

## The Price of Peace

Hurray, Peace is here! Hurray!  
And half the fleet is back in mothball.  
The other half is left to face the  
Drug Lords, and Pirates and Slavers out on the rim of space.  
And one Marine is having a particularly bad month.  
He's been captured by the slavers not once but twice  
But the real problem is that  
Both times, he woke up chained to the same attractive lady.  
And he's starting to like it.

To the Men and Women  
Who put on the uniform every morning  
When the victory parades are over and there's still work to be done  
Who pay the Price of Peace with their sweat and blood, loneliness and fear  
  
and to Trudy Moscoe  
and all the wives and kids, and now husbands, like her  
"They also serve who only stand and wait."

## ONE

Whites crisply starched and gig line perfect, Commander Izzy Umboto, captain of the Society of Humanity cruiser *Patton* started her day as she stepped from her day cabin onto the darkened bridge. The stink of tense sweat washed over her, just about wilting her uniform where she stood.

“Captain on the bridge.” The Officer of the Deck’s voice cracked.

“As you were,” she overspoke the lieutenant. “Any change in our unknown?” she asked as she had every hour through the ship’s night. Izzy studied the main screen; it answered her before the OOD could.

“No change, ma’am,” the OOD shot back. The young man’s Adam’s apple bobbed nervously. Recently qualified, this was his first time to sweat out a possible hostile approach with the entire ship his responsibility. Izzy had accepted the risk, wanting her best team well rested for today. She gave the young officer an affirming smile as she again measured the distance between the *Patton*, leisurely crossing this system at one gee like any heavily laden freighter, and the unknown galloping down on her at three gees. It was exactly where she expected it to be.

Izzy glanced around at the rest of the bridge crew, tired, worried young faces lit in multi-hued reflections from their stations. “Well done, all of you. Quartermaster of the watch, jack up the blowers.” The hum of the air circulation fans went up several notches. For the ship’s night, the lights and blowers had been reduced to aid the crew’s rest. It was time to get the crew up – and the smell of fear off Izzy’s bridge.

“Bos’n, pipe the crew to chow. Announce battle stations in twenty-five minutes.” She was cutting it close, but just as Nelson had calculated how fast the wind would drive his liners down upon the French and Spanish fleet, physics decreed how quickly a ship accelerating at three gees could overtake a ship making one gee. When would not be the surprise today. Who did what to whom — now, that would get exciting real soon.

“I’ll be in the wardroom. Call me if anything changes.”

“Yes, ma’am” and “Captain off the bridge,” followed her. She’d only had this

crew for two months, but they'd shaken down well. *If only the damn boat was as good.* All her career, Izzy had dreamed of commanding a warship in space, lusted for it in the worst way. She doubted it could get worse than the *Patton*. Izzy shrugged, as she had so many times in the war. No use complaining about what you can't fix. The potential pirate bearing down on her, now *that* was something she'd enjoy fixing.

The whiff and clatter of breakfast greeted her well before she entered the wardroom. As she did, a steward's mate started fixing her usual breakfast plate. Izzy noted he went light on the reconstituted scrambled eggs and bacon, and blessed him. This morning, she'd share a hearty meal with her band of officers. Still, she didn't want to lose it as she hurtled the *Patton* through battle maneuvers. And leaving half her breakfast on the plate would not be a good signal to her team.

The exec, Guns, Damage Control, Engineering, Comm and the leader of her marine detachment had an empty place at their table; she joined them, removing a white linen napkin from the dark blue tablecloth and settling it in her lap as the Steward deposited her plate in front of her. "Thank you," she smiled.

"Think we got ourselves a real pirate?" Guns grinned through a heap of eggs.

"Don't know many merchants that charge around a system at three gees." Izzy smiled in agreement. "Hell on the bottom line. Right, Vu?"

The bald, round chief engineer, last remaining member of the ship's old merchant marine crew, nodded like a silent Buddha, then went back to chasing his curried rice with chop sticks.

Lieutenant Commander Stan Gabon, her exec, wiped his lips with a linen napkin. "Could be hostile. Then again, it could be a courier ship or a fast private yacht."

Izzy nodded, wondering if this guy had been a nervous ninny all his career, or had just adopted the role after reading her career brief. "But three ships have disappeared without a trace, or one squawking life pod. If that ship is a pirate, it's in for a very bad day."

"You got that right," Guns chortled. Surrounding tables joined him. Izzy felt a rush, pure joy at leading these men and women into combat. For twenty-five years she'd dreamed and trained. Today, she'd put it all together.

"If this damn bucket of bolts and chips holds together," Comm muttered as the wardroom quieted. It got real quiet as his words sunk home.

The damage control officer looked grim. "We still haven't figured out why the stern sensor suite keeps dropping off line. The cable routing on this ship would drive a spider mad."

“That’s why warships are full of redundancies,” Izzy said. Her overworked maintenance chief didn’t look very convinced.

The exec’s face was also a cool mask, telling her nothing. He was a troubling unknown. His file said he was solid, but something had gone out of him a month ago. His kid brother disappeared just before he was to testify before a senate committee investigating corporate connection to the enemy during the recent war. Tom had been an up-and-coming corporate man. Now he was long gone, or sleeping with the fish or whatever happened to hard charging company men who knew too much of the wrong things. Stan had gotten quiet and withdrawn.

The leadership books said everyone had a right to grieve. Today, nobody had a right to mess up Izzy’s battle plan. She glanced at her wrist unit. “We go to battle stations in three minutes. Let’s make it a day to remember.”

\* \* \*

“Unknown in main battery range,” Sensors reported.

“Are they armed?” Izzy snapped, starring hard at the main screen, as if her eyeballs might see something *Patton’s* sensors had missed. The unknown was getting awfully close – and not saying a damn thing.

“Stern sensors are down again, ma’am. I’m doing the best I can with the bow suite.” Lieutenant Commander Igor McVinty waved a dark hand at the dozen screens on his board with straight lines across them. And Izzy cursed the spare parts shortage for the forty-eleventh time this cruise. *Damn budget cutters.*

Suddenly Igor’s lines became dancing squiggles. “Skunk powering up main battery. His passive sensors are humming now.” He shook his head. “Commander, that skunk is making music like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. She’s a warship.”

“Society or Unity?” the XO shot back. Officially, Unity was as dead as Shakespeare, to quote Izzy’s old boss. But what they said back on Earth and what a lone cruiser found far out on the rim of human space weren’t always the same.

Igor tapped his board. Red lines appeared right on top of the yellow ones that skittered over his screens. “I make it a Daring class Unity light cruiser.”

Izzy eyed Igor’s board. *Yep, a damn Daring.*

*Every mother’s son of which was supposed to be scrap!*

So much for the fine points of peace treaties.

“Communications here, Captain. We’re being hailed.”

“Comm, give me audio. No visual output on these transmissions.” Izzy could fake the outside of the *Patton*. There was no way to fake the bridge of a Navy cruiser with its crew at battle stations.

“Yes ma’am,” answered communications.

*We’re ready. It’s show time!*

“Howdy, stranger,” Izzy drawled. “This is Betsy Corbel, skipper of the *Pride of Portland*. What’cha want?” Betsy Corbel *did* captain the *Pride of Portland* . . . on the other side of human space.

A window opened on the main screen; an unshaven face starred out with a smile just one degree shy of a sneer. Then it went to puzzlement. “Your picture ain’t coming through.”

“Lost our bridge camera a month back,” Izzy assured him. “Haven’t had the money to replace it.”

“Oh,” the man on screen looked none to happy about that. But with a shrug, he went on. “There’re pirates around here. We’ll escort you. Keep you safe. For a slight fee.”

Izzy expanded the picture of the man to fill the entire main screen. That gave her a good look at the bridge activity behind him. His crew was a rough lot in rumpled clothing; some had started life as uniforms. None had been washed lately. In addition to the watch-standers, there was a clump of extra men and women, rifles, knives and assault weapons lovingly in hand. Izzy glanced at her XO; he returned a grim nod.

Izzy had heard from several merchant captains who’d paid what these guys asked. She had no idea what the three ships that had failed to make their next port of call had said and done. That was why the *Patton* was crossing this system with fake containers squaring off her cruiser lines. On visual, radar and laser, the *Patton* WAS the *Pride of P*. If the lieutenant in charge of the *Patton*’s electronic counter measures was half as good as she claimed . . . and her gear was working . . . this skunk was still in the dark about nine 6 inch laser cannons charged and ready.

“Sorry, friend,” Izzy answered, “but I’m just barely breaking even these trips. I’ll have to pass on the escort.” Izzy tried to sound grateful for the offer. *Come to Momma*.

There was silent laughter among the armed crew behind the face on screen as it lost any hint of a smile. Now it was pure cold evil, only slightly softened by greed. “I don’t think you understand the situation, sister. You see, it’s just you and me, and an

awful lot of space. Cough up a charge number and you might live. Keep on the way you're going, and you're gonna end up in deep shit."

"Helm, go to two gees." Izzy let a tremble shake her voice. What she wanted to do was shout for joy.

"Bad choice, girl." The screen went blank.

"Sensors, talk to me," Izzy snapped.

"They just powered up their active range finding gear. They'll need about half a minute before they can range us."

"Distance to skunk?"

"Coming up on fifteen thousand clicks."

Izzy settled herself back in her chair – and tightened her belt. Around the bridge, the crew did the same. The quartermaster of the watch whispered, "Skipper just tightened her seat belt, folks. I'd do the same." Not a regulation announcement, but Izzy wasn't about to squelch the initiative. She was having too much fun. Twenty-five years she'd waited for this. Finally, she was commanding a ship in space *in combat*. *If* that ship was a pirate, and *if* it would just take a swipe at her.

She hit her comm button. "Crew, we got a possible pirate off our stern quarter. In a few seconds, they may range us. If they do, I'm gonna start evasive maneuvers real fast. As soon as they miss us, we'll steady down and shoot back. This is what we trained for. We're good. Let's do it." She switched to gunnery circuit. "Guns, hold main battery fire until I give the word."

"Turret B and X won't take a charge. We're working on them. The rest are ready, skipper."

*Damn the budget cutters to hell and the spare parts crunch right behind them.* There was nothing she could do about that at the moment. The skunk was closing; it looked like she was going to get her fight. "Helm, prepare to flip ship and execute a down zig. Put spin on the ship when I order the down zig."

"Flip ship, standing by. Down zig, standing by. Spin, standing by," was the curt response from the young JG at the helm.

"Guns, as soon as I order the zig, you active range that bastard with everything we got. I want that target dialed in when I order a shoot."

"Yes ma'am," came back with a grin in it.

“Ping! We’ve just been pinged, laser and radar!”

“Flip ship!” Umboto snapped. The *Patton* quickly started rotating along its central axis. Now, instead of her vulnerable engines, her ice-armored nose faced hostile fire.

“Zig down,” she snapped as soon as that maneuver was done.

In a blink, the *Patton* dropped out from underneath Umboto. As the helmswoman initiated the defensive spin along the ship’s long axis, the captain was slammed into her seat. That was planned. Then the stern plunged and the bow shot up. That wasn’t. The *Patton* took off on her own, cartwheeling through space. The ragged broadside from the self-proven pirate cut through where the *Patton* had been – almost.

One ray sliced into ice armor. The *Patton* lurched; pumps whined as they redistributed reaction mass to balance the spinning ship. Umboto held her breath. Was the armor thick enough, the spin fast enough to keep the pirate laser from burning through? The pumps cut off as suddenly as they had started. The pirate had done his best. Now it was her turn.

“Hold fire, Guns, hold fire. Helm, steady as she goes.”

“Going to manual,” the young helmswoman answered. “Damn jets,” she muttered as her hands twisted both joysticks at her station. Scores of attitudinal jets, normally balanced by delicate computer modeling, responded to her deft coaxing. After wild seconds, the *Patton* held steady, pitch controlled. “I think I can hold her here for a few seconds, Captain.”

“Guns, we got them ranged.”

“Did before that last jig, skipper.”

“Main battery, fire salvo, pattern C,” Umboto ordered. Even with laser and radar range finders, at fifteen thousand kilometers, there was plenty of wiggle room for a five hundred-meter ship. Guns and Umboto had worked out an approach to that problem. Each gun aimed for a slightly different section of space, and zig zagged through it for the three seconds of the salvo. With luck, one gun would find the target, and the next salvo would center around that hit. Hopefully, the attitudinal problem hadn’t destroyed her carefully laid plans.

The lights dimmed as five six-inch lasers reached for the threat. In empty space, nothing colored the laser light; it passed invisible to the naked eye. Umboto concentrated on her battle screens. Rays ranged around the target, but there was no sign of a hit. Damn!

The *Patton's* spin brought two new guns to bear. Using the misses, Guns modified their salvo pattern. Damn, Umboto missed the two broke guns. But wish in one hand and spit in the other . . . see which one you get the most out of.

The target turned red as a single gun nipped it just as the salvo ended.

"Got a piece of'em," Guns shouted with glee.

The *Patton* took a lurch. "Sorry, ma'am," the helmswoman answered before her captain said anything.

"Do your best," Umboto said, hoping Gun's fire solution hadn't been hashed again. "XO, tell me something nice."

"Damage control reports they've got attitudinal control back. Helm, go to backup."

"Yes, sir." There was a pause while the *Patton* did nothing . . . exactly the way it was supposed to. The XO and Umboto breathed a sigh of relief at the same moment. And Umboto went back to her main problem. One damaged pirate.

"Sensors, talk to me."

"Target is putting on spin. Only a few RPM's though. Ranging us constantly." That told Umboto the bastard knew how to fight his ship, but probably didn't trust his crew and equipment to a standard battle stations twenty RPM – and was still very much spoiling for a fight.

"Sensors, time since last enemy salvo?"

"Coming up on ten seconds."

"Helm, zig right."

*Patton* slewed to the right even as the helmswoman repeated the order. No enemy fire came.

"Batteries are charged," Guns reported.

Sending out the next salvo meant committing the *Patton* to a steady course for five seconds. "Sensors?"

"Bandit is charged, ma'am."

*So which one of us fires first?* "Hold course steady," Umboto said, while



counting in her head one thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three. “Zig up.”

As the *Patton* zoomed up, the hostile lasers cut through the empty space where she’d been. Umboto had out guessed the bandit.

“Guns, pattern B.”

“On its way,” he said as the lights dimmed.

Five rays stabbed out, reaching for the pirate. One of them connected. The last two guns walked right into the target, slicing it.

“Good hits,” Guns growled.

“Well done, Guns. Target their engines next salvo.”

“Won’t get many prisoners,” the XO whispered softly.

“Three ships have disappeared and not a crew member to tell the tale, XO. I don’t want prisoners. Let the other pirates sweat what happened to this one. Sooner or later, the marines will dump someone in my brig. I’m in no rush.” Lights dimmed again. The five lasers slashed through the pirate for a second, then where a ship had been was only an expanding cloud of glowing gas. In only a moment, that too was gone.

“Yes!” Izzy crowed, her first kill . . . and immediately went back to work. “Comm, any distress signals, pods squawking?”

“Quiet as a tomb, Captain.”

Izzy leaned back in her seat. “Helm, belay the spin. Take us back to one gee. Damage control, report to the XO on anything needs fixing. And do an autopsy on that damn thruster. I want to know who, why, when, where and how it went bad.”

“Yes, ma’am,” came with a familiar sigh from damage control. Chips had been doing *post mortems* on too damn much of the *Patton*’s hardware and software. The ship was a jinx. She’d spent the war as a yard queen, tied up waiting for parts. Post war, the other merchant converts had been refitted back into freighters. Not the *Patton*. Nobody wanted her.

Still, the Society of Humanity’s Navy was now responsible for patrolling one hundred and fifty planets, not the forty-eight they’d had before the war. And what with war losses, there were even less ships to do the job. So cruisers like the *Patton*, that nobody wanted, were being given to people like Umboto, whom, if she was honest, nobody wanted. *Girl, you should have asked for the gripe sheet on the Patton before*

*you said you'd take her.*

Then she shrugged. The choice was between early retirement and the *Patton*. For Izzy, that was no choice, even if the peace becalmed Navy Department hadn't included the promotion to Captain that the skipper of a cruiser deserved.

So the skipper of the good ship *Patton* . . . whose every officer was drawing pay for one rank less than their job deserved . . . stood. "Stan, have division heads report to my day cabin in fifteen minutes. Let's critique this while it's still hot."

She headed for her cabin off the bridge, not turning back to acknowledge Stan's "Yes, ma'am." Only after the hatch closed behind her did she let out a yelp. "Hot damn, that was . . ." What? Scary. Fun. All of the above and a lot more.

She'd outsmarted the bastard! She knew she had to be a better ship handler than any jerk who didn't bother to shave in the morning.

Her knees began to shake. He could have gotten lucky.

Izzy shook her head. *No way! Lord, that was good!* She'd have to get these feelings out before the others reported. If Stan even half suspected how much she loved hanging it all out and winning, he'd get out and start walking for the nearest Navy base – with most of the crew ambling along right behind him.

Tigers get people killed. How often had Captain Andy warned her during the war that she needed adult supervision. Well, now the tiger had the conn. She almost pitied poor Stan; providing the mature judgment for this command was going to be a hell of a job for the guy.

A light blinked on her desk. Mail must have come in during the shoot. Personal mail was rare; her navy career left little room for attachments. Izzy's sister Lora rarely wrote, but her kid Franny was writing regularly, grateful to Izzy for paying her college tuition. There had to be a way out of the slums that didn't mean putting on a uniform. Izzy had begged Lora to emigrate out; there were planets begging for women, even a woman with a kid. Lora refused to leave mom, as if the old drunk noticed her kids. Enough of that. Franny was fun, working hard to get out, getting close to husband high. Izzy wouldn't mind paying for a wedding, or even the penalty for an unlicensed conception. Kids were cute, so long as they were someone else's to take home.

Izzy tapped the mail button; her screen filled with a weeping Lora. "Franny's dead. I should have called. I should have kept closer tabs on her at school. But she was at *school!*"

Lora's image broke down. Izzy took a step back from the vid as if she'd been slugged in the gut. Navy people died; you knew the job was dangerous when you took

it. *But college kids?*

Lora controlled her wailing. “Franny loved gaming. We joked she was addicted, but I never *thought* . . . Izzy, there’s this new drug going around. They say it makes VR real, that you forget there’s a real world, that it makes every pleasure ten times better. She and her roommates hooked themselves up to a game and plugged themselves into a drug bottle.”

Izzy slammed her fist down on her desk. “Not dehydration,” the professional in her choked, the anger of foreknowledge almost overriding Lora’s final sob.

“They died ‘cause they never came out for a drink of water. Oh God, if I’d only called. Just dropped by. I’d been meaning to. Honest, sis, I’d been meaning to.”

Izzy hit the close button. The pleading in her sister’s eyes faded to blank as Izzy collapsed into her work chair. What was wrong? What was missing? How could Franny have done this? How could Lora have missed the signs? Izzy shivered; the world was crazy. She’d just risked her life to burn a pirate, and Franny had thrown her life away on a thrill.

Izzy sat slumped in her chair until the computer reminded her she had a meeting to run. Lora’s message could wait for an answer. With a wrenching sigh that could not fill the void in her heart, Izzy went to do what duty demanded.

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Lieutenant Terrence Tordon was troubled. He was not used to that. Trouble to his enemies. Trouble to his friends, even Trouble to himself, and regularly in trouble, he wasn’t often troubled. Now, he sat at the captain’s conference table a very troubled man. His back was as ramrod straight as the world expected a marine’s, his face a study in military blandness, but behind the exterior, his mind was spinning. *What have I gotten myself and the platoon into?*

He’d worked with Izzy before. He knew she was a bit wild, but as a card-carrying member of the “Who Wants to Live Forever Club,” Trouble expected no problems. The joke was that after twenty-five years with the defense brigades, Izzy asked for marines for the *Patton* because she didn’t want to go anywhere without her security blanket. Since Trouble’s choices were between a paltry exit bonus or taking a cut to Second Lieutenant and a platoon when what he wanted was a promotion to Major and his own battalion, he’d jumped at the chance to staff six of the *Patton*’s secondary guns with his marine detachment.

After today’s live fire exercise, Trouble wondered if he’d jumped right. The commander had bet her ship and their lives on some pretty crappy equipment, savvy moves and a lot of luck. She’d won. Had she learned anything? Or would she be

chasing the same thrill tomorrow? Trouble eyed her without staring.

She was strangely subdued. Still her first question was a good one. "Chips, what's wrong with my ship."

Lieutenant Chippanda Eifervald shook her head. "I told you before skipper, and I'll tell you again. There ain't nothing wrong with this tub that couldn't be fixed by parking it alongside a pier and combing every square inch of it. I bet we'd find seven or eight good sub-assemblies to put back in stock to help the spares crunch. The rest, we sell by the pound."

"Yeah, Chips, but if we do that, what'll I command?"

"One hell of a beer bash," the Exec offered.

The skipper took a deep breath. The stale, processed air was no different from what she'd breathed on a dozen stations. The gray walls around her could be any of a score of offices she'd worked out of or cubicles she'd lived in. But the proprietary twist to her lips told Trouble all there was to know. *This* air and *that* wall were *her* ship's. The skipper would give them up over her dead body. "Okay, crew, enough jokes. Start with the most important gear in your areas and make sure it'll work next time we need it. Guns, that means those six-inchers. Chips, that means maneuvering. Engineering," Izzy glanced at Vu Van, "we got any problems?"

"If I had any failures, we would not be here to discuss them." The old Buddhist smiled, confident he could keep the plasma demons from eating his ship.

"Well, then, what did our little live fire exercise tell us about the opposition?"

The XO shrugged. "There be pirates here, or was. They had a Unity cruiser that was a long way from the scrap heap. They may be bold and brassy against unarmed civilians, but they can't stand up to a fighting ship. That about sum it up, skipper?"

"In a nut shell," the skipper scowled. "Let's go find ourselves another sucker."

The comm link buzzed at her elbow. She tapped it. "Yes?"

"We've got an all ships message from a businessman on Hurtford Corner. Says he's being threatened by bandits and requests the assistance of any ship in the vicinity."

"Who?"

"A Paul Withwaterson, licensed on Pitt's Hope to sell farming equipment and related gear. Sounds like a legitimate call."

“Yeah,” scowled Chips, “but is he really facing bandits or does he just want us to overawe some rubes that don’t want to pay what he wants to charge.” Trouble nodded; businessmen and the Navy rarely saw eye to eye on the proper use of naval presence.

“Has he made a previous request for help?” the captain asked. While Communications checked its database, the Exec called up the star map. Hurtford Corner was five jumps away.

“Withwaterson has never made a request for assistance of the Navy. This message is a week old,” Comm reported.

The skipper worried her lower lip. “Seven days to cross five jump points. No rush there.” Each jump point had a buoy marking its place in space. Message traffic passed from buoy to buoy, but stayed in system until the buoy jumped through just ahead of a ship or its message buffer filled and it dropped through the jump point to pass messages along to the next node. Ships could actually cover the distance between major planets faster than message traffic did between backwater systems.

“Not much of a dispersion,” the XO noted. “The Hurtford Corner system is pretty isolated. Doubt if any other ship has gotten this message. It could be a month or more before it gets to District HQ and we get orders.”

“Yeah,” now the boss was grinning. “Trouble, could your animals use some dirtside exercise?”

There was only one answer to that. “Marines always love getting their boots muddy, ma’am,” he said with innocent relish. The skipper gave him a wink.

“XO, lay in a course for Hurtford Corner. One and a quarter gee if you will.”

\* \* \*

Tom Gabon stood before the full length mirror. He adjusted his tie a smidgen. This might be the frontier, the rim of human space, but a businessman still needed to make a good first impression. This was the big promotion he’d been looking for. As Senior Vice President for Z&G on Riddle he would not only managed their planetwide facilities and construction projects, but would also be one of the thirteen who sat on the planet’s council. This sure as hell beat testifying to a Senate hearing.

Besides, what could he have told them? Sure, corporations kept their lines of communication open across the battle lines of the last war. Information was money. Just because Unity and Earth couldn’t talk civil to each other didn’t mean business had to stop. And maybe he had heard his Board of Directors brag that he could turn Unity’s President Urm off and on like a light switch, but hey, anyone listening with one ear in the right bars during the war knew that.

*All right, maybe I do know more than a lot, but that just means I know when to keep my mouth shut and listen more than a lot of them.* Tom grinned; that's how he'd found out about this opportunity. Keeping his mouth shut and listening.

Tom glanced at his wrist unit. The station's elevators had been lifting passengers out of the *Goethe* for a half hour. It was time he made his appearance. As expected four men were waiting for him as he exited the pier elevator.

"Mr. Gabon," a blue suit smiled. "We have a shuttle holding to take you down to Riddle. We can just make the meeting. Everyone wants to meet you." Tom had calculated that just right. He'd even remembered to include where the station was in its orbit around Riddle. Stan, his navy puke brother, would be proud of him. Just because Tom understood how business worked didn't mean he was illiterate about how the stars and planets turned.

Tom followed his escort down the promenade, heading for more elevators. They chatted lightly about the planet's weather . . . hot and damp as he'd been warned. The suit aimed Tom toward a small elevator. "I've reserved one for you."

Tom entered it; as he turned to face the door, his eye caught a gleam in the hand of the man behind him. A small cylinder with a needle. Before Tom could react, the needle was jammed in his neck.

"What the hell?" Tom got out even as his knees went weak and his eyes grayed out.

"You didn't think we'd let a snoop like you boss up one of our biggest concerns, did you?" The blue suiter snorted as Tom collapsed. "But don't worry. We have work for you. Oh, will you work."

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The sun ruled the blue summer sky with authority questioned only by two dust clouds showing where other tractors were at work on the rolling crop lands. This was the high summer that Ruth Edris-Morton loved. Long hot days full of hard work followed by cool summer nights and dreamless sleep.

Ruth reached the end of a row and carefully brought her tractor around, aligning the sprayer for the next pass. Pest control was only a minor part of the mixture this morning . . . and the least expensive. The activators in the mix would turn the modified soybeans into the initial feed stock the bio-companies paid hard money for. Pa would have a good cash crop this year. With luck there'd be enough left over to stake Brother and Miriam to a homestead of their own. Slim looked about ready to bring a wife home. Pa wouldn't be short handed, not with Ruth around. She scowled at Pa's blessing.

Ruth settled the tractor in the groove. Just to make sure, she verified it against the Global Position Satellites. Plus or minus .000 meters the GPS told her. Pa proudly said she had a farmer's eye. Yes, she knew the equipment, the crops and the fields. Maybe if she'd spent more time with Ma, she'd have landed a better man than Mordy.

Then the radio squawked.

"Anybody, can you help us?" The voice was young, female and very scared. It hit Ruth in that place women held sacred for children. For Ruth, it echoed hollow.

She grabbed for the mike, but Grandma Seddik, who guarded the emergency channels now that her arthritis was too bad to let her work the fields, was already talking. "What's your problem, honey," she said, soft and warm like the quilts she made.

"Brother spotted slackers on the ridge. They had rifles. Dad and Mom are getting the guns out. Dad told me to call in."

"Good, honey. What's your name?"

"Oh! I'm Lizie. Lizie Abdoes." Embarrassment tinged the answer to this basic question. The girl was eight, maybe nine, and knew radio discipline. That she'd forgotten told Ruth how terrified the little one was.

"Good girl, and what did you get for your birthday this year?" Grandma Seddik was going straight into the security check that had become standard while the Unity bullies were around. No matter how scared a young girl like Lizie might be, she knew what she got for her birthday – and how to say it wrong if a gun was already pointed at her head.

"A doll, a Rag Doll, and shoes. Boots really."

"This is a legit distress call," Grandma snapped. "Who's in position to help?"

Ruth had been listening, even as she kept the tractor on course, spray darkening the beans, no overlap, no misses. Now she zoomed her guidance map out, and frowned. The Abdoes place was thirty miles away. Dots lit up as people reported their locations and availability. Grandma would be getting a full readout on armaments as well. Ruth was about to report her presence when someone at the house beat her to it.

"Sis, Pa wants you in fast," came on the family channel. "Slim's already in. Mom, Miriam and the youngsters will hold the station." Brother, Slim and Pa were the usual contribution from the family to the community's Quick Response Team. While she and Mordy had been working for the Siddiks, QRT's were the only times she'd seen family. Now, she was back on Pa's team.

“On my way,” Ruth answered. She detached the sprayer; in a moment she was gunning down the row, careful of the bean plants on either side of the tractor’s big balloon tires. Once into a fallow field, she angled straight for home.

Surrounded by barn and outbuildings, the white painted two story house with a new wing for Brother, Miriam and their twins, gleamed in the sun under a mat black roof of solar collectors. Pa, Brother and Slim were waiting in the dusty yard between the house and the barn, ready to screw metal plates to the cab and vitals of the tractor. Miriam handed up Ruth’s rifle, extra ammo boxes and a basket of food. Mom held the twins, one to each hip; Tina held all three of the women’s rifles. Ruth’s youngest brother and sister, ten and twelve, already peered from the sandbagged lookout post atop the barn, the family’s practice rifles pointed out. The kids looked scared and trying to hide it.

“Take care,” Ma said, blowing Pa a quick good-by kiss. Miriam climbed up the tractor to give Brother the same. Ruth looked away, missing someone to say goodbye to.

“We always do,” Pa answered Mom, then turned. “Ruth, you drive. Boys,” his nod sent each of the men to a side view slot in the tractor’s makeshift armor. He settled into the seat next to Ruth as she put the rig in gear. “Head for the Kroger’s place,” Pa told her; Ruth gunned the tractor. The armor about balanced off for lack of something dragging behind, though it made for a top heavy drive. When they were kids, Pa listened to the net on earphones. Today, he listened through the speaker. Reports of availability rolled over Ruth. She ignored them, concentrating on getting where she was going fast . . . and safe.

Still, Ruth couldn’t ignore the change. *Slackers weren’t supposed to be problems.* They were just people who didn’t want or couldn’t find work. Before the war, they’d begged and sometimes stolen a few things. During the war, they’d been rounded up and put in the army — the army Mordy was drafted into. Now Mordy was still gone, and the slackers were back with guns. She’d gone home . . . and Pa sandbagged the lookout post above the barn.

Ruth made it to the Krogers in twenty minutes.

Close to a dozen rigs were parked haphazardly between the Kroger’s house and outbuildings. Ruth hadn’t even brought the tractor to a halt before Pa swung out the door and trotted for a clump of elders. “Stay with the rig, crew,” he said without looking back. Slim was already getting out, his eyes on the Zabossa rig with Becky. With a sigh, Slim dropped back into his seat. Becky waived to him; Slim waved back.

Most of the crews left behind were alertly eyeing the open fields and rolling woodlands around the farm. A light smudge marred the horizon where the Abdoes’ place was. Ruth checked her motor readouts; storage was at 80 percent. She spread



the solar wings to catch some rays, then called up the latest photo of the Abdoes station and the land between it and her tractor. Balancing distance against cover, she plotted the best course.

She'd just finished when Pa came back. "More are coming, but we got to get somebody there pronto. Those here are going now." He glanced at the display. "You got a route planned?"

She quickly sketched her path. He nodded. "We're lead tractor. Do it, Ruth. Boys, look sharp, lock and load."

With a hard swallow, Slim pulled back the arming bolt on his rifle, then safetied it. Brother did the same. Ruth folded the solar wings as she gunned the rig. As usual, Pa was leading the first reaction team. Before he emigrated, Pa had put in his time with the army on Lorna Do. Pa usually ended up with the lead on days like this, and Ruth had been studying how he went about it since she turned sixteen. Now Pa rarely modified her approach drives for fires, floods and slacker problems.

Ruth covered the first half of the ten mile drive at a good clip, keeping both eyes on the road and letting Pa and the boys worry about surprises. The other tractors and trucks followed in single line behind her, allowing plenty of room for her to spring any trap they were heading into. Ruth glanced at Pa; did he want her to slow down? His eyes were straight ahead. Swallowing her growing fear, Ruth kept throttle forward as the smoke plume grew in the sky.

At the woods this side of the Abdoes place, Pa called a halt. He signaled for the rifles teams to dismount and hoof it through the trees, then went forward at the head of the men and women. Ruth edged the tractor off the dirt road, hunting for a path through the trees. She didn't have to be told the road was no place for her today. She was almost through the woods when the net came alive.

"Don't look like there's nobody here. Let's close in."

Since that wasn't Pa talking, Ruth continued her cautious advance. When she finally did come up on the plowed fields, several trucks were already parked in front of the blackened house. The homestead had been built with tough local wood; it smoldered more than burned. Ruth's eyes were drawn to the front door. It had been blown in . . . explosives, or some sort of rocket. Pa would know. Carefully, she drove across the field and looped around back. Damage there was limited to windows and doors blown out. No bodies, just a few dead chickens. She spotted Brother and Slim kneeling beside tracks where the cows and horses had been herded off. Around the pig and goat pen there were decapitated heads, guts and blood.

"Looks like a quick butcher job," Brother surmised.

Around front, the human casualties were already under blankets. “Who’d they kill?” Slim asked.

Becky was leaning over, her last meal splattered on the dirt. She wiped her mouth and looked up. “The kids. The little kids,” she whimpered. “Why kill kids not big enough for schooling? And their Pa,” she added.

Slim knelt beside her, an arm around his future wife. Brother’s eyes had turned toward home, and his wife and twins. Ruth knew the answer. Kids slowed you down. These slackers must be planning on moving very fast. They’d better; if this posse caught them, they were dead. Ruth called up her map again. If she was running, where would she head?

North, east, south was open farm land – no place to hide there. To the west were mountains, with heavy forest and brush for cover. Lots of places to hide, no roads, no place to take tractors. But hills had rivers and lakes. She searched. Yep, there was the General Store. Old man Sanchez traded for pelts and herbs. His place was on Lake Guadalupe, easy to reach by boat. And he had boats that could reach back into the mountains faster than people could ride. “Brother.”

Both siblings looked over her shoulder as she outlined a pursuit. Brother nodded when she was done. “Let’s tell Pa.”

Pa was in the middle of the elders, and the elders were in the middle of an argument. Old man Seddik was all for going home. “We can’t catch ’em. Better we get ready for next time. Let’s talk next Thursday at the dance. We got to plan.”

The younger men, many friends of the dead Abdoes, wanted to hit the trail right now. “We got to stop these bastards. They’re loaded down with the stuff they stole. We can catch them. I say caesium ‘til hell freezes.”

“And what’s to keep them from bushwhacking you?” Ms. Zabossa cut in. That brought quiet for a moment.

Pa rubbed his chin. “You watch your step chasing them and they get away. You chase them fast and reckless, and they set up an ambush. The damn army may not have taught them much, but it would have taught them that.”

“So what do we do?” came an anguished cry from the back. “Just sit on our thumbs while they kill our kids and steal our wives?” Ruth saw her chance in the silence and took it.

“Pa, we don’t have to chase right behind them. We could get ahead of them if we used the boats from Trader Sanchez to get up valley before they can.”

There was a long silence as people called up maps in their heads and roughed out what Ruth had done. "Yeah," came from several. Pa gave her a tight smile. Old man Seddik settled it with a nod. "Okay. You folks chase them, but not too close. Joe Edris takes half and heads for the trading post."

"I'll get horses."

"I'll start the chase on foot. You give me a call when you got the horses."

Quickly, the teams organized themselves. In five minutes Pa was seated beside Ruth as she led five rigs for the trading post.

Ruth gunned the tractor, going for every bit of speed she could. Each curve was a challenge; each straight section a race. Pa said nothing. In the silence she felt his pride in her. It almost made her feel proud. That was something she hadn't felt in a long time.

Caution was what she felt as the Sanchez place came in view as they crested a hill above the lake. One glance showed none of the usual activity around the post. Even the dog was just lying there. Five minutes later, Pa ordered a halt. Through the trees and across a bay of the lake, Ruth had a better view. "The boats are gone," Brother reported. The door to the store was hanging open. The dog was lying in its own blood.

Pa waited for the other rigs to catch up. Then he ordered the rifle teams to slip through the woods and surrounded the place. Pa kept his eye on the store for a good fifteen minutes before he had Ruth slowly edge the tractor forward. He and Brother entered the store while Slim checked out the dock.

"Boats have been stove in," he quickly shouted.

Pa was slower in reporting. When he came out of the store, he whistled in the folks from the woods. Brother sat heavily on the steps. "Poor Paco didn't even know it was coming. He's there behind his counter, a shot between his eyes. Place has been ransacked." Brother choked on his words.

"Where're Agnatha and the kids?" Ruth asked, scared for the answer.

"Don't know." Pa sighed through a scowl. He reached through the tractor door for the phone. "Edris here. Stop the pursuit, Jeb. Sanchez's place has been sacked. Old man's dead. The rest are gone. Boats are sunk. Edris to everybody, we are gonna have to rethink ourselves."

The acknowledgments were slow and bitter. Pa's face was the deepest scowl Ruth had ever seen . . . and something else, hard and cold . . . as he handed back the

phone. "Looks like I got to go to Hurtford City."

"I'm going too," Ruth added.

\* \* \*

Zylon Plovdic didn't bother getting out of her truck. She went down the form, quickly checking off one box after another. Yes, the survey team had sufficient supplies for ninety days, their safety equipment was in order, and they had an emergency locator signal. True to the founders of Hurtford Corner, she verified only that they had what they needed for their own safety. She had no duty to check for hidden weapons, explosives or other potential dangers to the community. She grinned; the rifles, ammunition boxes and rockets were in clear view.

The leader of the "survey party" stood beside her truck. He accepted his official permit with a silent nod. He, along with five others actually would be surveying for the mineral wealth identified in the permit.

The other dozen or so riders collecting behind the pack mules were another matter. Zylon knew every one of them. Over the last several years, she'd tossed most of them in jail for several kinds of unacceptable behavior. She'd been happy to pass them over to the first Unity Planet Leader when he arrived. Now she was just as glad to turn them loose in the mountains west of town. There, they wouldn't cause her any trouble. Though, unlike the survey team, they would not long be riding west.

Soon enough, they'd be ranging with the other three batches of raiders among the farm stations to the north. But that was none of Zylon's concern.

The survey team leader accepted his authorization from Zylon and passed her the check in the agreed upon sum on an off-world bank. With mutual smiles, they went their own ways. He, to the western hills, she back to her office at the Center for Public Safety. Yes, she had the most volunteer hours of anyone in the city, all of them officially to secure the public safety. What they were securing for her was another matter entirely.

## TWO

“That’s hardly a town,” Izzy shook her head at Hurtford City’s pretensions. It was the planet’s one claim to urban living. She doubted more than 30,000 people occupied the shallow valley where two rivers merged. The ridge to its east did have a five kilometer landing strip; a dammed river to its west offered a wide reservoir if you preferred a water landing for your shuttle. “Comm, have we been hailed by the port captain?”

“No ma’am. I gave up waiting and called the number in the book. Got a recorded message. There’re out to lunch. Supposed to be back by 1:00.”

The XO frowned at the screen. “Looks to me like nine, maybe ten o’clock local down there,” he said dubiously.

“Me too,” Izzy snorted. “Comm, did they say what day they’d be back from lunch.”

“Didn’t even say what month, ma’am,” comm answered, getting into the humor.

Izzy had enough of the joke. “XO, break out the gig. Make sure any maintenance deficiencies on it have been corrected.” She tapped her comm link. “Lieutenant, I’d like a marine honor guard to accompany me dirtside. The emphasis should be more on the guard than honor.”

“No trouble, ma’am.”

“On the contrary, I want you with me, Trouble.”

“Damn, that’s gonna interfere with my afternoon nap.”

“See you at the gig in half an hour, Lieutenant. Out.”

The XO was rubbing his chin and giving her one of his motherly looks. Izzy set a prim, innocent smile on her face and asked. “You got a problem, Stan?”

He leaned close and kept his voice down. “Ma’am, if there is a problem down there, a captain’s place is not in the middle of it. If you want, I can lead the marines.”

“Stan, we don’t have a problem. This is a formal call by the skipper of a visiting warship on the governor or whatever they’re calling their boss man this week. I’ll arrange for some liberty, see if they got a rural hospital that needs painting. You know, do the nice stuff. And if Mr. Withwaterson wants to be at my elbow, making friendly sounds, he just may see some movement by the locals. I’m not going in there shooting, Stan, despite the stories you may have heard about me.”

The XO chuckled and shook his head. “And since you’ve made up your mind, butt out, boy.”

“I didn’t say that.” Izzy tried to look hurt. With her lack of practice, she doubted she succeeded.

“Then quit thinking it so loud.”

“Go check on the gig, Stan.”

“On my way,” he said, launching himself for the bridge hatch. With no station to swing around, the *Patton* was in for some serious zero gee time; the crew would need liberty. They’d get it, as soon as Izzy verified the “bandits” were just a businessman’s hyperbola.

Two hours later, as they finished their landing roll, they still hadn’t heard from any port master. Izzy let the marines exit first. At the foot of the gig’s stairs, she took her first look at Hurtford Corner. Wheat or some sort of grain crop, spring fresh and green, covered most of the shallow depression between her and the city to the west. More green stretched away to where rolling hills started the climb toward the mountains they’d overflowed on approach. A deep breath took in smells of cooling gig, morning rain and sun warmed earth. Several trucks and two cars raised dust on the single lane road to town.

“Nothing like a sonic boom to let folks know they got company,” Trouble observed dryly. The marine lieutenant, in dress whites, sword and pistol, shook his head at their immediate surroundings. “No hanger, no control tower. Must not expect much business.” Izzy nodded. The latest report on Hurtford Corner dated to the war. Did they still have a governor, or, now that the Unity overlords were gone, had they returned to a group of elders with a city manager hired for the town? Intelligence was mildly curious; Izzy would inform them of what she found.

The first truck disgorged a chubby, balding young man with a broad smile and a hand out. “I’m Paul Withwaterson. I am so glad to see you.”

*I bet you are.* Izzy shook the offered hand. “We are here. You seem to be safe. Where’re the port authorities? Their voice mail said they were out to lunch.”

“Oh, that. They’ve been out to lunch since they lost the war. My ship got the same message. It hasn’t been changed?”

“No. Who’s the rest of the welcoming committee?”

Mr. Withwaterson turned. “The other trucks are from my competitors. That black car is the city manager. He’s the closest you’ll get to a formal welcome. He’s the one you have to talk to about the lack of police services. My warehouse has been broken into five times since I landed.”

“You got any cargo in that dinky thing,” came a shout from the next arriving truck. A big man, with an mammoth red nose, took in the gig and crew with a jaundice eye.

“Commander Inez Umboto, Captain of the Humanity Ship *Patton*, at your service,” she answered.

“No shit. Well, no trade goods, no interest from me,” the man growled and did a U-turn. As he passed the next arriving truck, he shouted, “They got nothing, Dean. We wasted our time.”

Not the trusting type, the driver still drove over to them. A thin, white-haired man studied them through thick glasses. “Navy types, huh.”

“At your service,” Izzy smiled, and got a gunned motor for her trouble. The truck narrowly missed the arriving car.

A young man, short and thin, greeted Izzy with a wide smile and a handshake. “Mikhail Shezgo, City Manager. We’ve never had a navy ship drop by, but what can I do for you?”

Izzy gave the official line by heart. “We’re here on a routine visit. To show Hurtford Corner it’s a part of a bigger universe. Maybe recruit a few new hands, buy fresh fruits and vegetables, paint a hospital or community center. Think of us as ambassadors from the Society of Humanity.” Done with the basics, she went on. “With no station to give us gravity, I’ll want to give my people liberty for a good part of each day.”

“That may be a problem.” Mr. Shezgo answered quickly. Izzy had been expecting a brush off, but not this soon. She raised a questioning eyebrow. “I suspect,” he went on, “your young folks want what any youngsters want at the end of a long day. A couple of cool ones. Well, our local brewmasters make just enough for one day, two at the most. You drop three, four hundred thirsty sailors on us and some folks, yours or

mine, are gonna go wanting tonight. Think you could hold your folks aboard for a day. Tomorrow, I can promise you a real cotillion.”

Which had to be about the nicest way Izzy had ever been told to bugger off and let us have some time to get ready for you. Before she could answer, a siren went off in town, drawing her eyes to a rising cloud of gray smoke.

“Looks like a building’s afire,” Trouble broke the quiet as they all turned to watch. A moment later, another siren joined the first, though from the sound of it, this one was moving.

“That was a fast response,” Mr. Shezgo grinned. “Volunteer Fire Department is right on this one. Probably just a kitchen fire,” he concluded.

“Or someone who didn’t pay up,” Mr. Withwaterson shot back. “You don’t pay bribes and strange things start happening.”

Mr. Shezgo turned on him. “Trader, you are not a part of our community. You haven’t volunteered to spend any time with the local patrol, the fire department or any of the other community service sections. If you’re not going to work with us, you really ought to pay something back to the community.”

The businessman’s ears showed red. “So a ‘gratuity’ here, a ‘donation’ there, a warehouse broken into yesterday, a fire tomorrow and a ‘tip’ to the boys who turn out so quickly to put it out. This is no way to do business,” he roared.

“The founders of Hurtford Corner never intended business to be done your way. And no, our people don’t do business that way either. We’re different.”

“Different! You’re not different. You’re downright daft. Captain, there is no global network. No stock exchange. Nothing needed to do business.”

Mr. Shezgo laughed. “You bet. We don’t need them. We don’t want them. We get along fine without them.”

Izzy suspected she was walking into the middle of a long running argument, and the source of the call for help she’d intercepted. This planet wasn’t doing business the Harvard Business School way, and Mr. Withwaterson had problems adjusting. Well, it wasn’t the Navy’s job to educate him. “Ah, gentlemen, if you don’t mind, I’ll leave you to your discussions. Mr. Shezgo, I’ll bring down the first liberty party tomorrow, about noon. If you could let my ship know what time you are keeping, the port master’s message says he’s out to lunch until one.”

The city manager snorted. “We don’t have a port master. That’s a leftover from the Unity thing.”



“Yeah, and they went out to lunch about the time they lost the war and haven’t come back.” Mr. Withwaterson added. “Personally, I think this whole planet is out to lunch.”

Shezgo shook his head. “You just bring your crew down tomorrow. Captain, we’ll show your people a good time.”

Izzy boarded her gig, while the two returned to their previously scheduled argument.

\* \* \*

“How’d it go dirtside,” was the XO’s first question when Izzy and Trouble sailed onto the bridge.

“About like I expected,” Izzy said as she bounced off the ceiling and dove for her station chair. “The locals and visitors speak the same standard English and can’t understand a word. Trouble, turn out your marines in dress red and blues to impress tomorrow. I’ll also want extra shore patrol detachments. I still don’t know what’s down there. Probably nothing. But until I’m sure, let’s be careful while we have fun.”

“Yes ma’am’s” answered her from around the bridge.

\* \* \*

“I do not like problems.” Big Al growled.

“Well, if you’d just used some of that pull you’re all the time bragging about to handle Withwaterson, we wouldn’t have a problem.” Zef Davis shot back.

Zylon Plovdic kept her mouth shut. Big Al’s problems, whether they be people, places or things tended to disappear. The more Zef talked, the more Big Al growled about problems. Pretty soon, Zef was going to disappear. Which was no skin off Zylon’s nose. She, like Zef, had been born on Hurtford Corner. She also, like Zef, wanted out of the sameness Hurtford Corner prided itself on. When Zef disappeared, Zylon would be another step closer to where she wanted to be.

Conversation paused as Hurtford standard fare of stew, bread and beer arrived. They met in the back room of a restaurant whose management understood their needs for quiet and privacy.

As the waiter retired, Zef continued. “Now, we have two problems. Two guys from the farm stations have rolled into town. I expect they want to talk to the town elders. It would be a disaster if they chanced upon your problem.”

“Then you will have to get them out of town before they can.” Big Al smiled. Zylon would not want to be on the receiving end of that smile.

“How are you going to handle the navy?” Zef harped on Big Al’s part of the problem, ignoring his own.

Big Al pushed himself away from the dinning table, and the boring food that covered it. He glanced at Zylon. “I understand the Navy is looking for recruits. I believe that gives us an interesting avenue to rush them on their way. Ms. Plovdic, can you help me arrange an appropriate greeting for the crew?”

“I would be glad to,” Zylon raised her mug of beer.

Alexander Popov raised his in salute, and drained it. “A quaint local brew. Not unlike a minor one I tasted on Vega. Have you ever been to Vega?”

“Not yet.” They exchanged a smile, full of confidence she would.

\* \* \*

Ruth hadn’t seen Hurtford City for four or five years. Then, like every farm girl who came to town, she’d been husband hunting . . . and she’d found herself one. Mordy, just off a shuttle, had looked at her like no boy ever had. She’d taken him home, just like her Ma had taken Pa home. So what went wrong? Pa said Mordy was nothing like him, but Ruth couldn’t help but wonder what Ma had that she didn’t.

While her life had gone in circles, Hurtford City had grown out. The reprocessing plant for the pharmacologicals had been out in the country then. Now it was surrounded by shops, homes and a solar power plant with its own collection of small factories. As they came down into the valley, Ruth saw buildings stretching almost as far as she could see.

The hotel they stayed at was the same one, now looking a lot smaller and older than Ruth remembered. As they off loaded fresh fruit and vegetables, bags of grain and potatoes to pay their lodging, people passed them, lots of people. Folks didn’t wave or shout hello. It was as if, surrounded by so many, they didn’t see anyone at all.

Not everyone was busy. There were slackers, in parts of Unity uniforms, lounging against the building across from the hotel. None showed guns, but Ruth wondered how many would be willing to kill people like the Abdoes or the trader.

Checked into the hotel, the three gathered at a table. Mr. Seddik and Pa represented the stations. Ruth was there because she’d gotten in the truck. Nobody could tell a married woman what to do but her husband. This was the first time Ruth had tested the freedom that Mordy had left to her. She was none too sure how she felt

about it.

While they'd been unloading, Mr. Seddik had heard a rumor that a navy ship was in orbit. "I think that was their shuttle we saw landing as we came in. That might give us a bit more leverage. City elders won't want us raising a stink while the navy's around. They'll listen to us real well and real fast."

Pa wasn't so sure. "If these folks were going to help us, they would have. I don't think they will, or can."

"Then we go to the Navy," Seddik countered. "It's their job to knock heads, isn't it?"

Pa shrugged; everyone assumed his time with the Lorna Do army made him an expert on such things. He might be all the local expertise they had on military affairs, but he was the first to point out that wasn't much. "To make a rabbit stew, first you got to catch a rabbit. Five hundred navy types, two hundred miles up, with laser cannons aren't exactly what you need to hunt a rabbit."

"So what do we do?" Ruth asked. She might not have a vote, but the least she could do was ask dumb questions to keep Pa and old man Seddik from talking around and around the obvious.

The old man sighed. "I'll see about the next meeting of the city elders. Why don't you try to find out something about the Navy? When you got two bunches that might lend you a hand, it's best to know as much as you can about both."

Ruth would have rather gone with Mr. Seddik. She'd seen all the spacers she needed to see for the rest of her life. Pa took her elbow, so she went looking for spacers.

\* \* \*

Izzy spent the afternoon entangled in details. It seemed a shame to visit a planet whose main product was fresh fruit and vegetables and not take on a full larder. The price for inspected and bug free veggies would just have to be haggled, not something her supply officer was comfortable doing. Izzy's bigger problem was raised by the city manager.

"Uh, Captain, I don't know how long your folks have been in space, or what their idea of a good time is, but, while we got plenty of beer for the taking, our young women are not."

"And your young men?" Izzy couldn't pass up the jab at old fashion attitudes.

The city manager had the good humor to laugh. “What I’m trying to get at is that our women are free to do what they want. Dance with anyone. Go for a walk with anyone. But when they say no, they mean it. Most of’em will say no twice if they think someone is hard of hearing, but if a girl screams for help, you better believe a dozen good folks will be right there in a second. And they’ll make sure the guy who didn’t understand ‘no’ gets to understanding its meaning.”

Izzy wasn’t so sure the navy hadn’t applied the same education to some of its own. Still, this was no topic to be confused on. “I will get my dumb spacer back in one piece?”

“Oh yes. Just a bit the worse for wear – the first time.”

“Mr. Shezgo, if you will make sure my ‘worse for wear’ crew member gets turned over to the shore patrol, I will make sure he, or she, spends the rest of our stay aboard ship. Dented heads I can handle. Dead ones will be another matter.”

“Then I think we have an understanding. On Hurtford Corner, we teach people the right way the first time. We got too much open space to waste folks.”

Izzy had the word passed to her division heads and on to the Chiefs. “Anybody comes back from liberty with a black eye better not plan on going down again.”

\* \* \*

Trouble paused while a private from the trailing truck double timed up to open the car door for him and the skipper. He, like the young marine, was in full dress red and blues, complete with choke collar, sword and pistol. Izzy had made it clear that he and his marines were responsible for the perimeter security at whatever gala the locals laid on. He’d gotten the word out to his troops that as soon as the dumb swabies proved there were no landmines out there, he’d turn them loose for some fun.

His marines provided smart looking door guards, hall guards, and a couple of them were serving as waiters, making sure the officers’ glasses were kept filled . . . with water and soft drinks brought down from the ship.

The skipper was one paranoid woman. Trouble liked that.

The party was quite a spectacle. The local women were turned out in everything, from miniskirts with frilly undies that often flashed into view, to floor length dresses that could be tight sheaths or swirling skirts. Tight and loose, glitter and bows swirled next to each other on the dance floor. The men were somewhat more subdued in slacks and shirts with colorful needlework, although the city manager and several others wore something like tuxedos. Each different, the people had come for fun, and, to the tunes of several alternating bands, they did.

Regularly, Trouble made the rounds of his own men. Even though their red and blues clashed with the soft pastels the community center was hung in, Trouble assured them he appreciated their decorative contribution to the gala night – and that they stood ready to switch from toy soldiers to real ones. The night stayed hot, so he switched the guard detail from an hour on, an hour off, to one on, two off so he wouldn't lose any to heat prostration. That meant pulling the guards off the rear side of the center and covering that quarter of the perimeter with the roaming NCO, but it seemed a minor call. He did a quick touch base with a tall blond from the local Office of Safety and made regular radio check with the chief heading up the Shore Patrol. His teams were circulating, but had nothing to report but sailors and civilians having fun.

After two hours of this, Trouble was starting to relax as he rejoined the skipper. She was diplomatically declining a dance. The present song could be quite sedate, or otherwise, depending on who was leading. To her raised eyebrow, he answered a thumbs up. She turned back to a small circle and their discussion as he moved up to cover her back. Mr. Withwaterson was in full sail.

“Your communications are narrow band. I can give you ten times the bandwidth. Your solar power cells are twenty years behind, your storage cells at least fifty. I can update every part of your economy.”

“Why?” asked an elderly man in a tux.

“Why!” the businessman echoed in wonder.

“Yes, why?” A younger man in a nearly transparent lace shirt cut in. “They work fine. They get the job done. Why change what is doing the job for us?”

“But you can do it so much better, faster, cheaper with my equipment” Withwaterson sputtered.

The young man shook his head. “But what we have is paid for. It's doing what we want. What off planet exchange we've got needs to go for expansion where we see a need. We don't need a central fusion plant, or fancy do-dads. The mines we've opened meet our needs. What you've got costs too much.”

“If you'd quit stonewalling me and let my products onto the market, you'd find them indispensable. Whoever has been ripping them off from my warehouse already knows that.” The glances exchanged around the circle didn't seem to agree, as to whether that related to the indispensable claim or the part about stolen goods, Trouble couldn't decide.

“Lieutenant,” the city manager broke the silence before it ripped, “let me introduce some of the city elders to you. “Mr. Donovan,” was the older man. “Mr. Poniatow,” was the youngster. Trouble tried to suppress any surprise, but it must have

showed.

“I speak for the younger, less experienced,” the young man eyed the older, “maybe less hide bound.” The two locals shared a knowing smile. “Still, innovation for its own sake is not why my great grandfather came to Hurtford Corner. We are quite content to be a bit slower than the rest of humanity so long as we are comfortable and enjoying ourselves.” He turned to the band.

Four women had just finished backing up two others, one on sax, one singing a slow torch song. The couples on the dance floor had enjoyed the slow dance even if the sax had missed a few notes, and the singer broke on the final high one.

“We see nothing wrong with the real and natural. Why give up so much to chase the perfect, the flawless, the plastic. Next time you come, Mr. Withwaterson, bring a catalogue of what you can deliver. Most of what’s in your warehouse is just taking up space. I believe both your rent and restaurant tab is overdue. You should pay them.”

“I can’t pay until I sell something.”

“Then sell it. We are not stopping you,” said Mr. Donovan.

“For a tenth or a hundredth of what it’s worth.” The color was again rising up Mr. Withwaterson’s neck.

“Which is what it is worth to us. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve been promised several dances by a certain someone.” With that, Mr. Poniadow bowed slightly, joined another man and they disappeared onto the swirling dance floor.

“You know, Mr. Withwaterson,” Captain Umboto raised her glass in a mock salute, “that is just about what Earth said to the frontier worlds when they set the price for resources and finished goods before the war.”

“I had expected more support from the navy.”

“I’ll have supply go over what you have and see if we need any of it. That might at least allow you to pay your bills.”

From the glare the businessman gave his skipper, Trouble seriously doubted the man appreciated the navy’s help. Captain Umboto just shook her head as Mr. Withwaterson stomped away. “Someday, Trouble, when I’m old and got nothing better to do, I’m going to get myself a professorship at some big university and teach MBA’s a course on the proper application of military intimidation to the negotiating process.”

“The way you applied six inches of laser to that pirate’s butt,” he grinned.

“No, Trouble. As my old boss used to say, killing them is the easy part. Persuading someone you’re not allowed to kill. Now that’s what separates the men from the boys.”

“Boys?” Trouble tried to raise his eyebrow a tad higher. It was about as high as he could get it and still keep it on his forehead. The skipper was not known for accepting putdowns, sexist or otherwise, placidly.

“Andy had given up on me ever growing into a mature female officer. Said I’d just have to make due with my girlish innocence.”

They both laughed. “Well, skipper, with all this water you’ve been forcing on us, and despite this monkey suit’s wool content, I must go where even you can’t follow.”

“Think you can handle it?”

“About the only thing I’m sure I can.” He turned, still chuckling. The skipper was one tough broad. He pitied the poor SOB that got on her wrong side. The head was near the back of the building. He got in just ahead of someone with a cart that looked like he wanted to do maintenance. Trouble wondered how someone got stuck with the janitorial duties on a party night like this, but decided not to ask the dower-faced guy. He quickly did his duty and was washing his hands when the man next to him reached across him for the paper towels.

“Pardon me,” the guy in shirt and slacks said.

“No trouble,” Trouble smiled, stepping out of the way. The man’s hands followed him. For a brief second, the marine got a glance at a small cylinder, tiny needle sticking out. Then it was in his neck. “What the hell,” and a weak swing was all he got out before his knees caved in. Stretch out on the floor, he got a view of the maintenance wagon rolling in, the door to a side compartment opening like the third pit of hell. Trouble figured he’d just about fit in there. Then his vision blacked out and he quit trying to figure out anything for a while.

\* \* \*

Ruth didn’t expect to have a problem finding spacers; she had found Mordy and his friends easily enough five years ago. They’d been decked out in outfits you could spot a mile away and acting as if they owned the planet. Pa ignored the first collection of spacers they stumbled upon that evening. They looked young and pretty forlorn in their pasty white uniforms. “Let’s find someone with a bit of authority,” he said.

“How will you tell?”

“Trust me, Ruthie, you’ll have no doubt when you see one.”

Ruth didn't have any doubt when they spotted two spacers. One wasn't all that different from the others, except for a hard hat and a black armband. The other looked like he owned all space, and had covered most of it. Pa sidled up to that one. "How's it going, Chief?"

"Nice night." The older spacer wore a cloth hat, different from the helmet of the youngster beside him and the others walking away. Ruth had seen anchors like the one that decorated his hat on boats on the lake. What was a spacer doing wearing it? The chief's eyes roved over the night sky, taking in the stars. "A nice night to get some fresh air." Ruth wondered how long they could talk about the weather, but, then, if this fellow was a kind of chaperone, he wouldn't be interested in telling some stranger if he was having problems.

Pa took another tack. "How would you like some fresh food, apples, pears, lettuce?"

"Now that would make you a man after my own heart. Mess could sure use some chow that hasn't been frozen for a year or nine. Understand the Supply Officer has set up shop somewhere around Twenty-third and Main, if you know where that is."

"Imagine I could find it. Where are all the officers? They having their own fun?"

"The locals put on a party for them at a community center. Several other community centers got shindigs going for the kids, too. Look for the one with the fancy red and blue doormen. It's somewhere over there." He shook his hand in a general southeasterly direction. Pa led off that way. They passed shops, restaurants, hotels and homes. They located two large centers sporting dances, one had something to do with a religious group, the other was for some kind of Earth animal with four legs and horns bigger than any cow Ruth had ever seen, but all she actually saw were people having a good time. They were doubling back when they spotted the place with fancy doormen. They'd missed it the first time when they walked past the back of it.

Pa headed for the front door, Ruth right behind him, but, unlike the other places that were wide open, the doorman were keeping people out. "Just a second," Pa bristled. "I may be a mud farmer, but I got just as much right to party in there as any city boy."

"I don't care if you're God himself," growled an older marine, gold chevrons covering most of his sleeves, "Nobody's coming in or out of this building until we find our Lieutenant."

Pa, who'd looked like he was about to shove past two guys twice his size, even if they did have guns with long knives jutting from their barrels, backed up fast. "Daughter, never mess with armed men when they think somebody's done wrong to one of their own. Especially when a sergeant is pissed about what might have been



done to his officer.”

They slipped back a ways. Not so far they couldn't see and hear what was going on, but far enough that no one would mistake them for trying to cross the line. Several minutes later a diminutive woman in a long skirt and uniform coat, three gold stripes prominently displayed on each shoulders, came to a scowling halt at the front door. Several city men, full of self importance, followed on her footsteps, arguing that they, and their people had every right to leave. She ignored them the way Ruth did flies around the pig pen. “Sergeant,” she said in a voice hardly louder than a whisper.

Immediately, the tall marine with all the gold on his sleeves was in front of her. “Yes ma'am,” he said, standing as tall and straight as a barn door. The chatter died.

“Do you have anything to report on the Lieutenant?”

“No ma'am. We've gone through this building from top to bottom, stem to stern. No sign of him. Short of taking it apart brick by brick, I don't think we will.” The sergeant sounded quite ready to do the demolition job – with his bare hands.

The woman stared out into the street, right through Ruth. Her face was calm, a jarring difference from the excited men around her. Only the tightness around her eyes told Ruth that something was going on behind the face. Something that made Ruth shiver.

“Captain Umboto,” one of the city fellows interrupted the quiet. “Crew are all the time jumping ship out here. They see a nice leg, a well-filled sweater, and suddenly their starship doesn't look so appealing. Ask Mr. Withwaterson. One of the crewmen on the ship that brought him missed the last crew call. He's somewhere out on the farm stations, raising corn and kids. There's nothing criminal behind your man disappearing. I saw a number of our young girls measuring him for husband size. And he wasn't ignoring the looks his fancy suit got.”

The navy woman's eyes narrowed. She whirled on the speaker. “Lieutenant Tordon *is* a *Marine*. Always was. Always will be. His kind do not jump ship. They do not leave their shipmates in the lurch.”

A short, balding young man raised an eyebrow. “Navy's been pushing early outs. Sure you won't get back to base to find he's already turned in his bonus application and been processed out?”

The woman slowly turned on the speaker. “Mr. Withwaterson, I don't expect your kind to understand duty, honor, service. Don't talk about what you don't know. Sergeant.”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Recall all liberty parties. Mr. Shezgo,” she turned back to the one who thought the lieutenant had taken off with some girl. The fellow stepped back from the heat in the look she gave him. “My officer was drinking water, so there is no reason to believe he is drunk. He told me he would be right back, so the fact that he isn’t means to me that he is not free to do so. I want him found. You say your folks are nice and informal. Fine. You’ve got until ten o’clock your time to have Lieutenant Tordon call me and explain his absence. If I do not hear from him by ten hundred hours tomorrow, I will be in your office and we will begin doing it the Navy Way.” She turned away, “Sergeant.”

“Recall is being sounded.” From the landing field outside of town, a claxon went off. “Shore patrol is deputizing all petty officers to enforce the recall. It will take two hours for the launches to shuttle all liberty parties back to the ship.”

“Do it. Gentlemen. Goodnight. Officers. Follow me.”

Several other uniformed men and women had been waiting in the background. They filtered through the city folks like they were not there and quickly joined their captain. In a moment, they formed a solid block behind her, all in step. Just to look at them, Ruth felt . . . intimidated.

Before Ruth could even touch the feelings storming around her head, her stomach, marines filed out of the building. They didn’t pass through the city people; the city folks kind of levitated out of the marines’ path. The sergeant divided them into teams of five or six and sent them trotting in different directions. Pa watched them go with a tight smile on his face. “You can bitch all you want about the mickey mouse in the military, but when the boss man, er, woman, gives the word, things do happen fast and efficient.”

“Pa, did you like your time in the army?” Mordy had gone to the army, and not come back. Was that life better than what she had offered him?

“No way. Been there, done that, dodged the Unity goons when they were hanging guys for not putting on their uniform. Not interested. That doesn’t mean I don’t respect those who really know how to do it. Let’s head out toward the spaceport. I wonder if all their kids’ll make muster?”

Ruth followed. The spacers gathered at Twenty-third and Main. Ruth watched groups arrive and others form up to be carried out to the landing field on flat bed trucks. After an hour, Pa edged toward the chief they’d talked to earlier. “You missing any of your kids?”

“Too early to tell,” the chief answered, but the worry lines were deep around his eyes. “Why you asking?”

“We’re from the farm stations up north. Some of our people have gone missing

lately. In some cases, stations have been burned and dead bodies left behind. Wondered if you might be having problems like that?"

"We better not be taking any of my kids off this planet in body bags," he growled. "Listen, maybe we got the same problem. Some of us may be back tomorrow. I'll tell the First Lieutenant what you told me. Our Captain may want to talk to you."

"I think I'd like to talk with her, too." Pa answered, touching his right hand to his forehead, in a loose imitation of what the sergeant had done.

"Nice to see an old hand." The chief answered, and gave the same loose wave back.

"Okay, Ruth, let's get bedded down for the night." Pa turned and started a fast walk back toward their inn, his arms swinging at his sides. He moved just like the marines and navy people did when they had something to do. Ruth remembered Pa moving that way when she was a kid. Now his hands were usually in his pockets and he moved a lot slower.

"Pa, uniform or no, you look like you're in the army again."

Pa laughed, but he didn't slow down.

\* \* \*

Ruth was physically exhausted and mentally wrung out by the time they got back to the hotel. She headed for her room and the light was out in minutes. Still, sleep eluded her. What had she done with her life? Brother was two years younger. Yet he had a wife, two darling kids and was ready to start his own station. She'd married an off-worlder like her Ma and had nothing. How many times had Pa softly whispered all off-worlders are not the same? The ones she'd seen tonight were nothing like Mordy. The young spacers were lame and the marines hard, not at all the laughing young man she'd fallen in love with. But would the marines be looking for a new job every six months, the spacers rushing off to join the Unity Army at the first word of a draft? Mordy was . . . the man she'd followed from station to station, always ready with a joke, always fast with his fists, and needing a new job all too soon. And there were the dark demands from him, the ones that started with "a real woman would . . ." He'd taken her nos with a laugh or a sneer . . . and walked out of her life without her ever really knowing who he was. Or who she'd become around him. Ruth hugged the pillow but the pain was too old for tears to help. She drifted off.

A hissing brought her awake when it was still dark. Groggy, she lifted her head. There was a man in the room holding an aerosol bottle to her face. She tried to cry out, but couldn't breathe. Dropping into blackness, she heard the man snarl. "This ought to keep her men folk out of our hair."

## THREE

The agony of waking next morning reminded Trouble there was someone he wanted to hurt – badly. Keeping his eyes closed, he did a quick inventory. Everything was there, but his arms were tied and he couldn't feel his hands. His nose was on line; someone had lost their lunch. That stink was mixed with the scent of earth and growing things. He inched his eyes open.

He lay on the bare ground beneath trees of some sort along with several dozen people. Four wore whites; the rest looked civilian. As he struggled to sit up, he found that his hands, like everyone else's, were tied behind him. In the predawn light, his company looked pretty helpless.

"Thought you might be first up, soldier boy," came from behind him. A burly man in dirty jeans and a Unity shirt rolled Trouble over. The marine tried to kick him, and got a kick in his kidneys for the effort. "You just lie there, or the next kick will knock your head off." Trouble struggled to work his hands loose while the other man reached under the marine's dress blouse and cinched something around his waist. The guy's fingernails needed trimming; Trouble's stomach and back got raked liberally as a narrow plastic cord was pulled tight around him. "There," the ex-unity thug grinned. "You cause me any more trouble, you'll wish you hadn't."

"When's chow?" Trouble muttered.

"Soon enough." The fellow kicked Trouble again, pulled another belt from the sack at his waist, and started fumbling the sleeping woman next to the lieutenant. She was the one who'd emptied her stomach. A local, her clothes were workman like slacks and plaid flannel shirt. The thug yanked the shirrtails out, liberally coping feels, and attached a belt. The thin plastic strand cut into her belly, but it was the four cylinders, equally spaced around the band that made a tough marine like Trouble swallow hard. *Animal control pods*. One was enough to tame a bull. Four could kill a man. Trouble's belt had six.

The thug worked his way around the supine bodies on the forest floor. The men he kicked; the women he felt up. Most were too drugged to notice. One of the spacers, a third class petty officer, looked awake enough to object, but too groggy to know where

he was. Trouble coughed, caught his eye and gave him a quick shake of the head. The man gave sullen submission. The thug must have noticed, he gave the spacer a solid kick as he left him. The petty officer saw it coming, and rolled away.

By the time the tough had worked his way around to the young woman on Trouble's right, she was fully awake. As he pawed her clothes, she pitched away from his touch. "Well, maybe I'll just have to strip you, girlie." The scum-bag grinned and reached for the fly on her pants. The woman, curled up in a fetal ball, shot her legs out, catching the thug full in the front. He managed to keep the family jewels safe as he pitched over backwards.

As the thug sprawled out beside Trouble, the marine grit his teeth. He didn't want to do this; knights in shining armor trying to save damsels in distress were way dated. Now was the time to wait for these idiots to make a mistake. But the woman's scream of rage, the man's yowl. Trouble could not lie there and watch what came next. Pushing off, he rolled toward the tough, scissoring his legs around the guy's neck. "You aren't doing anything the young woman doesn't want."

"Lemme go," the thug pawed at Trouble's legs. The lieutenant locked his ankles together and got ready to ride this fellow out.

Sudden pain laced Trouble's belly, breath fled as he fought to keep from blacking out. If this scum bag had the regulator for the control pod, even a marine was dead.

"Let him go, soldier boy." A new voice came from behind Trouble. "Let him go or I'll up the pain."

"Will you keep him off the girl?" Trouble was damned if he wouldn't negotiate something out of his situation.

"Girl, you seen the belts Clem's been putting on everyone. Pull one out of his bag and put it on." The girl approached them gingerly. Despite tied hands, she got a belt out of Clem's sack. Putting it on was another thing.

"Let me help." The petty officer was on his feet. Between the two of them, they managed the belt.

"Come here."

The girl went to the voice. The marine ignored her; Clem was getting boisterous.

"Lets make that a tad tighter," came from behind him. Then, "Okay, soldier boy, turn Clem loose." Trouble took a deep breath, then started rolling. As expected, Clem fumbled his way to his feet and started trying to kick the marine.

“Clem, get out of here.”

“But boss,” the man hardly slowed in his one legged chase of Trouble.

“Clem. Go get some grub. Now. Or you’ll be wearing one of those belts.”

Clem made one more kick. Missed, and stomped away. Trouble found his back to a tree, so he struggled into a sitting position facing the voice. The man was slim, medium height, and held himself tight as a whip. “Much obliged,” Trouble nodded.

The man called boss eyed the marine for a second more, then roved the entire group, his hand coming up to display a small red box. “Listen up folks. It’s time we got the new employee orientation over. Welcome to ‘Day’s Work, Inc.’ As our newest hires, we want you to understand just where you fit in the organization chart.” He pressed the black button on the box. Pain shot through Trouble’s gut. Not as bad as the last time, but plenty bad. A woman screamed, other folks whimpered.

“The good news is I’ll be carrying this little motivational tool for the rest of this trip. The bad news is, you get too close to me or wander too far off and it don’t like it. It quits sending the ‘Good Employee Reward signal.’ If your belts ain’t getting that message, they’re gonna start giving you a motivational session. Soldier boy, you want to come here?”

“Not really,” Trouble said as he got to his feet and slowly approached the boss. At ten feet his pods sent pain through him. He inched forward. The agony grew.

“Like that?”

“No sir.”

“Think you could get any closer?”

“No sir.”

“Now start backing up. Get a move on.”

Trouble moved. At fifty feet the tingling sensation was back; he halted.

“Boy, I took you for tougher than that.” The empty smile vanished from the man’s face. “Keep going,” he growled.

“Just thought you’d made your point, sir.” Trouble used his best boyish grin, but started backing again.

“One of the lessons I strongly encourage new employees to learn,” the boss went on matter-of-factly as Trouble backed up and the pain grew, “is you don’t want to

come to management's attention. Not all bosses will be as kindhearted as I am. Why, I've known some labor consultants who'd make a new employee who'd cause trouble like that there soldier boy keep right on walking until he keeled over from the pain. It bad, boy?"

Trouble had no intention of trying to out macho this guy. The pain in his abdomen was past bad to agony. But, hunched over, he still was backing up. "It's got my attention, sir. Real good."

"Nice boy. Now, I could start walking away." And the boss took a step back. "In a few seconds you all would see just how fast a man can die from a belly ache."

The pain level shot up. Trouble risked a step forward.

"See. The man is educatable. He don't want to leave my company. And I don't want to miss delivering a full levy of new workers. So, come on back, soldier boy, and the rest of you get on your feet. We got to get moving."

The petty officer and a woman spacer headed for Trouble. He stumbled toward them as fast as he could to save them the pain he knew was growing in their guts. "You okay, sir," the man asked, taking Trouble's arm and putting it around his shoulder. The woman took the other. They half carried Trouble as they rejoined the milling group.

"Take my word for it. You want to stay where he wants you."

"We putting up with this shit?" the petty officer growled.

"Folks with shit for brains make mistakes. Let's see where they goof off, spacer. Don't blow our chances before then. I'm Lieutenant Tordon, but I go by Trouble."

"Third Class Petty Officer Jagowski, sir, Spacer First Yu." The woman on the other side of Trouble ducked her head. "Romez," was a red-haired and freckled fellow. "And Makingana, but we call her Mac." The last was a tall, rail thin woman whose dark skin shown where the sunlight caught it, but who could have disappeared into the shadows without a trace.

"What *do* we do, sir?" Romez asked.

"Any of you got a laser cannon in your boot?" The four spacers glanced at their shoes. "If not, we do exactly what the man says. Let them relax, go easy. They'll make their mistake and we'll be ready for it." The marine stepped away from his two supporters . . . and his knees almost caved in. "And get me a stick or something to lean on."

It was the woman Trouble had helped who tossed him a sturdy walking stick.

Raven haired and olive complexioned as seemed to be the local norm, she stepped around rocks and roots with the confidence of someone used to taking care of herself. Still, her left hand had a nervous way of flicking to the pods hidden under her shirt. "I can take care of myself," she threw at him along with the stick.

"Yeah. I could see you were about to take that slob apart."

"Maybe I would have."

"They would have killed you before you could."

"Funny talk coming from someone in a fancy uniform."

Trouble stepped closer to the woman, lowering his voice. "They would have killed you and none of us would have been any closer to freedom. Probably further. If we're going to get out of this mess, we'll do it by a plan, and we'll do it together."

Their eyes locked, Trouble stared into obsidian black seething with a rage he could not account for. The woman whirled and stomped away. "Off-world bossy" she tossed in her wake.

"Civilians," the petty officer breathed in answer.

"What's got into her?" Yu asked.

"I have no idea," Trouble concluded, not for the first time where a woman was concerned. "Bossy" rolled around in his skull for a moment, mixed with the background material he'd picked up and the experience he'd had with the locals at Izzy's elbow.

"Crew, I don't think these folks take well to being told what to do." He glanced around at a bedraggled bunch clumped together in various groups, and edging toward the boss with the dumb look of cows in a zoo. "Let's see what we can do about helping these folks without pissing any more off."

The spacers broke up, hunting up more walking sticks for those in most need. It turned out that the young woman was doing the same. Between shouts from boss and three other toughs like Clem, folks got moving. The buzzing in their bellies made sure of that as Boss mounted a mule and headed out. A couple of people had bad reactions to the drugs that had been used to capture them. Spacers stepped in to help. Trouble found himself on one side of an older woman who seemed to be the worst case just as his female nemesis took her other arm. "They call me Trouble," he introduced himself.

"I can see why," the young woman said across the older one. "I'm Ruth, from the farm stations." She glanced around. "Only farmer here."



“Not too many spacers either. I like the way you’re helping. Maybe if we work together, we can get through this.”

“Yeah,” Ruth sighed. “Think there is any help for us?”

Trouble glanced around; he saw bedraggled people, thugs and trees. Nothing too hopeful. “Somebody’s gonna come looking for us. The Navy looks after its own.”

\* \* \*

“The Navy looks after its own, Mr. Shezgo.” Izzy rested both hands firmly on the city manager’s desk and locked eyes with him. “I’m missing a marine officer and four spacers. I want them back. Now.”

The young city manager sat forward in his chair, eyes solid on Izzy . . . and gave not an inch. “As I told you, lots of off-worlders take a liking to our planet and its gentler, friendlier pace. I came here for a vacation after college and never left. Same thing probably happened to your folks. Adults make their own decisions. Sometimes, they suddenly swap one decision for another.”

This conversation could go on hours; Izzy cut it off. “Has anyone seen my Lieutenant? That uniform does catch the eye.” She glanced at the marine sergeant at her side. By means and methods known only to noncoms, the man was once again in immaculately dress blues. Izzy had asked for this uniform. If necessary, she’d put him on vid or whatever passed for mass communications around here.

“I agree, ma’am,” which were the first words from the city manager Izzy liked this morning. “I’ve had my Public Safety people working on it. Risa Powers is the Safety lead this year, Zylon Plovdic is her assistant. They’ve been up most of the night looking for your missing people. I don’t think your folks want to be found.”

Zylon was a tall blond that Izzy gladly would have taken on for a security guard. Risa was even smaller than Izzy; how she’d make out in a barroom brawl was very open to question. But the question wasn’t a fight this morning. It was finding her people. Izzy turned her attention full on Risa. “What have you tried?”

Without missing a beat, Risa launched into her report. Izzy liked subordinates that did that. “I’ve had their pictures on all the video feeds and sent personal mailings to the city’s business community. I’ve got 100 percent acknowledgments . . . and 100 percent negatives. Lots of people saw your marine patrols. Nobody saw a lone marine.”

The city manager tapped his computer and messages began to flash on its ancient flat screen. “They’re all here, if you want to review them.”

“Ship them up to the *Patton*. I’ll have my people check’em. What else?”

“I’ve messaged every trucking firm,” Risa continued. “Asked each one to make sure no driver had picked up someone in a gaudy red and blue outfit. Nothing.”

“And I’ve been catching grief all morning for that violation of privacy, not to mention that of your wayward officer.” The city manager cut in. “Around here, we let people do what they want. Best way to get a bloody nose is to interfere in someone else’s business.”

Izzy rubbed her eyes, going slowly over the torrent of words the people had dumped on her. Maybe if she took them one at a time, they’d mean something. “Nobody has reported seeing someone in a marine dress uniform leaving town.”

“No one in my area of responsibility.” Shezgo corrected.

“Farmers come in from the stations all the time,” Zylon pointed out. “Most likely, some farmer’s daughter drove the rig your man left town in.

“That would be none of our concern.” The city manager clearly was happy at the thought.

Izzy wasn’t. “Mr. Shezgo, that was a pretty fancy party you threw for me and my officers. How many were farmer’s daughters out on the dance floor last night?”

The city manager leaned back in his chair, a frown slowly replacing the invincible confidence he’d worn since Izzy marched into his office at ten hundred hours sharp. “None,” he muttered after a long minute.

“Did any of your city’s citizens see a very gaudily dressed marine officer leave by himself, or with one of their best friends on his elbow.”

“None that any of my people have talked to. And I’ve mailed everyone who was at that party a query.”

“Anyone find a pair of blue pants or fancy red shirt?”

Risa handled that question. “I warned the trash collection crews to be on the lookout for them when they started this morning. And no, I’ve heard nothing about the clothes either.”

“Then for now, I’m going to assume that my officer is still wearing them and he should be as out of place here as a drunk at a Baptist church picnic. You keep hunting for him. And I’ll start. How do I get in touch with the farm stations?”

Shezgo shrugged. "They guard some emergency channels, and I wouldn't recommend tying them up. Those folks can get very testy where safety is concerned. They have their own nets for business. They do what they want and as long as they don't create interference on our city nets, I don't bother them."

Izzy had a hard time swallowing that line. "You mean the two of you don't even talk?"

Shezgo's shrug got deeper. "When Unity was causing trouble, the farms didn't want to hear what was going on around here, and didn't want them listening in on what they were saying."

Izzy could see she had her work cut out for her, and nothing more would come from this meeting. With an about face, she headed for the door. Impatient, she had her XO on the comm unit as her car pulled away from city hall. Stan cut her off. "Skipper, the chief in charge of the Shore Patrol last night had a few words with some civilians. Farm types. They've had people disappear, too. Said they'd like to talk to us. Probably at last night's collection point. Supply wants to know if he's supposed to set up a purchasing station there this afternoon?"

"Yes, send Supply down with a large team and an armed escort," she answered. "Driver, head for Twenty-third and Main. Somebody may be waiting to meet us. Sergeant, load your weapon and get a pistol for me." Then she returned to the XO. "Stan, have comm do a full scan of all communication nets in use. Townees claim they don't talk to the farmers and vice versa. I somehow doubt that. Don't send any messages out before I get back. I want to make this a personal call. Can't believe how allergic these folks are to anything smelling of central organization. For now, let's do it their way. I want this place mapped, scanned and analyzed to the thirteenth decimal place. We got people down here in this haystack. Find them."

"Will do. When should I expect you?"

"Not for a while. I'll stake out the collection point, see if anyone wants to talk to me. You get Supply moving. As soon as he's here, I'll go back topside."

"Yes ma'am."

Izzy spent a long two hours waiting for Supply to show up. She hadn't been parked five minutes when a grandmother type stopped to tell her how much she'd enjoyed the dance last night, how nice it was to see someone from Earth, and how a ship's captain shouldn't mind if a few of her people decided to stay on Hurtford Corner. "We like to share with visitors who stay." That was just how it was.

Soon an old man joined the woman, giving Izzy a replay of the same views. Two teenagers showed up, a girl looking enough like Franny to cause Izzy to swallow a lump

of grief, and a boy hanging on her, both wondering what Earth was like and wanting to talk about maybe joining up. “Anything has to be easier than working for her old man.”

It went down hill from there. If Izzy hadn't feared missing whoever it was that was losing people, she would have had the driver gun out of the growing crowd. Instead, she stayed to learn how much people loved their planet, hated Unity, and really wondered what Earth was like. When Lieutenant Pollux arrived with a dozen storekeepers and as many guards, he'd already been briefed to keep an eye out for a contact. Without a backward glance, she had the driver head for the gig. Somewhere on this planet were five of her people. She wanted them back.

\* \* \*

Joe Edris drove the truck, Seth Seddik hunched silently beside him. In Joe's pocket, the note burned.

If you want to see your woman alive, go back where you belong. Get mixed up in what you don't know and you'll get her back in pieces. Then we'll come looking for the rest of your family.

Joe had been ready to go straight to the Navy. They were missing people, and whoever had their people had Ruth. Seth had backed away from Joe's anger, shaking his head. “You have no right to make the decision for all of us. Not for my family, not even for Ruth. She's a married woman. We must lay this before the elders. Whatever we do will effect everyone. Everyone has to have a say.”

“And while we're talking, what's happening to Ruth? Damn it, Seth, we got to do something now. Not next Thursday.”

“Joe, you were not raised on Hurtford, so I know it's hard on you. But you saw how we handled the Unity problem. We'll handle this one our way, too.” Seth paused, studying Joe out of the corner of his eye. “Unless you and your family are ready to leave the stations. Go out on your own.”

Joe knew how long he'd last without the community there when he and his needed more than the hands they had. He had no answer for that. Seth and he did not exchanged another word. It was a long, silent drive back to the stations.

\* \* \*

As a kid, Ruth loved trips to the forest to gather fungus. The family was

smaller then, and Ma and Pa had time for her. The drug company money from fungus helped make the payments on the station in those early years. Today was horribly different.

The boss set a fast pace. Comfortably mounted on a sure-footed mule, he paid no price for hills and gullies, brambles and jutting roots that dragged, tore and ripped at the walkers. Ruth was a big sister again, helping those who couldn't keep up. Lots of folks had worn dancing shoes last night . . . wrong gear for today. Others just were not up to the effort. Ruth did what she could, giving one an arm to lean on, finding a stick for someone else, carrying coats and sweaters a few people were ready to toss away in the heat of the day; they would want them tonight. Helping made her rub elbows with the spacers. The lieutenant, Trouble, told them to help and they did what he said without question. Course, he was helping, too. He spent as much time at the tail end of the column as did Ruth. Clem and three uglies like him rode mules back there, laughing at the half crippled stragglers, offering to shoot them if they fell further behind.

Trouble saw to it that his spacers took breaks, balancing caring for others with caring for themselves. His break time usually was spent near the head of the column, eyeing the boss when the boss wasn't looking. He'd said the navy looked after its own. Did he really think help was coming? After the fiasco at the Abdoes place, Ruth didn't expect anything from her own people. The slim chance that the marine knew what he was talking about kept hopelessness from eating her alive.

At the crest of a hill, the Boss rested his mule. Turning in the saddle, he smiled at the four big fellows that had kept up with him, then shook his head dolefully at the rest trailing far behind. He pulled the red box from his belt, raised it into view, and pushed the button. Ruth's belt went from a gnawing discomfort to a shooting pain. Around her, women and men screamed. Even the marine doubled over. Up ahead, the same reaction came from those who had kept up.

"Boss's leadership style needs improvement," the lieutenant observed dryly through gritted teeth. "Stinging those doing what he wants along with the rest of us is no way to get promoted in my Navy." Two of the spacers laughed; a grin escaped even Ruth. What kind of people laughed at times like this?

That didn't keep Ruth's mad from surfacing. "You got four legs moving you along," she called. "We got just two. And some of these folks ain't use to using either one of them. You got to slow down."

"I got a schedule to keep. You just got to keep up. If that means walking

all day and all night, I guess you'll just do it. Me, I'd like to get some sleep tonight."

"Some of us could use some chow," Jagowski pointed out.

"You'll eat when you reach tonight's camp, and not before. So folks, you've had your rest. Let's get a move on." He kicked his mule into movement. As he dropped over the ridge, the pain in Ruth's gut grew. They plodded on.

But now Ruth and the spacers weren't the only ones helping. The better off pitched in to help the worse. But that did nothing to ease the misery as the day grew hot and humid. Now parched lips gnawed more than empty bellies. She followed Trouble's lead as he edged his spacers up stream at water crossings. That way, she drank less mud. Balancing the need to move with growing exhaustion and the inevitable pain in the gut from being behind left the buzzing insects unnoticed . . . until angry welts splotched exposed faces, arms and legs.

"Damn death march," Jagowski muttered.

Ruth eyed the sun, finally dropping low in the sky. "Night's gonna be as cold as the day was hot. Better collect some dry wood for fires." People who could hardly hobble were soon clutching two or three sticks.

The boss called a halt as they entered a small clearing under a stand of tall, spreading oaks. "Take the rest of the night off," he announced. "You stay to that half of the clearing. I get this half." His half was marked by the remains of a fire; their half wasn't. Scattered over the clearing were trash, buzzing insects and proof no care had been taken about sanitation. Pa would never leave a camp like this.

"What do we do?" Ruth asked in the same breath Jagowski did. The marine officer rubbed the bridge of his nose. As he opened his mouth, Clem interrupted.

"I bet you're hungry," got everyone's attention. Clem's mouth moved as he counted the hungry faces gathering around him. Then he pawed in the pack of the mule he'd been leading and came up with, by Ruth's quick count, exactly half the ration boxes they needed. Clem pitched them out like one might toss dry bones to hungry dogs. Then the thug produced an extra ration. "Any of you girlies want to make friendly with me tonight, I got some extra grub for you." His gap-toothed grin made Ruth want to knock a few more out. She turned to the

marine.

He was eyeing the four burly types who had kept up with the boss; toughs who probably wanted Clem's job. That thug had made sure a good chunk of the rations landed near them. The biggest had grabbed three boxes, smirked, and turned away. The marine shook his head, lips getting thin. "Hate to get the boss's attention again, today," he muttered, then stepped forward.

"We got to share our food rations." The lieutenant's voice came out low, but rock hard in command. Several folks around Ruth started pairing up, though none in actual possession of food boxes seemed overly committed at the moment. The four kept walking away.

"Excuse me, gents, but I need those rations you're carrying." The marine repeated.

The one with three turned, a vicious grin on his face. "I'm hungry. When I'm hungry, I eat."

"Lots of folks are hungry."

"Tin soldier, you seem to have mistaken me for someone who gives a shit." The tough enjoyed the laugh that brought from his associates. Behind Ruth, Clem bayed like a donkey. The marine eyed the boss. He'd spread his bedroll; his interest centered on the mattress as it filled with air. The goings on around him apparently were no concern of his.

Trouble stepped toward the tough. "I want those rations."

"Come and get'em." The twisted smile was evil, delighted.

The marine took another step forward, but didn't go into a fighting stance. The thug couldn't pass that up. Dropping his ration boxes, he charged Trouble, arms flaying.

The officer ducked, sidestepped, and sent the big guy on his way with a push. The thug went down, sliding to a halt, nose buried in particularly messy residue from previous campers. He came up bellowing, blood bubbling from his nose. "You shouldn't have done that, pretty boy. I'm gonna sleep real warm tonight in your red coat. You're gonna be cold and dead."

"Come get it." Again, the marine just stood there.

This time the tough was slower in his approach. Lumbering up to the marine, he kept his arms wide, a big, nasty bear, ready to hug you to death.

Trouble waited, then went in with two fast punches. The big fellow stumbled back, shook his body to rid himself of the shock. Then, roaring his outrage, he charged again.

Trouble faked right, then evaded wide to the left, side kicking the fellow's knee as he went by. The man screamed, "My leg, my leg," as he went down. But not for long, as his skull came up hard against a tree.

"That's gonna cost you extra." The boss was relaxing on his bed, a warm meal in his lap. "You damage my merchandise, you got to make it up to me."

"I guess I'll have to run a tab," Trouble said, collecting the dropped rations, and ones offered him by the other toughs.

"Smokey'll share with me. Won't you?" Sharing had suddenly become popular. Clem and one of his sidekicks attempted first aid on the slow learner. Ruth could probably have done a better job, but at the moment, she had a meal to prepare.

A little shyly, she offered Trouble half of her only slightly warmed meal. "Heater didn't work too well," she apologized. As they split the beans and something, with ancient crackers and gummy fruit bits, Trouble outlined what he wanted.

"Place needs a little work to make it decent. Jagowski, you see about digging the latrines. I'll take care of the fires. Ruth, could you get people to gather ferns, leaves, things to put between us and the ground?"

"Right," Ruth agreed, "the ground's gonna get awfully cold before morning. Without blankets, we'll be in trouble."

The meal done, people went about their jobs in the rapidly fading daylight. Two of the spacers got promoted to doctors and assigned to examine the worst blisters. Ruth eyed the rocks around the boss's fire pit. "I could collect some more along the stream," Ruth said innocently, as she headed out.

Trouble came close to her. "They'll have water in them. Might explode." Ruth grinned; for a spacer, the guy knew something about dirt. She nodded, half swallowing a grin.



The marine shook his head. “Unlike plastic, rocks got no fuse. They go off when they want to, not when we want. Your heart’s in the right place, woman, but let’s pass on this one.” The marine gave her a thin smile, none of the smirks Mordy tossed on her ideas. “Dry rocks,” he whispered.

“Okay.” She headed into the gloom. When she got back, three fire pits were being dug, Trouble and two others working on one as near the Boss as the pain pods allowed.

“I love watching other people work,” Clem giggled, tossing a handful of dirt that had fallen near him back into the pit.

“So do I,” drawled the boss. “Clem, get a shovel and help these people. Soldier boy, a word with you.”

They walked off a ways. The boss held the red box tightly in his hand; the marine kept a respectful distance. They exchanged words for a few minutes; Ruth understood none of it.

Done, Trouble backed away slowly, then paused. “You got a med kit? We got folks who could use a hand with blisters. Maybe do something for that guy’s busted leg.”

Boss chewed on that for a long moment. “Clem, that hole’s big enough to bury someone. Go get a first aid kit.” As Clem shambled off, shovel swung over his shoulder, the boss followed him, his words now sing song as for a three-year old. “Take out the needles and the scissors. Mother can’t let them hurt themselves on pointy things.”

“Yeah, boss,” Clem snarled. But he emptied part of one med kit into another, then tossed the first one none too gently to Trouble. Bandages and antiseptic sprays flew in general formation with the kit. Trouble caught the box, gathered up the scattered contents and turned it over to the two spacers caring for feet. Ruth borrowed part of the first aid kit and took a look at the tough’s knee. Kneecap was out of place; she snapped it back in. The leg wasn’t broken, but the ligaments were a knot.

“Somebody’s gonna have to carry him tomorrow,” she told his buddies. They showed no enthusiasm for the chore. Knee wrapped, she returned to the fire pit nearest the boss.

It was done; the marine stood. “Spare us a match?”

“Here’s the deal,” boss said, tossing Trouble a single match. “You start it with that and I’ll let you take fire from it to start your own. You ask me for a second match, and all my fire stays put.”

No one risked a protest.

“Anybody here started a fire recently?” Trouble asked.

“Don’t you marines do this all the time,” Ruth snapped. “My Pa did.”

“Dirt time on an oxygen planet has been kind of scarce lately. Okay, stand back and let me have some air.” For the next minute, as twilight waned, the marine arranged tinder, twigs and small chunks of wood. He was almost out of daylight when he risked his match. He struck it along the sole of his boot. Got a spark . . . and nothing else.

“That’s dumb,” Ruth growled, and reached for a grainy rock like Pa used. She handed it to the marine. Trouble drew the match slowly along its flat, rough face, gradually increasing the pressure. The stick smoldered, then caught. After a brief flare, it died away almost to nothing. Holding his breath, the marine moved it the few inches to his tinder. The pile smoldered, caught, crackled, then began to die.

Carefully, Trouble fed the tiny flame, building it, letting it reach out to the larger sticks. *Grow damn you.* Expectant eyes glittered in its growing light.

Once it was well caught, Ruth wrapped some dry moss around a stick, let it catch, then took it to the next firepit. Jagowski had a pile of tinder and sticks like Trouble had made.

The third was almost routine.

Then the marine did surprise Ruth. He captured the ends of a couple of saplings, collected their ends together with his web belt and then tied that to a downed log. In one swoop he had a lean-to. While one of the other spacers used her belt to do the same for a second lean-to, people scattered arm fulls of leaves and sheaves of moss. “You got two choices tonight, folks,” the marine said, “stay close and warm or keep your distance and be cold. I never thought I’d say something nice about this choker set, but it’s got a lot of old fashion wool in it. I’ll take one of the outside edges.”

Plopping down with his back to the outside, Trouble eyed the rest. Well, he

hadn't been bossy, exactly. Besides, Ruth was exhausted. She lay out beside him, guiding a sick woman down beside her. The spacers settled in next like a pile of spoons. The city folks, depending on who they knew and how well, slowly found their places under the bowing saplings.

"Hope you don't mind if I snore?" Trouble said.

"Snoring's better than being pawing," Ruth answered. "Thanks for all you've done today." She wiggled closer to him, the closest she'd been to a man since her own walked out. Strange how this was working. She didn't expect to sleep, but in the warmth of Trouble behind her, she must have.

\* \* \*

Joe didn't know what to say to his wife. Bibi had raced from the house, the kids like a swarm of bees around her. The sight of the empty seat beside her husband had brought her up short. "Where's Ruth?"

"Somebody's grabbed her," he snarled, getting out. "Seth says we got to talk before we can decide what to do."

"This can't wait 'til next Thursday's dance." Bibi dried her hands on the towel she wore wrapped to her waist.

"It's not gonna," Joe snapped. "Son, get the crew saddled up, armed, supplied and ready. I'm not sure we'll be coming home after tonight's meeting."

"Right." The young man moved off, Slim at his elbow.

Bibi gathered the younger kids around her. "I'll get the rest packed. Where will we sleep tonight?"

"Love, I don't know. Maybe we'll have company. Maybe you'll go home to another station. I just don't know." He glanced at the dark western sky. "But this is going to stop."

\* \* \*

Zylon Plovdic worked late that night. Nothing about the missing navy personnel surfaced. No surprise for her. It was dark before Risa dismissed her office staff. "You've worked more than your fair share today. Get a good supper. I'll tell Mikhail the Navy's nowhere to be seen."

Zylon came late to supper, but she knew she would not be eating alone. The waiter brought her meal and left the table quickly. As Zylon expected, two men were already eating.

“Any surprises?” Big Al asked, the bland glance he threw her told that none were expected – and none would be accepted.

“No surprises. Everything’s under control,” Zylon answered the off-world boss. Alexander Popov had arrived with Unity — and survived their demise. His connections went far beyond the rim, Zylon suspected to old Earth itself. It was he who’d talked the elders into signing mineral contracts just before the war with some of the biggest names in space.

“We’ve got the farmers running back to their stations, tails between their legs,” added Zef Davis, the local boss, junior scone of a third generation Hurtford family. What he didn’t know about Hurtford hadn’t happened. What he wanted was for exciting things to happen, and real soon. “We won’t see the hay seeds again until they’ve had a chance to talk everything over six different ways, and then they still won’t decide anything. You get that damn cruiser off our backs and we’ll have a free hand. I still say we should have cut that Withwaterson fellow in. That would have saved us all this.”

“If we have to cut anyone in, it will not be a minor trader of his ilk. He’s out of his league and will learn soon enough.”

“Well how come your big league couldn’t keep one lousy cruiser off our backs?”

“I’m looking into that. It will be taken care of. In the meantime, that pretty little skipper has lost five of her crew. She will be more careful about spending time down here.” That got a laugh from both of them.

Zylon finished her nondescript stew while the two played their little power game. Like so much of what passed for food, goods and services on Hurtford Corner, the stew lacked taste, and the wine lacked body. Zylon wanted something rich, full bodied, overflowing. She nodded to the two, paid attention to both. Her time would come. When they fell silent, she summed up her day, and the next week . . . and life on Hurtford Corner.

“Nothing’s happening. Nothing will happen. We’ve tied up all the loose ends. I’ll keep an eye on them to make sure they don’t unravel.”

“Have supper with us tomorrow,” Big Al offered.

“Be glad to.”

\* \* \*

Izzy leaned back in an overstuffed chair of her day cabin which was more ship’s office than personal space. A conference table for big meetings stretched along the wide outside end of her pie-shaped cabin. Smaller meetings like tonight’s were done in comfortable chairs and a sofa grouped around a coffee table that looked wooden and hid a fully functional data display. Behind her, a desk occupied the narrow focus of the office. As usual, a dozen red lights blinked from her in-basket, reports, reviews and items demanding her signature before they left the ship. They’d wait. She had real business to handle, leaning forward to tap the coffee table, she called up her to-do list. “Found their recall beacons?” she asked Stan.

“All five,” her XO answered, no joy in his voice. “They’re all together in what looks like the town dump.”

“And Shezgo said they’d search the trash cans.”

“I think we ought to cut the guy some slack. I read the planet charter. All decisions are made by unanimous vote. There’s a little wiggle room, but these folks are dead against autocratic rule and unilateral action.”

Izzy rubbed her eyes as she mulled over that concept. “Hell of a way to run a warship,” she muttered, “or a planet.”

“They’ve been at it for eighty, ninety years and are still here.” Stan gave his boss a quirky smile.

Izzy could tell a dead end when it slapped her; it was time to move on. “What have we got on the farm net?”

“That was a bitch. We knew they were there, but couldn’t find them. Igor and one of his old chiefs tried a different track. Everything’s digital. You go up the frequencies by point one, point two, but what about what’s in between?”

Izzy was physically tired, and her attitude was rapidly going from pissed to downright cranky. “Talk to me, Stan.”

A quick nod, and words started falling quickly from the XO's mouth. "Looks like the farmers grow their own radio crystals. None of the frequencies they're using are at the standard digital points on the net. They can jump up the frequency by doubling, tripling or what have you, the base frequency. Igor and his team are working on a transmitter that ought to be able to dial in their net. Be ready by morning."

"Good. I want words with them. Morning ought to be soon enough." Izzy yawned. Her brain was turning to mush, but there was more to do. "What about our survey?"

Stan tapped the table. The screen changed from to-do list to a map, centered on Hurtford Corner. "Looks the same as the one we've been staring at for the last week," Izzy muttered.

"Pretty much is. Roads, rivers and hills don't change much. The farm area's spread out a bit. The town's a little bigger. Nothing significant has changed."

"What have we got real time?" Quickly the map was overlaid with a picture. Roads became a string of lights. Most buildings disappeared into darkness. The farm stations speckled their part of the map. Izzy zoomed the map onto the hills to the west. Tiny dots blinked. "What's in the back country?"

"Nothing but a few camp fires. Most are herb and plant hunters. Original flora has some interesting hydrocarbon chains. Brings a good price from the pharmaceutical Corps. Some are survey teams. Several Earth corporations got contracts to survey for minerals, both here and in the system."

Tired as she was, Izzy had the energy to frown at that. "A bunch of Luddites like these signed on for mining? What are they gonna have, a kinder, gentler strip mine?"

"I don't think the locals much like the contracts. Some Unity types signed them just before the war. But the Earthside suits are holding the present government to the contracts."

Izzy ordered the screen to zoom to each of the fires. Stan called up a database they'd acquired from the locals. "They keep good tabs on everyone back country."

"Isn't that a violation of somebody's privacy?"

“Seems that where search and rescue is concerned, folks are a bit more understanding. People are kind of scarce out this far. They don’t want anyone dying if they can help it.”

Izzy leaned back, eyes losing their focus as camp after camp flashed by. What was wrong with this picture? People were few and far between on the rim. Yet, where she came from, folks were crammed into slums. Homeless even. Governments tried forced immigration, but shipping all those bodies was awfully expensive considering the few who survived the first six months pioneering a planet. And folks like her sister Lora couldn’t be moved with explosives. In the war, Earth and her seven sisters had built most of the hardware. The other forty developed planets drafted most of the people who did the fighting. Funny how people and things ended up being distributed. *God, I’m tired.*

“Stop the scan. Go back.” Izzy sat up, leaning over the replaying scenes. Most camps had one fire. A second fire was usually a ways away from the first, as if somebody wanted her or his or their own part of the night. But . . .

“There, that one. What is it?”

Stan glanced at the camp, three fires forming a triangle, and read the database. “A survey party. Left Hurtford City five days ago.”

Izzy eyed it. “Hasn’t got very far.”

Stan did the measurement. “Not far at all.”

Izzy rubbed her eyes, tried to banish the exhaustion that was blocking memories. “Read something about a triangle once. Can’t remember now. Stan, tomorrow morning have Trouble’s Gunny Sergeant review these. Also, I want a marine detachment sent down to recover the beacons and anything else they can find in the dump that looks suspicious. Make sure they’re heavily armed and tell them to take no guff from the locals.” Stan’s eyebrows were up. “But not to start anything. Okay?”

“Yes ma’am. Now, why don’t you get some sleep. Not much either of us can do for a while.”

Izzy added two more notations to her TO DO list as she glided to her own night cabin just off her desk. She closed her door, less for privacy than to shut out the damn blinking lights from her ignored in-basket. A warm shower drained enough of her exhaustion to let her slip quickly to sleep without worrying too

much about what kind of night Trouble was having.

\* \* \*

Joe Edris fumed, and kept his hand in the air, though the muscles of his arm were knotted painfully and it would do him no good. Seddik had been good to his word. Joe had gotten the first words that night. But the moderator had dutifully followed tradition. Any newly raised hand got recognized before someone who'd already spoken. Old Seddik must have used a database to track who talked and how long. If Joe heard once more about the failed drainage project, he'd explode. The rains had been heavy last year; no amount of project planning could have prevented that. And it had nothing to do with someone kidnaping Ruth.

As more and more people yammered on, Joe waved his hand and sat on his thumbs.

His opening statement had gotten through to a few of the younger people. Still, the older folks couldn't seem to get it through their heads that the last month had changed everything. They may have out sat the Unity yahoos, but now somebody was coming after them where they lived.

Two hours into the talk-a-thon Joe gave up on being recognized a third time. As he stomped for the back of the hall and a glass of punch, others joined him. They took over a corner to talk among themselves.

"We got to protect the stations or we're gonna be burned out one by one," was the concern first and foremost in their minds.

"What about Ruth?" drew blank stares. These people had some ideas how they might protect their loved ones and live's works. They had no idea how to find one woman somewhere on this vast planet. Joe had seen it before; people concentrating on what they could do something about and turning their backs on what only overwhelmed them. He'd done it himself. Now, it was *his* daughter no one could help.

About the sixth time his "But what about Ruth?" was ignored, Bibi locked onto his elbow and hauled him out of the circle.

"You read the letter. You and Seth left town like they told you. We are doing what we can for Ruth. If we do nothing with the navy people, she will be returned."



“You can’t believe that?” Joe shook his head, incredulous.

“Why not? They gain nothing by breaking their word.”

And it hit Joseph Edris just how strange these people were he’d chosen to live among. No, not strange, just wonderfully rational. It was stupid to harm a woman if the farm stations did what they were told. Therefore, the kidnappers would not. Joe had been one of the few who’d expected the local Unity bunch to be worse than they had been. He’d seen, growing up, what passed as rationality on other planets. That was why he’d chosen Hurtford Corner. Now, Bibi and Seth were putting their faith that people were rational on the line for Ruth.

For a moment, Joe wanted to believe too. Slowly, he shook his head. “The raiders at the Abdoes place didn’t act rational.” He watched the color drain from her face, as if he’d hit her. “Bibi, something crazy and mindless and evil is out there stalking us. We’ve got to fight it every way we can.”

“Even after twenty-five years with me, you still say that first, with so little to go on. You say I don’t understand what’s happening. I say when we do, we’ll know better what to do. What fills you with anger and hatred and makes you ready to jump off into something you have no idea about? Joseph, you can’t risk our daughter’s life on just . . . just guesses.”

If he could not even convince his wife, how could he persuade the whole community? His daughter’s life hung in the balance, and his words carried no more weight than a feather.

Bibi returned to the circle of folks planning how they might protect themselves but still work their fields. After a long purgatory of frustration, Joe rejoined them. Here at least was something he could do. An hour later, Jethro Hakiem raised his hand. Jethro, a man whose quiet Joe had come to realize came not for a lack of anything to say, but a need to carefully order the myriad of thoughts in his mind, had said nothing that evening. Seth immediately recognized him. Slowly, methodically, he outlined the plan developed in the corner.

All the stations nearest the hills should be abandoned. The larger stations would provide temporary shelter for the smaller. Work would be done in teams, always three or four rigs together, going from one field to the next. Each occupied station would keep a twenty-four hour watch. Fire support teams would be on quick reaction alert. Dov Dobruja would turn his electronic shop into a sensor factory. He expected to have enough listening posts grown by next week

to cover the entire front range. “We do what we’ve always done. Stick together. We can turn aside this threat to our way of life.”

There were nods, even a few quiet cheers. Some of the younger couples were reluctant to abandon their stations, but fathers and married sons, mothers and grown daughters worked out those problems. Bibi had taken in four young couples, one wife heavy with their first born. They trailed her truck in the dark as she carefully led them back to the station. All the drive back, Joe sat across the seat from her, his gut ripped in two. He wanted to trust the way he’d lived the last twenty-five years. But he’d grown up on Lorna Do. He’d marched in her army. He knew the senseless, purposelessness of evil.

He trembled for his daughter.