

EVERMORE--P REVIEW

EVERMORE: A P REVIEW

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# EVERMORE

a novel by

Michael Casher

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ONE

THEY HAD SUMMONED HIM and there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't even know he was being called upon. They just put the notion in his head and he was *there*. That's why Jack Rand turned up in a farmer's field on a cool Wednesday night in September, in just his boxer shorts and a T-shirt. He was just about to call it a night when he suddenly got the bright idea that looking for shooting stars out in Miller's Field was about the coolest thing he could possibly do right then. Sleep would wait. Work could wait. Dressing was not necessary. Be there or be square, so to speak.

Of course none of these ideas ran through Jack's head in so many *words*. It was all spontaneous, like walking down the street one day and suddenly you find yourself in a store looking at stuff. It just happens. You may as well be an observer watching yourself. Your brain takes a vacation and you spend forty bucks on stuff you don't need.

So there he was, two miles outside of Evermore, standing in the middle of an old landing field that no plane had touched down on for fifty years, staring at the night sky with child-like

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wonder. His old unlaced sneakers were wet with dew and the soles were too thin for traipsing over the rocks and stones that covered the ground. It was only fifty-five degrees, which was perfectly normal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny Plateau this time of year at eleven o'clock at night. But Jack didn't mind it or the dampness that started to permeate his meager attire.

All he could do was stare at the star-filled sky, searching for something, but he wasn't sure what. Feet wet and cold, bare arms and legs covered with goose flesh, he was feeling perfectly okay in his underwear in some field off a dirt road two miles from home, in the middle of the night.

He saw nothing but stars.

"Snap out of it asshole," a raspy voice said.

Jack was no longer standing in Miller's Field. He was seated on a metal table in a metal room and it was warm like the inside of his little bungalow back in Evermore. There were no windows or doors. Or *walls*. The ceiling, when he looked at it, was a silver-gray and became the silver-gray floor when he looked down and it left him feeling like he was in some kind of bubble made of aluminum and the dim white light seemed to be coming from the aluminum itself.

"I said snap out of it, Earthface." Again the raspy voice, from nowhere, only louder.

Jack looked over his right shoulder. Nothing. Then over his left shoulder. Ditto. Nobody. Then he looked straight ahead again and there it was. A very mean-looking old man's or old woman's face on an emaciated body without a stitch of clothing on whatsoever. The face had no ears and no hair. The entire body and head were a pinkish-gray and looked like a burn victim that had totally healed but all the scars remained. It stood about six

feet tall and had arms that hung to the knees. There were no genitals.

"Like what you see, country boy?" the creature asked, but this time the voice was not the same raspy, normal-pitched voice that had brought Jack out of his lethargy, but a kind of teasing, young *girl's* voice, snide and cruel. "Oh Christ, it's pissing itself," said the girl voice.

Jack was indeed pissing himself. He was sitting in a puddle of it. It ran out of him like a pent-up flood over the cold metal table and onto the floor with a drip drip urgency that Jack could hear and smell. It smelled like fear.

"Pee You," came the girl voice again and a tiny scarred nose turned up. "Whatever shall we *do* with such a pisspot as *you*?"

Long, thin, scarred fingers fluttered to the rhythm of the words. Tiny rodent eyes widened to the size of walnuts, black as coal and shiny. This *creature* was mimicking some type of southern female that Jack had heard before, somewhere, sometime in his life. It was the voice of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*. This thing, this hideously-healed burn victim from some nightmare he must be having was *reveling* as Jack sat in cold piss and shivered like a boy suddenly confronted by the Bogeyman.

"Wwwwhat the hhhhell are *you*?" Jack asked the *Thing*. No. He pleaded. It was a boy's cry for help more than a man's request for information.

"Oh, Fiddle Dee Dee!" said the creature, putting its long, ugly hands together as if to pray but, instead, it tapped out a polite yet perverse applause that seemed to ask for an encore of pissing, shivering and pleading from the pathetic Jack Rand.

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Jack slowly, ever so deliberately and desperately controlling his fear and voice, formed a normal sentence. "Who the hell are you?"

"Easy, Earthbrain," came the raspy voice back again. The creature had dropped its Scarlett O'Hara impersonation for a sinister demeanor that had Jack forcing control of his fear and bladder again. "You passed the test after all," it told him. "I wouldn't have believed it, myself. But, then, the Learned Elites are always right." The creature gave Jack a measured look of approval, then withdrew backwards until its ugliness disappeared into and through the metal floor/ceiling/wall and was gone.

Jack sat dumbfounded but alert in the cold puddle of urine, forcing deep and controlled breaths. Then a sound like muted metal chimes came from his left and an opening appeared in the room in the shape of a rounded door. A human form appeared in the entrance and stepped forward cautiously as the opening closed with the same dull chiming.

With quickened steps, the being walked toward Jack to whom a sudden calmness had come, as though he was being reassured that everything was all right. Notions and ideas were pouring into his head in the form of...*feelings*. Astonished by the sensation, he asked himself, *Where is this stuff coming from?*

Who or what it was that slowly approached him was in a way saying things to him but Jack didn't hear anything. There were no words to hear, out loud or in his head, but the thing that came closer was undoubtedly trying to communicate something to him, something important.

Something *extraordinary*.

"Please forgive Unim." It was a man's voice. Smooth, kind, *American*. "He hates Earth and everything on it and would have

enjoyed killing you most horribly." The being paused and stepped directly in front of Jack. "But he knows with a certainty that I would not have allowed that."

A human Caucasian male about forty years old extended his right hand to Jack. The man was handsome and about five-ten, had dark green eyes and jet-black hair cut in a contemporary short style. He was wearing a gray plaid flannel shirt, blue jeans, and on his feet were square-toed cowboy boots.

"I am Zhorin. You are a guest aboard our starship, *Luminer*." He smiled and showed perfect white teeth and tiny smile lines beneath his green eyes.

"I don't feel like a guest," answered Jack, "I feel like a goddamn dog in a veterinarian's office." He stood up and looked down into Zhorin's model-human-male face. "I went out to look at the stars and suddenly I'm here, pissing myself and being insulted by some mummy man from hell. And now you tell me I'm your goddamn *guest*?"

Pee dripped from Jack's soaked boxer shorts onto the floor. His hands tightened into fists as he choked back tears of outrage and retreated a couple of steps as if ready for a fight. Jack looked fiercely at Zhorin who hastened to make his explanation.

"Jack Rand," said Zhorin, folding his arms onto his chest the way a father might do before delivering a stern lecture to an errant child, "you have been selected for an experiment that will be..."

"*Selected?*" said Jack, stung by Zhorin's glibness. He put up his dukes like a prizefighter. "Don't touch me, you prick!"

Zhorin instinctively stepped back a pace or two. His people were always surprised at how quickly Earth humans could express anger out of fear and how willing they were to fight.

Zhorin disliked this about Earthlings but admired it at the same time. Still, it would take some getting used to. The labs, the classrooms, all the teachings of the Learned Elites could not prepare him for such a confrontation. He would have to rely on his own human instincts as well as his schooling and specialized assignment training not to fail with this Earth human called Jack Rand from Evermore, Pennsylvania, United States, Fermia. He was far too important to the Mission.

"Please, Jack," said Zhorin, holding up his right hand in a halt signal, "I can and will explain everything, believe me. We mean you no harm. In fact, we brought you here because we...and others...need your help."

"My help?" replied Jack. He put his fists down. "How do you know my name?" He looked his captor sincerely and squarely in the eyes.

This change in Jack's mood and demeanor once again took Zhorin aback. These so-called *Earthlings*, these First-Time mortals, were truly amazing and everything the Learned Elites had taught. He wondered how anyone could fail to be amused by such creatures.

"Zhorin, is it?" asked Jack, trying to get an answer to his initial question.

"Yes. Zhorin. You can call me Zhor, if you like. I understand you Earthlings -- or Fermians, as we call you -- give nicknames to your friends."

"Is that what you are, *Zhor*?" asked Jack sarcastically, "my goddamn *friend*?"

Again, a change of attitude, Zhorin thought. There appeared to be no limit to the range of emotions and behavioral stances these Fermians could adopt. This was not going to be an easy assignment for him and his crew.

"That's correct," Zhorin replied with schoolmaster directness. "Whether or not you believe it." Then he added, "And whether or not you like it."

Jack pondered over the firm tactic his captor had adopted all of a sudden. An alien from somewhere in outer space who looked like some guy you might see at the mall was standing right in front of him, in a spaceship right out of a sci-fi flick, giving him some kind of ultimatum. *Jesus*, thought Jack, *I'm being told to get with the program by a goddamn bodysnatcher*. This Zhorin obviously had the upper hand for now, Jack conceded to himself, so it was probably best to play along with him and see where all this was headed.

"Well *Zhorin*," said Jack, pausing just enough to notice the other's resigned smile at being beaten on the topic of friendship, "how is it you know my name?" Jack forced himself to be calm and patient. Otherwise, his instincts told him, he would never see Miller's Field or his home in Evermore again.

He had been abducted by extraterrestrials, just like those poor saps he had seen on daytime talk shows and one-hour specials that aired after prime time, people no one seemed to believe except other poor saps like them. An *abductee*. Christ, he hated that word. He did not want this. But he had to play along for now.

"We've been studying you. And," added Zhorin, anticipating Jack's next question, "we are not from Fermia, as you may have guessed."

"Fer-*mee*-a?" Jack had never heard of that planet, or star.

"Fermia," explained Zhorin, "is Earth. That's what your planet is called in the Galactic Registry. It was named in advance after Enrico Fermi, your father of nuclear fission, long before there was life down there or, I mean, *here*." When Zhorin said "here"

he gestured with his right hand to one side of the metallic room and suddenly there was Earth, a massive blue, brown and white sphere revolving ever so slowly beneath them.

"Jesus!" yelled Jack, jumping back in fear of falling out of the huge picture window that magically replaced the dimly glowing aluminum-like wall that had been there before.

"Relax," said Zhorin, "it's only a window, so you can't fall out. This vessel's shell is constructed of *Translum*, a metal with at-will transparent properties that allow outviews for occupants whenever necessary."

A stunned Jack stumbled backward and sat down abruptly on a metal chair.

"I was just going to suggest that," said Zhorin with a sympathetic tone of voice. "You're going to be here for a few hours, listening mostly, so you may as well be comfortable." He gestured again with his right hand and the window on the world returned silently to the solid-looking substance it was before.

"Look..." Jack remained seated as he protested.

"You have nothing to fear," interrupted Zhorin, with a sigh, "But have no illusions about this. We have you. And we are in charge."

Jack shot his captor a look that said, *Now your true colors are showing.*

Sensing renewed hostility, Zhorin continued with a stepped-up pace.

"We have you...for now, that is. We are a team of human and non-human scientists from other worlds. He watched Jack's face pale at this remark. "And we have been given permission, the *authority*, to collect you and others for a mission of vital importance to this galaxy." Zhorin watched Jack carefully for any changes in temperament but Jack remained a thin white

ghost with slightly trembling lips, seated and ...*submissive*. "We are not evil," Zhorin continued, "and we are not mad or whimsical or vindictive. We are bound by cosmic responsibility to seek answers concerning the source of Life, itself."

Zhorin waited for Jack to say something but he just sat there, his head slightly bowed as though pondering his wet crotch. He looked like someone who had just heard the pitch of a life insurance salesman and was now pondering over options and premiums.

"Are you comprehending me?" asked Zhorin.

Jack slowly rose and put his hands on his hips. Why his head was suddenly clear and his thoughts rational in a situation like this he couldn't say. He was not scared anymore. Nor did he disbelieve any of this. He did not think he was dreaming or unconscious or dead. It was crystal clear to him. He had, in fact, been kidnapped by aliens -- humans and other creatures from another world. No, other *worlds*. Zhorin had been quite specific about that. And these people wanted his help because Earth was in some kind of trouble or something. They had not harmed him. He was not bleeding or in any kind of pain. There had been no medical experiments, no needles or probes, no Amazon women demanding his sperm. Zhorin didn't appear to be lying to him and, in fact, had been rather kind and patient, like he was right now, while waiting for an answer. Besides, he had never seen surroundings like this before and certainly, *never*, had he ever seen or even imagined a living creature like the scarred and sarcastic Unim.

"Yeah," Jack finally said, "Got any dry clothes for me?"

"Follow me," Zhorin beckoned with a wave. "For a moment, I really thought you were going to give me a hard time."

"This is incredible," Jack confided in him. "You know, I've always believed in life out there."

"We know." Zhorin put a fatherly hand on Jack's shoulder and Jack let him do so as they approached the edge of the room.

"You're going to see and do extraordinary things, things you never dreamed of, or even thought of before," Zhorin said. He stopped just short of hitting his head on the edge of the metal room when Jack once again heard the musical sound of muted metal chimes and a human-sized portal appeared for them to walk through. Zhorin stopped abruptly and looked Jack squarely in the eyes as he held both his shoulders. He said, "If, after you have heard our sales pitch and you decide not to buy our offer, you will be free to go. As if nothing had happened."

"With a part of my memory erased, right?" added Jack.

"Right." Zhorin was beginning to like this thirty-year-old nobody from Evermore, Pennsylvania, USA, Fermia.

"And if I accept?"

"You'll still be home for breakfast," Zhorin offered.

"OK," Jack said, "Sell away. But I'm a pretty shrewd customer."

"Right now you're a pretty wet one. Let's get you cleaned up before you meet the rest of the crew."

After the portal chimed shut Zhorin led Jack down a circular corridor that had similar architecture to the room they just left, the same look of dimly-glowing aluminum that played tricks on his eyes whenever he searched for walls and floors. The metal appeared to flow with his vision so that every part of it looked like every other part. Jack gave up on this because the effect was slightly dizzying. He reached out to touch a surface at shoulder height.

"Please don't touch anything with your hands," warned Zhorin. "The inner ship is constructed of a metal called *Fluidlum*, a luminous element with semi at-will properties, also not found on your Earth. It would rank rather high on your Periodic Table of Elements if it were known, with rather huge gaps between it and your highest ranking element now." He paused to look directly at Jack. "We know you are capable of grasping these scientific explanations because you have studied chemistry in high school and you have a Normal Bright IQ range, as your American psychologists would put it." Zhorin stopped walking and faced Jack squarely again. "But, whenever you don't understand what I'm talking about or leading up to, you must tell me. We don't know *everything* about you so we must assume certain things. And you know what happens when you assume something." Zhorin was looking at him, eyes narrowed, waiting.

There was a brief silence as the two men squared off once again.

"What?" A little wave of fear gripped Jack's balls.

Zhorin immediately sensed this fear and countered by using a Fermian gesture of not knowing anything which he'd studied on View Blocks the Learned Elites had given him. Arms cocked at the elbows, slightly splayed at an oblique from the torso, palms up.

"You make an ass out of you and me," said Zhorin in mid-gesture.

Jack sighed, relieved. Then surprise and amusement slipped into his overloaded mental circuitry.

"You know quite a bit about us, don't you?" he asked, with a small, forced laugh.

"Not nearly enough to assure the completion of this mission," confided Zhorin. "That's why we have *you*."

Jack smiled faintly and nodded in agreement. The fact that they *had* him was only half the story, as far as he was concerned. Now he *wanted* to be here. This was something he'd dreamed of all his life, meeting people from another planet and sharing something secret with them. He would gladly forsake his miserable life in Evermore for a new life *out there*. Maybe there would be a galactic war and he could be part of it, he thought. *Maybe...*

"Anyway, Jack, you didn't answer my question," Zhorin reminded him.

"Question?" Jack was still lost in thought, fighting for Truth and Justice and the American way, the *Fermian* way. He pulled himself out of this powerful and alluring daydream and back to reality. *Which was what?*, he asked himself. That he should answer this extraterrestrial's question so he'll let him go home for breakfast? For Jack, the real world had changed dramatically since yesterday.

"I'd simply asked you to let me know when I was talking over you head," responded Zhorin, an amused grin curling up the right side of his mouth.

"Sure," said Jack, snapping out of his *Star Wars* flight of fancy.

Zhorin continued with his lecture on Fluidlum.

"Don't worry about your shoes or your feet or any other part of your body touching anything right now," he instructed. "It's only the tips of your fingers and thumbs we are concerned about. Human beings, like you and I, as well as many other mortal species throughout the galaxy, radiate plasma energy from the tips of their fingers and thumbs. It is virtually indiscernible to your five human senses but it has a definite effect on many

molecular constructions. Such as Fluidlum. That's how this barrier -- or wall -- produces a portal at my command."

"But you never touched it," Jack observed. "You just waved at it."

"My plasma outflow is many times that of yours," said Zhorin. "In addition to that, I projected a thought command through the plasma emanating from the tips of my fingers and it is the resulting formatted energy that caused that particular section of Fluidlum to respond and allow us to pass through."

"What happened to the Fluidlum that used to be solid wall?"

"It contracts, actually, into the adjacent mass. When I project a second command that section expands back into its designed space." Zhorin sensed that there would be no end to his explaining the properties of not only Fluidlum but of many other substances and phenomena Jack would encounter during this and other visits with him and the Luminer crew. He would have to curtail scientific instruction for now and focus on the basics of this particular mission.

"I'm sorry I interrupt and ask so many questions," Jack said with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "I just find this stuff so fascinating that I'm keeping you from explaining why I'm here and what your...uh...agenda is." He smiled with his lips held together.

Zhorin was pleased by this young Fermian's acceptance of the situation. Jack's vulnerability might have produced a desire to be protective in others but Zhorin was all business. When the Learned Elites dispatched manipulators to carbon class worlds for research, having empathy for a contact was a warning sign for a crew member. And sympathy was tantamount to treason.

"You'll be glad you decided to work with us," said Zhorin, suddenly business-like. "Follow me and we'll get one of the

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interns to show you how to use our hygiene and outfitting facilities."

Jack walked beside his new acquaintance and was careful not to touch anything as the musical chimes once again sounded near Zhorin's outstretched right hand. Zhorin slipped quickly through the newly-created door and disappeared from Jack's view, through a kind of thin blue mist. Jack hesitated in the corridor because he had second thoughts now about cooperating with them. What he saw beyond the blue mist made him think only of escape.

TWO

LOGAN MASTERS LUGGED OUT his garbage at eleven o'clock Wednesday night because the Bainer brothers, who ran the refuse collection in Fuller Township, picked it up too early in the morning for Logan to set it out then. And he was determined not to get up one minute earlier than absolutely necessary during his retirement years. As far as Logan was concerned, the Bainer brothers could eat shit and die.

About once a month some animal would get in the garbage bags he'd set at the end of the driveway before he went to bed. It was usually just a skunk or stray dog but once it had been a coyote and Logan had heard the noise and had gotten off a shot with his snubnose thirty-eight but he had missed. It pissed him off that he couldn't set the trash out at a decent hour in the morning, like six or seven, and in cans with *lids*.

He did, in fact, use cans at one time. First, he used galvanized steel trash cans which the Bainer brothers had beaten up and thrown around so much they leaked like hell in the rain. Then he tried the new expensive heavy-duty plastic kind that even the Bainers couldn't destroy but they did manage to either lose or

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steal the lids or the bottoms enough times until there was only a lid left out of the three complete cans Logan had bought. They had cost him twenty-five bucks apiece at the old downtown hardware store, where Logan could still get a *man* to wait on him, not the sprawling home supply chain store out on Route 12.

Logan was so pissed off and fuming as he lugged the garbage bags to the end of his driveway he never saw Jack Rand drive up to Miller's Field, which was right behind Logan's thirty-acre township spread. He had beaten the high taxes by moving from his Cape Cod house in Evermore Borough after he retired several years ago. In Fuller Township he could thumb his nose at the borough's restrictive ordinances that didn't allow the discharge of firearms and open burning. Out here he didn't have to cut his grass before he felt like it or fix a sidewalk just because it ran in front of his house. He was his own man out here. This was the stuff that occupied his mind while he set out the garbage Wednesday night and which kept him from noticing Jack Rand's little blue Chevy Luv pickup working its way around the old landing field. But Logan did see the glowing thing Wednesday night that had eventually taken Jack.

Logan saw the dimly glowing round object rise out of the tree line behind Miller's Field but he dismissed it as nothing. He never got caught up in the hoopla about flying saucers and men from outer space in the fifties and he wasn't about to start now. Even then he believed it was just bullshit, although he remembered how much fun it had been to take a girl to the Pines Drive-In out on Route 12 to see stuff like *Earth Vs. the Flying Saucers* and try to get in her pants in the back seat of his dad's Plymouth. None of the guys Logan hung out with when he was a young buck actually watched that stuff because they were just like him. *Too busy with pussy*, Logan reminisced to himself.

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Except for Stevie Rand who *was* a pussy, as far as Logan was concerned, just like Stevie's unmarried pussy son, Jackie. Logan recalled how Stevie would always be at the drive-in by himself -- a "walk in" -- sitting in the rows of wooden seats the owners of the drive-in had installed in the middle of the parking lot so people who didn't have a car or who couldn't get a car could still see a drive-in movie. He would be called a "sci-fi nerd" today, Logan guessed, because Stevie Rand never missed a showing of flying saucer or robot monster movies at the Pines. He had always been there, in the front row of that little section of seats, along with other sci-fi buffs like Mills Morrison, the sissy egghead from the Evermore High School Class of 1957, and Vance and Helen McIntire.

Logan had never been impressed by the McIntires, who had coal money and a Cadillac Sedan DeVille as long as Logan's trailer, yet they walked to the Pines Drive-In just for exercise and probably to show the high school students that a car was a luxury and not a necessity. Logan wondered if the McIntires realized back then that they were only showing everyone how weird they were because they only appeared at the drive-in when a science fiction movie was playing. He never recalled them walking the two and a half miles from their big brick house on Maple Street for Frankie and Annette or John Wayne or Doris Day, just for space men and robots. Logan had gotten a kick out of the rumor around town that the McIntires were *mediums* and held *seances* with weird people from Pittsburgh and Philadelphia and a couple of highbrow types from a college town somewhere in New England. Part of the rumor was that the New England couple wintered in Florida and would stop in Evermore on their way down or on the way back for a chat with their dear departed dead from the McIntires' dining room table. Logan and his

buddies had laughed themselves sick when they heard that story for the first time.

But he was not sure what he had seen when he set out the garbage bags. It *looked* like a flying saucer to him. The thing was silver and slightly glowing, like the moon on a misty night, and it rose straight up from the grove of pines about two hundred yards behind Logan's back fence. That put it a good five or six hundred yards away and yet it still looked as big as a football at about twenty yards. Which meant that, whatever the thing was, it looked pretty damn big to him and that was too goddamn big for it to be anything he had seen before. But it was no UFO. That was crap, if you asked him.

Logan had once read about swamp gas and ball lightning and naturally-occurring phenomena that people were always mistaking for flying saucers and UFOs and things like that and he figured that's what he saw. Something natural. He hated people who were always looking for some kind of supernatural experience. He figured people made up stuff like that because their real lives were boring and pathetic and not worth living unless they were friends with aliens, or else their victims.

He set four thirty-three gallon garbage bags on the gravel driveway and cursed again about not having any cans to set them in. He mumbled to himself about not giving a shit about the fact that Fuller Township residents were only supposed to set out two bags of garbage per week, per household, because so much could be recycled these days.

"Fuck recycling," Logan grumbled, tramping back to his trailer, "More sissy-ass environmental bullshit. I'd like to see them *make* me recycle." He patted his belly to make sure his Smith & Wesson snubnose thirty-eight was still there, as it always was whenever he left the house.

T H R E E

JACK COULD NOT BELIEVE what he saw beyond the blue mist as he entered the ship's hygiene quarters. The mist must have been some kind of protective barrier against what was ahead because it was only about six feet thick and gave Jack a slight electric shock as it closed around him and then remained behind him as he walked through into a well-lit laboratory of some kind. Not the *lavatory* he was expecting but a terraced round room about thirty feet in diameter with a lot of equipment of some sort -- metal cubicles with curtains of red light for doors, consoles with shiny metal surfaces that appeared to have no controls or readouts or dials or anything until you approached them and then there were symbols everywhere, like Egyptian Hieroglyphics, most of them in black but some in various colors that seemed like neon reds, greens and light blues. These images and symbols -- whether they were words or numbers was a mystery -- were part of the metal surfaces themselves, nothing was above or below the polished pewter-like metal that the consoles were made of. There were no sharp edges, all the horizontal and vertical lines of the equipment blending into one

another in a rounded manner just like the interior of the ship. No one was manning the dozen or so consoles whose displays changed constantly, not blinking or glowing, but rather being *transformed* into other symbols and patterns of images in a natural progression that was like watching a movie where scenes overlap and change without any abruptness or edges. Fluid. Like everything on this ship.

But it wasn't the empty cubicles with light curtains for doors, or the unmanned consoles that made Jack want to bolt backward through the blue mist and jump right through the very next porthole on the world he could find. The hell with the vacuum of space, he'd rather have his blood boil and explode in his veins and arteries than wind up like the sorry human specimens that lined the outer wall of this intergalactic chamber of horrors.

"Easy," whispered Zhorin in Jack's right ear, from a half-step behind him, "it's not what you think."

"How do you know what I think?" Jack asked without turning to face Zhorin. He couldn't take his eyes off the living human artwork they beheld. People, men, women and children, of all sizes, shapes and several races seemed to be imbedded in the wall in a kind of three-dimensional animated reality. All were completely naked. Some were life-sized and some were as small as dolls but they moved and smiled and frowned and cried, without making a sound. They sat, stood, rubbed their eyes, looked pleadingly at him, appeared to be whispering something to him, shook their fists, fell down and got back up, all without the slightest noise. No where in this neo-Gothic dungeon was there any sound except Jack's shallow, nervous breathing and the dull thud thump of his own heart behind his ear drums. He was completely mesmerized by the Fellini-esque menagerie before him.

"Don't worry, they are not real." Zhorin's words were as much a shock to hear as the images Jack saw on the circular wall of the laboratory.

"Wow. They look so *alive*," Jack said in a barely audible voice, like he was at Sunday Mass and would be scolded for daring to speak.

"They *are* alive."

"But you said..." Jack turned to face Zhorin.

"I said they weren't real. There's a difference."

"How can they be real but not alive?"

"The same way you are real *and* alive but your childhood dog, Smoke, back on Earth, was only alive."

Jack ignored the fact that Zhorin knew about Smoke, pausing only a second or two to let this new bit of espionage into his private life sink in. He was too curious and amazed now to be scared or offended.

"What's the difference?" He put the question to Zhorin in a slightly accusatory tone, like an unprejudiced person back on Earth might ask a known bigot just what the difference was between skin color when everyone was, after all, a human being.

"Because the creatures you see here don't know they're alive and, therefore, are not and cannot be real." Zhorin offered this bit of science or philosophy or whatever it was in a very gentle tone with careful pauses, not in an arrogant or unattached manner. This was one of the confident and controlling aspects of Zhorin's personality that made him an excellent student for the Learned Elites back on his home planet, so far in distance and time from the backward Fermia.

"But..." Jack looked up and down and around for the idea, the thought he wished to convey, "isn't a stone real? A cloud?"

"Not in cosmic reality. They are only existent. They exist. They *are*. But they are not real to us. They have no *consciousness*."

"But..."

"They are only real to you and creatures like you because of a difference in language, in semantics, first of all. And, secondly, because humans at your level of evolution do not understand the universal truths governing life, *nonlife*, reality, unreality, *nonreality* and the inseparateness of thought, energy and matter."

Jack took this rather highbrow answer in tow but it did not quite catch up to him.

"Jack," Zhorin said gently as he put a firm hand on Jack's shoulder, "the sooner you realize that everything can be explained with science and that there is nothing else, and not until you realize that will you understand religion, philosophy, law, justice, guidance, forgiveness, mercy or love. Trust me. One day, in your incredibly special, short lifetime, you will realize what very few human beings and almost no Earthlings ever realized about what the universe is and that destiny and choice are the only two forces you will ever need to understand and harness."

"This is...too much. I can't..." Jack fumbled for words that weren't there.

"We'll have to go slower then," offered Zhorin. "Meaning, I might choose not to answer some of your questions right now, or maybe not at all, in order for us to establish a basis for your working with us."

Jack shot a distrustful glance at Zhorin.

"And what *that* means is that you can't know it all now, Jack. No one can. We don't know all there is to know, either. Trust me to be the judge of what you'll learn from us, so when and what you do learn won't confuse or confound you."

## EVERMORE--PREVIEW

Jack gave a little, semi-willing nod of agreement.

"OK?" Zhorin needed more than a nod from Jack before he could continue the tour and any training.

"OK, sure," said Jack.

"Then I'll leave you with one of our cadets and I'll see you in the ship's command center when you're freshened up." Zhorin did a smart one-eighty turn and headed back through the blue mist just as a figure emerged from the mist toward Jack with an outstretched, gloved hand.