

APOSTLE TO TRUTH

Frank Verits didn't have long to live, so telling the truth should have been easy. All he had to do was sit down with a Drudge, tell the biggest secret of all secrets, and his final months would be spent in comfort. Somehow it wasn't turning out to be that easy.

First the Drudge was late. That left Frank plenty of time to sit in the booth by himself wondering if a few months of comfort was worth it. Did he deserve a few months of comfort? Frank was afraid to answer that. Then there were the Recticulians to think about. It was their secret he was telling, their lives he was destroying. It would take thirty years for the truth to reach them, but there would be no stopping it once he spoke it. Frank had grave reservation about doing that, even after all he had written about the representative. That last day had changed everything.

Frank looked up as a couple was seated at a table next to his booth. Teenagers on a date, he thought. Their clean clothes and well-groomed manner reminded Frank just how much time had passed since his own coming of age. Hell, when he was a kid any one with unperforated skin was the weirdo, the freak. God, everything had changed. Frank politely turned his attention back to his drink as the teenagers said a soft prayer of grace.

The couple were just finishing their amens when the Drudge sat down in the booth.

“You’re late.” Pain put more of an edge in Frank’s voice than he had intended.

“Work goes seven twenty four.” As though to emphasize his point, the Drudge slapped a stim patch against his neck.

“In my day we had something called sleep.” Frank kicked back another slug from his drink.

“And caffeine, alcohol, cocaine, and truckloads more. So don’t get holy on me.”

“I could change my mind, not sell you the story.” Frank pushed the drink away and prepared to stand.

“But you won’t.” The Drudge signaled a server and placed his order, letting Frank stew for several long minutes. The Drudge waited for his drink to arrive, took a long slow draw from it, only then did he return to the conversation.

“You got a brain cancer. You’ve spent all your money fighting it, and now they tell you it was for nothing. All you’ve got is debts and a headache that never stops. You need my cash, so you’re going to stay put and tell me your story.”

Humility was not the Drudge’s strong suit.

“There was a time when newsmen didn’t buy stories.” Frank complained.

“Yeah, and buggy whips were selling like memory chips, too.” The Drudge pulled out his card, the invitation hanging in the air. Frank sighed and brought a card reader from out of his breast pocket. A quick swipe of the Drudge’s card and it was over, he had sold his soul. Frank wondered what thirty pieces of silver would bring on the market today.

“So let’s hear the big story.” The Drudge had flipped out his pickup so that it floated several inches away from his face, like some crazy monocle. The glowing

red band across the top of the pickup alerted Frank know that the recording had already started.

“I know why the Reticulian left.” It gave Frank a deep feeling of satisfaction to see the Drudge’s armor of indifference penetrated. The kid may have tools to disperse his stories around the world instantly, but he lacked the poker face a good reporter required.

“I was there the day he landed.” Frank’s mind misted with warmer, better memories.

“You were going to tell me why the alien left.” There was even a bit of a whine in the Drudge’s voice.

“Do you want to cancel the transfer?” Frank pushed his reader over to the Drudge. The Drudge ignored it. Frank took the reader back and put it away.

“I’ll tell you, in my own old man ways.”

Frank doubted the Drudge was old enough to even remember the day of the landing. Not even the sharp pain of the ever present headache could dull that memory for Frank. For days the ship had been tracked in Earth orbit. For hours before the landing, the signals were received. No translation was needed, a clear set of latitude and longitude co-ordinates. Then the little landing craft separated from the starship and came down. All of the world watched and wondered. Nothing else mattered to the world for that one moment; the political squabbles forgotten, no one cared about the bulls or the bears, even the boys of summer had stopped to watch as the craft descended to Earth. With American monuments providing a backdrop, the craft landed. It wasn’t long before

the alien appeared. Later the world would know him as T’hiver, but at that moment he was The Alien. With deliberate care and caution, the alien moved towards the cameras and men gathered there. There was nothing human about his three legs, or faceless head. No one knew what to expect, no one could have known what to have expect.

The Alien unfolded a device, then spoke. The device’s translation of his screeches and clacks was only a fraction of a second behind his speech.

“In The Name of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, I come in peace.”

“It was the last thing anyone expected.” Frank found his head pounding, rubbing his temples didn’t help at all. “People couldn’t have been more shocked it he had said, “take me to your leader.”

“It was a brilliant scam.” The Drudge offered a capsule to Frank. Frank’s hesitation was momentary.

“If it was a scam.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that.” The Drudge leaned back in the booth.

“You were one of first to see through T’hiver.”

“There’s no doubt I was his harshest critic.” Even with plenty of liquid, the capsule resisted being swallowed. “Not everyone was a skeptic.” Frank glanced to the couple he had been sureptiously watching all evening.

“Sheep.” The Drudge’s arrogance wasn’t disguised at all. There was a time when Frank felt exactly as the Drudge did. Now? Now he didn’t know how he felt.

The world exploded with T’hiver’s revelation. Celebrations of joy and confirmation clashed daily with protests and cynicism. At the time, Frank was proud to be one of those denouncing the alien and his ludicrous claims. He was too experienced of a reporter to believe anything to be taken on faith. A career of unmasking the lies of politicians and their advisors had made Frank distrustful of anything he had not personally seen and researched. From his position as a reporter and opinion maker, Frank attacked T’hiver claims wherever he could. He became the spokesman for those who believed that T’hiver had some dark, hidden agenda. Clearly the alien had listened to Earth’s broadcasts, of which far too many were religious. Once he, or they, had learned enough then their plan would be put in motion. T’hiver was here to quiet the natives, to win their trust, and many were falling for it.

“Not everyone fell for it’s line.” The Drudge commented.

“But enough did.” Frank glanced at the teenage couple again. “Even before T’hiver came there were plenty of people sitting on the theological fence. Especially in the industrial western nations. T’hivers’ claim was enough to push them off to one side.”

“It needed zealots.” The Drudge flicked off the burning tip of his cigarette, saving the stub for another time. “Divide and conquer. We did it to the Indians, and now they’ll do it to us. They’ll be back after we’ve killed enough non-Christian souls.”

“I don’t think so. The Pakistani Conflict, and all the others are our doing, not T’hivers’.”

T’hiver never asked to address the leaders of the nations. He was totally unconcerned with politics. T’hiver had come to preach, and to learn. All he asked was freedom to travel and preach the holy word of the lord, and to learn from us new colors to the holy words.

Frank didn’t buy this interstellar revival show. T’hivers’ sermons the arguments that he could never accept. Ones of faith. For Frank the world was a world of reason, not one of superstition. The crowds that came to hear the sermons were accepting where he was skeptical. Where Frank questioned, they believed. He become ever more determined in his quest to open the eyes that T’hiver was closing with practiced sermons.

Frank wasn’t alone. Wherever T’hiver went, a small army of supporters, protesters, and reporters followed. Serenely, T’hiver ignored all of them. By whatever logic his people used he would choose his places, travel there, and preach the word. He would meet with local priests and pastors, oblivious to if their congregations numbered in the dozens or thousands. Besides the sermons, there were long discussions on how alien Christianity differed from the human brand. A topic dull and meaningless to Frank.

“Of course T’hiver brought us more than just words.” Frank focused on the video pick-up floating in front of the Drudge’s right eye.

“Yeah, we got some pretty nifty beads.” The Drudge seemed pretty sarcastic for someone who was wearing one of the beads.

“Most everyone else thought it was a pretty good trade: access to some of his technology for the right to travel and preach.”

“Yeah, and during the colonial age a lot of natives thought it was a good idea to sell each other into slavery for metal pots. No alien is going to travel thirty light years to give away their best technology.” The Drudge’s skepticism was returning from where ever it had hidden.

“Not even a charitable one?”

“Charity is a myth. No one works for anything except their own best interest.”

“Maybe,” was Frank’s simple reply.

They were at San Diego when Frank got the invitation for the first time. Balboa Park was filled with people. Thiver’s brand of Christianity naturally didn’t fall into any one denomination, but it did cut across enough denominations to draw people from all of them. That also meant it drew out those of saw the church as an opponent or enemy. It was better than any national political convention Frank had ever covered.

“Frank!” Perry, his producer, had to shout to be heard over the crowd. This was still when teams worked on news stories, before the Drudges had turned it into a perpetual guerilla war.

“Isn’t this great?!” Frank blasted into Perry’s ear.

“It just got better. You’ve been invited for a chat with Thiver!”

“A press conference? Doesn’t it realize there isn’t enough time for one before the sermon?”

“This is not a press conference. Just you, no cameras.” Frank’s silence was destroyed by the sea of noise from the crowd. Frank recovered quickly.

“What conditions?”

“No equipment, no one else. That’s it.”

“Everything on the record? How did the network swing that?”

“Frank, the network didn’t. T’hiver asked for it. A chance to talk to you.”

“I’m getting under his skin!” Frank started off away from the crowd. “When does he want this meeting?”

“Right after the sermon.”

“Great, that’ll give me time to prepare and collect my thoughts. I’m sure as hell not going to get a second shot at this.”

The next two hours for Frank was a mixture of exhilaration and forced sedateness. It turned out to be of the few sermons by T’hiver that Frank missed.

Frank spent the two hours sitting among the flowers and trees of the park, planning for an interview that he had no way to plan for.

Frank wasn’t surprised to find human style chairs in T’hiver’s craft. Frank wasn’t the first to meet with T’hiver here and he wasn’t going to be the last. But all the others had been men of the cloth, Frank was not only the first non-religious man to be invited here, he was a critic of it.

“Welcome, Frank Vertis. Please accept the humble blessings of my home,”

T’hiver said as he entered the room. Frank had spent so many weeks following T’hiver from place to place that he no longer noticed the duality of T’hiver’s translator-enhanced speech.

“Thank you.” Frank took a seat. T’hiver folded his three legs at what would have been knees on a human, and rested upon the they tripod. Up close like this, Frank could make out the multitude of tiny openings covering the surface

of the alien head that fed T'hivers' lungs. Nothing else had a human analog. The eyeless, mouthless head would make for a difficult interview.

"I am interested in you, Frank. Of all my critics, only you travel with me. At every sermon you are there."

"Does that make you nervous?"

"No. If I am to understand your people, I must understand those like yourself as well. You seem to accept nothing from faith."

"There are plenty like me, why single me out for special attention?"

"None have your dedication I seem to be your personal..." T'hiver struggled for the right word.

"Crusade?" Frank offered.

"I don't know that word. Please help me with its color."

"The Crusades were Christian holy wars to reclaim the 'holy' land. The fact that infidels lived there only provide additional reason for the slaughter. Today the word means an irrational dedication to a cause."

"Oh, then that is not the word I would choose. You have not been irrational at all." T'hiver waved his third hand and an automaton delivered a tray of food and drink to Frank. "There is so much about your people and their color to the Lord's Word that I do not understand."

"Surely you studied us enough before landing to figure it out."

"I have read your writings, I have heard your reports. I know you think I am a deceiver. This is not true."

"A deceiver would say exactly the same thing, so protests are useless."

“So you have illustrated to your followers.”

“You have followers, I have readers and fans.” Frank riled at being compared to Thiver.

“Sadly, you are wrong. We both have followers, a better universe it would be if no one followed.”

“I don’t go looking for followers. I don’t exploit peoples’ fear to hoodwink them into following.”

“I speak against fear, not for it. Do you not listen to the sermon you attend?”

“Superstition has always been used to control people. Call it psychic nonsense, karma, or the word of God the end result is always the same. People giving up control over their actions to someone else. The only way make people free is to teach them to think! To question! Anyone who says they have the answers is a liar.”

“I am telling them of the Saviours words. Of the path to life and I ask nothing in return..”

“Historically, we’re pretty certain that Jesus existed, but he certainly didn’t fly from star to star. He lived in pretty barbaric times, pissed off the elites, and in the end got nailed to two pieces of wood. End of story. No miracles, no resurrection, that’s all Sunday school stories. Anything you tell is nothing more than an echo.”

“I will not debate this with you here and now. You have heard my sermons, you have heard the Savior’s words. The rest is up to your heart.” Thiver rose and

departed the room. Soon Frank found himself standing outside the vessel wondering about himself.

“It was pretty much the worst job I had ever done as a reporter,” he told the Drudge. “I let Thiver get under my skin. Once you lose your detachment you lose everything.”

“Stop lecturing. After that, why did he invite you back?”

“It certainly wasn’t curiosity. He wasn’t curious like a human would be.”

“He was curious about you.”

“Only in a practical way. I was already involved with his ministry, he needed to understand me to understand my effect.” Frank dug an item from his pocket and quickly covered it with coaster from his drink. “A human will pick this up just to see what is under it. Not a reticulan. He can go forever not knowing what’s underneath.”

Frank became aware of how much he was rambling. “After all, which made him more alien, his biology or coming from a culture that didn’t know war?”

“You don’t buy that crap, do you?”

“It would explain a great many things.”

“It was all part of that Christian disguise it wore.” The Drudge pulled out another memory chip and reloaded his recorder. “That story he fed us about god’s son being born among his people and bringing an age of peace and love. That was a con man’s game. Make us feel like losers, and we’ll turn to the winners for help.”

“But you have no proof of that, do you?” Frank asked.

“I don’t need proof. It’s logical and it doesn’t need any miracles to make it happen.” The Drudge pulled out a cigarette, prompting Frank to wonder how many different stimulants were charging thru the Drudge’s system. “But you’re the one with the answers. Right?”

Frank became the person who know T’hiver better than anyone on the planet. Frank continued his articles and reports, and surprisingly, his chats with T’hiver. Frank was part of the mobile army that followed T’hiver around. He was there at every sermon, at every security meeting, watching and reporting freely. T’hiver didn’t understand the concept of a hostile press. There was simply the truth. T’hiver never avoided a question, or dodged on issue. Frank concluded that politics on Reticuli would be dull news. He also learned a great deal about T’hiver views on Christ.

Christ had not appeared to the Recticulians as a human, but as one of their own. But the similarities between the religions had to be more than coincidence. The creation of life in divine grace, the fall from grace, the covenant and laws given to the chosen people. Hell, even the ten strictures were identical to the commandments. And of course the birth of the Christ, the Savior. Come to save souls and show the path to salvation. Straddling the duality between god and flesh, and illuminating the eternal soul.

Earth had not fared as well with her Christ as had the Recticulians. Their Christ did not die at the hands of fearful priests and politicians. He died simply and quietly in his sleep, to rise again bringing salvation and eternal life to

those who could accept and believe. Now his people lived together in peace and salvation.

“And the sheep came in great numbers, begging for the wolf to teach them salvation.” The Drudge leaned forward “Why did it leave?”

“What did T’hiver do on the sabbath?”

“Meditated, prayed I suppose.”

“You don’t know, cause no one knows. He never left that craft on his sabbath.”

“And?”

“I know. I saw the altar.” Frank tried to suppress the image in his mind.

T’hiver’s biology was alien, but his blood had the same coppery smell as any human’s.

“At the end I nearly total access to T’hiver and his craft. I don’t think he ever truly understood our degree of curiosity: that to most people a new corridor MUST be explored, or he would have never granted that access.”

Frank prowled about the spacecraft. Much of what he saw he didn’t understand. He doubted if he could understand, science has never been his best subject. Too dry too impersonal for him. What caught his attention was the door. Every other room was enter thru an arch or portal, this was the first door Frank had seen on the spacecraft. There was no handle, knob, or any other obvious method of opening the door. Frank tried the direct method, he pushed. The door swung open silently.

The room was simple and unadorned. In the center was an altar, stained brown with blood. Frank noticed that some of the blood did not seem to be very

old. Moving around the alter, Frank noticed crude hide straps. Six of them.

This was a device of sacrifice, Frank thought.

“No my friend,” Thiver answered Frank’s unspoken thought, “we do not sacrifice God’s creations upon this. This is for me, for all of us who go forth and spread the word of Our Lord.”

“Who? We’ve never seen anyone but you,” Frank uttered after recovering his startled breath.

“It is automated. In the old days the lashing was a task that fell upon those seeking to become a priest. They had to be made aware of what they were committing themselves to.”

“Why? I don’t understand this!”

“We must atone for our sins, for lies in spreading the word.”

“Lies?”

“Yes, I have lied to you and your people. In shame we have hidden our great sin, we live in terror of our shame becoming known.”

“What shame?”

“We killed the savior.”

“I thought...”

“You were led to think that. But he died being lashed, and so now we who would spread his word share his pain for our sins. Our blood runs as did his so that all may live forever with Our Lord and God.”

Thiver moved out of the temple, Frank following behind. “Now my friend, I must leave your lovely planet and hope that your people will find their own way to the word.”

“You’re leaving? Why? We did the same thing to Christ!”

“Are you wanting me to stay and to continue ‘to sell my snake oil?’” Thiver didn’t wait for Frank to reply. “No, now that your people will learn how unworthy we were of the Lord’s blessing, they can never trust us. How can we speak for the Lord and his teachings after we murdered him?”

“People won’t care, they don’t expect any better.”

“But we do, and we can not be that.”

The restaurant was now almost completely empty. Frank took a deep breath and stood up from the booth.

“Thiver left that very day. No word of explanation, no final sermon.”

“It was part of the scam, this was the ground work.” The Drudge didn’t get up, fighting his battle from the comfort of his seat. “He knew you’d put that story out. Once the story got out, the aliens would rise in stature. You know it! They’ll let the wars rage for awhile longer, then come in to ‘save us’. And these sheep will be willing to give them the store to be saved. Come on, I’m surprised you of all people didn’t see that.”

“I did, years ago. After all I have held on to this secret for over twenty years.”

Frank held on to the booth and leaned in close to the Drudge. “But there’s one little problem with your theory. There’s no proof. It’s all faith, faith in con men, faith scams, and most of all faith in the worst that anyone has to offer.”

“There’s no proof to Thivers’ story either.”

“Yeah, that’s the dilemma of faith.” Frank turned away from the Drudge and started out of the little eatery.

“You don’t believe it do you?” The Drudge called after him.

Frank stopped and turned around slowly. “Maybe it’s the cancer eating at my brain, and maybe it’s death looming fast and I don’t wanna die, but then again maybe it’s the truth and we are all saved if we choose to be. Yes, I do believe.”

Frank walked out into the night knowing that thirty years from now, the Reticulians would forgive him. Now he had to find his own forgiveness in the months left to him.