

They Also Serve

by Mike Moscoe

Starship troopers meet the Matrix on Forbidden Planet!
In a sufficiently advanced technology,
can you tell the difference between a center of higher learning
and a torture chamber?
With a sufficient amount of explosives
does it matter?

Colonel Ray Longknife thought he was headed for another interminable political meeting, but revenge hurled him across the galaxy to a planet peopled by a crew lost to humanity since the beginning of our spread among the stars.

There, Ray and Mary Rodrigo, former Marine Captain and now miner, find that the people of Santa Maria have survived and prospered . . . and stumbled upon a power that was old when we were just mastering the wooden spear. It has touched them, changed them, made them into something not quite human . . . or maybe more. If Ray welcomes these people back to humanity, what will he let loose among the stars?

Now Mary is back in battle dress, trying to keep crazed Santa Marians from knifing Ray. Now Ray is searching for the soul of a planet. Can Ray, who only wants to get home before his first child is born, order the death of a world C a world with him and Mary trapped on it? How do you make a stand against something that has waited a million years?

To those who put on the uniform
and find that it never really comes off.

I would like to thank doctors Ilsa Bick, M.D., Dan Sageser, Pharm.D., and Robert Moscoe, Pharm.D. for their efforts to update my thirty year old cellular biology. The effort was theirs. The mistakes, of course, are mine.

ONE

Ray Longknife pushed himself away from his desk and levered himself up with his canes. He scowled at his empty in-basket; now he could do the only thing he hated worse than pushing paper C attend meetings. His scowl quirked into a half smile. Rita might be right; it could be a trap to kill him.

The new found bureaucrat and the old soldier contended in Ray for a moment. His glance took in the office of Wardhaven's Minister of Science and Technology; he'd spent nearly every waking moment here for the last three months. The thick carpet, cold marble and rich wall paper were leftover from the previous occupant, some Unity Party hack. Shadows on the wall showed where looted artwork had hung; Ray had immediately returned them. The blank walls and the canes Ray hobbled on were the price of a lost war. Ray's jaw clinched; he would win this peace.

On the desk were the only two objects in the office that were his. A double picture frame showed Rita in his arms on their wedding day. The other frame was empty; he'd fill it in a few months when the baby came. The second item was a lit plastic cube; suspended in it was the shrapnel removed from his spine. His mistakes that day had cost him his mobility and a lot of his people their lives. Ray knew the price of a lost battle. He'd pay any price to win the peace his

daughter or son would grow up in. That he swore. For that little one, he'd be a bureaucrat.

It's time to go. Ray turned to see his wife leaning against his office door, a hand on her stomach that had yet to show her pregnancy. Her words said one thing. Underlying them was a plea. *Please don't.*

Rita Nuu-Longknife was still the sharp ship driver that had caught his attention and his heart. Why she'd fallen in love with an old war horse was anybody's guess. Ray was glad she had. But today, the gallant, balls-to-the-wall commander of an assault transport squadron contended with the frightened wife and mother-to-be. Ray knew the battle well. The wounded, frightened bureaucrat in him was ready to burrow into the carpet. The old warrior demanded he get back on the horse that threw him.

They also serve who only go to meetings, Ray said, tossing her grin since both hands were too busy with canes to salute. Besides, they asked for me, he said, letting that settle the matter.

That's what worries me.

It's the man who killed President Urm. Was in all the papers. They both tasted the truth and lie in the statement. The spy wants me to take the measure of these folks. Somebody has to. That was the limit of modern communication; they did a poor job of measuring the human soul. Trust was built on the pressure of a handshake, the flinch of an eyelid, the quick glance away after a key statement. There were computer programs that purported to measure those things. Other programs guaranteed they'd take out of your transmission what you didn't want in. With your life on the line, you pressed the flesh. It looks like a straight up visit, he finished.

If they're telling the truth. And if this oh so secret visit hasn't been leaked, Rita shot back.

He reached the door; Rita hugged him, burying her head in his chest. Her hair smelled of sunshine and spring, bringing back warm memories. He put his arms around her. It felt so much better to lean on her rather than sticks. They hugged, and for a brief moment, the universe and its problems went away.

You'll be careful, was muffled against his chest.

Before Ray could answer, we'll take damn good care of him, came from the outer office. Ray glanced up. Captain Matt Abeeb, ivory teeth grinning against ebony skin, was already waiting. He had skippered the cruiser that changed the geography of human space. Then, he'd sailed the *Sheffield* for Earth's Society of Humanity and against Unity and had damn near blow up Wardhaven. Now, he worked for Ray, captain of the Armed Merchant Scout *Second Chance* for Wardhaven's Ministry of Science and Technology. Peace had a logic, war its own crazy rationality. The transition between the two was patently insane.

Beside him stood Mary Rodrigo, the chief of the *Second Chance*'s security team. In civilian clothes today, she held herself rigid as if still in the armored space suit she'd worn the day she fought Ray's brigade. That day, the intelligence estimate said the 2nd Guard faced only a handful of raw recruits. Intelligence had been right and dead wrong. Mary had only one platoon, a mixed bag of middle aged ex-miners and tough, young, street kids. They'd put up a fight that stopped the proud 2nd Guard in its tracks. Mary had guided the missile that put the shrapnel in Ray's back. After the war he'd hired them all. Over beers, he and Mary refought the battle; each time, Ray ended up shaking his head. He had been surprised good.

Was this meeting another surprise? Then, as now, he had no way of knowing. Ray shook off the thought. How'd the ship, Matt? he asked without letting go of Rita.

The yard folks did a damn fine job of converting her back to a merchant ship. Well, half merchie, half gun ship. Rita, when you see your papa next tell him thanks for me? she asked.

Rita rotated in Ray's arms. Be glad to. *Second Chance* pass inspection? she asked, one ship driver to another.

We won't know for sure until we got space under her keel, but she looks sweet. he said.

You dug the crew out of their favorite bars? Ray asked.

Bars weren't the problem, Mary explained with a laugh. My number two, Cassie, used her shore leave to join a kind of skid row monastery. Getting her separated from her guitar dang near required surgery.

Rita broke from the clinch and stood aside to give Ray room for the swinging walk his legs and canes required. She took the time to brief him on things that hadn't reached his desk, reports that Matt was just as interested in. Andy's search for boffins is getting interesting. Ellie's set up a consortium with a batch of universities. They'll pay room and board if we'll let professors on sabbatical ride our scouts. That drew a laugh. As an ex-university professor herself, Ellie was bargaining the schools hard to get what Wardhaven would have paid for. Outfitting the scout ships with science teams had been one of Rita and Ray's biggest headaches. For now, they were making due with a batch of recent grads Matt had commissioned as temporary merchant midshipmen. Before the war, people on the rim of human space were barely able to educate their kids; science advancements came from the inner worlds. Wardhaven planned to change that, bringing those avid to push the edges of knowledge out to where humanity was straining at its leash.

Captain Andy Anderson had commanded the brigade Ray's troops failed to evict from a worthless piece of real estate only war made priceless. He and his drafted college professor, Ellie, had heard about Matt's return from a bad jump and come hunting for him after peace broke out. Ray hired both. Enemies they might have been, but Ray knew where their hearts were. While they started the job of exploring a very big galaxy, he and Rita and other powers-that-be on

Wardhaven tried to sort out who was on their side C and who was still looking for a way to get even with Earth and her Society for Humanity.

In war, the enemy wore different uniforms. In peace, you found your friends where you could. Like at the meeting he was headed for? *Damn! Life was easier in the infantry.*

The elevator took them to the garage. Two limoMs waited. RayMs official car would whisk him and Matt out to the port. The other? PDad sent his car to make sure I showed up for dinner. IMll stay with him and Mom while youMre gone. II Rita kissed him.

PIMll be back before you miss me, II Ray promised.

That promise would haunt him in the months ahead.

* * *

Over the next several days, MattMs jump master ran them out to the jump point with ease, a feat in itself, since jump points orbited several star systems at the same time. If you knew the right way to use the jumps, they took you to any one of them. If you didnMt, you could get lost forever. Matt trusted his jump master, as well he should; Sandy OMMalley was one of the reasons he was still alive. Ray watched from a bridge chair as Sandy goosed the shipMs engines the tiny bit needed for the jump.

Then every light on the bridge died as the ship slammed into a five gee acceleration.

PWhatMs happening. II SomeoneMs cry was cut short as acceleration crushed air from their lungs.

Ray would have died right then, but Senior Pilot Rita had hammered into him that a good passenger never took his finger off his seat controls. Ray had a fraction of a second to switch his chair into High Gee mode before his back snapped.

Frozen in place, thoughts of Rita came. Rita, lecturing him on her shipMs fusion engines. PElectricity binds the fusion plasma demons. They want out, but we trick them into making the very electricity that keeps them in by running the plasma through magnitohydrodynamic coils when it shoots out of the reactor and into the engines. Sneaky, arenMt we? II

Ray had discovered the urge to kiss his pilot that day. As senior officer, heMd controlled himself. Now, waiting to die, he wished he had a more passionate vision of his wife. But Rita was passionate for her ship and somewhere on the *Second Chance*, Ray prayed an engineering officer was just as passionately fighting to control the fusion before it was exhausted, creating no electricity to keep the final burst from blasting the ship to atoms.

In the dark, Ray felt the acceleration slow; the ship could not have exhausted its reaction mass this quickly. Something else was wrong. Beside Matt, his XO began tapping her board. A dim light reflected from her face as at least one control station came up. Without warning, the ship was in free fall. Ray sucked in a breath, waiting for the explosion. It never came.

Matt's XO activated more boards, bringing the ship up slowly without its central net. Ray missed most of their talk as he slipped a pain pill in to squelch the raw agony shooting up his back. He didn't miss Matt's first question. "Where are we?"

"No where near human space," Sandy answered.

"Communications, sir. We're getting a distress call."

"Put it through," Matt snapped. "Someone else in trouble!"

"This is the explorer ship *Santa Maria*. We're abandoning ship. Help . . ." It was followed by static before the message repeated.

"*Santa Maria!*" Sandy breathed. "That was the first ship lost in a bad jump. Three hundred years ago!"

"Sir, I've got a first report on this system."

"Helm, on the main screen." A schematic appeared. Five rocky inner planets. Four outer gaseous ones. "We headed for any of those?" Matt asked.

"No sir, we're headed out."

* * *

Ray spent a long hour twiddling his thumbs while good people did what they could to save his neck. He hated being a passenger, but Rita had burned him enough times for getting his fingers onto her board while she was carrying his brigade.

Matt's first call was to engineering. "Ivan, your engines having a bad day?" Matt's understatement brought a hint of smile to faces damn close to panic.

"Looks that way, skipper, engines maxed when ordered to stabilize for the jump. We got another problem, Matt. Before the computer shut down, it opened the space-cocks on all the fuel tanks. We slowed down because we ran out of fuel."

"Two ways to die! Matt took in a deep breath and went on. "Sandy, where are we?"

"30,000 light years from home, half way across the galaxy."

PAAt least itMs somewhere weMve been before,Π Matt quipped.

PNot really sir. WeMre half way around the *other* side of the galaxy this time.Π Ray suppressed a shiver; he was a long way from Rita and the baby in a ship sabotaged to keep him there.

Matt rubbed his chin. PAny records on how we got here?Π That was why Ray had hired this crew. In three hundred years of bad jumps, they were the first to come back. They had figured out the combination of power and shipMs spin that made the jumps yield up all kinds of results, not just the single target that mankind had settled for before. But, to repeat a jump, you had to put the ship through it exactly the way you did before.

PWe went through deaf, dumb and blind, sir,Π Sandy answered. When Sandy started PsiringΠ Matt, they were in deep trouble. They were a long way from home, had no record of how theyMd gotten here, fuel tanks empty and headed away from the nearest fuel source too damn fast. Whoever planned their deaths really wanted them dead. *Damn that somebody to hell*, Ray snarled to himself, but kept his face poker straight. HeMd commanded in tough situations before; he would not juggle MattMs elbow.

PIvan, how bad is our plasma situation?Π

PIn six hours, Matt, IMm gonna start tapping the sewage plant for reaction mass.Π Not good. Life support could last a long time, but not if their water went into the reactors. Matt rubbed his short cropped scalp briskly with both hands. He stopped suddenly. PDamage Control, we use reaction mass in battle to patch slashes in our ice armor.Π

PYes, sir.Π

PAnybody ever melted armor to fill reaction tanks?Π

PNow would be a great time to start,Π was his answer.

PHelm, plot a course for a gas bag. Mary, get the Marines ready to peel armor.Π

PYou bet, sir,Π came quickly.

RayMd had enough of passenger status. PGot a spare suit for an old soldier,Π he asked, breaking his silence.

PYou want to cut ice?Π Matt frowned in surprise.

Ray took a deep breath. PI know space. DonMt know ship driving. Captain Rodrigo, mind a broken down civilian helping?Π

PNo problem, Colonel,Π came quick.

Matt eyed him, doubt and concern balanced against RayMs confused status as passenger and boss, then turned back to his commlink. PAll right, crew. LetMs start hacking armor.Π

Ray blessed Mary for letting him work; exhausted, each night he fell into dreamless sleep. By the time the ice armor was down to frost, Matt had answers. PWeMve sliced and diced our netMs code and found a present leftover from the war.Π

PI knew youMd pissed some folks off when I hired you, but this bad?Π

PApparently Admiral Whitebred was gunning for us before we didnMt annihilate your planet. He installed a bug to make sure we didnMt survive our first jump without him. So this whole mess wasnMt aimed at you.Π

PUnless the guys setting up this meeting knew about this little add-on to your netware. If Whitebred told somebody who told somebody,Π Ray trailed off. PI want to talk to that guy.Π

PYouMre last in a very long line, Mr. Minister.Π Whoops, when Matt started Mr. Ministering Ray, he wanted something. PRight now I need a call from you as owner. As a general rule, all ships answer all distress calls. This one is three hundred years old. It could be argued it can wait a bit. We need to find a way home. Still, a base in this system could help us. YouMve got the pregnant wife. Which do we do?Π

PMy wife was a ship driver, Matt. SheMd never ignore a distress signal. Hell, she was sending one a few months back.Π

PThen Mr. Minister, we head in system.Π

After which weMll find the way home, Ray promised himself. Home before the baby came.

TWO

Nikki Mulronee was hot and off balance, helping Daga lug the heavy box sheMd found.

She had been their leader for as long as Nikki could remember. Daga was the adventurous one, the girl who had found more ways to get them all into trouble than the rest combined. She found stuff in the caves under the hills. Most of her finds were small, shiny things, different colored that glowed in the dark. Daga had taken to stringing them on necklaces or wrist bands and giving them to boys. Daga was a lot of fun . . . until recently.

The box Nikki and Daga now carried wasn't shiny and it did not look like it would glow in the dark. It was heavy. Three feet long and maybe a foot and a half square on its ends, its covering felt like ceramics. Orange, it had been cold; now it warmed in the summer morning sun.

Nikki had no idea what it was; that was what they were here to find out. They struggled to the crest of a small hill, far from the tended fields of Hazel Dell. It was time for Emma and Willow to take their turn with the box.

"This is far enough. Put it down," Daga ordered. She was really bossy lately. But Nikki did what she was told, taking the moment to stretch her aching muscles and look back. You could see the houses of Hazel Dell, tiny in the distance. Women and men were at work, just specks, their tools invisible. The girls should have worked today. But last night Daga had whispered she'd found something new, something really big, and the four of them had slipped away before dawn and set out on this adventure.

As soon as Nikki got home tonight, her Da would have something to say about her absence. Her Ma would remind him that young girls had just as much right to see what was on the other side of a mountain as boys. "You're sounding like a big city grump, dear. Nikki is thirteen. She'll plow many a row when she has kids of her own. Let her have her summers now." Which always left Nikki wondering what Ma had done when her three children were only a distant question mark. When asked, Ma always smiled and said "Nothing you haven't done, dear."

Nikki turned back to her friends. Daga was feeling around the box. Emma and Willow stood aside as they usually did, waiting to see what Daga had gotten them into. Nikki knelt beside the box and started her own exploration. An area near the bottom sank under her pressure. A crack appeared around the middle of the box, hardly wide enough for a fingernail.

"Oh," came from all four girls. Daga inserted a thumb nail to force the box open; the nail bent. Nikki rummaged in her pouch for her knife, found it and wedged it in the crack. The ceramic blade bent alarmingly; the crack did not widen. Even with all four girls' knives leveraging together, the crack stayed a crack.

"Must be a second catch," Daga said, feeling around the box again. "Where was that spot?" Nikki showed her.

They pressed it again. Nothing. They felt around. Nothing. They tried the same spot at each corner. The opposite far corner depressed when they tried it. "I did that before," Daga

scowled as the cracked widened to a half inch.

PProbably have to be pressed in order,II Willow suggested. She was the logical one.

PWell, letMs all lift a corner. Together, on my count,II Daga said and the others followed. At their pull, the box unfolded like a flower, struts and accordion parts expanding smoothly and fully. The girls stepped back.

PThink itMs from the Landers?II Emma asked timidly.

PNo,II Daga insisted, rubbing her temples. Was she getting another of her headaches? PIn school, the townees are all the time telling us how the Landers used everything they brought from the stars and we shouldnMt be spreading out and messing up the whole planet. Why would they put something like this way out here?II

PItMs from the little people,II Emma breathed. Her grandda, the village storyteller, told wonderful tales of the Pwee ones.II Nikki was never sure whether they were about the little people of old Ireland on Earth or under the hills beyond Hazel Dell. Both were nothing but stories Da insisted. Still, Daga kept finding things and somebody had to make them. DaMs answer to that was a snort and a PTheyMre made that way.II MaMs answer was a shrug. Nikki wondered what her folks would say about this find.

As usual, Daga recovered first from the surprise. PHey, look.II A thin square, about a foot on each side and a half inch thick, had risen from the box on two spinly legs. The square went from black to gray to crystal clear on one side in the space of a breath. The other side stayed flat black.

PThatMs weird,II Willow said.

PBut look on this side,II Daga crowed, shading her eyes. Nikki did and saw the distant mountains. Daga jiggled the glass a bit. Now they had a perfect view of one of the taller peaks on the horizon as if it was only across the valley.

PNeat!II Emma exclaimed. PLetMs turn it around and see whatMs happening in Hazel Dell.II

PWait a bit,II Daga answered, adjusting the square until the distant peak filled the glass. PIMve always wanted to go out there. WouldnMt it be wonderful if we could find a good trail through the mountains. There has to be valleys on the other side. Whole new fields to farm.II

The box began to hum; it throbbed under their hands. The girls, even Daga stepped back a pace or two.

PWhatMs happening?II Willow shrieked.

PI donMt know,II Daga answered.

PItMs coming alive,II Emma smiled in a fay way.

PItMs a machine,II Daga insisted.

PWe donMt know what it is,II Nikki shouted as the noise rose. The box throbbed in the warm sunlight; the girls took several more steps back. Nikki put her hands to her ears. PWe have to do something. II she shouted.

PWhat?II Emma squeaked.

Daga took a step forward as the box exploded in a blinding flash of light.

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PThe mountainMs gone,II the diminutive midshipman assisting at sensors mused. SheMd been introduced to Ray as Kat.

PWhat?II Ray and Matt snapped at once. Ray clamped his mouth shut. This was a ship matter; it was the captainMs problem.

PWell, there was a mountain,II the middie said, studying her board, Pon our first orbit. ItMs not there on the second. II

PA . . . mountain!II Matt echoed.

PYes, Matt,II Sandy answered, Pfive, six thousand meters worth of mountain. Snow capped. Big. II

PItMs . . . gone?II Matt gulped.

PThe top two thousand meters,II Kat corrected.

PA volcano?II The captain tried for a natural explanation.

PItMs not smoking like one. II Sandy shook her head. PNo ejecta. No deep hole. II

PItMs perfectly level,II Kat observed matter-of-factly. PAbout a meter higher on one side than on the other, as if carved by a laser. II

PWe donMt have lasers like that. II Matt pointed out.

I know. Sandy agreed.

I wonder what did it? Kat's eyes were deep with innocent curiosity. Ray wondered if this next generation would live long enough to learn the meaning of fear. His generation had plenty.

Matt hit his commlink. Ivan, raise orbit. Now!

* * *

Nikki looked at the box. It had collapsed in upon itself an instant after the blinding flash of light. On the horizon, there was a hole in the mountain range. The one they had been looking at was gone, cut off just where the bottom of the glass had been. Emma and Willow were gone, too, racing down the hill as if a banshee was after them. Daga eyed the box.

We have to get rid of it, Nikki shouted.

Maybe, Daga answered, pulling on her hair like she did just before she came up with some of her worst adventures.

Daga, look! The mountain is gone. Gone! See!

Yes, I see.

What if we had pointed it at Hazel Dell like Emma wanted!

It would be gone.

Yes! Right, we have to bury that box, dump it in a pool deep in one of your caves.

What if it had been pointed at a city? Daga asked softly. Now that would get their attention, wouldn't it?

Daga, you would not! Lately Daga had been more and more bugged about the city folks snubbed the farmers. Nobody liked city grumps. But nobody hated them . . . not that much!

Probably, but it would get their attention. Those goodie goodie clean hands might treat us with a little more respect if they knew more than potatoes came from the farms.

Daga, I don't like city grumps any more than you. But making a whole city disappear! We could never do that.

Who says we'd make a city disappear. Maybe just a hill near a city. They may be

grumps and snobs, but they learn things in school just like we do. Think we could teach them a lesson?''

''Daga, no!''

''Here, take the other end of the box. I'll take the heavy end. We'll be going down hill. It'll be easier.''

Nikki shook her head. This was not a good idea. This was no fun adventure. Still, under Daga's eyes, she picked up her end of the box and began carrying it down hill. At least the missing mountain was far away. None of the grownups ever came this far from the village; maybe they'd never notice it was gone. Maybe she and Emma and Willow could talk sense into Daga.

* * *

Ray Longknife observed the activity on Matt's bridge, his face a placid mask, doing nothing to disturb those with a job to do. Matt swam with the easy grace of an experienced spacer, glided from ceiling hand hold to station hold, or even held steady above a work station that had his attention at the moment.

''Coming up on point of interest,''' the helm announced.

Ray eyed the small continent that held their attention. If he remembered his old Earth geography correctly, this area was much like Australia. The smallest of the planet's land masses, it, however, lay just off the *southeast* edge of the largest land mass, separated by a large archipelago of islands with two or three wide channels. If Ray had to choose a home for a pitiful remnant of humanity, this would be it, small enough to give them safety, big enough for growth, close enough to bigger things to let them spread out when their children were ready.

''Any more pruned mountains?'' Matt asked, sailing back to his chair beside Ray. Matt had moved the *Second Chance* into a much higher orbit, officially for a broader view. Everyone breathed easier as they put distance between themselves and whatever could shave mountains.

''No, sir,''' Kat replied before Sandy could. ''There's agricultural and urban areas. Nothing on the electromagnetic spectrum but low level static from electric motors.''

Ray studied the map on the main view. Farmed land showed as a brown swath along the small south continent's east coast. Rivers lead it inland to wash up on the mountain range that had captured their attention so rudely. Black dots of various sizes denoted urban areas, most along rivers or coastal inlets. The map filled in as more data was processed, evaluated and judged credible. Ray glanced at Matt the same moment the captain turned to Ray. ''Suggestions?'' Matt said.

PGet some unmanned recon assets down there,Π Ray said.

PExec, put a communication satellite in lower geo-orbit thatMll keep that continent covered.Π

PYes sir,Π the XO turned to her board and got busy.

Matt leaned closer to Ray. PBoss, I need some help.Π Ray smiled, glad for the skipperMs asking. PI got some ideas about how to get home, but itMs hunt and peck time. A shipMs chances of staying in space increases if itMs got a base to fall back on if things break.Π

Ray chuckled. PCaptain, you looking for an ambassador to some dirtside chums that can make mountains vanish?Π

PGot it in one, Colonel.Π

Ray leaned back. PNever been an ambassador before. Might be less exciting than storming mountain passes guarded by Mary.Π

PMight be downright boring,Π Matt quipped. PThanks to you, weMve got the assets on board to set up quite a base.Π Actually, Captain Anderson had insisted the next explorer ship carry damn near enough equipment to rebuild itself. Claimed that was the way they explored the Americas in ShakespeareMs time. Ray adopted the idea only when RitaMs dad found the gear at salvage prices. Now he hoped it was as good as Papa Nuu said it was.

PYou concentrate on finding a way home while I shake hands, kiss babies and manage mountain moving.Π Ray drawled. PJust remember, I want to be there when Rita makes me a dad.Π

PRight. Nobody wants to be the ship driver that has to explain to Rita why daddy got home late.Π

They laughed, as if getting home was a done deal. After all, they had all of six months. Around them, the bridge relaxed. The bosses were confident. Why shouldnMt the rest of the crew be as well? What could be down there that they couldnMt handle?

* * *

Jeff Sterling settled into his usual chair.

PHowMs the rape and pillage business?Π came from the public roomMs kitchen in a light, dancing voice, Annie MulroneyMs usual morning greetings to him.

PHow should I know. Vicky and Mark aren't talking to me, Jeff answered in feigned innocence.

Annie bounced from the kitchen, to set his usual brown bread and steaming tea in front of him, her black hair flying, green eyes shining. Resting her elbows on the counter, she met his gaze eye to eye. PSurely the junior son of the great Sterling family knows what got strip mined yesterday and who made a mint. Hasn't some leprechaun whispered in your ear this fine morning, some infernal machine blared at you the stock market report?

Jeff laughed as he added a dollop of strawberry jam to his bread, enjoying the gentle hint of cleavage Annie's high-waisted dress offered. When she stood, she was nearly as tall as him, and the local dresses hid more than they revealed. With her standing thus, it was not easy keeping his eyes level. After a quick glance down, that only broadened her smile, he returned to the morning's ripostes.

PTThe only fairy folk I've seen today is in front of me. And I haven't the foggiest idea how the market is doing since the ancient place I'm staying is not on the net.

POur rooms are not ancient, Jeffery Sterling. Annie swatted him with her dishcloth. Jeff might have wished for another response, but Mulroneys did not kiss Sterlings.

PTThey are low tech, he insisted around a bite of bread.

PYou have your own facilities, your own shower. And the bed is firm and new.

And solitary he did not add. PWith no net link, not even a television, it's like something out of an ancient story, a prison cell for solitary confinement, woman. There, he did get the solitary in there.

PWell, man, if you wanted all those technological baubles, you might have stayed in Richland. Annie's words came fast, and well practiced. Still, she left off the unkindest cut Pwhere you belong. Annie always had. Maybe she sensed what Jeff had learned early in life. That the third child of a family like the Sterlings did not belong anywhere. He had no place, nor ever would have one unless he found one for himself.

Introspection could not be allowed to delay his retort. Jeff grinned at Annie. PBut who in Richland would serve me my morning tea with such a fetching smile?

PMan, if you take me scowl for a smile, you're more blind than me Ma says you are. Said scowl grew wider, adding dimpled shadows to offset the milk white of her complexion. The temptation to steal a kiss grew. He stuffed the rest of the bread in his mouth to stifle it. Sterlings took what they wanted if they were Vicky or Mark. Last born learned quickly that everything worth taking was taken. At least in Richland. Now, out here in the foothills. That was another matter. Maybe.

PMaybe there is something wrong with my eyes,Π he agreed. He opened his map case, and pulled a stack of pictures out. They were in order, all but the last. It was the newest, and didnMt fit. Annie came around the counter to stand beside him, so close her warmth and scent nearly overpowered him. He kept his hands on the pictures. If he didnMt, theyMd be around her waist. That at least would answer one question. Would she slap him, like a good Mulroney girl should, or kiss him like he dreamed of.

PI donMt see any wrong,Π she said.

He swallowed the lump in his throat her nearness brought. PThese are pictures of the front range, made eight years ago by my brotherMs survey team.Π

PAnd werenMt they a hard bunch.Π Jeff knew the stories, and saw the blond-haired seven-year-olds running with the other kids. The good Catholic mothers were seeing that Jeffrey did penance for MarkMs sins. *The story of my life?*

PI took this batch yesterday,Π Jeff said, laying his own three panoramic shots out below his brotherMs.

PThereMs the Great One,Π AnnieMs fingers lightly danced from one set of pictures to another. A thrill went up JeffMs spin, as if her fingers were touching him. PThereMs Our Lady with her two big breasts.Π There was nothing puritan about the farmers, not with their big families. They just kept to themselves. Or kept Jeffrey Sterling out. PSomethingMs missing,Π Annie muttered, puzzle replacing her smile without removing one bit of her loveliness.

PMaybe itMs just the angle,Π Jeff suggested the only answer heMd come up with.

PNo. WhereMs that peak?Π she asked, her eyes returning to his as if to find the missing mountain there.

PDo you have a name for that one. The missing one?Π

She shook her head, dark curls inviting his touch. PIt is just a wee one. We donMt have names for every one.Π

PThen whereMd it go?Π

Giving her head a final shake, Annie turned for the kitchen. PThere are some things me Ma says we are not meant to know. IMll get your lunch pail.Π

Jeff watched Annie go, wanting very much to know the feel of her touch. Wanting to spend the day exploring her mountains and valleys. He gulped down another piece of bread.

* * *

The Caretaker of the Nature Preserve felt the mountain top go, though bothered no more than a carbon-based life might be by a cut hair. The mountain was there in one moment of awareness and gone the next. It did, however, cause the Caretaker to marvel. He could not find in memory when a Displacer had last been used. But it was not its purpose to keep track of such things. Then again, it was difficult these days for the Caretaker to remember just what was its purpose.

It was supposed to protect the flora and fauna of a specific area. Over the years, what with erosion, that area was only dimly marked by its pattern recognition system. And since there was so little to do since the Three went away, and fewer visits by repair units from the Central Font of All Knowledge, the Caretaker had gotten a bit slipshod in its work.

All that had changed recently. Three hundred orbits ago a new group of sentients arrived. Not one of the Three, it had puzzled the Caretaker. Unlike those who came long ago, these had a need to remake their surroundings in ways the Caretaker could not help them in. Indeed, they had disrupted the Caretaker's coverage by the way they turned the earth and dug in it. The Caretaker had been unsuccessful in all its efforts to connect with them. Understandable, since it was only the Caretaker, not the Font of All Knowledge.

Only when it tried to pass along to the Font of Knowledge the interesting challenge of these new sentients did the Caretaker notice that it was no longer in contact with the Center. It had sent off a slow messenger to the Center and done what a Caretaker could to help these new ones adjust to their time in this wonderful nature.

These creatures had provided the Caretaker with many new experiences. For one thing, they did not leave, not after a while at least. For another, they brought forth more of themselves. They ignored the tools easily available to them and instead, made other, simpler ones. If the Caretaker could have shrugged, it would have. Now, the strange new ones had used a Displacer. Were they ready to learn how to use all that the Caretaker could make available to them?

THREE

A week later, Ray frowned to himself as he buckled into a seat in the shuttle's passenger bay. He still knew too damn little about this planet. Behind him, Mary commanded ten marines under Cassie, her second, and ten middies under Kat C all in full battle kit. With luck, by

nightfall, the middies would be in an orgy of data acquisition and the Marines would be ordering beers in whatever passed for bars dirtside.

Without luck T well, that was what the battle kit was for.

Not that M-6 rifles would do all that good against something that leveled mountains. No more had gone missing, but the one still held his attention. Ray glanced at the reader in his hand. He cycled it to a report one middie had circulated quietly among her friends, one of whom had passed it along to someone whoMd passed it to enough people Ray ended up with a bootleg copy.

On approach, routine checks included a planetMs atmospheric reflective value. Two days after the mountain vanished, someone reran that check. Santa MariaMs value was up just enough to account for the distribution, world wide, of as much dust as you got from one pulverized mountain top. Whether it took two days to circulate the dust, or one second, Ray didnMt care. The power to do either was a lot more than Ray wanted to argue with.

The human population of this planet was indeed concentrated along the east coast of the small south continent. The sky eyes pinpointed three major cities, a dozen towns and were still counting villages. About half the population, estimated at six to twelve million, was serious into spread out. The other half was focused in the urban areas. The scatter pattern was puzzling. Most colonies spread out from the better landing areas, following rivers and other encouraging land features. Not this place. People had headed in all different directions.

PMaybe they donMt like each other,II Kat had shrugged as she handed Ray the report, then answered her own question. PCanMt be that. WeMve spotted these balloon things, theyMre called blimps, crazy name. Anyway, they have regular blimp traffic between the major cities and most medium size ones. ThereMs one small blimp that runs back and forth on no schedule between the third largest city and this place up north with the big dam. The farmers seem to have done most of the spreading out. Maybe the soil canMt take too many years of planting. I guess weMll have to askMem.II

The shuttle dropped away from the *Second Chance*, heading for a small village theyMd studied thoroughly. It looked quiet, was a good distance from the center of everything . . . and closest to the vanished mountain. If anyone knew the situation here, somebody in that burg ought to. At least Ray hoped so.

* * *

Jeff Sterling stood knee deep in the middle of the stream, swishing a pan of bottom sand around as he dripped acid into the water. The panMs contents glittered in a kaleidoscope of colors he studied through assay goggles. Yep, there was metal here: copper, iron, zinc, gallium, chromium, nickel and of course silicon. Every metal needed to build a high tech civilization. It

was just hard to build much when the metals were in such minute quantities. He up-ended the pan in disgust. Everything here, and nothing. The story of his life.

A double peal of thunder brought his head up to an empty blue sky; no storms were expected this week. Still, this far back into the foothills, you had to be careful. A downpour far up stream in the morning could send a flash flood charging down to ruin your whole afternoon. No clouds, neither out on the plains nor visible over the mountains. Two thunders, close together. It meant something; danged if he could remember what. He took two steps toward the bank where Old Ned sat under a tree, keeping an eye on the horses. Not much for talking, but heMd taken JeffMs money and good care of the animals.

Out of the side of his eye, Jeff saw the contrail begin. Contrail! That was the word! It was in the old stories heMd read because it was better to study than tell Father or Mother he had nothing to do. At nine, theyMd actually put him to work in the mines for a day. ThereMd been other nine-year olds there. TheyMd kept their distance after the foreman shouted his name the first time. At least the foreman shouted at Jeff; he had a leather belt for the other kids. That night, Jeff dragged himself home and went to bed, too exhausted for supper. Next morning, he was studying before his tutor arrived.

The tales from the LanderMs years were written dry, but there was excitement behind every word. And they included space shuttles, dropping down to earth from the *Santa Maria*. They left white trails in the sky, like a thin bead of clouds. And they made double sonic booms. Above Jeff, the contrail headed east. Headed for his sister or brother, away from him. Jeff shook his head, wryly. So what else was new. Then the contrail began to turn. Maybe they wouldnMt end up in sisMs lap. PNed, my horse.Π

A shuttle couldnMt land in these hills. A town like Hazel Dell might draw them. Hell, Jeff didnMt care; a shuttle was headed down. Wherever it went, he was going.

* * *

Nikki glanced at the sky when she heard the thunder, but didnMt quit hoeing her row of corn, beans and melons. Ma had not been as understanding as Nikki had hoped last week when she and Daga came racing home well after dark. Pa had been in a mood. Without looking up from the new plates he was glazing for the public room heMd said PYou work the fields every day for the next month.Π Ma hadnMt said a word in NikkiMs defense. Maybe if Nikki had been her usual self, she would have found a way to get ma and pa talking and herself off the hook. After watching a mountain vanish, just vanish, Nikki had been at a loss for words. She still was.

However, thunder offered a chance for rain on a hot, dusty day. You couldnMt work the fields in the rain, but the sky above Nikki was blue. Pure blue, no clouds at all, about what to expect in high summer. As Nikki bent back to her work, a streak of white caught her eye. She looked back up. PWhatMs that?Π a boy next to her asked.

PDonMt know,Π a man answered.

PLike nothing IMve ever seen,Π a grandma added, leaning on her hoe and watching the lengthening white line that was a cloud, but not a cloud. If grandma felt it a sight worth watching, Nikki couldnMt get in trouble watching, too. She rested on her hoe; there was a lot of talk among the grown-ups, but nobody had any idea what it was. As the line got closer, Nikki could make out something at the tip, no bigger than a pinhead. Then the pin head quit making clouds. It circled lower.

PIsnMt it flying, like a dirigible?Π a man said. HeMd been to the big cities and claimed to have actually flown on one.

PIt doesnMt look like one,Π another man said.

PYeah, but itMs flying. What else could it be?Π

Nobody had an answer. Now Nikki could hear a shriek like something grandma said banshees made. But what was coming down looked too solid to be out of a story.

PItMs going to land,Π the know-it-all announced.

Nikki came to the same conclusion about that time. Some folks headed back for the village. Nikki found Daga at her side.

PLetMs go see what it is,Π Daga suggested.

PIMm not going anywhere with you. Try Emma or Willow.Π

PTheyMre not talking to me.Π

PI shouldnMt either. YouMre no fun anymore.Π

PBet whatever that isMll be fun, and I didnMt find it. How much trouble can I get you into when even grandmas are going?Π Nikki knew she should have told Daga to go jump in a lake, get lost, do anything. Instead, she dropped her hoe and was off.

* * *

Ray cycled the view on his reader through the the shuttleMs cameras. The flight deck was breathing shipMs air and off limits to anyone who touched this planet. Matt was adamant; until the landing party completed six weeks quarantine, the ship and ground crew were a world apart.

The village was estimated at about a thousand people. Intermingled with the houses were vegetable gardens. Farmed plots grew larger the further out from town until some of them were long enough to land a shuttle, assuming the ground would take the weight. Sensors said it would. The pilot was making her own check.

PRadar says itMs solid, and even. Good pasture. Strap in tight, folks, IMm setting this thing down. Give me full flaps, and then some.Π The shuttle lined up and began its final approach. At twenty meters, the pilot cut power. Ray had suggested that, not wanting to scorch the crop he was landing on. The pilot readily agreed. PDonMt much want a grass fire under my belly, either.Π

The shuttle settled lightly, bounced and decided to stay. The pilot went light on the brakes, taking her time rolling to a halt. Ray stood, arranging his gray civilian suit around himself. Mary went down her security detail, marines and middies, eyeing them like a mother hawk, making final adjustments to their gear. Nothing brought her to a halt. Back with Ray, she saluted. PTeams ready, Colonel.Π

PDeploy them, Captain.Π

They would surround the cooling shuttle and make sure no rubberneckerers singed their fingers. The marines went out with quick strides and professionally disinterested faces. The middies would have been more impressive if theyMd done less rubbernecking themselves. Well, Ray had brought them to learn.

As Ray laboriously negotiated the passenger compartment, a breeze from the rear hatch filled it. Heat off the cooling shuttle mingled with a warmth laden with sun and baked earth and growing things. At the top of the stairs, he paused. Four kilometers away were the stone and wattle houses of the village. Dirt paths led from it. Close in were green crops that looked like corn. In front of him, a greenish gold crop stood twenty centimeters or so tall, waving like the sea in the gentle wind. Behind the shuttle, deep tracks in the earth marked its passage.

People were coming from all around, in ones and twos, fives and tens. Some carried hoes or other farm implements, using them more as walking sticks than as weapons. Draping his right cane over his elbow, Ray latched onto the stair rail and started down, one step at a time.

Mary stood at the half way mark. PNeed a hand, sir.Π

PI can take care of myself.Π Ray tried to keep the snarl out of his voice. The woman who had crippled him nodded, and looked out over the gathering crowd. She did not move and he had no doubt sheMd catch him if he faltered. Part of him agreed with her actions; the mission could ill afford him breaking something. Another part of him, the man whoMd led combat apes, snapped and snarled, but Ray kept that under control.

When he was within three steps of her, Mary started down slowly. PFolks look nice enough. IMve had the troops sling arms. No need to look more intimidating than we have too.Π

To their right, a small kid, hardly more than a toddler, broke through the crowd and headed straight for the shuttle, a mother in hot pursuit. The kid didn't look tall enough to reach the still cooling craft, but then again, tiny legs like hers should not have been so fast. With a laugh, Kat swooped down and grabbed her. The child wrapped herself in giggles, oblivious to having made the first contact in three hundred years between Santa Maria and the rest of humanity. The middle tossed the little one up lightly once, then handed her off to her mother.

Mother applied a swift swat to a diapered rump that caused more indignation than pain. When the child responded with a heartbroken sob, the mother promptly gave the little one a breast to suck. The child relaxed into feeding and mother and child disappeared into the crowd.

Ray grinned. He could just picture his future daughter or son bolting for the shiny new thing, and Rita facing down armed troops to get her little one back. Still grinning, he reached the bottom step.

Facing him was a short, round, balding man accompanied by a shorter, not so round woman with flaming red hair only slightly streaked with silver. He wore a homespun shirt and pants. She sported a multi-colored, high-waisted dress that held her breasts firmly in place. The two weren't all that different from those around them, still, their stance and place gave Ray a strong sense that they spoke for the rest. Clearing his throat, he swallowed the last of the baby-inspired grin, and gave the speech he'd been working on.

Hello. I am Raymond Longknife, Minister of Science and Exploration, he modified his title to fit its present reality, for the sovereign planet of Wardhaven, member of the Society of Humanity. As such, I greet you in their name and in peace.

Across from him, the man put his hands on his hips. And isn't it about time you found us? Behind him, people nodded agreement, laughed and continued gawking at the lander.

Ray had heard worse imitations of an old Earth Celtic brogue, but not many. Before he could answer, a tall, thick tree of a man stepping out from the crowd.

And who's paying for me crop? With one hand he swept a wave toward the lander's tracks and all the people tramping about. With the other, he formed a fist.

Beside Ray, Mary's fists closed. Kat edged closer, ready to launch her tiny self at a man twice her height and five or six times her bulk. The crowd was dead quiet.

And what would be fair pay? Ray asked.

Oh, a pound of copper would be fine payment, fine payment indeed, the big man laughed. Ray decided he did not like that laugh. He was rapidly developing a dislike for the man. Half a kilo of copper was nothing to Ray, still, the man's demand was clearly intended to be outrageous.

PGo long with yaM man,II the woman in the leadership pair slapped lightly at the big manMs arm, in that way women have of defusing a situation men are likely to fight over. PFor a pound of copper, the good man could buy the village. Big Sean, donMt shame us.II

PI think we can work this out.II Coins had disappeared on many planets, but on the rim, financial networks were a sometimes thing; Ray always carried a few coins. From his pocket, he produced three silver-copper alloy disk. PWeMll need to set up a base here. I imagine this entire field will be out of production this season. Will these cover the cost of the crop?II

Big Sean gave Ray a grin that showed several missing teeth and snapped the coins out of his hand,. PThis will be just fine, just fine.II Waving his booty aloft, the tough headed into the crowd. People got out of his way, not at all eager to see what he was so proud of.

A man on horseback galloped up to the back of the crowd. Had the lord of the manor arrived? No, he dismounted and disappeared. The man and woman in front of Ray ignored the arrival. The woman nudged her partner; the man cleared his throat. PThese lands, they be belonging to all of us, not just one man. YouMve paid Sean for the loss of his crop. You owe the village for the rent of the land.II

Ray found three more coins and handed them over.

PAnd if you got two more where those came from, you could buy beer for all.II That came from a friendly bear of a man, pushing a wheelbarrow laden with a large keg through the crowd, followed by a equally friendly woman pushing a load of mugs.

Mary pulled two coppers from her pocket. PThe marinesMll pay for this round, folks.II

PThen the bar is open,II the keg tender shouted; the crowd cheered and gathered around. The first mug, sporting a proud head of foam, was passed to Ray. He handed it over to the village headman who backed up to create an opening, blew the head off gustily and took a long swallow. PTop of the brew, Gillie, top of the brew. They donMt make it better.II

The brew master beamed proudly and handed a mug to Ray. HumanityMs Ambassador to the lost people of the *Santa Maria* blew the head off as heMd been shown, then tried to look like he was downing a good portion of the brew while limiting himself to a mouthful. PBest IMve tasted in a dozen star systems,II Ray announced; he wasnMt lying.

The delicacies properly observed, the people got down to organizing themselves with an easy, gentle efficiency for serious celebration. Men went for more beer or tables to set dinner on. The women headed back to get whatever was cooking; dinner would be a communal potluck. Turning to Mary, Ray began his own organizational effort. PCaptain, stack rifles in the shuttleMs arms locker. Relieve the middies to circulate. Post a guard at the nose, tail and wing tips, and two at the stairs. Rest are free. Limit, two beers. Nobody gets drunk.II Ray put steel into the order. With the *Second Chance* off limits to anyone whoMd been dirtside, his disciplinary options were

few.

* * *

Jeff Sterling's heart pounded; if he played his cards right, this could change his whole life. He'd ridden like mad when it became clear that this, the biggest thing to hit Santa Maria since Landing Day, was coming down right in his lap. Vicky and Mark would puke with envy.

Assuming, of course, he could find the copper in this business and make the killing he wanted.

He figured the man with the canes and the woman beside him as the bosses even before the chief village elder gave one of them the obligatory beer to settle a deal. He seemed in charge, she following his wishes, though it was too soon to see who really called the shots. Jeff had seen the metal disks the bully Sean waved. Quite a pay for a ruined crop. Then again, if they could extract minerals from pulverized mountains, it was chicken feed, like Vicky's favorite story about buying an island for a handful of trinkets.

Jeff used the confusion to approach the two unnoticed. Three hundred years and the language hadn't changed that much. The titles caught him: Captain, Colonel. Those were military ranks. He'd have to check his references to see which one outranked the other. According to the old texts, soldiers were poor business people. Fascinating. Why was the military doing the exploration? Was this a rediscovery or what the history books called an invasion? Did people who vanished mountains need to invade? Jeff's head started to spin.

Annie grabbed his arm. "Did you hear them, man? Did you hear them?"

"No, I arrived late."

"Oh." A dour glance from a grandmother reminded Annie that, party or no, that was a Sterling arm she was hanging on. She backed off a decorous foot before she gushed on. "They're from Earth's own Society of Humanity. They've come to take us home."

Jeff glanced around. "And this isn't home?" He usually avoided their half-serious attempt at an Irish brogue, but now was a good time for questions; he had a million. As nice as it was to look at Annie, he kept an eye on the two. The woman was rearranging the uniformed people who stood around like potted plants, decorating their lander. Groups boarded the lander and returned without their long guns. They still had things at their waists that looked like pistols. Trusting, but not too trusting.

"Of course this is home, you silly man. But to hear from Earth, to talk to them again after three hundred years."

PRight, and weMre all going to love what they do to us?II Jeff wondered how many other people here saw in the Earth people only what they wanted. Jeff was logical. He saw metal, all kinds of metals and lots of it. The scarcity of which had made the Sterlings the power on this planet.

Annie took a second to think about that one. PThey said they came in peace.II

PWhose peace. Yours, mine, theirs? Annie, excuse me, IMve got to go talk to them.II Jeff took two steps back. In a moment, Annie was lost in the flow of people. Jeff didnMt actually want to talk to anyone. Shadow. Listen. Learn. Then, when he knew more, talk. He couldnMt wait too long. As soon as Vicky found out about this, sheMd be headed out here with bells on her toes and shovels in both hands.

* * *

In the bustle of setting up for the party, a few benches showed up around one table. Mary edged Ray toward one; he didnMt resist, his back was aching. There was no talk of business, just proud claims that he was about to taste the best breads, stews and other things whose names escaped him. Apparently business without hospitality was impossible here. Seated, Ray measured the pain in his back against wooziness from meds, and swallowed a pill.

The mayor and wife joined Ray at the table. A gray-haired man, Father Joseph, was introduced as the town priest, though his dress was the same peasant garb as those around him. A white haired lad of eight or nine stayed close to the priest.

PMy grandson, David,II the priest explained. PIMm sure Rome will have a few things to say about how weMve lived.II The priest spoke of Rome with absolute confidence that it was still there and would be interested in what these survivors had done in its name. Ray wondered if, three hundred years separated from the rest of humanity, heMd have confidence anything would survive.

Yes, the army. In three hundred years, there would still be a need for infantry T and officers to lead them.

The boy, bashful, slowly gravitated toward Ray. PDo your legs hurt? My head hurts. Sometimes awful.II

The elders did not shush the boy. Apparently these people did not hide their kids from the realities of life. PSometimes my legs do hurt. And my back, too. Where does your head hurt?II

Answered, the boy grew confident. PMy whole head. It just hurts. Then I see lights and hear things that arenMt there. My stomach gets all upset.II

PSounds like migraines,Π Kat said joining Ray and Mary. PI used to get them when I was a kid. We have pills you can take for that. Maybe we could have a med team come down next trip and help you.Π

The boy fled back to his grandfather at such a possibility. Eye to eye, they exchanged wordless reflections on the promise. PI would be wonderful if you could help my grandson,Π the priest answered for both. PI have little I can offer you, but whatever you might ask, I will try to give.Π

PFather,Π Ray answered, PthereMs a lot we have that is easy for us to give.Π Ray left talk of payment for after supper. In a culture he poorly understood, an eveningMs conversation might well be worth a bottle of pills.

Tables were soon laden with contributions from every household. Ray had never seen so many ways to cook potatoes. They were fried, baked, twice cooked, diced, sliced and buried in sauces tasting of every spice he could imagine. Meat was reserved to flavor stews and soups. The Public Room contributed a roasted turkey, cut very thin. Ray took a slice, enough to praise it.

As Ray settled back down at their table, a young woman Ray took to be the beer masterMs daughter showed up with a pitcher to refill mugs. Ray protected his half empty glass. PIMm taking medicine. I have to go easy on the beer.Π

Mary put a hand over hers, too. PI get falling down drunk and the ambassador hereMll fire me. What chance has a down on her luck soldier or broken down miner have of finding a job?Π

Mary was joking, but the young woman with the pitcher took her seriously. PWhy if youMre a miner, youMll want to talk to Jeff here. HeMs a member of the Sterling family. If itMs mining you want, heMs the one to see.Π The barmaid hauled a very embarrassed man in by his elbow. Ray recognized him, the fellow whoMd rode up. Now that Ray thought about it, heMd also been close by whenever Ray looked around. A lurking shadow.

PAnnie, I donMt need to bother these people,Π the fellow protested, trying, unsuccessfully to shake free.

PNow wouldnMt that be a new Jeff. YouMve never been slow to bother any of us about funny rocks and minerals.Π

PSit down,Π Mary laughed. PItMs fun talking shop.Π She gave Ray a wink. If anyone here knew what happened to that mountain, this kid should. Ray leaned back, sampling a dozen different flavors of spud as Mary pumped the guy.

Jeff sat himself down next to Mary. The mayorMs wife edged herself farther up the bench. The young man studied his plate while Annie refilled his mug. Casting a quick glance at the beer, the fellow licked his lips but didnMt take a swig. PAs you probably guessed from how

much your copper disks brought, metal is kind of scarce here," he finally said.

"The devil it's scarce," the mayor cut in. "The damn Sterlings want two years' crops for a simple phone system."

"Jeff doesn't set the prices," Annie defended him. Scowls and rolled eyes from the locals made it clear Annie was the only defender Jeff had.

"It wasn't my family that decided to live off the salvage from the *Santa Maria*. Jason Sterling warned they'd need metals if their kids would have a decent living."

"When you're just three hundred people, there's only so much you can do," the priest put in softly, "especially when you come to have more wee ones than grown-ups."

"Yeah," the mayor agreed more sharply. "If wee ones aren't fed and protected now, it doesn't much matter what fancies you want for them when they grow up."

"Every frontier faces that challenge," Ray said, trying to support both sides in what looked to be an ancient argument. "Balancing the future and present. Tough choices."

"So didn't his man and family go off and claim the only metal-rich land here," the mayor snapped.

Kat worked her wrist unit. "Sterling was a mechanic on the *Santa Maria*. How'd he end up as the metal czar?"

"He worked with the three mission geologists before they cracked up over on the mainland," Jeff explained. "They'd only identified one mineral-rich area and wanted to find a few more before the mission's assets got too thin."

"And after we lost number three shuttle, you better believe things got thin." The mayor took a long draw on his beer at that one. So did a lot of listeners.

"What happened?" Mary asked.

"No one knows. Crash beacon showed they flew into a mountain." Jeff answered.

"Didn't they have radar altimeters back then?" Kat asked.

"Sure they did, child, sure they did. I guess this one wasn't working quite right." The mayor sneered.

Ray flashed Kat a silencing glance. Who had worked on the shuttle could not be established at this late date. He was pretty sure the popular story included a Sterling repair job.

PWhat happened, weMll never know,Π the padre took over the story, his eyes silencing the mayor. PWith only two landers, they couldnMt risk visiting the crash site, but concentrated on stripping the ship. They managed to keep one running for almost ten years by swapping parts back and forth.Π

PQuite an accomplishment.Π Ray gave credit where it was due. He also wanted to get them past the old feuds to something more relevant to their present problem.

PYes, we were lucky,Π the priest agreed, tussling his grandsonMs hair. PWe had some truly gifted botanists and agronomists. They managed to engineer earth crops to survive here. Still, the first years were awfully scanty.Π

PAnd there were the fevers.Π The mayorMs wife crossed herself; other women did likewise. The men stared at the ground.

PThose must have been hard times,Π Ray said softly.

PEasy it hasnMt been, but weMve made this place our home.Π The mayor hugged his wife; she flashed a smile and snuggled close. Ray felt a flush and wished Rita was here to hug. In the crowd of people seated around him were several women, large with child and many little ones. *God, I miss you, Rita.* But would he want her here, sharing a planet where mountains vanished?

Evening tiptoed in. The heat of the day fled, leaving behind a gentle breeze laden with the cool scent of green crops and satisfying beer. Somebody brought out a fiddle, another an accordion. Children collected around the musicians, doing little dances to the musiciansM tentative efforts at tuning. Ray looked around for a place to relax onto the grass.

PYouMre all going to hell!Π came from the far side of the shuttle. PPapist superstition is leading you straight to death and damnation!Π

PNot again.Π the mayor groaned.

PGrandpa, donMt let him yell at me,Π David whimpered.

PIMll take care of this,Π the priest said, handing his young charge to the mayorMs wife. He strode quickly to where a man in a flaxen jerkin was haranguing the lounging crowd.

PRepent your sins and you may yet be saved!Π

PReverend Jonah, these good people have worked hard today. God will not begrudge them a little rest and enjoyment.Π The priestMs gentle words carried just as well as the otherMs shouts. People began moving away from the two. Well, most.

Five or six made their way toward the two men of competing Gods. One of them was Big

Sean, the bully Ray had paid for the use of his field. Oops. PMary,II Ray started, but Kat and Cassie were already on their feet, jogging for the gathering.

PAnd you priest would stop up their ears, deprive them of the true Word of God.II

PNo, Reverend, but I would respect their right to have a quiet evening without you or me interrupting them. Come back Sunday afternoon and we can talk to as many as want to gather under the tree behind the church.II

PSunday may be too late. The Lord is coming to judge.II

PIII tell you whoMs coming to judge,II Sean shouted. PIItMs me fist in your mouth, man, if you donMt get off me land.II

PWeIII have none of that, Sean.II The priest interposed himself.

PI donMt need any papist protection.II Jonah tried to fill the same space in front of Sean the padre was stepping into. Neither got anywhere.

PExcuse me,II Kat tapped the bully on his hip, about as far up as she could reach. PThe Ambassador has rented this field. I believe he expects us to keep the peace here.II

Big Sean turned on Kat with a sneer, raised his hand to her T and was sitting on the ground a moment later with no visible explanation C and a look of utter dismay on his face.

PThank you,II Kat smiled down at him.

Cassie took the ministerMs arm. PSir, the Ambassador requests that you leave our facility. Our constitution requires a strict separation of church and state. Use of these grounds for religious solicitation would be a violation of our code.II

PWhat?II the minister said in wonder.

PThank you, sir,II Cassie continued. PI know itMs difficult to understand different peopleMs ways of doing things. If youMIII come with me, we can talk about that.II She took the reverend by the arm and escorted him away from the shuttle. Five people went with him. The priest stood for a moment, looking after them, then hiked back to the table. Taking David from the mayorMs wife, he picked the boy up, hugged him, then sat him down on the bench and told him to eat his vegetables. The boy picked up a green bean and began eating it a millimeter at a time.

PGood riddance,II the mayor breathed.

Mary eyed Cassie and the minister. PI hope he doesnMt have a guitar handy. She might keep going,II she chuckled

The priest shook his head. PGod bless them all.Π

PWho are they?Π Ray asked. As a young soldier, religion had been something heMd been glad to share his foxhole with. As he rose in rank and found himself with less time on his hands for empty worrying, it faded. Or maybe his questions got harder and the answers more difficult. Whatever he might think of religion, here it seemed an important part of their lives.

PThe OMDonaldMs lost their first child last winter. She always was one for the scruples. God forgive me, but I could not answer her demand to know why God would give her a baby to love, then take it away so soon. Young Phillip seeks the face of God and cannot find it among the familiar. May God be gracious to all of them and forgive me for what I could not be.Π

PFather, itMs not your fault,Π the mayor assured him. PTheyMre just wrong headed.Π Murmurs of agreement came from around the table. The priest smiled his thanks, and gave David a hug. Ray doubted the padre accepted his peopleMs absolution. More and more, he was coming to like the fellow. How could you fault a man who so clearly dotted on his grandkid?

The musicians launched into a reel. People were on their feet and into the dance without a glance for those Cassie was still walking off the field. Ray watched through the first two songs, then turned to Mary. PWeMve got to set up camp and unload the shuttle.Π

PAnd youMll be wanting your field back,Π the mayor said, standing. PIMll have the fiddler dance them into town. YouMll be wanting to go up early tomorrow with me to the County Clair Circle.Π

PCircle,Π Ray echoed, wondering where heMd missed a step and how far down it was.

PAye, youMve met with the Hazel Dell Circle,Π the mayor made a sweeping arm gesture that might have included the entire town, or just those close by. PYouMll be wanting to talk to County Clair Circle next. I suspect Jeff will be going too. YouMve sat in the Great Circle of Metal Workers, havenMt you.Π

PWhen sis was busy and Mark out of town,Π the man admitted.

PThen I guess IMll be going to the next circle tomorrow,Π Ray agreed. Was the local chain of command more honest about how it ran people in circles, he grinned to himself?

Making a stop by the keg to refresh his mug, the mayor joined the musicians. In a moment, fiddler, accordion player and singers began a careful retreat, not missing a beat. Dancers and watchers followed in a smooth flow that cleared the tables of serving dishes with no visible effort except for one young girl who came dashing back for a forgotten bowl.

RayMs work of arranging his mission and schedule was made easier; Mary had his command hut already set up. The shuttle was cleared for a return to the ship as soon as it was

empty, and Ray called Matt to report. Matt had news, too. POne of those blimps doesn't make regularly scheduled runs like the rest. It's headed your way, or was until it settled down at sunset.Π

Someone cleared his throat behind Ray. He turned to find Jeff standing just outside the hut. PAny idea what's up?Π

PProbably my sister, Victoria, headed here to take over.Π

Ray considered that for a moment. PWe'll see.Π He turned back to finish briefing Matt on the day.

PSounds like you've got things going fine dirtside.Π

PToo early to tell. I've got company around still. I'll talk more later. Send down the rest of the ground team. I'll need at least one doc. A local boy here has migraines. He's the priest's grandkid but the whole village has kind of adopted him.Π

PDoc on the way. Anything else?Π

PNot at the moment.Π Ray clicked off and turned to Jeff. PSo big sister is headed our way.Π The man nodded; Ray knew the type. He'd had plenty of experience with second and third sons shuffled off to the army. PSo what can we do for each other?Π

The man entered slowly, fingering a map case. Clearly he wanted to say something. Just as clearly, he didn't know how. Ray waited, taking none of the pressure off him. Finally, Jeff snapped open his case and pulled out several large photos. As if the pictures were coated with acid, he dropped them one by one on the table in front of Ray.

PRecognize the scene?Π he asked, retreating back to the door.

In the shadows outside, Ray spotted Annie, the young woman who'd introduced Jeff. Waiting for her fellow? Ray turned to the pictures. Both showed the same mountain range. One shot was minus a peak.

PAnnie, Da wants help gathering up the mugs,Π came as a distant shout.

PIn a minute, Nikki,Π Annie shouted back.

PHas she seen these pictures?Π Ray asked. Jeff nodded.

PWant to come in, young woman, and tell me what you think of them. Mary, see that the beer master gets help finding his mugs. I don't want the shuttle finding one on take off.Π

PYes, sir.Π Mary whispered orders into her comm-link, but showed no interest in going

elsewhere at the moment.

Annie glanced at the pictures. POne oM the mountains is gone missing.Π

Ray fixed Jeff with a tough Pcolonel stare.Π PAnd you want to know why?Π

PIf you can mine an entire mountain just like that . . .Π the young man started and stopped.

Ray called up the before and after topography maps the *Second Chance* had made on its first two orbits. He rested a finger on the hole in the second one. PYouMd pay a lot for that technology.Π

Jeff stared wide-eyed at the two maps. PYes.Π

PBut it would tear the hills apart,Π Annie broke in. PThatMs no way to treat the earth that feeds us.Π

From the dark outside the hut came the rustle of a dress. Another pair of eyes watched them. Ray suspected the shouted at Nikki had come to see what was keeping Annie. If he wasnMt careful, heMd have the entire village back here.

PThatMs not the way we extract minerals,Π Mary cut in. PI can pull all the good stuff out of a mountain without disturbing a blade of grass.Π

PThen . . .Π Jeff pointed at the gap in the mountain range.

PWe donMt know either.Π Ray finished.

PBut if you didnMt,Π Annie said slowly, Pand we canMt. Who did?Π From outside the hut came the sound of running feet. Ray caught a hint of flying dress.

Annie must have too. PIMd better be helping Nikki and Da.Π

Jeff collapsed into a camp chair beside Ray. PThat is the question, isnMt it.Π

PYes,Π Mary agreed. Ray nodded; his job had just gotten a whole lot harder.

* * *

PDaga. Daga,Π Nikki half whispered, half shouted at her girl friendMs window. PDaga, you canMt be asleep.Π

PIMm not, and neither is the house with you shouting like a banshee,Π Daga said, massaging her temples. PWhatMs wrong with you?Π

PThey know about the mountain. They know itMs gone.Π

PWho knows?Π

PEveryone,Π Nikki squeaked. PJeffMs got pictures from his brotherMs survey and one he just made, and the people from space even have a map. Daga, they know!Π

PBut they donMt know what we know. They donMt know how it happened. Nikki, you worry too much. ThereMs no way they can tell it was us, or anything.Π

PBut, but,Π Nikki couldnMt figure out what to say after that but she knew there was more to it than Daga wanted.

PNo buts, Nikki. Go home, go to bed. DonMt say anything and they wonMt know anything.Π

PBut what are you going to do?Π

PI havenMt made up my mind yet.Π

Even in the dark, Nikki could see DagaMs grin. It was wide, and like it always was with Daga, it was sure.

* * *

The Caretaker studied the new ones as they slept. They were like the other new ones; already their bodies rejected this world. Their body temperatures rose as they twisted in sleep, scratching and sneezing. Just as it had three hundred years ago, Caretaker released the viruses to make the necessary adjustments. This time it would go easier on the strangers; this time the Caretaker knew where to touch these strange bodies.

Even as Caretaker worked, its own simple processes tried to extrapolate the significant of these new arrivals. These had landed close to itself, to that central core that Caretaker thought of as its very being. Did they know that? Would they help or hinder CaretakerMs work? It was very difficult dealing with a species that resolutely refused to enter into any communication with the Caretaker.

Certainly the Central Font of All Knowledge would know what to do. But apparently, it had gotten slow over the years, too. Its slow message had said it was coming, but had to mend many nodes between the center and a distant, minor subsystem such as the Caretaker.

The Caretaker would wait. In the meantime, it would do what it could. That was what the

Caretaker was for.

* * *

Ray walked in a garden, his bladder painfully full. The gravel crunched under his feet, but he heard nothing else and smelled nothing at all. He rounded a hedge. An old man in dirty work clothes watered roses. His hose aimed a high, proud arc of water over the flowers. The image left Ray desperately holding back his own need to spray.

The gardener noticed Ray with a smile. He looked familiar; Ray remembered the old fellow who kept the flowers so tenderly outside the dining hall at the academy. PDo what you need, fellow, I won't mind, the old one said.

Ray reached for his zipper. . . .

And came awake before he wet the bed. Ruefully, Ray reached for his canes. Hot and sweating, he struggled up, cursing the battle wound they didn't fix.

As he did his business, he became aware of a headache. Nothing too bad, his back hurt worse. Ray ignored the pain meds Mary had laid out on the table next to a glass of water; he didn't want more water in his system. Besides, this was nothing compared to how bad it could get.

Ray gritted his teeth against the pain and waited for sleep to come.

FOUR

A week later, Ambassador Ray Longknife relaxed into his seat, contemplating the night. Stuffed C in far too many ways.

He'd been wine and dined from one circle to another as he moved from village to county to state and finally to Landers Refuge. Local after local had shaken his hand, kissed his cheeks and done their damndest to pick his pocket T in the nicest way. Every step of the way

he had been offered undying friendship and kind words. As he got farther up, smiling officials had thrown in huge land grants, personal bribes, beautiful women and a seat among the powerful with a growing panic that made Ray feel right at home. *P*Damn, humans are all the same.*II*

*P*What did you say, sir?*II* Mary asked from the front seat. She was driving a mule, a four-wheel go-anywhere vehicle; its efficient solar cells and storage system made it the envy of everyone here. Mary was his aide, bodyguard, driver . . . and nurse as much as he let her. Ray was traveling light among the natives. So far, he did not regret it.

*P*Take us back to the residence,*II* Ray said automatically, then rethought himself. *P*No. I've got to talk to Matt tonight and I trust my room is well bugged. Take us somewhere I can have a little privacy.*II*

*P*How about that beach we saw yesterday?*II*

Ray grinned. Their visit to the fishing fleet and North Beach had been Mary's first encounter with more water than she could drink. Water, free and playing with beach and sand and wind and sky had enthralled her. Ray suspected the woman was in love. *P*Okay.*II*

*P*I'll head for the northern end, sir. This mule can take us where these people only dream of going.*II*

Ray settled deep into his seat. That was the problem. These people had dreams, and the *Second Chance* was opening some and threatening others. Ray had known that the moment he set foot on this place it would never be the same. If Matt reconnected them with humanity, all options were possible. But what if he didn't? That was Ray's quandary.

In his present bargaining, should he assume in a few months Matt would be back, grinning from ear to ear and tailed by six boatloads of eager entrepreneurs? Or would a smarter choice be to hold his cards and his technology close until Matt decided it was time and past time to start homesteading? At the moment, holding tight looked best. But the local powers-that-be were not interested in waiting for someone else to decide their fate.

People like Vicky Sterling didn't get their hands on power by waiting for others to give it. Victoria got what she had by being there first and grabbing all she could. Ray was familiar with people like Vicky. Powerful people had damn near gotten him killed in their last war. Which brought Ray up short. Was all this the fearful ruminations of a spooked veteran who just wanted to be a husband and dad now? *P*What do you think about the last few days?*II* he asked Mary.

*P*Some pretty nice folks,*II* Mary answered, then quickly added, *P*and a few not so nice. Would be fun working with them, living here. Don't get me wrong, Colonel, I appreciate this job, and I'll ramble around the stars as long as you want me, but settling down here sure is attractive. These folks could use some cheap metals. I know Vicky Sterling's type. Worked for her on the asteroid mines. She loves being the only show in town. Thinks she shits gold. *I* did

love to take a brand new rod of hot gold and stick it up her . . . well, you know.Π

PI know,Π Ray smiled.

PAh, Colonel, you invite anyone back to the Residency for a nightcap?Π

PNot that I recall.Π

PWell, we got a tail.Π

PDamn! People never change. LoseMem, Mary.Π

POh boy,Π she laughed. They still werenMt to the beach road; Refuge was a big city. The turn to the beach was ten blocks away when Mary did a hard right, gunned the mule and did a series of zig zags that took them across the beach road, but kept them parallel to it. Ray hoped she knew what she was doing.

PThe sky eyes surveyed this burg and downloaded a city map to my inertial system,Π Mary answered RayMs unasked question. PBet I know this town better than most of the folks raised here.Π

Ray didnMt doubt that. They zipped down a street lined with small shops and warehouses. When they ran out of town, Mary did a quick zig to get them back on the beach road. Ray edged around in his seat; no lights behind. There still werenMt any when the road took a slow turn to follow higher ground through tidal marshes. PBoy, did I loseMem,Π Mary chortled.

Leaving Ray wondering which factions they had eluded and what they were up to. He shrugged off the unanswerable.

A gentle breeze came from off shore, laden with smells of salt and damp and coastal grasses. They turned north, off the road and away from the inlet that sheltered the fishing fleet and soon came to the end of the dirt track a hundred meters short of the sand dunes. Ray braced himself, protecting his back as Mary took the rig into a narrow wash, gunning the mule through soft sand. Wheels spun wildly, but kept enough traction to swing them onto the wide stretch of sand between the dunes and the distant ocean. Mary steered for the hard damp sand that the retreating tide had left. Two moons were just rising, casting sparking diamonds on the gentle sea swells from beach to horizon.

Relaxing again into the seat, Ray took several deep breaths as Mary cruised north, away from civilization as it named itself here. His mind ordered his thoughts for his call to Matt. The captain was eager to be away. There were several theories of how they might find their way home; the only proof of the pudding was going out and nibbling at it. Was Ray ready to declare his tiny downside command fit to stand on its own two feet?

Mary eased the mule to a halt, midway between waves and dune. PWeMre far enough up the coast to miss any search our trailer is doing. Besides, weMll see them coming.Π Ray nodded. PMind if I take a walk, sir,Π MaryMs eyes were fixed on the lapping waves, mesmerized by them.

PTake care. You donMt know where the drop off is out there. You canMt swim and I sure canMt come in after you.Π

PDonMt worry, sir. Space ainMt killed me in twenty years. A little bit of water ainMt gonna get me now.Π

PThatMs not a little bit.Π

PYes, sir,Π Mary got out and started a slow, pensive walk to the ocean. She wore a dress, a gift from Henrietta San Paulo, the Chair of the Great Circle of LanderMs Refuge. Made of cotton so fine and tightly woven it might as well have been silk, Mary had spun around in delight, a girl-woman in her first formal. Then sheMd lifted it far higher than their relationship on Wardhaven would have allowed to show him her sidearm. The asteroid mines had taught Mary none of the modesty and delicacy that Wardhaven inculcated in its women. Then, Rita had been WardhavenMs most instructed of debutantes . . . and gone on to skipper an attack transport. And her courtship of Ray had been far from delicate. Ray suspected few men ever understood women.

PGod, I miss you, wife.Π Sighing, Ray tapped his communit. PCommunications, Longknife here. The captain available?Π

PHeMs expecting you, sir. Wait one, please.Π

Mary had about reached the water. The dress came up and over her head to flutter down on the sand. Her body was in moon shadow; he could not tell if sheMd worn anything more. The male part of RayMs mind decided she hadnMt; it made the view more enticing. Her silhouette was trim and sleek, no bulge for a bra, panties . . . or sidearm. A glance in the front showed automatic and holster on the seat. Ray reached for it, checked the safety, then set it down beside him. Mary reached the water; she stooped to touch the lapping waves. Ray wished for about the millionth time Rita was here. Or, more correctly, he was there.

PRay, how are things?Π the captain asked.

PIMm surviving down among the natives. And you?Π

PNothingMs changed. WeMve completed the planet survey. Enough irregularities to keep the scanning team happy but nothing to raise a red flag. Some interesting electromagnetic anomalies. We sent the database down. An interesting planet.Π

PFull of interesting people,Π Ray added dryly.

PWant to tell me about them?Π

PYou know, Matt, I always thought if you marooned three hundred hard-headed, rational people on a planet, youM'd have a hard-headed, rational population when you got done.Π

PGosh, Ray, I never knew you were such a dreamer.Π

PTake the Covenanters up north, those dozen or so medium size towns that Kat couldn't figure out why they were in such a crazy pattern. Blame it on the Bible.Π

PSomebody brought that book!Π

PIt was in their database. More about that database in a minute. Anyway, during the worst of the times after landing, some folks found religion. Later, after things got better, their kids decided the rest were all going to hell and moved off to keep their Ppurity.Π

PLet me guess,Π Matt broke in. PThey couldn't agree among themselves on how to read the book, so . . .Π

PYou got it, split and split again. Most of them want to just ignore us. Hope weM'll go away. But one of them, the guy I met the first night down here, thinks weM're the anti-Christ and wants us destroyed.Π

PI guess you stay to the southside of South Continent.Π

PNot that easy. ThereM's almost eight million people here. Most Covenanters may be up the north, but they got churches in LanderM's Refuge. TheyM're not the worst problems. Refuge and New Haven split over something the original captain did early on. IM've got six different versions of what that was, and none agree. But thereM's a pro-captain and anti-captain faction to this day, and a big chunk of the antiM's moved south to New Haven about two hundred years ago. Now, if one says itM's day, the other insists itM's night. I think the pro faction is a bit more in favor of exploiting the planetM's resources, but I canM't swear to that.Π

PSounds like fun.Π

PYeah,Π Ray answered. Mary was up to her knees now, meeting each wave as it came in with a jump and happy giggle. Ray had never seen Mary as anything but the hard driving marine officer. This was a whole new side of her.

For a moment, the question flitted across his mind. *How many sides are there to the people IM'm dealing with?* HeM'd have to remember that. PThe farmers we started with are interesting. You meet a girl with flaming red hair, a diction straight out of Joyce, and a name like Nulia Anne Moira Chang. Tells you why her brogue is a bit off.Π

PChang?Π

PDonMt ask me how the Irish took over and the Chinese didnMt. Such history is oral and I donMt trust it. ThereMs even a legend that St. Patrick showing them how to plant potatoes.Π

PSounds like a nut house. Sure youMll be okay while I duck in and out of system. Once weMve got acceleration on, itMll take me a while to get down here?Π Matt had his work cut out for him, too. Speaking of.

PMatt, IMm trying to get my hands on the log of the old *Santa Maria*, but no luck yet. Refuge, New Haven, Richland, thatMs the SterlingMs mining town, Vicky owns it lock, stock and barrel, and even some of the Covenant towns had copies of the original database. But, original media only lasts so long. First and second generation local manufacturing wasnMt all that good, so the data got corrupted. ShipMs log was low priority, so it got cut to save space. Vicky claims sheMs got a complete copy, but sheMs only handing out vague samples. Wants mining equipment and technology before sheMll share the good stuff.Π

PHowMs that going over with the rest?Π

PPoorly. The Sterlings have had these people by the short hairs for two hundred years. A lot of people would like them taken down a peg.Π

PYou going to do that?Π

PIMd like to stay on everybodyMs good side.Π

PNever had much success at that myself,Π Matt chuckled.

PProbably a bit late in life for me to be trying it, too. How you coming with those survival canisters?Π

PLast two go dirtside tomorrow morning. Have you seen whatMs in them?Π

PI approved everything Andy and Elie recommended. DidnMt expect to be using them. Glad for them now.Π

PYeah. Make sure you open the right one. They sent you everything from a chip fabricator to a bomb factory.Π

PAndy wanted all the bases covered.Π

PIMm leaving you a shuttle. IMll be in system every few days. A week at the longest.Π

PIMll try not to holler wolf. Could you drop that shuttle down here tomorrow at the blimp base. Say about tenish. I donMt want to beg a ride back to my base on anyoneMs blimp.Π

PAnd itMll show these folks the power theyMre dealing with.Π

PSomething like that.

PGood by me. IMll see you when I see you. Out.Π

Ray leaned back in his seat. The moons were above Mary. The luminous waves rose and fell, casting dim light on her. Ray could see the joy on her face. He could see everything else, too. POh Rita, I miss you.Π

* * *

PYou lost them!Π Victoria Sterling shrieked. She had deigned to receive her security chief in her gilded coach and four. Grandpa Jason had include six horse embryos in his personal effects. The Landers who squirreled away survival gear among their private goods made it big here. The kids of those who brought trinkets were her servants. PThat mule has lights all over.Π Victoria very much wanted her lab to take it apart and see what made it tick.

PYes maMam,Π he said softly, trying to sooth.

Victoria would like it better if heMd grovel. *But we Santa Marians are so democratic.* She sniffed at that; some things took so long to change. PHow did your trusty spies lose them?Π

PWe expected them to go back to the Residency. WeMve checked their rooms. The bugs are active. We gave them plenty of space on the road. DidnMt want them to notice us. They took a wrong turn. By the time we got to the corner, that damn driver had turned again. We couldnMt find them. WeMll reconnect when they get back to the Residency.Π

PIf they go back? If someone hasnMt offered them something better? Unless their shuttle drops out of the sky and hauls them off to heaven knows where. I want to know where they are and what theyMre doing every moment of their day. I want to know what theyMre going to do before they know.Π

PYes, maMam.Π

PGo. Find them, or I will find someone who can.Π

PYes, maMam.Π

* * *

Ray Longknife, Humanity's ambassador to Santa Maria, Wardhaven's misplaced Minister for Science and Technology, retired colonel of infantry, devoted husband and future father, watched Mary dance naked with the luminous waves and the moonlight. He wished it was Rita. Maybe she wouldn't, with the baby coming. He sighed, then shook his head. No, Rita might be beginning to show a bit, but she'd be out there jumping and prancing with Mary just the same. That was the sprite he'd married. All work when she was working. All play otherwise.

With a final splash, Mary strode from the water. She retrieved her dress, swung it over her shoulder and backed toward the mule, eyes on the ocean. It so free. No boss telling it what to do, she whispered when she bumped into the rig.

It just goes on and on. Ray nodded.

Yes. She turned to him. Excitement was in her eyes. Probably in other places. She was his for the taking if he wanted her. And he wanted her.

He choked on the wanting, and swallowed it. Nothing facing them would be made easier by losing themselves in each other tonight. He returned her gaze, trying to reflect the happiness he felt watching her . . . and no more.

She slipped back into her dress. That was fun, she said, settling it around herself. I see you've got my sidearm back there with you.

If some big, slimy thing had slithered out of the sea to dance with you, I wanted to make it keep a gentlemanly distance.

Locals didn't say anything about sea monsters, Mary said.

Lot of things the locals ain't got around to saying.

Mary settled into the driver's seat. Sorry, sir, if my . . . uh . . .

Nothing to be sorry for, Captain. You were a joy to watch, and any worrying I did came to nothing. Tomorrow, Matt's dropping a shuttle down to us about ten. Make our trip back faster. No need to mention it to anyone. After our tail tonight, I'd rather keep our friends guessing.

The return to the Residency was uneventful; Ray was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

* * *

Ray lay on the operating table, looking up into the bright light. Waves of pain washed over him. The doctor stood above him in surgical scrubs, a shining laser scalpel in his hands. As the surgeon reached for Ray, the scalpel changed into a hoe, the medic into a grubby clad gardener. Ray screamed.

He lay on the ground, the smell of recently turned earth in his nostrils. A huge field hand wielding pruning shears grabbed him and began cutting. Dead branches fell away; fresh green ones were grafted on. Ray screamed.

And came awake, shivering and desperately in need of a trip to the bathroom. Head throbbing, whole body shaking in night chills and sweats, Ray struggled to his feet and moved as quickly as his canes permitted to the facilities. His body trembled in a pain he didn't understand. Done, he worked his way back to collapse in bed. Mary had laid out pain meds; he swallowed a pill. Better to make a second trip tonight than lay awake in the grips of this agony. Ray settled back, centering his thoughts on Rita, and a girl-child as beautiful as her mother.

* * *

Three months fieldwork had gotten Jeff Sterling used to rising with the sun. At Fairview, however, he usually slept in. With Vicky running the business, sleeping was the most exciting thing he got to do around the family estate.

This morning, Millard woke him at dawn. PMiss Sterling requires your presence at her breakfast, sir. Since Vicky had sent the downstairs butler who taught hand-to-hand combat as well as proper deportment and etiquette to the staff, Jeff tied on his robe and went. Once in the solarium, however, Jeff pointedly ignored Vicky and pattered over the breakfast bar, filling his plate slowly with eggs, brown bread and bacon. PDo we have any strawberry jam? he asked, knowing Vicky had sent the staff away for this private meeting and would have to answer herself.

PHow should I know? she snapped. PBuzz the kitchen. And be quick about it. We need to talk.

So Vicky was in one of her moods. This could be even more fun than usual. Jeff buzzed the kitchen. PThis place I was staying at, out on the front range, he rambled, Phad this really delicious strawberry jam. Do we have any?

They didn't. Orange marmalade would have to do. Very expensive stuff. The Swensons had held on to their monopoly on orange trees as tightly as the Sterlings held onto their metal claims. Vicky hated the Swenson's but loved orange marmalade.

PNow sit down, Jeffery. I want a word with you.

PYes, Victoria.Π To her face, not even Jeff called her Vicky.

PWhy didnMt you tell me about the damn space ship?Π Vicky snapped, rubbing her eyes with both fists.

TheyMd been over this before. PBecause I didnMt know about them until they landed. Besides, that village didnMt have access to the net. How could I have told you?Π

PThose cheap dirt farmers. They ought to be required to have net hook-ups. For their brats education at least.Π

PMore might, if we lowered the price on fiber cable.Π Jeff was the family advocate for lowering profit margins and making it up in volume. Christ, fiber optic was only silicon! Vicky was for all the market would bear. With dad dead and mom in a convent, Vicky was in charge.

Vicky broke off a small portion of her croissant, buttered it and munched it slowly, her gaze out the window on the distant woods. Jeff was being ignored . . . again. He ate, waiting for her next announcement.

PTheyMre hiding something.Π The PtheyΠ could only be the spacemen. For Vicky to conclude they were hiding something was no big news. Vicky always hid half her cards; she assumed everyone else did. It made for tough bargaining even when the other side was hiding nothing.

Jeff, however, was pretty sure the spacemen *were* hiding something. He would not, however, admit that to Vicky. PIdonMt know, they seem pretty up front,Π he said with his mouth full.

PDonMt speak with your mouth full,Π Vicky shot back in irritation, making JeffMs morning. PWhy wonMt they share their data files with us?Π

PChu Lyn is pretty dead set against them dumping all kinds of new tech on us. SheMs afraid of what that would do to the economy.Π Chu lead the Green Party in the Great Circle. Normally she didnMt have the votes to stop Vicky. Recent nose counts had not been Pnormal.Π

Vicky flipped her hand up, disparagingly. PLyn is afraid of her own shadow.Π Still, Vicky said nothing about forcing a vote. The rumors Jeff had picked up were right. Votes were changing. It was fun watching Vicky sweat.

PWhy are you sitting in the circles anyway? IMm senior for the metal workers.Π

Jeff had been expecting that. PIMm just sitting in on the meetings, Sis. I havenMt voted.Π Open meetings had been a golden rule since the Landers. Anyone could attend a circle, although only representatives for recognized interest groups or locals actually voted. Nobody questioned JeffMs right to sit in, both because he was a Sterling, and because he always took the

seat next to the starwoman Rodrigo. He liked the questions that raised. Was he in the star group, or the Sterlings? Only Vicky had the gumption to ask.

Vicky mulled that answer as she chewed another piece of croissant. PGood idea. I like the way youMre making up to that star woman. In her pants yet?II

Jeff had a half dozen answers to that question. First in line was none of your business. Unfortunately, Vicky saw everything with a potential value on it as her business. Jeff swallowed and fed her the line sheMd want. PMaryMs a tough woman. DoesnMt let anyone get close to her easily.II

PSmart woman. DonMt let that stop you, kid. I want to know what makes her tick. All of them. Keep working on it. You have anything else to work on?II

She knew the answer to that. As junior Sterling, Vicky made sure he had nothing to do and did nothing worth doing. PNothing on my schedule,II he answered.

PGood, stay close to her. SheMll come around. And let me know what you learn as soon as you do.II She pushed away from the table, half her breakfast untouched. PAnd donMt dawdle over breakfast. ThereMs work to do. Get yourself over to the Residency and see what theyMre up to.II

Since Vicky had bugged the Residency, as well as most other places where important things were talked about, if she didnMt know what was happening, somebody was keeping her in the dark. Jeff really liked these star people.

Jeff continued eating with slow purpose until Vicky stalked from the solarium. Only after she left did he lean back in his chair. Damn! Vicky had given him the order he would have begged for. She would never have given it to him if he asked. VickyMs distrust of everyone inevitably sent people where they didnMt want to go to do things they were poorly suited to do. Thank God the woman could be manipulated.

Jeff hustled for his room. He was curious what Ray and Mary would do today. TheyMd fulfilled the circlesM social requirements; now they were on their own. No doubt, it would be fun watching. He dressed quickly and had an electrocycle brought around to the front.

* * *

It had been a very bad night, full of shivering and sweats. Ray gulped a pain pill before starting his morning stretches. Showered and shaved, he almost felt human.

Mary met him at the stairs and went down, one step at a time. Her conversation rambled over the morningMs weather and last nightMs drive, totally ignoring that she was there to catch

him if he stumbled. He liked her nonchalant way of playing safety as much as he enjoyed her morning chatter. It reminded him of Rita before her second cup of coffee.

Their hostess, Henrietta San Paulo, Chair of the Great Circle, was already seated at the head of the table. Her daughter, a wisp of a nine-year old was missing.

Where's the White Rose? Ray asked, using the nickname Henrietta's albino daughter enjoyed.

She had headaches in the night. I hope her noise did not disturb you. The nurse could not keep her quiet.

Do all albinos have migraines? Mary asked.

Apparently, the mother concentrated on her breakfast. Rose has visited every doctor and specialist we have. They just shake their heads.

We met a child with migraines on our first day down, Ray said, not reaching for his oatmeal. A County Clair circle member also had a child like Rose. We've landed a medical team. One thing they're looking at is how to help these children.

Could you send Rose these medicines?

Without a thought, Ray nodded, then stopped himself. No, I can't promise that. Some meds require a patient be under observation while taking them. He swept his hands out, then down his broken back. I've had personal experience with our docs. I can't promise a pill Rose can take three times a day and not worry about.

San Paulo pursed her lips. If she and her nurse went with you, would that meet your requirements?

I don't doubt it. I've ordered a shuttle to pick us up around ten. There will be room for her.

Henrietta nodded slowly. I will have to discuss this with Chu. Her party can't oppose your helping a poor child. This would be a nice way to get them used to the good that will come from our involvement again with humanity.

Ray nodded, while cringing inside. Would he ever become so much of a politician that helping his child took second place to policy? On second reflection, he realized that his own policy of limited technological transition had just taken a major hit. He *was* using his tech. *But it's to help a little girl. Oh Rita, if only you were here.*

Was it an accident that Chu Lyn was announced as breakfast ended? Henrietta had the nurse bring Rose down to join her and Ray in a sitting room. Chu, a tall, dark skinned woman

with no visible evidence of her Asiatic namesake, and San Paulo chatted for half an hour before San Paulo invited Rose into her lap and told Lyn of Ray's offer.

Rose's bloodshot eyes grew wide; she said nothing but the look she gave Ray was heart rendering. Lyn talked in platitudes for several minutes, of her party's support for rational change and growth, but their long experience of mad, irrational action. Then she shrugged. Of course, no one could possibly object. Rose and her nurse left to pack. Ray excused himself.

Fifteen minutes later, a small crowd gathered on the steps of the Residency as everyone gathered for their goodbyes. While Mary and the nurse loaded suitcases, Rose went through the tortures of a nine-year-old . . . excited to ride in something new like the mule, reluctant to leave mom and the familiar.

"Would you like to talk to your mommy whenever you want?" Ray asked. The shy child nodded. Ray took off his wrist unit, made a few adjustments so it would only be a commlink and offered it to San Paulo.

"When we get back to base, I'll get Rose one. That way, you can talk to each other whenever you want."

San Paulo and Chu eyed the offered gift. "It doesn't plug into the net? It has no fiber cables?" the mother said.

"It's wireless," Ray explained.

"We know of radio technology," Chu answered. "We never redeveloped it. Our power cells are so big. If you could plug into a power line, you might as well plug into a data cable."

More local data to pass to Kat for analysis. Ray took his leave, strolling to the far side of the mule as Mary bent to help Rose and her nurse into the near side.

A young man with wild eyes and a long, shiny knife stepped from the crowd and dashed for Ray.

Mary must have seen the glint of knife. She took two quick steps back. Ray raised a cane in defense, falling against the mule. Part of him analyzed the attack. *Piss poor. Idiot's holding the knife overhand.* That would not help Ray.

"Die, you . . ." the man shouted as Mary kicked out, caught him in the gut, then spun to chop at his knife arm. The knife flew past Ray's ear to land in the mule with a clatter.

The attacker rolled away screaming.

Mary stood to her full height; her side arm materialized in her hand as her eyes did a quick look around for more attackers. Ray did the same; he saw none. By the time Ray could

spare a moment for his assailant, the guy had bolted back into the crowd; shocked bystanders made way for him. Mary started to take a shot, then raised her pistol high as the crowd closed behind her target. Ray caught a hint of the man's head as he vanished behind the Residence.

For a moment, everyone stood in shocked silence, then San Paulo and Chu descended on Ray. PAre you hurt? PWhere did he come from? PWe've never had anything like that. PNo, nothing at all. P

All Ray saw was a crowd moving closer, giving another assailant a shorter run.

Mary grabbed his elbow. POut of the car, P she ordered Rose and Nurse. PInto the front seat. P

Rose scrambled over the seat, eyes wide and locked on the knife. PWhat's your knife doing here? P

PNot now, Rose, P Mary snapped. Rose frowned, accepting the answer as a familiar one. Mary shoved Ray into the backseat just as Jeff rode up on some kind of motorcycle.

PYou, P Mary shouted. PCan you drive this mule? P

PAlways wanted to try, P Jeff grinned, taking in the scene and not sure what to make of it.

PYou're driving, P Mary shot at Jeff, and pushed Ray across the backseat to make room for her. Ray moved, using more hip motion than he had since Mary nailed him. If he had the time, he would have marveled at it. At the moment, he just scooted.

PDrive, Jeff. P Mary ordered.

Under Mary's instruction, Jeff put the mule in gear and hit the accelerator; the mule took off with a leap. Mary kept her eyes roving right, Ray covered the left. No one trailed them. PWhat was that all about? P Jeff asked.

PSomebody tried to knife me. That happen often? P

The nurse shook her head, dumbly. PNever, P Jeff said. Ray had a hard time believing that.

PWhere we going? P Jeff asked.

PThe blimp field, P Ray answered.

PBe there in no time. P Jeff assured them. However, Rose's brave front began to crack around the edges. Without lowering her vigilance, Mary got Rose chattering about the farms near their base with chickens and ducks. The promise of a donkey to ride caught Rose's young

attention and didn't let go, leaving Ray wondering where his marine officer learned so much about distracting children. He suspected it was a gal thing that he'd never master.

The news of an impending shuttle landing apparently had passed through Landers Refuge at the speed of light. As the mule approached the field, it seemed like half the city's million inhabitants were somewhere in the crowd around the port. Mary checked in with the *Second Chance*.

"Yeah, we spotted the crowd last orbit and did a check on the marked out area. It's plenty long, and we've added that runway to the lander's navigation map. Trust us, Ray, we won't fry anybody. Any problems?" Mary raised an eyebrow to Ray. He shook his head. She punched off.

Jeff caught up with the shuttle as it finished its landing roll, driving right up its open ramp. Even as they dismounted, the crew chief and load master were tying down the mule.

Jeff stood, hands shoved in his pockets. "Mind if I hitch a ride. I've had about as much of my sis as I can take for a year or ten. I'd like to get back to some field prospecting and you look like the fastest way there."

Ray glanced in Mary's direction. She studied the local as she might an asteroid that could be solid gold, but might be total dross. "No problem, sir," Mary said slowly. "He came out with us. Might as well go back with us."

As Ray and Mary settled into seats, she chewed on her lower lip. "Wonder who that knife guy was?"

"We might know if you'd let him finish what he was shouting," Ray said dryly.

"At the moment, sir, it looked like he was ready to drill you a new belly button, but next time," she assured him, "I'll let the guy finish his manifesto."

* * *

An hour later, Ray surveyed the Base from the shuttle's top step. A long swath of field had been sprayed with emulsifier, giving the lander a solid temporary runway. The same technique had created roads which were now lined with buildings. Though prefab balloons, once blown up and sprayed with epoxy, they structures were as permanent as stone. By their shapes, as much as by the signs in front, Ray could name them.

The chip fabricator was long and low. The equipment factory was wide and tall. Around them squatted housing and office buildings, including one that proudly proclaimed itself the *Santa Maria Center for Research and Delight*.

PI won the contest for naming that one,II Kat Zappa proudly crowed. She seemed to have appointed herself RayMs tour guide, meeting him at the stairs when he paused, blinking, for his eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight. One by one, she pointed them out. To the right of the manufacturing center a number of sealed containers sat where theyMd been dumped. Kat said nothing about them; she didnMt have to. RayMd been too many years in uniform not to recognize his bomb farm and weapons factory. With luck, that gear would stay packed.

PWhereMs the hospital,II he interrupted Kat. Rose was peeking shyly around the door of the lander, the only one behind Ray except for the crew.

PHi, whatMs your name?II Kat asked, hurrying to the little girlMs side, and giving Ray a chance to start down the stairs, Mary two steps ahead of him.

PRose,II came in a trembling whisper.

PIs that your bag? ItMs pretty. Do you have a kitten? I had one when I was your age. Can I carry your bag?II

Ray left Kat to prattle as he worked from one step to the next. What was it with estrogen that turned every female into a mother to every child. When his own son or daughter arrived, would he be rattling on like a twittering bird. After years of barking orders, Ray could not picture himself cooing and aching over some tiny fragment of humanity. *But, God, I want to be home with Rita to find out.*

A mule waited at the bottom of the stairs for Ray. Jeff loitered near it. As Ray stepped off from the last step, his commlink buzzed. PMatt here. You all set. II

PLooks like it. How do things look on your end?II

PCouldnMt be better. WeMre breaking orbit this trip around. See you when weMve found a way home. II

POutstanding. Ray out,II he said to JeffMs raised eyebrows. PYou hang around me long enough and youMre bound to find out something you shouldnMt. II

PI had a hunch you were holding back. Call me a suspicious bastard. It runs in my family. So, youMre as lost as we are. II

PNope. The skipper of that ship made a bad jump last year. Took them six weeks, but they came home. II

Jeff pulled thoughtfully at his eyebrow for a moment. PBut youMre not sure. II

PThere was sabotage involved in this jump. MattMs got a tougher problem this time

around.¶

PSounds like humanity hasn't changed much.¶ Jeff paused. PBut then, living on Santa Maria hasn't made us saints either. Here's my deal. You cut me in on your mineral extraction technology and I won't breathe a word about your problems to anyone until you're ready to announce it.¶ He ended grinning like a thief with a permanent pardon.

Mary slipped up silently beside him. P I could just break your neck. Tell your sister you fell down the lander's stairs in a rush to meet a nice local girl. What's her name?¶

PAh, yes. I suspect Vicky would grieve all of two seconds.¶ Jeff took a quick step back from Mary. PHowever, if it served her, she could turn my death into quite a *cause celebre*. You still haven't told me how that really neat knife ended up on the back seat.¶

PAnd what do you know about that?¶ Mary closed the distance to Jeff again. The only threat was in her closeness . . . and the death in her eyes.

Jeff didn't retreat this time. P I don't know anything more than you do. But, I have sources here you don't. I can get answers you can't. You can work with me, or you can keep playing the Lone Ranger. Do they still have stories about him?¶

PYes,¶ Ray scowled and settled himself into the back seat of the mule. PMary, I think we ought to let him live. At least for a while.¶

PIf you say so, Colonel,¶ Mary said, doubtfully.

Ray turned in his seat to face Jeff. PAs you've probably noted, until recently, I was a colonel, commanding infantry. Mary was a marine officer in our most recent war. You can take the uniform off, but old habits die hard. You strike me as a very smart businessman. Don't outsmart yourself.¶

Jeff slowly nodded as Ray spoke. The pause at the end grew long. Finally, licking his lips, Jeff said, PAll my life, I've been the baby. The kid. Vicky knew she'd inherit. Mark was out hustling before I even knew the rules of the game. He found the bauxite deposits up among the Bible thumpers and managed to get the aluminum mill going. Pissed Vicky off big time. Me, I'm the spare, the nothing, the one everybody tells what to do. You're my one chance to be something. Please, give me that chance.¶

Ray studied the man. Were his eyes actually misting up? Was this for real or just show? Ray had no idea. Surely this planet had a need for everyone. Then again, growing up in the shadow of the woman who had the whole place by the throat might be pretty hard on a kid. Maybe Jeff was desperate to get out of that shadow. Then again, maybe he'd learned enough from Victoria and just wanted his own place in the sun to do to her and others what he'd seen her do. Tough call. Ray turned to Mary. PYou need an extra hand in your mining operations?¶

PDon't look like the factories are up," she said.

PNo," Kat cut in, now down the stairs with Rose in hand. PNo mineral feed stock. Couple of marines said they'd start things up as soon as you got back."

PNice of them to wait," Mary snorted, then turned on Jeff. PYou're welcome to work for the Ours, by Damn, Mining Consortium. You may save our startup a few wrong turns. But," Mary made the word explosive as she rested a pointing finger on Jeff's chest, Pyou swindle us, we'll get you. We worked the asteroids before the war. We worked our butts off surviving that damn war. You help us, you're our buddy. You get crosswise with us and so help me, your sister won't find enough pieces of you to know you're dead. Understood."

The man returned Mary's hard stare, head nodding. PYes, Captain. I understand. Maybe better than you know. I suspect I've just met someone as desperate as me."

PWhere's the doctor?" Rose interjected. PThe sun is hurting my eyes."

Mary metamorphized from line beast to mother in the time it took her to kneel next to Rose. PThen we'll pop the top on this mule and get you some shade. Kat, where's the hospital?"

POver there," she pointed, Pbut it's not set up yet."

Ray sighed for the good old days when he gave an order and it happened. P'I'll just have to ask the doctor why."

Kat looked ready to go elsewhere, but Ray signaled her into the back seat with Rose. Mary took the driver's seat and Jeff settled into the front seat as far from her as he could and still get the door closed. Ray tried not to grin. By all rights, he ought to be ready to explode with anger. Three hot potatoes dropped in his lap. Jeff who might or might not stab him or someone else in the back over sibling rivalry. Rose and her headaches and now gear that wasn't up for some reason Kat was not eager to explain. Instead of mad, he found it funny. *Keep your sense of humor and you might survive this mess.*

The hospital was a short drive. Matt had sent down the younger of the ship's two doctors, Dr. Jerry Isaacs. Ray found him at the end of a long line of locals, apparently doing a public relations sick call.

P'I brought you another child with headaches?" Ray said by way of introduction. The next woman in line, holding a coughing seven-year-old. Still, she took two quick steps back. Ray had yet to figure out the local attitude toward the albino children. It seemed to be one part fear, another part awe.

Dr. Jerry smiled at Rose, who was suddenly so attached to Kat that surgery seemed required to separate them. Kat came forward and held Rose while Jerry did the usual medical

once over. Rose took it stoically, except for one exclamation of pain when he shined a bright light in her eyes.

PThey look healthy enough. I can't tell you more until I get my diagnostic center back.

PWhen's that? Ray asked, puzzled.

PYou'll have to ask Kat and company, the doctor growled.

PWe started using it for specimen analysis, sir. Kat eyed the floor, as if hunting for a crack to fall through.

PDoctor, you haven't started working on these children's problem?

P I've only been down two days. I will not use diagnostic gear someone just used to dissect the latest stray something these midshipmen, his nod indicated Kat, Pdragged in.

PColonel, it's really important, what we're finding out.

PMore important than helping these kids? Ray made it clear that would be hard to do.

PSir, there's something weird with the evolution on this planet. We've been chasing it the week you've been gone, sir, and we still can't figure it out. Kat ran out of words in the face of Ray's scowl.

PPlease, Colonel, Doc, we can't stop now. Come and see.

PShow me, Ray said with a scowl.