

BLIMPIES

Rick Wilber

***Asimov's* regular Rick Wilber sends Peter Holman and his sister Kait to the home world of S'hudon in this latest installment of his S'hudonni Empire stories. Here, both Earthies are used as pawns in a chess match between the two princes of the House of S'hu, Twoclicks and Whistle, over who will control Earth's lucrative trade. Rick's recent novel, *Alien Day* (Tor, June 2021), incorporates elements of this story as the author gives flight to his explorations of sibling rivalries, charming if dangerous aliens, and, above it all, the enigmatic blimpies. Rick is an award-winning writer who teaches in the low-residency MFA in Creative Writing at Western Colorado University.**

Chapter One

In her dream, Kaitlyn Holman is walking her collie on her street in her town with her wife. They have just reached the pond, the three of them, and Kait has unleashed the collie to let it try once again to herd the geese, when a shadow approaches, something big in the sky right above Kait. She shields her eyes with her right hand and looks up.

It is a blimpie, one of those strange floating creatures that scared the hell out of her when she'd seen one for real here on S'hudon, just the other day. Smiles, Kait's S'hudonni attendant and language coach, pointed the blimpie out as it floated quietly over the courtyard during one of Kait's twice-daily exercise sessions. Smiles said they were intelligent but harmless, and Kait's subconscious must have believed her, since Kait feels no fear in this dream. She watches the blimpie go by and stays calm, even serene, as the blimpie, the size of a bus back home and no more than fifty meters up, in the shape of a blimp, eyes in the front, a narrow-lipped, wide mouth, small wings at the side, so deeply green as to be almost black, six tentacles hanging down to grab what food it wants and stuff it into that wide mouth, seems to look at her while it passes by.

She waves at the thing in her dream, and thinks maybe it is smiling back at her and coming her way, lower and lower, perhaps to take her for a ride. Wouldn't that be fun? Is she allowed to have fun? Let's find out!

But then there is a gentle wake-up bong, and then another, and she loses the dream as she comes awake. She lies there for a few minutes as the room powers up, the lights brightening and the water heater hissing and coffee machine gurgling in the kitchen.

She takes a breath, puts her feet over the side, stands, and looks around at her quarters. It's meant to look like her home back in Pasadena. The king-sized bed she

slept in looks like her bed, the one she shares with Sarah. The small chest of drawers with the mirror at the back is hers, and next to it is Sarah's. Hers is full of underwear and T-shirts and shorts; Sarah's is empty. There are sliding doors for the hers and hers closet and in her side of the closet more clothes are hung neatly, all of them her actual clothes, as far as she's been able to tell. On the floor are four pairs of shoes; her work shoes for the day job at the veterinarian clinic. She hasn't worn them since she got here. Her running shoes, which she wears every day, are there, too, and they look worn but clean. The sole up at the toe on the left shoe was working its way loose, pulling away from the bottom of the shoe; but now she sees that, miraculously, the shoe has been repaired. Her slippers are there, too: too cute for here since they look like a certain mouse from a certain park near her certain home back in Southern California. And there's a pair of pumps for going out in the evening. She hasn't worn them once since she got here.

There is also a table lamp, a beat-up old blue comfort chair with the coffee stain on the right arm, the light blue paint on the walls, the white ceiling, the gray carpet, and so on and so forth. None of it is really her stuff, is it? Here, a zillion miles from home? She makes a mental note to ask Smiles about that this morning.

She walks over to the bathroom door and opens it, walks into the bathroom and sees a row of makeup, for god's sake, on the counter: lipstick and eye shadow and blush, a hair brush, an upright tube of Aveeno scrub so she can be positively radiant, a bottle of Glytone gel cleanser and a small bottle of Retinal; all of this apparently there so her complexion will be nice for the next visit by Whistle, the alien overlord who has brought her here. Sarah used some makeup, but Kait ignored it, really. Here, she throws it away. Her captors must have a hoard of it somewhere.

How are things replaced? The toilet paper, for instance, or the makeup. Do her alien captors have a storeroom full of Kait Holman's replacement things? She shakes her head, pushes most of the makeup into the trash can under the sink as she does every day—her keepers must be mystified by that—but does pick up the well-used lipstick, her four or fifth tube of it since she arrived, and uses it to draw a cross-hatch across four short vertical lines to mark five "days" on the bathroom wall. It is the seventh cross-hatch. She's been here thirty-five days. She's met exactly two S'hudonni, Whistle and Smiles. The first came to see her just the once, and he scared the hell out of her, not only in that one meeting, but also when he promised that he'd be back soon. The second she sees a couple of times every day and has become kind of a friend.

Kait brushes her teeth and then takes a shower, in the stall that looks exactly like the one at home, minus the mold in the corners that they fight at home with X-14. No mold here, but there is, in fact, a squeeze bottle of X-14 under the bathroom sink. So is somebody spraying every day to keep the mold down? It doesn't smell like it.

The shower has a bar of soap that looks a lot like Dove, and she uses that. And there's some Garnier shampoo and conditioner, and she uses that, too. Then she chooses the fresh white bath towel over the fresh blue towel and dries off, putting the towel back over the top of the stall to dry when she's done. It will be clean and folded tomorrow when she wakes up.

Then she gets dressed in blue jeans, her Asics runners, a plaid shirt, a hoodie over that, and a few minutes later as she's drinking a cup of coffee—you'd swear it's Italian roast—there is a polite tap on the front door of her quarters, and Kait does a loud triple-click, using her new S'hudonni language skills to say enter. Her friend Smiles comes in and says, in English, "How are you this morning, friend Kaitlyn?"

"I am fine," Kait whistles and clicks back to her in S'hudon's tongue. This is their morning ritual. And, "I would like to go for a walk with you, friend Smiles," Kait adds. Smiles claps her hands in delight and says "Perfect!" Kait must have finally

gotten the intonation right.

They chat in S'hudonni about nothing, the two of them, as they walk out the door, down the hall, and then out the main door and into the large open courtyard. It's a damp, drizzly, gray day, as it has been every day that Kait has been here. Smiles says it is always so, unless a triple-click storm from the distant boiling south comes their way. Kait wouldn't mind seeing such a storm; at least it would be something different. She pulls up the hood to ward off the daily mist.

"Daily" is meaningless here, so Kait just uses it for convention. The red star that she calls a sun here hangs low in the sky and never rises or sets, the dim light never changing unless the cloud and mist and fog and light rain all clear out, which happens pretty much never. There is no day; there is no night. It's twilight, or dawn if you prefer, always.

They walk the outside of the courtyard, which is maybe five hundred meters on a side, so it's a nice walk. Most days, Kait walks and talks with Smiles for hours, around and around. Smiles is teaching her the whistles and clicks of S'hudon's language, and while Kait's whistling skills are minimal, she is improving, and she does a nice job on the tongue clicks. Smiles's English is perfect, and she's studied up on Earth in preparation for her teaching assignment, so the conversations get interesting. Smiles knows more about Earth's politics, old and new, than Kait does. But she's not pushy about it, and she's always smiling and nice to be around, and seems to genuinely like Kait. The feeling is mutual, after their month of twice-daily walks and talks. These walks are how Kait has developed her cautious, tentative friendship with Smiles.

Today, they talk in S'hudonni as usual, Kait sometimes struggling to get things said, Smiles patient with her and offering corrections now and again. Kait is getting better at the language all the time.

For a while, the topic today is Earth, sure, but California in particular, where Kait lives, or lived, past tense she's starting to think, before she was brought here. It starts with Kait asking about all those brand-name products from Earth that are available for her to use here: Dove and Garnier and Charmin and Sensodyne, and a Crest electric toothbrush, just like home. "Are they real? Did you bring them from Earth all the way here just for me?" she asks Smiles.

Kait realizes as she asks the questions that this is the moment that's been building for a month. Is Smiles ready for some honesty? It matters that Kait can express what's to come in S'hudon. She's done her part; she's learning the language. She's certain she whistled her question well, and hits a hard final click at the end. Maybe, now, today, there'll be no question about what's been asked and she'll finally get some answers.

But she doesn't, as it turns out, at least not quite yet. Instead, "Do these things comfort you, friend Kaitlyn?" Smiles asks her, dodging a straight reply. "They are meant to. I'm sure this was done for you with the best of intentions, to remind you of your home."

Kait looks at Smiles and thinks once again that only someone at the top of the food chain could say such a thing to someone at the bottom. Smiles is nice, and she's trying hard, but she can't possibly understand all that's wrong with what she's said.

All right, then. With a slightly botched whistle but some very good clicking, Kait finally lights it up, angry, swinging for the fences. "No! They don't comfort me, they just remind me every day that I'm not home! Smiles, I have a wife, and I miss her! And a dog, and I miss her, too! And my brothers, my friends, my world! No, none of this is helpful. I'm here, alone, trapped, and it most definitely is not just like home!"

Smiles, short and stubby even for a S'hudonni, reaches out and up to touch Kait's shoulder. Is there some affection here? Does Smiles truly feel some sympathy for what's happened to the Earthie she's teaching her language to?

Maybe there is, but this isn't that moment, yet. "It is so sad, friend Kaitlyn, that

you came here so ill-prepared.”

Kait looks at her, furious, brushes the hand off her shoulder. “Ill prepared! Whistle did this to me, Smiles, out of nowhere! How could I prepare?”

“But you came willingly, yes? That’s what we were told, friend Kait. You wanted to see your brother, Peter? The one who is staying with Twoclicks? Yes?”

The walking stops. Kait tries to get a grip on herself, dial it down some. “Of course I would like to see my brother, Smiles. He’s important to me. He saved my life, twice! And I owe it to him to do what I can for him in return, you know?”

“But?” asks Smiles.

“But I did not choose to come here now. I didn’t ask, I didn’t even think it would be possible. I was just waiting, like everyone else on Earth, to hear from him, to know he was all right.”

All these days of walking and yes, finally, this is a moment of truth. Kait gives up on S’hudon’s clicking and whistling, and says, in English, because that’s the only way to say this and make sure it won’t be wrong.

She takes a breath, says, “This is what happened. I was jogging for exercise along Demeter Road. I’d been doing it for more than a month. It was the new me, and I liked the new me, healthy and happy. I’d had some rough years in there, Smiles, awful stuff with my father is what started it all; but then I got involved with some really bad people. I was doing bad things, destroying myself, really. I almost died a couple of times. If it wasn’t for my brother Peter, I’d be dead.

“Then I found myself. I met a woman, Sarah, who was lovely—so lovely!—inside and out, and we fell in love. I was so lucky! I’d work all day at the vet’s office, helping take care of dogs and cats and ferrets and all sorts of Earthie animal pets. Then I’d come home to Sarah, who taught finance at a local college. She loved to cook, so she’d make dinner while I went jogging, and then I’d finish, shower, and we’d eat and just be together.

“It was a new me, a better me. I had two whole years when I was happy! Happy! The nightly run under the streetlights was part of that, where the shadows seem to chase you as you run toward the lights and then catch up with you when you’re under them and then they rush ahead again as you move on before the next streetlight approaches and it all starts over again. I always thought it was just like life, those nighttime shadows.

“So it was a warm night. I was thinking of Sarah, and how wonderful it was to love someone and be loved in return; and then thinking of Peter and how he’d saved my life twice during those horrible years. He was always there for me and now he was off and gone with Twoclicks.

“But he was famous! Twoclicks, for some reason, plucked Peter from obscurity and raised him to fame as Twoclicks’s Earthie spokesperson. Fame! Fortune! So when Twoclicks announced he was taking Peter along to document the negotiations between Twoclicks and Whistle, and while he was there tell all of us on Earth about the wonders of space travel and wormhole panes and life on S’hudon itself; well, that was amazing! We were all so excited for him. There was an audience of two billion of us Earthies watching as he stood on the ramp of Twoclicks’s ship, waved goodbye to Earth, and walked up into the dark interior. It was so sad and stirring and emotional and I was so proud of him. My brother!

“So all this was rolling around in my mind, and I was wondering just then how Peter was getting along on S’hudon. Was he there? Was he liking it? No one had heard from him since Twoclicks’s ship disappeared into the pane. Any day now we should hear that Peter was there, the peace talks were beginning, all of that stuff.

“Peter had given me a really good sweep receiver so once we got the message from him I’d be able to see what Peter saw and feel and taste and smell and touch the life

on S'hudon. It would be amazing!

"And then, I remember thinking, the car behind me on Demeter in the slow lane had been back there for a block now, headlights never going on past me like they should. So I picked up the pace some to move away from it, and instead it came even closer. I looked over my left shoulder, but couldn't see anything except lights, and then I heard car doors opening and people running at me and arms around me and a hood or something over my head, and then some grunting noises that might have been them or might have been me, trying to yell, and then my arms pulled behind me so hard that I thought my shoulder might pop out of its socket and then darkness, just darkness."

"You woke up here, dear friend Kaitlyn?" asks Smiles, shaking her head in sadness, an Earthie movement she's learned just so she can work with Kait. "It's a very long voyage from your Earth to S'hudon. You were unconscious the whole time?"

"I don't remember a thing about it, Smiles. Yes. And I must have been asleep or something for all of it," says Kait. "There were no dreams, thank god. And then I woke up, in my own bed, in my own room, in my own house. Except it wasn't, it isn't, and won't ever be. Everything there, every single thing, reminds me that I'm lost here and will never get home."

Smiles had been quiet through all this. They've stopped walking.

"I didn't know it happened this way, Kait." She reaches out to take Kait's arm and put it the crook of hers and smiles and whistles loudly, "Come, let's walk outside the courtyard to talk more."

Only once before has Kait been outside the courtyard, and that was on her third day here, after Whistle had paid his threatening visit and then Smiles had taken over as her sole S'hudonni contact. The purpose that day had been for Smiles to show Kait how hopeless it would be to try and escape from here. The estate was on a small rise and surrounded by boglands filled with dark green and purple plants, some of them the size of trees with huge wide leaves trying to gather as much light as they could from that deep red sun that appeared thinly through the clouds now and again. There were some things like small birds, and some things like large insects, and above it all, at the top of the food chain, the blimpies, floating serenely along, reaching down with those tentacles to grab a meal now and again. It all looked wet and cold and brambly and impenetrable. Kait knew at a glance that she'd never work her way through it.

But today, once they are outside the walls, walking along on a narrow, paved path that winds its way completely around the complex, Smiles reaches up to unclip a small, red pendant from Kait's hoodie and throws it out into the bog. Kait loses sight of it immediately.

A pair of blimpies in the distance, foraging over the boggy lowlands near the estate, turn to head their way. Then Smiles reaches over to hold Kait's hand as they walk along and she says, "Kait, we are friends now, yes? You and I?"

Are they? Kait has to wonder. Wheels within wheels. Is Smiles doing all this, building the friendship and all the rest, just to keep Kait complacent and calm until Whistle decides the kidnapping hasn't worked and considers her useless? Will he then dispose of her? Have her disappear?

The blimpies are closer now, but they just seem curious, like always. Kait thinks about friendship and Smiles. What choice does she have? Her only possible way out of all this is Smiles, so "Yes," she says, squeezing Smiles's hand. "Yes, we are friends now."

The blimpies are over them now and Smiles looks up to them, waves one small hand, and the blimpie somehow seems to say hi back. Kait only sees a slight flutter of one of the small wings on the side. Smiles seems to be listening to them, something out of Kait's range of hearing? Must be. Smiles whistles back, a sharp note that rises and, to Kait, seems to fade and disappear. The blimps flutter those side wings a

bit more, both of them, and then they drift away, one behind the other.

Smiles waves one last time and then turns to Kait and says, in English, “I was told you were on Twoclicks’s ship and had fled when it landed and that we were here to save you from Twoclicks. You say that isn’t so, and I believe you. The blimpies, they say the same. They might be lying, they all hate Whistle, who has done much to harm them over the years. He hunts them for entertainment. I am sure you are not surprised to hear this. Prince Whistle has a certain reputation.”

“No kidding,” Kait whistles at her in S’hudonni. She heard from Peter when they both were back on Earth that Twoclicks was an enigma, jovial and frightening by turn. But Whistle? He was vicious, Peter said. Straight ahead cruel and ambitious and vicious as hell.

On her first day here, while she was still dizzy with the shock of waking up on a strange world to find herself surrounded by threats, Kait met Whistle. He came to visit, dressed in a kind of tunic, dark green and festooned with glittery medallions that hung from what there was of a neck on that porpoisy body to the knees of his short, thin legs. Under different circumstances the look would have been comic. But here, in this setting, while she was still recovering from the trauma of the kidnapping, still trying to wrap her head around what had happened to her, it was surreal in its menace. With a snap of those tiny fingers she’d be dead, and she knew it.

His head was hairless, as always with the S’hudonni, his eyes set wide, and dark, with a membrane that slid down to cover them from time to time. His nasal slits were barely visible, his mouth almost lipless and forced that day into a tight smile as he spoke to her, the evil prince himself, trying to come across as charming.

“Welcome to my home, Kaitlyn Holman,” he said in excellent English. “You are all right? My instructions to those who brought you here were that you come to no harm whatsoever in your travels.” He waved those thin arms around. “You are happy with the accommodations? You are here as my guest, Kaitlyn. I want you to be comfortable.”

What he said was fine, but his look was one of menace, the power and evil in the prince coming right through his S’hudonni garb and his strange appearance. He was palpably deadly, dangerous. Kait had never been a screamer; but if she were, that would have been the right moment. But no, don’t give him the satisfaction, she thought, and “I’m all right,” she said.

“That is my desire for you, Kaitlyn, that you be all right. You are free to leave at any time. There are no locks on your doors, no bars on any windows, no constraints at all on your movement. You may come and go as you wish.”

Jesus, he was creepy. But she managed a thin smile as he added, “You are not a prisoner, Kaitlyn, you are my guest, an honored visitor from Earth. The same cannot be said for your brother, Peter, who is a captive in a prison near the capital. We hope he will come to no harm; but he is in grave danger. Perhaps you will be able to help us bring about his release? We would like you to stay for a few days and get to know us, and then perhaps, we can go together to the capital and find your brother, Peter?”

“I saw him leave Earth with Twoclicks,” Kait said. “They were on good terms. Peter was working for Twoclicks, what happened?”

Whistle shook his head. “It is all very sad, Kaitlyn. Your brother was misled. He is here, yes, and still working for Twoclicks, but under terrible circumstances, alone, fearful. It is a very sad thing.”

Kait had her doubts about that. She had her doubts about everything here. Then Whistle smiled at her again and added, “You may leave at any time to go see for yourself, Kaitlyn Holman. Nothing keeps you from leaving these quarters and going to see your brother. Nothing.”

But that was all a cruel tease on that first day, and Kait knew it. She didn’t know where she was, didn’t speak the language, had no friends, had been offered

no directions, no maps, had no one to help her.

So, sure, she was free to go find big brother Peter in whatever place he was and however well or poorly he was doing, and sure he might make it possible for Kait to talk to Sarah and everyone else on Earth and, maybe, get home. But it all didn't seem very likely. And Kait had never been that sort of risk-taker.

But that was then and this is now, seven five-days later. Kait knows a lot more now, about who's a prisoner and who's not. She and Smiles reach the main gates to the courtyard in silence, the two friends. They stop there, and before entering Smiles looks at Kait, reaches out to hold her hands, and says, "You have friends here, dearest Kaitlyn. You will need to trust me, soon, when the time comes."

Kait stops, looks around. The blimpies—a half-dozen of them, and where did they come from?—are out over the boglands, all of them facing toward the compound, toward her. What the hell does that mean? And what the hell did Smiles mean? "What time? When is soon? Smiles, what's going on?"

But Smiles doesn't answer. She's already dropped Kait's hands and turned her back on her to walk into the courtyard and leave. Moments later Kait walks into the courtyard herself and, no Smiles in sight, a minute or two after that she is back in her rooms with a lot to think about, alone.

* * *

Chapter Two

I was thinking about my sister Kait as I sat in my rocking chair on my veranda, looking out toward my yard, my white picket fence, my Center Street, my shops and my cafés and my one Irish pub. In short, my village of Holmanville. You'd almost think I was home, back on Earth, drinking my first cup of coffee in the half-light of early morning, shivering a bit in the cool mist despite my blue jeans, my long-sleeved shirt, my hoodie over that, green with white lettering across the front saying Dublin Rovers. There's nothing much going on, again. My day is wide open, again. And I'm waiting for my little princeling pal, Treble, again, in the hope that he'll have some information for me. He probably won't, I know, but the coffee is better than you'd think, the rocker is nice, the porch is nice, the view of my little faux village, built just for me, is perfectly fine. So I'll wait and hope.

To get me to come here, Twoclicks promised me three things: One, that I'd be able to see Kait and talk to her and, ultimately, take her back home to Earth. Another, that'd I be given full freedom to document the ongoing discussions between Twoclicks and his brother Whistle over who would have how much of Earth to run for their personal profit. The story would be an exclusive, just for me, and it would cement my fame and fortune back on Earth as soon as it got there. And third, he'd promised that I'd have all the comforts of home during my time here, no expense would be spared.

Now it was seven five-days after our arrival, as they counted things here on a world that was tidally locked as it sped around its red dwarf star, let's call it their sun, so that one side faced that sun, the other faced away and from where we were, in the Goldilocks zone, where everything that *could* live on the planet *did* just that, the days never changed, a deep-hue red twilight forever and always. And Twoclicks had delivered on only the last of those promises, and even that was half-measures. I was comfortable, sure. I had a rocking chair and a porch and a coffee shop and an Irish pub. I had Earthie food and drink in my little Potemkin village, and I was free to roam and did.

And, sure enough, I was there, at Twoclicks's invitation, when the negotiations went all to hell, and I'd documented it all through my sweep system and my trad

media and even my book that I worked on every day with pen and paper. It was great material, but Earth might never see it. It was all very delicate, and I was embargoed, and I should have understood that when I agreed to come, and so on and so forth.

* * *

On the day the talks collapsed I was there with my little pal Treble, the young princeling, son of both Twoclicks and Whistle, and mothered by The Mother, who was also the mother of Twoclicks and Whistle. They're semi-aquatic, remember, so The Mother deposited the eggs in a nest offshore, and Two and Whistle swam by to send clouds of milt over those eggs, and from a thousand fertilized eggs and tiny hatchlings, one, my little pal Treble, survived to become the princeling and heir to the throne.

The Mother ran the whole society, as the mother of all the mothers who mothered the villages and cities that populated this one island in this one archipelago in the temperate zone of this one crazy planet. There were only a million or so S'hudonni all told, and yet they ran an empire of six planets. Earth, if it was obedient and dutiful, would be the seventh.

I'd met Treble when I first arrived in the capital. I'd gone through a few days of quarantine and poking and prodding by S'hudonni medcots, capturing it all by wearing my sweep hardware, recording it in sound, sight, taste, smell, touch: an alien world! Anyone back on Earth wearing a receiver would be inside me, marveling at what happened those first few everdays, as Treble said I should call them in English.

Twoclicks, the S'hudonni I worked for, and Whistle, his nasty brother, were vying for control of Earth, the empire's latest acquisition. Their mother, *The Mother* in fact, the ruler of this whole society they'd built on this one small archipelago of the water world that was S'hudon, was the arbiter of the discussion over which of the two princes would rule Earth. I was rooting hard for Twoclicks, who struck me as by far the lesser of the two evils. If we couldn't run our own world by ourselves, if we had to be a colony of S'hudon, if we had to spend our time like most colonies, making profit for the Mother's country: well, let it be Twoclicks. He had a heart, or something like one. Twoclicks would rule Earth with an almost playful sense of *laissez-faire*. Sure, profits, plenty of profits. But an easy hand on the tiller, and most things for most people left well enough alone.

Whistle, on the other hand, was a bully; worse, an ambitious and deadly bully. Younger than Twoclicks, he wasn't in line for the throne. But if something happened that would change that? Well, Earth was full of profits for one prince or the other, and Whistle would do what it took to make sure that he was the one.

They were supposed to be negotiating, the two princes, but I'd been here for months as Earth figured time, a lot of five-days as it was figured here on S'hudon, and the only real effort at negotiations had been a shitshow when it finally occurred. That was a five-day ago, and all had gone quiet since.

It went down like this:

I was on the Mother's royal barge, drifting along the South Canal, while I held a small, beating heart in my hands and considered the merits of eating it. Twoclicks was the one who'd caught the bender, and with the help of some friends, ripped it apart and handed me the heart. Then he'd dived back into the water to frolic some more.

Treble was there as my translator and pal and adviser, helping me get through the protocols, some of which were tricky. Wonderful, I thought. Sure, I'd been through a whole protocol on arrival, swallowing nanos and getting inoculations and all the rest.

But a small beating heart?

I did it, while the entire pod of S'hudonni royals, fifty or more of them, was watching. Even the Mother, up on her ornate wooden throne, had her eye on me. For the first time all afternoon she was smiling, and I knew I'd passed some kind of weird initiation.

Everyone else seemed happy, as well. They chattered and whistled away with each other some more and then, one by one, they came over to me to talk. Each of them reached out stiffly to take my right hand in theirs and then shake, carefully and formally, before talking. A handshake was obviously something they'd learned just for this occasion.

This was my first public outing since Twoclicks had sent Treble to be my tutor a few ten-days before. Now, Twoclicks had decided, Treble had me ready for public display in front of the Mother. I hoped that I'd lived up to their expectations. This royal meeting on this royal barge on this royal canal was designed to be both social and political. At the end of it all, Treble told me, decisions would be made by the Mother on which son ruled which parts of Earth and which son would have to step aside. And I was there to chronicle the occasion and, I hoped, not make a fool of myself and make a fool of all of Earth, in the process.

So I breathed a small sigh of relief when things seemed to have gone all right. Maybe the sessions with Treble had been worth it? One could hope. I wanted to be in the Mother's good graces, certainly, so I could renew my prodding of the powers-that-be to allow me to visit, at least, with my sister Kait. And maybe try for more than that.

Why couldn't she stay with me in the little faux village they'd built for me, for instance? There was plenty of room, god knows, since I was the only live resident. And it made no sense for Kait or me to escape the place even if we'd wanted to. It was a tiny faux village in a small island on a planet unthinkably distant from Earth.

But politics was politics, and so I was taking it step by step. I'd even picked up a few ingratiating phrases in S'hudonni. With any luck I'd get a chance to show off my language skills. Anything to curry some favor.

It had taken me those several ten-days under Treble's tutelage to acquire the few phrases I had. Treble was great when it came to teaching me the language. He was both patient and persistent. But I had never been a good student in any subject other than English; and even here, in this incredible setting, I hadn't made a lot of progress. I had, at best, learned to whistle hello and click a thank you here and there.

For the rest of it, Treble translated for me as I answered a steady stream of questions, two or three from each S'hudonni before he or she (or it, I was still shaky on their odd multiple genders and how often they could switch), stepped aside and let the next one in line go through the same procedure. I did my best to be friendly and conversational as Treble stood by my side and listened to one after another ask me politely if I was enjoying my stay on S'hudon and I heard Treble's click and whistle translations for "Yes, very nice" often enough that I tried to duplicate it and Treble laughed and said it was very good and I should use it, so I went with that for a while. A declining sort of bird trill and a double-click of the tongue against the roof of the mouth and suddenly I was the hit of the party, at least for a few minutes.

"It speaks S'hudon!" one of them—a minor royal from a small district on the second island—whistled loudly enough for everyone to hear, and that brought a cacophony of whistles and clicks in response. Treble told me what the minor royal had said and added that the response was appreciative laughter. And then Treble gave me a hug around the waist, his small arms not able to reach all the way around.

"They find you as charming as I do, Uncle Peter," he said, and added that, "The Mother is pleased, I'm sure."

I looked up to the far end of the barge, where the Mother sat in regal comfort. She was looking at me and nodded.

Treble was watching this. "Bow a little bit, Uncle Peter," he said. "The Mother would like that." And so I did, and when I came back up from the bow, the Mother had her right hand up, too, acknowledging me.

"Whew," said Treble, taking me by the hand and leading me away to the far side of

the barge. “I was worried, Uncle Peter, since the Mother doesn’t usually like aliens. But it seems that she likes you. That is so good!”

Later, things had quieted down and we were all waiting for the real discussions to start between Twoclicks and Whistle, with the Mother holding her firm hand on the tiller. I stood alone at the edge of the barge as it traveled along the canal, the shore no more than a few meters away on the starboard side.

Treble, dutiful child, had left me to go sit at the feet of the Mother. He looked happy, clicking away to her and her to him. When he saw me looking his way he waved, and then cheerily said goodbye to the Mother, stood up and headed back toward me, grinning.

When he reached me he came with a formal request from the Mother herself. I was to visit with her for a “small conversation,” he said.

So I walked across the length of the barge to the raised platform where the three thrones sat, the Mother in the highest and in the middle, the smaller thrones for the two princes on the sides. Both of those were empty at the moment. Twoclicks had left to go for a swim, and Whistle hadn’t made an appearance.

We walked to stand in front of the Mother. She was smiling, and clicked and whistled to me as she slightly nodded her head.

“You should nod in return, Uncle Peter, and thank her for the day,” whispered Treble.

I did that, saying I enjoyed almost everything, and Treble whistled back to her. She tilted her head back and clicked and whistled loud enough for everyone around us to hear. Then she paused and clicked some more.

“She is laughing,” said Treble. “She finds you very funny. She wants to know if eating the heart of the bender was the thing that you did not enjoy.”

I smiled and returned the laugh. I kind of liked the Mother. Could S’hudon’s great queen have a sense of humor? “Yes,” I said, “let’s just say that that was not my favorite meal on S’hudon.”

Treble whistled that to her and clicked back.

“She asks, ‘What was your favorite meal?’ Uncle Peter,” said Treble.

I had an answer for that. “Tell her that meal I had with you and Twoclicks a ten-day ago was wonderful. All fresh caught swimmers from the sea. The creature called . . .” and I tried to whistle it, doing that from memory, hoping I got it right but knowing it would be amusing if I didn’t, “the long fish. It was especially good. Firm flesh with a taste not unlike a sea creature we have on Earth.”

Treble laughed even as the Mother did the same. Then she whistled a long question to him. “You said the long ‘book,’ Uncle Peter, instead of ‘fish,’ but she knows what you meant. And she asks if you are happy here. Is there anything she can offer you?”

Well, that open door was too good to be true. Maybe it would be a diplomatic disaster to ask, but I felt I had to try. “Treble,” I said, “tell her I want to see my sister. She’s being held by Whistle. I know she’s all right, but I want to see her. I want her to see me. Can the Mother arrange a meeting for the two of us?”

Treble looked at me and gave me a strange smile and a nod, then turned to whistle and click to the Mother, who listened very gravely to the question and was whistling back to Treble when, out of nowhere it seemed, it all went to hell with some hooting noises that I’d never heard the S’hudonni make before, and when I turned to look to see what was happening, there were S’hudonni walking onto the barge as a group, most of them wearing a kind of uniform, dark brown coats over black pants. Many of them were carrying weapons, lightweight rifles with thick, round barrels that looked porcelain rather than metal. They looked very Earthie, in fact, so I had to wonder if that was one of Earth’s contributions to S’hudon: weapons.

There were exactly twenty of them on the barge, two tens as they would say. I was recording it with my eye cam and the bowl amp in my ear, but I wanted to remember

it in all its details in my mind, too, so I focused intently on what was happening, trying to build some memories I could conjure up later in the day when I got home and could write about it. I had an idea that this was going to be an important next few minutes.

Where had these S'hudonni come from? I didn't know. And then there was another stir among the attending royals as they all looked toward the shore of the canal and there I saw a squadron of blimpies, those dirigible-shaped creatures the size of a city bus back home, coming in over the barge, all of them holding a palanquin, open sided, festooned with banners, and with two S'hudonni in the front, dressed in dark gray uniforms, holding tight on reins that went up to harnesses wrapped around the blimpies. In the middle of the palanquin was a kind of throne, wherein sat an imperious looking S'hudonni, holding a staff.

It looked ridiculous. The S'hudonni didn't usually go in for gaudy shows, their power was more subtle than that. But not this one. He wanted everyone to know he'd arrived.

"That's Whistle," Treble said to me calmly, showing no emotion. "He always makes a show of his arrival, but this." He shook his head ever so slightly, "this will not please the Mother. Those harnesses are barbed so the blimpies fear for their lives. If they are punctured . . .

I'd admired the blimpies I'd seen around my faux village. They seemed serenely calm as they foraged, and almost friendly the way they came close to look me over.

"It is forbidden to use the blimpies for such purposes, Uncle Peter," said Treble. "They are very intelligent, sometimes we can talk with them, in a way, a kind of emotional sharing. We honor them in our culture. Whistle debases them."

The blimpies eased the palanquin down until it bottomed out on the barge, and then some handlers helped Whistle off the palanquin and onto the barge, and the blimpies rose and drifted back behind us, fifty meters up and still in sight.

Whistle had stepped off the palanquin onto the barge and been immediately surrounded by his entourage. Now they walked toward Treble and me, and emerging from the group was the first truly menacing S'hudonni I'd ever seen.

Whistle was shorter than any of the other adult S'hudonni. They are generally short anyway, and stocky. But Whistle was the shortest of the two tens that stood there, and the thinnest. He wore a kind of bandolier belt that wrapped around his right shoulder and traveled down below to what passed for a waist, where it wrapped around again as a belt.

His bandolier didn't hold any weapons, but his thugs had short blades hanging down, and some kind of wrapped wire looped and tied to the belt, and ten of them or so held those Earth-style weapons with the porcelain barrels. As I looked, a half-dozen of those without the weapons dived right off the dock into the water and disappeared from view. It was easy to forget that underwater was where they truly belonged, and only at that moment, watching them dive in, did it occur to me that until I had a good mask, some fins to wear, and a breathing device, I'd never see the S'hudonni in their real element.

Whistle looked directly at me, smiled, walked over to me, and said, in perfect English. "Peter Holman. It is my great pleasure to meet you."

I knew I shouldn't have been surprised. There were only two Earthies on S'hudon, and one of them—my sister Kait—was captive at Whistle's own compound, so that made me pretty damn obvious.

"Yes," I said, walking toward Whistle. "I'm Peter Holman. And you, I take it, are . . ." I hesitated. What was appropriate? This was another opportunity for a major diplomatic error. Aim high, I thought, and ended it ". . . Prince Whistle."

Treble nudged me, whispered "Prince Whistle is correct, and he likes that. But bow your head, too, Uncle Peter." And so I did that.

Whistle smiled at my clumsy protocol but seemed forgiving. He turned to his right and addressed the throne in whistles and clicks. Treble translated.

“Mother, you asked us to attend, and now we are here. I regret that we missed so much of the pleasant day.”

The Mother was not smiling as she clicked back. “You bring weapons to the royal barge, my son?”

“Not done. Never done,” whispered Treble to me.

Whistle turned back to look at Treble and me, and then spoke to the Mother even as he looked at us. “We were told there were dangerous visitors on the barge, Mother. We wanted to be prepared.” Then he added, drily, “We know you are aware of how violent the Earthies can be.”

Treble squeezed my hand, whispered, “Say nothing, Uncle Peter.”

So I said nothing, but I did stare at Whistle, trying keep my face impassive. Then the Mother, thank god, finally spoke, leaning forward on her simple wooden throne to say, “You should not have brought these warriors with you, Whistle. And you should never, ever have allowed them to be armed in my presence.”

Treble translated that for me, but, for a change, I didn’t really need it. Though the Mother was, to me, a glistening porpoisy alien, I felt like I could read her body language; a general tensing up, the eyes narrowing, a slight lean forward. Whistle had overstepped. And dangerously so.

And then Whistle doubled-down. He walked up to the three thrones and stepped up on the low platform, turned around, and sat down on the throne on the Mother’s right: the throne of the heir. Twoclicks’s throne.

“I cannot believe what I am seeing, Uncle Peter,” whispered Treble. “That is not possible. Whistle seeks to replace Twoclicks at the right hand of the Mother. That is unbelievable.”

So, a kind of coup d’etat was taking place right before my eyes. Incredible. And where the hell was Twoclicks? He’d been here, then dived into the water and gone off for a swim before Whistle arrived to cause all this drama. It seemed like a long swim.

Treble reached up to take my hand. Squeezed it. Whispered, “Remain silent, Uncle Peter. Say nothing.”

And so I said nothing as Whistle turned left to look up at his mother. “It is regrettable that I felt I had to, Mother. But the situation on Earth grows dire. Your son Twoclicks, the one who should be sitting here now, next to you, instead of being off to play in the water, has lost control. Violence tears at the fabric of the short lives of these Earthies, and now I hear of the death of two of our own people from the house of S’hu. Young lives, gone.

“And these lives are gone through the actions of the Earthies! They are angry, these Earthies, and violent. They want to destroy everything they don’t know, everything they cannot understand. And this despite all we have done for them. All that we offer.”

“Not true,” Treble added after telling me what had been said. “One of them, at least, is safe, and perhaps the Mother knows this.”

“It is my understanding that in those parts of the planet where Twoclicks serves as governor-general, the Earthies are more accepting. Do you dispute that?” the Mother wanted to know.

“They have been lied to!” Whistle said, and then pointed his hand at me and added, “This Earthie lied to them at the urging of Twoclicks! And he will lie more from here—our home world!—if he is given the chance. He sends out lies about Twoclicks, glowing reports that convince the Earthies that all is fine, all will be fine, with Twoclicks as their leader. Bah!”

Treble translated that for me, and I saw the Mother look at me and, maybe, there

was a hint of a smile. Then she turned to Whistle. "He has sent no messages since his fortunate arrival here, Whistle. You know that. And if he does, it will be handwritten messages, ink on Earthie paper, carried by hand to a few on Earth. A slow process. And a nearly private one. Not very good as propaganda."

So that explained my tech embargo, I realized. The Mother herself was making sure I had no real way to communicate with Earth. I wondered just what she thought of me, really.

Whistle, annoyed, blew air out his airhole and clicked furiously for a few seconds. No need to translate that. But the Mother looked at him and held the gaze. A polite whistle. "She says, 'Silence, my son,' to Whistle," said Treble.

That was an effective reminder of who was in charge. Whistle shut up. The Mother looked at me

I shrugged. "I traveled with Twoclicks back on Earth and recorded everything and broadcast most of it, that's true, that's what I was hired to do.

"And then there was violence. It seemed like the start of a war between Twoclicks and your other son," and the Mother smiled at my oblique reference to Whistle. "I recorded that, too. And then, when they agreed to meet and work out their differences here on S'hudon, I came along to document that, too. And so I am here."

"And so you are," said the Mother. "Sometime soon we must allow you to communicate with your home, mustn't we?"

"He is an Earthie!" shouted Whistle with violent clicks, rising from his seat. "They are not to be trusted, Mother! I know many of them."

"We know," said the Mother, and added, "Sit, son. And over here," she waved, "on my left."

Whistle was outraged. "I will not!" and sat back down firmly onto Twoclicks's throne. There was an immediate rustle from a dozen S'hudonni standing behind and to the sides of the throne, a sort of imperial guard, I was guessing. But they took only one step when the Mother raised her hand to stop them.

I shook my head, but Treble whispered to me, "Do not worry, Uncle Peter. Just family squabbles. Look, see over there?" And he pointed to a spot some fifty meters away on the far side of the canal.

I looked and didn't see anything and admitted that to Treble.

"Oh, Uncle Peter, you have much to learn. See the dorsal?" And I looked where he was pointing and, sure enough, there it was, coming our way and fast. "That is Twoclicks. He will set things right."

I watched as that dorsal fin approached, and then behind it saw four, five, eight or more, other fins coming up behind it; all of these in a hurry.

The dorsals were coming up to the back of the barge, so Whistle and the Mother on those thrones couldn't see the fins; but a lot of excited whistling and clicking on the part of the gathered royals on the barge who could see them made it obvious something was going on. So Whistle and the Mother stood and turned to look.

They were watching as Twoclicks emerged from the water to slowly climb up the ladder at the side of the barge. He was trembling in anger, a reaction I hadn't seen before in any S'hudonni. And he was bruised and beaten, green welts along his right side and several large bruises the size of dinner plates along his front and both sides.

He stumbled as he reached the top step of the ladder and then stepped over to put first one foot, and then the other, on the barge. He walked forward. Behind him, others came aboard, a half-dozen of them, two of them firmly in the grasp of the other four.

He approached the Mother. She didn't look at Whistle, who sat impassively on Twoclicks's smaller throne as Twoclicks spoke. "I am sorry I wasn't here to properly greet my brother, dear Mother. I was busy enjoying some playful exercise with these

two,” and he pointed back at the two who were being held. “The exercise, as you can see, was rough. But I would like to think I gave as much as I received.”

He turned to his left to address Whistle directly. “Good to see you, brother. What do you think? Did I give as good as I got from these two?”

Whistle remained impassive.

“It was very entertaining,” Twoclicks said directly to Whistle. “They rammed me, they tried to slash with the short blades that are no longer in their possession,” and two of the S’hudonni who held the captives raised blades to show them to the crown.

“It was great fun,” Twoclicks said. “I fended them off, and then my friends arrived to grab them and bring them along as I returned to the barge.” He turned back to look at the Mother, “and to you, the Mother of us all.”

Twoclicks smiled, slumped down a bit, and added, “I would like to sit down. It’s been a tiring experience.” A dozen or more S’hudonni around the throne took steps forward to ensure that Twoclicks could sit where he was meant to.

Whistle rose. The day was not going as well as he’d hoped, I was sure. He walked between Twoclicks and the Mother and took a seat on her left.

“What happens next?” I whispered to Treble.

“This is very serious, Uncle Peter. Whistle is in big trouble. He could lose everything; his rank, his colonies, all of it.”

“And why do this with the talks about to finally begin?”

Treble shrugged. “Anger? Envy. Fear of losing everything in those talks?”

Yes, that sounded right to me. It was interesting to know the S’hudonni had some of the same motivations as Earthies. It was all about power, and, like Treble said, the anger and the envy that drove one to seek or defend that power.

The two who had been caught accosting Twoclicks were escorted from the barge, and then everything seemed strangely all right for a few minutes. Twoclicks chatting with the Mother and her smiling and agreeing with Twoclicks about what was being said. Whistle sat, aloof, alone, on the Mother’s left.

The barge reached its dock and was pulling in to tie off as the throng around the throne slowly dissipated, and I even walked away, Treble at my side, thinking maybe it was time to leave the barge and bring this strange day to a close. But then there were some whistles and clicks that I’d missed, and suddenly all three—Twoclicks, the Mother, and Whistle—were rising and walking to the ornate wooden gangplank that connected the barge to the wharf. Before they reached it, the Mother looked over at us and whistled something. Treble, for the moment, didn’t translate, but just whistled back.

As the three of them reached the wharf they had a retinue of twenty or more S’hudonni walking with them. Some of them, it seemed to me, were in custody.

They all walked to a line of wagon-shaped powered sleds that floated over the pavement. The first wagon in line was impressively ceremonial in design, enclosed with carved wood figures along the top and sides and doors that opened wide, with windows that had curtains. The three royals stepped into that wagon and the others filled the ones behind and off they went. Treble and I stood there watching. We had not been invited along.

Then, as they turned to go, Treble said to me: “The Mother said that she agrees to consider your plan to visit your sister.”

“Consider?” I asked

“It’s as much as she is able to say right now, I think, Uncle Peter, but it is a very good signal, yes? Oh, and she says I should warn you that storms are coming and you should be prepared.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“That storms are coming, Uncle Peter,” said Treble, as if speaking to a child, or a pet. Like me. “Prince Whistle will be held in safekeeping at the Mother’s House for a

time, and then he will be allowed to return home. A five-day, no longer."

"Are you saying we can go get her out of there, Treble? Is that it?"

"Almost," Treble said. "The Mother advises you to go home now and be ready."

"I'm ready right now, Treble; let's go get her." I was assuming that Treble would come along with me. I hadn't the first idea how to make it happen otherwise.

"There must be some conversations first, Uncle Peter," he said to me. "Be patient." That was so obliquely S'hudonni. Sure, go get her but don't but do, got it?

Sure, sure, I'd been here long enough to know that's how it worked. Everything was gray and dark and murky here, all the time. The climate, the people, the decision-making. Be patient? Okay, I was good at that. I shook my head and looked up at the gray sky. A pod of blimpies were up there, a half-dozen of them, cruising slowly by. None were wearing a harness, these were wild creatures. I'd swear they were looking at me.

* * *

Chapter Three

Kaitlyn Mary Theresa Holman is out of breath but still stumbling forward, trying to move as fast as she can through the boggy ground that's covered in dark purple bushes with wide leaves edged by small, sharp thorns. There are puddles all over the place. One of those puddles left her waist-deep in cold water when she tried to splash through it, so she's trying to avoid them all now. The perpetual red twilight of this place doesn't help her. It's the murkiest damn place she's ever been.

In front of her, Smiles is waddling along briskly on those short S'hudonni legs that provoke so much humor back on Earth, but here, on the home planet, seem to be working just fine. Smiles moves smoothly through the brambles and puddles, leading the way, even though she's slowed by a backpack that she's apparently had ready for this moment for a while. She grabbed it in seconds when the moment came to leave, when she'd come into Kait's quarters and said Whistle was returning, defeated and ousted and filled with deadly anger, from a visit with Twoclicks and the Mother. They had to flee! Now!

And so they are, running away from danger, as Kait so often has in her life. Behind them there are whistles and clicks from some kind of loudspeaker. Kait stops for a second to take a quick glance back toward the compound and sees several S'hudonni coming through the narrow courtyard gate in the stone wall. Oh, hell. Kait and Smiles had planned to get over the crest of the hill in front of them and down the other side to the Old Ones's path before anyone in the compound knew they were gone. Looks like that hasn't worked out.

"Hurry!" says Smiles in her excellent English, "I don't think they've seen us yet."

"Right behind you," Kait whistles back to her. Kait's S'hudonni is getting better all the time.

They are surrounded by insects, large double-winged things that look like dragonflies, and smaller, quicker darting things that are always in front of her but never land and, like the dragonflies, don't seem interested in biting. They're annoying, but they are the least of her worries right now. What Kait and Smiles are trying to reach is a paved trail and a vehicle that will take them to freedom; but getting to the trail isn't easy. There's a kilometer or more of this thick ground cover with its hidden puddles; difficult to avoid when you're trying to dodge around and through the bushes and any number of things that look like ferns. There are some small tree things with a deep purple fruit hanging down to touch the ground, too; when Kait tried to brush one of those out of the way it exploded with pulpy fruit and a thousand sticky purple seeds.

It all makes for hard going. Kait stumbles every five or six steps, dodging puddles and hanging fruit and once falling flat on her face into the ferns. These ferns on this strange and dark world look just like the spear ferns back home in Florida where she grew up; lots of long, narrow leaves with rows of spores on the underside of the leaves, ready to reproduce. They don't need much sunlight. Good thing, there's just the perpetual twilight of the huge red star that Kait has only rarely glimpsed through the cloud cover on her daily walks around the grounds of the compound in the usual mist and rain.

Today, oddly, it's dry, and there's a strange warm breeze blowing. Kait is sweating in that warmth and from her own exertion. She hasn't had a chance to jog or bike or do anything other than the daily walks with Smiles, and some yoga and some pushups and sit-ups since she was brought here.

They hear a loud high-pitched whistle behind them. It goes on for five seconds or so and then becomes a series of urgent clicks that go from two or three of them a second to ten or twenty, rapid-fire, urgent.

Kait looks over at Smiles, who looks back and says, in her near-perfect English, "They're looking for us. Please, dear friend Kait, we have to hurry."

Kait looks up and there are two, no, now it's three, of the blimpies coming sedately toward them. To watch? To help? To attack? She has no way to know and can't watch anymore anyway. Hurry hurry Kait does, struggling to keep up. All that time in the compound has left her out of shape. The walks in the courtyard just don't cut it.

The clicking ends, the whistle returns.

They finally crest the low hill, the last part of it on firmer, drier soil, and they start down the other side. Ahead of them, no more than two hundred meters away, is the path that was built by the Old Ones and, above the path, are those three blimpies, huge open eyes, dark pupils wide in the dim light, watching Kait and Smiles reach the path. It's several meters wide and straight as an arrow, heading off along toward the seacoast, toward Peter's little town, Kait thinks, and beyond that, great S'hudon City itself.

They push through the last of the brambles, and they don't look back until they get to the path and step up a good ten centimeters to get on it. Kait thinks it feels like asphalt, maybe with a little bounce to it. It seems ordinary. They look to the left, and the path is empty. They look back, and there are those four S'hudonni, pushing their way through the brambles as they crest the hill and head down, but now the blimpies are between the S'hudonni that are following them and Kait and Smiles. They've come down to just a meter above the path and are touching each other, side by side, three gentle giants blocking everything. The attackers slow, and that buys precious moments for Kait and Smiles to run away from their pursuers, down the path.

In fifty meters Kait looks back and three of the pursuers have managed to get around the blimpies, the other one is tangled in blimpie tentacles and is flailing away as that blimpie rises. Kait can't stop and see what happens, but as she turns back to run again she hears the S'hudonni whistle loudly and there is a crunching noise behind her. That pursuer hit the path hard.

And here they come again. They're not firing weapons yet, so they must need Kait alive. But Smiles? She's helped Kait escape, and they don't need her alive at all. Better, in fact, if she's not. And they're maybe five minutes away.

It's hopeless, she thinks, but whistles to Smiles anyway, "We have to run!"

But Smiles is just standing there, looking down the Old Ones' path. "Listen!" she says, in English.

Kait doesn't hear anything. But "There! There!" cries Smiles, and points toward something emerging from the mist. Two hundred meters away and coming toward them in a hurry. Some kind of wagon or sled or cart, the size of a small truck back

home; but no wheels, no sides on it. It floats over the pavement. Magnetic levitation? Could be.

There are two rows of six or seven seats, with just the front two of them occupied. A pair of S'hudonni are sitting upright, their dorsals poking through open slots in the seatbacks. One of them looks older, perhaps wiser, with a look of quiet command. The other, younger and energetic, is clicking and whistling like mad—"We are here! We are here!"—as the wagon pulls up, silently, and comes to a stop.

"Mother!" Smiles whistles to the older one, as Kait hears a pad pad behind her and turns to see the three remaining S'hudonni who were chasing them waddling up the path, wearing uniforms, dark purple shirts and black pants held up by suspenders, with devices attached to them. One is carrying what looks a lot like a leash and collar. The second carries what Kait guesses is a weapon; small, held in one tiny hand, with a single narrow stick that juts out the front so, she guesses, you can aim it.

It's the first weapon she's seen here, and she doesn't want to find out how it works. The third stands alone, off to the side of the others. Short and squat, dressed differently, in a kind of jacket, wearing long pants and wide footwear, and with a hat on, a ridiculous assemblage of cloth and ferns with a single eye in the middle of it, staring forward. Is that hat alive? Maybe; it seems to look at her, and then slowly blinks. It's creepy as hell.

It, he? she?—clicks at her as the eye blinks twice. "Dear friend Kaitlyn," it's saying, "you should return to your quarters."

Kait stares at that single eye as it blinks again. "I don't think so," she clicks and whistles back.

There is a burst of sound from behind her, and she turns to see the older of the two S'hudonni on the sled raising one arm to point at Kait as she says to Single-Eye with an emphatic high-pitched whistle. "You must leave! This Earthie is coming with us! I am her protector!"

Next to Kait, Smiles whistles softly, "That is my mother, dear friend Kait. And no one dares disagree with her."

There is another angry burst of clicks and whistles from the Mother, and Kait looks back to see her pointing at the S'hudonni who carries the thing that looks like a weapon as she is saying, "Put that thing away or I will tell your fathers!" And when Kait looks back, the S'hudonni is busy packing the weapon away into the small bag held by a belt that goes around his shoulders. Behind him, drifting toward the group, is one of the blimpies; the others are in the distance.

"Better," says the Mother, and "Isn't she wonderful," says Smiles to Kait in a whistle full of admiration though it's so low in volume that Kait can barely hear it.

"She sure is," Kait whispers in English, "but I wonder if . . ."

But there is no time for wonder, the Mother is waving her hands and whistling firmly, and Kait and Smiles are helped aboard the floating sled by the very ones who were chasing them. And then the sled is spinning on its axis to face the other way, and the Mother, doing the driving, is pushing a handle forward and turning to wave at the blimpie and whistle and click something so fast that Kait can't tell what was said, and then off they go, heading away from Whistle's compound, and away from their silenced pursuers, and on toward somewhere. Kait wishes she knew where. Toward her brother Peter, she hopes, who must be waiting for her, anxious, worried sick. Peter, the strong one, the big brother. Always.

* * *

Chapter Four

Waiting for death, but serene in my drugged state, I was being carried face down

over the edge of a two-hundred-meter cliff above the rocky shore of the Great Bight. We were apparently going out to sea, me and the blimpie that had a firm grip on me.

I had been carried away over the bogs and the woods and the meadows and the coastline of Curved Island. Great Bight was below me now, and the water was alive with mares' tails as the offshore wind ripped the tops off the waves. We were just high enough that if the blimpie holding me decided to let go, I was a dead man. Which I was maybe anyway. The various options didn't look good, which I found amusing.

The blimpie was struggling, rising and dropping a few meters erratically and making sudden jolting moves left and right. No surprise, given my weight and the gale we were sailing along in, the wind pushing us along the coast, sometimes far out over the Bight, sometimes over the bouldered shore.

I was held by a half-dozen of those long tentacles I'd seen trailing along underneath the blimpies as they'd cruised over the bogs, grabbing small creatures and plants and bringing them up to that wide mouth and tossing them in. It had been fascinating to watch, but was frightening as hell to literally get carried away by the experience.

I'd been tethered to the sled that held our gear, thinking it was heavy enough to keep me grounded in the fierce winds, but then a gust hit us that sent the sled and I both up into the air, the tether snapping so the sled went one way and I the other.

The blimpie had grabbed me midair after the sled and I parted ways, me going up, and the sled crashing down onto the shoreline below. There were small hooks at the end of the blimpie's tentacles, and they'd grabbed onto my clothes and dug into my skin to haul me up, up, and away. I'd struggled at first, but then another tentacle, and then a few more, had come down to barb me, and now I felt very relaxed, indeed, now that we were out of the gust and into spatters of rain and a steadier gale.

I'd be lunch, I'd supposed at first, but now I'd rethought that as the blimpie carried me along instead of eating me. Maybe I was on my way to some nesting site where I'd be fed to youngsters? Maybe I was on my way to a blimpie cookout, where a whole flock of these things would dine on the rare Earthie?

You'd think I'd be terrified to have that thought. Instead, I was at peace. Some sedatives must have come out of those barbs, I realized, and that sounded just fine. I was calm, watching the scenery go by as the tentacles turned me so my head was forward and face down, seeing the bluffs and rocky beaches and then the wide-open water of the Great Bight.

So, I thought, this is how it ends. My grand plan to be the hero and rescue my sister Kait was about to end with me dying of my own stupid hubris on this alien world, leaving Kait alone and terrified in Whistle's compound. She'd never again see me, or her wife Sarah, or anyone or anything else on Earth.

It was tragic, and all of it my own damn fault. We'd been doing fine, young Treble and I, hiking the dark paved path of the Old Ones on our way to Whistle's compound to find Kait and escort her to safety. It had been perfect walking weather, as it usually is on S'hudon; cool with a mist and an occasional rain shower rolling in from the Great Bight to our left. The gray weather, the constant red-wined twilight, the dark green and purple hues of the ferns and mosses that were everywhere, the constant light buzz of the insects that hovered around us, the blimpies cruising slowly overhead, those large downward-looking eyes searching for food: these were the sort of things that made S'hudon what it was, constant and dark and full of wonders.

The path was ancient, Treble had explained to me, though it looked new. It had been paved a thousand years before with a kind of living macadam that grew when and where it needed to in order to repair itself. It even redirected itself when that was called for; which happened often enough, I guessed, as the bluffs wore away from the encroaching sea.

Was it alive? Was it intelligent? Treble laughed when I asked that, and said "Of

course, Uncle Peter! Everything the Old Ones left behind is alive and intelligent, haven't you noticed that?"

"Sure," I said, but that was a lie; I hadn't noticed anything of the sort. The Old Ones? He'd talked about them often enough, but I thought he meant his ancestors. Now I realized he meant something else entirely? Another race of things that were here first? A fallen civilization? Who knew? His saying that, though, changed how I saw this pavement under us. I hope it liked me.

The path brooked no intrusions from the grasses and bushes that were along it on either side, so the footing was sure as we walked this way and that, the path a winding one. We tugged the floater sled along behind us on its long leash. It was packed with our camping gear and food. We were roughing it.

We'd seen no one else as the kilometers slowly slipped away. There was a major roadway a few kilometers farther inland, and that road was a straight shot from S'hudon the capital and the place where they'd housed me, to East Song, the only other city in the entire archipelago. Surely that was how everyone traveled, in bigger, larger floaters that zipped along in a hurry, carrying people and freight to and fro, the imported beings and their imported products from six other worlds to S'hudon, the hub of the empire.

Whistle's compound lay not far from East Song, so it wasn't more than a three-hour trip between cities if you sledged it. But Treble and I were traveling the slow and scenic way because we had to. I had no tech, and Treble had disengaged his external links so he couldn't be traced or use his tech either, because that's what the Mother had demanded.

Yes, sure, we'd been given permission to attempt this rescue of Kait; but no, certainly not, we wouldn't have any help in getting it done. Twoclicks and the Mother couldn't appear to have anything to do with it, and no detectable tech could be used. So we were on our own and being stealthy, my little S'hudonni princeling and I. Or so we hoped.

The path was a good four or five meters wide and ran along the shore of the Great Bight as we headed west. It wound its way alongside small coves and atop headlands and through occasional stands of forest, weaving and curving with the terrain as it went. Occasionally the bluff lowered, and for a while the path would wander along the outside edge of the boulder-strewn beaches with their coarse, dark sand before again rising to fifty or even one hundred meters above the shore, often sweeping south for a while into one of those headlands, which we would round before getting back to the more direct path toward Whistle's compound.

It felt great, having the chance, at last, to do something, to take some action, get moving, go forward, happy to be out in the real wilds of Curved Island in the Great Sea Archipelago, walking along with the princeling Treble, heading, at last, toward the chance to rescue my sister Kait. On we go, I'd thought with a kind of glee.

At first, I'd been overwhelmed by the scenery. I'd seen none of this from my little faux village. But here! The dark wide leaves of the plants folded and unfolded, moving in the breeze to outwit the neighboring plants in the struggle for energy from the dim, red star that emerged now and again from the clouds and the mist. Treble kept naming things for me, whistling and clicking first in S'hudonni and then following that with an English translation. I was free to rename things as I chose, and he found that hilarious. I was, to Treble, almost always funny and cute. Back on Earth, the term for what he thought of me would have been "adorable."

I didn't feel adorable, but I did feel adventurous, out in the wild at last. There were bogs everywhere, watery and shallow, covered by an algae-looking plant that seemed to sense I was walking by, the tiny individual plants rushing together to form a single, table-sized dark green flat surface that then opened to let balloons fly free from within.

Near the far end of one of the larger bogs, we'd stopped so I could watch the first time this happened. A large pod of plants suddenly coalesced as we neared and out came small balloons, blown by the onshore breeze right toward us. They popped dramatically, and this time as a thousand tiny particles scattered to the breeze, some of them washed right over us.

There was the musty smell of decay after they burst. I panicked and tried to run out of the cloud, scrambling madly down the path and brushing myself as I went.

"Uncle Peter! Uncle Peter!" Treble shouted at me in English as he did his best to keep up. "Stop! Stop! They're harmless!"

I stopped.

He trilled a laugh. "Well, *almost* harmless," he said, "but sticky! After a while they begin to dig into the skin. You have to wash them off in water to get rid of them before they implant, and you have a thousand itchy seeds growing under your skin!"

He came over to take my hand, "Come on, Uncle Peter, we'll wash off." And he led me off the path, over to a small bluff that we'd found a way down on, and out onto the grainy dark sand of the beach and then out into the water, stripping as we walked.

That was easy for Treble, who stepped out of his footwear, dropped his kilt, shrugged off his tunic and waddled into the water. Me, with laces to loosen and a belt to unbuckle and buttons to undo, took a little longer. Both of us carried our clothing into the sea with us.

The water was clear and cold and salty, just about like the water back home in Florida during a rare winter cold snap. I guessed it was about ten or twelve Celsius, which was bracing, indeed. But after diving in and then standing in the shallows and then ducking my head under the waves that came in, I adjusted and stayed for a few minutes, long enough to rub my face and hands and hair, anywhere those tiny seed pods might have fallen.

Then I rinsed out my shoes and clothes and waded back ashore. Treble was already there, waiting for me.

"Good job, Uncle Peter!" he said with his usual enthusiasm. "Those seeds can't live in salt water, so we're fine!"

We'd left the sled behind up on the path, so I stood there, naked, and slowly turned to let the sea breeze blow me dry. The day was dark and chilly and damp, but dry me it did, and not long after that the two of us, the princeling Treble and your faithful correspondent, walked back up the beach, barefoot, put our wet clothes on, then sat on boulders to brush the sand off our feet and put our shoes (and damp socks, for me) on and squished our way back to the path.

Before we got there it started raining again, cold spatters against a trembling me, shivering in the wet, and Treble—built to handle wet and cold—laughed and said he'd make camp for the night for us once we got off the bog.

We hurried past the burst balloons and on up a slight rise that led into a small stand of treelike plants that stood three or four times my height as I walked through them. In ten minutes we reached the far side of the tiny woods, and the path dipped underneath us, back into marshland.

At that spot on the path at the back edge of a large bog was when I got another close look at the blimpies, these ones purely in the wild, where they clearly belonged: large, black, orca-shaped creatures that floated along some forty or fifty meters up. Occasionally one would drop down lower to feed, getting within a meter of the bogs where tentacles emerged from the bottom of the blimpie to reach down into the bog bushes and small trees to literally grab a bite, one of the small squirming animals that peeked out from the shadowed higher branches of the banyan-like trees, or the large purple fruit—the size of volleyballs—that hung down from those same branches.

The blimpies had two huge eyes right on the front of a flat snout and below that a

wide mouth that opened for the food brought to it from one tentacle or another, and below that the single lower eye. Back when I'd first seen them in the distance from the edge of the bluff near my village, I'd thought they were mechanical, some sort of floating communication device, maybe. Later, seeing them up close on the Mother's royal barge, I'd realized they were living things; plants or animals or something in-between. Here as we walked, I saw them going to and fro regularly. They moved in a leisurely fashion, drifting with the breeze or using a kind of oar that emerged from the bottom to steer or even propel them into the wind.

Treble said there were many stories about them and how smart they were, sheltering their sick or wounded, calling to each other. They were beautiful in their languid mystery, those huge things floating in the mist and light rain. I'd named them blimpies from the first time I'd seen them, and here that led me to a spate of naming as I walked along. The strange sandy soil that was underneath the carpet grass, a mix of small rocks and grainy sand, dark-hued like everything else, but with strange streaks of light blue running through it. Sea sand.

The animals that lived in caves at the base of the bluffs and ran out into the waves to catch a meal and then carried it back across the sea sand to their caves? They were quick. The size of beavers, maybe. A kind of mossy fur on them, that same deep purple color I saw in other things. Call them otters, or purple otters, or purple people-eaters. I'd pick one of those later.

And that had led me into silliness for a while: a jub-jub bird and a squirrel-looking thing that hopped like a frog: a bandersnatch. And a small, very ugly reptilian thing that lay on the path and refused to move, then squirted me on my pants-leg as I walked by. Urine, or some kind of weapon? There was no smell, but in a few minutes the blue of the denim pants began to fade to white. There was a small stream cascading over the bluff. I washed off the pant leg in the water and wrung out the leg and put the pants back on. Acid Test, I decided to call the thing.

I'd had a goal; I'd been intent on reaching Kait. Whistle was confined to the Mother's Home at the moment, in a kind of time-out. But how long would that last? If the Mother had sent us on our way, wasn't there some hurry-up involved? I thought so, and Treble agreed, so I tried not to ogle at the headland's view of the combers rolling in from the cold sea to beat against the sheer face of the bluffs below as the sea spray rose from the rocks. We went on, Treble and I, taking turns in the harness that tugged the mag sled behind us, its bottom a dozen centimeters or more above the pavement.

And then the weather changed. We'd been walking along the top of still another headland, and had rounded the corner to walk back toward the main shoreline, when I saw their red sun slowly emerging through the usual low, gray clouds, the wind picking up out of the south, and thunderheads, the first storm clouds I'd seen on S'hudon, building up above us in all directions.

"Big changes coming," said Treble, standing in the middle of the paved trail and looking up.

I wanted to keep going. I'd waited a whole lot of five-days for this chance to quietly find Kait and bring her back to my little village.

I'd grown fond of Treble. He, or him, or her, was a terrific, personable young princeling or princess or royal. He wouldn't have to decide on which of the three states-of-being he wanted as his primary for another year, when he reached productivity. At the moment, he was male, and what we would call a child. In a few ten-days, he thought he'd give the female side a try. It was the females who became Mothers, so that was choosing the path to the throne. He said he planned to give the royal state a try later, too, and that was choosing civic duty.

Treble was friendly, bright, energetic, and honest, which were none of the traits I'd

associated with the adult S'hudonni I knew, including both of Treble's fathers, Whistle and Twoclicks. They were royals, and I now knew what that meant. They were interested in power and leadership, and no longer interested in reproduction. They'd been there and done that, and Treble was the result.

I'd looked at Treble. Big changes coming? "A storm? How bad will it be?" I'd asked. It was always misty, cool, cloudy, and dark on S'hudon, so I was thinking a storm would be interesting, even fun if it didn't slow us down too much.

Treble nodded. "Like a hurricane of yours back on Earth, Uncle Peter," showing off how well he'd done his homework about matters Earthie. "They can be dangerous. We'll need to stay safe somewhere, and soon."

"Can't we just keep moving on through it, Treble?" I'd asked, thinking of some hurricanes I'd been through as a kid growing up on the Gulf Coast of Florida. Dangerous? Sure, some of them. But others, sometimes, were smaller, easier to contend with. And I didn't want to wait this one out unless I really had to. Waiting is something I'd done too much of during my time on S'hudon and now that I was here, doing something, getting close to Kait so I could bring her to safety, I wanted to press on. How long did we have before Whistle was released from his confinement and went back to his compound? And what would he do to Kait once he got there?

I very much wanted to avoid having to answer those questions. "Let's just go get her and get out of there," I said to Treble. "I'd like to just bundle up in rain gear when it starts to pour," I added, "and then we could push on through, right? It'll be fun."

"I don't think it will be fun, Uncle Peter; but I agree it might be important. Losing a whole day might be giving Whistle too much time," Treble said. "But these storms can be terrible, and this one looks like it's coming right at us. It could be very ugly."

"I'll be all right," I'd said, and, "I don't think so," he'd said firmly, "but if you insist, then I'll stay with you right through it, Uncle Peter."

And so he did, the two of us pushing into the rain and the wind that grew and grew in strength until we could barely make our way into it. At one point we'd been struggling as the path edged along the top of a steep bluff that looked out to an angry sea in the Great Bight. We were happy to get to a small woodland.

What passed for trees on S'hudon were about ten- to twelve-meter-tall plants with multiple fibrous trunks that wound around each other until at the top they spread out with large, wide, deep-purple leaves. Those exploding gourd-shaped seedpods hung down from the multiple trunks.

The trees swayed in the gale, but also dampened it so we could keep moving. Then, when we emerged on the far side into another low-lying bog that bumped up nearly to the cliff edge, the wind increased steeply. I'd put my head down and trudged on, tugging the sled along behind me, with Treble in front.

I heard a shout from Treble and saw him point toward the sky. I looked there, and there was a deep-black funnel cloud emerging from a low deck of clouds just ahead of us. "Back! Back!" Treble was yelling as he turned toward me.

But it was too late. The funnel danced across the bog toward us, and then met us. I reached for Treble, who'd lost his footing and was sliding by me; but I couldn't get to him and then I watched in horror as he rose and then rose again and then went spinning out over the cliff edge toward the distant riot of the open sea.

I'd been next, lifted by the vortex even as I hung onto the sled. A few seconds later the strap broke, and I was free of the sled and carried toward the water myself, flailing toward certain death when the tentacles of the blimpie wrapped me tightly and carried me off into the nothing. Why had the blimpie grabbed me? I supposed it saw in me a very large meal, though that didn't seem to fit the mold of what Treble had told me.

Once the sedation took hold, I lay there with time to wonder how Treble was doing as the blimpie shook and trembled in the wind. I seemed to have plenty of calm

time to think about Treble, who was, after all, the only friend I had on this strange world. He was a tough kid, I figured, and if he landed in the water he'd be all right.

And then I thought of Kait, and wondered how she would manage without me. I'd spent my life trying to help Kait deal with a world full of problems and challenges, and I'd promised her often that I'd always be there to help. Bad friends and worse drugs had almost done Kait in several times as she'd gone through the dark cycle of being lost, then found and happy, and now lost again, an unthinkable distance from home and hearth. Through it all, I'd been there for her. But not this time.

The blimpie trembled again and headed down toward a cliff edge of the bluff with its beach below, huge rock outcrops on coarse sand. The squall line and the funnel cloud were well past us now as we passed over that bluff edge, and the rain that hit us was blinding and pushed us down and out toward the sea. But now there was lightning as a huge bolt nearly hit us with a massive crack of thunder. Then another crashing bolt and then another still as we neared the water and then, just when I thought perhaps I felt us begin to bank toward the sandy beach and safety, there came a blinding light and I felt the tentacles lose their grip on me and I was falling toward the stormy sea and that bouldered shore where huge waves were crashing. I'd be dead soon. I felt sorry for myself and for Treble and especially for Kait, who'd believed my promise that I'd always be there for her. Not this time. Too bad.

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Chapter Five

There is a name for everything: the air, the clouds, the plants, the things like trees, the buzzing and the flying and the soaring things, the crawling things, the leaping things, the things like grass and the things like mud, and the water and the bog and the rivers and, when they reached it at the end of the first day, the sea. These things and a thousand more have names, whistles, and clicks that rise or fall and come fast or slow or repeating or not. And Kait is learning them. One by one, she is learning.

Earlier, Smiles enjoyed pointing all these things out to Kait as they rode along on the Mother's sled. The path went for kilometers along a canal, and then along a river, and then they reached the sea. The weather was as the weather always was, cool and foggy and an occasional light rain, the red sun not often visible; but Smiles said she could feel a change in the air, something different.

No one had followed them yet, so perhaps Whistle hadn't sought vengeance after all, or wasn't yet back to his compound and in charge. But they were on their way now, so on they went, not bothered by the buzzing insects that swarmed around them.

When they reached the sea, they had to leave the path, and since the sled only floated over paths of the Old Ones, they tied it off in a shed that was there for that purpose, and walked on down to the sea. The beach was narrow, with the steep bluff behind them and a slate beach with one stretch of sand at the far end where the beach ended as it curved out into the water. That was where they headed, and that was where the tiny village that Smiles came from sat huddled up against the base of the bluff. There were a couple of dozen homes, each with a door above the waterline and an inside door right into the water, as well.

Smiles introduced Kait to the villagers; most were related to Smiles: a wide range of what Kait would call fathers and aunts and uncles and cousins and brothers and sisters. Watching over all these introductions with a benevolent smile was the village elder, the leader, the mayor, the arbitrator, the calm voice of reason: The Mother. The one who'd rescued them.

None of the villagers had ever personally met any creature from any of the planets in the S'hudonni Empire. In fact, village life seemed completely divorced from the

empire and its reach to Earth and Downtone and Harmony and Melody and the rest of the planets in the Six.

Kait was fascinated by what she found there. The living seemed communal, with the Mother's opinion the one that mattered. Smiles explained that there were many Mothers; each village had one. But all of S'hudon was ruled by the one Mother Over All. She was the parent of both Twoclicks and Whistle and even of their child, Treble.

Kait saw no farming going on, not even small gardens, so it was the sea that provided the food, and responsibility for gathering that food seemed equally shared.

There was a screen that floated in the Mother's home, showing the same impenetrable mix of images and sounds that Kait had seen back in her apartment in Whistle's compound. She saw it there when she was introduced to the Mother, and managed to impress the Mother and the others with her language skills.

Kait and Smiles rested there, and slept, and ate. The raw fish had been cut for her, and the seaweed—if that's what it was—was prepared as a bed for the diced fish that had a light sauce poured over it. It was delicious and filling; but Kait wondered how her body had been changed during her quarantine after her arrival so that she could safely eat alien food on an alien world. The food she'd been eating in her captivity had been Earthie in style. She had assumed it had been imported for her and that Peter was probably eating the same sort of food wherever he was.

She felt safe here. No one seemed worried about anyone coming after them, or concerned about anything much at all, really, except the weather. The Mother warned them a storm was coming and that they should stay safely in the village for a day or two while it blew over. And so Smiles and Kait made plans to do that, with Smiles putting together a kind of bed for Kait in the same hut where she would be. The S'hudonni seemed to sleep lightly and not often, preferring frequent short naps to long stretches of sleep; but Kait didn't know if this was related to their aquatic lifestyle or their locked star that sat forever on the horizon, never rising or falling, a permanent late afternoon.

The bed looked comfortable, but Kait wanted to take one more look at this remarkable place before sleeping, so she wandered outside, alone, to stand on the shingled beach and try to capture in her own memory what it looked like here, what it smelled like and how the air and the mist tasted and felt like on her arms and her face as she walked along. The buzzing insects were there, as always, sharing her walk with her.

As she strolled along the sky brightened, still dark hues of green and purple and reds, but brighter than usual. Then, there was a strangely clearing sky, much brighter, and the sun emerged in all its rouge glory.

It seemed wonderful. Kait stood atop a boulder on that beach and stretched out her arms to embrace the rare appearance. The wind was from the shore and pushing the water out to sea, flattening the waves. The beach was widened, and there were stranded fish squirming in the sand and small pools of water left behind.

And then she felt the wind begin to shift, a big change and a sudden one, taking place in just a few minutes, nearly a one-eighty. And the breeze was something warmer and easier to embrace than the usual cold chill. She took off the jacket she was wearing and laid it down on the boulder, then sat down on it to put her hands down behind her and lean back so she could close her eyes and feel the sun on her face. That, and the warm wind, reminded her for a few precious moments of her youth in Florida, on warm beaches with a hot, bright yellow sun.

Somewhere out there in the Gulf, Peter was snorkeling, looking for sand dollars or crabs out past the first sandbar, where the water was a little deeper. Mom was behind her, sitting in the shade of that big umbrella and reading a book while she kept an eye

on her children. Father, a pediatrician, was off at his important work, like always.

Kait's mask was next to her, and her snorkel and her fins. She stood up, kicked over the half-hearted sandcastle she'd been building, grabbed the fins and mask and snorkel, and ran into the water, shouting at her brothers, "Hey, wait up!" and then splashing into the shallow water, then wading deeper, then slipping on the fins and spitting into the mask and swishing around the spit on the glass so it wouldn't fog up and diving in, putting the snorkel mouthpiece between her teeth and giving one good blow out to clear it and then off she went, catching up with Tom and Peter until the three of them swam together between the two sandbars, checking out the crabs and sand dollars and pockets of seaweed with the minnows darting around. Warm and wet and thoroughly wonderful, those shallow waters.

It had been a lovely childhood, no question, until Father ruined it, ruined everything. Trust broken. Faith destroyed.

Kait had grown up on a small barrier island that had been the southern tip of Long Key until Hurricane Edna had come through before she was born and opened the pass between their part of the key and the larger, main island. Some sort of long, involved political tussle came after that as the city, the county, the state, and the federal government all fought over building a bridge. The short-term solution to that now-isolated part of the key was a flat-bottom car ferry that could handle a half-dozen cars at a time, along with foot passengers. The crossing took ten minutes, and the whole thing was so popular that the bridge never got built, the ferry service expanded to two larger ferries during the spring season, to handle the tourists as well as the locals. New restaurants and bars opened to cater to the tourist trade, and the water was clear and the sun was shining and the Holman kids grew up happy on one small island that was connected by ferry to a larger island that had bridges to the nearby city, and that wasn't a bad way to grow up. They kayaked in the mangroves on the bay side, played on the beach on the Gulf side with their mother sitting under a beach umbrella with a book in her hands as she kept a loose eye on her three children on that mile-long stretch of sugary sand.

There were problems, but Kait and her brothers weren't aware of them. Climate and politics and oil spills and dying manatees and all the rest were worrisome, but not to the Holman kids. They enjoyed life, and they weren't worried about the rising tides of trouble.

And then there was Father. In her sophomore year of high school it all fell apart, and Father was the principal horror of that awful year. What he did was terrible, and it cost Kait dearly.

That was when she ran, the first of several times she fled from trouble. She made some bad decisions while she was deep into the turmoil and depression that pursued her, and those decisions followed her for years. Even being here, trapped on this strange planet a zillion miles from home; even this was better than what she was then. The classic progression, from partying and forgetting to deeply hooked. It really only took a month or two, and then it lasted off and on for, god, almost ten years. She threw off the shackles any number of times in that decade, and then went right back and put them on again, trying for that blessed relief. It was strange, really, that she survived at all.

She wrote off Father and Mom, didn't want to hear from them, didn't need or want anything to do with them. They were the problem, and they'd written her off, so she'd returned the favor. Only Peter, big brother Peter, was on her side through all of that. He was the one who'd stayed in touch with smarty vids back and forth. He was the one who'd helped her get to and through a couple of rehabs, he was the one who had saved her life in Santa Fe that time when she was up to the gills in an OD and she'd called him and passed out and the EMTs came because Peter, off in Dublin playing

pro basketball, had made the call and gave them her number so they could GPS it and find her and, no shit, save her life.

More recently, he was the one to come and visit when she'd found real love at last with Sarah, and a real life with her, with a real job. He was there, Peter. She owed him, big time. She loved him fiercely.

She'd been told by Smiles that Peter was trying to come get her. That didn't surprise her a bit. That was her big brother.

And she hadn't needed him! She'd constructed her own damn rescue!

There was a lot of whistling going on. She came out of her daydream and saw Smiles coming up toward her waving, whistling some kind of warning, pointing at the sky. Kait turned to look and there, out to sea, was a squall line, dark and green with waterspouts, a line of them, dropping down into the water. Behind it there was a wave, a big one, coming their way. The word came to her: seiche. That was why the water had receded, pulled away by the wind and then, when it shifted, back the water came, a kind of tsunami. It would wash all the way up this small beach, and maybe halfway up the bluff.

It was headed their way, and coming fast. Kait scrambled down off the boulder and ran toward Smiles. When she got to her, Kait turned around once more to look at the squall line and the waterspouts and that wave, and it all was coming, too fast.

She looked around. All the S'hudonni were gone, into their homes and into the water pools. They could stay down for hours, they'd be fine under the water, swimming back and rebuilding when it all passed by.

But Smiles had stayed with Kait, who couldn't hold her breath for more than a couple of minutes at best. Kait had to climb. Smiles went with her, trying to get to the bluff and get up it before the squall line and then the wave hit them.

Together the two of them ran toward the bluff: a hundred meters, fifty, and then they were onto the switchback path that led to the top and away from that wave. The squall line caught them about halfway up, and as it turned out that was just high enough.

* * *

Chapter Six

The insects were buzzing around me again, five or ten of them swooping in to check me out and then swooping back out when they realized I was not something they were interested in biting or laying eggs in or sucking blood from.

I was firmly stuck, and it occurred to me that I could die here. I would die here, in fact, if someone didn't come help me. The tide was coming in, and I was keeping an eye on that, though I didn't think it would reach as far as the boulders where I was trapped. A day, at least, had gone by since that wave had placed me here, and wedged my right arm between the boulders. It was hard to tell how long it had been under S'hudon's red, still star. Strangely, the clouds had cleared again and that sun was out. I'd been on this planet for more than a month, and where I lived I'd never seen more than hour or two of clear sky in total. And now, along this coastline, I'd seen clear days twice, with that massive storm in between.

It had clouded over and rained on me twice, the first time before I'd realized how hopeless things were—I'd been thinking someone would come by to help me soon—and so I'd welcomed the rain and looked up at the rain to hold my mouth open and get some raindrops. But I hadn't thought to capture any of it, and when the shower ended it wasn't long before my thirst returned and I had no water. I had it everywhere, of course, but not a drop to drink.

There were indentations on the top of the one boulder I could reach with my left

hand, so I brushed one of those clear of pebbles and debris so I had a shallow depression in the rock that might hold some rainwater. Then I used my finger to open up a few paths in the mossy surface that might, if I was lucky, give the raindrops a tiny streambed to follow to lead to the cupped area I'd cleaned out.

Spending ten or fifteen minutes doing that exhausted me, but took my mind a bit off the deep ache from my elbow. After resting for a minute or two I tried once again to pull my right arm free and the pain was immediate and terrible. Something was broken in there, for sure; maybe crushed. I felt faint with the pain and started to collapse against the boulder, and that raised the agony to a level I didn't know it could go. Incredible shooting pains, like someone was cutting through my arm just above the elbow with a very dull blade.

If I stood straight and held that arm and elbow in just the right way I could get the pain to ease. It wasn't gone, it wasn't even tolerable, really. But it was the best I could do.

I started shouting again, yelling "Help! I need help!" over and over again until my voice gave out. At some point, I hoped, some S'hudonni would hear me; but I knew the odds weren't good.

I waved away some insects. I croaked out another "Help me, please," but it wasn't very loud. I didn't have the voice for that. With that big red sun shining down and a suspiciously warm breeze blowing again I was hot, and thirsty, and in pain. I felt a drop of rain, then more. I looked up—even that motion bringing sharp knives of pain again—and saw one dark cloud scudding by, a rain shower falling from it. Please let it rain, please let my tiny reservoir fill so I could quench my thirst. Please let some S'hudonni hear me and save me. Please. Please.

The rain picked up the pace and for ten minutes or so I was cool and wet, my head up and my tongue out to catch a few drops. When the shower ended my little plan had worked and there was a pool of rainwater on the top of the boulder. I sipped from it. The boulder had trapped me, but now was giving me water.

This was a perfect example of the S'hudonni paradox: promise always held peril in equal measure, and it had right from the beginning of this little adventure.

Time passed. One hour or ten hours later—who could tell?—I was licking the bowl dry on the boulder, that little reservoir of rainwater gone so only some moisture remained, when I heard some splashing from the sea. Painfully, I turned to look. It was Marina, beautiful Marina, emerging from the waves to walk on the beach toward me, holding a gray pitcher of water in one hand and a sturdy piece of driftwood in the other. "Peter!" she yelled, and held up the pitcher for me to see.

My coterie of insects buzzed off and zoomed toward her. She smiled at them and then came within a few meters of me, insects trailing. "Peter, what a mess you're in," she said.

I knew I was hallucinating, I'd fallen in love with Marina a trillion miles ago, back on Earth, back in my basketball days, when I'd been the off-guard for the Dublin Rovers. I'd met her in the Prado in Madrid, seen her again in the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, and then later she'd come to visit me in Dublin. I'd fallen hard for her. It was one of those things where you know in the first few minutes that this is the one, this is forever. She was beautiful, intelligent, strong. I couldn't believe a woman like that could care for me at all, much less love me.

And then she'd left Dublin to go home to Madrid, and I'd never heard from her again. No response to my messages and calls. I went to her apartment in Madrid on a crazy off-day expedition from Dublin, and she didn't live there and never had. She could not be found. She'd been too good to be true and I knew it and, finally, a long time later, I got over it.

And now here she was. On S'hudon, leaning over me with the pitcher in her hand to splash some cold water on my face and to let me drink my fill. She leaned down to

kiss my chapped lips and said, "I've missed you, Peter," and then added, "but, really, I think it's time."

"Time for what?" I asked her. Death, I assumed she'd say. Time to give up. Relax. Accept it.

She set the driftwood next to me and said, "Really, Peter. It's time," and she reached out to touch my cheek and then turned and walked away. I wept. I knew I was dying. I slumped down against the boulder, and howled with the pain that tore through me with that effort.

How long had it been? I'd lost track completely. Hours? Days? It seemed hot to me, the sand on my feet as hot as the beach I'd grown up on in a slowly drowning Florida, rising water eating away at the shoreline year by year, and the heat and humidity rising and rising again. I wondered if I'd ever go back there, and then answered that to myself. Not bloody likely.

It rained again, filled up my little pool on the top of the boulder. It's time, it's time. I swatted at the insects. Missed them all, of course.

I drank. I stood. The clouds and mist were back. I understood what Marina had told me. It was time for me.

It was going to be terribly painful. The boulders lay on sand. If I lowered myself as much as I could and ignored the searing pain that came with that, I could use that piece of driftwood that Marina had left me and I could dig out the sand behind the boulder and to my left. I tried it, gasping with pain, but able to get the end of the branch into the sand beneath the boulder. I poked and scraped, a cupful of sand or so at a time, pushing it back and out of the way, digging out that loose sand from beneath the boulder, small handfuls of it at a time, but making progress.

This went on for a long time. Too long. I stopped and drank the last of the water from the top of the boulder. A thick fog was rolling in from the sea. I stood. I braced myself with my back against one boulder and my feet against the one I hoped to move. The pain from that trapped right arm was dreadful and demanding. It wanted me to quit. But Marina said it was time, so I pushed with my feet. Nothing. Pushed again, nothing. I stopped, returning to digging out the sand. Returned to pushing with my feet. Did that again. And again. Excruciating pain. And then, at last, some movement. Just a hint of the boulder moving, but I screamed in excitement, "Yes! Yes! Goddamnit, yes! Move, you son of a bitch! Move!" And it did again, a centimeter, then two. I tried pulling out my trapped right arm and it moved, too! Not free yet, but it had moved. I returned to pushing and then, at last, the boulder seemed to sigh and admit defeat, and rolled a good five centimeters. My arm was free. I saw blood oozing from it, a lot of it, too damn much of it. I collapsed onto the sand and sat there, in terrible pain, watching as the blood oozed, and I knew that after all that pain and all that effort, I would die here on this beach. I yelled, "Help me. Please!" and then screamed that again and then I lay back and closed my eyes and waited for the pain to end.

And then felt a hand on my cheek, and hands on my arm, and felt water being poured, a tiny bit of it at a time, into my mouth. I opened my eyes to see who my savior was. Treble, I bet.

But it was Kait, my sister to the rescue. Sweet Kait. "It's okay, Peter, I'm here," she said. "You'll be fine. I'm here."

I thought I was hallucinating again; or, more likely, I was dead. And I was all right with that, really, but did that mean Kait was dead, too? I'd failed to help her, then. My One Good Thing and I'd failed at that.

Well, too bad. I closed my eyes and drifted off.

* * *

Chapter Seven

Kait and Smiles had to wait a full day before the storm was finally done with them. They'd found a cave near the top of the bluff, though maybe cave was too grand a term for the indentation in the soft clay. It went into the bluff for about four or five meters and it angled slightly to the right, so that got them out of the wind and the rain, at least.

Kait knew that they'd be leaving soon when Smiles left the cave, walked on down to the beach, and swam out to get them both a meal. Smiles had packed some Earthie heat-and-eat packages, but wanted Kait to taste the real thing. That's what all those nano injections were for when she'd first arrived.

Smiles brought back two eel-like creatures, each a good meter long, and told Kait that they were delicacies. Kait was hungry enough to not question that idea, though the eel-like things were repulsive to look at, covered in a kind of mucus with a greenish tinge to it. They had large oval eyes that dripped the same mucus, and nasal slits that did the same. They looked long, thin, and awful. But they tasted fine, and she felt better for having eaten one of them, chewy and slimy though it was.

An hour later they'd put together some backpacks full of food and water and rain gear and said goodbye to the villagers and, especially, to the Mother. Then they were on their way, walking up the switchback path to the top of the bluff, where they found the paved path, and Kait marveled at seeing it dry and clear. How was that done? She whistled that question to Smiles, who whistled back that no one knew, that the Old Ones had left behind many things that everyone used without really knowing how they worked.

And so the conversation about the Old Ones took up the next couple of hours as Smiles and Kait walked the path, knowing that if they kept on it long enough they'd reach Peter's village. There was a lot to talk about: the screamships, the buildings, the travel beds, the guides who changed shapes, the power units and all the rest of the technology left behind.

Would the Old Ones come back for all their things one day? Kait asked the question, but Smiles didn't know. No one knew. It occurred to Kait that the S'hudonni had been pretty lucky to stumble into this treasure hoard. They didn't seem all that capable on their own. The only really competent S'hudonni she knew of was Smiles.

Somehow the path stayed dry even as it wound through flooded bogs and then through wet, decimated woods. The very first woods they came to had been flattened by the storm, especially on its outer ring that had faced that ferocious wind. Farther in, the crush of fallen trees finally eased, and a few stronger trees had survived upright. Farther still and the survival rate looked much better, with most of the older and stronger trees still standing. The trees all seemed to be made of intertwined trunks that wound their way to a canopy of broad dark leaves at the top, with some of those exploding seed pods hanging from parts of one trunk or another. The paved path was clear of debris all the way through the woods, as if the fallen trees had been careful to avoid blocking the path. And on the bog lands the path seemed to rise as necessary to stay slightly atop the shallow water they crossed. Within a day or two, she supposed, much of the water might drain away, but for now it would be impossible going if not for the path.

As she had done before the storm had hit them, Smiles kept parting ways with Kait, heading off on her own when the path wound close to the sea and then swimming forward to reconnect with Kait two or three kilometers down the road.

This gave Kait plenty of time to remember, to think and to plan as she walked. The good times and the bad, growing up on the beach in hot and steamy Florida, so very

different from this cold and wet coast that she walked along now. If this all worked out like it was supposed to and they reached Peter's village and he was there and everything was fine, then she would finally tell him the truth of things. Just how bad it had been when she was fourteen and her father had come into her room, drunk.

Seeing Peter here—a zillion miles away from their Florida home and all the evil she associated with that—would make it easier to finally get rid of those things she'd held inside all these years. Only Sarah—wonderful Sarah back in Pasadena, in California, on Earth, so far from here—knew the whole horrid story.

That was all too depressing to deal with. Here she was free and walking along on an alien world, with a friend who was about as different as a friend could be, and on her way to see her brother, and together, the two of them, they would, eventually, go home. She'd get there. She'd be with Sarah, in their little house on Oak Street, just off Demeter. Life would be good again. She promised herself that. Heck, Smiles could come visit, she and Sarah would get along great.

And then she swatted at the inevitable insects that had followed them all the way from Whistle's compound and were back again within a couple of hours of the storm ending, buzzing around her but never landing, never biting. She was too different for them, she guessed, and laughed at that thought. Too different, that was her.

By the third time Kait reconnected with Smiles, Kait was getting tired and asked Smiles about their taking a break for a while to eat and rest; so at the next flattened forest they got into the middle of the woods, in a place where at least half the trees were still standing, and settled down on the path to rest.

Smiles' backpack was more of a carry pouch that slung over her left shoulder and bumped against her right hip. It was capacious, and now she was happily digging into it to find something special for Kait: some Earth-style bread that it didn't seem possible for her to have found in that village, and some salted seafood. And then they talked, the two of them, in a kind of Shunglish that they'd stumbled into, a combination of English and S'hudonni that didn't convey much information, but they both found hilarious. It was a good, pleasant hour, and then Smiles let Kait have another hour for a nap and they were off, an odd pair to be best friends, but that's what it was, friendship, thought Kait as she walked alone, mostly, while Smiles did her swimming.

It was three such stops later that Smiles heard something. They had met on a spot where the low boglands edged right up to the beach for a kilometer or more. Smiles was sitting on the Old Ones' path waiting for Kait, who emerged from a distant woods and followed the path as it slowly angled toward the beach and then started climbing up the next hill that made for another bluff overlooking the beach. Smiles, as she often did, walked along for a while, climbing the hill with Kait. Eventually, she'd take the path down the bluff. The path wound along the very edge of the bluff, offering impressive views of the rocky beach below and the Great Bight, open water seeming to stretch away into the distance forever, though ultimately, Kait now knew, that sea grew warm and then terribly hot on the sunstruck, unlivable side of the planet. Go far enough in the other direction and there was nothing but the frozen wasteland of a perpetual ice cap that covered about one-third of the planet.

The weather was cloudy and cool, misty but with no real rain, and a light breeze coming in from the water to rise up over the bluff and ease its way past Kait and Smiles. Pleasant for walking, really. They were talking about that, about how nice the weather was by S'hudonni standards, when Smiles stopped and held up her hand to ask Kait, "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"It can't be," Smiles said, "but it certainly sounded like a cry for help. In English."

It took Kait a second to process that, and then she stopped in her tracks. "In

English?" That didn't make any sense at all. There were only two Earthies on the whole planet. Peter!

She ran to the edge of the bluff, Smiles right behind her. They looked down to the base of the small cliff and the beach beyond and could see it covered in detritus from the storm. There was a small travel sled upended, empty, wedged into some boulders at the base of the low cliff on the far side. The waves must have washed right up to the bluff.

And there, nearly at the footpath that led from the beach up to where they stood, was someone, yelling and waving. Peter. Peter! "We're coming!" she screamed into the wind, and started running, scrambling, tumbling in her hurry to get down the path, which had two switchbacks to navigate. Smiles did her best, but lagged behind.

It wasn't more than a couple of minutes before Kait reached the bottom and could see Peter there. He was sitting next to two large boulders on the beach, leaning back against one of them, his right arm soaked in blood. She ran to him, kneeled next to him and took a little of her fresh water and splashed it on his face, put a few drops into his mouth.

His eyes opened. "It's okay, Peter. I'm here," she said. "You'll be fine. I'm here."

"Kait," he said, mumbling. "Thank god."

* * *

Chapter Eight

Kait's S'hudonni friend, Smiles, brought me out of the cold and wet and into a shallow cave in the bluff, and then after I asked if they'd found Treble, Smiles left to search for any sign of the princeling. It seemed an impossible task, but she wanted to try.

While Smiles was gone, Kait began telling me her whole, long story of being kidnapped and waking up on S'hudon, in the firm grasp of the deadly Whistle. And Whistle, she said, was likely out looking for them right now.

I told her my side of the Whistle story, about his attempted coup and how the Mother had him in detention for a few days.

"So he could be free by now, right?" she asked, and I had to nod, yes, he sure could be.

We both knew we had to get moving, so while she was talking, Kait had wrapped my banged-up knee and bandaged my right arm enough to stop the bleeding, and then rigged up a sling for me before propping me up against the back wall, so that I could see out the cave mouth opening to the coarse sand and boulders on the beach and the gray sea and gray sky beyond. We'd get going as soon as Smiles was back.

Smiles was back after a bit, and then the two of them made sure I was hydrated and dosed up with the meds and food that Smiles had brought along for Kait, some naproxen and a lot of fresh water and some self-heat Earthie ham sandwiches, and I said I was ready to give it a try. I thought maybe I could walk out with them, getting back on the Old Ones's path and taking us all to my little fake village of Holmanville and the safety it held for us all, protected as it was by Twoclicks. I could hope we'd find Treble there. He was my friend, and my guide, and my mentor despite his apparent youth. Plus, he was the son of Twoclicks and Whistle and so the heir to the throne. So I stood up—pretty damn shaky, to be honest—and started hobbling toward the cave mouth.

But I couldn't do it. At the moment, the knee hurt the most. I'd twisted something in there badly, and the knee hadn't been any good since I tore it up playing pro basketball for the Rovers, trying to penetrate the big men and dish it out. Now it was

really ruined, ACL? MCL? God, whatever. I couldn't put any weight on that leg at all.

Smiles clicked and whistled at Kait when I tried and failed, and Kait came over to me, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, "Don't be stupid, Peter. You're not capable of walking right now, so just sit back down."

That seemed like a command from my sister, probably the first one she'd issued me since we were kids on the beach together and she'd tell me to behave myself when I came near her sandcastle.

I sat back down and listened as Smiles and Kait did a lot of whistling and clicking back and forth, with a few words in English tossed into the mix: "sled," and "quicker" and "tent" were what I heard popping up in that animated conversation.

"You're pretty damn fluent, Kaitie," I said to her when they paused.

She just smiled at me and said, "Here's what we're going to do, Peter. We found a small sled stuck into the sand and rocks. Smiles has pulled it out and walked it up to the top of the cliff edge. She says it's empty, but it works fine on the path, so you and I will get you onto that and head toward your village and some help.

"Smiles, though, will move much faster in the water than we all will on land, so she's leaving in a few minutes to swim along the coast toward that same place. She's left us the camping gear, including a nice little tent that will do fine for us. We'll all meet up on the path, near Holmanville. If she gets there first—and that's likely—she'll get help and they'll come on the path toward us. The sooner we can get you into a suitable medcot the better."

"That's fine," I said, "but what about Treble?"

"Smiles will leave a message for him here, then while she's in the water she'll keep an ear and an eye out for any sign of Treble. They talk well through the water, you know, Peter, like the whales do back home. If Treble is out there and clicking, she'll find him. Oh, and we'll do the same as we take the path."

"Treble is what matters," I said, and was about to offer some thoughts on how we could walk the beaches instead of the path, but Kait wasn't paying any attention to me. She'd already turned away to have another quick conversation with Smiles, who nodded her head yes in a very deliberate Earth bit of communication aimed at me, I'm sure.

Then she came over, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, "I will get help, Peter. You stay with your sister, all right?"

"Sure," I said, "I'm feeling better all the time." Which wasn't quite true, but I managed to get to my feet again to show off my mobility. The arm hurt like hell, but there was plenty of naproxen, and moving toward safety and some medical attention seemed better than sticking it out here in this cold, damp cave.

"You'll feel better as soon as we can get you back to Twoclicks' staff," Smiles said. "I'm sure they have a medcot with Earthie settings on it for you."

I nodded my agreement. Hell, I'd just slow things down. So I watched as Smiles reached into a pouch she was wearing around her waist, pulled out a small device to hold in her hand, and then left the cave and headed off down the beach. I watched as she spoke to the device, unfolded it like an umbrella, and stuck it into the sand next to the boulder where I'd been trapped. Then she waded into the water for a few moments, dived forward and was instantly gone from sight, heading out to get help, or find Treble, or both.

Me, I held Kait's hand as we left the cave, walked along the sand toward the switchback path that wound its way up the bluff and there, at the top, the path of the Old Ones. There we got the battered floater going. I sat down on it as Kait walked ahead of me, towing it. It was the very one that almost killed me, of course, so there was a certain irony to using it now to save my sorry ass. And off we went, walking back to Holmanville, a place I never thought I'd miss, but right then was anxious

to reach. Home, sweet home.

Walking along with my sister, I tried to think about anything other than the ache in my right arm and the sharp, breathtaking stab of pain when I tried to adjust the sling. I felt feverish and weak. But I was glad to be alive and able to talk with her. I just wished that we'd already found our way to that promised medcot where I could sleep as the thing healed me.

But the whole point of the exercise had been to not have an electronic footprint, and Kait said that was true for them, too. So I sat there, and occasionally got off to stretch my legs and try to walk along, using my good arm to wave off the inevitable buzzing insects, that hovered around all the time, rain or shine, though "shine" wasn't anything we were going to see again anytime soon. The weather had returned to its stable, misty, dark gray, light-rain self. It was warm enough, fourteen or fifteen Celsius, which was great for walking as long you could ignore the damp. I was getting good at that after all those ten days on the planet..

I never lasted long on foot, so we'd pause as I sat back down and got as comfortable as I could, then we'd press on until at last, hours later, Kait declared it time for some sleep and rest and we went inland for a few hundred meters, off the path and into a wooded upland. Above us, always were blimpies drifting by, feeding off the swamps and the treetops.

Yes, we were concerned about Whistle and his pursuit of us, but we both needed some rest, me especially. I assumed that if Whistle had been released on schedule from his time-out confinement in the Mother's home, he'd be under the same constraints as us, no tech weapons. They would take him to his compound and there he would find out about Kait's escape and, if he lived up to his reputation, he'd be on the path and headed our way as soon as he could. He wouldn't mind staying completely no tech, since that would allow him to get away with murder, literally.

So he was, perhaps right now, on this same path, behind us and coming our way. It that wasn't the case, we'd already be captured or dead, right? But we had to steal an hour or two for sleep. So we made camp, a pretty comfortable one courtesy of the magic unfolding tent that Smiles had left with us.

I was dreading trying to use my right arm in any useful way to hurriedly set up the camp when Kait told me not to worry, she had it all under control, even in the rain. She pulled a small black box about the size of an old hardcover book out of her backpack and pressed a black dot on the top of the box and stepped back to watch the tent unfold. It unfolded by itself again and again, larger with each unfolding, turning itself into a dry, comfortable tent with a padded floor and a space big enough for two to sit or lie in and tall enough for Kait, at least, to stand. The unfolding took two or three minutes, and then Kait pulled back the flap and we both crawled in, grateful to be dry. Let it rain!

I sat on the cushioned floor of the tent, my back against one sidewall, my legs out in front of me. There was no way the left knee was going to bend enough for me to sit any other way, and we had no chairs; even the backpack wasn't big enough to serve as one. I didn't care, we were out of the wind and rain, there was hot food and cold water and I wouldn't have to step out into the nasty weather except to relieve myself. I promised myself to hang on and only do that once.

The light mist had hardened into a good rain and was threatening to turn into a real downpour as we hung our outer clothes up to dry. It took another few minutes for Kait to pull out the heat-and-eat Earthie meals and pull the heat tabs on them, and then we were quite comfortable, thanks.

We ate, Kait talking about the raw fish and slimy eels she'd eaten with Smiles when they'd visited the village that Smiles was from. "Better than you'd think," she said with a smile. "But mucus is mucus, you know?"

I laughed my first laugh in a long time, and that led us both into some silly cackling that lasted a minute or two, the safety of our current situation relieving the tension we'd both felt building for days, maybe years. I was here. Kait was here. We were safe.

When we calmed down from the giggles, I told her this reminded me of the camping we'd done as kids, back on our little island, the three of us; Kait, me, and Tom.

"Good days," Kait said, "the three of us in that tent that Mom bought for the family camping trip that never happened. Remember how complicated it was to set that tent up? Took the three of us an hour, I bet. Mom had to come out from the house and finally figure it out."

"Yep," I said. "Not like this Taj Mahal we're in here."

"And we have flashlights!" she said, and I laughed again. Back in that Florida past we'd forgotten the flashlights when we set it up, so the three of us ran inside the house to get a couple and Mom had just finished baking cookies for us and one thing led to another, so we wound up back in the tent a half-hour later with plenty of chocolate chip cookies and still no flashlights. It became a family joke that lasted for years: Flashlights!

"Good memories, Kaitie," I said, "eating those cookies and some popcorn and crawling out at three in the morning to look up at the stars."

"And finally getting a flashlight," Kait added, smiling.

We paused. I was thinking of me and Kait and how we'd gotten along so well as kids. We'd been lucky to have each other. We lived on that little barrier island off the West Coast of Florida, near Tampa Bay, and since you could only get to it by ferry and there were only a couple of dozen homes on the whole island and none of them with kids, Kait and Tom and I relied on each other. It was just the three of us, snorkeling and shelling and running on the beach and reading books during the thunderstorms that came every day in the summer.

I said, quietly, "I'm so sorry about Whistle, and what they did to you, Kaitie. It was horrible."

She stared at me, then shook her head. "It was. I mean, I was comfortable, and after awhile I had Smiles to talk to, but the isolation was terrible."

"I'm so sorry," I said. "It's all because of me."

She didn't deny that. "I was scared to death, Peter. When I was kidnapped I thought I was going to be killed. And then I woke up in this crazy place," and she smiled. "It's awfully good to see you, Petey, but I miss Earth, I miss home. I miss my puppy, and most of all, I miss Sarah. I think about her all the time, Petey. True love, you know? I didn't think that was a real thing until I met her and then, wham! True love."

I reached over to hold my sister's hand. I said this to her. "I found out you'd been taken, Kaitie. Twoclicks heard from Whistle about it, with all those veiled threats those two specialize in. That changed everything for me. All the documentary stuff, and all the sending stories back to Earth and working for Twoclicks and all of that took a back seat to coming here to try and save you."

Kait was still holding my hand. She said, "Oh, Petey," and gripped it tighter and maybe her eyes teared up. And then she grinned right through the tears. "But let's be clear about who found who, Petey, right?"

I laughed. "You saved my life today, Kait," I said.

"Oh, Petey," she said again. "This is all still hard to believe. But here we are, right? You and me?"

"You and me, Kaitie," I said, and squeezed her hand one more time.

"Flashlights!" she said, and smiled.

We slept fitfully for a couple of hours after that, listening to the raindrops bounce off the material—something else made by the Old Ones, I guessed—that the tent was

made of. Then we got up after the rain had eased, ate some warm food, packed ourselves up and got back on the path.

On we went, quiet for a good hour, the two of us walking and me sometimes taking a lift on the sled. Woods, shoreline, bogs and repeat.

Finally, I asked, "How'd you find me, Kaitie? I thought you didn't have any tech? Were you even looking for me?"

"No, it was just dumb luck, Petey, that we happened by, and that Smiles has great hearing. She's really the one responsible for any life-saving that went on."

"That you were there at all is because you broke free, Kaitie," I said. "And thank god for that. How'd you two get to be such friends? And where did you pick up these language skills? And when did you become a superhero? Escaping from the clutches of the baddest of the bad guys?"

"There's a story there, Petey," she said.

"I bet," I said, and chuckled. "And this is a good time to tell it."

She smiled again, said, "True enough," and then, as we walked, she talked about her time in captivity.

The story started off with joy and satisfaction. Kait had never thought of herself as a risk-taker, even in those darkest days when she was strung out on horse and oppy and meth and every other damn thing that came long. That wasn't taking risks, she explained, that was running away from risk. Did I understand that?

I did. Family trait, in fact, I thought at that moment.

But now, here, she'd attempted—and succeeded—at the Great Escape! The way she said it sounded to me like it deserved being capitalized. She'd done it. Without hesitating, without worry over it and wondering if she'd be killed or caught and punished; she'd summoned up the courage and held hands with her S'hudonni pal Smiles, and now here she was, with me, nearly home, nearly safe.

Now she could put things behind her, she said. The cold mornings when she'd wake up in her strange and awful bedroom—the one just like home we grew up in—from the usual troubled sleep with the usual bad dreams.

At least the water seemed safe. Smiles told her on the very first day they met that water is water, just like home. Sure, she thought, after you've been injected with enough nanos to handle the parasites. Hah. That had been a pretty horrible ten-day, the whole decontamination thing they'd put her through after her ship arrived. Flushing everything out that was old; injections or oral or suppositories for everything new.

I told her they'd put me through the same thing: a full ten-day of decontamination and nano injections. It was no damn fun at all, but at least I felt safer in this cold, dark, damp alien place.

We kept walking. Or, I should say, she walked and I mostly sat on that sled that she was towing, holding onto the sled's leash while I sat and rested my knee and worried that I could feel the blood flowing again from my right arm. Onward. One more day, I figured, or maybe two, and we'd be back.

* * *

Chapter Nine

I was thinking we were getting closer to Holmanville as we crested a hill, a nice view of the Great Bight to our right, a bog and beyond that some woods to our left. It had been an up and down day, literally and figuratively. We'd walked these hills on our way out from Holmanville, a few days ago now, but it felt like a month. Treble called these the Steeps, and he wasn't kidding. They were all steep enough that the Old Ones' path switchbacked its way up to the top and then straightened out for a few

hundred meters before switchbacking right down the other side. Then it was a half-kilometer or so to the next bit of exercise. Ugh, I'd thought at the time, and I'd been exhausted getting it all done with him, though I'd been hale and hearty, instead of now when I was walking wounded.

But it had to be done, so we started with my trying to walk up the first leg of the three switchbacks. I did it, but it was slow. We stopped at the flat spot where the road switched back and I sat on the sled for a good ten minutes or more, catching my breath and letting the aches and pains subside. Then, onward!

But I couldn't do it. By the time I was halfway up this switchback I was in deep pain in my left knee. I had to stop. We tried having me sit on the sled and Kait pulling up the road, and she managed for a hundred meters or so and then had to take a rest. Then she did that again. And again. I managed to walk the last few hundred steep meters to reach the top of the hill.

It was good for both of us to stop there and rest, looking out over the view of the Great Bight in one direction, and the interior bogs and woodlands in the other. At this height we'd risen above the ground fog that plagued us all the time down below, and while it wasn't clear skies, it was a nice view of deep green woodlands, gray distant skies over the gray water of the bight and, behind us, the long, flat plain we'd cross before getting to the hills.

I was hurting, and naproxen wasn't doing anything more than dulling the pain as I sat there and thought about the growing possibility that Treble wouldn't be there when we got to Holmanville. And where was Smiles? She'd promised to meet us on the path, and here we were a few more hills and another ten clicks or so and we'd be back in Holmanville. I'd have a pint of faux Guinness in The Brazen Head pub, for sure; but would I be toasting Kait's success at getting us there, or would I be raising a glass to the memory of the only two really good S'hudonni I'd met? Whatever. I was so, so tired. I slumped and must have drifted off.

* * *

Whistle, second son of the Mother of All Mothers, brother of Twoclicks, father of Treble, Administrator of Trade for three worlds in the Mercantile Empire, Governor-general of Canadian North America, South Asia, China, Korea, the Urals, and Sahel Africa, is visibly upset. Dressed in formal attire for the ritual he intends to perform, he has a tunic festooned with medals, and he wears his bandolier. It holds no detectable energy weapons, but has a wonderfully sharp blade half the length of his arm.

Sitting on his throne on his grounded palanquin in the middle of the spacious courtyard of his commodious compound, he waits for the royal blimpies, tamed and trustworthy, to float in above him, drift down to attach themselves to the upper rigging of the palanquin, and take him to the Old Ones' Path and the two Earthies who have cheated him of his rightful place on Earth, that newest colony and the one where Twoclicks, his brother, has caused such problems that only Whistle can fix them.

The blimpies are late, and the blimpies, *his* blimpies, are never late. He will teach them a lesson later, he thinks, but only after today's obligations are met. After his release from the five-day detention at the Mother's palace there was a great rush on ground transport to this compound, where he demanded the Earthie, Kaitlyn. His guards had to explain that Kaitlyn and her tutor, Smiles, had fled to the path of the Old Ones, where a village Mother had come to protect them. They waited out that storm there, and now, his guards are certain, they are on the path of the Old Ones, walking toward the village that Twoclicks built for his pet Earthie, Peter Holman.

So he sits on his palanquin throne, waiting for his blimpies, planning how he will do what he wants to do with Kaitlyn Holman and the traitorous Smiles. It will require some negotiating with the local Mother, and the price will be high. But he will have his way with them, of that he is certain.

There is a deep, soft sigh from above, and Whistle looks up. Four blimpies are coming in toward him, easing down into the courtyard, hovering over the palanquin, their tentacles with those fingers at the end reaching down to the top frame of the palanquin. It is not his usual team of blimpies; these don't wear the barbed harnesses that allow Whistle the control he likes. He is too angry to care. These will do. They will carry him, all but undetectably since he'll carry no technology, to wherever on the Old Ones's path the despicable human Kaitlyn and the traitor Smiles are walking. He will end this whole charade then. His blade, of excellent steel from the planet Downtone, where the energetic daffodils make wonderful weapons of all sorts, will certainly get the job done.

All four blimpies are sighing, with those deep soulful exhalations that mark a blimpie's descent, as they reach down to grasp the palanquin and then rise, taking Whistle where he needs to go.

* * *

Kait brought me awake with gentle prods and more naproxen to dull the deep ache in my arm and knee that became shooting, searing pain when I stood and tried to walk. But walk I must, so in a few minutes we were back in motion, me hobbling along or sitting by turn, Kait walking and pulling the sled, with me or without me on it.

The downhill side of that hill was, in its own way, as difficult for me as the uphill side. My knee, especially, was more painful going down than going up. To add to the misery, it started raining hard again, no surprise, a few minutes after we started down. Soon I had to take another break and sit for a spell, with Kait doing all the hard work, handling the simple handbrake on the sled as down we went, with my leg propped up on the sled's rail.

We had rain gear, of course; thin ply, rain-repellent ponchos; one for her and one that was meant for Smiles but worked, mostly, for me. That square piece of material was too short to have done me much good if I was walking, but for something to hold over my head as I sat there on the sled it worked fine. I wasn't dry, but I wasn't soaked, and so, eventually, we reached the flat swamp below and began following the path across that fen.

But then conditions got even worse. As we struggled along, the wind picked up and the temperature dropped and dropped again, all in the space of thirty minutes or so. The wind was coming from the north—the cold, perpetually frozen sunless side of S'hudon—and even after traveling across two thousand kilometers of warmer, open water it still carried a bite.

We reached the base of the next hill and started up the switchbacks, me walking when I could, sitting when I had to; Kait doing all the hardest work, busy saving us both, I kept thinking as I did my best.

The cold rain turned to sleet, the first I'd seen on S'hudon, as we climbed higher, and that slushy mess started to accumulate on the sled and on my little square hand-held roof as I sat on the sled. I was cold, and getting colder fast. I decided to try and walk for a while and eased my way off the slowly moving sled and stood there. The left knee ached. The path stayed wet, but the sleet melted on contact and the water ran off rapidly to the sides, so the footing was good.

The wind went up a notch again. I'd walked this path in the other direction just a few days ago, and there'd been nothing but deep-purple clouds and a light rain. That had been downright pleasant to walk in, by comparison.

It certainly wasn't pleasant now. We had to get over the spine that was still ahead of us, and continue on the other side, where the path ran downhill at an angle that led to the Great Bight. I could hope that it would get warmer as we went downhill, and if I remembered it all correctly, it wasn't more than a few kilometers or so after that and we'd be back in Holmanville.

I couldn't handle the walking. My knee was screaming at me with sharp daggers, and I could feel the wounds in the right arm oozing through the bandages. I was warmer for the effort of walking; but the pain was too high a price to pay, so it was freeze on the sled or limp along slowly on foot.

I climbed back on the sled, slowly and painfully, shivering in the wind as the sleet disappeared and in the space of ten minutes, no more, the clouds thinned and that red sun started to poke through. That made the struggle up the last switchback a little easier until, thank god, we reached the top of that hill and collapsed, the both of us, behind a huge boulder that blocked the wind and faced that thin, cruel bit of red sun and warmed us a bit and we felt better.

The blimpies that had been over us all along this journey, one and sometimes two of them ahead or behind or beside us, up a few hundred meters, watching us, through wind and rain and even that horrible sleet, made a deep rumbling sigh. Then they turned to face back where we'd been and started drifting in that direction.

I was too tired to move, but Kait stood, brushed off her pants, and then walked back to the edge of the steep incline we'd just come up. "Petey," she said, "I see trouble coming our way."

Crap. I managed to stand, and hobbled over to be next to her and took a look. There, on the far side of the valley we'd crossed a couple of hours ago, was a little flock of blimpies, or a pod, or a school or a squadron, you tell me. Four of them, and together they seemed harnessed to a kind of flat deck, or maybe they were just holding onto it with their tentacles. The deck was festooned with banners. Oh, hell, I'd seen that before. A palanquin, and in the middle of it, on his throne, was a S'hudonni. I knew who that had to be.

"Hell," I said, "Kaitie, that's Whistle. That's how he showed up that time I told you about, on the royal barge. Him and his tamed blimpies making a real show of landing on the barge and playing king."

"Oh, no," she said, and I added, "Yes, oh no," myself.

The blimpies that had been keeping an eye on us for the entire journey were now right above us. The one above me lowered its tentacles, put one around me, then another, then another. I could feel pinpricks and then a calm acceptance. I knew that feeling from my rescue. Was this the same blimpie? I couldn't tell, but I thought maybe it was.

I turned to look at Kait, and she was wrapped, too. She looked calm, unafraid, brave Kaitie. "I'm hearing them, Peter. Yours, mine, the ones over there with Whistle. I can hear them talking. The blimpies? They're not so tame as Whistle thinks."

"So this is okay, do you think?" I said. "You know they saved me before, during that storm."

"Maybe the one that has you now is the one who saved you, Petey."

"I don't know," I said, and then it lifted me up, put me into a kind of sitting position, tentacles beneath me and behind me and across my lap.

We moved out over the crest of the hill and headed toward the palanquin that held Whistle. I managed to look back, and there was Kait, held by her blimpie and rising now and coming toward us.

I turned back. We were ten minutes away, at least, from our little midair meetup: me, Kait, and Whistle. What did the blimpies have planned for us? I was in no shape for any kind of physical confrontation, to be sure, but loaded up with sedatives from the barbs at the end of those tentacles I felt up to having a little verbal joust with Whistle. Heck, that sounded like fun. Anything, in fact, sound like fun.

I sat there, serene, held in the grip of those tentacles. I had plenty of time to study the tentacle that crossed my lap as a kind of seat belt. It was about as thick around as the business end of a baseball bat. It was dark gray with almost a bluish tint to it, and with hundreds of tiny suckers that opened or closed depending on the need. It

was those suckers on the four different tentacles that held me so firmly in place. At the end of the tentacle was a four-fingered kind of hand, one of the fingers slightly set apart maybe to serve as a thumb for gripping purposes? I was guessing, of course.

I didn't see any barbs, so I wondered where they were. As I wondered, a good dozen of them emerged from the top of the tentacle that crossed my lap. Well, all right then, I thought, so they read minds, do they, the blimpies? That would explain a lot.

Peaceful and wistful at the moment, I leaned over to look down. We were maybe two hundred meters up over the boglands, the hard pavement of the path to our left and the steep hills right in front and back behind us. It was all very scenic. They should bring Earthies here for fun rides, I thought. It was so incredibly peaceful.

And then I felt a jab in my buttocks and in a few seconds all the pleasantries came to an end. I was suddenly alert and tense as we approached Whistle, the obscene creature who'd threatened me any number of times, kidnapped my sister, and brought her here a zillion miles from her home and wife so he could threaten and torment her and use her as a pawn in some power play he was making. It was awful. He was awful.

And he was smiling. As I got close enough to see that round face and those cruel eyes, I could tell he was as heavily drugged as I'd been. As I, in fact, still was, some small part of my brain was telling me. It's the drugs! It's the drugs!

So I tried to corral my emotions and stay calm. It wasn't easy. "Prince Whistle," I yelled to him, "how odd to meet you here."

"Peter Holman!," he said back. "Nice to see you! Beautiful weather we're having!"

Right. It had, in fact, stopped raining. I was surprised that Whistle could tell. He was doped to the gills.

"I have been looking for you, Peter Holman! And for your delightful sister, Kaitlyn Holman. Is that her?" He pointed toward the blimpie coming up beside me now, with Kaitie sitting in the tentacled seat. "Ho! Kaitlyn," he said, "I've been looking for you!"

"I bet," Kaitie said, and then she turned to me and said, "We are to keep him busy for a few moments, Peter."

I smiled. Easy enough. I turned back to face Whistle, said, "Prince Whistle, I see you've been released from detention. How nice that must be for you."

He laughed so hard that he shook, and then said, "All a big misunderstanding, Peter Holman. The Mother loves me! She would never harm me, I have too many friends!" "I bet," Kait said to me again, quietly.

Whistle went on. "I will make corrections for you both, Peter and Kaitlyn Holman. Then no more problems!"

The humming was louder, the throb underneath it more pronounced.

Whistle stood up from his throne, reached into the bandolier that was wrapped over his torso, and pulled out a blade, something like a short sword you'd see in an old Roman-era movie. I remembered it as the same blade that had dismembered that little bender back at the dustup on the barge, gutting it, then pulling out the heart and handing it to me.

He held it up high, and then stepped down from his throne and walked unsteadily toward us. He was whistling and clicking like mad, something furious. "He really hates you, Peter, and blames you for everything," Kait said. "He tried to kill you on Earth twice, he says, and didn't get it done. So now he's going to finish this."

"Sure he is, Kaitie," I said, as I wondered how I was going to get out of this mid-air tentacled seat to try and stop the carnage. Not that I could. That sober part of me, down deep, saw the situation with some clarity. It wasn't pretty. Even if I could manage to get out of my chair and onto the barge, I was in no shape to get into a fight. I'd get hacked to pieces.

But whatever chemicals were coursing through me at the moment had the

drugged part of me thinking otherwise. I could handle him! I'd twist that sword out of his hand and stab him with it, that's all. Easy peasey!

But I didn't have to. Kait, my sister Kait, the one who'd run and run from trouble all her life and finally found peace back home, but had then been yanked to this strange world and its strange habitations, had been dumped, upright and ready to go, by the tentacles that held her and there she was, ready to take on Whistle.

"Kait!" I yelled, but she didn't look. Instead, she stepped toward Whistle, who clicked like crazy at her and her right back at him, and now the background rumbling and vibrations from the blimpies was louder and louder. I was vibrating with it over in my weird chair, and I could see the palanquin vibrating with it, too, and swaying and yawing. Whistle was trying to stand upright but only barely succeeding, as Kait, steady Kait, walked over to him, one tentacle from her blimpie still wrapped around her waist as she ducked underneath a wild swing of that blade to reach him, and touch him, and push just once, so that he staggered to the edge, pointed the blade at the base of the palanquin and shoved it down to steady himself, turned to glare and make a noise I could barely hear over the thunderous vibrations from the blimpies as he steadied himself, started to pull that sword out from the palanquin floor and then, in a heartbeat, that all didn't seem to matter. The noise and thunder from the blimpies reached a deep crescendo and then, all at once, the tentacles holding the palanquin all let go and down it went, fluttering like a piece of paper with Whistle, going end over end, plunging past it and down and down again and into the bog, a thousand meters below.

* * *

The blimpie had held on firmly to Kait and then reeled her in and back into a seat so that she and I could both be carried back to the top of the hill where we'd started all this. It only took a few minutes, and then there we were standing there, looking at each other, whatever drugs those blimpies had injected us with wearing off as we stood there.

I sat on the sled. "Kaitie, did that really happen?" The effect of whatever had been injected into me had ebbed in seconds, so I was back to pain, a lot of it. I couldn't see how I could possibly make it the rest of the way to Holmanville, even with Kait's help.

She walked over to the edge and looked down toward the bogs below. She pointed. "Do you want to see where it landed?"

I didn't—that would require standing and walking. "No thanks," I said. "Is he dead?"

"It's a long way off, but I can't see any movement. I can't tell what's Whistle and what's the palanquin, though. They wound up piled up together down there."

"Great. Kait," I said. And she cut me off, walking toward me. "I know. We'll stop here for a while now, Petey, and I'll give you the last of the naproxen. And then I guess we'll go down the other side and make our way to Holmanville."

It wasn't possible, but I didn't have the heart to tell her just then. I sat there as Kait gently moved me a bit and then poked around in the sled and got out the magic tent. She hit the button, and as we watched it slowly unfold we heard a noise. Higher-pitched, a kind of distant screaming. Blimpies back and angry?

No, I'd heard this sound before, back on Earth, and been terrified by it. A screamship, the weapons that had pacified Earth in one terrible day. I'd watched people die by the hundreds from the "necessary police action" by one of these ships. I'd watched my best friend try to run away from the deadly light that came down from the ships and then watched, helpless, as he was turned to dust. This was Whistle's personal guard getting even. Too late to stop the blimpies, but not too late to do away with the Earthies who had caused all these problems. Soon, I knew, there would be a bright beam of light, so intense you couldn't stand it, and anything that was in its way would be vaporized, bits scattered in the wind. That'd be me, that'd be Kait.

I was too tired to care. Instead, as the scream overwhelmed me, I fell back onto the

sled, waiting for the final moment when that light would pull Kait and me both apart and scatter the bright, glittery bits of us into the wind and rain of S'hudon.

Kait came over to me and threw her arms about me in a hug. So this was it. Hell, I thought we'd made it and now this. At least it would be quick.

And then the chaos and lights and screaming ended, over, done; just like that. The screamship hovered right over our heads, a huge thing, slowly coming lower and lower. A hatch irised open. Several S'hudonni were there, looking down at us, a platform dropping down with one of them on it.

"Uncle Peter!" said Treble, alive and well. Smiles stood next to him, waving at us. Twoclicks and the Mother stood behind them. "So glad we found you!"

* * *

Two ten-days later, I stood on the pavement at the S'hudonni landing field, where a dozen huge freighters floated just inches off the tarmac. More remnant technologies from the Old Ones, I was sure.

Whistle was given a state funeral. It was very sad that he'd fallen to his death, and the Mother said some very nice things about him at that service. Then his body was given back to the ocean: a squadron of blimpies, ten of them, ceremoniously took the body out over the Great Bight and released it. Kait and I were whispering back and forth during that ceremony about how we were certain that the blimpies were as glad to see Whistle rejoin Mother Ocean as we were.

Twoclicks, a being of good cheer these days since he was now temporarily in charge of all that had been Whistle's, was heading back to Earth to run the whole thing the way he wanted, and Treble was leaving with him because the Mother said it was time for him to learn from his father Twoclicks the best way to run an Empire. In a few years he would take over Whistle's planets. We were sure he'd be a capable governess-general, since he'd also announced he'd reached his productivity state and he'd chosen the path of female and Motherhood, at least for the next year. After learning the ropes, little Treble would sit on the throne, and I was sure she'd prosper there.

Me and Kait? We'd had enough adventure for a lifetime, so we were going home, too. Me, back to work for Twoclicks, and Kait, back to hearth and home with her wife, Sarah. She'd have plenty of stories to share with her.

Perhaps you're reading this, old school style in print form, the way I wrote it. If you're hearing it, you're also getting the sounds of S'hudon that I captured with my Sweep equipment. And if you're sweeping it, you're inside my head as I went through all this. I hope it's been more fun for you than it was for me. And at the end, please pay attention to the special message from Governor General Twoclicks of the House of S'hu, who wants to share with you our recent successes despite the global unpleasantness of the Earthie Land Relocation Act. He's really sorry about all that turmoil. Honest.