

A Gentle Stroll

March 2026 — Issue Eight



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Editorial Note

To my great annoyance, I seem to have misplaced a contribution. I am not bright enough to figure out whose it was or where it went, but I think there was another contribution. Please resubmit.

We are switching over to bimonthly publication. There are too many time demands on your humble collator. Please email PDFs of your zines to the collator, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net The due date of the next issue will be May 2, 2026.

General rules: Publication is bimonthly. Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Discussions of contemporary politics and graphic pornography will be rejected. Recall that A Gentle Stroll will appear with our other zines on our web pages, so matters you would not want seen by the public should go elsewhere. You retain all rights to your material, except that the N3F may use your submissions in this magazine, which may be distributed to subscribers and/or N3F members, and will be placed on our web site or other electronic archives.

Subscriptions: For the first some number of issues, A Gentle Stroll is free. After that, unless we end the project, contributors are asked to pay \$6 per year and be recognized as voting members of N3F (there is no obligation to vote or participate in other N3F activities). Readers are charged nothing. Contributors and readers have to opt-in to receive A Gentle Stroll. Contributors and readers also get to choose: (1) Receive only A Gentle Stroll and a rare issue of our other zines, or (2) Receive all N3F fanzines.

Ronin Engineer for A Gentle Stroll #8

by Jim Eckman,
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Notes

Those interested in a copy of Wanderer can e-mail me.

IRL

Wrapping up holidays with Lunar New Year and too much good food.

Worldbuilding

World and Campaign Generation (Wanderer)
Version 1.02 May 17th, 2001
copyright James D. Eckman

Introduction

I have a fairly terrible memory and I find that by writing down or computer generating large chunks of the campaign ahead of time, that I can keep track of player interactions over the long term. Villains and old friends pop up, an old insult leads to a later bad effect, etc.

Individual civilizations

1. Locations

The most favored to least favored locations for civilizations seem to be:

- River deltas - often generates a water culture
- Plains with streams and light forests
- Hillsides near plains with water
- Heavy forests
- Swamps - usually requires a form of central control
- Fertile mountain valleys near lakes and rivers
- Mountains

2. Resources

Newer civilizations in virgin areas often have access to far more raw materials than older civilizations.

Lower technology cultures:

- Raw land
- Wood
- Metals in surface deposits
- Gems and gold in near surface deposits

3. Science Fiction

Earlier travellers might of visited a planet, things left behind may include:

- Legends and information
- Small artifacts of artistic value
- Technology artifacts
- Settlements, outposts, cities

- Creatures, pets, strange plants

4. Reasons for cities can include:

- Trade
- Defense
- Central location for infrastructure
- Religious
- Cities as capitals and collections of wealthy/resource sinks i.e. Constantinople and Trantor
- Cities as accumulation points, Venice other trader cities

5. Reasons for roads can include:

- Trade
- Military
- Governmental
- Pilgrimages

6. Inhabitants

- Who knows? Anything goes.

7. Cities can be organized as:

- Small complete subcities
- Each skill has it's own city area
- Each cultural group has it's own area

8. Worlds

See wgen

9. People

- True nomads - wander far with no fixed routes, can be quite aggressive
- Transhumance* - travel fixed routes at fixed times, shepards, etc. Usually considered almost an outcast group.
- Peasants/Serfs - Workers of the soil
- Artisans/Craftsmen - Workers of materials and such
- Intelligentsia
- Government

10.0 Traumatic events

- Invasions
- Wars
- Drought/Famines
- Plagues
- Social upheaval/revolutions
- Technological churning/radical manufacturing/food raising changes
- Massive immigration
- Long term climatic changes

11.0 Use of technology

- Creators and users of current technology
- Users of current technology - must import some goods ex. colonies
- Rejectors of current technology - not used for some cultural reason

- Technology wannabes - they want it, but can't handle or afford it
- Technology outcasts - they're not supposed to have it, usually weapons

12.0 Religion

- Tolerant/intolerant

13.0 Laws

- Strict/Lax
- Expect outlanders to fully comply

14.0 Customs

- Birth
- Death
- Coming of age
- Marriage

15.0 Long distance trading

- Rare metals
- Hardware
- Spices
- Speciality clothes
- Knowledge/books

16.0 Boundaries

- Tolls/customs
- Dangerous crossings
- Forbidden zones

17.0 Organizations

- Guilds
- Unions
- Police
- Fire
- Taxation
- Inquisitions

18.0 General cultural problems

- Distances
- Languages
- Religions
- Population
- Transport

19.0 Odd map types

- Isochronic maps - travel times to/from a region could be color coded for speeds

20.0 Mediums of trade

- Barter
- Cash
- Letters of exchange

- Accounts

21.0 Major industries based on tech level

- Agriculture
- Textiles

22.0 Transportation trends

- Large ships or elaborate systems tend to favor monopolies and larger merchants
- Small ships tend to favor entrepreneurs and small merchants

23.0 Organization Memberships

23.1 By relation

- Self
- Immediate family
- Relatives

- Race

23.2 By belief

- Religious
- Political
- Mutual interests

23.3 By purpose

- Volunteer civic groups
- Mutual aid societies

23.4 By happenstance

- By draft
- By location

24.0 Joining Organizations

- Birth
- Infection
- Through reference
- By examination
- By payment
- By volunteering
- By draft
- By existing

25.0 Organization Hierarchies

- None, totally anarchy
- Cells
- Tiger teams
- Location
- Matrix management
- Rigid top down command

Note: theoretical TOE may have nothing to do with real TOE

26.0 Promotion Within Organizations

- Chance
- Examination
- Payment

- Draft
- Length of service
- Volunteering
- By reference
- By selection

27.0 Organization Office Functions

- Simple command - I command, you obey
- Thought officers - Think right or be disciplined
- Clerical - Keep track of data, authority to log and change
- Spares - Replaces officer as required

28.0 Organization characteristics - derived from other characteristics

- Flexible - inflexible
- Tolerant - intolerant
- Fast response - slow response
- Smart - dumb
- Rich - poor
- Creative - rigid
- Free - dictatorial

Characteristics of organizations

1. Size
2. Status
3. Tolerance of outsiders
4. Fame
5. Control level
6. Cohesion
7. Overall wealth
8. Distribution of wealth
9. Economic efficiency
10. Law and bureaucracy
11. Corruption
12. Major goals

Suborganizations

1. Size

Definitions

Members - They don't have to be people!

Size

Size 0 - Extinct, of historical interest only

Size 1 - 1-10 members

Size 2 - 11-100 members

Size 3 - 101 - 1000 members

etc....

Overall wealth

Wealth 0 - Dirt poor, many members are starving, etc.

Wealth 9 - Extremely wealthy, controls most of the resources of a given area.

Distribution of wealth

Distribution 0 - A few members have it all

Distribution 9 - The resources are very evenly divided

Economic efficiency

Efficiency 0 - Total wastrels, this organization will soon be broke.

Efficiency 9 - The Midas touch.

Next issue

More worldbuilding?

Reactions to Issue #7

Cavern City by Tiffanie Gray – Another lovely cover.

Arcane Drugs by Clark B. Timmins – You’ve been hanging out with too many Doaists, they were always messing around with alchemy and mercury was a prime ingredient. Sounds like an interesting world idea.

1PMG PBEM How to Get Started, Part 4 by Jim Vassilakos - The Emotion Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Expression is available at the local libraries. An interesting way to run a campaign.

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #5 by Gabriel Roark – Love Dispatches from the Field.

The Fox's Den by N. C. Shapero – This reminds me a bit of “The Wheels of If” by Sprague de Camp. When is he? Interesting story so far. Re: Thorne Smith “‘Hogomous, higomous, females are polygamous’ TS’s version: Hogamous, Higamous, Man is polygamous, Higamous, Hogamous, Woman monagamous.

I will continue being a happy cockroach, though “Kafka, the Roleplaying Game” doesn’t seem to be in print yet.

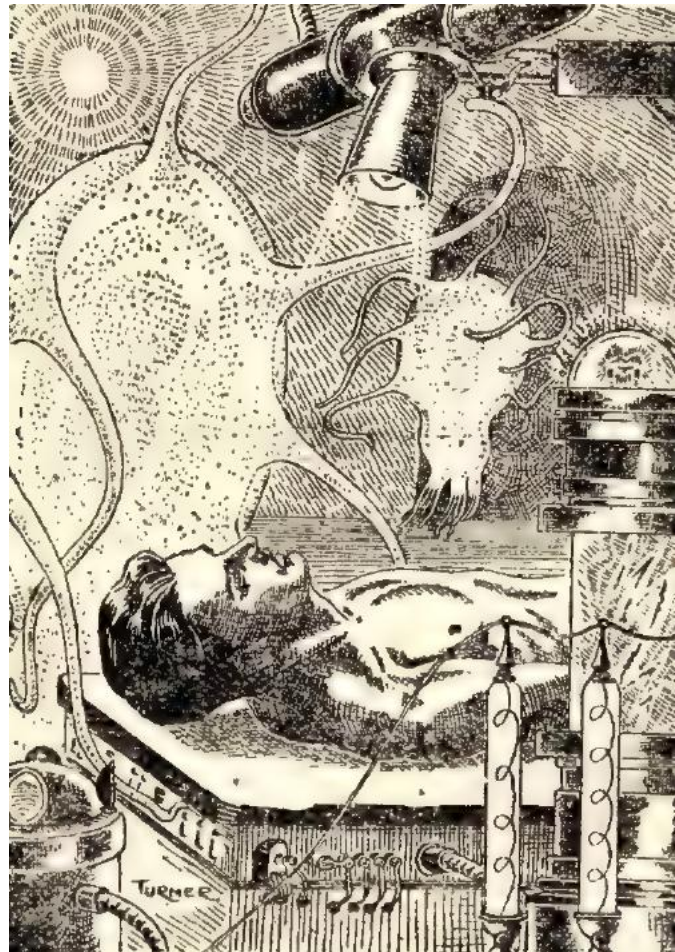
A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #7 by George Phillies - Third Millennium’s Astrogator’s Handbook would have certainly been a much desired volume in my SF games, my jump drive’s operation was stolen from Starman Jones. You must approach a jump point at a certain speed and vector to pass thru correctly and they are not easy to find. No Tears for a Princess has a golden age feel, especially the names. Ancient D&D - Rijstaffel makes me hungry!

The story "Escape to Mlok" was written by Clark Ashton Smith and published in *Tales of Wonder and Super-Science*, No. 15, Autumn 1941, pp. 57-67. The quarterly magazine was published by The World's Work Ltd., at The Windmill Press, Kingswood, Surrey.

In the story, the protagonist (Sarkis) encounters two alien beings – Mloki – and then travels to their planet which he finds incomprehensible and terrifying. The Mloki perform some type of transformative procedure throughout his body which alters him, allowing him to experience their home world as they do. He spends an indeterminate amount of time on their world. He learns their home world has been infected by some type of cosmic plague and will shortly be entirely consumed. The Mloki then send him back to Earth. Unfortunately for Sarkis, the alterations that were made to his perception and senses now make Earth incomprehensible and terrifying. After a dizzying episode he is taken to a mental hospital for treatment, and he dies a few days later.

"Instead of the tourist or mountaineer he had expected, he saw two beings who bore not even the remotest appearance to humankind, and, moreover, were obviously unrelated to any species of Earth life." (p. 57)

"Each of the beings was about four feet high, with a somewhat doubtful division into head and body. Their formation was incredibly flat and two-dimensional; and they seemed to float rather than stand, as if swimming through the air. The upper division, which one accustomed to Earthly physical structures would have taken for the head, was much larger than the lower, and more rotund. It resembled the featureless disk of a moon-fish and was fringed with numberless



interbranching tendrils or feelers, like a floral arabesque. The lower division suggested a Chinese kite. It was marked with unknown goblin features, some of which may have

been eyes, of a peculiarly elongated and oblique sort. It ended in three broad, streamer-like members, sub-dividing into webby tassels that trailed on the ground but seemed wholly inadequate for the purpose of legs." (pp 57-58). It later develops that these tassels are "unbelievably strong" and "clammily repulsive as the tentacles of an octopi" – and further that their touch can impart "an icy coldness" that numbs him and makes his mind wander away.

Their color alternates between "opal-shot blackness," "elusive greyness," and "blood-bright violet". They make a low, humming sound, and appear to have some type of telepathy. They appear to use alterations of this humming and telepathy to simulate, vaguely, human speech.

They can also project crude images onto their body surface. The protagonist appears to understand what he's being shown but later recalls the images as "an alien spectrum, a trans-Euclidian geometry" and notes that "their very hues and proportions baffled his recollection". When they appear, the protagonist seems to go into a nearly hypnotic state of calm. After a short period of time, the hypnotic state gives way to terror. Later, he learns that the image projection is the creatures' primary form of communication.

They appear to be able to teleport themselves by manifesting some type of device or structure described as a "maze of slanting rods and curving reticulations" that surrounds them – and then they disappear. They use this same process to surround and teleport the protagonist. Upon his arrival on their home world the rods sink into "a circle of small sockets that were part of the floor". Eventually, he learns the rods are the physical manifestation of "an arcanic force which, by projecting itself through the Fifth Dimension, could exist simultaneously in opposite corners of the universe."

The creatures derive their nourishment directly from "the air and light". The story's only illustration suggests a technologically advanced civilization, but the story itself does not strongly convey this sense, offering more of a science-fantasy fusion.

Mloki

Medium aberration, unaligned

Armor Class 9

Initiative -1 (9)

Hit Points 52 (7d8 + 21)

Speed 30 ft. fly (hover)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	8 (-1)	16 (+3)	18 (+4)	11 (+0)	6 (-2)

Immunities Charmed, Prone

Senses Darkvision 60'; Passive Perception 12

Languages None; telepathy 60 ft.

CR 2 (XP 450; PB +2)

TRAITS

Mesmerizing. Wisdom Saving Throw: DC 12, each creature within 30' of Mloki, that can see the Mloki. *Failure:* 3 (1d6) Psychic damage, and the target has the *Stunned* condition until the start of their next turn. *Success:* The target is immune to this Mloki's *Mesmerizing* for 24 hours.

ACTIONS

Icy Tendril. *Melee Attack Roll:* +5, reach 5 ft. *Hit:* 3 (1d4 + 1) Bludgeoning damage plus 3 (1d4 + 1) Cold damage.

BONUS ACTIONS

Uncanny Teleport. The Mloki teleports to a fixed location on its home world from any location on the Material plane. This is accompanied by strange visual effects on the Material Plane.

– Clark B. Timmins

Mloki #1

February 2026

Comments on A Gentle Stroll 7 (January 2026_

1PMG PBEM/Jim Vassilakos: I've never gotten in to play-by-email games as such, though I suppose that some of the game/story work could almost be considered as such. Though the "rules" under which the collaborations operate (at least, the way George and I have done it) amount to more "collaborative storytelling" than any game system).

Postscripts From the Phoenix Throne/Gabriel Roark: "I Got Where I Wasn't Going" was pure storytelling, unlike the story I'm including in this issue, which is more the expansion of the improvisational storytelling of a gaming session than pure out-of-one-mind creative writing. And I *try* for "show, don't tell". And it's Shaefer, by the by, not Schaefer. There's some really ugly backstory to the world that I built for that story (a lot of it ended up in the worldbuilding for the Cyberfur campaign ... and it had a "populist" would-be-dictator strongly resembling a certain orange man-baby ... though the worldbuilding predates the man-baby by a number of years).

What follows is a writeup of a session from my Cyberfur campaign back in January of 2010. It was written, revised, and rewritten by myself and George Cole (with whom I have co-authored some three published novels to date) with several revisions "suggested" by other participants in the gaming session.

All Alone In The Dark

By N. C. Shapero, G. S. Cole and several of the participants in the gaming session

1330 Zulu, 30 December 2105, GUSS Beagle, Briefing Room Deck 15, 204-D

Captain Daniel V. Gallery put his hands on the lectern and looked down at the briefing notes displayed on its built-in monitor. He took a deep breath, and looked up and out, scanning across the rows of eager faces looking intently at him. "Gentlemen, please activate the biometric scanners in your arm rests, and place your palms against the scanners." He then waited until his display – and the enlarged version behind him – showed individual and group compliance. When all the lights showed green, he pressed his own palm against the master scanner, and tapped the monitor twice.

"This," he said, as the giant display behind him lit up with the first image of a document entitled **Pinlight Project**, "gentlemen, is the real reason behind our mission. Our world – excuse me, the three worlds of our Terran System Alliance – believes that we are going out on what has been described as a 'Grand Survey'. They believe that our mission is to find out what is 'out here', in space – with a particular interest in finding inhabitable worlds orbiting other suns than Sol." He nodded as the image changed to an 'artist's impression' of an alien planet's surface where humans, vulpines, and other Uplifts, all wearing the TSA uniforms bearing their mission patch, were standing around a grounded landing craft in the middle of the view. "Their belief is correct. We will, indeed, be conducting such a search, along with conducting astrographic, astronomic, and other scientific investigations."

Captain Gallery tapped the monitor in front of him and the report cover faded out, to be replaced with two images; on the left a red/grey/white furred, sharp-muzzled, and obviously three-fingered alien; on the right, mirror-imaged, a grey/white/red twin. "In addition, we have been tasked with discovering as much as possible about the Altha'ani and

The Fox's Den: By N. C. Shapero for A GENTLE STROLL 8 (March 2026)

the Shidran-kas. The image on the left is believed to be typical of a male Altha'ani, that on the right of a male Shidran-kas. These two races are, as we understand it, engaged in a war of literally galactic scale which both sides characterize as a war for survival but which the 'pin stripe brigade' believes to be the ultimate expression of a 'family fight'."

Gallery leaned forward and looked intently at the people watching him. "This war is, in no small part, why our launch was delayed, and why the *Adventure* and her associated picket ships are accompanying us on our 'Grand Survey'. Neither side in this war is believed to understand the concept of 'neutral' – which means that we have to be prepared to fight. We don't know where, or when, we might meet them 'out there'."

Another tap on the monitor, and several images of the alien ships – from Orbital and TSA records – appeared in a hexagonally-spread display. "The bulk of the TSA's three worlds' population knows little more than that there are aliens out there and that we have made contact with them – contact that has been peaceful, so far. They are not yet aware that should we choose to ally ourselves with either side, the other will immediately become our deadly enemy. Part – and it is only part – of our mission is to gain as much intelligence about these aliens as we can without becoming a 'war front' in their civil war."

Captain Gallery stepped to the side of the lectern and raised both hands in front of him. "Both of those goals are true – but they are also far less than the whole truth. Because we are engaging in what will be a revolutionary transformation in not just our standing and position in this galaxy, but also the aliens we know of, and probably a great many more. We are going to change the 'rules of the game' and our strategic position, gentlemen; as we have to, if our people – our worlds – our entire civilization – is going to hope to survive the dangers we jointly face."

Gallery stepped back behind the lectern. "The principal objectives of our 'Grand Survey' are first, to find locations where our engineering teams can construct 'stargates', and then, to deploy a network of these 'stargates', which we believe may provide us with the 'ultimate weapon' for defense of the Three Worlds. To this end, we have gathered the 'best and brightest' to act as pathfinders for our engineering teams. These pathfinders, volunteers all, will be going out as the sharp end of the TSA's spear. They will be our 'first-in teams', and as with any pioneers, they will be taking the greatest risks of us all."

"We will find 'strange new worlds'; we will study alien stars and planets, and we will meet – at any time and any place – new species of thinking, organized, civilized beings. But this is the mission behind the mission behind the mission," Captain Gallery said, now using a laser pointer to dart underneath and draw attention to the lead word at the top center of the display. "We are going to leap beyond starships even as we leap out into space in starships – in that sense, we are going to make every step a potentially permanent replacement of the very mode we are now using to travel."

Captain Gallery gave a stern, but proud smile. "The first priority of this task force is to implement our stargate network. Success at this task, will dramatically alter – perhaps even revolutionize – the galactic balance of power, and put the Terran System Alliance into a nearly inconceivably bettered strategic posture. We are out here to make it not only possible, but probable, for our people to guarantee our survival and independence against any existing interstellar nation. Whether they base themselves on worlds, like the Altha'ani, or on deep-space-roaming, massive Homeships, like the Shidran-kas. We, gen-

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tlemen, are going to build a network that will allow us to connect with and use any valuable asset we may find – whether it be a planet, an asteroid, an abandoned Homeship, a suitable volume of empty interstellar space, or even a star. And the first step towards this task, gentlemen, is a place that I for one had never conceived of before I was brought in.”

Captain Gallery gestured again, and a new slide displayed a glaring bright star and besides it, an alphanumeric string that read ‘PSR 1257+12’. “This, gentlemen, is the remnant of a star – one that can be detected from anywhere in the galaxy by the energy it outputs. It is a type of ‘neutron star’ called a ‘pulsar’. It is also another of the reasons our departure was delayed beyond the original plan. Without additional shielding, our ships could not safely enter the PSR 1257+12 system. It would be like stepping in front of a high-pressure steam jet without any protective gear – or jumping into a live furnace wearing nothing but a ‘birthday suit’. We had to redesign and rebuild our ships with the most recent of our advances in order to make this mission possible.”

He stopped, and then smiled at his senior engineering officer. “Commander Gibbs has been patiently awaiting this briefing, because he has had full knowledge of how hazardous and problematic operating in the pulsar’s system is going to be for quite some time; he had the responsibility for preparing this ship, and all of the task force to enter the PSR 1257+12 system. A sane man, he has told me, would stay away – just as a sane man would stay away from standing right next to, under, or in a blast furnace.”

Commander Gibbs nodded, his face otherwise expressionless.

“We have seen how our ‘sensor techs’ can pick up the traces of our defensive fleets and planetary Bridges even from Charon orbit,” Gallery continued. “If we put a primary transfer station for all Pinlight operations on an ordinary planet, or in the middle of deep space, we would be setting up a beacon that can be spotted with ease by anyone either ‘in the neighborhood’.” Gallery shook his head. “Making them a first-class target, busily signaling ‘we are here!’ to anyone who might be hostile. That’s not a good idea, generally speaking. Especially when we don’t know just how big and nasty the other guys’ weapons and systems might be.”

“It may seem easy to hide a ship on the ocean when all you have is eyes, or in space if all you have is radar – but that is not true if the vessel is ‘lit up’. Crew and officers in the wet navy learned the necessity of having all lights, down to the tiny coal of a single cigarette, extinguished whenever they were passing through U-boat territory, possible or suspected or even known. Because in the midst of the ocean’s dark, a single light stood out.”

Gallery looked around. “But if we put our core station right next to a natural source of tremendously greater intensities of light and noise – just like putting a radio relay next to an active volcano, say – then we will not be setting up a beacon that will attract the attention of all spacefaring passers-by. That, gentlemen, is the first step of ‘Pinlight’ – setting up a first extra-solar station where it will not immediately give away its presence by its operations to outside aliens.”

Gallery smiled again. “We are going to PSR 1257+12 *because* of its incredible radiation output. We are going there to hide the energy signature of the Pinlight stargates in the glare of the pulsar’s output. Without that ‘masking’ glare, I was told, the energy out-

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put of a Pinlight stargate would stand out like a lighthouse on a dark clear night, or a radio beacon in the atmosphere.” Gallery smiled, showing teeth.

“In the PSR 1257+12 system, a Pinlight stargate will not immediately give away its presence by its operations to outside aliens. We are going to be setting up a network of these stations – which is why we have both an 18-month mission plan and a 3-year food supply. Our first stop will be the one we most want to keep others from noticing.”

Gallery looked down and tapped the monitor, again, and a new image appeared. An “artist’s conception” of the view from a pulsar planet, with a massive building at the crest of a small hill in the near background. The near surface of the building was glowing, and a heavy construction vehicle was emerging from the operating stargate. “We are directed to construct a network of these Pinlight stargates that will permit us to shift equipment and personnel across interstellar distances in moments, and even to transfer beamed energy from one point to another. The first ‘station’ in this network will be in the pulsar system; Major Richard Fox and his team will be the pathfinders – the ‘first in team’ – sent to investigate PSR 1257+12. When they have determined that we can proceed, an engineering team will be deployed to establish the station, and the squadron will proceed to its next target.”

Gibbs nodded. “Captain – this ‘Pinlight’ system – I presume it can work across the distance we’re talking about? I mean, our task force has an average speed of 30 light-years per hour, and it’s going to take us 33 hours just to get to this destination, which is 980 light years away. There are a number of other star systems – even a couple with better planetary similarities – closer than that, aren’t there?”

Gallery grinned – broadly and with wrinkling eyes. “Commander, for all practical purposes, a pair of tuned ‘Pinlight’ stations do not experience any separating distance within their operational range. Which varies according to a complex set of factors which the scientists understand, but which we generally can express as follows: for moving from normal star system to normal star system, a ‘Pinlight’ pair can reach roughly three hundred parsecs – or nearly a thousand light-years.”

Commander Gibbs’ expression went through several changes, in color before he managed to wrestle his reactions down to a manageable level. “How large a, ah, ‘Bridge’, ah, interface can be managed?”

“Large enough to send any of this task force’s vessels through,” Captain Gallery answered. “Gentlemen, while the exact course of this task force is subject to change, depending on what we find, the probability – the high probability – is that we will spend the great majority of our time going ‘out’. Because we do not have to spend an equal amount of time coming ‘back’ – since we will only have to return to the last-completed ‘Pinlight’ station in order to be able to then transit to any other point in the network *with no humanly-noticeable delay*. This also means that we may be able to arrange for, or anticipate, a ‘hot-swap’ of mission assets through the same network. The more we build, the wider, deeper, and further our reach and the more focused and immediate our projection, of our total power can become. It will be as if we could put the Atlantic and Pacific, Home and Mediterranean, U.S. and British fleets all into the North Sea – or at least Scapa Flow – with one single movement order and transfer time. This is one time when the strategists and tacticians and the logistical staff all combined, are scrambling desperately to bring

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their insights and thinking into order around the changes which the scientists have wrought.”

“How much power does each Pinlight station need?” Commander Gibbs asked.

“An immense amount,” Captain Gallery said. “For practical purposes, think of each as requiring as much engineering and capital investment as this ship required. But they require nothing like the same number of crew to operate – and the network will become a ‘force multiplier’ far more expansive than anything we’ve ever had before.”

“I am, ah, one of those struggling to ‘wrap my mind around that’ myself. Very much so,” Commander Gibbs said. “Captain – does this mean that we could theoretically bring all of the space warships currently in orbit around Exodus 8, forward to this, ah, ‘pulsar’, once the station is created?”

“All of those plus all other starships around Homeworld or in the Orbital space or lunar orbits – from both moons,” Captain Gallery said. “It will take us just short of 30 hours to get to where we will send the ‘away team’ off. It may take them several hundred hours to actually get to the planets, or one of the planets, around the pulsar. If they had a ready-to-use Bridge with them – and no, we don’t have one of those – the entire Home fleet could be at that pulsar a week before we could get there. Or they could come in, and then be projected to a likely intercept point. Not that that would make any sense, since the odds of finding a vector from which they could make contact would be so small.”

“Why will it take hundreds of hours to get to the planets, when it will take just over a day to get to that pulsar?” somebody asked.

“Because our stardrive takes big, but somewhat awkward and clumsy steps,” Captain Gallery answered. “It’s fine when you’re moving from one solar system to another – they’re plenty big, and the steps that cross the distance get you within the system. But to go exactly to your target point within that system, you can’t use our stardrive.”

“Why not?” somebody else asked.

“Two reasons. First, going too deep into a solar system on stardrive, is very dangerous – especially to the ship on stardrive,” Captain Gallery answered. “Secondly, where you exit hyperdrive is neither predictable nor knowable. There is an ‘uncertainty’ factor – you cannot make just a ‘short hop’ – measuring ‘short’ in tens of what are called ‘astronomical units’, or as far as the Earth is from the sun – with any accuracy. Another way to think about this, is that when you try to step a ‘mere’ eight light minutes – or 310 million miles – you might end up right next to the sun and get fried, or twice as far away, even if you just ‘burped’ the stardrive.”

Captain Gallery looked around. “Those of us who saw that tremendous light-show, about five months after the Futurists arrived around what they call ‘E8’ and we call ‘home’, saw what happened to an experimental ship that tried to use stardrive too close to Earth and the sun. It turned into energy, 100% of it. Fortunately, it was an unmanned experimental craft, so nobody became an angel of light unexpectedly early.”

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1530 Zulu, 30 December 2105, GUSS Beagle, 'Away Team 1' Ops/Plan Room

“So, there we have it, folks: what we are really going to be doing.” Major R. C. Fox looked at the others sitting – or, in the AI's case, standing – around the table. “We're going to be the first to go in-system to the pulsar.”

“I find this tremendously fulfilling,” Henry said. “My programming is to investigate, and it is much more satisfying to be recording fresh data than to be analyzing others' reports or collecting confirmatory recordings.”

“Henry, I thought you didn't have emotions. How can anything be ‘satisfying’?” Jennifer C. Lotor asked.

“While I do not have glands to supply hormones in response to external stimuli,” Henry replied, “I do have adaptive subfunctions which supply the equivalent. So, I do feel the equivalent of human and uplift emotions, even if they are the result of outputs from subroutines instead of organic glands.”

“So, we're going to leave the *Beagle* and fly to the planets of whatever system our task force is exploring?” Michael C. Reynard asked.

Major Fox grinned at him. “Actually, you are going to do the flying whenever it gets non-routine. Which is why I picked a pilot with strong Comm/Sensor skills, instead of a Comm/Sensor specialist with merely adequate piloting skills. Somebody has to steer our craft – and I'm not qualified.”

“There should always be backups,” Michael said. He sounded pleased and his body posture seconded that with its own message; his fur and posture were taut and high.

Henry chuckled. “I think that will be my job, as well. Something about being able to compute trajectories without consulting the ship's computer.”

“Henry,” Michael notes, “you *are* the computer.”

“No more, or less so, than you,” Henry replied. “But I do have a natural advantage. As I stated – I do have the ability to compute trajectory changes in real-time.”

“So will the *Beagle* and her escorts stay at the fringe of the system?” Liselle Francis asked.

“No, they'll be proceeding to the next destination system to drop off another ‘first in’ team,” Major Richard Fox said. “We'll communicate with them via ‘message torpedoes’. Those torpedoes – they have their own FTL drives – will rendezvous with the squadron and transmit their data.”

“But I thought that the exit placement was stochastic,” Michael Reynard said. “As much as ten AU from the ‘target’ point.”

“Which is close enough, in normal-space, for the sensors on the picket ships to pick up a missile's emergence and send the proper crypto key to get the return data squirt. If the missile catches the squadron in jump space, the software controls permit a direct rendezvous,” Major Fox answered, and went on.

“The first message torpedo gets sent immediately after we arrive ‘in-system’, preparing against the worst-case – that we get killed right after that. Now, we have a little more

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than a day before we go into jump, and some thirty hours more to prepare for separation – and we're going to need at least half that time to coordinate with all the civilian specialists and scientists whom we are *not* taking along with us. I've blocked out 'mission limits' on both time and load which apply to our trip. You do not have discretion to alter, evade, or ignore those limits. Period. You also are instructed to advise any specialist who urges you to 'sneak' just one more thing aboard, that I will be running a post-launch inspection and will jettison any and all unauthorized and uncleared items. Meaning that not only won't they get their 'unauthorized' instruments' readings back, but also that they won't be getting those instruments back."

"Harsh," Ell Eff said, frowning.

"Major, I'm glad to hear that," Christiaan Ferret said, and for the first time since the meeting began the ferret Uplift and ex-SEAL, now officially their team's 'Survival Expert', smiled. "You've picked the only workable threat to keep us from being loaded down with five times what we could carry."

"It's not a threat, it's a promise," Major Fox said. "Anybody who protests, you hand them one of these." He held out a fistful of small, stiff, paper slips. They were easily carried between two fingers, and were printed with a light off-green background, on which several lines of smaller black text were overlaid. At one end, offset by 90° and so parallel to the short end, were two larger letters in brown: 'T.S.'. "Each complainant gets one, and only one of these tickets. You will not only ask a complainant new to you whether they have received one, but check their name against the team's mission database. If the complainant's name isn't entered there, hand them a ticket and enter their name. If their name is entered there, the moment they start a complaint, you demand to see their ticket."

"What if they don't have one but are in the database?" Ell Eff asked.

"Then you send them away without any further conversation," Major Fox said.

"What do we do when they present it?" Jennifer C. Lotor asked.

Major Fox pulled one of the small tickets out and held it up. "Find your initials," he said, pointing to a string of small bubbles along the top of the ticket (based on orientation of the main text strings); each bubble had a set of initials underneath it. "Then using any appropriate tool at hand," he popped out his right index claw, "you punch their ticket there. Then you hand it back and send them away again, without bothering to hear their objection."

Christiaan was struggling to contain his laughter. "In other words, we punch their 'tough shit' ticket?" he got out. The rest of the team began to grin or laugh as Major Fox nodded soberly – though the corners of both his eyes and lips were crinkling, enough so that even the non-VU-14 team-members could easily detect it.

"What happens if somebody gets a complete set of punch marks?" Henry asked.

"Both their superiors and our superior will be getting that reported to them automatically," Major Fox responded.

"Your superior officer is Captain Gallery," Mike C. Reynard said, blinking.

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“Who can make his own command judgment as to the most effective use of time amongst mission personnel, and direct his subordinates accordingly,” Major Fox said.

“What if somebody tries to come back a second time to one of us?” Jennifer C. Lotor asked.

“You refer any ‘second bite’ takers to me and then refuse to talk with them – period. Nondiscretionary,” Major Fox said.

“What do you do when and if they appear?” Ell Eff asked.

“Use my judgment as to the least disruptive means to prevent interference with mission effectiveness,” Major Fox answered. “Which specifically includes assessing ‘best’ from a whole-mission, all-personnel perspective. If I decide it’s quickest to act as Master-At-Arms and Punishment Officer simultaneously, I may cold-cock the obsessively intrusive protester and have him or her taken away in a med gurney. I don’t think I will have to actually do that.”

“I imagine that letting the rumor get around that you will do so will be quite effective,” Ell Eff said.

“That’s what I like about you, Ell Eff; you’re always such an optimist,” Christiaan said with a smile. “It’s not a rumor, it’s a promise.”

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“Once more, so we know them all by heart: what are our three mission priorities?” Major Fox asked.

The Away Team smiled – Henry twinkled his lights – and said, in chorus, “First, investigate any possible site for use as a Pinlight station. Second, investigate any other item of scientific curiosity. Third, deal with any first contact situations if and as they may develop.”

“Well done!” Major Fox applauded. “Only you left out the base or grounding start: Get the Info Back to the Others. None of our successes or even endeavors will mean anything if we don’t pass on what we learn.”

“Since that means, as a necessary corollary, that we are supposed to do our damndest to keep ourselves alive, I’m all in favor of that,” Liselle Francis said.

“Not quite, Ell Eff,” Christiaan corrected her. “If we stay alive, but the info doesn’t get back, that’s a loss. If we all die, but the info gets back – including as much as we can about what kills us and might threaten them – that’s a win. But other than that, I’m in complete agreement with your assessment.” He looked over at Major Fox. “As I’ve said before and am happy to once again, ‘can’t argue with them orders, sir’.”

“That’s pretty much what I said to Captain Gallery when he handed me our orders,” Major Fox said, smiling. “It’s nice to be wanted in the right way.”

“Major?” Jennifer asked; getting the non-verbal signal to go ahead, she continued, “What are we going to call our destination star system?”

“Yeah, it needs a name,” Liselle Francis said energetically.

“It has one: PSR 1257+12,” Henry noted.

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"Naaah. Not good enough," Liselle Francis said.

"It precisely and accurately describes the star's nature and relative location. Are you perhaps concerned about some aspect of security?" Henry asked. "That referent would be a meaningless token to alien observers."

"That's a great justification to hand to the high brass – but we can't make any sense of that name, really," Liselle Francis said.

"I'd spent years dealing with military lingo, and I find it awkward," Christiaan agreed. "What about 'Barnyard'?"

"We're on the *Beagle*, accompanied by the *Adventure* – echoing the voyage of Charles Darwin some two hundred fifty years ago," Liselle Francis said. "I think we ought to call it 'Galapagos'. That's where Darwin made the most important of his discoveries."

"Actually, he made the set of observations from which he was able to subsequently derive the theory of evolutionary adaptation to differentiated environments," Henry said.

"Galapagos', eh? I like it!" Jennifer Lotor said with approval.

"Works for me, too," Christiaan added.

"It is a lot more sensible," Mike said. Seeing several of the other teammates turn to face him, he shrugged his shoulders. "Orbitals split off long after Darwin's time, so he's part of our culture, too, you know."

"More of yours than some of ours. We've still got religious loonies – in the continental United States and the Russian states too," Richard C. Fox noted. "Okay, Ell Eff, from now on in our team records, we'll call our goal system 'Galapagos'. Which does resolve security issues too," he added, looking directly at Henry.

"It makes little sense, but forming that associational linkage...is that how sentient beings organize their memories?" Henry asked.

"It is one of the ways. They mostly do not conflict," Richard added.

"Very inefficient and troublesome. No wonder you get so little rationally correct," Henry said.

2000 Zulu, 30 December 2105, GUSS Beagle, Galley 4

"I really don't like the 'name' that *our* ship's been stuck with," Major Fox said.

"What's the matter with it? TSA-PS-124 – Terran Systems Alliance, Probeship 124. It's even pronounceable – teesaps, one twenty four," Major Lotor said.

"Letters and numbers – it's just not something you can give your heart to. Too impersonal," Major Fox said.

"It is why *I* insist upon being referred to as Henry, not AIX21M9G. *I*, for one, see the difference that a name, versus a series of letters and numbers, produces in biological intelligences," Henry said.

"You're a person," Lieutenant Ferret said. "But just out of curiosity, what does AIX21M9G stand for? What does it mean?"

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"Artificial Intelligence, Experimental, unit 21, Mark 9, revision G," Henry replied.

"I can see why you prefer Henry," Michael Reynard said. "How about *The Lead Balloon* for our ship's name?"

"Great. We're supposed to 'sink without a trace'?" Lieutenant Ferret said.

"No – it's from a series of science fiction stories¹ I read as a kit..." Michael Reynard said, ears and body down in a submissive pose.

"Relax, Michael," Major Fox said. "If we're taking ship names from stories, why not *The Muddlin' Through?* Lord knows, there's Solar Spice and Liquors supplies in the main hold right now."

"We don't have a 'Muddlehead', and Henry is better than that," Liselle objected.

"How about 'The Walloping Window Blind'?" Lieutenant Ferret said.

"What's that from, Gilbert and Sullivan?" Michael Reynard asked.

"No, it's from a song I once heard at a filksing²," Lieutenant Ferret said. "And before you ask – a filk is a science fiction folksong. Hey, folks, science fiction fandom has been talking about what we're now doing for over a century. Why not immortalize one of their dreams in the name of our probeship? The first space shuttle was named 'Enterprise' after **STAR TREK**, the original series, so why not carry on the tradition?"

"I second *The Walloping Window Blind*," Michael Reynard said.

"Call for a vote," Major Lotor said.

The vote was five to two.

"So, *The Walloping Window Blind* it is," Major Fox said. "I'll inform command as to the new 'official' designation." *But not until later, when they can't force a change.*

1040 Zulu, 31 December 2105, Bridge of the GUS Beagle

Captain Gallery looked over the displays at his station, then glanced at the COB³. "Initiate jump sequence, Mister Kyle."

"Initiate jump sequence, aye," the COB replied, then repeated the command to Engineering. A few seconds pause, and the COB turned back to face his captain. "Sequence initiated, sir. Jump transition estimated in 236 minutes⁴."

"Signal the *Adventure* and the rest of the fleet of our estimated transition, COB," Captain Gallery said.

¹ Something I wrote a *long* time ago. – Niall.

² The Walloping Window Blind (by Charles Edward Carryl) is not a filk – it's an old children's nonsense poem, subsequently set to music. But it might well be sung at a filksing – I've done it. And Christiaan may not even know of its provenance. So, I'd suggest changing the sentence in question slightly to "from a song I once heard at a filksing" and continue on as is. – Kay

³ Chief Of Boat. – Niall.

⁴ It takes between one and six minutes for the jump field to build to sufficient strength to transition a 10,000-ton ship; the time required goes up linearly as the mass to be transitioned increases, and the *Beagle* masses roughly 675,000 metric tons. – Niall.

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“Aye, signaling the *Adventure* of transit in 236 minutes,” the COB answered, and did so. “*Adventure* signals that she will initiate jump sequence in 187 minutes⁵. Other elements of the Squadron are sending confirmations.”

1429 Zulu, 31 December 2105, GUSS Beagle, Deck 9, Ready Room 106-A

“Ready to roll?” Lieutenant Christiaan Ferret asked.

“As ready as any of us will ever be, Christiaan,” Major Richard Charles Fox said, looking up at the countdown clock. “I thought that the countdown was only an approximation. So why the display?”

“To give us a bit of warning,” Henry said. “We have the five minute warning. So if you won’t be needing me, I’ll just shut down now.”

“Save your circuits, good buddy,” Christiaan said, as the AI’s cylinder settled into its secure cradle and went completely silent. “Spooky, that. Would you want to be able to just ‘shut yourself off’?” he asked, looking over at Major Fox.

Major Fox nodded, memories of several of his ‘worst moments’ fresh and heavy. “Sometimes – oh, very much so. Before a circuit-crash is forced? Yeah.”

A split-second later Christiaan nodded, certain of his own memories equally pressing.

1830 Zulu, 1 January 2106, GUSS Beagle, Captain's Ready Room

“Major Fox, I’ve one last question.” Captain Gallery looked at the shorter vulpine, who was holding a now-empty wineglass and looking down at the table. Major Richard Fox lifted his head and turned both muzzle and ears towards the *Beagle*’s CO. “Have you named your scout vessel? Make that two questions – if not, when will you; and if so, what?”

“We have, Captain.” Major Fox closed his mouth, and his whiskers quivered and ears twitched; then he shrugged, paused and then added, “Our choice was, *The Walloping Window Blind*.⁶”

⁵ The *Adventure*, massing only a fifth of the *Beagle*, takes only a fifth the time to build the necessary strength jump field to transition into C+ space. With an expected forty-nine minutes to generate its jump field, the *Adventure* need only begin building the jump field some three hours seven minutes after the *Beagle*. The bulk of the fleet is made up of even smaller ships, with correspondingly shorter times to build their jump fields; they would wait until the “last minute” to initiate their own jump sequences in consequence. – Niall.

⁶ <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/walloping-window-blind-the/>

A capital ship for an ocean trip
Was the Walloping Window Blind.
No gale that blew dismayed her crew
Or troubled the captain’s mind.

The man at the wheel was taught to feel
Contempt for the wildest blow.
And it often appeared when the weather had cleared
That he’d been in his bunk below.

The boatswain’s mate was very sedate,
Yet fond of amusement too;

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Captain Gallery blinked. Then his face first twitched only to almost immediately freeze solid. Then, remembering what he had been told about vulpine uplifts – and more specifically, about this particular individual – he gave up trying to hide his reaction. He laughed, loud and hard – while wincing. “That is not going to look very dashing on the expedition’s records, Major. Nor, frankly, does it appear sensible – given how closely those same records are going to be scrutinized.”

“I agree, Captain.”

And he played hopscotch with the starboard watch
While the captain tickled the crew.

And the gunner we had was apparently mad
For he stood on the cannon’s tail,
And fired salutes in the captain’s boots
In the teeth of a booming gale.

The captain sat in a commodore’s hat
And dined in a royal way
On toasted pigs and pickles and figs
And gummery bread each day.

But the rest of us ate from an odious plate
For the food that was given the crew
Was a number of tons of hot cross buns
Chopped up with sugar and glue.

We all felt ill as mariners will
On a diet that’s cheap and rude,
And the poop deck shook when we dipped the cook
In a tub of his gluesome food.

Then nautical pride we laid aside,
And we cast the vessel ashore
On the Gulliby Isles, where the Poohpooh smiles
And the Anagzanders roar.

Composed of sand was that favored land
And trimmed in cinnamon straws;
And pink and blue was the pleasing hue
Of the Tickletoeteasers claws.

We climbed to the edge of a sandy ledge
And soared with the whistling bee,
And we only stopped at four o’clock
For a pot of cinnamon tea.

From dawn to dark, on rubagub bark
We fed, till we all had grown
Uncommonly thin. Then a boat blew in
On a wind from the torriby zone.

She was stubby and square, but we didn’t much care,
And we cheerily put to sea.
We plotted a course for the Land of Blue Horse,
Due west ‘cross the Peppermint Sea.

Charles E. Carryl 1841-1920

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Captain Gallery frowned. “Major – I have been warned that when you become polite, even deferential, that that is a signal of trouble. I fail to see, however, how anyone else but you stand exposed to the troubles that that name will bring.”

“Yes, sir,” Major Fox said humbly.

“Major – I am being serious here. I hope I am not being stuffy or seen as ‘plush-bottomed’, either. But I am concerned for the negative impact this could have on you and your team, and your careers – not mine,” Captain Gallery said.

“I understand and appreciate your concern, sir. But your assessment addressed appearance, rather than function,” Major Fox responded.

“I – am going to ask if you could further enlighten me, then?” Captain Gallery asked. “If need be, this can be unofficial.”

“No need for that. Plush-bottom types won’t understand it, while the professionals may argue for or even convince us to change – but they’ll do so from a solid pragmatic and scientific basis,” Major Fox answered. “Captain, tell me this: are we – the Away Team – a military unit by function?”

“By function?” Captain Gallery paused, then nodded. “Reconnaissance is a military function.”

“Of our multiple roles, which predominates – military, diplomatic, scientific, or cultural?” Major Fox asked.

“Situationally dependent – I’m afraid that you’ll have to ‘play it by ear’. It’s something that I understand you’re good at,” Captain Gallery said.

The vulpine nodded. “Yes. If we don’t get shot to flinders without any effort to continue a contact, aliens whom we encounter will probably be communicating later with other elements of our society. Other fleet ships, or diplomatic missions, or commercial ventures. What will those aliens be able to deduce about the process of the first contact, our society, or about us, their opposite numbers, on hearing the name of our craft? On hearing the response of those other, later, contactees of our kind to that name?”

“Damn little that they could depend on,” Captain Gallery said. “The first response for many of our people – soldiers more so than civilians – will be to ask whether this was some sort of a joke.” He shook his head. “But that would still leave them – both aliens and our people – questioning who the joke was on.”

“Yes. Suppose you – as either the alien or the TSA member – knew that the *Wallop-ing Window Blind* was a military craft?”

Captain Gallery shook his head. “I’d know it was a damn different one than any I might have imagined. I would be very leery about jumping to conclusions about what had happened – or about what my opposite number might or might not think about those people.”

“Which is a very big benefit – since the ‘alienness’ of the encounter would not have been significantly reduced by the one prior contact,” Major Fox said. “Would you pay more attention to the reports about that meeting you might have, or the evidence of your senses and reasoning as to what was currently happening?”

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“Major, I’d still be wondering whether that name could have been real, or if this was some sort of a tall story,” Captain Gallery answered. “I wouldn’t be sure I could trust my own records, frankly.”

“Uh-huh. Captain, I’ve heard a very learned psychologist explain laughter as a ‘mental circuit breaker’; it exists and happens, he said, whenever the real world differs from a preconceived notion or theoretical assumption. Building that sort of natural warning effect for all parties into all subsequent contacts and analyses seems to me to be not only effective but desirable. A second and as attractive function will be our inability to take ourselves altogether too seriously or fanatically. Who would ever be able to build a good, antagonism-raising, slogan out of our ship’s name?” Major Fox spread his hands and smiled toothily.

“Aren’t you concerned about the effect on your crew’s discipline? Or on the effect it might have on the rest of the crew of this ship?” Captain Gallery asked.

“Given their commanders – no.”

Captain Gallery shot a hard, intent glance at the vulpine uplift – and then he relaxed and laughed once more. “I only wish I could be there when our superiors learn about this,” he said. “Major, I was told that, when this sort of situation arose, that I should remind you of your brother’s promise.”

“His promise?” Major Fox asked.

“Yes, that someday, you would have someone just like you under your command,” Captain Gallery said, grinning.

“Besides, they turned down my second and more formal, or at least more dignified suggestion – the *Frederick Brown*.”

Gallery frowned. “I don’t recognize the name. A relative of that fanatical anti-slavery preacher? The one hanged just before the start of the Civil War.” A split-second later Gallery added, “The American Civil War, that is.”

“I know about John Brown. Not a relative – not that I know of, at any rate,” Major Fox said. “A science-fiction writer from just after your time, mostly. He specialized in short stories more than novels, and had a series of stories – more of a bag or an unordered set, really – about space exploration and alien contact specialists. Most of whom specialized in not taking either themselves, or their alien counterparts, any too seriously.”

“Major, I take back what I said. No, I’m adding to it,” Captain Gallery said. “I will back your unit’s choice. Anything that will make sentient beings think – even naval or other military officers, or even, with a miracle, politicians – deserves that, and more. How long did it take you to think of that name?”

“About five seconds. My explanatory reasoning could all be post-hoc rationalization,” Major Fox said with equanimity. “But it sounds good and will cover our tails, even if it doesn’t do anything else.” He shrugged. “It’s a ‘gut call’, Captain. Anything serious, or ‘dashing’, or ‘dramatic’, held resonances that I found suspect. This one has the virtue of at least throwing our critics into confusion.”

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“Not the die-hard critics; they’ll castigate it no matter what. They’ll find it easy to do, attacking it as ‘frivolous’ or ‘thoughtless’,” Gallery predicted.

“Who will take such attacks seriously?” Major Fox asked. “Either we will have screwed up big-time, in which case this can be a convenient fiction for cashiering us or stringing us up ‘to encourage the others’; or else we will have managed to survive unscathed and get back with information, in which case we’ll all be happy. Even Int. Sec. might like this as a prime example of ‘alien dezinformatsiya’.”

“I will be in favor of anything that gets you back with the information alive and unharmed. If being laughed at will keep you from being shot – or keep us from being seen as threatening – then I can live with that,” Captain Gallery said.

“Of course we can. But you’re the one with the ship that’s actually able to shoot in a meaningful way. We are much better off knowing that we may have to eat ‘humble pie’,” Major Fox responded, putting down his mug.⁷

“Captain, may I ask a question?”

“Certainly.”

“We haven’t discussed the matter of ‘mission time’,” Major Fox said. “You haven’t given any sense of a timetable for our mission. I find that most unusual in a military operation.”

Captain Gallery nodded. “Major, we talked about this – I with my superiors, and the planning and operational staffs back home.” He sipped at his drink, then lowered the glass again. “It took me a little while to get used to the disparities from what I was used to – ocean voyages measured in days or weeks, when it comes to covering the distances, and months to quarter-years, when it comes to fulfilling missions. Oddly, that was part of the reason why I was picked for this command, I suspect.”

“It was?”

Gallery nodded. “It will take us a day – a day and a half, if we count the coordination time at both ends – for this task force to get you to where you will proceed on to PSR 1257 +12 – ‘Galapagos’.” He shook his head. “Your Major Reynard – the comp-infil, not the Orbital – might be pleased to know that I’ve already decided that it would be impossible to suppress that re-naming; it’s already common practice throughout the expedition. Even some of the astronomers are using that designation when talking amongst themselves.” He took another sip, then recollecting his chain of thought, proceeded once again on the main line.

“It will take you less than an hour to reach the Galapagos system from our deep-space separation point. When you drop into ‘normal’ space, with the estimated ten astronomical unit distance ‘uncertainty factor’ in your exit point, you will be something between ten and thirty astronomical units out from the pulsar. I do not have an intuitive feel, as yet, for the much more complicated calculations which allow me to translate between a linear distance and a time-to-travel, for our new ‘gravity drive’ ships. I understand that I can’t

⁷ I happen to like this chunk, and Frederick Brown is underappreciated. Also, Gallery definitely liked humor and thinking – he did invent ‘pushball’ in Iceland. GSC

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just jump from saying 'it takes seventy hours to go one AU from stop to stop' to a simple multiple for the number of AU you will have to cover, because the transitions involve acceleration and deceleration curves. And my navigation people tell me that it will take you as much as seventy-two hours to run a preliminary in-system astronomical scan. Perhaps because that's close enough to the time it would take one of the primitive naval ships I was accustomed to, to do a full 'soundings and bearings chart' for a moderately complex yet completely unknown harbor."

Major Fox nodded; he'd asked the same question and gotten the same basic answer.

"Of course, it may take more time because you find more there," Captain Gallery said. "Again, something I understand: the more complex the underwater profiles are, or the more active the local tides and currents, the trickier and longer it takes to get a good 'feel' for a harbor. But that only lets you know which planet to go to."

Again, Major Fox nodded.

"I am also aware, at least up here," Captain Gallery lightly tapped the side of his head, "that you will be looking at planets. Multiple continents. With vastly better tools than I am familiar with, to be sure – but these are still large places. To take a week per planet would not be unreasonable; and, since none of them, according to my experts, are likely to be inhabitable, you're probably going to have to look at all of them. Plus any extra you find. This means that a month will be needed for the basic survey, which you absolutely have to complete before making your selection of the 'optimal' Pinlight choice."

"Glad to hear that I'm not the only one worrying about how long this can take," Major Fox said.

Captain Gallery chuckled. "A lot of people forget that exploring, when done properly, is mostly incredibly boring for those involved who are not there do to the actual work of mapping and recording what is found – and setting the context. We could, of course, shorten the time period by sending more people and platforms. But that was decided against by the Joint Chiefs. You will not, after all, be alone 'out there'. There will be dozens of teams exploring other 'likely systems'."

"I really wondered about that. I was told that I had no need to know the reasons behind their decision. That was before I was cleared for and told about 'Pinlight'," Major Fox said. "Then it made sense, in a weird way."

Captain Gallery nodded. "If we send more ships, and anyone is looking around there, our interest will seem...exaggerated. By sending just one, as we will for most systems in this 'Grand Survey', we keep our interest from standing out."

"Will the rest of the expedition know about this? I noticed the 'Pinlight' briefing was limited to senior officers – and no Marines, fliers, or any of the other 'away teams'," Major Fox asked.

"They will not – unless or until we need to send in a back-up or second wave," Captain Gallery said.

"Then...why were we told?" Major Fox asked.

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“It is a limited probability that you do encounter aliens there, and an even more limited probability that they have telepaths – which is what would be needed to give away our purpose,” Captain Gallery said. “That’s assuming that they do read your mind at the right time.”

“Uh-huh. Meaning I have to keep from thinking about the elephant while dancing around its nest. But –”

“Major, the Joint Chiefs – General Kamirov and Admiral Abends, specifically – decided that they had two options. If they sent in a team who didn’t know what was at stake, any assessment would be flawed. Could they correct it by a remote ‘records review’ more accurately? Or do we keep updating our assessment with the best knowledge of what is at stake from the start?” Captain Gallery shook his head. “If it’s any consolation, I am relieved that you’re going to be the first one in line for second-guessing, because you will be standing directly in front of me.”

“It still seems odd. Tactical and strategic decision-making have different constraints generally – picking a prime ‘Pinlight’ base seems to be more of the latter,” Major Fox said. “Captain Gallery, this isn’t a complaint. I’m trying to learn more than anything else, really.”

“Major, the fundamental reason you’re not being given a deadline is that the Joint Chiefs decided that this specific operation was vital. It is more important that you do things correctly, rather on any particular schedule, particularly since no schedule or plan could be drawn up that incorporated any knowledge which you may come across while you are there. ‘No battle plan survives five minutes contact with the enemy’ is a rule that every combat commander learns early in his career – I am morally certain that it is one that your fellows are quite familiar.”

Major Fox nodded, swallowed nervously, and said nothing. Captain Gallery noted the other’s unease and his tone shifted to a slightly more reassuring note.

“We’re not going to be just floating around out here and waiting on your return, Major. You are being sent off with the technological equivalent of ‘homing pigeons’ – a dozen of them – which you can send back with interim reports. Or you can use them to call for help. Of course, since our drives operate under the same physical laws that yours do, any rescue mission can easily expect to take as much as nine days to reach you to provide direct assistance.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’re also going to be sending out several of the other ‘away teams’ to scout out other systems. If someone – or *something* – tries to backtrack any of those teams, or your own, they will only find their way back to deep and empty space. The location and safety of the Homeworld is paramount; to this end, the Fleet is prepared to sacrifice individuals, if necessary. The Fleet is prepared to sacrifice you and your team, should it become necessary, much though I might hope that it does not.”

“But if the situation arises where it is necessary...” Major Fox began.

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“I will not hesitate – nor would I expect you to hesitate to sacrifice yourself and your team ‘should it become necessary’. Although I would much prefer that you come back in one piece, along with the knowledge that you will collect.”

“Yes, Captain Gallery,” Major Fox said. “Twelve message torpedoes, we will use them...”

“At the start of each week in which there is something to report, We expect that there may be as much as two weeks between ‘birds’, Major, but when you have expended all of your message torpedoes, we hope that you would return to give a personal report no more than four weeks after your last bird is sent.”

Mission Hour Zero, 2000 Zulu, 10 January 2106, Walloping Window Blind Bridge

“Prepare for separation,” Major Fox said.

Michael Reynard looked back from his sensor display. “Jump-space clear, *Beagle* reports ‘ready to disconnect’. Standing by.”

“Disconnect,” Major Fox called out.

“And we begin our elevator ride to Hell,” Lieutenant Christiaan whispered.

The *Walloping Window Blind*'s connections severed, the smaller vessel altered course in one direction while the *Beagle* shifted course towards its next ‘drop off’ point.

Mission Hour 33, 2300 Zulu, 11 January 2106, Walloping Window Blind, PSR 1257+12

“...and, showtime! All hands, secure from jump. Sensors – power up and begin system scan. Try to see anybody who might shoot us before they get alerted to our presence, and let’s get that message torp with the Deadman’s switch dropped and the relay chain started,” Major Fox said. To his delight, neither he nor anyone else in his little crew was suffering from “jump shock”; although Henry had to be rebooted and it would be several minutes before the AI was fully operational and responsive. All hands were “on watch” at this, the believed most dangerous time – just after transition, before they were fully operational and had a clear view of the local space.

“Comm/Flight, restore sensor power and begin system scan, acknowledged,” Michael C. Reynard said. The former Orbital began deliberately bringing active and on-line the ship’s systems, focusing on the sensor array, life support and communications, in that order.

“Secondary Flight, weapons, acknowledging.” Liselle Francis answered, her own arms moving and hands and head turning and shifting about, as she ran through her own post breakout procedures.

“Rebooting Henry,” Christiaan Ferret reported. “You may never get sick, good buddy,” he said, as he patted the AI’s canister, “but we can’t chance the damage jump transition might do to your memories. You’ll just have to tolerate the ‘down time’ before and after C+ transition...” he whispered to the AI, even though it was not yet aware.

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“Life support coming on-line,” Major Jennifer Lotor said. She glanced around the bridge. “We’ve just had a prime example of ‘beginners luck’, folks – none of us are sick with jump shock.”

“Lessens the clean-up load and lightens our day. Anybody shot at us yet, Michael?” Major Fox asked.

“No sign of bandits⁸, bogies⁹ or skunks¹⁰. Estimate time to initial sky map as one hour twenty minutes. Initial estimate of breakout ...” Michael Reynard fought with the navigational computer as it finished its bootup process. “Between twenty and thirty AU from primary. Better estimate in ... one hour.”

Jennifer Lotor chuckled. With all the good luck, a little poorer than average luck was to be expected. “All of us dodged jump shock going in, and all of us dodged it coming out of jump. A little less-than-perfect luck may help keep us from hubris.” She looked over at their mission commander, “Think we might be able to develop an ‘immunity’ to jump shock?”

“No one on any of the ‘space trials’ did,” Major Fox said. “Of course, they were only Human...”

“Maybe Uplifts are better able to handle the shock?” Christiaan asked.

“We’ll find out,” Michael said, as he continued his battle with the navigational computers. “It might make for an interesting study, when all the teams get back to the *Beagle*.”

As Henry finished his boot process (faster, it turned out, than the navigational computers), he unfastened his lockdowns and moved to assist Michael in his battle with the navigational systems.

“What do we know and what do we hope about this system, anyways?” Jennifer C. Lotor asked.

“Long-range survey methods showed three definite and one possible planets,” Henry said. “In order outward from the pulsar, the three known planets are labelled A, B, and C. A is at one-fifth of an astronomical unit, has a 25¼ day orbital period, and 1/40th of the Earth’s mass. Detailed display coming up now on the main screen...”

⁸ Hostiles. – Niall.

⁹ Unidentified craft. – Niall.

¹⁰ Identified civilian craft. – Niall.

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The PSR 1257+12 system				
Order	Mass	Semimajor Axis (AU)	Orbital period (days)	Eccentricity
a	0.025 Me	0.19	25.262 (± 0.003)	0.00
b	4.3 \pm 0.2 Me	0.36	66.5419 (± 0.0001)	0.0186 (± 0.0002)
c	3.9 \pm 0.2 Me	0.46	98.2114 (± 0.0002)	0.0252 (± 0.0002)
D	<0.0004 Me	2.6	1250	unknown

PSR B1257+12 D is a possible extrasolar dwarf planet approximately 980 light-years away in the constellation of Virgo. It is suspected that a dwarf planet is orbiting PSR B1257+12 at an average orbital distance of 2.6 AU with an orbital period of approximately 3.5 years.

Originally, in 1996, a possible Saturn-like (100 Earth mass) gas giant was announced orbiting the pulsar at a distance of about 40 AU. However, the discovery was not conclusive and was later retracted. It is now thought that the signal came from a dwarf planetary body

The object is so small that it is not even considered to be a planet, but it is the first known extrasolar dwarf planet akin to the objects in the Kuiper belt in our solar system. It is possible that this object is the largest member of a belt of minor objects around the pulsar.

“Henry, you’re learning to be approximate! That’s great!” Jennifer said encouragingly.

“Ell Eff told me to think of very broad rounding for poorly maintained storage units, when I thought of human detail management and capabilities,” Henry responded. “Planet b is at 0.34 astronomical units, has a 66 day orbital period, and between 4 and 1/3 and 4½ earth masses. Planet c is at 0.45 astronomical units, has an orbital period of 98.6 days, and 4 Earth masses. It is generally accepted by astronomers that planets a, b, and c are former gas giants whose surrounding atmosphere and a good portion of their total mass were presumably blown off when the pulsar grew active.”

“Three...out of four. The fourth is the ‘possible’?” Jennifer asked.

“Yes. Planet d is at 2.6 astronomical units, has an orbital period of 1,250 days, and about 4/10,000ths of Earth’s mass. It is below the limit of acceptable proof but is within the range of potential stable readings,” Henry said.

“We can’t call these ‘a’, ‘b’, ‘c’, and ‘d’ – those make it sound like we’re grading them. Personally, I’d reverse that order, if we’re measuring likely liveability,” Christiaan said.

“Who gets to name them?” Jennifer asked.

“I’ve learned one thing from Richard; whoever is the first to act and get her or his thoughts on record, has the greatest advantage,” Liselle Francis said. “We should keep to naming sequence that is appropriate to this system, though. Otherwise, I’d be naming one or more of the inner planets ‘Styx’ or from other parts of the firey hells. Those can’t be survivable without a helluva lot of protection.”

“Well, the Task Force is calling this whole system the ‘Galapagos’ system, after you spread that suggestion around,” Jennifer Lotor said. “So it would make sense to name the planets after things that Darwin and others found on his expedition. Things that the average person would associate with the Galapagos islands.”

“They really noticed the iguanas. Which can grow really, really big,” Liselle Francis said.

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“Darwin and the others noted the number of tortoises. Ate a good many of them too,” Jennifer Lotor said.

“I thought he made most of his observations that led to his constructing the theory of evolution from the birds that he found there. Most of whom were a variation on some branch of the finch family,” Liselle Francis added.

“Okay, so Planet A becomes ‘Iguana’,” Jennifer Lotor agreed.

“Then Planet B becomes ‘Tortoise’, Planet ‘C’ becomes ‘Finch’ – easy enough,” Michael Reynard said.

“Oh? We’ve run out of planets – and we don’t even know if ‘D’ exists,” Christiaan objected. “But if it does, what are we going to name it?”

“Unicorn,” Major Fox answered confidently.

“Works for me!” Liselle Francis sang out.

“I like it too,” Jennifer Lotor added a split second later.

“Definitely zipped,” Christiaan said.

“A unicorn is a mythical beast, a combination of horse, goat, and ass, with a single horn growing out of its forehead,” Henry said. “There were no unicorns found in the Galapagos Islands, or on Earth anywhere. Until the first was created by genetic manipulation in –”

“Henry, we don’t know if Planet d is even there. So, it too is mythical,” Jennifer Lotor explained.

“Ah. Humor. Very peculiar association – yet you each seemed to understand it perfectly. Including Major Reynard. Do the Orbitals have myths about unicorns, then?”

“We do,” Mike said.

“Henry – how big is Unicorn? Planet d?” Liselle Francis asked.

“I have no data from which that can be determined,” Henry responded.

“If its average density were similar to that of either an earth-like planet or another *Kiran*, what size would it be?” Major Fox asked.

“One moment; I do not have that...” Henry clicked and blinked his lights. “With an average density equivalent to that of Earth’s, Unicorn would have a diameter of roughly 950 kilometers. In other words, it is entirely possible that Unicorn could be an Shidran-Kas Greater Homeship.” He ran his lights around in a circle and shimmered from side to side rapidly several times. “Major Fox – how could you attain that comparison without any data?”

“It’s called ‘guessing’, Henry. Besides, it just felt right as a possible supposition,” Major Fox answered. The other team members blinked, filed that away, and continued on with their duties as the ‘sky mapping’ progressed.

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Mission Hour 34, 0030 Zulu, 12 January 2106, Walloping Window Blind, PSR 1257+12

“Command, Sensors: preliminary estimate of break out complete,” Lieutenant Michael Reynard said. “We are approximately 25 astronomical units from the primary – an error of 5 AU ‘outward’ from the primary. Estimated time to full sky map is seventy-five hours.”

“Acknowledged, Sensors, twenty-five AU from primary, 75 hours to full sky map. Assume standard watch sequence, folks,” Major Richard Fox said.

Mission Hour 109, 0330 Zulu, 15 January 2106, Walloping Window Blind Galley

“All four planets are confirmed. ‘Unicorn’ is there,” Lieutenant Michael Reynard said. “The read-outs from our scan differ only around the second decimal point from those given in the long-range view for the first three. Iguana, Tortoise, and Finch all appear to have been Jovian-class planets before the pulsar went ‘blooie!'; what we’re looking at are the remaining rocky cores after their atmospheres were blown off in the first, or from the series, of supernoval pulses.”

“I don’t think ‘supernoval’, is a noun!” Jennifer Lotor objected.

“It is not; it is an adjective. Now,” Mike said.

“Fine points of English aside, what more can you tell us about Unicorn?” Major Fox asked.

“Despite not being in the habitable zone for this star, Unicorn has three strong signals indicating that it is habitable on the surface,” Mike said. “It’s atmosphere is an oxy-nitro composi—”

“33% oxygen, 66% nitrogen, 0.9% argon, 0.1% other gases,” Henry interjected.

Mike shot a hard glance at his ‘team member’, who remained outwardly unaware of the Orbital’s body language. “Unicorn also has a spectrographic emissions profile signaling that it has a liquid water environment – as well as traces of both chlorophyll and xanthophyl.”

“Both found on Earth,” Liselle Francis noted.

“Unicorn also has a surface temperature of 295° Kelvin. That’s 22° Celsius,” Mike added.

R. C. Fox didn’t try to convert to Fahrenheit; the approximate, not exact, value was what was disturbing. “That means that it’s suitable for short-sleeves, effectively. Can we hypothetically survive without breathing gear?”

“There will be some danger of oxygen poisoning, unless we wear filter masks,” Liselle Francis objected.

“Furthermore,” Mike ground on, his tone harshening as he got tired of the interruptions of his startling compendium of announcements, “Unicorn displays on the surface a cyclical light/dark pattern that does not match the planet’s solar orbit or its own rotation. Yet it does not appear to have another light source nor any orbiting satellite to account for this phenomenon.”

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Liselle Francis blinked.

Christiaan laughed. "It is a unicorn, all right – perfectly and inexplicably mythical!"

"These readings appear nonsensical, at least on the basis of current science," Henry objected. "The solar inputs from PSR 1257+12 should mean its surface temperature would range fr—"

"What's the surface gravitational field, as detectible by the localized lensing?" Major Fox interrupted to ask.

Mike blinked. "We need to get closer to determine the precise gravitational field strength, Major Fox. That will require that we go there and find out."

Henry flashed his lights, and everyone turned towards the AI 'Christmas tree'. "Time to target – if we select Unicorn as our first target – is three hundred forty-three hours."

"Okay, we're going to go look at Unicorn – set course accordingly. Before we go, however, put everything we know and have found out so far onto our next message torpedo. I want that to ready to go before we alter course and potentially signal anybody in this system that we're going to Unicorn," Major Fox ordered.

"Launch two torpedoes within hours of each other?" Christiaan asked.

"We leave one torp here. From now on, we copy all data out to it on burst transmissions, using the tightest whisker lasers – and if we need, booster relay sats – we can manage. If this passive remote doesn't get a 'stay-here' chirp – say, one every three hours – then it jumps for home," Major Fox said. "We will not go unnoticed into the dark night'."

"What if somebody tries to pick it up?" Liselle Francis asked.

"Then it pings us and scrams instanter," Mike suggested.¹¹

"Make it so," Major Fox said, and the AI's lights flashed again.

"Orbit changes initiated. Time to target: Mission Hour 452, roughly two weeks from now."

Mission Hour 247, 2130 Zulu, 20 January 2106, The Walloping Window Blind, en route to Unicorn

"Afternoon, Michael. I thought you were off-duty?" Richard Charles Fox came into the 'operational' part of the ship, as he thought of it, carrying a cup of 'bug juice' in each hand. "Want something to drink?"

"Sure." Michael C. Reynard took the second cup from his team-mate and took a sip, then made a face. "Bleagh. I can't see how humans can drink this even they couldn't be so insensitive that this stuff would be tolerable," He took another sip. "Water would almost be better."

¹¹ Okay, this is added since the run. On the other hand, with days of extra time to think of 'fall-back' plans, and being able to come up with this on the re-reading, I think it's reasonable to put in; also, it will become a 'S.O.P.' for the exploration missions. "Always get the info back – even if the only info is that you got killed." – GSC. Acknowledged, and accepted. – Niall.

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"We'd get bored if we just drank water. Which is an option."

"I'm already bored," Liselle Francis said, coming up from the second deck. "Thanks for the temporary relief, Michael."

He shrugged. "I can stay 'on boards' for the moment. Re-running the sensor comparisons will keep me mildly amused."

"Bored is good, children." That was Christiaan Ferret, sticking his head up from the hatchway. "Bored, means nobody is either hunting you or shooting at you. Be grateful for being 'bored'."

"Yeah, sure," Liselle Francis said, but without feeling. She sat down on the secondary command chair and swiveled to look at the main display screen and its vision of the star pattern they were surrounded by. "You're a pessimist, Christiaan. And a paranoid to boot. Who's going to shoot at us, out here?"

A light on her console lit up, as did one on Michael's. Both jumped as if they had been hit with an electric shock.

"Captain – incoming signal!" Michael spluttered.

Richard, recovering from having ducked the tossed-away cup (not entirely successfully missing the liquids that had departed on separating vectors), asked, "Video or audio only?"

"Uh—" Michael hastily ran the analysis, "—audio only, standard ship-to-ship."

"Put them on then," Richard said. The comm burbled fractionally and then a human-sounding voice was heard.

"—repeating. Hi, Captain! Mind if I come on board?"

Liselle Francis's ears went utterly limp, and she turned her head to stare at the viewscreen. On it – responding to the inputs now coming from Michael's hastily re-tuned sensor scans – was displayed a new object. His fur was bottled out and his hackles were fully raised, and his motions were jerky as he tried to run a back-trace on a ship that had just appeared out of nowhere. *I know that voice*, Liselle Francis thought frantically, *But that has to be an illusion! That person can't be –*

"Hello, Auren. Sure, you can," Richard answered.

Michael, Liselle, and Christiaan all stared at their team leader. His voice was completely calm and his demeanor was relaxed – he apparently was paying more attention to wiping off as much of the 'bug juice' that had decorated his clothing and fur, than he was to the impossible conversation that had started up.

"Got one question before you arrive, though," Richard added.

"Sure! What?" Auren asked.

"We're running under standard record-everything procedures. I can turn those off, or you can mask them yourself when you come on board, if you want. Since the latter might be more of a problem – correcting it afterwards, really – and we're not going to be reporting this to anybody who might do anything about it for some time, I don't know if you want us to go to that sort of trouble." Richard picked up and took the last slug from his

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cup of 'bug juice' – most of which he had also spilled when he'd been dodging the other – and put the cup down again.

Christiaan came all the way out of the hatch and was sidling towards Michael, who was running the analytic software to get the readings on the ship – the other ship – that was obviously now pacing them, exactly 0.4 miles away on their lower port flank.

Auren laughed. "I don't care if they know about me. They should have a decent record of my voice from the *Kiran*. Are you upset?"

"Frankly? I'm delighted. It'll be another great signal that we – they – don't know and can't predict everything. It should cause tremendous furor and confusion later on, particularly amongst the stuffier 'know-it-all' types. Not to mention what it'll do to our security paranoids," Richard C. Fox said.

"And how," Christiaan whispered. Michael looked at him and nodded. This would, indeed, put everyone in the entire mission-reviewing net into as bad a frenzy as they had just experienced.

"Well, since you put it so nicely and gave me the choice – I rather like the idea of causing those types of people to suffer from conniption fits. All of them," Auren said. "They certainly didn't seem to have any trouble with my presence at your wedding."

"That's probably because you represented a contradiction which the system wasn't able to handle," Richard said. "You were on the list of invitees, so the lower-level, actualy-present types, were conditioned to pass you through. Since you didn't show up by any of the standard travel means, none of the higher-up 'cognitive' types, had enough warning to initiate countermeasures."

"Your Major Kamirov was there – and he did talk with me," Auren said. "Frankly, I was surprised that he didn't try to arrest me – either of us, really."

"Major Kamirov has good judgment and common sense. He also is willing to provide sufficient rope to people to allow them to hang themselves," Richard responded. "Your presence and activities were not a known, active, current, threat to GUS security, and he got valuable data about potentialities and capabilities at very little cost. Sure, he might have gotten more by trying more 'interventionist' or 'activist' approaches – but he also would have certainly disrupted the proceedings and potentially antagonized a number of very sensitive political and powerful individuals. With a very questionable, and unknown, probability of any beneficial outcome."

Richard shook his head and took a sip from his mug. "On the other hand, if you'd stayed there for more than 12 hours, or he'd been able to isolate you and surround you with KGB thugs – he'd have had a chance to learn a lot more, and probably taken it."

"Well, that's why I generally prefer to drop in when there aren't those types around," Auren said. "Give me a minute to switch things to self-contained mode here, and I'll come over."

The comm went quiet as the signals stopped. Michael blinked and looked over at Richard. Before he could speak – though he was opening his mouth – Liselle Francis did.

"That's Auren. We met her on the *Kiran*. She also just 'walked in on us' there."

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“But, but, but ... how?” Michael asked. “Major, one minute there was nobody on the screen – and the next, that ship was! No gravity waves, no nothing!”

“Who knows? Paratemporal emergence may not have the same energy signature, particularly if it's done slickly,” Richard said. “Or she has some form of stealth technology that spoofs our sensors. Either way, or any of a half-dozen or more other possibilities, explain the reality. Which is that she's coming over and is friendly. Aren't you willing to be glad of that?”

“Yes,” Michael said decisively. “Because if she'd wanted to smoke us – my guess is that we'd be ash right now.”

Mission Hour 452, 1030 Zulu, 29 January 2106, The Walloping Window Blind, Unicorn orbit

“Now we can say what Unicorn's gravity is,” Michael said. “The surface acceleration is 1.01 gees, based on the probes we sent ahead. Of course, there's only microgravity here. With the surveillance satellites deployed, we should have reasonable maps within twenty-four hours.”

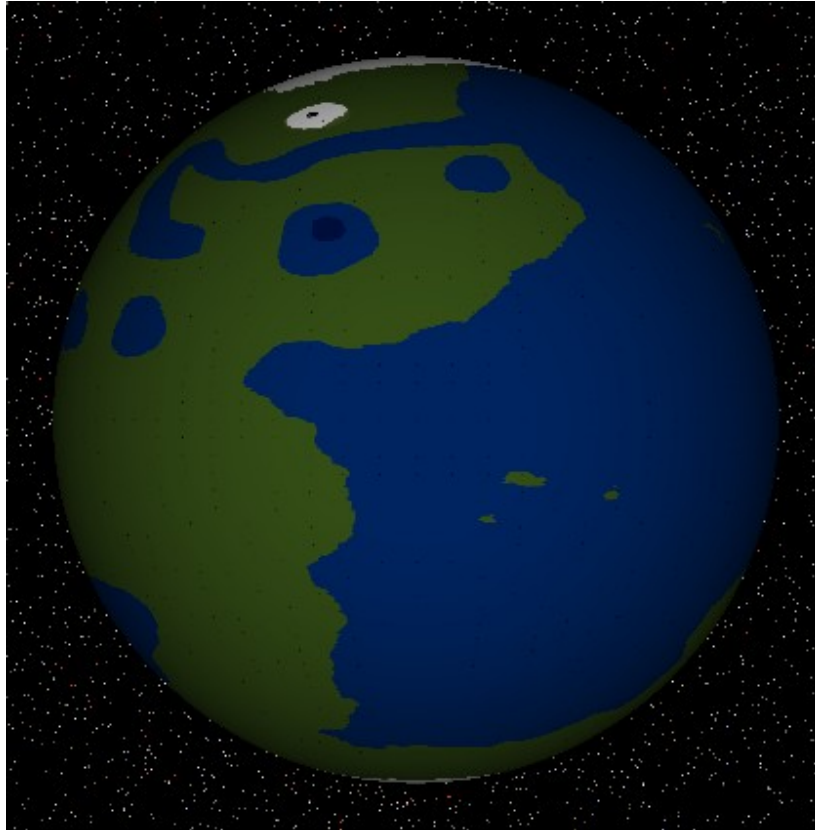
“Make it so, Lieutenant,” Major Fox said. *We cross light-years in minutes, and then spend weeks crossing a star system. Oh well, it still takes homo sap the same time to walk across a room, no matter how fast our starships travel; H. Beam Piper was right!*

Mission Hour 476, 1030 Zulu, 30 January 2106, The Walloping Window Blind, Unicorn Orbit.

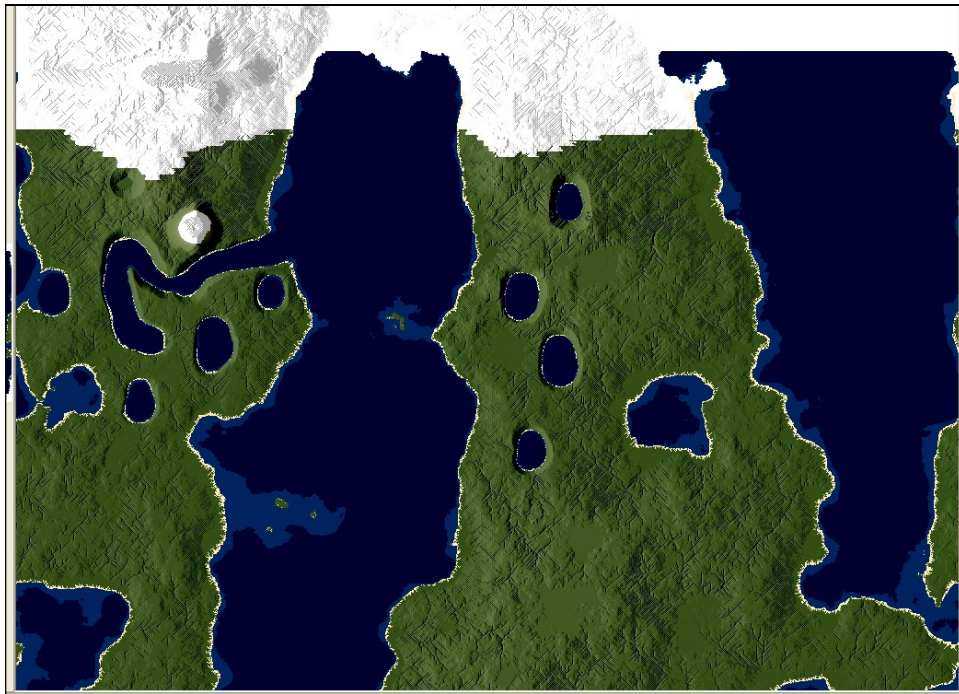
“An excellent job, Michael. Truly excellent,” Major Fox said. The surveillance satellites provided visual, thermographic, magnetographic, radio spectral and other images of the “planet”.



Longitude 0, Latitude 0



Longitude 180, Latitude 0



Contour Map

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“That has to be one hell of a tall mountain – you can see it over the curve of the horizon from a good part of the north quadrisphere,” Liselle Francis said, pointing to the white-capped area somewhat south and separated from an obvious pole. Which was designated as ‘north’, rather than being indicated as such by magnetic fields, as none surrounded the planetoid.

“15 kilometers high, basically,” Michael said. “Maj – Richard, in answer to your question earlier, there aren’t any emissions, radio or otherwise. Nor are there thermal hotspots, visual light sources, or other indications of sentient life.”

“What we think of as ‘civilization’ markers, anyways,” Jennifer C. Lotor said.

“No contra-gravity, no neutrino pulses, nor any of the more ‘exotic’ or ‘advanced’ signals or indicators either,” Michael said. “Which leaves two extremes: there’s nothing above muscle-level down there, or they’re using technologies we can’t spot at a distance.”

“That could be biological, underground, or psionic,” Liselle Francis said. “Or something else entirely.”

“What’s disturbing is that the planetoid shouldn’t have the readings that our drones indicate it has, as far as surface conditions go,” Michael said.

“Oh?” Richard asked.

“No,” Michael said firmly. “The pressure at the surface is 1.01 Terran atmospheres. The pressure at the top of that mountain is also 1.01 Terran atmospheres. But the pressure at 10 kilometers over open water – the ‘seas’ – is 0 atmospheres. Which shouldn’t be possible.”

“Also, the spectral input from PSR 1257+12 does not match the surface-reflected spectral emissions, which are those of a G2-G3 star,” Henry said. “This is most disturbing as it contradicts astronomical principles.”

“Presume there’s at least one intervening factor, probably an advanced and alien technology, Henry,” Richard said.

“Ah. Guessing, again?” Henry asked.

“Nope. Inferring. One variation from scientific norms, is much more disturbing as it suggests that our previous measurements or theory require modification to handle the ‘odd case’. This many deviations suggest something else: somebody wanted to set up a near-Terran-normal environment, and had the technological means to do it at a planetary scale. The results from our drones on each of Iguana, Tortoise, and Finch indicate that they follow the rules – so this localized set of deviations probably has a local, not a general, cause. Hence,” Richard shrugged, “alien tech.”

“That is an interesting variation on the application of Ockham’s Razor, Major Fox,” Henry said. “But what if your assumption is in error?”

“Until we have more data, we couldn’t test any assumption – so we focus on gathering more data,” Richard said.

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“Here’s another very interesting piece of data,” Michael said. He tapped at the controls and the image of the solo, giant mountain began to expand. “There’s a building on the top of that mountain.”

The screen split to put the global view on one side, and the expanded view on the other. At the top of the mountain was a metallic shape with regular sides and a shadow – from a direction different than that which the pulsar would have cast. “Is that building really there? Or the surface, for that matter?” Liselle Francis asked.

“It’s there,” Auren said, after a split second in which she had ‘listened’ to her ship’s reports. “It’s also impenetrable to my remote sensing equipment, so it’s shielded.”

“Probably the most obvious point of alien contact,” Richard said. “Let’s not try and direct or destructive testing on it – no lasing, not even for communications checks, okay?”

“Why not?” Auren asked.

“I don’t want to provoke it into responding in kind, only more energetically so,” Richard said.

“Fair enough,” Auren conceded.

“Michael – drop one of our probes from 10 km down towards the surface, running barometric and reflectivity checks every 50-100 meters along the way,” Richard said.

“Wilco. Why?” Michael asked, as he tasked one of the remote ‘drones’ accordingly.

Richard shrugged. “Let’s find out where the atmosphere starts, and what its depth and variation are.”

The answer came quickly – as the probe descended through 2070 meters above sea level, the atmospheric pressure jumped abruptly from zero to 768 mm Hg (1.01 Earth sea level pressure). “Damn, that’s fast!” Michael Reynard said, as he watched the telemetry from the probe; the probe’s signal continued unhindered as it passed through the boundary layer.

“Okay, now drop the drone down to 150 meters, and set it to looking upwards,” Richard said.

“Acknowledged, sending the drone down to 150 meters altitude and directing sensors skyward,” Michael said, confirming the order as his hands danced across the keyboard.

“I want to see whether the sky one would see from below the interface, is the same as the sky one would see from above it,” Richard said.

A few minutes later, everyone was staring at the main display. “That is impossible,” Jennifer Lotor said. “Entirely different skies!”

“Above the interface, it’s the view of this solar system. Below, it’s a view from another solar system,” Liselle Francis said.

“Is it? Michael, bring the probe up above the interface layer, move it over the ‘night time’ and then send it down again,” Richard said.

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When the next views came in, Auren snickered. "It's the same star-set, Richard. Is that what you expected?"

"I don't get it," Michael said¹². "When it's pointing 'skyward' in the 'day time' area, we don't see *any* sun, nor do we see the pulsar. But in the 'night time' area, we see the same weird starry sky."

"And our current sky isn't weird?" Liselle Francis asked.

"Ok, point granted, but this is *doubly* weird," Michael replied.

"No argument there," Richard said, resting his hand on the tod's shoulder. "No argument at all."

"You've got the indirect lighting effect as though a G2 or G3 sun was illuminating the area. Neat trick, that," Michael said. "Thoroughly zipped, if not bundled and dropped."

"What's more disturbing is that there are no clouds in the atmosphere – because there is no atmosphere – above 2,070 meters," Henry said. "Yet the visual impression one gets from below the interface is that there are all the layers – stratus, cumulus, nimbus, and so on – from the lowest level to the highest level of the stratosphere."

"It's not just visual," Michael said. He switched to a different drone – which was flying through a rainstorm. Then the screen flared white. "Now *that* is not just a rainstorm. Definitely zipped! We're picking up r-f hash from the lightning – both above and below the interface." He shook his head. "This is beyond zipped, people – it just doesn't make sense, with no 'real' lightning flashes at the indicated altitudes. It *shouldn't* be possible."

"For a given value of 'possible', sure," Richard said. "But it is, since we're observing it. That makes it fun."

"I'll say," Liselle Francis said. "Want to bet that that building is involved, somehow?"

"But we haven't detected any emissions from that building!" Michael protested.

"We may not be using the right instruments. How many ceegee pulses have you seen?" Richard asked.

"Let's go back to the big picture," Jennifer C. Lotor said. Michael nodded and the global view once more filled the main screen. "The thing I find interesting is that we have a lot of different biomes. We've got rainforests, tundra, deciduous and coniferous equivalents – that planetoid has more variation than can be explained by evolution." She tapped at one of several large, round lakes displayed there. "I look at those, however, and I see asteroidal impact craters. Enough of them, in enough of a pattern, to suggest that somebody may have taken pot-shots at that mountain and building."

"Just over two clicks of atmosphere isn't going to insulate the planetoid much against spatial debris," Michael said.

"Wouldn't the pulsar's bloom have blown all of that out of the system?" Henry asked.

¹² Can we divide the questions asked to allow instructing the reader up a bit more? Auren is not that uninformed. – Kay. Done. – Niall.

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“Out to a given value, based on the energy of the most enthusiastic pulse, sure,” Richard said. “We haven’t been looking for anything like Earth’s Oort cloud – and it’d take way too long to find such ‘small stuff’, even with binocular-parallax mapping efforts. How long would finding even a planetoid this size out that far likely take, Henry?”

“Assuming maximum effort of our full satellites and probes? To produce a 90% confidence level survey? Approximately 4200 hours,” Henry said.

“Major, why do you think there are so few different animals on the surface?” Michael asked.

“I like the big dragonflies!” Liselle Francis said. “Aren’t those enough?” They had been nearly a meter long, with a two-to-four-meter combined wingspan. Hexapodal, with eight wings in two sets, four forward, smaller, like aircraft canards, and four rearward, larger, like helicopter lifting surfaces.

“If we land one of our drones,” Jennifer Lotor said, “we might have a bit better luck at seeing animal life. While they’re hovering, the drones are pretty noisy, and if *I* were an animal and heard something making that much noise, I’d try and get out of sight.”

“But the drones aren’t predators – and why would anything evolve that response when there aren’t any such predators on the planet’s surface?” Liselle Francis asked.

“You’re going to have to land sooner or later, and, if I get a vote, I’d vote for ‘sooner’ rather than later,” Auren said. “It would be nice to find out what’s down there first hand.”

“Sure. Where do we land?” Jennifer C. Lotor asked.

“Nowhere near the building,” Richard said.

“Why not?” Auren asked.

“Because if things go middling wrong, we could be dumped into that biosphere without means to leave or continue sustaining our own systems. I want to know the dangers of cross-contamination, them to us or we to them, first,” Richard said.

“Boring but sensible,” Auren said. “Tell you what – I’ll leave my ship in orbit around the planet as a back-up.”

“Thank you. Oh, and Michael?”

“Yes?”

“Make certain we’ve got a Skywatch set and rolling, won’t you? I want to know if somebody else pops in to take a look at this place, while we’re down on the surface,” Richard said.

“It’s a big universe – what are the odds against that?” Auren asked.

“Even or worse,” Christiaan said. “You dropped in.”

“Yeah, but I had my reasons,” Auren said. “I’m already here, so that should fill the probability distribution right there.”

“That never works for independent probabilities – and I can’t think of much more independent than separately-evolving star-faring civilizations,” Richard said.

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“Pfui. Point granted,” Auren conceded with a feigned ill-grace.

Mission Hour 494, 0430 Zulu, 31 January 2106, The Walloping Window Blind, Unicorn South Polar Region

“Good landing, Henry,” Michael Reynard said, thinking, *Helps when your computer is actually able to handle the final approach. I wonder if we could get this technology for Orbital use – it would make environmental work a whole lot more reliable.*

“Thank you, Michael. We can start sampling directly, now,” Henry said.

“A penny for your thoughts, Michael,” Richard Fox asked. *The Orbital seems a bit more thoughtful than usual*, he thought.

“Nothing important, just wishing for improvements back home,” Michael replied.

“Have anyone ‘back home’ you’d specifically be wishing for?” Liselle Francis asked.

“I wish,” Michael answered. “But let’s get to work...” he said, in an effort to divert the curiosity of his shipmates.

Mission Hour 538, 0030 Zulu, 2 February, 2106, The Walloping Window Blind, Unicorn South Polar Region

“So, what do we have?” Jennifer Lotor asked, as she slid out of her environmental suit.

“A whole lot of gunk,” Liselle Francis said succinctly. “Something sort of like krill, with something like DNA as the likely genetic transmitter. At least, that’s what the analysis gear says. There’s phosphorus in the local biosphere as an integral element.”

“The gunk part, I could have made without any instrumentation,” Jennifer Lotor said. She looked at the external videos on the monitor in the suiting chamber. Slightly dusted ice surrounded their ship – they’d taken numerous ice cores and surface samples, and set passive and active but low-power detectors around the ship. “There’s nothing really living on this ice field.”

“Nothing above the multi-cellular organism level, that’s for certain,” Liselle Francis said.

“We landed here because it was about as far away from that building as we could get. Which suits me just fine. Not getting shot at is a win whenever you’re scouting.” Christiaan Ferret looked across the white and shining plain. “There’s a bright side; we could at least mine this ice for water.”

“We’d have to process it thoroughly first,” Liselle Francis said. “It’s mineral-rich – probably from the asteroid strikes stirring up a heavy amount of atmospheric dust.”

“I don’t get it. The splash from those strikes would go above whatever is holding in the atmosphere – meaning most of the ejecta would fly free, since the orbital gravity of Unicorn above that level is what we’d expect for a planetoid this size,” Christiaan said. “Henry’s analysis shows that those strikes should have disturbed the orbit considerably. But without knowing when they took place, he can’t posit any ‘original orbit’ this might have had.”

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“Do we know anything more about that building than we did when we found it?” Liselle Francis asked.

Jennifer Lotor shook her head. “No change. It’s still resting on the base rock of the mountain. It’s still got those diamond-shaped doorways or other openings – at varied heights, the lowest of which is 3 meters off the ground. It’s still 50 meters tall.”

“You left out the facts that no one – that nothing alive or moving has been spotted in, at, by, or near it,” Christiaan said. “Negative news is still news. Anything else you can tell us about this ‘gunk’, Ell Eff?”

“Most of the biologicals in the cores is pollen of one kind or another. We’re getting a pretty good read on the biological norms for Unicorn. It looks as if we could survive its proteins, just as the locals should survive ours. Not that we’d want to eat any of the plants or animals we’ve observed to date – but we won’t go into anaphylactic shock or even develop contact dermatitis from simple exposure.”

“That’s nice to know,” Christiaan said. “I’ve been through biocontainment exercises to find them more than just a little bit of a pain in the posterior.”

“We’ll still use environment suits with the usual – 60 hour consumables, auto-links, and sampling kits,” Liselle Francis said. “Though it may seem an unnecessary effort to collect the equivalent of ‘phytoplankton’ and ‘krill’ on this frozen wasteland.”

“I suppose we’ll find out if there’s anything else after we find it ... after we get more intelligently directed sampling,” Christiaan said.

Liselle Francis snorted. “Okay, the local biome has its own variation on the DNA and other sample beings mechanization – more of a pseudo-DNA, really.”

“What’s the difference?” Jennifer asked.

“The long-chain proteins are made of the same quartet of smaller proteins – Guanine, cytosine, and...the other two¹³,” Liselle Francis said, waving her hand.

“Adenine and thymine are ‘the other two’,” Henry chimed in.

“Thank you, oh great master,” Liselle Francis said, bowing in the direction of the AI’s cylinder. “The phosphorus ratios are similar, too. But the structure and orders are different – so much so, that there’s very little likelihood of receptor sites operating. It’s as if we’re on different key systems entirely.”

“Ah. Well, excuse me; got a task,” Christiaan said. He and Michael marched around to the side of the ship and pulled one of the message torpedoes out from the larger hatch. The others watched as the pair took it some distance off, set it up, and then launched it.

“Anybody know why we’re taking this long to do the bio-assay, in such a bleak and empty place?” Liselle Francis asked.

“I do. I did, because I asked our fearless leader,” Jennifer C. Lotor answered.

After nearly a minute, Liselle Francis sighed. “And he said?” she prompted.

¹³ The four chemical components are guanine, cytosine, adenine, and thymine, not creatine. Corrected references accordingly. – Niall.

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“That it was better to get it done right, and safely, than get caught with our tails uncovered. When we’ve done this sort of landing and biological survey a double-dozen times, so we know every step in our sleep...”

“What’s the point of those simulations, then?” Liselle Francis grumbled.

“...and when we’ve been caught with our tails uncovered and survived, then we’ll have the experience to judge how and when to cut corners. Since we’re the ones at risk, he’s not interested in seeing us get zapped,” Jennifer finished.

Christiaan came over. “This sort of leadership doesn’t win medals. I am much in favor of this sort of leadership, accordingly.”

“But it’s boorrring!” Liselle Francis objected.

“You finished your contact reports for yesterday’s interactions with Auren, yet?” Christiaan asked.

“No,” Liselle Francis grumpily admitted.

“Do we have any age for those asteroid strikes?” Christiaan asked of Jennifer.

“No,” she replied, shaking her head. “If I had wear rate or similar weathering information, I might make a guess.”

“But we’ve got the ice core strata which Henry analyzed,” Liselle Francis protested.

“Uh-huh. With global weather patterns from where?” Jennifer said. “There’s no stratospheric exchange, and we’ve no idea, still, about the air or oceanic current patterns on Unicorn. If something goes up above 6,800 feet in the northern hemisphere’s atmosphere, does it transfer down here? Or is the entire atmospheric process just a ‘bump’ in some other planet’s atmosphere?”

“Hell of a big bump – and we’d have fliers coming through if it were,” Christiaan said.

“Who’s to say we haven’t? We don’t know the source for the mega-dragonflies we spotted, or any of the other fauna either,” Jennifer replied. “It’s a mystery.”

“At least we’re going to move tomorrow,” Michael said as he came up.

“Really? Where?” Liselle Francis asked.

“To the southern extension of the peninsula at the end of the Amalthea River,” Michael answered. “That large, visible-from-space feature that runs east-west some distance south of Horn Mountain.”

“When did that get named?” a startled and somewhat disgruntled Liselle Francis asked. “And who picked it?”

“I did – the river name, at any rate,” Christiaan said. “I sure wasn’t going to let it be called ‘Fishhook’ – never mind that it looks like one. Amalthea was the name of the lead female protagonist in Peter Beagle’s **The Last Unicorn**.”

“I thought that was the unicorn’s name,” Liselle Francis objected.

“The unicorn never had a name, except as an alias,” Christiaan said, shaking his head.

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“Well, what about the mountain?” Liselle Francis asked.

“If you think about the size of the thing, compared to the scale of this world – and see it as leading the planet about in its revolution – considering the name of this world, it made a great deal of sense,” Christiaan said. “We had to call it something.”

Mission Hour 540, 0230 Zulu, 2 February, 2106, Cape Camp, next to the Walloping Window Blind

“Can you remind me just *why* we are going to move to this ‘Site 2’?” Liselle Francis asked.

Christiaan sighed. “It is out of sight of the mountain, but the ‘stay at camp’ group will be able to remain in communication with the ‘go to the mountain’ group with our current communication satellite constellation.”

Jennifer Lotor stopped twisting her tailtip fur into knots. “What I find harder to understand is how Richard was just able to go to bed, like he has.”

“*That’s* easy to answer,” Christiaan replied. “Any good soldier learns the trick of getting sleep whenever he can, regardless of the past or future problems he may have faced or may have to face. ‘Push your troubles into a box, then stick the box under your bed – and leave it for later’.”

“New site, another survey...” Jennifer began.

“‘Pushy your troubles into a box...’. Besides, if *he* gets his sleep, he might be able to enforce sleep rules on the rest of us when he has to,” Christiaan interrupted.

“That is the most *twisted* logic I’ve heard from you to date,” Liselle Francis said. Shaking her head, she continued, “Dropping here instead of going to Mount Horn seems like excessive caution.”

“Not to me it doesn’t,” Michael said. “With a body – in some sort of suit, possibly a spacesuit – outside the building, we have evidence that there is or was something dangerous in or around the building. Also, we have evidence that that building is neither abandoned nor dead. So we only take another ‘baby’ step closer.”

“A body?” Liselle Francis asked, startled.

“Someone moving there?” Jennifer asked quickly.

“Source?” Christiaan asked.

“A survey drone – the third loop out from the close-in around the building,” Michael said. “The body is partially buried under debris. Settled, erosion-and-overgrowth type debris, not blast debris. That’s why it took time to spot it; it filtered through the pattern-spotting algorithms on the search drones at too low a probability level.” He shook his head. “More questions, however, arise from those scans.”

“These I gotta see,” Liselle Francis said. She bounded towards the airlock and went inside, followed by the others.

Briefing Room, The Walloping Window Blind

It took Michael almost no time to call up the images, and focus them down with the magnification on the area in question.

“That’s a body all right,” Liselle Francis said, as Michael brought up the drone survey image.

“A naturally-covered body, not a buried one,” Jennifer C. Lotor added. “Damn! I’m really going to have to try to fine-tune our erosion and deposition data.”

“I thought you’d made progress on that from our South Pole data,” Liselle Francis said.

“Yes, for the polar area. This is a temperate area – different biome entirely,” Jennifer C. Lotor replied.

“Well, we’ve got to study the worms,” Liselle Francis said firmly.

“Worms? What worms? Why?” Christiaan said.

“You can learn a lot from worms,” Liselle Francis said. She launched into a disquisition about worm biology, the benefit of examining a ‘pared down’ functional organism vis-à-vis more complex genomic expression creatures, and the differences between flat, round, necrophoric, and other worms, that left the rest of her shipmates utterly bewildered.

“I was asking about the worms at the body,” Christiaan finally said.

“Ohmigosh! Is there enough there, for there to be worms? That’d mean it – he or she – whatever – died really shortly ago. Historically speaking, anyways,” Liselle Francis said. “Nothing in geologic terms, though.”

“No worms at the body. It’s apparently in a sealed suit – sort of like our envirosuits,” Michael answered. He reached over to the controls. “But that lets me show you just why this suddenly got important.”

The viewpoint zoomed in as the digital magnification software was invoked. The image grew as the apparent point-of-view shifted closer and closer, until they all could see the outline of the helmet, the lines of the body connected to it – and, written on the inner rim of the helmet, the phrase, ‘EOMSS Nicholas II’.

“That’s impossible,” Jennifer expostulated. “It’s got to be – it can’t be – we don’t even know what it means!”

“Richard said it probably was ‘Empire of Man – Starship Nicholas II’,” Michael said. “Then he went to bed.”

“I’m going back to my worms,” Liselle Francis said. “At least I can have some hope of making sense of them.”

Mission Hour 662, 0430 Zulu, 7 February, 2106, en route to Mount Horn from the Walloping Window Blind

“Five days of waiting, and for what? Nothing!” Liselle Francis said. She slipped the helicopter slightly, wagging it about to express her frustration. Complaints and protests from the passengers dampened down her further, albeit minimal, aerobatics.

“You were the one who spent all that time studying the worms, and other lower life forms,” Jennifer C. Lotor said.

“How was I supposed to know that they’d turn out to have three sexes? Male, transmitter, and female?” Liselle Francis objected.

“Well, they’re hexapodal, so that works out evenly,” Christiaan said.

Liselle Francis spun to face him, her lungs inflating with the volume of air she was drawing in preparatory to blasting his complete and utter biological idiocy – when she spotted the cues in his body language and fur. The same breath that had gone in, came out in a huge burst of laughter. When she could speak again, she was shaking her head.

“Caught me!” she admitted, laughing slower now. “Oh, caught me good. But nobody can be as dumb as you pretended to be!”

“Nobody on this expedition, sure – but what about politicians and salespeople back home?” Jennifer asked.

“They are not here, and they don’t have to figure out what is going on here,” Liselle Francis said, and looked at Michael. “Has there been any sign of anything moving in, around, or out of that building yet?”

“Negative, and it appears to be dust-free – the building itself, that is. Even after that breeze two days ago, which was blowing things around, even up there.”

“Spooky,” Liselle Francis said.

“It suggests a high level of automation, or some form of quantum-manipulable immaterial force blocking, akin to our defensive shields,” Michael said.

“I was imagining macro-absorbant wall and floor surfaces,” Liselle Francis said. “Do we know whether the dust goes in, or not?”

“Our sensors aren’t quite that good, so ‘no’,” Michael said.

“At least we know they’re not going to be shot,” Liselle Francis said. “I don’t see why, Richard, you have us carrying our envirosuits. We know we don’t have to wear them.”

“Since Unicorn cannot keep an atmosphere using its natural gravity,” Richard Fox answered, “and decompression on the planetary scale would be utterly irresistible, I’d just as soon give us *some* chance of surviving if somebody ‘throws the switch’ on whatever’s keeping the environment livable.”

“But that’d be – unh. We have no idea just what is possible here, do we?” Liselle Francis asked.

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“Sure we do. We can be certain that we’ll make *some* sense of this situation ... assuming enough of us live through it to make it to a decent debrief,” Richard answered.

“There would be room for everyone on *my* ship, Major,” Auren said. “I could have it move in and rendezvous with the ... ah ... drifters?”

“With the amount of debris that would be accompanying us – probably a good part of the biosphere, and all of the oceanic boil-off – finding us, let alone moving at any speed, through the dispersion cloud might be problematic,” Richard noted.

“Noted,” Auren said, “but there are ... methods ... available to me that might make the problem easier. Not trivial, of course, but ... ‘easier’.”

“So, Richard, that’s why you’ve been insisting on all those suit drills?” Jennifer asked.

“Precisely,” Richard answered. “And it’s why I’m wearing mine.”

“Tail-end Charlie, slowest on the drill,” Christiaan said, and chuckled.

Mission Hour 665, 0730 Zulu, 7 February, 2106, on top of Mount Horn

“How far is the body from the building?” Auren asked.

“Thirty meters,” Christiaan said.

“Exactly?”

“To what part of the body? It’s a meter-and-a-half, maybe two – depending on the length buried below the waist. It looks Terran enough, but hey, maybe it’s a gigantic python breed,” Christiaan said.

“Do you have python Uplifts?” Auren asked interestedly.

“Not even Doctor Chambers has gone that far in her enthusiasm,” Christiaan said, and grinned. “Yet, that is. Major Fox?”

“Yes?” Richard answered immediately.

“That suit is more advanced than ours,” Christiaan said.

“How can you tell?” Liselle Francis asked.

“The lesser joints, mostly. Our CV joints are bigger, bulkier. This one is a heck of a lot more close-fitting. What looks like his joints look more like skin-tight clothing than these things,” Christiaan said, holding up one hand and wiggling his fingers.

“I don’t see any sign of battle damage on the exposed parts,” Richard said. He was circling the body, looking first at it, and then at the ground around it.

“There’s a nametag on the front right!” Liselle Francis said. “It looks like ... English. If it is, it reads... ‘V. I. Canis’!”

“Stands for Vladimir Ilyich Canis,” Richard said.

“How can you know that?” Jennifer C. Lotor asked.

He shrugged, smiled and looked down. “It’s definitely a canid skull in there. And the gloves have four fingers and a thumb.”

#

A more careful examination of the suit determined that it was a carbon nanofiber weave.

“So...what do we do with this?” Liselle Francis asked.

“Tag it, bag it, and move it to the helicopter for later analysis in the *Beagle*'s facilities – they're more advanced and complete – and we record the whole process,” Richard said.

Jennifer stirred, but stayed silent.

“I'd like to try a first crack at that suit myself,” Liselle Francis said. “Richard, there's a datachip in the helmet, which I think we can match up to.”

“After we finish the excavation and physical artifacts examination,” he promised her. “Jennifer – this is your line of expertise. We're just the shovel bums.”

Jennifer nodded, and resumed work on the excavation site.

Mission Hour 671, 1330 Zulu, 7 February, 2106, Cape Camp, on board the Walloping Window Blind

“What do we know?” Richard asked Jennifer.

“Best estimate I can make is that the body has been there for 300 years. But that's going to be plus or minus at least 100 years. That's still making a lot of assumptions about how the weather patterns on this tangled mass of anomalies work out,” Jennifer said. “Given that Unicorn has 0° axial tilt, there wouldn't be nearly the same generative strength for weather effects as we have on Earth.”

“Not to mention all the other –” Auren began to say.

“Definitely not mentioning all the other anomalies,” Jennifer rode over Auren's cheerful insouciance. “The suit is definitely more advanced than ours – but it seems to be out of power.” She shook her head, and continued reporting.

“The sidearm is a slugthrower, pretty obviously an evolution of ours. 12mm, automatic, 15 round clip, loaded with warshot,” Jennifer continued. “I'd guess that it's biometrically locked so only it's owner could use it, but that's not proven. It seems to have some sort of sensors interior to it, but I can't make sense of them – not without a destructive disassembly in a lab with things like a scanning microscope.” Nobody blinked or objected to that assessment.

“The knife –” Jennifer shook her head. “It's a match for what our military call a ‘K-Bar’, except that it has utilities in it. Compass, fishhook and line, other items – a survival knife as much as a combat knife. But if you handed it to me, I'd assume it was something that we could get out of a standard catalog for survivalists and military types.”

“What about those metal packets?” Liselle Francis asked.

Jennifer snorted. “The ones with the manufacturing marks, and other writing? Those are emergency rations and/or energy bars, take your pick. But they make even less sense.”

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“Why is that? Richard carries E-rats around everywhere!” Liselle Francis said reasonably.

“Because these have an expiration date of 12-15-1900 – two centuries ago,” Jennifer said.

“Unless they changed the calendar – dating from the start of the Atomic Era, for example,” Richard said.

“Major Fox, how can you do that?” Henry asked.

“Do what?”

“Shift your context like that? I have noticed that you seem more flexible than most individuals about what most people consider to be fixed, or constant, aspects of their environment,” Henry asked.

“Practice,” Richard answered evenly. There was a pause.

“Also, the flashlight is from a higher-tech society. The casing is a beryllium-titanium alloy which gives it a strength and lightness we’d never manage,” Jennifer went on. “The battery – one – is some kind of weird thing.” She shook her head. “I have no idea how much power it could store, or how long it could hold it. But my examination of the focusing and lighting element strongly suggests that it could vary from broad, incoherent, multispectral lighting to a coherent and tightly-focused laser. Variable wavelength, too.” She shook her head. “That’s going to pay off for the electronics boys when we get back to the *Beagle*¹⁴”

“Anything else?” Richard asked.

“Other than that – not without opening the suit. Which would expose it to the environment here, and probably mean it’d start rotting. Or continue rotting. Or expose us to any biocontaminants the corpse is carrying. I’d really rather not if we don’t have to. It was bad enough doing so for the brief sampling probe, under full Level IV protections – but we weren’t going to get the bioassay samples any other way,” Jennifer said.

“Okay, let’s go on to talk about those,” Richard said, turning to Liselle Francis. “What’d you get?”

“We got full DNA readings, Richard,” Liselle Francis said. “Down to and including mitochondrial comparisons. That...” she shook her head. “You tell him,” she said, looking at Henry.

“The deceased was a canid uplift, of a well-mixed combination. As some might say, ‘a mutt’,” Henry said. “Based on the genetic drift analysis from the mitochondrial DNA, he was a member of something between the 65th and 85th generations of canids.”

“Waitamminute. We’re only five generations out....” Christiaan’s voice tailed off as the consequences of Henry’s statement sunk home.

“Assuming a generational range of between 20 and 100 years, that means that this being comes from 1,200 to 8,500 years in our future, yes,” Henry said. “An English-using,

¹⁴ Niall – I’m extrapolating from what we actually covered during the run. You can excise or not as you desire. GSC.

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but not insuperably advanced society. We could have walked right past this being, or any like him, in the crowds back on either Homeworld or Exodus 8 and never known it.”

“A lifespan of 100 years? Isn’t that extreme?” Jennifer asked.

“Not with rejuvenative technology – and that’s a generational spacing, not a lifespan, multiplier. The true measure probably lies between the two extremes but depends on the rate of adoption of –”

“Never mind; we wouldn’t know anyways,” Richard said, interrupting Henry, who obediently stayed silent. “Besides, we can just ‘go look at the record’ – maybe. Or at least Ell Eff can.”

“The datachip?” she said, beaming.

“Yes. With full protection,” he added.

“Leech? Why?” she protested.

“That’s a military suit – or a very advanced one. Who knows what’s on the chip?” Richard answered.

“I agree,” Christiaan said. “Besides – you’ve got to consider the chance that the corpse had time to set a booby-trap. We don’t know what killed him, but he might have had time to act paranoid.”

“You’ve got a weird attitude to be walking around on strange planetary surfaces, Christiaan. All that suspicion, and you’re still taking those risks?” Auren asked.

“Sure. It lets me enjoy the ‘boring’ when and as it happens. What’s life without a good deal of comparative experience?” Christiaan answered.

#

Liselle Francis rested on a comfortable couch, the ‘leech’ in its cell by her side connected to the datachip from the found suit. “I’ve hooked up a display so you can ‘follow’ what I do, at least to a certain amount, assuming there’s a visual aspect,” she said. “The datastream and other major flows aren’t going to show, except as symbols and text in the display band at the bottom of the monitor – but the only time you’ll need to worry is if the screen goes all white or all black.”

“What do those mean?” Auren asked interestedly.

“White means an energy surge – an attack,” Liselle Francis said. “Then it depends on whether the leech blows before I do. Black means I’ve been sucked into a ‘tar baby’ – where all computational and data flow paths have been reversed. As long as there’s a timer or countdown element showing things aren’t hopeless. But featureless, flat black ... well, there won’t be any of ‘me’ left in this skull to worry over.”

“Oh, joy,” Auren said.¹⁵

¹⁵ Auren’s not from Earth, and hasn’t picked up much of the slang, leastwise not pseudobrit (heck, I’m assuming “cool” as “good” has formally become part of Standard English – if it hasn’t already). She’d say something more like “Oh joy.”, or “Oh what fun.” in the appropriate tones for meaning exactly the reverse. – Kay.

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“Here goes, then.” Liselle reached down, tied in to the leech, and powered up the connection.

Everyone's eyes flickered to the screen. It flashed, not white but blue – then a swirl of changes roiled across and about its surface. The audio speaker attached suddenly burped.

“Contact identified as non-hostile, authorized, and trustworthy,” the speaker said. “Last data recording before events became stably periodic was 19 January 1843.” This voice was unnaturally monotonic, but not even – it was meant to be recognizably artificial, and contained no sub-sounds of breathing or other noises.

“Damn long shelf life for those food bars,” Ell Eff's voice said.

“Vocal replay completed. Visual replay, time-marked accordingly, begins.” Five seconds later the speaker added in the same artificial voice, “Visual replay ends. Last event: collapse of Vladimir Ilyich Canis with negative bioreadings. No attack or other causative factor identified. No environmental factor correlating with death. No external or observed third party present. No explanation possible. Without knowledge of location, impossible to signal for assistance to military or civilian authorities, allied or at least non-hostile. System going into shut-down mode to conserve power.”

The screen greyed down to black, with a bottom line displayed, showing strings of alphanumeric characters. Then it turned off, and Liselle Francis stirred.

“The first thing I got from it,” Liselle said, “was that it was ... ‘glad’ ... I think is the best way to describe it. I was ‘born of and to the purple’, and hence it said that I was ‘eminently trustworthy’.” She shook her head, clearing the last of the time/speed transition to biologic rather than silicon-based cycles. Sitting up, she looked over at Jennifer first, then at Richard, then back at Jennifer.

“You're not gonna believe this, Jennifer – but Richard got our deader's name right,” Liselle Francis said.

“The only explanation possible is probabilistic,” Henry said. “Extrapolation from an assumption of cultural similarity would lead –”

“Call it a ‘lucky guess’ and forget about it,” Richard said.

“But Major, it happened! Do you want me to wipe that memory pair?” Henry asked.

“Disregard it as insignificant. I lost nothing by guessing and should gain as little,” Richard said. “I take it you found out more?” he asked Liselle Francis.

“Yeah. Oh, yeah!” she said enthusiastically. “Okay, I can now run some of this for the rest of you – we got recordings about what happened to V. I. Canid. They don't make any sense, but we can see them nonetheless.”

Liselle Francis closed her eyes and, through her complink, took control over the the main screen of the briefing room. On it appeared images she'd gotten from the spacesuit.

A beach lay before them, with a differently-colored sky and considerably different vegetation – and the ocean was much greener, with copper rather than cobalt hues to the foam. The sand on the beach was brighter, with a lighter average color and more reflectivity, either from water or more fractional-plane surfaces to the individual grains. An

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object on the beach shone, glittering in the over-the-viewpoint's-shoulder light source. As the view grew nearer, a hand reaching out gave both the perspective and object the missing dimensional-context cues that let them realize this was a shot from the helmet front. The hand picked up the object, and then the second hand came in and helped cradle it. A half-turn put the object back into the sunlight; as that happened, it flared a brilliant blue – and the scene changed.

Now the viewpoint was of a room, with pillar-cones and odd objects at differing locations, heights and angles. Each pillar-cone pairing had a first element horizontal and parallel to the floor of the building, a second element perpendicular to that, and a cone atop the second element with the point up and the base down. The height and angles of the cones varied, but more noticeably, so too did their colors.

Some were red. Others were yellow, blue, green, black, or white. A small subset were clear – and harder to spot as a consequence, for they were very transparent – and another subset were smoky. There also were, very occasionally, multicolored cones visible.

The floor was flat, and only a very few – a double-handful or so – of the pillar-cones were at or near that level. Others were higher up along the inside walls of the multi-sided building. Near many of them were openings, pentagonal in shape and perhaps two meters from base to peak. The view outside through the openings resembled the view from the top of the hill.

“That’s got to be the building we’re standing outside,” Christiaan said.

“It is,” Liselle Francis’ voice played over the speakers. “I’m going to fast-forward through this next portion – which is wandering around inside the building.”

The screen blurred, then slowed; it showed the viewpoint of the record-taker stepping forward, through, and out of one of the nearest-to-the-ground openings. The view now clearly was that of the top of Mt. Horn, though the vegetative patterns were different in mix of locations and species.

“I ran an analysis and the change in undergrowth and plant life matches the time estimate that Jennifer gave us,” Liselle Francis’ voice said. “This next bit is the real disturbing part.”

The view went forward, nearly to the edge of the cleared area. Then it turned around and took in the building as a whole. Then the view started forward again – to suddenly pivot and drop, making it seem as if the planetary surface had risen up and struck the helmet. “That’s where the picture reaches ‘stability’, as the chip put it, until our arrival here,” Liselle Francis said. The screen went black as she pulled the link out of her skull. “That’s where the AI left me.”

“AI?” Henry asked.

“In the datachip. Primitive – at least it seemed that way, though I wasn’t trying to probe deeply – but still, it was evaluating me before I got any of that information, Liselle Francis told their team’s AI member. “Auren, I get a distinct impression that if you tried to interface with this chip, it’d slag down.”

“Any idea why?” Auren asked.

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“The ‘why’ is clear; it’s the ‘why’ behind the ‘why’, that I don’t understand,” Liselle Francis said. “I’m cleared because I’m a vulpine Uplift, and thus inherently and utterly trustworthy. The actual phrase I think I got was ‘born to the purple’. Which makes no sense to me whatsoever.”

Richard kept his mouth shut. Memories of a Timedive were not a reputable source of information, and he had already slipped up at least once.

“So, as a human, I’d not pass that basic test?” Auren asked. “Hmm. I suppose I could try to ‘spoof’ the signal going in, but that assumes I know what tests it is making. Tricky.”

“I didn’t see it doing DNA testing, but I did feel my autonomic nervous system touched, very briefly,” Liselle Francis said. “It very definitely was testing me for suitability. We’re going to have to limit our access to vulpines until we can tease out the operational parameters and limitations on this AI.” She shook her head. “It’s clear that this being is a time-traveler; what we don’t know is whether it jumped world-lines, time-lines, or both together, to get here.”

“Why did Mr. Canid fall down, though?” Auren asked.

“He died. I don’t know why. The AI hadn’t let me into the suit’s med-records,” Liselle Francis answered.

“Right. The building – the area – may be hazardous. Big surprise; there are dangerous places here. Possibly ‘protected’ ones,” Richard said. “Time for a perimeter marking effort, I think.”

Mission Hour 702, 2030 Zulu, 8 February, 2106, atop Mount Horn

“That’s about all we can get from a distance, Major.” Christiaan Ferret straightened his back and looked around. They had drawn a physical ‘deadline’ in the ground where they could, laid out rocks where they had had to, and also built small cairns in a complex polygon, whose irregular sides were laid out as a compromise matching the terrain and the 30-meter minimum distance suggested by the ‘computer dive’ performed by Liselle Francis, as the operative limit of whatever the killing effect might have been. “We can’t get any more information about the inside of that structure without sending something in.”

“Or somebody,” Liselle Francis said. “I bet you anything, those pillar-cones are controls! And that this building is the ‘switchboard’ for a lot if not all of Unicorn’s exceptional conditions.”

“I won’t take that bet; I think you’re absolutely right,” Richard agreed.

“Goody! So, who gets to go in first?” Liselle Francis asked.

“Nobody. We’re going to leave, now that we’ve marked out the limits of the ‘safe’ zone as best as we can.” Richard turned and headed back towards the helicopter.

“Leave?” Liselle Francis goggled and blinked her eyes. “You’ve got to be fripping kidding, Richard!”

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“Deadly serious. That’s not a suggestion, and not an advisement, and not subject to argument. I’d rather not make it an out-and-out order, but if I have to I will.” Richard turned back to look at her.

Liselle Francis looked around. Christiaan was already gathering up his share of the deployed passive sensing gear, and Henry was floating back towards the helicopter. But Jennifer Lotor was also looking disappointed. “C’mon, Richard! We’re specifically tasked to explore scientific controversies and to make new discoveries! That’s got to be the biggest of them all that we’ll find in this whole system!”

“Yes, it is. But our first goal is to find a suitable site for use as a Pinlight station. Which means not screwing up the best one we find.” Richard paused, then went on. “This is a survivable environment – effectively an ‘Earth-normal’ one, on the surface. Building up Pinlight stations on Unicorn, plus military outposts, back-up sites, and defenses and/or other facilities on the other three planets, will be greatly speeded up as a consequence. Finding out more about that building, the people and science behind it, is a major research program on its own. Would you agree with that?”

“Well...we could make a start!” Liselle Francis said.

“Or we could screw things up, too.” Jennifer Lotor turned and started towards the helicopter. “You’re right, damn it. We don’t even know what methodology of investigation to use. I’d want professionals – trained to record every action, and trained to stick only to the line of action selected for their investigation – to be messing around with those controls. Which probably will do a whole lot of nothing, or apparent nothing, for most of the degrees of freedom; and whose limits and interactions will take sophisticated analysis to positively identify.”

“But, but, but we could...we could at least try!” Liselle Francis said. “I could –”

“There aren’t any outlets you could plug into, and we’ve no idea how to make a leech integration with the devices there,” Christiaan said. “You told us that yourself after viewing the video close-ups yesterday.”

“Yeah, but I could bring over some very sensitive scopes and meters – the range might be millimetric, while we’re multiple tens of meters away!” Liselle Francis objected.

“Do you know if anyone who gets closer, and then comes away again, won’t suffer the same fate that V. I. Canis did?” Richard asked. He shook his head. “That’s the other reason, Major Reynard – a larger group can afford to hazard casualties when there’s no immediate trade-off requiring that risk. A good player knows when to walk away.”

“Auren?” Liselle Francis asked, turning to the only remaining visitor present.

“It’s very tempting...but I’ve gotten absolutely nowhere with any of my remote probes. Whatever’s in there, is keeping my stuff from working. Even when I tried to ‘piggyback’ it in on your one mobile drone.” Which had stopped – as if it had run into an instantaneously-effective, inertial-dampening wall, two meters from the opening it had been aiming at. Auren shook her head. “I think I agree with Mr. Boss. At the least I want

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somebody else around who can report why I died, if that thing were to fry me.” She also headed for the helicopter¹⁶.

Liselle Francis stared at the others' backs; then turned her head and looked at the open doorways across the flat space. She could just sprint over there and – the image of the half-buried spacesuit and its dried-out skeletal remains filled her imaginative view. Despite her detailed interrogation of the suit's inbuilt AI, she still had no explanation for the death of its occupant. Nor for the continued complete freedom from dust or other airborne, environmental substances, that existed inside despite the many open doorways. With a final, frustrated shake of her head, Liselle Francis stamped over to the helicopter. She didn't say a word or look at the others, either, as they all strapped in and prepared to leave – but when they took off, she put the stick and pedals hard over, banking more aggressively than safe¹⁷.

They had managed to cross the Amalthea River and reach its far side, and were heading 'downstream' towards their cape camp, when events took charge of their actions. Since they were in a helicopter, Liselle Francis had been keeping them, where she could, at an altitude that was 300 meters above the ground level. That had been possible once they had 'sideslid' down the slopes of Mt. Horn, where the 6,800-foot atmospheric constraint had narrowed to about one-sixth that level on the 'slope' of those rises.

This height gave several advantages. First, it put them well above the highest growth or outcropping of rock, meaning that they were safe from sudden forward impacts. Second, it also put them above the average flight level for the mega-canard flies¹⁸, as the meter-long, eight-winged insectoids had been nicknamed. Third, it gave enough altitude for Liselle Francis to use the 'autogyro' capability of the helicopter's main rotor to manage a moderately less-hazardous 'set down'. Whenever she was flying over denser forest or more bumpy terrain, she varied her altitude to always give them a glide-path towards a semi-reasonable crash-landing site.

This meant that their path was a bit less than that of a straight line in any of the three dimensions – north/south, east/west, and up/down – that would measure the shortest path between their current location and the base camp. It consumed more fuel and took more time. But it also meant that they had a margin for safe...well, less disastrous...flight that did not depend on continued operation of the helicopter's engines.

They had, of course, generally adapted to the weird atmospheric conditions and the limited 'guessability' of the weather along their flight path. The closer they flew to the surface, the more Unicorn's surface curvature tended to hide the weather at a distance;

¹⁶ Just as a reassurance; this paragraph is fine. Auren's quite deliberately NOT shielding her ad-hoc pixiedust concoctions so as to avoid anything that looks like a threat, and anything that dampens inertia like that will drain them pretty much instantly. What can't be retrieved will fall to bits pretty quickly, and join the rest of the regular dust on the planet. – Kay.

¹⁷ I admit to considerable 'interpolation' and 'creative infill' here. Kay, Lisa, Ellie – mostly Kay, I suspect – feel free to change this! GSC. Slight modifications made here, more in the interest of verisimilitude than reality. – Niall.

¹⁸ "mega-canard flies", huh? :) Somewhere along the line, Christiaan will call them "bugs", or if looked at funny change it to "*big* bugs" and grin. (Leave us be grateful I'm not there, considering certain passages in the Old Testament and dubbing them "seraphim" until suppressed forcibly.) – Kay.

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the closer they flew to the atmospheric limit, the less certain they felt that what they saw in the 'far angle' actually represented what they would experience.

There had been a line storm – a series of weather cells with precipitation – across their path eastward towards the camp. Which was itself reporting both clear weather and no sight of any precipitation. It seemed somewhat doubtful, therefore, that the weather they were seeing from the west was the same as the weather that Michael, back aboard their ship, reported seeing from the east. Which argued that either it was not the same, or that it was a very thin line of cells.

Liselle Francis had decided to fly through one of the rain cells. Her only other option apparent at the time would have been to fly for at least one to two hours due 'north' or 'south' to get around the rain she could see falling east of them, to the horizon on either direction. Nothing tremendously vicious had shown up in the radar, and helicopters, while not the most comfortable vehicle to take into a rainstorm, are not wicked witches prone to dissolving when wetted. Not modern, well-maintained, and supposedly all-weather prepped helicopters like the one she was flying.

But helicopters are also not designed to fly through thunderstorms – and from the bottom of a cloud it is impossible to visually see how far up it extends. The anomalous nature of Unicorn also had prevented any of their orbital satellites from getting a predictive outlook from above. So, when the first tremendous gust slapped their helicopter sideways and took away over 40% of their lift, nobody on board blamed Liselle Francis. Whatever they might have said was blotted out as a huge flare of light and roar announced the near-strike of a lightning flash.

Under those conditions the only sensible thing to do was to try to land before they were swatted out of the sky. Or, worse, sucked higher up into the sky (updrafts in a thunderstorm can yank a small craft upward over 200' per minute) while bending every one of the rotor's blades – leaving them with the flying, or falling, characteristics of a brick and a much greater kinetic energy potential. It might be a bit of an exaggeration to assert that they were in danger of being flung into the stratosphere – as somebody screamed during their ascent – as the anvil-top of a typical mature cumulonimbus formation is the tropopause, which is the bottom of that layer. Exaggeration or not, their continued ability to fly was, no matter how assessed, 'negatively impacted' by the storm.

UP gave way to DOWN – accompanied by small pinging noises and a complete blotting out of visibility. The engine, weatherproofed or not, began to cough and choke as the percentage of 'atmosphere' as opposed to 'liquid' radically shifted. A side jolt threw them out of the downdraft and falling rain, and with the engine radically hiccupping and becoming erratic, Jennifer desperately sought to reach ground...in one cohesive piece.

WHAM!

Crinkling, pinging, battering noises.

A voice in the headphones. "Sound off."

"Ell Eff."

"Christiaan."

"Henry."

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“Auren.”

“Okay. Anybody injured?” Richard asked.

Over the next several minutes they took stock. Bruised and sore, yes; injured – no. Not beyond the limits of the on-board first-aid kit’s contents to deal with. The rain that had been pounding on them began to slacken, and they could start to hear with more normal discrimination.

“Good landing, Ell Eff,” Christiaan said.

“What?” a startled Liselle Francis said.

“Any landing you can walk away from, is a good landing,” Richard agreed. “First off – how far are we from the ship?”

“I dunno exactly, Richard,” Liselle Francis said. “We were just about 150 clicks out when the flight path deviated from the flight plan. I was too busy to track our vectors against anything but not hitting the ground after that.” She shook her head cautiously – her neck was stiff and she suspected she’d have bruised ears from her helmet’s rim. “Call it a hundred miles, but not a very accurate one.”

“We should be able to get a fix from the radio easily enough,” Jennifer said.

“Radio’s out. So are all the on-board systems. This is a dead bird,” Liselle Francis said gloomily.

“With all her little chicks safe and sound. That’s a good trade-off. A hundred miles? No problem; that’s a day’s run,” Richard said.

Christiaan groaned and rolled his eyes. “Vulpines!” he exclaimed theatrically.

Auren looked out the window. “Um... no, I think not. If I call down my ship it can carry...” she paused. “Uh oh.”¹⁹

“I feel really good now,” Christiaan said even more theatrically. “What is it?”

“Skywatch Alert!” That sounded over their personal radios. “Michael to ground party: we have an in-system arrival!”

“Company calling, and the house a mess,” Liselle Francis said, shaking her head, looking around the interior of the crashed helicopter.

“Details, please?” Richard asked.

Auren blinked. “My ship says that the new arrival had an insystem point 40 AU out -- and an in-system speed of 0.75C. Three-quarters of the speed of light. They’re currently only 10 A.U. away.”

Richard’s eyes blanked, and his lips twitched; then he shook his head. “90 minutes away. That’s...what else?”

¹⁹ Replace this paragraph: “That’s not something I particularly want to engage in,” Auren said a bit frostily. “Look, I can call my ship down, and it can carry...hmm. It’d take multiple trips.” She looked aside, and then really frowned. “Uh-oh.” With the following: Auren looked out the window. “Um... no, I think not. If I call down my ship it can carry...” she paused. “Uh oh.” – Kay.

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"There are no grav ripples, but there are neutrino emissions," Auren said.

"That's not a drive we recognize, then," Richard said. "How about you?"

She shrugged. "Not one either I or my ship do. If it's not a natural phenomenon."

"Michael, what's the track?" Richard asked.

"It's definitely heading right for Unicorn," Michael said.

"Odds?" Richard asked Auren.

"We've got more visitors," she replied immediately.

"Yeah. Michael – go into 'silent running' mode. We can't make it back to the ship –"

"I could come get you!" Michael said.

"—and even if we were together, we couldn't make it off-planet to a safe limit for hyperspatial drive before being overtaken. They're coming in too fast for us to scamper away – and that may not be their top in-system speed," Richard finished.

"I think I can keep from being²⁰ detected in my ship. And I can call it down here, and be gone before they arrive," Auren said.

"Would you consider taking somebody else with you?" Richard asked.

"I've only got room for one. If the new arrivals are hostile, and your ship gets destroyed and they start a hunt, I'd have to space out – I need to keep to the limit we can keep alive until I reach a drop point," Auren said. She pointed at Liselle Francis. "I'll take her."

"With a copy of all of our information," Richard said.

"You already promised me a copy; of course," Auren responded.

"A second copy, for Ell Eff to carry. That's what I meant."

"Oh." Auren blinked. "Fair enough. I'm calling my ship now."

"See to it," Richard said to Liselle Francis. Then he looked over at Christiaan. "We're going to prepare for ground-based E&E. I want several kits, layered, for each of us – including the complete no-tech kit. Michael – do not acknowledge. We're going to Security Plan Ferret-One."

"Why did you have to name it that?" Christiaan asked, even as he was busily sorting their evacuation gear out from the storage areas – with some difficulty.

"I like ferrets; they're low and slinky and hard to spot and got a good little nip," Richard said. "But they're also smart enough not to have delusions of combativeness, unlike, say, wolverines or corgis."

#

"Richard?"

"Yes, Ell Eff?"

²⁰ "being" for "getting" here. – Kay.

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“Auren thinks that we can stay in orbit and stay undetected – she’s very confident in her security in a low-power state.”

“We didn’t spot her,” Christiaan pointed out.

“Besides, she’d be more detectible if she tries to leave,” Liselle Francis said. “What’s that?” There was a murmur of noise, then Auren’s voice sounded in the headphones of the ‘downside team’.

“I don’t see how the incoming aliens can detect us while we’re using these whisker lasers, especially at this low a power and with this erratic a frequency-and-time shift,” Auren said. “You got some real paranoids in your military, Mister Fox.”

“If they didn’t have such job security, I’d consider that more of a problem,” Richard said.

Auren chuckled. “Fair enough. You might be interested to know that our aliens really do have an interesting drive. They’re 1 A.U. away, and their speed just dropped to 0.5 lightspeed. Without any braking interval or energy pulse. That I could detect, anyways – and I was looking. It suggests that their insystem drive has some sort of a ‘step function’. I wouldn’t mind getting a peek at it.”

“That makes it unanimous,” Liselle Francis said. “Up here.”

“And down here – but I think I’d rather ask nicely. If we get the chance.”

“Why shouldn’t you?” Auren asked.

“They may have job security for their paranoids too – and who knows which of their people are visiting?” Richard asked.

“Hmmm. If you didn’t make sense, I’d call you another paranoid. But then I’d be tarring myself with the same brush,” Auren said. “So...you still staying silent down there?”

“Yep. They’ll be at the planet in minutes, now – we can go silent better by hiding quiet and slow, than dashing through the underbrush,” Richard said.

There was a silence in a period of time that seemed much longer than it was. Then:

“Hunh. That’s interesting!” Auren said.

A number of lips were held, or bitten, or lightly chewed, but nothing was said.

“At one million clicks out, they went from 0.5c to ‘rest’. Now their ship is emitting gravity waves – and it’s coming towards a planetary orbit. Moving at...0.8 gees,” Auren said. “Betcha that’s a round-factor of their home environment’s gravity. Ahah!”

“Yes?” Richard asked.

Auren’s voice sounded slightly distracted. “They’re scanning this area – Unicorn and its orbital space. My reads say that they’re not only staying completely spoofed by my ship’s anti-detection measures, but that they’re not going to have any chance to spot me.”

“Even if you start to fly away?” Richard asked.

“Well...okay, then they’d see me. I guess we stay quiet a bit longer.” Auren paused. “Hey! Mr. Fox – can I use the sensors on your satellites?”

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"You have permission, if you won't give either of us away," Richard answered.

"Ha, ha. Got me again – yes, I am able. I'd probably have done it anyways, but it's nice to be polite." Auren went silent.

Down on the ground, Christiaan looked at their placement. "Why'd you put Henry under the helicopter?" he asked.

"As another item of probable 'crash debris', he's not worth independently investigating. As an anomaly – which he'd be anywhere else, if they run magnetic scans, or power-scans – he'd be of interest," Richard answered.

"Is that why I'm out here in my skivvies, with no power tools, only the low-level direct-link, different-band radio, and that well outside my hidey-hole?" Christiaan asked.

"Yep. If they come down and after us, your job is to run away, stay hidden, and only later try to report in. If you wait long enough, the *Beagle*'s back-up teams will be here."

"I could get pretty hungry in that time," Christiaan said.

"If you have to get that hungry, what chance we're enjoying better fortune?" Richard asked.

Christiaan sighed. "I really, really wish you wouldn't get these noble ambitions, Major. Trying to be the heroic officer is a good way to get killed!"

"Mission priority one always is getting the info back. You're our best when it comes to E&E and survival expertise. Assigning anyone else your task would be stupid and foolish. I may be one or the other, but if I'm both, you shouldn't find it hard to talk me out of this decision," Richard said.

"No, if you were stupid and foolish it'd be easy – phut. That's what you just said, isn't it?" Christiaan coughed. "I still wish I could disagree with you."

"Hey, folks, guess what?" Auren said.

"What?" Jennifer answered.

"That ship isn't all that big – about the same size as yours. Some 20,000 tons, I'd guess," Auren said. There's writing on it, and paint – or differently-colored alloys in real wild and irregular patterns."

"Writing? What's it *look* like?" Jennifer asked.

"Chicken scratches. My analytical support gets nothing – it's not known to the Teklenan," Auren answered. "Oh – and their ship is slightly aerodynamic in form. Hah!"

Everybody groundside jumped, just a bit, at that exclamation.

"They're going into a polar orbit! Oh – and they're scanning."

Richard swallowed and crossed his fingers.

"Aaaaaahhhh – nothing to it," Auren sniffed. "Easy to beat – they're just using Radar and Lidar. They're definitely checking out your satellites, though."

"How so?" Richard asked.

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“They’re changing their orbits to match up with, circle around, and then re-start their polar orbital efforts. Like they’re trying to do a one-pass scan of everything downstairs and up,” Auren said. “Pretty slick flying.”

#

“WOW!”

The exclamation blurring from their headphones brought the ground crew back to alertness. It was local night, and there was a low overcast (of necessity, lower than 6,800’) and very little light.

“What’s up?” Jennifer asked.

“Our visitors just took a biiiig potshot at Unicorn!” Liselle Francis said. “Dead center in the middle of one of those asteroid strikes – on the far side of the planet from where you are.”

“That was a good-sized zap, all right,” Auren added. “The equivalent of a 20-kiloton nuclear blast. I’m going to run my analyses while their gas-diffusion efforts are still there. Might as well get better data on what’s inside Unicorn’s crust.”

There was silence for a while. Christiaan eventually broke it.

“Major – it’s been a fair amount of time. Enough for both Jennifer and Henry to get back to the *Walloping Window Blind*, even with him grounding and ‘going still’ each time they passed overhead. They’ve reported their arrival.”

“Did they?” Richard asked.

“Yeah. You were asleep – I cut you out of the circuit because you were snoring,” Christiaan said.

“Thank God for that,” Jennifer added, over the radio. “If it weren’t for the insulation in the *Blind*, I’d have considered assaulting you.”

“Anyways – I wanted to ask, are we going to keep silent still?” Christiaan concluded.

“I don’t think so,” Richard said. “They have to know that the helicopter is here – Auren detected them using strong electromagnetics, so they would probably pick it up by a MAD pulse. If they hadn’t just seen in – we weren’t able to camouflage it very well.”

“Yeah, well – it punched a hole in the forest, and then stayed pretty intact in the opening it made,” Christiaan said. “So, you think they’ll come looking?”

“I would if I were them. By signaling now – before they swoop in – we can indicate that this is not necessarily an abandoned wreck,” Richard answered.

“What if they think it’s a trap? Or that we’ve been hiding here?” Jennifer asked.

“That, plus just taking time to get here – if we left and came back, say – or dealing with other concerns groundside – make too many explanations to base a decision on without more data,” Richard said. “I want them to be thinking, and maybe a bit cautious.”

“So how do we get their attention?” Jennifer asked. “Start a smoke signal?”

“No, we send out a radio signal,” Richard said.

The Fox's Den: By N. C. Shapero for A GENTLE STROLL 8 (March 2026)

“How do we match frequency? What if they use AM? Or complex interweaves to avoid detection, as we're doing?” Christiaan asked.

“That's why we put on both a base frequency and a varying one,” Richard said.

“And what signal could we send that they could decipher anyways?” Jennifer asked.

“We'll give them the digits for pi. In a varying cycle. Each time, at the same point in the cycle, it gives the same number of digits of accuracy – but the number of digits will change. As will the base for the arithmetic, from base 2 to base 8 to base 10 to base 12 to base 20. Also, the beam will sweep around the horizon in a cone – making a circular pattern.” Richard sat down on the log he had carefully placed in front of the small, but well-embered fire.

“Do you really expect them to be able to read that? Or understand that mish-mash?” Jennifer asked.

Mission Hour 733, 0330 Zulu, 11 February, 2106, Crash Camp, Unicorn.

“Going back to your question about the radio codes – if they're using radar to scan, then they're going to be able to decode pulses on those wavelengths,” Richard said. “How long it would take them to figure out the pattern was one question, but figuring out that there was a pattern – that was something I thought they'd pick up almost immediately.”

“Why not send a series of count-repeats?” Jennifer asked.

“We know that they're from a technological civilization, indicating considerable complexity is probable,” Richard said. “I expected them to detect our output's complexity, identify at least one main and one under pattern, and so recognize that this isn't a ‘count two, buckle my shoe’ culture,” Richard answered.

“But...the repeats?” Jennifer asked.

“I thought it was too simple, myself,” Auren chimed in over the radio. “After those boring days I was debating about flying away with Ell Eff, but things got interesting down there once more,” Auren said. “Y'know, they must have spent some time analyzing those repeats, too. Which means that they're going to know we have automation – a live ‘caster would've had exhaustion-induced slippage, now that it's been a couple of hours.”

“Getting bored again?” Richard asked.

“Nope. It's going to be getting interesting down there again, too,” Auren said cheerfully.

“How so?” Jennifer asked.

“The aliens have landed. They took a smaller craft out of their ship, and landed that about 10 kilometers south-south-west of where you are. I betcha they're coming towards you – but without using any powered gear. I can't track them other than visually. It'll be interesting!” Auren said.

“Christiaan – overwatch time,” Richard said.

“Waitaminute. You're gonna just sit out there in the open? While I skulk back here, well-concealed and safe? Major, do you have a suicide gene?” Christiaan objected.

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“Who’s got the best talkie-talk of the team, Christiaan?” Liselle Francis asked. Her voice, even over the radio, showed her interest and frustration at not being there.

“Again, you guys are picking on me – using reason! Not fair!” Christiaan objected. But he slid under the carefully-arranged, naturally-appearing brushwork he’d spent hours arranging as he did so.

Richard looked around the clearing he had selected. The sun was shining down from his front right. Behind him, and within four body lengths, the trees and foliage blocked both vision and access – most of the clear space was before him. As were the fire in its rock-and-dirt lined shallow pit, and a stack of ready-to-use, small, trimmed branches.

Beside him was a canteen which he’d filled with water, taken from a stream and then carefully filtered. There were also two transparent glasses, obviously manufactured yet simple in form. Several short lengths of stout tree-trunk were placed at varying distances between five and twenty feet, in an expanding curve leading from his front right to his front left. Christiaan was concealed in the undergrowth off to his right and ahead of him. If Richard had to flee, he would do so to his left rear, meaning that any attacker would be choosing between tracking him or turning to face Christiaan’s position.

Several items – a voice and image recording unit (to his left), a perscomp (to his right), a pair of toolkits (one on either side), and a pad of paper with pencils, colored crayons, and pens (on the ground ahead and to Richard’s left) – had been carefully placed and, in the case of the paper, weighted down against errant breezes. Richard turned carefully around and fixed several possible escape routes into the forest cover in his mind, and then turning back, seated himself on the log and waited.

“They’ve separated,” Auren’s voice came through his left earbud. “One of them is circling to get behind you – but is also climbing.”

“What are they using as transport?” Richard asked.

“You’ll see. The one in front of you is coming straight and slow – should be just to the left of the sun-path,” Auren said.

There was a black blot now climbing over the raised ‘horizon’ of the far end of the clearing. It wiggled, or moved. Richard debated pulling out his binoculars before deciding against it; he didn’t want anything in his hands that might be misinterpreted as a weapon. Even with his much-better eyesight, he couldn’t make out details. Yet. The blot grew larger as the incoming individual flew closer.

Soon enough, though, it was visibly evident that the newcomers were their own flying transport. “Auren, I’m guessing those wings are three or four meters long, each,” Richard said.

“About seven meters total wingspan. Yeah, that’s what the remotes say,” Auren responded.

“You’re not using a lidar rangefi—” Richard started to object; then Liselle interrupted.

“Parallax from two at known distance from each other, plus simple time-lapse trig, Richard,” she reassured him. “Strictly passive observation, like you insisted.”

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“They’ve got big tails,” Auren added. “You probably can’t see that from your viewpoint, since the one coming toward you would have it behind him, while the one circling is staying below the horizon-limit.” She paused, then added, “They’ve got to be in communication with each other – their angles are too closely coordinated so the one who is coming in, is always in sight of the one flying ‘oversight’.”

“I dunno – they could just be using natural, instinct-based capabilities,” Jennifer objected. “We got some great photos already, Richard – their bodies are about one-and-a-half meters tall. Bilaterally symmetric, large- ”

“Think ‘big birds’,” Liselle Francis interrupted.

“Okay, the obvious one is swooping down; let me concentrate,” Richard said. His earbud went silent as the others shifted their cross-observations to a separate channel.

Ospreys – jumbo-sized, Richard thought, watching the other being flare into a landing at the far end of the clearing. He noticed that the other was wearing a baldric, on which pouches and distorted shapes depended – some moving almost separately, but only with a range of motion that reflected the wearer’s vectors. The other being also had hands, making them hexapodal-based, as he/she/it also had a pair of legs. With the tail, that might or might not be a septapodal based lineage – just as the Earth had had before the Devonian, or maybe it was Carboniferous, mass extinction.

Having landed, the other being paused and settled its wings, folding them in and up against its back. Then it bobbed its head and took a step – ahead, but not directly towards, where Richard was sitting.

“Hello, and welcome to Unicorn,” Richard said.

The other had halted immediately when he spoke. He/she/it reciprocated, emitting a complex polyphony.

Richard waited a half-second, but nothing came out of the earbud, which meant that none of the machine-based translation programs had anything to offer. He slowly shook his head from side to side. Then he repeated his welcome in Harashan.

The other being made a very slight readjustment of its eyes and beak – so slight, that only a V14 could have caught the gesture at the 10 meters of intervening distance. Then the other being took a couple of steps closer – still avoiding a direct line, but crossing slightly over its previous line to stay very near to the perfect center of Richard’s view. Again he/she/it stopped, and this time emitted a different polyphony.

Richard noted the bright, iridescent plumage on the other. He also noted markings on an object on the baldric, near the center of the other’s torso, that he momentarily focused closer on. A memory from his most recent Timedives came in – those were the markings of the Whitewings Aerie! He fought to keep a smile from coming onto his face or the surge of relief and relaxation from affecting his body, posture of voice.

These were explorers. Seeking biochemical and other ‘alien origin’ goods. Capable of nano-technology, with a less-than-perfectly unitary society, and experience with aliens. Meaning, in all probability, that the being opposite him was picked and trained to manage encounters with weird, alien, even bug-eyed creatures.

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“Hello,” Richard said. “Would you like some water?” Moving with exaggerated slowness, he reached down with his left hand (the dominant hand for the other being’s species, Richard remembered) and picked up the canteen. He poured a small amount of water into each of the two cups, then putting the canteen down again, picked up the cup nearest his right hand, but with his left hand. He lifted it, brought it closer to himself, and pointed at the liquid inside, shifting it about in the cup slightly. “Water,” Richard repeated, and then he took a swallow, half-emptying the cup.

The other being came forward – also moving, Richard noted, with exaggerated slowness and with a minimum of extraneous motion. Which was harder as both wings and tail had to gyrate to compensate for the shifting center of mass as the other walked. He (as the plumage indicated to Richard, now that the species had been identified) picked up the other cup with his left hand and brought it close. Then, with his right hand, he opened a pouch, pulled out an instrument, and dipped it into the water. His gaze flickered to what had to be a read-out, and then he lowered the hand with the instrument and looked at Richard. “Whaaa-trrrr,” the other being said. He drank half. Then he focused his eyes on the remaining liquid, moved it in the cup, and looked at Richard again.

“Whaaa-trrrr,” he said. “Shhassa.” He drank the remaining liquid.

Richard moved the liquid in his cup. “Shhassa,” he repeated back. “Wat-er.” Then he drank the remaining water in his cup. Language lessons, obviously, were going to be the focus of the next phase of their relationship. He just hoped that Auren wouldn’t be getting too bored by what would be in turns ridiculous, frustrating, repetitive, and confusing. Just like Charades, only on a much grander scale. *Linguist. Next time I want a linguist on the team*, he thought – and then began the ‘naming’ exchanges with his opposite.

Mission Hour 1093, 0330 Zulu, 26 February, 2106, Crash Camp, Unicorn.

“We are pleased to meet.” Krikeyya, the first alien, looked at each of Auren and Liselle Francis. “Your presence was a surprise to my fellows aboard the *Wings of Hope*; we are pleased this, also, was peaceful.”

“I hope we did not scare you too badly,” Auren said.

Turkeyya rattled his wings lightly. “It was a lesson against relaxation,” he said. “But it gave evidence that your alliance of species is not hostile.”

“We did wonder why your main ship had given up the High View,” said Krikeyya. She was a much more subdued being, both in plumage and in personality, compared to her more extroverted, energetic, and active partner. “Having one on the ground and one overhead, explained much.”

“Now that you are here, it may be time to try to meet more deeply,” Turkeyya said. He turned to Richard. “We know you are many, beyond those who are here. We, too, stand for many who are not here. We, and you, these bigger groups, are meeting here through us.”

“Yes. You learned our language well,” Richard said. The aliens had – much more so than any of Richard, Auren, Jennifer, or any of the Terrans had.

“That is what Turkeyya should have done,” Krikeyya said.

The Fox's Den: By N. C. Shapero for A GENTLE STROLL 8 (March 2026)

“It is a part of my task,” Turkeeya said. “Now I wish to speak for the interests of the Combined Aeries.” He paused. “Can you speak for the interests of the Terran Systems Alliance?”

“Yes. But we must speak with care and caution,” Richard said.

“That is true for us, also, until the Aeries speak with one breath,” Turkeeya said. “Our question is this: do you make an exclusive claim to this system, and all here?”

Richard waited a half-minute, long enough to show that he was thinking over his answer, long enough to review the realities of the situation. Then he shook his head from side to side slowly. “Not if such a claim would necessarily exclude the Combined Aeries against their interests or will,” he said. “You are here, and we are here, as Auren is also – these are true facts. Those who made that building had been here. We can gain from not excluding each other from here – for then, we can have a known meeting place, for both, without putting the home aeries at hazard. A place for learning, and trading, and sharing. Would the Combined Aeries consider our peoples, together, issuing claims that do not exclude each other, but do exclude all others not present?”

Very, very subtle physical cues – scent rather than physical – marked a relaxation on the part of both Turkeeya and Krikeeya. “We will. We temporarily agree to such, here and now,” Turkeeya said. “It will take time, but I wish that the Combined Aeries will speak with one voice to make such agreement and claims.”

“As, I wish, will the Terran Systems Alliance,” Richard said. “When we leave, our satellites will stay – so we should ensure that they will not interfere with each other’s.”

“That is so. We will make our orbits better for longer times. It will take time for further greetings and exchanges to happen – this is distant from the Combined Aeries,” Turkeeya said.

“Also – we would not insist on exclusion of others if that would put species or home Aeries at hazard,” Richard added.

Turkeeya nodded. “Yes. There is nothing yet known here, worth that hazard.”

“In the spirit of sharing, and sparing from hazard, I offer this observation of hazard. This is a warning against a danger I will give my people who come here, and I share that with you for your safety just as I will with them,” Richard said. “We have reason to believe that entry into the building on the large mountain can be deadly. Or, rather, that entry followed by leaving can.”

“What do you base that belief on?” Turkeeya asked.

“We will share that information too,” Richard said. “A being not of this party entered that building, and left it, and died almost immediately. We found his body and the record of his transit. We will share that record and our record of finding him.” He paused, and then added, “Also, I propose that we share our records of discovery of this system with each other.”

Turkeeya and Krikeeya exchanged a quick rattle of their language and a flash of expressions of body language, then Turkeeya faced Richard again. “That is good, and I agree. It will help with exchange of knowledge and perhaps spare waste effort.”

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"I have a question to ask of the Combined Aeries," Richard said.

"Yes?" Turkeeya had gone perfectly still – like a hawk awaiting prey, or spotting distant danger in the sky.

"This also arises from knowledge of a possible danger. We know of a combat, between those we call the Altha'ani, and those we call the Shidren-Kas," Richard said. He took his perscomp and made a split-screen image of the two named aliens appear on it. Pointing to them and naming them again, Richard added, "They are fighting each other with great violence. Each claims the other has destroyed starships, and aeries, of the other. We are seeking not to become part of that conflict. But while we do not have a claim against either of them, or they against us," he shrugged, "when lightning strikes, it can hit both hawk and rabbit."

Turkeeya clacked his beak. "Those are not species we – the Combined Aeries – have any knowledge of. Those species that were threats to us, are not so any longer," he said.

"Their description of the conflict is one where billions are killed each year, and where entire worlds have been destroyed. Hence, we rate the potential danger as great. More than our small ships here can protect against," Richard said.

"A true assessment, for all of us together," Krikeeya said. "Our three ships could not destroy such. Let us hope they do not come here to test our non-exclusive claims before we have both means to resist such intrusion present." He paused. "Was that why you lurked on the ground, when we first came here?"

"Only until we knew that you were not they," Richard said. "Finding out about other species is part of our task."

"As it is with ours. This has been a much gooder meeting," Turkeeya said.

Mission Hour 1372, 1830 Zulu, 9 March, 2106, outbound from Unicorn on the Walloping Window Blind

"I noticed you didn't say anything about the Teklénan or Techno-Mages, Richard, when you made those claims to this system." Auren's voice and image came over the laserlink between their ships, both boosting outwards towards the 'safe' limit for activating their respective hyperdrives.

"Consider my pronouns carefully, Auren," he replied calmly. "Have I ever indicated that I thought it was possible to exclude that particular bag of 'you's'?"

Auren chuckled. "No. That does make you different from most military twerps. But you might get ordered to do so in the future."

"Ah, but you are already my friend, Auren. After all, you were invited to and came to my wedding!"

"Richard –" Christiaan shook his head from side to side. "That won't satisfy the Security types. Our service's security types."

"Let alone the Eyes," Liselle Francis added.

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"I leave them alone, they leave me alone; that works," Auren said confidently. "It's nice to have friends ... Major Fox. Richard." The moment the voice ended, the image blanked – and the Teklénan ship also vanished from the sensors.

"Damn, but he's got hot ECM," Mike said, looking over his boards.

"Amen to that," Liselle Francis added, reviewing her systems, too. "Not a whisper, not a ripple, no warning whatsoever. Slick."

"But did she²¹ leave, or just 'cloak'?" Mike asked in frustration.

"Bit hard to exclude somebody you can't detect, isn't it?" Richard asked. "What are our new friends doing?"

"Moving like a fusion-powered bat out of hell. They'll be at safe jumpspace entry distance well before we will. We have *got* to get that drive," Michael said. He turned away from the sensors. "They'll know that we would be easy to beat, Richard; their drive alone gives them a distinct tactical advantage."

"Yeah? Well, Auren's cloaking capabilities should keep them a touch more honest," Richard said.

"She's already gone, though!" Liselle Francis noted. "Anyways, the Teklénan don't go in for 'group politics' – she's not, they're not, part of the TSA!"

"Not yet, anyway," Michael said.

"She may not be gone yet – remember, she may have engaged her cloak and be shadowing us right now. And whether she's gone, or just became invisible – the *Wings of Hope* has doubtless recorded something, even if it's not the right thing, and their 'Combined Aeries' will have something else to chew on than our *apparent* vulnerability," Richard said. "And they don't know what our relationship is. Auren didn't give that away to them."

"Unless they're running a double-bluff and were able to detect Auren all along," Christiaan pointed out.

"Possible, but not likely. Not from the activity that resulted when she dropped her camouflage," Richard said. That had been a pretty nervous ten minutes down on Unicorn's surface for all the beings present there. One that they had managed to calm down, but also one that had led to a temporary separation.

"Why didn't you talk about trade?" Liselle Francis asked.

"But we did!" Jennifer pointed out. "They were really, really, really interested in our biological data from Unicorn. I don't see why you gave that away to them, Richard," she added.

"Data is tradeable, but also readily obtainable. We got their groundside data in return – doubling our effective sampling set for each of us. That was mutually advantageous," he replied. "Win-win conditioning, Jennifer."

²¹ "she" – Auren's female. – Kay.

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“Which can be negated by just one higher-up decreeing against its continuance,” she said.

“Sure. But that’s more of a hazard for them than for us – their Aeries are much less coordinated than we are within the TSA,” Richard said.

“I dunno ... there are plenty of Russian states that –”

“Don’t fund separate star exploration efforts,” Richard said. “The separate Aeries do.”

“So, they have multiple competing sovereignties contemporaneous with stardrive and fusion technologies? That does not sound particularly rational – or sane,” Henry interjected.

“‘Judge not, lest ye be also judged’, Henry,” Michael quoted. “The TSA is not much older than you are, and on Exodus 8, there are *still* a few dozen ‘competing sovereignties’.”

“But they don’t have fusion technology...” Henry began.

“Except by trade – likewise stardrives, which *we* didn’t have ten years ago,” Jennifer Lotor pointed out. “And it’s just your interpretation of their culture – that they’re split into multiple competing sovereignties, Richard. Based on the sub-patterns you claim to have spotted while going through the language training,” Jennifer argued. “It could be just as easily explained as an erroneous leap to conclusions.”

“Not entirely. Turkeeya didn’t try to narrow the negotiated claims over the system to his Aerie, but accepted it on behalf of the Combined Aeries. However, we *didn’t* make any such broadening offer vis-à-vis our data exchanges. Which will give him, and his Aerie, negotiating points to bring other aeries around to signing off on the broad claim,” Richard responded.

“What irks me is that they learned our language a lot faster, and better, than we learned theirs,” Liselle Francis said. “I thought you were the expert, Richard.”

“Maybe I’ll add that to my ‘honeydew’ list – add a *real* linguist to our team,” Richard said.

“Don’t do it,” Christiaan said.

“Huh?” “What?” “Why not?” The others in the team turned to look at the ferret uplift.

“I’m already spread kind of thin trying to watch over the number of people we’ve got,” Christiaan said. “Add another, and we’d have to go to at least two gropos²². Probably more, and then we’d have to spend much more time training. Geometrically more – ‘cause we’d have to cover all the sub-set groupings. Until we reach a size where sub-units can be treated as ‘exchangeable’, which always happens at a lower utility function.”

“Christiaan – that’s not how I’d’ve expected to hear you phrase that,” Liselle Francis said.

²² Ground Pounders. – Niall.

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He shrugged. "It's the downside of becoming an officer; you have to start using officer-speak. Instead of the simpler language for non-coms and privates – 'If you get too big, you get clumsy'. Which isn't *exactly* true, but it's good enough."

"But a linguist would be such a help with these alien contacts!" Jennifer objected.

"Either we'll figure out how to do the basics of their job, or not – but we're just the first-in crew. Problem-finders, not problem-solvers," Christiaan said.

"Which is my complaint about leaving without pushing into that building," Jennifer said. "I've got almost nothing to report about that whole new level of civilization!"

"The next team can include a sub-group much more suitable for that process," Christiaan said. "Besides, we probably will be back here with the *Beagle*."

"Why'd we leave, anyways, instead of waiting for them to come here?" Jennifer asked.

"We were running out of mission-critical supplies," Michael answered.

"Huh? We've plenty of consumables left! None of the luxuries, sure, but there's –"

"Message torpedoes," Michael answered. "Besides, I'm sure Captain Gallery is going to want to pick our brains thoroughly before the next teams land on, and spread through, the Galapagos system's planets."

"Relax, Jennifer," Richard said. "You'll get your chance to argue for your design for the next-phase exploration anyways. In person, which will be that much more persuasive."

Jennifer snorted and looked away – but her fur and scent suggested that she was in fact mollified by Major Fox's response.

At Home

The Pentagon, Conference Room 2A224²³, GUS, Homeworld

“Bozhemoi. What unbelievable bad fortune, that aliens should be exploring the pulsar system, even as our people are there!” General Deremenko shook his head, scowling and rubbing at the base of his neck. “This makes all our plans for **Pinlight** obsolete!” Other general officers voiced similar opinions around the conference table while Deremenko shook his head in disgust.

“Why did not Major Fox attack those aliens? He knew the critical importance of our **Pinlight** placement staying secret! That was emphasized – repeatedly – in all of the briefings on his mission goals! Was he a coward? Or was he a fool? He invited the aliens to share the system with us – without knowing anything, anything at all about them!”

“He could have, he should have, warned them off – claimed the entire system for us. They were explorers too; they showed up after we had landed and thus established a claim to the system. It was insanity not to bar them from further contact!”

“No.” That stern negative got everyone sitting and standing around the conference room to stop speaking and look at General Kamirov. Seated at the head of the table and focus point for the briefing displays, he was shaking his head from side to side and scowling. “He could not have enforced such a ban. Have you forgotten the first rule²⁴?”

“Major Fox could have fired on the intruders,” Deremenko said. “The data relayed indicated that it would have been simple. A first strike, before they could suspect –”

“Start a fight with a species that had already demonstrated superior drive technology?” General Nicholas Charles Reynard III interrupted. “The sensor readings, according to the latest scientific report, indicate that they used something other than the gravity drive that our ships now use.”

²³ The conference room number originally given here was inconsistent with the actual numbering system used in the Pentagon.

The concentric rings are designated from the center out as “A” through “E” (with in addition “F” and “G” in the basement). “E” Ring offices are the only ones with outside views and are generally occupied by senior officials. Office numbers go clockwise around each of the rings, and have two parts: a nearest-corridor number (1 to 10) followed by a bay number (00 to 99), so office numbers range from 100 to 1099. These corridors radiate out from the central courtyard, with corridor 1 beginning with the Concourse’s south end. Each numbered radial corridor intersects with the corresponding numbered group of offices (for example, corridor 5 divides the 500 series office block). There are a number of historical displays in the building, particularly in the “A” and “E” rings.

Floors in The Pentagon are lettered “B” for Basement and “M” for Mezzanine, both of which are below ground level. The concourse is located on the second floor at the metro entrance. Above ground floors are numbered 1 to 5. Room numbers are given as the floor, concentric ring, and office number (which is in turn the nearest corridor number followed by the bay number). Thus, office 2B315 is on the second floor, B ring, and nearest to corridor 3 (between corridors 2 and 3). One way to get to this office would be to go to the second floor, get to the A (innermost) ring, go to and take corridor 3, and then turn left on ring B to get to bay 15.

A person can walk between any two points in less than seven minutes.

From: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pentagon – Niall

²⁴ Never issue an order which you do not expect to be obeyed or cannot enforce. – Niall.

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“But they were reduced to using that same gravity drive for ‘close in’ maneuvering,” General Deremenko said. “There has been no indication that these ‘Auri’ possess weapon or defensive technology beyond what we possess – or what Major Fox’s *Wallop-ing Window Blind* carried.”

General Kamirov shook his head. “I would agree with Nicholas – this alternate in-system drive is far superior to what we use, and I believe it would provide a significant strategic advantage. And to attack the ‘Auri’ without warning would be a signal we would not want to send.”

“Why should we not wish to?” Deremenko replied. “The mustiline creatures that attacked the *Beagle* and her task force did so without warning. Why should we treat others any differently that we ourselves are treated?”

“Because, General,” General Reynard answered, “The mustiline pirates – whatever they were, they certainly weren’t soldiers – are not like these ‘Auri’. Their actions place them in an entirely different category.”

“And that category is?” General Kamirov asked.

“I would have thought it was obvious – vermin,” General Reynard answered, and grinned, showing brilliant white carnassials.

General Kamirov stood up and slammed his palm down on the conference table, “Enough!” The JCS members and other general officers present froze to attention; the Chairman waited a long ten count before continuing. “Fact: the aliens arrived. Fact: the aliens left. Fact: the aliens will return to the pulsar. We must work with facts – deal with the universe as it is, not as we might wish it to be.” The Chairman looked around the table at the other Chiefs, then at the other general officers. “We did not send out the *Beagle* and its squadron to start a war. We advised all of her officers, and most especially the probe ship commanders, of whom Major Fox is one, to avoid initiating combat with any eetees encountered if at all possible. Were Major Fox to have disregarded those *legitimate and direct military orders* he would have been guilty of a serious crime under the UCMJ. The matter of these winged extraterrestrials, these ‘Auri’, is closed. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

A chorus of “crystal, sir” echoed around the table. Deremenko waited until the chorus died before asking, “What about the *other* extraterrestrial? The one who appears human, and just ‘appeared’ with her²⁵ own ship in the pulsar system, practically on top of the Major’s ship.”

“That other alien,” General Kamirov said, “has been to Earth before. This is the same individual based on the similarity of records we have from there and from the earlier encounter – who met with the Major and the others of his team, on their first landing on and exploration of the *Kiran*. Whatever the Major did, somebody else would have known about it – somebody who is from a place, or civilization, which we have not yet been able to even identify. Think on that, long and hard, gentlemen.”

General Kamirov looked around the table. “The prior encounter with this alien – the being calling herself ‘Auren’ – indicated that that person, and that civilization, have ad-

²⁵ Auren is a “she”, and with those records Kamirov WOULD know. – Kay.

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vanced nano-technological capabilities, possibly beyond those that we possess. What was intended as a 'secret' penetration of the Galapagos system, was from the start one that was known, immediately or potentially, to another civilization. One which already knows where the Terran Systems Alliance's worlds are located."

"What?" several of those present exclaimed, startled.

"This 'Auren' was encountered first on the *Kiran* in the Exodus 8 system, then at the Major's wedding," Kamirov said. "And attacking the 'Auuri' in order to preserve the secret of our presence at PSR 1257+12 would be a case of 'locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen', as our Ami friends would put it."

"The Major could have captured this 'Auren' and destroyed her spaceship too, then," suggested one officer.

"That would have been ... ill advised," General Reynard replied. "Even with nano-technology only *equal* to our own, and indications are that this 'Auren' has access to superior nanoweaponry, that would be a poor tactical choice."

"But a stealthed, surprise attack –"

"The Major deployed drones as part of his survey; he could reasonably assume like precautions against unexpected dangers from the others who came there," General Kamirov scowled and tapped his left fingers into the palm of his right hand. "He took precautions against any such 'surprise attack' against his ship. It would be ... idiotic, for him to presume that other explorers would not do the same."

"The Major was not present when the task force was attacked! He had no knowledge that there are starfaring species – fleets, even – who do attack if an opportunity seems to suggest itself," one of the admirals objected.

"While Major Fox may not have had that knowledge, we cannot assume that the 'Auuri' were or are similarly ill-informed," Kamirov replied. "While we may have to adjust our **Pinlight** deployment plans, I do not believe that it is time to throw out those plans and hide in the Homesystem; the time for isolationism is long past."

Secretary of Defense Kalerenin²⁶ cleared his throat. "This is a change from what we hoped, yes; but when we made our plan to use the Galapagos system, we did not know whether it was unoccupied or inhabited. Could we shift to the contingency plan where it was found to have been occupied?"

"We could, da," General Kamirov said. "Should we do so?" He shook his head. "This report re-proves the old maxim about battle plans and enemies – or perhaps, the universe. None of our contingency alternatives anticipated meeting one, let alone two, separate, starfaring explorers at the pulsar."

"On review, perhaps we should have?" General Deremenko asked.

²⁶ First identified *Janus*, there referenced by Hawksbury, who also spoke of "his predecessor in the Pierce administration".

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“Because the pulsar is a strong enough anomaly that other species would be curious and investigate it?” Secretary of Defense²⁷ Kalerenin asked.

“No, because while it is human to hope for the best, it is intelligent to expect the worst,” General Deremenko said. *And to consider the trouble-finding nature of certain subordinates more carefully ... next time*, he thought but carefully did not mention.

“What about whoever built that fourth planet – Unicorn,” a doubting officer noted.

“If you find one anomaly in a star system, which you can ascribe to an alien species different from those then present, and later discover a second anomaly, equally different from what you know about those same aliens – would you suspect more the creators of the first anomaly, or the later-coming and lesser-advanced aliens?” Secretary of Defense Kalerenin asked. “May we at least consider that aspect?”

“That is not in our contingency plans, yet,” the senior staff officer, Major General Fred Peterson noted, blinking hard and repetitively with the shock of that concept. “We had thought that that lay in the realm of science-fiction; obviously we are going to have to re-evaluate some of our basic assumptions.” Others around the table laughed with the Major General.

“I’d like to think,” General Reynard said, after the laughter died down, “that, given how much ‘science-fiction’ has become hard fact to deal with in the last five years, that we all could do to reevaluate some of our basic assumptions. If it happened, it has to be possible – which takes it out of the realm of fiction, science or otherwise, and into the realm of news.”

“Having done so, would they then expect him – or our species – of trying to hide anything about our interaction with the Galapagos system? Or our intentions towards it?” General Deremenko asked. He remained silent about the benefit of receiving the Aurii’s scans -- as well as the cost/benefit evaluation of each other’s technological capacities that the results would provide, when a repeat visit would attempt to duplicate the Aurii’s results with Terran equipment and personnel.

“But they will come back there – they will, to some extent, claim a share. Without paying us for our efforts!” General Peterson objected.

“Is it possible that Major Fox gave them our findings, to keep the aliens from performing further searches on the other planets on the Galapagos system?” another, and far less senior, officer asked. Colonel Russa Polta, one of the very, very few Prussians who had managed to reach a higher rank in the Aerospace Force, looked around the conference table. “Did he intend to leave us with grounds to assert that the stargates we might emplace there, actually were later-located ‘relics’ of the same people who made Unicorn?”

“We don’t know that, and won’t know that until the debriefing. Whether or not the Major intended that, however, it still remains a valid possibility,” General Kamirov looked at Colonel Polta, nodding in acknowledgment, and then around the table again. “As General Deremenko intimated we may be able to still use the Galapagos as the principal node – but we may wish to design our emplaced systems, and select their locations,

²⁷ Called first SecDef, then SecWar. Changed second title reference to match the first. – Niall.

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with another goal in mind; that of supporting a *maskirovka* of their being a 'found' artifact from the previous inhabitants." He looked around the table. "We will now continue with the mission report, preparing as we do the schedule and tasking for..."

Five and two-thirds hours later, General Kamirov was seated at his favorite chair in his quarters, with a bottle of vodka chilling in an ice tumbler next to it, his senior aide-de-camp in the next chair over, and an open line to General Nicholas Reynard III. "Those were damn good questions Polta asked about your cousin's intentions, Nicholas. What answer would you make?"

The image on the screen – which also had a liquid-bearing container in its hand, though the speaker was almost twelve-hours, and a half-planet (and one Gate) removed, shrugged its shoulders. "I think we'd both give the same answer – that all of us, and from the sounds of it, the Secretary of Defense and General Deremenko would, too. Let's start by dealing with the hand we've been dealt first. Which is a lot better than it otherwise might have been. Would have been, if one of those hotheads had been in command. That's what really is important to our operations and future plans."

"So is understanding the thinking of today's subordinate officers – because we're always trying to find and groom tomorrow's leaders," General Kamirov took another swallow, shook his head, and placed the neatly-emptied glass on a convenient coaster. "The support and engineering staff are not happy with the new proposals for the **Pinlight** gates at the pulsar, though. Putting them underground will be expensive."

"Trading off shielding and complexity in later-on retooling or base design changes, for greater shielding from the external radiation. Which, if we start working on the other planets closer to the pulsar, will be a lot greater. We'd be wanting to go underground anyway," General Reynard responded.

"But it will take time, effort, and creative imagination – and considerable engineering, both design and manufacturing-base, to build installations which will be believably and consistently 'alien' for our **Pinlight** gates," General Kamirov said. "It will involve retrofitting those already established in this system."

"Unless we elect to institute a series of alternative architectures – down to the tooling and measurements – to suggest a truly multi-species, star-spanning culture. Which shares technologies across varying implementations," General Reynard replied, sipping at his drink.

"Which your brother suggested in his commander's secured section of his report, da. He suggested that a density of initial designs – and a certain degree of, ah, 'artistic flexibility' as to the adaptations to differing locales – would be a reasonably cheap way to...how did he put it?" General Deremenko asked.

"'Copper plate our brass-balled bets'," General Reynard answered immediately, chuckling as he did. "For either the Altha'ani or the Shidran-Kas, whose cultures focus on uniformity –"

"Appear to emphasize uniformity. We still lack independent confirmation of most of the cultural information about these aliens," General Deremenko said. Then he shook his head from side to side. "I know, I know – others who have gained any information – the Orbital traders, those who also touched that statue, the staffers who interacted with the

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stranded scientist – have confirmed a great many of your brother's observations and interpolations. As has our new, ha, 'contract xenosociology specialist'. But none of these are truly independent sources."

"They're just the only information we have to date. All sociological observations are to some extent subjective anyways," General Reynard noted.

"Da. Well...I.S. will strongly concur and support the recommendations for this extensive maskirovka effort with the **Pinlight** gates," General Deremenko said. Then he smiled. "No doubt it will be interesting to see what the various artists we have agreed to commission 'concept drawings' from on E8 will come up with."

"I want to see what Kelly Freas does – and Picasso," General Reynard agreed.

[Niall – I found this little historical gem in a book on Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard, actually, titled 'Bill and Dave', written by Michael Malone, which I'm just reading. It doesn't go into the 'game notes' but I don't want it lost from the canon. Richard]

Mount Olympus, Occupied Japan, E8

"Admiral Takashika Hideoyara, this court has considered the evidence of your case." The four-star admiral looked down and to his left at the individual seated there; then shifted his gaze to the person seated immediately to his right. "General Wanatabe Koyiishi, this court has considered the evidence of your case." Neither of the two addressed said anything, nor did they look up or around. Their entire attitude was one of defeat and despair. "This court, having reached its verdict, as required by the laws of the military occupation, submitted the result for independent review by both the newly elected government of Occupied Japan and the Supreme Commander of the Occupation Forces."

Neither of the two men looked up. But now they were each holding their breath.

The four-star admiral waited for ten seconds, looking out very briefly over the packed courtroom – every seat of the eighty-seven available was full, with over three-quarters of those being Japanese, and over three-quarters of those individuals, former or current military officers of flag or general's rank. Then he shifted his gaze back to the two defendants and spoke again.

"These higher authorities were asked to review, reconsider, and as they saw fit, redress any injustice in the trial, its determination, and its outcome, in each of your cases," he said. "They completed those tasks and put their response on the record as the final, and finished, decision." He paused, and then asked, "Have you any questions as to the accuracy of my summary of the course of your individual appeals?"

Two very subdued, almost invisible head-shakes were the response.

"Very well. This military court tried and convicted Takashira Hideoyara and Wanatabe Koyiishi, separately and individually, on the grounds of treason to the armed services, people, government, and nation of Japan. Each of you was identified as the individual commanding officer who made the determination for your respective services – the Japanese Imperial Navy and Japanese Imperial Army, respectively – that your aircrafts' Identify-Friend-or-Foe radio transponder – your services' IFF – would not recognize your other service's IFF as being valid. As a consequence of your separate determinations, an Imperial Japanese Army flier who flew too near a base or vessel of an Imperial Japanese

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Navy would be shot at – and many were shot down – by that overflowed unit's defenses. Similarly, a Naval flier who overflowed a land-based airstrip would find himself being shot at and similarly shot down, by that airstrip's defenses²⁸. This absolute intransigence and inability to subordinate the pride in one's individual military branch to the necessity of more effectively cooperating against your common defendant or defendants, prevented your services from cooperating. To the benefit of your victims and of those against whom you aggressed, to be sure – but that does not alleviate the depth of your shame and guilt for the losses, totally unnecessary, suffered by your combat pilots and aircrews.”

The four-star admiral took a breath, and continued on. “This court's determination was that you should be dishonorably discharged from your services, executed, and denied any burial or recognition at either Yasukuni Shrine or any Shinto shrine in Japan or any of the lands controlled by the Occupation Force or the Terran Systems' Alliance. Your names shall be stricken from the military records and only the depth of your crime, and of your punishment, shall continue to be kept – and will be repeated, on the anniversary of the date of your execution, to every member of any military or governmental force serving in or for Japan from this day forward. In that you may finally be used as an example of how not to do things in the future.”

By now both men were weeping, with sobs coming up from one or the other. The occupants of the courtroom were also silent, with the Japanese contingent entirely stunned – these two men had not only been ordered killed, but all memory of them, obliterated save for the heinous bad example they had created. They would be driven out of Dai Nippon, out of the consciousness and fellowship of their nation and its people.

The four-star admiral struck the bell beside him, eight times. “This hearing is now over. Prisoners are to be returned to their cells to await execution, which is to be completed as soon as is possible. They are denied contact with anyone, military or civilian, and shall be kept on the strictest suicide watch attainable. God Bless the Occupation Authority and the Greater United States, and all of Her allies.”

²⁸ Bill and Dave: How Hewlett and Packard Built the World's Greatest Company; © 2007 Michael S. Malone ISBN 978-1-59184-152-4; p. 93, citing to a personal interview between M. S. Malone and W. Hewlett, who as a US officer went to post-war Japan and interviewed many Japanese technologists. Including Hidetsugu Yagi, who was (a) a famous scientist, the world's leading expert on antennae; his reflector antennae are still used in many televisions, and were used in the altitude-sensitive fuses of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan; (b) the director of all Japan's civilian R&D, the equivalent of the U.S.'s Vannevar Bush; (c) the innovative source of the incendiary balloon attack efforts that in 1943 and 1944 caused problems in the West Coast, all of which were voluntarily suppressed at the source, leading to the Japanese abandoning the program; and (d) immensely frustrated with the Japanese military, who refused to let him do anything but used him as a propaganda device, i.e. issuing announcements of the development of a 'death ray', etc.. Yagi was a 'learning experience' to Hewlett about the danger of disgruntled former employees; he told Bill Hewlett and the U.S. team “where all the technical information lay and whom we ought to talk to in the military”. (p. 92-93)

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News

Since I last wrote, substantial progress was made on reconstructing the N3F website. There are undoubtedly some things that need to be inserted again, but there is also a plan to modernize the site. At the moment the front pages present huge walls of text, the hottest thing in a webpage, assuming that you are in the year 1995. Fortunately, the N3F has some members who are graphically and video graphically inclined, so there are plans that have faced several interruptions to update the website into a modern form. I have no idea what the modern form will be, because I am not graphically inclined.

After months of searching, I was able to reach the heir of James Schmitz's intellectual property rights. There was rational discussion. In exchange for certain payments, I was able to obtain non-exclusive rights to write new novels in Schmitz's Hub Universe, using Telzey Amberdon and his other characters. Writing is under way.

With respect to comments: The Fox's Den appears to skip from one story to another. I much enjoyed reading the story that we did have in the last issue, but I was somewhat curious what was going to happen to the character seen in issue five.

Comments

Arcane Drugs: from Clark Timmins

These are very strange pharmaceutical instruments. The claimed effects to my ear are not much stranger than the effects claimed in the late 1960s and early 1970s for various illicit pharmaceutical compounds, of which LSD was probably the tamest. (Your editor scrupulously adhered to avoiding any contact with any of the substances. I have only a few brain cells, and do not want to blow any of them up through some arcane chemical process.

The idea of someone selling a fake drug whose properties somewhat resemble the real drug apparently exists in the real world, though if pressed I cannot actually tell you which illicit narcotic substances are being sold as some other illicit narcotic substance. Drugs that induce apparent time travel are very clever. And perhaps there is some highly purified variant on these which causes the user to be physically transported to some of those other past, present, future, or alternative realities.

1PMG PBEM: that's a sound discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of play-by-chat and play-by-email systems. An event in which all persons are physically present in the same location would appear to be a fancy version of play-by-chat.

Thank you for your discussion of the distinction between fiction based on character development and fiction based on plot. Having the character discuss motivation also has the effect, at least in a game in which the gamesmaster has time to think, of advising the gamesmaster as to which choices the players are likely to make.

Your technical description of this Google document processing system will be very useful, I expect, for people who are using it. It appeared to me that small details were very important for actually getting the

system to work. On the same line, the discussion of how often the campaign should be advanced, and how that question depends on the other time demands on the players, is certainly important.

I am not being particularly critical in my discussion, in the sense of raising things that look as though they might have difficulties. On one hand, I know nothing about the Google drive system. On the other hand I've never tried your play by mail arrangements, so I'm not quite sure how they would work. Once upon a time, I did do something somewhat similar in a back issue or series of issues of *The Wild Hunt*, but that campaign ended poorly because the gamesmaster, namely me, made a very bad decision on one point. I also managed to trigger a religious opinion of two of the players that I had no idea was there.

Notes from the *Phoenix Throne*: it has been a good half-century since I went ice-skating, but my distant memories that at the time I enjoyed it. I did have at least two bad falls. One was forward, before I learned how to fall properly onto my arms rather than my hands, and the other was backwards, at which point I knocked the back of my head. I can report that the phrase "seeing stars" is fairly accurate, though the objects looked less like stars and more like characters in an alphabet formed from slightly irregular straight lines. The stars were indeed red, green, and blue.

Thank you for your comments on my Zine. That's actually more comments than I ever received when I sent material to the other APA. It's a very nice APA, but entering into the conversation was a bit challenging.

Special Acquisitions Section is a very clever name for an organization whose purposes sound to be slightly different than

those one might expect for a museum. The author's adventures in a late-nineteenth-century town, closing with his encounter with the snake who appears to have killed the bodyguard, are very well told and exciting.

The *Fox's Den*: which edition of Avalon Hill *Battle of the Bulge* were you referring to? The original version, played with what appear to be the intended rules, was very difficult for the Germans to lose, except by bad luck. However if you didn't find the clever winning strategies the Germans were in very difficult positions very quickly.

We have a tale with a very complex and ornate social relationships and ways of expressing it. To an American reader, it comes across as being alien. The effort that must've gone into writing it is extremely impressive. There are vast numbers of details well and coherently linked to give structure to what might be written as a very simple plot. The time traveler meeting himself was a bit of a surprise. All said, it was a very impressive long story.

Fiction

No Tears for a Princess

"And the Duke sent them," said Elaine, more to herself than to Grandoon. "That wall was empty, no witnesses. Only the Duke could arrange that. But why?"

She was downfaced. "I saved his city, and didn't even ask for any big reward or anything like that." Her thoughts hurt her more than any of the blows she had taken. "He couldn't be afraid of me. And he does have some decent advisors, even if he is jealous and suspicious. It must be like court manners. No matter what I say, people get

mad. Like Earl Yoog today. He gave me the sword, but when I tried to thank him,... , well, you saw what happened. I never say things quite right."

"I saw and heard. However, your style was entirely proper." From her manner, Grandoon concluded that Elaine was of a noble house; peasant maids simply did not learn the modes of address she had used so elegantly.

"My style? Oh, come on, Grandoon! You were there! He was angry, just from having to put up with me. I never say things quite right. But I'm never sure afterwards. What do I say wrong?" She shook her head and looked skywards. Tegel-La was a tangerine half-hidden in a black lattice of leaves and branches.

"Do you really want that answered?" His tone was suddenly serious.

"Thanks, I've had my fill of lectures on bowing and scraping." She continued to look at the sky, drinking in the peace of moon and stars. For a space they walked together, neither speaking.

"That is what you meant, isn't it? Oh, go on! Tell me. Why not?"

"Some things are difficult to say with grace. You might take offense." She caught a retort in her throat, then nodded impatiently.

He stared at how the moonlight caught the curves and planes of her face.

"Doubtless," he began, "you know Bishop Averoff's book of riddles. A classic is "What is the way of a moon through the sky, a swan through the air, a ship through the sea, a man with a maid?" I have spent much of my life trying to answer the first question,

without great success. The second and third parts are not so hard, at least for one of my modest learning. Recently, I came to understand the last."

"You? Recently? But you're supposed to have ... I mean, your reputation as a lady's man got here before you."

Grandoon smiled. "You're thinking of something a little different. But surely someone your age has known a boyfriend or two?"

"Me? Oh, yeah! Sure! Two or three all the time. Hadn't you noticed?" The defiance melted from her voice. "No, not really. When I was a lot younger, there were a couple fellows -- all we ever did is hold hands. But none of them ever liked me for very long."

"Did you like them?"

"Well, ... yes". Her sadness gave her an aura of greater age. She wondered why she was admitting so much. Where did Grandoon's arguments lead?

"In my homeland, things were different. The warmth was actually in the caress itself, not in the thought behind it. Here the relevant proverb is 'None greeted as warmly as mage's friends, nor met so coldly as mage's foes.' I suspect you never thought that proverb made sense. Unlike your fellows, you find my greetings neither warmer nor colder than anyone else's. The reason -- your problem -- is you, rather, your aura. Your suitors, whatever their inclinations, were daunted by that fortress which is your mind."

"The problem's me?" she shouted, at the edge of an explosion of anger. He

hardly had given an explanation, let alone what she'd expected. Was he mocking her because she'd rejected him last night?

"Are you trying to confuse me?" Her words came in bursts, like the thrusts of a dagger. "You've done it! Riddles and proverbs! You know perfectly well I'm no mage. And the last one before you to notice I'm a girl was that drunkard, Earl Glord. He didn't try court manners or caresses, either, or take a simple 'no' for an answer. How did you think his arms got themselves broken?"

"Now, let me weave together the threads of my argument -- though you gave the Earl his just desserts." Grandoon continued imperturbably ahead. "Most men have no command of the Presence, of the Art which raises mountains and revives the dead. But almost everyone in the world -- in this world, anyway -- uses magic all the time in small ways."

"What? Magic's something you learn from books, from meditation and ritual practice, not something for every swineherd and goatgirl."

"You don't count tind erspark and horsecalm and doorseal and dustbane?" he asked.

"Those aren't the same. Though I guess they must be some sort of magic, now that you mention it, since I can't do any of them."

"As I began by saying, I have only recently come to understand the truth. It would appear that sorcery is merely the conscious use of an innate ability of all men."

"I don't believe it!" She shook her head. In the back of her mind she set up a list of acts beyond tind erspark and horsecalm, all of which had always been denied her. Certainly she knew no more than three or

four persons, other than herself, who habitually carried flint and steel to start a fire.

"My colleagues were even more skeptical. After all, the idea threatens my profession's arcane reputation. But I have definitive proof. My new cryptic mirror, undoubtedly the finest ever made, is just sensitive enough to reveal it. If one finds a pair of lovers walking arm in arm, one sees through the mirror that they reinforce their physical contact with psychic bonds, of precisely the sort found in spells of empathic control. The couple's bonds, of course, are used to enhance love, not to enslave. A great general inspiring his troops before battle uses the same bonding, so each man in the army is convinced that every other man in the whole army depends personally on him. Of course, one with proper thaumaturgic training automatically strengthens the bonds, without realizing he's doing it, whencefrom the proverb."

He let Elaine's thoughts take their course. To understand the works she read, she was clearly brilliant. Her tough-sounding talk was a masquerade, a verbal foil to the aura about her psyche.

"Which explains why people -- some people -- take fright in places where magic doesn't work?"

"Precisely. Wards which prevent active spellcasting can also inhibit psychic bonding. When warded, people no longer feel their companions around them. An inexperienced militia levy, shielded against battle magic for the first time, not infrequently panics and routs because each man thinks his neighbors are abandoning him. Even the most experienced troops speak of 'the vasty gloom of battle imminent.'" He was suddenly touched by

pity. "And you stand within your unbreaking screens, so none may judge you 'friend'. That is how you offended Earl Yoog this noon."

"Screens? They don't bother me!" She peered away into the woods. The trees were black shadows, lost in the breezeless air. The night was not yet cold, but now she felt chilled to her bones. Of course her aura didn't bother her. What mattered was what it did to others. She sifted through her memories.

Each rejection, each betrayal, suddenly made some slight sense. Her friends had sought psychic warmth, and found wintry darkness. For a time she listened to the forest's silence, letting the clatter of their footsteps echo through the hollows of her mind.

"You may have a choice." Grandoon's voice intruded into her quiet. "You have considerable formal knowledge of the Art. You are probably able to open your mind, if you choose."

The Ancient D&D Campaign

"Sandra," Brian said, "I recognize your thinking, but neither of the moons will be up tonight. How will you even find any villains, let alone fight them?"

"I shall trust to the light of the stars," Sandra answered. "Also, if I cannot see them, they cannot see me, making matters even."

The next morning, Sandra reappeared with a smallcrofter, thoroughly tied with ropes, over one shoulder. "We had a visitor," she announced. "He and his two friends were discussing torching the barn with fire arrows. At least, I think that's what they were saying."

"Where are his two companions?" Barnabus asked.

"Quite dead," Sandra answered. "I took them from behind. The first lost his head before he was aware I was there. The second took a sword thrust to the stomach, from the side, while he was turning. When you spear the kidneys, the pain is too great; you don't scream. This one put up a fight, but I had a sword and he had a dagger he didn't know how to use. My cape got slashed up and will need some mending. He got knocked out. However, I have no idea what he has been saying, though I suspect it is language that no lady should speak."

Brian wondered how she had managed to sneak up on the trio in pitch darkness, but decided not to ask.

"Oh, Barnabus," Sandra added, "these villains were on your land, so their money and such are properly yours. Here are their purses and their few copper pieces."

"What is all the paper in the other purse?" Emmanuel asked.

"No idea," Sandra answered. "I finished searching them at dawn's first light, when it was hard to read." She passed around several pieces of paper, colorfully printed.

"One of the stonecutter scripts," Vincent said. "It's the Common Tongue, written in these very strange letters. 'Money of the People'," it says. "This note may be exchanged for five silver pieces when the people win. Glory to the Small Giant Class Liberation Army." He looked puzzled. "Small what?"

"How can this piece of paper be worth silver pieces?" Gowophilus asked. "It defies common sense."