

SPACE COMMANDOS

In the present state of our Human Sciences, it is pretty certain that no country has suddenly discovered the secret of a power source that would explain how “Flying Saucers” could accomplish their extraordinary feats... It comes down, therefore, to an extra-terrestrial origin, to that famous ESMA¹ that are increasing their observation flights because the Earthlings have discovered the secret of the atom and appear able to become a danger to other worlds.

-- General L. M. Chassin, Commander on Chief of the French Air Force and Air Defense Coordinator

¹ *Escadrille de Surveillance des Mondes Attardés*, i.e.: Surveillance Squadrons of Backward Worlds.

CHAPTER ONE

For a long time Hogounn watched the blurry spot form on the triangular screen of his space teleradar and start to come into focus. Sitting in front of his tilted control panel he skillfully maneuvered a kind of hexagonal dial, slipped in two cream-colored strips that touched two contacts and when all this was done he put his hands flat on the blue metal panel and sighed.

Injya, sitting next to him, was piloting the spaceship. She pulled down three small levers, slowly turned an oval wheel with an off-center axis and leaning back in her strange, bowl-shaped chair, left everything to the guidance system of the electro-magnetic radar-pilotage.

She looked over at her companion with a smile and said, "You're funny, Hogounn. Every time we approach planet T27 you sigh the same way and do the same thing. Even if I don't see you I'm sure that after sighing you're going to put your hands flat on the instrument panel and look up at the ceiling, exasperated."

Hogounn smiled back at the ironic remark and shrugged his shoulders, replying, "I don't know if you're having fun but these observation trips are awfully monotonous to me. Since we've been studying the pseudo-civilization of these natives on T27, I've ended up wondering if we'll ever get the go ahead to contact them."

"Our leaders are full of wisdom, Hogounn. From time immemorial they've studied the galactic races who are still in their 'infancy' and they know perfectly well that any premature contact could have negative consequences for our projects. You purposely forget that we're dealing with primitives."

"And what primitives!" Hogounn added. "They are as big as they are stupid. A *decan* hasn't gone by without one of their nations attacking another or some bloody civil war destroying their people."

"They're barbarians, I agree, but they're crossing an evolutionary stage that we crossed before. In time and thanks to our future intervention they'll get the wisdom they're lacking. We have to be patient. Besides, luckily for our future relations with these beings, there are a few among them who have a quotient of perception and knowledge clearly higher than most of their brothers."

"How lucky!" Hogounn grumbled. "If the order to land and show ourselves to these primitives doesn't come soon I think I'll ask for a transfer to a commando unit operating in some other solar system."

Injya cast a furtive glance at her companion who saw the disappointment in her eyes and in her fleeting frown. He regretted his words because he was pretty sure that Injya felt more than just friendship for him. To transfer to a commando unit was a pure and simple desertion of the girl whom he hoped to get up enough courage to confess his feelings for some day.

He was shaken out of his thoughts when a bank of lights on the triangular teleradar started blinking. On the frosted glass was the surface of a continent, growing bigger very quickly, looking like it was coming straight at them. Under the spaceship, which had just entered the atmosphere of T27, and on the hemisphere plunged in darkness, some lighter spots sprinkled with luminous dots marked the location of the cities being flown over at 3000 miles an hour.

Injya hovered over the urban area for 20 seconds and zigzagged down for several miles before heading toward a kind of narrow path on which ran two metal rails crossed by countless strips of wood.

The spaceship set down smoothly at the same time as six telescopic legs emerged from its underside. Without a bump and in perfect silence the ship landed.

Injya and Hogounn opened a narrow recess across from the cockpit and took out two heavy spacesuits so they could make a brief outing on this world whose atmosphere they could not breathe.

Hogounn courteously helped Injya put her spacesuit on, seal the huge, metal helmet with a rectangular opening at eye level made of transparent *xoning* and checked her reserves of artificial air built into the stocky "chest" of the protective suit.

When he, too, was stuffed in his clumsy metal outfit whose legs were the only jointed parts, he went to activate the long-distance security system. The controls inside the spacesuit could also work the system

no matter where they were. The robotic device could “cover” them, if need be, if they were far from the ship.

A rectangular hatch opened in the side of the ship and the two astronauts jumped to the ground. A polygravity belt automatically corrected their weight to the same as their home planet, allowing them to walk without any trouble. Their metal outfits, however, sometimes made them waddle in a strange way.

Hogounn, followed by Injya, walked down the path between the two metal rails, jumping from one cross beam to the next. Their upper limbs were imprisoned in the cylindrical chest where it was easy for them to work the controls of their various devices: weight corrector, podogyroscope (so they would not fall), feeder valves (for the artificial air), weapons and remote control for the long-distance security set up around the spaceship.

On the edge of the path cut by the two rails stood one of those odd, rectangular houses with a roof slanting on two sides away from each other.

Hogounn stopped, as did Injya.

“My *Onka* ray detector is reacting,” he spoke into his transmitter. “A living being is not far from us.”

“I’ve got it too,” Injya said. “It’s a little thing because our projection beams stop detecting it at thigh-level.”

“Exactly. The tingle from the reflecting waves stop a little higher than my knees.”

“Intelligence quotient 0.13,” Injya announced, “warm blooded. It’s a creature much more primitive than most of the natives on this planet.”

Looking toward the gray building on the side of the iron-lined path, they noticed a rectangular opening up above casting a pool of light on the ground. In the sky the only satellite of the T27 planet colored the landscape with a whitish-blue light. Some clouds, a mixture of oxygen and hydrogen, sometimes veiled the glow of the satellite, which lacked an atmosphere.

Hogounn increased the power of his *Onka* ray detector. Thanks to the sensory scale affixed directly to his skin he controlled the magnitude of the reactions on a small screen that was clearly visible in the bottom of his helmet.

“There are two natives in that building, maybe three. I detected a double intelligence quotient varying from 65 to 77. The third barely reaches 29.”

“I think it’s a non-adult native,” Injya guessed, “because its heartbeats is around 105 as opposed to the 70/75 of the two others nearby. They are normal beats and not sped up by an emotional disorder.”

A long, faint rumbling that soon turned into shrill, clipped cries screamed through the silent night. Hogounn and Injya stopped and went on the defensive.

“It’s that small creature,” Hogounn said. “Sneaking around in the shadow of that wall. It’s found us out.”

“Doesn’t matter. We can still go a little farther to test the natives reactions... if they decide to leave their shelter.”

The two astronauts waddled along the crossties and metal bars. They stopped a second time on alert.

A big rectangle opened in a wall of the cubic building. A bright light poured out. In the rectangle of light the outline of a creature appeared with two arms and two legs and a head covered with black hair on top. In its general shape it resembled the two observers but it was twice as big.

“An inhabitant of planet T27,” Injya whispered as she watched with curiosity.

“You can speak louder,” her partner said. “It can’t hear us in our helmets.”

The native pronounced some garbled words, apparently talking to someone much, much smaller than itself and also pointing to something in the dark. In fact, it was speaking to a small, hairy creature with four short legs. An extremely mobile appendage came out of its body above its rear legs. When the primitive stopped talking, the hair system of the small creature bristled, its eyes turned shifty, its rear appendage curved between its legs and it started grunting and growling. The giant bent down and with one of its long upper limbs it tapped the head of the scared thing, whispering to it.

Hogounn turned up his phonic recorder to capture the sound emissions of these strange beings.

The small creature continued growling and casting frightened glances in the night. The giant stood up straight and lifted up a cylindrical object. The instrument threw a beam of light toward the place where its four-legged friend was looking.

The giant jumped and cried out. It looked disturbed at the sight of this weird “thing” (it obviously did not know what a spaceship was!) that sat so close to its box dwelling. It must have wondered how this amber object could have arrived so secretly. Was it an airplane? If so, it was very different from what it was used to.

All of a sudden the small, four-legged creature started barking furiously. Then it crouched down on its belly and slunk behind the giant, yelping and whining. The native, stupefied and terrorized and not believing its rudimentary senses, finally saw the cause of its dwarf friend’s fright.

There, close by, in the shadows that its light tube was now chasing away, two creatures, like cylindrical mannequins, were standing there on two legs (skinny compared to its own) and staring through the transparent part of their helmets.

Hogounn and Injya enjoyed the terror that they struck in this inhabitant of planet T27.

“I think that’s enough,” Hogounn counseled. “Let’s activate the security and get back to our ship.”

Lowering a tiny lever inside his spacesuit he turned it on. A short distance away, an opening in their ship parked on the path shot out a green ray and swept across the countryside until it rested in the giant, who stumbled back in fear. It was instantly paralyzed while its four-legged friend, because of its size, escaped the emerald green light beam and scurried into the boxy house where the other two natives remained.

Hogounn and Injya headed for their spaceship, passing close by the giant who could not move, frozen with a look of utter confusion.

The two astronauts jumped onto the ramp leading into the ventral hatch. Very soon, sitting at their command posts, they stopped the green paralyzing ray and started up the gravito-magnetic thrusters. When the ray was gone the giant could move. In a daze and pale with fear it dropped its portable light and backed away. Its big, frightened eyes watched the mysterious machine rise up with its two weird “creatures” that came straight out of a nightmare.

In a few seconds the spaceship reached a very high altitude and shot off toward the second observation astrobase that had been orbiting around planet T27 for a little while. Out of their spacesuits now Hogounn and Injya looked at each other and broke out laughing.

“I’m a little ashamed of playing tricks like that on these primitives,” Injya confessed.

“Nah, it’s necessary... and it confirms our opinion of them. With a few rare exceptions their reactions are always the same. When they see us either they run away as fast as their long limbs can carry them or they fall to the ground. We make them so scared every time.”

“When the giant saw us our Onka detector showed its heart rate jump from 75 to 95, then to 100 instantly!”

“Put yourself in their place. Seeing an inexplicable and frightening ‘vision’—like our appearance—is a rude awakening. We can’t lose sight of the fact that these beings are like giants to us, so we must look like dwarves to them. When they see us, many of them are first wondering if they can believe their eyes. And then when they tell their ‘unbelievable’ stories to the other natives, they’re considered crazy or frauds. Since they can’t travel in space from one solar system to another they don’t know about or refuse to accept the existence of other beings living on countless planets in the galaxy. It’s hard for them to imagine that they’re not the only intelligent beings in the cosmos. So, the creature we just scared and paralyzed will have a lot of trouble convincing others of the truth about the adventure. Only a few inhabitants on T27 with a more evolved mind will admit that he really did experience this ‘strange encounter’. For the others, the vast majority unfortunately, he’ll be out of his mind or playing a bad joke.”

Injya shook her head and sighed. “These Earthlings are really a stupid and backward race!”

The spaceship of Hogounn and Injya slowed down. On the black background speckled with bright stars, far beyond the atmosphere, it took two hours for the huge astrobase to make the complete orbit of planet T27, the galactic name for planet Earth.

The disc-shaped reconnaissance ship approached the base—an extraordinary spherical ship over a mile and a half in diameter—and slowly entered the huge hatch that was 165 feet wide and long and closing up behind it.

The spaceship (20 feet in diameter and 5 feet high on its axis), a tiny orange chip compared to the formidable observation base, landed on its round platform at the end of the first row of other similar machines. In the huge “garage” of the artificial satellite, in tight rows were lined up almost 500 *Finn’has*, the disc-shaped reconnaissance ships that the inhabitants of T27 persisted in calling “Flying Saucers.”

Around every ten minutes one or more of these *Finn’has* took off for Earth. Others, at pretty much the same rhythm, came back to the base after a mission to film the cities and industrial centers or perhaps a “quick experiment of contact with the natives.”

Hogounn and Injya sat in a kind of metal cube that started sliding over the shiny floor then gradually rose up to around eight inches off the ground. The cube went around the impressive squad of spaceships, climbed up a ramp and jumped into a circular opening, a kind of well with bright walls where it sped up. Over a mile up the cube entered one of the many openings along the tube that linked the two “poles” and moved down a 12-foot wide, 20-foot high corridor that wound around the axis of the artificial satellite.

The space station had 117 floors that included the air-conditioned living spaces, various laboratories, observatories, stock rooms and numerous centers of scientific research. Four special sections, two at the top and two at the bottom, served as astrodromes able to hold up to 500 spaceships depending on their size and function.

Every floor, with pressure and air system adapted to the physiological requirements of the occupants, had several corridors in addition to one big, inner corridor that had no atmosphere where the different types of living beings on the base had to move about in the spacesuits fitting their biological category.

The inhabitants of the astrobase, to get from one floor or section to another, could use either the gravito-magnetic tubes and corridors or simply the two- and four-seater cubes. These vehicles, by varying (sometimes totally eliminating) the strength of the artificial gravity of the satellite, moved every which way with extraordinary ease thanks to their electromagnetic propulsive field.

The cube in which Hogounn and Injya were sitting stopped in front of a big hatch. The two astronauts jumped onto the metal floor and straightway the strange, wheel-less vehicle rose up to the ceiling and sped off in the opposite direction.

The hatch opened and the two “visitors” entered a huge, triangular room in the middle of which, sitting behind a kind of desk, waited someone quite different from the two astronauts. The latter were around three feet tall, their skin orange and their delicate hands each had six fingers, but the being awaiting them, on the contrary, was taller at almost four feet and its skinny arms ended in a kind of hand with four opposable fingers. In his black face were huge, oval, extremely movable eyes that jutted out rather creepily. On his cheeks and chin clumps of long hair grew straight and rigid, very thick, all the way down to his bare chest that was covered with long, blackish fuzz.

His nose was stuck in a capsule with two flexible tubes that hooked up to an air tank strapped to his back. Just as the regulations of the base demanded, although the chief of the base belonged to a different race than his visitors and therefore did not breathe the same air, he had to adapt his inhaler. After emptying the air from his office and replacing it with an artificial atmosphere fitting for his visitors, they could then be welcomed and make their report without needing to wear their bulky spacesuits.

Hogounn and Injya bowed to Fohag, the base chief, and rattled off their identities, “Hogounn and Injya, numbers AL-279 and AL-3017, originally from the planet Alkar in the Valnyk solar system,” Hogounn said. “Hello, Fohag!”

Fohag spun his bulging pink eyes in their sockets to glance at them as he watched the spaceships moving on a video wall map. Then in a familiar gesture he raised the four fingers of his left hand to his right shoulder and broke the silence by using the universal language of the Federated Worlds.

“Hello, Centaurians.”

Fohag paused and his pink eyes turned blue, which on his planet meant he was smiling.

“I call you Centaurians because that’s how the Earthlings would call you if they knew about your existence. Valnyk, your sun, is for them the star Alpha in the constellation Centaurus. I make this brief

digression because I know that after your mission you're going to ask again to teach you one or more languages spoken on T27. Right now I can only give you a few words, like the Earth name for Valnyk, for example."

One of his big eyes stared at the animated star chart while the other concentrated his attention on his two visitors.

"I'm listening, Centaurians."

When they had told him of their expedition down to the slightest detail, Fohag declared, "You were careless in landing your Fimn'has on what you figured was an unused road. We haven't been exploring this planet from the air for eight years just so you could take a stroll. Hundreds of thousands of films have been taken on all the continents. Today we have a topographical map of this world more precise than its own inhabitants possess. These maps are at your disposal. If you'd carefully studied the map of the region you were in, you would have seen that what you took for a path was, in fact, what the Earthlings call a 'railroad'."

"Railroad?" Hogounn and Injya echoed, embarrassed for committing a tactical error.

"It means a special road with twin metal runners sticking up that guide a heavy steam engine, sometimes electric, to transport natives, animals and all kinds of material. If such a vehicle had hit you during your landing, despite the ship's unbelievable strength in Earthling terms, vital elements could have been damaged. Staying faithful to our principles of non-violence when violence is not an issue, you would not have been punished. However, from now on I insist that you follow the rules of landing to the letter."

"We will follow them, Fohag, and thank you for your leniency," Hogounn promised, disturbed by this incident.

Any witness to this interview would be surprised by the logic and ethics that was so different, if not paradoxical to the human mind.

Hogounn handed the Chief a kind of pyramid with notched edges. Through the notches was wound a magnetic thread on which the different sounds they heard during their mission were recorded.

Fohag took the pyramidal spool in his three long fingers and slipped it pointing downward into a rectangular opening on his half-moon desk. He pressed the bottom of the small spool and they heard a click. The magnetic thread was starting to feed into the "reading head" of the machine that was built into the strange metal furniture with levers, buttons, dials and screens all over its top.

Hogounn and Injya listened carefully. Over the background speakers came the thousands of sounds that they had heard during their visit to T27. First there was the muffled stomp of their boots on the railroad ties, the rustling of the wind in the vegetation along the path and then the first growls of the small, four-legged creature that was soon barking furiously. After a silence, disturbed only by the yelping of the scared dog, the barking started up again, sometimes cut with oddly pitched howls. Finally came the entrance of the primitive "giant", the Earthling, intrigued by the unusual behavior of his dog.

Hogounn and Injya paid close attention to the polyphonic jumble that they did not understand. Only Fohag, being Chief of the base, had received instruction in the main terrestrial languages and could understand the meaning of this weird recording.

The ambient stereo produced the clear and distinct voice of the Earthling speaking to his dog: *Come on, Kiki, be quiet!* Here the sound of his hand petting the dog affectionately. *What's going on?* Yapping followed by howling, then fading away. *Holy shit!* Barking that faded and scratching on the pavement when it scampered away while its master stood paralyzed.

The two Centaurian astronauts were amused to relive the episode of their routine landing on planet Earth.

"Is the recording... interesting?" Injya was still hoping that the Chief would decide one of these days to give them a few translations of their many recordings.

"Well... yes, interesting enough. When the Earthling saw your Fimn'has so close to his habitation he said something that I don't understand... I'm going to make a semantic analysis immediately with the help of the comparative-translator to get the exact meaning of the word. You can go now, Centaurians. Even though your missions seem boring and eternally repetitive to you, they are nonetheless very useful

because they bring us some new knowledge every time. Go, brother Centaurians. You have ten *sfang* of rest. Spend the time however you want and come back when it's over."

When the two Centaurian troopers of the Space Commandos assigned to this solar system had walked out to enjoy their "leave", Fohag got to work on searching for the meaning of the new word. For this he isolated the word in question and ran it several times through the "reader". He listened carefully until it became monotonous and then passed it into the electronic comparative-translator.

With his long fingers bent back, which neither the Centaurians nor humans could do, Fohag reflected on the weird sound of the incomprehensible word while waiting for the machine to give him a translation.

After a relatively short time he heard a click and in the galactic language of the Federated Worlds the speaker pronounced in a monotone the various comparative ideas that the word evoked under its multiple forms in the seven primary languages spoken on T27.

After listening to the voice of the electronic brain that controlled the translator, Fohag shivered. His eyes went from pink to green, thus betraying his outrage and confusion caused by the translation of this... "perfectly English" word!

"Really, these Earthlings are not only primitive but very crude!" the Chief of the astrobase concluded.

His Wolfian sensibility (for, he was originally from the planet Mongan in the Wolf 359 solar system according to Earth's astronomical nomenclature) was deeply shocked.