

Generation upon generation the Ekz had scanned the cosmos, listening. They hoped to hear signs of alien life, of other intelligent species, and that this would be a means to an end, or rather to their *not* end. For their time left - although it was hundreds of thousands of orbits of their twin suns SolX and SolY - was irrevocably finite, unless other beings from elsewhere in the galaxy gave a pointer to a 'new Val', another planet, where the Ekz might go. And for the Ekz although it was tens of thousands of generations - well, that was not much time at all. Even their best telescopes could only see so far into the night skies and little could be discerned for sure. No, the only way to know of intelligent life elsewhere was to scan for the signals that such life might emit.

Over the millennia all that had been heard from any direction was silence or static or the radio waves from a dying star: the flame of hope flickered and was almost extinguished. Many of the older Ekz counselled that their race must be resigned to their fate; there was no escape from their planet Val. However some refused to give up and continued to listen and scan the starry skies, more out of habit than true expectation. So they did not initially believe it when they picked up extremely faint transmissions that were coming from the vicinity of a rather unremarkable yellow sun that was so close, no further than light would travel during the time it took Val to orbit their suns fifteen times.

The signals were so full of noise and so puzzling that they could not be deciphered, despite the numerous orbit-times that had passed and the on-going reception of the signals, which added an abundance of data but no clarity. Then after hundreds of orbit-times the signals simply stopped.

The Ekz themselves had been careful never to transmit in this way; to do so seemed extremely foolish. Any alien race with the technology to send such signals into space would inevitably be highly developed. So logically they should have long passed the primitive stage of attacking first and communicating after (as had the Ekz) - the aliens would *likely* not be hostile. However why take that chance? It was possible that such an alien race had the temperament of a darg parent separated from its young; or that they were so far in advance of the Ekz that they thought the Ekz so primitive that they were not worthy or preservation, to be brushed aside or expunged like an irritating infection. And it was reasonable to assume that any alien race that could receive such transmissions could determine their origin and potentially much about the originators. True, the Ekz had not succeeded in the latter, but the argument remained the same: to encourage others towards Val invited danger which could prematurely end their race, far before the dying sun

SolX would. The thought of aliens, strange beings, amongst them terrified the Ekz like nothing else.

So from the time that the signals were first received the Upholders had decreed that the Ekz must wait and simply keep listening, for however many orbits it took. That could be done: patience the Ekz had in abundance.

Fortunately it was no time at all - little more than a thousand orbits after the signals had abruptly stopped - that transmissions started again, from exactly the same direction. But this time the signal was different. The earlier signals had been a fluctuating jumble, a cacophonous overlapping mess of signals, always changing, never the same from one diurnal to the next. But the new signal was much simpler in form and it was a single transmission, repeated over and over at a regular interval. Its strength was gradually increasing which meant the signal became clearer and easier to pick out from the background noise of the universe, not that that helped much: despite the improving clarity the Ekz scholars analysing the signal still had no idea what it said. That was of no real concern now.

For such a signal could only be transmitted by intelligent alien life, and now that the signal's direction and increasing strength had been established there was no doubt: alien life was coming directly towards Val.