

TAGGING BRUNO

Allen M. Steele

Allen M. Steele's book *Coyote*, stories from which first appeared in *Asimov's*, has recently been optioned for television by Bainframe. "Tagging Bruno" is the first new *Coyote* tale to appear in *Asimov's* since *Galaxy Blues* was serialized here in 2007, and it was inspired in large part by recent efforts to tag and track great white sharks off Cape Cod. Allen's next novel, *Avengers of the Moon*, will be out from Tor Books in March. It's the first new *Captain Future* novel to be published since 1946.

The arrival of the Bridgeton ferry was heralded by the ringing of an iron bell down at the wharf. Sawyer Lee was having coffee at the Captain's Lady a few blocks away when he heard it. He listened for the number of bells: four, a long pause, then four more. Familiarity with the dock master's signals told him that this was the boat he'd been expecting. Sawyer dug into his trouser pocket for a colonial and dropped it on the table, telling the girl who'd brought him coffee to keep the change. He then shouldered his pack, picked up his flechette rifle, and sauntered out the open door.

Sawyer took his time getting to the waterfront. It was a pleasant morning in mid-Muriel, warm with the taste of springtime, *Coyote's* summer solstice five weeks away. Even after all these years, Leeport was still a small town, its cobblestone streets lined with blackwood-frame shops and houses. Sawyer enjoyed his leisurely stroll from Main to Wharf, dry now that the rainy season was over. At his age, he didn't like to hurry, and he saw no reason to do so now.

By the time he reached the wharf, the ferry was tied up at the pier, its gangway lowered. Sawyer recognized it as one of the larger boats out of Bridgeton, meant more for carrying freight than people. Steam was rising from its funnel, though, so it must have arrived only a few minutes ago. As he got closer, he spotted a large object on the aft deck, bulging at the top and front, covered with heavy tarps. He had a good idea what it was.

Three men were helping the ferry crew unload aluminum equipment cases from the boat and stack them on the pier. Each of the boxes was marked UNF, leaving no doubt where they'd come from and to whom they belonged. Sawyer approached the oldest of the three, a tall, sparsely bearded gent about his age wearing a field hat over a nearly hairless scalp. He had a datapad in hand and was using a stencil to check off the serial numbers of each item from the University of New Florida.

"Ronald Blair, I presume?"

"I'm Dr. Blair, yes. And who might you—?" Looking up, Blair regarded Sawyer

owlishly for a moment, then a smile slowly appeared. "Ah-ha! You must be General Lee."

"Sawyer will do, please. I stopped using my rank when I retired." Still, he couldn't help but feel flattered. Not many people these days remembered that he'd once held command of the Coyote Federation Corps of Exploration. Only another old-timer would know this; recent immigrants had seldom heard of him.

"If you insist." However long he'd lived here, Blair's voice still carried a British accent. He shook Sawyer's hand, then turned to the two younger men who'd just come down the gangway, each of them lugging boxes. "Cary, Jack . . . our guide, Sawyer Lee."

Introductions were made. Cary Minnehan was in his late single digits by the LeMarean calendar, early twenties in Earth years; his accent identified him as a second-generation Coyote native. Bespectacled and slight of build, Sawyer pegged him as an academic trying to pass as an outdoorsman. Blair proudly claimed him as one of his grad students at the university and a collaborator on this particular research program.

Jack Clark was just a couple of years older. Big-boned and muscular, like Sawyer he was a dark-skinned man of African-American heritage; he also sounded like someone who'd been born and raised on Coyote. He was from the university, too, but he hadn't always been there. When Sawyer offered him his hand, Jack responded by first giving him a military salute.

"I remember you, sir," he said, "even if you don't remember me. I was in the corps the same time as you were . . . posted at Mariannetown on Iroquois."

"Oh, okay." Sawyer returned the salute, then offered his hand again. He couldn't be expected to remember every single corpsman who'd served under his command, and Mariannetown—a recent settlement on the Great Equatorial River, south of the equator—was somewhat remote. "As I've told Dr. Blair, I dropped my rank when I left the corps. So just call me Sawyer."

"Sorry, sir, but that's going to be hard to do." There was hero worship in Jack's eyes as he shook Sawyer's hand. "If it wasn't for the corps, I wouldn't be here today."

"Jack's our pilot." Blair clapped a hand on his shoulder. "The university assigned him to Cary and me when we tested Boidtracker last fall near Sand Creek. The test was successful, so I asked for him again." He grinned. "I want to have the best people with me now that we're getting the program up and running. That's why I asked for you, General."

"Sawyer . . . please." He'd already noticed that Blair didn't request the same first-name informality for himself. "Dr. Blair, I'm only too happy to join this expedition. If nothing else, UNF is paying me well. But if you have these two young men with you, I don't see how you need my help. Jack, what rank did you have when you were with the corps?"

"Master Sergeant, sir," Jack said with no small pride.

"Master Sergeant . . . which you don't earn in the corps sitting behind a desk." Sawyer looked at Blair again. "So I don't know why it's so important that you'd need me. There's a lot of people who know how to find boids."

As he spoke, there was the high-pitched whine of a motor under strain, followed by shouted commands from the dock master. They looked around; while they'd been speaking, the ferry crew had moved the deck crane into position and were preparing to raise the tarp-covered cargo from the aft deck and lower it to the wharf. The freight was massive, though; the crane operators and the crew looked like they might have trouble getting it ashore.

"Pardon me," Blair said, then hurried away. "Here, now," he yelled to the crane operator, "watch where you're going with that thing—!"

Sawyer watched him go, mildly irritated that the expedition leader hadn't answered his question. Jack noticed this. "I think he meant to say that there's no one

else who knows how to track boids as well as you, sir,” he said quietly, still deferential to his former rank.

“For now,” Cary added. “If we’re successful, then anyone will be able to locate them.”
“Really?” Sawyer said dryly. “Is that a fact?”

* * *

Sawyer Lee hadn’t wanted to make this trip. Since stepping down as commandant of the Corps of Exploration, a position he’d held ever since it was established by the Coyote Federation’s late president, Carlos Montero—indeed, he and Carlos had brainstormed the Corps during the Exploratory Expedition of c.y. 17—he’d been content with quiet retirement in Leeport, the town where he lived back when he’d paid his bills as a wilderness guide for hire. The town was christened in honor of the captain of the URSS *Alabama*, R.E. Lee, to whom Sawyer was unrelated. Once Sawyer returned to become a permanent resident, though, it was almost as if Leeport was indeed named after him; he had that kind of local notoriety, and he couldn’t say he didn’t enjoy it. He was older now, and no longer the explorer he’d once been. His hair and mustache were tinted with grey and there was a pot at his stomach, and every morning he woke up with arthritic stiffness in his hips and lower back. So putting on a pack and picking up a rifle and going off into the grasslands of New Florida to look for boids was no longer his idea of fun. A younger man might make his living this way, but Sawyer had a comfortable civil-service pension, and he liked afternoon naps and spending his evenings at the Captain’s Lady, drinking sourgrass ale and swapping lies with the other old-timers.

Then he got a call from an old friend: Susan Montero, Carlos’ daughter who’d lately become the president of the University of New Florida. Sawyer hadn’t seen much of her in recent years; the UNF main campus was located in Liberty, on the other side of New Florida from Leeport. But they’d been on the Exploratory Expedition together, and some years later Sawyer had helped her steal and secretly cremate her mother’s body after she passed away—a long story in itself—and these things had established a certain bond between them. So when the phone in his apartment buzzed and it was Susan asking for a personal favor, he felt an obligation to fulfill it, regardless of what was involved.

Before becoming the university’s chief administrator, Susan was a naturalist—in fact, she and her husband Jonathan had led the Exploratory Expedition—so she had a personal interest in a research program that had lately been undertaken by the College of Natural Sciences. Over the last decade or so, New Florida’s boid population had been diminishing. The cause wasn’t mysterious; as Coyote’s human settlements expanded, particularly on New Florida, the predatory avians who haunted the tropical savannahs had been steadily killed off, mainly because they were maneaters who posed a threat to people and livestock. Even the colonists’ dogs had learned how to find their nests and destroy their eggs, further decimating their numbers. The surviving flocks had been driven away from Liberty, Shuttlefield, Leeport, and Bridgeton into the unsettled grasslands of the island’s southern interior between East Channel and West Channel, where they were only occasionally spotted by tourists, hunters, and explorers. No one knew how many of the giant, flightless birds were still left, though, and now there was concern that, since the same thing was occurring on Great Dakota, Midland, and Albion, the boids of Coyote might be on the verge of becoming an endangered species.

A UNF professor, Ronald Blair, had proposed a way of studying New Florida’s remaining boids: tag them with radio transmitters, which could then be tracked via satellite. He and his students had developed a tiny transmitter that could be implanted beneath a boid’s skin after it was captured and sedated. Once the boid was tagged, logged, and released again, its movements could be monitored at all times. This would

be particularly helpful during the winter months, when the boids were known to migrate south toward the equator, the period when they were most likely to come in contact with humans. It was a technique developed on Earth long ago to study everything from bears to sharks, and Blair thought it could be useful on Coyote as well.

Now that the transmitters and the receiving equipment had been tested, the next step was an expedition into New Florida's interior to prove that an accurate census of the remaining boid flocks could be made. And while Dr. Blair was no stranger to the Coyote wilderness, he'd admitted in a meeting with the university president that he needed someone who "could smell a boid a mile away" (as Susan put it).

So she'd called Sawyer. And that was why he now stood beside the skimmer the university had shipped in, watching as Jack gave the vehicle a final inspection.

The skimmer had been moved from the wharf to the nearby mouth of the Alabama River, where it sat on the riverbank awaiting departure. It was a military hovercraft, probably brought to Coyote many years ago by the Western Hemisphere Union and left behind after its occupational forces were defeated during the Revolution and sent back to Earth. Although the vehicle once carried a chain gun, it had been principally designed for troop and cargo transport, so in the rear between its twin turbofan engines was a large cargo bed with a swing-down rear gate. Up front was the bubble-like forward cockpit, and above and slightly behind it was a small, open platform: a gun turret, its swivel mount now holding a high-power pneumatic dart rifle capable of bringing down a full-grown boid. Or so Blair claimed; Sawyer had his doubts.

The skimmer looked sturdy enough, but the fact remained that it was fifty-seven Earth-years old, a decommissioned military vehicle salvaged from a colonial militia depot in Liberty and refurbished for this particular job. Sawyer couldn't help but notice that the body was dented and showed signs of rust, and the cockpit bubble had hairline cracks in some of its panes. He'd wondered why Blair had the hovercraft transported by ferry all the way around the southern end of New Florida when it could have made the trip overland on the Savannah Road between Liberty and Leeport in much less time. Now he understood. The less wear and tear on the decrepit old machine, the better.

But it wasn't just the skimmer that gave him pause. Cary Minnehan had admitted to him that they'd practiced tag-and-release only a few times near Sand Creek just south of Liberty, an area that Sawyer knew to be largely uninhabited by boids ever since humans moved in. Any boids there in the autumn were old and sick ones left behind by their flocks during the last seasonal migration. Easy to find and bring down.

Altogether, he was beginning to regret accepting Susan's request.

"Okay, I think we're all set." Jack pulled his hands out of the starboard engine and wiped them on a bandana, then slammed the cover shut. With an athleticism Sawyer could only envy, he jumped down from the skimmer. "We're ready to go any time you are, sir."

"Not up to me." *And stop calling me sir*, he was tempted to add. The kid meant well, but they were no longer in the corps. He raised his voice and called out, "Dr. Blair—?"

Blair's head rose from the turret hatch. He said nothing, just gave Sawyer a questioning look. "Are you ready to go?" Sawyer asked.

"Well . . ." Blair climbed up into the turret. Bracing himself against its railing, he raised a hand to his eyes as he squinted against the midday sun. "I was thinking perhaps we could wait until tomorrow. I mean, it's a bit late to get a start, isn't it? And I could fancy a pint at the pub in town."

"It's a quarter to twelve, professor." Sawyer kept his voice even. "The sun doesn't go down for another seven hours. By that time we can be halfway down the Alabama

River to the Lee River fork. You can have that pint at the Captain's Lady when we get back."

As they spoke, Cary walked down the lowered rear gate from the cargo bed, where he'd been loading the last of the supplies they'd bought in town. He glanced first at Jack, then at Sawyer, and finally up at Blair. There was a questioning look on his face, as if he was silently wondering whether his mentor seriously proposed to delay the trip just so they could waste a day at the local tavern. Jack said nothing, simply continued wiping engine oil from his hands.

Seeing no support from his companions, Blair evinced a disappointed shrug. "I suppose you're right. Very well, gentlemen, let's be on our way."

He disappeared down the hatch. Cary turned to walk back into the skimmer, but not before he caught Jack's eye. They said nothing, but the look they exchanged carried a meaning that Sawyer had seen before. These two men had respect for their leader, but they didn't totally trust him. Sawyer wondered why.

Cary vanished into the cargo deck; there was a loud clang as he slammed shut the rear gate. Jack turned to climb up the cockpit ladder, then paused to look back at Sawyer. "Coming, sir?"

All of a sudden, a few drinks at his favorite watering hole didn't seem like such a bad idea. Maybe if he had enough, he'd think of way to get out of this. But . . .

"Right behind you," Sawyer replied.

* * *

It had been some years since the last time Sawyer went down the Alabama River, so he'd forgotten just how quickly LEEPport disappeared from sight. Although there were new farms south of town, with cornfields, hemp plantations, and waterfruit canals stretching out along the riverside, they were left behind before the skimmer reached the place where Boid Creek branched off to the east and the river continued toward the south.

The expedition followed the Alabama for another twenty miles, but they didn't remain on the river very much longer. At Sawyer's direction, Jack took the skimmer ashore. There was a hard lurch as it hit solid ground, then the pilot throttled up the engines and the skimmer roared into the savannah, scattering grasshoppers from the bushes and causing swoops to take wing as they angrily scolded the alien invaders for their temerity.

They were now in boid country. Before them lay a seemingly endless sea of grass, broken here and there by islets of sprawling blackwood trees or tangled masses of spiderbrush. Serpentine creeks meandered through the grasslands, some so narrow that they were little more than ditches. Two of Coyote's neighbors, Eagle and Snake, were visible as small crescent moons in the deep blue sky. Here, New Florida looked exactly the way it had before humans came to the 47 Ursae Majoris system.

"See anything?" Blair asked. He sat in the front passenger seat, peering into the tall grass as it parted before the skimmer. Sawyer was sitting behind him; he would have preferred to ride up top in the turret, but when he'd climbed up the inside ladder and opened the top hatch, the engine noise threatened to deafen him. So he'd retreated back into the cockpit, which had become sweltering in the afternoon heat.

"No," Sawyer replied, "but that doesn't mean anything. Boids can hide in plain sight." He didn't feel it necessary to remind a naturalist that their dun-colored plumage gave them perfect natural camouflage. And unlike other native birds, they didn't startle easily. Unless the skimmer headed straight toward one, they were likely to remain still until it passed by.

"Hmm . . . yes, I suppose you're right." Blair reached into his bush jacket and pulled out a pewter liquor flask. Sawyer smelled sour-mash whisky as he unscrewed the cap. Blair had begun drinking shortly after they'd left LEEPport, and although the whisky

didn't seem to have affected him very much, it was now clear that this was the reason why he'd wanted to remain in town for a day before heading out into the wilderness.

The professor was an alcoholic, albeit a functional one. Cary and Jack apparently knew this and had learned to deal with it. Sawyer supposed he'd have to as well, but that didn't mean he had to like it. Drunks make bad leaders, and although Blair was officially in charge of the expedition, Sawyer wondered if this was the real reason why Susan asked him to come along, to keep him in line.

Cary was sitting beside Sawyer in the back of the cockpit. "If we stop and deploy the scatcat," he said, leaning forward so that Blair and Jack could hear him, "maybe we can get one to come out from hiding."

"Yes . . . yes, that might work." Blair glanced over his shoulder at Sawyer. Seeing no objections, he turned to Jack. "Bring us to a halt, please, and idle the engines while we get the drone up and running."

"Okay." Jack grasped the twin throttle bars beside his seat and gradually pulled them back. The skimmer responded by slowing down, its engines becoming less deafening. Once the hovercraft glided to a halt, the pilot looked back at Cary and Sawyer. "All right, gentlemen, you're on."

Cary unbuckled his seat belt and headed for the rear hatch. Sawyer followed him as the younger man pushed the hatch open. They emerged into sunlight, humidity, and the chlorophyll odor of sourgrass. There was a large, flat equipment case lashed against the side of the cargo hold. Sawyer watched as Cary detached the bungee cords, carefully laid the case flat on its back, and opened its lid.

Inside the padded case was a large, disk-shaped drone, its prop protected by its hard plastic fuselage. Sawyer helped Cary unpack the drone and carry it to the other end of the cargo bed. The young naturalist returned to the case and came back with a whip antenna sheathed within hairy tan fiber like fake fur. Once Cary attached the antenna to one end of the fuselage's upper side, the drone had a tail. At the other end was a pair of fiberoptic camera lenses with an audio speaker between them. Someone had painted feline strips along the sides, giving the drone the appearance of a housecat shaped like a squared doughnut.

"I assume you're going to tell me what this is," Sawyer said.

"Well, I could," Cary replied, "but I think it would better if I showed you." He grinned. "Trust me, you're gonna love it."

Leaving the drone on the open tailgate, he opened another equipment case and removed a VR headset. "I'll do the flying," Cary said as he made a couple of adjustments to the back of the helmet, "if you'll go up top and act as spotter."

"Spotter?"

"Uh-huh. You're going to be another pair of eyes for Jack and me. If I manage to flush out a boid . . . shouldn't take long . . . it'll be your job to tell us which way to go. Blair will handle the gun."

Sawyer looked up at the top of the skimmer. Blair had already climbed into the turret and taken his place behind the dart gun. Apparently neither Cary nor Jack had any misgivings about letting someone do this who'd been drinking all afternoon.

"Sounds like a plan," Sawyer said, "but you'll excuse me if I don't take any chances." He returned to the cockpit just long enough to retrieve his rifle. "Just to be on the safe side," he added as he jacked a razor-sharp flechette into its chamber.

Cary nodded, then pulled on the control gauntlets and donned the helmet; Sawyer waited until he was ready, then climbed up the ladder to join Blair in the turret. "Keep a sharp eye out now," the professor said as he opened the dart gun's magazine to check its load. "Once we get going, things'll get pretty fast."

Sawyer could smell the booze on his breath. He said nothing about this, though, but instead put on his headset and tested the comlink with Jack.

“All right, we’re off,” Cary called from below. Sitting on an upended crate in the middle of the cargo bed, helmet visor lowered over his eyes, he lifted his hands and flexed his fingertips. With a whirr, the drone rose and purred out through the tailgate. Flying low to the ground, it immediately disappeared into the tall grass; only the fact that its rotor was in the center of its fuselage kept it from being snarled in the grass. Sawyer couldn’t see anything but its whip antenna, but . . .

Suddenly, there was an eerie, menacing yowl from where the drone had vanished, a sound very familiar to him: a creek cat, one of the large, predatory felines that prowled the swamps and savannahs of Coyote’s equatorial lowlands. The cry faded, then started again about a dozen yards from where Sawyer had last seen it. This time, he spotted the drone’s furry whip antenna moving through the grass.

Now he understood. Boids were apex predators, and creek cats were their favorite prey. They might not break from cover for a skimmer in their midst, but they would instinctively pursue a creek cat that had made its presence known. So this so-called scatcat mimicked a creek cat, from its distinctive cry to an antenna that resembled a cat’s tail rising from the tall grass.

For the next ten minutes, the skimmer quietly hovered in place, its fans idling softly, as Cary steered the scatcat in broad S-curves through the sourgrass, keeping it within sight while letting it get far enough away from the hovercraft to give the illusion that it wasn’t a suspicious alien object. On occasion the scatcat let out another yowl that Sawyer recognized as the mating cry of a female in heat. They usually only did that at night, but a hungry boid might not notice. And boids were always hungry.

The afternoon was warm, the sun baking the skimmer’s metal roof. Sawyer was about to succumb to temptation and ask Blair if he could spare a sip from his flask when there was sudden movement about twenty yards in front of the scatcat. The grass stopped thrashing back and forth a moment after he spotted it, but a few seconds later it began moving again, this time closer to the drone.

He knew at once what it was. “Boid,” he said softly. “Eleven o’clock, about fifty or sixty feet.”

“Got it.” Blair loaded a dart into the breech and, bending low over the gun, swiveled it in the direction Sawyer indicated. “See anything, Cary?”

“Nothing,” Cary replied. “Still a little too far away.”

“That’s all right. I’m sure the general’s eyes are good.” He said this without irony, but Sawyer didn’t appreciate it anyway. “Stand by, Jack. I think—”

Suddenly, the boid lunged from the high grass just fifteen feet from the scatcat. Sawyer caught a glimpse of a tufted narrow skull, beady and malevolent eyes, and a parrot-like orange beak big enough to decapitate a man with one snap. A female, slightly smaller than a male, her feathers slightly duller in color. Then Blair yelled, “Go, go, *go!*” and he had to grab the side of the hatch for support as the skimmer came to life and tore off in pursuit.

For the next several minutes, the chase ripped through the grasslands. The boid continued to pursue the scatcat, which managed to remain only a few yards ahead, until the creature realized that, this time, she was prey and not predator. She veered to the right, forgetting the drone as she sought to escape the big, growling monster behind her, but by then she was ahead of the skimmer by just a dozen feet or so and quickly losing ground.

Keeping his eyes on the boid, Sawyer called down directions to Jack, telling him which way to turn. From the corner of his eye, he saw Cary down in the cargo bed, VR helmet still in place, hanging on for dear life as the skimmer twisted madly back and forth. The boid was fast, but the skimmer was faster, and very soon they were alongside the long-legged avian.

Blair waited until he had a clear shot. As soon as he had the boid in his sights, he

squeezed the trigger twice, sending two darts into her back and the base of her long, thick neck. The boid squawked, an ugly sound, and the claws at the ends of her vestigial wings twitched uselessly as she made one of those little hops Sawyer recognized as a fight-or-flee movement. She continued running for a few more steps, then her long, backward-jointed legs faltered and she slowed, and suddenly the big avian pitched forward and hurtled head first into the ground.

"Got her!" Blair pumped his fist into the air. "Nailed the bloody bitch!" He pounded Sawyer on the back, then looked down the manhole between them. "Swing us around, Jack, and back us in. She'll be napping by the time we're ready to haul her aboard."

As the skimmer made a wide, sweeping turn to bring them back to where the boid had fallen, the professor locked down the dart gun. "What do you think, General?" he asked, a broad grin across his face. "What sport, eh?"

Sawyer gazed over to where the boid lay unconscious. The scatcat hovered a short distance away; down in the cargo bed, Cary had finally removed his VR gear. He was doubled over, heaving up lunch. Motion sickness: he hadn't taken off his helmet in time.

"I thought this was supposed to be science," Sawyer said.

Blair shrugged. "No reason why it can't be both."

* * *

Cary recovered by the time Jack pulled to a halt in front of the fallen boid. By then, three minutes had passed since she'd been struck by Blair's darts. The sedative in them was good for only fifteen or twenty minutes, the professor told Sawyer, so they'd have to work fast. "She's going to be rather irate when she wakes up," he said as they climbed down from the turret, "and I don't think you want to be anywhere nearby."

As if Sawyer had never been near a boid before. He ignored the condescension, though, as he helped Cary with the coil of thick hemp rope attached to an electric winch in the back of the cargo bed. Rifle in hand, he watched as Cary jumped off the lowered tailgate and, dragging the rope behind him, ran back to where the boid lay. It took just a couple of minutes for him to wrap the rope around her legs; two bungee cords sealed her beak. When he was done, he gave Blair the thumbs-up. The professor started up the winch and the boid was dragged through the grass, up the tailgate, and into the bed.

"All right, mates," Blair said, "the clock's ticking, so let's get to work." Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a carpenter's tape measure. "Here, General," he added, tossing it to Sawyer, "make yourself useful and give me a measurement. Head to foot, if you please."

Sawyer caught an apologetic glance from Cary, but said nothing as he bent to the task Blair had given him. The boid was slumbering, chest slowly rising and falling, eyes half-open and staring at nothing. This was the closest he'd ever been to one that was still alive; he approached her as if she was a sleeping tiger.

This particular boid was average size, 78.2 inches from the top of her head to the scimitar-shaped claws at the ends of her feet, with an estimated body weight somewhere around 250 pounds. Blair pronounced her to be a young adult female, probably having reached maturity only a couple of seasons ago. Cary used a thick hypodermic needle to draw blood and bone marrow samples from the bones of one of her wings, then Blair took an injection gun and planted its barrel against the base of her neck.

"Stand clear," he said. Cary and Sawyer backed away, and Blair squeezed the trigger. A soft *thuft!* as the compressor buried the tracer under the boid's skin where she couldn't reach back to dig it out. The boid jerked, her feet kicking forward in an instinctive attack move; if any of them had been in range, her claws would have dis-

emboweled them.

“All right, we’re done.” Blair checked his watch. “Five minutes. Throw her overboard.”

Hurrying now, the two scientists grabbed the rope and, grunting with effort, hauled the boid across the cargo bed. As soon as she was off the skimmer, Cary removed the rope and bungee cords, then he and Blair scrambled back aboard the hovercraft. Once they’d retrieved the scatcat and slammed shut the tailgate, Jack moved the skimmer about fifty yards away from the boid. There they stopped and waited until the sedative wore off.

At first, the boid moved only a little, her legs and wings flexing weakly as she struggled to regain her senses. Then, all at once, she was on her feet, fully aware of her surroundings. She spotted the nearby skimmer and glared at it, and for a moment it seemed as if she’d attack the strange alien thing that had briefly held her captive. Her beak opened and she let forth one of the bloodcurdling screams that made everyone think of a woman being murdered in the worst way possible, and then she lifted her legs and loped off.

Gone, but not entirely vanished. “And there she goes,” Cary said, peering at the screen of his datapad. It displayed a satellite image of the area they were in, with map coordinates laid over it. And just off the center of the screen, where the skimmer lay, a small red crosshairs labeled XXX was quickly moving away: the boid they’d captured, her whereabouts accurately tracked by the subcutaneous tag she now carried.

“Very good.” Peering over his shoulder, Blair nodded with satisfaction. “Well done, boys,” he said as he pulled out his flask again. “Now who wants to name her? Has to begin with an A and it should be a woman’s name.”

“I once had a girlfriend named Abbie,” Jack said, calling back from the cockpit.

“Abbie it is. Log it in, Cary.” Blair took a pull from his flask, then looked up at the sky. The sun was beginning to get close to the horizon. “We’re off to a good start. Let’s call it a day, shall we?”

* * *

They returned to the Alabama River and went downstream until they located a peaceful-looking lagoon with riverbanks far enough away to prevent boids from getting to them; although the avians could hop long distances, they couldn’t swim. Once they’d dropped anchor, Sawyer helped Jack open the canvas awning that would provide cover for the cargo bed, which was where they were going to sleep.

They were not going to camp on shore because UNF hadn’t provided Blair with motion-sensitive perimeter guns like those commonly used by the corps. When Sawyer asked why, the professor muttered something about the university being cheapskates. As an answer, it was consistent with what he’d already observed—the skimmer alone was proof that the program was operating on limited funds—but it wasn’t complete. For something as potentially useful as this, why hadn’t the university given Blair a bigger budget?

The subject came up again after dinner. Cary had set up a portable electric camp stove on the lowered rear gate, then opened the crock of fresh-made lamb stew he’d bought at a deli in Leeport before leaving. They ate sitting in folding chairs around a battery lamp. It was a cool spring evening, and shortly after sunset 47 Uma-B made its nightly ascent, its ring plane rising above the eastern horizon just ahead of the gas giant itself.

The calm was broken by a harsh screech some distance away: a boid. Everyone stopped to listen, and Jack chuckled. “Maybe that’s Abbie,” he said, “protesting her rude treatment this afternoon.”

“Can’t be her.” Shaking his head, Cary wagged a fork in the direction from which they’d heard the sound. “That’s a male’s mating cry.” They heard it again, louder and perhaps a little closer. “See? He’ll keep doing that until a female obliges him by drop-

ping by for a quickie.”

“Just that?” Sawyer gave him a skeptical look. “I’ve always been under the impression that boids mated for life.”

“That’s what a lot of people thought, but since we’ve begun studying boid populations on New Florida, we now believe that flocks function as extended families, with one male having quite a few female partners over the course of a lifetime. And they’re very long-lived. Carbon testing of boid skeletons had shown that they can live as long as thirty-five years, LeMarean calendar.”

Sawyer raised an eyebrow. By Gregorian reckoning, that was about 105 years. “I had no idea.”

“The bastards are horny as hell, all right,” Blair said. “That’s why we gotta keep track of ’em, or they’ll eat us alive.”

The whisky he’d been sipping all day had finally caught up with him; Blair was now indisputably drunk. Drunk and rather surly, despite the successful tagging of the first boid they’d seen. He was slumped in his camp chair, legs splayed out before him. Sawyer noticed that he hadn’t finished his meal; his plate was on the deck beside him, but the liquor flask was nestled in his lap. Whisky for lunch and whisky for dinner. What was he going to have for breakfast in the morning?

“The uni just wants to study them for the sake of science,” he went on, “and that’s why they’ve lowballed our budget—”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s fair,” Cary said. “Sure, the grant could’ve been larger, but—”

“—but anyone with any sense knows better,” Blair went on, interrupting his student as if he hadn’t spoken. “You want to control these monsters, not just track them, and if you’re going to do that, then you’ve gotta get serious about funding. A beat-to-shit old skimmer, a beat-to-shit old guide . . .” He looked at Sawyer. “No offense, General.”

“None taken,” Sawyer said dryly. He’d already resigned himself to having Blair constantly address him by his former rank; being insulted on top of that hardly made much difference. But something he’d just said made him curious. “What do you mean by control? If you’re not tracking them as scientific research, then what’s the purpose of doing this?”

“Oh, c’mon. You know better than that . . . or at least you ought to.” Blair offered him the flask and took another drink himself when Sawyer shook his head. “You were big friends with Carlos Montero, weren’t you? Then you know how his folks died.”

“Of course.” It was a story well-known to anyone who’d studied Coyote history. Jorge and Rita Montero were the first two casualties among the *Alabama* passengers who’d established the original Liberty colony, killed by a boid just four days after First Landing Day. Their children Carlos and Marie had been orphaned by the tragedy; Carlos in particular had been haunted by this. “We talked about it a few times, and when he was president he kept the skull of the boid he’d killed in his office. But I never heard him say anything about wanting to control them. He called them a force of nature, and I have to agree. You don’t get anywhere by treating nature as your enemy.”

“Oh, yes . . . bravo!” Blair mockingly clapped his hands. “Nice speech, well done. But tell me . . . back when you were a wilderness guide, didn’t you lead hunting safaris? You must have bagged a few boids in your time.”

“I did, and yes, I’ve killed several boids and helped others do the same. But I changed my mind about taking the lives of a native species solely for sport and started leading camera safaris instead.” Sawyer forced a smile. “Safer that way, and I didn’t have to worry whether I was going to be responsible for the death of the last boid on Coyote.”

“Well, you’ll never have to fret about that again,” Blair replied. “Bull males hump like militia soldiers in a New Brighton whorehouse, so I doubt we’ll see the last boid in these parts.” He shrugged. “And y’know what? So what if we do. Just means we

can spread out across the island, build more farms, all that good stuff.”

Hearing this, Sawyer felt something cold run down his back. Until now, he'd believed that Boidtracker was a scientific tool, nothing more, but it sounded like Blair had something else in mind: using it to track down and exterminate the remaining boid flocks on New Florida. And while boids were widespread across Coyote, it was a slippery slope between eradicating a dangerous animal in one area and the eventual extinction of the entire species.

“I don't think I—” he began.

“Well, I'd love to talk, but it's time to collapse.” Twisting the cap shut on his flask, Blair heaved himself out of his seat. “Gonna sleep in the cockpit, if'n you don't mind,” he slurred as he lurched away. “Won't get eaten by skeeters that way. G'night.”

Nobody said anything until he vanished through the cockpit's rear hatch, slamming it shut behind him. Then Cary let out his breath. “Sorry,” he said to Sawyer, keeping his voice low. “He's usually not that—” His voice trailed off.

“Obnoxious,” Jack murmured. “Or maybe what you're looking for is 'self-righteous.'”

“That's not what I—”

Cary stopped himself as they heard the creak of the top hatch opening. They watched as Blair unsteadily climbed up the ladder to the gun turret. Turning away from them, he braced himself against the railing as he reached down to unzip his fly. A moment later, a thin stream of urine fell to the river below.

Blair had been doing this all day, disdaining the skimmer's chemical toilet. *I piss on boids from a considerable height*, he'd said the second time, and although it was meant as a joke, Sawyer was beginning to perceive that the comment represented his true feelings. Deep down inside, the professor had contempt for the creatures he was studying.

Without a word, Blair finished his business, then turned and climbed back down the ladder. The men in the cargo bed waited until the hatch shut again, then moved to gather their plates and clean up before bed. No one spoke, but it was clear to Sawyer that Cary and Jack were all too familiar with the more annoying aspects of Ronald Blair's personality.

Perhaps tomorrow would be better.

* * *

He didn't sleep well.

It wasn't just that the skimmer's aft deck was uncomfortable; its metal deck was cold, and he could feel the ribbing of its steel plates beneath his bedroll's foam pad. He didn't even mind that Jack snored and he was only a few feet away; years of sharing tents with loud sleepers had inured him to this. And when the sky clouded over shortly after midnight and a cool spring rain pattered down upon the awning, it came as a welcome relief, albeit short-lived, from what was keeping him awake.

As he lay within the wool blankets, Sawyer Lee listened to the night.

The fact that Coyote was a satellite of a gas giant meant that its nights were seldom completely dark. 47 Uma-B reflected enough light that, even when the sky was overcast, there was enough illumination to give its nocturnal species sufficient light to summon potential mates or stalk their prey. So he could hear the yowl of creek cats with their newborn kits, the death cry of a rodent-like swamper meeting its demise within the beak or claws that had found it in the darkness . . .

And the boids.

Not very far from where the skimmer rested at anchor, a terrifying screech signified the presence of one of the avians. It was close enough that Sawyer knew the creature could probably see the alien craft floating in the river. It might be looking at them even now, its cry a warning to come no closer.

It took a long time for him to get to sleep.

The following morning, after a quick breakfast of coffee, dried fruit, and homemade bread, Jack moved the skimmer ashore and had Sawyer and Cary clean out the engines. The air intakes were clogged with vegetation that had been pulled into them during yesterday's high-speed pursuit. To fix the problem, Sawyer had to climb down from the vehicle, then go to each side, reach up to the intake vents, and yank out clumps of sourgrass and spiderbrush. Cary had the tougher job of lying face-down atop the turbfans and doing the same there; he cursed when his probing fingers came upon the mauled body of a grasshopper who hadn't escaped in time. Seeing this, Sawyer reflected that they were lucky they hadn't run over an entire nest. Skimmers had been disabled when their engines sucked in enough of the ground-dwelling birds to damage them.

Blair didn't help them with this chore. Badly hungover from the night before, he was in a foul mood. He skipped breakfast and had only coffee instead, and shortly afterward he staggered into the toilet and spent the next ten minutes there, vomiting. But it didn't stop him from starting all over again. As the four of them opened a topo map in the cargo bed and spread it across the food locker to plan the day's hunt, Blair took the fifth of Midland whisky he'd brought with them and replenished his flask.

"Don't you think you might feel better if you laid off that stuff?" Sawyer asked, watching Blair as he twisted shut the flask cap.

"Don't you think you ought to piss off?" Blair looked him straight in the eye. "I'm fine with this, and I don't need a nanny."

Neither Jack nor Cary said anything. They stared down at the map, unwilling to insert themselves in a quarrel between the expedition leader and their guide. "All I'm saying," Sawyer said, "is that we're hunting some very dangerous animals and it would be wise to keep your wits about you at all times."

"I bagged Abbie yesterday, didn't I? And look here—" Blair shoved the flask into his jacket pocket, then held both hands out before him, fingers spread and palms down. "See? Solid as rocks, nary a tremor. I can handle the gun, don't worry about that."

"Professor Blair—"

"General Lee, you're not in charge here. I appreciate the fact that Susan Montero personally asked you to accompany us, but I'm leading this expedition, not you. If you don't like the way I'm running things, you can leave any time you want." He pointed to the north, across the grasslands bordering the river. "Leeport is that way. If you start walking now and don't stop, I imagine you'll get home by dinner . . . unless, of course, something out there has you for dinner first."

There was nothing Sawyer could say to this. Blair knew that he wasn't about to attempt something as foolish as hiking all the way back to Leeport. The professor was also right about who was in charge here. Sawyer might later register a formal complaint with the university about Blair's drinking, but it probably wouldn't get him very far. So there was little he could do except nod in acceptance and try to ignore Blair's fatuous smirk.

"So . . . now that we've got that straightened out, let's talk about what we're doing today." Laying a forefinger on the map, Blair traced a circle around the area of New Florida they were exploring. "Since we've tagged Abbie, I'd like to use her whereabouts to find the rest of our flock. They're probably still in these parts. If we can find them, we can probably tag one of the males, too."

"That would make sense," Cary said. "Male boids usually have two or three female mates with them . . . we call them 'consorts,'" he added, looking at Sawyer. "So all we have to do is relocate Abbie, and we'll likely find a male suitable for tagging. Once that's done, we'll have a reliable means of tracking this particular flock."

Sawyer nodded. It was a good plan, he had to admit. Instead of trying to tag each

and every individual boid on New Florida, they'd tag males and females of different flocks and count on them remaining alive long enough to be used as tracers. "So once we've found a male and tagged him, you intend to venture further south?"

"For as long as our fuel holds out, yes." Blair smiled, still smug. "Oh, don't worry, General. We won't keep you out here for more than two or three more days. We'll drop you off when we return to Leepport for supplies. I'm sure we'll be able to handle ourselves after that."

Blair chuckled as he reached down to fold the map, ignoring the uncomfortable silence from his two men. "All right, gents," he said. "Let's go find Bruno."

"Bruno?" Cary raised an eyebrow. "You've already named the next boid we tag?"

"Sure. You named yours Abbie. The next one is mine, and since we've established that it's got to be a male whose name begins with a B, I want to call him Bruno." Sticking the folded map in his jacket beside his whisky flask, he turned to the cockpit. "Tally ho . . . let's find a big one."

* * *

That day, Blair rode up top, insisting that Cary join him. Cary was reluctant to climb up where they'd be windblown and deafened by the engines, but Blair wanted to use Boidtracker to help them locate Abbie's flock; he believed their chances would be better if Cary acted as spotter while Blair himself operated the tracker. So they stuffed wet cloths of paper in their ears and put on some old sun goggles Jack found in a supply locker, and the pilot kept the engines at half-throttle as they moved away from the river and back into the grasslands.

With Blair and Cary up in the turret, Sawyer took the professor's place in the cockpit. At first Jack was unnaturally quiet; he said little as the skimmer began making its way across the savannah, weaving its way through the tall grass in a broad, sickle-shaped search pattern. Finally the pilot broke the silence.

"I want to apologize for Dr. Blair, sir," Jack said, after glancing back to make sure that he and Sawyer were alone. The top hatch was still open, but he kept his voice low enough that he couldn't be heard. "Some of the things he's said to you, the way he's been acting . . . they're totally uncalled for."

"Don't worry about it, Sarge." Sawyer had already guessed that Jack liked being addressed by his former corps rank. "I know it's not your fault, and you've apologized for him already." He paused, then quietly added, "If I was going to be upset with anyone, it would be Susan Montero for not warning me in advance."

Jack said nothing for a few moments as he steered the hovercraft around a small pond. Sawyer caught a brief glimpse of a creek cat at the water's edge, then it disappeared into the grass. "I hate to say this, sir, but it's her fault that he's acting this way. Partly, at least."

Sawyer looked at him sharply. "How's that?"

"C'mon . . . you can see Boidtracker's commercial potential, can't you, sir? If this thing can be made to work reliably and enough boids are tagged, then the university can license out its patent and make money from it. So they've been putting pressure on him to prove that it'll work as well as he's been claiming it would, and so he's—"

"Boid!"

Blair's shout came down from above, followed a moment later by Cary's calmer voice in their headsets: "*We've picked up Abbie's signal at two o'clock starboard, distance about one-quarter mile. And she's not alone . . . Dr. Blair thinks he's spotted a whole flock.*"

"We're on it." Cary made a forty-five degree right turn. He grinned at Sawyer. "Here we go . . . the chase is on."

And so it was. Just as Blair had predicted, Abbie appeared to be a consort in a large, male-dominant flock. The boids remained motionless until the skimmer was

nearly on top of them, then they scattered in all directions, their tufted heads visible above the grass tops as they fled from the roaring machine in their midst. There was no need to use the scatcat to flush them out; the avians were all around them.

That was when Blair spotted Bruno.

"*There's the one I want!*" he yelled even though Sawyer and Jack could clearly hear him through the comlink. "*That big one . . . see it?*"

"*Got it,*" Cary responded. "*Jack, thirty degrees to eleven o'clock port. Big male, about—*"

"*Shut up and go down below,*" Blair snapped. "*Be ready to bring the bastard aboard. Get up here, Lee. I want you spotting for me.*"

Sawyer hesitated. It was going to be hard for him and Cary to move around the skimmer while it was in motion, even dangerous. But Blair had made it clear he wasn't about to tolerate any disagreements, so he unbuckled his seat belt and, grabbing hold of anything he could, struggled his way to the ladder. No time to retrieve his rifle from the locker where he'd stowed it. He needed to get up top, fast.

Cary had already climbed down into the bed when Sawyer emerged from the top hatch. Hanging onto the hatch cover, he pulled himself the rest of the way into the turret to stand beside Blair. The professor was hovering over the dart rifle, his gaze locked on something off to the left. "There he is!" he snapped, pointing in that direction. "See him?"

Sawyer looked where the professor was pointing and gasped involuntarily. Just fifty feet away, running alongside the skimmer, was one of the largest boids he had ever seen . . . one of the largest, in fact, that *anyone* had ever seen. Even running, the creature's head rose fully above the grass; from that, it was easy to guess that he was a bull male over eight feet tall, perhaps even nine from feet to beak. And the beak alone was monstrous, something out of a nightmare. Sawyer didn't even want to guess how much the rest of the beast weighed.

Suddenly, Sawyer felt something he'd seldom felt before: fear. He'd hunted many boids in his life, including quite a few adult males, but something about this particular one sparked an almost overwhelming urge to keep his distance.

"Give it up, Blair," he blurted out. "It's too big."

Blair's eyes widened behind his goggles. "Have you lost your mind?" he demanded. "That's the flock leader! If we can tag him, we'll be able to track his flock for years! I'm not—!"

"*Look out!*"

Sawyer saw what happened before anyone else. As Blair was arguing with him, Bruno—all at once, an entirely appropriate name—swerved suddenly to the right. No longer attempting to evade the skimmer, the boid charged straight at them. As incredible as it seemed, there was no doubt what he meant to do. Bruno was attacking the skimmer.

"Turn right!" Sawyer grabbed the turret's metal side. "It's charging! Turn to the—!"

"No!" Hunched over the dart gun, Blair was trying to get a bead on the creature. "Stay on course! I'm getting my—!"

"Turn!" Sawyer yelled, and this time Jack listened to him. As the skimmer fish-tailed violently to the right, Blair squeezed the trigger. The dart missed; the boid kept coming.

"God damn it!" Blair jacked another dart into the chamber. "Lee, you ass, you fouled my shot!"

Sawyer ignored him. Looking back, he saw that Bruno had fallen behind. But the big bull male wasn't the only boid in sight. The other members of the flock were all around them; at least half a dozen heads were visible through the high grass, and none of them were making any effort to hide or escape. It was almost as if . . .

Bruno screeched.

There was no other word to describe the cry the boid made; in all his years, Sawyer had never heard anything like it. Loud, hideous, painful to the human ear, it rippled across the grasslands like something evil.

Sawyer looked at Blair, and as Blair stared back at him, he knew that the fear in his eyes was reflected by his own. They both had the same atavistic reaction: they were no longer the hunters, and instead had become the prey.

“Jack,” Sawyer snapped, “get us out of here!” He looked down at Cary, who had gotten down to the cargo bed and was hanging onto a tie-down rung. “Get me my rifle! Quick!”

Cary let go of the rung and flung himself toward the rear hatch. He’d barely reached it when the skimmer made a hard turn to the right. Looking around, Sawyer saw that Jack had moved to avoid two boids who’d thrown themselves at the vehicle.

Just as he’d suspected, Bruno had signaled the flock to attack the intruder in their midst. And to make matters worse—unless Sawyer’s sense of direction was wrong, it seemed to him that they were heading away from the Alabama River, their best route of escape. It might only be an accident, but it was possible . . .

“Sawyer,” Blair said, “I think we can still make this work.”

“You don’t think we’re still tagging Bruno, do you?” Sawyer didn’t know what surprised him more: the fact that Blair had stopped calling him general, or the fact he apparently didn’t comprehend the danger they were in.

Another screech, this time warbling in a way Sawyer had never heard from a boid before. He caught a glimpse of Bruno running behind and to the right of the skimmer. He wasn’t quite as fast as the hovercraft, but he wasn’t having trouble keeping pace. And neither was his flock. He spotted two more boids coming at them from the left, and he just had time to yell for Jack to make another evasive right turn before one of the consorts vaulted into the air. Her enormous beak struck the side of the vehicle and she fell back, but another couple of feet and she would have been in the skimmer.

“If we can just outrun the rest of the flock,” Blair said, “I can target Bruno and bring him down. Then—”

“What?” Sawyer couldn’t quite believe he was hearing this. “Let’s say you get lucky and you get him tranked. What do you intend to do then? Stop, get out, drag him aboard, measure and tag him, then drag him back out and let him go again?” He shook his head. “We’re going to be lucky if—”

“Here’s your gun.” Unnoticed by either of them, Cary had climbed up from the cockpit, Sawyer’s flechette rifle slung over his left shoulder.

“Thanks,” Sawyer said. There wasn’t enough room for all three men in the turret, so while Cary clung to the ladder, Sawyer reached down to take the rifle from him. “Now go down and tell Jack to head west toward the river. Whatever we do, we gotta get back to the Alabama.”

“No! Absolutely not!” Once again, Blair became angry. “You’re not in charge, Lee, and I’m telling you, we—”

This time, there was no warning. Another boid charged the skimmer from the right, so close to the cockpit that Jack saw it before either Sawyer or Blair did. The pilot swerved left and managed to avoid the avian, but that wasn’t the threat.

No one saw it coming: the shallow creek dead ahead, the spider brush growing along its banks, the grasshopper nest within its dense branches.

The skimmer plowed straight into them.

Suddenly, the air itself was filled with creek water and torn branches and small flying birds. Sawyer and Blair both threw up their hands and ducked for cover as wet debris and feathers rained down upon them, scratching their faces and arms, and Sawyer barely had time to realize what had just happened when there was a harsh roar from the engines. Then the skimmer spun about, clear of the creek but

out of control, and came to a sudden halt. A second later, its turbofans shut down and the vehicle fell to the ground with a bone-rattling jolt.

"What the hell?" Blair shouted, still cowering within the turret. He crawled on hands and knees to the hatch and yelled past Cary, who'd somehow managed to hang onto the ladder. "What are you stopping for? Get us out of here!"

Sawyer smelled burning oil. Cautiously rising to his feet, he peered down at the engines. Black smoke billowed from the intakes and turbofans, the same places he and Cary had cleared just a few hours ago. The very thing they'd tried to prevent with routine maintenance had just happened; the crash had caused brush and birds to fly into the engines, ripping them apart from within.

The skimmer wasn't going anywhere. They were stranded.

* * *

There wasn't any doubt whether they'd be able to fix the engines. Even if they had replacements for the parts that had burned out or been destroyed, any effort to make repairs would be fatal; the boids would attack anyone who tried to work outside the skimmer. Nor was there any question that the engines were totaled. Once Cary grabbed the fire extinguisher and passed it up to Sawyer, who used it to put out the fires, Jack came up from the cockpit to peer at the smoke-blackened intakes from the safety of the gun turret.

"Yeah, they're toast, all right." The pilot's face was grim as he turned to Sawyer. "This old crate was good for just one more run, but . . . well, I'm sorry, sir, but I could've told you that it couldn't take what we threw at it."

"What *you* threw at it, you mean." Sitting on an equipment case down in the bed, Blair squinted against the sun as he opened his flask. "Bloody fool. If you hadn't run through the brush—"

"Shut up. This is no one's fault and you damned well know it." Sawyer seldom spoke to anyone that way, but he'd had enough of Blair's drinking and griping. Especially the drinking; he was tempted to take the flask from him and throw it to the boids. He looked at Jack again. "Sorry, Sarge . . . you were saying?"

"That's the bad news," Jack went on, ignoring Blair to speak to Sawyer and Cary, who were standing on the turret ladder. "The good news is that the radio works just fine and so does the satphone. I've already called the corps post in Shuttlefield and apprised them of our situation, and they're sending a SAR team as soon as they can get an airship ready to go."

"An airship?" Cary asked. "Why not a gyro? They're faster."

"There's four of us, and a typical Corps SAR team consists of three . . . pilot, copilot, and medic. That's seven. The gyros big enough for seven or more passengers can't hover and lower a harness. They have to land." Jack gestured away from the skimmer. "Would you want to put a gyro down out there and open the hatch?"

Sawyer didn't have to look to know what he meant. The boid flock had the skimmer surrounded. They were unable to hide and stalk their intended prey, for the sourgrass around the skimmer had been flattened during the spin-out and crash, so they restlessly prowled about the immobile vehicle, looking for any advantage. They'd learned already to keep their distance when Sawyer had shot and killed a female—not Abbie—who'd lunged at the skimmer minutes after it came to rest, but they weren't going away, and now there were more than there had been before. At least a dozen, perhaps more if there were adolescents who weren't tall enough to be seen through the untrampled grass a short distance away.

Most unnerving of all was Bruno.

From the corner of his eye, Sawyer could see the flock leader standing where he'd stood ever since the skimmer had come to a halt, to the left of the gun turret no more than fifteen feet away. Rooted on this spot, occasionally swaying from side to side, the

giant avian never looked away. It constantly studied the humans visible in the gun turret, as if waiting for a moment of carelessness when the time would come to strike.

“So we’re waiting for an airship to fly out from Shuttlefield.” Cary shrugged. “That’s what? Two hours, three?”

“Four at the most,” Sawyer said, nodding as he checked his watch. It was just a few minutes after twelve noon; Shuttlefield, just outside Liberty, was a little more than a couple of hundred miles northeast from their position. “We’ll be picked up sometime this afternoon. If all goes well, that is.”

“Oh, what could possibly go wrong?” Blair’s voice was acidic with sarcasm. “Besides being eaten alive?”

“The skimmer will keep them out.” Sawyer spoke calmly; he’d privately resolved not to let Blair get under his skin, which the professor was apparently determined to do. “So long as we’re alert and keep an eye on them, we should be safe until help arrives.” He looked at Cary and Jack. “Stay out of the cockpit as much as you can. That’s our most vulnerable point. They can see us in there, and the glass doesn’t look like it could stand up to a determined assault. Sarge, can you keep your headset on while you’re out here?”

“Sure, no problem,” Jack replied. “I’ve left the satphone on so that the SAR team can use the GPS to locate us.”

“Well done. We’ll hang out in the cargo bed, then, keeping one person on watch up here at all times.” He lifted the rifle in his arms. “I’m got plenty of ammo, so we don’t have to worry about that at least.”

“And we’ve got the dart gun, too,” Cary added.

Sawyer glanced at the gun, which was swiveled upward on its mount and untouched since the crash. “I hate to say it, but that gun is almost useless. The darts will knock them down for fifteen or twenty minutes, then they’ll be back on their feet again . . . probably mad as hell, too.”

“You’ve got that.” Blair nodded toward the flechette rifle in Sawyer’s hands. “Mow down the lot and be done with it.” He shrugged. “Or just kill Bruno. The rest of the flock will scatter like thieves if you knock off the leader.”

Cary stared at Blair as though he didn’t quite believe he’d just heard this from a professor of natural history. Disgusted, Sawyer looked away; he wasn’t about to waste his breath explaining why he wasn’t willing to commit mass murder on an endangered species, particularly if it wasn’t necessary to do so.

“You’re right, sir,” Jack said after a moment, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “Probably best to leave ’em alone.” He forced a grin. “Well, then . . . who’s up for lunch? Got nothing else to do.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know about that.” Down in the cargo bed, Blair raised his flask in a mock toast. “Bar’s open, gents. First round is on me.”

* * *

No one took Blair up on his suggestion to spend the afternoon passing the bottle around. While Jack made a cold lunch of ham and cheese sandwiches, Cary strung an awning across the cargo bed to keep the sun from slowly broiling them alive. Sawyer stood watch in the turret, flechette rifle resting lightly in his arms but nonetheless cocked and ready to fire.

The only one who did nothing was Blair, who sat on the equipment case as if it was his throne, flask propped on one knee. He silently drank while he regarded Cary and Jack with contempt; he seemed to be deliberately avoiding eye contact with Sawyer, though, apparently perceiving him as a threat to his authority . . . what was left of it, anyway.

Jack announced that lunch was ready, then climbed up into the turret to take Sawyer’s place while he ate. Sawyer let him; by then he was hungry enough to put

up with Blair and his braggadocio. He ate quietly as he listened to him and Cary talk about the circumstances that had brought them here.

"If Jack hadn't wrecked us—" Blair said.

"It wasn't his fault, Dr. Blair." As always, Cary politely deferred to his mentor even when he disagreed with him. "He was trying to avoid the boids, and they drove us straight into the grasshopper nest."

"Drove us?" Blair raised an eyebrow as he took a tug from his flask. "C'mon now . . . that implies deliberate, organized action on their part. You don't know what you're saying."

"No, sir, I do." A good student, Cary stood his ground without being obtuse. "It wasn't an accident. I think Bruno had the flock chase us into the creek, knowing that the collision with the spider brush and the nest within it would—"

"Bollocks! They're animals. You're just anthropomorphizing their behavior." Blair gave Sawyer a sidelong smile as if sharing a confidence. "Mr. Minnehan here is just reiterating an old argument we've carried out at the university about whether or not boids are actually intelligent. He equates instinctive behavioral patterns like flocking with conscious decision-making."

"And why not?" Cary mumbled around a mouthful of the sandwich he continued to eat while they talked. "We've seen social behavior with another native species. The *chireep*—"

"Then prove it. Drop the scatcat over the side and send it away. If the boids go chasing after it, then it's instinctive . . . they'd do that because their intuition tells them to pursue something that moves and sounds like a creek cat. If they don't, then we'd know—"

"No." Sawyer shook his head. "No experiments. I don't want us to do anything except sit tight and wait for the corps to pick us up."

"And since when were you put in charge?" In an instant, Blair's attitude changed. "You're just the bloody guide, Lee, not a general. So kindly piss off, will you?"

Sawyer knew that arguing with a drunk was an exercise in futility, so he said nothing. Having finished his sandwich, he stood up from the crate on which he'd been sitting and, brushing crumbs from his trousers, then stepped out from beneath the awning. "Why don't you come down and have lunch?" he called up to Jack. "I'll take over."

Jack nodded, but before he could climb down from the turret, Blair followed Sawyer from beneath the awning. "Before we have the changing of the guard," he said, "I need to drain the lizard . . . 'scuse me."

"Why don't you use the toilet instead?" This was something else about Blair that Sawyer found annoying: his persistent use of the turret as his personal latrine instead of the chemical toilet inside the skimmer.

"Are you mad? It's an oven in there." Blair was already climbing the exterior ladder to the skimmer's roof.

Jack made a face as he joined him in the turret, but gave him room. Stepping to the edge of the turret, Blair held onto the railing for support as he used his free hand to unzip his fly. "Y'know," he said, looking over his shoulder at Sawyer as he began to urinate, "it's not such a bad idea, come to think of it. If we could distract the flock with the scatcat, maybe we could dart old Bruno here and—"

Like a devil summoned by the speaking of his name, Bruno attacked.

The bull male had never stopped watching the turret, even as the humans became inured to his presence. So when Blair stepped up to the railing to relieve himself over the side, then turned his head to speak to Sawyer, that was the mistake Bruno had been patiently waiting for someone to make.

In that instant, Bruno hurled himself at the skimmer. It was a running jump no

boid except one his size could have made; powerful legs sent him into the air, all the way to the top of the skimmer. And before Jack could react, before Sawyer and Cary were even aware of what was happening, Bruno caught Blair within his massive beak.

Blair barely had a chance to scream before the boid disappeared from sight, taking the professor with him. Jack was still staring at the place where he'd been when Blair screamed again, this time in mortal agony. The scream abruptly ended, but by then the pilot had recovered from his surprise. Lunging for the other side of the turret, Jack pointed the rifle over the side and fired.

His aim was blind, though. He hit nothing. By the time Sawyer scrambled up the ladder and snatched the rifle from him, it was all over. Bruno had carried Blair's mutilated corpse away from the skimmer, then dropped it and backed away. In a sickening way, it turned out that Cary was right after all; Bruno exhibited social behavior by allowing Abbie and the other consorts and their offspring to eat first.

But Sawyer wasn't done with Bruno yet.

"Here, Sarge," he said quietly, "take this." He handed the flechette rifle back to Jack, then he took hold of the dart gun, swung it around, and aimed at the bull's neck.

He squeezed the trigger and waited for Bruno to fall over.

* * *

The corps sent its best airship for the rescue mission: the CES *Dana Monroe*, which Sawyer had christened himself after the *Alabama's* former chief engineer, the woman who'd later befriended him as a young man. An immense silver ovoid, the dirigible hovered low over the grasslands as a SAR team rappelled down to the disabled skimmer. One by one, the three surviving expedition members were hoisted up to the *Monroe*, leaving the wrecked hovercraft behind.

From a starboard window in the airship's forward observation lounge, Sawyer Lee gazed down at the skimmer as the *Monroe* slowly made its ascent. Someone might eventually try to salvage the skimmer, but he doubted it. It had been an old machine in the first place, on the verge of being sent to the junkyard. And anyone who even thought about retrieving it would know that this part of New Florida was boid-infested.

If they were wise, they would reconsider.

"General? The medic will see you whenever you're ready, sir." The young lieutenant who'd run the rescue operation had just returned to the lounge. Looking up at her, Sawyer perceived the same hero worship in her eyes that he'd seen in Jack's.

"Thanks, but I don't need a doctor," Sawyer replied. "I don't think any of us do . . . right?"

Sitting beside him, Jack shook his head. Cary didn't notice; his attention was fully focused on the datapad in his lap. None of them had suffered anything more than mild sunburn and dehydration from their hours in the grasslands. No one smiled, though, or said anything. The expedition's sole causality was beyond a doctor's help. Even his bones would never be found.

Sawyer shook his head, dismissing the lieutenant for the time being, then looked out the window again. The skimmer could no longer be seen. And as for the boids . . . the flock had disappeared seconds after Bruno hit the ground.

Blair had been right about one thing, at least. Since boid flocks were male dominated, with bull males firmly in control, when Bruno went down, the others thought he was dead. In confusion, they'd scattered, and that had given Sawyer the chance to . . .

"I've located him," Cary said, interrupting his train of thought. He pointed to the datapad in his lap. "The tracker's operating and I'm getting a strong signal."

Hearing this, Sawyer smiled. There was nothing funny about what he'd done, but nonetheless the irony was inescapable. If only this one thing had occurred to him earlier, he could have gotten rid of the flock before they laid siege to the skimmer. But because Ronald Blair had been such a horse's ass, he'd been distracted until it

was too late.

Sawyer felt a bit guilty about this, but not much. It probably wouldn't have made any difference. Blair was killed by his own carelessness, not anything Sawyer had failed to do. And in the end, at least one thing had been accomplished.

Getting up from his seat, Sawyer walked over to where Cary was sitting. So did Jack. Without a word, they stood behind Cary to peer over his shoulder at his datapad. On its screen was a topo map of the area they'd just left. Off to one side was a familiar red crosshairs marked *Abbie*; close to it was a green crosshairs, this one only designated XXX.

Another boid. The one Sawyer had tagged himself. "I think you know what to call it," he said quietly, resting his hand on Cary's shoulder. "Male name. Begins with the letter B."

Cary nodded, then logged the boid with its new name.

"It's difficult to believe that forty years have passed since the day I picked up the premiere issue of Asimov's. It's even more difficult to believe that, just eleven years later, my first story appeared in its pages and that my work has been here ever since. Asimov's is my home base in the science fiction field . . . three Hugo Awards and six Asimov's Readers' Awards have pretty much locked that door . . . but still it's a kick to be back again for the fortieth anniversary."

—Allen M. Steele