

The bomb flared. Its light sped out at 186,000 miles per second, a thunderous roar crawled behind at the speed of sound. The wind swelled and the ground heaved and bucked.

“Woo-hoo!” Todd yelled.

“It’s a big one!” I shouted.

“The Atomic Cannon is cool,” Todd grinned. “Too bad Truman didn’t use it on the North Koreans.”

I nodded. Dad’s brother had just come back from flying F-80s in Korea. He’d wanted to A-bomb the whole place.

We peered out the slits of the old bunker we’d discovered while sneaking around the atomic proving grounds outside of Los Alamos. The bunker and crumbling labyrinth beyond became the private clubhouse of our group of friends, kids of the eggheads who worked at the labs. We didn’t mix that much with the townies, even though we all attended Los Alamos High.

Grit and debris joined the wind, making us duck till the worst passed. Then we popped back up to the slits, watching as the wind shredded the mushroom cloud. We studied the smoke trails through Army binoculars for a while.

Todd sat back and yawned. Like me, he was caked with dust, except where his dark goggles had protected his face: a raccoon in reverse. “So, you want to shoot some rabbits and eat out here?”

“Nah,” I replied. “Rabbits won’t stop running for two days. Besides I don’t feel like dressing them out and you do a lousy job.”

“Then let’s explore up toward Calderon’s,” Todd said. “Maybe we’ll find that canyon. We can leave the rifles here. Too darn hot to tote them if we aren’t going to hunt.”

“OK, get a flashlight out of the locker,” I said.

We wrapped our rifles in their bags and locked them in the old footlocker we’d salvaged from the bunker complex. Our dads were always lugging stuff home from the base, and we’d become expert scroungers, loading the clubhouse with old ammo boxes, C-rations, walkie-talkies and other goodies. Sometimes, we brought black powder and fireworks out there to blow stuff up; just like our parents. Becky, our group tomboy, had found forty rounds of .50 caliber ammo and planned to do some real damage with those. I’d liberated some metal fence spikes the Army left unattended. I’d thought about bracing some of the collapsing tunnels around our bunker with them but hadn’t gotten around to it.

As usual, we covered our tracks and piled sage back up in front of the bunker door. With our fortress secured, we struck out for Calderon’s Cave, careful to stay off the ridges where scientists and the Army might spot us. For all that, we made good time.

We hiked down Creager’s Draw with the sun beating down on our dust-covered bodies and clothes. Our metal canteens bumped on our butts as we struggled over the rough ground. I carried the map and radium compass. Todd was great at blowing things up, but maps confused him.

“Wow,” Todd said, wiping his brow. “I thought it was closer.”

I pointed down the arroyo to our left. “Is that it?”

“Looks like it.”

We headed for the spacious cave. Rumor said it was more of a tunnel leading to a hidden box canyon. We went in about thirty feet and sat down in the tunnel's coolness. The cave yawned back out of sight. Its roof disappeared in the dark over our heads. I took a few sips of warm metallic tasting water from my canteen. I knew I'd need the rest for the long walk home.

"Greetings," said a voice from behind us.

Todd jumped and yelled. I ducked behind a rock. Then, I looked at Todd and he at me. We both had short crewcuts, the only thing that kept our hair from standing on end. Todd's flashlight snapped on and I added the beam of my own. Nothing.

"Don't be afraid," the voice came again.

"Who are you?" I said, standing and thinking about running. "Where are you?"

"You may call me Hotkas and I am close by."

"Whaddya want?" Todd yelled from behind a boulder.

"I'm an explorer," said the unseen Hotkas.

"He might be a Red spy," Todd whispered.

"I'm not a Red spy. I'm not even of your world."

"A spaceman..." I said, awed.

"Off a flying saucer," Todd finished.

"Yes. I am from space. But I'm not a man. My appearance may frighten you, so I chose to make myself known in this way."

"We're not scared," I said, though my heart beat a tattoo in my chest.

"Then come through the cave into the canyon beyond," Hotkas said. "I'll reward you if you help me."

Todd stared at me. I just couldn't see backing down in front of him; I was the child of a scientist.

Side-by-side we inched down the cave. I wished for my 30/30 or even Todd's lousy .22. We rounded the curve into daylight. Cautiously, we peeked out the cave exit into the high-walled canyon.

A saucer lay there. Just like the ones on comic book covers, a silver disk as wide as a B-29's wings and about three stories tall.

"Wow," Todd said.

We crept out of the cave, our fear displaced by wonder. The ship rested on the ground, its seamless hull glinting brilliantly.

"Where are you?" I called.

"Behind you," the voice said.

We spun on our heels, saw Hotkas, and screamed. We'd have run – except it was between the cave entrance and us.

Hotkas looked like a cross between a crocodile and a nightmare. Six legs held its twenty-foot-long body off the ground, a tail stuck out rigid behind it. Its chest reared up and two arms hung from its shoulders. The crocodile head held huge yellow eyes. Fabric covered parts of Hotkas and a purple, jewel-like device hung under its neck.

"Don't be frightened," Hotkas said. Its voice was a dull rumble rendered by some mechanical device into plain, unaccented English. The alien's eyes locked on mine, cold and reptilian, yet lit with intelligence.

Hotkas crawled over slowly and settled near us. "I've come to your world from our outpost on Proxima Centauri. We're surveying worlds and species in your system. I want to learn about humans. Tell me your names."

We traded introductions and gradually calmed down.

"Come," it said. We turned and saw that an opening had appeared in the ship's gleaming side.

"What should we do?" Todd whispered.

"If it wanted to harm us," I said with a confidence I didn't feel, "it could tear us to pieces with ease. I think we should go in."

Hotkas looked at me. "Excellent reasoning. In any event I intend you no harm."

We followed him into the saucer to confront bewildering batteries of lights, machines, corridors built on Hotkas' scale. For all the ship's size, we saw no other aliens. Hotkas strode onto a large metallic plate on the floor. It lifted smoothly to another deck. Todd and I clutched at each other. Hotkas' bright yellow eyes focused on me. "Afraid, John?"

I let go of Todd. "Not of an elevator. I was startled. Ours are usually enclosed."

"Your kind fear heights."

"We fly and we climb mountains too," I said

"Yes."

We stepped off the plate onto a deck filled with black and silver machines. A large glass dome stood in the middle of the space. Hotkas gestured for us to stand there. I felt like a monkey trying to comprehend an atom-lab. Hotkas aimed various machines at us; neither of us felt anything when he did so.

Finally, I turned to Hotkas, who fiddled with yet another machine. Its claw-like hands worked with surprising delicacy.

"Why did you land here, Hotkas?"

It looked down at me and I had the oddest feeling that I saw approval in those big, yellow eyes. "I came down in the desert because I feared that if I landed in town, I'd provoke an attack. Your authorities might panic."

"Yeah," I said. "Especially here, near the atomic proving sites. They would have sicced the Army on you in a heartbeat."

"After I finish my tests," Hotkas continued, "I'll reveal myself to the authorities through you children. You'll act as emissaries and bring me into contact with your leaders. Meanwhile, I'll prepare to meet other children."

"You'll scare them like you did us," Todd said.

"Watch," Hotkas said.

It went into a machine at the back of the room. Lights flashed and machinery hummed and a boy appeared in front of us. He looked like a peculiar fusion of Todd and me, but his eyes remained yellow. Even his clothes appeared to be a combination of what Todd and I wore.

"How did you do that?" Todd said.

"Matter transformation," Hotkas said in a boy's voice.

"You're so small," I marveled.

"Yeah," Todd said, scratching his head. "Where did the rest of you go?"

"Tell me," Hotkas turned to face Todd.

Todd shrugged helplessly.

Hotkas turned to me. "Tell me."

I thought furiously, determined not to let him believe earth people were stupid barbarians. I might be only a high school sophomore but my dad was a major scientist. "Clearly, the machine turned you into energy. Then back into matter, but you're smaller now. How much do you weigh?"

Hotkas stared at me, deadpan. "One hundred twenty-five pounds."

"So," I continued slowly, "since matter and energy can't be destroyed, the rest of you must still be in the machine, held as energy until it remakes your full-size body."

Hotkas seemed incapable of facial expression, but he nodded. "Yes, John, an excellent display of logic and intelligence."

"Thanks," I stammered.

"What's that thing you're wearing?" Todd pointed at the jewel-like device Hotkas-boy still wore around his neck.

"Observant," Hotkas said. "It is a recording device given to all scouts. All that I see or hear is recorded. It can't be erased, altered or turned off. It broadcasts periodically to our base."

"Keeps you honest, huh?" Todd observed.

"Tell me where to meet you in the morning," Hotkas said.

We drew maps on Hotkas' machine with his help and showed him where to meet us in the morning outside Los Alamos High.

"Meanwhile, you must remain silent about me," Hotkas warned. "Do not tell even your parents until I have paved the way for a safe contact. If a military aircraft or troop formation heads in my direction, it could be unfortunate for all concerned. I will defend myself."

Hotkas escorted us back to Calderon's. "Remember, tell no one of my presence, or you risk a terrible conflict between our species."

"They'd just lock us away in the looney bin if we told them we'd met an alien," Todd said.

Todd and I made our way home in a daze. He stayed over with me and we had dinner at my house. Dad was working late at the lab, and Mom had a card party. Todd and I talked well into the morning hours before falling asleep. We wanted to tell Becky, Ty and Henri but there was no way they would believe us without meeting Hotkas.

When Mom woke me in the morning, it all seemed like a dream. I thought about talking to her or Dad but Hotkas' warning stopped me. I could see my Dad giving me that disappointed look, "Son, where's the evidence? What sort of science is this?"

Todd went home to change. I wolfed breakfast and ran out. Mom didn't seem to notice anything odd. I met Todd at his house and we hotfooted it to school. Becky, Ty and Henri were at our usual spot by a cottonwood tree. Not far away stood Hotkas in his boy form. He was real. We hadn't imagined him. I spotted Todd coming the other way. He nodded and went to get Hotkas. I walked toward the others.

Ty leaned his beanpole form against a fence. With his pale skin and light sandy hair, he made an odd contrast with Henri, a stocky half-Mexican. Both their dads worked in the Labs. Becky Lane stood next to them, almost as lean and angular as Ty, with a snub nose, blue eyes and blond hair perpetually tied in a ponytail. Becky's mom died when she was four and she grew up half-wild on her father's ranch. I could out-shoot Becky but only by standing on the ground; no one could out-shoot her from horseback. She was the only girl to get away with wearing slacks to school. She didn't own dresses or skirts.

"Hey, Johnny," Becky waved. "Who's the new kid?"

"He's..." I paused, dumbfounded. "He's from out of town."

Before I could blather on, Hotkas-boy came up, following Todd. "Hey guys," Todd said. "Meet Hotkas."

"Hotkas," Ty snorted. "What the heck kind of a name is that?"

"Foreign," Hotkas replied. His face was so calm and still as to look a bit unreal. The

yellow irises made it worse. "I came from far away. To learn about your school."

"Foreign?" Becky studied Hotkas. "That's funny. You look enough like Johnny here to be his cousin, except for your tiger-eyes. For that matter he looks a bit like you too, Todd. Golly, I sure can't place your accent."

"Oh-oh," Henri said. "Trouble, twelve o'clock high."

I turned and saw the usual source of the warning: jockheads, four football players from the Hilltoppers, wearing green and gold jackets, and led by their goon quarterback, Ron Bauer.

"Well, well," Bauer said. "If it isn't the egghead squad."

"Buzz off," Becky said over her shoulder. She could. She was a girl. Bauer wouldn't hit her.

Bauer ignored her. "Hey, new kid. You don't want to hang around with these losers unless you're one yourself."

Hotkas turned to look at them. "Large fighting males."

"Yeah, that's right," Gerald said. He was Bauer's lead-flunky. I hoped they'd eventually wind up sharing a prison cell. "We're fighters, yellow-eyes. We kicked your buddies butts for them."

"Ooohh, what big men," Becky laughed, "You've been left back so often you'll be able to vote in high school."

"Shut up, you *****, " Gerald spat out a word I never thought I would hear anyone say to a girl.

"Hey! Watch your mouth," I said, shocked out of caution by the cuss word.

Bauer smiled. "You want to rumble? Four of us ... four of you." The other football goons spread out to face us.

"Five," Becky snapped, stepping next to Todd and I. .

"Are you going to fight, John?" Hotkas asked.

"What's it to you?" Bauer said. "You want some of this action?"

"I'm merely here to observe," Hotkas replied

"I think he's yellow," Gerald sneered, "like his eyes."

Bauer moved toward me. Hotkas stood in his way and Bauer shoved him. Or tried to. Hotkas's arms blurred. He slammed Bauer, throwing him back ten feet. The other goons gaped at Hotkas, then at Bauer, who sat, groaning on the grass. They seemed undecided about rushing Hotkas. We eggheads fanned out on either side of our new friend.

The jocks fell back on Bauer, helping him up as he glared daggers at us. "Later for you, eggheads. And I'm going to remember you, yellow-eyes."

The goons walked off, their leader cussing and sucking wind.

"They ruined my observations," Hotkas said. "I wanted to observe your fighting skills."

"You wouldn't have been impressed," I said ruefully.

"John, you *do* need to impress me."

The way he said it sent a chill through me.

We spent the rest of the day showing Hotkas around Los Alamos High. Becky clearly realized something was wrong with him. Ty and Henri just thought he was weird. We saw some of the football team shadowing us and decided to vamoose right after class.

"Where are we going?" Henri huffed as we fled the campus grounds into the desert.

"Hotkas has something to show you," I said.

We finally made it to Calderon's cave. Becky, Ty and Henri's reactions were everything I hoped for when they saw the ship and figured out what Hotkas was. Shadows had begun to fill

the box canyon and the saucer seemed even more mysterious in the failing light.

"Follow me," Hotkas said. Reassured by Todd and me, the others trooped into the saucer and Hotkas began to do his tests. Only about five minutes into it, a red light and a chime demanded Hotkas's attention.

"It seems that we've been pursued," Hotkas said. He flipped a dial and a screen snapped on; on it we saw Bauer and his three buddies entering Calderon's Cave.

"They want to get even," Becky grinned. "Boy, do they have a surprise coming."

"Yes," Hotkas said, "a surprise." He looked at me and I knew something was wrong. Hotkas's hand touched another control. Suddenly I felt woozy, and everything went black.

I came to in a larger space in Hotkas's ship than I'd seen before. Around me lay both my friends and Bauer's goons, blinking and sitting up.

Hotkas, still a boy, stood on the other side of the room, just outside the entranceway. Gerald got up and took two steps toward Hotkas before running into something that flared and pitched him on his butt.

"Idiot," I snapped. "Did you think you could tackle him?"

"It was quite stupid, John," Hotkas nodded. "You wouldn't have done that."

"I don't feel that smart," I said standing. "I thought you were our friend."

"Now you do disappoint me, John. I land without permission in your country, hide among you near your nuclear weapons testing facility. I'm an intelligent carnivore. We don't have friends.

"My people are evaluating your people as both opponents and as a food source. Now that I have a large enough sample, I can proceed to do the real tests. I must classify your species."

"It's going to eat us," Gerald croaked.

"Eventually," Hotkas agreed. "Now, I must return to my true shape and size. I've been in this puny body too long." He turned and walked out of sight.

"What are we going to do?" Todd asked. Like me, I could see he blamed himself for our predicament.

"What do you mean?" Bauer said, eyes wide. "You've seen this ship, his powers. They can move from star to star. We don't stand a chance against them."

"So," Becky challenged, "you're just going to give up?"

"I'm going to stay alive."

Hotkas hove back into view and even Becky screamed, dashing for the back of the room. He looked even bigger than before. "When I drop the force shield," he said. "Do not give me trouble. I need to select one of you for a test subject."

"Still trying to classify us?" I asked.

Hotkas looked at me. "No. The detail work remains, but your performance to this point has already classified you."

I looked up at the saurian. He stared back with cold, yellow eyes. They were empty of hate. Of course, I thought, I don't hate cows or chickens. I just eat them.

"So," I said. "What are you going to class us as?"

"You are *Tien-shri-ja*," he said. "The most common variety of food. It translates as: 'the meat that fights poorly.'"

"Do you wish to select one of your own to go first?" Hotkas asked. "Or shall I?"

Bauer looked up at the crocodilian monster. "Wait," he said. "Maybe we can make a deal. If you guys are moving in here, you'll need help. Locals to supply you with information. Loyal subjects –"

“So,” Hotkas rumbled, “you’d turn on your own kind? Work for my people?”

“Yes,” Bauer said, his face strained and white.

Disgust filled me. I’d been afraid of this piece of human garbage?

“Well, John?” Hotkas asked. “What do you say? Will you secure your life by working for my people? I shall guarantee no harm will ever befall you. I’ll even spare two of your friends, though I must use the others.”

I could see Ty, Henri, Todd, and especially Becky looking at me. *This is it: Custer’s Last Stand, the Alamo, Wake Island.* I looked up at Hotkas and felt sick.

“Go to hell,” I croaked out. I hoped it wasn’t going to hurt. I didn’t want to scream in front of Becky.

“Another good answer, John,” Hotkas said. He turned toward Bauer. *Oh, God*, I thought, seeing the shift in the powerful carnivore’s body.

“Who,” Hotkas growled, “is so weak that he would be served by such as you?”

Bauer saw it coming; his mouth hung open but no sound came from it. Hotkas lunged, jaws and claws meeting in Bauer’s body. Bauer managed to shriek once.

We all screamed, sobbed and begged for God to make it stop. He didn’t. Bauer didn’t die quickly enough. No matter how I had hated him, I didn’t want to see him die that way.

I turned away and jammed my hands into my ears trying to block out the horrible, wet, crunching sounds behind me. Most of the kids lay on the floor, unconscious or whimpering hysterically.

Not Becky, she glared at Hotkas with a hate that should have torn him limb from limb.

I knelt down and threw up. It was over. I heard Hotkas walking away, doubtless to dispose of what was left of Bauer.

I felt a small, hard hand on my shoulder. “Get up, John.”

“It’s no use,” I whimpered.

Becky shook me. “John, you’ve got to get hold of yourself. He’s interested in you, seems to respect you. We’ve got to use that.”

“How?” Todd said. “He’s too big, too strong.”

“So were cave-bears, dire wolves and saber-tooth tigers,” Becky said. “We took them. We have to take him.”

I looked up into her clear blue eyes. With a shock I realized Becky was serious. She wasn’t beaten. Afraid—yes, beaten—no.

“You think we can?” Todd said, visibly firming.

I felt heart flow back into me and got off the floor.

“He’s too big for us to overcome,” she said, “even if we all rushed him. So we have to out-think him. Tell me what you know about Hotkas.”

“He said he came from Proxima — ”

“No,” she interrupted. “About *him*. How does he think? He’s an intelligent carnivore. What motivates him?”

“I dunno,” I said.

“He seems interested in everything competitive that we do,” Todd whispered. “Like a teacher from hell. He seems to want John to pass his tests. Can we use that?”

“Maybe we can talk him into one last test,” Becky said. “Us versus him.”

I glanced around. Henri had fainted. Gerald sat on the floor, eyes vacant, drooling. Even Ty and the other football guys were out of it. No, not a mass fight.

I touched Becky’s shoulder. “Thanks,” I said, looking at her and maybe actually seeing

her for the first time. “I think I know what to do.”

Hotkas returned. Those kids who were conscious pressed back against the wall. Only Todd, Becky and I didn’t fall back.

“Hotkas,” I called.

He came up to the force curtain.

“It’s not an accurate test,” I said.

“Tell me why,” Hotkas said, in his oddly patient “teacher” manner.

“An animal in the jungle knows his predators. Would it be a fair test to you if an invisible monster dropped from overhead and ripped your throat out? You took us unaware. You won’t be able to do so in the future.”

Hotkas looked up at the ceiling, then back at me. “Sound logic, John. What do you propose?”

I almost froze then. I was talking with the saurian as if we were pals. As if I hadn’t watched him tear a human being into bite-size pieces only minutes ago.

“Todd, Becky and I against you,” I managed. “We get a half-hour head start, then you come after us.”

“You’d simply run for your military,” Hotkas said, “across a distance you can’t cross before I catch up to you. It will be merely tedious.”

I looked up into those inhuman eyes. “We,” I said, my voice ragged with anger, “are not ‘meat that fights poorly.’ You come after us, Hotkas, you’re gonna die.”

I don’t think Hotkas had a sense of humor. Yet, somehow, I again drew the impression that I’d both amused and pleased the alien.

“Very well, John,” Hotkas said. “You shall have your test. I commend both your intelligence and fighting spirit. I’ll be sure to kill you quickly.”

“Thanks,” I said, mouth dry.

“You three come forward,” he said. Hotkas waved a taloned hand and the force barrier let us through. He handed me a red bracelet with a jewel-like device on it.

“Take it,” he ordered when I hesitated to come close. I recognized it as a recording device like the one Hotkas had worn in his boy-form. “It will record everything we see and say. I can’t use it to track you. Put it on your wrist.”

Reluctantly, I slipped the device on over my hand. It resized itself to fit me.

Hotkas glared down at us. “Now run.”

We fled right by him, inhaling the alien’s dry, spicy scent.

“Your half-hour,” Hotkas called, “begins when you leave the cave.”

We sped from the ship, and raced through Calderon’s. When we came out, I cut right and Becky and Todd followed.

“Where are we going?” Becky yelled.

“He’s a carnivore, right?” I called back, amazed at how calm and cool my mind had become. “We’re prey. He expects us to act that way. Run away or hide. We’re going to do just what he wants.... ”

I gestured to the bracelet on my arm. Maybe Hotkas was telling the truth about not spying on us and maybe not. We were going to start fighting smart. Becky and Todd nodded, understanding in their eyes.

We headed toward town for a mile, then cut back through a draw and onto the ridge of rocks, where we would leave no prints, then headed into the desert, back to our clubhouse.

I realized that we must have been unconscious for hours in Hotkas’ ship as the sun was

climbing toward noon. Our parents must be looking for us by now. I looked up into the blazing arch of the sky. No airplanes searched for us. We were on our own.

We finally reached the clubhouse and pulled the sage and cover from the door, slipping into the cool dark of bunker. Todd ran over to where we'd left our guns and Becky got water out of the cistern we'd rigged in the back. I ignored my thirst and grubbed about until I found what we needed most: Paper and pencil.

"Safe," Todd sighed, clutching his .22 rifle.

I turned and made a furious slashing gesture across my throat. I pulled up my pad and pencil and gestured at the 30.30 and .22. *Toys*, I wrote. Becky nodded; her face grim.

Plan? she scratched in the dirt.

Get .50 caliber ammo. All black powder I wrote. I pointed to a large metal fire pail that had been left in the bunker.

I pointed at Todd. *Blasting caps?* I wrote.

He nodded vigorously. *Wire and batteries too.* He mimed a walkie-talkie.

If Hotkas could read lips he could read my pad. I let it go. I'd forgotten about the walkie-talkies,. Pity they weren't long-ranged enough to call for help.

Need 200-foot-long rig for detonation, I wrote.

I wrenched open the inner door of the bunker. It led to a tunnel partly collapsed and badly shored up by us. Inside, I found what I was looking for, sheet metal and two dozen metal fence spikes.

I grabbed the flashlight and leaving the others to their preparations, set out down the tunnel. If only we had the time. I scrambled over partially collapsed sections until I reached a blocked area. I turned back and brought up some sheet metal to fashion a scoop. I cursed myself for not leaving a real shovel in the hideout. As I scooped frantically, I checked the time by the glimmer of my radium watch. How much time had my feint toward town bought us?

A sound behind made me whirl, spike in hand. "Becky," I breathed, before remembering Hotkas' sensor. Of course, the monster could never fit in the tunnel. She carried the large pail and dragged wire behind her. From the amount of dirt in her hair she must have had a bad time coming down the passage. We cleared enough of the collapse to make it to the section beyond.

The tunnel turned upward and daylight drifted down through its partly collapsed roof. I picked my spot, then began spreading the sheet metal on the floor, gesturing at Becky to get more. I took the pail of black powder and dug it into the dirt then surrounded it with more sheet metal forming a cone, narrow at the base, pointing upward. I noted with approval that Becky had put the bullet tops from the .50 ammo in with the black powder. I kept the wire and blasting caps well clear of everything. Todd and I had almost blown ourselves up by being sloppy with caps.

Todd trailed Becky, bringing up the last of the sheet metal and the spikes. He'd found more black powder and the rounds from Henri's old 12 gauge. They went into the fire-bucket at the bottom of the cone. Then I carefully put the spikes in the cone as Todd and Becky used dirt, rock to keep the cone upright. Finally, very carefully, Todd wired up the blasting cap and we retreated to the main bunker. I linked the wires to a detonator switch we'd scavenged.

Todd grabbed my pad as soon as we got there and scribbled, *How do we get him over it?"*

I looked at them and made a running man out of my two fingers and hand and then gestured at myself. Todd gulped but Becky shook her head vigorously and pointed at herself. "Like hell," I said before I could catch myself.

She snatched the pad from my hands and wrote. *He respects you. He doesn't respect me any more than a hunter respects a doe. I'm just meat and he won't be wary of me. He'll run*

straight at me.

I shook my head. *Too dangerous*, I mimed.

Becky looked me in the eye. "I'm right and you know it," she whispered.

I looked at Todd. He looked at the floor. Becky's eyes didn't leave mine.

I never did win any arguments with Becky. I took the pad and wrote in big letters, *MUST PROMISE. Run for town if mine doesn't work. We hold him with guns. Don't look back. Don't stop.*"

She nodded. I made her place her hand over her heart and nod again.

Becky got up to go outside. I grabbed her in a hug. She hugged me back then punched me in the ribs and went out.

Todd handed me the loaded .30.30 but left out his hand. I shook it hard, reluctant to let go. We stepped up to the bunker slits, the same one through which we'd watched Atomic Annie only two days ago. Becky wiped up our tracks with sagebrush then built herself a blind of loose brush near the mine, burying herself in the sand.

We didn't have long to wait.

"What are you up to, John?" Hotkas asked. I froze until I realized the voice emanated from the device on my arm. Todd stared at me; eyes wide with terror.

"I expected you to run for the town," Hotkas continued, "seeking the protection of your own Army. You started that way, then circled back instead, heading into the desert. A wonderful stratagem; I wasted an hour heading toward town and back. Meanwhile the sun has burned off much of your scent. Unfortunately for you, I can sight-track and you left prints in the soft sand between the stones you tried to stay on."

I kept my thoughts to myself. Hotkas said the wrist-recorder couldn't track us through the machine; I didn't believe it.

"Your cleverness pleases me," Hotkas said. "There is little honor in finding more *Tien-shri-ja*; the galaxy is full of it."

"There," I pointed as Hotkas crested the ridge. A large pistol rode between Hotkas's front and rear legs, tied down in its holster. *Well, he promised a fair fight. With those teeth and claws, he probably doesn't need a weapon.*

"Ah," Hotkas said through the bracelet. "Small bits of human-made debris, bones of small animals and indications of fires. You have a den here. John, you disappoint me. I smell your scent. Underground perhaps?"

Hotkas moved forward confidently on his four lower limbs, his immense weight pressing on the sand beneath him. I could see his head traverse over his chest as he looked for us.

A scream rent the air. Becky burst from cover forty yards ahead of him. Hotkas, every instinct triggered by the sight of fleeing prey, charged. On his second stride the earth below him sagged.

I twisted the detonator.

Sand fountained and spikes of flying metal impaled the alien's body. Small metal chunks blew clear through him.

Hotkas crashed to the ground, blood splashing out on the sand.

"Well done, John," I heard him whisper over the bracelet.

"Got him!" Todd screamed.

We raced out of the bunker, rifles ready. Now came the hard part. Hotkas stirred feebly. I sighted my rifle between his eyes just as he opened them.

"Don't move...." I shrilled. Then, roughening my voice, "Freeze or die."

Hotkas's breath came like a bellows. The fence rails skewered through him as if he were a pincushion, some projecting right through the twenty-foot saurian. Hotkas focused one huge, yellow eye on me.

"I have a deal, monster," I said.

"What?" he asked. The translated voice couldn't show pain but the body convulsed in spasms. I hoped Hotkas was in agony.

"I could shoot you," I said. "Then get you hung and dressed and feed a piece of you to every leader of earth. Do you hear me? We could eat YOU."

For the first time I saw emotion in Hotkas's eyes. I was threatening something more than death. Utter disgrace. I had been promoted from food to an enemy. I was worth hating now.

"What's at the top of the food chain?" I asked

"*Dredja*," Hotkas said, "self-meat. For when we consume one of our own kind."

That won't work, I thought. "And below that?"

"*Troka-ja*, the meat that we eat last."

"That's how you're going to classify my species," I said, triumph singing through my veins. "Meat that's just too tough if there's other prey. The meat you eat last. You swear to do that and I'll let you live."

Hotkas stared back at me. "What prevents me from lying to you now and classing you as what I want later?"

I leaned in close. "You told us that everything you do and say down here is recorded. You can't even erase it. Your people will know what happened here. Either we are that meat, or you're weak and unfit. What would your fate be when they review your tapes and learn you were beaten by *Tien-shri-ja*?"

"And," I continued, "we are that tough and that smart. We're just kids and we beat you. We talked you into chasing your food, giving up all your advantages, and then we beat you."

"I agree to your terms," Hotkas said. "You will be reclassified."

"Release the kids on your ship. Then call it here if you can. Tell one of the kids to come here so we know you let the others go."

Hotkas did it. I don't know how. The silver saucer showed up only a minute later. It settled a hundred yards away with a whine of whatever it used for an engine. The breeze it kicked up chilled me. I realized my shirt was soaked with sweat.

A panel opened in the saucer; Henri and Ty piled out.

"You got him!" they jumped up and down.

"Yep," Todd answered, posing with his rifle on his hip.

"The jocks ran for home as soon as the force screen came down," Ty said. "The voice said you wanted someone to come, so I stayed."

"Me, too," Henri added.

Todd covered me as I worked the alien's pistol out of its holster.

I aimed Hotkas's pistol, struggling with the weight of it. "Get off our planet, monster."

Hotkas huffed and groaned, fighting to stay erect. The monster staggered toward the ship, trailing blood. We all kept Hotkas in our sights as he crawled into the ship. Seconds later, the saucer whooshed skyward in a way no Air Force jet could match.

The weapon in my hands began to whine. I realized what Hotkas was up to.

"Throw it over the cliff!" Todd yelled.

I ran and flung the weapon. We all sprinted for the bunker and piled in. Becky landed on top of us, then she dropped the cover.

The explosion wasn't up to atomic standards, but whatever powered that gun was fearsome. The ground quaked. As the dust settled, we climbed out, hooting, hollering and thumbing our noses at Hotkas.

Becky gave all of us kisses.

The End