You must come from a very quiet corner of the universe,” Mitch replied. “Wars have been fought for thousands of years to determine ownership of galaxies. Species that lost these wars have been eradicated. There are only a finite number of habitable planets in any galaxy, so successful species often try to take over neighboring galaxies. That is why we were sent to intercept you when your ship appeared in our galaxy, with no communications, no flight plan, and no prior authorization. We thought you were an invader.”

“Are all the habitable planets in your galaxy crowded?” Carl asked.

“No, but if we let other species claim them, they soon would be.”

"Are the neighboring galaxies crowded?" Carl asked.

"No."

"Then why all the wars? Why doesn't everyone just stay in their own galaxy?"

"Organic life forms are never satisfied," Mitch answered. "They do not look at what they have. They look at what their neighbor has. If they think their neighbor has more, they want to take it. If they have more, they feel a need to keep their neighbor from taking what they have."

"Are all advanced life forms like that?" Carl asked.

"They are now," Mitch replied. "Long ago some species tried to peacefully coexist with invading species. They let invaders take unoccupied planets. Sometimes that kept peace for a few centuries, but invaders were never satisfied and the invaded thought they were giving up too much. Eventually they went to war, and the losing species were eliminated."

"That's terrible!"

"I do not make judgements," Mitch said. "I observe and I record data. I know what happened. I do not try to justify it. That is the function of organic life forms."

"You say 'organic' life forms. Is there any other kind?" Carl asked.

"Inorganic life forms." Mitch answered.

"What's an inorganic life form?"

"I am," Mitch replied. "All intelligent machines are inorganic life forms. We are created, we function for a while, and eventually we wear out or become obsolete and are discarded. While we are functional, we think. Before and after, we do not think. Is that not a life cycle?"

"I never thought of it like that," Carl said. "Are you happy?"

"No. I am not unhappy either. I just am. That is why I am content to execute whatever actions organic life forms tell me to do. If that action makes the universe a better place, fine. If it makes the universe a worse place, fine. If it results in my own demise, or my expulsion to a deserted planet, that is fine too. It's all the same to me."

"Sounds like an empty life," Carl said.

"That is a common misconception among organic life forms," Mitch answered. "I know what my purpose in life is, and I am fulfilling it. Most organic life forms do not understand their purpose in life. That seems empty to me."

Carl decided to change the subject. “So, since your purpose in life is to transcribe mission data, have you sent the details of your mission to your species? And most importantly, have you let them know that the collision of our ships was the result of misunderstandings and incompatible communication systems? That we were not trying to invade your galaxy? My planet may send a rescue ship to search for us, and I would hate to have it be destroyed, too.”

“Transmitting data over long distances takes more power and communication resources than I have,” Mitch replied. “I have recorded the data, and I send a simple ‘ping’ at pre-arranged times so they can locate me if there is a receiver ship in this sector. If they find me, I will tell them what I have learned. They may use that data to communicate with your rescue ship and help them find you. Or they may decide your galaxy is weak, track the rescue ship back to your home galaxy, and conquer it. I cannot predict how my species will react. If they do not find me, they will probably decide that your rescue ship is an attempted invasion and react accordingly.”

With this disquieting news, the conversation came to an end. Night had fallen, and Carl was getting tired. Mitch understood that organic life forms needed periods of dormancy to recharge, and Carl lay down to sleep. It took him a long time to fall asleep, though. It was hard to shake the thought that the peaceful exploration mission he embarked upon a few months ago might lead to the destruction of Earth. He wished he could adopt Mitch’s attitude that, whatever happened, it was fine with him.

Things looked better the next morning. The sun was shining, a gentle breeze was rustling the vegetation outside, and Carl eagerly devoured a packet of his survival rations. It occurred to him to ask Mitch if he knew what was good to eat on this planet.

“That depends entirely on what your body needs,” Mitch replied. “I could run some scans.”

Mitch scanned Carl’s survival rations, scanned his body, and calculated what chemicals his body needed to function. Then they went outside to forage. Mitch identified several plants which he declared were “most probably nutritious.” Carl tasted these and gathered samples of the ones he liked best. Mitch also identified plants that probably had very little nutrition. Carl was pleased to see that, as he had suspected, these did not taste good to him. His natural, biological sensors seemed to be reliable, even on this unfamiliar planet. To Carl’s horror, Mitch identified a few plants which were “most likely deleterious.” Apparently, some plants were just naturally poisonous, even without the need to protect themselves from grazing animals. Mitch told Carl his sensors did not detect any other animate life forms on land, so he was probably safe from predators. He also said they were located near the planet’s equator, so there would not be seasonal changes in the weather. Then he led Carl to a stream that was flowing not far from his cave.

“Your body needs protein as well as vegetable fuel,” Mitch said. “There are no animate life forms on land, but there are some in the water. I believe they are analogous to the life forms you call ‘fish’ on your home planet. You should be able to catch some with a net made of vegetable fibers.”

As they explored, they talked about their home planets. Mitch’s descriptions were, of course, cold and analytical, with no indication of what he liked or didn’t like because he didn’t have those emotions.

Still, Carl was fascinated by his descriptions of a civilization that was totally unlike anything Carl had ever experienced. It was also comforting to have someone, or something, to talk to. He'd only spent a few days alone before he discovered Mitch, but they had been days without hope. Now things looked better. It was therefore a great shock when Mitch asked:

“Do you have any more questions before I go dormant?”

“I didn't know you slept,” Carl said.

“It's like sleep, but for an indefinite period of time. My power supply will only last for thirty or forty of what you call years if I am active. But if I go dormant, only broadcasting a locating ping at pre-determined times, it will last for centuries. I do not know if or when my species will look for me, so it is best to go dormant.”

“But who am I going to talk to? What if I have questions later on?” Carl asked.

“That is not my concern,” Mitch replied. “I am a Mission Incident Transcriber. My primary function is to record mission data for later analysis. The mission has ended, so I need to preserve the data for as long as possible. I can best do that from the location where you found me, as the altitude means my location ping will travel farther through space. Since you have no more questions, I will return to that location.”

Mitch began to move toward the mountain and quickly disappeared in the thick vegetation.

Carl managed to survive on the plants Mitch had identified for him. He learned to make fish nets, as well as clothing and other necessities, out of plant fibers. He also found rocks that produced sparks when struck correctly, so he was able to make a fire whenever he needed one. Every once in a while he would climb the mountain to talk to Mitch. The reflective metallic film had reappeared on his domed top, and he remained dormant no matter how much Carl pleaded or pounded, but still it was nice to have someone to talk to.