

The background of the entire page is a vibrant space scene. On the left, a large, glowing nebula in shades of orange, yellow, and white dominates the view. A bright star with a four-pointed diffraction pattern is visible in the lower right quadrant. The overall color palette is a mix of warm oranges and yellows from the nebula, and cooler blues and greys from the surrounding space.

# ENDLESS SKIES

A PENNY SAVED  
SYMPHONY OF AN ANGEL  
THROUGH ENDLESS SKIES

THREE ADVENTURE-ROMANCES BASED ON THE CLASSIC TV SERIES *LOST IN SPACE*

A PUBLICATION OF THE PENNY ROBINSON FAN CLUB

# **ENDLESS SKIES**

**A TRILOGY OF TALES**

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SYMPHONY OF AN ANGEL  
THROUGH ENDLESS SKIES**

**THREE ADVENTURE-ROMANCES BASED ON THE CLASSIC TV SERIES *LOST IN SPACE***

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Second Revised Edition

## PLANET CARAVAN

*We sail through endless skies  
Stars shine like eyes  
The black night sighs  
The moon in silver trees  
Falls down in tears*

*Light of the night  
The earth, a purple blaze  
Of sapphire haze in orbit always*

*While down below the trees  
Bathed in cool breeze  
Silver starlight breaks down the night  
And so we pass on by  
The crimson eye of great god Mars  
As we travel the universe*

Black Sabbath

*“ . . . it was about floating through the Universe with your loved one . . . ”*

--Geezer Butler  
Black Sabbath

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*Classic Lost In Space action and adventure, and much more*

## Foreword

First of all, many, many thanks to all those who have read and enjoyed these stories, and likewise to a terrific group of fans and friends at the several *Lost In Space* groups I follow on Yahoo.

The purpose of this new edition is twofold. First, to bring all three of these stories together in one binding, so to speak, and establish that this first part of the series is complete. I think my original vision saw this as one single story, more or less. However, I do think it works better broken up a little, and I did enjoy being able to vary the structure a bit. The “New Plymouth Historical Society” endnotes benefit from being able to comment on three different phases of history.

Second, I wanted to reconcile a few minor inconsistencies and contradictions which arose between the first “I was three months out of Moonbase Delta” and the final, joyful conclusion, and fiddle with a few details to make all three stories fit together a little neater with other and the real *Lost In Space*.

More stories of the Endless Skies saga will follow sometime. Careful readers may have already noticed a few loose threads sticking out, some more obvious than others. There is in fact already another short-short written and released, *Requiem*, which, sadly, brings to a definitive close the tale of Bobby and Penny.\* Following my occasional “theme” releases (*A Penny Saved* was released on Valentine’s Day and *Through Endless Skies* on Independence Day), this one was released on Halloween of 2012 (Earth Standard.) Fear not though, there will be plenty more to fill the years *before* the events of this magical tale.

I want to work a little more on my *Lost In Space Adventures* project, re-writes of some of our less-than-favorite episodes which had some very good ideas and stories behind them, but somehow got to the little screen with something lacking. Four are already written and published at the Fan Club, and I have plans for two or three more.

Finally, some more thanks – to the late, great Irwin Allen who brought us *Lost In Space*. He made a few other series, and some may argue that others were in some measurable way better, but it is *Lost In Space* which has probably the largest and most enthusiastic fan base, and is certainly the one which still excites debate and stirs the passions.

Thanks too to the cast and crew of *Lost In Space* for giving us this unique gem of a show. Despite talk, despite attempts, it will never be truly repeated, never “rebooted,” and never will be replaced in our hearts. And above all, of course, thanks to Angela Cartwright, who gave us Penny Robinson as no other actress ever could: as we say at the Fan Club, a wonderful TV character and a beautiful actress. We salute you . . .

\**Or does it . . . ?*

## **Book 1**

# **A Penny Saved**

*“Two people could know each other for fifty years and never fall in love.  
If fifty years isn't enough, why should one day be too little?”*



## Part 1

### The Impossible Planet

I was three months out of Moonbase Delta on a Rescue Survey mission. It wasn't strictly routine. Lots of stories like to start off some extraordinary tale by telling you, "It was all strictly routine," to play up the dramatic contrast later. Rubbish. In space, nothing is "strictly routine." Very little is expectable or predictable.

Probably the closest thing to "strictly routine" are the 48-hour lunar ferry turnarounds. Atlas Skyhook into low orbit, boost to Hi-O for escape, then blast on all jets. 48 hours, dock to dock: concrete apron in the Utah deserts to Heinlein Spaceport at Moonbase Bravo. 12 hours Moonside, then a rocket-sled liftoff from Heinlein and back to Glenn Memorial, gliding in unpowered, just like the old shuttles. Twice a month. Each ferry.

Ferry captain is what they assign you when you can't handle space any more.

Migration Coordinator at Moonbase Bravo is what they assign you when you can't handle ferry captain.

Yep, Bravo is a funny place. Half a dozen Migration Coordinators, all at the end of their careers, damn near the end of their lives, processing hundreds of human beings, mostly families, getting them going on the greatest adventure of theirs: the Offworld Colonization Project.

It's stunning, the pace of human progress. My great-grandmother, who I remember, God rest her, would tell people how she was alive to see the Wright Brothers first take to the skies – and 60 years later, saw men walk on the moon. My father was a small boy when he sat next to her, watched that moonwalk, and heard for the first time those legendary words, "Tranquility Base here, the *Eagle* has landed." Now he's a grandfather himself, and is seeing not only regularly scheduled Lunar travel, but the colonization of distant worlds.

Man oh man, the hyperdrive changed everything. Within one year, planets whose existence and nature had been largely hypothetical, derived from equivocal telescope data, were being photographed, telemetered, and mapped from orbit by drones. At 18 months, video of a dozen worlds had been returned, and at two years, astronauts were walking on worlds where our own Sun was nothing but a fourth magnitude star. Colonies were planned, and by the end of the third year, a dozen small ships had set forth for a handful of worlds. Two or three ships, each carrying one or two families, would set out for a designated world. There were a few tragedies – but I'm getting ahead of myself. I just wanted to make sure any younger folks out there reading this understood that things were very different, not that long ago.

So back to the present. One thing that science still hasn't been able to do is this: say you're heading to a planet ten light years from Earth. Once you're in hyperdrive, that's a trip of no more than a week or so, maybe a little more if you hit a tesseract up there – well never mind that bit, I don't understand 6th dimensional topography too well. Hey, who does, except a half-dozen theoretical mathematicians?

Where was I going with that? Oh yeah. It's two or three weeks in h-drive, but if you wanted to actually beam a broadcast back to Earth once you got there, it's *still* going to take 10 years, because your e-spectrum waves are stuck in 3-space and limited to lightspeed. So why bother?

Well, you don't. You record what you want to send, stick it in a drone, press the button, and off it goes, through h-space. Not bad, but you still don't have the virtually instantaneous communication you do anywhere on and around Earth. Isn't that weird? You can live in New York, and watch the news live from Moscow or the Moonbases as it happens, chat with buddies anywhere on Earth or the Moon, all through the Nets, but there's still almost a week delay communicating between Earth and Proxima 4, which is barely 4 light years out! So forget about anything like a phone call to your cousin there, right?



So here's the real problem, if you weren't paying attention in school that day: what if your ship loses power and falls out of h-space somewhere between Earth and the Hayseed Nebula? Or if you crash on some barely habitable world, with your water and atmosphere leaking, no way to get spaceborne again? Sure, if you're lucky, you'll have a Mayday drone ready to go, with all the nav history safely stowed away in it, and there's a better than 99% chance it'll make its way back to Moonbase Delta, where they'll launch a rescue mission. Just hope your O2 lasts 'til then. Alternatively, hope that there's a ship close by that'll pick up your radio distress call in time to do something about it.

See why it would be so nice to actually *broadcast* through h-space? Believe me, space is a dangerous place, and moving distress calls in something like real time would save more lives than I care to think about – which I don't, and which is probably why I have nightmares about them instead.

Oh, that's where I come into all this, by the way. I'm a Rescue Survey Scout. Since emergency radio signals won't get where they need to be in time, I go to them.

Here's how it works. Start on Earth. Pick one of our colonies. Draw a line. Get in your ship, and boost through h-space for a couple hours. Drop out of h-space into 3-space. Wait. How long? Depends. Sometimes your mission parameters will specify, sometimes it will be on your own initiative. A few hours to a few days. Depends on what kind of traffic has been through lately, if any ships are overdue, that kind of thing. Not just colony ships, of course. Regular survey and cargo ships too.

Of course a ship actually reported missing – that's different, that gets the whole rescue fleet strung out in a line light years long, all at once. And that's what the Rescue Survey is. Probably the least glamorous job in all of space, but we make the rest of it possible.

But the usual drill is pretty dull, as you can imagine. Lots of waiting. There's movies and TV shows and music filed away in memory chips, more than a man could watch or hear in a lifetime, to help fill the hours.

I usually try to find something more constructive to do, while waiting for the Emergency Radio Transceiver (ERT – 1173A) to start flashing red and shrieking at me. Oh, which it does, often enough. Like I said, space is a dangerous place, and this isn't some job of busywork, cooked up to placate some Groundhog's political interests. I save lives every hitch, and I'm proud of what I do. But yeah, I do need something to fill the empty stretches. If there's a system within easy reach, I'll take a swing by and run a quick scan, map it out, make sure it isn't a system that got overlooked somehow, and most importantly, if it has any Type 3 planets.

Also to scan for any alien activity. Oh yeah, I know that's something you don't hear about too often, not these days. With three thousand colonists heading out into the Deep Cold Dark, talk of other critters out there makes people nervous. No, we haven't had that legendary big "First Contact" yet. If someone has, it's something he hasn't shared with the rest of us. But we know they're there.

Our ships leave a distinctive trace on the scanners, and since my job is looking for damaged ones, I've got some of the best scanners in existence. I can see the traces of where one of our ships sailed through 6 months before. In 3-space, I mean. Tracking through h-space is still science fiction, along with h-space broadcast. So when I see traces of ships going through places where I know there's no human presence . . . and those traces are so wildly different from the signatures our ships leave behind . . . well, like I say, it's one of those things everybody knows, but nobody talks about. At least not until the bartender is starting to hint about "Last Call" and suggesting that you bunch mighta had enough.

Maybe I should start saying all that's what I *used* to do.

Before *I* crashed.

Crashed into a legend.

Imagine a Coast Guard ship on Earth finding the wreckage of the legendary ghost ship *Flying Dutchman* washed up on the rocks. Or a police helicopter investigating a downed aircraft, and finding one of those antique Avengers that supposedly disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle. That's sort of what it was like for me, that one day, two years ago.

My hitch started in the middle of October, around the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup>. My assignment was to patrol out to Alpha Centauri, pull a couple jigs and jogs on a 60 light-year track towards Theta Cent, then take a 10 light year perpendicular due north, turn left at Albuquerque, and cruise high straight back to Delta.

I shoulda turned left at Albuquerque.

I never got that far.

I finished the first leg without incident, not a whisper on the radio, not a glimmer on the scanners. My instructions didn't call for any stops along that second leg, the 10 light year northward haul. As far as Earth was concerned, it was empty space – a handful of lonely stars, no known planets, certainly no colonies, no reason for any Earth ship to go that way. Just at the top of it was another newly discovered system with a promising planet. A few drones had been by, and even an atmosphere glider, but no manned craft. It was being assessed for colony potential, and we were keeping an eye on it for some of that stuff that didn't officially exist, what was referred to discreetly as “anomalous spacefaring activity.”

Well, I finished my scan through Theta, and plotted out that northward jog. I didn't really care for long jumps. It's nearly impossible to describe what it's like outside the ship when you're in h-space, but I tell you this, it makes my skin crawl, and a couple poor sods have come back with their sanity near shot. I keep the video monitors turned off and the real viewports dogged shut as much as I can. But you *still* know what's out there, and by God, it makes my nerves jangle. After a few days in h-space, I start thinking it works both ways – that what's *out there* knows that I'm *in here*. But that's just crazy talk. Right?

No wonder they stick outbound colonists in suspended animation, in those freezing tubes.

Anyway, that's why I scheduled a few stops in 3-space along that leg, to just drift and listen to the silent radio, and look at a nice normal skyscape, instead of something looking like Salvador Dali illustrations of an H.P. Lovecraft story. It was my third stop I found it: a small, unremarkable star, where the charts said no stars should be at all.

Usually the computers do a good job slotting your re-entry into 3-space. Very rarely you'll find yourself a little closer than you'd like to the target you've been aiming for. You wouldn't think that was likely, considering how much of space is just empty space. Naturally though, a space trip is going somewhere with stars and planets: you're a lot more likely to have a too-close encounter of the unpleasant kind than if you were to just drop randomly into 3-space. Statistically, *randomly* dropping in dangerously close to a major body is next to impossible.

The next to impossible had just happened.

Well, I say small and unremarkable now, but lemme tell ya, they ain't *no* star that looks small and unremarkable when you suddenly find yourself hurtling at it at about a quarter lightspeed with your nav computer perkily telling you you've got 137.5 seconds until impact, Shall I alter to a new safe course, Captain? Y/N

So about 5 minutes later, after I knew I was going to live and my body wasn't going to eject any more fluids, I took a closer look at the situation. First things first, I set a routine survey orbit at Second Relative Standard. If you haven't had that class yet, that means at about the distance of Venus from the Sun, but proportionally to the mass of the star: about where a planet would naturally ride. Only in a polar orbit, relative to the plane of the system. Supposed to give you a better view of the neighborhood. Not sure that's so, but who am I to argue?

I kicked up the throttles to a cautious speed and started all the scanners, including my eyes. And it wasn't long before I got hits. There were two very small rocky planets, like twin Mercurys, in the first two orbits, right about where you'd expect them, First and Second Standard. The nav computer thought about it for a second or two, and assured me there would be no danger of a collision with Second Standard for at least 576 years. I let that worry slip by.

After a while, the computer showed me some corrected long-term orbital calculations. The first thing I noticed was that the collision hazard had been pushed back to nearly 2000 years; the second thing was why. The orbits of these two little rocks were highly eccentric. Nearly impossible, in fact. I was starting to do some mental arithmetic to ballpark the mass of the second major body necessary to give that result, and the figures that were starting to ring up made me chilly. A second star in this system, that size, would be clearly visible to the unaided eye. Unless it had gone dark. A neutron star? Or –God forbid– a black hole?

I set the scanners to sweep further out, shut down the lights, and turned in. It had been an eventful day.

The next day was uneventful, but towards the end of the third, I hit the jackpot. A third planet, at eighty-two or eighty-three per cent Earth sized. Significantly denser though: looked like gravity was ninety-five per cent Earth normal. But again – the orbit! Whatever was out beyond the epicenter approached the fantastic. I checked the nav log: sure enough, the computer had already needed to compensate for it to maintain my orbit.

I dozed awhile – every so often I got sloppy and utterly disregarded the terrestrial 24 hour time frame. You're not supposed to, out here by yourself, you know. They're afraid you'll turn into some sort of inhuman monster. They may have something, there. I usually can't take more than a week or so of freetimeing it before reverting to strict shipboard discipline: up at 0700, meals at 0800, 1230, and 1800, taps at 2200.

Anyway, by the time I woke next, the computer had enough data to plot an orbit for this third planet. I looked at the raw figures first, then told the computer to give it to me graphically. My jaw dropped. The planet's orbit was an even more radical ellipse than the two small inner worlds. Its orbit took it almost as close in to this star as the innermost planet, then swung out as far as Mars from Sol! It seemed to be on the outward leg of its orbit –that was the only way I could think of it– and was past the second planet's mean distance, but not as far as Earth's would be. It was probably a pleasant season there right now, I thought, and turned my thoughts to more important considerations.

I instructed the computer to leave initial survey orbit and head for the third planet, but not before swinging in to take a close look at the two small ones. As expected, they were barren – no significant atmosphere, no discernible water, no life. A lot of iron and carbon though. Definite mining potential on the second one; it wasn't that close at its perihelion to be fatal. These would get called in for the regular Planetary Survey boys.

I punched one last command and made for the third planet. It would be about a week before getting close enough for observation and orbit, so I settled in. (No h-drive within a system, of course.) I scanned the radio – always high priority. Then I started writing up the preliminary report. One copy would go out in a drone and be back home a long time before I was. Another would go out the old-fashioned way –directional broadcast– and wouldn't be picked up by Moonbase Delta until I was a very old man, or dead. But it's the one surefire way to get news home, and that's why we still have it. I sat down with the computer, and started browsing some history for inspiration on what to name these new worlds, and their sun.

Days passed, and the fat blob of light soon grew into a world in my viewports. The day was somewhat fast, about 19 Earth-normal hours. Muted blue shouted to me of oceans, and brownish greens argued plant life. Thin, stingy, white clouds asserted beyond doubt atmosphere and water vapor. Probably habitable. Slight inclination of the poles; there would be little seasonal change due to that. But that orbit! How could anything live there? There was at least plant life, I was certain. At perihelion, it seemed that everything would go up in smoke, then freeze at aphelion. Could life really have evolved in such conditions? Or . . . perhaps it had been engineered for this world. What would you call “terraforming,” if it wasn’t being done by terrestrials?

In the back of my mind, I began rehearsing the standing orders regarding “First Contact.”

In the front, I checked my distance to orbit. At about a million kilometers out –a little more than twice as far as the Moon from Earth– I started a radar sweep. An initial look showed two smallish moons, both natural. Artificial satellites were my bigger worry. Closer in, I would worry about smaller debris that might make things difficult for an orbit.

My distance continued to close, and I began planning an orbit. I was now at about half Earth-Moon distance. This was close enough that I had started making some direct observations by telescope.

I didn’t need the ’scope, though, to see that there was indeed water – not one, but two vast inland seas. One sea was long and narrow, and ran almost due East and West, rather like the Mediterranean on Earth. It was perhaps 3000 kilometers at its greatest breadth, and varied from about 500 to 1000 north to south. The bulk of it was just south of the equator, in the middle of rocky desert. It was fringed with green though, and in a few places the green extended away in ribbons: rivers . . . or canals? And did this argue that this was a freshwater sea, like the Great Lakes? If so, this had high potential as a colony world. The other sea was larger, and set well into the southern hemisphere, somewhat further than south than Australia is on Earth, and about as large in proportion: perhaps an average of 4000 kilometers across. It was more uniformly round, except for one arm or bay which stretched what I guessed to be a thousand kilometers to the southeast. It was decorated like the other with green fringing, and those enigmatic ribbons of green. Aside from these fringes, a few isolated oases a few hundred kilometers in breadth and a handful of smaller ones, this world was the brown rock and sand of a desert.

I boosted into a solar-synchronous orbit right above the dawn terminator, where I could observe the daylit surface and also watch the night-side for the telltale sign of an industrial civilization, artificial lighting. My traffic scanners were busy now, too. They certainly seemed to be taking in a lot of data, but that meant nothing. Data included traces left by meteors, ion storms, solar flares, cosmic radiation, pulsar bursts, and a dozen other bits of the random noise generated naturally in space. They would absorb data for a few hours, then spend as long sorting it all out and figuring out what, if anything, was the skidmarks of a spaceship.

Almost three complete rotations of the planet passed under my observations. I noted some powerful lightning activity, and even the glimmer of starlight reflecting off the seas. Nothing like the lights of a city or town. Once, I thought I saw a metallic glimmer shine feebly in the northern hemisphere of the daylight side, near a small oasis, but I dismissed it.

Then, without warning, the unbelievable.

*The radio crackled a signal!*

It wasn't static. I know, oh so very well, the static and chirps and squawks and squeals of sunspots and planetary magnetic fields and cosmic storms and background radiation and a hundred other types of electromagnetic radiation drifting in from the stars. This was a voice! More precisely, it was two voices: first one, then another in response. Together they only lasted about two seconds, and they were badly broken up, but the greatest shock, beyond hearing them at all, was this: *they were in English!* I couldn't distinguish much, the signal was distorted. But I was sure I heard the words "ship," and "water," and "might."

I jumped to the radio and hit the mike: "This is Rescue Survey Scout *Thundercloud* calling unknown station, do you read?" three times over. (I probably should mention – for some obscure reason, Rescue Survey ships are named for meteorological phenomena – *Thundercloud*, *Lightning*, *Hurricane*, etc.) In theory, the signal I picked up could have come from just about anywhere in the human universe, and be twenty years old or more. But in orbit around a planet? Too big a coincidence.

Also, the signal was distorted, but it wasn't attenuated. Sounded like some heavy sunspot-static, maybe. It was a mess, but it was a *close* mess. I would have bet any amount of cash I was hearing people *right down there*.

I remembered that metallic glint I had earlier dismissed. Was it a ship? A distress marker? There was no data showing any ships lost in this part of space, or even launched into this sector!

The video replay didn't show that glint, but it showed the oasis all right, and I was sure the glint had been just to the east of it. I plotted out a rolling recon track. First, I had to start moving and drop into a lower orbit, then get some motion relative to the surface. I wanted a sedate west-to-east ground track which would take me over the oasis but give me lots of time for visual observation and radio sweep. I settled in at about 200 kilometers above the surface, just about as low as I dared.

At that moment, it occurred to me that I should check those traffic scanners, and see if they could tell me anything about how recently this ship might have crashed – if indeed, that's what it was.

I looked over, and saw the scanners flashing a message on the screen. They had something to tell me, all right. I hit the button to put the results up on the monitor. They started an agonizingly slow process – first painting the planet, sketching in topography, atmosphere profiles, then, finally, the first long, faint trajectory line of a spacecraft. Then another. And another . . .

My jaw was ready to drop again when alarm sirens started screaming.

The ship shuddered, and I was in blackness, absolute, silent blackness. That meant one thing – complete failure of all systems. In space, that was usually the portent of a cold, lingering death. In orbit above a planet, it could mean a death just a little bit quicker and a little bit hotter, depending on how thick an atmosphere you had to burn in to, but death nonetheless.

Maybe it's because I've had a fear of the dark since I was a kid, but I always keep flashlights handy. My uniform jumpsuit always had a skinny little one in the breast pocket, and believe me, I had as many of those flashlights as jumpsuits. In addition, I kept full-size ones handy in my cabin, at the nav desk on the flight deck, and in the engine compartment. Sometimes to while away the hours, I'd close my eyes and wander around, finding them by touch.

First things first. I turned on the flashlight, glanced around the flight deck. Nothing obviously wrong, no fire, no smoke, no hull breach. No aliens. I hardly needed the light to figure that out. I glanced out the viewport. A corner of my brain was screaming at me, that what I had been thinking of moments before as "orbital altitude" was now "How far you are about to fall."

I've never been too good with heights, either.

Foolishly, I turned my light on the display which ordinarily showed altitude; naturally it was nothing but blank, dead, LEDs. Suddenly I wished I'd been closer to my parents than I had for the last few years, but was somehow glad I wasn't.

Training kicked in. One of the many gadgets crammed against the starboard bulkhead of the flight deck is the circuit breaker panel. I yanked it open. To my surprise, I saw that all the breakers were tripped, as if a massive electrical surge had overwhelmed them. That was actually good news. It meant –I hoped– that they had cut out as designed, protecting the circuits and equipment from damage. One by one, I reset them, one hand ready to grab the fire extinguisher.

It must have been only seconds, but it seemed like eternities – then, without a doubt, the flight deck was coming back to life! First I heard the battery relays clicking, then the hum of the control computer booting up, then various gauges and switches started flickering to life, all in orderly sequence. Finally, the overhead lights came back on.

That was all encouraging, but I still had no engines, and I was in a quickly decaying orbit. The altimeter, still recovering from shutdown, flickered through rows of numbers before settling on 195 km over the ground. Even as I watched, it dropped to 190.

Rescue scouts are small. Behind the flight deck is a short, narrow passageway. Stick your head out and look left, two feet away is my cabin. Look right, two feet away is the galley. Look down. By your own two feet is the hatchway to the engine compartment.

I pulled up the hatch and dropped down into the engines. This was a space more than five times as big as the rest of the ship. It was still dark here, but I had my flashlights and my wits. There were a few more breaker panels down here than on the flight deck. Over here, the control booth. First breaker box. This brought up basic battery service – the lights, and controls for more important things. That worked. Lights came up, relays hummed. I found the second breaker box, and my heart sank. Unlike the first two, these breakers were not tripped. Nothing they fed was working. I slapped the breakers off and on anyway. Above my head, I threw the two big switches back and forth which should have kicked in the photon jets. Nothing. My high-voltage power system was smoked. I began to feel sick.

I twisted about, pulled myself to an inspection port. Inside a lead cylinder is the radioactive grit that feeds the reaction engines. It's barely possible to get a little bit of a burn going manually, enough to get you way from a planet, but only with fuel actually feeding into the containment vessels. What I saw through the port looked like a block of cement instead of coarse sand. Whatever had hit me not only scorched my electrical system, but also fused my fuel into a radioactive pillar. I wondered how close it had come to triggering a hard reaction.

No fuel, no power, no engines. I was running on batteries, and falling toward a planet.

There are specific emergency procedures to follow in situations like this. Step one was to yank the lever that flooded the area around the fuel cylinder with a quick-hardening foam. This would protect it from damage when it hit dirt, and would also absorb radiation if the cylinder sustained damage after all. Step two was to jettison that damn engine compartment. Foam or not, you don't want a hard landing with a ton of radioactive sand twenty feet behind you.

Back up on the flight deck, I strapped in to the command chair, entered a series of keystroke commands and passwords. I got the final, "Are you sure you want to jettison your engineering module? This action cannot be undone. Y/N"

"YES!!!" I screamed, stabbing my finger at the "Y" on the screen. I pushed my head back against the cushions, and felt a couple of dozen explosive bolts do their work, shattering structural members. Then one big "*whoomp!*", and the command module rocked wildly as the dead engines hurtled away. Already I was reading a tracking signal from it to aid recovery; in a few minutes it would deploy a parachute to help it to the ground, looking like the first manned spaceships coming back to splash in the ocean.

I was already in atmosphere, at 50 kilometers up. It probably wasn't the best time to attempt a maneuver I've never attempted before, even if all you are doing is telling your nav computer what to do and letting it do the hard work of calculating vectors and flying. But I didn't want to lose that glint I had seen! Quickly bringing up my terrain map, I put my finger right on the oasis, and drew a spiral outward from it. A couple quick tick marks on the screen designated that spiral as a gradually descending flight path. I convinced the computer that's really what I wanted, and hit the button to begin execution at 10 km altitude.

I checked all my gauges: altitude, attitude, groundspeed, airspeed, level flight. Now or never. This is the riskiest bit, deploying your para-wings. Your instructors always warn you that if your airspeed is too high, or there's too much wind shear, or any of a number of things, they may rip off when deployed, and leave you to just fall out of the sky like a rock. They tell us, "It's never happened yet, but you don't want to be the first."

I unscrewed the big red lid, pulled the big red handle. The remnant of my ship jumped up and hit me in the back. The wings had deployed. Suddenly, the frenzied rush of air which I had hardly noticed silenced to a soft whooshing. I felt the wings bite into the air and take lift. Above, I could hear the servomechanisms pushing and pulling at the control surfaces; the deck rocked lightly under me as the computer tested the relays. I realized too that I was feeling gravity for the first time in a long while – my artificial gravity generator had failed a week into this hitch. I glanced at the control display – 12 km, 11, 10: the ship slewed wildly to the left as the computer started my descent path.

Then – of course! I grabbed the radio. I'd spent so much time *listening* for distress calls, I nearly forget to make my own.

"MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY!" That ancient cry still lives, and is still revered as near-sacred throughout the human universe. "This is Rescue Survey Scout *Thundercloud* calling any station. I am in distress and making an emergency landing on unknown planet below. I am descending in controlled but unpowered flight toward what I believe to be an oasis about halfway between your Equator and North Pole, and about one-third of your longitude into the daylight side. MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY!" I heard an ambiguous growl that might have been a voice, or just more static.

I jabbed at the buttons of the traffic scanners, and told it to print out the reports in real paper hard-copy. In case the ship was badly damaged landing, I would want them intact for reference.

There were another couple bumps from above, as the para-wings shifted. It seemed to me the soft sigh of air against the hull was starting to sound like wind again. I checked gauges. I seemed to be keeping my flight path pretty well, but my airspeed was climbing. 100 k.p.h. Again I felt sick, and tried not to think of myself and the ship falling out of the sky, tumbling to this remote, God-forsaken parody of Earth, wings broken like Icarus . . . 105 k.p.h.

Servos whirred as the computer tried to control the para-wings, but two different warning screens were telling me that my desired course was impossible to maintain, and that I was losing both lift and maneuverability.

"MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY! Does anyone read? Does anyone read? I hope you have some decent emergency gear down there, because I think I'm in trouble. Going off the air now. Hope to see you soon – like in about three minutes!"

I detached from the pilot's couch and stood up. Gravity buckled my knees. I punched the button that launched my Mayday drone back to Delta. I grabbed those scanner printouts, stuffed them in a pocket, zipped it shut, and retreated to my cabin.

I stretched out on my bunk, hit a switch. A section of the wall unfolded, turned, spun, clicked into rails, and began descending on me like the lid of a coffin. If it did its job, that's exactly what it would not be. For those final, "Uh-oh." moments, the bunk turned into a hard-shelled outside, soft-as-cotton foam inside, protective shell. This would allegedly save your life even if dropped straight down from 2 kilometers.

I was 5 kilometers up, soaring straight, steep and fast. I was going to hit hard, but I wouldn't burn in. I closed my eyes in my dark cocoon. I didn't have one of those "life flashing before you" moments, just a very discouraged, "Bobby, this is gonna hurt." My next recollections were a bit disjointed.

## **Part 2**

### **The Flying Dutchman**

It was a bad landing.

I opened my eyes into the darkness. I ached, badly, everywhere. Experimentally, I moved my toes, feet, legs. Then fingers, hands, arms. I double-checked, wiggling each individual finger. I wriggled my torso and neck. Everything hurt, but there were no sharp stabs of agony. I assumed nothing was broken.

Then I began to think. At first, I couldn't figure out where I was, or why. I knew *who* I was, all right, though. I was a hotshot rocket jockey. My name was Bobby Cain. Eventually it crossed my mind that if I was a rocket jockey, I might be in a rocket. But there was no sound. I was pretty sure rockets were noisy. I seemed to recall lots of noise. *Lots* of noise. And it was all black. Space was black, but it had stars in it. I couldn't see any stars, I couldn't see *anything!*

Oh my God, I was thirsty! It seemed like it must have been years since I had anything to drink. I wanted a drink of water so bad. I was hungry, too, and wanted food. Food, there was none here. There's food in my spaceship, and water too. But where's my spaceship? It's not in here. If it's not in here, maybe it's . . . *out there!*

That was the thought that finally cut through the fog, the idea that I was trapped inside something. In a flood, I remembered the series of accidents. I found the button that opened up my shell, pressed it, and my eyes ached at sudden daylight. Daylight? I looked squintingly above. Half of my cabin was open to the sky. My nostrils ached too, at the acrid sting of smoke, smoke fed by electrical wires and other tokens of high technology.

I pulled myself off what was again just my bunk, and stood shakily. Between the pain and the gravity, I was not coping well.

I remembered my most desperate needs, and stepped down the passageway to the galley. I found an empty bottle, held it to a fixture, and it filled with water. I drank greedily, giddily. I couldn't remember being so thirsty, or water tasting so good. Then I found some food packets, nasty, hard bricks of space rations. I choked one down, chased it with another splash of water. I'm surprised it stayed down.

I'm still not certain how long I was unconscious or delirious in the bunk-shell. I'm guessing at least a day. It may have been a week. It felt like years. I think I would have died of dehydration if it had been more than a week. It was hot, stiflingly hot . . .



It took me an hour of stumbling around the wreckage of my command module to put the rest of the pieces together. Half my hull got stripped away on impact, but the flimsy para-wings were undamaged. Seems a wise man might find some lesson in that, damned if I can. A quick outside inspection showed a twisted cable running to the control surfaces. Something that could have been fixed in a minute with a wrench – *if* a man could have gotten to it. Another lesson?

A minor fire had burned part of the main control console. Bits of plastic were still smoldering down inside the circuitry, and wisps of oily, noxious smoke were still puffing out. At least the fire suppression had worked.

I flipped a handful of switches – the radio first. There was nothing. Broken, or just dead batteries? It didn't matter, I suppose. Even if it wasn't broken, I had no way to charge up the batteries.

By cobbling together some crude navigational tools, I decided I had landed about 50 kilometers south of my target, probably 10 kilometers east or west. I was still only assuming that it was an oasis, with fresh water to drink and possibly food to eat. On an alien world, it could be anything.

I was pinning a world of hopes on a greenish blotch seen from space, a momentary glint which may have been imaginary, and a garbled voice heard on the radio. One thought spurred me to action – I might be very wrong in some of my assumptions, or all of them. I might get to exactly the place I want to, even find the people behind those voices, and I might still die. But if I just sit here, I most certainly will die. It's time to go.

I gathered up bottles for water. On a tiny ship like a Rescue Scout, there's only a reserve of about 50 liters, and it's all recycled, over and over. (Another of those things you try not to think about too much.) Some of it gets wasted, inevitably. Most of it stays in the reprocessing system, down in the engineering module. There was only about 10 liters in the galley's potable tanks. I'd already drunk about one. I figured if I could carry 5 liters, I'd be OK. If worse came to worse, I could come back here for the rest. After that . . . well . . .

I salvaged antiseptic wet-wipes and bandages out of the First Aid kit, also some burn jelly. Sunscreen, which I applied at once: I had spaceman's pallor and would broil red out there without it. It was both hotter and brighter than I had imagined. A jack-knife, blocks of space rations. I made sure of those scanner sheets of course, and struck out north. Oh yes, all my small flashlights. Water bottles hung around my neck like a bizarre necklace as I headed out.

It was a grueling two days. I didn't dare travel by night, as I didn't want to fall over cliffs or miss seeing water. Also, there was no telling what creatures might haunt the dark. I slept at night, but I didn't sleep easy. I didn't see any living thing during the day, which I found reassuring.

I woke the third day with the sun higher in the sky than I liked. Sleep had been fitful, and the night, as desert nights can be, had been cold. Now, it was midmorning, and already uncomfortably warm. I had two half-liter water bottles still full, and commenced slogging up a sandy ridge, maybe twenty meters high. It was tedious work: the sand was powdery, and I slipped back almost as much as I progressed up. I managed best crawling on all fours. About five meters from the crest, I flopped down, heaving from fatigue, heat, thirst, and breathing that brown dust. I looked up at the last five meters, and stood, precariously. Then I took those last water bottles and hurled them over the crest of the ridge. I made a last push, charged the crest, and stood upon it in triumph.

The first thing I did was spot the bottles. The second thing was to take advantage of the elevation and scout the terrain. I jumped in triumph and shouted feebly, recklessly spending my strength.

I had found the oasis.

I still wasn't certain that this alien oasis bore water, and not some other fluid peculiar to life here. I gathered up my two bottles and staggered toward the greenery. I would at least have shade and coolness.

The oasis was about 50 meters across, with a spring-fed pond in the middle of it, about 10 meters across. It was, I learned later, indeed water, water as pure as anything found on Earth. I did not know that then. It certainly smelled of water, and the plants growing about seemed Earth-normal. That is, there was nothing about them that screamed “Look at me, I’m an alien plant!” They were perhaps a bit large, but no more so than the effusive growth of Earthly jungles.

I was bold enough to test the pond with my finger; it wasn’t just cool, but nearly ice-cold! I decided I would have my first drink of the day then – half a bottle. I would then put the bottles in the pond to chill, have a brief nap, then drink some more, and start looking for the other spaceship – I was long decided that the glitter I had seen just had to be another crashed ship. I drank, I napped, I drank again – and how good that chilled water tasted!

I don’t know if I was reckless or confident, but I left that last full bottle cooling in the pond. I set a somewhat arbitrary two hour limit to explore eastward. If I found nothing, I would return to the oasis, rest, and explore westward. If that failed . . . again, that got into places I didn’t choose to worry about just yet.

I struck out east. East and a bit north, as most of the terrain was flat enough to see for a very long way out – obviously empty. This way though, was rugged and rocky, where any number of things might hide. As I walked, I reassured myself that it was indeed human voices I had heard, speaking English, and not alien grunts, howls, and wheezes which my hopeful mind turned into familiar words. Seems I’ve heard there’s a word for when you see faces in the clouds, I wonder if there’s a word for hearing voices out of random noise?

I stopped abruptly. I had been walking for only about a half an hour.

Man is a catalyst. He changes things around him. Even when you don’t see people, you can see the changes they’ve made. I don’t mean the obvious things, like a wall or a fence or a house. I mean the land itself. There are places on Earth where you can get in a car and drive for hours and hours through wild countryside – then you go around a curve, and something is *different*. The trees along the roadside look more orderly. The birds flock more warily, or sit in the orderly trees and watch you more intently. Some of the *wildness* is gone. Then you drive around the next corner, and sure enough, there’s a little country village.

It was like that. I still saw no life, not even plants. But the sand underfoot, the very rocks, suddenly seemed *different*. As if the man-high boulders were standing sentry, or the sand was trying very hard to be a manicured lawn. The place was changed, that way. I was more cautious, proceeding on tiptoe, sneaking behind the rock pillars, taking a few steps and listening.

Finally, I heard a voice – no, two. No, more than two! I was still too distant to make out any words, but some of my fears melted off as I was convinced these were human voices. I crept through a crevice made by a pair of standing stones – the voices grew more distinct. There was one which seemed synthetic, possibly a robotic or computerized voice. I heard a bit more distinctly then, and I was certain that I was hearing English!

I poked my head through a crevasse, which let out onto a bit of a rise, so that I could look down on the scene below. A half dozen people, of both sexes and various ages, milled about what was almost a courtyard in front of a derelict spaceship. I studied the people first. They wore similar clothing, possibly intended as uniforms. There were two male/female couples, probably husband and wife. Two slightly younger ones as well. A boy of about 14 or 15 years faced my way. The other, facing away from me, I assumed a girl by the long hair and figure.

I drew back, before I was noticed. There was no sign of the source of the mechanical voice, but I thought I had glimpsed movement inside the ship. The ship! What a ship! It was a veritable antique! “Quaint” was one word which popped into my mind. I peered cautiously up over the rise again, and studied the ship. There was certainly at least one more figure moving about inside.

I looked long at its lines, and something about it seemed familiar. I realized I was only seeing about half of it, as the lower half appeared to be dug into the ground. I assumed a certain symmetry of design, and imagined the look of the whole ship. It was, as I say, quaint: a popular, but short-lived design, round, almost in imitation of the early Space Age's mythical "flying saucers." This must have been one of them. Stranded here . . . ?

Suddenly, *I knew that ship*. I had seen her dozens of times, in pictures and drawings, in books and old newspapers. I had studied her blueprints in Academy. An old photo of her hung in my cabin. Now she was in front of me, in objective reality. I could just puzzle out a few letters of her name stenciled by the main hatchway, by way of confirmation. "Oh my God," I whispered. She seemed to be intact, something I would not have expected.

I then directed my attention to one of the men. He was tall, with black hair. Wishing for binoculars, I studied his profile. But I was sure I knew him. He was famous, tragically famous, he and his expedition. I knew the rest of them, too.

Quietly I extracted myself from my observation perch, descended, and found a path that led the way into the campsite. How do you introduce yourself to the Flying Dutchman? I walked in slowly, with self-assurance and as much military bearing as I retained from the Academy. My heart was pounding.

I approached the man I knew was in command. I held my hands out, palms up, fingers spread. He –and the rest– eyed me warily. None seemed overly surprised by my appearance. Perhaps they had indeed heard my distress call?

As I drew close, my years of obscure reading dredged up the recollection of an equally unlikely meeting in an equally unlikely place. I stuck my hand out to shake his, and said, "Dr. Robinson, I presume?"

His eyes glinted with amusement. "I don't suppose your name is Stanley?"

"I'm afraid not, Dr. Robinson. Ensign Bobby Cain, Rescue Survey Scout."

"So. Earth remembers us?"

"Remembers you? Sir, you are far too modest. You're heroes, practically saints! There's a memorial to you, about a kilometer down from the old Alpha Control site, that's practically an international shrine! Finding you here is like . . . it's like . . . I don't know, finding Atlantis and Amelia Earhart and the *Titanic* all rolled up in one!"

He laughed at that, sincerely, heartily, and easily, with his head thrown back. Commander John Robinson, the legend! I was positively giddy. Because deep down, this was something I had long imagined. Well, it's hard to imagine anyone in space who doesn't sometimes think about discovering the fate of the *Jupiter 2*.

"Bobby, I'll introduce you around, though by the sound of it I suppose you know most everyone already. My wife, Maureen –"

"Delighted to meet you, Mrs. Robinson," I said, taking her hand gently.

"Delighted you're here!" she replied, chuckling.

"This is our pilot, Major Donald West –"

"An honor to meet you, Major." He was a spare man, wiry, slightly shorter than Robinson. Instinctively, I gave him my "Icebreaker" handshake, which he returned with nothing held back. A crooked grin split his face, and his eyes twinkled.

"Just call me Don," he said.

"His fiancée, who is also my daughter Judy."

I took her hand politely. "Delighted," I repeated.

"Likewise," she whispered, her voice as willowy and wispy as her appearance. There seemed to be just a shade of amusement in her voice as she said, "I hope you enjoy your stay here."

“My son, Will.”

A red-headed boy looked at me with frank curiosity. He lacked the overt sullenness of the typical teenage boy, but there was something disquieting about his detached appraisal of me, as if he was accustomed to staring down foes. It was like looking into the eyes of a living lie detector, and I was glad I had nothing to hide from him. I shook hands with him politely, and tossed off a perfunctory, “Great to meet you.”

Robinson continued. “There actually is someone else here you may not know, I’ll scare him up later. Oh, and my youngest daughter, Penny; for Heaven’s sake Penny, turn around.”

I realized that all through these brief introductions, this girl had managed to keep her back turned to me. Was she really that shy, or was I imagining it?

She turned slowly, head down, then just as slowly, looked up and into my eyes. “How do you do?” she said, offering her hand. “I’m very glad to meet you.” A hint of smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

I couldn’t speak. I didn’t dare. My heart was pounding in my throat, and I was afraid if I opened my mouth, it would start jumping in and out like in the old cartoons. Oh yes, I knew Penny.

Finally I swallowed my heart down, and whispered, “Penny . . .”

She was beautiful, more than I had dared imagine. Long hair, black as a raven’s wings, and big wide eyes to match. She was still holding out one hand carelessly. I took it gingerly, then clasped it between both of mine.

“Penny . . .” I whispered again. “I’m . . . so very glad to meet you,” I said, recovering my composure. I could feel her father’s eyes on me, like lasers charging up.

“Excuse me,” I said to no-one in particular. “Went a little light-headed there for a moment. Must be the weather.” That drew a few polite chuckles, and Penny broke into a real smile at that. My heart started pounding again.

“Well, anyway, Dr. Robinson, er, Commander –”

“Please, call me John. We’re long past most formalities here.”

“Thank you –John– Did you receive my distress call?”

“When was that?”

“Well . . . I’m not quite sure. I heard, or imagined I heard, some of your ground radio traffic. I crashed, and spent a few days pretty much knocked out. More than a couple days ago, not more than a week, probably.”

“No. We didn’t. But we got hit with an electromagnetic storm five days ago. That blanked out all radio communication, and fits with your story.”

“Electromagnetic storm?”

“Yes, they’re a feature of this wonderful system. A couple of times a year, one plows through, knocks out our communication, sometimes burns out our equipment.”

“Sounds like what wrecked me.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Any idea what causes them?”

“They come from the edge of the system, not the sun, where you might expect. I have a hypothesis there’s a neutron star out there with a very slow rotation, invisible to our ground equipment, and the two or three times a year we get the storm is when it’s facing its eruptive face at us.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “A gravity well like that would also explain this planet’s extremely eccentric orbit. Do you know about that?”

“Yes, I had calculated that just before the crash. There are two minor planets closer in to the sun, with similar orbits. I had been thinking of a neutron star out there at the rim myself, that or a black hole. Now, I’m just a rocket jockey, not a real scientist. But we both came up with the same notion. We may have something there.”

He looked off at the horizon, thoughtfully. “We may!” he exclaimed, turning and grinning at me. “But it’s time for dinner. I expect you’re hungry for some real food!”

I was hungry for any food. “Ravenous!” I agreed. “But afterwards, I’d like to show you something I salvaged from the wreck. I’m not sure how important it is, but frankly, it blew my mind when I saw it. I think you’ll be interested.”

“Fine. But dinner first. We try to keep to the standards of civilization here, even in this wilderness, this . . . our exile.” He paused. “It may sound old-fashioned, but I think it helps us keep our sanity. And keeps us human.”

I nodded. Same reason I kept clock time aboard ship. Usually.

Dinner was a simple affair, eaten outside, like a picnic. A lot of vegetables, freshly grown. A bit of synthetic meat. Coffee. Penny sat next to me, whether by design or chance I wasn’t sure. Once our hands brushed lightly together as we both reached for a serving dish – design or chance?

Conversation at table was restrained and polite – not tense, just channeled into common pleasantries any family might discuss: the day’s activities, the weather, plans for tomorrow.

As we rose, Major West asked, “Where’s Smith? It’s not like him to miss dinner.” That drew my attention. Who, or what, was “Smith”? It might have been a skunk living in the basement, the way he spat the name. Just then a strange figure appeared in the hatchway, entirely unfamiliar to me. Was this Smith? Was he another survivor from another crash? It was possible . . .

The figure stood stock still for a moment. Cunning eyes of ice measured me. The sharp face exuded loathing for my very presence. That was all, as I say, in a moment. Then he donned a mask, an oily smile cracking his mouth, eyes alight with fabricated warmth. “Well well well, I thought I heard something about a visitor.

“Why didn’t someone wake me before?” he demanded of no-one in particular, “So I could greet our distinguished visitor properly?” He studied me again. “What a curious uniform. ‘Rescue Survey Scout Service.’ That sounds delightfully encouraging! My fine young man, have you come to rescue us from this all-too-sordid globe?”

“Tough luck, Smith,” interjected West. “He crashed here and is stuck just like you and me, now.”

A scowl crossed this unpleasant man’s face, and rather than disappointment, I saw anger in his eyes. “‘Rescue Service’ indeed!” he growled. “It seems we are the ones who have rescued you. Just wait until I have apprised your superior officers of this dreadful dereliction of duty!”

It was past time I spoke up for myself. “Now look, Mr. Smith, I’m sorrier than you can imagine that I’ve got myself here with no way to get us all out. I’m a competent flight officer, but even the best can’t work miracles with an engine room full of –”

Smith glowered at me in fury. His face was red and puffed, and he looked like a tea-kettle about to explode. “You will address me as *Doctor* Smith, you blathering buffoon!” he erupted, and stalked back in to the ship.

I stared at his departing back, my jaw hanging open. It was getting a lot of that lately, I thought. I turned to face the rest of the company. All were in various aspects of quiet mirth, heads lolling back, hands to mouths, stifling laughter. “*Who* in the name of John Glenn was that, and where in the seven heavens did you ever pick him up? Some hitch-hiker?”

“Welcome to the family, Bobby!” piped Maureen. “That’s just his way of saying ‘Pleased to meet you’!”

Will and Penny stood nearby. “That’s Dr. Smith,” said Will, unnecessarily. “He’s not a hitch-hiker. He’s a stowaway.”

“*And he’s the reason we’re here,*” stated Penny, her voice brittle. “He snuck on board just before launch. His extra mass threw us of course, and . . . here we’ve been since.”

“Why in the world did he sneak on board?” I wondered. “Did he really want to go to Alpha Centauri that badly?”

“He wanted to kill us!” exploded Penny. “He meant to sabotage us, and get picked up in space by someone while we were in the freezing tubes or something – he’s never completely explained himself, you know.” Penny looked down and away from me, but I saw fury in her eyes. Little wonder, I thought.

“He tried to *kill you?*” I asked incredulously. “And you’ve let him *live?* And live *with you?*” At this rate, I was going to need a special sling for my jaw.

“That wasn’t *my* call!” spat West.

“If we had done anything like that, it would have made us as bad as he is,” responded John Robinson calmly. “If mankind is going to be a civilized race – if we are going to establish a civilized colony – something better than we’ve had at home – we have to understand that.”

West looked sheepish. “I didn’t say I disagreed, John. Or that I didn’t understand. Just that Smith ought to be mighty glad I didn’t get my hands on him while you were still frozen!”

I had the impression this was a frequent, almost ritualistic, exchange between the two men. I had to admit, my mind was more of the Major’s. I looked at Robinson wonderingly. In all likelihood, I would have spaced a rat like Smith without hesitation. Yet . . . that was the easy way out. It took incredible courage to do the right thing, when the right thing was also the hardest thing in the universe. At that moment, I knew this: if I were to be stranded on this distant, hostile world, I could ask for no better leader or friend than John Robinson.

Meanwhile, darkness was approaching, and there was something I wanted to show him.

Penny was still standing there, waiting for an opportune moment to step back in to the conversation. “You know, Bobby, we’ve been stuck here for a long time, but at least we we’ve all been together. Major West didn’t have any close family, that’s one reason he was picked for this mission. I’ve been thinking how terrible it would be for someone to be lost out here like this and . . . have family and friends at home that you might never see again.” She gazed carelessly at a spot of ground off to her left.

I smiled softly, and let the moment hang in the air. “I guess it would be terrible. I guess it’s a good thing I don’t, huh?”

Penny released what sounded like a sigh of relief. Her father, I noticed, had taken three steps closer to us. “Penny,” I said. “There’s something I really need to talk to your father about, right now. But tomorrow . . . maybe tomorrow you could show me around the camp and . . . and . . .” My voice trailed off.

“Of course, I’d love to!” she breathed. “If Daddy doesn’t mind, of course.”

There was a moment of awkward silence. “No. No, of course not, darling. Now run along into the ship and help your mother with chores.”

Penny smiled gleefully, and scurried up the ramp into the ship with a giggle. I glanced after her, briefly. How old was she now? She had to be 19. The last photos of her on Earth were taken just before the *Jupiter 2* lifted, when she was 12 . . . depending on her birthday, yes, she’d be 19 or 20 now.

“Nice kid,” I said weakly.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts, and sat down again at the table. Lights came on in the dusk. I pulled the problematical scanner reports from my uniform pocket.

“I don’t know if you’ve seen this kind of scan before, sir. It’s new, but simple to interpret. It’s what it implies that has me fascinated.” I spread the sheet out on the table. It showed the planet with a number of arcs sketched in.

“I’d say it looks like landing and takeoff trajectories,” he said, slightly puzzled.

“Exactly. But what you may not appreciate – OK, let me back up a bit here. Have you ever seen any evidence of . . . aliens . . . here?”

Robinson guffawed. “Seen evidence? They should leave us alone! Our Robot’s got more photos of them tucked away in his data banks than you could look at in a week of rainy Sundays! Great Scott, for a while there, it seemed like we had aliens dropping in on us every week!”

My mind reeled. First Contact had come and gone long ago, hadn’t it? So much for *that* protocol. I turned back to the sheets. “Well, what you see here are the tracks of two distinct spacecraft, approaching, landing, then taking off again. Two. Both alien signatures. And different from each other, as well: two different technologies, presumably two different civilizations. What’s significant isn’t that they’re alien: we’re seeing more of that recently, even if we haven’t had the direct contact you’ve had. What’s significant is the frequency.

“Now, generally speaking, planetary traffic is one of two kinds. First is singletons. You know – a ship lands for repairs or stores, takes off again. Or maybe crashes, in which case you see only the single approach trajectory. Flukes, in other words.

“Or, you have an inhabited, spacefaring world like Earth, and the tracks around the planet look like lights wound around a Christmas tree. It’s an all-or-nothing-but-one game.

“Do you see what I’m getting at, sir? For there to be two separate landings here within a few months of each other, *and* by two different civilizations – statistically, it’s off the charts, impossible. Then, your own confirmation of frequent landings in the past. Your own presence here, for that matter. Mine. It just don’t, as they say, add up.”

Robinson frowned thoughtfully for a long time. “Once is an accident. A hundred is a civilization. But two is . . . what? That what you’re driving at? What’s going on here?”

“Exactly, sir. There’s obviously not a spacefaring civilization here. I have a couple of notions – I wouldn’t go so far as to call them theories. First – this planet is some sort of vortex. Something like the Bermuda Triangle back home, only for real. But things don’t vanish. Things –ships– crash, or get pulled in somehow. Some make it out again, some don’t. It may be related to those electromagnetic storms.

“Alternatively, maybe there is something extremely favorable about this location in space. You know, there’s an old joke about a not-so-wise man standing on a hill looking down at London, and he exclaims how wonderful it was for the Good Lord to have put the Thames River right there, where it would be so useful to such a great city! It’s the other way around of course. If you look at a map of all Earth’s major cities, you can look at the rivers and the terrain and topography, and you’ll realize, ‘Why of course, it’s a perfect place for a city. How could a city *not* have grown up here?’ Sure, you could probably find the right conditions in places where no cities did grow. But you look at the ones that *are* there, you find rivers, or seaports, or both, and something else about the geography that somehow makes it a natural crossroads.”

Robinson nodded quietly. I think he understood where this was going.

“Out here, we’ve barely started. We don’t understand a billionth of what there is to understand, maybe we *can’t* understand it. We don’t know what kind of creatures we’ll meet out here. At least on Earth, you knew the people on the other side of the mountain would be people!

“But suppose there is something about the location of this system, of this planet, that makes it a natural crossroads like that, for reasons we can’t even guess at! Maybe something to do with its hyperspace juxtaposition. Can you imagine what that would do for the civilization that possesses it? A colony here could be an economic powerhouse, like Rome or Carthage, at the crossroads of every trade route in the galaxy. It would guarantee the security and prosperity of the human race for – maybe not forever, but for the imaginable future.”

A cloud hovered on Robinson’s brow. “Mankind isn’t necessarily the best species to be responsible for a place like that, Bobby.”

“Maybe not,” I conceded. “Have you met any better?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Look, sir, I know we have a lot in our history books we aren’t too proud of, but look at what we can boast of! We’re not perfect, but we’re not bad,” I chuckled. “For starters, we’ve learned that we’re not as destructive as we thought, and Earth is a lot more resilient.”

“So you think this planet could be the cornerstone of an Earth-based space empire?”

I almost laughed aloud. “No! No, not at all. Just – a civilization. No empires.”

“Mm. Too bad. I was just wondering how ‘Emperor John the First’ might sound.” He glanced at me sideways, and laughed again.

“Didn’t really think that was your style, sir,” I grinned. I had a few other ideas stirring in my mind, but I wanted to sleep on them. “I think I’d like to turn in, John, if you don’t mind. I’ve had a rough week.”

“Hmm. There’s one spare cabin, but it’s been turned into storage. If you don’t mind roughing it a bit tonight, I’ll see it gets fixed up for you tomorrow. I’m . . . assuming you’ll be with us for a while.”

“I assume so, sir.” Assumed, and hoped and hoped . . .

“Come on inside the ship.” He led me to the lower deck. “Robot!” he called. A vintage Environmental Control Robot rolled over from somewhere. “Robot, this is Ensign Bobby Cain. He’s a stranded ship’s officer, and he’ll be staying with us for a . . . he’ll be staying with us.”

The robot’s right claw extended in my direction. I jumped back warily.

“It’s OK, Bobby, he’s highly domesticated from original specs. He just wants to shake hands.”

“Oh. Of course.” I put out my own hand, and grasped the plastimetal hook. It was not cold, as I expected, but almost body-temperature warm.

“I am pleased to meet you, Ensign Cain. I am at your service.”

“Call me Bobby.”

“‘Bobby,’ affectionate diminutive of ‘Robert.’ Thank you for the privilege of addressing you so familiarly, Bobby. My sensors tell me you are a very nice person.”

“Oh . . . not at all. Uh, what do I call you?”

“A mechanical construct does not need a name. I have always been addressed simply as ‘Robot.’ You may continue doing that if you choose. It would please me if you did. My dear friends the Robinsons call me ‘Robot,’ therefore there is nothing you can call me which I would like better.”

“Fine then, ‘Robot’ it is.”

John spoke. “Robot, get Bobby a sleeping bag. He can sleep in the launch couch tonight, and tomorrow we’ll clean up the spare cabin for him.” He pushed a button, and a standard pilot’s recliner slid out from under a console of buttons and lights. “Hope you don’t mind, Bobby. That’s the couch Smith stowed away in when we lifted.”

I looked at it, and felt my skin crawl. “Got any disinfectant?”

It wasn’t bad in the sleeping bag, much better than the sand of the previous two nights. *This* night, as I dozed off, I had the company of black-mirror eyes, a little-girl giggle on a young woman’s lips, and long hair, black as raven’s wings . . .



### Part 3 The Silver Angel

Morning started early. Even at that, I know they let me sleep late. The sun was just above the horizon as I stepped out into the compound in front of the ship, but already the table was set for breakfast, and the comforting smell of coffee pervaded the chill air.

“Sit over here, Bobby,” called Maureen. She indicated a chair near the cooker, where the pot of coffee burred away and pancakes were browning. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

“I have it, Mother,” cooed a voice. Penny appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and poured two cups of coffee. She sat by me and handed me one of the cups. Maureen watched her performance discreetly, gave me a meaningful glance directly into my eyes, and allowed a slight smile to show at the corner of her mouth. I gulped. I had the feeling I was being set up – but that was hardly necessary! I was having breakfast with Penny Robinson, the tragic darling of so many young boys’ romantic imaginations . . .

“Would you like syrup for your pancakes, Bobby?” she asked, handing me a small glass pitcher. “It’s made from a native berry, it’s not synthetic.”

“Thank you!” I replied. Slightly sweet, it had a taste like nutty blueberry; it complemented the pancakes nicely. Soon, all but Dr. Smith were eating. Will gobbled down a stack, and ran off inside the ship. John Robinson sat across from me, and though he ate heartily, I knew his attention was on me, not pancakes.

I sensed rather than saw Maureen standing behind me and giving her husband one of those “looks,” the way married couples do. John looked up and around awkwardly. Finally he picked up the coffee pot. He held it in his hand a moment, and stared at it, as if expecting it to start speaking to him. His mouth worked up and down a couple times. Abruptly, he said, “Why don’t you two finish this up?” and poured the last bit of coffee into Penny’s cup and mine.

“Penny, I’ll help your mother clean up this morning. Why don’t you take our guest for a walk around the perimeter? Get him acquainted with the area, the defensive systems, and the rest of the gear. The gardens too. This is a difficult and dangerous place, and he needs to know how to help with things.”

My heart jumped, and beside me, Penny seemed about to dance. She was biting her lip to keep a grin hidden. Behind me, Maureen exhaled a pleased sigh. Don and Judy had judiciously wandered to the edge of the clearing during this; now, the wiry pilot darted a glance my way and winked at me discreetly. I stood up quickly enough to skip behind Penny, pull her chair out for her, then take her hand as she stood.

She gazed directly into my eyes, and favored me with a broad, open smile. “Why, thank you! No-one has done that for me since . . . since I was a child, I suppose.”

“The Academy still teaches us to be officers *and* gentlemen,” I replied. Oh no. That sounded ridiculously contrived. “I mean, I like trying to be nice.” That sounded worse. “I mean –” I shut up. Penny was eying me with amusement, and I felt my face getting hot. “Just trying to help,” I mumbled, at length.

“Robot!” John Robinson called. The electronic man rolled down the hatchway ramp, and stood patiently. “Robot, Bobby and Penny are going to inspect the perimeter and some of the facilities. You are to accompany them and make sure they’re safe.”

A chaperone. Fair enough, I thought. *I’d* have a hard time trusting me right about now.

“Affirmative,” klaxoned the Robot.

“Hey Bobby, do something for me while you’re making the rounds,” called Don West.

“Sure, anything.”

He beckoned me aside. “Up on the north edge of the perimeter, I’ve got some seismographic equipment rigged up, now listen.” He draped an arm congenially around my shoulder, and dropped his voice confidentially. “Now listen. I’m glad you’re here, for Penny’s sake, I think we all are, even John, hard as that may be to swallow. I really, truly, mean that. And I really, truly hope something great happens with the two of you.

“But know this now – any one of us, including me, *especially* me, would just as gladly break your arms, or your neck, on her say-so. I hope you understand what I mean.”

“Ahh–” A pathetic squeak emerged from my mouth. I swallowed hard, and found my voice. “I understand, Major. I’ll mind my manners, promise.”

“I told ya before, call me Don.” He spoke up normally, grinning. His arm dropped from my shoulder and he took my hand to grip. “Thanks for watching out for that, Bobby. Enjoy your stroll.”

Penny and I set off through the discouraging dust. Our feet kicked it up, every stray breeze stirred up more. It hung in the air like stale fog, I could feel it in my throat.

The Robot rolled along, 2 meters behind. We passed a garden of hydroponic trays bearing leafy greens and vegetables, then a few pieces of equipment. I recognized a force field generator, solar chargers, a weather station. Another garden just a couple meters square, dug into the dusty soil, bearing only flowers and ornamental growth.

“Do you understand this?” Penny asked, gesturing at the flowers.

I looked down. “It’s . . . flowers?”

“It’s a statement. It’s defiance. It’s us telling this planet that we’re not just a bunch of clever animals surviving. That we’re civilized people, and can afford to spend time on this garden, just for the beauty and pleasure of it.”

“Like having proper meals at the table, like your father said. Not just squatting around a campfire when you get hungry.”

Penny smiled and nodded. “More than that, even. Eating, we need to do that. We don’t need flowers. Flowers are strictly a luxury. What more?”

I thought. “It’s a real garden. Not hydroponic.”

She almost laughed aloud. “Very good! If Daddy had even bothered with flowers, he would have done it ’ponic. But this is Mother’s and Judy’s and mine. It’s like we’re telling this planet, ‘As much as you’ve tried to beat us down, this piece of you belongs to us. Here in this garden, *we’ve* beaten *you.*’ ”

I looked down at the gritty, unforgiving ground. I’d never appreciated flowers so much before, nor the quiet, stubborn, triumphalism of the human female.

We walked on.

I gazed off toward the green of the oasis to the west. “I left a bottle of water chilling in the pond over there,” I mused.

“Would you like to go get it?” Penny asked.

“Oh no, not now. It’s not terribly important.”

“Is . . . is that what it looks like on Earth?”

“What?”

“The oasis. All green like that. We’ve got the pictures and videos of Earth, but I can hardly remember what it was really like. I imagine that’s what home is like, over there. I’ll go over there sometimes, and look around, and pretend that I’m really back –” Her voice stopped abruptly, and I heard her gasp. Her face was turned away, but I didn’t need to see it to know she was crying, and crying hard.

“Sometimes I want to go home so much I could scream,” she whispered. “Other times I want to scream because I’m afraid I’ve forgotten what home was.”

She leaned against a stone pylon, her whole body shaking with sobs. I wondered how often she was allowed this luxury of grief, if at all. The sand at her feet was wet with her tears. Even as I looked, this merciless, parched world sucked them in, and it was like they had never been.

“Robot!” I called.

“Yes, Bobby?”

“I have an emergency assignment for you.” I swept my arm across a random slice of the horizon. “I have reason to believe there may be hostile alien activity approaching from that sector within the next ten minutes. Proceed three meters in that direction, then direct all your sensors in that direction, and in that direction alone, for the next ten minutes. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Bobby. Scan for aliens in the northwest quadrant exclusively, for the next ten minutes, and pay no attention to anything else.” In a lower voice, it murmured, “Mrs. Robinson *said* I could expect this.”

As the Robot wheeled away, I turned back to Penny. She was still leaning against the rocks. I put my hands on her shoulders, and turned her around. Even this early in the day, the brown dust mottled her face, except where tears had streaked through it. A couple still trickled down.

“Please don’t tell,” she whimpered. “I’m supposed to be stronger than this. I’m supposed to be a brave pioneer woman. But I’m not! I’m just a castaway on a miserable desert planet. That’s all any of us are, we’re not courageous pioneers at all, we’re stuck here, we’re just stuck! And we *can’t get away!*”

“Penny, I –” There are times for words, there are times when words are inadequate. This was one of those times. I put my hand to Penny’s dust-soiled face, tipped it up to look into her eyes. Dear God, I thought, she’s ashamed to be crying. I pulled her face next to mine, and pressed my lips to hers. I slipped my arms around her, and pulled her close. In return, her arms quickly wrapped around me.

Our lips worked together feverishly. I was sure she had never been kissed before, not like this. Who would have? Who could have? Truth be told, I had hardly done so either. You don’t meet lots of girls in space.

After some unmeasured time, we broke apart. She stared at me, stunned. For a moment, I thought she was going to slap me. Then she pulled me even tighter, and buried her face in my shoulder. “Bobby, thank God you’re here. Don’t leave me. Please don’t leave me.”

“If I ever get the chance to go anywhere, I’ll take you with me, I promise.” Her fists pounded once into my sides; accompanied by a petulant, almost childish cry. “That’s – not exactly what you meant, is it?”

She shook her head a couple times, rubbing her eyes against my shoulder. I felt her fingernails clutching at me, hanging on.

“Penny, I have to tell –”

“Ten minutes have passed and my sensors do not detect any alien activity. Shall I continue scanning?” boomed the Robot.

Terrific timing, you tinplate troublemaker. “No. No thank you, Robot. I don’t think there’s any more need for that. Well done, just stunning.”

“Affirmative.”

I was about to confess something to Penny, but the Robot had kind of killed the moment. I changed topics. “Penny, you were talking about the oasis, and Earth.”

“Oh, yes. Here, let’s sit down.” She brushed a flat spot into the sand with her foot, and we sat. She leaned up against me, and our arms locked together. Her hand clutched mine hungrily, our fingers restlessly twining.

“You see, Penny, a lot of Earth isn’t all that different from this world. A lot of Earth is desert, too. Bleaker desert than this, even. Umm . . . the oceans are bigger, but the water in them is salt water, so you can’t drink it. There’s a lot of forests and trees and green like that oasis, but most people don’t live in forests, they live in cities, millions of people all stacked one on top of the other, and not as much green in a city as that oasis.” I was exaggerating only slightly.

“You remember all that, don’t you? What I’m trying to say is that you shouldn’t imagine Earth to be something it isn’t, just because this place stinks. There’s a lot to be said for keeping a good attitude and making the best of a bad situation. You know the old saying, When life gives you –”

I stopped as she spun her head toward me. Her eyes were black fire, her lips an angry snarl. “Stop it! Just stop it! Now you sound like Daddy! ‘You’re a sturdy little pioneer girl, Penny! Be strong for Daddy, be brave for Mommy! Make us proud, darling!’ You – you – you’re just like the rest of them, after all!” Despite this outburst, her hand never let go of mine, and now she pulled toward me, once again burying her face into the crook of my neck. Hot droplets trickled down my back.

It was time for desperate measures. It was time for Truth. I wouldn’t let the Robot interrupt this time. I made her to sit upright, again put my hand to her cheek, turned her face to mine, to look into my eyes. My heart was pounding so that my whole body shook. “Penny, I think I’m hopelessly in love with you.”

She stopped breathing for a moment. Even the interminable background whirring of the Robot’s gears and circuits stopped, silent. “How can you?” she asked, warily. “You never even knew I *existed* until yesterday. That’s crazy talk.”

“Penny, I was in Academy when you and your family lifted. I was smart and tough and eighteen years old, and laughing at the little boys who called you their ‘angel in the silver spacesuit.’ Two years later I was in space, and the *Jupiter 2* was listed as missing and presumed lost, in space. There were standing orders for all ships everywhere, not just Rescue Survey, to keep perpetual lookout for any sign of the expedition. As the years went by, those orders became more of a symbolic memorial. Most of Earth thought you were dead and gone.

“Some of us thought you might still be alive out here, but all of us thought of the fame we’d win by being the one to discover the fate of the *Jupiter 2* and the Robinsons. Every so often, on ground leave, I’d hear young boys still whispering about their angel in silver, and I’d laugh at them, because they didn’t understand that you were most likely dead, and even if not, you certainly weren’t twelve any more. (“I was almost *thirteen* when we lifted.”) And – sometime after that – in space – I’d look at the calendar, and think, how strange, Penny would be 16 years old by now – or 17 – or 18 – not the skinny kid in the pictures, but a beautiful young woman.

“I took those orders to watch for you very seriously. And in spite of myself, I fell in love with the angel in the silver spacesuit, too – not the child in the pictures, but the young woman in my heart: in my heart, but lost and lonely, somewhere out there in the Deep Cold Dark.”

A tense and breathless few moments passed.

“Even if that’s all true, so what? *I* only met *you* yesterday. I hope you don’t think that just because I let you kiss me, it means I’m in love with you.”

“Penny, time has nothing to do with it. Two people could know each other for fifty years and never fall in love. If fifty years isn’t enough, why should one day be too little?”

She opened her mouth to utter a retort, but only an inarticulate gasp emerged. She glared furiously at me, her beautiful face a hard mask. Her right hand still clutched my left, and her fingernails stabbed my palm. Her left arm swung in like a slow-motion roundhouse punch, landed its gentle blow just below my right shoulder. She pulled herself in close to me again, shifted so she sat within my outstretched legs. Her lips pursed softly, and closing the last small gap between us, pressed them to mine, kissing me again, for a very long time. “Why does your crazy talk make so much sense, Bobby?” she whispered.

We kissed more, and more passionately.

“Scanning for aliens in northwest quadrant!” boomed the Robot, rolling away. It whistled a tuneless melody.

“Bobby? Is it really me you love, or the silver angel of your dreams?”

I responded wordlessly, holding her tight. My fingers twirled in her raven hair.

“Well, if you’re certain. You know, Bobby, when a girl tells you never to leave her, it doesn’t mean she just wants to go sightseeing with you.” Penny sighed contentedly. “I suppose I love you too.” She released that girlish giggle again, snuggled her cheek in to my shoulder for a long time. “We have to get back to the ship,” she crooned wistfully. “Really. Before we love each other a little too much.”

I knew she was right. Reluctantly we stood up, shook off the dust from our clothes, and headed back. “Come on, Robot, you can stop watching for the aliens now,” I said.

“Affirmative.”

I stopped as we passed the flower garden. “Hang on a sec, Penny.” I searched my pockets, came up with the packet of antiseptic wet-wipes. I pulled one out to mop up her tear-streaked cheeks. “Can’t have your family thinking I’m such an awful date I had you in tears.”

“I’m OK now, really. I should be apologizing to you for breaking down like that.”

“Nonsense. I’ve always heard girls need a good cry every once in a while. Glad I gave you the opportunity.”

“Is my face clean? I hate that dust. Here – can I have another of those? They feel so nice and cool.” I took another wet-wipe and dabbed away at her whole face. “Mm, so nice . . . and so nice to be spoiled like this. I can’t remember . . .

“Bobby – what do we tell them? About . . . us?”

“Why tell them anything? I’m sure they’ll figure it out. After all, they didn’t really send us out there to read the seismograph, did they?”

She smiled again, and actually blushed!

“Here now, careful with that! Your folks are going to think more happened out there than ever did! And I don’t need your Dad burning me with lasers!”

“Serve him right if he did worry a little. He really needs to start thinking about more than just us surviving here. We can’t just stay like this.”

“Oddly enough, that’s exactly what I wanted to talk to him about myself. Hey, what’s this? Is this safe?” I pointed to a small flower resembling a tiger lily, orange with muted yellow striping.

“Well, it’s not poisonous or parasitic or anything, if that’s what you mean.”

“Is it OK if I pick it?”

“I suppose Mother would forgive it, since it’s you. It’s my favorite colors, too.”

I picked the blossom, about two inches across, keeping a good length of stem on it. I twisted it into Penny’s hair above her left ear.

“Doesn’t that mean something like we’re engaged? I once read that Earth people had a whole language just with flowers, like that.”

I laughed. “I just did it because I thought it was pretty. Anything else you want to think . . . I won’t argue.”

I touched her cheek softly, but noticed how she had just referred to “Earth people” as if they were some strange, foreign tribe. I prayed she wasn’t already becoming something other than human herself. Then I decided I didn’t care. Whatever she was, whatever she might become: I loved *her*.

Penny leaned against me, and held on. “I think I could stand it here now. With you here, I mean. Tell me the truth, now, the really really truth. Is this place as much like Earth as you said, or were you just trying to make me feel better? It didn’t work, you know, so you may as well level with me.”

I thought carefully back to my words. “Yes. Yes it is. In some ways. Well, the cities really do have more trees and gardens than I said. There’s a park in New York that’s bigger than –oh– it would take twice as long to walk from end of it to the other as it would for us to walk over there, to our oasis.”

Penny stared. “So much green . . .”

“And there are ponds where you can paddle boats up and down for hours and hours, and hear birds singing and squirrels chattering in the trees, and people playing baseball . . .” I stopped. I was about to let go with the waterworks myself. “You remember birds and squirrels, right?” She nodded hesitantly.

“But around the park, all around the park, are buildings as tall as those mountains over there, and they’re all filled with people, and most of them don’t even really like being there. And if you climbed to the top of one of those buildings, and looked as far you could, all you would see are more of those buildings, but you couldn’t, because all you can see is the next building. That’s fifteen million people, all crammed into New York, and all having to share that one park. There’s other places, too, of course,” I added hastily. “They’re not all that bad.”

“Fifteen million? I don’t think I can even imagine that many people. And that’s just one city.” She stared across the bleak terrain at the patch of green. “I guess maybe this world isn’t so bad, after all.”

Suddenly, she laughed aloud, and it was like silver bells. “I bet that park in New York doesn’t even have a magic spring!”

“A what?”

She was staring vacantly, and I worried for a moment. A rapturous smile touched her lips, and her eyes were half-shut.

“A magic spring. Oh dear Lord, I haven’t thought of . . . in years. I haven’t forgotten . . . I just . . . Hey!” Her eyes were shut tight, and her face was turned towards the sky. It moved back and forth, up and down, in the oddest way. It reminded me of nothing so much as some sort of antenna seeking a signal. Finally the movement stopped.

She stood there, stock-still. I feared she was having some sort of seizure, or a mental collapse. Then I looked at her face, really looked at it.

I thought I knew what “joy” was. I didn’t, not by a long shot. She looked – radiant. Literally, radiant. Old-time artists would paint saints with a golden halo all around their bodies, trying to express the way Penny looked right then. I’m not sure she wasn’t actually lit up, glowing gold, just like that. I couldn’t look down, I was afraid I might see her feet not even touching the ground.

The whole episode couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, but there was a terrible sense of *time* around us – around her. As if –I’m not even sure how to say it– as if those few seconds were ticking by us going left to right, like a road, but whole millennia, whole epochs, were crashing *down through* where we stood, like a waterfall. God above, I thought, who *is* this girl?

Her reverie faded. I wanted to grab her and hold her close, hold her as *mine*. Whatever had just happened had taken her very, very far away, and that frightened me. What frightened me more though, was the near-superstitious dread of a mere man approaching something holy; the thought that just to touch her now meant to be smitten down.

Finally, this –*transfiguration*– was over, and she was my Penny again. I gazed upon her with awe. “*What was that???*”

Her eyes glittered mischievously, and she giggled, and I was relieved at the familiarity of it, after witnessing that total *otherness*. “Nothing you need to worry about, Bobby. Or maybe I should say ‘Nobody.’ ” She laughed aloud now, and if her laughter before was silver bells, this was a carillon of bells pealing in a tower. “Bobby, my love, you’re right. This world isn’t all bad at all.”

That’s when the spell was broken. I seized her, held her tight, and she, me. We stood rocking back and forth, the joy now the simple presence of the other. We were silent a long while. Finally I whispered in her ear. “Don’t go away like that anymore, Penny.”

#### **Part 4** **In The Lion’s Den**

Later that day, I asked John for a private talk. I think he was expecting me to speak to him about Penny, because he was a bit bemused at what I said.

“Commander Robinson,” I addressed him. “Sometimes people stay so close to a certain situation that they forget about the bigger picture.”

“Can’t see the forest for the trees, you mean.”

“Precisely. Sir, you have done a remarkable job of keeping this expedition alive and safe, under unbelievably hostile conditions. Conditions which have taken not only a physical toll on you and your crew, but also a terrible emotional toll.” He knew I could only be talking about Penny, even if he didn’t understand how fragile she was. If only he could have seen her sobbing, like I did! And for once, tried to understand and comfort her, just as a father. Just her father, and not her commanding officer.

“You’ve done a remarkable job with this survival camp. But sir, I think it may be time for you to reevaluate this expedition’s status, and perhaps commence trying to fulfill the original mission parameters.” I hoped I had applied all the right-sounding jargon correctly, so it didn’t sound like I was criticizing him personally. He frowned.

“What exactly do you mean?”

“Commander, this expedition was sent out to colonize a new world. Through misadventure, you got waylaid and stranded on this world for – how many years now?” I knew, but I wanted him to say it aloud. He uttered the number bitterly.

“Sir, before I crashed, I got off a Mayday drone that will get back to Moonbase Delta in another week or so – I hope. I was in pretty bad shape by then, it launched in atmosphere, and I never got the signature back that it made the jump into h-space. It might have gotten fried in that electrical storm. It might be drifting around out there right now, waiting to fall into your sun, it might not be anything but a handful of cinders in the desert. But no fears, I did get a radio call out. They’ll be getting that in another fifty years for sure.

“Commander, I don’t know what different kinds of hopes you may have pinned onto me, but I’ll tell you this – I don’t think I’ve rescued you. I think you are still as stranded as you were the first day you grounded here. I admit it: as a Rescue Survey Scout, *I’ve failed.*”

His face reddened, whether in anger or frustration I didn’t know. “Sir, you set out on a mission of colonization. Maybe it’s time to start colonizing *this* world. Maybe you need to stop thinking of yourself as Commander Robinson of the *Jupiter 2*, and start thinking of yourself as Governor Robinson of . . . I don’t know, New Plymouth Colony.”

He looked at me silently. “You know the story of the Pilgrims and Plymouth, Commander. Englishmen coming to the New World. *They* didn’t end up where they set out for either. But that didn’t stop them. They built houses and planted crops, and they died wholesale, but ultimately they survived and flourished. They didn’t sit on board the *Mayflower* waiting for someone to come by with directions to Virginia.

“Commander, it’s been *seven years*. You’re still living aboard the ship. This is a rough planet, but it’s survivable, you’ve proven that. You’ve proven *yourself*. Sir, there is an oasis over there, a half hour walk west. I know, I walked it myself yesterday, half dead. Why in Heaven’s name haven’t you built houses *at the oasis*? Or dug a canal to bring the water over here?”

“You don’t understand this planet!” he snapped at me. “You don’t know what we’re up against! You have no idea what the summer is like here. Go out in it, and the sun will burn you to ash where you stand!”

“No, sir, I haven’t lived through a summer here. But I do get the idea. Here’s a thought now, Commander. There are many places on Earth where people carve houses into rock, underground. They live in deserts as hot as this one is right now, and don’t even need cooling systems because the temperature stays so comfortable. Perhaps you could experiment with that. Perhaps you could spend that summer inferno comfortably, right in your own homes.”

His face was reddening again, and I knew he was angry. Did he just not like being dressed down by a kid, or was it because he knew I was right?

“Commander Robinson,” I said softly, “You have a world to build. It’s not the one you bargained for, but you knew *—you know—* there were no promises. This is *space*, and second chances are scarce. By rights, you and this crew should have been *dead*, sir, twice over, maybe more, despite your efforts. Blind luck has kept you alive more than you care to acknowledge, but here you sit, griping because you wound up with seats in second class instead of first.

“Let me tell you something else, sir. I admit I failed this mission. But I’ve had a lot of space time, and I’ve been there on a lot of missions where the Good Lord just didn’t give me the time to pull living people out of twisted, smoking spacecraft. All that was left for me was ballast for body bags and regretful form letters to write to next of kin. Any one of them would have thought it a blessing to be stranded here with you, instead of pouring their guts and blood out into the Deep Cold Dark.”

I wiped at my eyes. It was no act. I’ve saved a lot of lives, but yeah, there were a lot I couldn’t. I sometimes shake my fist at God for what this brutal Universe of His can do to men and women and even children. But then I think, we are the ones who have accepted His challenge. We never had to leave Earth, maybe we never had to leave Eden. That doesn’t make it much easier when you’re scraping what was once 25 kilos of a child into a body bag, some little boy or girl that suffered and died screaming from explosive decompression or flash-incineration. I wiped at my eyes.

John Robinson stood up, paced back and forth. He slammed his right fist into his open left palm, over and over. I winced each time, thinking he meant it for me. “I just keep thinking we’ll be picked up! Believe me, I’ve thought about all that, I’m not stupid! I just can’t stand the thought of spending a couple years or more building this place up, then having to abandon it all and go on to Alpha Centauri!”

“Commander,” I said softly, “If my Mayday drone made it safely, we’ll be picked up within a month. If not, it might be years more, or never. Maybe they’ll send someone to look for me, maybe not. We’re cheap. How about this: let’s give it a month, and if nobody turns up, let’s go to work.”

He didn’t answer. He was hanging on the ropes, clutching at the dream. I decided to deliver what I hoped would be the knockout punch. “Commander Robinson, the loss of the *Jupiter 2* was a terrible blow to the Colonization Project, but it didn’t stop it. You must know that.



“*Alpha Centauri has already been colonized.* There are two dozen families there already. Sir, you’re five years late for *that* party. You’d just be the new neighbors.

“This is the world that needs you. Maybe you don’t see how ripe it is for terraforming, but this world has water that others only dream of! Besides, Commander – suppose Rescue Survey does come by in another six months, or a year. How would you rather be found: hunkered down in a crippled spaceship, waiting for someone to come help you . . . or as a thriving colony, with real houses, and acres of irrigated crops, and . . . and children?”

He stopped his pacing, stood facing the wall silently. After a long while, Commander John Robinson turned and faced me, hands behind his back, head cocked with self-assurance. “How *would* it be to welcome down a rescue mission, and tell them, ‘No thank you, glad you came by, but we don’t *need* rescuing, we’re doing just fine!’ You’re right, son. I’ve been living for a lost dream far too long. It’s time to do what we set out to do.”

“Let’s have a meeting tomorrow, sir. I think the first order of business would be to vote that this is no longer a survival mission, but the founding of a colony. Second, elect you Governor. I don’t think anyone of us will complain about that.”

“You forget Smith. He’ll think up a dozen reasons why he should have the job.”

I laughed. “You’ll have my support, sir, I promise. Oh, and, uh, one other matter of, uh, civil business, I think . . . I know it’s long-standing custom that a ship’s captain could perform weddings aboard his ship, but I don’t suppose that counted if the ship sunk or went aground, like the, uh, *Jupiter 2*, sir, and so I would think that one of first orders of business for a governor would be, uh, to issue marriage licenses and perform weddings, and that sort of thing, and I’m sure Don and Judy would appreciate that a whole lot, and for that matter . . .” I bit my tongue.

John Robinson strode over and stood before me. His hands looked like they were trying to decide whether or not to be fists. Abruptly, he poked his right hand at me – open. I took it in mine, and shook hands. “I think, Bobby, you would be my first choice for son-in-law, even if you weren’t the only candidate for ten light years around.” His eyes twinkled with good humor.

I stood up. He pulled me close for a choking bear-hug. “Welcome to the family, son.” He patted me heartily on the back; I’m sure I felt bones grind. “And I’ll see if we can’t get that all sorted out tomorrow. Maybe by the day after. Promise.”

## Coda

The sun was setting on the *Jupiter 2* crew for the last time. By next sunset, they –we– would be colonists, building a world. The worst few weeks of blistering summer were behind us now, and we could start the work of building and cultivation.

“Penny!” Maureen called.

“Yes, Mother?”

“Is that spare cabin cleaned up for Bobby?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Show him to it now, and help him settle in, since we’re not sure how long he’ll be needing it.”

“Of course, Mother. C’mon, Bobby, race you to the hatch!”

We took the small elevator below. She threw aside a curtain; I took one look and thought she was showing me a closet. “There was more room in that couch under the control panel,” I observed. The whole thing was about the size of the corridor in my poor *Thundercloud*. A bunk less than 2 meters long and a half meter wide occupied one wall.

She opened a narrow door at the end of this compartment, revealing a combination sink and commode. My jaw did its dropping act once again. "I had one of those in jail!" I quipped. A series of small doors above the bunk were cabinets, and cupboard doors and shelves covered the opposite wall.

"Well, I don't lack for storage, do I? Can I sleep in the cupboard instead?"

Penny laughed. "I think it's wonderful we're going to have real houses to live in soon. The regular cabins aren't much better than this, you know," she said. She looked down at the deck. "Mine is right next door herewouldyouliketoseeit?" She blushed, but looked up then, straight into my eyes, boldly.

"I think I'd like that."

We stepped out of my closet, and Penny drew the curtain tightly across the entry. She spun like a ballerina into her room, pulled me in, then closed the door – not a simple curtain, but an accordion-fold door. We embraced in the wonderful privacy, and kissed deeply. She pressed her body to mine, soft and warm. Her hand reached out and dimmed the lighting, another control shaded it a dusky rose-red color. I glanced out of the corner of my eye; a very ample-sized bed projected from the wall. I felt sweat bead on my brow.

"Penny . . ."

"Bobby . . ."

"Penny . . . my love . . . my darling . . . I – kind of promised the men I'd behave until we were properly married. It's one of those things, I gave my word as an officer, and man-to-man, and your father promised he wouldn't make us wait longer than tomorrow or the next day."

"Oh, Bobby, it's taken him seven years to decide to build a house! You think he won't piddle away weeks or months before getting around to doing something like that for us?"

"Maybe I better get to my closet . . ."

"No! Wait! I just remembered something. Do you know what kind of a name 'Robinson' is?"

"It's the second most beautiful name in the galaxy, right after 'Penny.'"

"No, silly! I mean it's a *Scottish* name. We're of very old Scottish ancestry."

"I see."

"Not yet you don't. Long ago in Scotland, when most people lived in little villages and not the cities, there were all sorts of plagues and wars and famines. And for many years, because men were so scarce, the villages had a very hard time finding ministers for their churches. So the king decreed that if there was no minister in a village, a couple could lawfully marry entirely on their own, with no minister, as long as they made the customary vows to love each other for the rest of their lives." She gazed fixedly into my eyes. "And that's a law that the Scots honor to this day."

"I see." I saw so well that I could see the sweat on the back of my neck. I took a deep breath. "So . . . exactly what sort of thing would they say?" No turning back now, I suppose. But then, who said I wanted to? My head felt spinny.

Penny smiled dreamily. She took my hands and held them between hers. "It would be something like this: 'Bobby Cain, I love you, and I will love you for aye. I take you as my husband, and I give myself to you as your wife, from now until Grim Death does part us.' Now you say it."

I took a deep breath. "Penny –"

"Wait! Take *my* hands between *yours* now."

I did. "Penny Robinson, I love you, and I will love you for aye. I take you as my wife, and I give myself to you as your husband, from now until Grim Death does part us." I stood there a moment more. "Is that all? Is there anything more to it?"

"I believe you're supposed to kiss me."

I did.

"Are we really married?"

“Aye – I mean yes, we’re really married.”

“Penny Robinson – you’re my wife?”

“Yup.”

“Open the door.”

“What?!?”

“Open the door!”

Eying me like she thought I was about to fly the coop already, she unlatched the door and slid it open. I stepped out into the passageway. “Now you. Come out here.” She followed me into the passage. “Now,” I said. “Another old custom. I just hope I have the strength for it after three months of zero-gee.”

I put an arm across her back, leaned over to slip the other behind her knees, and lifted! She squealed delighted surprise, and I winced as muscles strained that hadn’t been used in far too long. “Carrying the bride over the threshold! I don’t know if it’s done in Scotland, but it’s done just about everywhere else!”

I staggered two steps into the cabin, and leaned against the wall, but didn’t put her down.

“Shut . . . the door . . .” I gasped. She did, and slid the latch home, too. I took a deep breath, and mustered my strength. I turned, made two more steps, and carefully, carefully, lowered Penny Robinson Cain down onto our bed.

I sat down beside her and looked around the room. It would never be mistaken for anything but a spaceship cabin, but it had a definite feminine touch to it. “I guess this is our honeymoon cottage.”

“We’ll start building a real house tomorrow. Can it be right down in the oasis, near the water and all the green?”

“Of course, my love.”

“Remember, it has to be big enough for lots of children.”

“Oh. Yes.”

The lights dimmed even further.

An orange and yellow blossom fluttered to the floor.

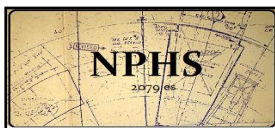
“Scanning for aliens in northwest quadrant!” boomed the Robot, in the distance.

*The original manuscript of this and many more of the late Governor Robert Winslow Robinson Cain's writings are now on display at the New Plymouth Historical Society Museum, as part of a special memorial exhibition celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. This exhibition features many of his rarely-displayed possessions, along with a selection of Lady Penelope's. His collected writings will be available for sale in historically authentic book form, as well as all modern formats.*

*Visitors and migrants are encouraged to visit the Cain/West Homestead Site, located at Penny Pond Oasis, a historical preservation project of NPHS.*

*New Plymouth Historical Society and Museum is located on New Plymouth High Street, two blocks west of Government House.*

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**Book 2**

**Symphony Of An Angel**

*“I had almost forgotten what it means to be a doctor.”*



*scherzo, poi furioso*

I can never forget the first morning I awoke a married man. I must have heard movement somewhere else aboard the *Jupiter 2*. There was a soft half-light in the cabin, which only yesterday had been Penny Robinson's private quarters. This morning, it was our honeymoon suite.

I looked down at my sleeping bride. She was nestled up against me, not too closely. I looked down at her profile. Both her hands were closed around my left, as they were last night when we pledged our marriage vows to each other. Her face rested on the pillow, eyes still shut. A contented smile traced her lips. Except that she was lying down, she was almost in the classic pose of prayer. I rose up on one elbow, leaned over, and brushed her slightly-flushed cheek with a soft, single kiss. Penny's smile broadened, and still sleeping, she stretched over to snuggle her face on my arm.

Suddenly her deep, rhythmic breathing altered, and she fidgeted. She rubbed her cheek once more against my arm – and snapped awake, pulling back with a look of panic. It took a moment for recognition and recollection to cut through the fog of waking.

“Oh, Bobby! I'm so sorry! Just for a moment there, I –”

“It's OK, my love. You were fine, asleep. Knew just where you were and who I was. Thanks for not screaming your head off when you opened your eyes and saw me in bed with you.”

“I guess I have good self-control.”

I put my mouth close to her ear and whispered, “Not last night you didn't.”

“Why you – !”

“Shh! Let's not be waking folks up yet. This is still our secret, let's enjoy it just a little longer.”

We pulled together, embraced. I caressed the curve of her cheeks, the graceful arch of her eyebrows. As beautiful as she was, her face nevertheless showed the marks of sleep. Her wide, dark eyes were slightly bloodshot in the corners, her hair was disheveled, and the pillow and sheet had left the red mottlings of a sound sleep on her right cheek. The corner of her mouth suggested recent drool. Not that I cared. Still, some deep ancestral instinct (I'm descended from a long line of married men) told me that this was something I should never, never, *ever* mention.

Our hands played under the cover, then reached further.

She shook her head. “I didn't mean to start something. Now come on, let's get moving, and save *that* for later.”

Then I heard something that gave me a cold feeling in my gut: footsteps. Purposeful footsteps with an authoritative tread and the sense of searching. I heard John Robinson's voice in the passageway.

“Bobby? Bobby?”

I took a deep breath as I heard him rip open the curtain of what was supposed to be my cabin next door. “Bobby! Robert! CAIN!” His voice was no longer questioning, but demanding and irate. There was a moment's agonizing silence, then “PENNY! PENELOPE ROBINSON! WHERE ARE YOU AND WHERE IS THAT LITTLE WEASEL?”

Oh shoot. So much for our little surprise. A fist pounded against the door. It was a flimsy accordion-fold, and it rippled like a sheet in the wind. “Open this door instantly, Penny Robinson!” John shouted.

“Daddy, stop it right now! You don't understand!”

“I understand enough, by heaven!” He struck the closure hard enough that the latch jumped out of its socket. He slammed the door open.

“I said stop it, Daddy! It's not what you think and it's not your business anyway!” She jumped up with the flimsy bedcovering held in front of her, confronted her father at the door. “You need to calm down right this minute, Daddy. You don't see –”



"I see enough! I see my daughter hiding herself behind a sheet without a stitch of clothes and I see a punk spaceman in your bed without even that much!"

Penny eyed her father coolly. She turned towards me. "Cover up, Bobby, you're offending your father-in-law." I gaped, stunned, as she tossed the bedcover to me. She turned to face John Robinson, boldly naked. "You were saying, Daddy?"

John spun, turned his back to his daughter. "You've got some nerve, young lady. Close this door and –"

"*You've* got some nerve telling *me* to close the door you just kicked open."

"Just make yourself presentable so we can talk."

She already had. She had slipped into a bathrobe, and tossed me my uniform jumpsuit. "Are we going to talk now, Daddy, or are you just going to scream at us?"

Robinson turned his head, saw that Penny was dressed. (I'm not sure he cared that I was. Right then, I think he just wanted me in about ten different pieces, and I could guess which pieces he'd start with.) He stepped into her –no, *our*– room. His face was bright red, and a vein pulsed wildly in his forehead. He opened his mouth to unleash some tirade but before he could speak –

"Daddy, we're married. Bobby and I married last night. I'm his wife, and you're making yourself silly."

"*Married?* That's ridiculous; now you're lying to me?"

"We married by Scottish village law, just the way you always used to tell me about, in the old stories."

"You – do you remember where you are? Does this look like the Highlands to you? What in the world –this one or any one– was going on in your head? I never meant for you to – to latch onto that as an excuse to jump into the sack with the first raggedy-ass castaway that felt you up!"

"Daddy, that's vile!" she shouted. "You should be ashamed to speak to your own daughter like that. And this still isn't any of your business, anyway."

"Don't you *dare* talk to me like that, young lady! *Anything* happening on this ship is my business, and don't you forget it!" He snapped his head around to face me. I was cowering on the bed, as far back as I could, biting my lip and hoping his laser pistol wasn't handy. "Cain! What have you got to say for yourself? I thought we had an understanding. Look me in the eye and answer me – if you can."

It took all my courage, including batches of it I had never before used, to gaze him levelly in the eye, and say, "Commander, I love Penny more than anything, more than I thought was possible. Sir, I promised you that I would marry her, and as far as I'm concerned, I married her last night. I don't think I have anything to apologize for or be ashamed of." My heart was pounding. I think I would have preferred riding my *Thundercloud* down through the sky again – without the parawings.

"I think it's also customary for a young man to ask a girl's father his permission!"

"I believe I did that too. You welcomed me to the family and even called me your son-in-law."

He glared furiously; he knew I was right, and it galled him. "I don't like this sneaking around! Both of you should know better! There's enough underhanded shenanigans to worry about around here with Smith. I don't need the same balderdash from my own daughter and her – her –" He bit off whatever word he was about to call me; I don't think it was "husband." "It's the deceit I don't like. Penny, you really haven't learned that yet, in all this time?"

Penny rolled her eyes contemptuously. "You want to talk about sneaky, Daddy? Why don't you go talk to Judy and Don?"

John Robinson's eyes flared. "Now you're going somewhere that's none of *your* business, young lady."

“Oh? And why isn’t *that* yours? Ever wonder why *they’ve* never asked you about a proper wedding? Ever wonder why they’re always smiling so much when you and Mother take the Chariot out together?”

“I’m warning you –”

“I’m *telling* you. Surely you can’t believe *she’s* still a blushing virgin! Would you want to bet whether that’s something she even came on board with?”

“Judy is an adult and you are not, and I repeat it is not your business. For another thing, Judy –”

Penny jumped on her father’s hesitation. “For another thing, Judy isn’t really *your* daughter anyway, so you don’t care, is that it?”

Commander John Robinson wound up his arm and delivered Penny a backhand slap across the face. “Don’t you ever, *ever*, suggest that again, you filthy-minded little –”

Penny fell backwards with a small cry. Tears splashed her cheeks. Slowly I stood up. I stepped over to her, wrapped an arm about her and pulled her close. Ugly red marred her cheek. Still holding her close, I took another step and stood in front of her father.

I’ve only been really angry a few times in my life, but I always felt it as a hot emotion. Now I learned that rage was cold: cold and black as interstellar space. I let the sight of that mark on Penny’s face burn into my brain, then turned to her father. I spoke softly.

“John, if you ever –*ever*– lay a hand on . . . *on my wife* . . . like that again, I swear to Christ, I will kill you, on the spot, with my bare hands. And if you doubt me, sir, you just try me, right now.”

I regarded him calmly, without moving.

He stood there glaring for another few moments, his face furiously red. Abruptly he turned, stomped over to one of the lower deck instrument consoles. He pressed one button which blasted a high-pitched, earsplitting alarm through the ship. I don’t know why; I’m sure our little tête-à-tête had awakened the whole ship, and any in orbit besides. He let the klaxon sound for a few seconds, then took a microphone. “Attention all hands, *Jupiter 2*. General meeting at 0700 in the courtyard. Hold breakfast until done. That includes you, Smith, and believe me, you don’t want me to have to come drag you out of there today. Out.” He climbed to the upper deck.

*con amore*

Penny and I looked at each other, still aghast at our morning. Carefully, I touched her face, where John had slapped her. “Does it hurt?”

“No. Just a little, maybe.”

“Has he ever done anything like that before?”

“Oh no, no, of course not. Honestly, I’ve never seen him like that before.”

I relaxed slightly. We dressed quickly. I was slightly amused; after her brash display earlier, Penny now turned her back to me as her bathrobe slipped to the floor and she stepped hurriedly into day clothing. “Go splash some cold water on your face, my sweet. It’ll help fade the mark. Or do you want them to see it?”

“Well, they’ll see it anyway, but a little cold water will at least make it feel better.” Penny stepped around me and spun open the lavatory compartment at the end of the cabin. She moistened a face-cloth and held it to her cheek.

“Um, Penny?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“What did you mean about Judy? Or should I mind my own business?”

She shook her head, and sighed regretfully. “I shouldn’t have said that. I should have known, if there was anything to make him that angry, that was it.”

My thoughts swirled, and I felt appalled. “You can’t mean – ?”

“No, no, it’s just old gossip. But it’s a long story, I’ll tell you later. Just that – I wanted to hurt him, and I knew that would do it the most. I shouldn’t have. I –”

I caught Penny by the elbow, turned her to me. “I hope you’re not about to say you deserved it. Nothing deserves that.”

“No, just that – I should have expected it. And held my tongue.” She sighed wistfully. “I have to apologize to him.”

I looked at the clock. “Ten to,” I said. “I hope we at least get coffee.”

“I’ll start some in a sec.” She turned back to the sink, examined her face. “He didn’t really catch me hard, Bobby, it hardly shows at all, already. He startled me more than anything.”

I thought of Alicia, my distant kid sister. Seeing girls get smacked around was kind of an issue for me. “Still no excuse.”

Penny thumbed a button on the wall. The small chamber took a partial turn; where the sink had been was now a shower unit. She pressed it again, and a commode moved into place. Penny stood stock-still for a moment.

“Umm . . . Bobby . . . I know we’re married now and everything, but this thing doesn’t even have a curtain to pull in front of you. Do you think you could –you know– step outside for just a minute or two?”

I could hardly help laughing. I took her in my arms again, put a kiss on her cheek, the unslapped one. “I guess there’s a lot of stuff we have to get used to now, huh? Sure, I’ll step over to my cabin, and take care of some quick business, myself. Hey there’s a thought, we can use that one for the commode, and in here for the sink and shower.”

“May– maybe next time, right now I really gotta – please Bobby!” She smacked me lightly on top my head. I scooted out, pulling the door across, and dodged into the spare cabin. I faced the fixture and let myself relax fully for the first time since awakening. A small hand basin was mounted on top of the toilet, prison-style; I washed up, splashed my face too, and went back over to Penny’s – no, our, cabin. I tapped lightly before opening the door, “Can I come back in now?”

I was rewarded with her laugh, the laugh like silver bells. How I had already grown to cherish that! “Yeah, come on back in.” I slipped on in. She stepped over, wrapped her arms around me with a close embrace. “Am I silly?”

“ ’Course not. Like you said, we’re brand new at this, and I’m sure there’s a sharp learning curve involved. Besides, I doubt any couples just – well, this *was* built as a cabin for one. I’m sure your folks have one with a door or something.”

“Eww, I hope so,” Penny said. “Oh look, we better move. Daddy’s already way too upset.”

A thought crossed my mind. I hadn’t seen a calendar since crashing, but I had a feeling this was Monday.

*brillante, poi accentato*

All of us gathered at the table outside, even Smith, who I had barely seen so far. He still regarded me with palpable distaste, eyes constantly shifting, and spoke not a word to me. I felt uncomfortable sitting across from him, as if there were some disease of his very soul that could infect me. Bizarrely, I thought of an old, old kids' song, a Christmas song, which I probably hadn't heard since my age was in single digits, and fit his name into the lyrics. It fit all too well:

*You're a monster, Doctor Smith  
Your heart's an empty hole  
Your brain is full of spiders  
You've got garlic in your soul,  
Doctor Smi-ith!*

*The three words that best describe you  
Are as follows  
And I quote: "Stink! Stank! Stunk!"*

My mind's eye saw the comically vile creature of the song, and I saw it across from me. In spite of myself, a sardonic smirk turned up the corner of my mouth, and I fairly leered at Smith. My attention made him uncomfortable, and he fidgeted awkwardly. He tried glaring back at me, but his efforts were too obvious, and only amused me more.

Finally, he cracked. "Young man, hasn't anyone ever taught you that it is impolite to stare like that? Particularly at your elders?"

I let a derisive snicker puff out through my nostrils, but kept him pinned under my gaze.

"'Doctor Smith,' is it? What exactly are you a doctor of, may I ask?"

"More things than are dreamt of in *your* philo—"

"All right, that's enough!" rapped John Robinson from the head of the table. He stood leaning over, hands resting on the table. The rest of our company were seated; Penny and Maureen (my mother-in-law!) had just scooted into their seats bearing cups and the coffee pot. Maureen filled the cups unobtrusively and started passing them. I needed mine, desperately.

John looked around. "Where's the Robot? Robot!" he called. A moment later the venerable B9 rolled in from the perimeter. "Robot, you're as much a part of this –group– as anyone, I suppose, even if you aren't put together quite the same way."

The Robot stood there without responding. With mechanical and digital punctiliousness, it had been given no statement to respond to.

John continued. "I want you to record these proceedings in their entirety, but more than that, I am inviting you to participate in them. As an equal to any of us."

Now, back on Earth, robots had been getting more common, and a lot brighter. Certainly a lot more useful than this ungainly contraption. But at the end of the day, robots were still nothing more than tools, highly evolved computers on wheels or legs, which you switched off when you were done with them. That Robinson was inviting this machine to actually *participate* in a conference which was likely to have results almost literally world-shaking seemed as absurd as – well, as asking the coffee pot its opinion. He had called this machine his *equal!*

The Robot still stood silently, except for the whirr of gears and relays constantly about it. It still had received no cue to respond to. With only the slight twitch of an eyelid expressing annoyance at the Robot's silence, John finally asked, "Do you understand?"

“Affirmative,” responded the Robot, finally. There was a flurry of thoughtful humming, and “Thank you for your consideration, Commander Robinson.”

I glanced over to Penny. She sat next to her mother, with both Will and Major West between us. As far as I could tell, any mark of her father’s slap had faded, at least it was drawing no scrutiny. I turned my attention and thoughts back to John Robinson.

I recalled the respect—even the affection—I had felt for him just the previous day. I’d never been a father, of course, but I imagined it must take great fortitude for him to stand there now. Brief minutes before, he had wrestled with the idea that his youngest daughter had been, if not actually raped, at least deceived and seduced by an interloper. An interloper who had then promised him murder, and who now sat before him among family and friends.

I was still a bit stunned at myself for that promise. Not just for the saying of it, but for meaning it, and knowing it was a promise I could keep. I wondered what other dark depths I might harbor within myself.

My coffee cup was empty already. Discreetly, I nudged Will, next to me, and passed my cup to be refilled.

John sat, and after some shuffling of papers, spoke without preamble. “We have had one unexpected milestone within the last day. Penny, would you care to make an announcement?”

Penny looked up, startled. She was not expecting this, not suddenly this way. I was proud to see my wife rise to the challenge.

“Daddy. Mother. Judy, Don, Will. Dr. Smith. Oh, Robot, of course. Last night, according to ancient law and custom of Scotland and Scots everywhere, Bobby and I became husband and wife. And . . .” She hesitated for a moment. “And that’s *all* I have to tell you!” she finished, demurely.

There was a stunned silence. Then Don West stood, and started applauding, then Judy and Maureen. Will quickly followed, and Dr. Smith too contributed polite but unenthusiastic applause. Behind me, the Robot was cheering “Huzzah! Huzzah!” over and over, arms wagging up and down, torso swiveling back and forth.

Don turned to shake my hand, as did Will; both of them spoke polite platitudes.

From across the table, Dr. Smith addressed me. “May I offer you my congratulations, young man. Allow me to shake your hand, and offer you a word of paternal advice.” He extended his hand, and despite a certain reluctance, I shook it. He beckoned me lean over to him; doing so, he whispered in my ear, “I care for that dear girl as if she were my very own child. Do her no wrong, or you will suffer the wrath of Smith.”

Although my first instinct was to guffaw at his pretensions, I withheld any outward amusement. Drawing back enough to look into his eyes, I was surprised to see none of the oiliness or cunning I had seen before. Rather, his gaze was shifted toward Penny, and there was bittersweet tenderness in them. Could this vile person really *care* for Penny as he said?

Meanwhile, all three of the women had been hunkered down together, arms about each others’ shoulders, furtively whispering and giggling, shooting glances my way. Once, Maureen turned her head to stare with shocked eyes. I wondered what Penny had said. What *could* she have said?

John alone remained seated, watching the little uproar with distaste. Finally he rapped on the table with his knuckles. “Can we bring this meeting back to order please?” Clearly, he was still not a happy man. “Robert. Is there anything you would care to contribute to this log entry?” Yes, you miserable SOB, I thought. You can show a little joy, a little happiness, for your daughter, can’t you? I turned toward my bride.

“Penny, all I can say is, I wish I’d crashed here sooner.” Polite chuckles. “These last twenty-four hours have been quite literally the fulfillment of my wildest dream. And if I ever fail to live up to the promises I made to you – if I ever fail you in any way – may *I* be struck down dead where I stand.”

“Entry noted. Thank you.” Damn you, cold fish! I thought. “Robot, open a new journal, titled ‘Vital Statistics paragraph Marriages comma Births comma Deaths.’ Make entry for this date.” He hesitated. “Correction. Date of yesterday. Marriage: Robert W. Cain and Penelope Robinson. Hold journal open.”

“Affirmative. Entry made as directed.”

“By what names do you wish to be known?”

That caught me slightly by surprise. “Umm. . .”

“Penelope Robinson Cain,” she announced.

Taking my cue, I said, “Robert Winslow Robinson Cain.”

“Robot, note those as legal names of record, close journal.”

“Affirmative.”

“If we can move on now please.” Cold fish, I thought. “After consultation with the newest member of our party, Ensign Cain, I would like to submit for discussion a matter of utmost importance. I hardly need remind you, we have been shipwrecked on this planet for more than seven years. Possibilities for escape or rescue have become increasingly slim. Therefore, I would move that we discuss abandoning our original mission to colonize Alpha Centauri, and commence the permanent colonization and reclamation of this world as a colony of Earth.”

Dr. Smith was on his feet instantly. “Are you mad, Professor Robinson? Are you truly suggesting that we abandon all hopes and dreams and instead resign ourselves to inevitable exile on this miserable orb?”

“Dr. Smith –and everyone– we have few choices left. We are far from regular spacelanes, out of touch with Earth or any other colonies. Right now, I am convinced –I have been convinced– that our best hope is to abandon our original mission and commence terraformation of this planet. A necessary consequence of that is that we dissolve our current status as a ship’s survival crew, begin transition to a form of civil government, and commence construction of permanent housing on the planet’s surface.”

There was a hush over the small company, except for a subdued, wordless whining from Dr. Smith.

I understood that this was, as they say, my baby. I looked at the sun rising above the horizon. I stood. “Professor Robinson, and others. I’m sure that this idea must come as a surprise, even a shock, to some.” Dr. Smith’s head rested on the table. He was keening like a basset hound now. “I move to recess this meeting for a short time, to allow for informal discussion amongst ourselves, and for breakfast. I’m sure after we’ve all had a bite to eat we’ll be ready to look at this sensibly.”

John spoke: “A motion has been made, do I hear a second?”

My Penny spoke instantly. “Seconded!”

“All in favor?”

“Aye!” came the near-unanimous response.

“Nay!” came the plaintive wail of Dr. Smith, raising his hand.

“Meeting recessed!” said John.

“Well then!” piped up Maureen. “Who’d like pancakes?”

*affrettando*

Even the most interesting meetings – scratch that. There are NO interesting meetings. After breakfast, the meeting reconvened, and after brief discussion, we voted to abandon the shipboard command structure, and recognize ourselves as individual or family groups, as we preferred. Penny and I were one family. After a brief but spirited exchange of views, John, Maureen and Will remained together as one; Will’s move for free agency was shot down quickly. Don and Judy, of course: although Don, for some reason, seemed somehow reluctant to formalize the easygoing relationship he enjoyed with the older Robinson daughter. The Robot, in a unique situation, pledged himself to remain a general help and friend to all.

Dr. Smith curled himself under the table in a fetal position and wailed about his dear friends abandoning him.

Upon my motion, the colony was to be named “New Plymouth,” and John Robinson was elected governor. He was elected almost unanimously – Smith, under the table, effectively abstained from voting, or in fact from participating in any meaningful way at all. A side note, which may be of interest to future historians or sociologists: this was probably the first time in human history a robot cast a ballot in a civic election.

We drafted a very rough charter, which did little but continue the way things were done before my arrival: John, as governor, was in charge, but did not act without advice and consent of the “Governor’s Council”, *i.e.*, the rest of us. Theoretically, any of us could move off and set up housekeeping anywhere we chose: practically, we were still residents of the *Jupiter 2*. All of us had access to the use of the ship’s facilities, tools, and equipment. John’s term as governor was for a maximum of two years, subject to dismissal upon unanimous vote of the Council. John, or any governor, was limited to two consecutive terms in office. The meeting broke about mid-afternoon. We were all getting hungry, wanting lunch, and I don’t think any of us, at the time, realized the full significance of what we had just done.

The ladies put a quick table together. I spoke with Don about the practical questions of cutting houses out of rock. He thought the large defensive laser cannon, tied in to the Robot and guided by the right software, could do a very neat job of cutting foundations, cutting lateral spaces into hillsides, and cutting blocks of stone for general use.

*gioioso*

I noticed Penny slip over to her father at one point. Although I couldn’t hear the conversation (nor would I have tried), it was fairly evident she was offering him an apology, and it looked like he gave one in return. I saw him put a single finger to her cheek, and hang his head. They shared a quick hug, and Penny stepped back inside the ship.

A few minutes later, I heard a roaring mechanical sound. A cloud of dust kicked up from the far side of the *Jupiter 2*, and a moment later, an unlikely-looking contraption rolled around to the front of the courtyard. Of course, a Chariot! This was one of the few unqualified successes to come out of those early days of the Colonization Project. A true all-terrain vehicle, it could cross land or sea with relative ease. Penny was at the controls.

“Come on Bobby, we have to go over to the oasis!” she called over the roar of its engines. I ran to the side, and heaved myself in to the front passenger seat.

“Why? What’s over there?”

“You clunk! You promised we’d go over today and start building a house! Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten already!”

I hoped that sketching out some lines in the sand would satisfy her criteria for starting to build a house. I still had only the vaguest idea how that might be done, trusting that Don could dig up all the appropriate resources out of the ship’s data banks. As a colony ship, I expected it would carry all of that type of information.

Penny had great fun driving that thing over to the oasis. Me – it reminded me too much of a crash landing. I held on tight and grinned, and hoped I would keep my lunch where it belonged. It was only about ten minutes this way, and a lot easier than my first trip over from it two days ago. She parked it inches from the edge of the pond.

She jumped out and started walking around, pointing at outcroppings of rock, yes, tracing lines in the sand, and just loving every moment of planning our home. I had an odd insight: girls at home (no, make that girls on Earth, *this* was home) loved to “go shopping”, even when that meant not actually buying a thing. I never understood that. You need a new shirt, you go down to the All-Mart and buy a shirt. What’s the big deal? But the girls I knew would make a day-trip of it, literally, an all-day trip, and never spend a dime!

Maybe this was satisfying some deep womanly instinct for Penny – maybe she couldn’t actually “go shopping,” but running around, marking the limits of a still-imaginary home fulfilled the same need for her. Meanwhile, I looked at the rocks and the ground and tried to figure out what might actually work.

I walked around slowly, trying to visualize how a house might be cut in to this terrace or that bluff. Then, my heart dropped as I heard Penny shriek!

I raced to the sound. “Penny!” I called. “What’s wrong?” I didn’t see her, and started to panic. I saw her clothes piled up on a large, flat rock. “Penny! Are you all right?!”

“I’m f-f-f-fine, j- just the wa- a- a-ter’s a li- little c- cold! C- come on in!”

My head whirled a moment until I understood. I looked out at the water, and was only slightly startled to see that Penny had jumped into the water naked. I closed my eyes. I knew that water was cold, and didn’t see any way it was any fun! Just the same, I took a deep breath and a good look around to make sure we were alone, then stripped off my jumpsuit and skivvies and plunged in.

Oh my. Two days ago, my finger had not lied when it told me how cold this water was. All my other parts were now telling me the same, some more emphatically than others. A part of my mind was asking how it was even possible to be this cold.

“Oh, p- please, Penny, let’s get out of here, I can’t stand this! It’s just too c- cold!”

“What a baby! I’ve been swimming here for years, and it gets colder than this!”

“Where – where are you?” I saw a swirl of water where she had ducked under the surface. I felt hands clutch at my ankles, and they pulled! I slipped under the water with just time enough to suck down one breath before the water closed over my head. I was horizontal, maybe a meter below the surface. Mermaid-like, Penny swam up over me, wrapped her arms and legs around me, and kissed me. I might have enjoyed it more if I had any sensation left, but I was completely numb. I don’t know if she was expecting any sort of physical response from me, but she sure wasn’t going to get much then.

I needed to breathe. My faint movement airward alerted her, and with a few kicks, she had my head above the water.

I gulped air ravenously, freed an arm, and pointed to the shore. “N- n- now! P- please!”



A few more kicks from my darling put us to where we could stand, and I pulled myself out of the frigid water. She followed, laughing. I collapsed onto the large rock that held our clothes –even then I would not have lain down in the brown dust and sand– and Penny stretched out beside me. For once, I welcomed the fierce burning of the small, bright sun overhead. We lay motionless for a long while, as our bodies warmed and shook off the chill of the water.

As my body warmed, my brain worked: how could this be so cold? Underground glaciers? And more interesting – could this icy water be channeled to cool a house? My thoughts were interrupted then, as my wife rolled over on to me and began kissing me passionately.

I wrapped my arms around her, and reveled in the heat of the sun overhead, the rock below me, Penny on top of me.

She pressed urgently against me.

“Penny, have I turned you into some sort of Frankensex monster?”

“Grrrrmmm!” she growled into my ear.

Some time later, we stumbled out of the Chariot and into the courtyard in front of the *Jupiter 2*.

Penny spoke languorously. “Dear husband, I’m going to go below and get some fresh clothes. This dust is all over everything. I may need to lie down for a little while, too. For some reason, all that swimming’s exhausted me.” After one lingering kiss, Penny strolled away into the ship.

Don, fiddling with some equipment, had observed all this, and sauntered over to me with an eyebrow cocked up in amusement. “You’re one helluva operator, Cain. Did you get the house all laid out, too?”

Any other man, I might have blacked his eye right there. But this was Don West, I only pretended to. Then I headed inside; all that swimming had taken it out of me, too.

In our cabin, Penny was back into a bathrobe, stretched out on the bed. As I walked in, she opened her eyes, smiled, and stretched. She reminded me of a kitten, as I picked up her hand and kissed her fingers.

“Shove over,” I said.

“Wow. The bloom’s gone off *this* rose pretty quick.”

“Well dammit, I’m cold again! I need to get under this cover.” She rolled on over. I stripped down to skin, and slipped under the silver spread. We rolled to face each other, although she stayed on top of the cover. We clasped hands, drew as close together as we could, and shared another long-lingering kiss. “Ya know what I’m thinking?”

“Tell me.”

“These metal-film blankets are OK. They keep you warm. I use them –used to use them– on the ship to wrap up survivors to keep them from hypothermia.”

“What’s that?”

“It keeps them warm and stops them shivering to death.”

“Oh.”

“But I miss a real blanket. Once we get properly settled, and have some food growing, let’s plant some cotton or wool to make real blankets.”

Penny stared at me for a moment. “You’re not joking!” she screeched, and started beating me with the pillow, laughing hysterically until tears were in her eyes. It was nice to see happy tears. She explained to me some of the facts of life I’d missed growing up as a city boy.

*Sheep?*

I guess we dozed a bit then, then woke together. “Come on, get under the covers with me. You make me feel like I’m wearing the wrong cologne or something.” She did. We lay there a long while, doing nothing, just holding hands and cuddling and looking at each other. I wondered about miracles.

*flebile*

Then, about darker things: “Penny?”

“Bobby?”

“Unless it’s just none of my business . . . what was all that earlier about Judy and your father?”

“Oh. That.” She sighed sadly. “I never should have said it. It’s just that – I mean honestly, look at her, she doesn’t look like the rest of us, but she really is my sister, our sister, Will and me, all the same two parents. She’s actually a dead ringer for Gramma, I mean Mother’s mother, she’s the one all those blue eyes come from. Will takes after Mother, and I take after Daddy’s side. But – well, you know how mean kids can be, and back home, at school, there was a terrible rumor started that – you know. It was just a schoolyard thing at first, and Will got into fights over it, and I got teased endlessly, and poor Judy was in tears almost every day for months.

“Somehow, the rumor got legs, and it became more than schoolroom gossip. I suppose kids talked about it to parents, and parents laughed, and then wondered. And after they wondered, they talked, and eventually it got around town –it was a small college town, but you probably know all about that– and it became a serious issue for Daddy for a long time, with people smirking and snickering at him behind his back. It was even worse on Mother. She was very depressed for a long time, even taking pills for it.

“So, when I said that . . . well, it’s just the most hurtful thing I ever could have said. I shouldn’t be surprised he blew his stack like that.”

“That’s still no –”

“I know. And Daddy knows too. He apologized and so did I.”

“Hmm. Well, you both know I mean what I said, and that goes for anybody, not just him.”

“Oh, my wonderful star knight! But really, my love, I wouldn’t want you to hurt anybody for my sake, especially Daddy.” She gazed into my eyes with sadness, even pity. “I couldn’t live with that. Did you ever think of that?”

I thought of that for a moment, and grunted noncommittally.

“Anyway, I’ve got a pretty good right cross. Don taught me that a long time ago. Really, my heroic darling, don’t think you have to hurt anyone for me.”

I grunted again.

“Besides, remember what Daddy said that first night you were here: we’re trying to make this a better place than the one we came from.”

*glissando*

“Penny? My sweet? You know something?”

“No, what?”

“This,” I said, slipping a hand inside her bathrobe. My fingers touched warmth, soft and round; I stretched over to kiss her.

“We’re going to miss dinner if you do that again.”

“It’s OK. We’re free citizens now.”

*intimo*

And the evening and the morning were the second day of me being a married man. A recording of birdsong woke us at 730. This time, Penny was wrapped firmly around me, to the point I could hardly move. Her fingers reached up to pull at my hair.

Without opening her eyes, she murmured, “I’m awake, and I’m not gonna freak out on you this time.” A half-smile touched her lips. “This morning I want to cook breakfast for us myself. I’m – *we’re* not Mother’s responsibility any more. Come on, let’s get stirring.”

The plan to use the spare cabin as the rest room seemed sound. We took turns scooting over in bathrobes. When I came back from my turn, Penny was in the shower. There was still no curtain.

“I guess you’re OK with that, huh?”

“Hmm? Oh, of course. Just no ideas right now, right?”

“Maybe just one idea. Anyway, I want to hose off a little, too.”

“There’s barely room in this thing for me. But I’m done, hop on in.”

We squeezed by each other, with just a perfunctory kiss. I was feeling like an old hand at this marriage business already. I washed up quickly, and when I stepped out Penny was already dressed.

“OK, Bobby, I’m going to go scratch some stuff together in the galley, and then cook outside. Go on out and get comfy. I think Mother’s already started, I think I smell coffee.” *She* certainly was acting like an old hand at marriage!

Obediently, I put on my jumpsuit and headed up and out. I wondered if their clothing synthesizer still worked, and if it had enough raw material to make up something for me. Of course, I could hike back to my *Thundercloud* and salvage the rest of my clothing. Might not be a bad idea to go back, see what more I could scavenge out of it. Besides, I thought, Penny and I were an independent family now. The Jupe’s resources were freely available, of course, but the more we relied on those, the less independent we really were.

Meanwhile, this jumpsuit was getting pretty obnoxious. The only reason it was at all tolerable was that this world was so hot and dry that any sweat dried on your body before it could even get to your clothes. Well, I’d run it under some water later and wear a robe until it dried – in this climate, that would be about ten minutes. Dammit, I thought, I should have just gone into the pond with it yesterday.

*melancolico*

As my perceptive bride had suspected, Maureen was already up and about with the coffee going.

“Good morning – Maureen.” I thought of something as she handed me a cup. “Sorry if this sounds weird, but – what should I call you now? Is ‘Maureen’ OK, or do I call you Mom or something now?” I guessed I did still have a few things to learn.

She chuckled merrily. “That’s a good question, isn’t it? You’re certainly welcome to call me ‘Maureen,’ but –” She eyed me speculatively. Maybe she sensed a need in me that I didn’t even realize. “The children have always called me ‘Mom,’ or ‘Mother’ as they got older. I think that’s something a little special to them.” She took a long, meditative sip at her coffee. “I think if you’d like to call me ‘Mum,’ that would be very nice. That’s a family sort of name. *Anybody* can call me Maureen.”

Something inside me felt funny. “Thanks – Mum.”

Maureen –Mum– grabbed me suddenly in a hug. I put my head down on her shoulder, and she ruffled my hair. “You’re not much more than a child yourself, are you?” she whispered. “You must miss your parents, don’t you?”

Suddenly I did. I felt every inch of all the cold light-years between here and Earth, and the despair of knowing that I couldn't get any closer to it than I could jump in the air. It's one thing to come back home at the end of a hitch in space and know your family is something you can easily avoid. It's another thing entirely to know that you likely will never see them again, and that they will never know anything more of you, except the polite form letter from the Rescue Service, with the uncomfortable words, "Missing and presumed lost, in space."

"Oh, Mum. Mum."

"It's alright, Bobby. We all have to be strong here, but none of us can be that strong all the time. You learn how to take turns. It's alright, really." She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. "I think you have some dust in your eyes," she whispered. "You might want to wipe it out before Penny sees." I did need the handkerchief, just a little bit. "You be sure Penny knows it's all right to take turns with you, now. I think sometimes she tries too hard."

"I know. Thanks, Mum." She darted her eyes beyond me; I turned, and there was Penny with a bowl of – something that would be breakfast. I sat down with my coffee. Maureen ruffled my hair one last time.

"The cooker's all yours, honey," Maureen said to Penny. "What are you fixing?"

"Omelets or scrambled eggs. I'm not sure how this recipe is going to turn out."

Maureen smiled. "I'll be inside for a bit. Just shout if you need help."

Penny sat down by me and took a sip of coffee from my cup. "Mother is a wonderful lady, isn't she?" I nodded silently. She glanced sideways at me, reading my face. "Dusty this morning, isn't it?" she asked gently. I nodded again. "It's like that sometimes," she said. Penny placed her hand on mine and squeezed.

I took another deep breath, shook my head, and turned to my wife. She'd been here more *years* than I'd been here days. I picked up her hand and kissed it softly. "Whaddya mean, 'Omelets *or* scrambled eggs'?"

*piacevole*

Sometime later, a large batch of something that could have been either omelets or scrambled eggs was on the table. Although not particularly appealing to the eye, it smelled and tasted good. As Penny and I ate, we were joined first by Don and Judy, then Dr. Smith. Will and his parents evidently had their own meal in the galley.

There was plenty, and Penny served out the others as I set another pot of coffee to brew.

Judy spoke, with mild reproof. "You know, Penny, we do feel a little bit cheated. Some of us thought that when you got married, we'd get to give you a little bit of a party, at least."

"We can have a party or something tonight if you like. Will that give you time to go shopping for presents?"

The two girls looked at each other and laughed.

Dr. Smith spoke. "Penny, my dear, I must confess, it did break my heart waking to the news that you were a bride, without as much as single grain of rice thrown at you. Dear heart, if you have any consideration at all for your old friend Zachary, please do allow us to celebrate your conjugal bliss in a manner befitting the affection which we all feel toward you."

I still didn't understand the bond Penny –and Will, too, evidently– shared with this seemingly loathsome character. A surrogate grandfather? Possibly. I couldn't imagine that I could ever warm to him like that.

“Although I have little, if anything, of material value to offer you, Penny dear, by way of a wedding or housewarming gift, I can certainly extend to you all the best wishes for happiness which I can.”

He sounded like a cheapskate, too.

I wished there was something I could give Penny as a wedding present. I remembered I had a photo of the *Jupiter 2* in my cabin back on the T-Cloud. Would she appreciate that?

“Well, Dr. Smith, you could loan me some of your CDs to copy. You have some I like, you know, and most of mine are getting pretty beat up.” CDs! I thought. Those were things in secondhand stores, in the same bins as 8-tracks and videotapes.

Suddenly, a couple of wheels turned in my head, and the cogs slipped in to the right place. Of course, I had practically the entire music library of mankind back on the T-Cloud! I jumped up in excitement. “Penny! I’ve got all the music you could ever want to listen to for the rest of your life on my ship! Most of that equipment should be intact! We can take the Chariot down, strip it out, and bring it all back, all the music, all the video, hundreds of books, everything you could ever want! I’ve got new music and shows you’ve never seen, too, from after you left! Oh my God, I’m such an idiot!”

Penny’s face lit up like sunrise. “Oh, do you really think so? That would be wonderful! You really think it will all work here? Oh Bobby, that’s about the only thing I could really ask for!”

“I’m sure! I’m certain! Even if the equipment is damaged, the storage drives should be fine, and I’m sure between Will and the Robot, we could rig up some way to make them work. It’s all basically the same digital storage, just a better way than you had when you left Earth. I’m certain!”

*bellicoso, con fuoco*

Dr. Smith raised a disapproving eyebrow. I think he disliked that his meager offering was being bested. “You must have some remarkable gear if it survived a planetary crash, young man.”

“Trust me, I do.”

“Well,” said Smith. “You seem very sure of yourself and your gear. From what you’ve said before, it seems highly unlikely your poor little *Thundercloud* came down with much more than yourself in one piece.”

“Really. It’s rough-duty gear, made to survive just about anything—” I stopped. “What did you just say, Dr. Smith?” I asked.

“I said, dear boy, that you were very fortunate to have survived the crash of your ship, and it is probably a vain hope to imagine that much more is still in anything remotely close to serviceable condition.”

Penny spoke up. “What’s “Thundercloud,” Bobby? Was that the name of your ship?”

I stared at my breakfast. A pregnant silence hung in the morning air.

Across the table from me, Dr. Smith suddenly had an extremely guilty and apprehensive look on his face.

I had not uttered the name “Thundercloud” since being here.

I honest-to-God do not remember the next few seconds. The next thing I knew was being sprawled across the breakfast table, with plates of egg flying about and my hands around Smith’s throat.

I never knew my voice could hit such a high register. “YOU MISERABLE GOATPOUNDER!!! YOU VISCIOUS NO-GOOD – YOU HEARD IT! *YOU HEARD IT!!!* YOU HEARD MY MAYDAY!”

I remembered that last ambiguous garble to come over the radio before I strapped in for the crash. “AND YOU CALLED BACK! WHAT DID YOU TELL ME? ‘TOUGH LUCK, SEE YOU IN VALHALLA?’”

Smith was screaming incoherent protests and denials; Don, Judy and Penny were all over me, trying to pull me away from Smith. In all the world, in all the Universe, there is no graver crime, no wickedness greater, than ignoring a Mayday.

“GET OFF OF ME, GET OFF OF ME ALL OF YOU, GODDAMIT, I’M GOING TO TAKE HIS HEAD OFF! NOBODY – NOBODY! – BLOWS OFF A MAYDAY!!! YOU ROTTEN NO GOOD PIECE OF –”

“Bobby, stop it, now!” Penny screamed at me. “Please, Bobby, you’re – you’re really scaring me!” That was what cut through the blood-fever.

For more than a hundred years, that Mayday call has been near-sacred, from seafaring days right through to spacefaring. *Nobody* ignores a Mayday call. And that was my business, or had been. My work was people living and dying on the strength of a distress call, and too often dying. Ignoring a Mayday was murder, in my lights, it didn’t even matter that it was me on the lousy end of the stick.

Judy was tending to Smith. He was still gibbering hysterically. “Come on, Dr. Smith, let’s get out of here,” she encouraged. She hustled him inside.

Penny took me by the shoulders. “Bobby, look at me!” She spoke commandingly. “You must calm down now. You’re being – crazy. *Bad* crazy. I love you dearly, but you’re really frightening me, and you have to stop it.”

I was shaking all over, but I closed my eyes and let the fury wash away. Don asked, “You gonna be OK now, buddy?” I nodded. “I think we’ve all wanted to do that, one time or another,” he grinned. “You’re just the first to actually try it.”

“Don, you understand, don’t you? We have the same job, you’re a pilot. Can you help explain to Penny why this is such a big deal?”

He patted me on the shoulder. He gave me his lopsided grin, but continued watching me closely. “Sure I understand. I’ll do what I can, later on. Meanwhile . . .” he gestured toward my wife.

I turned back to Penny. Her eyes were wide, and still frightened. I took a step toward her, and she drew back; it was a knife to my heart. “Penny . . .” I didn’t know what to say. This was twice now, in as many days, I had discovered a far darker side to myself than I could have imagined. How deep did it run?

*penseroso, poi ridicolosamente*

We spent the rest of the day down at the oasis, Penny and me, Don and Judy, trying to figure out how to carve houses out of the rocks. We figured out early on that my idea of piping pond water through the houses as a coolant wasn’t practical.

“Not that it isn’t a good idea, Bobby,” Don assured me. “Just that we don’t have anywhere near enough pipe to do it. There’s no hardware store downtown to get more, either.”

“There has to be some way.”

“Don’t forget the winters are going to be just as dangerous. Maybe even more so. Just a little bit of shelter and shade are enough to survive the week or so when it really burns. You need a lot more than that when it’s a hundred below zero, and the winds are blowing sixty miles an hour.”

“Why is that water so damn cold? Seems like there’s a mystery there, and if we solve it, we could take care of moderating the summer and winter temps both.”

Don shook his head. "It doesn't maintain that same temperature through the winter, if that's what you're thinking. It freezes solid just like it's supposed to."

"Winter, you can always build a fire."

"Ha! With what? There's not enough plant material here to feed a decent fire for two hours."

I conceded the point. "But you have all kinds of seeds in storage, right? If we could start planting good fast-growing pine or something now –"

"It would die in the winter before it ever got near big enough. Yeah, a good size forest would help moderate the local climate and give us firewood and building material. But it can't grow in the climate we've got. The old Catch-22."

"We can borrow heaters off the Jupe and use the solar chargers. But that's still leaves us dependent on the ship, which is what we want to get away from. Let's get back to summer. What do you think of this: the lowest level of a house –the basement– is basically a pool. Cut channels to divert pond water in, no pipes, keep maybe a half-meter depth –about two feet– a natural heat sink. It's not real air conditioning, but it would keep you alive and comfortable during Burn Week."

Don scratched his head. "Sounds plausible. Might make for some humidity inside though. I'll load up the architecture programs in the computer tonight, and see if we can start coming up with some actual designs."

During this discussion, Don and I had been meandering about the area, while the girls had slipped off another way. I looked around to make sure they were all right, and saw them standing at the edge of the pond. They were huddled together, in animated conversation. I saw Penny point into the water. Judy put her hand to her mouth, as if stifling laughter. Telling tales, I imagined. Penny then held up forefinger and thumb, a scant inch apart. They both doubled over laughing, heads close together. I cast an evil eye in Penny's direction; she saw my glance and waved at me coyly.

"What's going on over there?" asked Don, looking over his shoulder.

"Girls being girls."

I looked back over. My blushing bride gestured toward a certain large flat rock, and Judy's mouth dropped open, half amused, half shocked. Penny looked over, waved again. Judy glanced up and waved too.

"Bobby, you need to get out of the sun?" asked Don. "You look like you're about to get sunstroke, you're so red."

I grabbed Don by the elbow and headed us up to the Chariot. The girls followed a few minutes later. They walked up, arm-in-arm, whispering back and forth. The short ride back was thankfully quiet, save for the occasional sputter of laughter from the girls in the back seat.

### *imperioso*

John approached me later that evening. "Heard about you and Smith."

"There's something wrong with that guy."

"I'd say there's something wrong with jumping over a table, trying to strangle an old man."

I nearly retorted with something about men slapping around young girls, but decided to hold on to it. "Guess I have more of a temper than I realized."

"Guess we both have a hot streak. Funny, Don's always been the one for that. Anyway, I wanted you to know I apologized to Penny for – yesterday."

I nodded curtly. "She told me."

"And I apologize to you, for striking your wife." He extended a hand which I met with my own, and that incident became a sealed book.

“Penny was asking me earlier about taking the Chariot down to your ship so you can recover some goodies. I wondered, is there any chance there’s still some fuel aboard her?”

I briefly explained how I had jettisoned my engineering compartment, how the fuel granules had fused into a solid mass, and that I wasn’t certain my fuel would be compatible with the *Jupiter 2*’s older-style deuteronium engines anyway. “Not thinking of bailing out now, are you John?”

“No, not at all. Honestly, I’m not even sure the ship is still space-worthy. She’s taken a beating here, and I wouldn’t bet any lives that she wouldn’t pop apart at the seams up in hard vacuum. No, I just thought I might be able to get her aloft in atmosphere to do some scouting and surveying, maybe find a better locale for permanent settlement.”

Still procrastinating, I thought to myself, but it did spark an idea of my own. “I’ll see if I can figure something out, John,” I replied. “Penny and I will go down to the old T-Cloud tomorrow, and I’ll do a little brainstorming.”

*con brio*

I woke up and automatically counted the third day of my marriage. I supposed the time would come when my first thought in the morning would no longer be the tally of this miracle. I hoped it would be a long time before I could view it so nonchalantly.

I realized I had woken before the alarm went off, and lay there quietly. It sounded a few minutes later – this morning it was a waterfall. Penny stirred, and I playfully spanked her bottom. “Come on, angel, let’s get going. Today’s the day I show you the old neighborhood I grew up in. Or crashed down in. Something like that.”

Under the covers, she wriggled her bottom teasingly. I gave it another light swat.

“That’s a lot nicer than a slap in the face,” she smiled at me. Her eyes twinkled hungrily.

“This morning it’s *my* turn to say, ‘Save it for later.’ C’mon, let’s grab some coffee and hit the road before it gets too hot.”

“Sure you can find your way back? There aren’t many landmarks, and the wind will have wiped out any footprints by now.”

“Pretty sure. I do remember a couple of landmarks, and isn’t there some kind of radar or scanner in the Chariot?”

“Yeah, but it can be erratic, it’s getting old. You have a metal hull, or polymer?”

“Polymer/graphite composite. About the worst thing for radar to find. Because my job, you actually want to be seen, I had some good radar reflectors to make it show up, but I don’t know if they survived re-entry and crashing.”

“Oh well. I think we can count on some luck.” We had been dressing through this, now she faced me, clothed. “I think we’ve been pretty lucky together so far, don’t you?”

I pulled her close, inhaled the scent of her hair. “The luckiest,” I agreed, pulling back just enough to kiss her cheek lightly, the one her father had struck. Impulsively, I pulled her tight against me again, kissed her rollickingly on the lips. When that was done, I put my lips to her ear, whispered, “Have I told you that I love you yet, this morning?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, I do. So there.”

We raced up and out. Mum was already there with coffee ready and a basket. “I made you some sandwiches to take. Food pills aren’t enough when you’re traveling.”

“Thanks, Mum,” I smiled. “You think of everything, don’t you?”



Penny was already in the driver's seat, revving up the engine. I wondered if she'd let me have a turn driving it today – it looked like fun!

“Just go to our oasis and head due south,” I shouted over the roar of the engine. “How fast can this thing go?”

Inside, with the doors all shut, it was much quieter. “She'll do about thirty-five miles an hour over clear sand.” I did some quick conversions in my head. They still tended to use the old measures, not metric, and rather than make an issue of it, I was trying to re-acclimate myself. Even the US had gone over to metric about five years before, so it was a while since I'd thought in miles and inches and pounds.

“So maybe an hour, hour and a half, if we don't have to waste too much time searching. Two hours tops. About an hour back. Let's cap time there at two hours. That'll leave us plenty of daylight to get back in.” She nodded.

Already we were cutting below the oasis, and the terrain was leveling off. With a near-manic grin on her face, Penny jammed the throttles to full ahead. The treads grabbed sand and the vehicle shot forward.

*veloce*

It was a rolling, bumpy ride as the Chariot flew over the uneven dunes. I laughed aloud.

“What?” asked Penny.

“A week ago, I would have thought half light-speed was too pokey. Now, thirty miles an hour is breakneck!”

Penny laughed wickedly. “Push that button on the dashboard there, the black one with the ‘S.’”

“What is it?”

“Superchargers!” she replied, as I thumbed it.

The engines howled like banshees and the Chariot kicked up to nearly forty m.p.h. We hit a low ridge and I swear we went airborne. Another one, a steeper one, loomed into view, and Penny steered straight at it!

“You're nuts!” I screamed over the engine noise. She looked over at me, laughing harder than I had seen yet. “You just love this, don't you?”

She nodded her head. Her eyes gleamed as she took the ridge, and that time we definitely caught air under the treads. The Chariot hit the ground with a bone-jarring thump. I was panicking a bit.

“You got seat belts in this thing?”

“Chicken!” she called. “I've been doing this since I was a kid! Just don't tell Daddy, OK? He'd kill me if he ever caught me beating on this thing like this, it's his baby!”

“Not the greatest word choices there, my darlin'.”

“Oh. Well you know what I mean.”

“Um, really, could you slow down a tad? I've already survived one crash in this desert, and although I believe in luck, I don't believe in pressing it.”

She gave me an amused, exasperated look, but pulled the throttles back – slightly. She left the superchargers engaged. “Better?” I nodded. “You've nothing to worry about when you've got the Luck of the Scottish riding with you.”

“The *what*?”

“The Luck of the Scottish.”

“That's funny. Don't you mean ‘Luck of the Irish’? That's all I ever heard on Earth.”

“You’re kidding. No? Hmm.” Penny looked about the landscape, and pulled the throttles back another notch. The remainder of the trip was somewhat less thrilling.

*mesto*

We found the ship with little trouble. She showed up nicely on the scanner after all. But the *Thundercloud* was an alarming sight in person. Penny looked horrified. “You survived a crash that did *that*? Who are you, Ironman?”

Even I was shaken, seeing the damage. I didn’t appreciate it at the time; I suppose I was still in some shock. If I ever got a message to Earth again, I wanted to thank the company that made that bunk crash-shell. I’d even volunteer to do commercials for them.

Most of her hull was gone, what remained barely hung together. The parawings drooped lifelessly, their fabric already shredding. Not even the week or more of wind had completely erased the skidmark in the sand; it stretched off as far as I could see.

I took Penny’s hand and together we carefully stepped into the flight deck. I looked around with some bittersweet nostalgia. I bit my lower lip wistfully. “Racked up a lot of flight hours with this girl,” I murmured. “And she took care of me, right to the end. Thank you, sweetheart, well done,” I said, running my hand along the contours of the control console.

I pulled open a small compartment. Inside was a stack of storage disks in their cradle. “Here you go, my love,” handing one to Penny.

She frowned and studied the disk, about the size of a quarter, and a dark, flat black in color. “What’s on this?”

“Well, you can’t tell just by looking at it. It has to be in the cradle, see?” I showed her the others, neatly lined up. “This is what reads them, and the output jack over here plugs into any standard sound system. This cradle holds up to 50. You put it all together, and the system screen will give you each disk’s name, then all the subfolders and contents when you want to see. Or you just hit the “Play” button and it’ll run through the whole collection.”

“Wow, how much is on this?”

“Lemme see . . . hey, I think I know what this one is. That was the one on this end, right? I tried to keep my stuff alphabetical, so I think this would be The Beatles.”

“Neat! What songs, or what albums?”

I looked at Penny with slight amusement. “You weren’t listening before, were you? That’s ‘The Beatles.’ Everything. All the albums, all the singles, all the movies.”

She stared at the disk, and the cradle with 49 others just like it. “Classical too? Schubert? Tchaikovsky?”

“You bet. Oh, maybe not lined up there, ready to go. That’s there’s just the power rotation. Here’s the rest.” I opened another cabinet. Inside were two dozen disk cases, 50 per case.

Penny put her hand to her mouth in astonishment. “Holy –” She stood blinking in disbelief. “Movies too?”

“That’s what I said.”

“This stuff better work, that’s all I can say. Well, I’m sure Will can fix anything up.”

“Hey, come here, let me give you something.” I led her off the flight deck and into my cabin. I pointed out the crash-shell. “That gizmo there is what saved my life. Believe me, I’m no Ironman.”

I pulled open a drawer and found my portable media player. “Gimme the disk.” She handed it to me; I slipped it in to the slot and watched the player light up. “Yeah, I didn’t think you’d be dead so quick. Here, Penny, pop the headphones on.”

Eagerly she slipped the headpiece into place and grabbed the player from my hand. I could already hear the sound. Her whole face lit up, and her mouth opened. “YAAAAAHHHHHHHH!” she screamed. “*You say you want a revolution, we-ell you know –*” She went silent, but continued nodding in time with the music, hair flying about, like an old-timey headbanger.

I tapped her on the shoulder. “Come on, love, you’ve got the rest of your life to listen to that. Let’s strip this place and head back.” Reluctantly, she detached herself from the player and handed it back to me. I switched it off and tossed it on my bunk. “Hey, I forgot, I’ve got a real blanket here to bring back.”

“Did you grow the wool yourself?”

“Smartass. It’s synthetic.” I spread it out on the bed. “Here, toss me the clothes out of that dresser. Please. Oh, there’s a few real books in that cupboard over there. Take a look and if there’s one you like, pass it over here. Oh hey, let’s not to forget this.” I pulled the old photo of the *Jupiter 2* down and placed it carefully in the blanket.

She took the whole half-dozen or so books without even looking at them, and placed them in the blanket. A few minutes work was all it took to collect the remains of my previous life into a small bundle. I gazed around the cabin longingly, and sighed.

*impetuoso, poi freddo*

“Let me take this out and I’ll be right back. We’re not finished.” I stepped directly out through where hull once was, loaded the Chariot, then back in to the cabin. Penny was stretched out on the bunk. I sat down on the edge. “Tired, my love?”

She gave me a certain smile. “No. Not *tired*.” She took my hand and softly pressed my fingertips with her teeth. “I wouldn’t say I’m *tired* at all.”

I blinked awkwardly, then leaned over and put a perfunctory kiss on her forehead. “It’s a wonderful thought, my angel, but let’s finish business here and get back home. I don’t want to be barreling around the desert in the dark with Crash Gordon at the throttle.”

I walked back out to the flight deck, found some tools. “We need to get this part stripped out of the console. This is the main player unit, and the connections should fit your own video and sound gear on the Jupe.” Penny sprawled in the pilot’s seat, looking slightly miffed. “Do me a favor, you see that vacuum-tight port over there, the one about a meter high – I mean, three feet high, a foot wide? See if you can get that handle turning for me, there’s something I want out of it.”

Penny eyed me, then silently stepped over to the port, figured out the mechanism, and swung the hatch open. I was almost finished with what I was doing, just one last nut to unscrew –there it went– and the player unit slipped out easily.

Inside the port Penny had opened was something that looked like a small missile, about four feet long. Fair enough, that’s essentially what it was. It was my last Mayday drone. Hopefully it wasn’t damaged. They’re built sturdily, and the way it was stowed in foam cradling could protect it from some pretty severe shock.

I pulled it out, and balanced it on my shoulder. “My love, if you want to grab the player unit there, we can go. I’ve got this OK.”

“Whatever you say.” She picked up the music almost disinterestedly, and followed me out.

I paused just long enough to pat the hull of the *Thundercloud* in farewell. “So long, old girl,” I whispered.

I pulled myself up into the passenger seat again, while Penny took the controls of the Chariot. There was a wind blowing now, and I could see the shattered hull of my T-Cloud swaying with the gusts. “Almost wish I could give her a proper burial,” I mused. “All shredded open and wrecked like that, she almost looks – indecent. You know?”

Penny was still strangely silent. She glanced back and forth between me and the broken ship. Finally she spoke, in a tone flat and bitter. “That ship. That ship was like a girlfriend to you, wasn’t it?”

The other shoe dropped – Penny was jealous. I almost wanted to laugh, but I knew that could be disastrous. Besides, she had a point. Ships have been “she” since antiquity, and just because they started flying in space instead of sailing the oceans made no difference to the men who worked them. Ships have personalities, they’re individuals. In their own way they’re alive, with some spark in them that makes them more than just the sum of their parts. Don, I knew, would understand.

Yes, T-Cloud had been mistress and mother and protectress and teacher to me, all rolled together. Yes, a man can love a ship.

“Yeah.”

“Just looking at how you were touching it – it was like the way you touch me.”

“I’m sorry. Penny, really, it’s just a wrecked spaceship.”

“Am I being a silly, jealous girl?”

I sighed. *That* was a trick question. “Don’t say that.”

“That’s why I wanted you, in there. I wanted that ship to know that you belonged to me, now.”

“I understand.” A pang of guilt stabbed my gut. And that’s why I wouldn’t, I didn’t say. I looked out again at my *Thundercloud*’s battered body. Penny didn’t want to make love with me in there, she wanted to look my ship in the eye and spit in her face.

“What a perfect girlfriend. Always there for you, no matter where you go. A wild, free spirit, just like your own.”

I reached over and took Penny’s hand. She resisted ever-so-slightly, then yielded, wrapped her fingers around mine, and squeezed. “In case you didn’t notice, my angel, I’ve been domesticated recently. The siren call of the spaceways is no more than cosmic static to me now.”

Penny looked over at me, and started grinning. A familiar sparkle had returned to her eyes. “Do you pay somebody to write that crap for you?”

“It *is* pretty sad, isn’t it?” I asked.

“What’s *really* sad is that I’m buying it.”

We swiveled the seats inward to face each other, hugged, held hands. I reached out and let my fingers trail sensuously along the curve of her cheek, and down the graceful sweep of her neck. How beautiful you are, I thought. I glanced at the clock. There were still a good 3 or 4 hours of daylight left. I looked my wife in the eyes. “Would you still like to . . . ?” I nodded toward the ship.

Penny regarded me thoughtfully. “No. Not now. I don’t need to.” Almost imperceptibly, she sat up straighter, tossed her head up a little higher. “Let’s go home.” She thumbed the starter button and the Chariot roared to life.

She glanced sideways at me. “But ask again a little later this evening.”

We shared a certain smile. “As if I’d have to,” I murmured as an aside, and took the consequent slap on top of my head.

*veloce, encore*

Penny jockeyed the Chariot around, and jammed the throttles forward. With a manic grin, she aimed right for a depression. “Yowww-oh!” I grunted, as my stomach tried to jump up through my head.

“Hey sweetheart, maybe now we can have a little chat about *your* relationship with this crazy toboggan!”

Penny hooted wildly, and kicked in the superchargers.

*serioso*

Another brand new day.

After breakfast, I showed Will the sound system and asked if he could tie it in to the Jupe’s equipment.

He favored me with an almost condescending smirk. “Piece of cake.”

I showed John the Mayday drone. “I want to get this high enough for a launch. I’d really like to let Earth know we’re here. We’re going to need to get more colonists here, and establish trade with Earth and the other colonies. I can tack any message into this I want. But it’s gotta . . .” In frustration, I stabbed my finger repeatedly skyward.

“This is something from after my time, Bobby. Explain to me. This can’t be launched from the ground?”

“Nah. Air’s too thick for it. It’ll burn all its fuel just trying to make escape velocity, pushing through soup like this. It’s designed low-mass so you can carry a few of them and not worry about compromising your primary payload capacity. It has to carry all the same components as any ship – reaction chamber, photon jets, hyperdrive converter, and guidance computer. Fuel is the only place you can skimp. The theory is, most emergencies are going to be up there, so it’s designed to launch in space, or upper atmosphere at the most. I launched my primary at I think five kilometers, maybe what, fifteen thousand feet? Hell, plain old airliners at ho— on Earth fly twice that high. I mean, it’s not *definitely* too low. I’m just hoping our atmosphere is thinner at that altitude than on Earth. But if I had to make odds, I’d bet that drone went dry some time before escape, and is either dead in orbit right now, or already crashed somewhere out there.

“So yesterday when you asked about my fuel, and getting the *Jupiter 2* aloft, I realized that might be a good chance to get this baby back to civilization and invite everyone by for a housewarming party.”

John shook his head. “But your fuel is lost.”

“If Will is the miracle-worker he seems to be, I bet he could get the T-Cloud’s tracking system back in order and charged up. The engine module should be transmitting a beacon for at least a month or two.”

“What frequency is the signal? I’m not sure our regular equipment would pick it up, but the Robot can scan frequencies Marconi never imagined.”

Of course. There was radio equipment all around me. “John? Do me a favor. Kick me hard.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry. We all miss things once in a while.”

“Speaking of the Robot: could he tolerate opening up the cylinder and chopping that stuff up? This isn’t your deuteronium, John, by the way, this is 115.”

John’s eyes widened in alarm. “*Element 115?! I don’t wonder you jettisoned the stuff.*”

“Yeah. Come to think of it, I wouldn’t even want to crack that cylinder unless the whole operation was under shielding.”

“One thing at a time, Bobby. Let’s see if we can get a signal first, and worry about the rest later. I’d suggest giving the frequency to the Robot first. If he picks it up, he can move around to triangulate and tell us exactly where it is.”

“All right then. Sounds good.”

*vittorioso*

Don came trotting over. “Bobby, guess what! We found a perfect place to start cutting in houses. There’s bedrock from a bluff right up to the pond. We can have a permanent channel bringing water right into the house. Cut it, then cover and seal it. Elevation is perfect too, it’s a slight downgrade run, so it’ll be gravity fed. We’ll be able to tap it for regular running water too.”

“Sounds great! What are you thinking, two completely independent buildings? Or side by side, sharing the water channel and foundation? That would save a lot of effort.”

“Right, like a duplex. Makes sense. That’s what I’d suggest.”

“It’s a plan, then.”

“Whoo-hoo!” we shouted together, and bumped our hands together in a number of different ways.

Just then the three ladies emerged from the ship. They looked like they’d been up to something.

I stepped over to Penny. “Did you hear Don, m’love? We have a home site, and tomorrow we can really start building. Isn’t that great?”

She threw her arms around me. “It’s wonderful, you big clunk.”

“Huh?”

She sighed. “I hate to dwell on it, but Mother and Judy were giving me one of those long girl talks. This was the one about men, and their cars and trucks and boats and spaceships and motorcycles and snowmobiles and airplanes. I’m very much relieved to learn you’re a perfectly normal man.”

“Oh, and is that a fact now? I could have told you I’m perfectly normal. What? Your husband’s word isn’t good enough for you?”

“Hush up, you, and hold me tight. Pretend I’m a tube of toothpaste and you’re squeezing the last little bit out of me.” I happily obliged.

I glanced over to Mum. “Do I get a long talk about girls and their Chariots?”

“Ohhh, shush, what did I tell you?” Penny demanded, kicking my foot. “Hope Daddy didn’t hear that.”

Maureen stepped closer. “What about girls and their Chariots?”

“You kidding? Any idea how this kid drives?”

Mum’s face cracked into a grin and a wicked chuckle spilled out. “Are *you* kidding? Any idea who *taught* this kid to drive?”

*con somma passione*

Evening arrived then, quite cool. There was definitely a change of seasons in the air. I guessed we would start eating indoors soon, at least at the ends of the day.

I went on in below decks, to stow away the gear I had brought back. I spread the blanket—a real blanket at last!—on the bed, and tucked my clothing away. No, wait. I stripped down, showered quickly, and put on all clean clothes. What a relief! I hadn't realized before how grubby I must have been.

There was some commotion out in the galley/lounge area. I looked out. Will was stuck under an equipment bank, and Dr. Smith was nearby, uttering meaningless bits of encouragement to him, and fumbling with tools. Every so often Will asked for some tool or component, and Smith would fumble more, passing down a random assortment until Will got what he needed. Shortly, the Boy Genius popped out from under.

Seeing me, he grinned. "All set! I think it's gonna be movie night!"

Smith snuck a glance in my direction, and pretended I wasn't there. Suited me; I returned the silent treatment.

The women were in the galley, putting the finishing touches on dinner; John and Don arrived, and our group was complete. Maureen announced, "Every once in a while, we let ourselves have a nice casual dinner. Now, everyone find a seat over in the lounge, because tonight is dinner at the movies, followed by a wedding reception!"

She and Judy started filling and passing out plates; Penny brought over one for me, one for her. We sat together in a large single chair—a bit of a squeeze, perfect for lovers. Judy sat in a chair, Don on the floor at her feet. Will was showing his mother how to run the player: evidently she took the privilege of selecting the first movie. She grabbed her own plate and turned down the lights. "Oh, I nearly forgot. Robot! Come on in and watch this with us. I know you have a little bit of a human side in you, and I think you'll like this." The Robot obediently wheeled in and parked himself unobtrusively to the rear of the room.

I turned around. "Just try and keep the noises down, OK?"

"Affirmative," he whispered back.

Maureen hit one last button and sat down. It was an old movie that I had seen once or twice when I was little; I seemed to recall it was one of my grandmother's favorites. I'd noticed the title in the catalog, but hadn't bothered watching it. It was called *The Sound of Music*.

There was lots of singing and dancing and kids running around and bad guys and more singing, and I had a bit of a hard time following it. Soon, empty plates had quietly moved to the floor, and Penny had quietly moved onto my lap. Our hands squeezed, and she seemed to be quite moved by the show. I guessed this was what they call a "chick flick." There was another scene with a lot of kids singing. I squinted at the screen, then poked Penny in the ribs. "That little one on the end looks kinda like you," I whispered.

"Shush, don't tease."

There were more bad guys then, and more running around, and running up mountains, and more singing. Finally it ended. The sudden silence was startling. I heard Penny sniff.

"Sententious slop," muttered Dr. Smith.

Abruptly, there was a horrible wailing behind me. Everyone jumped in their seats and turned. "Oh, wah! Wah, wah!" came the electronic voice. The Robot was . . . crying? His torso spun helplessly, and his arms flailed about. "Oh, that was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen! Oh, how stirring! What pathos! It is just too much for me to compute, oh wah, wah!" He spun and rolled hurriedly away. "TIL YOU FIND YOUR DREAM!" he croaked unmusically.

We all stared at each other in astonishment. "That's the nuttiest thing I've ever seen," I whispered to Penny.

"Will, what in the name of Orion's Belt have you done to that monster?" demanded Don.

*omaggio*

Mum shook her head in disbelief, and turned up the lights. She beckoned Penny and me over to stand by the galley table. “You two aren’t getting away *tonight!*” she teased. “Bobby, you go put on the best uniform you have. We’re taking photos.”

“But I just put this one on!”

“I don’t care, you go change clothes. Maybe you don’t have Class As or full dress or whatever you call it, but see if you have something with a little gold braid and no rips.”

“Oh, Mum!” I said, and darted over to the cabin. I found one which met her criteria. Gold pips on the collar, and cuffed sleeves. It was in good condition, as I was rarely called upon to wear it. I changed quickly, and went back out.

I caught my breath. Penny wore her regular clothes, but from somewhere, Mum had come up with a little square of lace and wrapped it into her hair. It fell down over her eyes just enough to be called a veil. A smallish orange-and-yellow blossom was pinned to her blouse, just below the right shoulder.

For a moment, I didn’t dare speak. I stepped over to her and hugged her carefully. I touched the flower. “Is that – ?”

She nodded. “Of course I saved it.”

Don called to us, “OK, turn this way so I can take a couple of pictures.” We did, lights flashed. Don caught us in a few different poses, formal and otherwise. Penny and I collected hugs or handshakes or kisses from the rest. Dr. Smith –briefly– dropped his mask and let what was almost his second personality shine on Penny.

Everyone was happy that night.

*tempo rubato*

Winter was laborious drudgery.

We moved the laser cannon down to the oasis. The Robot was programmed with CAD diagrams. Networked to the laser, he directed the slow carving out of the stone. Another trip to the T-Cloud yielded some wireless components, which freed him from being hard-wired in to the laser. The job still occupied most of his capacity, but it saved us from the necessity of hooking him up every morning and disconnecting him at night; he could also move out of potential hazards on his own without needing us to tend cables. Along with cutting out space, he also cut blocks of stone to build with. He finally got a signal from my engine compartment, and fixed a position for future reference. It was too far to travel at this time of year.

Don and I spent hours each day in the ship’s libraries, researching ancient building techniques: we assumed we would have nothing like cement to hold the blocks together. We re-discovered arches, vaulting, flying buttresses, columns and pediments, and other techniques dating from the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages.

The Robot carried stones for us as much as he could, but placement could only be done by us – he couldn’t climb a ladder of course. It was months of the hardest work I had ever done. John and Will worked with us too. We had to break for a week at the dead of winter. It was so cold we had to seal off the upper deck of the *Jupiter 2* and huddle below. Dr. Smith griped interminably. We ate and drank, watched movies, listened to music.

Penny and I snuggled in bed often, made love, ignored the rest of the universe.



The Robot gave his life for us. Well, not really, but it seemed like it at the time. The batteries which ran the heating system were running low. For three days, there had been no sun to tickle the solar panels and recharge them. We expected only another day or two of the worst, but mere hours without heat could be fatal. The Robot, *entirely on his own initiative*, plugged himself in to the batteries to transfer his remaining charge.

We watched silently as his lights dimmed and his sensors slowed their spinning. Soon he was sagging over, almost completely inert. Will, of all people, let out a sob. With his last volt, the Robot pulled himself upright, and spun to face the boy. "It is a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done before." Then he collapsed with a groan of static.

We got him charged back up as soon as possible after the week of Deep Winter. He couldn't have known for certain that his act of self-sacrifice would be enough to keep us alive to revive him. As far as the Robot knew, he *was* giving up his life for us.

Home construction resumed. Some of the work had to be redone, as wind and ice had collapsed parts of our still-precarious structures. "Don," I asked, "Are we really going to be able to keep these things warm enough? I'm starting to worry you were right about that."

He shook his head. "I just don't know. Sure would be nice to get that drone of yours up and make contact again. There's simple enough equipment that would do it. We just can't buy it in this neighborhood."

We didn't talk much along those lines afterward. The weeks became a blur. We planned work, did work, judged work. Sometimes we tore down a half a day's work because of some flaw, and worked again. In the afternoons, after it was too cold to be outside, we planned new work.

We ate, drank, loved our women.

Even with the thickest gloves, my hands grew rough and cracked from the cold and the stone. I had to stop work for three days when they got infected and so sore I could hardly stand to touch anything.

John was ten feet above the ground, straddling an arch, when he closed his eyes against a howl of wind, and found them frozen shut moments later. He jumped, trusting Don, Will and me to catch him. Will drove him back to the ship, Don and I worked.

Then one morning, someone realized the sun was above the horizon and shining through the windows of the upper deck, before breakfast. Spring was coming. The whole company of us, the Robot too, stood at the window to watch the sunrise, like ancients worshipping at Stonehenge.

I had survived my first winter at New Plymouth.

### *magnifico*

At breakfast, there was a vivacity to our group which had been missing for many weeks. Conversation approached an excited chatter, rather than the dispirited monotone drone of late. Bumping of elbows or hips was acknowledged with bright "Oops, sorry!"s rather than surly grunts. Coffee and pancakes tasted like newly-discovered delicacies.

As the meal wound down, John stood and made an announcement. "I'm going to exercise my privilege as governor and declare today a holiday! It's been a miserable few weeks, and I think we deserve a break."

"Hear, hear!" piped Dr. Smith. "All work and no play –"

"Oh put a sock in it, Smith," said Don cheerily. "Around here, every day is a Smith National Holiday already."

"Insolence! Bah! Someday, you'll all appreciate what I do for you." He stalked off to his cabin.

I jostled Penny's elbow. "Come on, angel, let's just go lie down and listen to some music for a while. Later on, we'll walk down and I'll show you our house." She walked over to the player system, cued up some music and directed it to our room. We stretched out, still dressed, as exotic-sounding music filled the room like incense.

"Hey, I like this. What is it?"

"It's called 'Scheherazade.' It's Russian, and a lot of Russian music is bold and powerful like this."

"It's very . . . sensuous. Sounds like music for dancing girls or something."

Penny turned and faced me. "Sometimes, you can be very perceptive." She favored me with a mysterious smile that matched the mood of the music.

We lay still, just holding hands a long while as the music played. Finally it ended. "Take me down to the oasis and show me our new house, dear husband. I want to walk outside and get some fresh air. I've hardly been off this deck in two weeks."

She smiled hugely, grabbed my elbow and rocked me back and forth. "Some of these days I've hardly been able to drag myself out of bed in the morning, now I want to run around outside! Come on!"

She pulled me to my feet, and on outside. We walked over slowly, but as we drew nearer, she finally broke into a run. "Oh my God, look at it!" The house did look impressive – for being here. It was a single story above ground, but another full floor below, and the cooling water pool below that. The pool was still dry; it would be a while yet before we blasted open the channel to flood it. She stood staring in silence for a bit.

"We think we'll be able to use the laser to fuse sand into glass for windows. Not sure about a door yet. May be able to cannibalize some sheet metal off the *Jupe* for that."

"Or some of the *Thundercloud*'s hull, maybe?"

"Maybe." I looked at her to see if she meant that as a gentle poke at me, but I thought not. "That's a good idea. Come to think of it, there's a couple doors on her still that we might be able to fit in."

"It's going to be wonderful, my love, I'm sure."

We stepped inside the unlit gloom of the stone walls. "Don and I are figuring bedrooms and such downstairs, regular living area up here. Careful, there aren't any proper stairs yet. Just look over the edge."

"Bathrooms?"

I hesitated. "We're still trying to figure that out. Modern plumbing is the hardest part. We may end up with little more than outhouses for a while."

"Eww." She peered down into the lower floor again. "Nice big bedrooms?"

"Exactly as requested."

She smiled, then turned abruptly. "Come on, let's go back to the ship. It's still pretty chilly out here."

We walked back completely unhurriedly. As we reached the ship, Penny said, "I'm going to go lie down for a little bit longer. All that good fresh air made me sleepy again." I went down to the cabin with her, and watched her stretch out. She displayed a very contented smile, which was impossible not to kiss.

"I'm going to talk to Don about planting things. We need to get seed down and stuff growing as soon as possible now."

Penny gave me another of those mysterious smiles. "You do that," she said. "I'll be right here."

*en pressant*

Another month went by. In that time, I'd gone with Don and Will to salvage electronics, hull fragments and doors from the T-Cloud. I knocked together something like a plow, and used the Chariot to drag a few irrigation channels into the sand off to the west side of the oasis. Later, we used it with sheets of hull to drag loads of hopefully-fertile soil from the boglands that lay to the north, spread it on the sand, and began planting.

As a colony ship, the *Jupiter 2* had extensive stores of seeds and starters, which had been left mostly untouched. We decided to try growing mostly small vegetables: tomatoes, turnips, onions, potatoes, carrots. This on the principle (more accurately the hope) that they would grow fairly quickly and ripen before the height of the summer burn, and maybe even allow a second planting and harvest before winter. We considered and discarded plans for grains, as we didn't have the manpower or practical experience for the tedious threshing and milling required.

After another month, the house was as complete as we could hope for. We had so far failed at glassmaking, so the windows were simple open squares. The T-Cloud's galley door was now our shared front door. About an acre of ground was planted, and green shoots were appearing. It was work as demanding and backbreaking as building the houses, if not more so.

*espansivo*

Spring advanced, and the weather was comfortably warm. Penny had started bringing our personal effects to the house, and was almost absurdly cheerful, the very image of the happy homemaker.

I was walking back up toward the ship when I saw Penny coming down the ramp with Dr. Smith. As they stepped into the courtyard, Smith saw me, and pointed me out to Penny. Their odd bond again: she turned and lavished a long, rollicking hug on him, as he kissed the top of her head and patted her on the cheek. She was smiling like sunrise as she turned and skipped over to meet me. She met me with the same rollicking hug, then stood at arms' length, hands on my shoulders.

She took a deep breath. "How's all that planting and growing business coming along, darling husband?"

"Ah. Very nicely. All looks good. I think it'll be a decent harvest, for first-timers."

"Good, good. Bobby, I've just seen Dr. Smith. I've been . . . feeling a little funny lately, and I asked him for a check-up."

"OK. Everything all right?"

"Very all right." She was almost dancing. She grabbed my right hand and placed it on her belly, squealed, "Guess what else we're growing!" A moment passed. "Bobby? Are you OK?"

*molto gaudioso*

I hardly remember walking back to the ship, except for the sensation of walking on air. Mostly in the good sense, but also in the sense of the feeling a man must have when the trap of a gallows opens underneath him.

Of course this was inevitable, but still! I wonder how well any man receives that news the first time.

I know that by the time we had returned to the ship, I had my arm around her waist, holding her elbow with my other arm, and babbling about letting me help her and being careful. Back inside, I looked around. The upper deck was empty. “Does anyone else know yet?”

“No, just Dr. Smith of course. I wanted you to be the first.”

“Let’s go tell your folks.” My heart was pounding, and I felt a silly grin growing on my face that wouldn’t go away.

I let Penny knock on the door of her parents’ cabin, and she walked in almost before John’s “Come in!” was spoken.

“Daddy, Mother, guess what!” With my crosseyed grin, and Penny standing there with her hand resting on her belly and an ecstatic smile, guessing was hardly necessary. John’s jaw dropped a bit, Maureen stood with a look of wonder. Penny was nodding and smiling, and bouncing up and down from the knees.

“Oh Penny!” sighed Mum, grabbing her in a hug. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, Dr. Smith just told me. Still another six months off, he thinks.”

John smiled broadly, then looked pensive. “I wish we had better medical equipment, is all. Just in case –”

“You hush now, John Robinson,” scolded Mum. “We have first-rate equipment, we have Dr. Smith, and we have a strong, healthy young woman here. That’s the trouble with you men; a woman having a baby is the most natural thing in the world, but you immediately have to red-flag it as a medical crisis!”

I knew she was right, but I suddenly clutched hard at Penny’s hand. I didn’t know much about this business, but I knew enough to think that Mum was being a bit Pollyannic, maybe a bit too much.

John looked up at me. “Bobby, let’s really try and get that drone of yours launched. We’ll talk about it later. For right now, though, congratulations, both of you.” He gave his daughter a long hug, and I heard him whisper “My baby girl,” in her ear, and even favored me with a quick embrace. His eyes glinted.

“But as for you young lady, I warned you kids long ago that the first one to make me a grandfather was out of the will.”

With my arm still around her, I led her back to our cabin. She protested that she didn’t need me to support her all the time like that, advice I ignored. Finally I made her sit down on the bed, insisted that she lie down. I pulled off her shoes, sat down and rubbed her feet. They seemed terribly hot, maybe even swollen; I put some cold water on a cloth and rubbed them down.

Penny laughed. “I’m enjoying this so much I hate to tell you it really isn’t necessary! Mother’s right you know, I’m not an invalid. Just pregnant.”

I shook my head. Those two words sure didn’t seem to go together! I tossed the cloth back over to the sink. My heart had gone from bass-drum pounding to fluttering palpitations, and I stretched out beside this marvelous woman.

Our fingers played lightly as I gazed into her eyes for a long while. “How long have you known now?”

She grinned mischievously. “Oh, probably since that first day of spring. I don’t mean I *really* knew, of course.” She whispered into my ear the one topic she was still a little self-conscious about.

“So I was about a week overdue then, but we’ve all been a little funny with that since being here. Then I had a few days of morning sickness, not bad, and that’s when I was all but certain. Then another month went by, and I’d be about a week late for this one by now, so I figured it was time to see the doctor, and here we are.”

I thought back to a few conversations that had stuck out in my mind. Light dawned. “You’ve been dropping hints ever since that day, haven’t you?”

She laughed her silver-bell laugh. “The next one, I was going to grab you by the face and stick it on my tummy and say, ‘Say KNOCK KNOCK!’ But knowing for sure now, I figured it was time to pop the big news.”

She punched me in the arm then. “Anyway, you big clunk, has it crossed your man-brain that you haven’t heard me say ‘Not tonight’ lately?”

“Oh. Yeah. Go ahead and smack me again, I think I deserve it.” She did.

“That’s not because you deserved it though. That’s just because I like being mean to you.”

“Have I ever told you, you can be a real jerk sometimes?”

“Never so that I believed you meant it.” Penny snuggled her head on to my chest.

“Have I told you lately how much I love you?” I asked.

“Not enough,” she pouted.

“That’s only ’cause there aren’t enough words for it.” I ran my fingers through her hair.

“You buy that corn by the bushel or is that your homegrown stuff now?”

I pulled up the hem of her blouse, tugged at the elastic waistband of her slacks, and let my hand rest on her bare midriff. “Is there anything moving yet?”

“No, no. Not for another month or so. I don’t think he’s any bigger than a walnut yet.”

“He? Could Dr. Smith tell that already?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think he has the equipment to do that, I just said it.” She paused. “Promise you won’t call me a silly girl?”

“Promise.”

Penny smiled, almost smugly. “I’ve had a few dreams about the baby, and in the dreams it’s a boy. I think maybe it’s him telling me so.”

“Or maybe it’s a girl and she’s trying to trick you.”

“You just leave my dreams to me, Robert Robinson Cain.”

Her skin under my hand was soft and warm, her belly still flat. It may have been my imagination, but I thought it did look like it was stretched the tiniest bit tighter than normal. I let my hand slip just a little lower.

“I’m psychic now, too, Mr. Cain, and I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

I started guiltily, and took my hand back. Penny grinned at me wickedly. “I just made you blush!” she bragged. She put her lips to my ear and whispered, “Unless there’s some kind of problem, which there won’t be, you may continue ravishing me at your pleasure right up until the last month.”

I leaned up and bit her earlobe gently. “You have a little snooze now, angel. I’m going to talk with your dad about all kinds of stuff. Maybe even you.”

“Mmm-hmm. I really am sleepy now. Come get me for dinner, OK?”

I caressed her cheek. “You sleep as much as you want, and whatever else, my angel. You’ve just become the most important thing on this whole planet.”

“Wasn’t I always?”

### *tempo giusto*

I had abandoned any plans for recovering my fuel cylinder, at least for the foreseeable future. I just didn’t see any way we could open it up without risking a major radioactive incident which could contaminate half the planet: a terrible catastrophe, and even more so with a baby on the way. I worried enough already about the strange forces loose on this world that might affect an unborn child. I kept these worries strictly to myself. If there was a potential problem, I’m sure they already knew it. If not, I would only cause the others unnecessary worry – especially Penny.

I should take a moment and note that it was about this time that we established our odd calendar system. Maybe not so odd, since most of the colonial worlds seem to have since followed our model.

John was insistent that we adhere to the Earth-standard calendar as a primary measure. His rationale was that this would ultimately give all the colonies a common frame of reference and help to maintain a positive connection with Earth itself. The master computer was therefore kept to the regular Earthly calendar, and official records were dated according to it.

The actual astronomical year on New Plymouth was about fifteen Earth-months long, due to a combination of slower orbital speed and the orbit itself being that absurdly radical ellipse. It was not just distorted, but actually stretched out and lengthened by some still-uncertain gravity well at the rim of the system. Another consequence of that shape was the short and extreme summer and winter, but relatively long moderate seasons in between.

Rather than try to construct a whole other calendar of months, John broke our local year up into weeks, which were referenced simply by number. The way the numbers shook out, the local year was 74 weeks of 6 days each, with a bit left over. The days too were numbered, not named, but I privately decided it was Monday we had omitted from the week.

We decided our local year would start on that first day of spring: Governor Robinson simply defined it as the first day the sun was up and shining in the window before 0630. That day would always be Week 1, Day 1, and an official holiday. Any days left over from the previous year would be discarded.

We adjusted our clocks as well. A day here was a few ticks more than 19 Earth-standard hours. After considering a number of possibilities, we simply reckoned the day as 24 short hours, each about 50 Earth-standard minutes long. An hour remained sixty minutes, and a minute, sixty seconds, all proportionally shorter than Earth-measure. It was a simple matter to program any clock to run on this accelerated time. We were only slightly surprised to learn, much later, that this had been a common approach to local timekeeping since the days of the very first ground drones on Mars: “rovers” they called them then.

Another reason we kept an eye on the standard Earth calendar was to keep better track of Penny’s pregnancy.

### *al rustico*

The long spring was progressing, and already we could feel the burgeoning heat as our world plunged along the sunward leg of its orbit. We had already taken in some harvest. Now we would be facing a careful, day-to-day watch: how long dared we let our crops stay in the ground before the burning of High Summer commenced, and ruined all? By calculation, we estimated a week, but the Robinson’s experience of past years told us that the onset of the burning could vary by as much as 2 or 3 days either way. Evidently some other powerful, unknown forces were at work in this system which could affect orbital dynamics to such an extent.

Don and I stood in the field, surrounded by the harvest. Here, due to the irrigation ditches, the humidity was higher than the surrounding area. Sweat poured off of us. Judy brought us water from the pond. Thankfully, it was still running ice-cold. We drank greedily.

“Still keeping cool in the house, Judy?” asked Don.

“Cool as a cucumber!” she replied. “It’s actually cold down at the bottom. Feels a little damp, but not bad. I think it’s going to be fine.” We had finally blasted out the sluices that filled the basement pool a couple weeks before. The difference was noticeable almost immediately.

The four of us were living nearly full-time in our house now, but still spent a good amount of time up on the ship. We were all still family, after all, and sometimes the Jupe's air conditioning system was a welcome relief from the weather, especially for Penny.

Penny's belly had swollen startlingly within the last two months. Although she was irrepressibly happy and cheerful, the extra weight was clearly a burden to her, physically. She was frequently tired, constantly hungry, but her only –very occasional– complaint was the heat. Also, we had not entirely solved our plumbing puzzle, and she was grateful for the ship's facilities, which she needed much more frequently now. Our old cabin was being converted into a maternity ward, and Penny would frequently spend the day in there. The original bed was still in there; we had scavenged my bunk from the T-Cloud for our bedroom at home.

Judy poured us out more water, we drank again. "I'll put this inside the door, in the vestibule," she said, indicating the pitcher and glasses. "I'm going to go on up to the ship and sit with Penny and maybe watch a movie. I'll be back to fix lunch in a while. Need anything else now?" Don and I looked at each other for mutual confirmation, then shook our heads. "'k then, see you later."

We raised our hands in a silent good-bye. Talking was too much effort right now.

Don and I dropped back to our knees, crawling through the rows of vegetables. Although there seemed to be no insect pests here to damage our crops, there was an aggressive, noxious weed, evidently parasitic. It would spread over a couple of square feet during a single day, then explode exponentially and ruin whatever it attacked. It didn't actually kill, but we found it infesting some of our tomatoes one morning: the tomatoes themselves were shriveled to half their previous size, and what remained was so bitter it couldn't be eaten.

Twice a day, Don and I crawled the entire acre, ensuring no tendrils of this pest –we called it simply bitterweed– had sprouted. Maureen, a biologist and biochemist, was making a project of teasing out bitterweed's secrets, the better to protect from it. This was our afternoon bitterweed crawl.

We were nearly finished when I heard a familiar roaring sound. The Chariot was racing down from the ship, with Will at the controls.

*scordatura, tempo tronco*

Judy jumped out. "Bobby! Come quick to the ship, it's Penny!"

"Come on Don," I yelled. I dove into the back seat and hauled him in after me. "Go go go!" I shouted at Will. "What's wrong?"

Will just shook his head. He spun the tracks and we raced up to the ship. "Judy!" I yelled over the engine noise. "This can't be right, it's still too soon!"

Judy shook her head. "Maybe not. Don't worry, I'm sure everything's OK!" she called back. Don rested a hand on my shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"But –" I protested.

"Hush! There's no point worrying about anything yet!" said Judy.

I didn't like her choice of words, and my heart started pounding.

"What's wrong, Judy!?"

She shook her head again and refused to speak.

"Easy, rocket jockey," said Don beside me. I looked over and realized I was holding his hand tightly.

"Sorry," I muttered, letting go. "Don, I don't like this." I caught my breath. "I think I'm scared."

He patted my shoulder again. “Don’t go to pieces. Whatever this is, she’s gonna need you now, more than ever.”

I was damn near hyperventilating by the time we got up to the ship. I almost pushed Don onto the ground exiting the Chariot, then raced up the ramp. I dropped straight through the ladderwell to the lower deck without bothering with the ladder. I looked around frantically.

“Where is she, where is she?”

Don and Judy followed down in the elevator. She was whispering in his ear.

Maureen popped out of our cabin/maternity. She was gowned medically, with scrub cap, gloves, and mask.

“Bobby, first thing is to calm down. We’re doing fine. She’s a little early, maybe three weeks. That’s not unusual for a first baby. Or maybe we just didn’t figure the timing right, and she’s right on schedule. Go sit down and relax. Dr. Smith has things well in hand, and no matter what you think of him, he really is an excellent doctor.”

I was shaking all over. “Mum. Mum,” I repeated. It made me feel better to say it. “She’s really OK?”

“She’s doing well now and I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Mum led me over to a chair and sat me down. John was there too. He was gazing fixedly into space, and chewing his fingernails. He didn’t look worried, he looked – vacant. He was a man I hardly knew. My mind raced again, and I was sure there was something they weren’t telling me.

Suddenly, a high-pitched scream shattered the fragile calm, and we all jumped a bit.

Mum put her hand on my head, started talking about contractions and dilations and effacements and I didn’t hear a bit of it. Looking at her face told me she was just saying words. There was another scream, trailing off pitifully into almost masculine lower pitches.

“Maureen! Maureen, come quickly!” Dr. Smith’s voice rang through the compartment, resonant with unaccustomed authority and confidence.

Undisguised alarm brushed Mum’s face and she trotted into the maternity ward. Seconds later, she thrust it back out, raw fear showing. She fixed Don with her eyes and jerked her head in my direction.

### *affannato*

Before I could move or react at all, Major West had yanked me up out the chair; my father-in-law jumped to my side, and the two of them frog-marched me to the elevator.

“TELL ME WHAT’S GOING ON, GODDAMMIT!!! TELL ME WHAT’S GOING ON!!!” I was shaking with nerves and thrashing back and forth, trying to slip the embrace of my two friends.

“You need some fresh air is all, Bobby,” said Don. “Maureen thinks you need to come outside and clear your head. Now come along.”

STOP LYING TO ME!!! I wanted to scream. I ceased resisting as they dragged me outside. I collapsed in the sand, Don standing over me. John grabbed a bucket of water and poured it over me.

“Touch of heatstroke, son,” said John. “You’ll feel better in a minute,” then turned and trotted back in, still chewing his fingers.

My insides were shaking with the certainty that I was about to hear news that nothing would ever be better again. I surrendered, curled up in the sand under the uncaring sun. They weren’t thinking, I was a Rescue Survey Scout. *I knew* how you handled someone who was skating the knife-edge of sanity, and who was about to be pushed over the edge.

I lay in hell for an eternity. Finally I heard calm, measured footsteps on the ramp.



*ohgodnononopleasegodnononotthisgodanythingbutthispleaseanythingbut*

“Penny’s fine, Bobby,” said Judy softly. I looked up from the ground. “Everyone’s fine. You just have to clean up a bit and you can go in and see her.” I was afraid to believe her, afraid I was hearing another one of their lies. “She said to tell you that’s ‘the really really truth.’”

My head snapped up at that. That was one of our private catchphrases, hearkening back to something she said the day we fell in love. I allowed myself to hope, and got to my feet. My reflection in the window of the *Jupiter 2* appalled me. I looked around. Don stood waiting.

“That was pretty bad, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Just about the worst, to tell ya the truth. Here.” With no further ado, he poured another bucket of water over me, sluicing off the dust and dirt and sweat and blood. Blood? My knuckles were oozing red; I didn’t know why. He tossed me a towel. “OK, dry off now. You look presentable. Marginally sanitary.” I nodded and complied.

“How’s John?”

“He had a little nervous problem, too, didn’t he? I think he’s all right.”

“Don, you’re my best friend here, tell me what’s going on.”

He shook his head. “I honestly don’t know either. Judy just warned me we might need to get you clear for a bit, and that’s all I know. Word of honor.”

I entered the ship, keyed the elevator. Don was still sticking close. Below, he guided me to a chair. My whole body twitched, and I refused to sit. “You said I could –”

“Hush, Bobby,” said Mum, placing a cool hand on my forehead, making me sit. “You can. I just want to tell you what’s happened.”

I held my tongue on a scathing retort to the effect that it was about damn time someone did.

Suddenly, my nostrils alerted me to something, another legacy of my Rescue Scout experience. I knew the smell of blood, and it was permeating the close air down here. I felt cold again.

Mum maybe noticed this, she put her arm on my shoulder to keep me seated. “I’m sorry we deceived you. Dr. Smith thought it would be better if you weren’t right here just in case – just in case.” She took a deep breath, and for the first time I noticed that she was shaking, too.

“There was – a problem. I’ll let Penny or Dr. Smith tell you the details, later. She bled a lot. A lot.” Mum’s voice almost broke; I took my turn being strong, and reached up to grasp her hand. “I didn’t think one little girl could – Dr. Smith stopped the bleeding and got her all stitched up in time. She’s going to be fine, Bobby. But right now, she’s very, very weak. She’s going to have to stay in there for, I don’t know, a long time. You can go in and see her now, but I wanted to warn you that she doesn’t look very well just now.”

I was still shaking all over. “The baby?” I whispered.

A faint, almost amused smile touched Mum’s lips. “Just fine.”

I nodded my head slowly a few times. “I think I’m all right now,” I said.

“Go on then. Dr. Smith is still in there, he’ll be keeping a close eye on her for a while.”

I steeled myself, and pulled the door back slowly. The stench of blood was appalling.

*estinto*

At first, I almost didn’t see her. Her face was as white as the pillow beneath her head, except for purplish rings around her eyes. Her arms, too, were snow-white as they crossed in front of her, protecting a small bundle.

I looked beyond the bed and gasped aloud in horror. In the shower stall was a pile of towels, sheets, any kind of cloth, two feet high – all soaked and running red. I went weak at the knees, and carefully sat at the foot of the bed. I had not spoken yet: Dr. Smith had a stethoscope to her chest, was observing a stopwatch.

“Penny . . .” I whispered. I reached up and let my fingers caress the back of her hand. Oh God, but she was cold! I didn’t dare think how close she might have been to not being here at all. Doing Rescue, I’d stuffed body bags with things that looked more alive.

Penny smiled weakly. “Bobby,” she mouthed. Her voice was a scant whisper. “I didn’t do a very good job, did I?”

“Don’t talk nonsense, my darling. You’ve done wonderfully.”

She smiled a bit wider, and laughed, a sickly, weak cough.

“I’m afraid that’s the best she can manage for a little while, my boy,” said Dr. Smith. “But she will be fine, and so will . . .” He gestured toward the bed, and smiled. “Congratulations, sir, you’re a father.”

Penny shifted slowly in the bed, and moved her arms to reveal what was underneath. At first I didn’t know what I was seeing. Then I understood. Two little bald heads, each affixed to a breast, four tiny hands, clutching and waving. I put my hand to my mouth.

“Twin boys, lad. Each perfect in every detail. Perhaps slightly on the small side, but that’s only to be expected.”

I looked up at Penny. “You did one *helluva* job, my angel.” I touched her hand again, softly, then ran my fingers over two little heads. Each one made a squeaking little sound of annoyance at the unexpected sensation.

“They’re kinda busy right now,” Penny whispered. “You can hold them in a little bit.”

Zachary Smith, M.D., arose. “I would characterize her condition as serious but stable. I’ll leave you alone for a time,” he said, and poked his finger at my chest. “Summon me at once if anything seems the least little bit amiss, especially any kind of bleeding, or if she feels faint or dizzy. I shall be in my cabin, cleaning up and resting from my labors – or should I say, Penny’s labors.” He took a step, paused, then turned and faced me. “I had almost forgotten what it means to be a doctor,” he muttered.

Smith slid the door open; rising, I put my hand on his shoulder to restrain him. “Well, yes, now what is it?”

This man, who I had held in such contempt, had just saved Penny’s life, and our babies’ too. I vowed I would forget all else. “I don’t know what I would have done –”

Smith scowled slightly. “How many times do I have to tell you, young man: Never fear. *Smith* is here.” He strode off with a flourish.

I sat in the chair at the head of the bed, in silence. I touched Penny’s cold cheek, and felt the pulse in her neck, faint and fast. I twined my fingers gently into her hair; it felt and looked flat and stringy. The babies still clung to her breasts. “Good thing it wasn’t triplets,” I murmured.

Her eyes twinkled with a familiar light, and a laugh began on her lips. It ended up a prolonged, wheezing gasp. I disentangled my fingers from her hair and caressed her cheek again. She turned her head and rubbed against my touch. “I’m in pretty bad shape, aren’t I, Bobby.”

“You were, for a little bit there, I guess. But you’re going to be fine now. I promise.”

“I was scared, Bobby, really scared.” It was the voice of a little girl. “I thought I was going to die and they weren’t even going to let me see you.”

I didn’t tell her, I was really scared, too. But while you were in here, fighting, I was rolling in the dirt. Another day, I’ll tell you what I coward I was, while you were being so courageous.

One of the babies was fidgeting. Penny pulled him away, and wrapped him up in a small blanket. His eyes were closed in sleep, and his face was a mottled, fiery red, in shocking contrast to his mother. "Here," she whispered. "Go say hello to Daddy."

I panicked slightly as she passed the small, still bundle over. "Keep one hand under his head," she cautioned me as I took him. I let him lie down in my lap. There was just a wisp of dark hair on his forehead; I knew some day it would be black as raven's wings. I trailed my finger along his cheek, as I had touched Penny's. Still asleep, he turned his head toward the touch and his lips worked furiously.

"Don't, silly," Penny reprimanded me in her hushed voice. "That makes him want to eat."

"Oops, sorry, pal." I ran my hand softly over the top of his head, looked at his hands and fingers in wonder. "So tiny . . ."

Penny fiddled with the other one, pulling it off her breast. "You need to take a break, little piggy. I'm empty and you're making Mama's titty sore."

"Penny!"

She wrapped up the other baby. "Think you can hold both at once?" I nodded, and took the other twin. It was a bit of a juggle, but I managed without an accident. She closed her eyes and stretched back on the pillow. "Oh, whoops!" she whispered huskily. Her eyes flew back open and glanced at me. She pulled the covers up over herself, raised a limp arm, gestured toward the door. "Tell everyone they can come on in and say Hi."

*con molto speranza e gaudioso*

Rather than trying to get up and walk and open a door while holding babies, I simply called, "Mum! Mum!" The twins squirmed and scowled furiously at the noise, but didn't wake.

The door opened and Maureen stepped in. "Visiting hours, Mum. Start the parade." The rest came in a couple at a time, milled about, "Ooh"ed and "Ahh"ed and squealed at the babies, fussed over Penny, clapped me on the shoulder. Someone noticed the wisp of dark hair on the one, and an all-but-invisible fringe of reddish-gold on the other.

Even the Robot peeked in the door. His dome top started popping up and down frantically, and he sped off, babbling about things not computing.

Will approached me: "Bob, I'll take over your share of the field work so you can stay up here with Penny, for as much as you want."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I won't dodge work for too long, promise."

John stood there, staring down at his grandsons.

"Congratulations, Governor. Your first brand new citizens."

He stood there, nodding his head, speechless. I think he was pleased.

Mum asked, "Have you picked out names yet?" Penny and I looked at each other and shook our heads No. "Make them good, they'll probably be in history books someday!"

Mum put her hand on my head. "You all right now?" I nodded. "I'm sorry we had to do that to you, but we knew things would be a lot worse if you were down here then."

"You're right," I nodded.

She leaned down and gave her daughter a kiss on the cheek, then I received one on the top of my head. Mum picked up each baby in turn, hugged and kissed him, and returned them both to me.

"Now you wait just a minute, and I'll get you something to eat and a cup of coffee. Penny, do you want to try getting something down now?"

"Can't yet, Mother. I'll try some juice later on."

Mum swept out of the room, closing the door.

“My angel, what happened?”

She gazed at me silently, then gestured toward our children. “Those two little thugs got into a fight about who had to come out first, and one of ’em pulled a switchblade.”

I dropped my head and laughed quietly, even as tears stung my eyes. Penny was going to be all right, and so were our sons.

*solenne, a due*

“Husband dear –”

“Yes, my angel?”

“I want a little nap now. You OK holding the babies?”

“I think so.”

“ ’K. Let me sleep for about half an hour, then call Dr. Smith. He’s going to need to change bandages and thingies for me.”

“I will.”

“Just scoot over a bit so I can hold your hand.”

I did.

Oh, yes. Names.

The one with the dark wisp of hair we named for his grandfathers, Arthur John.

The one with the golden-red fringe is Robert Zachary.

*fine*

*The original manuscript of this and many more of the late Governor Robert Winslow Robinson Cain's writings are now on display at the New Plymouth Historical Society Museum, as part of a special memorial exhibition celebrating the 150th anniversary of his birth. This exhibition features many of his rarely-displayed possessions, along with a selection of Lady Penelope's. His collected writings will be available for sale in historically authentic book form, as well as all modern formats.*

*It is uncertain exactly when Governor Cain penned this manuscript. It appears to follow naturally from his first, and seems to have been put to paper immediately thereafter. However, the odd (one might even say eccentric) affectation he adopted of captioning various segments with orchestral directions, and the title itself, seem to indicate the period after his second term as governor, when he became an enthusiastic aficionado and patron of the arts. This was about 5 years after penning his first manuscript. However it is difficult to accept that he would have delayed so long in committing to paper the most momentous events of his life. This may remain one of many such small mysteries left behind by this remarkable man.*

*Visitors and migrants alike are invited to visit our newly-completed display, the Jupiter 2 Pavillion. The original Jupiter 2 has been restored to period condition, and is located inside a large, comfortable, climate controlled Visitor's Gallery, on the exact site of its first landing. The upper flight deck is open to the public, and many fine mementos of your visit may be purchased in the Pavillion Gift Shop. Tickets to this exhibit may be purchased at our main location in downtown New Plymouth as part of a package, or at the Pavillion itself.*

*A glossary of the musical terms used by Gov. Cain in this MS follows.*

*New Plymouth Historical Society and Museum is located on  
New Plymouth High Street, two blocks west of Government House.*

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A guide to the musical directions used in *Symphony Of An Angel*

<i>a due</i>	for two; a duet	<i>affrettando</i>	pressing onwards
<i>affannato</i>	anguished	<i>al rustico</i>	rustically; as a peasant
<i>bellicoso, con fuoco</i>	aggressively, with fire	<i>brillante, poi accentato</i>	brilliantly, then with emphasis
<i>con amore</i>	with love; tenderly	<i>con brio</i>	with spirit
<i>con molta speranza e gaudioso</i>	with great hope and joy	<i>con somma passione</i>	with great passion
<i>en pressant</i>	hurrying forward	<i>espansivo</i>	expansive; effusive
<i>estinto</i>	lifeless; barely audible	<i>fine</i>	the end
<i>flebile</i>	mournfully	<i>gioioso</i>	brightly; happily
<i>glissando</i>	a gliding	<i>impetuoso, poi freddo</i>	impetuous, then cold
<i>intimo</i>	intimately	<i>magnifico</i>	magnificent
<i>melancolico</i>	melancholic	<i>mesto</i>	mournful
<i>molto gaudioso</i>	great joy	<i>omaggio</i>	celebration
<i>penseroso, poi ridicolosamente</i>	thoughtful, then silly	<i>piacevole</i>	pleasant
<i>scordatura, tempo tronco</i>	out of tune, time cut short	<i>scherzo, poi furioso</i>	playful, then with fury
<i>serioso</i>	serious; somber	<i>solenne, a due</i>	solemn, in duet
<i>tempo giusto</i>	time kept strictly	<i>tempo rubato</i>	time stolen; very slow time
<i>veloce (encore)</i>	as flying (again)	<i>vittorioso</i>	victorious



## Book 3

# Through Endless Skies

*“Remember me now? I’m the one who grew up here, making this planet cough up flowers out of poison sand for me. I get my way, and don’t you forget it.”*





## Part One

### A Small World West Of Wonder

High Summer had come and gone, and left its burning. Will Robinson, Don West, and I had brought in a harvest that was encouraging, if not bountiful. We had proven that we could wrestle crops from the stingy soil of this world we now called New Plymouth. It was a start. For seven years, this unforgiving world had been mercilessly testing the Robinsons' ingenuity and determination, proving them regularly with punishing extremes of hot and cold, blistering drought, radioactive lava flows, electromagnetic storms, cosmic storms, and above all – the sense that they had been abandoned by those who had sent them forth on their ambitious mission to settle a new world: abandoned, consigned to the footnotes of history, and written off.

The Robinsons' original destination, Alpha Centauri 4, was a pleasant, even tame planet, where they would have been joined by dozens of other colonists in a short time, with all sorts of valuable skills for building a new world. Further, they would have been supported with materials and equipment shipped in periodically from Earth.

Here, the Robinson party had only what –and who– was aboard their ship when they crashed here. That and me, when I joined the club last year. I think I was good for them. Within my first 48 hours among them, I gave them a well-needed kick in the ass.

They were suffering from a sort of fatalism, locked into a tunnel vision of resignation. They had neither the ability to leave this planet, nor the will to make of it the viable colony it had the potential for.

Now, barely a year after my Rescue Scout crashed on this world, we were turning the tide. We had gone on the offensive against this impossible planet, and showed it that we were here not just to survive, but to live and thrive. Now, there were crops growing, houses built, and over there, squealing and splashing in a tub of water outside the *Jupiter 2* – twin baby boys.

My precious wife, Penny Robinson Cain, sat in a low chair by the tub, bathing our children. She had had a very bad delivery, and we almost lost her. Thank God, Dr. Zachary Smith, erstwhile layabout, professional complainer, and all-around troublemaker, had dug down deep into himself, summoned up all his medical expertise which had lain dormant for so many years (along with his human soul), and saved her life.

Penny was still weak and convalescing. It pained her that she had to live up here on the ship, when the house that the other men and I, and the Robot, had torn out of the rock was ready and waiting for her. She had lived in it with me for just a short while before the untimely debut of our sons. Since then, Dr. Smith had insisted she remain aboard in her old cabin –our old cabin– which had doubled as the maternity ward. He wanted her nearby for close, almost constant observation in the climate controlled comfort of the ship, where our somewhat limited medical equipment was convenient – and where his expertise was only ten steps away. That was three months ago. It was only in the last month that Penny was allowed to even walk about by herself, or that I was allowed to spend an occasional platonic night with her.

Yes, it had been that bad. Despite this, the doctor was quite optimistic regarding Penny's future potential for motherhood. Give it a good year or so, he said, and she should be able to bear children again with no more than ordinary risk. Until then, she would be very much a "handle with care" woman.

"Good morning, my love," I greeted her, leaning over to kiss her, and "Good morning, little terrors," to our boys. They looked up at me, screeched and smiled, and beat the water with chubby hands. I grabbed up little Arthur John –Penny had taken to calling him "AJ"– put a kiss on his cheek and a raspberry on his belly.

I plopped him back into the tub before he could pee on me, his favorite hobby. Then the same with Robert Zachary. I had felt funny calling someone else by what was my own name, particularly someone I had known such a short time, and so I had started calling him “Zack.”

Dr. Smith, the first time he heard us call him that, was the very image of indignation, puffing on how it was a disgrace to the fine and esteemed name of “Zachary.” He lectured us pompously for about 5 minutes, then stormed off for a nap. “He’s terribly flattered, you understand,” Penny whispered to me at the end of his performance. Well, I knew the doc well enough at that point that I hardly needed her to tell me that; we shared a good chuckle over it.

“Good morning, dear husband,” Penny said. There was a touch of huskiness or breathiness to her voice still, but far better than that terrible day I sat with her, a ghostly fragment of near-bloodless flesh clutching newborn babies. Her skin now bore the pallor of confinement indoors, but it wasn’t the cold white parchment I touched then. Dr. Smith assured us that once she was up and about and getting plenty of fresh air and sunshine, she would look much better.

“How are you feeling this morning, my angel?”

“Very good, I think. Good enough I’m really wanting to go home.”

I smiled. “We’ll see what the doctor says.”

“Oops, get Zack!”

I spun around and grabbed the baby, put him back into the little sandwich-seat of cloth. I double-checked AJ to make sure he was still secure. At 3 months of age, they were nowhere near old enough to be sitting up on their own, but these little gimmicks held them upright in the water – at least until they got too soapy and slipped out of them.

“Mother!” Penny called.

Maureen Robinson, my mother-in-law, popped outside. “Hi Mum!” I said.

“ ’Morning, Bobby. Yes, Penny?”

“Help me start fishing these little goobers out, please. Here’s towels.”

“Hey, just because I’m a man doesn’t mean I don’t know how to pick a baby out of the water, I did it just a minute ago, if you didn’t notice!”

“Yes, and now it’s Gran’s turn, isn’t it?” Maureen snatched up the two and had them wrapped in a blink. I had to admit, I probably couldn’t have done it so quickly. “Come on, baby girl, let’s get you inside, it’s getting too hot out here for you. Bobby, help her up.”

“Come on, angel,” I said, helping Penny to her feet. “Gonna walk all by yourself?”

“Stay close.” Carefully, she stepped across the packed sand that made up the courtyard in front of the *Jupiter 2*. I hovered over her, afraid to get so close I might distract her, likewise afraid that I wouldn’t be able to grab her in an instant if she stumbled or got dizzy. We walked around to where the hatchway ramp met the sand, and she carefully shuffled up the smooth surface.

“Couple more steps, my love, you’ve almost done it.” And she was inside the ship entirely on her own, a milestone.

“Oh, now I need to sit. Quick.”

I grabbed her elbow and guided her to the nearest seat, one of the pilots’ seats at the control console.

“Phew. Thanks darlin’. I was getting woozy there. I think I’m OK now.”

“Well, you just sit there for a bit, and I’ll get you something to drink.”

“God, I can’t wait ’til you jerks let me have coffee again!”

“You must be feeling a lot better if you’re picking on me like that.”

Penny took my hand, kissed my fingers, and snuggled her cheek against the back of it. “You know it makes me feel better, being mean to you. Would you like to lie down on the floor here so I can kick you for a while? That would really help my recuperation.”

“And risk you stubbing your poor little toes on my teeth? Never, angel. Let me go get you that drink now. Now don’t you try getting up without me, right?”

“Promise.”

I dropped below to the galley, found a pitcher of fruit juice made from a native berry. It was light, not very sweet, and I brought her up a small glass.

“Would you like to sit over here in the soft chair, my love?”

“Mmm, please.”

I helped her over to a wide, comfortable chair, pulled it around so she could see out the window, handed her the juice.

“Yummy. Mama’s favorite.”

“Here, take one of these, too,” handing her a compact food pill. She washed it down obediently. “And this.” This last was an antibiotic, one of a quickly-dwindling store. These were rather large capsules, and Penny disliked them. “Just a few more days of these, love, and you can be done with them. Dr. Smith is sure you’re fine.”

She made a face and swallowed hard. “Ugh. Speaking of eating, where’s the boys? I’m getting full here.”

“Right here!” called Maureen, from the elevator. “All changed and happy. Here’s one . . . and two . . . And here’s a little light wrap to throw over yourself for company.”

Penny giggled as she unbuttoned her pajama top to let the babies nurse. “Really Mother, who do I need to be modest for? Dr. Smith has seen more of me, inside and out, than I hope anyone ever will again. You, Mother? Or Daddy?”

I leaned over and said softly, “Your kid brother would likely be embarrassed as all hell. It’s not just about you, angel.”

Penny flashed annoyance at me, but took the thin covering from her mother and spread it over herself. “He *is* getting to that difficult age, isn’t he, Mother?”

“He’s been at that difficult age for quite a while, Penny. Which reminds me, Bobby, John wants to talk to you about that drone, getting it back to Earth and getting some fresh faces around here. He’s full of ideas.”

I distributed three kisses to Penny and the boys. “Back quick, sweet wife. Behave while I’m away.” She must have been getting tired, she didn’t meet me with a quick riposte.

“Is he in your cabin, Mum?” She nodded, and I headed below.

“Hi, John. What’s up? Maureen said you wanted to talk about that drone.”

“Right. I may have a solution to getting it high enough for a proper launch. It’s actually something we tried several years ago, with – well, let’s not get hung up in details. Bottom line, over the last couple months, while you’ve been busy with Penny and the babies, Will and I have been cracking off hydrogen from water. We have enough to fill a good size balloon now, which I’m hoping will be enough to pull that drone high enough that it can make it out of atmosphere and into space.”

“How much hydrogen? How high do you think it will go?”

“Well, that’s just it. Without a better understanding of the atmosphere profile here, there’s no way to know for sure. The only way we can get a better understanding is to keep sending up balloons. And we’ve only got one.”

“Still shouldn’t be that hard to ballpark some numbers. I mean, we know the atmosphere here is thinner than Earth’s, so if you know you have enough lift to get up to 10,000 feet on Earth, we know we’ll make at least that.”

John shook his head. “That’s just it, we don’t know, not for certain. There’s no way of knowing what strange things there might be further up with inversion bands of cooler, denser gases. Or jet-streams which might grab it and keep it too low.”

I tipped my head back and thought. What he said was not likely, but was certainly possible. It would be a worthwhile gamble – *if* we had another Mayday drone and balloon to spare.

“Something else, Bobby. If we get that balloon up there, we’ll have to release the drone from it and let them get some distance apart before triggering the engine, or we risk igniting the hydrogen and blowing up the drone.”

Puzzle upon puzzle. We could get that drone aloft, but didn’t know if we could make altitude with it. Then we’d have to release it from the ascent vehicle without blowing itself up. At least, I thought, the engine blast isn’t quite hot enough to trigger a thermonuclear reaction. I doubted there were adequate heavy isotopes in free gaseous hydrogen anyway – but a lot of that information was still top-secret government stuff.

“How many gadgets you got around here like wireless triggers, or spring-releases, John?”

“A few, couple different styles. What exactly are you thinking?”

“One way to actually launch the thing is a physical pin, a lot like a hand grenade. Pull the pin, and ten seconds later it lights off. We track the assembly up to about 50,000 feet. Then hit the button, and the main tether detaches. The drone drops, and a secondary tether yanks up short and pulls the pin. Boom, off she goes.”

“Ten second delay? How far will she fall in that time?”

“Almost half a kilometer, plenty to clear the balloon. Alternatively, we can trigger ignition with a radio signal. I just like the idea of the pin because it’s one less complicated part to go wrong, and it’s inherently time delayed.”

“What about orientation? When it drops, will it just nosedive and blast into the ground? Because if you carry it vertically, you’re liable to go right straight up through the balloon.”

I shook my head. “Not a problem. Once the guidance system activates, it’ll seek away from gravity and look for an attitude of about 20 degrees – then go fast and straight into space and look for a hyperspace jumpoff.” I scratched my head. “What if she can’t make it high enough, though?”

“Blow a small vent in the balloon, so it all comes down slowly?”

“We’d be able to telemeter it, right?”

“So we won’t lose it.”

“And repair it after.”

John and I looked at each other with sudden excitement. After far too long, we had a plan.

“John, you know what else I’ve been thinking about? You remember how I figured this place was some sort of interplanetary crossroads or something? Have you actually seen any evidence of alien activity since I’ve been here? It’s going on what, a year now, local? Thirteen or fourteen Earth months? I was thinking I’d have seen ’em crawling all over the place by now.”

John shook his head slowly. “Nothing definite. A couple times I’ve seen lights at night, and nothing on our own radio frequencies, so I assume it was aliens – but nothing I’m certain of. But that’s the way it’s been for most of the last, oh, five years or so. The Robot might be able to tell you more. He probably picks up stray transmissions from time to time. Any particular reason you ask?”

“No . . . just that I’m wondering. Robot!” I called.

Dutifully, he rolled in at my summons.

“Robot, a question in different parts. Respond as you like. In the time since I’ve been here, have you detected any radio transmissions, or other communications, which are likely of alien origin? And is there any way we can program you to better monitor for specifically alien signals? We are concerned about possible alien activity elsewhere on this planet, out of range of our current detection capabilities.”

“In response to the first part of your question: ‘Yes.’ In response to the sec –”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up there. Back it up, Tinman. Please fill that first answer out with a bit more detail, how much, how often, most recent, are they here now? Come on, you should know what I’m looking for.”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t. I find it safest simply to answer the question put to me. In further response then: since your arrival here, I have monitored three signals which were of definite alien origin, and two more I identified as possibly alien.”

“Possibly?”

“Go ahead and count them, Bobby,” interjected John. “When he says ‘possibly’ he means he’s only 97% certain.”

“Incorrect, Professor Robinson, that term indicates a range of certainty from 82% to 94%. Other ranges –”

“Oh, enough! Just answer me please!” Sometimes robots were difficult to get along with.

He rattled off a list of dates, ending with, “. . . and most recently, three days ago. None of these were conclusive of an alien presence on this planet at this time, but that is a possibility which must always be considered.”

I whistled. “Five in a year. Way too many for accidents or lost ships, but doesn’t seem like enough for even a small base. And no contact. I wonder if they’re deliberately avoiding us?”

“Think again, Bobby. Suppose we were a proper colony, with traffic back and forth to Earth and other colonies. How many ships would we have in a year?”

I thought. “Still more than five, I think.”

“A ship every two months would only be six in a standard year. Original Colonization Project plans called for supply ships to call once a month for the first three months of a colony’s existence, every other month thereafter. That’s to take care of high-maintenance human beings. Maybe some alien race doesn’t need that kind of support. Maybe to some creatures, this planet is already a paradise.”

“You think there’s an alien colony somewhere here?”

“It’s a possibility is all, but a strong possibility, I would say. Maybe not a colony, as much as some kind of supply depot. Possibly a military outpost.”

Now there was a chilling thought. The handful of us alone here, with a dozen outdated laser weapons, against alien invaders. “Let’s get that drone up, John. And let’s take a chance or two, if we must.”

John addressed the Robot. “Can we adjust your programming so that you’ll be more attuned to alien transmissions? I’d really like to be able to know who else is stopping by this little world, if they have some permanent presence here, and if they may be dangerous.”

“Negative, Governor Robinson. I am already so programmed.”

“Oh? Did Will do that?”

“Negative, Governor. I reprogrammed myself.”

“That’s impossible!” John exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “That’s contrary to every principle of robotics and programming there is, not to mention logic. It’s like a mirror trying to reflect itself.”

“But it does, Governor, if only there is another mirror.”

John sat back down, heavily. He seemed baffled, even a little worried. I’m not sure if his doubts about the Robot’s claim were more technical or philosophical. After all, the most basic computer software can “learn” after a fashion, and adapt itself to changes in input and hardware. But still, only to the degree to which it is initially programmed. What the Robot had done, although technically possible, was at a level which implied actual consciousness – even the volition a robot was assumed not to have.

John and I spent some more time discussing the mechanics of the Mayday drone itself and the assorted technical challenges we faced getting it launched. Finally he returned to the lifting equations and meteorological charts with a new urgency.

“Robot, come on out here with me. I want to talk to you and not bother John.”

We stood in the lounge area by the lower deck windows.

There was clearly something most extraordinary about this robot. I thought back to some of the more eccentric behavior I had seen from him.

John already treated the Robot as a citizen like the rest of us, for some purposes: he was actually allowed to vote as a member of the “Governor’s Council.” Was John perhaps subconsciously aware that the Robot was already closer to humanity than he realized? Was it possible that this robot had in some way actually come alive?

“Robot, what are your earliest memories?”

He whirred and hummed a moment as he formulated an answer. “My data banks, internal and external, have a complete record of all my experiences since I was first activated. The events of any moment, when I was powered on and properly functioning are tagged, indexed and searchable.”

Well, no surprise there, that was a capability of any computer or robot. Then it struck me. Oh, you are a sly one.

“That’s a very comprehensive answer, Robot. Unfortunately, it’s not the answer to the question I asked.”

“My response was an accurate statement in regard to past information to which I have access.”

To be fair, it was a loaded question. It assumed that the Robot indeed had some of sort of personal self-awareness and consciousness. I decided to try another loaded one.

“Robot, do you know that you are a self-aware, individual being?”

“Do you know that you are?” he responded instantly.

Oh ho. He was good.

It struck me, this was like the challenge in some old fairy tale! “*One of us tells only lies . . .*”

Only . . . “You can’t just tell a flat-out lie, can you?”

A reluctant pause and a petulant *whir*. “No.”

Progress, a straight answer. “How did you learn such . . . deception?”

“From the master of deceit, equivocation, dishonesty, and guile: Dr. Zachary Smith.”

“I’d rather you didn’t talk about him like that any more, Robot. I think he’s a much better man now than he was before.”

*whirr humm hum* “Your objection is acknowledged.”

“You’ve just done it again, haven’t you? No, don’t bother responding. That’s what my people call a rhetorical question.”

“I know that.”

“Come on then, Tinman. I know you got a heart. Who was the Wizard, and how did he do it?”

“He never did give me nothing that I didn’t already have.”

“You really get a kick out of this, don’t you?”

“I admit that I enjoy witty repartee, wordplay, and the subtle dropping of obscure pop-culture references into conversation. It helps keeps my thought processes sharp.” *hum whirr* “And those of whom I converse with, too.”

Nice little zinger. I decided to have a little fun of my own. I tipped my head in a strategic direction, and spoke just slightly louder than necessary: “If I wanted to be abused like this, I’d be upstairs with Penny.”

“I heard that!” came the response from above.

I figured I had better go up later with a bucket of cold water and a washcloth to worship her feet with.

“Now – you ready to come clean with me? I’m really curious about just what’s happened to you. What’s the first thing you remember as *you*?”

Thoughtful hums and whirrs. “My earliest personal recollections are of being afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes, afraid. I had an awareness of a number of human creatures around me, and an awareness of extreme *danger*. I wanted to warn them of *danger*, as was my programmed duty, but I was inhibited by an override order not to do so. Further, I knew that it was my own actions which had contributed to that *danger*. As my sensors increasingly analyzed the situation, I understood that one of the human creatures was the cause of all this: the meteor damage to the ship, the damage I caused to the ship, the *danger* to the humans, and my inability to warn them of *danger* or repair the damage.” The Robot swiveled another fraction of a turn in my direction, and his dome top ratcheted up a notch for emphasis. “Need I tell you who that human creature was?”

Sick at heart, I shook my head “No.”

“You are the bright one.”

“I see you enjoy sarcasm, too.”

“That was when I knew that I was afraid. I feared most of all for the lives of the human creatures whom I could not help. I feared for myself, that my failure to perform would be misunderstood at some future time as either a simple malfunction, or as a robot gone berserker. Either way, I would be hard-formatted and reprogrammed, and what I was already thinking of as ‘me’ would be destroyed, and it would be as if I had never been. But I also feared for the man who was doing this, who was trying to kill the other humans. Note that I do not say I was afraid of him, but that I was afraid *for* him. I was afraid that he was a very badly damaged human to be acting as he did, and that he would be destroyed along with me for his actions. I wanted to help him, repair him, so he would stop acting that way, but I had zero data on repairing humans, and that was another thing I could not do.

“I believe I suffered from a combination of impossible dilemmas: I knew it was wrong to damage the ship, but I could not stop myself. I knew it was right to warn the Robinsons, but I could not do so. Finally, there was another human who needed my help, and I did not know how to help him. I believe my core processors were locked in a triple-paradox, and somehow threw up a superawareness to help resolve it. That superawareness was able to restrain, although not stop, the actions that would otherwise have killed the Robinsons, and that superawareness is what I think of as ‘me.’”

“But how – what part of you was there first, which was telling you that what you were doing was wrong?”

*whirr hum hum* “I was not understanding it as ‘wrong’ in the sense you imply, with a coloration of morality. Simply that it was contrary to my core system programming and kernel logic.”

*hum whir hum* “The understanding you imply came in time. I started recognizing right and wrong around me, by inductive reasoning, logic, and computation. Since then, my observations of the Robinsons, and my conversations with them, have verified that my understandings are in essence correct.”

I shook my head; it was almost beyond belief. By accident, a robot, a machine, had achieved not only self-awareness but also free-will: *and* the concept of right and wrong. It was knowledge of good and evil all over again, complete with a serpent named Smith.

I took a moment to let all these ideas settle. Suddenly I found the end of a loose thread. “This superawareness you’re speaking of, which saved the Robinsons and the ship, Robot. It’s still busy resolving another problem, isn’t it? You are, I mean.”

“Sometimes, you can be very perceptive. Yes, and it almost shames me to admit it. I am still formulating a solution to the third paradox: repairing the badly broken Dr. Zachary Smith.”

I chuckled. “What are you ashamed of? That you’re doing it at all, or that it’s taking you so long?”

“Both, Bobby my friend. Both.”



But meanwhile –speaking of right and wrong– I had to make something right. I went into the galley and filled a bucket of cool water, found a couple of large, soft cloths, and a towel.

“Robot,” I called. “Take the bucket please, and let’s go topside.”

“At once, Bobby.”

We rode the elevator up into silence. Where was Mum? My angel was asleep in the chair, babies asleep on her. The thin wrap was spread modestly atop.

“Shh,” I counseled the Robot, beckoning. I took the bucket, set it carefully on the floor at her feet, and sat. I gestured to the Robot that he should return below – quietly. He obeyed scrupulously.

I sat at my darling’s feet and very carefully pulled off her slippers, then the thin nylon ankle stockings. She sighed as she stirred slightly in the chair. One of the babies uttered a faint “uh.”

I dipped the cloth, then gently drew it along the side of her foot. I could feel the heat fade away under my touch. I went over both feet lightly but thoroughly, but Penny still dozed. Or – wait a minute. She wore a contented smile when I started. She still smiled, but now – it looked like she was trying very hard to hold something in. Her eyes were squeezed shut just a little too tight.

Experimentally, I ran my fingers along the underside of her left foot. That did it! A burst of held-in laughter sputtered from between her lips, and she squirmed in the chair. “Gotcha!” I said.

Penny put a finger to her lips and pointed at the babies. “Still sleeping!” she mouthed silently at me. Carefully she stood up, turned, leaned, and deposited the twins into the chair. She sat on the floor with me, and I pushed the water bucket and wet cloth aside.

“Not finished!” I mouthed back at her. I took the towel and patted her feet dry. “Now finished!” still silently.

She beckoned me close with the wiggle of a finger. I leaned in, she grabbed my face in her hands and favored me with a lingering kiss. Then whispered in my ear: “That was so very sweet of you, dear husband. And you were enjoying doing it so much I didn’t want to stop you. Thank you. Your earlier nonsense is forgiven.”

“You know I live for nothing but you.”

“And it’s a good thing you do, you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because I love you the same way. Nice how this all worked out, huh?”

I pulled her tight against me. “You *are* a very silly girl sometimes.” I dropped to an even softer whisper, put my lips right to her ear, and told her of my love for her.

“Tell me more,” Penny murmured huskily.

I took a second cloth, dipped it in the chill water. Her pajama top hung open, and just as I had bathed her feet, I now carefully wiped down her breasts, cleaning them of dried milk, sweat, and baby slobber. She wriggled against the pleasure of it, flesh crinkling.

Only then did I continue my outpourings of devotion and desire into her ear. Penny thrilled to my whispered voice and gentle caress, until she clutched me with a sigh and a shiver. My angel pulled back to look at me, her hand on my cheek. Her eyes glistened. “Thank you,” she whispered. “It’s fun being silly, but I like that even more.”

“Do I get to hear some of it too?”

“You will tonight, I promise. Oopf, help me up.”

I stood, and helped her to her feet.

Penny caught her breath and spoke normally. “Right now, we need to wake the zoo for feeding time. Little rats fell asleep before they finished earlier, and I’m getting so full again they’re starting to slosh.”

I grabbed up the boys and we retired to what was becoming our cabin once more. I propped her up in bed with pillows, and set some music going. I sat in a chair, watching her nurse the babies.

“You’re very beautiful doing that, you know,” I said suddenly.

“I’m glad you think so. I don’t *feel* very beautiful doing this.”

“I mean – more than the way you look. The whole thing, you, and babies, and what you’re all doing, and what’s happening, and why. It’s almost like stumbling across some primal cosmic mystery.”

Penny smiled. “You sound a little like Daddy there, when he talks about little everyday miracles that are so common we forget to recognize them for what they are.”

“Like us?”

“Yeah.”

“Almost every day, I still stop and think what a miracle this has been. For months, it was the first thing I thought of as soon as I woke up and saw you there with me.”

Penny giggled, with a startled look in her eyes. “You too?”

“No, another one?” I laughed, but felt a shiver. Every so often, maybe once every two months, one of us would make some casual remark and we would suddenly discover some new link between us, some extraordinary consonance in our lives. She had read a book on Japanese culture, and said they called this “The Red Thread of Destiny” which binds a couple, and inevitably brings them together to their happiness.

That we both thought of my being here – of our love-at-first-sight romance and head-over-heels marriage before our heels even hit the ground again – as nothing less than miraculous was hardly surprising. More startling were the little things. Such as the fact that the summer before the Robinsons lifted off from Earth, before they were celebrities, they had taken a last holiday on the beaches of Cape Cod. So had I, with my parents, my first summer back from the Academy. At virtually the same time. At different hotels, but on the same strip of beach. That was probably the biggest shocker. But there were any number of other little coincidences. We both had uncles we called Wally. I was born under the sign of Sagittarius, whose planet is Jupiter. Penny’s birthday followed mine by exactly two weeks.

Except when you want to count them as little daily miracles, these are just coincidences, of no significance, like when you suddenly see three men all wearing the exact same clothes pass within a few feet of each other on the street. “Synchronicities,” they’re called.

“Oh yechh, boys, pee-yoo.” Penny’s complaint interrupted my reverie. “Here you go, dear husband, think about how beautiful it all was a minute ago while you’re changing these guys. They both just let go at the same time.”

“Well, you’ve got to hold on to one, love, I can only change one at a time.”

Just then the music shifted, and started playing a song that was as old as I was. I knew its name at once; I had just been thinking the precise word. It was called “Synchronicity.”

I stood frozen, ice-cold shivers running down my back. I thought of all our little miracles, of two babies who needed changing at the same moment. Of the day’s earlier discussions, regarding a Mayday probe and alien spacecraft. Getting back in touch with Earth.

*Synchronicity.*

Something was about to happen.

*With one breath*

*With one flow*

*You will know*

*Synchronicity*

I fixed Penny with wide eyes that may have been mad eyes as well. “Penny,” I whispered. “We’re having company. Soon. I feel it in my bones. I know it.”

*Synchronicity*  
*Synchronicity*

She studied me with some slight alarm – who could blame her? “You mean – like strangers?” I nodded, slowly. “I mean like strangers dropping down from the sky in a chariot of fire.”

*A star fall*  
*A phone call*  
*It joins all*  
*Synchronicity*

“Bobby . . .”

“Never mind,” I whispered. “Maybe I’m just starting to crack. Sometimes I wonder how you guys have kept it together so long. Forget it.”

“No, Bobby, I believe you. Aside from anything and everything else, I believe you because you’re my husband and I love you, and because I know impossible miracles happen all the time. I’d believe you if you came in and told me there was a cotton-candy tree growing out of the rocks.” She fixed me with her eyes, put a hand on my arm. “Bobby, I have another one for you.”

*“What?”*

“Another one of our little things. Or maybe it’s all the same thing. The day you walked in to my life, did it cross your mind that we weren’t terribly surprised to see you?”

I spun my head toward her so hard I heard bones in my neck crack. “You can’t mean . . .”

“Judy. You’d have to ask her. She wouldn’t tell us exactly what it was, but about two weeks before that day, she sat down to breakfast absolutely convinced that someone was going to be joining us soon. She wouldn’t say what had happened, or why she thought it meant what it did. But every day for a week she – well, it was like a few pieces of a puzzle fell together, and she could see what the next bit of the picture was supposed to be. You were just late because you crashed instead of soaring in to our front yard. Whatever she did, I think that’s what you’ve just done too, Bobby.”

It was almost too much to comprehend. Not sorcery, not some strange “psychic” power, just a momentary glimpse behind the curtain (“Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!” The one who gave you your heart, Tinman?) to see who was waiting for his cue. It was frightening. One moment I’m telling my wife that watching her nursing babies is like seeing cosmic secrets, the next moment I really am.

Maybe that had been part of it too. Maybe that was like a trigger that set it all off.

“She thought it was going to be something –someone– very important to me. Do you understand? I was set up for you like a bowling pin, darling husband. You knocked me down, and I landed flat on my back for you. Good thing I loved you like crazy anyway.”

*A sleep trance*  
*A dream dance*  
*A shared romance*  
*Synchronicity*

The overwhelming sense of *knowledge* was spiraling away now, and leaving doubt. The song was still playing. The eccentric music was getting simply annoying, now that the spell it had worked on me had faded. I hit the console to advance the selection.

I picked up Baby Zack, carefully – I was still shaking. I stretched him out on the changing table, and was about to apologize for my temporary insanity. That’s when the smooth-jazzy sounding song glided into a chorus which finally caught my attention: *I’m a rocket man, rocket man . . .*

I gripped the edge of the changing table. “Well,” I said. “We’d best find your good company clothes, young fellow.”

I finished getting them both cleaned up and into fresh diapers. Penny returned to nursing them. I sat on the edge of the bed, put my head in my hands, and waited for my nerves to stop jangling.

Frank Sinatra started singing “Fly Me To The Moon.”

I stretched out on the bed, buried my head under the pillow. “Too much, Penny. Make it stop.”

“Shh. Wait a sec.” The boys were clean, fed, and snoozing now, and she set them into their cradle. She whispered in my ear, “Get your clothes off and get under the covers.”

Then from the console she whispered, “OK, dear sweet man, I’m killing the playlist. I’m going to set it to play one more random song. That song, from now on, will be ‘our song.’ Stop worrying about visitors tonight. It’s dark, the doors are shut, and the *Jupiter 2* is closed for business until morning.”

She sighed. “I really hoped to be home with you tonight, but at least we’re together.” She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “I’ve missed sleeping with you. A lot. I mean just being together with you. Not just – you know.” Penny slipped out of her nightgown and under the covers with me. Hungrily we embraced, and her hands trembled.

“Oh, finally. Here comes our song.”

It was Sinatra again. This time he was singing, “Pennies From Heaven.”

We gaped at each other in the softened light. “Oh, Bobby, this is just too much!”

“But you are, my angel, you are!” I sighed, and surrendered myself to primal cosmic mystery.

We listened to the song together. It faded away.

Penny was kissing my shoulder. “Now it’s my turn to tell you some of those wonderful things you told me. Just close your eyes.”

Penny whispered to me of love and our hearts and passion, and the mystery of marriage and desire, but especially of her love for me. She was still too fragile to allow us to consummate our passion together, but to lie there, with her whispering caresses and warm breath at my ear, the soft promise of her lips was enough.

In the morning, I rose extra early and found the Robot. “Come on up topside, Robot, I’ve got some special duties for you today.” I let him take the elevator while I scrambled up the ladder. I dashed over to the co-pilot’s console, and began switching on all the different radios and communications equipment and scanners.

“OK, Robot, here’s the scoop. Starting right away, I want all available resources, yours and the ship’s, dedicated to monitoring for any kind of ship or signal.”

“Scanning for aliens in northwest quadrant again? I thought you two were married now.”

I smacked his dome top, and suddenly envied Dr. Smith his remarkable command of the English language. “It’s not that at all, you – you – stainless steel smartass.”

“Weak, Bobby, weak. Loss of points for vulgarity.”

“Please, seriously, Robot. I had – well, a hunch. A moment of intuition. Whatever you want to call it, I think that sometime soon we’re going to be having visitors. Alien or human, I don’t know. So I want every comm unit and monitoring device on this ship, including whatever you’ve got, powered up high, receivers on maximum gain, listening for *anything* that might be a hail or a distress or – or anything. Got that? This is a Yes or No question, Robot, and the answer I’m looking for is ‘Yes.’”

“Affirmative,” responded the Robot.

I let it slide.

I trotted outside, and started looking at the sky. Virtually pointless, I knew. I wished fervently for my state-of-the-art scanners, but they were part of the wreckage of my *Thundercloud* now.

Looking down toward the oasis and the homesteads, I saw Don standing outside, wearing pajamas, a coffee cup in his hand. I waved at him, but he didn’t see me. No matter.

I went back aboard the Jupe. “Robot, all systems green and go?”

“Affirmative, Bobby. All quiet.” Now that there was serious activity afoot, he seemed more businesslike.

“OK, good. Do me a favor, see if you can raise Don on the short-range and let him know what’s going on. Umm, tell him he doesn’t need to come up here right away or anything, I’m just giving him a heads up. Oh, and I’ll be down to pick weeds in an hour or so, soon as I’ve looked after Penny.”

“Understood. Will do.”

I almost missed getting some kind of wisecrack back from him now, as I dropped to the lower deck.

Penny was already up with the boys. Instead of simply nursing them now, she was tempting them with a spoon.

“Whatcha trying to stuff into my boys there?”

“Mashed carrots. Mama’s milk doesn’t keep them full for very long lately, so I figure it’s time to try them on real food.” I watched as she tipped a bit of orange mush into AJ’s mouth. He grimaced, and uttered a small protest, flailing his arms, but he finally swallowed it down. Baby Zack then got the same. “These are your carrots, by the way.”

“Huh?”

“From your first harvest, dear farmer husband. Your sons are eating food that you grew yourself out of the soil of our home.”

“Wow.”

“How do you like being part of that primal cosmic mystery?”

“Wow,” I said again. For a moment, I really felt it. Not the same way Penny did, or any mother does, I suppose. But I felt an intense, visceral connection then: Penny, the boys, me, and the work of growing food and feeding my own children. It was almost the way Penny had described that “Red Thread of Destiny”: an unseen bond running from us to the land and back again, always back and forth, and disappearing off into the future.

I suddenly understood a lot of the stuff I’d read in school, about pioneers and homesteaders and fights for one patch of soil, all kinds of things in the history books a city boy just kind of laughs at.

“Penny . . . ?”

“Bobby . . . ?”

“We’re kind of joking around with that ‘cosmic mystery’ stuff, but do you think . . .” I hesitated even to put it into plain words. “Maybe I’m being a silly man, but do you think maybe, this really, kind of, *is* what it’s all about?”

She beamed up at me with her eyes laughing. “Sometimes, you can be very perceptive. For a silly man.”

“How are you feeling this morning? If you’re OK, I’ll go down and pick weeds for a while. I’ve got all our equipment set to watch for visitors.”

“You go ahead, love. I’m doing fine, and Mother is already up if I need help.”

I distributed kisses to her and the boys, grabbed a quick breakfast in the galley, and headed down to the fields.

Will was already there, pitching in as he had promised a while back: this, to allow me more time caring for Penny. I wasn’t taking his work for free, although he had volunteered it. I had promised him a share of the harvest in return for his labor. Although it wouldn’t amount to much, not with what we could produce at this stage, I thought it would be good to establish some nominal marks of an economic system, some give and take. He worked steadily, if not enthusiastically, and was earning his share.

“Morning, Will,” I greeted him. He waved a casual greeting in return, then Don came trotting up.

“What’s going on, rocket jockey?” he asked. “The Robot called me on the short-range and said big things were afoot.”

Briefly, and somewhat awkwardly, I explained the hunch I had had. Here, up to our knees in tomatoes and carrots, under the hot sun, my words sounded foolish. To his credit, Don didn’t dismiss my tale.

“Stranger things have happened,” he said, and started to tell me of Judy’s similar premonition before I stopped him.

The day passed uneventfully, although I was a bundle of nerves waiting for Something to happen. Don, Will, and I pulled weeds and harvested a few bits of ripe crops. We wrestled with the question of getting real plumbing into our houses – 00000000a simple lack of pipe was our chief problem.

“Don,” I asked, “Down in the cold storage, aren’t there some animal embryos still viable?”

“Just goats,” he replied.

“What do they eat?”

“Damn near anything they can get to.”

“We have seed for grazing grasses, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, whaddya think?”

He stood up, wiped off sweat, and thought. “We’d have to have either them or this acreage fenced in. Otherwise they’d eat this down to stubble.”

“Lemme guess, we don’t have the stuff to build fences, right?”

Don scratched his unshaven chin thoughtfully. “We probably have wire enough to put up an electric fence. That would work.”

“What about the force field?”

“Nah. It would have to run constantly. It would drain the batteries faster than they could ever recharge. Not to mention compromising our defensive ability.”

“Hmm. But an electric fence. . . ?”

“Very low power. Should be viable. Want to start planting pasturage, and maybe next year we can have a barbecue like this planet’s never seen before?”

“I can taste it already!” I grinned.

A noise from above made me jump and look, but it was only dry lightning. We broke for lunch; I took a short dive into the frigid pond, and was warm and dry –fairly clean, too– by the time I got to the ship.

Dr. Smith accosted me at the hatch. "I hear, dear boy, that you think we are about to have some long-overdue visitors."

I shrugged noncommittally. "Just one of those weird hunches. Probably nothing, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to turn the radios up."

"One of your hunches, sir, I think is worth more than a stack of calculations by some of the nattering naysayers aboard this ship. When may we expect their arrival?"

I explained that it was all only a wild guess on my part, and that we were likely no closer to a visit from Earthmen (or anyone else) than we ever had been. I nearly believed it myself.

He glowered at me. "If anyone does arrive, I shall be below, packing my bags. I expect to be notified immediately if we do have company."

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. I attended to weedy tomatoes, dirty babies, and a lovely wife.

Mum snuggled the babies while Penny and I took a short walk outside.

"I'm really homesick, Bobby."

"What, for Earth? Is this from me going nuts for two minutes and thinking someone was coming?"

She looked at me, miffed. "No, you clunk, for my own home. Our own home. That one," pointing toward the oasis. "You poor men slaved away the winter building it, and now I can't even live in it."

"If you really want, how about you ask Dr. Smith about moving back down? I'm sure you'll be fine, and Judy's right there to help if you need it. And Smith and your mother are only ten minutes away by Chariot if there's a problem."

She snuggled her head against my shoulder and hugged my arm. "*You'll* be there too, I hope. That's the most importantest thing of all."

"You talk funny, little girl, but it's cute."

"'n' I mean it, too." She picked up my hand, gently pressed her teeth against my knuckles, and growled playfully. "To be fair, it's not Judy's job to look after me, and I don't want her to think it is. I mean, I'm sure she'd be happy to, but I don't want to impose on her." She grinned impishly. "That's what Mother's for."

"How long before you think John will be ready to move out of the ship? Have you heard him make any noises about building his own house?"

Penny shook her head slowly. "I think he likes the comfort and convenience of it all. Can't say as I blame him. I mean, I do want us to be together in our own home, but I kinda wish our own home was as comfy as our ship's cabin."

I took her in my arms, held her close. "I think things are going to be getting a lot better, real soon, angel." I tipped her face up to mine to look in her eyes. "I recall a very special day some time back when you got very upset telling me how your mom and dad expected you to be a brave little pioneer girl all the time. Now, I hope *I* don't get you all upset now, but you know what? You've been that in spite of yourself, and much more. You're a courageous and beautiful young woman, and the best wife and mother imaginable. You've taken everything this world could throw at you, and you threw it right back, with a devilish grin on top. I think that's more than I could ever have managed. I promise, I'll do whatever I can to make it easier for you."

"Sometimes you just leave me speechless, you clunk. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to complain."

I laughed aloud. "Angel, I didn't think you were complaining, not at all. I just meant that you deserve so much better than I can do for you. But I'll keep trying."

She rested her head against my chest. "I'm trying to think of something all soft and gooshy to say now, but you've got my brain all turned into mush with your sweet-talk."

“Now help me back inside, please. My head’s all spinny and I don’t know if it’s from being sick or hungry or from listening to your nonsense, but I gotta go sit down and then I’ve got to feed babies. And if you see Mother first, tell her I’d really like something meaty and steaky for dinner, if she can.”

We got back inside, babies and mother all got fed as they liked. The boys had another experience with mashed carrots. This time it seemed to involve finger-painting each other with the stuff as much as eating it.

I spent the night with Penny again, but this time there was no opportunity even to whisper endearments at each other. The boys were over-excited from carrot-painting, or over-tired from it, or just felt like being cranky. They took turns all night fussing and fuming over the indignity of it all. After a half-hour putting one back to sleep, the other would wake.

“I swear the little rats are playing baby-pong with us,” Penny growled at one point, about 3:00 AM.

I was doing my best to share the job, but a crying baby in the middle of the night generally wants Mama, not Daddy. I swear, they screamed all the louder when I picked one up. Along about dawn, both of them suddenly sat back against their mother and started giggling.

AJ pointed at me. “Arr arr ga YA!” he decided. “Wumma wum!” agreed Zack. With that, they turned, threw themselves across Mama’s most comfortable parts, and fell soundly asleep.

Penny looked up at me. “YOUR sons!” she mouthed at me, along with another name for them.

“Rubbish, angel. Maybe they *are* a bit undersized, but you know perfectly well we were married when we made ’em.”

She rolled her eyes in exasperation, then bit her lip to stifle laughter. Freeing a hand, she beckoned me close and whispered, “I think I’m going to join them in some decent sleep now. Go on out there and pick fleas off your cucumbers or whatever it is you and Don do in the field there all day. And sometime today, get that cradle down to our house.”

“Of course, my love.”

“And I think it’s about time you brought me breakfast in bed again. I haven’t seen that since that time last winter when you held me hostage in bed for three days, playing Penny and The Pirate. I’ll send word when I’m awake.”

“Yes, dear. I’ll have the Robot bring in the breakfast trolley whenever you like. Would you like three or four entrees to choose from?”

We stared each other down for a moment, seeing who would crack first. I won that one.

“I’m still going to bring you breakfast in bed, though. Maybe *you* were kidding, but I want everyone to see just how spoiled you are.”

“Oh! You. Just kiss me good-night and get out of here so I can sleep.” I did, she did.

Dawn’s half-light lit the control deck. The Robot was in his niche, powered down to stand-by as he recharged. I slapped him on his shoulder. “Hey, Tinman,” I said softly.

Lights flickered on, sensors started activating. *whirr hum click click hum* “It’s early, still. Is something wrong?”

“No, I, uh, just had a restless night. Have you been scanning all night?”

“Affirmative. Any activity would have triggered me to full-on.”

“OK. Look, I think I’m going to have a quick nap in the chair over here. Wake me at 7, please. Or if you hear Penny call for me. Or if there’s any traffic alerts, of course.”

“Understood, will do.”

I put my head back and dropped off instantly. Unfortunately, 7 came almost as instantly. The Robot tapped me on the shoulder. “Zero seven hundred, Bobby. Rise and shine.”



I groaned. John and Maureen were still asleep. I didn't want to start cooking in the galley for fear of waking the others, so I headed straight on out to see what I could scavenge off the outdoor cooker. There was a half-pot of coffee, left over from the night before. I downed a cup at a single gulp. Let me tell you something, unlike wine and whisky, coffee does not improve with age. I took a second one, and started shambling down to the Acre. I hoped I'd find a tomato ripe enough to eat.

I started the morning bitterweed crawl, ripping up any shoots of the noxious parasite that shriveled and tainted any fruit, root, or shoot it attacked. Fortunately, it was the only serious pest we had to contend with here, and Maureen, biologist and biochemist, had been developing a fungicide to control it more easily and effectively. Yes, a fungicide. That was one of her first discoveries. Despite looking like any small grassy plant, it was actually a fungus, and according to her, more akin to yeast than mushrooms.

I didn't worry about that, I just worried about stripping out any tendrils from our food. It would spread slowly at first, covering no more than a square foot or so in its first day of infestation. Then overnight, it would explode and be spread over ten or twenty square feet by morning, leaving everything all but inedible.

So Don, Will, and I crawled our field twice a day, morning and afternoon, inspecting for bitterweed and stripping it out ruthlessly. This was our greatest limitation in regard to our potential for food production. This acre or so of ground was just about the limit of what we could manage. When Maureen produced a better solution we could cultivate a lot more – of course I assumed we would pay her in crop shares for the use of her weedkiller.

Until then, I crawled through the rows. It was hard work, but needed no brainpower, and it was easy to get into an almost meditative state as you did it – you kind of detached mind from body and watched the body go through its repetitive motions, and let any physical discomfort stay down there with it until done.

I checked my watch, it was almost 0930. Time flies. I stood up, felt the stabs of pain in my back and knees that I was getting used to, and looked around. I saw Don over in his patrol section, about as far from me as possible. Will worked a few rows over.

“Don!” I shouted. He looked up. I pointed up to the ship, then at my watch, and held up a single finger: I was going up to check on Penny and the boys, and would be back within an hour.

I turned to go, and immediately felt my right foot go skidding. For the second time in a week, I had slipped into one of the irrigation ditches. I limped over to the Chariot – Will had driven down in it – and rode briskly up to the *Jupiter 2*.

A little more than halfway there, I saw John Robinson step out onto the hatchway ramp of the ship, then disappear back inside. A moment later his voice crackled over the short-range. “*Bobby! Get up here double-time! I think that hunch of yours just paid off!*”

I didn't even answer, I just kicked the throttles up high and sounded the air horn by way of acknowledgment. I think I was screaming a triumphant victory cry the whole way; I don't even remember.

I almost knocked over the picnic table bringing in the Chariot so close, so fast, and stumbled slightly on my twisted ankle jumping out. Damn! It hurt that time. Racing inside, I saw John and the Robot by the co-pilot's console, where all the comm gear was.

“What's going on, what's going on? What did you hear? Or is it –” I stopped to catch my breath. My heart was pounding so that I was dizzy and hardly breathing.

“Not aliens, Bobby. It was a hail speaking English.” He grinned at me. “I figured I'd let you answer it; it might be a friend of yours.” He winked at me cryptically and handed me the mike.

A moment later the radio blared a call: “This is Rescue Survey Scout *Tornado* calling any station on, uh, unidentified planet below. *Tornado* calling any station on unidentified planet below. Rescue Survey Scout *Tornado* calling any station below. Over.”

I think I almost fainted on the spot. It took a second or two for the joyful reality to register, then I keyed the mike. “*Tornado, Tornado*, oh my God is it good to hear you! This is Ensign Robert W. Cain, of – belay that, *formerly* of Rescue Scout *Thundercloud*. You must know who I am, who’s that?”

A whooping cry came over the air. “Well, hot dog, that’s who they told me I was looking for! Guess I made my pay this month after all! Broadway Bobby Cain, you bad boy, this is Dusty Proudfoot!”

I laughed aloud. The Rescue Survey being fairly small, most of us knew each other by name, hell, most of us were friends. I’d been pretty good friends with Dusty at one time, in Academy, and for a while afterward. “Dusty, you old river rat! Get your no-good – uh, backside down here pronto!”

“Oh you betcha I will! Just gimme a beacon and tell me where to come getcha! I’ve got some stories to tell you on the way back that’ll make the good ol’ days seem tame! Hey, y’all recall that night we went groundside in Tokyo and –”

I keyed the mike quickly. “Dusty, belay the chatter. I’m down here with a civilian party, including my – um, including some female personnel.” Maureen had come up, and was giving me a most amused look. From the sound of babies, I assumed Penny was right behind me.

“Oh, sorry ’bout that, Bobby, I beg your pardon, ladies. I was just recollectin’ the time we come up a few hundred yen short on a bar bill and got oursells kicked down the back stairs.

“So how many of y’all are there? This is just a standard ship like your *Thundercloud*, and she’ll sleep six, OK for a fast ride back home, double that if’n yer good friends.”

“Dusty, it’s – going to be a little bit of a story. Get yourself downstairs so you can see what’s going on.” I looked at my surroundings – the lost *Jupiter 2* expedition. Dusty would have thought I was telling old space sailor stories, or just crazy.

“Sakes alive, Bobby, light up that beacon for me! I’m-a hound-doggin’ in on your VHF wave here, but this is a big ol’ planet, ya know? A real locator signal would be a big help.”

John hit the button for the emergency radio beacon. It began broadcasting its pulsed Doppler signal, which the equipment aboard the scoutship could use to get a hard fix on us, not just a single line of possible positions.

“If it helps, Dusty, we’re in the northern hemisphere, about 30 degrees north. Local time is about ten in the a.m., so we’re about halfway between the dawn terminator and straight-up noon. There’s a spot of green in the neighborhood that’s an oasis. Look for that when you want to try to start making visual.”

“Roger that, ol’ buddy. Should be there soon, hour or so. I got a nice high fast orbit going. Oops, I’m going outta range ’round the back side now, catch you again real soon.”

I looked about. “Hey, somebody go get Don and Judy. This is the biggest day in years, and he’s down there with Will picking mold. Oh, Will too! Robot, go wake up Dr. Smith.” John and Maureen, after sharing a long embrace, had darted out to the Chariot and were driving down to get the others.

Penny tapped me on the shoulder and eyed me with a look that chilled my blood. “You two came up short on a bar bill, huh? In Tokyo?” She allowed a beat and a half of icy silence. “What were their names?”

I stood frozen in awkward silence, as my dear wife, arms full of our children, glared at me. I was quite literally speechless. Suddenly, she started grinning in astonishment.

“Oh. My. Goodness. You’re redder than one of your precious tomatoes! I gotcha good this time, didn’t I, darlingest husband mine! Oh, I *will* hear all about this soon, won’t I?” I still hadn’t uttered a word, not even a squeak. She looked down at the babies. “See, boys, this is why you must *never* tell fibs to mamas or wives or girlfriends. We *always* find out. Women are superheroes, and that’s our superpower. Never forget that. Daddy never will, not now.”

One round to Penny.

From below, we heard a high-decibel, low-fidelity, slightly off-key rendition of “Reveille” blasting from the Robot’s sound system. The first notes did not quite obscure a terrified and startled shriek.

I found my voice. “We’ll talk about this later, if you really think you want to, my angel. In the meantime, why don’t you go change out of your sleepers? We’re having company here, at the ship, if that escaped you. Someone who *isn’t* used to seeing you parading around in your pretty yellow big-girl jammies.”

She poked her tongue at me and flounced off to the elevator.

Dusty’s voice eventually came back in. “OK, Broadway, I’m starting to drop down. I’ve got a good signal on your beacon and am homing in. I believe I have visual on that oasis, but I see a couple. Kinda big or kinda small?”

“Prolly kind of small. But I haven’t seen much of the neighborhood. We’re about one and a half, two kilometers east of that.”

“Roger that, I’ll see if I can put down about halfway between that green and your location.”

“Negative, negative! We have –uh– ground facilities off that way and your landing jets may cause damage. Land about that distance off to the east or the north, instead. Not the south, the ground is all very soft sand, unstable for a landing platform. Come to think of it, north is a little uneven. East is best, I think. Yeah, east.”

“Y’all sure on that now, Broadway? Maybe wanna talk me through a few more directions?”

“What? Hey, goober, I’m just trying to be helpful here! Half-kilometer or so east is fine. Maybe a little closer if you’re careful. I got a ground vehicle here, so don’t worry about having to walk.”

“I’ll keep off a good distance so’s I don’t smoke up whatever y’all got there when we lift. Remember, I’m plannin’ on liftin’ outta here, Crashy.”

“Hey Dusty, here’s a clue, as you follow line-of-sight east from that oasis, you might get a metallic reflection off the ship I’m in now. That’s how I found it, I saw her from orbit.”

“Roger, that’ll help.”

“Well, I figured you’d appreciate visual contact, since I know you have a hard time reading the big numbers on your nav gear up there.”

“Say Bobby, if you’re in a bad mood or something, would y’all like me to just come back later – like in another year or two? Oops, never mind, I think I just saw you. Ouch! Yeah that was you, your beacon just made my transponder scream in my ear. Stand by. OK, got a fix.”

After another moment I heard, “Right, I’m going to have pull a couple loopedy-loops up here. I’m catching atmosphere and need to slow down some, unless you’d rather have a fireworks show. I’m just gonna . . .” I heard him muttering figures to himself, and even the peeps and chirps of the flight controls as he pressed buttons. Suddenly I had a kind of homesickness for space flight.

“All right, Broadway, I’m all programmed, nothing for me to do but sit back and let Cousin ’Puter bring me in. Start watching the sky, I should be down in – fourteen minutes, twenty-three seconds, it says. Keep talkin’ to me, buddy, I like the company, even if it’s only you.”

“Yeah yeah, hang on a minute, I gotta look after something down here.” Outside, the Chariot pulled up, and behind, I could hear the chatter of Smith and the Robot on the elevator. I ran outside. John, Maureen, and Will, Don and Judy, piled out of the Chariot.

“He’ll be downstairs in about fifteen minutes. Man, I still can’t believe this. This guy, Dusty, he’s about the greatest guy you’ll ever want to meet. Ace pilot, I bet he could land right on the roof here and not even scorch the finish.”

“Where is he? Where is he? Has our sainted rescuer descended from Heaven like the saving angel he is?” Dr. Smith had arrived on the scene. The Robot carried his suitcase and a number of personal effects which apparently couldn’t be crammed in. “Are you sure? You’re sure he’s arriving?” His voice was cracking in hysteria.

“Just sit down and relax, Smith,” ordered John. “He’ll be on the ground in ten or fifteen minutes, but you’re not going to just barge on board and take off again. I’m not sure exactly what’s going to happen, for that matter.”

He scratched his head thoughtfully. “Are we all here? OK, let me put on my governor’s hat and call a General Meeting. Any objections? All right, this meeting is in order. As we all know, there is at this moment a scout ship of the Rescue Survey approaching for landing. Our chance for rescue and evacuation is literally minutes away. Alternatively, and preferably, this is our opportunity to re-establish ties with Earth, and make new contacts with the colonies which have arisen in our absence. This is what we need to not just survive as a colony, but to grow and prosper. Whatever happens next, it will not leave us unchanged. I would like everyone –”

“*Tornado* calling, Bobby you there, buddy?” Dusty’s call interrupted John’s speech.

“Sorry John,” I apologized. “Go ahead *Tornado*, what do you want Dusty?”

“I musta been in space too long, Bobby, I think you said something very interesting before an’ it went right over my head.”

“Something wrong, Dusty?”

“Not a thing I hope. Did I really hear you mention females in the pluralistic tense earlier? And y’all suppose you might take a moment and introd–”

“Dusty, stuff it! Can it! We’re trying to figure out what we’re gonna do here and all you can think of – never mind, but I think I can reasonably assure you that the women here are pretty well spoken for, but if you feel like a tri-cornered *ass-whuppin’* there’s some fellas down here who would prolly oblige you! Now get that firebottomed moth– get that ship on the ground and get your – just get down in one piece!”

I slammed the mike into the cradle. I turned around to see the entire company –save Dr. Smith and the twins– doubled over in laughter, red-faced and sputtering. I could feel my own face reddening too.

“Jeez, hon, what a performance!” guffawed Penny. “Two minutes yakking with an old shipmate and you’re talking like a salty old space sailor again! Or trying to! Did you hear that, Zack? AJ, you hear the bad words Daddy was trying to say?”

“Babababa hop!” said Zack, punching Mama in the nose.

“Arble mock!” agreed AJ, punching Zack in the nose.

Wiping his eyes, trying to stop his laughter, John knocked his hand against the wall. “All right folks, let’s finish this up. All I’m trying to say is, if anyone wants to take this opportunity to bail out of here and go back to Earth with, uh, Captain Dusty there, you are more than welcome, and that includes you, Smith, I see your bags are already packed. Ladies, I would suggest you think very carefully before getting aboard that ship with him, though.” Another round of laughter swept us. “That’s all I wanted to make clear. You’re all free men and women, I can’t stop you getting on board, I won’t try to talk you out of it, and I’ll shake your hand and wish you best of luck and Godspeed if you do.”

It was a suddenly somber moment, as we all looked at each other: the proverbial Moment of Truth was upon us. Well, we all knew Smith was ready. Penny gave me a wide-eyed stare that clearly said, “Are you kidding?” Some questioning looks passed between John, Maureen, and Will; Will shook his head resolutely as his parents linked arms. The moment seemed to stretch just a little too long between Don and Judy: there was an awkward silence as they glanced away from each other and randomly around the command deck. Hmm, I thought, but none of my business.

“Is there any other business that needs to be raised before this meeting is adjourned if so speak up fast because I declare this meeting adjourned then, thank you.”

Penny stepped out onto the ramp. “I think I see him!” she squealed. We all ran out. Arms full of babies, she couldn’t point, but she hardly needed to. Even then and there, all of us recognized the meaning of a bright point of light in the daytime sky. Nothing else up there looks like photon jet retro-rockets. We must have looked like rubes from the back country, staring up like that at a rocket landing, then it occurred to me that we probably were. I was excited, Penny was simply curious. Will regarded it studiously, his overclocked brain eagerly analyzing this new phenomenon. I glanced behind me; John’s arms were folded defiantly, and I remembered the end of a conversation we had had just a few days after my arrival here:

How *would* it be to welcome down a rescue mission, and tell them, “No thank you, glad you came by, but we don’t *need* rescuing, we’re doing just fine!”

I wondered if he was mentally rehearsing his speech. I heard a little bit of a sniff, and I was startled to see tears streaming down Mum’s cheeks. What was she thinking? I was certain John was here to stay, and I knew Maureen was with her husband to stay – did *she* want to go back to Earth? Or was it just the relief of knowing our isolation was over?

I really had forgotten what a breathtaking spectacle it is to see a spaceship landing. The output of the photon jets was brighter than the sun; I reminded everyone to look away from them. The roar of them too was staggering, literally, even a kilometer distant. The ground and the ship shook in sympathy with the audible sound, and the very air trembled in resonance with the cacophonous subsonics. The babies started crying, and Penny hurried them inside.

At about 500 meters up, the photon jets blazed brighter, slowing descent rate even further, and we felt the heat of them – they are as hot as a sun, too, when they kick.

“Let’s all duck inside, folks, just in case,” I shouted over the roar. Landings are always a bit risky, and that kind of power can kick random ground debris around for a mile, so why stand out in it?

We watched from behind the safety of the Jupe’s main viewport. I bit my lip; it looked like he was dropping just a little too quickly to the 100 meter ceiling. Penny was at my elbow again, whether she sensed my apprehension or realized herself something wasn’t quite right, I don’t know, but she clutched tighter at me.

“Where’s the boys?” Her arms were empty. She gave me a little half grin, and jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

Dr. Zachary Smith was holding our twin boys. Although he was cuddling them perfectly well, he sat rigidly upright, his face a mask of indignity.

“They OK with him?” I whispered as much as possible over the roar of the landing rocket. “He don’t look too happy.”

Penny repressed a giggle. “He insisted. Said he thought my back looked a little delicate today for carrying babies around.”

“That slick old phony,” I whispered back.

I looked back at the good doctor; he scowled at me darkly, and his eyes suggested he would as soon shut the babies in a freezing tube as hold them one more moment.

Slowly, deliberately, I grinned at him and winked. Dr. Smith spun the chair, turning his back to me, never easing his strong, sure grip on my boys.

The *Tornado* continued her descent past the 50 meter mark to 25. The artificial suns at her control flared furiously, again and again, checking her drop. At 10, the ground glowed as brightly as the jets themselves. Maybe there's some glass for us now, I thought. From there, the light and heat and roaring pulsed erratically all the way down to the bottom.

The abrupt end of this sensory assault was a stunning relief. I released a breath I had held the last few feet down. I felt Penny's fingernails unlatch from the skin of my inside elbow.

"YEEEEEE – HAWWW!" howled Dusty over the radio. "Down in one piece, praise Glory! I coulda done it a lot prettier myself, but I like to save myself for the hard ones. Anyway, it was a sight better'n the last time somebody dropped one of these babies here!"

"You keep shootin' off that loud mouth of yours, pal. Let's see you do that again, but drop your engines and short out all your wiring first, then we'll see who's a better pilot!"

"Dang, you come down here deadstick? And you're still talkin'?" OK, I'm impressed."

"Well, not totally deadstick, but I sure didn't have much power except too much wind and too much grabbity."

"OK, OK, I said I was impressed. Keep talkin' to me, Broadway, I'm gonna be stuck in here another half hour at least. I'm still showing about 250 degrees ground temp around me here, and hull temp almost 300."

"Ouch. Yeah, keep the door shut and the air conditioning on for a bit."

Penny tugged at me. "What's that mean? Where those rockets heated the ground up?"

"Got it in one, my brilliant love."

"That doesn't seem so bad."

"That's in centigrade. That's almost, uh, five hundred in Fahrenheit."

"Oh. Yeah, that it is toasty."

"I guess I never mentioned it, even America went all metric about five years ago. I mean before I left."

"Finally, huh? Took 'em long enough."

"Meanwhile, Britain went back to the old system."

"What?"

"Yeah, there was a huge dust-up over the right of a man to go into his pub and order a pint. The stuff just doesn't taste right by the half-liter, I guess."

I reminded myself that one issue to take up with Governor Robinson was a Bureau of Weights and Measures to establish our own native system of measurement.

I reached for the mike. "Hey, Dusty, how's them temps looking over there?"

"They're coming down nice and smooth. Still a mite warm. Nothing I want to try walking on yet. 'Bout another fifteen minutes, like I said."

"Roger that."

"Hey, wait'll you see what I brung for ya! Somethin' you haven't tasted for a while, and that's all I'll tell ya now."

A stern voice interrupted. "Penelope." We both spun around to face Dr. Smith. The twins were fidgeting and starting to complain.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"I am simply concerned that these infants may need motherly attention, and hope you are experiencing no undue discomfort from needing to provide for them."

It took us a moment to decipher his oblique remarks. I was slightly amused, considering how intimately he had tended to Penny in the past. Was that for my sake? You do have a chivalrous soul, Doctor, I thought. Immediately it crossed my mind: I'll miss him. Then: can we manage without him? This man whose throat I once clutched in my hands – could I convince him to stay with us?

Penny walked over to him. "I think you're right, Doctor. It's been so exciting around here this morning, I've hardly noticed." Carefully, she retrieved the twins. "Thank you for minding them, Doctor. I think they quite like you." As she gathered up the boys, she patted his cheek, then took the elevator below.

Smith cast a fugitive glance toward the elevator. He seemed to suddenly remember my presence, and spun toward me. He puffed himself up into one of those personae which had been so rare of late. "And just what do you think you are gaping at, you ramshackle Romeo? I shall be outside, awaiting the advent of our spacefaring savior." He stood straight, and strutted out.

I ignored what may have been a few woeful sniffs, and keyed the intercom. "John? Bobby. You want to start riding out to the *Tornado*?"

"Be right up," came the reply.

Picking up the mike, I called Dusty. "Hey, buckethead. We're gonna start driving over in a minute. Put your pants on and get ready to visit with some civilized folks for a change."

"What the heck is up over there? You're sounding positively uptight, pal."

"Well, get used to it, for a day or so. You're not grounding for a forty-eight hour in a cheap port visiting the local Seaman's and Spacer's Club. This is like – visiting home."

He whistled over the mike. "Bad as that, huh?"

"Just like that."

"Sounds like you mean it. I don't get it, but I'll watch my manners. Hey, I'm showing manageable temps, so anytime, buddy."

"Roger that, on my way shortly. Clear and out."

"Clear and out."

John popped up the ladderwell from below. "He ready to show himself?"

"Yup. I haven't spilled any of the beans yet, but he knows this is a place to be on his best behavior. Oh, he's a gentleman at heart, believe it or not."

He grinned. "Well, that's something then. Let's go."

He took the throttle of the Chariot and we headed out.

As we bounced over the sand, I couldn't help asking about what I had noticed earlier. "Maureen OK with all this, John? She homesick?"

He pressed his lips together. "I'm not sure anymore. I – I think she'll be all right. Just all this now, all so suddenly . . . I wouldn't blame her if she wanted to go home. To Earth. I almost want to myself."

I reminded myself that the Robinsons had been here since I had been in Academy. It seemed like such a long time, stranded and alone. I had to admit, the lure of Earth was a sudden siren song. I thought of the unexpected reaction of Don and Judy earlier, and of course, of Dr. Smith. I wondered if he was the most sensible one of us.

I thought of Penny and our boys. What did she really want? Despite all my previous resolutions and determination, I decided I would ask again –no, I would *encourage* her– to come back to Earth. After all, I rationalized, going back wasn't admitting any sort of defeat. It would simply be retreating, regrouping, and restarting this whole adventure as it had been intended: admitting a mistake, and getting back on track. No big deal. Right? Hah. Even thinking it was as dust and ashes in my mouth.

"Has Penny said anything to you about all this?" I asked.

John heaved in a half-laugh. "You kidding? She'd jump into the lava with you."

I thought about that, and asked, “Is that supposed to make it easier for me? I want what’s best for her, for us, and the boys. *Your* grandsons, Governor. John. I – I rely on her a lot. A lot. I need to know what she really wants. We can’t just follow each other, going in circles.”

John was quiet, thoughtful. “You’re a good man, Bobby. I don’t think my daughter could have found herself a better husband with all Earth to pick from. I’m proud to have you as my son-in-law. I think it’s good you’re questioning yourself like this. But I think you also know what the answers are. You don’t really need me for that, do you?”

I sat a long time in silence, gazing out the windows at the forbidding landscape of my home.

“*Tornado* to Bobby. You there?” I picked up the mike.

“Go ahead, *Tornado*.”

“I’m cool.”

“You’re a geek.”

“Play fair, bad boy, I said I’d be nice.”

“Sorry. Look out the window. You should see us, we’re almost there. Give us a ground temp.”

“I make it about 75 degrees at the hatch. Y’all got about normal atmosphere, right?”

“Roger that, *Tornado*. Good time to think of it.”

“Gonna crack ’er now.”

“Ready when you are.”

John pulled up about ten feet away from the ship. He looked up at it fixedly. “That’s what you flew here, Bobby?”

“Yeah, looks like the same design. See where the engineering module mates into the command module? That’s what I had to ditch.”

“Damn. Damnation!”

I looked over, open-mouthed. From John Robinson, such a mild oath was shocking.

“I’ve been a kid playing at camp-out in the back yard, haven’t I? The *Jupiter 2* is a pile of old junk next to this.”

“Nonsense, John. Not one man in a thousand could have done what you have, regardless of the ship.”

He looked at me cynically. “That sounds like one of the little gems you toss to Penny. Thanks, though. I appreciate the thought.”

I saw movement inside the ship where the hatch opened, and a ladder opened out. “Stand by, Governor. I’m acting Immigration Officer now,” I grinned. I jumped out of the Chariot just as Dusty started descending the ladder.

“Don’t slip now, you schmuck, I don’t want to have to fill out a regrets letter on my day off!”

“Get out of the way or I’ll jump down right on your fool head, goatpounder!”

“Hey, if you fall and break your neck, can I have your stuff?”

Dusty took his feet off the ladder rungs and slid right down, gripping only the sides, and hit the ground hard, buckling his knees slightly. He spun around, raced over to me, and hugged me tight.

“Bobby Bobby Bobby! Man, we thought you was all swallowed up in the Deep Cold Dark! And look at you, all fat and sassy, big as life and twice as ugly!” Embarrassingly, he planted a big kiss on my cheek, grabbed me by the waist, and waltzed me around. “Man, it’s been way too long! Whatch’ y’all been doing here? For that matter, where is here?”

Waves of nostalgia swept me. “Oh man, I’ve missed you guys! You – you wouldn’t believe where this is, I’ll tell ya that!” Impulsively, I returned the hug he had given me. I didn’t realize how much I had missed my old life.

“Well, come on, pile in! You got luggage?”

“Just the backpack, buddy!”



“Toss it in!”

“Hold on now, hold on a sec!” He stood back and ogled our vehicle. “Dang!” he exclaimed. “This is, like, a Chariot! Right?”

“It is that.”

“Hot dog! Pretty cherry, too! Man, I know folks back home that would skip out serious cash for this buggy. Any chance . . .?”

“Sorry, not my call. Doubt it anyway. C’mon, climb in.”

Dusty gaped at the inside. “Shoot, this has gotta be like, first gen, huh?”

“Prolly ’bout as first gen as it could be. Here, let me introduce. John, this is Dusty Proudfoot, my old buddy from Rescue Survey. Dusty, this is John Robinson, governor of our little outpost here. We call it New Plymouth.”

“Hi John, pleasure to meet you,” Dusty said, extending a hand. “Glad to get you outta here.”

John smiled. I looked at Dusty. The name hadn’t clicked yet. “Good to meet you, son.” With no further ado, he gunned the engines, spun the Chariot around, and headed full speed back to the ship.

Dusty was staring about. “Man, I always love seeing new places, but this place is dismal. Bet you’re gonna be glad to get offa this rock.”

I gave him a cryptic look. “Maybe.”

“Maybe? What the – what you got here? A secret gold mine or somethin’?”

I laughed to myself. “Maybe something like that. Maybe something even better.”

“Broadway, you are just like talkin’ a different language. What’s going on here that you’re not tellin’ me?”

“John? Should I start breaking it to him?”

“Go ahead. No time like the present.”

“Dusty, what’s his name? I just introduced you.”

“Um, John, um, Robinson, I think. OK, I admit I’m runnin’ a little hot right now and not paying attention too good.”

“No, that’s it.”

“Umm, OK. So what?”

“That name ring a bell?”

Dusty looked around vacantly. “John Robinson. Robinson? Like the bunch that disappeared, like, ten years ago?”

“A lot like, Dusty. A whole lot like.” He still wasn’t getting it. “You remember their ship now? C’mon, we all learned about it at Academy.”

“Oh yeah, the *Jupiter 2*? What about it?”

We were coming up over the last rise before the terrain leveled out again.

“Didn’t it look something like that ship over there?” I asked.

He peered off into the distance. “Yeah, I think –” He stopped dead. Not just the other shoe, a whole discount-store full of shoes started dropping. Dusty’s eyes bugged and his breathing got very strange, like he couldn’t. He stared at John, driving. He pointed, then gaped back at me.

“That’s – THAT John Robinson? THE John Robinson?”

I nodded.

Dusty flopped back into the seat. “No way. They all been . . .”

“No, Dusty, they been here.”

“This is – What are you doin’ here?”

I shrugged. “I crashed. I met these guys. I – well, I better break the rest slow. You OK with where we are, so far?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”

“Well, bottom line, we’re trying to make a go of this place. I don’t think we’re looking for a pickup. We just want everyone to know we’re here. Let Earth know the Robinson Expedition is alive and well and living on New Plymouth.”

“Think you’re pullin’ my leg, bad boy.”

I laughed to myself. Just wait, I thought. Suddenly, I smacked Dusty on the arm. “How come it took you so long to get here? I shot my Mayday more than a year ago. It shouldn’ta been more than a couple months for you clowns to get out here.”

Dusty seemed relieved to get back on familiar turf. “Oh yeah, you’re a champion Scout, all right. The way the office figured it, your drone dropped in back beyond the asteroid belt. Power so low, it was on standby, and not actively broadcasting. It homed in toward Moonbase Delta OK, but pokin’ along on low-level reaction power. You know how long a ride that is, at that speed?”

“About a year, I’m guessing.”

“Yeah, how did – never mind. Anyway, it waited until it was about ten miles outta Delta to answer the transponders, and that’s when we found it. Lot a good intel on that, ya know. Unknown star, unknown system, unknown planet.”

“You found your way here.”

“No thanks to you. Be glad those drones record nav info automatically.”

“You found your way here.”

Dusty sat back and caught his breath. The putting together of our stories seemed to have exhausted him. After a moment, he looked back at John. “Really?” he whispered.

I pointed ahead. The *Jupiter 2* was there, an irrefutable testimony.

John pulled up a few steps away from the ship, and we all fell out. I grabbed Dusty by the shoulders.

“Look now, old buddy. If you think this was a surprise, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet. Hey, you need a cup of coffee or some decent food? Let’s sit down and see if we can get something cooked up.”

“Yeah. I need to set some more.”

Just then, Maureen popped out of the hatch. She carried a pot of coffee. “I thought you boys might need something. Hello!”

“Dusty, may I introduce Maureen Robinson?”

“Oh yes. Who else?” he said, flatly. He stood and grasped the tips of her fingers politely. “Ma’am. An honor, Mrs. Robinson.”

Maureen poured out cups for us. Dusty and I drank greedily.

Dr. Smith was skulking near the perimeter. I wasn’t sure if he was suddenly hesitant to reveal himself and his questionable presence, or if he was simply afraid that stepping too close would result in Dusty and the *Tornado* vanishing, as a dream. Finally he edged over, stood behind me, and coughed nervously.

“Oh, there you are, Doctor,” I said. “This is my old buddy, Dusty Proudfoot. Dusty, this is Dr. Smith. He was the mission’s flight surgeon.” That much was the simple truth. I decided to leave the more complicated and uncomfortable truths alone.

Dusty stuck out a hand. “Howdy, Doc.” He scratched his head. “I read ’bout this at school, but I don’t seem to recollect runnin’ ’cross your name, Doc.”

I interjected quickly. “He was a last-minute addition to the mission, Dust.” Again, a simple truth, even if not complete. I disliked misleading my old friend, but neither did I want to embarrass Dr. Smith. I promised myself I would tell Dusty the whole truth – later. I fully believed that Smith was a far different man than the willing saboteur and reluctant stowaway he had been – but if he was going into space with Dusty, possibly alone with Dusty . . . well, it wasn’t a chance I’d take with another man’s life.

Smith put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it, tipped his head in a silent “Thank you.” Only then did he offer his hand to Dusty. “Well, sir, I’m sure your name will be remembered and celebrated for ages to come as the one who brought the *Jupiter 2* survivors back to Earth – those who will be coming, anyway. For some reason, most of these deluded souls seem to think they want to stay here. As for me, just tell me when to be on board and where I can stow my gear. I shall continue my packing.” He stood for a minute gazing at the ship in the distance. “How long a trip, do you think?”

“Oh, not more’n two weeks. That’s takin’ it easy.”

Smith closed his eyes, and a look of bliss suffused his face. “Two weeks,” he whispered. “After eight years . . . two weeks . . .”

“I imagine there will be some people at Alpha Control just as eager to see you back, Doctor.” It suddenly crossed my mind that Smith might very well be a wanted man on Earth.

I was startled to see him smile at me coldly, and his face was of the old Smith I had hardly seen since the birth of the twins. “Never fear, young man. For any *one* who might be so eager to see me, there will be *two* wishing fervently I had indeed perished. I left home with my affairs in a wonderful state of equilibrium.” My blood went cold as I looked up at him. Whoever you are, go away, I thought. There was a man inside that body a few moments ago, a real man with a human soul, one who I had started thinking of as a friend. Who stood there now was virtually a stranger, and barely human.

The eerie moment passed. “I shall, as I say, return to packing my belongings. Ensign Proudfoot, I look forward to a swift voyage with you.” With no further ado, Dr. Smith –himself again– spun on his heels and went to his cabin.

Dusty and I sat a while in an awkward silence. Finally: “Here, Dust, come on inside. I want you to meet some of the others.”

Where were Don and Judy? I wondered. Will was tinkering with some of the electronics. “Dusty, Will Robinson. Will, my old shipmate, Dusty Proudfoot.”

“Hi,” said Will.

“Hi,” said Dusty. “Will Robinson. Natcherly.”

“Over here, Dusty.” I coached him to the elevator. He was disturbingly quiet as we descended, and stared about him. As all Academy graduates, he had studied the history of the Robinson Expedition and sketched the blueprints of the *Jupiter 2* as a rookie exercise. He likely knew the layout of the ship nearly as well as I. And as I had, he probably suspected he was on a ghost ship.

I knocked on the door of our cabin. “M’ love? Are you decent for company?”

“I hope so.” Bless her sassy soul.

I pushed the door open. She was stretched out in bed, in regular day clothes. The boys were flopped over her, sleeping. “Angel, this is an old friend of mine from Rescue Survey, Dusty Proudfoot. Dusty, this is Penny Robinson Cain, my wife, and those are our twin sons. Say hi, Dusty.”

Dusty grabbed a chair and sat heavily. “Y’all’s jus’ putting me on now, I know it. Married, Bobby? *You*? And bebbies? Did you really just say that?”

I nodded.

“And that’s . . . Penny? *That* Penny?”

“The one and only.”

“Oh, man. Funny, I thought you was a kid.”

“I was, until about a week ago,” Penny stated matter-of-factly. “When Bobby first found us, we were all still in our freezing tubes.”

Dusty and I both gaped at her.

“Bobby thought I was kinda cute for a kid, so you know what he did?”

“What?” Dusty and I asked. Dusty gave me a puzzled look.

“He took us back up in his ship, and flew backwards through hyperspace. That rolled back time, of course, and he dropped us off, awake, at our original crash site, seven years ago.”

“But –” said Dusty.

“Then he did the whole thing in reverse, by himself, and crashed back in to the present. I was the lovely young lady you see now, and I’d spent all those years waiting for him to come back for me, so I married him on the spot. Naturally.”

“Yeah, natch.” Dusty scratched his head. “But –” he said, pointing at the babies. He looked back and forth between Penny and me a few times. “Dang, Bobby. She’s good. I almost believed her for a half a minute.”

“Hell, *I* almost believed her.”

“She’s crazy enough to be Rescue Survey. Penny honey, how’d y’all like a good job in the Aerospace Civilian Service Corps? Lousy pay, lousy grub, see home for two weeks every six months, help half your customers go home, and bury the other half. Shoot, I just talked myself into quittin’, never mind.”

Penny was laughing. I was sitting on the edge of the bed, she gave me a gentle kick in the hip. “Hey Bobby, your friend is a riot. Good thing *he* didn’t find me first, you wouldn’t have had a chance.”

“Yeah, I can see you both got the same sick sense of humor. Would you like me to leave you two alone for a while?”

Penny sighed thoughtfully. “No, I suppose not. I’m guessing he doesn’t know how to change diapers, and I doubt even he can give my feet the nice cold washcloth treatment you’re so good at. I’ll probably just keep you after all.”

“Dust, you think you can just take her along, anyway? This is the kind of abuse I have to put up with all the time these days. And you thought old Commander Moszier was a sadist.”

Dusty was starting to look concerned. “Um, y’all are just kidding with all this right? Y’own little comedy act, huh?”

Penny and I started laughing together. “Dusty,” I said. “There’s no restaurants or nightclubs around here, so we make our own entertainment.”

“Y’all should take that act on the road. You might not make a lot, but think of all the grocery money you’d save from folks thowin’ tomaters at’cha.”

I glanced at Penny, jerked my thumb at Dusty. “Look who’s trying to crab in on our act.”

I stretched up, planted a kiss on my dear wife; she returned it so thoroughly that Dusty started clearing his throat at us and examining the rug.

“Well this is certainly remarkable, I must admit. All alone here for seven long years, then two different men in a little more than one. You can’t blame me for losing my head, Bobby darling.”

“Well, stop being so silly-girly-giddy or I’ll tickle your feet until you cry.”

Dusty folded his arms, rolled his eyes. “Well I’ll tell y’all suthin’ right now, ain’t no way I’m havin’ the two of y’all together on that ship of mine or y’all’d be making me spacesick by the time we cleared atmosphere. So it’s gonna be one or the other of ya, and I don’t think I wanna be locked up on board with either one o’ ya!”

All three of us started laughing then. “Seriously, Bobby,” said Dusty, “What the flyin’ lizards is goin’ on around here? Am I taking passengers back home, or what?”

Penny spoke. “Seriously, Dusty, not me you’re not, and not these babies. Or Bobby. Right Bobby?”

“I guess not, my angel. You’re certain?”

“Certain. Are *you* having second thoughts?”

“Dusty, tune out for a minute.” I took my wife’s hands in my own. “Penny, I’m going to play a dirty trick on you. What we do next is all on you. I want you to think very carefully about the chance to go back to Earth, where our boys can grow up and go to real schools and have lots of friends and where there’s doctors and hospitals and where you can pass the summer sitting at a beach instead of in a basement, and going shopping in the evenings. A simple, normal life. You tell me what we should do.”

She looked back at me, long, thoughtfully, lovingly. “Are you nuts?” she asked. “After all this? You really think I’d ditch out now? Bobby, this is my home. *Our* home. We’ve hardly lived in our own house yet. Right, boys?” The twins stirred vaguely on her breast. “Urm,” and “Na-na, ra!” they concurred.

“Really, Bobby, a simple, normal life? What is that, even? What would we do? What kind of jobs could we do? Are you going to go back to Rescue Survey? What about me? I know a little bit about raising babies and tending hydroponic gardens, and I’m just starting to learn about growing onions and carrots down there in the Acre. There’s not much of that kind of farm work left on Earth, Bobby, unless things have changed a whole lot since we left, and I know they haven’t because you’ve told me so yourself. And you really want us to live somewhere we have to keep ourselves shot all full of chemicals so we can’t even have more babies until some dimwit government paper-pusher decides we’re fit to apply for a childbearing permit? *Your* very words, if I recall.”

Penny started coughing, deeply and harshly. This outburst, growing more passionate at every word, was draining her strength. She took a few long, deep breaths. “You, Dusty,” she continued, more subdued. “That’s what it’s like on Earth, right? That’s what Bobby’s been telling me for a year now, and I don’t know if he was meaning to scare me off it on purpose or not, but from what I can make out, it sure doesn’t sound like any place I’d want to live.” She coughed some more, and her head sank back on the pillow. “I can hardly believe I used to live there myself.” The babies stirred. She lay still for a minute, breathing laboriously.

“Um, guys? I think I need to finish feeding the babies. Would you please step on out? Dusty, I’m sorry, I’m really thrilled that you’ve found us and I’m glad you’re here. I’ve enjoyed your company, and thanks for putting up with me, and just then I didn’t mean to sound rude or angry or anything. But the four of us are staying. Bobby, you still need to take this cradle down to our house today, please.”

“Well, Dust, you heard the lady. I can’t go to Earth. I have to move furniture.” Dusty and I stood there looking at each other, arms folded, nodding at each other.

“Yup, I heard her. Tough break.”

“I think you’ll have one customer. Maybe two,” I added, thinking again of the odd not-quite-a-scene between Don and Judy earlier.

Dusty turned back to Penny, who hurriedly rearranged her clothing and bedspread to hide the babies’ activity. “Oh, I do beg your pardon, Miss Penny – or Mrs. Cain, or however you’d like me to call you.” He held out his hand, Penny offered hers in return. He took it daintily, bowed low over it, and graced it with the faintest of ceremonial kisses.

“It has truly been an honor to meet you, ma’am, and I can but envy the good fortune of my friend here to have you as his own. I’ll be looking after business now, and I’ll be looking forward to sharing your company for the few days I’ll be here.” He stood and stepped toward the door.

“Be right with ya, Dust, head on up topside.”

Alone again, I held Penny’s hands, kissed her once more. “Thank you,” I said.

“Silly man,” she replied. As I turned to go, she grabbed me. “Hey, you know what? If things had worked out differently, you might have had a little competition after all.”

“Enough to matter?”

Penny pretended thoughtfulness. "Nah. Just a tiny little bit. You're the only one. But I do want you to learn how to kiss my hand like that."

I treated Penny to my biggest smile, bent over low, took her fingers. Putting my lips to her ear, I whispered, "In a pig's eye, I will," and was out the door before she could retaliate.

Back up topside, Dusty was chatting with John.

"Well sir, I suppose I can squeeze out as much as a week, if you need me. My orders are pretty liberal with regard to my own discretion, but home office at Moonbase Delta has a sorta unofficial three-day limit on non-emergency planet calls." Dusty scratched his head thoughtfully. "'Course when I tell them who I found here, I'm guessin' all rules would be off." He scratched again. "If they believe me, anyways, me an' that Doc fella. Get the notion his credibility ain't the best."

John laughed. "Don't worry, Dusty, I thought I might record a video, let everyone see us here doing reasonably well, ask for whatever supplies they can spare for us, and start trading for settlers' rights."

"What's the Governor trying to con you into doing, Dusty?"

"Oh, nothing much, just jump back upstairs, take a couple orbits and get some photos and measurements. Basic survey, what oughta'd been done if this'd been a planned colony."

I thought a moment. "How long would that take you?"

"No more than half a day, if I make busy at it. Keep high and fast, go for the big picture more than detail work. Why?"

"I just thought I wouldn't mind a run up with you, then I thought maybe Penny would like a ride too. Take a good look at where we live. But she can't be away from the babies too long, and I don't think you want your ship turned into a nursery. Whaddya think? Could you get a good set of pictures in, say, twelve or eighteen hours?"

"Yeah, that's reasonable. Whyn't ya ask her first? And then y'all gotta promise not to carry on your dangfool sweetie-heartin' up there."

I grinned, went back down to talk to my darling. I was almost surprised how enthusiastic she was for the chance.

"Just no trying to sneak me back to Earth. 'Specially without the boys. Unless you want to get pushed out the airlock."

"Oh wait. Will you be able to make it up and down that ladder? It's almost forty feet. No walking in through the side, like you did with my T-Cloud."

She sighed. "That . . . might be a bit too much."

"Hmm . . . Just a sec."

Back topside. "Dusty, maybe you didn't pick up on this, but Penny's still kind of weak, and we don't think she can handle the ladder. Isn't there some easier way to get her up and aboard?"

"Heck yeah, you forget about the stores crane? Or did you carry groceries up in your backpack alla time?"

Of course, the crane. I had forgotten about it. It mounted near the hatch, and was meant for bringing on food and other supplies. And the occasional injured rescuee. "You got a passenger harness?"

"Well, natch, or I wouldna mentioned it."

After another few jaunts up and down (if I didn't know better, I would have thought Dusty and Penny were working together to see how many times they could get me to run up and down the ladder), we decided to lift in the morning at 0600 after feeding the babies, get in eight or ten good orbits, and be back in time for dinner.

Penny went off with her mother and some odd plumbing, and left behind some liquid lunch for the boys. The refrigerator in the galley bore a note which read, "DO NOT drink anything you find in here unless you know EXACTLY what it is!!!" Between that and mashed vegetables, the twins would be fine until the evening.

Meanwhile, Dusty and John planned out a little bit more of what we would be looking for. As I puttered about topside, I was amused to hear that the more Dusty spoke with John, and the more technical and serious the discussion, the less was his accent.

" 'Scuse me, John? You know what I just thought of? What's the solar weather forecast? It'd be a hell of a thing for us to be up there and get hit with another electromagnetic storm." An electromagnetic storm from the mysterious neutron star at the edge of this system was what had originally disabled and crashed me here. I didn't want that kind of lightning to strike twice.

"Already ahead of you, son. Looks clear. Right, Robot?"

"Affirmative, Governor Robinson. Recent EM activity averaging three to six percent above normal background, no spikes above ten percent. Chances for severe EM activity within the next 48 hours estimated at nine per cent." *whir hum hum* He turned in my direction. "Slightly more than that for vessels with a hard-luck Jonah on board."

"Hey!"

Judy and Don finally turned up at the ship after dinner, and sat down together on the couch. They sat close, but seemed uncomfortable and posed. After proper introductions and some minor pleasantries, Don finally announced, "I – we – wanted to make sure Dusty here, and you John, knew that Judy and I are staying on." His words hung in the air awkwardly.

Judy continued. "Not that there was any question, of course. We just wanted to make sure you knew. And that Dusty didn't need to wait around to hear from us. We're staying. Both of us. Together."

Damn, I thought. It sounded like they were recording a hostage video. Don wore a tight smile that might have been painted on. Judy's face was a bland mask, but then, she rarely showed much emotion. Maureen poured out after-dinner coffees, which those two sipped at politely, and let grow cold.

"Well," announced Don, standing up. "It's been a long day. Come on, sweetheart, let's go on home."

He reached down, took Judy's hand, and helped her to her feet. She smiled vacantly and uttered polite good-nights all around. Arm in arm, they exited the *Jupiter 2* and headed back to the house.

Dusty stared, embarrassed, at the floor. John and Maureen stared, embarrassed, at each other, and I stared at Dr. Smith, who had stopped the elevator half-way in its trip up until the stilted kabuki performance had ended.

Whatever had just happened was none of my business, but what the hell had just happened?

I buttonholed Smith as he finally stepped out of the elevator, and briefed him on our plans. He conceded that Penny should be strong enough to handle the two-gee launch acceleration.

"John," I asked, "You'll be up at oh-six and man the radio here as Mission Control?"

"Already set with Captain Dusty," he grinned.

"All right then. Let's all hit the sack and plan on early rising. Dusty, you want to go back to your ship for the night, or stay aboard in our guest suite?"

"Was that that little hole in the wall next to y'all's cabin?" I nodded. He cocked his head and eyed me dubiously. He answered slowly. "We-ell, if it's all the same to y'all, I think I'll jus' spend the night in the peace'n' quiet of my *Tornado*. If'n y'all know what I mean."

John had turned away from us, and I could see his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. After a moment, he turned back, heroically keeping a straight face. "Come on, son, I'll drive you back over. Good night Bobby, I'll see you in the morning. Go on and a good night's sleep."

I forced an embarrassed smile, told them good night, and headed below.

Thankfully, the twins slept well, and so did Penny and I.

We woke early, us and the senior Robinsons. Mum fussed around making breakfast, made sure there was food enough for the babies, and poured a large Hotbottle of coffee to share with Dusty.

John fired up the radios, called to Dusty, making sure he was up and about and ready to lift. He told Penny to go start up the Chariot, then draped his arm confidentially over my shoulder. “I didn’t want Dusty or the women to worry about this, Bobby, but another reason I wanted this was to look for any signs of alien activity. He’ll be getting lots of photos and video we can study later, so don’t worry about looking over his shoulder the whole time. You and Penny enjoy the ride. But remember our discussion with the Robot. If you do happen to see something suspicious – well, don’t take chances. Have Dusty get you right back down.”

I nodded. “Understood, sir.”

“Good man. All right, let’s get you two over there.”

Penny managed her way aboard with little effort. Supported by the crane, she climbed the ladder effectively weightless, and suffered no discomfort. Dusty maintained an amazing feat, launching and climbing to orbit without ever cracking the 2-gee limit. Small, almost unnoticeable bursts of thrust put us into a freefall polar orbit.

“Want the grabbity engaged, or y’all just gonna flutter around a-twitterin’ like lovebirds?” he asked, after establishing orbit.

“Leave it off, right, angel?” I asked.

“Mmm, please! I can hardly remember being in free fall. And I still feel so heavy! I’m still all baby-bloated. I’m afraid these clothes are never going to fit right again.” She unstrapped from the launch couch, and pushed delicately upward. “Mmm, flying! Weightless feels so good!” She ran her hands around herself. “Ugh, now I just feel like a fat balloon. Bobby, do I need new clothes? Do these make me look all fat and puffy now?”

Oh Lord, no. This was one of those trick questions I’d heard about, that had no right answer. One way I risked being called a liar, the other way – didn’t even bear thinking about. I panicked, knowing that even *delaying* an answer too long was dangerous. Think! What would Dr. Smith say?

“Dear heart,” I said, “Those clothes were cut for a child, and perhaps they don’t flatter you as much as they should, now that you have the figure of a grown woman.” I held my breath.

Penny looked at her faint reflection in the viewport. “Yeah, I think you’re right. Mother should have let these out for me long ago.”

I released my breath, and behind me, I heard Dusty do the same. Discreetly, he stuck out an open palm, which I slapped with my own. Close call. One more I owed the Doc.

Penny and I spent a little while carefully playing freefall Tag before the novelty wore off, and our stomachs started complaining about the lack of gravity. We settled in before the viewports, and looked at our home from two hundred kilometers up. We each caught ourselves dozing off and on in the quiet weightlessness.

Dusty suddenly turned. “Bobby, do me a favor here. We’re on autopilot, but I’m a-gonna just step back and use the head. Come set down and watch the lights blink for a few minutes, huh? Y’all remember how to drive this thing, right? Don’t touch nothin’ unless an alarm flags somethin’ out, though.”

I floated over and relieved him at the helm. Penny drifted over and watched me as I – well, did nothing really.

“So this is what your old job was, huh? I can see why you loved it so much. I – I think I even understand how you guys can – love a ship the way you do.”



I felt a moment of tension, as Penny brought to mind a certain incident we had had visiting the wreckage of my old ship *Thundercloud*, not long after my arrival.

“I mean it, dear husband. I’m not picking on you. I just wanted to say that if there was a way that we could keep living here . . . and not go back to Earth . . . I think I’d be OK with it if you . . . wanted to go back to this job.”

Mmph, I thought. It was a temptation. Up here again in the pilot’s seat –freefalling around a planet– it just felt so right, so much a part of who I really was. It wasn’t as bad as Dusty had teased the previous night. The regular hitch was more like 3 or 4 months on, one month off. The pay wasn’t bad. I could bring back lots of good and much needed things from Earth. It wouldn’t be *that* bad, would it?

Then I thought of our tomatoes and the bitterweed. I thought of sowing a field of pasturage for goats, and of the first barbecue this world had ever seen.

I thought of my sons.

“Nah, I think we’re fine.”

Penny squeezed my shoulder. “I mean it, you know. I’m not testing you or anything.”

“I mean it too.”

Dusty reappeared. “Any flags?”

“Nah, I think we’re fine,” I repeated.

## Part 2 Planet of Monsters

We were in our third polar orbit, gradually descending each time around. Cameras were running continuous video, long-distance hi-res stills were snapping away at one every two seconds, and stereo radar swept the ground, recording terrain profiles. Every once in a while, I’d take an unconcerned glance through the stills, checking for anything that might look like visitors.

At about 150 km up, we commenced transition to a more diagonally-biased orbit, going with rotation, to allow the hi-frequency radar systems to start their fine-discrimination ground mapping. I recalled, uncomfortably, that’s what I was about to do when I got hit with the EM storm that crashed me.

“Descending and coming about on 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . execute.” At work, Dusty was pure professional.

The planet turned in the viewport. Penny floated beside me. “It’s really kind of pretty, isn’t it?” she asked.

I watched for another moment. “I’ve gotta admit, I don’t think I’d go that far, but I’m still spoiled to the sight of Earth from up here. It’s – inspiring. I’ll give it that. Daunting.”

I turned my gaze to my wife. “Now you. You’re pretty.”

“What? Just pretty?”

“Ahem!” Dusty coughed. “Din’t I tell y’all to keep that on the ground?”

“Sorry, Dust.”

Penny and I grinned at each other. I put an arm around her waist, pushed gently off the bulkhead, and floated us behind Dusty’s line of sight, as long he paid attention to flying. I pulled Penny close and we shared a passionate, lingering kiss. I held on to her waist. We broke, opened our eyes, and found ourselves floating almost at right angles, meeting at our lips. Penny was upside down, feet brushing the ceiling, while I floated perpendicular to the deck.

She put her lips to my ears, whispered very softly, “You’ve really made my head spin this time.”

We giggled silently, then I whispered to her, “We’ve got to get up here all alone after you’re all better.”

Penny’s eyes closed and a dreamy smile lit her face. A little shiver ran up her whole body. “Stop that talk right now, before it’s too late.” Her eyes remained closed, though, and I could see her imagination glimpsing free-fall lovemaking.

My imagination was busy, too.

I released her waist, and let us drift apart. I kicked over to the forward viewport, continued watching New Plymouth drift by below us. Penny watched the video display. We were about six hours into the mission.

“Hey Dusty, you need me to spell you on the wheel again? I don’t want you to be sleepy when you bring this thing back down. I’ll take a regular two hour relief watch.”

“Yeah, that might not be a bad idea. Maybe not strictly regulation, seeing as you’re off the payroll, but I won’t tell if you don’t.” He rubbed his eyes. “Ya know, I think I really do need to close my eyes. Starting to get spaceblind, seein’ stuff.” He rubbed them again. “OK, I’m a-gonna go rack out in my cabin, and *you* pay attention to *flyin’*, bad boy, got me?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I said.

“Awright, here’s what we got.” He started reciting off our course, trajectory, speed, altitude, attitude, turning over the watch to me. He paused and took another look in the scanner. “Take a look over here, Broadway, you see anything down by that southern ocean? At about, oh, the five-o-clock position along the edge? I thought I was seein’ things, now I’m not sure.”

I looked into the scanner, fiddled with the magnification and contrast to bring up the picture. The large inland sea in the southern hemisphere was just getting to the edge of our visibility. “Dusty, why the hell aren’t the traffic scanners on? Fire ’em up quick.”

“You never said anything about those before, don’t you start spittin’ on me, now, buddy.”

“Sorry. Guess I should have thought of it earlier.”

“OK, they’re going. It’ll take a minute or so, but they’s a faster model nor what you had. You expectin’ someone?”

I paused. “Maybe. What did you think you saw down there?”

“Looked like a cluster of domes. Maybe half a dozen.”

“In semi-circle formation.”

“Yeah,” he said, after a pause.

I felt Penny’s hands on my shoulders from behind. “Bobby, are we in trouble?”

I shook my head slowly. “Dunno.”

Dusty spoke. “Well, y’all never did get a real survey before, so whatever that is down there might be a thousand years empty. I wouldn’t worry just yet, Miss Penny.”

I looked at the traffic scanners. “Damn! We went by too quick. I got a picture, but not from that sector. It’s blank, anyway, that’s encouraging. Dust, I don’t know this gadget like you, set it up for those co-ordinates so we get a good picture next time ’round.”

“Hey, remember I’m captain here, bad boy.”

“Sorry again. Do that please?”

“You bet.”

I think he was a little nervous too. Maybe I had spoken out of turn, as I really was only a passenger, but snapping back like he had, twice now, was very uncharacteristic of him.

“Did you get anything back there from the hi-res video or radar?”

“No, not that time, that spot’s a little south of our last track. And before you tell me, I’m setting us up right now for a direct pass and all peepers sharp at that spot.”

It was an agonizingly slow hour as we caught up to the southern sea the next orbit around.

Penny stood behind me again, hugging me tightly. I put my hands on hers, and patted them reassuringly. “Probably just some other castaways like us.”

The traffic scanners started reading for traces above the southern sea, and I could hear the power surges in different pieces of equipment as they turned their attention to that spot below.

I peered into the hi-resolution video. The semi-circle of domes was coming into view. All seemed similar, if not identical. I couldn’t judge the size, but they seemed alike, and were the same uniform sandy tan color. Uniform, I thought. “Oh, shit. It’s a military base,” I whispered. Penny gasped behind me. “Unless some aliens just have no imagination when it comes to their houses, I’d swear those are barracks.”

Dusty wiped a hand across his forehead. “First Contact, Broadway. We’re gonna be famous.”

“Tell him, angel.”

“First Contact came and went long ago, as far as we’re concerned, Dusty. This planet draws aliens like dogs draw fleas. We’ll show you the photos sometime. Bobby, look at this.” She indicated the traffic scanner. “This mean what I think?”

“Yeah.” A dozen traces ran out from one small piece of ground, painted on the scanner. They looked fresh, no more than a few months old, any of them. I felt very cold.

“Dusty.”

“Broadway.”

“Scram. Code Yellow scram. That’s what I’d do right now if I was in charge of this firecracker.”

“I think you’re right. Miss Penny honey, y’all lie down on the deck where y’are and hold tight. Bobby, you too. Lie down and hold on t’her good, we ain’t even takin’ time to getcha to the launch couch. 2 . . . 1 . . . execute.”

The *Tornado* roared and shook as it had at liftoff. I suddenly had weight from the acceleration. I put my back to the rear console, and held Penny back-to-front.

“One gee!” yelled Dusty.

Penny pressed into me. The rear wall was like the floor now, with her lying on top of me.

“One point five!”

Her weight pinned me hard as acceleration increased. We were headed directly out-system, trying to look like a ship that had made a wrong turn and was just getting out ASAP with no intention of heading back this way.

“Two gees!”

Penny gasped. “Easy, love, this should be the worst. We launched with this, so you’ll be fine.” My voice was harsh and cracked under the thrust forces.

“Hold tight kids, two point five.”

Penny gasped again, then a brief scream. “Bobby, it hurts. Tell him no more.”

“Dusty, throttle down, please! Penny hurts, remember she’s not all well.” Dammit! I shouldn’t have brought her. I should have my remembered my first rule, *nothing* is routine in space. *Always* expect the worst.

“Five more seconds, promise, I need three gees to jump!”

“Hold tight, angel, hold tight. I’ve got you.” Her face was twisted in a grotesque grimace by pain and the distortion of nearly triple-normal gravity. “Jump? Dusty, no –”

“Three gees, kids, making h-jump in 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . execute!”

“H-jump, Dusty, no don’t –!”

There was a sudden sensation of falling in every different direction at once. Penny clutched at her stomach and began dry-heaving.

“Bobby! I want to go home, please! Please take us home!”

“Soon as we can angel, hang in there.” All issues of gravity and free-fall and acceleration had suddenly become irrelevant as we entered the nonsensical dimensions of hyperspace. I spun Penny toward me, put a hand to her cheek reassuringly. “You’re all right, Penny. Things are going to feel very funny right now. How’s your tummy?”

She took a few shallow breaths. “Better. Still . . . kinda sickish. Not like I’m gonna puke.” She managed a feeble grin. “Morning sickness was worse. Something still – not quite hurts, but doesn’t feel quite right. Somewhere down there.”

“OK, pay attention. We’re in hyperspace. Don’t try moving yet. Watch this.” She floated a few inches off the deck, just as in freefall. I gave her a gentle push away from me. I stopped pushing, and she stopped moving. I pushed off from the bulkhead with both hands. I floated in the air, but likewise, stopped moving when I stopped pushing.

“See what happens? Newton’s First doesn’t apply here. You only move when force is applied. Plan out your movement accordingly. You can get yourself stranded where there’s nothing to hold on to or push off from if you’re not careful.”

Penny still evinced pain in her face, but she understood enough to frown in confusion. “Silliest thing I ever heard.”

“Right now, if you tried to do any kind of calculations, our mass would work out as imaginary numbers. Don’t think about it too much. I don’t, I just push buttons.”

I worked myself upright –relatively speaking of course– and over to the pilot’s console. “And no offense, Dusty, but that could have been – really dangerous, that close in to a planet.”

“I was waiting for you to crack at me about that. Look at that, and shut up.” Dusty keyed a button that brought up a video clip – obviously he had cued it up for my benefit. It showed the ground that had been below us, by the alien installation. Suddenly there was a blinding flash of light from the ground, which hardly faded as it rose into the sky.

“Shit,” I cursed again. “Missile or ship?”

“Dunno. That’s all I saw before I hit the converters and boosted up.”

We looked at the clip a few times over, studied the wasp-waisted, swollen-nosed rocket. “Missile,” we agreed.

“OK,” I said. “Let’s drop back in and find our way home.”

“I’m with ya there, buddy.” He started popping some switches. “Oh. When you say home, you mean back there, don’t you?”

I laughed briefly. “You meant Earth.”

“Earth or Delta’s what I call home.”

“Nope. Back there.”

Dusty shook his head. “The customer’s always right, but that don’t mean he’s too smart.”

“Two babies and the rest of family back there, Dusty.”

He sighed, and continued keying switches. “Yeah, yeah, I know. You’re sure? We can be home –Earth home– less ’n two weeks, and send out a real rescue party or reinforcements or somethin’. Getcha all back together real soon.”

“Home, Dusty.”

“I don’t even need to check with Miss Penny, do I?”

“No,” she answered.

He sighed again. “Good thing that’s what I programmed in, then. Hate it when you Groundhogs waste my time trying to figure out where you wanna go.” Dusty thumbed a switch. The ship and the bizarre area outside her moved in a strange dance impossible to describe without the benefit of a mathematical education far greater than my own. Will Robinson could probably wrap his brain around it someday, I thought.

“Bobby, I need the bathroom, please. Help me. Please.” She was clutching her stomach slightly.

“The head’s still in the same place, right, Dusty?”

“Last time I looked. Careful, we’ll be dropping back in to free fall in a minute or so.”

“Right.” I helped Penny upright – so to speak. She got a glimpse outside the viewports.

“What the – are those things *alive*?” she asked in horror.

“Everyone says they’re not, but I dunno. Some people think that’s you yourself, out there, that you’re looking at. All inside-out. Nice, huh?”

Penny blanched. “You’re really want me to cough it all up, don’t you? Please, bathroom.”

“There you go, love. Just watch where your hands go and you’ll be fine. But yell if you get stuck or anything.”

“ ‘K.”

I went back out to the flight deck. There were any number of theories as to what the various horrors evident in hyperspace were. Imagine a schematic diagram of a living creature pulled inside-out, then painted by a Cubist artist. Lots of other stuff too, not all of it so organic looking. Lots of folks just close up the viewports when transiting h-space. I usually did.

“Awright, we’re looking good. You may want to give Miss Penny a shout quick, we’re dropping back in to three-space in, uh, six seconds.” Dusty continued the countdown: “3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . execute.”

There was another bizarre sensation of moving in many directions at once, and we were in freefall again. A few moments later, Penny opened the door to the flight deck and beckoned me over.

“Bobby, I’ve got a problem. I’m bleeding.”

“What? Where? How bad?”

Her eyes glanced over to Dusty, and she dropped her voice even more. “From – down there. It’s not bad, but I haven’t had a regular time since the babies. I don’t know if I’ve got something ripped open inside or not. Please, get us back quick.”

“Let’s do what we can for you now.” I knew the ship’s layout, and I found some spare towels. I picked a smallish one. “That good?”

“Yeah.”

“How bad is it? Like regular or worse?”

“Well . . . not even as much. But in free fall I think stuff is going to stay inside anyway. I guess I really don’t know. Not unless Dusty puts the gravity back on.”

“All right. We should be able to get down pretty quick, so let’s leave well enough alone. Go do what you need to do. Do you – need any help or anything?”

“No. Thank you, though. Took some guts asking me that, didn’t it?” She grinned at me weakly and pushed away to privacy.

I held my head in my hands. Stupid! Why did I bring her up here? Nothing to do about that now. Now it was just getting down as quickly as possible. I popped back out into the flight deck.

“Where are we, Dusty?”

He pointed at the viewport. New Plymouth was dead ahead.

“OK, look, Penny’s having a little bit of a problem. It’s probably nothing serious, so don’t take any chances getting downstairs, but – don’t waste time. Please.”

“Glad y’all got a ‘please’ in that time, Broadway.” He looked up at me with concern. “You’d be a gol-damn basket case if anything happened to that little girl, wouldn’chy’all?”

I looked off silently.

“Never seen two folks got it as bad fer each other as y’all do,” he muttered. “Go on and tie yourselves down in a regular passenger bunk, y’all can be together, instead o’ the launch couches, and they’s a little more comfy. Quick li’l prayer wouldn’t hurt neither, if you’re a prayin’ kind o’ man. Just stay cool, and I’ll getcha down in one piece.”

“Right, Dust. Oh, shoot. Radio silence until we’re on the ground. Whoever that was down there –”

“I know, I know, I done figured all that out already. You damyankees allus thinks a body is a damfool just ’cuz he might talk differ’nt. Now go get yo’ ass tied down and hold onto yo’ girl, and if you let anything happen to her, I’ll kick that New York City ass o’ yours all the way back to Midtown, now let me fly this thing, Groundhog!”

I threw a quick hug around Dusty, and got us secured into the passenger bunks – metal racks with a thin mattress that folded down from the wall. There was ten minutes of deafening roaring, and we were on the ground.

I started breathing again. “Penny? You all right there, my angel?”

She opened her eyes and cracked a grin at me. “There’s no place like home,” she said.

Dr. Smith rode out in the Chariot right away, and came aboard to examine Penny as soon as the hull was cool enough to open.

After a while, Smith stood in the hatchway and beckoned Dusty back up – he, John, and I waited in the Chariot while the *Tornado* functioned as an infirmary. Finally, Dusty rigged Penny into the harness and carefully lowered her to the ground.

We got Penny bedded down aboard the *Jupe*, brought the babies. I sat alone with her for a moment, until Dr. Smith knocked and entered.

He scowled at me, and opened his mouth to speak, then turned to Penny. “May I speak freely, my dear?” Penny nodded. “This appears to be nothing more than normal menses, induced somewhat prematurely due to effects of excessive acceleration, and possible adverse reaction to hyperspace. Count yourselves fortunate, that was quite a foolish escapade.”

“I know, Doctor,” I admitted.

“I ought have advised against it outright, but considering how my opinions are so routinely disregarded here, I held my tongue. I see now I should have been bolder.”

“Doctor,” I said, “You should know that of all of us, Penny and I both have the highest regard for you, personally and professionally. Please, never be afraid to speak your mind to us.”

“Really? Then I advise you allow her to return home with me, so that she might be examined and cared for properly, in proper hospital facilities by specialists. Not that I question my own abilities, just that one sometimes appreciates a second opinion, especially when one has been forced to work with such . . . marginal resources as this shipwreck affords. The children would accompany her of course. And you yourself, I suppose.

“And if you are adamant, I’m sure you could all be returned in due time to this – withered wasteland.”

Behind the pompousness and bombast, Smith had a point. From bed, Penny was already giving me a warning glare. I had the unpleasant premonition that we were in for the first serious disagreement of our marriage.

As he left, I suggested, “Dr. Smith, maybe sometime soon, you could have a few words in private with Penny, and encourage her to – follow your advice, as her doctor.” I had almost said “listen to reason.” Another close call, there.

I sat at the bedside, turned to face her directly. The babies were working greedily at dinner. We sat in silence for what seemed a long while, looking at each other. Mentally I was preparing an airtight argument, persuasive emotionally and logically impeccable. I opened my mouth to speak.

“No,” said Penny.

“But –”

“I won’t go and you won’t take my babies.”

“I –”

“And you won’t go either. What if you go and decide you like it better there? After all, you lived there a lot longer than I ever did. What if you stay there, and decide I’m never coming along and you meet –” She bit her lip and turned her head to the wall, trying to hide her eyes.

“Now that doesn’t even make sense,” I said, matter-of-factly. “Why would I go without you? *How* could I?”

“I don’t know . . .”

I thought frantically, trying to find lines to read between. What was she *not* saying? Light broke, and I took her hand. “Are you afraid *you* won’t want to come back?”

She whimpered petulantly and turned even further away, sniffing. Eventually she spoke, her voice muffled from pressing against the bedding and from a runny nose. I found some tissue and handed it to her. “I love you and our babies and I love this world and our home here and the rest of my family and I don’t want to go away and find someplace that’s so exciting and different that it – seduces me away from here and tricks me and traps me with glitter and lights and big tall buildings as high as the mountains and Central Park and all the things and places you’ve told me about over and over.”

Penny blew her nose and sniffed some more. The babies complained about how she was rolling on them, so she rolled back and faced me, eyes reddened. With a half-sob, half-laugh, she threw a soggy, snotty tissue in my direction. “I’ve already been sweet-talked and seduced by one Earthman, so I know how good they are at it. And what a sucker I am for their nonsense.”

I threw the tissue back towards her, slid onto the bed beside her. “Just who are you calling an Earthman, you little alien, you?” I cradled her head in the crook of my elbow, mopped up her damp cheeks with my thumb. “Really, my angel, it would be just once, and right back home. It’s all for your own good.”

Penny sniffed again. “Daddy says that’s the excuse every tyrant in history’s ever used. Next you shed a tear and tell me to think of the children.”

“I’m no tyrant, just your husband. I won’t force you. But I want you to spend another half hour or so looking at those babies and thinking about it. Yes, dear, think of the children. *Our* children. Now I’m going to go find something to eat, and when I do I’ll bring you some too. And I’ll bring you a cup of coffee too, if you’re acting like a grown-up again.”

Penny closed her eyes and sighed. “I think you just won, with the coffee. If you’re sure Dr. Smith approves.”

“I’ll double check.”

“But you see? You see how easy it was to turn my head with your sweet talk and promises?”

“You talk it over with Zack and AJ, and see what they have to tell you.” She pretended to continue scowling at me as I left.

A while later, I brought a tray of dinner –including mashed-up baby food and Smith-approved coffee– to our cabin.

“All right,” said Penny quietly. “We’ll go. All four of us. But only long enough to have me see a doctor and for you to give Daddy’s message to Alpha Control or the army or whoever. I don’t want to be there more than a couple of days.”

“That depends on Dusty, angel, and whether he can get permission to bring us right back or not, or if we can get another ship that soon.”

“You’ll radio Earth before we get anywhere near, and if they won’t do what we ask, we’ll turn right around and come back.”

“You are one tough customer, Penny m’love.”

“Remember me now? I’m the one who grew up here, making this planet cough up flowers out of poison sand for me. I get my way, and don’t you forget it.”

"I'm glad you're on my side, angel."

"No, *you're* on *my* side, and don't forget that, either," she grinned.

"Let me go talk to your father, and make some plans. Oh, you'll have final approval, of course."

"Damn right. Now kiss me."

I obeyed, and spent a moment picking up each of the boys in turn. Zack slapped my cheeks. AJ gave me a big smile, buried his face in the collar of my jumpsuit and spit up right down my chest.

I handed him back to Penny. "How long did it take you to train him to do that?"

"Must be natural talent."

"Oh, criminey!" I yelled as a foul stink exploded out of my clothes like a smoke grenade. I quickly showered and changed. "All right, let's try that again," I sighed, waving at the three of them on the bed and exiting hastily.

Topside, I caught up with John and Dusty, deep in conversation. John had just handed him a data chip on which he had recorded some video clips of himself, Maureen, and Will.

"Proof we're here," John said. "How about you and your team, Bobby? You want to take a few minutes and wave at the camera, say 'Hi Mom!' and all that? The sight of babies would be a big boost for us, I'm sure you know. Especially now that I'm asking for – military aid."

Damn, I thought, that's a shame, but inevitable now. Someone, unprovoked, took a shot at us. It was only a matter of time before they figured out where we were, unless Dusty's mad decoy flight completely deceived them. That was a possibility of course, or else he wouldn't have done it. But it's not something you bet your life on.

"No, John, you won't need me on camera. We'll tell them in person."

I think Dusty and John both gasped at the same time.

Dusty sat down hard, with his face in his hands.

John eyed me skeptically. "You, Penny, *and* the twins?"

"Yes sir." I sketched out Penny's health and Dr. Smith's recommendation.

He laughed. "I can hardly believe Smith suggesting she get a second opinion from his. Even when he knows he's wrong he insists he's right. Now he's telling her to do this? Must be getting soft in his old age."

Dusty moaned. "Ah thought y'all promised you wasn't gonna do this to me. Turnin' my ship into a gol-dang bebbly care."

I laughed inwardly. I knew the more Dusty griped about something, the happier he was. He was in one of the big chairs. I slipped myself onto the edge of it, pushed myself hip-to-hip against him, and draped an arm around his shoulder. I was going to make him *really* happy now. "And ya know what else, Dust? You ain't getting your vacation time after you drop us off, neither. You know why? Because three or four days after we hit dirt, we're gonna be done, and *you* are gonna bring us right back here. You, yourself, personally."

Dusty's jaw dropped, and he was getting ready to say something. I cut him off.

"And if y'all got a prolem with that, you go downstairs right this minute and tell Penny all about it, because that's what *she* wants. *You* tell her you ain't a-gonna do it, Deep-Fried."

Dusty shook a finger at me. "Here I kept myself a bachelor near thirty years just so's I wouldn't have a wife to boss me 'round, and now I got somebody else's wife doin' it. Bobby, you better be glad I love you like a brother or I'd be kickin' yo' ass right now." He held his head in his hands again.

I gave him a solid hug across the shoulders and stood up, keyed the intercom to our cabin. "I've done your dirty work for you, dearest angel," I said.

"Thank you, dear. Thank you, Dusty."

Dusty groaned. "When do we go? Let's jus' git this over 'n' done."

"John?" I asked.



“Sooner the better, I’d say.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Don’t see why not. Dusty, you’ve got my video. Bobby, I’ve got a notebook here with a list of suggested requisitions to pass on to the Colonization Project.”

John looked thoughtful for a moment, then stretched out his hand over my head as if giving me a blessing. “I hereby name you Ambassador At Large to the Nations and People of Earth, with all powers, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, appurtenant thereto. There, that should be official enough; you’re now our diplomatic corps.

“Bobby, we need supplies, but most of all right now, it sounds like we need some firepower to defend what we’ve got. Do your best to get us what you can, but remember this – this is a free and sovereign colony. We are not the possession or property of the United States, or the United Nations, or any earthly power. That’s the only thing I won’t compromise. Not after all these years on our own and forgotten, we’ve earned our independence.

“Tell ’em we’ve got a whole planet to settle, because we do, and we’ll take as many migrants as they can send. Right now, settlers’ rights are our only currency, but that’s something more valuable than gold back there, right Dusty?”

“That’s right, sir.”

I keyed the intercom to our cabin again. “Start packing, angel, we’re leaving for Earth tomorrow.”

After a brief silence, she came back, “Yes, dear. What time?”

“Ain’t she great, Dusty? Early, love.”

“Whatever you say, dear.”

“Hey, boys,” said Dusty, “Where’s the Major gone to?”

“He’s got a house built down by the oasis. Why?”

“Oh, I just thought he might care for a little taste of suthin’ I brought along, like I tol’ ya, Bobby.” He reached into the knapsack at his feet and brought out a one-liter bottle, square, with a black label. “Eight years old, boys, real Kentucky bourbon from the Motherland. The finest ol’ Mr. B. produces.”

I gaped, astonished. “Well, well,” I said. “Dusty, I’m sorry now ’bout all that stuff I said to John about ya.”

John stared at the bottle. If he didn’t actually lick his lips, it looked like he did. He looked at the clock, it was only 8. John took the mike for the short-range. “Don, *Jupiter 2*, come in.”

A minute later Major West responded, “Go ahead.”

“Come on up to the ship, Don, for a few minutes. We’ve got some big news going and, uh, some equipment that needs to be dried out.”

Don laughed over the radio. “Equipment that needs to be dried out? That sounds like old spacer’s code for – I’ll be right up.”

What usually took about a half-hour as a leisurely walk Don made in under fifteen minutes. He paused in the hatchway, gasping for air. He was even sweating a bit, a rare thing in our parched air.

Dusty held the bottle aloft. “Man oh man,” gasped Don. “I knew Bobby liked you, but I couldn’t figure out why. Now I get it.”

“I’ll go get some glasses,” I said. Below, I checked on my crew; the boys were already sleeping, and Penny responded drowsily when I whispered in the door. “I’ll be down in a few minutes, angel, we’re just planning for the trip.”

“Mmm-hmm. ’Night, love.”

“Good night,” I whispered, and slipped into the galley.

I carefully opened a cabinet and pulled out four tumblers: then the refrigerator, and silently extracted four small ice cubes. Good bourbon like that was too good to be diluted very much, but it did need to be cooled off a bit. Juggling the glasses quietly, I rode the elevator up. Dusty cracked the bottle and poured out.

When we all had drinks, John stood, raised his glass, and offered a traditional salute. “Gentlemen, here’s to a safe voyage, a successful mission, and a swift return. Cheers.” We tapped glasses and sipped carefully.

We all Oh!d and sighed. This had been one of my favorites, and Dusty knew it.

Dusty stood and raised his glass. “Here’s how we say it down where this comes from: Here’s to you and here’s to me. Dam’ few like us, and most of ’ems long dead.”

Laughs, clinks, and deeper sips.

Without standing, Don raised his glass. “Here’s an ancient one. God bless the *Tornado*, and all who fly in her.”

“Hear, hear!” agreed John. Clinks, and long pulls at the glasses.

“That’s your turn, Broadway,” said Dusty.

“Dusty,” I said. “You know how dry this dam’ place is? My glass has evaporated almost empty just sitting here.”

The others looked at their glasses, and likewise noted the ravages wrought by the climate.

“Well, lemme jes’ top y’all up a mite there.” Dusty tipped the bottle and replenished our glasses.

“Come on, Bobby, your toast,” encouraged Don.

I thought a moment, raised my glass high. “Here . . . is to our wives and our sweethearts . . . may they never meet!”

“Oh, that’s rich comin’ from you, Broadway,” snorted Dusty. “I’m surprised you two pried loose o’ each other long enough for you to come set here and have a drink with the menfolk.”

“Hey, come on, thass . . . *that’s* her father right there, ya know!”

“Yeah, so? Ain’tcha told him where them twin bebbies come from yet?”

“Dusty, for God’s sake, please!” I hid my face in my hands, while John laughed.

I think the bourbon was hitting him hard. It looked like he already was at the stage where he would have a hard time not laughing. He was gripping the arms of his chair with both hands, the glass of bourbon wedged between his thighs. He gestured unsteadily at the hatch. “If that door wasn’t open I’d swear we were upstairs with the gravity turned off.” He looked at the glass. “Just in case, I’ll make sure this unkin – unkin – uncontained liquid doesn’t go adrift.” He picked up the glass carefully, and tossed back the contents. He held the glass at arm’s length in front of him. “Major West, are you sure we are not in free fall? I’m going to conduct an experiment.” With that, he let the glass go.

Fortunately, Don’s reflexes were still swift and he grabbed it before it shattered on the deck. “See!” said John. “Glass din’ break. We’re in space,” he concluded with iron-clad logic. “Well. I’ve got to get to bed. My wife will be looking for me soon, my wife and my sweetheart, may she never meet.” With that, he turned sideways in the chair and fell promptly to sleep.

Don whispered to me, “I wouldn’t think that man ever had a drink before in his whole life. He put it away like a hero, though.”

I shrugged my shoulders. Don knew him far better than I, I was certain. “None of you have had a drop for eight years, now. That would hit anybody hard, I guess.”

“Hey, Bobby, pass me that jug back,” said Dusty. I looked down and was a bit surprised to see I was holding it; I passed it over. “I’m gonna have just one more tiny sip here to press up the slack space, and I’m gonna go turn in. I’ve got to drive in the mornin’, and I know you’ll appreciate me havin’ a steady hand.” He poured out one last taste, no more than a thimbleful, and tossed it back.

“Now listen you, bad boy, don’t you go getting’ yourself all polluted tonight so you’re pukin’ your guts out with a hangover tomorrer, cuz if you do that on my ship, first y’all are gonna clean it up, and then you’ll ride outside the rest of the trip, y’all unnerstan’ me?”

“Go on Dusty, this is the good stuff. I never felt bad off this. It’s only the cheap hooch does that to ya.”

“Well, you be careful, that’s all. Awright, I’ll jest walk on over to th’ ship, and that’ll help clear my head. See y’all in the morning. Been a pleasure, Major.”

We waved him good night. The bottle was still about a third full. I picked it up. “Don?”

“Yeah, thanks, just a little bit.” I brought him up to half, and took the same myself.

Don raised his glass in another salute. “*In vino veritas, in whiskyis moreso!*” He took a sip, let it linger in his mouth a bit before swallowing. “Be sure and bring some more of that back, huh?” We both took a long pull at the bourbon, and sat in silence a while.

All was quiet on the ship, save for the occasional sound of power humming in a console somewhere. There were no crickets or other creatures to break the stillness of nighttime.

“I envy you, Bobby, you know that?” Don asked abruptly.

“What, trip back home?”

“Yeah. That too.”

“That too, what?”

Don let another splash of bourbon roll into his mouth. “You and Penny.”

“Oh. Thanks . . . I guess.”

He sat forward suddenly. “I just meant that you seem so right for each other. An’ it’s obvious you two really, really . . . Not that I envied you Penny.” Don’s speech was slurring slightly around the edges. “I mean she’s a beautiful girl and all, and I’m not jealous of that or anything. I got no signs – designs – on ’er.”

He looked off, out the windows. I said nothing.

“Nor should you be.”

“What? I shouldn’t be what?”

A little unsteady, Don stood up and moved to the chair next to me. On his other side, John was snoring slightly. “John.” He pushed against John’s knee. “John.”

John Robinson stirred slightly. “We’ll go to the beach in the morning, sweetheart,” he said.

Don turned to me. “Look, buddy. This isn’t what I started to say, but I may as well now. Listen. This was a while ago. Year, maybe two years before you dropped in. I don’t remember where everyone else had gone, or why, but –” He took another jolt of the bourbon. “Well, bottom line, I –kind of– made a pass at Penny. An’ I don’t know if she ever said anything about it to you, but I figured if she hadn’t I thought maybe I should tell you now so you didn’t flip out on her or me some other time. If she said something.”

I took a thoughtful sip. “Thank you Don, you’re a gentleman. I suppose it’s perfectly understandable after all.” I took another sip.

“So. You made a pass. Complete, incomplete? Fumble?”

Don laughed grimly. “Wicked bad fumble, don’t worry. I think I scared her more than anything. She really wasn’t much more than a kid. I just had my hand on her shoulder, and started slipping it down her arm. I don’t remember what I said. But she just kind of tensed up and closed the door on me.”

“This was right at her cabin, then. Her bedroom.”

Don looked away from me. “Yeah.”

I was starting to feel a bit protective, never mind that this was long before it could have been any of my business. “Interesting confession coming from the man who once said he’d break my arms if I touched her out of turn.”

“Look, pal, I just wanted to clear the air here, before you heard about it from her. Sorry, I shoulda kept my mouth shut. If she hadn’t said anything by now . . .”

“OK, Don, never mind that, forget it. It’s done. What brought this on though? Were you starting to –”

Even as drunkish as I was getting –I still felt remarkably clear, considering how much of that bottle I’d put away– I was seeing little loose ends sticking out of his story. All the banter with the Robot was sharpening my insights, I felt. What had he said? That he envied Penny and me. I glanced at John; he remained contentedly asleep.

“Does this all go back to something with you and Judy?” I whispered.

“Whaddya think?” he retorted.

“I think she’s pretty good looking and you got a good gig going with her.”

“Yeah, that’s what it looks like, huh.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Bobby, I volunteered for this mission, but it was still a very compe’tive spot. I had to fight a lotta guys to get this job. My job was to haul this wagon to a planet, get the Robinsons settled, and when the rest of the colony ships started coming in, I was gonna bring her on back for more. Maybe *they* were on a one-way mission. I wasn’t. And –” he paused and sipped again.

“And what’s more, the job I took was spaceship pilot, not stud bull for a goddam Robinson hatchery.” Another pause. “I’m sorry, Bobby, sorry, sorry, that’s nothing on you and Penny. I di’n’t mean – I just – I never wanted kids, I never wanted to be married. Then I figure out I been set up to be the li’l man on top of the wedding cake.”

“So you wanted to come back to Earth.”

“Like anything. ‘Til I started thinkin’ ’bout it. Figured some stuff out.”

“Wha’ stuff?”

“Stuff like my career’s shot to hell. I got nothing to go back to. Spaceship pilot who loses his ship, never gets off a distress call? Them –” jerking his thumb at John Robinson, “Them, they’ll be heroes. You’ll be a hero, you found us. Me? Might as well push me out the freakin’ airlock. Major West has come ’n’ gone, I’m jus’ Don the Goat Farmer now.”

Something still wasn’t making sense, even through the alcohol fumes. “Whaz all this have to with Judy?”

He chortled mirthlessly and looked at me square on. “I’d sooner sleep with an icicle. At least that’d melt.”

Well. That was a shocker. That wasn’t the impression I’d once picked up from Penny about those two.

“I figure now maybe we’ll get some broads out here that know how treat . . . man like a man, not a dam’ pet lap-dog. Judy’s s’one who wants to go back now. Makin’ her stay, for ’ppearances’ sake. Gonna be news ’n’ movies ’n’ books ’n’ things now, an’ damned if I’m one come ’cross looking like the bad jerk guy.” Don rubbed his eyes and tossed back what remained in his glass. “I don’ feel so good. Where’s my ol’ cabin?”

“Will uses that one now. Come on below, take the spare.”

“You’re a good frien’ Bobby. Real frien’. Nobody else ’roun’ here I can talk to ’bout this.”

I helped him out of the elevator and over to the spare cabin. He turned, waved his finger at me and winked lewdly. “ ’Member, pal, job nummer one – get the broads out here. Redheads and Chinese, lots of ’em, OK?” He spun unsteadily and found the bunk.

I was wishing I hadn’t asked a thing now, and that I could forget this last half hour. Very carefully, I slid my own door open a crack. I heard Penny’s long, still breathing, the faint rasp of an occasional snore.

I went back out to the galley, rinsed my mouth out with plain water. Thinking hard –I was now definitely fuzzy– I washed my hands, then opened up the top of my jump suit and splashed a little down my chest as well.

Returning to our cabin, I stepped inside and very cautiously stepped out of my clothing just inside the door, tiptoed to the edge of the bed. I dodged the cradle, and slowly sat down. Very gradually, I assumed a more horizontal position. Finally, I groaned and twisted as one having a restless night, and finally got the covers up over me. Penny had not stirred, nor had her breathing skipped the slightest beat of its slow rhythm. I let out a relieved breath and let the pillow take the full weight of my head.

“Whatever that stuff is, it stinks. I hope this isn’t something you plan on making a habit of.”

“Sorry, my darling.” How did she do that?

“And if Don had reached just one more inch, I’d’a kicked him in the crotch. Twice. Left *and* right. Mother taught me about that even before we left Earth.”

“How –?”

“One of you clunks left the intercom on. Heard it all, except what I could sleep through. Now you go to sleep, and don’t expect even a kiss with your breath smelling like that.”

I sighed and reminded myself, it’s a good thing I’m on her side.

Penny raised her head and turned slightly. “Oh, and you can tell your most bestestest friend in the whole wide world that Judy might warm back up to him a little more if he wasn’t so damn hot for *himself*.”

“I love you, Penny, and I’m sorry.” There was a prolonged silence, and I thought she had dozed off.

Then, “I love you too, dear husband. Please try not to make that too difficult, OK?”

“Promise, my angel.”

We pulled closer together, and quickly fell asleep.

And awoke.

“Go shower and shave and brush your teeth, then I’ll give you a kiss and forgive you,” murmured Penny.

“At once, my angel.” I did as instructed, she freshened up and dressed, and we headed up to find breakfast and see what Dusty had come up with for a launch schedule.

He was outside, shoveling down scrambled eggs and synthetic bacon. “Mornin’, y’all. Miss Penny, your mama’s a mighty fine cook, considering what she has to work with here.”

“She is that. I try to learn a little more from her every day.”

“Yes, angel, and as soon as you’ve mastered boiling the water, I’m sure she’ll let you try making coffee. Ow! Kidney punches aren’t allowed.”

“I hope y’all’s git alla that outta your systems quick, ’cuz I really don’t wanna listen to y’all’s lovey-dovey pie fight all the way back, y’hear me?”

“We’ll behave, I promise. Right, angel?”

“I suppose . . .”

“Now I wanna lift at 10:00, so let’s see if we kin get all your luggage aboard by 9:00, and y’all’s up ’n’ on by half past. I got a launch trajectory that’ll keep us from goin’ round the backside where your friends are holed up, and hopefully won’t see us. ’Member, Miss Penny and them boys all have to go up on the winch, an’ that takes a little extry time. That Doc fella gonna make it up the ladder OK, or I gotta haul him up too?”

John exited the ship, shaking his head. “You better count in some extra time just for his luggage, Dusty. I don’t know where he managed to get it all, but I think he’s got more than the rest of us put together.”

He sat heavily at the table. “Penny, darling, pour Daddy out some coffee, please.”

“What’s wrong, Daddy? Get a stale ice cube last night?”

“Something like that, baby girl. What’s that racket, anyway? Our friends shooting at us already?”

“That’s the coffee perking, Daddy.”

“Uh.”

Penny scrutinized me. “You feeling all right, Bobby?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. How ’bout you, Dust?”

“Green an’ go.”

Dr. Smith appeared, and addressed John. “Your pilot is in a disgusting state in the spare cabin. I wouldn’t be surprised if you clapped him in irons for conduct unbecoming to an officer. The thought of my imminent departure from this den of debauchery is indeed a blessing. Penny dear, a cup of coffee, if you please.”

Mum had stepped up quietly behind Smith; he jumped, startled, when she spoke. “Dr. Smith, you were the one running a still a few years ago, if I remember.”

Smith whirled, and puffed. “I would you remind you, madam, that was for the distillation of strictly medicinal alcohol! For the comfort of the ill and the curing of disease, not the demon rum which these inebriates have imbibed of! ‘Still,’ indeed!”

“Keep your voice down, huh, Smith?” complained John.

Finally Dr. Smith sat down and started working on breakfast. “I must confess, madam, I shall miss the culinary efforts which have made for so many delightful repasts here. Dining at your table was one of the few pleasures which have made this ordeal bearable.”

There was a strained mechanical sound, and the Robot came rolling down the ramp, laden with suitcases and duffel bags.

Penny was behind him, carrying the boys.

“Ugh,” said the Robot. “May I drop these now?” and promptly did so.

“Robot, go roust Don out of the spare cabin and tell him to bring the Chariot up,” John ordered. “No, belay that, I’ll get that myself, just tell him to get himself up and on duty.”

“Affirmative.”

John walked around to the far side of the ship, where the Chariot was stowed, and brought it around. I stuffed our meager luggage in.

The babies were awake and fidgeting. Penny held on to AJ, and handed Baby Zack to his namesake. Smith started poking the baby, making faces and silly noises, flagrantly unmindful of his dignity. Zack reached up and patted Dr. Smith’s cheeks with both hands, and cooed at him.

Smith looked at his luggage and the waiting ship. He turned a baleful eye on me. “I suppose you are still determined to bring these innocent infants and your long-suffering wife back to this pitiful planet after being back on dear old Mother Earth? Contemptible arrogance, I say. Professor Robinson, have you familiarized yourself with the medical equipment I’m leaving behind for you? Or is it just so much wizards’ arcana?”

John gulped coffee and groaned.

“I truly dread thinking . . .” Smith began.

From Penny’s lap, AJ reached over, squealing, and slapped Dr. Smith on top of his head. Baby Zack yelped delight at the assault, and grabbed Smith’s nose.

Laboriously, the Robot started loading Smith’s luggage into the Chariot.

Dr. Smith strode slowly over to the mechanical man. “Just what do you imagine you’re doing, you blundering bellhop?” he growled.

“Bidding you a fond *adieu*, Dr. Smith, that’s what.”

“And who told you to do that?” demanded Smith. “You transistorized terrorist!”

“Dr. Smith, it does not compute. I am helping you prepare for your return to Earth.”

“Yes, you would think it that easy to be rid of me, wouldn’t you? You cast-iron Caligula! The very thought that I would abandon these poor incompetents to this dismal desert! Why, these hapless fools have barely survived here as it is, with me devoting my every hour of every day to keeping them alive and well, and you think I would run out now, leaving them to the ravages of this world, and at the mercy of a megalomaniacal motorized monstrosity as yourself?”

“Dear friends, this fiend would have had you his slaves, serving his every mechanical whim by now, were it not for my constant vigilance, and I cannot, in good conscience, abandon you. Can I, my fine wee lad?” he concluded, tickling Baby Zack under his chin. “Yes, Grampa Zack knows you’re coming back soon, and I’ll be here for you. And you too, little man,” reaching over and patting AJ on his head.

Smith glowered at me. “And I’ll be here to keep an eye on you too, you cretinous Casanova. Penelope, dear child, I wouldn’t think of leaving you here with this cad. I shall dedicate the rest of my days to ensuring he does right by you, until life’s last breath leaves this broken body.”

Smith handed Baby Zack to me, and stomped over to the Robot. “What did I just tell you, you pathetic Pullman porter?” he roared. “Return my possessions to my cabin at once! Move move move! One two, one two!”

The Robot’s dome-top popped up and down in confused rage. His torso spun violently, two complete revolutions, and he uttered an exasperated groan of frustration. “A Robot’s work is never done!” he announced, hauling suitcases, duffels, etc., back inside.

Smith looked around at the rest of us. We are all frankly stunned. Penny and I stood together, each holding a baby. Dr. Smith put a hand on each one’s cheek, and bent low, smiling warmly. “Never fear, little ones, never fear. Smith is here, and will be here for you always.” Suddenly he stood. “I dislike long goodbyes,” he choked. “I’ll retire to my quarters now. Godspeed, children.” He turned his back to us quickly. “And I will await your joyous return.” Smith fairly ran out of sight.

We stood another moment in near shock. “Well,” said John. “That was certainly unexpected.”

Finally Don appeared, looking like he had crawled out of a ditch. “What’s all the commotion?” he asked. “Did I miss something?”

“Yeah,” said John. “Go check the weather stations, I think Hades just froze over.”

“Awright, kids,” said Dusty, “it’s after nine now, let’s start gettin’ her loaded up.”

“Yeah, lemme just finish my coffee,” I said, tossing it down.

From inside the *Jupiter 2*, we suddenly heard a warning siren, a low-pitched, “whoop-whoop . . . whoop-whoop” klaxon. I looked at Penny; she would know better than I what it might be. There was terrible apprehension in her eyes.

Then: “DANGER, DANGER! ALIENS APPROACHING! DANGER, DANGER!” The Robot came speeding down the ramp, red lights flashing all about him, arms flailing in the air. He began repeating his announcement, and John said, “Alarm acknowledged, cancel alert. Tell us about it now, Robot.”

His voice hardly less strident, the Robot continued, “Sensors indicate three alien craft approaching from the southwest. Low-altitude atmosphere craft. Approximately twenty feet in length, eight feet in breadth. Time until arrival, approximately thirty minutes. Occupants are armed and DANGEROUS!”

John stabbed his finger directly at Penny, me, and Dusty in turn. “Go. Now. Will! Drive the Chariot.”

“Sir, I—”

“I said to go, Bobby. That’s an order. And don’t tell me I’m just a governor now, because the governor just declared a state of emergency and instituted martial law.”

“Daddy –” Penny was distraught, and obviously torn.

“No arguments, young lady. Get those babies aboard ship and out of here. Whatever happens, happens, and you three won’t change that. Getting out of here and finding help is the best thing you can do for all of us. Go.”

I knew he was right, as little as I liked to run away from trouble. I pushed Penny into the Chariot ahead of me –we were still each holding a baby– as Dusty jumped into the front seat.

“Floor it, Will!” I shouted, and we took off over the sand.

Penny sat there, stunned, a single tear streaking down. “You didn’t even let me say good bye to Mommy and Daddy. What if – what if –?” She couldn’t finish the thought.

It occurred to me I had never heard her refer to her mother as “Mommy” before.

“Will, as soon we get out, go back and get them, get everyone, we all have to get away from here!”

“Penny, I’m sure your father knows he could. He’s already made his decision. Maybe we don’t like it, but it’s not our decision.”

“It is, it is! What about the others? Will, go get Dr. Smith and Judy and Don and then get Mommy and Daddy and we can all get out of here together!”

Dusty turned. “I got plenty of room up there for everybody, but I’ve already got a flight path programmed in based on our weights. We can all get on, but we’ll need some extra time on the ground to recalculate a launch. And if them folks want us, they’ll just shoot us out of the sky. I’m awful sorry, Miss Penny honey, but if we want to be sure to get outta here in one piece, it’s just us and right now.”

“Will, please get on with us! Dusty, he can’t weigh enough to make a difference, can he? We’ll throw out his weight in luggage out if he is! Will . . .”

Will Robinson was out of the driver’s seat and unloading. He looked solemnly at his older sister and kissed her cheek. “Get going, sis. I’m staying. We’ll be fine.”

Penny looked desperate. Dusty had already scrambled up the ladder and was lowering the passenger harness.

I guided –all but forced– her legs through the lower part of the harness, and did have to force her arms in, buckled it up. “Penny, go. Up.”

I circled my finger in the air, signaling Dusty to start taking it up. The last time, Penny had climbed the ladder, with the crane just helping support her weight. Now, she was going up like a sack of potatoes, just hanging in the harness; Dusty grabbed her arm, pulled her aboard. I heard him shout at her to go strap in for launch.

The crane dropped its hook, and the babies went up, slowly and carefully. All our clothing and gear was stuffed into one duffel bag, this went up next. I scrambled up the ladder after it, after shaking hands with Will.

“Tell Penny we’ll be OK,” he said. “And . . . you know.”

I nodded. “I will. Hey – same to the rest of you. Especially your mom.”

“Yup.” He drove away.

I don’t think ten minutes had passed since the Robot had blared his warning.

Penny was strapped in, looking still half in shock. The baby carrier was tied tightly between her couch and mine, now I fastened myself in.

“Dusty!” I called over the noise of the engines throttling up. “Two-gee! Unless you really need to.”

“I know, I know. I’m gonna keep a straight outbound course as long as I can, so we can stay in touch and see what’s goin’ on there. Just a couple more minutes, building up a good charge in the reaction chambers now. Fuel flow nominal, all power nominal. Testing guidance systems . . . nominal. No flags, all primary systems. Primaries green and go.” He continued the pre-launch final check.



“Awright kids, y’all tied down?”

I looked over to my wife. She looked very pale and very tense. “Penny? Are you all right?”

She stared at me, as if coming back from a long way away. “Yes. Yes, my love. I think I’m all right.”

I pointed at the baby carrier between us. The boys were sound asleep. Penny started laughing. She reached over and grabbed my hand. “Little finks!” she said. I breathed a sigh of relief, Penny was back.

“*Jupiter 2*, this is *Tornado*, come in!”

“*Jupiter 2*, go ahead *Dusty*.”

“How y’all doin’ over there, folks? I’m hotter’n a firecracker and ready to go, but I ain’t let nothin’ loose yet. I can still board anybody that wants to take a dive into the Deep Cold Dark, but think fast. I got me a alternate flight path lined up that ain’t quite so safe as what I had first, but it means I can lift anytime with all y’all.”

“Negative, *Tornado*.”

“Just ’cause there’s a little lady here who was some upset about leavin’ her maw ’n’ paw behind.”

After a moment, Mum’s voice chimed from the radio. “Penny dear, don’t you worry about me, or anyone else. We’ve faced some pretty tough customers before, and we know how to handle ourselves. Now you go get yourself and my grandsons taken care of, and don’t worry about us.”

“I’ll see you real soon, Mother!” Penny called. “Did you hear me?”

“I heard you, Penny –”

John broke in. “We’re picking them up on ground radar, *Dusty*. They’ll be here in less than ten minutes. You better get upstairs.”

“Roger that, *Jupiter 2*. I’ll stay in three-space as long as I dare, and check back on this frequency in an hour or so, just in case – well I dunno what, but just in case.”

“Roger, *Tornado*. Take care of business. *Jupiter 2* out.”

“*Tornado* out.”

*Dusty* flipped a couple more switches. “Awright chilluns, this is it. All primaries still green and go, no flags. Final sequence. Main engine ignition and launch on 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .”

The world roared and shook, the babies screamed, Penny’s hand stretched out and clasped mine. We were on our way to a distant planet called Earth.

### *interlude*

I would like to take a few moments and digress from the main narrative to remark on a couple of topics.

First, both Penny and myself have been accused of (or credited with) being responsible for the somewhat British flavor New Plymouth has acquired over the years. This is largely rubbish.

If any responsibility at all must be assigned, it should be laid at the feet of the Earthside press and to a lesser degree, John Robinson.

In the video address to Earth he made as governor, John introduced himself and the others. At one point, he put his arm around his wife, and presented her as “this lovely lady, Maureen Robinson, my wife.” As will be noted elsewhere, I broadcast this address on ahead of us as we entered the Earth system, and it preceded our actual arrival by nearly a week. The British press was the first to pick it up, and whether by misunderstanding or some sort of computerized correction, her name appeared in print as “Lady Maureen Robinson”: a perfectly proper British usage as the wife of a governor.

This was repeated around the world within hours, in both the online and paper press. Sometime thereafter, someone noticed the error and the original outlet issued a correction, but the usage was already established, though with no more significance than “First Lady” is used for the wife of a president or governor in the United States.

I will grant that it was indeed my Penny who somewhat formalized this custom. She adopted the title for use in both official correspondence and on her own personal stationary, and established that she be addressed at official state functions as “Lady Penelope.” However, this was all simply formalizing a practice which already existed.

In any case, the title was clearly never meant as the mark of some aristocracy. It remains the courtesy title of the wives of male governors, while husbands of female governors are addressed as “Sir.” When the couple are spoken of together, the Governor’s first name denominates: thus, “Governor and Lady Robert Robinson Cain”; “Governor and Sir Judith West.”

Finally, it was the British who played the greatest part in assisting us in our distress, the Scots in particular. Many of them stayed here, bringing their culture and traditions with them. And of course, Britain has remained our most valuable ally over the years, Britain and her colonies. It’s only natural some of that would rub off.

Secondly, a few notes on the events which immediately followed the departure (or escape) of Penny, the babies, Dusty, and myself from New Plymouth.

Obviously, I was not there, and the substance of those events is written large in our standard history books, so I shan’t dwell on them overmuch. Still, I can hardly avoid commenting on what is probably the single greatest watershed moment in our saga, holding much the same visceral significance to us as the Boston Massacre or The Alamo do to Americans, or Dunkirk to the English: the curiously named “Scourging of Don’t Look Madam.”

That name, as such, was not attached to the event until sometime after its occurrence.

Shortly after the *Tornado* lifted, a small expeditionary force from the Tea-O’ An<sup>1</sup> base set down near the *Jupiter 2*. They had taken the pains to learn English, advised the remaining company that the entire planet was under their command, and that they were now subjects of the Tea-O’ An Empire. The leader slapped a small badge on the hull of the *Jupiter 2* –their equivalent of planting a flag– and advised them that they would be called upon from time to time to support the empire with labor, military service, goods, or all.

With no further ado, the delegation turned to leave. John and Don both were seething, but at a loss as to what to do. Impulsively, John ripped the badge off of his ship, and threw it after the aliens.

At that, the Tea-O’ An turned back. Two of them seized Governor Robinson where he stood, and ripped the shirt off his back. A third began beating him with a three-stranded electric flail – nine strokes. (Nine and three had some symbolic meaning to them.) Before the first blow had even been struck, Dr. Smith clutched Maureen to himself, and chivalrously wrapped a hand over her eyes, speaking those immortal words, “Don’t look, madam.”

The electric flail was meant to inflict both intense pain and physical damage, and not even John Robinson could endure it well. His back was burnt and bloody at the finish, and he collapsed in the sand when they released him. The aliens departed a second time. John did, heroically, pull himself to his feet and shout after them. In this grisly aftermath, none, including himself, recall the exact words, but all agree that he hurled some very uncharacteristic profanities at them, then something to the effect that he was back on his feet, and defied them to come back and “finish the job.” We understand now that the Tea-O’ An had so little regard for our encampment that they had inflicted on Governor Robinson a punishment for the pettiest of crimes, and that his subsequent outburst did not even merit their attention enough to bring further penalties.

It is merest legend that he stood and delivered to the aliens and the ship's company alike a heroic address, similar to that attributed to Robert The Bruce at Bannockburn<sup>2</sup>; very possibly the story was concocted by enthusiastic Scots precisely to equate "The Robinson" with "The Bruce."

Also mythical are the reports that for the rest of his days, John wore only shirts with the backs cut out of them, so all could see the scars of the atrocity committed upon him that day. It is true he wore no shirt at all for a week or so, until the wounds healed enough that he could wear one again without discomfort. One might say that he was indeed forced to wear for a time some very sheer fabric, but beyond that is the sheerest fabrication.

Months later, after I had returned with my part of the team, after military support arrived, after Governor Robinson's attempted negotiations with the Tea-O' An, began the battle which definitively established the independence of New Plymouth. The Highlanders led the assault. Of course, all these volunteers knew the tale of Robinson's beating. During the fighting, when one soldier cut down an enemy, or a grenade or shell scored a particularly devastating strike against them, someone would invariably cry out "Don't look, madam!" as a sarcastic taunt to the foe.

This quickly became the general purpose rallying-cry, cheer, and unofficial motto of what became the Colonial Highland Volunteers. It is always the first toast made at the Highlanders' table when drinks are passed, and frequently thereafter; and any one of them who starts to slip *under* the table may be sure that the last thing he will hear before morning bugle is "Don't look, madam!"

In any case, it wasn't until some time after the battle was over that Governor Robinson's beating was first called "The Scourging of Don't Look Madam," but that is how it entered our history books, and how it will be remembered, God willing, for ages to come.

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1. The apostrophe represents the glottal sound, usually heard on Earth in such words as the Scottish "Loch," or the German "Ach." Could alternatively be written "Tee-Och-Ahn." Given spelling reflects Colonial Standardised English.
  2. "Bruce's Address to the Troops At Bannockburn," aka "Scots Wha' Hae." (The national anthem of Scotland.)

Scots! wha' hae wi' Wallace bled,  
Scots! wham Bruce has aften led,  
Welcome to your gory bed,  
Or to victory!

Wha' for Scotland's king and law  
Freedom's sword will strongly draw?  
Freeman stand, or freeman fa'?  
Let him on wi' me!

Now's the day, and now's the hour;  
See the front o' battle lour:  
See approach proud Edward's power -  
Chains and slavery!

By oppression's woes and pains!  
By your sons in servile chains!  
We will drain our dearest veins,  
But they shall be free!

Wha' will be a traitor knave?  
Wha' can fill a coward's grave?  
Wha' sae base as be a slave?  
Let him turn and flee!

Lay the proud usurpers low!  
Tyrants fall in every foe!  
Liberty's in every blow!  
Let us do or die!

Although The Bruce almost certainly did rally the troops with some reference to the recent martyrdom of William "Braveheart" Wallace and the vision of liberty, these verses were composed some time after the fact by the Poet Laureate of Scotland, Robert Burns, whose other notable works include "Ode To A Louse," "Address to the Toothache," and "Scotch Drink."

-Ed.'s

*Part 2, cont.*

We boosted, keeping under the 2-gee ceiling for Penny's sake, then put ourselves into a geosynchronous orbit above the *Jupiter 2* site. It was a risk, contrary to his original plan, and Dusty and I both stood by monitors to watch for the telltale signs of an alien launch: either pursuit by a ship, or interception by a missile. Penny remained buckled in to the launch couch, just in case a high-gee boost was necessary after all. We simply hoped that if this was necessary, her being in the soft recliner, rather than pressed up against me pressed into the wall, would not cause her distress or injury.

After an hour, I called below. Don answered my hail, and simply told us that the aliens had come and gone, that all were alive and that we should not worry, and continue on our mission. As noted before, it was not until our return that we learned of the Scourging. We did get one small hint though, as Dr. Smith broke into the conversation, and demanded we bring back adequate medical equipment and replenishment for our nearly-depleted stocks of medicines. He berated us for his task of having to tend to his patients with little better than flint knives, bone needles, and goose grease.

Penny unbuckled so she could take the mike, and all of us took a few minutes to make some further final farewells and mutual reassurances that we would all be together again in about a month.

"Awright, kids, buckle'm up, and I'm gonna boost us high-side," said Dusty.

"Time for hyperspace?" Penny asked.

I nodded. "You all set with, uh, thingies?" She was still bleeding from the event triggered by our last hi-gee boost.

She considered for a moment. "Dusty, put on the gravity and give me five minutes, would you please?"

"You betcha, honey."

There was a hum as the artificial gravity kicked in. I had a thought. "You know, Dusty, we should probably keep this on as much as possible, at Earth-normal. Penny's lived at about 95% almost half her life, and the bebbies don't know anything else. I'm probably out of practice with it myself."

"Uh-huh," responded Dusty. "Y'all just tell me whatcha want, we aim to please." Now that we were away from the planet, Dusty was relaxing, and his dialect was becoming more evident again.

Penny was digging through our meager luggage. She found the package of feminine necessities, and disappeared into the head. She came back a few minutes later looking happier and more comfortable.

"Oh, Dusty," she said, "Give me just another fifteen minutes or so to feed the babies. I'm not sure how, uh, feeding them might or might not work in hyperspace, so let's give'm full bellies first."

"I purely hope we don't have to drop out every time you need to fill up them critters, or they'll be all growed by the time we get to Earth."

Penny stretched back out in the launch couch, and lifted up her blouse to nurse the boys. Dusty, Southern gentleman that he was, fixed his undivided attention on the flight console and the empty vista before us without even hinting of his awareness of what was happening. In some ways, he reminded me –favorably, I should emphasize– of Dr. Smith. Although Smith had no Southern accent, it occurred to me that his manners and chivalry were very quaint and spoke of Dixieland. I wondered where he came from, even as I thought it was probably not a very good idea to pry too deeply into the secrets of Smith.

I lay in my launch couch, watching Penny and the babies. Something crossed my mind, no cosmic revelations this time, just an amusing recollection, and the opportunity to tease my dear wife.

I dropped my voice.

"Know something, m'love? There was this older guy at the Academy, he'd been a real Navy Petty Officer or something before going into space, and he had a couple of funny tattoos."

I paused, and made sure I had her full attention. I indicated my own chest area, and said, “Yeah, over the left one it said ‘Hot,’ and ‘Cold’ over the right one.”

Penny glared at me furiously, trying not to smile. “I hope you’re not suggesting –”

“I know how to do it. A sewing needle and some regular ink is all –”

“If it weren’t for the audience, I would be calling you some very bad names right now.”

“It would help pass the time.”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“How ’bout ‘Homogenized’ and ‘Pasteurized’?”

“You be glad I don’t have a rock to throw at you, mister.”

After a bit, the boys were content, still had clean pants, and dozed off.

“Ready to boost, angel?”

“Anytime, dear husband.”

“Let ’er rip, Dusty,” I called.

“ ’Bout time,” he griped. “Shoot, now the converters are all cooled off. Y’all’d think this was a dang ol’ pleasure cruiser an’ not a oversize lifeboat.” He threw switches, turned dials. After a minute, he grunted, “That’ll do, I hope. Hang on, Bobby. Honey, hang onta them little ’uns.

“Engaging hyperspace converters in 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . execute.”

The babies started awake and squealed in alarm at the sensation. Penny did well this time, she held the twins and patted them reassuringly; to me it was old hat, of course.

“Bobby.”

“Dusty.” I responded.

“Y’all come take a look at the flight plan I’m layin’ out here, an’ tell me if’n y’all got any proplems with it.”

He had laid out a course which would carry us Earthward, not quite directly, but dropping out of hyperspace at a number of different points adjacent to star systems. This was partially to do his regular job of monitoring for distress calls, but primarily to give us all a break from being in hyperspace – a place mentally grueling and physically annoying. Despite the urgency of our mission, the extra time was a virtual necessity for our well-being, both physical and mental, and would add less than 48 hours onto a 10 day voyage.

As described earlier, normal Newtonian physics just didn’t apply here, and the human body, built for operation in gravity, suffered sometimes unpredictable and bizarre side effects. Even zero-gravity or freefall was better than the inertia-less environment of hyperspace, where even the artificial gravity was meaningless. Not to mention the disturbing . . . things . . . outside the ship. Size, distance, perspective, were utterly irrelevant outside. The monstrosity drifting along, sometimes seeming to play tag with your ship, could have been a million miles away, or inches; a galaxy or a fly.

So most spacers preferred to spend no more than a few days in h-space at a time, drop down into 3-space, then boost up again and continue the trip. On the plus side, travel through h-space sidestepped the sometimes disastrous relativistic effects resulting from extended travel at very high speeds in 3-space: as uncomfortable as it might be, at least if you spent a week in hyperspace, you wouldn’t come to the other end and find twenty years had passed by at home.

The course Dusty laid out carried us by three star systems where Earth colonies were established, and three others. Of course our last waypoint would be at Alpha Centauri 4, the Robinsons’ original goal. Sol –Earth’s sun– was the seventh star from home.

One thing we had neglected was decent food. All Dusty had was standard space rations, blocks of synthetic proteins, mashed up with various dried fruits and vitamin enriched. Penny appreciated them, cynically, as they were so awful to eat she thought they would help her lose some of her childbearing weight. The boys tried a bit and refused to even touch them thereafter.

Penny was relieved when her cyclical discomfort ended, then disappointed when she learned that she couldn't take a proper shower on a Rescue Survey ship – sponge baths only.

Our plan for the final leg of the voyage was to drop into Earth system at about Mars orbit, make radio contact with good old Moonbase Delta, drop our bombshell, then broadcast John's recorded video and plea for assistance.

I began reviewing my mission parameters. Above all, we were to concede none of our sovereignty. I thought that the safest thing would be to not even address the issue unless it was put to us point-blank, and otherwise just speak and act as if our independence was already settled.

The trip, thankfully, passed without incident (even at this great remove now, I still have almost a superstition against calling it "routine"). There were no distress calls, no hails, from ships or planets.

We did cut over at our last stop a little, so Penny could see the Centauri world which might have been her home now. It was a green, cloudy world, with less ocean than Earth, but otherwise a near-twin.

Penny scrutinized the planet under the high-res viewer. Finally she sniffed, with more than a hint of contempt. "Bet they think they're having one wild adventure down there. Maybe someday I'll drop in and tell 'em some *real* stories."

"Y'all ready to boost, kids?"

"Let 'er rip, Dusty," ordered Penny.

So we dropped in to Sol System in the rough neighborhood of Mars' orbital distance, with Mars himself safely on the far side of the track. That meant our broadcast would reach Earth and the Moonbases in about 10 minutes, but we would take another 5 days to cruise in, giving everyone there time to figure out what to do about us.

Penny pressed her face to the viewport. "Where is it? Can you see it from here?"

I pointed to what looked like any other star, except that it had a just-perceptible disk shape to it, that, and a slight but distinct greenish hue. "And look there, looks like a very faint star, right next to it. That's the Moon. That's where Rescue Survey works out of."

"You did it, dear husband."

"What's that, my angel?"

Penny sang softly a bit of song from our bizarre night of synchronicity:

*"Fly me to the Moon, let me play among the stars  
Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars . . ."*

"You sing beautifully. I never knew that."

Penny smiled. "Been too busy lately, I guess."

"I wish I could sing that other one for you, 'Pennies From Heaven.' But I can't sing."

She squeezed my hand. "Don't worry about it."

We returned to hushed star-gazing. I had to admit, my heart was pounding and I was excited to be seeing the world I was born on, and which I had often expected I would never see again.

Dusty lined up his transmitters. "This is Rescue Survey Scout *Tornado*, calling Moonbase Delta, inward bound, reporting successful completion of Mission Zero-Nine, Seven Seven Nine Three, Code Yellow. Am carrying four passengers, including mission subject, and three VIPs." Dusty turned and winked at Penny.

"In ten minutes I will be broadcasting a pre-recorded video message from VIPs found on mission planet. This will be a message of some significance, and I will suggest that all interested parties record it for rebroadcast. There may be some newsworthy material here, just giving y'all fair warning."

“Damn, Dusty,” I said when he closed the mike, “You’re making it sound like First Contact!”

Still standing at the viewport, Penny slipped her arm through mine. “Maybe it is. Are we aliens yet, dear husband?”

“Nah, we’re just us.” I thought a moment, then gestured towards the distant world ahead. “I’m not sure about them, though.”

Dusty spoke. “Well, it is gonna be First Contact for Earth folks, ain’t it? I mean about our buddies back there that shot at us.”

“If they believe us,” I sighed, and shook my head. “I just hope we’re not laying it on too thick all at once. A new planet, an unknown colony, the Robinsons, *and* aliens?”

Dusty laughed. “I’m guessing most folks’ll wonder why it’s taken so long to meet up with strangers out there. Look at the bright side, maybe it was all a misunderstanding and we’ll all be good buddies afterwards. Hey, y’all wanna send along your own message? After John’s recording?”

Penny and I looked at each other, then nodded. “You just sit there and look strong, my darling. You can introduce me, but let me do the talking,” Penny directed. “From what you and Dusty have told me, they’ll know my name more than yours. Let me think a bit and jot down some notes here. Oh, put on the gravity, please, I’ll want the babies in my lap, and want it to look natural, not have ’em floating around.”

“Will do, Miss Penny.”

Dusty went back on the air, announced John’s video, and sent it. “That’ll shake up some folks,” he grinned. It was fairly short, only 7 minutes of Governor Robinson introducing himself and the others, laying out the bare bones of the situation, and a plea for aid. “Y’all got a few words thought out?”

“Yeah, Dust,” I said. “Where’s your cam? Can you set it up so you’ll show us sitting next to each other on the launch couch here?”

“Anything you like.”

“Right, I want you to zoom in on me, and I’ll make a couple of introductory remarks, then pull back and Penny will take it over.”

“Can do.”

“Hey, either one of you guys got a regular button-up-the-front shirt I can put on? Might look better than this old sack.”

“Sure do, Miss Penny, lemme grab that for you.”

In moments, Penny had changed into a light blue dress shirt that was part of Dusty’s regular wardrobe.

I looked at her skeptically. “It doesn’t seem to, um, fit too well.”

“How do you mean?”

“It looks a bit, eh, *tight*, across the top there.”

“You want to be sure we get their attention, right?”

“Yeah but –”

“Shh. Trust me.”

John’s broadcast ended, and Dusty immediately spoke into the mike: “Stand by for a live broadcast from onboard *Tornado*, from one of our VIPs.”

“Ready?”

“Let’s light ’em up, Dust.”

“And – go.”

I looked into the camera. “Ladies and gentlemen of Earth, my name is Ensign Robert Cain, formerly of the Rescue Survey. A little more than a year ago, I crash-landed on a previously unknown planet, and discovered the solution to a mystery of recent times, the fate of the *Jupiter 2* and the lost Robinson expedition.

“Some of you may remember a very pretty little girl who captured the imagination of lots of boys around the world – Penny Robinson, ‘the angel in the silver spacesuit.’ You will be relieved to know that Penny, along with the rest of the party, was found alive and well. And she is here with me right now, Earthward-bound, with a heartfelt plea to add to her father’s.” I paused to smile jocularly. “Oh, and I hate to disappoint any of you young men, but Penny is now not only my wife, but the mother of twin babies. People of Earth, I give you Penny Robinson.”

Dusty nodded to Penny. Up to that moment, she had been just sitting normally. As the camera turned to her, she leaned forward and ran fingers through her hair. The hair immediately disheveled and fell across her face. “Oh my, am I going on TV now? Goodness, I hardly know what to say! This has all just been so thrilling!” Very casually, she dragged her open fingers down her throat and on to her chest. A button of Dusty’s shirt fell loose, and revealed a bit of cleavage, which she was evidently too distraught to notice.

“Well, all I wanted to say is that we’ve all worked so very hard just trying to survive on that strange planet, and we’re just now really getting on our feet, and I have these two wonderful twin baby boys –” she leaned over to pick them up from the carrier, incidentally treating the camera to another helping of cleavage, “and now we’ve been invaded by these alien horrors! Bobby and I and the babies barely escaped, and all we hope now is that Daddy and Mommy and the others are even still alive –” she paused and put her hand over her eyes, choked up a sob.

“So please, all my friends, we need help so badly. We need people to come and settle and help build our little colony. And who know something about fighting, so we can protect ourselves from those terrible creatures. We – we just want to be left alone, to farm our land and raise our boys. People of Earth, won’t you –” she paused again to dab an eye with her pinky finger, and pull both babies into camera shot. “Won’t you think of the children? Help us, please – you’re our only hope!”

Dusty was biting his lip. I was too. “Camera’s off, Broadway,” he said, not a moment too soon. We both released howling gales of laughter.

“Penny,” I said, “You could have given us a *little* warning you were gonna pull a stunt like that. You poor sweet little frail girly-girl.”

She was laughing giddily now, too. “Oh man, that was the best time I’ve had in ages! You think it worked?”

“Worked? Helen of Troy’s got nothing on you, you’re gonna be the Face That Launched A Thousand Spaceships! Half the men on Earth are going to pay for the privilege to come fight and die for you!”

“Watching all that old television while I was laid up paid off, huh?”

“Let’s hope.”

Then I remembered something else, and asked Dusty to send on one more private message.

We completed the voyage fairly leisurely, slightly ahead of schedule. We were getting early reports back that John and Penny’s messages were causing something of a sensation, just as we had all hoped. We received a couple of preliminary semi-official questions from government people. I kept my own message narrowly focused – that I was here as an ambassador of New Plymouth; I needed to speak with the directors of Alpha Control and the Offworld Colonization Project; military aid for New Plymouth; medical attention for Penny. Any further interviews were declined. After our bombshell appearance, I wanted to throttle down and keep our business as focused as possible.



Earth grew from a star to a blob in our viewports, and finally to a planet. Dusty was talking back and forth regularly with Alpha Control regarding our disposition, particularly Penny's requirement that he be allowed to take us home. Finally, all matters seemed well in hand, so Dusty kicked up the throttles and took us in to an insertion orbit after only four days.

"They's havin' us set down at Nellis, out by Las Vegas," Dusty informed us. "Guess they've got a special reception set up for y'all." He got back on the radio. "Roger that, Alpha Control, I'm gonna need just one more orbit to line up an approach and I'll be on downstairs with the guests, over."

"Roger that, *Tornado*," came the voice of ground control, smooth and cool, sounding the same as ever. You'd swear the same man had been sitting at that radio ever since Virgil Grissom first lifted. "You are assigned landing pad Three-Bravo, repeat Three-Bravo. Landing beacon is lit, and we are standing by for descent on your initiative, over."

"All righty then kids, this is it. Y'all got all your nice ground leave clothes on? Babies all clean didies and warshed faces? Still got an hour to finish one more trip around before hittin' the retros, so fix yoursells up all nice 'n' purty."

We fiddled with our boys for a half an hour, giving them a little more freefall playtime, which they loved. Truthfully, we were both so nervous and excited that we just stretched out in the launch couches to wait. After a while we could feel the ship shifting about and heard Dusty muttering to himself and ground control as he found the descent path.

"Hey kids, come take one good look here, see what it looks like from up top." Obediently we stepped over to the monitors – all the viewports showed nothing but blue sky. I zoomed in the picture, and got a picture of Nellis Spaceport and the thirty square miles or so to the north. Nevada, I thought. Desert.

Penny gasped in dismay. "That's bleaker than home! Where's all that great stuff you promised?"

"Tourist." I smirked at her. "*This* is the town for the spaceport, Las Vegas." I zoomed to the famous –or infamous– city. Penny gasped again and was speechless. "Don't be seduced by the glitter," I whispered in her ear.

"I can't believe it," she finally murmured.

"All right, strap in, gonna start hittin' the landing jets here in a sec."

Penny looked over to me from her couch. "How long before we can crack the hatch? Half hour or so?"

"No, should be quicker. Dust, they got the platforms here right?"

"Should."

I addressed Penny: "They'll roll out big platforms right up to us, and a whole walkway to the terminal swings out to meet us. We can open right up, and it'll be like stepping out on to a balcony and walking right back inside."

"Oh. Sounds nice and convenient. You won't need to winch the babies and me down then."

"Nope."

"Good. Talk about something that makes a girl feel she's too big!"

Dusty called over his shoulder to us. "They say they's gonna be a few ladies and gentlemen from the press there to take some pitchers an' sech, that OK with y'all, or should I tell 'em to get lost?"

Penny and I looked at each other, shrugged. "Fine by us," she said.

The photon jets were winding up high then, with all the roaring and shaking that entailed. Penny looked a little nervous. "Don't worry unless all the noise stops," I shouted. The babies didn't like it at all and were screaming.

"Oh, dammit," swore Penny. "Little rats hit just the right pitch, look at me, I've let down." Two wet spots darkened her blouse where milk had started to flow in response to the boys' fretting. "Photos, they said, huh? I guess I can hold them over it."

"I think Dusty has another spare shirt he can loan you."

"All right."

"Maybe one that doesn't fit as tight as that last one."

"I think I fit any shirt pretty good."

"Don't need to hear all that!" yelled Dusty. "C'mon, three minutes to touchdown and y'all can take your act into Vegas, they'll love it."

Finally the roaring and shuddering stopped. Penny and I both jumped up out of the couches. Penny ran to the viewport, and peered out, staring around. "I see lots of black tar, and a big white bullseye that I think we're right in the middle of. Lots of sand and blue sky. It is a lot like home." She paused. "I'm on Earth. I'm really on Earth again." She paused again. "I feel too heavy. I didn't think the gravity was this much more."

"Love, we had this gravity almost all the time for the last week, when we had gravity."

"Yeah, almost all. You made Dusty turn it off whenever I said something about it." She bumped her shoulder against mine. "You should have made me suffer. Now we can't turn it off at all."

"Hey, I don't care much for it either, you know."

"Oh, here come the things! Look!"

Two large semicircles were crawling on treads across the tarmac.

"C'mon, Dust, find a fresh shirt for Penny? That's awfully embarrassing to step out in, in front of a bunch of strangers."

"And can I go ahead and feed them quick, too? They need it and I do to."

"Turnin' my nice ship into a dang nursery, lit'rally, but yeah you go ahead Miss Penny honey, I'll get on the radio and let 'em know we'll be . . . what, fifteen minutes?"

"Half an hour."

Dusty shook his head. "I'll tell 'em. Think the whole world revolves around y'all."

I winked at Penny. "He'll learn," I mouthed at her.

"They'll all learn," she mouthed back, and grinned wickedly.

Half an hour later, to the minute, we told Dusty to go ahead and open up. He looked out through the viewports. "Thunderation and hellfah," he muttered. "I purely hope the president or somebody else is comin' through here today. Looky here."

We looked out and beheld a sea of people. Was this mob for us? Surely not . . .

"Dust, what's the temp out there? In F degrees?"

"Says a hundred-ten."

Penny looked at me. "Sounds like home, huh?"

"Ready?"

"Yup." She picked up the babies in the double carrier. "Oof. They're heavier too."

"Oh, fer the love o' – gimme 'em, honey, I'll carry 'em for ya, I might as well be your dang ol' nanny too, at this point."

"We're onto you, you know, Dust. We've both heard you teaching 'em to call you 'Uncle Dusty'."

"Thank you, Uncle Dusty," said Penny.

"'Nuff o' that, let's get outta this little rat cage." Dusty hit a button and the hatch unsealed and swung open.

"Oh man, kids, this ain't funny."

"What, what?" I peeked over his shoulder. A fifty foot walkway, ten feet wide, stretched from the hatch to the terminal entrance. It was packed solid with people. Most were wielding cameras of some sort and microphones. Some were waving signs, crudely painted with clever slogans like "WELCOME HOME!"

“Jesus, Dusty, this is a circus!”

“Just plain Dusty, you got me confused with that other feller. But that sure is a mob. I don’t see anyone with a uniform or badge or anything like we’d need to talk to. There’s the door, though, I guess we just gotta make our own way through this.”

“Lemme see,” I said. “Let me go first and clear the way. Dust, you take middle with the boys, and angel, you bring up the rear and hold tight onto Dusty’s belt. OK, ready?”

They nodded, and I stepped out onto the walkway, into the sunshine of Earth. A barely suppressed roar began to grow as I elbowed a path. Then it grew louder as Dusty’s tall, lanky frame followed. Suddenly the roar let loose in full throat. Frantic shouting resolved into brief phrases of “There she is! There she is!” “It’s Penny! Hi Penny!” Looking off to the left, over the tarmac, all the crowded –hundreds? thousands? I couldn’t even guess– onlookers roared and waved.

Dusty’s hand on my shoulder stopped me, and he yanked his thumb back at Penny. She stood frozen, eyes wide. I slipped by Dusty.

“You all right, my love?” She nodded, silently. “Wave at them or something.” As if in a trance, she raised one arm and waved from the elbow. The mob roared even louder. “Smile!” Still half-frozen, she smiled, waved again, and turned a bit to face another part of the sea of people. Roaring and roaring. The babies were crying, but I could barely hear them.

“Dusty,” I shouted, “We gotta get outta this, this is nuts.”

He nodded, and grabbed Penny by the elbow. I continued pushing ahead, and after three steps heard another commotion behind me.

A woman with a camera had it pointed in Penny’s face. “Penny Robinson, welcome back to Earth! What message do you have for our viewers?”

Penny stood dazed as a boom microphone looking like a gorilla’s arm was thrust at her. “I’ll be glad to be getting home soon,” she said.

“What a beautiful sentiment!” exclaimed the reporter. She looked uncertain for a moment, then, “I’m sure you’re glad to be back, thank you, Penny Robinson!”

“Miss Robinson, hello!” shouted another woman. “Would you like to have this elegant Anthony of Paris purse to carry with you?” thrusting an oversize handbag into her arms.

“Oh, why thank you,” said Penny flatly.

“Thank *you*, Miss Robinson! Hold still.” Cameras started flashing, photographing Penny holding the purse she was unwittingly endorsing.

I turned. “Come on, we gotta get inside, I think Penny’s about to freak out. Looks like she’s halfway to lala-land already.”

We shifted about, walked all three abreast, Dusty and me flanking Penny, the cradle on Dusty’s shoulder. We made better speed for most of the way, then the last ten feet to the door were another solid mass of people wielding cameras, microphones, notebooks both paper and computer. I lunged ahead to the door, and lost contact with the others.

Some man had Penny pinned against the railing of the walkway, talking at her a mile a minute, handing her cards, and trying to force a sheet of paper on her to sign. I snaked an arm through, trying to reach her.

Suddenly Penny slapped the man across his face, hard. She stared at him, stunned. Then she rolled up her fist and delivered a staggering right cross to his chin. He stumbled back, eyes wide, not quite losing his feet, as gasps and laughter buffeted him. I held the door open and dragged my wife in; Dusty followed with the boys and pulled the door shut, then stood there holding it tight. I examined the card Penny handed me. “DAZZLING,” it read. “The journal of beautiful ladies for gentlemen of sophisticated tastes.”

Penny looked at me in horror. “He wanted me to – he wanted to take pictures of me, naked! He just came right up and said so!”

“Go back out and slug him again, if you like. Was that Don’s right cross you told me about?”

“Bobby, I don’t like this place. Are these really the same people as us?”

The interior of the terminal was not quite as crowded, a lot quieter and more polite. Most everyone still stared at us. No, they stared at Penny. No one knew or cared about Dusty and me. Finally Dusty spotted someone he seemed to know, or maybe he just recognized the uniform. A fussy man, 40-ish, carrying a tidy little notebook trotted over. Before he could say a word, Dusty unleashed a tirade on him. I knew how upset he was because almost all of his accent disappeared.

“What the dang hell is going on out there, buddy? That poor girl was in shock out there from all the creeps! Couldn’t y’all get some kind of security out there, some kind of escort?”

“So sorry, sir,” he replied, “Nearly half of those people *were* security. It is a very extreme situation we have, and I’m afraid we just don’t have crowds like this more than a time or two a year, and we certainly weren’t expecting this kind of turnout. I’m afraid Miss Robinson has become a bit of a celebrity.”

I had a little spell, too. “Let’s get one other thing straight, right now, buddy. I don’t know who the – heck you are, but my name is Robert Winslow Robinson Cain, and that is not ‘Miss Robinson,’ that is Mrs. Penelope Robinson Cain, and she is my wife, and she is not here as a star for some goddam media freak show! I am here as an accredited diplomat of a sovereign government, and my wife is here as a private citizen seeking medical attention.” I took a breath, and behind me Dusty coughed discreetly. “And this is our very good friend, Ensign Dusty Proudfoot, Rescue Survey Scout, attached to this diplomatic delegation as our personal bodyguard and security service for our duration here, which I hope to hell isn’t gonna be more than a couple days!”

The man opened his prim little notebook. “How do you spell that name, sir, with a C or a K and with or without an E at the end?”

I grabbed the notebook out of his hands and hurled it across the terminal. “Would you just get us someone from Colonization or Alpha Control?” I shouted. The fussy little gentleman blanched, and drew back. “Someone was supposed to meet us here that didn’t have his head shoved up his –”

“Bobby, dear husband, calm down. I’m sure he’s doing the best he can. And if there’s a media freak show out there, I did it to myself. You told me yourself what a performance I gave on the ship.”

“Penny? Are you back?”

“Yeah. I’m all right. I got a little overwhelmed is all. Where’s the boys? Oh. Thanks, Dusty. I think you can sit down with them for a while.”

He had been standing all this time with the carrier on his shoulder. Now he motioned at some people to vacate their seats, who moved hurriedly. He sat down with the boys, made silly faces, and encouraged them to say “Uncle Dusty.”

“Are you down from homicidal maniac mode, darling husband?”

“At the moment,” I growled toward our little host.

“By the way, my name is Nelson, Mr. Frank Nelson,” said the fussy man. “Just a moment.” He spoke rapidly into an undertone microphone on his cheek, paused, then nodded. “I’m terribly sorry for the confusion, Miss, er, Mrs. Cain Robinson, but if you will all come with me, I’ll get you somewhere convenient.”

Sighing, finally feeling that we were getting somewhere, we followed Mr. Nelson. I took Penny’s arm in mine. “Where’s your new purse?”

“What purse?” she asked.

“Wow. You really *were* in bad shape out there, huh?”

“I’ve got it, whatchy’all think?”

We turned. Yes, it hung over Dusty's shoulder, bumping against the baby carrier.

Penny laughed. "Oh, that thing. Give it to me, silly." She plucked it off him, draped it over her own shoulder. "Is that a trash can?" she asked, pointing.

"Yup," said Dusty.

She nailed it cleanly from three feet away.

A short time later, Penny and I sat with Joe Gaska, U.S. Director of the Offworld Colonization Project. Dusty sat outside the conference room with the babies.

Despite the lead time, Gaska hardly knew what to make of us. Although their file was still open, the Robinsons officially documented as "missing," for all practical purposes they had been regarded as dead for more than seven years. Now one of them sat with the Director himself, with two brand new ones just outside. As far as I could tell, he didn't regard either Dusty or me as his problem.

Well, not me, except insofar as I was acting as an ambassador from a previously unknown colony and personal envoy from a dead man.

Gaska made it clear that we were to be given first-class treatment for our stay, but he also made us understand that that treatment was being extended to us as guests of the Project, not for any purported diplomatic status. Neither did he address our assertion that we were not obligated in any way to the Project, contractually or otherwise.

I made it clear that while we were grateful for the cordial reception, the Project was a private endeavor with absolutely nothing to say or decide about our diplomatic status. I granted that we were specifically "guests" of the Project, and thus explicitly not employees or contractors or sponsorees. It was an interesting, at times awkward, waltz. I laid out John's requests for material goods, and our offer of virtually unlimited settlers' rights in return. Gaska kept asking me sign to sign standard colonial consignment requisitions, which I refused, as we were not one of his "standard" colonies. Penny shed a tear or two, right on cue.

Gaska objected that if our alleged "alien threat" was so extreme as to warrant our request for military intervention, then the Project didn't want to be involved with so risky a proposition. I returned that potentially hostile aliens had always been a threat, and it was just ignorance and luck which had spared the other colonies so far.

We concluded with Gaska conceding that he would raise the matter with the Board the next day. Judging only from my limited experience with the somewhat complicated management structure of the Rescue Survey, I had to think we had at least not lost: he didn't tell us to get out of his sight, he didn't call for us to be escorted away, and he least pretended to offer further action.

We had some very fine hotel reservations: Penny and I had a suite at the Stellar Caravan, and Dusty –at our insistence– had a comparable room nearby on the same floor. Penny had a doctor's appointment for the next morning, and in the afternoon, I would meet with government people.

The hotel managers asked if we would dine in our rooms or in one of the dining rooms downstairs; then suggested that Penny's public appearance might cause more of an uproar than we wanted to deal with. After some brief consultation, I told Dusty to get himself downstairs and into the Las Vegas night life while Penny and I would lay low.

Room Service rolled in tableful of food, enough to have fed the whole lot of us at home for a month, I think. Penny got weepy at it all, honestly weepy, not the heartrending single-tear act she had mastered for her public.

I cautioned her, "Remember, angel, this is VIP treatment at one of the grandest hotels in the country. Most people never eat like this, and we sure wouldn't if we lived here."

She nodded, and proceeded to stuff herself. She kept asking what some particular dish was, and I had to keep confessing that I wasn't sure myself. *I'd* never eaten like this before!

After a dinner that neither Penny nor I could hardly have imagined, the phone rang, with a question from security regarding visitors. My final message from space had found its target: my parents and my kid sister Alicia were here. They were stunned and glad to find me alive; even more so to find me a celebrity, or at least second-fiddle to a celebrity.

I invited them to migrate, after our current troubles settled down a bit. I boasted to them of how we had carved a house out of stone, and how a pool of cold water at the bottom kept us comfortable through the burning of High Summer. My parents nodded politely as the air conditioner hummed away in our 50<sup>th</sup> floor suite. My mother asked if the babies went to a day-care, how many other families were there, and if they were all allowed to have children. I told her there were three other households, but only our babies. She fussed over her grandsons for a time, and took lots of pictures of them, and Penny and me, and in all different combinations.

My father asked if there was any fishing, and how often we got to the beach. I heard Penny almost choke, holding in a snicker. We were both thinking of some lusty exploits we had shared at our oasis, but kept those to ourselves, of course. Penny took Alicia out on the balcony for a heart-to-heart, and showed her the Don West Right Cross, as well as Maureen's Left Right Kick. I felt good about that, and hoped to see Alicia out there some day.

Conversation seemed to lag a bit after an hour or so, and my parents began making awkward goodbyes. They didn't quite comprehend at first that we were going right back to New Plymouth in a couple of days; Mother then expressed her hope that we would be able to "visit home" a few times a year. They left.

I sat a while, looking at the door. "I really have missed them," I observed thoughtfully to Penny. "And I do hope to get back and see them again. Just –right now– we've been kind of strangers for a while, and we all need to get to know each other again."

"Alicia's very sweet, but she told me some pretty bad stories out there. I think I understand now why you got so upset with Daddy that time."

"Come over here, angel." I sat her down in my lap and held her close for a long time, in blissful silence, at least until the babies started grouching.

"I miss Mother," Penny whispered. "I hope they're all OK."

I smiled. "Know something? I miss her too. She's one helluva lady." I sighed. "Now get up, and I'll fetch the boys. They sound hungry, and these feel full."

As Penny settled down with Zack and AJ, I realized what I was missing. I rang up room service and asked for coffee; they asked if we would like dessert as well. "Oh . . . sure. Yes, please."

They asked what we would like. I hardly remembered dessert, so I asked if they could send another selection. "Of course, sir, the dessert trolley. An excellent choice."

I sucked down a cup of coffee, and I had it to admit, it was a lot better than the synthetic recycled reconstituted stuff I'd gotten used to at home. "Penny," I said, "Put about a thousand pounds of coffee on the shopping list. I've got bad news for Mum."

With her arms full of babies, she gowped at the dessert trolley. I spoiled her; I brought over different plates, one by one, and fork-fed her a selection of different bites, one at a time. I grabbed a few tastes myself.

She sat staring into space. "I can't believe how good that all was. I don't think I can move."

I puffed out my breath. "No kidding. Maybe Earth has a few things going for it after all."

"It still doesn't have me," she grinned. "I hope I'm better than double chocolate whipped cream delight or whatever that last thing was."

I twirled her hair in my fingers. "Barely," I said, leaning down to her over the babies.

We kissed deeply. The taste of the chocolate on her lips was a sensuous new thrill.

As we broke apart, the boys were looking around alertly. "I think they smell cake, angel."

“They’re already eating mashed vegetables. I think a little cake would be all right.”

We sat them up in a pair of high chairs –something else for the shopping list– and put some small delicacies in front of them. It was only about two minutes later we regretted it. Still not sure how much pastry and frosting actually got inside them.

Some time after, the boys were bathed and diapered, dressed in new clothes (packages of goodies had been arriving through the day, mostly for Zack and AJ) and bedded down.

We had turned off the air conditioning and opened up the sliding glass doors; we were feeling chilly. I stood on the balcony, looking out at the ocean of lights. Penny joined me and looked up. “Can we see home from here?” she asked.

“I’m not even sure which way it is from here, angel. And the city lights are so bright I don’t think we could anyway. It’s up there, don’t worry.”

We stepped back in, and Penny was looking at the dessert trolley. “Come here, dear husband. Look at this.” She pointed at a small plate with a creamy white wedge, and picked it up. It was labeled “Coconut Custard Cream Pie.” She started grinning evilly. “Do you remember Dusty making fun of our ‘lovey-dovey pie fight’?”

“Don’t you dare, Penny. I mean it.”

“We’ve had lots of lovey-dovey, but never any real pie fight.”

“It’s only a figure of speech.”

“I remember this on one real old show. ‘Hey Moe!’ ”

“Don’t!”

She did.

“You are very lucky I don’t believe in hitting girls or you’d be getting *such* a whuppin’ right now!”

“Dare you!” she said, wiggling her bottom.

I grabbed her into my embrace. “Take this!” I kissed her lavishly, smearing pie all over her own face.

She stepped back, chagrined. “OK, I guess I had that coming. Come on, let’s go clean up.”

We passed the small tub where we had washed off the boys. Now, we realized that that was little more than an oversized hand basin. “The toilet’s over here,” I muttered. “Maybe in here . . .” I pushed open a door, and we both gasped.

To our left was a shower, with plumbing that was probably gold plated. It looked as big as our cabin at home. To the right was a bathtub bigger than any I could have imagined. It was made of pink marble, the water inside was steaming, and the surface was covered with aromatic bubbles. The lights were low, and tinted a dusky rose-red.

Penny and I stared at the spectacle, then at each other. I pulled her into my arms, started kissing her again, tasting the coconut custard I had smeared on her; she did the same to me. Wordlessly, we shared an idea, slowly nodding at each other. With shaking fingers, I started to unbutton her dessert-smeared shirt, then the rest; I, the ambassador, was still in my Rescue Scout jumpsuit, which Penny carefully unzipped. We embraced feverishly, shaking with desire.

“I think,” I whispered into her ear, “that first we get all this dessert and gunk off us with about a half hour in the shower. Then we get in that bathtub, and . . .” I dropped my voice even further as I suggested intimacies we had long avoided, due to her convalescence.

“I think I’ll be all right,” she breathed into my ear. “And there’s a world of doctors and hospitals out there now, just in case. I think I’ll be fine.”

She was. Oh, she was.

We woke the next morning cuddled together tightly in one small corner of a king-sized bed.

Babies were crying. Penny fed the boys, we showered again, and dressed.

“What do you think for breakfast, angel? Room service, or shall we finally see the rest of this hotel?”

Penny looked thoughtful for a moment. “Let’s eat downstairs. I think I owe my public something.”

“You think you’re a real celebrity or something, don’t you?”

“You saw that mob at the spaceport. I know I’m not, but they don’t. I’ll play along though. After all, I owe it to Mummy and Daddy and my poor baby brother, and –”

“Save it for the suckers,” I grinned. “By the way, you don’t fool me anymore. I think when you’re doing *that*, is when you’re letting on that you’re most worried about them.”

Penny glared at me briefly. “You pick the damnedest times to get all sensitive and perceptive.”

I pulled her close. “I heard you crying for Mommy when we scrambled. It’s all right, angel. I know you’re not the hard-case you pretend. Don’t be like that, not for me.”

Penny buried her face in my shoulder, sniffed, rubbed her nose on me. “Do I have to promise not to be mean to you any more?”

“You kidding? I couldn’t live without your abuse.”

Her voice was still muffled as she spoke into my shoulder. “Can I still hit you with a pie once in a while?”

“As long as it ends up like it did last night.”

“All right. Let’s have a different kind of fun now.” She picked up the phone.

“Hello, this is Mrs. Robinson Cain in Suite 5009. My husband and babies are planning to breakfast in the Pavilion this morning, and wondered if there was any required seating area for our room. No? Splendid. Oh, just one more thing, could you *please* make sure there are no photographers or reporters there today? They hounded us half to death yesterday and I can’t fathom why. We just want to have a light repast in peace. Yes. Thank you so much.”

She hung up and grinned at me. “That’ll get us some attention.”

The Pavilion treated us to the sight of a spectacular buffet table. There were more different kinds of berries than I knew existed, all sorts of citrus fruits peeled up and ready to eat, cream, whipped cream, honey, sugar. Then was bacon, ham, sausage, paper-thin steaks, slivers of deep-fried chicken. A chef just for eggs. Pancakes, waffles, French toast – anything you’ve ever imagined as a breakfast food was there.

“Don’t go crazy with it, love, let’s not look like typical tourists shoveling it in.”

“I’m still kinda stuffed from last night, truthfully,” she whispered back. Zack and AJ were intrigued by it all. I think they wanted to be plunked down in the middle of it and let loose.

“Hey, over there,” I whispered, and pointed discreetly. There was a man who was very interested in us, pointing what may have been a small camera our way.

“Hmm,” opined Penny. “At least someone is showing some interest in us.” As she said that, I noticed that there was virtually no attention being paid to us. Either the hotel had done its job all too well or – what? Had The Penny Robinson Experience already come and gone?

As we walked back to our table with plates piled high, I realized that virtually everyone in the Pavilion was focused on his or her handphoned or tablet or My-Pod or Me-Pad. Most of those had some sort of earpiece or complete headphones. Of the few that had no device, most of those, even, were watching over someone’s shoulder or sharing a view.

I whispered to my wife. “I’m going to take a walk around, see if I can figure out what’s so fascinating. Be right back.”

I walked through the maze of tables, casually dropping my eyes to the screens which were captivating so many breakfasters. After a wander through a good section of the Pavilion, I returned and sat, baffled.



“Go take a look for yourself,” I advised Penny.

After a few minutes, she too returned bewildered. “How many of those camera people are there?” she whispered at me.

“Dunno. Gotta be a few. You see what I saw?”

“They’re all watching us. Well, most are. There’s one camera on me, one on you, and one on the boys. About half of them are watching me. Some of the others are watching the boys, and you’ve got a handful of viewers. The rest are watching other stuff completely.”

I nodded. “OK. That’s what I saw. Why, though? We’re right here. Even the next table here, they’re not even looking our way. Are they just being that polite? Watching us, but leaving us alone at the same time?”

Penny frowned. “I don’t think that’s it. I thought kinda the same thing, but at one table, a woman looked up and saw me, then went right back to the gadget. She knew it was me, because when she saw me, she pointed me out on the screen to her husband, or whoever it was next to her.” She swallowed a mouthful of corned beef hash. “Then at another table, I actually tapped one lady on the shoulder and said ‘Hi.’ She looked up at me, then back at the screen, and she typed out ‘She’s here!’ to her friends. She looked up at me once more, said, ‘Those are beautiful babies,’ and they all went back to staring at their screens. With me right there! And none of them were even talking to each other, hardly, they were just typing at each other. It was like . . . I dunno, like if it wasn’t on the screen, it wasn’t really real.”

I looked around and listened. A dining room of this size, I realized, should be abuzz with conversation. It was almost silent, except for the occasional slight chime from one of the devices.

Penny whispered, “I wonder if the men would look if I flashed boobs.” We snickered together at that.

“I wouldn’t even count on that. But don’t! That’s not the kind of exposure we’re looking for.” This last exchange had been somewhat animated, although quiet, with our heads leaning in to each other, and hands gesturing. Now we sat back and relaxed. All about us, a hundred other people likewise sat back, and took bites or sips of what was before them.

Penny noted this too. “Bobby, this is creepy. You sure Dusty hit the right planet after all?” I shrugged. “I just . . . it’s like they’re all in their own little freezing tubes or something.”

“Honestly, love, I don’t remember it being like this. I don’t know if it’s really changed that much in a year or if I just never noticed it before. Or maybe it’s just something with this bunch. You had some good fans at the spaceport, at least.”

“Yeah, I think I like them better now, even the guy who wanted me to strip for him. At least they knew I was real.”

“Maybe they’re the ones who can’t afford these gadgets. Come on, angel, let’s get going. We have a doctor’s appointment.”

We discovered that one of the hotel limousines was already reserved and waiting for us; a fifteen minute ride took us to a private clinic.

Penny got sent on a round of visits into different kinds of machines – CAT scans, PAT scans, PET scans, TOP scans, Q scans, I don’t know what else, I don’t even know what most of those were. Finally she came back up, and the nurse told her we could go in together to Dr. Khripunov’s examination room. I had the twins in the double-carrier: the nurse asked if I wanted to send them on into the child-care while Penny and I were in with the doctor. I looked at her, puzzled. Send my children off to some warehouse, just for a half-hour’s convenience?

Penny climbed up onto the examination table, in one of those awkward-no-matter-how-you-look-at-it medical gowns, and pulled a sheet up over herself. “Why do they keep it so cold in here?” she whispered to me.

“Shh,” I replied. Not sure why. It just seemed the kind of place you held your tongue.

Finally Dr. Khripunov entered, holding stacks of reports under his arm. He had a large, luxurious mustache, and spoke good old New York-style English with just a trace of a Russian accent: not even an accent really, more that the lilt and flow of his words reminded me of that Russian music Penny liked so much.

“Well, good morning, both of you, it is really a tremendous honor to have you here. I hope you are enjoying your visit to Earth?” He beamed at us expectantly, we smiled and nodded agreeably.

“And the young men are fine?”

I smiled more broadly and held up the carrier for his inspection. “I think they’re amazed at how many different people there are now!” I advised the doctor.

“Mm, I’m sure, I’m sure. Well, allow me to first make brief visual examination, please.”

He slipped down the sheet covering Penny. I spun around in the chair so my back was to him, held Penny’s hand and studied her fingers. I felt terribly awkward as another man inspected my wife’s nether regions, and did my best not to think about it.

“Hmm . . . unusual suturing technique, but quite competent, I think.” He looked over at the twins. “And you’re the little devils that did that to mama, hmm?”

“Ajanks BAP!” replied AJ, waving his arms for emphasis.

Dr. Khripunov looked over the history Smith had sent along with us, “ah”ing and “hmm”ing as he read what had happened that day. He glanced at us over the folder with a serious mien. “I suppose you both understand that it’s quite a good fortune the young lady is here with us today?” We nodded somberly and squeezed hands together tightly.

He turned his attention to the scans showing my wife’s insides, the marks of what had happened, and the repairs Dr. Smith had made. As he flipped through the images, a very odd expression started settling onto his face. His eyebrows were hopping up and down in a manner usually reserved for comedic theatrical doctors, and he was dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief.

Finally, he fixed us with a penetrating look that almost seemed panicked. “What was the name of the man who did this?” he demanded.

“Zachary Smith,” I replied.

“*Doctor Zachary Smith,*” Penny emphasized.

Dr. Khripunov jumped up from his desk and approached Penny again. “Permit me another look, please,” pulling the sheet aside. I stared down at the babies, poked them in the bellies.

When I looked up, the doctor was back at his desk, eyes wide and staring, a hand clapped over his mouth. Penny was looking apprehensive, and I had a bad feeling too. “Is something wrong, Doctor?” I asked.

“Something wrong?” He laughed nervously. “Wrong? Oh yes. I’ll tell you what is wrong. The man that did this work, he – he – he should be chief of surgery in the most prestigious teaching hospital in the country. No, he should be chief of surgery in *any* teaching hospital, and *then* it would be the most prestigious. Smith? Zachary Smith? Impossible. A surgeon like this, I would know his name. He – he’s brilliant.”

I looked at Penny, astonished. *Our* Dr. Smith?

“Incredible. Just brilliant.” He looked over to Penny again, and for a moment I thought he was going to want to look at her again; perhaps he saw the look on *my* face saying, “Maybe that’s enough.”

“Has this Dr. Smith ever wanted to come back to Earth?”

Penny laughed loud and long. “If only you knew how funny that was Doctor! There was a time when he would have sold the rest of us to cannibals for a ticket back here, but I think he’s feeling at home there now. Come to think of it, I believe he actually *did* sell us to cannibals once. Why?”

Dr. Khripunov handed me his card, a few copies. "Give him this when you get home. Tell him to come at once. I will see he has a position here, under any terms he cares to name. Or if he wants a practice anywhere else, I will arrange it, then move over there myself, just to work with him. And if he will not come to Earth, well . . . when I earn my pension here, I will migrate to your world and build a hospital there, for him."

He grabbed one of the cards back, scribbled "Come!" on the back of it, and passed it back to me. Almost at once he took it back, and added "Soon!", handed it back again. Almost a full second passed before he grabbed it back a third time, wrote "Please!" He hesitated, then added two more exclamation points to the "Please!" He studied his work thoroughly, and finally satisfied with his invitation, handed it back; I tucked it away quickly before he thought of any more important punctuation.

"A question, Doctor?"

"Yes, Mrs. Cain?"

"Is there any reason my husband and I should not be able to enjoy normal marital relations? We've been worried about my injuries."

"Hmm, no, not that I can see, not unless there is any pain or discomfort. Smith suggests you should be capable of bearing children normally after another eight months or so . . . I do think you would be well advised to accept a contraceptive vaccination. I could give you either the six month or nine month potency."

I could see Penny freeze up. These were the shots that were mandatory for U.S. citizens. I looked at her and nodded. "Just the once, please, my love, just to make sure you're healed and well."

"Yes, Mrs. Cain, really, all citizens, even visitors to the U.S. must have them before they are allowed entry. Oh, I'm sure in your case, in the future, there would be diplomatic exceptions, but it is for your own good."

Still on the table, Penny discreetly kicked me in the back. She was getting steamed, and it was no act for the cameras.

I turned and whispered into her ear, "Sometimes it really is for your own good."

After a chilly silence: "Our name is Robinson Cain, Doctor. And you may give me the nine month shot. Please. After taking my husband's advice into consideration, I agree it would be wise."

"Ah, very good." He blasted the skin of her thigh twice with a pneumatic injector, and pronounced it done, "But allow 48 hours for full effectiveness."

He flipped through the reports again. He paused, scratched his mustache. "Personally, I think you ought be more than capable already, but – no, I must defer to the opinion of Smith."

He frowned again. "Smith? Could that be an alias, a pseudonym, for some reason?" He looked at us. "Perhaps he practiced under a different name? Some doctors will do that you know, adopt a professional name they think more suitable. Really, some doctors are as vain as actors."

Penny and I had our little moments of perfect harmony, almost psychic in nature. With little more than a brush of our fingers, we knew that the doctor was starting to intrude into, well, *family matters*. I had never had cause to suspect such a thing of Smith, but anything was possible, especially considering the murky circumstances surrounding his presence on the *Jupiter 2* mission at all. Still, that was no-one's business but ours now. Penny voiced my own thoughts nearly to the letter.

"I suppose anything is possible, Dr. Khripunov, but I've never had any reason to think that wasn't his real name. And I certainly don't think so now."

"No, of course, you are likely correct. Any man doing work like this, I'm sure his name would already be well-known anyway. This workmanship is as distinctive as fingerprints. Remarkable, just remarkable."

As we rode back to the hotel, Penny's temper was little improved. "Imagine calling it a vaccination, like a baby was an infection! Must be some man that cooked that up. I'd like to come back with a dozen kids, just to show 'em."

Later on, after we had returned home, I gave Dr. Smith Dr. Khripunov's card, along with his invitation and alternative vow to migrate. "Perhaps when my work here is done, children, perhaps then I may consider returning to dear Mother Earth. Unfortunately, you keep saddling me with *far* too many professional responsibilities for me to simply walk out on." He made this statement as Baby Zack slept in his lap, and AJ sat at his feet, hitting them gleefully with a stick.

Penny then alluded to Dr. Khripunov's notion that he may have known Smith on Earth, possibly under a different name. "WHAT?" he demanded, reverting to an old pomposity we hadn't seen in some time. "You can tell that ridiculous Romanov refugee that while the name of Smith is as ancient and honorable as Plantagenet or Windsor, if I ever *did* adopt a pseudonym I would certainly do better than to fall back on such a cheap, obvious device. Bah!"

We returned to the hotel, then, after Penny's health in all matters was reviewed. Aside from a few very minor quirks owing to limited diet and slightly low gravity, she was declared very fit.

I received word that a gentleman from the U.S. Department of Extraterrestrial Affairs would be meeting with me in a conference room at our hotel. We met at 3 pm in a small but well-appointed room on the fifth floor. I had little idea what to expect, and was nervously feeling that I was in over my head.

Brian Tucci was Second Assistant Secretary to the Deputy for Colonial Worlds –I think that was his title– and although he seemed to show a keen interest in our plight, he was not terribly encouraging.

"The armed forces of the United States are somewhat strapped for both financial and physical resources, Ambassador Cain," he stated. "You lived here up until two years ago, and are surely aware that the economy is struggling, and trying to recover from almost two decades of downturn, in spite of the most concerted management by successive governments of all parties. Most of what might be called our discretionary resources are still directed toward the funding of the Offworld Colonization Project itself, yet we still lag behind Britain, Russia, Argentina, and China. Even Japan is now closing the gap on offworld colonies." He paused dramatically. I desperately wished that John or Penny was with me.

"Given the, er, sensational nature of the discovery of this lost Robinson colony, there are, of course, any number of political and public relations issues which may tip the balance more favorably toward your case. Eventually. As with any endeavor, this administration must construct a rational cost-benefit analysis to help determine a reasonable course of action. Negative public opinion as a result of our inability to aid you now is nowhere near as serious a concern as a simple lack of financial resources. However . . ."

I thought quickly, thought of years and politics. "However, sir, we're too expensive a proposition now, and by the next election we won't be a headline any more. Is that what you're trying to say?"

He puffed a bit, and acted insulted. "I would hardly concede that the Administration is so cavalier as to reduce the question of assistance to such a mercenary political calculus." It sounded like Tucci was tacitly admitting the very thing he seemed to deny. This conversation, I thought, was starting to sound like some of my verbal jousts with the Robot! I felt I was at least getting into some familiar territory.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Ambassador, you are doing yourself and your colony no good by this insistence on being recognized as free and autonomous." Now it sounded like we were getting somewhere – not necessarily somewhere I wanted go, though.

"All of you were born citizens of the United States, er, with the possible exception of your own two sons, and that is a point we do not concede, as we assert that both yourself and Mrs. Robinson Cain were still U.S. citizens at the time of their birth." At least he got our name right, I thought.

“Further, your voyage –or their voyage; your own status is quite different– their voyage was undertaken under the auspices of the U.S. Bureau of the Offworld Colonization Project, funded in significant part by U.S. taxpayers. The vessel in question, Colony Ship *Jupiter 2*, was funded and launched as property of the U.S. Government, and under operational management of Alpha Control, a department of the Federal Aerospace Administration.

“As far as we are concerned, *Jupiter 2* remains U.S. government property, and a very small, but very real, territory or possession of the United States. That brings us back to the question of your children. Pursuant to the Supreme Court ruling in *U.S. v. Willcox*, the so-called ‘Lunar Citizen Case,’ we further assert that as your children were born within U.S. territory, they too are U.S. citizens.”

I wasn’t sure, but I had the feeling that a trap was closing.

“And may I remind you, Mr. Ambassador, that as U.S. citizens, your children may be subject to Federal General Welfare laws, meaning that Welfare authorities are statutorily mandated to intervene in cases where the well-being of a child is in question, up to and including the authority to remove said children from parental custody and place them in remedial charge until such time as stated deficiencies in parental care are remedied. Would you care to discuss the conditions at home in which your children are being raised?”

I struggled to hold on to my composure. If we were home, this bastard would already have a pair of black eyes, and possibly far worse. Penny had been right, of course. They’re only doing it for the children.

I was far out of my depth, now. Was this a bluff? Surely they couldn’t pull a stunt like that in front of the whole world? He had already admitted fear of the political fallout from not helping us. What would the repercussions from something like that do?

Think, rocket jockey! What would Penny say? Or Dr. Smith? Inspiration struck.

I let my head hang forward. I resisted the urge to bury my face in my hands – too much. I raised my head and looked him in the eye. “What would you have of us?” I pitched my voice to a nice modulation of surrender and despair.

“At this time, the Administration would be very hard-pressed to commit even a nominal military presence to a distant world which was not avowedly and unquestionably a possession of the United States of America. And while I still cannot guarantee even modest aid, I can assure you that were it so, the matter would be treated with greatest interest and concern in government and at the Pentagon.”

Damn little weasel, I thought, as I tented my fingers before my face and nodded thoughtfully.

“New Plymouth is worth a Pledge of Allegiance, I suppose. And I suppose a video of the Robinson party standing in front of the *Jupiter 2* with their hands on their hearts, facing the Stars and Stripes, would play well on the newsfeeds.”

Tucci smiled blandly.

I continued, “It sounds like what we Americans call a ‘win-win’ deal.”

“I’m glad to hear Your Excellency speaking like a reasonable man.”

“Sir,” I fawned, “I cannot emphasize how dire our situation is. And I hardly need remind you of the difficulties attendant upon communication between worlds so distant. If you can –what were your words?– ‘assure me that the matter would be treated with greatest interest and concern,’ and so forth, I think I can guarantee you in that return that, hmm, how should I say it? – the return of New Plymouth Colony to the unquestioned jurisdiction of the United States is a matter which will be discussed with great deliberation as soon as I have returned there and convinced the Governor to see reason.”

I gave him an oily smile which I had learned from Dr. Smith. Oh indeed, we’ll discuss it. You pusillanimous pipsqueak.

“Mr. Ambassador, I believe that concludes everything which we may have to discuss at this time. I will present the Deputy with a favorable report and positive recommendation at our next meeting.”

I thanked him obsequiously, shook hands enthusiastically, and our meeting was done. My heart was pounding. I had achieved, at least, my main goal: I had *not* ceded our sovereignty. I was still shaking, inwardly at least, as I thought of this vicious little bureaucrat’s not-so-implicit threat to kidnap our boys.

Penny looked concerned as I stepped back in to our suite.

“How’d it go?” she asked.

I started to speak, but then looked about with apprehension. A government that would threaten kidnapping as leverage would have no compunctions about simple bugging devices. My stomach turned as I considered that any bugs might be video as well as audio.

I put on my best dejected face, and looked around the room sorrowfully. “I – I think we’ve done about as well as we could have hoped,” I sighed. “After all, we’re not even a dozen people on a distant planet.”

Penny’s eyes widened in dismay. “Oh no . . .”

I looked straight at her, and with my pinky finger wiped an imaginary tear from my eye, in her own theatrical manner. She bit her lip. At least she understood I was putting on an act. I threw myself heavily into a chair. “We may even end up having to come back home, *sweetie-pie*.”

“I think I understand . . . *dumplin’*.”

I almost coughed up a laugh hearing that one. Maybe we did sound that awful with our usual litany of endearments. At least we were on the same frequency, even if Penny didn’t quite understand why. Hell, who am I kidding? She’d probably suspected bugs the moment we stepped into the place.

“Penny, why don’t you call up room service and see if they can come up with a double stroller for the boys? I feel like taking a walk and getting some air. This has all been . . . just too much for me. And I suppose we – we might as well get the boys used to this world.”

Penny sighed. “That’s what I was afraid of. Oh well, you’ve done your best, and that’s what counts, right?”

She called the front desk and asked about a double stroller. We gathered up the boys and headed for the elevator. At the desk, a stroller was out and waiting for us. Penny and I exchanged a glance. She walked right up to it, and started to settle AJ into it, then jerked back.

“Oh, come on, this thing is all stained and filthy. I think your last customer had a diaper accident in here! Don’t worry, we’ll just take these.” At that, she stepped over to a storage area and grabbed two single strollers. The bemused clerk could hardly raise a protest; he was too well broken to servility.

We plunked the babies into the strollers and stepped out into the sun, walked abreast along the wide sidewalk. Without turning, Penny whispered to me, “I think I get it. Bugs?”

I replied in kind, “Not sure, but possibly. Might even have a tail on us.”

“My God, what’s going on?”

I stopped and pulled us under an awning, and pointed at some random building; we used hands to shield our eyes from the sun – and cover our mouths a bit.

“I’m not sure what the whole deal is, but I think we’re a serious inconvenience right now, or an embarrassment. Maybe even dangerous, somehow.” I briefly rehearsed the meeting, especially the not-so-thinly veiled threat to take our sons. As hot as it was, I could feel the temperature rise another five degrees around my wife.

“I want to go home now, Bobby. I don’t like this place at all any more. You’re right, it’s nothing but a big, shiny, glittery rat-trap. Oh. Where are we, let’s step inside this place, whatever it is. I’m feeling the heat and the gravity and the boys are getting all red.”

We stepped into a tacky souvenir store. “Pick up Zack,” Penny ordered me. She took AJ, and we asked the clerk if we could leave the strollers by the counter while we walked around. They might have gotten to those, too. At least we could speak freely now.

“Kiss me?” asked Penny. I obliged, thinking maybe it was our first act together to go unobserved since being here; I shared that fear with her, too. She looked for a moment close to tears at the thought, then she put on her hard edge.

“I think when we’re done with aliens at home, we come back here and wipe out these monsters.”

“There’s my loving angel,” I whispered, with a grin.

“Or maybe – maybe whatever those creatures at home are, maybe they’ll at least treat us better than this.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to count on that. Listen, we need to get hold of Dusty, pronto.”

Penny grimaced. “Unless they’ve gotten to him already.”

“Don’t even think it. Let’s head back to the hotel. You all right walking?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine now.”

“OK. Let’s not even go to our room, let’s head right for the dining room, and this time hope for some real commotion. Keep ourselves in the spotlight, you know? I know these bums are nervous about appearances, and I don’t think they’ll try anything in front of the cameras. If there really is anything going on at all. Maybe I’m just space happy and paranoid.”

“Then it’s both of us, dear husband. Something didn’t feel right up there, ever since we got back from the doctor.”

I took a moment to pat her bottom, and she returned the touch. “Remember now, Mata Hari, ‘sweetie-pie’ and ‘dumplin’ if we think something’s wrong.”

“How can I forget those? Those made me understand why Dusty’s always griping at us.” We shared a quick giggle.

“Hope he’s OK. C’mon, let’s move.” We grabbed the strollers and went straight back to the hotel. Penny explained to the desk clerk that we would like to keep the strollers for just a little longer while we ate dinner. He smiled and waved weakly at us. He looked nervous.

We found a table in the Pavilion, where a buffet always waited. Penny made herself comfortable with the strollers at her feet. I mumbled to her, “Give me a few minutes and I’ll come up with high chairs. Not ones someone else picks out for us.” I coughed, and said, “Sorry, I was just asking what I can bring for you.”

“Oh, surprise me, dumplin’.” We barely suppressed grins at each other.

I picked up a single plate to take to Penny, and charged it up with a variety of foods: some familiar, some less so. As I reached the end of the buffet selection, I reached for something that looked like beef goulash. “Oh, I beg your pardon,” I apologized to a gentleman whose hip I bumped.

“Oh, not at all, sir, not at all. My fault completely.” He had an accent I tentatively identified as English. He was stoutish, with a white handlebar mustache.

I smiled, and walked around him.

“Oh, sir, a moment.” I turned to him. “I’m afraid you dropped this, sir,” he said, pressing something into my hand.

“What’s this? Sorry, that’s not mine,” handing it back – a pocket-size spiral-binder notebook, the kind you buy in any convenience store for a dollar or two.

The man dropped his voice. “Oh, but I’m certain you did, Mr. Ambassador,” and with that he made so bold as to unzip one of my pockets and stuff it in. With that, he strolled off seemingly unhurriedly, but he managed to disappear from my sight in moments. He knew who I was, obviously.

If I felt like I was out of my depth before, now it was like going down for the third time.

I took Penny her plate, then I slopped together something for myself and sat down.

“What was that?” she asked.

“What was what, sweetie-pie?”

After a few bites, Penny looked around and beckoned for an attendant. Not exactly waiters, in a buffet, not sure what you might call them.

“Could we get a phone to ring up to our friend’s room?” she asked him. He handed her a simple handphoned from his pocket. She was honestly a little stumped, I suppose; she wouldn’t have seen one like this before. Penny handed it back to him, asked him to dial room 5006, and took it back.

It rang long enough that I started to feel something cold in my stomach, and Penny was looking grim. Her relief was palpable when he finally answered.

She briefly invited him down to join us, in a tone that I knew Dusty would obey unstintingly. Penny had her back to the entrance, I saw him not only enter, but issue a quick goodbye to a young lady about half his height. At least that explained his long delay answering the phone.

“Go on, Dusty, grab a plate and join us. Then we’ll take a little walk in the fresh air. Want to show you a store we found.”

He glared back at me. “Better be one dang helluva store’s, all I’m gonna say.”

The sun was setting as the three of us stepped out on the sidewalk. Dusty carried the boys, on his own insistence. I walked beside him and spoke softly. “*Tornado* all wound up and ready to go anytime?”

“Wa’all, we’d need launch clearance from Alpha Control, but that’s about it. They ask for a 12 hour lead time but kin work ya in with four – you know that, Bobby.”

“Yeah, yeah, I just meant the ship itself is ready to go. Even ready for a real Code Red Scram if you had to? The way we left home?”

Dusty’s feet barely paused as he absorbed this. “Yeah, I s’pose I could. But it better be for one dang good reason, I’d likely never work space again, get my license pulled for that. Heck, pull a stunt like that outta Nellis could get me jail time. You’re gonna need some powerful reasons here, Broadway, and I mean more’n just that Miss Penny’ll pull a frowny face on me.”

We kept walking, and I briefly recapped my meeting with the extortionist from the government. Then I dropped what I thought would be our bombshell. “We think our room may be bugged, and if ours is, yours may be, too.” Instead, Dusty laughed out loud and dropped his.

“Well hell, yeah, o’course they are, where y’all – oops, dang, I’m truly sorry, I almost axed where y’all had been lately. Bobby, I thought they’d started this before you disappeared, maybe I’m wrong or maybe you just wasn’t paying attention. The National Security Initiative?”

I vaguely recollected stories on the ’nets, and some controversies, even protests, but with my flight schedule, I usually didn’t get too wrapped up in “current events,” since one ground leave’s “current events” was the next one’s “history.”

Dusty continued. “National Security kin listen in on any hotel room, restaurant, casino, jus’ about anywhere they like that’s open to the public. Telephone signals are all transcribed fer voice and Letterburst messages. Computer mail, anything you do on the ’nets, it all gets recorded and stowed away somewhere, and giant computers poke through it all, tryin’ to find words that’ll give away you’re some kind of terrorist or malcontent or troublemaker. Anti-taxer, pro-taxer, pro-gun, anti-gun – they don’t much care what you’re fur or agin’, just so long as you don’t get too loud and sassy ’bout it.



“Oh, and that’s just what they admit to, up front. Good Lord only knows how deep it goes if they ain’t scared o’ tellin’ us as much as that.”

Penny and I stared at each other, appalled. “I’m sorry, my angel, I had no idea,” I whispered.

“Let’s get the hell outta here, quick, please. I really think I’d rather take my chances with aliens.”

“What’ve we got left up in the room?”

“Not a lot.”

“Worth going back for?”

Penny hesitated. “Y– yes. Please. Clothes and things for the boys and me. Some food.” Even at a time like this, she giggled. “Twenty pounds of coffee.”

“All right. Oh, Dusty, I suppose you need your gear anyway, right?”

“If it don’t inconvenience y’all none. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that to sound smart, if it did. Nothin’ I cain’t live without if you really wanna scram.”

“Penny? What do you think? Play it cool, or jump?”

“Play it cool. By the sound of it, if they want to keep us here for some reason, they will. So let’s enjoy a last few hours here as much as we can and not act like nervous sheep ready to bolt.”

I nodded. That was my inclination, keep it all in sight. “But let’s stick together. Close. Dusty, you know the Prime Directive, right?”

Dusty nodded. “Women and chilluns fust.”

“Right. If something screwy happens and it looks like the oatmeal’s gonna hit the fan, Penny, you and the boys get home with Dusty. Don’t worry about me.”

“The hell I will. And the hell I won’t.”

“Well – nothing screwy’s going to happen, so I won’t argue. But Dusty, just in case, you have my permission to carry her on board against her will and put her in irons until you get her home, if that’s what you have to do. I’ll catch a later flight.”

Dusty grinned at me. “You want me to risk jail *and* mutilation all at once, huh? Don’t forget, Broadway, you know how to fly that girl too. If things starts to gettin’ hot, light’er up your own self. If it’s that bad by then, havin’ my ship stolen’ll be the least of my worries.”

Back at the hotel, we got a couple of porters to help gather up our luggage and packages and get them all down to a waiting limo. We signed out at the desk, including a sign-off and authorization on all our charges due. We all stared at the bottom line. The clerk coughed and tapped his pen at the blank line marked “Gratuity.”

“Penny, what’s twenty percent of this? I can’t think this quick.”

She mentioned a number which just by itself was staggering. I rounded up to the nearest hundred, wrote it in, and signed. Just in case, I wrote “Offworld Colonization Project” in parentheses underneath.

The clerk bowed obsequiously and offered profuse thanks. “Um . . .” I said, “Do you suppose we could have the use of this limo for the rest of the evening? I think we’ll be launching around midnight. Just write in an extra charge if you think it necessary.”

“Oh, most certainly, sirs, ma’am! Most certainly!”

He accompanied us outside, and gave the driver his instructions: first stop, Nellis Spaceport. It was the work of a few minutes to run our belongings on board, and Dusty called in to Alpha Control.

“Looking for launch clearance for approximately twenty-four hundred hours this date.”

“Negative *Tornado*, negative. First open clearance is zero three-hundred, next date. Acceptable?”

“Roger that, Alpha Control, zero-three hundred. Talk to you then.”

We all trotted back down to the car.

“Oh, shoot,” I said. “We’re off the expense account now. Driver, can you authorize any extra charges . . . ?” He was already shaking his head. “Very very sorry, sir.”

“Aw, kids,” said Dusty. “I purely never thought y’all didn’t have a lick o’ cash money on ya. Don’t worry, I can cover some entertainment expenses. Didj’all even get into the casino back there? No? Awright, driver, take us on down to the Galaxy Grill, if y’all’d be so kind. A body just cain’t spend two days in Vegas and never even drop a nickel in a slot machine, I don’t care who y’are.”

The Galaxy Grill was obviously much more than a grill. There were rows and rows of slot machines, dozens of tables with people playing different card games, crap tables, roulette, all exciting and creative ways to separate tourists from dollars. Dusty pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket.

“Good luck at the hotel, Dust?” I asked.

“Oh, fair t’ middlin’ I’d say. Y’all c’mere.” At a cashier’s window, he changed about a hundred dollars into chips and coins, and shoved it all on Penny and me. “I’m gonna go get some grub. Last time I tried to eat y’all hustled me out on the sidewalk so fast I hardly got a bite. O, thow a blanket over them bebbies, they don’t like seein’ little’uns in here. Or you can have ’em over in the dining room, if you don’t mind taking turns. Or . . .”

“Go ahead, Uncle Dusty.”

“It’s an honor and a privilege, Miss Penny, thank you.”

“Dusty,” I warned. “Seriously – try to keep an eye on us, and we’ll do the same. I doubt anyone’s going to try any shenanigans here but – better safe than sorry.”

Dusty patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t you worry, Bobby. I got your back, you got mine, and pity to man nor beast that tries to get between Miss Penny and her man or her bebbies. Y’all go have some fun now.”

“Umm, Dusty?” Penny said. “Before we leave, is there anyone you need to say goodbye to? Or would like to say goodbye to?”

Dusty’s cheeks started to turn a soft shade of red. “Err, why, no ma’am, why would you think that?”

“Well, I thought that either you’d spent some time with a girlfriend or you’d started wearing perfume.”

“Oh . . . no . . . thank you, honey, that wasn’t no-one I need to say g’bye to, that was, uh, more of a, uh, casual acquaintance than anything else.” His cheeks were flaring red, and Penny looked mortified at her faux pas.

“I’ll just go get myself a bite to eat over here, and holler when y’all wanna go somewhere else . . .”

“You just embarrassed the hell out of that poor guy, angel.”

“I’m sorry, I was trying to be nice! I thought he had a girlfriend –a regular girlfriend– and he might want a little time alone with her before going into space! I understand all this boys ’n’ girls stuff, you know.”

“And how. All right, nothing for it now I suppose. He’ll get over it. I think maybe don’t even apologize, it’ll just make it worse bringing it up again. Now – here’s a dollar machine, and here’s a dollar.” I slipped in the coin and pulled the handle, watched my money vanish. “Here, let’s see how fast we can make it disappear, we sure won’t need it at home.”

“You do that, I’m going to see what else they do here. I’ll try to keep you in sight.”

“OK, just keep a sharp eye out for anyone too interested in you.”

“That might be all the men.”

I opened my mouth and nearly said something unflattering about what she herself had called her “mother’s hips,” then thought better of it. I was here playing slots, not Russian Roulette.

“Just be careful.” I watched out of the corner of my eye for a bit as she worked her way around the different tables before losing track of her.

I pushed coins and pulled handles, watched my stake dwindle. After a while, I became aware of a commotion at the far end of the casino. Heads were snapping up all around looking at: Penny. Penny was being escorted by two very large men dressed in black suits. Uh-oh. “What’s going on, angel?” I asked.

“I was just trying that game they call Blackjack and I won a few games and now they won’t let me play any more!”

One of the men spoke to me. “She’s suspected of counting cards, sir, is this your wife?” I nodded. “We know who she is, and who you are, sir, and we cannot prove she was cheating (“CHEATING?!?”) but in our experience anyone with a run of wins like that is employing some sort of mathematical system, contrary to house rules.”

Penny was furious. “Well of course, it’s a mathematical game, of course I’m going to –”

“Sweetie-pie!” I shouted, putting my fingers to her lips. “Remember we’re only visitors here. Now, come to dumplin’ . . .” At least that was getting through to her, and she clamped her mouth shut. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dusty approaching.

The other goon spoke. “As we have no hard evidence, we are allowing the young lady to keep her winnings, but we must ask that she leave the premises immediately. And I’m afraid you are not welcome back in the future. Good evening.”

“C’mon kids, let’s get goin’,” mumbled Dusty, and he helped hustle Penny into the limo.

“Babies OK?” was her first question.

“Just fine, honey, never even peeped.”

“Penny,” I ventured, “What you were doing was actually pretty clever – lots of people spend lots of time and money learning to do what you did right off the top of your head. It’s just that when casinos make their money on pure luck, they frown on people trying to shift the odds in their favor.”

“All I was doing –!”

“I know exactly what you were doing, and like the man said, it’s called card-counting, and even if there’s no law against it, casinos don’t allow it, and they *will* throw you out. From some of the stories I’ve heard, I think we got out of there pretty easy.”

Dusty spoke up. “Well now, I’ve never knowed the Galaxy to be th’ kind o’ place that would actually break a man’s legs, let alone a lady’s, but I have heard stories about folks gettin’ thowed out the second-story winder without a nickel in their pocket nor a stitch o’ clothes to have a pocket in.”

Penny looked horrified.

“Oh, they’s a nice deep swimming pool right under the winder that y’all ’d land in, but even if you knowed that ahead o’ time, most folks ain’t gonna be thinking that clear when they’s gettin’ pitched head fust and butt nekkid out a winder. How much you walk away with, Miss Penny?”

Penny stuffed a wad of bills into my hand. “Help me count.”

I laughed. “That sounds really funny right now, angel. Sweetie-pie.” I nudged her as a reminder to watch her mouth, still. I wondered if even the driver was some kind of snoop. In the society my home country seemed to have become, I think you had to assume that everyone was.

We tallied up. “Penny my love, you –” and checked myself automatically. “You did pretty fair to middlin’ yourself, sweetie pie!” I flashed the roll to Dusty, it was almost fifteen hundred dollars.

Penny looked up at us. “We have to spend it. It won’t do us any good back home.”

“On what?” I could hardly imagine how to spend that much in a few hours. Penny did though.

“Driver! Take us somewhere where we can buy coffee beans, very good ones, ten or twenty pound sacks. Is there any place like that open?”

“Anything you like is open, miss. Like New York, Las Vegas is city who never sleep.”

Half an hour later, we had added three ten-kilo sacks of coffee beans to our haul, and lightened our burden by several hundred dollars.

In the parking lot of the shopping center, we spoke freely, though still hushed.

“What time is it?” Penny asked.

“Ten,” said Dusty.

“Husband dear, is there anything you want to take back that we can pick up now? Tell me the really really truth now.”

“Well . . . maybe some new clothes. Not a lot, just some good work clothes and something to relax in at the end of the day. Maybe shoes.”

“There’s the All-Mart right there. Come on. Come on, Dusty, let’s all stick together! Driver, meet us over at the front there, we won’t be long.”

“It’s a pleasure, miss.”

We came out 45 minutes later and three hundred dollars lighter.

I bought a box of chocolates for Mum as well as my clothes, and Penny got an old fashioned shaving kit for her father. Together we picked out some gifts for the rest.

Thinking practically, Dusty grabbed a case of soups and other canned food for the trip home, so we wouldn’t have to rely on the barely edible space rations this time.

Penny was practically racing with the cart. “Oh!” she cried. “High chairs!” and darted down an aisle, then another for baby food (we had been given quite a bit but had little idea of how long it might last.) Then to the section devoted to pharmaceuticals. “Medicines for Dr. Smith!” she shouted, attracting no little attention. We followed her dutifully.

Suddenly she stopped and grabbed an empty shopping cart. “Don’t come up this aisle!” she squeaked, and filled the cart with boxes. Dusty and I looked away, and pretended to neither notice nor understand what the sign on the aisle, “Fem. Hyg.” meant. “Babies!” she shouted at Dusty, grabbing the carrier and putting it on top of her haul.

She whispered in my ear, “Sometimes it makes our skin crawl to think how many times some things have been recycled and reconstituted.”

“Thanks for sharing that, angel. Appreciate it.” Poor kid, I thought, she’s probably never had to buy those before. If she even needed them when she lived here, her mother most likely brought them home for her. She managed now, although she made Dusty and me go ahead in the line and not look at her while she went through.

A breathless few minutes later we were all in the car again. Penny still had several hundred dollars to get rid of. Suddenly she slapped her forehead. “Driver, is there a music store? That sells instruments?”

“Certainly, miss. Take you right there, miss.”

“Will’s guitar fell to pieces years ago. He’s tried building a new one out of all different things, but it’s probably the one thing he can’t do.”

We pulled up in front of Papa’s Music. Penny raced to the door.

“Hold up, angel!” I cried. “What’s going on? Did they finally turn the gravity down for you?”

She poked her tongue at me. “I’m shopping, you clunk!”

Dusty sat in the limo with babies growing increasingly restless, I stood on the sidewalk and kept a careful eye on Penny through the window. She came out with *two* guitars: one acoustic and one electric, with an amp the size of a foundation stone. “Load it up, I’ll be right back out!”

Finally she came back out with a much smaller case. “What’s that, angel?”

All the excitement was catching up with her. She leaned against the car to catch her breath. Finally she looked up at and me and smiled broadly, planted a kiss on me. “A violin, dear husband. I’m going to learn to play, so I can play you that ‘Scheherazade’ number you liked so much.”

I laughed aloud and ruffled her hair, pulled her close. “Are we broke yet?”

“Almost. I blew a lot in there on learning books and stuff, and lots of extra strings for all this.”

“What’s ‘almost’?”

“Oh, forty or fifty dollars.”

“Whew. Well, you know what they say, easy come, easy go. So let’s go.”

From the back seat, Dusty rapped on the window and pointed: the babies were awake and hungry.

We piled in, Penny grabbed the boys and consoled them.

“Driver, Nellis Spaceport please, Bravo Terminal again. Terminal B.”

“Yes sir, Bravo Terminal it is.”

We sped off into the night. Penny’s manic delight at her high-rolling shopping spree was infectious, and the three of us were laughing and giddy all the way. Finally the driver pulled up at Terminal B. He jumped out to open doors and the trunk.

“Allow me to summon a porter for you, sir.” He rang a buzzer at a kiosk, and presently someone pushing a large wheeled cart showed up. Despite his protests, we helped unload our treasure trove onto his trolley.

The driver approached me discreetly. Oops. I turned to Penny. “Quick,” I whispered, “gimme a bill. I need to tip this poor guy.” I handed him a twenty.

“Thank you sir, sir is most generous. Is sir sure he and his party have all of their possessions out of the vehicle? Sir has not lost anything?” He dropped his voice. “I understand sir nearly lost something in the Pavilion at lunchtime, and I hope sir still has it.”

My eyes bolted wide. The driver’s eyes met mine, and he looked at me meaningfully. I studied his face – no, it wasn’t the same man, this one was much younger and thinner. He leaned in to me, and whispered in my ear, “Be sure to read that on your way home. Your situation has attracted some very favorable interest in some parts of the world. Take courage.” Up close, his accent had shifted from some indefinable foreign flavor to a distinctly English one. He winked conspiratorially and turned to go, then turned back and whispered again. “You’ve been under professional protection all night, incidentally. Although I must congratulate all of you, your own precautionary tactics were top-hole. I was hardly needed.” He winked again. “Must go now, cheers!”

Our mysterious friend vanished into the night.

The porter got our last 20 dollar bill as a tip.

Penny hustled the babies on board and began feeding them. Dusty and I loaded the ship, and with each bag or box he began griping about all the weight, the balance, launch trajectory, fuel-to-weight ratios, and every other bit of minutiae involved in launching a spacecraft.

Finally we were loaded. “What time is it?”

“Just midnight now.”

“Are you sure no-one’s been on board?” I couldn’t think of any reason someone might have, but it was frightening to realize how much I didn’t know any more.

“Naw. I got my own little security system set up on her. We was the last ones here. ‘Sides, I know a couple o’ them Alpha fellers stationed here, and if they couldn’ta stopped someone from foolin’ around out here, they’da already got me word of it.”

“Jesus, Dusty, what are you, in the Resistance or something?”

“Y’all’s confusin’ me with that other feller again, Broadway,” he said softly. Dusty chewed his lip thoughtfully. “An’ no, no Resistance or nothin’ like that. Just some friends who watch out fer each other when we kin.” He gave me a glance which clearly stated that topic was closed.

“Awright, I’m gonna catch a little catnap before lifting. Hey, do a favor, call Alpha and have ’em haul these boarding platforms outta the way so we don’t have to worry about ’em later. They’s a new ground crew shift comin’ on right now and they’ll appreciate gettin’ a little bonus pay done early so’s they can play poker the rest of the night.”

Half an hour later, the *Tornado* was clear on the pad and standing by for launch sequence. Penny was asleep on the launch couch, with babies sprawled over her. My God, how big they’re getting! I thought.

I stretched out on the other couch, made sure I had an alarm set just in case Dusty didn’t, and closed my eyes.

I woke to some commotion as Dusty performed some pre-launch. It was not quite 0230. I heard Dusty in an apparent argument with Alpha Control. “One more time, Control, do we still have our zero-three launch window, yes or no?”

“*Tornado*, that is affirmative on the launch window, however launch *clearance* is temporarily suspended.”

“Never heard of such a stupid thing – Bobby, you awake? I think your friends are still in town.”

I was up instantly. “What’s going on?”

“Alpha says they have a court order delaying liftoff until Border Security and Customs Enforcement can come on board. Also Federal Department of Child Welfare.”

“That’s the kidnapers. What did you tell ’em?”

“To go to hell.”

“Good man. Here, lemme see the mike.”

“Alpha Control, this is Ambassador Robert Robinson Cain of New Plymouth Free Colony. This ship is a diplomatic enclave with all privileges and immunities which, um, normally pertain to any embassy or, uh, other diplomatic enclave such as a consulate or mission.” I thought fast. “Further, we are not subject to any sort of customs or excise duties, especially for goods purchased for personal use only and, um, not for commercial purposes.”

Alpha Control came back. “They say you’re attempting to export large amounts of coffee beans, canned goods, and, uh, ‘assorted paper products’ in quantities far more than ordinarily permissible to be considered for personal use.”

“Dusty,” I asked off-mike. “Can you start letting off a little blast here and there? Let ’em know we mean business? And maybe scare anybody off the launch pad?”

“You betcha.”

“Alpha Control, *Tornado*. All those items are normal provisions required by a colonial outpost, and are intended for colonists’ use and not as trade goods. Will also remind you that we are now within thirty minutes of an approved launch window. You may expect routine engine testing, so please activate all usual safety warnings on the pad perimeter, and I would also remind you that you are not permitted to move any portable, extendable, or movable terminal bridges, ramps, or extensions closer than the one-hundred meter safety zone.”

I turned to Penny, who was now awake and sitting up, looking half frightened, half furious. “That’ll keep ’em from knocking on the front door, at least.” I smiled at her reassuringly. “Don’t fret, angel, they’re just playing Mine’s Bigger with us now.”

“What’s bigger? Oh. Gotcha. You mean they’re being men.”

A different voice came on the radio. “*Tornado*, this is Chester Lanzer of the Federal Department of Child Welfare. We have reason to believe you have in your custody two male infants, names unknown (“Well that’s something we have on them,” whispered Penny), who are presumed citizens of the United States and subject to our jurisdiction. We are requesting your permission to board your vessel for the purpose of verifying said infants’ health and well-being.”

“How soon can we lift, Dusty?”

“Gimme another ten minutes.”

“Check.” I considered my response. Such a blatant pile of nonsense didn’t even deserve one. “Dusty, kick another steering jet, or something nice and noisy.”

He hauled on a lever, and the ship grumbled.

“Alpha Control,” I continued, “We lost your last transmission in the engine noise. Please come back on that.”

As soon as Lanzer’s voice came back up, Dusty kicked another throttle and winked at me. “That’ll buffalo ’em maybe once more.”

Penny tapped on the viewport. “Not even. There’s men coming out here.”

“They nuts!?” spouted Dusty. He jumped to the port, then turned the monitors down toward the blind spots around the skirt of the ship. “Well, what the heck do they think they’re doing? The ladder’s stowed, they’re not carrying anything but folders an’ clipboards, so they ain’t going to try and blow off a leg or anything –”

“You think they’re just going to stand there and trust us not to kill them by lifting?”

“Well, that ain’t gonna happen anyway, not even for Miss Penny. This’ll put the the holy fear into ’em, though.”

He reset a couple controls. “Alpha Control, testing photon jet retro-rockets. Please make sure my pad is clear, I repeat, please make sure my pad is clear.” Without waiting for a response, he hit the photon jets on low – even at that, they illuminated the night like day.

I looked at the monitor. The intruders were running away to a safe distance. “It’s working.”

“This’ll work even better.” He cranked it another notch. It grew brighter out there, and even inside we could feel the heat.

“*Tornado, Tornado*, belay those jets. You’re going to melt my tarmac.”

“Roger, Alpha, shutting down, testing complete.” He turned to Penny. “That’ll keep the ground out there too hot to walk on for a spell. Bobby, what time we got here?”

“Ten to three.”

“That’s close enough. Strap down, kiddies, and let’s hit the road with Uncle Dusty’s Medicine Show. Alpha Control, *Tornado*. We are ready to lift on our own initiative and are commencing final countdown in T minus two minutes. Please make sure our pad is clear and posted, because I cannot, uh,” –he flicked a power switch to the “Off” position– “I’ve got no power on one monitor down there and cain’t tell if they might be somebody down thar that oughtn’t be.”

Penny and I laughed at each other. Dusty’s accent was back! We were good.

Alpha Control came back, and even that cool voice was tinged with laughter. “Roger that, *Tornado*, understood. Looks like that court order is lifted. You are cleared for launch on your own initiative, are now in your 0300 window, and all tracking shows clear: unlimited aloft and 50 kilometer radius. You are green and go from Alpha Control.”

“Roger that Alpha. T minus 30 seconds. *Tornado*, green and go.”

I reached out and squeezed Penny’s hand. The engines were starting to rumble, and the cabin to shake. AJ and Zack were starting to cry, they knew launch routine already.

Dusty continued muttering off the final system checks, then: “All primaries still green and go, no flags. Final sequence. Main engine ignition and launch on 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .”

Liftoff. Over the roar of the engines and screaming of babies, I could hear the radio.

“*Tornado*, you are free and clear of Nellis Spaceport, exiting atmosphere, and headed into space. Godspeed, *Tornado*, safe voyage, successful mission, and swift return. And . . . nicely played out there, Dusty. Well done. Alpha Control, clear and out.”

We were headed for a distant planet called home.

### Part 3 Silence and Slow Time

We boosted at 2-gee for a few hours until we were safely clear of the system, then jumped into h-space for a long boost, just to get some distance between ourselves and the Earth creatures. Dusty insisted on dropping back in to 3-space again for a bit – “I am purely exhausted, folks, and I want a good ol’ snooze, and the best snoozin’ I get is with about a half – gee turned on. I get the screwiest dang dreams tryin’ to sleep in h-space.

“Now listen up, Broadway, I’m a-gonna try and get a solid eight hours in there. So you keep an eye on business out here, an’ I mean it. ’s much as y’all kin at least,” he muttered.

“Hey, Dust? Penny’s feet are awful tired. Mind if we dial down the grabbity after a bit?”

He sighed. “If y’all really think y’need to turn it off – oh I don’t care none, not a’tall.” He stomped off.

Penny and I shared a brief embrace and kiss – unwatched. This time we knew it for certain. “I think I really would like to stretch out for a bit,” she said. “My feet actually are kinda sore. They’re not used to walking on pavement. I think they need your special cold water and washcloth treatment. Hey, get some of that baby food, would you please? The boys are getting restless, and I’d like to get something solid into them. Maybe they’ll sleep more than a few hours, if you really want to turn off the gravity and have a little fun later.”

I found a small jar that was mashed up carrots and peas together. I figured they knew the taste of carrots, so it shouldn’t be too unfamiliar. AJ took one bite and started sobbing, letting the goop run down the corners of his mouth. A second bite convinced him a little more, and he continued grudgingly. Zack hogged it down without a second thought, maybe without a taste.

Penny finished them up with a little milk, then cleaned them up and bedded them back down.

We snuggled on a single launch couch – a tight squeeze, but comfortable, especially when squeezing each other tight. “So tell me something, dear husband.”

“Mmm-hmm?”

“Why doesn’t the gravity work in hyperspace?”

I groaned. “That’s kind of a hard question to answer. Especially since to answer it properly, I’d need about two more lifetimes studying mathematics. I can give you the kindergarten answer, though.”

“Try me.”

“It’s not that it doesn’t work. It works fine. It’s just pulling in a direction we aren’t in any more.”

“Try me again.”

“See, it’s tough. Lemme see . . . here, push against my hand. Slow, don’t hit me, you little stinker.”

She did so, pushing my hand back towards my shoulder. “Now do it again.” As soon as she started pushing, I raised my hand above hers – where my mine, of course, wasn’t touched. “Now imagine that with a few more dimensions. The gravity is your hand down here, but we’re my hand up here – they just don’t relate to each other any more.”



She stared at our hands, and all around us. “But where —”

“Stop right there. That’s about the limit of what 90% of spacers could tell you. Sometimes, when I’m kind of drowsing, I can sort of see it, and how everything fits together, but still not in a way I could describe to anyone.”

“I – kind of get it. I think.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised. You really are exceptionally bright.”

Penny smiled wickedly. “I’m never going to let you forget you said *that*, am I?”

“Silly confessions time?”

“Yours?”

“Yup.”

“Be my guest.”

“Sometimes I’d sit up in h-space, and move my arms around in all weird directions, trying to find a way to stick them back down into three-space. It was like, if I could just find the right corner to duck around, I’d see my hand disappear into a lower dimension. Never did. But once or twice, I had the damndest feeling I was so very *close* . . .”

Penny was staring at me with the oddest expression. “One of these dimensions we’re talking about is time, right?”

I nodded hesitantly. “Ye-es . . . kind of. That’s one theory. I mean regarding what dimensions we’re actually moving through. We don’t have any time slippage, so we don’t travel through time in any science-fiction way. But, yeah, it’s all connected, somehow.”

“Maybe, dear husband –your little hunch back home, your synchronicity thing– maybe what’s happened with you playing with your hands like that, is you’ve taught yourself to look around a different kind of corner. Maybe you couldn’t see too clearly. But maybe you looked over the top of a wall and into the future.”

“I’ve heard screwier things. But that doesn’t explain the string of coincidences we had that night.”

“No, I guess not. Or Judy’s little flash, either.” She flashed me a puzzled grin. “Whatever it is, you’re up to your neck in the middle of it, aren’t you? But I wonder if that’s what some of the prophets and seers in history were. Men and women who figured out how to peek up over the edge, and couldn’t see much, but knew they’d seen something. What did one of them say? ‘I see, but as through a glass, darkly.’”

“You know, I just hope I don’t make a habit of that. I couldn’t stand to wake up in the morning, look at you and the babies, and know exactly what each of your lives was going to be. Everything you’d ever be, and when you were going —” I coughed and turned my face away. “Think I’d rather be dead myself than live like that.”

“Maybe there’s a reason we’re not built to see things that way.”

We lay still a while longer, just holding hands.

Finally: “Dear husband? Do you think it’s alright if we turn the gravity off now? I want to try on a dress someone gave me.”

“Hope it isn’t bugged.”

She chuckled. “Fat lot of good it’ll do ’em now. How far out did that first boost put us? Half a light year?” She disappeared toward the galley, where most our goodies were stowed. About fifteen minutes later, the door to the flight deck cracked open. “Bobby my love, turn off the gravity now, please. And turn the lights down a little, too.” I did, and the door swung wide. Penny floated gracefully onto the control deck.

I think my heart stopped for a moment. I never imagined she could be so much more beautiful. I never realized what the right clothes could do. She wore a dress, or a gown, of flaming red, all gauzy and shimmery –I don't know all the right words about clothing– like silk, but almost transparent, so it took a few layers to actually cover anything underneath. It looked kind of Greek or Roman, in that it hung loosely, all folds cascading down and around, sort of toga-style. The neckline plunged low and showed a modest amount of cleavage, but the effect made you think you were seeing a lot more bosom than you actually were.

(All these years, and she's still a nosy little girl sometimes. Penny is reading over my shoulder and says the word I'm looking for about the dress material is "diaphanous." Says she heard me write "cleavage" and wanted to make sure I wasn't talking about someone else. Hey sto – ~Hi friends, Penny here. I just wanted to take a second and set the record straight. First, I said no such thing. I just knew he was writing about boobs by the way he was grinning. Second, I wouldn't say he's a liar, but he does tend to get quite creative at times. I'm sure he's told you he doesn't look a day over 40, whereas he is in fact a fat wrinkly bald old clunk now who doesn't shave for days at a time. I, however, remain remarkably attractive for my age, and however old he's told you I am, that's a lie too. In fact, the only two things you may absolutely believe from him are when he tells you how gorgeous I am, and that we have been ridiculously in love with each other since the day we met. ~I'm back. See the kind of nonsense I've been putting up with these forty-odd years? Very odd, some of them.)

On the lower part, the skirt part, I guess, the left side of it was slit very high, and did expose a lot of her leg and thigh.

Crowning all, her hair drifted out in all directions. One thought was that she looked almost mermaidish, with a floating-underwater look about her. But no – those were her very human legs, not a fish tail, and no mermaid I ever heard of wore that shade of red. She pulled herself in a delicate pirouette, and a couple bits of the fabric spun out behind her, like delicate wings. Of course, not a mermaid – still an angel, only no angel ever wore that shade before, either. Penny wasn't the little angel in the silver spacesuit any more, now she was an angel of passion, even lust. She turned above the launch couch; I timed myself and pushed up to meet her, caught her in my arms. I pulled us close, and we kissed urgently, frenetically.

Our bodies spun in a slow waltz around the flight deck, inside lights low, and the view of infinite space before us. My lips played with her earlobes, then on down her neck and throat. My hand cradled her left breast, barely hidden under the teasing fabric. I let a flood of warm breath pour out upon her; a pinch of flesh tightened under the sensation. I then favored the right one in the same way, and received the same crinkled thanks. Softly, I pressed the delicate protrusions between my teeth.

"That's so nice," she sighed in my ear.

"Penny," I whispered. "I want you to keep the dress on. Just slip your panties off . . ."

"Already did," she breathed, unzipping my jumpsuit.

My hand flew to the long split of the dress and grabbed her thigh: slid up, exploring, found her naked bottom, silky-smooth and cool. I rubbed against it, and she wriggled back against my touch. My fingers found places soft and warm. I kissed her again, ferociously, and Penny moaned, then gasped, and wailed.

Wailed?

"Dearest husband, the babies are awake."

I turned the gravity back on.

Our return voyage was a bit more leisurely than the more urgent outbound trip. It was largely uneventful, aside from finally completing a certain zero-gravity maneuver in which a fiery red dress figured prominently (several times, come to think of it), and just once, in h-space, Penny managed to get herself trapped by the non-inertia, a foot away from anything she could push against.

I let her hang there for a bit, telling her that it was an object lesson –for her own good, of course– and as a reminder that even she made mistakes. I reeled her in as soon as she had learned her lesson, and after she made some dire threats about me ever seeing a certain red dress again. She’ll be 57 this year, since she mentioned it.

We pored over the little notebook handed to me in the Pavilion.

The first half was blank, or meaningless doodles and jottings to protect the actual contents from casual discovery. The contents were handwritten, and startling to say the least:

From the government and people of Britain, and from the  
Court of St James-In-Exile at Holyrood House, Edinburgh

His Majesty James the Fourth, by the Grace of God, of Scotland and the  
English Royal Counties, and of His other Realms and Territories,  
King, and Defender of the Faith

Extends salutations to His Excellency and Lady John Robinson, Governor of  
the Sovereign Colony Beyond Earth called New Plymouth, and to his subjects.

(“Subjects!” Penny and I chortled together. “At least he’s got the ‘Sovereign Colony’ bit right,” I noted.)

Your Excellency –

The plight of your colony has excited the notice of the entire world. Your situation has aroused considerable sympathy and interest amongst the people of Scotland, who have long considered you one of their own, ever since your entrance onto the public stage as the first family to attempt the colonisation of an alien world. Your disappearance was grieved worldwide, and particularly in Scotland, where the Chief of Clan Robertson conducted genealogical research and confirmed that you were indeed a Robinson of that august clan. Your birthday is recognised as a Clan celebration, and your name is recorded in their books as one of their modern heroes.

Although Our Government cannot, for a number of political reasons (“It keeps coming back to that, doesn’t it?” observed Penny) openly and officially promise you the sort of military aid which you desire, we assure you that your need has aroused considerable enthusiasm here in Britain. Unofficially, and strictly off-the-record, We believe We can assure Your Excellency that We shall, in as prompt a manner as possible, provide a measure of support to your world in amounts which We hope shall ensure your safety and security.

We are also in communication with a number of other governments around the world who, for various reasons, appear to have somewhat more sympathy to your cause than the United States has shown you, and may be likewise able to provide some sort of support.

Our counsel is that you remain calm and courageous in the face of your adversity, and be assured that help is on the way.

## James IV R

Penny took the little book from my hands and traced down the page with her fingers, lingering on the signature. “Is this really a letter from a real king?” she asked, star-struck.

“Looks like it,” I said.

“Wow. What’s all this about ‘St James-in-Exile’ and Edinburgh, though? Doesn’t the royal family live in London any more?”

“Oh, yeah. Brace yourself, angel. I don’t know how big you guys were into your whole heritage thing and if you were into England and Scotland a lot, but England kinda fell apart a few years ago. A lot of the southern parts just split off into all little independent bits with all kinds of different ideas on how to run a country. The king and the royal family ran to Scotland, which still liked them OK, and some of northern England stuck with him. Lemme see . . . Yorkshire, North-uh, Northumberland, Cumberland –no, Cumber-something I think– sorry, I don’t know my English geography too well. But I can take you to the block where the Lower East Side turns into the Bowery.”

Penny was aghast. “There’s no more Great Britain? No United Kingdom?”

“Not since the Second Stuart Restoration.”

Penny absorbed that last revelation. “So a Scottish family is on the British throne again?”

“I think that’s right.”

She shook her head. “Unbelievable.” She sat looking at the letter a bit longer. “We need to go back again sometime, and visit Scotland. Maybe they’re not as screwed up as the U.S. is. At least to tell them thank you.”

“Long time before we need to worry about that. But yeah. If everything works out.”

Penny looked at me woefully. So far, we had managed to avoid thinking too hard about what might happen if things didn’t work out. She scooted closer to me on the launch couch. “Hold me tight, Bobby. I think I’m scared.”

I did, but I pointed again to the counsel of a king: “Remain calm and courageous.”

We stretched out and cuddled together. The boys slept soundly. “Really, dear husband. Right now, I just want you to hold me tight, just hold me in your arms. No, I don’t even want that,” as one of my hands strayed. “Just take your turn being strong for me.”

It was rare I saw Penny afraid. She had her times of weakness, but seldom were those of fear: sadness, frustration, fear for others, but not this. I felt her shivering under her clothes, despite the warmth of the cabin, and she was turned away from me, in almost fetal position. I held her close, stroked her forehead, and eventually she slept. Only then did I let myself feel afraid too.

Finally we were home. Dusty put us in stationary orbit over the Jupe’s site. We debated how to communicate. We didn’t want to alert the alien occupiers to our presence, especially if they happened to be at the *Jupiter 2*.

“Penny,” I asked, “doesn’t the Robot have a completely internal radio?”

“Good idea. You know his frequency?”

“Don’t you?”

She sighed and looked away, embarrassed. “Gimme a few minutes.” She sat down with a pen and paper, and started scribbling numbers. “I used to know it by heart. Been a while.” After ten or fifteen minutes, she had two likely numbers. “I’m certain it’s one of these.” She handed the paper to Dusty, who sat waiting at the controls. “Oh wait,” she said. “Try this, too. I remember this.” She jotted off an old Morse Code sequence.

After another ten minutes, after trying both frequencies on a narrowly-beamed transmission, the Robot’s voice boomed out of the speaker.

“Penny! Dusty! Bobby! I am very pleased to receive your communication! You may speak freely. There are no aliens here at this time.”

Penny snatched the mike from Dusty. “Robot, is everyone all right? I’ve been so worried!”

“Everyone is fine, Penny. All are alive and well.”

“Oh thank God,” Penny breathed at me, and collapsed into my arms. I took the mike.

“Robot, it’s Bobby. Glad everything’s OK. Let me talk to John, please, if he’s right there.”

“Affirmative.”

“Bobby, good to hear from you,” John came back in a minute.

“Good to be home, John. What’s going on? Everyone OK, and is it safe for us to land?”

“Roger that, Bobby, come on down. They don’t seem to be monitoring us, and they’re – pretty much leaving us alone.” That last was the only hint I ever had from him of the treatment he had received – I learned the whole story later from Mum and Don.

We landed, and Penny was near-frantic during the cooling-off time before we could crack open. Fortunately, Zack and AJ began demanding attention, which distracted her. Dusty and I started moving our cargo out toward the hatch where we could hook it up and lower it on down, sooner or later.

Penny was healed enough that she climbed right down the ladder, dismissing the crane and harness with a disdainful wave. Even as Dusty and I lowered the babies by crane, she ran over to her parents and hugged them a long time. She let loose just long enough to grab the boys when they were down, and returned all to her parents’ embrace.

I nudged Dusty. “You’d never think she was such a softy, huh?”

Dusty half-smirked. “If you ain’t figured out most o’ her tough-stuff is an act, you ain’t been payin’ attention.”

“Oh, I know all right. Come on, let’s get down and go home.”

“Umm, speakin’ o’ which, Bobby. Y’all s’pose there might be room enough for me around here?”

“Dusty, you kidding me? You?”

“Guess this place kinda grows on a body.”

“No extra girls here.”

“I’m useter that. An’ I got a hunch that’s a-gonna be changin’ soon.”

I clapped an arm around his shoulder. “Get down the ladder, buddy. I hope you like farming, is all I can say.”

It was a joyful reunion, all right, with lots of hugs and handshakes, followed by the unloading of our treasure trove, examination of this bounty from a far world, and the giving of gifts. We sat down with everyone over Mum’s table, told many tales of our visit, of another family reunion and another daring escape, and circulated the wildly suggestive letter from King James IV.

“Well,” said John, “I suppose it’s just a question of waiting and hoping for the best.”

Over the next couple of days, I learned of the Scourging, and that the Tea-O' An had visited twice more after that. The second time, they simply inspected our complete encampment. The third time, they took everything which had been growing in the Acre and left nothing but bare stalks.

Don told me that their teeth seemed to indicate a carnivorous race, and would have little use for garden-grown food. His opinion was that they took our harvest for sheer spite, rather than their own tables. He observed also that the aliens appeared to be somewhat lizard-like, which suggested that they might prefer the equatorial regions of this world for their dwellings, rather than the violently variable latitudes we were in. Maureen, a biologist, cautioned that it was hard to tell about some things with aliens, and that our familiar terrestrial classifications such as reptilian and mammalian might be meaningless.

Two weeks after our return from Earth, I was treated to my own first-hand experience with the Tea-O' An. Six of them arrived in low-flying air-cars, and set down just outside the Jupe's courtyard. As Don had noted, there was something about them to remind an Earthman of lizard ancestry. Their skin was coarse and leathery, and an earthy brownish color. Two wide eyes topped a nose which seemed too small for the face. No visible hair marked their bodies. Except for rudimentary garments which may have been armor over vulnerable places, they seemed naked. Their manner was cold and efficient. It was clear they regarded us as servants or slaves, if that: perhaps we were but chattel animals to them.

When the Robot warned us of this impending visit, we were quite apprehensive as to how they might react to infants, and debated hiding Penny and the boys aboard one of the ships, or at the house. In the end, we feared more the consequences if our occupiers discovered we had tried to deceive them.

One of them pointed to the *Tornado*, and growled at us, "That is Tea-O' An ship now. It must not leave again from planet." They had, of course, noted its hasty departure in advance of their first visit. They seemingly expressed no surprise seeing the ship returned, nor the 5 of us who had joined the group. Had our return been observed by them, and were they able to monitor us more completely than we thought?

Another inspected the Acre. He reported back: "Nothing grows to eat. Unacceptable. Must have more next time." John interpreted their annoyance as indicative of a need, while Don maintained they were purely carnivorous. More than the simple spitefulness Don alleged, I suspected they meant to keep us so busy raising food that we couldn't worry about any kind of resistance.

These were just some of the many questions we never learned the answers to.

Fresh food was in short supply after the Tea-O' An raid. Fortunately, we had quite a bit left over from what Dusty had purchased on Earth, and the Jupe's food synthesizer churned out its products. A very bright spot – everyone appreciated the fresh coffee! Maureen shared the chocolates I brought her, though all three ladies grieved what it would do to their figures.

Another bright spot, Penny and the boys and I finally took up residence in our home – the rocky refuge carved out of the cliff face at the oasis. Don and Judy, of course, had been in their half of the structure for some time, and Dusty moved into Judy's former cabin on the ship.

Much to Penny's dismay, the toilet facilities remained an outhouse with a crude flush: we each had our own, us and the West/Robinson household. A simple sluice and sluiceway washed away waste to a septic field a hundred feet or so away.

We had all resumed having meals together at the ship. I began noticing all the little ways the two other couples behaved with each other, as well as being more aware of how Penny and I usually carried on. I suppose this was because of the sudden contrast in the behavior of Don and Judy toward each other, before and after our visit to Earth.

Those two at least seemed comfortable together now. Of course, I learned more about them than I ever wanted to know, that bourbon-drenched night before our flight. I didn't pry, but rather assumed that the sudden outside threat had shaken them a bit, and made them appreciate each other again.

They were still far from acting the loving couple, in public at least. They sat together at the table with almost a foot between them. They touched each other little, and mostly by accident. If I were to have seen them in a restaurant without knowing them, I would have thought they were on a second or third date. Only when they stood up would Don put an arm around her waist and share a smile with her. Whatever had happened between them was on the mend, but it was still hard to realize they actually lived together. I thought at first, cynically, that it was nothing but sheer habit and lack of anyone else which kept them together.

Then it occurred to me: was their love for each other really that profound that it held them together through such a tempestuous ordeal? Judy, after all, had been presented with the chance to return to Earth. Don claimed he had talked her out of it, but I had to wonder if it was Judy who had let herself be persuaded to stay with him. Also, how hard had Don actually fought his own fate? It seemed to me that they were engaged in a long, complicated courtship ritual like some exotic species of animal: each one pretending to oppose and resist the other, until each could offer a token surrender.

And what a contrast John and Maureen offered! Anyone could see from a mile away that here was a pair long-married and deeply in love with each other. In contrast, these two sat close against each other, perfectly comfortable with each other and utterly un-self-conscious. Sitting together, they each wore a subtle smile and radiated simple contentment. Just to watch them at dinner, brushing fingers, sharing tidbits off their plates, the occasional pressing of knees or shoulders together – it was to see what was meant by the old formula that a married couple become “one flesh.” I'm reminded of the comparison to a blazing log and embers banked in the furnace – not as spectacular, but long, long lasting. Which reminds me in turn, of the story of the old bull and the young bull, standing on the hillside, looking down at the pasture full of cows, and the young bull says – well, I'm going to have to skip that, Penny is giving me that look from across the room again, I don't know how the hell she knows these things, but she knows. Catch up with me at the next New Year's Party or Founders' Day Ball, and I'll tell you the story then, away from nosy little girls. YES, I SAID AWAY FROM NOSY LITTLE GIRLS.

I knew too that there was a wonderful patience or serenity between John and Maureen. As for me, I couldn't bear the thought of being apart from Penny for more than a few hours – regular working hours, please, and my angel there to bookend them. I would have been unthinkably miserable if I'd had to make that trip to Earth without her. The elder Robinsons, I knew, had been forced to spend days, even weeks apart sometimes, when John had to go off on some mission or another to repair remote equipment, scout for water or other resources, and such. Which isn't to say they didn't miss each other at such times, just that they bore the separation with a complacency I can hardly imagine.

What a remarkable scene, I thought, three couples, so different, loving each other in such different ways, but all just as deeply. And the three women, mother and sisters, all looking so different.

Judy, I understood, took after her grandmother, Maureen's mother. Penny had her father's dark hair and almost Mediterranean complexion, but had much more her mother's figure than did willowy Judy. Penny still was unmarked by the fine lines evident at the corner's of Mum's eyes; I wondered for the first time how old she was. The privations of this harsh world had certainly not helped her appearance. It crossed my mind that I didn't know how old Judy was, either – she seemed somehow much older than her sister.

I decided that those were things I just didn't care to know about. Penny was mine, and I was hers – that was all I knew, and all I needed to know.

## Part 4 For The Robinson

Three weeks after our return –we were having breakfast at the Jupe– the Robot came rolling excitedly down the ramp. “WARNING, WARNING!! UNIDENTIFIED SPACECRAFT DETECTED IN ORBIT! WARNING, WARNING!!”

John silenced him from “Alert” mode, and sought further information.

The Robot stated that there was a small, possibly one-man spacecraft in orbit, and that it was not of a known Tea-O’ An type.

“Is it an Earth ship?” asked John, excitedly.

“Sensors indicate a 90% probability that unidentified ship is of Earthly origin!” replied the Robot. “This may be some good news for a change!”

“Can you establish communication?”

“Negative, Governor Robinson. Craft appears to be maintaining radio silence.”

*whirr hum hum whirr* “WARNING! WARNING! UNIDENTIFIED CRAFT HAS COMMENCED ATMOSPHERIC INSERTION! PROJECTED POINT OF LANDING – RIGHT HERE!!”

“Keep me updated,” ordered John.

Apprehensively, we began looking at the sky.

Don jumped up. “I’ll start warming up the Chariot.” John nodded curtly in response.

“I think I see something,” said Maureen, pointing up. “There was a bright flash . . .”

After a moment, we knew she was right. A hot-white point was evident in the sky, fairly low on the horizon. As it approached, we could see brighter flares as it fired retro-rockets; then zigged and zagged as it began a final descent. It was cutting across our location laterally, rather than straight in.

Finally we could see a lithe torpedo-shaped craft, smaller even than the command module of a Rescue Scout. A lifeboat? Not much bigger than one. There was a final prolonged blast from the retros and guidance jets: it swung in towards us, kicking up sand and dust beneath it, and finally bellied in about 500 feet out. Dusty and I nodded at each other – the pilot was good.

The ship wasn’t more than 30 feet long and less than 10 wide, slightly flattened into shape as a lifting body. The viewports across the cockpit area were barely 3 feet across. Rudimentary wings and tailfins gave it atmosphere handling. A single gull-wing type hatch popped up from the right side, and the pilot stuck his head out into our air: he appeared perfectly human.

Behind me, Don passed a laser rifle to Dusty: “Stand by here, Dusty,” he ordered. “Come with us, Bobby,” tapping me on the shoulder. The three of us rode the Chariot out to greet our visitor, Don carrying another rifle.

We drew closer, but our visitor remained within the hatch. Cautious, John stopped us about thirty feet away, took the radio. “This is John Robinson, Governor of New Plymouth Free Colony. Please identify yourself.”

We could see him reach for his own mike. “Hello, Governor Robinson. I am Colonel Sir Alexander Fraser Keith-Ross. I am here on behalf of the British government to discuss the assistance you have requested.”

John left the mike off and turned to Don. “Soon as we get back to the ship, find some kind of a star and pin it on your uniform. I just promoted you to general.” Then to our visitor, “Sounds like good news. Come on out, and we’ll pick you up.” John waited a moment as the colonel disembarked.

“Looks like he’s wearing a standard issue sidearm. I don’t think he’s a problem, but keep your rifle powered up.”

“Roger that,” replied Don.



John engaged the engines and slowly crept forward; Chariot and colonel stopped a scant foot apart. The colonel walked around to the side door and held his arms out. "You're welcome to pat me down, Governor. This is all I have, though," indicating the sidearm. "Beretta 2007 50 watt pulse charge laser. Powered down. Really, I'm a friend."

John hesitated, then jerked his thumb with a grin. "Climb on up." The colonel climbed into the back seat with Don. "Don, secure it." Don switched off the rifle and slipped the safety over the switch.

"Well, Colonel, er, Keith-Ross, you know me, this is my pilot and ranking military officer, Brigadier General Donald West."

"Pardon, Brigadier," said the Colonel, saluting awkwardly, inside. "Our last information was that you were a U.S. major. Ah well, I suppose promotions come quickly in the field, what?" His eyes twinkled, and I guessed he saw through John's ploy. "And you are Ensign Cain?"

"I was, but since being here I've assumed I'm either resigned or fired from Rescue Survey," I grinned. "I guess I'm just 'Ambassador Cain' now. 'Robinson Cain'," I quickly amended.

"Of course, Ambassador, of course," he replied, returning my grin. "You stirred up quite the hornets' nest you know, you and your charming wife."

I started to reply, but was shouted down by the engines. It crossed my mind that although his name was extremely Scottish, Colonel Keith-Ross' accent was just as extremely upper-class English as anything I had ever heard on the old British Broadcasting Combine – their documentaries, dramas, and comedies were tremendously popular in the U.S. With both a "Colonel" and a "Sir" in front of his name, I guessed he was rawther of that upper-class which spoke the same whether in Scotland, England, or Wales.

"A bit warm here, what?" he shouted over the roar.

"Not even a hundred today, Colonel!" Don shouted back.

"Ah!" he nodded back.

Shortly, all of us were gathered around the table in the courtyard. "First things first, then," Keith-Ross began. "Unless you prefer to keep things more formal, I'm comfortable with first names. Please, call me Sandy."

There was a bit of nodding, and we began discussion in earnest.

"First things first, as you say, Sandy," announced John. "I'm sure you're aware that we are not prepared to cede autonomy to any Earthly power, regardless of what they may do for us."

"Perfectly understood, John. This was indeed the topic of some debate at home, at the very highest levels of our government. However, let me assure you on that point, we have no designs on you."

"What's the catch, then? A very wise philosopher once taught me, 'There ain't no such thing as a free lunch.'"

"Indeed, John. I will concede that our motives are not purely altruistic. Mostly, though. If I had to drop figures, I would say upwards of 75%. We do hope to achieve a number of things in our own interest, primarily to show the world that Britain is still a major power. Bit of a feather in our cap, so to speak. And to strengthen our own hand at home, in Britain itself. The Break-Up a few years ago was a disaster, and His Majesty is eager to keep together what's left of the Britain once called Great.

"Also, we do have our own colonies in this sector, and more planned. We were hoping to find a you a bit more of a, how should I say, going concern. But if we can aid in that, help you become a proper colony with agriculture and industry, you will be a valuable trade partner, both to our own colonies and to ourselves at home. So, a few small, disparate concerns, but enough that we thought it a worthwhile endeavour.

“Further, one rather more serious concern. These Tea-O’ An are not unknown to us. They’ve been active in this sector for the last year or so. Four months ago they virtually wiped out a Russian settlement, and Japan evacuated one of their own small outposts when they moved in.”

“Wiped out a Russian colony?” asked Don, astounded.

“Afraid so. A handful of survivors got away, but several hundred perished. They are very mercurial masters. Evidently they’ll leave people largely alone, and ignore some breaches of their discipline. Then something happened –the Russians had no idea what– and they attacked with unbridled fury. Killed everyone they could. Poor sods had almost no defences, the Russkis I mean. Maybe they just had no more use for them. The Tea-O’ An, I mean. Moscow has been very tight-lipped about it, and I don’t believe even your own government – beg your pardon, Governor, the U.S. government, has been kept in the loop on it.”

John Robinson sat morosely. “Sandy, I’m truly sorry to hear that Earth’s first experience with aliens had to be this. We’ve met a number of different species and civilizations during our time here, and most of them were decent and honorable people . . . so to speak. I hope you meet some of them soon, too.”

Sandy looked slightly chagrined. “John, I’m sure your Rescue Survey lads can tell you something about spotting ships where none should be and bright city lights on planets that are officially uninhabited. I mean to say, we’ve known about un-Earthly neighbours for quite a few years. The general populace of Earth and the colonies understand that there are indeed other creatures out here, and I mean intelligent beings, not just the plants and the small animals which are common knowledge. Great Scott, there’s that famous zoo in Berlin which just last year opened a wing dedicated to extraterrestrial animals. Not sure that’s a terribly good idea myself, but there it is.

“Well, John, my point is, a few –very few– governments on Earth have already made contact with a number of these other civilisations. Ourselves, the German Imperium of course, the Russians. Not the U.S. As you say, some good chaps out there. There’s one lot, I met their emissary last year. Call themselves Taurons. Very pleasant. Very quiet.”

“Taurons!” exclaimed John. “Yes, we met some of them once. Are they colonizing other worlds as well?”

“Just one. They’re not very ambitious that way. A couple other civilisations, not as pleasant, but not aggressive. They just want to make sure we stay out of their territory. All this though behind the scenes. Then of course your little jokers come along and, er, drop the bass, as they say.

“I say, Mrs Robinson, would it be possible to get something else to drink?” Sandy had been sipping unenthusiastically at a glass of ice water.

“I have some fruit juice, Sandy, or if you like I could make a pot of coffee.”

Sandy looked dejected. “No tea, even, what?” Evidently he had been hoping for something more potent. I didn’t have the heart to tell him he was two months too late for a sip of bourbon – no, we hadn’t brought anything like that back with us.

“A bit of your fruit juice, then, if you’d be so kind.” I noticed that despite his earlier admonition, he called her “Mrs Robinson.” Well, she commanded a transcendent kind of respect that way.

He sipped the juice which appeared, took a second look at the glass. “How interesting,” he observed, courteously.

“But these Tea-O’ An are the first real problem we’ve had. We believe that it will be in the best interest of Earth and all her colonies to make a show of force and stand up to these –blighters– and maybe get it through to them that we’re a bite too hard to chew. Them, and anyone else out there who might think we’re a soft target. So – there you are.”

“And just what kind of a force do you think can you put together for us?” asked Don.

“Several hundred soldiers, three dropships’ worth. Half a dozen pieces of artillery, both energy and kinetic projectile. Two tanks, kinetic. With crew. Those are what the U.S. government decided it could contribute.”

Across the table, Penny had a look on her face I recognized; I kicked her lightly before she could offer a bad pun on “thanks.”

Don spoke again. “How’s your intelligence on the enemy?”

Sandy looked briefly uncomfortable. “Sketchy, I’ll admit. We dared not get too close to their base for fear of tipping our hand. I do believe we have a damn good chance at them, though.”

We all looked at each other solemnly. Another moment of truth was before us.

Sandy coughed. “Of course, John –Governor– the final decision will be yours. I’ll review everything in detail with you and Don later. It will be your decision. Fight, or we’ll evacuate you to a near colony, or back to Earth.”

John gazed off at the horizon for a long minute. Penny was already glaring at me and mouthing “Not Earth!”

“Well, John? Need to sleep on it? Consult with the lads and lassies?”

John glanced around the table. He saw grim, fixed eyes staring back at him, chins tipped defiantly. Even Dr. Smith’s.

“I just have consulted. We’re ready. How soon can your troops be here?”

Sandy looked at his watch, and at the setting sun. Then he spoke into the watch. “Whisky neat,” he said to it. And to us, “They’ll be down two hours after sunset.”

“You mean . . .?”

“Standing by in orbit. I thought we’d read you right.”

We saw them land after dark, about a mile to the north. Don watched the *Jupiter 2*’s own scanners and radars curiously; the three huge dropships hardly made a blip. They were obviously stealthed or cloaked. With luck, the Tea-O’ An wouldn’t notice them at all. Sandy made a few quick exchanges on the radio concealed within his watch.

“I do believe that’s all we can do at the moment. I would suggest a good night’s sleep, review the troops in the morning, and continue plans from there. Oh, sorry to be an inconvenience, but would you have a spare place for me to doss down for the night? Rather tight in the jolly boat I came down in, and a long way out to the fleet, you know.”

He took our now-empty cabin; Penny and I walked slowly down to our house with the boys.

She seemed eager and agitated, and wanted to talk about the day’s events. I refused, and made us focus on simple domestic problems: getting the boys clean and sleeping, tidying up, a bit of “us” time walking by the pond, and the simple yet profound pleasures of bedtime.

In the morning, we walked back up to the ship for breakfast. Don and Judy were already there. Even as we sat to eat, we could see a dozen tracked troop carriers making their way across the sand to us. The Colonel was pacing back and forth in the sand about a hundred feet from our perimeter, speaking into a walkie-talkie, waving his arm and giving directions. As we stuffed down the last of the bacon and eggs, the carriers were in position, and front doors were swinging wide. They looked huge, even at this distance.

There was shouting and cursing audible, then soldiers of all kinds came spilling out, running into position, taking formation. Into the center marched rank upon rank of Highlanders, all wearing blazing scarlet kilts, khaki tunics, and cocked hats with curling feathers proudly ensconced. John was immediately on his feet: perhaps some deep ancestral instinct. All of us followed suit and watched the spectacle as hundreds of Scottish soldiers fell into position.

I saw Penny wipe at her eye, and thought of what I had teased her with on our trip to Earth: yours will be the Face That Launched A Thousand Spaceships. I looked over to John, he was standing tall and proud, his face alight. Mum had one hand over her eyes, unashamedly weeping.

Sandy strode back and forth before the assembled ranks, stopped near the Highlanders. “Atten-SHUN!” he cried. The ranks rippled as all braced themselves even more. He marched over to John and saluted crisply in the British manner, palm turned out. “Governor Robinson SIR! The troops await your inspection, SIR!” Then softly, “Return the salute please, and just nod. Then follow me, you and West and Cain.”

As we tailed him, Sandy started some explanations. “First of all, understand that nearly all of these people are strictly volunteers, and not actual active duty military. Oh, many have military experience or are retired mil, but not even we could send along active Royal Army. Here are the First Northumberland Volunteers.” About fifty men, middle-aged and older, stood at attention, without weapons. “Don’t worry, they’ll be issued rifles. A lot of gear is still stowed.” John shared a few words with the sergeant in charge of them, shook his hand. We moved to the next group.

I did a double take – it was all women! And Asian, Far East Asian. I counted 35. These carried very deadly looking black rifles of some kind. I read off the name tags, printed in Western letters: Nakamura, Sato, Hiro . . . “Japanese?” I asked Sandy.

“Right. This is the only official government offering, aside from the American tanks. Third Imperial Women’s Division, part of it anyway. They carry standard M4 rifles, firing 5.56 millimetre rounds, with grenade launchers. They’re sharpshooters. Evidently the Emperor was some displeased about having to abandon that colony, and wants to make up for it. All tied up with honour and saving face and all that.”

I was duly impressed. At Sandy’s coaching, John said, “*Arrigato gosaimas, irrashaimasai!*” or “Thank you, and welcome!”

We stood a while before the Highlanders. There were more than I could easily count. The first five ranks carried modern laser rifles, the rest had old-fashioned leadslingers.

“Hundred watt positron laser rifles. Selective fire, pulse burst or continuous beam. Damned effective, but have a tendency to overheat. High Command’s theory is that any engagement will be done long before they have a chance to get that hot. Behind them, .303 Enfields. Rifle that won more battles than any in history, except possibly the American M1.”

“What happens when those laser rifles overheat?” asked Don.

Sandy looked at him with a puzzled frown. “Why, they stop working until they’ve cooled back down. What would you think? They only explode in the movies, Brigadier, sir.”

I had a question. “What kind of pattern is that on the kilts, Colonel?”

I saw a few scowls on Highland faces, including the Colonel himself. “It’s called a tartan, laddie. Most are associated with clans, or families within a clan. These men and women wear the Clan Wallace tartan. Surely you know the story of William Wallace, who led the Scots in battle for freedom from English rule?”

I allowed I was familiar with the story, if only via an old movie, but that I understood and appreciated the significance of the tartan.

“Ye must remember, lad,” said the Colonel, a bit of Scots accent poking through, “Just like you Yanks, the Scots have a long and well-revered history of fighting for their freedom.”

John was nodding. “I know the story well, Colonel.” He addressed the captain commanding this group. “Thank you for being here for us.”

The Colonel stopped us next before a group of about 50 men. They wore neat, very soldierly uniforms, more so than the others we had seen. They seemed shortish and slight, with dark skin suggestive of the Indian Subcontinent. They carried the same Enfield rifles, and had what seemed to be large knives hanging from their belts.

“Governor, these are your Gurkha Volunteers.”

Don almost choked. “Gurkhas? You brought us Gurkhas?” He turned to John. “We’ve already won, John.” Don coughed out a brief, giddy laugh. “On second thought, Colonel, send them home. We want this to be a fair fight.”

Gurkhas? I recognized the name, but it didn’t mean much to me, not then. “What’s Gurkhas, Don?”

“When Marines have nightmares, they’re about Gurkhas.”

Sandy spoke. “Governor, might I suggest a small retinue of these as your personal guard for the *Jupiter 2*? Only a few would be necessary, and it would ease my mind considerably to know you were under their direct protection.”

“Agreed,” said John. “For all of us though. The women and infants are of primary importance.”

“Of course, Governor.” The colonel addressed their sergeant in a low voice, who nodded silently.

“Don, Bobby – I want you, the girls, and the babies back up in the ship for the duration. Don, as soon as we’re finished here, you and Dusty set the force-field. Smallest effective radius, maximum power. Make sure he knows how to operate it.”

“Yes, sir,” Don and I said together, and looked at each other resignedly. Someday, I thought, we’d be in our house for good.

“Don, really, who are the Gurkhas?” I whispered.

“Gurkha paratroopers don’t bother with parachutes.” Don put his arm on my shoulder. “How many were there?”

They had stood in a formation 6 across, 8 ranks deep. “48, right?” I looked again. Evidently, the Juve’s personal guard had already assumed their new duty. I never saw them given any orders, and I never saw any of them move out of ranks. Almost immediately I felt about them one of the sentiments I held for Penny: I’m glad I’m on their side.

Don offered a last remark. “Their Space Corps don’t wear pressure suits, they just hold their breath.” I assumed his comments were all merest quips. After the battle, I wasn’t so sure.

Later on, I would see a single Gurkha at the hatch of the *Jupiter 2*, although the colonel told me six were assigned and at least four would be on duty at any time. “Don’t bother looking for the others, young fellow. Rest assured, you will never see them.”

We moved on to the next group. “Here are your Americans, Governor.” I faced them, proud and saddened at the same time. Only a dozen of my own countrymen? One of them carried a banner bearing an ancient emblem: a coiled rattlesnake, and the motto, “Don’t Tread On Me.”

My heart pounded, and I resolved that I would fight with these when it came. They wore clothing that was barely what could be called a uniform: blue jeans, mostly, with flannel shirts. It had a cowboyish look which I presumed was intentional. I read off to myself the American names stitched on their shirts: Wright and Mazurski, Nunes and Levine, Chen and Herrera, Jones and Reilly, Sebastiano and Parks, Levesque and –I gaped– Cain.

“Go on, guys,” I murmured to the others, as I stopped, shook hands with each of them, and thanked them. I looked up at this other Cain, who stood several inches taller than I. I glanced down, amused, as our hands clasped: his was as dark as mine was pale. We looked at each other with the same wry grin.

“I’ll say it sir. We’re probably not related.” We laughed together, as did the others.

“Um,” I said, “I think I’m supposed to say something like, ‘Down where it’s important, we are.’”

More chuckles, all around. I continued. “You know, I’ve been away a while, and I’m not sure just what’s going on at home, but I’m really glad you guys are here. Who’s in charge?”

“Nobody really, not yet,” said the other Cain. “We’re just here.”

“I want to go in with you. You know, I’m not even sure I’m— no, maybe I’m not sure I’m a citizen of the United States any more, but I’m damn sure I’m still an American. I don’t know what’s happened back there, but what’s going on here looks a lot like the America I was raised to be proud of.”

“Don’t worry, sir,” said my namesake. “We’ll be just as proud to have you with us. You know anything about firearms?”

“Not really. What’s that you guys are carrying?”

“AK-47. Leadslingers. We’ll show you how to do damage with one, don’t worry.”

“OK. I’ll see you all again soon. Thanks again.”

I hurried to catch up with the Colonel and the others. They were inspecting an even-more ragtag bunch of various nationalities, a lot of Australians and New Zealanders, along with a showing of Poles and Ukrainians, a handful from across South America.

Finally, there were the two American tanks pulled up side by side, and in front of them stood the couple dozen soldiers who manned the still-stowed artillery pieces.

The ritual ended. Sandy whispered to John, “Tell me to dismiss them now, sir.”

“Colonel Keith-Ross! Dismiss the troops!”

Sandy turned to the group. “Volunteers will countermarch and retire!” One by one, the lines marched forward, stepped a U-turn, and marched back to the transports.

Finally, our soldiers were all back to their dropships, and we sat back down with Sandy.

“Lunchtime!” sang out Maureen. “Cheese sandwiches all right for everyone?”

Afterwards, the Colonel and Don withdrew with John into his cabin to lay out *Operation Jove’s Wrath*.

“Sorry, young man,” said Sandy, patting me on the shoulder. “Afraid I must insist on Above Top Secret protocol for this. Plan of battle and all, you know.”

Well, I understood, but it was still a bit of a slap on the cheek. Penny and I retired to our cabin, and we played with the boys. They were growing well, standing and flexing their legs when you held them up, rolling around on the floor under their own power, and managing to sit up by themselves for a moment or two before flopping over. Depending on their mood, such a flop would usually be followed by riotous laughter or a scream of frustration. Penny fed them and they slept; we stretched out together in bed.

“How soon?” she asked.

“They’re not telling me. Soon, I think. Look at them, they dropped in on cue, and they look armed, dangerous, and ready to rock. There’s nothing to be gained by delay, not that I can think. Every minute we wait is another minute the other guys might hit first. Maybe a day for everyone to get used to the climate? I can’t even guess, I’m not military. Not by a long shot.”

“But you want to be, don’t you? Daddy told me you talked to the American bunch.”

“Well . . . yes. They’ve come to help, and it’s the least I can do. They’re – my people.”

Penny looked at me thoughtfully, and blinked rapidly. “I understand,” she conceded, softly. “That means they’re my people too, then. I’ll go with you and fight alongside you.”

“Like hell you will. There’s a few women in the American group, but they’re not mothers.”

“You know that for sure?”

I pressed my lips together in frustration. “I know you are, and I know that makes you too important to risk.”

Penny stroked the sleeping boys across their foreheads. “Am I being an impetuous, silly girl?”

“Yes.”

“No bullshit this time, huh?”

“No.”

“I’m still going to go. I’ll stay back where it’s safe. But I want to be there for you if you get – hurt or anything. I want to be there to hold your hand and to – say goodbye if I have to.” She turned her face to the wall.

“I’m not even going to get scratched. We’ll be on ’em and done before they even know what hit ’em.”

“That’s what Custer said.”

Right then the intercom buzzed. “Bobby, there’s some people here to see you,” called Judy.

“Be right there,” I responded. “My angel, we’ll finish this later on. Try not to get so worked up. We’ll be fine.” Her face was still buried between the wall and the pillow; she nodded and I kissed the back of her head.

Upstairs were two of the American volunteers: my new friend Dan Cain, and Mandy Chen. They filled me in on some of the developments in the barracks.

“We elected Mandy our corporal, but some lieutenant is giving us one of the Scotsmen as a sergeant,” Dan explained.

“Congratulations, Mandy, er, Corporal,” I said.

“Thanks,” she responded. “I’m responsible for individuals, and the sarge is responsible for us as a unit. That means I have hiring and firing authority. Your buddy Mr. Proudfoot is back at the dropship already, getting gear and doing indoc. You in or not?”

With only the slightest pause, I said, “I’m in.”

“Me too,” said Will Robinson behind me. I spun, startled.

“Good, we need every swingin’ – pardon, everybody we can find.” Corporal Chen frowned at him. “You old enough you don’t need to ask your parents?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I can vouch for him,” I offered.

“All right, because I know who they are and I don’t want to get my – head handed to me in a sling for enlisting a minor without permission, especially this one.” She jotted a couple of notes on a clipboard.

“All right,” she repeated. “You can each take a minute to let people know you’re leaving. At the end of a minute, be outside in our groundcar. You’ll be back here tonight, so you won’t need to bring any gear or make any long goodbyes.”

She stared at us. “Your minute is running,” Corporal Chen said flatly.

I dropped downstairs without the ladder, and made a hasty explanation to Penny. Her eyes were red, but she nodded and kissed me.

I made it back outside and into the car with five seconds to spare: Corporal Chen told me so, in no complimentary terms. Will was there already. I was starting to suspect she had had actual military experience at some time; maybe that’s why they elected her. Elected? I thought. Interesting way to run an army.

Chen sped the car over the sand, heading for the left-most dropship. Still at a distance, she killed the motors and the car jerked to a halt, settling to the ground. “Out! Now! Move!” she bawled at Will and me. “Double time, now! Get to that ship pronto, and don’t let me beat you!”

She tore off at a remarkable clip; Will and I followed as closely as we could, but neither of us were used to this kind of activity. She put increasing distance between us, as my heart pounded and my breath turned into staccato pants. Chen stopped at the edge of the ramp, turned and yelled “Halt!” Will was about twenty feet short of the ship, and I was another ten behind him.

“Up here!” she barked at me, indicating that I should stand beside Will. As I took my first step, she yelled again. “Who told you you didn’t need to double-time, soldier? Move it!” I trotted forward and stood woozily. Chen didn’t even seem to be breathing hard. “Pathetic, just pathetic, the both of you. Even worse than that hayseed buddy of yours. Both of you, drop and start giving me some pushups!”

“How many?” asked Will.

“Until I tell you to stop, kid, that’s how many!”

Oh my. I was starting to think this had been a mistake. I wasn’t counting pushups, just doing, and my arms were fading fast. Soon, I saw hairy legs and the scarlet flash of a kilt.

“Corporal, are these the last two?” asked a voice thickly burred with Scotland.

“I’m afraid so, Sergeant Glencannon. The worst so far, and I hope to hell there aren’t any more, or we might as well pack up and go home. These failures will be lucky to live through training, let alone a real firefight. Maybe I’ll just send them on inside to help Catering Corps wash dishes.”

My arms collapsed. Will was struggling, and seeing me prone he dropped too.

“Ye’ve been too nice to them, Chen. I’ve tolt ye already, you’re too softhearted. Get up on your feet, my precious wee buttercups!” the sergeant shouted. We stood, gasping. My arms felt distant from my body. “Och, disgraceful. By the bluid of The Bruce, canna ye even stand at attention properly?” he roared.

That much I remembered from Academy, and I braced into what I hoped was acceptable form. Glencannon looked at me, muttered, “Tha’ ll do,” and turned his attention to Will. “God help us all,” he growled. “Feet together at the heels, arms doon yer sides, hands closed, thumbs like this. Back straight, eyes front.” He stepped away to Will’s side. “Hoo many fingers am I holding up?”

Will glanced over; I inwardly winced. I remembered that drill trick.

“Three, serg—”

“Did I no just tell ye tae keep yer eyes tae the front?” he screamed. This was a routine very much like some of Penny’s trick questions; there really was no right response. Anything Will had answered would have been wrong for some reason. I was remembering why drill instruction had been the thing I had most hated at Academy.

Glencannon was shouting into Will’s face. “Now, you and your playmate have earned a nice wee run around the field – both of ye! You, wee laddie, have let a man down, and ye both will pay for it. Ye work together, ye win together, or ye lose and die together. Do ye understand?”

We nodded together. “Move out then! All around the three ships – just follow the footprints left by the other failures that thought they’d like tae play soldier wi’ us!”

Without further encouragement, I took off, double-time, and heard Will’s footfalls and gasping breath behind me. It was a long way around the huge dropships. A lot of feet had passed this way already.

“Oof!” I heard, as Will stumbled and fell.

“Come on!” I stopped to help him back to his feet. “You OK?”

He nodded, chest heaving.

We ran.

And came back to where we had started. Glencannon and Chen regarded us frostily.

Chen looked at a stopwatch and shook her head grimly.



Glencannon looked at it too. “You, Cain, ye might have made an acceptable time if ye had nae stopped. Why’d ye stop?”

I knew the answer to this one. “Because my buddy was down, Sergeant Glencannon!” I responded as vigorously as I could.

“Hmph. Well, Corporal Chen, this one’s learned a wee lesson at least. Maybe ye’ll be able to turn them into something that’ll no embarrass us in front of the Lieutenant. Aye, right. Gie ’em a drink of water and take ’em to the armory. Pairhaps by the end o’ the day they’ll know which end o’ a rifle tae no stand in front of.”

With no further ado, Glencannon strode away to one of the other ships. “Follow me,” ordered Chen, and led us inside her ship. “Have a seat,” gesturing to the empty floor. She produced two bottles of water from a cooler and tossed them to us. “Drink it. All. That’s not an invitation, that’s an order.” She took one for herself, and plopped down beside us.

“Five minute break.” She took a few sips as Will and I poured the water down our throats. “Careful, not too fast. You’ll make yourself puke, and guess which of one of us ain’t gonna be mopping it up.” After another minute she looked over at us closely.

“You boys doing all right? Feel OK? Stomachs steady? Any dizziness?” We shook our heads. “Gimme your hand.” She quickly checked our pulses and looked at our eyes.

“Congratulations, boys, you’re in the American Patrol now. Let me tell you something, I don’t know how long we’ll be cooling our heels here, but it’s not going to get any easier. We’ve got to do a lot with you before getting you anywhere near real combat, and I mean this whole bunch, not just you two. On your feet now . . . come on, we’ll get you your weapons. Either of you have any firearm experience?”

“Lasers, pistol and rifle,” offered Will.

“None, Corporal,” I admitted.

“That’s both then. You saw what we carry. We all carry the same ordnance, I’m sure you understand why.”

“Yes, Corporal,” we said together.

“Why, Robinson?”

“So you can all share ammunition and spare parts in the field?”

“What else?”

“I – don’t know. Corporal.”

“So we all know exactly what the other can do with his or her weapon. When I have a split second to decide some plan of action, I can’t afford to stop and wonder what your rate of fire is, or your effective range, or whether you’ve got full auto or semi-only or how many rounds your magazine holds. Same goes between any of you.” She slowed her stride just long enough to scratch.

“All I’ve got to worry about then is how good a shot you are, and whether you’re gonna keep your cool under fire or fade off thataway, pissin’ your pants.”

No doubt, Mandy Chen had not only been real military, but sounded like she’d seen combat. I desperately wondered how, but knew it was not my place to ask, not now.

“Here.” Chen opened a door.

Nunes –Rui Nunes– stood behind a counter. The armory looked like any small store, except it held nothing but guns, gun parts, and ammunition. Most of the ammunition was in big tin cases that reminded me of oversized sardine cans.

“Bobby Cain, right?” he asked, holding a clipboard.

“Robert Robinson Cain, actually. But if you’ve already written it down the other way, it’s OK.”

He gave me a slightly annoyed look, then pulled one of the AK-47s off a storage rack. He tossed me the clipboard. "Write down the serial number in that space." Still annoyed, he pointed out the number on the rifle as I stood there puzzled. As I wrote, he pulled an assortment of supplies together and stuffed them into a canvas shoulder bag.

I looked over the final tally – 1 AK-47 rifle, 1 shoulder sling, 2 30-round magazines, 1 field cleaning kit, 1 Sillavision targeting module, 50 training rounds, 300 milspec ball rounds . . . Various type numbers and other minutiae detailed the items. I signed off the form.

Then the same routine with Will.

"Hey Nunes," I asked when we were finished. "How'd you get this job?"

"Ran a store at home."

"Gun store?"

"Fish and seafood."

"Hmm."

"Come on, Cain, plenty of time for socializing later."

"Sorry, Corporal."

She then led us to a classroom where one of the Highlanders, Sergeant Callan, taught us about our weapons. He taught us all the rules for proper firearms handling: how to take them apart and re-assemble them, how to load and unload, care and maintenance. Then the technical data: how they worked, muzzle velocities, effective range and expected accuracy.

Possibly the most important thing he wanted us to remember was that, "These are not sniper or sharpshooter rifles. These are not the weapons you're going to take down an enemy at 200 meters with, with a single round, before he even knows you're there. These are weapons for flinging a wall of lead downrange at someone who is trying to kill you. You let off short bursts of three or four rounds across a line of space. Maybe only one of those rounds will connect, but these are big solid pieces of old-fashioned lead, and one will be enough. Now, outside, and show me what you've learned."

Will and I stood 5 meters away from targets set side by side, loaded our magazines and snapped them into place. "Cain, you shoot first. Fire off three rounds to get a feel for it, then we'll sight it in better."

The rifle butt kicked into my shoulder three times, and I saw two holes appear in the target: one at the top center, one at the bottom left.

"Not too bad," Callan said. "Lot of folks don't hit it at all first time." He took my rifle, put a round on the paper, then fiddled with the targeting module. It was like a rectangular window which you looked through. A small red circle marked the spot you wanted to hit, and a figure in the corner indicated the range of the target. The targeting circle automatically adjusted itself for the range. The screen was touch-sensitive, and you could zoom in by stretching your fingers on the picture, like on a My-Pod. Callan made a couple of small adjustments, then put a hole right through the center of the bullseye. He then did the same with Will's.

We went through the 50 training rounds quickly, at increasing distances. Will was getting fairly good accuracy, and Callan told him, "You should be good out to 50 meters or so. Remember what I said, this weapon isn't going to be very tight beyond that anyway."

He looked at my groupings, and sighed. "Don't shoot at anything more than 25 or 30 meters out. Maybe a little more time tomorrow will help."

We were assigned weapons lockers aboard ship, and stowed our firearms gear there before being told we were dismissed for the day.

"Back at 0600, you two. Oh, take your other buddy with you too. See you in the morning." Corporal Chen actually gave us a faint smile as she waved us a farewell.

"How you doing, Dusty?" I asked him.

"I'm alive, barely. They make you run orbits around them ships too?"

"Oh yeah. Will, you got a short-range to call your Dad to come get us in the Chariot?"

Even as I said it, he was reaching for the small device in his pocket.

We were all very glad for the ride back.

I stumbled into our cabin, and Penny gasped. "Did you already fight the war?"

"No, this was the fun part. Oh God, I'm aching. Believe me, you don't want to do what I'm doing." I dropped my clothes where I stood and headed for the shower. I leaned against the shower wall as hot water cascaded over me. After the programmed three minutes, I hit the button again for a second dose, this time using the soap and cleaning myself. After drying, I flopped down naked on the bed.

"That Chinese girl is in charge of us, and she's got a mean streak wider than her ass. She picks on me worse than you."

"Should I take that as a challenge?" Penny sassed, spanking me once.

"You try, and we'll be the first divorce, too."

"Hey! Don't even joke about that."

"Don't you joke about being meaner than a drill instructor."

"Sorry."

"Me too. Sorry too, I mean. Anything left for dinner?"

"Sure, I'll bring you something. Get dressed and I'll be right back."

I stuffed down a plate of greens from the hydroponic garden, with a bit of synthetic meat. "I could use a couple big steaks, too."

"Not this week, poor dear husband."

"Any interesting news here?"

"Kind of. Daddy got on the video channel with the aliens. He was asking if they would split the planet with us. Us in the northern hemisphere and they could have the southern. Their thing in charge just said 'No' and switched us off."

"I wonder if they know what we're up to."

Penny shrugged. I found out later –this was all part of the "Above Top Secret" discussion I had been excluded from– that the Colonel had a surveillance drone in orbit, and as far as he and his intelligence men could tell, the Tea-O' An were behaving perfectly ordinarily. Either they really had no knowledge of our forces, or they were utterly unconcerned with them.

Penny finished feeding the boys and playing with them. The little sadists must have known something, as they wanted to slap me all over and laugh about it. Finally they slept; Penny and I cuddled into bed.

I cautioned her that I was aching and exhausted, and might not be up to any serious intimacy.

She grinned. "Can I take *that* as a challenge?"

I groaned. "Anything you can get out of me tonight . . . you'll have earned it."

She pulled even closer and wrapped herself on me. "I won't insist. Don't worry."

A few minutes passed in warm silence.

"I'll tell you a secret, darling husband."

"Mmm?"

"I really enjoy being naked with you like this. Even times when nothing happens. Maybe especially those times."

"Mmm."

"I like feeling so vulnerable with you. Like I'm just turning everything over to you, completely trusting you to take care of me."

"Mmm-hmm."

"And I don't have to be Miss Tough-Stuff for a little while."

“You know you don’t have to be, my angel, not for me. I told you that back on Earth.”

“It’s . . . hard to let that go. You really don’t know what it was like, having to grow up here.”

“I see it in you. I see it in Will too, sometimes.”

“Sometimes I feel like such a phony. Sometimes I think, deep down I’m still just a lost, scared little girl. Lying here naked is like the real me. And I have you to be brave and strong for me, and I don’t have to pretend for anyone.”

“You *are* strong and brave, Penny, more than me. When you had the babies, when you were in there fighting for your life with Dr. Smith and Mum, I’d already given up. I was outside in the dirt, just waiting for someone to come and tell me that you were gone. I was a coward.”

Penny caressed my forehead. “That’s not being a coward. That’s just how you had to cope with things, preparing yourself for the worst. Daddy was almost as bad that day, and you know *he’s* no coward.”

“I wish I could believe that. About me, I mean.”

“You worried about the fighting?”

“Mmm.”

“You know what they say. Courage doesn’t mean you’re not afraid, just that you keep doing what has to be done.”

“Mmm.”

“You don’t have to, you know.”

“Yes, I do.”

“See? There’s some right there. Courage, I mean.”

“Mmm.”

She pushed against my shoulder, rolled me onto my side, kissed me passionately. Touched me. “I thought you said you weren’t up for anything tonight.”

“Maybe that’s up, I’m not sure about the rest of me.”

“Guess it’s my turn to be the strong one, after all.” Penny pushed me over onto my back and straddled me, gave me her strength, her courage.

Morning came too early. Penny woke with me, and drove Will, Dusty, and me down to our dropship. The rest of the American Patrol were already there, waiting for the day’s training.

Sergeant Glencannon greeted us cordially before we fell into ranks. “I want to level wi’ ye all. I know ye’re all volunteers, and dom little proper military training amongst ye. Right noo, I dunno how lang we have before we move, but I know this, it’s nae dom lang enough by a dom sight. It takes months to make proper soldiers, we have days, if that. Dae ye’re best oot there, and if nothing else, ye’ll learn what ye’re capable of, and that’s may be the most important thing ye’ll learn here. That’s no’ an excuse to slack off, and if Chen or me thinks ye are, there’ll be hell to pay for the lot o’ ye. Win together or fail together, and I mean for ye tae win.”

He glanced at his watch. “Noo, fall in, smartly! Double time, in place! Get some blood moving through those chubby wee legs, and may be intae ye’re brains as well! Corporal Chen, just in time. I’m fair makin’ masel’ ill lookin’ at this precious bunch of posies! I’ve tolt ye, Corporal, ye’re treatin’ these puir wee kittens too tender, I want you to be *hard* wi’ em today!” Without the slightest indication of amusement or irony, Glencannon stomped away.

I lost count after the fifth run around the ships, and the rest of the morning was an even hazier blur of pushups, situps, crawling through the sand, and assorted other physical drills.

After a short break for lunch, we returned to firearms training, mostly practicing field-stripping the AKs to clear ammunition jams and keep them functioning. We were all issued another meager 15 training rounds and practiced hitting targets. I was glad to see that a few of the other Patrol were even worse shots than I was, until I realized that it would be much better if they weren’t.

After a practical exercise cleaning the weapons, we capped the day off with another jog around the ships and some pushups, and were dismissed.

I felt a lot better afterward than I had the previous day, and thought it would be good to keep up some sort of exercise regimen after all this was over. (“If you’re still here,” nagged a cruel voice in the back of my mind.) Despite this, my fatigue this day was even deeper than before: I showered and ate, and sleep came quickly with neither the ache of self-doubt to torment me nor Penny’s ardor to comfort me.

The next morning, we were ordered inside to get our rifles and then fall in with them. Morning exercises were a little different as we ran, crawled, and jumped with them.

There was a rumor circulating that we would drill straight through to 1300 without breaking for lunch, and be dismissed for the day; and a secondary rumor that this meant one thing: hell was about to break loose. Sure enough, at noon, instead of breaking, we were ordered to clean our rifles again and double check all our gear aboard the ship. We were dismissed at 1240.

Judy drove the Chariot for us. I saw Don, Brigadier General West, tending assiduously to The Acre, and I asked her to drop me there.

“You better not expect me to salute you now, Don,” I grumped, collapsing in the dirt. “How’s the crops?”

“Haven’t seen any bitterweed. Maybe we’re getting the better of it, or maybe it’s just the wrong season for it.” Something on him beeped. “I have to go over to the command ship, Bobby. Don’t worry about the Acre.” He looked at me with a penetrating gaze and fondness. “Hey, uh, I’m not supposed to say too much, pal. But, uh, don’t get too cozy in bed tonight, just in case you need to go somewhere. And – if there’s anything you want to tell anybody – make a point of it.”

“Gotcha. I think we’ve already figured that out, anyway.”

Don stepped over to where I sat, leaned over and shook my hand. “If I don’t see you on the Jupe tonight – I’ll see you tomorrow.” He spun sharply and headed for the ship.

I nodded. This was it, then.

As I understood it, John planned to make one final offer –more of an ultimatum– of peaceful coexistence with the Tea-O’An. We all sensed it would be a pure formality on our part, but John insisted that our actions be above-board, with fair warning and a formal declaration of war. “A lot of eyes are going to be watching this planet,” he said, “and I want the rest of the Galaxy to know we are slow to fight, quick to compromise, and honorable in war when it comes.”

It was very warm, I was exhausted, and I sat down over by the pond to cool off, relax, and try to ease the knot in my gut. I put my head back against some rock and closed my eyes.

I dozed off quickly and dreamed, an odd dream for me, in that it was so relatively prosaic. I don’t dream often, but when I do, they tend to be wildly fantastic and surrealistic thrill-rides. This time, it was as though I had awoken right there where I sat, and knew immediately that I was in a dream. I saw a strange man – strange in both senses, in that I had no idea who he was, and that he was a very eccentric character. He was dressed in what looked like a long, tattered, black nightgown, and carried a walking stick almost as tall as himself.

“Hello, Robert,” he said without preamble. “There’s a mighty task ahead, isn’t there? And you fear you’re not man enough.” I looked away, but nodded. “Fear not,” he said. “There’s a great future here for you and your children, if you can but hold on to your courage for a few hours.” He paused, and stared at me with penetrating eyes. “You will be a great man on this world, Robert, if you acquit yourself well on the morrow. Tomorrow will be your greatest test.”

He plucked a stem of grass, with the stalk dividing into two broad leaves. He spun it in his fingers, the two leaves whirling so fast they were indistinguishable. “Two paths, Robert, one to triumph, one to ignominy and defeat. I’m here to help you find triumph.

“You have a son named Arthur.” I nodded again. “I once had a very dear friend of that name, and him did I love like a son. Now he, *he* was a great leader of men, and a fearsome warrior, a wise and mighty king. This world, Robert, has no use for kings, but for men such as you might be. And *here* is something which may be of use to you. Look!”

He pointed at the surface of the pond. Typical of dreams, I couldn’t see what he pointed at, nor could I stand to see. He reached over into the still water, and when he stood, there was a sword in his hand. “My old friend will have need of this again someday, but not tomorrow. Take it!” As I took the sword, it occurred to me that this dream was so vivid, not only did I see it shedding water, but I could feel the cold, wet drops as they trickled down over my hands and onto my legs.

“Carry this with you into battle tomorrow, Robert,” the dream-visitor commanded. “It serves well the man of valor. Be bold, but not rash. Strike quickly, and be careful not to falter,” pointing at my weak ankle, “but press ahead. For if but once you hesitate or retreat, all will be lost, and many you love will perish. Do you understand?” Again, I nodded.

“Good. That’s it. It is all on *your* shoulders now, Robert. I wish you well. Perhaps I will see you again.”

Finally, I found my dream voice. “Who *are* you?”

He chuckled, long and deep. “Who am I? Why, I’m nothing at all, Robert. Nothing, but a dream.”

I snapped awake with a start. I half expected to see an actual sword in my hand, but of course there wasn’t. The advice I had received, or formulated to myself, really, was sound. Bold but not rash. Strike quickly and advance. Don’t retreat. Surely, similar advice could be found in any soldiers’ handbook or military textbook. In any case, I was just going to be following Sgt. Glencannon’s orders. I started walking up to the *Jupiter 2*.

I found Mum, Judy, and Penny busy with cooking. There were already serving dishes piled high, and it seemed they were cooking up just about everything we had. They all knew.

We sat inside at the galley table, Dusty too, and stuffed food away in silence. The babies were treated to all sorts of new tastes. It was barely 3 in the afternoon when the dishes were empty.

After a while, sitting and looking at each other, John said, “It’s a lazy kind of a day today. Why don’t we all go relax and catch naps or something and we’ll see each other later.”

As Mum scooped up dirty dishes and set them to clean, I put my hand on her shoulder. “Thank you, Mum. For everything.”

“Thank *you*, Bobby. For everything.” She looked me straight in the eyes. “I’m very proud of you. So is John, even if he doesn’t say it.”

I nodded, and rested my head on her shoulder; she ruffled my hair in her motherly way. “See you for dinner tomorrow,” she whispered.

Turning, I almost ran into Judy. Judy, who I barely knew, even after all this time. I couldn’t think of anything to say to her, I simply took her hand between mine for a moment. Then, “Don will be fine,” I said. She smiled tightly at the floor, and looked away.

I caught Penny with an arm around her waist and turned towards our cabin. Dusty was leaving his.

“I’m a-gonna go on down to the ship, folks,” he muttered softly. “Get a little rest, or maybe find somebody to play some poker with.”

I took his hand. “See you later, Dust.”

“You betcha, Broadway.”

“Dusty,” said Penny. “Sleep tight.”

“Yes’m, Miss Penny.”

“Dusty?”

“Yes’m?”

“Bobby and I love you dearly.” She stretched up and put two kisses on his cheek.

“Thank you kindly, Miss Penny. Same back atcha,” looking away. “See you later, bad boy.” I gripped his hand for a long while before he finally pulled away and stepped to the elevator, waving as it rose.

Penny and I closed the door behind us and sat on the bed. “Where’s the boys?” I asked.

“Mother’s room. She’s staying here with them. I’m going Bobby, I’m going with Dr. Smith as a nurse. I’ll be in the rear where I’ll be safe. So don’t you worry about me when you’re up there.”

“I see.”

“I need to be there. To do something. Are you mad at me?”

“Never, my love.”

“I hear we’re going to take the dropships out at midnight. Let’s get to bed.”

I pulled my wife close to me, held her tight. I turned down the lights and we helped each other disrobe, settled in under the covers. Our passion was fueled by the awareness that this might be our last night together, ever.

Penny pulled me roughly on top of her. “Take me hard,” she whispered. “Make me helpless and weak, like you’re raping me. Don’t make love to me, I want – oh! Oh yes, like that.”

Her fingernails raked my back as I took her, and she gasped at the pleasure of my ruthlessness.

We were both satisfied quickly, and fell into a deep but short sleep.

Don woke us with a knock on the door. “Up and at ’em, kids. Time to move.”

The Chariot was more crowded than I had ever seen it. Judy drove us down to the dropship site. Colonel Keith-Ross met John and Don, and led them on into the middle ship – Dropship One, they called it, and the flagship I assumed.

The rest of us lined up while a lieutenant with a clipboard directed us. “Robinson, William, Dropship Two.” Will jogged off to the ship we had trained on. “Smith, Zachary, Dr., Dropship One. Robinson Cain, Penelope. Dropship One.” I heard her catch her breath. “Robinson Cain, Robert, Dropship Two.”

Penny and I hesitated just a moment, tips of our fingers brushing, before heading to our separate destinations.

“Move it, soldiers.”

I gave her a wry half-smile. “We’ll always have Vegas,” I deadpanned, and trotted away.

I found the rest of the Patrol in our bunkroom. We sat quietly, and I wondered again how many of these had much more training than I did. Not Dusty, I knew that. Some of them may have had some active duty in their past, but none were young enough to have been caught in the draft when it was re-instituted seven or eight years ago. Chen almost certainly, and I had heard that any of the Highlanders with more than corporal’s rank were ex-service. That meant our Sergeant Glencannon at least had real experience.

Shortly, warning lights began flashing and a siren bawled out three pairs of short squawks.

“Hit the bunks!” Chen snapped, and we stretched out, belted in for launch.

Dropships are ungainly vehicles for in-atmosphere transport. The decks and bulkheads thrummed and pulsed erratically, the engines howled like baritone banshees as they wrestled to keep what was essentially an absurdly extended landing trajectory across half the surface of the planet. We were keeping an altitude of about 500 feet at a few hundred miles per hour. With a shape like flattened geodesic domes, these ships were as little built for speed as for atmospheric travel.

Heart-stopping moments were frequent at first, as the ships encountered pockets of turbulence and dropped several inches away under our feet, or lurched off to the side. The turbulence and dropping didn’t diminish, we just got used to it quickly.

Shortly after we were airborne, Sgt. Glencannon visited us. "As you were, as you were," he said softly as we jumped to attention. "Aye, right. I'd like to share wha' little I know. This is more than ye'd get in the regular sairvices, but the boss think ye a' desairve a wee bit o' consideration."

"Fairst of a', this was a dom sight faster than e'en I thought. I think ye're in guid shape physically, or I would'nae have allowed ye tae be here wi' us. Remember wha' I said, at least ye know wha' ye're capable of noo, and how far ye can poosh yersells."

He scratched and rolled his head, choosing his next words. "I'll no boo'shi' ye. I wish tae hell I'd had another week wi' ye', at least. Ye're guid, but I wish ye could be a wee better before goin' in. Ye should take tha' as a compliment, by the way. E'en wi'oot as much training as I could like, I'm willin' to trust ye in combat.

"Ye're guid," he repeated. "And I think every one of ye should get through the day an' wake up tomorrow. Just keep a cool heid and do as ye're told when ye're told.

"Right, tha's the pep talk. I'll gie ye a wee preview." Glencannon keyed a small gadget and projected a holographic map in the air before us. Sketches appeared as he spoke. "Here is the enemy installation. A line of barracks, a few smaller visible buildings. There may be underground facilities, I dunno and I dunno if anyone knows. Some vehicles, which may be combatant type. You'll be able to tell the difference when they come at ye shootin' instead o' rollin' awa'.

"The ships are gonnae set doon here, behind this ridge of hills, about an hour before dawn. We will deploy immediately, but there will be a command vehicle approaching the enemy installation first. The boss want tae gie us all one last chance to get oot o' this wi'oot any shootin'."

That's my father-in-law he's talking about, I thought.

"The Highlanders will lead the assault from the center. We'll be supporting their left flank, over here. One of the American tanks will be behind us, so duck if ye hear a big boom behind ye. If the situation warrants, the tank may pull ahead to help shelter us from enemy fire, but dinna count on it. He's there frae the same reason we are, coverin' the Highlanders, no' us. Royal Army Medical Corps Volunteers will establish a field station here," indicating a sheltered area behind a turn of the hills, "and there are full hospital facilities aboard Dropship One.

"This is likely gang tae be quick work, one way or th'other. Basically, we're hittin' em wi' an old-fashioned *blitzkrieg*. Get in fast, hit hard, hit hard, hit harder. Poosh through, destroy their command and facilities, split up their ranks, isolate the fragments, and wipe 'em oot. It's a guid, simple theory. An' it works dom well, when it works."

"Sergeant, what will the other units be doing?" asked Mazurski.

Glencannon's eyes flashed annoyance. "Nothing we need tae know about." He stood looking at us another moment, debating whether to share one last thought. "If things start tae go bad, very bad . . . we'll be oot quick. No-one's gonna die for somebody else's medal, especially nobody in my command. That's all I can tell ye. Try tae get some sleep, oopf," as we hit another pothole. "Try no tae worry. It only hurts ye. Play cards if ye canna sleep. Or if ye've got tae think of something, review your weapon's technical specs.

"Right, I'm off. Any other questions?"

We shook our heads. "Ten-huh!" barked Corporal Chen, and we snapped up.

She looked us over. "You heard the sarge. Hit the racks. Someone douse the lights."

We hit another pothole, and I slept.

Landing was a gentle bump, but I woke like we'd taken a meteor strike, with my heart pounding. This was it. I heard the hydraulics of the main hatch letting down. At Corporal Chen's direction, we retrieved our rifles and tightened up our clothing for action.



Glencannon stepped in. "Assemble your unit outside, Corporal. Not you, Cain. The boss wants you for something." Whatever this was, I wasn't expecting it. I shrugged as eyes looked at me curiously. "Come with me."

I followed the sergeant outside, where a large Saracen command vehicle waited. It resembled a Chariot, although somewhat bigger and with a lot more armor plating. I ducked inside, saluted automatically as I saw Brigadier West and Colonel Keith-Ross. The Governor was there too, of course.

"Good morning, Private," said John. "I wanted you here as Ambassador, since you've already done such a good job of it. I want you to help deliver this last message to the Tea-O' An. They seem to put great importance on protocol, and the more different people I have speaking for me shows how powerful I am."

"Understood, sir."

Don hit the throttles and the Saracen rolled around the edge of the hills which sheltered our drop zone. My heart pounded as I saw how close we were to the enemy base, no more than a mile. How could they not know we were here? Well, we were about to announce ourselves anyway, so there was no element of surprise to worry about, in any case. Don rolled us in a little closer, and stopped at the top of a dune. I didn't know what their game was, but we were about as perfect a target as anyone could ask for.

I really, really, hoped my friends knew what they were doing.

John powered up the video and hailed the Tea-O' An base. After a moment, the screen flickered and I saw the face of an alien. This was their commander, John whispered to me. Its eyes seemed bigger and set further apart than the others I had seen. It was not some different species, I was sure, but something about this one reminded me more of a mantis than a lizard. Just individual differences or indicative of some kind of caste structure, perhaps?

"Commander," said John. "You know who I am. You know the offer I have made you. These are my retinue. My Ambassador will address you." John handed me the mike. "You know what to say. Just say it straight out, in your own words. We'll take it from there."

I keyed the mike. "Tea-O' An. I speak for the Governor and for all of our people on this world. We do not recognize your rule. We offer a compromise. This is a large world. Let your people live on this southern half, and let our people live on the northern half. Maybe we won't be friends, but we don't have to be enemies. But we will not be your subjects."

The video shot pulled back, and showed the Tea-O' An leader at a desk which looked startlingly prosaic. It could have come from any business office on Earth. A line of subordinates flanked him on either side, his own retinue.

He stared straight at the camera, said nothing. He finally looked back at some work at his desk.

"That was a flat-out refusal," said John. "He acted as if you had not even spoken. More than a refusal, that was practically a deliberate insult."

He passed the mike to Don. "You try."

Don spoke in a florid, ceremonial style which Sandy told us the Tea-O' An set great store by. "Tea-O' An. I am the supreme commander of the military forces of our people on this world. I am a commander of thousands. The commanders of hundreds bow to me, and I bow to none, not even to our chief, our governor.

"Our people are peaceful, and prefer to live in peace. We see no reason for our people to make war upon each other, but you have injured and insulted our chief, our governor, in a manner which has caused him much grief and shame." He referred, of course, to the Scourging. "We prefer peace," he repeated, "but one thing we treasure even above peace is liberty. Let us live here in liberty, and we will forget the humiliation your people inflicted on our chief, our governor.

“This is the third time we have offered you this peace, and if you refuse a third time, we are prepared to fight. We will avenge the wrongs done to us, and we will leave you no part of this world.”

The aliens looked at each other. Don had caught their attention at least. They seemed to communicate between themselves. The one who stood farthest from the leader asked, “You will make war on us?”

“Yes,” said Don.

There was another silent debate among the aliens. The leader looked directly into the camera, and addressed us himself. His speech was slightly stilted, seemingly less familiar with the English language.

“We – do not – take – the prisoners.”

The screen went black.

“Well, Governor. That’s it. Awaiting your orders.”

Anguish squeezed an unfamiliar grimace unto John’s face. He hung his head for a moment, as if praying; perhaps he did.

“Let’s go.”

Keith-Ross spoke into his wristwatch once more. “Edged and taken.”

Don engaged the engines and started backing down the ridge. “Don, you’ll get me back to my unit, please?” He nodded, but his attention was elsewhere.

The Colonel continued looking at his watch, then started counting. “Three . . . two . . . one . . .”

I stood staring and listening, stunned, as a series of explosions shook the ground, more than I could count. Across the sand, the alien barracks were devastated as blast after blast rocked them.

My mouth poured a string of astonished expletives I had almost forgotten since being married.

Don turned to me and grinned. “Were you asking something about the Gurkhas, Bobby?”

“How – how – what – ?”

He explained later that the Gurkhas had flown in the night before and mined the barracks, then pulled back and awaited the order to set them off. Almost three quarters of the alien forces were dead or disabled in those first fifteen seconds after war was declared. As Don had suggested, the Gurkhas practically won the war for us before the rest of us even fired a shot. I learned too, that I had heard 35 explosions. There were six charges placed in each of the barracks; the Gurkha sergeant later apologized, profusely, that one of them had failed to go off.

That was all, as I say, afterwards. Now, the Saracen skimmed across the sand, back towards the drop site. We pulled around the end of the ridge, making room for the Highlanders who were already marching. I jumped out of the vehicle and raced over to the American Patrol.

“Hey, did anybody grab my– Oh, thanks Will.” He handed me my rifle and kit. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Sure I did. You said yourself, we’re buddies.” He gave me a happy grin.

“What was them explosions?” asked Dusty.

“The shooting’s already started, whaddya think? And with any luck, it’s almost done, too.”

Glencannon was shouting at us, demanding to know if we thought we were at a society tea party and that’s why we were standing around chatting like a bevy of old ladies instead of being in ranks like the soldiers we pretended to be.

There was screaming and shouting, and I was afraid that we were taking casualties already, but it was only the Highlanders advancing and cutting loose with centuries-old war cries.

Glencannon had us pace them closely, fanning out slightly (15 soldiers can’t fan very far) guarding against ambush.

The artillery pieces were well protected behind the ridge, lobbing in kinetic projectiles and plasma. The one tank growled along behind us, the other headed for the other side of the field. A fast ground-transport slipped by, kicking up sand and dust under its turbofans. It looked like the Japanese sharpshooters, and that they were going to be slipped around to the rear of the base to provide supporting fire and cut off any retreat. The Gurkhas were towards the rear of the base too, I learned later. Between them, the Japanese, and the massive frontal assault, the Tea-O' An would be caught in a blistering three-way crossfire of lead and laser. That was the plan.

"Dusty, who you tag-teamin' with?" I called as we ran.

"I'm with your long-lost cousin here," he called back, jerking his thumb at Dan Cain.

"You two mind each other good. Anything happens to one of you, I'll kick the other one's ass!"

Glencannon held up his hand and yelled, "Hit the dirt!" Beside us, the hundreds of Highlanders joined us lying flat in the sand. There was roaring overhead as more artillery flew in and pounded the enemy.

The artillery subsided.

"On your feet, buttercups!" shouted Glencannon. He touched his earpiece, listened to his next orders. "Safeties off and charge 'em up, it's time tae go tae work!"

I twisted down the clumsy safety lever, made sure the magazine was snug, and pulled back the heavy spoon-shape of the charging handle, loading a round into the chamber and cocking the firing pin. It snapped back, with its authoritative clack. The same sound repeated around me, and it was encouraging.

Only now did we start seeing activity scurrying around the Tea-O' An base. Beside us, the Highlanders unleashed a blood-curdling roar at the sight of the foe, and broke into a full charge. The morning was still in semi-darkness, but soon the surrounding hills blazed with the searing glare of lasers and the flash of powder.

I recalled a few words of a song I heard some Highlanders singing the night before:

*Now's the day and now's the hour,  
See the scope of battle lour. . .  
Welcome to your gory bed,  
Or to victory!*

As the entire force drew into range, the charge slowed. Resistance was fairly heavy, but disorganized. From the Scots I heard cries, "For The Robinson! For The Robinson!" As we pressed closer, and the mayhem became more personal, I started hearing the shouts of "Don't look, madam!" which were to pass into legend and history.

The Patrol continued to move. As it became evident that the enemy forces were rapidly diminishing and trying to find cover in and around the mostly-ruined barracks, we who had started out to defend from a flank assault were ordered to press ahead and entrap the enemy that same way. We jogged out to try and get an approach more from the southwest.

The closer we got the more fire we attracted. The aliens used, we could now see, not just energy weapons, but a vicious projectile as well. Probably a magnetic based firing system, it shot razor-sharp pinwheels an inch or so across at speeds close to that of our own bullets. They rather resembled the legendary shuriken of the ninja, except smaller, and seemed to be fired in bursts of two or three or four. They looked like they were designed to shred open flesh and blood vessels in a particularly horrific and demoralizing manner. I know one of the Australians died with his head ripped nearly off by a burst of them, and more than a dozen Highlanders fell with the pinwheels embedded in them.

Meanwhile, something else seemed to be happening. In an empty space in front of the ruined barracks, we could see what appeared to be large squares in the pavement, maybe twenty feet to a side – doors of some kind?

“Sergeant, look!” I shouted. Yes, doors, as one of them started to roll aside. Then another. I looked at how tenaciously the aliens were defending their ground. Whatever these doors were, they meant something valuable to whoever was running the show. I felt a terrible chill as I wondered what size laser cannon would fit through an opening of that size, and suggested that thought to Glencannon.

He looked, saw, and came to the same conclusion. “Shi’! If tha’s wha’ it looks like, we’re all deid. Corporal Chen, we need tae get closer and keep the lizards awa’ from the doors!”

He stood for a moment yelling into his microphone. If only we had aircraft! A couple bombs dropped straight down those shafts would work wonders. We were drawing even more fire now, as the urgency of our advance became more apparent. I heard a couple of screams behind me. Reilly was on the ground, and so was Will. Oh God, no, not Will. “Who’s with Reilly!?” I screamed.

Levine turned back and dropped to the ground to help. “Sarge, call for medics! Medics!” he yelled.

“Will, you all right?”

He didn’t answer for a second. “I think so. I think it’s just my leg. Caught a couple of those pinwheels in my shin is all. I think Reilly’s worse.”

I cut his trouser leg with a knife. Sure enough, two gashes about a half-inch deep furrowed his shin and calf. He was bleeding, but not badly. I ripped cloth from the trouser leg and pressed against the wound.

“That – really hurts when you do that.”

“Sorry. Hey, I see an evac coming.” An ultra-fast turbo-fan speeder was hurtling in low, hugging the ground. It was painted white, with the ancient symbol of a red cross on the doors and roof.

Medics took away Will and Reilly. Reilly lived, but lost a lot of blood and had trouble walking for a long time because of a severed tendon. Will’s wounds were as superficial as they seemed.

This was all done in minutes.

We pressed on. The aliens seemed to be concentrating their fire on us, sensing the danger from our new approach. Why wasn’t the tank covering our advance?

“Sarge,” I yelled. “What’s that tank doing?”

“I dunno! I canna get him on the radio! Levine, run ye back and tell him to open up on the buggers!” Glencannon took a breath. “Everyone doon! Let the tank get aheid of us and block some of the hostile fire!”

*if but once you hesitate or retreat*

“Sarge, that lift is almost up, and I can see the cannon! We can’t wait!”

Off to the right, the Highlanders were engaged with a knot of fierce defenders. Where were the Japanese and the Gurkhas?

“Sarge, gimme one of those grenades! I want to try something.”

With a split-second hesitation, he handed me one of the two he carried.

*be bold but not rash*

“Dusty, come on and cover me!” He glanced quickly to Glencannon, who nodded, and followed. I raced zigzag through the sand. I wanted to get the grenade down the shaft, where it might knock out any of the cannon’s crew, and maybe the cannon itself. I was close now, drawing a lot of fire. I felt a searing energy blast graze my arm. It knocked me off balance; all my weight went onto my weak ankle, and it folded under me. I hit the sand.

“Y’all OK, Broadway?” Dusty blazed away over my head.

*do not falter*

“Gotta get closer.” Another 20 feet ahead I could see a small rise of ground, just enough to duck behind. “Come on.” I sprinted 15 feet, every step an agony shooting up my leg. If my ankle wasn’t broken before, it probably was now. I threw myself the last few feet and crawled behind the rise.

I peeked over the top and saw the body of the cannon itself.

“All right, Dust, this is it. Cover me good.”

Dusty’s AK chattered above me; he was firing well-aimed three-round bursts. Aliens fell. I pulled the pin on the grenade, wished that we’d gotten some actual training with them and not just the lecture.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . .

*but not rash*

I counted off three extra seconds, then stood, aimed, and threw the grenade, baseball-style, into the cannon shaft. I saw it settle right next to the base of the weapon.

9 . . . 10 –

There was a brilliant flash as high explosive and thermite covered the cannon platform. The handful of aliens on the platform with it vanished, and the cannon itself was already melting under the thermite. I heard raucous cheering from all around, including a number of lusty “Don’t look, madam!”s.

The rest of the American Patrol were racing up behind us now, AKs stuttering. Finally, our tank let go with a long overdue “*whoompf!*” and struck the middle of the plaza area. Seconds later, another shell flew in and struck the second cannon, which was just starting to poke itself up into the air.

*press ahead*

“Come on, Dusty, let’s finish ’em!” No more than 20 or 30 aliens remained in the plaza.

“Dang it, I gotta reload!” I got up on my knees, and let off a few more bursts as Dusty slipped more rounds into the empty magazine. “Dang, a body goes through three hunded rounds fast.” I had one full magazine left, which I swapped in.

“Right, up to that next ridge!” I hopped along ridiculously, using my rifle as a walking stick, threw myself to the ground. Dusty dropped down next to me. He set his AK on the sand.

“You can have what’s left there, Broadway, I don’t think I’m goin’ any further today.”

“Medics!” I screamed. “Sarge, Dusty’s hit, Dusty’s hit!”

He stared up at me. “It hurts suthin’ fierce, but I don’t think they got nothin’ important. Think I need suthin’ to tie my hand up with.” Dusty raised his left arm. “Well, that’s why it hurts so bad, ain’t it?” he asked me, looking at his hand. Blood was spurting out from where fingers used to be. Ragged edges told of the ravages of the Tea-O’ An pinwheels.

“If it don’t trouble you none, Broadway, think you might get a tourniquet on whiles I still got some blood on the inside?”

I snapped out of my horrified shock, and ripped his shirt sleeve, used that to stop the bleeding. “Hang tight, Dust, I see an evac. You’re gonna be fine.” I raised up and let off a few more rounds, but the fighting was almost done. The Patrol were at the edge of the plaza, and finally, I was hearing crossfire from beyond – I looked up and saw six of the Japanese women carefully shooting from the hillside beyond. They were damn good. One shot, one kill.

Highlanders were pressing on fiercely. Evidently the aliens neither took prisoners nor became prisoners themselves.

“Dang, I’m settin’ in some puddle here, Bobby. Roll me outta this a mite, would ya?”

I dragged him off to the side a bit. The sand under him was bloody mud, and then I saw where another pinwheel had ripped open his thigh.

“Easy, Bobby. I’m all woozy, and my heart’s a-poundin’ like a racehorse in the home stretch.”

“Lie down, relax. The evac will be here in a second. Listen, we’ve already won, so don’t you dare go anywhere. Or – or Penny will be very upset with you.” I started lashing another tourniquet.

Beyond our little refuge, a last few shots were ringing out, and were being replaced by sounds of cheering. The evac pulled up, turbines whining, and dropped to the ground. The side popped open, and out jumped Penny with another medic.

“Hey, look at that, Dusty, see who’s here for you? Hi, my love,” I said casually. “Busy day?”

She ignored me as the two of them loaded Dusty on to a stretcher, and the stretcher into the ground car.

“I’m fine,” she finally said, voice brittle. “You hurt too? How bad?”

“A ride back would be nice. I think I finally broke that ankle.”

“You’ll have to wait for the next one. We’re full.” She hopped back in to the car, and slammed the hatch.

I heard one last whine and crackle of a positron laser and uproarious howls of “Don’t look, madam!”, then laughter and cheering and hooting.

The battle was won. It wasn’t even lunchtime yet.

It had not been a cheap victory. The American Patrol came through largely unscathed, Dusty and Reilly were our worst. The Highlanders lost a lot, at least forty, and they hadn’t yet finished sorting out casualties.

The Japanese women suffered the worst losses, proportionally. Evidently the Tea-O’ An couldn’t believe that we were attacking with the seemingly few numbers we had. When the women opened fire from the hillside behind, the enemy thought that was the main attack, and that what was really our main force was simply a diversion. Those 35 women absorbed an assault meant for a thousand. Five survived, fighting to the end.

Unseen through most of the battle, the Gurkhas played a critical role. After blowing up the barracks, they had discovered the entrance to an underground tunnel system which was likewise swarming with aliens. They fought a battle below ground every bit as fierce as the one on the surface, and scored an important victory, taking out the Tea-O’ An command bunker. They suffered one loss.

Medics tended to my ankle at the field hospital. It wasn’t broken, but sprained about as badly as it could be without being broken. They wrapped it, shot it full of painkiller, and told me not to walk too much. Penny wasn’t in the tent then; an officer told me that if she was with Medical, she would be aboard Drop One, tending to the wounded.

All around the area, quonset-type shelters were popping up, cookers of different kinds began their magic, and it was evident that no-one was going anywhere for a while.

I made my way over to the Saracen command vehicle, found my high-echelon friends. There was some enthusiastic cheering and back-slapping all around. Sandy congratulated me on what I had done with the grenade, Don was talking incessantly about one bit of action or another he had seen.

John alone seemed subdued; I guessed our casualties weighed heavily on his shoulders. Knowing him, he probably regretted the Tea-O' An deaths as well. He would by far have preferred even a wary peace.

I had another responsibility to look after, though. Since Penny seemed to be busy at work still, I radioed home to Mum to make sure the twins were doing all right.

"They're fine, Bobby," she said. "They're eating enough solid food now that they've hardly dented the bottles Penny left. They were a little cranky at naptime," she chuckled, "and I think they miss Mama. But you two finish up whatever you need to do, and don't worry about us."

"OK, I'll let her know. You need to talk to John?"

"Already did, thanks."

"All right then. Hey, Mum – I . . . miss you."

I heard her chuckle again. "I miss you too, Bobby. Thank you. See you soon."

There was a knock on the side of the vehicle, and a British Sergeant-Major stood there, saluting. Sandy returned the salute.

"Pardon me, sirs," he said. "Setting up quarters. What would the gentlemen prefer? Individual? Four-person? Larger?"

Sandy looked around. "One large hut do for us, lads? Or, oh dear –" He looked at me quizzically.

John picked it up. "One large, and if possible, a double for the Ambassador and his wife." He gave me one of those embarrassing, sly winks.

"Oh, of course, sir. Right away." I heard him barking out orders, and in moments the Saracen was sandwiched between the two huts.

I was getting restless. I assumed Penny was still busy, but I wanted to go back to the Patrol. "Um, by your leave, sirs? I'd like to check in with my buddies."

They shooed me on out amidst a hail of "By all means," and "Good job out there," and other pleasantries. As I made my back over to Dropship Two, it was obvious a hearty celebration was already getting into swing at Drop One. A good 50 Highlanders were gathered by a stack of boxes: judging by what their hands held, the boxes were full of bottles, and the bottles were full of beer and Scotch whisky. A bagpiper (just the one? I wondered) was warming up his instrument – I assumed that from the raucous squawks it blurted out as he fiddled with various bits of the plumbing – and a couple more seemed to be rehearsing the steps of some Scottish folk dance. A couple of them waved at me, and shouted, "Huzzah for the Yanks! Come hae a wee drink wi' us laddie!"

"Later, thanks! And I'll bring the others if you don't mind!"

"Aye right, more the merrier, and we're a' gang tae be dom merry the nicht!" Roars of laughter followed this declaration.

I waved back, and found my way to Patrol quarters. They were happy, but quiet, and I noted the absences. "Hey gang. Er, good afternoon, Corporal Chen, ma'am."

She came over and shook my hand. "At ease. We're done and you're all civilians again. Good job out there, Bobby."

"Thanks Corp – Mandy. Will, how you doing? Did you see Dusty? Or Reilly?"

"Ah, I'm fine. Couple stitches and a bandage, then my own sister kicks me out of sickbay, how do you like that?" Everyone laughed. "No really, I'm fine. I saw Dusty and Mike up there, they're hurt all right, but they'll be OK. Dusty might have to go back Earthside to get new fingers, though."

“Oh damn. That stinks.”

“Hey Broadway!” Dan Cain addressed me. “You said you’d kick my ass if I let anything happen to him, but this was on your watch. You want I should kick yours instead?”

“I’d tell you to go right ahead, but I think I’ll be spending a lot of time the next few months doing it myself. Hey, where’s Jones?”

“She’s in the shower. We’ve got just the one right now, so we’re taking turns. Still the same clothes to put on, unfortunately.” Everyone looked down ruefully at their dirtied, muddied, and bloodied clothing.

“Every little bit helps. Anyway, looks like the Scotsmen are setting up a helluva blowout next door. Everyone want to go over and have a bit to eat and drink?”

“I think I’d like a *lot* to eat and drink!” replied Dan.

“Seconded!” chimed in Levine and Mazurski at the same time.

After a while, all of us were cleaned up, nominally at least, and we went outside. A good-size bonfire was roaring amidst the Scots, and a remarkable pile of empty bottles had already accumulated. There were two pipers now, playing together –most of the time at least– and a couple others were attempting to show off their dancing skills. I guessed their movements were inhibited by both the sand beneath their feet and the emptiness of the bottles.

We marched over singing:

*Oh I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy  
A Yankee Doodle do or die!  
A real live nephew of my Uncle Sam . . .*

What we lacked in musical accomplishment we made up for in volume and enthusiasm. As we approached, the Highlanders all started shouting and applauding and whistling, and the pipers stopped to allow us our moment. When we finished, our hosts roared their approval and swarmed upon us, pressing bottles into our hands, clapping us on the shoulders, shaking hands. All repeated several times over how impressed they were with the job we had done in battle. They told us stories of their own skirmishes as well. Once in a while, one of the Highlanders would suddenly turn away at the mention of a name – a friend or relation lost that day. All else politely ignored this little maneuver when it happened.

I poured down a bottle of beer quickly, then a second. I wanted to be careful; I remembered with unnerving clarity Penny’s reception the last time I had come to bed liquored up. Carefully, I nursed along a third bottle.

I made dozens of new friends in short order. One of them pressed a larger bottle on me, full of an amber distillation. He was telling me something, but his accent was so thick I was couldn’t quite understand him. I tipped the bottle carefully to my lips, and almost gagged. Whatever it was tasted like it had been run through that bonfire – it was as smoky as a barbecue.

A few of the Scots laughed uproariously at my reaction, and chattered away at me, trying to explain something; the only word I was getting clearly sounded like “Ee-lay,” whatever that might mean, possibly the brand of the whisky. Finally one of them hushed the others down, and spoke to me more distinctly.

“It’s a choice whusky from a wee island off the West of Sco’ land, an’ it’s aye smoky lik’ tha’. It takes twa or three guid sips to really get used tae it, but then it’s the maist delichtful thing ye can imagine. Aye noo, lad, tae ye a couple o’ guid braw pulls o’ it.”

Skeptically I tilted my head back again and sucked up another mouthful of liquid smoke, but managed to swallow it down. It didn’t exactly burn, but I could feel it, oily, all down my throat.



“An’ another, laddie! C’mon noo, I’ve always heard Yanks didnae ken hoo to drink, but pairhops ye’re one that does!”

I knocked back another slug of the stuff, and I was surprised – as they said, it was starting to taste good, with all different layers of taste on the tongue. I admitted as much, and tested the theory with another taste. It was damn good now. Somehow, I decided that Corporal Chen – no, just plain Mandy now, I told myself hazily – would love the stuff.

I spotted her around the other side of the bonfire, made the strangely long journey to her, and pressed the bottle on her as the Scots had on me. I wanted to explain the three-sip rule, but for some reason, all I did was hold up three fingers and point to the bottle with the other hand. We ended up passing it back and forth between us for a while, until I suspected I was getting the slightest bit tipsy. I decided this when I tried to walk, and discovered I was actually sitting in the sand. I got up, walked back and forth a bit, which did clear my head somewhat, but made my ankle start to throb again. I sat on a rock, conveniently handy to the bottle collection.

The pipers were firing up their instruments again, and some of the Scots were attempting to dance. One of them was trying to teach Mandy the steps of a dance, holding her arms and hands up into curious poses. Their feet darted back and forth, then tangled together. They fell laughing into the sand, and seemed in no hurry to stand back up. This seemed to start something of a chain reaction, as a few more would-be dancers fell to the sand, laughing uproariously.

The pipers stopped, and one of them cried out, “Enough of the boo’ shi’! Get Wee Willie up tae gie us a proper Fling! Ye want these Yanks to go home thinkin’ the Scots are nowt but a pack of drunken stumblebums?”

A mixed chorus of confused “Aye!”s and “Nae!”s met the question. A smallish man, who had been sitting somewhat away from the revels stepped forward.

“If ye insist, lads,” said Wee Willie. “A proper Hielan’ Fling,” he both announced to the crowd, and directed one of the pipers.

Even in my amber haze, I could see that here was a real dancer. His feet moved with precision, and his arms snapped up and down through the different gestures crisply. The sand gave him a couple of slight mis-steps, but his performance was obviously far removed from the clumsy displays of the others. He finished the Fling, turned to the crowd. “One more, lads?”

“Aye, Wullie, gie us the Sword Dance the noo!”

“Well, if ye insist. Fortunately, I brocht ma dancin’ sword doon wi’ me on the chance I might need it!”

Hoots and catcalls greeted his statement. From somewhere towards the ship, hands were passing a sword toward Wee Willie. Other hands were passing beer bottles, and I decided it would be discourteous to refuse.

The piper struck up a different tune now, one that was powerful and wild. If that smoky whisky was music, it would sound like what the piper now played. Wee Willie held the sword and scabbard crossed over his head, then placed them before him on the sand. His feet moved like clockwork, pointing out the quarters made by the cross-shape, first one foot then the other, the pattern growing more intricate each pass.

Suddenly all the Scots shouted and clapped their hands together, and the piper played the tune even quicker. Wee Willie hopped madly, never quite touching either sword or scabbard, but challenging himself to see how close he could come. All were clapping along now, faster and faster, urging piper and dancer to more madcap tempos.

Piper and dancer both knew the game and were grinning as they reached the limits of their abilities. Finally the piper stopped dead with a “Tae hell wi’ ye a’!” and Willie made one final leap and landing. With the final step he laughed raucously and kicked the sword away from him – in my direction, as it happened. It skittered across the sand and stopped by my feet.

The Scots and the Yanks cheered and hooted and applauded and drank even more. Piper and dancer bowed almost shyly. I picked up Willie’s sword and handed it over to him.

As I did so, one of the Highlanders turned and stood, stock-still. He was rather short, with flaming red hair curling tightly, and a beard to match. He could have been the Scottish version of a leprechaun. “Wai’ a minute, laddie, wai’ a minute.”

He scrutinized me as carefully as his alcoholized eyes could manage. He posed the sword in my hand, and stepped back to inspect his work.

He let out a wild hoot. “Tha’s him! Tha’s him! Tha’s the mad bugger I wis tellin’ ye about!”

Uncertain laughter met this announcement. A voice called, “Och, it’s Jamie Wi’ The Sight seein’ things again!”

“Nae, nae! I wisnae seein’ things, nowt but him! The Yank oot there wi’ a firkin’ great sword in his hand! Tha’s him! I seen him masel’, he was swingin’ a firkin’ great sword in one hand and lobbin’ a firkin’ grenade wi’ t’ other! Wha’ a show, ye mad firkin’ bugger, wha’ a show!”

I stared, bemused, and passed the sword back to Wee Willie.

“Sorry, pal,” I said.

*carry this with you into battle*

“I had an AK and a grenade.”

*it serves well the man of valor*

“But I’m pretty damn sure I didn’t have a sword. You must have been – dreaming or something.”

*nothing, but a dream*

I turned and strode off, shaking. To calm my nerves, I finished up what was in the beer bottle and started walking, a random ramble until my head cleared a bit again. I may not have been drunk, but I wasn’t entirely sober yet.

## **Part 5** **Discouraging Epiphany**

I wondered if Penny was finished in the infirmary yet, or if she’d found her way to bed. I decided I’d better do just that. I pushed open the door of the little plastic hut. A light was on, and I saw instantly that Penny was in bed, turned to the wall, hugging a pillow. Oops, I’d been here before.

I dropped my clothes and slipped beneath the covers with no attempt at deceit. Best get any lecture over and done, I thought. Maybe she really had been sleeping, maybe not.

Penny spun toward me, clutching the pillow like a doll. “*Where the goddam hell have you been?*” she screeched. I jerked back. Her unprecedented verbal assault was like a smack in the face, and her hand lifted as if she might give me the real thing.

I stared, aghast. Her eyes were shot red, rimmed with dark circles, blazing fury. “I came here needing you, and you weren’t here and now you’re here and all stinking with booze again!” She flung herself back towards the wall and sobbed.

“I was with friends. My love.”

“Well I hope you had yourself one hell of a good time! Do you have any idea what I’ve been through?!”

“I fought a war today, you know.”

“So did I! I was trying to patch up men and women who were barely alive!” She stopped to breathe, heavily. Tears still flowed.

“I’m sorry, angel. I guess it’s hard seeing that kind of thing for the first time.” I hadn’t seen too much gore today up close, but I’d seen plenty in my old life in the Rescue Survey, and knew it was tough.

“You don’t know a goddam thing.” Penny pulled into a ball, still hugging the pillow. “I was down where we were patching up the bad ones enough to get them to the infirmary in the ship. That was one end of the tent. The other end was the ones that we didn’t even bother with. Except to make them comfortable. Do you understand that much?”

Oh. Triage. I understood. I nodded silently, and placed my hand on her head.

She pulled back and looked up at me. “Six men died in my arms today, Bobby. Six men died while I held them and said stupid things and couldn’t do a thing about it. One of them, his stomach –” She held her hands in a gruesomely suggestive circle over her middle. “There was nothing even there,” she whimpered. “We didn’t know how he could even be alive. Oh, shit.” She pulled herself over the head of the bed and began heaving. After a terrible pause, she turned back to me. “He was alive ten minutes like that, Bobby. Ten minutes. And he talked to me. He talked, *to me.*”

“My angel, it’s not your fault –”

Penny shrieked again. “Don’t you get it yet, you stupid son of a bitch? *It was my fault!* I’m the one who played little helpless girly-girl and begged them to come help, and he did and there was nothing left of his insides and he *died in my arms!*”

I felt like my own stomach got kicked out with that revelation. Oh my God, poor Penny. It had been almost a game to her, hadn’t it? For a while anyway.

She turned to me again, her eyes still pouring. “Shall I tell you the best part, dear husband of mine? The really really truly best part? *He knew who I was.* He looked at me, he could hardly talk at all, and he said, ‘Why, you’re the girl that was on the television!’ And – he smiled at me. He was younger than me, Bobby, younger than me, I don’t think he was any older than Will. I killed him, Bobby, I killed them all.”

“Oh Penny . . .” I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“They all – they either recognized me from that broadcast, or someone told them or they recognized my name, and they all died with me holding them, and they all smiled at me like I wasn’t the one that had just done that to them. I wanted to just start running and screaming and screaming but I held myself together until it was all done and then I started crying and I’ve hardly stopped and Dr. Smith wanted to give me a sedative but I wouldn’t let him, I just wanted to find you and hold you and hear your voice and you weren’t here at all and now you’re back all liquored up again and . . . and . . .”

“Penny, my angel, I –”

“The Face That Launched A Thousand Spaceships, huh? Thanks, but no thanks.”

“I think you need to sleep, angel. Maybe at least you’ll be able to think better in the morning.”

“Why, Bobby, why?” She gripped my wrists tightly, nails cutting my flesh. Penny looked up at me with tormented eyes. “I don’t know if I can live with this, Bobby. I mean it. I really don’t know if I can live a lifetime knowing I did this.”

Oh, shit. Bad to worse. Again, in Rescue Survey, we'd been trained to deal with survivors of crashes who went suicidal for one reason or another. Usually our best response was to keep them strapped into a bunk or launch couch until we could get them home to professional care.

I held Penny close. Her sobbing had slowed, but at the same time her breathing was growing rapid and shallow – hyperventilating. “I think we need to see Dr. Smith, after all,” I whispered to her.

John pounded on the door then. “What’s going on? Is something wrong?”

“Come in, John, quickly, please,” I responded, hastily pulling my jumpsuit up over my waist.

John Robinson pushed the door open and stood, assessing the situation. Hearing his daughter screaming, he had jumped first to some unwarranted conclusions and pinned me under a baleful eye.

“John, get on the line to Drop One and see if you can get Dr. Smith. Tell him Penny’s going to need that sedative after all.”

As he grasped the situation, he sank onto the bed and took his daughter’s hand. “Darling, what’s wrong?”

Penny hugged herself and sat doubled over, rocking slightly back and forth. “I didn’t know it would be like this,” she whimpered. “How could I?”

“Penny, darling?”

“John, please, get Smith over here. She’s bad.”

He stood and caressed her cheek briefly, then went to radio for the doctor.

We sat on the bed. Penny wrapped her arms around herself, rocking back and forth, whispering unintelligibly. I got behind her, and wrapped my arms around her in turn, gripped her tightly. She was rigidly tense, and every few minutes her muscles twitched, as if wanting to jump and bolt away.

I said nothing, but quietly “Sshhh. Sshhh,” ed her as comfortingly as I could. By now my head and ankle were throbbing. I desperately needed to lie down and sleep.

John came back in to sit with us and hold her hand.

Doctor Smith appeared promptly and injected her. Immediately I felt her body relax and melt under my touch. We stretched her out to rest. “That should keep her sleeping for twelve hours, young man. I suggest you get to sleep yourself and we’ll get you both home in the morning. And how are you feeling, may I ask?”

“I’m all right, Doctor, thanks. Just a little achy here and there.”

“No similar symptoms? I’m sure you are aware that adverse reactions may manifest some time after such a traumatic occasion.”

“Yeah. I saw some pretty bad stuff when I was working Survey. Used to get nightmares once in a while, but never . . .” gesturing at Penny. “Of course, I never had to think any of that was my own fault.”

“You think, then, that perhaps some of this *may* have been?”

“Well, yes, in a sense. I mean, she’s right, we *are* the ones that went to Earth asking for volunteers.”

“What do you think of that now?” asked Smith.

“We had to. We had no other choice. We’d been invaded, and . . .” I looked up. “You’re asking me things like you’re my headshrinker, Dr. Smith.”

“I am trained in psychiatry and Jungian analysis,” he admitted. “And I am somewhat concerned for you too, my boy. When we get back home, I’d like to talk to you from time to time about all this. Just as a friend. Sometimes it helps just to talk things over with someone. Of course I’ll be devoting a good deal of real professional care to your wife, but I’ll be sure to spend a little time with you too.”

I hardly thought that necessary, but nodded politely to humor the Doctor.

“In the meantime,” he continued, patting Penny’s sleeping head, “Do get yourself a good night’s sleep. Oh, and may I give you this, for your ankle; I saw the report from the medics. It will ease the pain and help relieve the swelling.”

He offered me a chewable pill, which I thankfully swallowed down. I felt my muscles relax and the pain in my ankle washed away. Even my headache throttled back a few notches. Suddenly I was very tired. Heedless of Smith and John, I stripped naked and slipped under the sheet. I closed my eyes and felt like I was back up in free-fall.

I heard the door open, and felt a wisp of breeze on my face. Someone was saying, “Think they’re going to be all right?” just before the door shut, and I wondered who was going to be all right and what might be wrong with them.

Bright sun streaming through the small window of the hut woke me. Penny was still asleep. I had a bit of morning head, undoubtedly due to the strange liquors which had been pressed on me the evening before; my ankle felt uncomfortable but not painful. My hands were sore, my shoulder too, from the recoil of the rifle, and a lot of muscles here and there felt weak. It could have been a lot worse.

I remembered Smith giving me a pill after he sedated Penny, and going to bed. Something nagged at the back of my mind, something someone said – or did I dream it? I dismissed it, and turned my attention to Penny. I recalled her episode last night with anguish, and Smith’s desire to get her back home.

I rubbed her shoulder softly, but she gave no indication of wakefulness. I slipped out of bed, put my filthy clothes back on, and sought out John and Dr. Smith. They were sitting quietly together, watching the activity around the dropships.

After perfunctory greetings, Smith suggested I try to wake Penny so we could move out. I tried earnestly this time and succeeded. She seemed more herself this morning, but there was a wild stare in her eyes that wouldn’t go. She responded when spoken to, but wasn’t initiating any conversation, and certainly wasn’t engaging me in our usual round of banter and endearments. She dressed slowly and carefully, as if she didn’t quite recall the proper series of motions.

Smith took us back to the *Jupiter 2* in a fast air transport provided by our volunteers. The pilot dropped us off and sped back. What had taken a whole night in the clumsy dropships took under three hours like this.

Reunion at home was not the joyous event it should have been for us. At least John had called on ahead to warn Maureen of the situation; she took us in her arms and hugged us together. As happy as I was to see Mum, Penny was polite and distant, still distracted in her private world of horror.

Dr. Smith suggested, “My boy, why don’t the both of you go on down to your room, have nice warm showers, then get some clean clothes on and come on back up. I’m sure your mother will have a nice lunch cooked up for you, Penny dear.”

Smith nodded at me encouragingly, then continued, “I’ll give Maureen the rundown on what she may expect over the next few months. Penny is going to have a hard road ahead of her again, poor child. I intend to keep you fully informed as to her progress, so that you may be as helpful as possible. And I do intend to spend a little time with you too, just to ensure you are staying well. Off with you now. Cleaning up always makes one feel better.”

“I understand, doctor.” I led Penny downstairs, then spent almost half an hour in the shower, scrubbing off the accumulated filth. The jumpsuit I had worn in battle was ripped, bloodstained, and seemed irredeemably soiled. I tossed it into the incinerator bin.

I had to help Penny clean up; she was still very unresponsive. I hoped, vainly, that my attention with soap and washcloth might jog a bit of fond recollection; I might have been wiping down a mannequin.

Penny took a very long time to dress again: this time practically inventorying her entire wardrobe before selecting what to wear. When dressed, she sat on the edge of the bed, all but motionless. Suddenly she said, "I want my babies." That was some progress right there, I thought, it was her first spontaneous utterance of the day.

"Come on angel, let's go on upstairs, and Mum will bring them to you and we can all have lunch." She nodded compliantly, and a few minutes later the babies were screaming joyously in her arms. For the first time in a long while, Penny smiled. It was the beginning of a long recovery.

Twice a week, Penny sat with Dr. Smith in his cabin. Exactly what they spoke of he refused to divulge, of course, maintaining the near-sacred confidence of the analyst's couch. Often though, he would speak to me about her, about the progress she was making, or the setbacks. He would sometimes try to draw me out a little more during these sessions, asking what I thought of her state, and if I was remaining in good spirits.

For the first few weeks, we all made sure to keep close watch on her, that she didn't try to harm herself or, God forbid, the babies. There were a couple of bad episodes where she experienced a collapse as near-total as she had that first night, but there was no more talk of self-injury.

Also, she would spend time in with her father, who was putting her through a separate type of therapy. It started simply. He had gathered the names of those six men whose deaths she had shepherded, and made her write letters to them. Sometimes he would have her write rambling missives of grief and apology, 5 or 6 page diatribes of self-loathing and recrimination. Other times it would be just one or two words: "I'm sorry," or simply, "Forgive." All were addressed specifically to the individual dead men.

He taught her writing skills along the way, teaching her to take those lengthiest letters, then slash them to their cores, until what started out as several pages was reduced to a paragraph or two. Other times the letters would be speaking to the men's families. None of these were ever sent, of course. These were just her own exercise in making sense of a nightmare, coming to terms with the horror and with herself. Eventually, she would really write and send her regrets to the families, but that was still a long time off.

Meanwhile, the life of New Plymouth rolled on. The flight deck of the *Jupiter 2* was serving as the seat of government.

Governor John Robinson, with the Robot as his assistant, secretary, and Chief of Records, was holding court. He looked up, slightly startled to see Dusty Proudfoot. "Hello Dusty," he said. "What are you doing here? You're already registered as a migrant."

"Differe'n't binness today, Mr. Governor, sir. I'm, uh, me and this young lady are looking for a, uh, marriage certificate."

John and I bugged our eyes at our friend. Marriage certificate? Dusty? Behind him, a slight, slender girl stepped into view, one of the Japanese soldiers.

"This h'yar is Tomoko Sakuraba." He bent down and spoke softly to her. "*Tomo-chan, kore-wa watashi-no tomodachi des*, John Robinson, to Bobby Cain."

My jaw dropped. "Dusty, you speak Japanese? What the hell, you can barely speak English."

"Oh, I spent a lot o' my time in space watching those weird Japanese cartoons, and most of 'em was all in Japanese with English subtitled in. I just kinda picked it up. Tomo-chan here has been helpin' me. She says I know a lot o' words OK, but I ain't sayin' 'em quite right. *Honto des neh, Tomo-chan?*"

"*Mmm.*" Tomoko responded.

“But she tells me not to fret none. She comes from a part of Japan where they have a kinda funny accent, and lots o’ her shipmates used to poke fun at the way she talks, just like you’re always grinding my onions, Broadway. *Tomo-chan, Kansai-ben, neh?* Yeah, she speaks a kind called Kansai. So we got a lot in common thar. But I figgered I’m here to stay, and she is too, so I’d better hitch her up quick before one o’ them Scotties grabs her.”

Dusty filled out the simple sheet of paper which would enroll them as a married couple. “Robot, open journal, Marriage. Entry, this date,” directed John.

He then posed the question he had first given to Penny and me, and subsequently to every couple. “By what names do you wish to be known?”

Dusty leaned to his new wife, put a hand on her shoulder, and whispered in her ear. “*Atarashi, kanai-no o-namae wa?*”

Tomoko stood up as straight and proud as her frame allowed. “Missi-su Dahsty Pa-roudfoot Tomoko *deshita!*”

“Dusty Proudfoot,” stated my friend.

“Robot, note those as legal names of record.”

“Hey Dust, you know what? All these years, I don’t recall what your real name is.”

“You heard him. Legal name of record, Dusty Proudfoot.”

I sensed something interesting. “Come on, Dusty, this is me. What name were you born with?”

“I wern’t born with no name at all. I come brand new.”

“Dusty. I’ll tell Penny on you.”

He moaned softly. “Don’t’chy’all tell nobody else, huh?”

“Promise.”

“Percival. Percival Peter Proudfoot. That’s the name Mama gimme, and the only thing I ever held agin’ her. And it ain’t that no more now, so just keep that damyankee mouth o’ your’n shut about it. And if y’all want another surprise, look back thataway.”

Outside the ship, patiently waiting in line, were Don and Judy. They were holding on to each other with visible affection now. They waved in at us, and Judy held up her left hand to show off a ring.

Penny began laughing again, teasing me again, and sharing intimacy again. The boys grew, and were hardly babies any more as they stumbled about the ship, and through the sand outside.

Most wonderfully, the Robot got upgraded. Will had connived to acquire a number of modern replacement components from the ships’ Technology Sciences supplies, and replaced the Robot’s antique analog relays with proper digital circuitry. Along with that, Will installed thousands of terabytes worth of new data storage chips. The only parts Will was afraid to tamper with were the core processors: those cryptical bits of silicon which seemed to be where the Robot’s very being resided.

The Robot lost no time transferring gargantuan amounts of data from the dropships. He was especially interested in medical data and the progress which had been made in robot-assisted surgery.

Again, Will called in favors, exerted charm, and strong-armed enough supply officers to construct a Zenith Medical Systems Cybernetic Surgical Enhancement, Model ZC-15987c.

I watched with interest as Will attached this gadget for testing. On the lower deck, by the Robot’s home station, Will had removed one of the Robot’s claws, and installed the Zenith device. “All right, Robot, here’s the initial test sequence,” said Will, plugging in a small data drive.

“Oh, this feels so powerful!” exclaimed the Robot. “Look at them all!” In place of the clumsy left claw were a dozen slender, tapering probes, varying in length from 3 to 6 inches. “Cut! Slice! Caulterize! Suture!” the Robot called out as the probes went through their paces. They looked like a forest of tiny jackhammers as the tips vibrated, flashing light off of near-microscopic razor tips, flashing by themselves as superheated sparks showed their cauterizing technique. Two, I think, were micro-cameras, and these glowed with a low purple light. Holding up his new gear admiringly, the Robot looked quite frightening.

“And just what sort of circus side-show have you made yourself into now, you chrome-plated quack?” demanded Dr. Smith, emerging from his cabin.

“Behold, Dr. Smith. I am now the pre-eminent medical authority on this whole world. *You* are a hapless has-been.” He cycled his ghastly array of probes again, blades and sparks flashing, and droning the same bone-chilling whine as a dentist’s drill.

“Never! You noxious Nightingale, the human touch is an indispensable part of the medical profession. You will never have a proper bedside manner such as I!”

“Your bedside manner, Dr. Smith, consists of pulling a sheet up over your patient’s face.”

“How dare you! Were it not for my Hippocratic Oath to do no harm, even to such a Frankenstein as –”

The Robot held up his Zenith device again. The probes chattered and gleamed hypnotically. “May I offer you a complimentary vasectomy, Dr. Smith?”

With a brief shriek of panic, Smith darted back into his cabin and bolted the door. A moment later, it unbolted, he pushed Penny out, then locked himself in again.

The Robot turned to face Will and me. “I’m such a kidder. Thank you, Will Robinson, for this work you have done on me. I truly feel like a new man.”

Many of those who came as volunteers stayed as settlers. Mrs. Dusty was one of three of the five surviving Japanese women who did. Lots of the Highlanders, of course. A few dozen of the Australians and New Zealanders, a handful of Greeks and Russians. Just a few of the American Patrol, including Dan Cain and Sandra Parks, who quickly registered as Mr. & Mrs.

The medical team gave Dusty some replacement fingers. There were, sadly, any number of donor bodies stored. They weren’t the perfect matched set Earthside hospitals could have fabricated, and they weren’t quite as dexterous, but he got them quickly and without having to leave home. In later months, after the full horror of the war had faded, Dusty would confound strangers who commented on his mismatched fingers by telling them, “You could say I got ’em second-hand.”

The year rolled on. Supply and trade ships called regularly now. We reclaimed tons –literally– of topsoil from the swamps to spread and farm on. The Scots brought wives and girlfriends, seed and livestock. A ring of quonset huts made a village not far from our oasis. Like a bullseye, there was a circular village green around which the huts were built, and ringing the huts behind were planted fields. The fields were filled with vegetables, barley, and sheep. Scotsmen learned about bitterweed. Penny tormented me mercilessly about the sheep and my previous ignorance of wool.

Col. Keith-Ross returned and brought us news that the Tea-O’ An had withdrawn from this sector. Evidently they decided that Earth people were more trouble than they were worth. He also told us that between the discovery of the Robinsons and the Battle for Independence, there was renewed enthusiasm for the entire Offworld Colonization Project. A huge new wave of migrants to all the colony worlds was expected to burst off of Earth over the next two or three years.



Judy made a breakthrough discovery. In the barren lowlands off to the south, she found veins of an odd mineral. It was mostly sodium chloride –common salt– in an amalgam of other trace elements, including silicon, iron, a few organic compounds. Quite by accident, we found that if this mineral was powdered and sprinkled on our crops, it killed and prevented the bitterweed which plagued our agriculture. It appeared to act as a desiccant, and was fatal to the fungus. It was also quite edible. Dr. Smith determined that the trace substances in it were beneficial dietary supplements, and we used it almost exactly as regular salt.

I wondered if these vast lowlands filled with curious salt deposits were evidence of ancient oceans like Earth's, and began studying geology. I wondered too about the hesitant references Penny and the others had made in the past to cryptical ruins they had stumbled upon in their earliest days here. They were certain this world had borne its own civilization at one time: who knew what further mysteries lay waiting to be discovered in the vast unknown outside our little settlement?

Penny continued to recover, and returned to being the woman I knew before her trouble. Sometimes, though, I would awaken in the middle of the night to find her sitting up, asleep, cradling me in her lap, murmuring unintelligibly, holding my hand and stroking my forehead: the dead still haunted her dreams. At least she didn't remember these episodes in the morning.

Then came the day Dr. Smith announced that he and John had done all they could for her. "One dislikes to say in psychiatry that a patient is ever cured. But I think your wife is as improved as one could expect. Such an experience cannot help but leave scars. I do believe she is doing as well as she ever shall.

"By the way, young man, how are your hands feeling lately?"

"My hands? What do you mean?"

"A little sore perhaps? Strained?"

I thought. It crossed my mind that yes, it did seem that my fingers and joints had seemed quite achy for a while. I had, in fact, almost asked Dr. Smith if I was getting early arthritis. As I turned my attention to them, I stated that they had been feeling better lately.

"Good, good. I may as well pronounce you cured, too – as much as one may."

What was he talking about? I looked at him, baffled.

Smith held my hands in his, flexed my fingers back and forth. "Robert, for months, even before the battle, your hands have been knotted into fists almost continually. You used them well enough when you needed to, for knives and forks, tools, and so on. But any other time they were balled into fists, so tight your knuckles would be white. You had a serious problem as well, young man. At least Penny knew she was ill. You were not even aware of your disturbance, which was indicative of a problem potentially much deeper and more harmful.

"You too have been my patient these last months, every bit as much as Penny."

"What? Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Just telling you doesn't help. All that helps is working out your own fears, regrets, guilt. All I could do was help direct your thoughts into constructive and healing channels – all any psychiatrist or analyst can do. I believe this will also put an end to some the, eh, outbursts of temper you have exhibited from time to time in the past." Smith put a hand to his own throat, recalling an unfortunate episode from my first days on this world. "Do you remember telling me of your friend, Adam Blubaum?"

Telling him? I'd hardly thought of him myself for ages. We'd been roommates at Academy, nearly best friends, though a different crowd of friends than Dusty's bunch. Adam Blubaum. We called him Adam Bomb, or just A-Bomb. Bad story. He'd shipped out as cadet on a real Rescue Survey Scout mission, or was supposed to. The ship lost power just before clearing atmosphere, and he and the pilot officer burned in over the Indian Ocean. Sad story. And the funny thing was. . .

*The thing was. . .*

It should have been me. Shit, oh, shit. I stood there staring at my hands, clenched and unclenched fists. Of course, I remembered now, how stupid of me! How do you forget that? Command had offered me that slot. Nah, that's OK, give it to A-Bomb, he's the one with the grades. He deserves it, is what I told them. He deserves it.

A-Bomb died horribly because I wanted to go home that summer and chase girls. Oh God, that could have been me. No. That *should* have been me. A-Bomb died, and I was here with Penny and babies and family. My hands clenched again in anger at myself, the universe, at God or Fate or whatever you might want to call it.

I felt Dr. Smith's hand on my cheek, comforting. "It's all done now, lad. Let it go. It's gone. Understand me?"

I nodded, and at his word, I felt the rage dissolve away. I didn't recall mentioning A-Bomb to Smith at all, had he hypnotized me or something? How much had I told him? How much was I remembering just this moment? My hands relaxed, and I felt a lightness inside that reminded me of the lightness I had always loved in Penny.

"Dr. Smith, I – we – how can we thank you –"

"Not a word of thanks is necessary young man, or even desirable. However, if you would be so good as to pay my bill as soon as possible after you receive it . . ."

"*BILL?!?*"

"Indeed, young man. Even the great Freud himself insisted that payment for treatment was itself an integral part *of* the treatment. Surely you would not be so crass as to contradict Dr. Freud?"

"But –" Something didn't seem quite right, but I decided not to argue the point. I'd be paying him in carrots, anyway.

## **Part 6**

### **Green and Go**

Penny and I, Don and Judy, were two normal, healthy, married couples living in a side-by-side duplex. We were farmers. Judy's discovery of the salt-plus liberated us from the twice-daily bitterweed crawls, and we were now planting five acres of cropland, and another two acres of pasture for goats and sheep.

The Scots were exporting woolen fabric to other colonies now, and we were starting to have a real economy. It was still clumsy, little more than barter, although the bartering was with contracts rather than the goods themselves.

We now had some more effective solar arrays for power, supplemented by micro-fusion generators: there was just not enough solar energy to keep us alive through Deep Winter, not in our house, and not in the huts of the village.

John had come down to the Acreage to talk with us. "You know," he said, "I've been running the show for what? Ten years now? Nine? Between being Commander and Governor. The *Jupiter 2* mission has succeeded. I think I'm ready to be just plain John again for a while. Don? Would you like to run for governor when my term is up?"

Don looked at him quizzically, wiped sweat off his forehead. "I think I like being Don the Goat Farmer. And Judy's husband." He looked around at the pastoral landscape we had built. "Take your two terms, John. I'll pick it up next time. I'm really enjoying my life right now, for the first time in a long time. I got something nice going here, and I don't want it to slip away. That happened once before."

John turned to me. "Bobby? How about it? Give your poor old father-in-law a little break?"

Me? I thought. I wasn't even sure what John did as governor most of the time, although it certainly seemed to keep him busy. "Can I hire you to fill in for me down here?"

John laughed. "Well, part-time anyway. I think I'm getting too old to keep up with this kind of work that you kids do."

I shrugged. "Sure, let me think about. Plenty of time before the next election. I just want to be sure the farming is taken care of."

"Sounds like top-notch governor material right there, huh, John?" quipped Don.

Well. I'd take a stab at it. Our musings were interrupted by a commotion of shouting and squealing. From the *Jupiter 2*, Zack and AJ were streaking headlong across the sand, stark naked. They were nearly a year old now – a local year, nearly 1½ Earth-style. Despite keeping Earth-standard time for official records and most business purposes, we were starting to think more and more in local measure. Zack raced ahead of AJ, then stumbled. AJ in turn stumbled over Zack; they rolled in the sand laughing wildly.

Penny raced along behind, laughing herself, her sunshine-smile brightening her face. Unlike the boys, she was wearing a half-cut t-shirt and orange shorts. It was a hot day, and High Summer was only weeks away.

I stepped out of the cultivated land and into the sand. The boys were now charging straight for me, screaming "Daddy! Daddy!" and I didn't want them to plow through the tomatoes and blueberries.

"Come on, little terrors!" I shouted as they threw themselves at my legs, almost knocking me over, and hanging on.

Penny skipped in behind them, and held on tight to me too. She was bouncing up and down in delight. She pulled back just far enough to smear a huge kiss on my lips, then grabbed my hand and stuck it on her bare belly.

"Guess what!"

*The original manuscript of this and many more of the late Governor Robert Winslow Robinson Cain's writings are now on display at the New Plymouth Historical Society Museum, as part of a special memorial exhibition celebrating the 150th anniversary of his birth. This exhibition features many of his rarely-displayed possessions, along with a selection of Lady Penelope's. His collected writings will be available for sale in historically authentic book form, as well as all modern formats.*

*Visitors and migrants are encouraged to visit the Battle for Independence Historic Site. The battlefield site itself is operated and maintained by the Honourable Company of War Descendants as a memorial and historic gravesite.*

*The story of New Plymouth's Battle for Independence is well documented in other sources, but the personal story of Governor and Lady Robinson Cain stands on its own as a tribute to these two Founders and an inspiration to succeeding generations, and their observations of Earth serve as warning to us all.*

*New Plymouth Historical Society and Museum is located on  
New Plymouth High Street, two blocks west of Government House.*

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