

Goodbye, Aliens

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Transparent airlocks slide open below the slowly-descending transport pod and a disembodied voice belonging to an automated hostess greets Seehnak and his colleagues: "We would like to welcome all Scintillan attendees to the Johannesburg Conferencing Hub. You have now entered the spectacular dome providing a safe breathing environment for all our delegates. Congratulations on reaching ground zero for corporate workshops, conventions and inter-alien symposia for a trio of solar systems."

Seehnak looks down, taking in the view through the clear deck with his compound eyes. Beyond the dome is a featureless wasteland. Inside it, trailing off in every direction, the buildings below them all share a terrifying uniformity.

Above their pod swirls a gigantic poisonous cloud, turning flaming red and orange by the setting sun. The ghostly voice of their hostess returns: "The facility you will soon be entering is a product of the far-sighted New Ekurhuleni Municipality. You'll be interested to learn that Ekurhuleni means place of peace in Tsonga, a language endemic to this region prior to the undisputed adoption of the Universal Trade Tongue. We urge you not to leave the protected environment of the dome. Acid mine drainage has rendered the groundwater unfit for consumption and air pollution has made the atmosphere unsuitable for healthy respiratory action."

A brief pause before the voice continues: "These fortuitous environmental disasters laid the foundations for the erection of the galactic-standard yet affordable facilities that you will soon have the opportunity to experience and enjoy."

Half an hour later, seated in the conference room serving as the venue for their three-day teambuilding, Seehnak is trying his level best not to look bored. This takes considerable willpower to achieve since the photophores around his cheeks tend to flush pale blue whenever his level of disinterest increases.

It is a trait he shares with all Scintillans and Seehnak is only too aware of how easily, under the current circumstances, the blue of boredom ó already bad enough ó can be replaced by the deep indigo of incredulity, a hue that in his present situation will amount to career suicide.

He traces the tip of a tentacle over the piece of paper their programme had been printed on, surprised at how rough the fibres feel. Seehnak has heard of paper before, but this is the first time he has come into actual contact with it. Trees are rare and processed tree products are exceedingly expensive. No doubt the paper is there to drive home how important this workshop is, not to mention the weight of the expectations attached to it. Seehnak jerks as the sharp edge of the paper slices into the tip of his tentacle.

He risks a fleeting look around the room at the other mid-level employees who, like him, are stealing furtive glances but avoiding eye contact. Seehnak wonders why any of them, himself included, bother with trying to be covert. They all know why they are there: their particular corporate departments have not met their sales targets and this team building is a final effort on the part of the company to get them to perform. And if they don't, the company can demonstrate that it has tried to remedy their lack of achievement before firing the whole lot of them.

So far, Seehnak has managed not to let his lack of interest show, but the day is young and Professor Vanjun ó the motivational speaker hired by the company for the duration of the three-day team building titled *Unlocking Your Hidden Potential* ó is just beginning to warm up.

Seehnak takes a deep breath. The scrubbed air being pumped into the conference room makes the knots in both his stomachs tighten. He hopes the illegal and costly photo-suppression capsule he swallowed just before they started will kick in soon.

Two terrifying thoughts enter his mind ó what if the capsule has begun to work already and it is still not enough to keep the blue from his face? Or what if he bought a dud and he is lit up in pallid azure dots reflecting his true state of mind?

He switches his tablet to mirror and checks. Relief floods through him: the light-emitting organs around his cheeks are displaying the alert and interested neutral green exhibited by the other Scintillans in the room. He is safe. That capsule may have cost a lot, Seehnak thinks, but it was worth every credit.

He turns his attention to the dozen or so Earthlings in the conference room. For the first time ever he feels something close to envy for them. His interplanetary colleagues exhibit very little colour variation according to their state of mind. Seehnak is aware that some of them can go pale if shocked or red when feeling embarrassed, but to a Scintillan born with a whole colour wheel of expressions, this lack of colour-display potential is pitiful. He spent two years on Earth studying the Universal Trade Tongue. During those two years Seehnak made Earthling friends and enjoyed some of their customs, especially their leisurely seventy-hour work week.

But never before has he envied them.

Now he wishes he could just mimic their expressionless masks without having to resort to expensive drugs not to flare up in career-murdering indigo.

The humans are their guests from one of the company's offices on Earth, resulting in the team building being held in the Universal Trade Tongue. No one calls it English anymore. Even though they have the ability to talk, Scintillans find talking on its own to be a tedious form of communication, preferring to converse using the variations in colour and intensity of the photophores that dotted their skin. These light-emitting organs are not just prevalent around the face: a Scintillan's entire body serves as a message board.

But here we are, thinks Seehnak, not just having to talk, but also having to wear clothes. All of them, Earthlings and Scintillans, are dressed in suits of either dull grey or brown, matched with muted ties. For some reason humans find dealing with naked Scintillans disconcerting. It is something Seehnak still cannot understand, even after his years spent on Earth. He quickly suppresses an embarrassing memory of when, unclothed, he was chased out of a strategy meeting in New Pretoria.

He looks down at the name tag clipped to the lapel of his suit jacket. They have been issued these by Professor Vanjun himself. The name tag features Seehnak's name with a large old-fashioned metal key hanging over it, like a sword, poised to sever him from his underperforming behavioural patterns and to unlock his hidden potential.

Seehnak's anxious thoughts are cut short by the smack of the Professor clapping his tentacles together. The Professor has introduced himself as a liberator of hidden potential but Seehnak is sure his invoice to the company will state something a lot more mundane, like *consultant*. He has been tempted to ask the Professor what he is a professor of but was grateful he had resisted the urge to do so. It would have marked him as a non-team player right at the start. Their chairs and desks are arranged in a semi-circle, with the Professor taking centre stage and prancing from one end of the room to another, looking casual-sharp in designer jeans and carrying a microphone and a tablet covered in smooth eel leather.

“What we are here to unlock today exists already and is much closer than you may think,” says the Professor. “It just needs to be brought out from inside you.” He pauses for effect, taking the time to fix each attendee with a meaningful look. “What is this thing I am talking about?” Another, even longer pause. “It is nothing more, and nothing less, than your own boundless potential.” The Professor's presentation is gaining momentum and the photophores on his face flashed bright fuchsia with enthusiasm. Around the room, some of the Scintillan attendees start to do the same.

“I believe there is an LED array in the sky that has existed since you were born. But it is not lit up,” the Professor says. “You are the energy source to light it up and our work here today will activate your own potential and connect you with that array, so you can light it up brighter than you could ever have thought possible.”

LED array in the sky? Is this guy serious? Seehnak wonders. Those things only survive in museums. He stifles a smirk and glances at two of his colleagues seated on either side of him. He is

astonished to see that both of them are hanging on to the Professor's every word. Seehnak quickly assumes a similar posture.

-Be careful not to squander your energies, the Professor says. His Universal Trade Tongue is perfectly understandable but peppered with odd pronunciation. -Focus is key. Focus on the task at hand so that you can sustain a position of paaawa.

At first Seehnak finds the Professor's peculiar pronunciation mildly amusing, but this gets upgraded to full-blown hilarious when the Professor begins talking about how each and every person in the room can become a wiener and how wieners manage to hold firm because they have unlocked their potential. He assures his audience that their company's culture encourages every employee to be a wiener.

Seehnak has a quick look at the others in the room, hoping to catch the eye of someone, anyone, who is finding the situation as ridiculous as him, but all of the other Scintillans and Earthlings are captivated by what the Professor is saying. With a cold shiver it dawns on him that all of them are swallowing the entire song and dance whole.

They break for tea. To his horror, Seehnak finds himself hemmed in by an Earthling group bemoaning the abysmal sales figures of vat-grown Very Nearly Beef. Clearly in distress, one of the Earthlings appears to be on the verge of tears trying to explain the unjust reasons for lab-grown processed meat's unmerited exclusion from consumer's plates, despite its recent inclusion in the eleventh edition of the Noakes Nutrition Bible. Their carping is interrupted by the sound of a ruckus from one of the food stations. Grateful for the opportunity to escape, Seehnak rushes over to the food station to see what is causing the commotion.

A Scintillan who Seehnak has noticed around his home planet office but does not know personally is flushed with the vivid cerise of acute distress and waving a tentacle so vigorously that it seems as if she is trying to detach it from her body. A closer inspection of the tentacle reveals the source of her torment: a syrupy wedge of baklava is stuck to end of the appendage, refusing to let go no matter how forcefully the Scintillan is trying to shake it off. She keeps repeating: -I thought it was a small sandwich. Seehnak wants to help, but the extreme Scintillan aversion to anything sticky keeps him rooted to the spot.

Two Earthlings step in to save the day: one holds the Scintillan in a gentle bear hug while the other pries off the baklava with a pair of rubber-tipped tongs. The Scintillan thanks her rescuers and goes off to the cloakroom to wash her tentacle clean, a violet flush of embarrassment colours her cheeks.

A few minutes after the incident, the food and beverage manager comes over to apologise and assure them all that a workshop will be convened to come up with a policy to regulate the relative stickiness of food offered to delegates. One of the attendees standing behind Seehnak voices his shock that such a policy does not exist already.

“I want you to write a word now. Write it on your tablets but write it not from left to right, but from top to bottom,” commands the Professor. “The word I want you to write is *attitude*.”

Professor Vanjun waits for them to do as he has instructed. “Now ascribe each letter a number according to its position in the Universal Trade Tongue alphabet. The letter ‘A’ will be one; ‘B’ will be two, and so on. Once you’ve done this, add up the numbers associated with each of the letters in *attitude*.” The Professor gives them a minute to follow his instructions and a satisfied grin spreads across his face. “How much do they add up to?” he asks.

Seehnak totals up and sees that he got a hundred. He has a pretty good idea what is coming next.

“Go ahead,” says the Professor. “Tell your neighbour the total.”

Seehnak turns to the Scintillan on his right, an encryption coder with chronic tardiness issues. His photophores are flushed the delicate magenta of confusion. He shows Seehnak the total he has reached on his tablet. It is eighty. He has misspelled the word, leaving out one ‘T’. When he looks at Seehnak’s tablet and realises his mistake he briefly flashes the bright purple of dire embarrassment and turns away. Seehnak wants to tell him that it doesn’t matter, that this is all just a show with no substance, but he can tell his support will not be received in the spirit he intends it.

“Do you see what I am getting at, colleagues?” says the Professor. “Your attitude must be one hundred percent positive. The word itself demands it and the numbers don’t lie.” Professor Vanjun leans back against a table and crosses his tentacles. He looks extremely pleased with his neat numerological trick.

A buzzing noise starts up in Seehnak’s ears. The tie around his neck seems to tighten.

“It’s all about values,” continues the Professor. “And I’m not just talking about just your company’s values. These are deeper than that.” Professor Vanjun stops and places a tentacle on his chest. “I’m talking about values not written in letters on a screen, but inscribed in blood on your heart.”

A new image appears on the screen, taking up most of the wall behind the Professor. It shows the words *Corporate Denial* attached to an arrow pointing downward to *Corporate Demise*. Next is an image showing *Corporate Repentance* at the bottom of the screen with an arrow rising up from it to the heavenly heights of *Corporate Revival*.

“You might not want to hear this but I am going to tell you a truth now and you have to choose today which path you will follow,” Professor Vanjun says. “Corporate denial leads to corporate demise, while corporate repentance leads to corporate revival!” The Professor ends his exclamation by raising the tentacle clutching his microphone pointed as high up into the air as he can reach. His audience follows it with their eyes, as if expecting some sort of divine confirmation of his words to drop from the ceiling.

“Now it’s time for some of you to take the stage,” says the Professor. “We’re having a special session. I call it a session of thanks and apology, so if you would like to thank someone in this room, or to apologise, please come forward. Remember, we are in a non-judgmental space here.”

Seehnak takes a deep breath. At first this is difficult with the constricting tie around his neck but after a few moments the tightness eases. As he exhales he starts laughing. His colleagues, both Earthling and Scintillan, look at him with puzzled expressions tinged with relief, glad to have the attention away from themselves.

Seehnak stands up. Every eye in the room tracks him as he walks towards the Professor, who extends his tentacle holding the microphone. Professor Vanjun’s face is lit up with encouraging pink. The pink turns to confused orange as Seehnak ignores the microphone and walks past the Professor on his way out through the doors to the conference room.

He continues down the narrow hallway to a door leading to the outside. As Seehnak exits the building he notices that the planet’s moon is faintly visible as a circular blur through the dirty cloud on the other side of the dome protecting them from Johannesburg’s true atmosphere.

An artificial breeze tickles Seehnak’s face. He feels a tapping against his chest. Looking down he sees it is his name tag, the one with the key hanging over his name, flapping in the breeze.

He tears it off and drops it to the ground.

Almost immediately a trash drone swoops in to pick up the tag, tossing it into a narrow circular bin strapped to its back and giving Seehnak a quadruple beep of disapproval. Seehnak ignores the drone and his suit, shirt and tie soon follow, tumbling to the ground in a graceless heap. This drives the drone into a frenzy as it tries to stuff the clothes into its bin, but they will not fit. Seehnak walks away, oblivious to the drone’s flurry of annoyance.

A few kilometres away stands one of the gossamer gateways leading to outside the dome. It takes Seehnak twenty minutes to reach it. He keeps looking behind him, worried that they might be chasing after him to take him back to the team-building exercise. For the moment there appears to be no one in pursuit.

Next to the gateway is a sign reading: NO EXIT WITHOUT SURVIVAL SUIT. Seehnak flashes a crimson of non-compliance. He’s had enough of suits. He holds his face close to the screen mounted in front of the gateway and the photophores circling his eyes flash a staccato of colours. The first set of gateway doors slide open. Seehnak knows the override codes ó his corporate section wrote the security protocols for the gateways. He walks through the doors and they *woosh* closed behind him before the second set of doors in front of him slides open.

His feet crunch on barren sand covering the inhospitable wasteland stretching to the horizon. The devastated atmosphere claws inside his chest with each breath and his eyes begin to stream. Despite the discomfort he feels a greater sense of freedom than he has experienced in years. After a while he stops. He wants to walk more, but his legs don’t get the message. Seehnak blinks the tears

away and looks up at the moon. He knows it is just wishful seeing, but out here, despite the pollution but without the dome between him and the planet's only natural satellite, he feels sure he can see it much more clearly.

Author's note: A lot of this story is true, a terrifying amount of it, actually. It's based on a team-building workshop I had to attend, but unlike Sehnak, I couldn't escape. Writing this story was my way of trying to deal with the trauma.

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