

Dr. Carlos Obregon,
Starship *Brendan*'s Chief Medical Officer

Steven M. Moore

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Introduction

I've been writing short stories about Dr. Carlos Obregon and his adventures aboard the Space Exploration Bureau's (SEB's) survey ship *Brendan* for many years now. The stories occur after all the events in "The Chaos Chronicles Trilogy" of books (now available as a three-book bundle titled *The Chaos Chronicles Trilogy Collection*). They span the events in *Rogue Planet* and A.B. Carolan's *The Secret of the Urns* and *Mind Games* (his *The Secret Lab* occurs at the same time as the events in the first book of the trilogy).

Through *Brendan*'s chief medical officer and the rest of its crew, and others like them, Humans and their ET friends continue to explore the vastness of near-Earth's many planetary systems. Some of these become members of the Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets (ITUIP), which began with New Haven (82 Eridani system), Novo Mondo (Tau Ceti system), and Sanctuary (Delta Pavonis system), and included Earth (Sol system) after Humans defeated the Tali there. The SEB's mission is to discover new planets and determine if they're suitable for colonization.

When I wrote *Teeter-Totter between Lust and Murder* (2013), I said it was my first mystery. I should have said first mystery novel. Many of the following stories are sci-fi mysteries...and thrillers, even romances. They illustrate how Dr. Carlos gets into many problems and resolves the issues in his voyages around the galaxy. He really deserves his own novel. Maybe I'll write that someday.

The stories in this collection have been sprinkled around my oeuvre in various places. I thought it would be useful to collect them altogether in one spot. I reedited them especially for this collection.

I always have fun writing a Dr. Carlos story. I hope you have fun reading them.

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ 2019

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“Julie, I wish I hadn’t so often said that you have a fine head on your shoulders.”

One of their three guards prodded Doctor Carlos Obregon with his rifle, but they didn’t seem to mind them talking as they marched the doctors towards the arena where several thousand people were waiting to watch their execution by beheading.

“You mean, because I’m going to lose it? That’s a very bad joke and I’m not laughing.”

Julie Chen, his current intern, looked tired.

She has a right to be, thought Obregon. We’ve been going full steam for over forty standard hours.

It had all started when the survey ship *Brendan* crossed through the normal brane back into standard space-time and orbited around Nimbus, a large Jupiter-like planet located in the E-zone of an ordinary G-type star. One of the Nimbus satellites, called Cloud Haven on the charts, was habitable. Such systems were common. Because of this fact, Cloud Haven was only a minor entry in a large Planet Survey database from eight hundred years earlier. They had expected to find an unpopulated planet. As often happens, Human colonists arriving there some five hundred years earlier had failed to inform anyone of their intentions to settle.

There were eleven different towns on Cloud Haven along the east coast of the largest continent. Using the high-powered telescope on the survey ship, they could see each town consisted of small houses sprinkled amidst a chaotic network of dirt roads. These houses increased in size towards the center of town. Most had chimneys emitting a lazy plume of smoke. In the center of each town was a long building and an abutting arena of some kind.

“What’s your take on this, George?”

Captain Lester Wilson was no scientist. He knew how to do many things on a survey ship, but assessing the culture of a Human colony out of contact with the rest of the Galaxy for five hundred years was not one of them.

George Edgerton, on the other hand, was a xenosociologist now serving as a cultural anthropologist, because he was dealing with a Human population.

“Until I’m down there, I can only offer educated guesses. They’ve suffered a regression, intentionally or otherwise. We’re looking at a frontier town. The long building is a meetinghouse or place of worship. Who knows what the arena is for. The platform in the center is suggestive, although I’d prefer not to go there.”

“Spit it out, George,” said Obregon, entering the room. “If I’m going down there, I need to know what you think I’m exposing myself to.”

“Well, my guess is the arena is for public executions and the platform is a stage for them.”

Wilson saw Obregon grimace.

“No theater in the round?” he said with a nervous laugh. “Should I ask Riley to ready his boys?”

Obregon frowned, and Wilson knew why. Lt. Riley, head of security, was one to shoot first and ask questions later. The young man was okay as a person and was interested in his intern, but Carlos didn't believe in violence.

"Why don't we go down and try playing nice first?" he said. "We're supposed to be the civilized ones, you know. We have enough firepower here to stop anything these blokes can throw at us, so let's be restrained."

"Last stop, I remember Julie doing a little sewing job on you in order to seal that spear wound," commented Edgerton.

"Yeah, but these are our own kind. We can reason with our own kind, can't we?"

"I hope so," said Wilson. "Okay. Let's try Doc's way first. Which town do we visit?"

"I'd pick the one where those two rivers come together," said Edgerton. "Lots of woods around."

"I suppose you want to take Julie?" Wilson said to Obregon.

"That's what she's here for. She can't learn what she needs to learn sitting around here, especially with Riley going gaga over her."

"Are you being a fatherly protector, old man?" said Edgerton.

"I always protect my interns. Let's get on with it."

Obregon walked from the room. Wilson looked at Edgerton and winked. They both then smiled.

Carlos Obregon was already a legend among the hardy souls in the Space Exploration Bureau of ITUIP (Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets). He had participated in more surveys than anyone on board. He had also been near death more times—the spear was only one example. Trouble seemed to find him. Not noted for his diplomacy and more explorer than doctor, he was *Brendan's* Chief Medical Officer. In that capacity, he had also saved countless explorers' lives.

George Edgerton, Brian Page, Abby Sanchez, Julie Chen, and Doctor Carlos made up the first contact team. The lander touched down by a small lake about ten clicks from their target town. From there, they planned to walk through forest and into town. When they left the forest, they were surprised to enter a large and recently plowed field. About a kilometer away, they saw a nightmarish creature pulling a plow. The plow was a throwback to the Kansas prairie of the 1870's, but neither steed nor its driver was Human.

"I thought this planet had no native ET population," said Page.

"The records must be in error," said Sanchez.

Edgerton called to the ET behind the plow. He took one look at them and ran off toward the center of town. The nightmarish creature pulling the plow stopped moving and started to nibble at some weeds.

"Local version of oxen," announced Edgerton. "I don't understand. We saw Humans through the scope."

"And here they come," announced Chen.

In the distance, they could see about a hundred people approaching them. Edgerton started walking towards them.

"They have guns," observed Page.

"Hold out your hands, palms up and open," said Edgerton. "They will see we have no weapons."

It worked. The townspeople lowered their weapons as they approached. A burly man with a beard reaching halfway down his chest was the leader.

"You came from the heavens?" he said.

So began first contact with the Humans of Cloud Haven. It soon bored Obregon. While Edgerton and the rest chatted with the mayor and the town council, the good doctor and his intern explored town center.

They called the little ETs Gondols. They were everywhere. They were obsequious to Humans and did their bidding without complaint.

"We've found a master-slave society here," observed Chen in a whisper.

"How perceptive of you," said Obregon. "I find it repulsive. It goes against every statute associated with colonizing. With these little fellows present, Humans shouldn't even be here, except by invitation. Come on. Let's explore some more."

On the other side of the village, they entered woods again, moving down a well-traveled path.

Did ETs make the path or Humans? Obregon asked himself.

Around a bend, they came upon a Human beating a female Gondol. She was already groveling in the dust, mewling like a wounded cat. The bearded Human picked up an ax lying on the ground.

"He's going to kill her!" said Chen.

Obregon sprang into action. With his long legs and the low gravity of Cloud Haven, he was upon the Human as the ax started its lethal swing down to the Gondol's head. Chen wished she had a video record of the action; the astonishment on the Human's face was worth showing to future generations.

The Human half rose, trying to pry the ax from the doctor's hands, but he was no match for the doctor, who towered over him. Holding onto the ax with his right hand, Obregon pushed the Human away from the Gondol so hard the Human went backwards a good five feet before crashing to the ground. Nevertheless, he bounced right up and ran off into the woods.

The doctors went to work on the Gondol. She was badly injured. Remarkably, in spite of some major differences in their physiologies, their intuition was enough to guide them. They saved her life. She was stabilizing when Obregon heard a branch snap.

Both Chen and Obregon turned. They faced a group of twenty or so Gondol warriors, each carrying a spear that waved menacingly at them.

Obregon rose slowly and helped Chen. They backed away from the injured Gondol.

"I think these aren't so subservient," Obregon observed.

Some warriors picked up the wounded Gondol. They then marched them into the woods. After about six clicks, they came to a clearing filled with stone huts in the shape of beehives.

"Like the monks' huts in Ireland," observed Chen.

"I don't know where that is," said Obregon, "but it doesn't sound like something you learned studying medicine."

"I read up on the history behind the name of our ship."

"Brendan? I didn't know there was any history. This is the head honcho's place, I'll bet."

Their captors stopped in front of a larger stone beehive. A wizened Gondol came out.

"I'm Fod'Mir, chief of this Gondol tribe," he said in perfect Standard. "Yvn'Rud has told us you saved her life. Why did you do that?"

"What do you mean?" said Chen. "She was going to be killed."

"You Humans have not shown much respect for Gondol life before. You have enslaved us since you came to this planet. Most of us know no other life but slavery. Why do you now show compassion?"

"Because we are not from the people who enslave you," said Obregon. "Our mission is to save lives, whether they're Human or Gondol."

"Then I wish there were more like you. No matter how much we try to defend you, you will soon die along with Yvn'Rud and some of us."

"Because we saved a life?" said Chen.

"No, because you went against the will of a master. Your people will come to kill Yvn'Rud. And you too, for disobeying the laws."

"They're not our laws," insisted the doctor. He looked at Chen with eyebrows raised in silent question. She nodded. He turned again to the chief. "Do you think these other people who look like us are from this planet?"

"No, we know they came from the sky. This happened a long time ago. Many of us became their servants. But others of us don't believe we have to remain their servants, because many of your people treat us so badly."

"Listen to me," said Obregon, "these masters of yours made up laws for their own convenience. They're not the general laws most of my people follow. Do you understand that? They're disobeying the laws of my people."

"Why aren't they punished?" said the chief.

"Because we didn't even know they were here," explained Chen. "They didn't ask permission to come here. They came here in violation of our laws."

"But how can you not know what your own people are doing?" Fod'Mir sat down on the ground, taking up a lotus position. Obregon sat down in front of him, motioning for Chen to join them. The warriors surrounding the two doctors relaxed their spears a little.

"There are too many of us," Obregon explained, pointing skyward. "Many stars in the sky have planets like this where people also live. There are thousands of such planets. Many have people that are even more different from either you or me than we are from each other. Some people who think alike, no matter how crazy their thoughts are, band together and go to new planets, often against our laws. It's supposed to be controlled, but it isn't. There are too many people, stars, and planets."

"We know there are many stars," said the chief. "Our star belongs to a large group of many stars, and we suppose your home star is also in this group. We even understand what makes these stars shine, namely the pressure of their own weight allowing the fusion of their smallest pieces. We are not complete primitives."

"How do you know all this?" said Chen.

"We didn't learn it from your people, who truly seem to be primitives in spite of your size and massive heads. They try to destroy our traditions. It is written in the records. We have gone through many cycles of cataclysmic change where many of us have died. But records

remain. Knowing we did it once before, we rebuild. We were in that rebuilding process when your people came.”

Obregon swallowed. *I’m just guessing, but these little fellows may have gone through several atomic or biological wars, and may have even been fighting them before the birth of modern Humans. Yet they seem so peaceful.*

“There are some of us who would like to study those records,” said Chen quietly, nearly reading his mind. “To understand you better.”

“In due time,” said the chief. “I am honored you show an interest. Others don’t. But I think you have more immediate problems. The others of your kind will come looking for you, to take revenge and to kill Yvn’Rud, who escaped from her master.”

At that moment, as if on cue, a group of Humans pushed into the Gondol village. The Gondols scattered. Obregon observed with satisfaction some warriors carried Yvn’Rud away. *Well, we saved one life.*

The trek back to the Human town began.

Edgerton had been right. The stand at the center of the arena was for executions. Chen and Obregon climbed up the few steps, prodded by their guards. A hush had fallen over the arena as the people sat in anticipation for the fall of the executioner’s ax.

He didn’t wear a mask. The foul-smelling giant of a man, two meters tall, was about Obregon’s height, but his shoulders were wider. The ax in his hand was about half his height. It had a large curved blade that looked razor sharp.

“Do you want to pray?” he said.

“To your gods or mine?” Obregon said.

“To me it doesn’t matter, but the crowd would be pleased if you pray to mine.”

Obregon heard a gentle whir coming from above the low cloud cover. *Maybe I can stall.*

“Can I make a last request instead?”

“We only allow a short prayer. That’s all. If you do not want to pray, kneel down and put your head on the block. I assure you it will be painless.”

“And I can assure you it won’t be. I’m a doctor, you know.”

“I don’t know what that is. Do you mean a healer?”

“Yes, a healer. I saved Yvn’Rud.”

“They will find her. And she will die horribly, as must be. But you are not a healer. Only the purest in spirit who believe in our gods can become healers.”

“That’s bullshit!”

The executioner didn’t know what bullshit meant, but Obregon’s tone of voice made him furious.

“Kneel down!”

“Make me!”

The other three now rushed forward to make him kneel. While not as huge and muscle-bound as the executioner, they were strong. They forced Obregon down, wedging his neck into the block. The executioner raised his ax. The blade flashed in the sun at its apogee, but then he crumpled to the ground. The three men also fell and the crowd went wild as the lander came down by the platform.

Lt. Riley and nine others poured from the lander, dressed in battle armor. The crowd surged from the wooden bleachers in panic. Obregon managed to rise to his feet.

"Giv'em hell, Riley!" he called, forgetting his pacifist proclivities.

"Just board the lander," Riley called to him.

"Can't!" said Chen, screaming to be heard above the noise. "Our hands are tied."

Riley climbed up the steps and with a large knife hacked through first Chen's then Obregon's ropes.

"All right, doctors, let's move it!"

By the time they climbed down the ladder, bullets and stones were flying as furious members of the crowd now ran towards them. Riley's men opened fire on the nearest and protected Riley and the doctors as they climbed into the lander. They then followed, dragging three wounded. Chen and Obregon went to work on their injuries as the lander took off.

"How do you punish ten thousand people for stupidity?" said Captain Wilson.

"Not all of them were in the stadium," said Edgerton. "Certainly not those from other towns."

Chen knew the locals had held Edgerton and other crewmembers in a cell in the long building by the arena. Lt. Riley freed them first.

"No, they weren't," said Obregon, "but it's more than stupidity. All of them participated in the enslaving of the Gondols."

"But we can't stay here to enforce the law. We'd have to be here for years until SEB sends a follow-on ship. And that would violate the ITUIP Protocol." Wilson looked perplexed. Clearly, he had no idea how to handle the situation.

"I think I have the perfect solution," said Obregon. "We arm the Gondols and make them peacekeepers."

"Doesn't that go against your pacifist philosophy, Carlos? Besides violating the Protocol."

"A little. But it's also justice. As long as the Gondols don't turn into Humans, which I'm pretty sure isn't going to happen, it's about all we can do."

Chen smiled at him. Obregon was learning too.

Doctor Carlos and the Mona Lisa in Overdrive
Jameson's Planet, 4033
Copyright 2007

Carlos Obregon gazed into the casket at Wilma Brown's body. His eyes were moist. He had known Brown, mayor of Three Rivers, for more than seventy-five years. That long ago, there was only a small village at the point where Darwin's Run and the Little Muddy joined the wider James Clerk Maxwell River. Now the town's population numbered some forty thousand souls, so it was no surprise the wake was packed with Humans, Rangers, and other grieving citizens.

Obregon and the rest of the crew of the survey ship *Brendan* were on Jameson's Planet for a ship tune-up and some needed R&R. The planet's tight little solar system only had three planets, including Jameson's. The other two were gas giants. Wilma had possessed the vision to realize their solar system was well located to serve as a waypoint for ships leaving the galactic neighborhood of Earth on their way to the inner galaxy. The four original Human worlds of Earth, Sanctuary, New Haven, and Novo Mondo had by now increased to hundreds, and several planets like Jameson's had become important in the Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets, better known as "I-tweep" from its acronym ITUIP. And beyond, as new planets were colonized.

A smile on Wilma's face made her look beautiful, enigmatic and unnatural to Obregon. His intern, Julie Chen, made the same observation as they walked from the funeral home.

"I'll bet you want to go say hi to the coroner, right?" she said.

"You're getting to know me all too well."

She hooked her arm in his.

"This is the first chance in months when I have the opportunity to have some me-time, and I blow it by making that suggestion."

"Too bad." He flagged a taxi. After giving the taxi's AI brain their destination, he settled into the comfortable back seat. Chen had already entered the other side of the open-air coach. "But I'm glad you corroborated my observation."

"Any ideas about what made her smile like that?"

"Well, I didn't hear any gossips at the wake talking about a young lover, so I'm suspecting some kind of hallucinogenic. The question is why. Was she murdered? Or, just tripping while relaxing at home? Never knew her to do that, by the way."

"Did you know her well?"

"Very. Long ago. Some of it X-rated, not fit for an impressionable young woman's ears."

"I'm not exactly innocent of such things, but you're incorrigible."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Bret Conway was the Three Rivers coroner. He seated them in his shabby office that looked as if an indoor hurricane had hit it.

"What an honor to have you here, Doctor Carlos. Wilma often talked about you."

“Yeah, my ears would become red from time to time, even light-years away. So much for relativity. Instant messaging across parsecs, that ear thing. Now if they could only make a starship drive using the phenomenon.”

Conway chortled and poured three small cups of an amber liquid.

“Local brandy, by which I mean it comes from a local fruit. The technology is as old as Human history. A real treat.”

“Actually, Rangers were already making brandy from havenberries when we arrived at New Haven, so I presume they knew the technology long before Humans even started an agrarian society on Earth.”

Conway now frowned. His left eye twitched nervously.

“I referred to Human history, doctor. I suppose there are parallel developments in non-Human cultures. I do believe you’re wrong, though. When we encountered the Rangers, we were much more advanced than they were. Being stranded on New Haven made them revert back to their prehistoric state.”

“I’ll not argue the point with you. I wasn’t there. *Alors bien, santé, Monsieur Conway.*”

Obregon tossed his down and enjoyed the slight burn and burst of flavor. Chen and Conway sipped more discreetly. An old-fashioned cuckoo clock ushered in the change of the hour. The doctor looked at his watch. For a moment, he was puzzled and then plunged deep into thought.

“Now, what brings you here to my official lair?” Conway said.

Obregon surfaced from his river of thoughts to return to the shadowy realm of the office.

“Wilma’s smile. Either she had just experienced some wonderful sex, or she ran into Da Vinci himself.”

“Da Vinci?” said Conway. “Strange name. Is he a Ranger or some other ET?”

“Leonardo da Vinci,” explained Chen. “He painted the ‘Mona Lisa,’ who has probably the most famous smile in Human history.”

“I wouldn’t know about either of them,” said Conway. “History is irrelevant to me, and Jameson’s Planet, for that matter.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” muttered Obregon. “So what was the cause of death?”

“I can’t determine one.”

“Did you do an autopsy?” Julie said.

“Of course. Required by law. She had a drink of something toxic. We found the bottle. Its contents correspond to what was in her stomach. Definitely organic, but off world. I can’t place it. It could have been the cause of death.”

“Anybody try it?”

Conway looked shocked.

“Of course not! If it’s a poison....”

“Mind if I look at the bottle?”

“I guess that wouldn’t be a problem.”

They followed him into the basement of the building where they kept evidence and archives. A bored Usk released an evidence box to Conway. Usks were more common on Jameson’s Planet than Rangers were. They were also more humanoid. He handed Obregon sterile gloves and the doctor took a stubby glass bottle from the box. It had a simple stopper in it.

"I'd seal this if I were you."

"Why? Do you think the vapors are toxic?" Conway looked worried.

"No, probably not. The density would be too low. But they can make someone sick. And, with time, it would evaporate. Your evidence would be gone. You told me you suspect it's poison. If there were no other physical signs I'd seal it if only in the hope that someday you can identify the contents." He took the stopper off the bottle and took a whiff. He then held it under Chen's nose. "Recognize it?"

"No. Am I supposed to?"

"Another addendum to your training. The list gets bigger and bigger instead of smaller. Sorry about that. If you ever smell this on someone's breath and they are having difficulty breathing, start doing CPR and put the person into an oxygen tent as soon as possible."

"What is it?" said Conway.

"An aged bit of Happy Juice. There is a bee-like insect on New Haven—it has eight legs and two sets of wings, though, and was probably brought from the Rangers' home world—this insect produces a bland form of honey when processing most flowers. But there are occasional fields of Walking Vines. Their flowers, when processed by this insect, produce a hallucinogenic honey, even when diluted. That's what you have here. An overdose produces the symptom I described." He took the bottle by the mouth end and held it up to the dim light bulb. "And we have a print. Match the print with its owner and we may have our murderer."

Conway looked at the bottle.

"I'll be damned." He smiled at Chen. "You weren't the only one who didn't know that."

On their way out, Obregon stopped to admire the cuckoo clock. It was a fine piece, equal to the best he had ever seen. He looked underneath for the manufacturer and confirmed it wasn't from Earth. Made well after the Tali invasion of the home planet, only Rangers made such fine clocks now. Their factories on New Haven rivaled anything the Swiss had ever had. Of course, Switzerland had long ago disappeared in the Tali invasion, along with all other political divisions on Earth.

Obregon smiled at Conway and left with his arm hooked in Julie's as if they were going to a parade.

Hours later Conway called Obregon at the boarding house where he and most of *Brendan's* crew were staying. Obregon, faced with either bluffing or folding in a poker game, was happy with the interruption.

"I have to take this, gents. I'm bowing out."

"Hey, I want a chance to recover my money," said Brendan's captain, Lester Wilson. "If you leave now, we have to postpone."

"Up to you," said Obregon, pausing at the door. "I need to take this on the porch. The reception's lousy in here."

Chen was on the porch talking to George Edgerton, the ship's xenosociologist.

Obregon ignored them and answered the phone. Conway's face appeared on the tiny instrument's screen.

"The print belongs to a Ranger, Swims-in-Moonbeams. Dominant female in a clan outside of Three Rivers. The clan is part owner of an import-export business. She would have

the means to move something like your Happy Juice through our spaceport customs, which are lax. The police are questioning her now.”

“They have Rangers in their fingerprint database?”

“Why not? The prints are alien, but the principle is the same.”

“I need to talk to her.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise. She can set her whole clan against you.”

“Rangers don’t do that. Usks might. Talis might. Humans surely would. But not Rangers.”

“These are exiles. They made trouble on New Haven and emigrated. I arrived here a few months later but I heard the case against them there was solid.”

“That’s curious. Now I truly need to talk to her.” He hung up on Conway, looked at Edgerton, and snapped his fingers. “Come on, old man. You may be interested in this. And Chen, come along. You may learn something.”

“Every day,” said Chen, rolling her eyes.

They took a taxi to the police station. During the entire ride, Obregon had a whispered conversation with Edgerton.

“Nice name,” said Obregon.

“An old name,” said the Ranger. “One from Mother World.”

A translation unit hanging around her neck formed the words. The Rangers’ language was a biological form of spread spectrum modulation and de-modulation. Humans had neither processing capability nor physical apparatus to produce the complex sound waveform.

When Humans first settled on New Haven in the 82 Eridani system centuries ago, they discovered another sentient life form there and gave it the name Rangers. A typical full-grown adult is many times smaller than an adult Human. The ET is about eighty centimeters high, sixty wide, and one hundred forty long, with six short legs. The back two are a bit longer, with knees jointed backwards with respect to a human leg. The bottom part of the back legs look like boat oars.

The front of a Ranger had looked ugly to those first Human colonists. A cluster of six eyes, three above and three below, surround the mouth. Two large membranes, one on each side, are behind the eye-mouth arrangement. These organs produce complex spread spectrum signals forming the basis of the Rangers’ language.

A circle of twelve tentacles exists between eyes and mouth. Four of these are longer than the others. They look like small versions of an elephant’s trunk. All four have two opposable thumbs and three stubby fingers between them and are efficient at handling a variety of tools.

“So why did you kill Wilma?” said the doctor.

“Pardon. Who is Wilma?”

“The mayor of Three Rivers.”

“Oh, you mean Dances-in-Starlight.”

“Was that your name for her?”

“That is her Ranger name. She was made an honorary member of my clan.”

Obregon's jaw dropped. He had never heard of that happening. Ranger clans worked well with Humans but tended to mix with them only on a business basis. Not many Humans even knew what the inside of a clan cave or river lodge looked like.

"I guess old Wilma had a few tricks up her sleeve you didn't know about," observed Chen with a smile.

"You seem surprised," said Edgerton. "It's been known to happen before. Ever since first contact was made on New Haven. Remember the great collaboration between Human physicist Annie Li and Ranger physicist Deep Breather."

"Yes, *voilà*, FTL and the start of the modern era," said Chen.

"Well, not all at the same time," said Edgerton with a smile, "but close enough."

"All right," said Obregon, glaring at Edgerton and then directing his attention again to Swims-in-Moonbeams, "why did you kill Dances-in-Starlight?"

"I didn't."

"You do admit the bottle was one of your imports?"

"Yes. And, if you say so, I guess my prints are on it. But we do not import Happy Juice. It's a narcotic. Less for my people than yours, but dangerous nevertheless."

"Hallucinogenic," corrected Obregon.

"Is it possible the contents of the bottle were switched?" said Chen.

"Of course," said Swims-in-Moonbeams. "They had to be. My guess would be that it happened here. But your questioning does not go far enough. I also had motive. I know your detective literature, you see. I am being interrogated, yes?"

"Not exactly," said Obregon.

"Yes, you are," said Chen, glaring at Obregon.

He smiled. Chen had a lot of experience with non-Human sentients, second only to Edgerton's, and probably had more empathy towards them than the old man had. She could have been a good xenosociologist too, except she lacked objectivity.

"But she's a suspect," he observed.

"Let's hear her motive," said Edgerton.

"Oh, my motive is simple. Taxes. Dances-in-Starlight was about to raise them. A luxury goods tax, she called it. Of course, nearly all our imports can be considered luxuries."

"But you're on the Town Council that elected Wilma—excuse me, Dances-in-Starlight—over and over again."

"Dan O'Shea once and Blibarus once," corrected Swims-In-Moonbeams. "Never a Ranger. Only another Human and an Usk. We Rangers don't care much for your Human politics. That said, while all our clan loved Dances-in-Starlight, and loved her dearly, I do have the tax motive. I also had access and you have my print on the murder weapon. Book'em Dan-o."

"What the hell is she talking about?" Obregon said.

"You might know a lot of Earth history, but you don't know entertainment trivia. Hawaii Five-Oh was an ancient TV show from Earth." Edgerton put on his lecturing face. "The original colony on New Haven had a complete library in its computer databases they brought with them on the colonizing ship Magellan. The name Ranger comes from another of those shows. Many New Haven Rangers in those days carried two energy weapons in holsters on the top of their heads and went into battle with both guns blazing. It reminded someone of the Lone Ranger. At any rate, I daresay the Rangers were more into old TV shows than Humans were. They had never seen anything like them."

"I'm confused," said Chen.

"Never mind. I think I know who murdered Wilma." Obregon looked at Swims-in-Moonbeams. "Would you say most Humans here in Three Rivers get along with Rangers?"

"Yes, I would say so. We both have gone way beyond the xenophobia often associated with a first encounter between sentients. Why do you ask?"

"Bear with me."

Obregon left the room. They saw him talking to the police chief. He then returned.

"Sorry. We have to wait a bit. Homer went to fetch someone I want you to talk with."

"Then I will kill time, as you Humans say, telling you the story of my clan."

Fortunately the town's AI doing the translating was merciful. Rangers' stories were often epic and covered several generations, and each generation was several centuries long.

Chen listened intently as they learned Swims-in-Moonbeams' clan was one of the original ones from the Rangers' home planet. She hadn't even reached the history of the flight to New Haven to flee the Tali when the police chief arrived with Conway. They both came into the interrogation room.

"Sit down, Bret, Homer. I think you'll find this interesting." Obregon turned to the Ranger. "You say you had motive and opportunity."

"Don't forget the print," said Conway.

He was perspiring. Chen didn't think the room was that hot. Obregon saw her watching the nervous Conway and winked at her.

"I won't. Now, did anyone else in Three Rivers know Wilma was an honorary member of your clan and that you all loved each other like brothers and sisters?"

"I suppose most Humans were aware of it, although I can't be sure. Certainly, all Rangers knew it."

"Did you know it, Bret?"

"Of course. I'm well connected here. Why wouldn't I know it?"

"Indeed. Did everyone know about the tax proposal?"

"Probably not," replied the Ranger. "Dances-in-Starlight discussed it in a Town Council meeting two days before she died."

"Were you upset in that meeting? I mean, about the proposal?"

"Of course. I told her so, and the rest of the Council. I said it would probably destroy our import-export business. We try to be fair with our prices and live off a slim margin. If we raised prices to cover the tax, probably not many would buy. If we didn't, we would go broke. I believe you Humans call it a Catch-22."

"Who else is present at the Town Council meeting?"

"Homer or one of his deputies is usually there to keep order, as if that were necessary. That night it was Homer."

"Any others?"

"Meetings are open to the public," explained the police chief.

“Yes. But are town officials required to attend?”

“Not really. I remember Bret was there and Margarita Ibarra, head of the hospital. They weren’t required to be there. Meetings are boring, if you ask me.”

“But necessary,” said Conway.

“Okay. Now, Mr. Conway, would you go sit by Swims-in-Moonbeams.”

“I don’t see why I should. She’s a murderer.”

“Do it, Bret,” said Homer.

Edgerton looked first at Conway, then at Obregon. Finally, he too winked at Chen. She didn’t see what he found so amusing. *Is it related to the conversation with Obregon?*

“Fine, but I don’t understand where you’re going with this.”

He circled the table and sat down next to the Ranger.

“Now, Swims-in-Moonbeams, shake Mr. Conway’s hand.”

Conway scooted his chair back and fell off.

“I will not shake hands with this over-grown water bug!”

He picked himself off the floor and sat down again.

“There you have it,” said Obregon in a calm voice. “Homer, arrest this man for the murder of Dances-in-Starlight.”

“What- what-” sputtered Conway. “You can’t do this! You have no proof!”

“All circumstantial, correct,” said Edgerton. “But I believe we have enough to ask a judge for a search warrant. Right, Homer.”

“You bet. How did you figure it out, Obregon?”

“I listened. First, Conway here became angry about who invented brandy, when, in fact, most researchers believe Rangers invented many things before we even left our caves. Parallel development, yes, but if you count their home planet, they have a much longer history than Humans do. Second, to Conway history is irrelevant, so he didn’t know about this research into Ranger history. He didn’t even care about Human history. Third, he knew what was contained in the bottle was a poison, but he never ran any tests on it. A simple series of tests would have shown it’s related to ricin, an old poison made from castor beans. Parallel evolution. Walking Vines have flowers which, when pollinated, produce pods containing beans similar to castor beans. The flower and especially the beans are hallucinogenic and poisonous in an overdose. Four, he said the print on the bottle was alien. We don’t like to use that term any more—it can imply bigotry. Our union, as loose as it is, prides itself on being tolerant. We even treat the Tali with respect now. Five, he said Swims-in-Moonbeams would make her whole clan go after me, which smacks of xenophobia. Six, he knew their clan had been exiled. Last, but not least, I conferred with Edgerton on the way over. I asked him whether there was any recorded case of a Ranger murdering another sentient. He knew of none.” He nodded to Swims-in-Moonbeams. “I’d decided you hadn’t done it before I arrived here. The fact Wilma, rather Dances-in-Starlight, was in your clan sealed Conway’s fate.”

“What do you mean? You have no proof.” Conway was red in the face. “Look, I’ll shake her hand!” He offered his hand to Swims-in-Moonbeams, who looked at it with curiosity.

“Too late,” said Obregon. “Even if we don’t find Happy Juice in your house, I’m sure Homer can hold you long enough to verify with New Haven authorities that you were involved in the case back on New Haven against Swims-in-Moonbeams’ clan. You are from New Haven, right?”

The police chief smiled at Obregon. “How did you know he’s from New Haven?”

“A little bird told me.”

Dr. Carlos and the Crystal Concert Hall
Planet EXB234, 4027
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"I'm not sure you needed me as a babysitter. Julie would have been fine."

Ron Baker looked up at Carlos Obregon. The swarthy features of the survey ship's doctor were lost in the glare of the setting sun of the planet they called EXB-232. Baker was *Brendan's* xenoarchaeologist. He studied ancient civilizations of extraterrestrials.

"The captain said your intern was running a fever. One, do you want to contaminate an entire planet with what she might have; and two, doesn't she have a right to take care of herself even if her boss is lazy?"

Obregon made a face. "You like me walking around so you and others can enjoy my well known gift of gab." He indicated the whole area with a sweep of his arm. "Seen it once, seen it all, I say. A civilization that commits suicide. It was only luck we avoided a similar fate. Probably in some parallel universe, some alien Ron Baker is digging around in Human ruins on a parallel Earth. And his ship's doctor is also wondering why the hell his time's being wasted."

Baker shook his head and went back to screening the debris pile. His robots covered a wide area, but this particular pile had caught his eye. He cast one more look at Obregon. The doctor was walking towards the area's perimeter. He seemed deep in thought.

Probably listening to his music. The comlink wi-fi unit plugged into the side of their heads also allowed the user to ignore the rest of the world and listen to newsnets or music from an extensive databank.

Baker knew Obregon was also a historian, a man that knew more about Earth's history than anyone Baker had ever met, although it was rumored his knowledge was selective. Part of that love was dedicated to music—very old music.

Baker sighed. He hoped Obregon wouldn't get in the way.

Captain Lester Wilson had lost count of how many times Obregon had caused problems on a planetary mission. All he had to do was ask the ship's AI, of course, but he was usually so busy he wouldn't remember the number for the next time.

"Did he manage to turn off his locator?"

On the planet, Lt. Riley, the head of *Brendan's* security, understood the captain's ire. Obregon was a good doctor and damn clever, but trouble always seemed to find him.

"Baker and his robots were the last to see him. He wandered off towards those low-lying foothills a few clicks away from where Baker's working."

Wilson wasn't happy with Baker either. The captain lived and worked with scientists, but they irritated him when they wanted to squeeze the maximum information they could from a short planetary mission. He considered their main mission was to find E-type planets that could be colonized one day. Science came second.

The Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets, better known as "I-tweep" from its acronym ITUIP, was growing like microbes in a Petri dish. The four original Human worlds of Earth, Sanctuary, New Haven, and Novo Mondo by now had increased their numbers to hundreds. Colonists from multiple groups of galactic sentients followed behind ships like

Brendan, the lag sometimes as long as several centuries after a planet was entered in the SEB database. Yet the pressure was always there to expand.

It didn't help that Baker admitted to discovering little but was still excited.

"Okay, give Obregon a bit more time," said Wilson, "and after that we'll have to form a search party to look for him. As for Baker, tell him to wrap things up. I've already classified EXB-232 as a potential colony for oxygen breathers. We're readying *Brendan* for another jump."

Baker didn't worry Wilson as much as Obregon did. *He's probably at the bottom of some cave or pit with a broken leg.*

At the bottom of the cave entrance, Obregon rubbed his leg to keep the circulation going. He had entered with care but still fell—the culprit rock had been slimy with some indigenous plant-like moss.

He had already applied nanopaste to the gash. The little robots had stopped the bleeding and worked the antibiotic paste into the tissues so there would be no infection. But it still hurt like hell. *I'll also be limping for a bit. Too many light-years, old man.*

He stood and tested the leg by putting some weight on it. It felt okay, so he tried to forget about it to survey his surroundings.

A thirty-degree slope covered with water and moss-like green growth led up and back to the entrance, a bright area about twenty meters away. He had seen it hidden among the crumbled rock and jagged boulders. His desire to explore kicked into high gear. *Damn curiosity will kill me one of these days.*

He flashed his light around the cavern and laughed when he saw narrow steps at the far side of the slope. The green slime also covered them.

"Do it the hard way, Obregon," he told himself.

Confident the steps would be a safe escape route, he moved into the cave to explore. Within minutes, he was no longer in sight of the rugged opening where he had entered. His light caught floor and walls. *Are they becoming smooth and shiny? And they're no longer slimy, wet stone.*

He came to a turn. *Wilson will probably kill me for taking chances, but Baker will probably give me a hug. This tunnel is artificial.* As he made a turn, he heard a click. The lights came on.

"All right, Obregon, let's call this in." He subvocally commanded his music to stop through his wi-fi implant. He then tried to rouse someone. "Hey, Baker or *Brendan*, can anyone hear me? If it's Baker, you're wasting your time, man. I've found something a lot more important than an ancient garbage dump. If it's *Brendan*, tell Wilson to bring Riley down here to cover my butt. I may be meeting some ETs and who knows if they're friendly."

Nothing. *Walls probably have a high metallic content. Shall I forge ahead?*

Like most spacers, Obregon followed the dictates of his curiosity. He shrugged and continued down the tunnel.

After two more turns, he came to a massive door.

“Why is there now a door?” he asked himself. “Why here? Why not at the entrance?”

He pushed on the door. Nothing. He then noticed a recess at the side of the door. It was in the shape of a hand. One large thumb, three large fingers—an alien hand.

He tried fitting his right hand in the recess. He had a large Human hand, but not that large. Nevertheless, by putting his pinky and ring finger in the last finger spot, his hand fit.

Yet nothing happened. He was about to take his hand away when there was another click. *Ancient relays*, he thought, *the same with the lights*. The door swung open.

At first, it was dark behind the door. The lights then came on. The contrast between dark and light made Obregon cover his eyes. He slowly opened them.

He’d seen a lot in his long career. This was something ethereal and spectacular. It was a great concert hall made of colored crystal.

Seats clustered in semicircles spiraled down to the stage. They were a deep emerald green but what looked like frozen, shimmering draperies were all the colors of the rainbow. Obregon let out his breath.

“Okay, Carlitos, this is truly something, you’ll have to admit.”

He walked down the central aisle until he was eight rows back from the stage. He took an aisle seat; rather, it took him. It molded the best it could to his frame, but his feet still dangled above the floor. At that moment, he noticed the figure on the stage. A short and rotund Human looked like he was coming to life. The initial movements, though, told Obregon it was an android still stiff from millennia of immobility. It turned to Obregon and smiled.

“*Guten Abend, mein Herr*,” it said. It continued to speak in German.

Long ago Obregon had learned French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian, as well as old English, because these were the principal languages of what academics called the classical period of Earth’s music. In particular, he wanted to listen to operas in the original languages, not their translation to Standard. In general, it was more evidence for his love of Earth history. *I guess this robot thinks it’s evening. An evening concert perhaps?*

“I welcome you to my performance. I will start this evening with my ‘Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor.’”

The robot started to play. It sounded a little off tempo to Obregon, but he recognized it. He did a quick calculation. Assuming the ETs had intercepted this music in an analog radio or TV broadcast from Earth, he was able to deduce the maximum age of the theater. The answer was frightening, considering how long Humans had been expanding in the Galaxy. *Baker will be ecstatic*. The ETs probably never made it outside their solar system but they obviously admired Earth culture.

The music is fantastic. It’s a real pipe organ. The reverb in the theater is perfect. Obregon sat mesmerized until the final note of the fugue.

“I see we have some late arrivals,” said the android.

Obregon turned. Riley and his search party were filing down the steps. The doctor put a finger to his lips. “Sit down and listen for a bit. You’ll be exposed to some culture.”

“Culture? Wilson is furious with you.”

“Shut up and listen.”

They listened to the ‘Toccata and Fugue in D minor.’

“Okay, I’ll admit that was interesting.” Riley stood, his laser rifle clanging on the seat. “But don’t you think we should return?”

“Good idea. I want to bring Baker here.”

“You’ll have to clear that with Wilson. Let’s go, doc.”

As they approached the door, it swung shut. Obregon turned to the android.

“You are strangers,” it said. “I’ve been programmed to maintain you here until the masters decide what to do with you.”

“The masters?” said Obregon, nearly shouting. They were trying to maintain a conversation over an immense distance. “Who are they?”

“The masters. The ones who come and listen. Who else?”

“But they don’t come anymore, so we don’t have to wait.”

“It’s true they haven’t come for a long time, but, all the same, you must wait. Please sit down.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Riley, raising the rifle. He soon dropped it as the metal parts turned red and the plastic parts began to melt.

“Sit down! J. S. Bach commands you to listen!”

The android played the ‘Little Fugue in G minor.’

As the android played, Riley whispered to Obregon. “What now, doc? You brought us into this—bail us out. Or, are we trapped here?”

“Shut up and let me think. Enjoy the music, damn it.”

By the time the fugue ended, Obregon had a solution. He jumped up from his seat.

“Bravo, bravo, Herr Bach! *C’est magnifique!*” He clapped and ran down the aisle towards the stage. “You are J. S. Bach, right?”

The android folded its hands over its fat belly and stared at Obregon with soulful eyes.

“This is a strange outburst.” He stood and bowed. “Of course I am J. S. Bach. And I’m playing my music.”

Obregon smiled. “Do you know ‘*Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*’?”

“Why, yes, the 10th movement from my cantata *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben*. From my Weimar period. We have no singers here tonight, but I can improvise an organ transcription.”

Obregon was tempted. He was familiar with the Peter Hurford transcription. *What a treat it would be to hear Bach’s own! But then, this isn’t truly Bach.*

The android sat back down on the stool and prepared to play, stretching his fingers more like a pianist might. Or, so reasoned Obregon. He’d never seen a pianist.

“Before you start, *mein Herr Bach*,” said Obregon, “would you mind telling me who *Jesu* is?”

“Why, of course. He’s the joy of man’s desiring. What else could it be?”

“You don’t know Earth theology, do you?”

“I only entertain the masters. What is theology?”

Obregon explained a little. He was rusty himself, but he did an acceptable job of summarizing the various theological movements in Earth’s past.

“So you see, the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition believes in one God, a unique God. There are Humans today that still believe this. In particular, J. S. Bach was extremely religious and had a deep faith in God. Therefore, you cannot be J. S. Bach.”

The android froze, its hands still poised above the five keyboards, its feet in midair still ready to attack the bass pedals.

“Chu, blast that damn door open!”

Chu, a member of Riley’s team, still had his rifle. He complied.

Obregon later returned with Ron Baker and others to crystal concert hall. There was no music. The android never moved again.

They found other similar concert halls sprinkled around the planet. One had featured music from an old quartet Obregon liked, the Beatles—he recognized the Sgt. Peppers outfits. But these androids were all immobile too.

He told Julie Chen, his intern, about the experience.

“I need to continue your musical education,” she said.

“Say what? Lester thinks I’m always lost in the past as it is.”

“But what about Chinese opera?”

“Hmm. Can you teach me Chinese?”

Doctor Carlos and the Frontier Affair
Trickster, 4054
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Captain Lester Wilson looked around the bus. “Where’s Obregon?”

Most of the crew from the survey ship *Brendan* had already climbed aboard the rusted-out vehicle that would take them back to the spaceport. They were whining, chatting, or bragging about their adventures on Trickster, a rough frontier planet and a regular stop for cruisers and freighters servicing the out-worlds. Survey ships visited less often for supplies and shore leave.

They had been planet-bound for nearly two weeks. This amount of time made most crewmembers eager to return to the space lanes. Wilson was among them. He didn’t like shore leaves.

The four original Human worlds of Earth, Sanctuary, New Haven, and Novo Mondo had seen an increase in their numbers to the hundreds. Several planets like Trickster were important ports-of-call in ITUIP. Ships like *Brendan* had an exploratory role in ITUIP’s SEB.

“He and Chen headed over to Jokester right after we landed,” replied Lt. Riley, head of Brendan’s security detail. “They didn’t say what for.”

“Didn’t have to,” mumbled the captain, “but I warned them when we’d be leaving. They’re AWOL, as far as I’m concerned.”

Jester and Jokester were the two big continents on Trickster. The first and more populated was home to the more recent Human settlers. The second was sparsely populated and home to the original Trickster sapiens, the Webeth. They had invited the Human colonists to stay, thus satisfying conditions in the ITUIP Protocol, and lived in peace under the provisions of a five-hundred-year-old treaty. There was some commerce between the two groups.

The ancient Webeth had been courageous seafarers. With the passing of centuries, they fed their wanderlust by expanding to several nearby star systems long before Humans ventured into space, but they pulled back during the Tali conquests. Even after Humans had forced the Tali to make peace, the Webeth were content to keep a low profile.

Wilson, like Riley, was not a scientist, but *Brendan*’s scientists respected the wiry little man and his command abilities. He made the executive decision they paid him to make. “Riley, take four of your guys and go find them. We’re taking off tomorrow, but we can’t do it without a ship’s doctor.”

“And his intern,” reminded Riley.

“Yeah, we need one or the other. I don’t care which one.” He returned to a normal seating position, wondering how locals possibly could feel comfortable on the hard seats. *What’s Obregon up to?* he asked himself.

Two weeks earlier Carlos Obregon and Julie Chen had disembarked from the water ferry at the docks of Freetown, the name the Humans gave to the Webeth’s largest city on the western shore of Jokester. Neither one exhibited the ubiquitous pallor of the spacer. They were inconspicuous among the swarthy Human population of Jester. Jokester was different.

“When you say this will be educational for me,” said Chen, “do you mean medically speaking?” She looked with distaste at the squalor of the city. Piles of garbage were common; the smell of raw sewage was heavy in the air. “I can’t believe the Webeth are an old civilization.”

“You’re anthropomorphizing, Dr. Chen,” said Obregon. “Human civilization’s ideas about urban development often differ from others’. Get used to it. Different folks have different priorities. We like to take a shower every day but reduce that frequency aboard *Brendan* to help on water recycling. We can adapt.”

“Where are we going?”

Obregon noted she was annoyed. He knew he tended to pontificate.

“A place on the outskirts of Freetown. A clinic belonging to some friends of mine.”

They mounted a vehicle for public transportation comprised of a front-end electric truck, which, in this case, pulled two people-carrying wagons. They were the only Humans on board, a fact that bothered them much less than it would a Human from Jester. The Webeth on board politely pulled back from them, leaving them an entire seat for themselves.

“I have the impression they don’t like us.” She smiled at the Webeth across the aisle, but they ignored her and maintained their stoic expressions.

“Oh, they like us well enough. They just think we smell funny.”

“You have to be kidding.”

“Nope.” He turned around and faced a couple and their children behind them. He said something filled with gutturals and pitch changes in their strange language. The father Webeth laughed. He said something back to Obregon. Turning to Chen, he said, “You see, I confirmed it. Their words for it are ‘pa doa jope’el,’ meaning roughly ‘too squeaky clean,’ or more literally ‘no smell of the land.’ After a few days they’ll be fine with us.”

“What? I’m not bathing all the time we’re here?”

“Look around, doctor. It’s all dust, sand, and rock. They use a large percentage of their water for irrigation. Jokester is a lot more arid than Jester.”

After an hour’s ride, they climbed down from their wagon and started to walk. Another twenty minutes brought them to a compound. A huge sign in front was mainly in Webeth glyphs that read from top to bottom, right to left, but, in small faded letters at the bottom, Chen read the Human words “Free Clinic.”

“How can it be free?” she said. “They have to have operating costs.”

“Donations from Jester,” explained Obregon. “Either Mike or Judy make a fund-raising trip every six months. Makes contributing Jester folks feel good about themselves and the Webeth love the attention. They’re not used to charity, so don’t call it that—they’re used to fending for themselves.”

They walked through an open gate and up to the largest building inside the compound. It was run-down but sturdy. The waiting room was full of Webeth.

“I’m Dr. Carlos Obregon to see either Dr. Mike or Dr. Judy.” The Webeth receptionist pointed to a small microphone and Obregon repeated what he had said for the primitive translator.

“Miracle of miracles,” said a booming voice. A giant of a man had exploded through the door leading inside the clinic. He hugged Obregon and pounded him on the back.

His biceps were bigger than Chen's calf. A ring of red hair surrounded his bald crown. His red beard was full and curly. He was taller than Obregon, who was not a small man. Long, delicate fingers stroked the beard as he studied Chen.

"Julie Chen, my intern," said Obregon.

Mike O'Neill was about to give her the same welcome, but she held him off. "Sorry, Mike, I'm more delicate." He shook her hand, instead.

The giant stood back and studied her a bit more. "Well, if you can stand to work for this slave driver, you're a strong woman in my eyes." He winked at Obregon. "The Webeth elders told me an SEB ship was in orbit. We have them visit all the time, so I didn't imagine it was yours. Nice of you to think of us."

"Years ago, I nearly abandoned the life of an adventurer to stay here and help in the clinic," Obregon explained to Chen. "They do a lot of good work here. The Webeth are too casual about taking care of themselves. The SEB calls them 'Post Starflight.' They don't travel much, so they have no idea how backward they seem to Humans. They also have some crazy religious beliefs about the sacredness of the body, beliefs we Humans don't pay attention to. Nevertheless, Judy and Mike have trained hundreds of locals to go beyond their beliefs and in turn train others."

"Sounds like fulfilling work," observed Chen. "Why did you leave?"

"Yes, Carlitos, why did you leave?"

Obregon looked across the room to the door where a tall, curvaceous redhead had entered. "Hi, Judy, how are you?" She walked across the waiting room and stretched to plant a kiss on his lips.

Judy and Mike came straggling home as Trickster's star was sinking over the eastern hills above Freetown. The thin atmosphere rapidly changed dusk to night and sprinkled stars into a purple sky. The two siblings looked tired.

"Bad day?" Obregon said. Chen and he were waiting on the porch of the little house where Mike and Judy lived and the ship's doctors were now guests. The clinic's founders had sent them on ahead.

The house had an open floor plan and open doors and windows. There were no thieves in Freetown and the Webeth didn't worry about their insects. The native bugs didn't like Humans. Chen had seen some big ones that could even fly short distances, but there was nothing like mosquitoes.

Judy plopped down into a padded chair. "Find me a beer, will you, Mike?" He nodded. "I lost one patient; Mike lost two. The Webeths wait to the last minute. They think our clinic is an ER. They take it so stoically when one of them dies. I become frustrated."

"What's their physiology like?" said Chen.

"Pretty much like ours. You've seen them. Little differences like six fingers and toes and their big heads. Our brains tend to favor one side or the other; theirs don't. They have a longer bowel tract. You become used to the differences. I can probably treat a Webeth easier than a Human."

Mike returned to the porch with cold beers for all. Chen saw Obregon look at the bottle. There was no label.

“Our own micro-brewery product,” said Mike, laughing at Obregon’s concern. “Webeths love it too, so we’ve created a small business with the proceeds going to the clinic.”

Obregon took a gulp, and Chen followed his example. It felt wonderful going down in the arid atmosphere. “Works for me. I’m adaptable,” said Obregon.

“To a point,” said Judy. Chen was surprised at the animosity in her voice. Judy caught it. “Oh, don’t mind me, but by now you probably know Carlos Obregon well. He can be a stubborn man.”

Chen nodded.

“Hey, I’m sitting right here on this porch,” objected Obregon. “Do you give Mike such crap?”

“She knows better,” said the brother. “Judy, lighten up. He doesn’t know.”

The sister shrugged. “That’s the problem. It’s good to see you again, Carlitos. And nice to meet you, Julie. How long have you been interning under this awful man? And I hope it’s not literally under.”

Obregon blushed. “Let’s not go there, lady. My relationship with Chen is professional. I’m trying to make her into a fine ship’s doctor. So far, she’s doing okay, in spite of me. I brought her along so she can ask questions like she was asking.”

“Makes sense to me,” said Mike. “Being a ship’s doctor is complicated. You’ll have to deal with many more types of sapiens, some a lot more complicated than Webeths, both internally and externally.”

“Mike used to work on a SEB ship,” explained Obregon. “He stayed on to work with Judy. I couldn’t hack it.”

“Working with me, you mean?” Judy asked. Chen noticed that Mike admonished her by touching her arm.

“No, it was this place,” said Obregon. “It drove me nuts. And the Webeth walk around as if they don’t have a care in the world. No wonder they ran from the Tali.”

“Well, they didn’t exactly run,” said Mike. “They won some important battles and were able to keep their home planet, which is more than we did for a while. But they are stubborn about keeping their own customs.”

“That’s why they need our help,” said Judy.

“Mom, mom! Who’s here? I hear voices.”

“My daughter, Debby,” explained Judy.

A little girl had come in the back way. She dashed through the house and onto the porch. She had a cane but it didn’t look like she used it much. “Who’s here?” she said again, although she was standing right in front of Obregon. She was sniffing the air like a Webeth.

Julie Chen’s jaw dropped. The resemblance was unmistakable.

“I didn’t know you had a daughter,” Obregon said.

“You didn’t know you had a daughter,” said Judy.

“That too.”

Mike was embarrassed. “Things happen.” Judy had sent Debby inside to find some snacks. “She’s been good for Judy.”

“Should I go help her?” Chen said.

"No, she likes to do things on her own around the house. She knows where everything is. Most of our guests are Webeth elders. We rarely have Humans around."

"I would think she'd miss Human company," said Obregon. "Kids her own age, I mean."

"She probably misses having a father more," said Judy. She paused a moment as Obregon looked wounded. "I didn't mean that to be so caustic. I'm sorry. You didn't know, so that's that." She smiled at her brother. "Uncle Mike's been a good surrogate."

"And her eyes?" Chen said. "How can that be permanent?"

"It's not—not necessarily. There was a small tumor right where the optic nerves cross. Mike and I extirpated it, but the nerves are damaged. We don't have the cloned parts and neither one of us is a good enough surgeon. At least, not for that kind of specialized surgery."

Obregon smiled at Chen. "I should have guessed I had another reason for bringing you along." Chen nodded.

"What?" said Mike, looking from one to the other.

"One of Chen's specialties is neuro-ophthalmology," explained Obregon. "She can probably do that surgery in her sleep, if it's what I think it is. Me, I can do it too, but not in my sleep. Excuse me a minute."

Obregon walked off the porch and made a call. He had to use a handheld because their communications had to go through *Brendan*. The Human continent was too far away. Chen saw his face turn red and then angry as he started to argue with someone on the other end. Finally, he slammed the clamshell shut and returned to the porch.

"Lester sent Riley to haul us in. Can you imagine that?" Nevertheless, he beamed at Judy. "Still, he agreed to the surgery. Are you up to it?"

"I think it's Debby's decision," said Judy. "I want it and you want it, but she has to want it too."

"Does she know?" said Obregon.

"Of course not. But if you fix her eyes, she will."

"Then, mum dear, we'd better tell her. Do you think she can handle it?"

"Oh, she can handle it. But she might not like the fact you deserted her."

"I didn't desert her. I didn't even know she existed. She's an angel, by the way."

"We know that," said Mike. "She might look like you, but she has Judy's personality."

Riley pushed away from the table. "I didn't think vegetarian could be so good."

"We've become inventive with our cooking as a way to adapt to Webeth customs," said Mike. "Strangely enough, they sale lots of fish, wildlife, and our own domestic animals they raise to the Humans on Jester. They don't eat anything with a central nervous system."

"Religious more than dietary?" said Obregon.

"Religious," said Judy. She gazed at the back deck. Debby was playing some Webeth board game with a Webeth youngster. "She gets along well with the local kids. There's the occasional cultural clash, of course."

As if they had acted upon a telepathic suggestion, the two children started throwing some angry words around. The grownups all watched as the skirmish ended with both children jumping up and shaking their fists at each other. Debby came in angry and crying and the Webeth child ran off down the road towards Freetown, looking back from time to time and shaking his little fist.

“What was all that about?” Judy said.

“Zye’epow doesn’t want me to have the surgery. And he’s going to make the Elders stop me.”

Riley bristled. “That’s not happening, kid.” He patted the butt of his stun gun, oblivious to the fact the gesture was lost on Debby. “We’ll do the surgery on *Brendan*.”

“I was going to suggest that,” said Chen. “You probably don’t have the cloned nerve replacements.”

Mike sank down in his chair and Judy shook her head sadly.

“They have us. By treaty, the clinic has to operate within the Webeth legal system. We have to abide by their rules because we live on Jokester. If the Elders vote against us, they’ll close the clinic.”

“You can come back and reopen it,” suggested one of Riley’s men.

“It doesn’t work that way,” said Mike. “The place becomes taboo because it flaunted the Webeth moral codes.”

“So, build a new place,” suggested Riley.

“I think Mike means the idea of the clinic becomes taboo,” said Obregon, “not the physical setting. No wonder I left this place.” He stood and headed outside.

“Where you going, cowboy?” said Judy.

“I need to determine the fine details of that treaty from the Captain. I’ll get better reception outside. Damn Webeths should get some microwave repeaters.”

“They’re not backward,” said Debby, “only different.”

“Yeah, I know that, hon. But I don’t have to like it.”

“As father of the child, you must argue her case, Carlos of Obregon.”

Dye’ema’ak the Elder studied Judy. Chen thought he expected the mother to object. Instead, she shrugged.

“He can probably do a better job of it,” she said. “He always says I’m too emotional.”

“Ouch,” said Obregon. He tapped the side of his head where he had plugged in the wi-fi unit allowing him to communicate with the *Brendan*’s AI. “But I do have one of these. Do the Webeth know what it’s used for?”

“Vaguely,” said Mike. “I don’t think they can imagine the quantity of data you have at your beck and call.”

“None of us can,” said Chen. “AI’s are now self-aware synthetic minds designed for storing and fast retrieval of large quantities of information. Quantum computing has come a long way.”

“When do I go before the Elders?” Obregon said to Dye’ema’ak.

“Now,” he said, gesturing to the back deck of the clinic.

They all looked outside and saw the semicircle of old Webeths on the back deck.

“Creepy,” whispered Julie to Judy. “How’d they do that?”

“They always seem to be in the right place at the right time,” observed Mike. “I think we’d better go out.”

Dye'ema'ak, the oldest Elder, started by introducing the others to the Humans and to the case being decided. He then gestured for Obregon to step forward.

The vista distracted Carlos Obregon. The backyard fell off at a slight gradient for about one hundred meters and turned into crop fields. They looked like vineyards. He had once visited that part of South America they said had been home to his ancestors. The view here was similar—rows and rows of fruit hanging from vines, ripening under the Trickster sun. *What were they called? Grapes.* He knew these weren't grapes, but they looked similar.

He shook himself from his reverie. He had a daughter that needed her eyes fixed.

"I'm Debby's father," he began. This didn't seem to surprise them. "Some Humans and most Webeths believe the surgery we want to perform on Debby violates treaty provisions between Humans and Webeths. Let me argue against that."

The Elders didn't seem impressed. Some became restless, perhaps thinking he was wasting their time.

"First point: this clinic was established before Debby was conceived. Its charter specifies that it must operate according to Webeth law as determined by the Council of Elders." There were nods. "But only Mike and Judy signed that charter, not me. And I repeat: I am the father of the child." Now the nods were more reluctant—it was obvious to Obregon that some had realized where he was going. Paternal responsibility was important to the Webeth. "Also, the persons performing the surgery, Julie Chen and myself, do not work for the clinic—in fact, we're only bound by laws and regulations of the ITUIP Protocol and SEB's, not Jester's or Jokester's." Now for the *coup de grace*. "And finally, Debby was born to an immigrant Human mother from Jester. There is no provision in Webeth law or in the treaty saying the child automatically becomes a citizen of Jokester. She is therefore subject to both ITUIP and Jester laws, not Jokester laws. If she and her parents allow the surgery, the Webeth have no say in the matter."

"But the child's body is still a sacred vessel according to Webeth law, for it is said it is the air and the land and the sea that gave her life," objected an Elder.

The AI came through via the wi-fi device. Beyond the nearly instantaneous translation from *Brendan's* AI, Obregon was also able to read from the treaty document, a transcript only he could see. He hastened to arrange his thoughts in a way the Elders could understand. "As a matter of fact, Article 12, Section 11, of the treaty states Webeth sacred law can only hold in those cases where it doesn't contradict the provisions of the treaty. Because she is not a citizen of Jokester, because of an omission in the treaty, her body wasn't created from Jokester's air, land, and sea, and therefore it's not a sacred vessel." Obregon was getting a headache from the verbal acrobatics, but he smiled at Dye'ema'ak. "Friend Webeths, you have to read the fine print. You have a secular government on Trickster as far as Human-Webeth relations go."

The Elders discussed a bit and then nodded. They stood, bowed to the Humans, and filed off the back deck in silence.

"How is she?" said Captain Wilson.

"She'll be fine," said Chen. "Obregon has a daughter who can see now what a gruff old curmudgeon he truly is."

"I'm just an old Santa Claus," said Obregon as he removed the operating smock.

"What's that?" said Wilson.

"An old folk hero from Earth."

Wilson nodded. He was used to Obregon's strange references to ancient Earth history. He often thought Obregon lived in the past. "You've still created a stir. The Webeth are asking for a revision of the treaty. If they sneak their religious mumbo-jumbo in, the Humans will want something similar."

"I didn't know Humans here were religious," said Chen.

"They aren't particularly," said Obregon, "but original colonists were. Something called Buddhism. It happens a lot. Sects and creeds leave near-Earth space to find their own little planet and establish their uniqueness. ITUIP moves in and makes the place a crossroads for interstellar commerce, messing everything up. I think Santa Claus was killed that way back on Earth."

"Do you think Jester will sit down at the bargaining table with Jokester again?" Chen said with a smile. "They probably want to add a provision that Humans born on Jokester automatically become Webeths."

"Better question: whose side will Mike and Judy be on?" said Obregon. "I'm sure Judy will make sure our daughter is protected."

"And any other Human immigrating to Jokester," said Wilson. "Or, being born there."

Obregon shook water off his hands before drying them. "Let's hope it works both ways. Too many times it doesn't."

Debby's parents were there when she awoke from the anesthesia. Obregon held her hand for an hour before Riley took Mike, Judy, and Debby back to the clinic.

Obregon watched the shuttle leave *Brendan's* dock on its way to the coast, wondering when he would see his daughter again. His life would never be the same.

Doctor Carlos and the Android
Novo Mondo, 4046
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"It's creepy," said Julie Chen. She took a sip of the local brew and smiled. "Let's replace its weight with some of this."

Carlos Obregon nodded. His intern was learning fast. *Maybe too fast?*

"Can't. They load it in big vats on freighters and bottle it on other worlds." He jerked his thumb toward the loading dock. "Sanctuary product. Their robots and androids are second in quality only to Earth's. Our android is a 'free advertising sample,' with emphasis on free."

"But what can he, rather it, do better than a standard portadoc? In fact, our old portadoc has more robotic arms and a bigger brain."

"Take your complaint to the captain. I just take orders."

"And you and I will eventually be replaced by an android. If not this model, then a newer one."

The ship's medical officer reached over, patted her hand, and smiled. "Let's revisit your pronoun difficulty. It reminds me of a story from medical school."

"Do I have to hear it?"

Damn. She knows me too well.

"It's part of your education," he insisted. "There were ten of us in our class at the start, but only nine graduated. Jocelyn Braun ended up in a mental ward. We all had anatomically correct dummies to practice on instead of cadavers. The anti-senescence drugs had produced a shortage of dead bodies."

"Are you saying this android is anatomically correct?"

"It's not my job to check. All I'm saying is that Braun fell in love with her dummy and her obsession drove her crazy. Fair warning."

"Was the dummy a he or a she?"

"Does it matter? It was only a dummy."

"Our dummy must be a he, don't you think?"

"Like I said, not my job. As soon as we lift off, I'll deactivate it and put it in a closet."

"That would probably violate the agreement with that locals and cause them problems with the Sanctuary manufacturers."

"No one will ever know. How likely is it *Brendan* will be back here any time soon?"

He saw that she pondered the question.

"How do you know we can't use the android?"

"Ah, but I will use it. I plan to hang my dress uniform on it. We're about the same build."

"You have more tummy and it has more muscles."

"Mine are real; its are fake."

"And if the captain insists on using it?"

"I'll look into reprogramming it to take the captain's place. Or, something more drastic."

Chen frowned. Obregon knew she was thinking a storm was coming and it wouldn't correspond to the black clouds rolling in from across the bay.

They left Novo Mondo the next day. Captain Wilson insisted on introducing the android to the crew the first night out.

“Speech,” said Lt. Riley, head of ship’s security. Obregon knew he said it in jest, but everyone shut up when the android started to talk.

“I’m honored to serve on the good ship *Brendan* with all of you. I hope I can help doctors Chen and Obregon attend to all your healthcare needs aboard ship and when we land on new and strange worlds. I am here to serve.”

There was some applause. Obregon felt embarrassed for the android. *It’s trying, but maybe too hard?*

“We can’t call you Android Physician Model Beta Version 3.1,” he said. “Do you have a more Human-like name?”

“I wasn’t provided with one, but I’m open to suggestions.”

“Carlos,” said the captain, “I think you should name him. He’s working for you.”

Oh, the responsibility! Obregon thought for a few beats. “How about Doc Holliday?”

“I have found an entry for a Doc Holliday in my database. He was a frontier dentist who helped the Earp brothers in the gunfight at the OK Corral.”

“Your database should also tell you frontier doctors and dentists were more or less the same thing, like here on *Brendan*. And most places we’ll go are so frontier-like no Humans exist there. So, how about it?”

Obregon wasn’t sure about his equating doctors and dentists, but he liked the name.

“I would be honored, Dr. Obregon. Please, everyone, you should now call me Doc Holliday.”

Afterwards Captain Wilson took Obregon aside. “Say, didn’t that guy Holliday die at the OK Corral?”

“Nope, he died of consumption, same as his mother. That’s an old name for TB, often a death sentence at that time. Who cares? Our Doc Holliday is not alive. It’s only a damned machine.”

They assigned the Earth-like planet the catalog number E-1093. It was teeming with life, including nomadic tribes of pre-agrarian ETs. The Humans set up a camouflaged observation station near a watering hole several of tribes used. They couldn’t let themselves be seen because of the ITUIP Protocol, but they would observe the tribes long enough to substantiate their argument for declaring the planet off-limits for colonization.

“They respect territorial boundaries right down to the shore line,” said Potts, the new xenosociologist. “But they must have fought in the past to establish those boundaries.”

Potts and some other scientists were studying the groups. Obregon and Doc Holliday sat on camp chairs. Obregon was revising a list of supplies he needed.

“Nix that electron microscope,” he said. “We can function awhile with the old one. How are we doing?”

Doc Holliday provided him a total.

“A bit over budget, but the captain will probably go along. Everything seems necessary. Enjoying the sun, are you?”

The android turned and watched the interplay of shadows from E-1093’s star and the J-type planet it orbited. It was fortunate for the planet’s teeming life that the gas giant was in the E-zone. The situation was a common one.

“You have yet to use me as I was intended to be used,” it said.

“Consider yourself lucky. I could have stuffed you in a closet.”

“But I only clean Petri dishes, sweep the floor, and perform other menial chores any robot can perform.”

“Clever of Chen to offload that onto you. But there’s no way I’m letting you operate on a crewmember. I don’t care if your damn database contains every surgical technique known to Humans.”

“I also understand the anatomy and surgical procedures for every sentient species known to Humans.”

“Oh, yeah, what about those furry guys out there? What would you do with them?”

“The same as you. After examining the patient externally, I would have to diagnose the problem by appealing to similarities with other bipeds. There might be some trial and error. Even with Humans, medicine is not an exact science. That’s how new procedures are discovered.”

“Well, you’ll only be permitted trial and error with *Brendan’s* crew over my dead body.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s an adage, an expression. It means you’ll continue to clean Petri dishes. So, observe and learn. When we give you back to your company reps, you can operate on them.”

“Obregon!” The doctor was dozing when Riley woke him. “We have a wounded native headed our way. Looks like his tribe wants to be rid of him. He’s bleeding like crazy.”

The doctor peered through the limbs and brush of the camouflage barrier in time to see the native stumble and fall. He squeezed through an opening and ran towards the native.

“Stop!” said Riley. “We’re only supposed to study them.”

Obregon stopped and turned. “Sorry, Lt., but I’m a doctor and he’s a patient who needs me. Give me cover in case the other furries become testy.”

He approached the wounded native with arms extended and palms open. The group that had chased him stopped about one hundred meters away. They milled around trying to understand the situation.

Obregon reached the native, knelt, and began his examination. *One less rib than us and two on the left broken. Two lungs, same as us, but the left one is probably punctured by one of the ribs given the amount of blood he’s coughing up.*

“Doc Holliday, bring me the equipment pack.” *I’m going to save this old boy.*

The android arrived and laid out surgical tools. Obregon was about to shave bluish fur from the area where he was going to make the incision when a spear hit him from behind. He gasped, pitched forward on his face, and lost the battle to remain conscious.

Doc Holliday watched as Lt. Riley and other members of the security detail fired warning shots over the band of natives. They threw down their weapons, covered their ears, and scattered to the wind. The android turned its attention to its patients.

It deduced the native needed help first. Putting its super-sensitive ear to the native's side, it located the exact spot to make the incision. In short time, it shaved away the fur, made its cut, removed the broken rib from the lung, and repaired it, and then repaired the lung.

A broken spear tip complicated Obregon's case. It tossed the spear away after noting the length of the tip. From the entry point and angle of entry, the android knew where to probe for the sharp point. It then had to repair an artery and drain the blood from the abdominal cavity. Obregon was lucky—the tip had only nicked an artery and missed the heart.

After it finished, Doc Holliday picked up Obregon and carried first Obregon and then the native to the camouflage post.

"Are they OK?" said Riley.

"Both need recovery time. I loaded them up with painkillers. The furry one's body chemistry is similar enough to use artificial opiates on him too. Please call Dr. Chen and ask her to prepare sick bay for one Human and one native."

"I guess you'll have to change your mind about using Doc Holliday," said Captain Wilson. "He probably saved your life."

"No doubt about it," said Obregon. "The native's too. Chen confirmed everything it did. Are we stuck here until Blue Boy can rejoin his tribe?"

"I'm not sure what to do about that. They weren't too happy with him. But we've already violated the Protocol, so maybe we should just hold onto him."

"That's because he's from another tribe. He was fooling around with a Blue Girl from the tribe chasing him."

"How do you know that?"

"Simple examination. Doc Holliday did a thorough exam of the fellow. Their reproductive system is similar to ours. We have to let him off at the watering hole and he'll find his way back to his own tribe. He'll be bragging about his night of lechery for some time."

"You're assuming they have a language, of course. But, are you sure about this?"

"Doc Holliday wouldn't make a diagnostic mistake. Ever heard the tale of Romeo and Juliet?"

"Is this another one of your trivia questions about ancient Earth history?"

"Listen up. There are several versions. Romeo and Juliet and the Hatfields and the McCoys are two. Now we have Blue Boy and Blue Girl. Another chapter of romantic dalliances. And this one didn't end in tragedy."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Captain Wilson.

Obregon sighed. *Maybe Doc Holliday will be interested in the history.*

Dr. Carlos and the Merchants of Doom
Near Smith's World, 4057
Copyright 2013

"He's a eunuch," said Julie Chen, the intern.

Carlos Obregon, Chief Medical Officer of the starship *Brendan*, surveyed the neutered man from head to toe. No small man himself, this fellow stood a third of a meter taller.

"I believe the correct pronoun is 'it.' It's a eunuch." He grabbed a chair, scooted it over to the giant, stood on it, and looked him in the eye. "Tell me your name, sir, and please don't say it's Tiny."

Obregon noticed the tattoos across the massive shoulders now, an intricate design of some sinister flying creatures breathing fire and devouring bodies—human bodies. In other circumstances, he might consider the work a piece of mobile art because the muscles would put the creatures in motion.

"You're wasting time, doctor. He's also mute."

Obregon pirouetted on the chair and looked across the room at a young woman dressed in one of the examining robes they provided their patients. He arched an eyebrow. Chen shrugged. The doctor dismounted.

"I hope he wasn't mute when you made him a eunuch," he said. He watched the blush pass upwards from her cleavage to her forehead. "Poor bastard wouldn't be able to scream. Who are you, by the way, and why have you invaded my domain?"

"I forgot to tell you," said Chen. "You have to examine her as well—captain's orders. There's an outbreak of Johansson's Plague on her planet."

He then noticed the discreet but effective face mask. The captain wasn't stupid. The Plague would run through the ship faster than an electronic fire in an oxygen-enriched environment.

He placed the tablet he had been holding on a floating gurney, his reading about the new techniques in Tali heart surgery all but forgotten. *This might be interesting*, he thought.

"Well, whoever she is, what's she doing on *Brendan* and why is her little mascot here with her?"

"My name is Princess Jacqueline..." The rest that followed was a name so long Obregon was tapping his foot before it ended with, "...future Queen of Smith's World."

He assumed the princess was a daughter belonging to some royal house on the planet they had left.

"Your ship will be taking me to a nearby star system where I will wed."

"With the King of Smith's World, I presume," said Obregon, rolling his eyes. He had little use for planets outside the ITUIP who had reverted to monarchies. Or, theocracies. They tended to live in the past. "Please don't tell me I'm supposed to certify you're also a virgin."

"That has already been done," said the princess. "Your assistant informed you of your orders."

Obregon jerked a thumb over his shoulders at the giant. "What's this little fellow here for?"

"He's to ensure I remain a virgin," said the princess with a smile.

Obregon shook his head in disbelief.

Brendan was an ITUIP SEB survey ship with the mission of charting the regions of the Galaxy close to Earth and its original three colonies, a region often known as near-Earth space by Humans. It often happened that an “unexplored” E-type planet already had some sort of sentient life. Less commonly, they found the planet already colonized by Humans or one of the other known galactic peoples. Groups of Humans often went exploring on their own these days, driven by a desire to live their lives within special social structures and without obligations associated with living on an ITUIP world. It wasn’t unusual that such groups reverted to ways of life that were primitive compared to ITUIP planets’.

In this case, the two planets had starships, but not many of them. *Otherwise, why hitch a ride?*

“Do you know what Johansson’s Plague is?” Obregon said to Chen.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said. She helped the princess remove her robe. “The doctor will examine you now.”

Damn anti-senescence drugs. How old is she? The young woman was stunning, but he wasn’t impressed. If her people still had starships, they probably used genetic engineering to make the ideal feminine body, especially because she was royalty. *Royalty! What a bunch of hydroponics waste.*

By the end of the exam, he had changed his mind. Princess Jacqueline’s DNA had never been reprogrammed *in utero*. She was a natural thoroughbred. *That makes her a scientific oddity.*

He helped her back into the robe.

“Do I also need to examine your eunuch?” Obregon said, thinking of the Plague.

“He’s not mine. He was sent by the King to serve me during my voyage.”

“Smith’s Worlds’ people have immunity to Johansson’s,” added Chen.

“Anyone know why?” said Obregon.

He was sorry he asked when his intern launched into a complicated explanation about a local mutation producing a gene that controlled a slightly modified enzyme. It was common that Human populations living on planets with little outside contact mutated into almost separate species. Starships used FTL technology developed by the Human theoretical physicist Annie Li and the Ranger mathematical physicist Deep Breather, but going from point A to point B still took subjective time. The various planets of ITUIP were even isolated, although less so than Smith’s World.

“And where is your assistant tonight, doctor?”

Obregon, decked out in his gray dress uniform, complete with sash and epaulets, slid his chair away from the table, circled it, waited for her majesty to sit, and then pushed her forward. He walked back around the captain’s table and returned to his own seat.

“We aren’t slaves to pomp and circumstance, but on your first night out, Captain Wilson thought you might enjoy something more formal.” He took a sip from his water glass. “There’ll be only twelve of us. Chen’s on duty in the infirmary. Others in the crew just grab meals when they’re hungry. We’re informal here, most of the time.”

“Yes, my father told me I would be roughing it.” She held up a fork. “But this looks like silver.”

“Hardly. It’s a special lightweight alloy. Sometimes, we lose artificial gravity and things start flying around. You don’t want to be hit by something heavy.” Obregon made a fork from three fingers and plunged it into his throat.

“Very graphic. I suppose that can happen if you’re attacked.”

“Attacked? Doesn’t happen, ma’am. We have some defensive weapons, but we’ve never been attacked. Who does that anymore?”

“The Merchants of Doom.”

Obregon dropped his napkin.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Smith’s World has been warring with Doom for centuries. In the shipping lanes of this small region of near-Earth, the merchants plunder our freighters. They board our ships and steal all they contain and then resell the cargo to their own population.”

“We call that piracy and those kinds of people pirates, not merchants.”

“I’ll not argue semantics. Pirates or merchants, the name doesn’t matter. They will try to stop our two kingdoms from becoming one.”

“Why is that, Princess?”

“I thought to you, of all people, it would be obvious.” She moved her bodice down almost to her left nipple. He remembered the hourglass tattoo. *These people are into their ink.* “That’s the symbol of Doom. I was stolen from there when I was five.”

“Do you think I would have agreed to ferry the princess to Smith’s World if I had known *Brendan* would be in danger?”

Obregon had leaned on Captain Wilson’s desk with his left hand and pointed his long, slim right index finger at Wilson’s face, nearly touching the captain’s nose. He then decided to keep his answer private and collapsed into the captain’s guest chair.

“I suppose not.”

“I can now understand why you looked like a man with acid reflux and a bad case of gas during dinner.”

“Leave the medical metaphors to me,” growled Obregon. “And I’ll take that as an apology. What do you plan to do?”

“If we’re attacked? Why surrender, of course. *Brendan* can’t tangle with an armed battle cruiser. It would be suicide.”

“They’ll take her.”

“You mean the princess? Good riddance. Her parents pulled a fast one.”

“They’re not her parents, technically speaking,” said Obregon, “but she doesn’t want to go with the Merchants. Who names their damn planet Doom?”

“Someone who plays VR role-playing games in their spare time, maybe? Some of our own crew are addicted to these games. They’ve been around forever. Well, thousands of years.”

“That’s harmless. Boarding another ship by force, murdering the crew, and kidnapping someone are not acceptable pastimes.”

“These planets aren’t in the ITUIP.”

“And they never will be.” Obregon pounded the desk so hard the captain jumped. “And I’ll be damned if I’ll let them take the princess. She loves the man she’s going to marry.”

Lester Wilson smiled and sighed. “That’s how I was roped into this. I’m an old romantic. Marriage. How archaic! But, at the same time, how romantic.”

“Oh, shut up,” said Obregon.

Philippe de la Rue didn’t have his heart in his mission. He understood the Merchants had a vendetta. Kidnapping the princess would erase the embarrassment they had suffered many years ago. *But why me!*

He was as bloodthirsty as the next Merchant, but he was also practical. He would probably receive a silver or gold Merchants’ medal if he recovered the princess. That wouldn’t pay for the trip or satisfy his men. In fact, one of their planets was rich in metals, so a medal might only be worth a manicure if he melted it down. His chest was full of them. He didn’t need any more.

“One-tenth parsec and closing,” said his navigator.

While ITUIP’s worlds were more advanced than the Merchants’ were in most things related to ship-to-ship battles, subspace radar and communications belonged solely to them. They used up a lot of energy in order to provide the carrier for ordinary EM radar and communications. Like the ship’s engines, the carrier didn’t work very well in the gravity well of a star system. But they were in intergalactic space.

“They probably think we’re coming,” said Philippe, “but they’re blind to us. They’ll be blind right up to the point we jerk them back into real space.” He smiled. “That was a great deal we made with those strange ETs a few centuries ago.”

The navigator knew his history too. “Some deal. We didn’t want the planet; they did.”

“We convinced them we had first claim.”

Philippe was remembering how the Merchants had blown up the artifacts on the planet that would have established prior ownership for those same ETs. They had traded a planet the ETs already owned for some cutting-edge technology.

“How long?” he said after a few beats, as a way of changing the subject. Everyone in this part of the galaxy knew the Merchants of Doom were conniving and ruthless. *It’s our way of life.*

“About ten minutes, our subjective time. You might as well stay here.”

“Boring. I’m going down to the cargo bay where the invading team is waiting. More fun there. I want to see this whore they call a princess.”

A short burst from sirens flooded *Brendan’s* corridors. Obregon dropped his tablet onto his desk. A medical article was on the screen.

“We’re about to be boarded.” Lester Wilson’s voice on the ship intercom sounded stressed. “Please don’t resist.”

“The hell you say,” muttered Obregon. “Chen, follow me.”

Chen tried to keep up as Obregon made his way through dim corridors to the passenger cabin where Princess Jacqueline bunked. She was standing in the doorway. Her eunuch stepped in front of her, blocking the way.

"Tell your giant friend we mean you no harm," said Obregon. "I want to help."

"And how do you intend to do that?"

"We'll jump ship in an escape pod."

"That's risky," said Chen. "You have no idea where we are."

"Would you prefer to take your chances with the Merchants?" Obregon said to the princess. "You'll never see your fiancé again."

He waited a few beats, his impatience growing by the second.

"OK, let's go," said the princess.

"We'll all go," said Chen. "I'm not sure I want to be aboard when the Merchants discover you scarpered."

"The more the merrier," said Obregon.

They wound their way to one of the pod bays.

"This could be interesting. I haven't piloted one of these babies in a long while. Not since medical school, in fact."

"Everyone OK?"

"Minor abrasions," said Chen. "You're the worse off. That gash on your forehead needs stitches."

"Later." He took a long piece of gauze, doubled it, and wrapped it around his forehead. Blood started to seep into the makeshift bandage. "I'll need your help to test the air and water."

They were on a planet orbiting a G-type star, the whole solar system devoid of intelligent life. They concluded they would be a bit light-headed because the atmosphere corresponded to E-normal at 2200 meters altitude—mountain living on Earth. The humidity was a bit high. *We're lucky.*

"Okay. Everyone out. Eyes and ears on full-time sensor duty. If there are bad flora and fauna around, we don't have many defenses except our wits."

"Bad flora?" said Jacqueline. "A Human-eating plant, you mean? That's farfetched."

"My dear, we've been places where walking through a field of wildflowers was more dangerous than facing a Broden tiger."

"Remind me not to collect any bouquets," mumbled Chen.

"I don't know what a Broden tiger is," said Jacqueline, "but I'll take your word for it. How long before *Brendan* rescues us?"

"Depends on what your Merchants did with the ship. I don't know how they operate. They might space the crew and tear it apart to sell it for scrap."

Julie Chen shook. "They wouldn't dare!"

"I think we're dealing with some very ruthless people. Right, Jacqueline?"

She was daubing at some cuts on her eunuch. "I only have second-hand information, like you. I was kidnapped a long time ago. Can you give me some help here?"

"Chen, take care of it." He smiled at the double meaning of "it." Language was so ambivalent at times. "He's a big guy. He'll be a mass of bruises by the end of the day, whatever the day is here." He scrounged around in a supply closet and found a bigger first-aid kit. He

tossed it to Chen. “Maybe this will help. The pod’s not well equipped. Not surprising.” He opened some other closets. “Maybe enough food for a few days. Let’s hope we can eat some local flora and fauna. Too many times, enzymes are opposite-handed to ours. It can even taste good, but we can’t process them.”

“Let’s be more positive,” said Chen.

“I’m being positive,” said Obregon. “After all, we saved the princess from Doom—” he smiled again— “and we’re still alive. That’s damn positive, to my way of thinking.”

“Watch your step!” Obregon caught Jacqueline’s as she placed her foot on a piece of shale and went flying. He jerked her forward and she fell into his arms. “I know this is hard, but we should make that cave before nightfall.” He released her. She smiled.

“Thank you, Doctor. You have skills beyond your professional ones.” She winked. “Strong arms, intelligent—you’d make a good breeder.”

He blushed. “While I have been known to offer myself as breeding stock, Princess, you’re way out of my league.”

She had ripped her gown at knee height and distributed pieces of remnants to the others. They now all wore headdresses to protect them from the intense sun.

Obregon figured that when the sun went down, they might feel extreme cold. Chen had spotted the cave about 300 meters up a hillside. There was a winding path up made by beasts, but the beasts were better climbers—the way up was dangerous with loose rock, shale and sandy loam not providing good purchase for two-legged creatures.

The princess didn’t have boots, though. Her shoes were little more than slippers. Her feet were already bleeding. But she didn’t complain.

I like her moxy. She won’t take shit from that king.

They arrived at the cave as the sun disappeared beyond the opposite mountain range. Chen set out rations for them. They munched and watched the amazing display of green, blue, and violet waves of light in the sky.

“That will be enough to light up the whole night,” said Jacqueline. “It’s beautiful.”

“Particles in the atmosphere being repeatedly ionized,” said Obregon. “I saw it at northern latitudes on Earth once and on some other planets. The local solar wind must be strong. I wish I knew more about this system. We have to find water soon.”

“We’ll look tomorrow. Right now, I’m exhausted. But talk all you want—I won’t hear you.” Chen used a dry, mossy material as a pillow and was soon asleep. The eunuch was already snoring.

“Your king should have removed his adenoids along with his other parts.”

“That’s insensitive,” said Jacqueline.

“I don’t have much sympathy for a culture that creates eunuchs.”

“It’s not his fault, though. He was born into a service caste.”

“I suppose you won’t like me anymore if I say that’s plain bullshit. Monarchies, castes, kings, and princesses—it’s like stepping through a time portal back thousands of years when Earth was a barbarian planet.”

“I wouldn’t know. I barely recognize the name Earth. It’s where Humans originated, right?”

Obregon sighed. But then he perked up. *Maybe I’ll have time to educate this woman!*

Philippe de la Rue sipped his havenberry brandy, eyeing Captain Wilson over the rim of the special glass. He admired the design, its shape. It holds in the delightful aromas.

“Can you give me a reason why I shouldn’t space all of you and haul your pretty little ship in as salvage?”

“I have a few hundred at least. That’s the number of brandy bottles I have in a cache. Only I know where that cache exists. Oh, and one other: if you space us, ITUIP laws won’t recognize your legal right to salvage. Instead, you will be on everyone’s wanted list for murder. Believe me, you don’t want to see a flotilla of ITUIP warships approaching your pissy little planets.”

“Not Doom’s. You seem to forget your situation, Captain. You aren’t anywhere near any ITUIP world. Your little gunships still wouldn’t be a match for my battle cruiser.”

“You’re right. One of our gunships would not be a match. A thousand would. Are you willing to risk war with us?”

“People say warfare is good for business. It might be worth the experiment. I can see myself dashing through the lines on smuggling missions.” He sipped again and laughed. “But you have to see my dilemma. I want the girl, your fake princess. She’s no more a princess than I am, by the way. She’s one of us.”

“I told you what happened. I don’t know where Obregon took her.”

“How do I know you didn’t plan the whole escape with this Obregon fellow? And, if you didn’t, you’re a poor authority figure—can’t even control your own crew.”

“Read the ship’s logs. Carlos Obregon is a free spirit, to put it nicely. I do my best to keep him out of trouble, but he always still seems to find it. He acted on his own.”

“So why did his intern go with him. Looks to me like you’re without any medical staff.” De la Rue took another sip. “This is damn good.”

“I knew you would like it. Most people do. Even cutthroats like you.”

“No need for insults. No idea where the doctor took the little brat?”

“You’re as capable as I am to determine the nearest stars and their planets, even more than us—this is your region of near-Earth space. The pod Obregon took has limited range. For one person, maybe a couple of cubic parsecs. Your guess is as good as mine for four persons. The princess is small; her eunuch is big. Put your engineers to work, man.”

De la Rue laughed. “Hard to imagine a man without balls needing as much air as a normal man.”

“But I can imagine a man without balls being a much nicer person than you.” He put down his own glass. “You want the princess. Go find her.”

Obregon stood a moment to watch the others. They had solved the water problem easily. One of their caves had a tunnel that led to a bubbling underground stream, its run-off flowing down the tunnel to a small opening wide enough to create a beautiful waterfall on the other side of the hill. Their backs were toward it now.

The other problem, food, was more difficult. They had discovered some edible nuts hanging from trees that grew along the small stream and some edible berries in bushes dispersed throughout the grasslands.

We've reverted to hunter-gatherers. Well, not so much hunting. Only gathering. Obregon's back was killing him. He could imagine how the eunuch must feel. Both the women had followed his lead and removed their jerseys in order to serve as makeshift collection baskets. *That improves the scenery at least.*

Arid grasslands stretched across the planetary surface as far as the eye could see. The rough, teal-colored grass could leave a nasty welt if it hit you just right. The largest animal they had seen was more like a large beetle. From there down in size, there were many insects.

It hadn't been easy maintaining morale. Even the eunuch looked despondent, but Jacqueline suffered the most. She had led a life of luxury until now. *You never know what life will throw at you. It'll be good for her.*

He stopped and looked her way. *Of course, learning those lessons will not be of much use if we all die here.*

"I'm sick of this place," said Jacqueline.

"Me too," said Chen.

"Me three," said Obregon. He threw another dry stick on the fire. "I predict we will like it less as time goes on."

"You've noticed it too?" said Chen.

"When we first landed here, we didn't need a fire." Obregon pointed to the pile of wood. "Now the nights are cooler."

"I don't understand," said the princess. "Aren't we going round and round the yellow star?"

"Most assuredly," said Obregon, "but either the planet is in a highly eccentric elliptical orbit of about a standard year, because it's in the E-zone, like moving from Venus' distance to just beyond Mars', or we have a large axis tilt like New Haven. In any case, the extremes won't be nice. We're heading into winter, folks."

He popped a berry. It was sweet and sour, not unlike a havenberry, but crunchy, like a nut.

"How cold will it get?" said Jacqueline.

"Good question," said Obregon. "And the cave is our only shelter. We need some animal skins." The princess made a face. "Oh, c'mon, I'm good, but I can't keep two women warm."

"I'll take my chances with my eunuch."

"Not a bad choice. Plenty of body heat and no sex drive."

Chen threw a stick at him. He caught it, smiled, and threw it on the fire.

Six weeks later, Obregon was not so full of jocular banter. He was cold. Everybody was. After hauling anything in the shuttle they could pry loose and make use of to the cave, they retreated down one of the tunnels. It was still cold. His thermometer said 5 degrees centigrade

but a slight breeze wafting down the tunnel from above made it feel colder. They were forced to huddle.

He knew it wouldn't be long before hyperthermia started to reduce their ranks. The thin atmosphere of the planet didn't help, although all except the eunuch took turns donning the two spacesuits and checking on the shuttle from the cave's entrance. If Wilson came to save them, he would land where the crippled shuttle sat lifeless on that grassy plain.

They had water but food rationing was in effect.

"I'm so hungry I could eat you," Chen told him.

He studied her a few beats. "It's sometimes unfortunate we have a taboo against cannibalism. Survival logic dictates that the weakest member of the pack provides dinners for the rest. By that logic, your eunuch friend would probably be the last man standing, if you forgive the incorrect use of language. From my point of view, I couldn't bring myself to eat you any more than I could have sex with my full sister."

"You don't have a sister," said Chen.

"I'm speaking rhetorically—making a point. Except for some arcane religious services, we don't practice cannibalism. Or sex with close blood relatives."

"Oh, shut up," said Jacqueline. He could barely understand her because the cold chapped their lips. "And what are those arcane religious services?"

"The priests in one ancient Earth religion would practice symbolic cannibalism, eating bread, which supposedly turned into the body of their founder, and drinking wine, which supposedly turned into blood. It was harmless symbolism in the sense that what was preached by their founder still are generally sound moral rules. There are weirder things in human history, let me assure you."

"I don't care. It's so cold I'm afraid my pee will freeze."

Chen's long face tugged at Obregon's fatherly emotions toward his intern.

"Can't. It's at body temperature. You'll freeze before it does. I'll admit it's a bit cold to do your business, but stay focused. Drink plenty of water. We have all we need and you have to keep hydrated."

"Too bad we don't have any of those old cryo units."

Humans began their colonization of near-Earth planets using huge, slow, sublight ships filled with cryo units. The units weren't always reliable. Many colonists went into deep sleep and never woke up.

"Say that again!" Obregon held up his hand, cutting her off. "The escape pod has to have them. It can't go so far as a modern starship. The rest is coasting at sublight with the survivors in cryo units."

"Of course. I knew that." Obregon knew she was beating herself up for not remembering the importance of that fact. "How many do you think we have?"

"It's a five-person escape pod. I suspect we have five. But they might not all be working because of the crash."

"Are you suggesting we sleep away the winter?" Jacqueline said.

"Not only the winter. Until someone finds us. The power units on the shuttle are still okay, maybe good for a hundred standard years or so. I'll have to confirm how many units there are and whether they're working. Chen and I will go do that in the suits. You two try to stay warm and alive. We'll be back shortly."

"I'm too tired to move a muscle," said Jacqueline.

“That’s not tiredness. You’re going into hypothermic shock. Remove your clothes, Chen.”

“What? I’ll freeze too.”

“Not in the suit. And that’ll give the princess and her eunuch some extra warmth.”

Chen shrugged and Jacqueline smiled.

No one could move fast, but the giant and the princess soon wore all the available clothes. The eunuch looked like a kid who had suffered a tremendous growth spurt—even Obregon’s clothes were too small. The princess, much smaller than Chen, was happy to fold up sleeves and pants cuffs that were too long in order to make double layers.

Chen and Obregon headed down the hill in the bulky suits.

“20% failure rate. Someone should complain to the shuttle manufacturer. Not acceptable.”

“Quit complaining. We have our four units.” She looked at the icicles on the inner walls of the pod. “It’s colder here than in the cave.”

“Of course, but we won’t care about that.” He tapped the com button on the front of the suit. “We’re all set, Princess. How fast can you come?”

There was no response.

“They’re dead,” said Chen.

“Not likely. Maybe unconscious. Stay here. I’ll make faster time alone. If I’m not back in eight hours, crawl into a cryo and cycle it operational. At least you’ll survive.”

“And the princess and her eunuch? You can’t carry them both.”

“Who said anything about carrying them?” He pointed to a large section of wall panel that had almost detached from the side of the shuttle. “I’m carrying that. We’ll slide down the damn hill.”

Chen laughed. “How are you going to control the slide?”

“I’ll discover a way.”

Obregon found the princess in the arms of her eunuch.

“He saved my life,” she said, her voice a whisper. “He was old, I think.”

He bent and pressed the eunuch’s carotid. “TOD, unknown,” he muttered. “COD, hypothermia.” He gently removed the man’s arms from around the princess. “I’ll help you to your feet. We can’t wait long or you’ll join him. And I’m pretty certain you won’t like eunuch heaven.”

“I thought you didn’t like religious mumbo-jumbo.”

“It’s an expression.”

“Should we take his clothes?”

“No. We won’t fail by leaving him a bit of dignity. Say, I never knew his name. Do you?”

“He wrote it in the dirt for me before he died. It’s Karl.”

He nodded and smiled at the irony of the name similarity. "Well, thank you, Carlos, old fellow. You saved this crazy little princess. At least, I think you did. We still have to make it down the mountain."

"I can't walk, Obregon. I'm too tired."

"Who said anything about walking?"

Five minutes later they sat perched on the makeshift sled, sliding down through the shale and rocks. Using two sturdy branches destined for firewood, he managed to control the direction a bit by digging them into the ground. The sled twisted and turned. The trip down took far less time than his trip up.

They were near the bottom when the right stick caught, twisting and flipping their sled. The princess fell on top of him, knocking the wind from his lungs. In the rare atmosphere, it took him time to recover.

"Arise, my princess, and help me up," he said.

"We have company," she said as she helped him to his feet.

Obregon looked around. There was nowhere to hide. The Merchants' shuttle dwarfed their escape pod. A group of unarmed men waited for them to approach.

"Welcome, Doctor," said Philippe de la Rue. "Thank you for keeping the little wench alive. This is not a hospitable place."

"Beats Doom," said Obregon.

He walked up to De la Rue, stared at him, and then punched him. Blood spurted from the hooked nose of the pirate. Guns appeared and were leveled at Obregon.

"Don't shoot," said De la Rue, struggling to his feet. "I must say, you caught me by surprise. That was a risk you took."

"The sled made it easy," said Obregon. "You'd better move her inside before she turns into a block of ice."

"I meant it was a risk to strike me. My men don't like persons who do that."

"They just haven't had enough practice."

"Take them inside," De la Rue ordered his men. "I'll pay the doctor back later."

"For the life of me, I can't see why Doom would risk war with ITUIP," said Obregon.

"Because we would win," said De la Rue, now sporting a small ice pack taped over his nose. "Your worlds have been at peace too long. The fighting spirit is gone. We also have a technical advantage."

"You mean the FTL carrier for radar and communications?"

De la Rue's draw dropped.

"How did you know?"

"How else could you track us and jerk us from stringspace? As we departed in our little pod, I communicated with Wilson. You no longer have that technical advantage. Several of our crew electronically snooped around your ship while you people were making your grandiose entry, thinking you had captured our little princess. Your inflated ego is not a positive quality."

De la Rue's face turned crimson. "I don't believe you."

“So, where is *Brendan*?”

“We let it go. Wilson is a coward, but you had taken the princess.”

“Wilson’s the smartest man you’ll ever know,” said Obregon. “I suspect ITUIP scientists have already duplicated your stringspace carrier, informed SEB’s HQ, and ITUIP ships are now preparing to invade Doom. Want to make a bet?” Obregon sat on the edge of a table, at ease with his enemy. “Knowing Wilson, he’ll assume we’re all dead. We were there on that miserable planetoid long enough. Because he believes that, the fleet will shoot first and ask questions later, unless he hears from me. Have family on Doom, Philippe?”

Obregon watched the merchant swallow hard and smiled.

“And if he does hear from you?”

“I believe we can probably arrange something if you didn’t piss him off too much. Freedom for the three of us in exchange for your planet maybe? Like he probably warned you, one battle cruiser is a big ship compared to *Brendan*, but not compared to a flotilla.”

Philippe de la Rue seemed to deflate like a punctured toy balloon. “How will you communicate with them?”

“Via your com system using the stringspace carrier, of course. What else is it good for?”

Doctor Carlos and the Scion Syndrome
Hercules' Scion (Scion Home World), 4103
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Anisha Ito feared for her life for the first time. In the middle of the shrinking divide between two Scion armies, she also feared for her small group of scientists. Some faced the purple army, others the gold. The ground shook from marching feet. The typical Scion, half the height of a Human, wouldn't make the ground tremble. Thousands of them did.

Scions brandishing swords and spears and carrying shields dominated the front lines. Like nightmarish centaurs, they rose up on their hind legs at times to make threatening gestures at the opposing forces. Next came archers with longbows impossible to pull with Humans' frail arms. Finally came artillery, towing and firing projectiles from versions of medieval catapults. When not snorting threats that sounded elephantine, the combatants sang ET martial hymns that sounded like Souza doing twelve-tone Gregorian chant.

The purple army's mail armor gleamed in the morning's desert sun. Ito once had thought its intricate patterns were beautiful. Her opinion had changed. The other army had its back to the sun. Sand dunes and rocky berms filled the battlefield. Thousands of long shadows seemed to increase the number of combatants.

"What the hell is going on?" said Patty Fontana, the woman next to Ito.

"They've been congregating for days," said Tom Chambers. "Something triggered this confrontation."

"But where do they come from?" Fontana said. "There are so many."

"The caves," said Ito. "All over. I don't know, damn it. Let's back up toward that rock outcropping. We'll have one side protected at least."

Waves of Scions swept over them. They didn't even notice the Humans as the armies' lines clashed, buckled, surged, and clashed again. It was all the scientists could do to keep from being trampled. Ito's fear increased as she saw Fontana collapse under a wave of twenty or more Scions. They weren't directly threatening the Humans. The latter were like bugs underfoot in a wild horse stampede—innocent victims to violent mass hysteria.

"Something's going on down there," announced Lt. Riley, head of starship Brendan's small security force. "Some of our people are caught in a battle between natives."

Chief Medical Officer Carlos Obregon glanced up from his tablet where he was reading an article on treating a specific brain aneurysm in their New Haven ET friends, the Rangers. Some of *Brendan's* newest crewmembers were Rangers. He looked at the widescreen where the Scion armies were marching toward each other.

"Looks like a scene from Earth's Middle Ages," he said. "I reviewed this place just last night. Wasn't it sparsely populated five years ago when we left our scientists here?"

"It's like two tsunamis of New Haven fire beetles colliding," said Captain Lester Wilson. "I don't understand. Riley, send a probe down to ask these idiots if they need help."

"Looks like we arrived in time to bury a scientific expedition," said Obregon. "Just in case, I'll wake up Chen and prepare the ER. It's been a while since we worked on Humans."

"He sounds cheerful," said Riley, readying the probe.

“That’s rare,” observed Wilson.

Brendan’s shuttle bay opened and a probe sped down toward the planet’s surface. At one hundred kilometers altitude, it started braking. By the time it reached fifty meters, it was hovering above the small group of Humans.

“This is *Brendan*. Can we be of assistance?”

Ito shielded her eyes and looked skyward. She spotted the probe, a shiny drone with multiple arms extended as if to collect samples from planetary flora and fauna below. Chambers started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” she said.

“Better late than never,” he said.

“Do you have a transceiver? I lost mine.”

Chambers handed her a small device. “Hell if I know if it’s working.”

“Can you hear me, *Brendan*? This is Anisha Ito, head of the expedition.” Riley acknowledged. “What you can do is stun this whole area, a five kilometer radius, please.”

“Won’t that stun you too?” said Riley.

“Yes, but it’ll give you a chance to pick us all up in your shuttle. We have casualties.”

“This is Captain Wilson. You sure you want us to stun that whole area, Anisha?”

“Do it! We’ll all be dead if you don’t.”

“Acknowledged. One-two-three.”

On Wilson’s three, Ito felt her head explode. The others in her group, not already on the ground, collapsed. All around them Scions keeled over too. An eerie silence hung over the area.

“I have some medical training,” said Ito.

Obregon waved his hands around the mess cave that served as a large kitchen and dining room for the scientific group. “Okay, perform some magic and turn this damn place into an ER. If we move these people any more, we’ll be moving corpses. Riley, make yourself useful.” He tossed a tablet at the security man. “A list of supplies I need. Tell Julie to prepare to receive some of the less injured. *Pronto, hombre*.”

Riley had heard the phrase before. He wasn’t sure of the exact meaning, but when Obregon used it, he knew he needed to move fast. He dashed through three other caves to the sandy ledge where they had left the shuttle.

He was smiling. After months in space, they finally had some action. *I sure hope it’s not at the cost of casualties.*

Three Human scientists stayed in Obregon’s planet-side ER where he fought to save their lives. Seven others went aloft with Riley to receive minor treatment from Obregon’s intern. Anisha Ito proved her mettle, offering loving and guiding hands when the ship’s medical robot’s programming came up short.

“Primitive conditions, and I’m a little rusty for working on Humans, but not bad,” said Obregon after they finished. He raised his surgical visor. “And not bad for an administrator either.”

“I’m a licensed xenosociologist and qualified to lead planetary expeditions, I’ll have you know,” said Ito. “I therefore outrank you in SEB. Live with it.”

“Well, it looks to me like you entered a concert hall and yelled, ‘Fire!’ That’s not too smart, Ito. But hey, I was giving you a compliment. You were a big help. I needed Chen up there in orbit. I would have been shorthanded here.”

Ito collapsed onto a stool and removed the surgical gloves, tossing them into a waste container. “I’m not sure I’ll ever feel the same eating here again.”

“What? Only a bit of blood and gore on the dining tables? A carafe of good red wine and you’ll forget all about that.”

“It’s my friends’ blood and gore.”

“Well, by applying the tourniquet, somebody saved the guy who lost his arm, and putting the tube down the throat of the woman was inventive too. The other woman’s the worse for it. I put her into an induced coma, but I think she’ll be fine.”

Ito smiled. “The tourniquet and plastic tubing were my ideas, but Tom Chambers helped, even with one arm. We are a team, you know.”

Obregon nodded. “And one hell of a team, at that.” He also removed his gloves. “You know, the idea of the stun bomb might have helped the comatose woman too. Probably takes the stress right from the body.”

“Do you think the Scions are okay?”

Obregon picked off a piece of artery from his white smock, now with darkening red splotches, and put it into the waste. “From the stun effects, sure. The dead ones from both sides are just dead. Vicious little bastards, aren’t they?”

“Not usually,” she said. She raised her visor and smock and removed a platinum coin from her baggy pants. “I’ll toss this Annie Li commemorative coin for first-in-line for a shower.”

Obregon looked around the small cave that had become their makeshift ER. “You have a shower?”

“Yes, three caves farther in.” She pointed to a two-meter by one-meter opening. “It’s not private, but we’re not prudes. You can’t be and survive on Hercules’ Scion. I choose heads.”

She flipped the coin. He watched it fall. It was heads.

Obregon watched the woman bathe. The mossy growth on the cave walls around the little waterfall and stream twinkled in phosphorescent glory. Although he had a scientific explanation, the experience was magical. Ito sponging off grime from the makeshift ER added to the magic. She smiled at him occasionally.

It was worthwhile to lose the coin toss, he thought. As a doctor, he had mixed emotions, so his mind wandered. He stood and inspected the moss. It looked cultivated.

“The Scions,” said Ito. “They know something about genetic engineering.”

“Yet they seem to be primitive, warlike creatures. From what you told me, they only considered your group to be part of the landscape.”

“Tom Chambers has worked hard trying to decipher their language. The little pups offered some clues to that, by the way. They point at us and use the same word they use for desert mirage. We’re wraith-like to them, I guess.”

“I can’t believe they ran over you. Sounds like mass psychosis.”

“Possibly. My hypothesis is that they’re like lemmings.”

“Lemmings? What’s that?”

Ito laughed. “From a bit of Earth’s history. As far as I know, Earth still has lemmings, but I can’t guarantee it. The Tali tried to engineer a series of retroviruses to destroy all life on Earth. If they caught the little lemmings in a down cycle, it’s possible they didn’t survive.” She left the pool and began toweling off. “In any case, the lemming population would grow and they would migrate to the sea to throw themselves over the cliffs. Enough survive to start the cycle all over again, assuming they survived the Tali.”

“But our Scions aren’t committing mindless mass suicide,” Obregon objected. “It takes intelligent thought to plan battles, although wild-eyed bloodlust takes over.”

“These massive battles happen at population peaks, though. I’ve called it a Malthusian syndrome.”

“Another bit of Earth history, I suppose. I thought I knew it.” Obregon, now naked, stepped into the pool, grabbed the rough soap off a rock by the waterfall, and let the crystal-clear water flow over him. *Can’t enjoy this much liquid in Brendan.*

“You look like you’re enjoying that,” said Ito, wrapping the wet towel around her. “I’m heading back for a change of clothes.” She formed a square with her hands as if she were framing a picture of him. “You’re about Tom’s size. He won’t be needing clean clothes for a while. I’m sure he can lend you something.”

“I’ll thank him later,” said Obregon, who had stepped from beneath the waterfall to lather up. “Of course, I saved his butt, metaphorically. He shouldn’t mind at all. Never had to grow a new arm before. Always surprises.”

“You say the Scions breed like crazy and when there are too many of them, they go to war?” Obregon studied Ito over his cup of tea. “So, how’d they find the peace and tranquility to biologically engineer the moss in this cave?”

“In all the caves. Three islands over, there are ruins of a huge underground city. This whole archipelago is riddled with caves containing remains from a past civilization. We don’t know what happened. Patty was just starting some comparative genetics.”

Obregon grimaced. Patty Fontana, the woman in the coma, was still recovering. He’d have to check on her.

“Sounds like I should sub for her. What was she looking for?”

“Why the Scions breed so fast and why they have this Malthusian syndrome.”

“Lucky for them they were into life sciences. If they knew how to build H-bombs, they wouldn’t be breeding at all.”

“Will your captain give up that much of your time?” said Ito.

“Wilson has my intern to sub for me. He’s supposed to pick up another group of crazy scientists parked around a neutron star—they’re only about ten light years from here. What’s wrong?” Obregon caught her frowning as she sipped the strong brew.

“Only that you think we’re crazy too. You said ‘another.’ You’d think a doctor would be more understanding.”

“Understanding, maybe. But ship’s surgeons are more like engineers or even artisans. We repair people. We’re human engineers. We have to be practical.”

“And we’re not?”

“Although this type of operation might be considered a violation of the ITUIP Protocol, maybe its practical in a way. Scientists are curious—they like to know things, learn about the weirdness in Nature. I respect that. Just not my preference.” It was his turn to frown. “I suppose I ruined my chances with you. You put on a show at the waterfall.”

“Some of it was intentional, but you never had a chance. I’m in a relationship, Obregon. You can admire, but that’s it.”

“Who’s the lucky person?”

“Persons. Tom Chambers and Rachel Gonzales.”

Obregon nodded. “No wonder you were so upset about Tom and Rachel. I’m sorry.”

Ito shrugged. “Shit happens. They’ll recover. Where do you want to start with the comparative genetics?”

“Fontana’s notes, I guess. Do you have some DNA samples?”

“We started collecting some years ago. It’s a bit difficult. The Scions don’t let us near them and they are good at dodging our stun darts. We do have some blood samples from various groups.”

“You weren’t trying to obtain more when they became lemmings, were you?”

“We were sneaking around their little camps, collecting from messengers and sentries. That’s when all hell broke loose.”

“I can’t imagine it. A whole planet in continuous war. Yet—” Obregon waved his hand, indicating the walls of the cave, “—sometime in the past they engineered all of this.”

“Becoming curious, Doc?” she said, now with a smile.

Obregon counted himself lucky—Captain Wilson gave him four standard weeks. It turned out the captain was interested in neutron stars too. The doctor became lost in his work.

“Don’t see much of you here,” said Tom Chambers during one of Obregon’s visit to the mess cave for a break and coffee.

“There’s a lot to do. I finished processing DNA samples. I need more.”

“We expected that. We’re going tomorrow.”

“Are the Scions calm now?”

“They will be for another four or five years. We should have collected samples from the dead bodies, but everyone was stunned.”

“Or injured. How’s the arm?”

Chambers held up the new arm and admired it. The skin was pink and soft like a baby’s, but otherwise there was no longer any difference between the new arm and the one he hadn’t lost.

“Now, if I can only have a new brain...”

“Can’t be done.” Obregon tapped the table. “You know that the comparative genetics study might be fruitless. Their five-year cycle could be behavioral.”

“Ito has said the same thing. We’re brainstorming other possibilities, but no great ideas yet. I’m learning more of the language, including the written one. It’s an exponentially increasing process, which is good. The ruins might tell us something.”

“Keep that up. I might come up with what’s wrong, but what started everything is unknown. That might be just as important.”

“You’re starting to sound more like a scientist, you know,” said Chambers.

“Yeah, a bitch, isn’t it?” Obregon rose from his stool. “Back to work.”

At week two, Patty Fontana awoke from her coma. At week three, the new comparative genetics team of Fontana and Obregon had their breakthrough.

They all met in the mess cave, Ito pulled down a widescreen, and Obregon presented their findings.

“Fontana wrote code to look at the smears and determine commonalities.” He paged forward to a typical smear with his tablet and projected the image to the widescreen. Using a laser pointer, he indicated an area in the image. “I originally thought this was junk DNA. That’s probably common to any lifeforms going through a normal Darwinian process. We have it. The Scions have it. Pieces of virus, whatever. Still, Fontana’s program showed this piece was common to all living Scions and not a mutation per se. Patty?”

The scientist received the laser pointer. Obregon sat down.

“Obregon has determined this is almost the complete genetic blueprint for a virus that takes over the timing of certain enzyme production processes, altering the role of the enzymes in every living Scion.” She went to a slide containing a list of enzymes. “Some of you will recognize the enzymes in this list. We often call them aging enzymes because they determine how many divisions a cell can make before the telomeric extensions become too short and the cell dies.”

“Any way to calculate how much shorter the life span of a Scion cell will be?” said Chambers.

“We know this pretty well now,” said Obregon, “because our early anti-senescence efforts used similar enzyme triggers. We were looking to extend cell life—the opposite to what’s happened to the Scions. I’m not good at the math, but Fontana thinks the life time of a Scion’s cell is reduced 90%.”

“In other words,” said Fontana, “if the original Scion lived one hundred years, the infected one would live only ten.”

“And be at his or her prime at four or five,” murmured Ito. “They don’t have time for anything now.”

“It’s worse,” said Obregon. “In years three to seven they produce many more offspring, a side effect of the time compression. After getting the virus or disease or whatever you want to call it, nature came up with a viable solution to preserve the species. Make more offspring. They became intelligent lemmings.”

“Okay, we have the reasons for the present situation,” said Chambers. “What can we do about it?”

“I can’t believe the original infection occurred naturally,” said Fontana. “There was some cataclysmic event. We need to know what that was and if there are still remnants.”

“Can’t you make a vaccine from that bit of DNA?” said Ito, leaping over several logical steps in other peoples’ thoughts.

“It’s not the complete virus,” said Obregon. “I can try to hook it on to some other virus—our own chicken pox might be a good candidate. But I don’t think it will work. It would be better to have some of the original.”

“I vote for a major attack on the ruins to try to find that remnant,” said Chambers.

“There’s a moral issue, besides the legal Protocol issue,” said Fontana in a low voice.

“What kind of moral issue can there be?” Ito said. “The Scions are condemned to eternal warfare otherwise.”

“The Scions might prefer that to the alternative,” said Obregon.

“Isn’t the alternative to return to the way they were, having time to think about other things?” said Chambers. “Inventions, art, beautiful cities, exploring their world—you name it.”

“If I can guarantee that alternative, maybe they would prefer it.” Obregon looked around the group. “The alternative might be to lose sentience, only to become long-lived animals. I’m not sure I’d want that.”

“Well, let’s table that discussion,” suggested Ito, “until we know there’s an alternative.”

They all nodded. They made plans to visit ruins and try to find what caused the Scion’s decline. Fontana and Obregon would continue to work on the possibility of engineering an anti-virus.

At the start of week four, the group met in the mess cave once again. Now Tom Chambers held court. The first slide showed an image of a stone column. He zoomed in on a specific part of the image.

“When we put our mind to it, we found it easier to decipher the writing and give learning the spoken language a lower priority. Of course, I worked on both during the last four years, so we weren’t starting from zero. Bottom line: Obregon’s virus came here in a space cloud. Better said, the planet Hercules’ Scion passed through a dust cloud from a supernova.”

“Wouldn’t that have killed the virus particles?” said Ito.

“Apparently not.” He went to another slide, an image of an alien vase. “The writing here indicates that sealed within we’ll find vials containing the virus. Some scientific team composed of Scions isolated the virus and stored it in crystallized form.”

“And you found the vials,” said Obregon. He laughed. “I wonder if we can just add water.”

“I’d try distilled water,” said Fontana with a smile.

“I wasn’t going to make instant coffee with it,” said Obregon, now with a frown. “How many vials?”

“There were sixty-four,” said Ito, “but forty-seven were contaminated. The corking material became old and cracked.”

“We’ll remove the material in the others in a sterile environment,” said Fontana, “and begin work.”

“We have a partial solution to the moral dilemma too,” said Ito.

“Oh,” said Obregon, “do tell. I can’t guarantee the results our anti-virus will produce.”

“We can try it on a single Scion.” There was an intake of breath from all present. “And what? You’d prefer to inoculate the whole damn population without knowing what the results will be?”

“Anisha has a point, but I propose a two-step process,” said Obregon. “We take some Scion cell samples and mix them with the anti-virus. Let’s see what happens at the cellular level first.”

“Captain Wilson is having a stroke,” Obregon told the group. “I have to take leave of you fine folks.” He pointed to the slide on the widescreen. “Our antidote probably works well enough, at both the cellular level and on that Scion youngster who was going to be euthanized by his peers.”

“On the battle field, having no front limbs is a death sentence,” Chambers reminded the meeting attendees. “The best I could determine, he volunteered.”

“I suggest we wait,” said Ito. “We’ll adopt the pup and study him for long-term effects. That’s the right way to do this.”

Fontana looked around the group. Some nodded; others looked unhappy.

“Obregon?”

Obregon shrugged. “Not my call. I’ve only heard of one similar case. Andrew Jolei, born 2446 on Sanctuary to Heracles Jolei and Sarah Johannsen. He graduated from First Landing University on New Haven in 2467 with highest honors in xenoviralgenetics. He did field research work in League Planetary Studies Division until 2471, when he committed xenocide on Weinstein’s Planet. They sentenced him to partial mindwipe and rehabilitation on Habitat 3697. He subsequently saved the sentient species he nearly destroyed, earning a pardon. Patty and I used many of his techniques here.”

“Rain World,” said Ito in a hushed whisper.

“Habitat 3697,” said Chambers. “I’ve heard of the case. That’s a good precedent.”

“Not necessarily,” said Fontana. “Jolei engineered both the infecting virus and its anti-virus. We’re working more in the dark here.”

“Not my problem,” said Obregon. “I’m okay with whatever you decide. But I’m not going to play lord and master of all creation and decide for the Scions. My original fear still stands: by applying the anti-virus, you might turn the Scions into long-lived beasts without sentience.”

“You’d leave things like they are?” said Ito.

“There is that option,” said Chambers. “We can learn more about their culture and language until we can ask them what they want.”

“That works too,” said Obregon. “You’re letting them decide the moral dilemma. Clever.” He stood. “I wish I could tell you how to choose between A, B, and C. Unlike Jolei, no one will fault you for your decision. Maybe Tom’s solution is best.”

Doctor Carlos and the Man's World
Minerva, 4063
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Carlos Obregon had decided to keep his mouth shut. The five-person delegation from ITUIP (Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets) was supposed to make an objective decision about Minerva's entry into the Union, so the starship *Brendan*'s chief medical officer wasn't supposed to voice his opinions. They were already predetermined, of course.

"I was on Minerva twenty standard years ago," he had told Julie Chen, his young intern. "In spite of the name, both male and female settlers are bigots with respect to women's rights. Both sexes think men should control everything and anything associated with the female human body. There's no genital mutilation involved, but men consider women their property and the women accept it, so the mutilation became mental, a brainwashed aberration of everything human females have accomplished since the cultural wars on ancient Earth."

"Nobody cares about that anymore," said Chen. "The delegation only has to decide whether Minerva can function as an equal trade partner in ITUIP." She smiled. "But you have a point. On my shore leave, I'll forego my uniform because natives will likely think it's too revealing. I have an ankle-length gown and long-sleeved blouse with a high collar from Price's Planet I can wear. You'll have no problem, of course."

Dr. Carlos smiled at the term "shore leave." Because he dabbled in Earth history, he was probably the only person on board who knew the phrase originated with crews on ships that sailed the Seven Seas and wasn't strictly applicable to an exploratory starship like *Brendan*. He also remembered histories about the cultural wars on Earth as various groups and nations, dominated by males, had tried to keep female Humans down, to the point of trying to control what they did with their bodies.

Although ITUIP tried to control colonization, many culturally diverse but strictly homogeneous Human groups colonized thousands of planets discovered by ITUIP's exploratory ships sent out by the Space Exploration Bureau (SEB). There were many cases where they were left alone for hundreds of years and reverted back to theocratic, fascistic, or dictatorial modes of governing, sometimes combining all three and more. ITUIP would publish warnings about such places for tourists and business travelers, but they still often dealt with them because money was to be made. Obregon hated those policies, but he didn't have any power to do anything about it.

"I'll not be taking shore leave," he said. "I'd prefer to stay on board and listen to some good music than mingle among those crazy people."

"Suit yourself. I need to explore a bit. They say some planetary vistas are spectacular."

"And primitive," said Obregon. "The population has increased tremendously over four hundred years, for reasons you know all too well, but Minerva is bigger than most E-type planets. Enjoy yourself, but be careful."

"What's it like to live on a starship?"

Chen studied her guide, a young woman dressed more conservatively than she was. Unlike Julie, she was truly young and not young because she took anti-senescence drugs. The

question was whispered after the guide, Jomi, had looked around the cafeteria to make sure no one was listening.

"I'm an intern for the ship's medical officer," said Julie, matching the whisper. "I help take care of the crew and any passengers who might be on board. We often carry scientists, for example, and diplomats, but less often." She smiled.

"Women can become professionals?"

"Of course. Women can become starship captains. So can Rangers, Tali, and others."

"The non-Humans," said Jomi with a nod. "The inferior galaxy dwellers."

"We prefer to call them by their real names and treat them as respected equals."

Jomi frowned. "My father says they're inferior to us. He also doesn't understand why I want to be a guide, but it's all I can do without any schooling. Only our men can become professionals."

"So you're condemned to being a guide the rest of your life?"

Chen knew from stats that the average life span on Minerva was only about seventy standard years. That was still a lot of time to be doing something you didn't find fulfilling.

"Oh, no, not at all. My father expects me to meet a man and have lots of children, fulfilling my obligation to be obedient to my lord and master and suckling his offspring." She looked around again, but no one was watching. She put her hands under her breasts, giving them shape under the heavy clothing, and smiled. "I expect to have lots of milk."

"So your life's passion will change from guide to breeder. How marvelous! What about all the wonderful things women can contribute to your planet's science and culture?"

"What more can I contribute than many healthy children for the man I marry? It's our wonderful role in life, you know. You'll have to follow the same route if you want to reach your full potential. You need to find a man who will take care of you and give you many children. The ideal situation is to be pregnant all the time, I'm told."

"Obregon would say that's early 19th century on the North American frontier or 22nd century in the Holy Prophet's Caliphate. That's not for me, Jomi. Well, maybe someday I could have children with the right man, but I'm not going to be either his slave or breeder. I have a gift, and I think I can help people who are sick." She watched a group of men enter the cafeteria. Several frowned at the two women sitting alone. "Are they trouble?"

Jomi looked from the corner of her eye. "Maybe. I don't know them, but men usually don't like to see women congregating. They think we're plotting heresy." She turned to one of the men. "I'm Jomi, a tour guide for this Outlander. She's from the starship *Brendan*."

The scowls relaxed, and the men began to study the simple menu.

Outlander? thought Julie. *Maybe Obregon was right about not taking shore leave here!*

The vistas that day made up for the incident in the cafeteria. Minerva was a beautiful world in spite of the strange Humans populating it. They checked into a hotel where Julie enjoyed the scenery from her room's outdoor deck. Verdant valleys shrouded in mist were surrounded by majestic peaks still capped in snow. Forests of strange trees bordered the meadow at the back of the hotel, trees and air above them filled with many four-winged animals Julie was sure were absent from any ITUIP zoological catalogs, just like the trees wouldn't be found in any botanical texts. *Like Obregon said—primitive.*

The young man who had checked her in was grooming a horse—she waved at him, and he waved back. At least, she thought the animal was a horse. *Hadn't they all died with the Tali invasion of Earth?* The *Brendan* occasionally found surprises like that. Even backward cultures had scientists who knew about genetics and recombinant DNA protocols. Obregon had made her laugh one time by showing her an old Earth entertainment video file where primitive Earth scientists used DNA from some fossil insects that fed on the beasts the Humans wanted to recreate. Like the horses, she had no idea where the video came from, or whether the monsters created had actually existed at one time.

The horseman gestured for her to join him. *Why not? Maybe it's time to meet a misogynist male and get his perspective?* She wound her way down three flights of stairs and found an exit to the paddock in the back.

"I'm called Salin," said the young man. Julie noted the accent was on the last syllable. She repeated it. He smiled. "I registered you."

"Yes, I remember." He seemed pleasant enough. She didn't know how a misogynist should act.

"Would you like to take a ride?"

"There's no saddle," she said.

He looked puzzled for a moment. "You lean on his neck and guide him with your arms and legs. He's quite docile."

"Show me." He mounted the beast, leaned forward, and said some words in Minervan, not Standard. He guided the steed around a circle. "You see, it's easy. Want to try?"

She studied the huge, snorting animal and smiled at its rider. "Pull me up behind you and you guide the horse," she said.

He frowned and looked around. *What's with these people? Is everyone spying on everyone else?* But he reached down and offered her a hand. And they were off!

She'd have slid off the horse's rear if she hadn't circled his waist with her arms. The wind unfurled her hair bun, a style she had adopted in deference to the planet's customs—the horse's and her manes flowed and her eyes watered from the wind. Into the forest they went.

Their steed knew how to pick his way through brush and smaller trees, although Salin often pushed threatening branches out of their way. She started to have the strangest sensation between her legs. *Control yourself, woman! You're on Minerva.*

Soon they came to a clearing, a secluded area in the middle of woods, with short grass and a bubbling brook running through the middle. Salin helped her dismount and rode off to the brook. He slid off the horse too, letting it graze on grass and drink. He returned to where she was standing.

"Do they mow this?"

He smiled. "Some native ungulates inhabit this forest. They feed here at dawn and dusk. They're your mowers."

"I'm surprised they don't eat the grass down to its roots," she said. "It looks like perfect fodder for them."

"They know not to do that. There are many clearings like this."

"Do they have predators to keep their numbers in check?"

"Of course." He frowned. "The worst predators are Minervan Humans. When I eat rabou steak, I try to forget where it comes from, but it's a major source of protein. The herds are plentiful."

She examined the area around her, looking for rabou feces, and plopped onto the grass.
“Come, sit beside me. I don’t bite.”

He smiled and sat. “My father warned me about Outlander women.”

“Oh, what was his warning?”

“That you’re promiscuous seductresses who try to ruin a man before he’s ready to wed and have children. He says you have no interest in children.”

“Yet children are born in Outlander worlds,” she said with a wink. “I’d say your father doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Maybe that will all change if Minerva joins ITUIP.”

“Some of us don’t want that to happen.”

“How about you?”

He looked off over the trees as a flock of the four-winged animals took flight and turned back to her, his eyes twinkling with intelligence...and passion? “Let’s just say I’m enjoying the moment. Ever since I saw you, I’ve been enchanted.”

She brushed his curly black hair back from his forehead. “Yes, I can be an enchanting and promiscuous seductress. Would you like to experience that?”

She already knew the answer.

They rode back to the hotel the same way. There was a difference now, though, an intimacy not shared on the trip out. She was beaming as she stripped to her underwear to clean up a bit in her hotel room. She was surprised when the door opened.

The three strangers at the door were in brown uniforms. *Police?*

“Slut!” said one man. He handed her a paper cup with a lid. “Pee in the cup.”

She tossed the cup back at him. “I’m a guest on Minerva. You can’t force me to do that. How dare you break in here!”

All three frowned. “You must obey our planet’s laws,” said the original speaker. “You are female.”

“I’d think that’s obvious. Or, haven’t you seen nearly naked women before. Am I offending your eyes?”

“If she doesn’t pee in the cup, we have to assume she’s guilty,” said a second cop to the first.

“Guilty of what?” said Julie.

“Having sexual relations with Salin. He’s already tested positive.”

What? Are these bozos kidding? “Maybe he was masturbating.”

That shocked them. All three blushed.

“Put your clothes on,” said the first cop. “You’re under arrest. We’re taking you in.”

They tried to make her pee in a cup again. Again, she refused. So, they held her down and took blood samples.

“I’m a doctor,” she protested. “You can’t prove I’ve had intercourse with blood samples, you stupid idiots!”

The one who drew blood smiled at her. "I'm also a doctor. If I find traces of anti-senescence drugs or anti-fertility drugs in your system, it will be enough to charge you for tampering with your body without male medical permission. That's the law of the land."

"Why don't you just do a vaginal smear while you're at it?" said Julie.

"That would be a violation of your privacy," the doctor said.

After they left, she crawled up on the hard bunk of her cell, drew her legs up, and rested her chin on her knees. *What a planet!*

"You're not from here," a muffled, sweet voice called to her.

Julie rose and put her ear to the thin wall. "Who are you?"

"Asum Dukat. You don't know me, but we share a common crime. I had sex with a deacon, but he reported me to authorities. It's a man's world, honey. You can never forget it here, not for one moment."

"I wonder if ITUIP knows how bad it is," Julie said.

"I'll make sure of that," said Obregon, who had just arrived. "How are you doing, you young fornicator?" His amusement with the situation was obvious. "Didn't I warn you? The place has become worse over the years. It's like a powder keg with the fuse sizzling away, right, Asum?"

"I don't know who you are, but I'm sure Julie won't welcome any male visitors at this time."

"He's my boss," said Julie.

"And she's my intern," said Obregon, "but she bosses me around too. In ITUIP, women and men are considered intellectual and mostly physical equals, except for the obvious plumbing differences. I warned Julie about Minerva, though."

"And I didn't pay attention, bla-bla-bla," said Julie. "I hadn't planned on a romantic dalliance, but Salin was a bit too good to pass up."

"A natural activity for a shore leave," said Obregon. "I've had a few dalliances myself."

"Including the one resulting in your daughter," said Julie. "Will the Captain and crew back me up? This planet shouldn't be in the Union. Maybe even quarantine it. These people are mentally ill."

"Even Human females here," said Obregon.

"Not all of us," said Asum. "We have a—"

"Silence!" warned Obregon. "They're likely listening. You don't want to give them more to charge you with."

"But you're talking about torpedoing their application to ITUIP. They won't let you out of here."

"I have diplomatic immunity. The delegation put me on the list when they heard what happened to Julie."

"Ha! You think the men here will care about that?" Asum's voice was weary. "They only respect macho bullies on this planet."

"I don't know about the bully part, but I'm sure your locals won't want an ITUIP embargo enforced by a fleet of warships. The delegation will make that threat when they inform authorities that all talks about joining ITUIP are off unless they release Julie into my custody."

"They won't cancel talks if they release me?" said Julie.

"No. I told them not to."

"You see, Julie, all men are alike," said Asum, pounding on the wall.

“You have to see the big picture,” said Obregon. “If Minerva joins ITUIP and trade prospers, there will be economic pressure to change their laws. They won’t want to chance another incident like Julie’s little tryst with Salin. Trade, money, and greed trumps old-fashioned Puritan laws every time.”

“What’s a Puritan? We don’t know all the peoples in ITUIP here.” Asum coughed. “I hate to say it, but we’re provincial in more than sexual liberties.”

“Historically, they often go hand-in-hand. Puritans were an ancient Earth group of Human religious fanatics. One nation that dominated pre-stellar history was overly influenced by their absurd strictures.” Obregon smiled at Chen. “Fortunately, for you, young lady, we overcame that centuries ago. It only festers on out-of-the-way planets like Minerva. We’ll have you released shortly. Want to join us, Asum? I’ve already invited Salin.”

“What was his answer?” said Chen.

“He wants to stay and teach his fellow males that Human females are their equals, if not their betters. I don’t know about the last, but I admire his spunk.”

“I think that’s my answer too,” said Asum. “I’d work a lot better toward that same goal if you help me out of here, though.”

“Consider it done,” said Obregon.

“I was actually hoping you’d stand trial,” said Obregon to Chen. *Brendan* had left Minerva two days earlier. “It might have been interesting.”

“Why would you want me to go through that?” she said.

“Because I was prepared to help the defense with the entire history of the struggle for sexual freedom and women’s rights on Earth. It’s a long history with many ups and downs, touching many cultures, not only that Puritan country I spoke of, but societies even more backward, ones that practiced genital mutilation, female servitude, and murder of female babies. That history might have shook up Minervan females a bit, helping Asum’s cause.”

“And Salin’s,” said Chen. “You think ITUIP will change the situation on Minerva?”

“Inevitable. The place has gorgeous landscapes, and that will start bringing tourists, maybe before traders and commercial interests. It will be harder for them each passing standard year to maintain their misogynist fascism.” He smiled at Julie. “Was Salin worth it, by the way?”

“Most definitely. The bareback ride put me in the mood.”

“I don’t doubt it. Works for Human males too, by the way.”

“Have you ridden a horse?”

“When I visited here,” he said. He laughed. “The odd thing about authorities here is they go after men who have pre-marital sex too. At that time, authorities were more acceptable to bribes. My partner was a rich widow with a mind of her own.”

It was her turn to smile. “Tell me no more.”

Dr. Carlos and the Black Hole Murder
Near a Blackhole, 4072
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Carlos Obregon, starship medical officer, kept his eyes on the video screen, even when the call came in. The Human surgeon in the video was completing an autopsy on a Tali female, focusing on a missed tumor, the cause of her death. Such events were rare now, but the tumor was in an inaccessible spot and wouldn't register with anything less than a WIMP imaging device, something the *Brendan*, a common survey and explorer starship for ITUIP (Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets), could never carry because of its size and huge power drain.

Obregon sighed. "I'm busy, Lester. Buzz off."

"We're matching orbits with the science station," said Brendan's captain, Lester Wilson. "I expect you to attend dinner with the other department heads."

"Don't care to. Waste of time. I'd prefer to spend it catching up on some new surgical techniques. Send Chen." Julie Chen was Obregon's intern. They'd served together for a while. He was dreading the day when she'd leave for her own post on another ship because he'd miss her expertise and good wit. "Those scientists eat too healthy for my taste."

"On the contrary, this is a big deal—a mini-celebration, if you will, because we're offloading all that new equipment for black hole research." *Yeah, and Brendan was reduced to a cargo ship.* "The station's chefs will be programming a sumptuous feast. I heard they might have some wine from Earth."

With its reduced population after the Tali plague and subsequent invasion centuries ago, Earth had first become an agricultural planet that exported to ITUIP's member planets. Later it also became an exporter of advanced robotics and medical devices. Defeated Tali who had stayed on Earth after losing the war with Humans were eager participants in the new economies. The video Obregon was watching had been filmed there.

Obregon stifled a burp. Hearing about food reminded him of the black hole's tides. It was too far away to have any physical effects, so the perception his intestines were being squeezed and stretched by its tidal forces was psychological. He'd prefer to be a lot farther away, though, for multiple reasons. Avoiding Lester's whining was one of them.

"Julie will brighten any conversation with those graybeards," he said. The captain laughed. Obregon smiled. Rubbing his own beard streaked with gray, he saw the inconsistency in his comment. "Sorry. You can't convince me. Buzz off, I say."

"I'll make it a direct order," said Wilson.

Obregon could count on one hand the times the man had pulled rank on him. "As the ship's chief medical officer, I can declare you mentally incompetent and take over command," he warned.

"We're not en route. Give up, Carlos. I'll expect you in your dress uniform. This is important."

And why is that? Obregon asked himself. Now his curiosity was piqued.

Chen attended the dinner as well. Nearly as tall as Obregon, her lithe body contrasted with his chunkiness. He offered his arm before they entered the mess hall.

“Making the grand entrance, are we?” she said. “You cut a smashing figure, you know, at least among Humans. I heard you were reluctant to attend this dinner. Your excuse that you need time to read about new advances in medicine is suspect. There’s another reason. Confess.”

“Lester has some ulterior motive for wanting me to attend,” said Obregon, “and I want to know what that is. Two little mysteries to rattle around in your pretty little head. I can’t imagine anything more boring, by the way, although I’m surprised my uniform still fits.” No way was he going to confess the real reason why he didn’t want to attend.

“It’s an opportunity to sample some different food and wine,” she said. He answered with a grunt.

The captain met them and latched onto Obregon’s other arm. “Julie, I need to borrow this old scoundrel for the duration. Carlos, I want to introduce you to someone.”

Aha, thought Obregon, *the plot thickens*. He allowed the captain to guide him to a table with only two empty chairs available. Seated around the long table was a small mix of crew people, all in dress uniforms and all Humans, and numerous Tali dressed in various garments they considered fancy evening wear, some with ceremonial sashes and swords.

“Ambassador Havian, allow me to present *Brendan*’s illustrious ship’s chief medical officer, Doctor Carlos Obregon.” The Tali who rose from the head chair was much taller than Obregon. He was an immense ET with enough gaudy garb and officious bling to make it all the more difficult to focus and try to discern facial features. The nose-less face was an expressionless black mask crowned by the tufty reddish orange ears of a Koala bear. Obregon knew Humans who fought them on Earth had called them murderous teddy bears, but he had no idea why. What fur was visible elsewhere was well groomed. The hand offered in greeting looked like a small woman’s, a woman who wore dainty black leather gloves. “Carlos, the ambassador has asked us to join him at his table. You once worked with his brother.”

“Second cousin is your equivalent, I believe,” said the ambassador. “We too have brought much needed equipment to this important research station. Out of scientific curiosity, my delegation and I hitched a ride here as a leg of our journey to a Tali colony in need of some diplomacy. If I’m not mistaken, *Brendan* surveyed that planet years ago, but it’s ninety per cent Tali now.”

Obregon nodded, remembering both the nearby star system, its planet, and the ambassador’s relative. He ignored the reference. “Your cousin and I had our problems, but Joprel and I separated on good terms. I hope he’s well.”

“I’m afraid he has passed on. A mining accident. His son is here. Pel.” A seated Tali inclined his head. Although it was impossible to read the facial expression, shoulder twitches showed Obregon that Pel was nervous. “Let me introduce you to my other dinner guests.”

The station’s or scientists’ dinner guests, not my dinner guests. Havian was full of himself. Joprel had been less unctuous and arrogant than this Tali dandy.

After introductions, Wilson and Obregon took their seats. Serverbots started their first of many circuits around the table, dispensing choices for main courses, a mix of Human and Tali cuisine—Obregon didn’t mind the latter because he wasn’t a vegetarian.

His first fear was realized: Dinner was boring. But the captain had known about Obregon’s relationship to the ambassador and used it for social advantage. *I can understand his thinking; I don’t have to like it.*

Several times during the elaborate meal, Pel made remarks that irked Obregon. How Tali were now leaders in astrophysics research (they were), how they had made many breakthroughs in describing black hole phenomenology (they hadn't), and how he hoped equipment they had offloaded would create many more breakthroughs (remained to be seen). His prattling probably irked the ambassador too; the head of the table interrupted Pel a number of times to change the course of conversation. For Obregon, it was an interesting dynamic. The two relatives were competitive; no family love was shared between them, an uncharacteristic display considering the ex-warlike Tali were still so family-oriented.

They had just finished, the crowd had thinned, and the remainder, with after-dinner drinks in hand, were milling around schmoozing. Obregon walked around too, trying to ignore Humans while listening to ETs' conversations out of simple curiosity. The device plugged into the socket behind his ear, now RF-linked to the station's AI, had its translation software working overtime. In particular, he overheard the ambassador berating his relative while the latter implied his elder had lost contact with Tali tradition. Obregon wasn't sure what that meant. He knew more about ET anatomies than psychologies.

He had taken his first sip from a mug of Irish whiskey when his second fear was realized. "Carlos, you old space dog, how are you?"

Brenda Karpov was an astrophysicist who specialized in black holes. She hooked her arm into his, nearly spilling his drink. *I was afraid she might be here.*

Obregon was two heads taller than Karpov. Compared to Chen, she looked like a little girl's doll. Her pale skin, nearly translucent in its contrast with her smooth black hair, her full, red lips, and her rosy cheeks also reminded him of a fairy tale protagonist in an old book in his small collection of antique Earth classics. Those twinkling, dark eyes had enchanted him once. *It's a small galaxy.* The doctor rubbed his bearded chin and wondered why such awkward moments had to occur. *I need a larger circle of friends.*

"I was unhappy the old ambassador stole you from me tonight," Karpov said, saluting Obregon and swallowing the vodka in her shot glass. "I saw you go to his table with your captain. Did you know I was here?"

"No idea," he said. *I considered it likely, though.*

Except for the galaxy's center—a major trip in subjective time even with FTL technology—a stable black hole was a rarity. A few smaller ones were prevalent enough at the centers of some dense globular clusters, but this small one had no such history. It had eaten only a few thousand stars, leaving a spherical wound in one of the galaxy's arms. A nearby planet's pre-spaceflight and pre-contact ETs had given the black hole a name that translated to "eater of many suns," but in the grand scheme of things, the "many" didn't apply. ITUIP had been contemplating contact with them because their science was so advanced, but observations indicated planetary social structures had a stubborn provincial and xenophobic streak in them. For now, it was better to leave them alone, but Obregon wondered if station scientists had secretly borrowed data from those ETs.

"I don't suppose you want to hear about my research," she said.

"Will I understand it?"

"Not likely. Chen was sitting at our table, by the way. I learned you have a daughter." There was a sly grin on the woman's face.

“Chen talks too much.”

“She said she likes your daughter. She also did the surgery on her eyes.”

“I was attending. It’s Chen’s specialty, so it was appropriate. Why is my daughter part of this discussion?”

“Because I always thought I was your one true love.”

“That was nearly a century ago. Our world lines have diverged since then.”

“And now they’ve rejoined,” said Karpov, who seemed to enjoy the reference to modern relativistic physics. “Around a black hole. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Don’t try to rekindle an old flame. You’d only become the same pushy and arrogant woman again.”

Raised eyebrows. “You enjoyed my company back then.”

“A fling. I’ve had a few, I’ll admit. But I tend to avoid serious commitments.”

“I pity your daughter.”

“That’s different. Being a father is different from being a lover. Besides, she already had a father, a good man who’s adopted her. Mother and father take good care of her. I only helped fix her eyes.”

Karpov nodded. “OK, I can take a hint. It’s still good to see you again.”

“Likewise. And, if it ends this discussion on a positive note, you still look ravishing. Any genetic mods must have been built on a good foundation. You’re better for wear than I am.” *Now there’s a professional opinion!*

“I’ll consider that a compliment. I can trace my family’s history all the way back to Imperial Russia. My mods were more internal. Several potential genetic diseases and anomalies were nipped in the bud. Are we comparing genealogies?”

“You’d win. I’m a mongrel.” Obregon used the Tali word for a mixture of high-class and low-class citizens, a combination still frowned upon by some Tali home-world dwellers. The word sounded a bit like a Human clearing his throat followed by a whistle. *Or, was the whistle a mere diminutive to increase the insult?*

She put her empty shot glass on a tray a passing serverbot was carrying. Obregon followed suit with his mug.

“Why don’t we walk to the observation deck? Have you ever seen a black hole?”

“Didn’t think you could,” he said, following her, glad to escape the captain and other Brendan crewmembers who might be insulted he had spent more time eavesdropping on ETs’ conversations.

“Particles radiate as they fall into the event horizon, producing an impressive corona. It’s akin to an eclipse of the Sun on Earth, except the streamers go the other way.”

“Is it true matter going in appears in some other multiverse?”

“Good question. We have theories, but no exact answers. We know how to jump around multiverses with our superstring FTL drives, but we still have a lot to learn about physics.”

There were other visitors on the observation deck—Humans, Talis, Rangers, and other ETs from different sectors of ITUIP, mostly scientists and their families. Not many had been at the formal dinner. *Should I be flattered that I was invited?*

“Watch where you’re stepping, you big oaf,” a Ranger said to Obregon. *Translation software is creative, thought Obregon, but most Humans won’t know what an “oaf” is. Or does*

it tailor phrases to the person listening? He had always been curious about AIs and often thought they “knew” too much about him.

He studied the water-bug-like ET for a few beats. “Suns on Rocks, is that you? What are you doing here?”

“Working, of course. Theoreticians here can’t do anything worthwhile without help from applied physicists and engineers. I jumped at the chance.”

Obregon had met the Ranger engineer years ago on New Haven. “Looks like a black hole’s attraction extends to scientists and technicians everywhere. Don’t you miss your clan?”

“On the contrary. Our clan mother passed on and I was next in line. That’s a thankless job and I didn’t want it. Not for a few centuries, at least. I wanted this one.”

Obregon smiled. It was unusual to see Rangers living independently, but not unheard of. He reached down and scratched the fur on the head of his old friend. *Add one more to my circle of friends here.* He glanced at Brenda Karpov, who was transfixed by the distant black hole. He enjoyed seeing Suns on Rocks more than Karpov; he knew the Ranger never would make demands on him.

The trio watched the display produced by the black hole until they were interrupted by Human screams. They came from the far corner of the deck. In spite of his size, or because of it, Obregon managed to push his way through the crowd of curious spectators, thinking he’d be of medical assistance. The Tali ambassador was lying on the floor. An aide who had been at the dining table bent over the body. He looked up at Obregon.

“I think he’s dead.”

Obregon looked at the knife buried deep in the ambassador’s eye and nodded, but he still probed the short neck. None of the four carotids pumped ET blood. He looked at his chronometer and pressed two buttons, one for ITUIP standard time and another for recording. He uttered the bio data for the victim. “TOD, 23:13 ITUIP standard.” More buttons followed to end his short report. “I’m sorry. My condolences. Will your delegation tend to the body?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t this a murder? Station security has precedence.”

“I suppose.” Obregon removed the formal handkerchief from the front pocket of his dress uniform and used it to remove the knife. “It’s an ancient dagger. Possibly ceremonial.”

“One of ours?”

There was a time when Talis had a rigid social structure and their leaders were treated like gods, a time for bellicose pomp and circumstance. *Not a good time*, thought Obregon. He shook his head.

“I’d guess it’s of Human origin.” The script etched into the sharp blade looked familiar. He used the device at the side of his head to query a database. “It’s Cyrillic, an old Earth alphabet.”

“Human? Who would carry such a weapon?” someone in the crowd said. The question came through the translator. Obregon feared he knew the answer.

“It’s not mine,” said Karpov. “I keep my collection of antiquities under electronic lock and key.”

"Please open the case," said the man from station security.

Karpov rose from her bunk and walked to a cabinet attached to the opposite wall. Enough scientists knew about the collection that it was only a short time before her name had come up in the investigation. Obregon stood at the entrance to her quarters, hoping for the best.

The cabinet door dropped to reveal a display of Earth artifacts. There were gold and several chalices, Russian Orthodox crosses, and long broadswords, many encrusted with jewels.

"You see—" Karpov's jaw dropped. Two hooks marked an empty space in the display.

"Someone stole it!"

The security agent frowned. "Given the evidence in this case, I have to arrest you, Professor Karpov. Will you come willingly?"

"Where to?"

"We have a small area in Security we can turn into a brig. We'll hold you there until we process the case to the point where we can turn you over to the Tali delegation."

Karpov looked at Obregon and back at the agent. "How does that work? Do I need a barrister?"

"Fraid not. ITUIP treaty details tell us what must happen in these cases. This is an ITUIP scientific station under no member planet's authority. The treaty says we have to remand you to the victim's government for trial."

"How soon?" said Obregon.

"Depends on what we need to complete here and when the Tali delegation returns from its diplomatic mission. Someone will have to take her to the ambassador's home world, of course."

Obregon didn't like the sound of that. Tali justice was swift and deadly, even for Tali. He couldn't imagine how bad it might be for a Human.

Obregon faced Karpov across the table in the secure storeroom that had become her jail cell.

"I didn't do it, Carlitos."

"I know that. You have one hell of a temper, but I've never known you to attack someone physically. Your rants can shave the short fur off a Ranger, though. And you tried to slap me once."

"You deserved it. You can be an arrogant bastard."

He nodded. "I said I was a mongrel." He examined his hands. The steady hands of a surgeon, the hands of an artisan unsure of how to proceed. "This is serious," he said in a whisper. "Tali still have the death penalty. And the method of punishment is cruel and unusual." He saw nascent tears. "Where did you obtain the dagger?"

"Years ago, I went to a conference on Earth—near old Moscow, to be precise. I met a scientist in a bar who was leading the excavation of some ruins in the old city. I thought it would be a hoot to do something like that. I had the time, so I helped in the dig. I found the dagger but didn't tell anyone about it. There were so many other artifacts."

"That's a bit dishonest," said Obregon.

"He'd jilted me for another woman after three days. It was payback, I guess. Seems a bit stupid now."

"What's it say on the blade?"

“One side says ‘My Lord will protect me,’ while the other says ‘My Lord gives me strength.’”

“Is the dagger a religious relic?”

“Who knows? The message is religious. But it’s a dagger.” She dabbed at the tears. “What am I going to do?”

“The captain’s offered to represent you, but we’ll be departing soon. I need to resolve this ASAP. Pel’s making a case for applying the death penalty right here and now. That’d be a first.”

“Who’s Pel?”

He told her. Before he left, he talked to station security.

“Do we have any background on members of the ambassador’s delegation?” he said.

“I’ll try to find some. They’re all secretive at best, you know. Want me to download it to Captain Wilson?”

“Just to me, if you will. I’ll forward.”

“You’re wasting your time. This is a clear case of murder. Professor Karpov’s prints were all over the dagger, no one else’s.”

“Fingerprints? That’s a bit old-fashioned. I’d do a DNA work-up too. Besides, Karpov owned the dagger. And Tali don’t have fingerprints, but they leave DNA traces.”

“Okay. I’ll get right on it.”

Obregon thanked the man and left.

The DNA results were easy to obtain and understand, in one sense. There was genetic material from Humans, Rangers, Tali, and other ETs. Karpov told Obregon she had shown her collection to multiple members of the station’s scientific teams over a period of years. She wasn’t surprised. Either was Obregon. Matching the evidence to anyone at the station was impossible, especially with the Tali delegation. There were no other suspects, so no one wanted to give samples, not even Humans.

“I think your friend is in trouble,” said the captain. “And we need to be on our way.”

“Set up a hearing for tomorrow,” said Obregon. He tapped his head. “I’ll have this figured out by then.”

“Playing detective again? I’d leave that to security. Let them take the heat for remanding a Human to torture and death.”

“You’re not helping. I’m waiting for background about delegation members. I’ll copy you.”

“Do you have reason to—?”

“Yes,” said Obregon. “I believe someone in that delegation killed the ambassador. I need to prove that.”

“You’d better have good evidence.”

“I will. I only have to prove reasonable doubt. I already have that, and it’s becoming more reasonable.”

“Be careful. The Tali might not accept ITUIP’s formal decision.” *In other words, yours. Will that be a problem?* “They tend to assume guilt and it’s up to the accused to prove innocence.”

“Different cultures. Let me work on it.”

“Okay, but let me help, if I can. You might need it.”

“I hope not.”

Obregon conferred with Karpov one more time before putting together her defense. She shuffled into the station’s conference room they were using for the hearing. As the highest ranking ITUIP authority, the *Brendan*’s captain presided. It was informal. There would be no jury. The only decision to be made was whether to remand the Human scientist over to the Tali justice system.

“We’ll hear from Professor Karpov first,” said Wilson.

Karpov stood. She admitted the dagger was hers, saw it last locked away in her antiques case, and insisted she didn’t kill the Tali ambassador. Her testimony was short and to the point. Obregon looked around the room. Humans were nodding their heads—believing her innocent? Talis were shaking their heads, including delegation members—believing her guilty? Rangers filled the room with low-level buzzspeak, their strange language sounding more like something emitted by a cloud of angry insects than a complex group of intelligent word symbols. His translator interpreted that as a mixed opinion.

“Who will speak against the defendant?” said the captain.

Pel rose. He wasn’t the highest ranking Tali, but he had nominated himself, as the ambassador’s relative. The gist of his argument was the weapon was Karpov’s, and she should pay the ultimate price for the murder.

“Who will speak for the defendant?”

Obregon rose.

“The honorable Pel presented no new evidence, but I have some. Please focus your attention on the screen behind Captain Wilson.” Doctor Carlos had forewarned Lester, so the captain found a seat with the rest. Three stick figures appeared on the screen, one short, one medium size, and one tall. Carlos strode to the table. “First point: Professor Karpov, will you please come here and stand by me.” The scientist shuffled over. “Don’t slouch. The captain will note the professor is much smaller than I am. Now I’ll ask the tallest Tali to join us.” The Tali looked at each other for a few beats; one then rose and joined them. “Please state your name and your business at the station.”

“Furlon, black hole specialist,” was the response that sounded a bit like rocks being ground in a rock polisher, although the station’s AI had no problem translating it.

“Have you ever met the murder victim?”

“Only at that formal dinner. I’m chief Tali scientist at the station. I had to attend, although I had much better things to do.”

An ET who thinks like me, thought Obregon. “I presume, as a scientist, you’re an observant fellow.” Furlon nodded, his twitching ears giving away that he was perplexed by the question. *Or maybe insulted?* “Would you say the ambassador was as tall as you are?”

“Taller,” said the Tali.

“Professor, go stand by your colleague.” Karpov left Obregon’s side and joined the Tali.

“Is this pathetic dance going to prove something?” said Pel.

There were mutters, growls, and buzzes, among other Human and ET sounds, from the audience. Obregon held up a hand for silence.

“Professor, can you reach and touch Furlon in the eye.” She tried and missed, her hand landing on what served that leathery face as a cheek.

“That’s point one. The professor can’t have stabbed the ambassador in the eye.”

“She can jump!” said Pel.

“Maybe. But I observed the angle of entry when I pulled the dagger out. The direction was downward around forty-five degrees from horizontal. Only someone about the same height would have enough force to murder the ambassador, given those details.”

Tali jumped to their feet, led by Pel. Humans soon followed. The captain went forward to call for order.

“If it wasn’t the professor, who was it?” he said.

Obregon pushed a button on a remote. A text file appeared on the huge screen. It was written in the artistic curly and dotted right-to-left Tali script, accompanied with lightning bolts of various lengths and orientations he knew expressed emotions. He saw Tali in the audience reading while others listened to an AI translation.

“To answer obtusely, obviously whoever stole the dagger from the professor’s case,” said Obregon. “I had station security check on backgrounds of all Tali present on this station.”

“That’s a violation of diplomatic immunity!” said Pel.

Obregon shrugged. “Your home world was only happy to provide the information. Complain to them. They also sent us DNA data they had on record.” He paged to Pel’s section of the file. “My old friend’s son has a bit of a reputation. Pel, it says here you were an active member of a movement that wants to leave ITUIP and return to the old ways of the Tali Hegemony. Do you deny that?”

“The ambassador knew that. It’s ancient history. He didn’t care. I’m his closest relative, after all.”

“I think he did care, from what I overheard at that formal dinner. The data also says you were going to be tried for treason. He stepped in, obtained an edict for exile, and brought you along. Was he going to obtain refuge for you at your destination? Leave you to start a new life on a colony planet?”

“That’s preposterous. Who would say, nay even think, such slander?”

“I’m only repeating information sent to us, except for my last two questions, which are conjectures. But facts are what they are. The one other important fact: they sent your DNA sequence because they had it on file, because of your arrest. It matched some DNA on the dagger.”

Pel dashed from the room.

“Stop him!” said a man from station security.

Obregon smiled. *Good luck with that! He’s as big as the ambassador.* But Obregon also knew there was nowhere for Pel to go.

But he was wrong. Pel stole a life raft from the Tali ship berthed at the station’s space dock alongside the *Brendan*.

“Where the hell is he heading?” the station security boss later said as Obregon, the captain, and others watched the station’s AI plot the trajectory, which was matched to returns from a neutrino radar.

“He’s no pilot,” said Suns on Rocks. “He’s heading toward the event horizon!”

Tidal forces ripped the shuttle apart before it neared that point of no return, creating thousands of blips on the radar screen. Remains of the Tali and his craft joined the other millions of elementary particles streaming into the singularity.

“You would make a good barrister,” said Karpov, stretching to kiss him on the cheek.

“I always fancied myself more as an amateur sleuth,” Obregon said. “I suppose I should say I hope you have some peace now.”

She frowned. “What do you mean, peace? Yes, I can go about my work now without fearing a Tali sentence, a punishment they say is worse than death, although it ends that way.”

“I edited the e-file. I can’t read Tali script, but the AI can. The station and *Brendan* now have an abbreviated version attached to the case history. I deleted material about the ambassador being a direct descendant of a Tali invader who tortured and killed a Human scientist centuries ago on Earth. Tali don’t distinguish between diplomatic and military personnel, so that history was in Ambassador Havian’s background information. Was it all worth avenging your great-great-whatever-numbered grandfather?”

“But you proved I couldn’t have done it!”

“But somehow you enabled Pel. I don’t care about details. I’m not sure two Tali murders are equivalent to one Human’s, especially to one so far in the past.”

“Pel committed suicide by trying to escape,” she said.

“I look at it differently. He might have turned over a new leaf in the colony, if given the chance.”

“I don’t know what that expression means, but I can guess from the tone in your voice. He was worse than the ambassador, you know. He wanted to return to those awful times. As long as you’re using old Earth adages, I’d say the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree. What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. I can’t prove anything. For everyone here besides me, Pel’s fleeing was an admission of guilt. I don’t buy it, though. It isn’t the whole story.”

She started to walk away but stopped and turned toward him. “I’ll miss you. And I still am in your debt.”

“I understand both statements. I, on the other hand, will try my best to forget you. Have a good life living with your conscience.”

Dr. Carlos and the Slave Woman
Charity, 4051
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Once starship *Brendan* left orbit, Captain Wilson stopped pacing on the bridge.

"It's incredible how much a planet can change in two hundred standard years," he said to no one in particular.

Loves Rapids, the navigator of the small ship in ITUIP's SEB fleet, spun her special chair around. The tentacles around the Ranger's mouth fluttered a bit, body language indicating this representative of the Human's first-contact friends was about to say something witty. The translation emitted from her decoder box drowned out the original buzzspeak.

"I'd like to remind the captain, if I may do so, that a huge change occurred in Human civilization on Earth between the year 1900 AD and 2100 AD."

"You're sounding like Obregon," said Wilson with a growl. "That backwards slide wasn't nearly as bad as what we've just witnessed on Charity. I'm going to ask ITUIP to put the planet in quarantine."

"Loves Rapids has become quite the student of Earth history," said Carlos Obregon, coming onto the bridge and sitting in the captain's chair. The medical officer smiled at Wilson. "But I'll agree with you. That was a near disaster."

"How are the wounded doing?"

"Under Chen's supervision and resting in the portadocs. They'll have some new body parts in a couple of days. They showed remarkable restraint, considering. It could have been a bloodbath."

Wilson went to his chair and gestured for Obregon to get up. The doctor smiled and vacated the chair with a gallant gesture.

The captain made himself comfortable and sighed. "This is one of those cases when I wish ITUIP gave medals of valor."

"Thank the nebulae they don't. We have enough bureaucracy to—" He was interrupted by the message from Lt. Riley they all received on their com implants.

"Riley to bridge," said the head of ship's security. "We have stowaways."

"This is Wilson. How could that happen?"

"They hid in the samples storage locker on the shuttle."

"Empty because we didn't take samples," said Obregon. "And we leave the ship open like idiots. Guess we have bio samples now. Do I need to examine them?"

"Chen's already beginning that. They're members of Charity's slave race. The adult female is in bad shape. The male child seems to be in good condition."

"I'll be right down," said Obregon. He nodded at Wilson. "You'll have to return them to the planet. ITUIP Protocol."

"No way," said the captain. "They don't belong there anyway. If anything, we'll drop them off on their home planet. That's a small bending of the Protocol."

"That might be difficult. Edgerton and the others are still trying to figure out the slaves' origins."

The shuttle's landing on Charity had started what was expected to be a routine update on a primitive humanoid society. The last explorer ship to visit some two hundred years ago had reported a sparsely populated agrarian world.

In near-Earth space, the Human form was more common than not. The Rangers were the exception rather than the rule. Galactic peoples tended to be bipeds, with minor differences in physiology and culture and different evolutionary trees, but evolution had still opted for a body with two arms and two legs and a brain encased in a skull. Exceptions to that rule, like the Arlmati, the Rangers, and certain collective intelligences like the Singer, weren't that common.

From space they'd seen more villages and more planted fields this time. Their instruments hadn't detected the hidden walled cities with their teeming millions. About half that population were slaves. George Edgerton, the ship's xenosociologist, and other scientists had taken the shuttle down to the planet, accompanied by a minimal security detail chosen by Lt. Riley. Now three scientists and two of the four security detail were dead, and others were critically wounded. The sneak attack from the nearest city's inhabitants had been massive. The shuttle had barely escaped.

Edgerton had concluded that the planet's political structure was somewhat akin to ancient Greece, except Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and Thebes had been multiplied tenfold and were more populated. Every city-state had its own set of gods, although there was some commonality. Citizens of other city-states who were captured became slaves, but they were far outnumbered by the other slaves, who clearly weren't native to Charity.

Charity was the name given to the planet by the first ITUIP visitors. It hardly seemed appropriate now. The attack on the scientists had shown little charity. There was no attempt at conquest even. The attackers had aimed to kill everyone and almost succeeded.

Obregon probably knew more about the physiology of other genotypes in the near-Earth regions of the galaxy than any Human alive, but the slaves on Charity had baffled him a bit. He relished the idea of examining a few up close. He and Julie Chen, his former intern and now nearly his equal, went into overdrive. The female slave almost died on them as they determined the best portadoc parameters.

It was no consolation to them that most of her condition stemmed from her treatment on Charity. Old scars on her back were lost among new lacerations. Her left arm was useless.

Because the stowaways were humanoid, they had used some old procedures to determine the portadoc's settings. Details like the number of teeth and ribs weren't important in that determination. Blood chemistry, genetic structure, and location of vital organs were.

"Her evolution obeyed symmetry," said Chen. "There's no real need for a second heart."

"Some kind of survival mechanism maybe," said Obregon. "It usually comes to that. Left does the top, right the bottom. The brain can die, but she could still bring a pregnancy to term. The webbed feet indicate an aquatic environment on their home world. We'll have to pass the information on to Edgerton and his team. That might help them determine where they're from originally."

"I don't understand how that brutish master race could enslave these people. The slavers haven't left their world, even to explore their own solar system."

"Let's count our blessings. These fellows are as bad as the Tali once were. Loves Rapids will be happy to know they might be aquatic originally. She takes a lot of lonely swims."

“I swim with her sometimes. So do you.”

Obregon shrugged. “She has to do it almost every day. We don’t, and often don’t have time to do so.”

After their patient went into the portadoc, they turned their attention to the male child who was sedated. Obregon recognized the brand on the child’s forehead.

“He belongs to the leader of that city-state that attacked our camp,” he told Chen.

The female didn’t have the brand. From their samples, it didn’t take long for them to determine that she was the child’s mother. Had she been given her freedom? Had she stolen the child?

Considering what the pair had gone through, Obregon agreed with Wilson. They shouldn’t return the pair to the planet.

“I’m going to throw out a wild theory,” said Obregon, looking over his coffee cup’s brim at Edgerton. He had left Chen monitoring the stowaways and the Human survivors while he visited the ship’s galley to let the stress out.

Edgerton laughed. “Your theories often merit that adjective. Go ahead.”

“What if the enslaved race are refugees from their home planet? It might be in bad shape after a war or climatological disaster, for example, and they came here, like the Rangers did at New Haven in the 82 Eridani system so long ago.”

“And we did too, ending up in several places, including New Haven.” Edgerton thought a moment. “That’s not such a wild idea. Definitely in the realm of the possible. A fairly large and genetically viable population lands on Charity, but not large enough to defend themselves against the locals. Doesn’t explain why the locals were so intent on killing us, though.”

Obregon sent Edgerton an image via the com implant. The scientist studied it. “I’m not going to ask who this naked Human female is, but why is her picture side by side with the stowaway’s?”

The doctor shrugged. “Old girlfriend. I took a picture of her when she was sleeping. She’ll never know the difference. Being a scientist too, she’d appreciate how I’m using her to compare to the slave woman. What do you see, old man?”

“You’re probably expecting me to say that the slaves look more like us than the locals, right?”

“Humans come in many colors, so ignore skin color. That’s exactly what you should see. The locals on Charity are short and stumpy, almost hunchbacks. Victor Hugo could almost use them as a model for his novel.”

“Who’s Victor Hugo?”

“An author from Earth’s pre-spaceflight history. 19th century, if I remember correctly—old counting system. His most famous work is *Les Miserables*, but he also wrote *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The main character lived in a church steeple. Look it up in the database.”

“Is Notre Dame the name of a town?”

“The name of a church. It was on an island in the Seine, a river flowing through Paris, the capital of France. Almost burned down in the 21st century until they figured out they should use fireproofed construction materials. Didn’t help later when the Tali almost destroyed it.”

“That’s enough ancient history for today. Back to the point. Are you conjecturing that the locals, the slave masters, thought we were from the slaves’ planet?”

“On Charity once again, this time looking for revenge.” Obregon smiled. “Guilt by association. If you’ll pardon another history lesson, a whole group of Humans were considered evil by association—again the 21st century, I believe—but saner minds prevailed and the Muslims weren’t persecuted even though a few radicals professing that faith created all sorts of mayhem and murder.”

“I’m not sure I buy that theory. But back to the first one. Doesn’t it imply that the slaves’ planet is nearby somewhere?”

“I’m sure of it. And I have a way to find out.” Obregon stood but saw the raised eyebrows. He laughed. “Now I have your attention. I’m going to ask the female slave. She might know.” He turned to go, but looked back over his shoulder at Edgerton. “And don’t get any ideas about Zebi. She’s happy with another man now and no longer available.”

“We’ll have to tell the AI to use the master race’s language,” said Obregon. “I hope it doesn’t frighten her.” He turned to Chen. “Maybe if she saw you first? I’ll give her the antidote for the sedative.”

They had already added the com implant behind her ear that was a miniature of what Loves Rapids hung around what served as the Ranger’s neck. Chen and Obregon would speak Standard and the stowaway would hear Charity’s language, the whole process controlled by the ship’s AI.

“How do you feel?” said Chen after Obregon threw the switch and the stowaway’s eyes popped open.

“I—who are you?”

“You may call me Chen. You stowed away on our shuttle that lifted from Charity and brought you to us. I’m sorry we didn’t find you sooner. We had our own wounded to take care of.”

The stowaway started to rub her eyes. *Is she crying?* Obregon could only guess. If they were truly aquatic in origin, tears wouldn’t be the norm, so maybe her action was just a reflex to waking up after a long nap.

“My name is Hali. I’m sorry for that bloodshed. My people had nothing to do with it. The Masters are very paranoid about us. They try to beat memories of our history out of us. And you look like us.”

Obregon looked back to where Edgerton and others were looking through the one-way glass and winked.

Chen nodded. “I think I understand. Can I introduce you to a friend?”

“Are you my friend?” Chen nodded. The stowaway seemed satisfied. “Then I would like to meet her.”

“Him. Meet Obregon. We treated you. We gave you a new arm and did some other necessary repairs to your body.”

Obregon stepped forward. “I’m happy to meet you, Hali.”

She looked from Obregon to Chen. “I-I don’t understand. Are you shamans?”

"We're a bit more advanced than that. You can understand us through the implant, for example." He touched his own. She touched hers. "You must have realized that, though, when you boarded our shuttle."

"Yes, lots of magic. My son was impressed."

"Your son's fine, by the way," said Chen.

"Yes, he told me."

Chen looked at Obregon. He shrugged.

"I detect some wonder and doubt," said Hali. "The Neri can detect feelings, some more than others. My master valued my abilities—I gave him valuable insight about what his enemies were planning." She smiled at the two physicians. "My abilities also permitted me to hide my intentions from him."

"And he probably wants you back," said Chen.

"More my son, who has the promise of being even more gifted than I am."

"Why was he branded and not you?" said Obregon.

"My master wanted to be able to sell me after my son's skills are fully developed. Little did he know that I taught my son to hide most of his skills. He has already surpassed me." She didn't hide the next emotion—it showed on her face: an infinite sadness. "Now it doesn't matter. We have betrayed all the Neri on Charity."

"Maybe you and your son can change that," said Obregon. "Where do the Neri come from? We know you didn't originate on Charity."

"I don't understand how you know that, but I detect certainty in your emotions. I'm not sure where we come from. Our legends talk about the god star. Some of our wise men point to a star in the sky."

"If we show you the sky as it would appear from Charity, can you pick out that star?"

"Of course."

Obregon smiled at Chen. "I think we have solved Edgerton's mystery."

"We have a problem," said Wilson, who walked into Obregon's small office in *Brendan's* sickbay.

"Beyond violating several don'ts in the ITUIP Protocol?" said the doctor. "Have a seat, Lester. I don't need to be an empath to detect that you're a troubled man."

"We've already discussed our violations of the Protocol long enough. I'm morally supporting you, even if it means we'll lose our jobs. Everyone here has recorded their opinion. The few opposed to our actions will be protected from prosecution, if it comes to that."

"Depends on how everything turns out. So, what's the problem, captain?"

"The planet of the Neri is still there, but it's a cinder. The star went nova. Not a supernova, but still enough of a disaster that Hali's people were all wiped out. Their ship that landed on Charity was an ark of some sort. Your parallel with the history of the Rangers is holding up."

"Edgerton must have mentioned that. It was a wild guess at the time. So, what's our next move?"

"You mean, after you tell Hali?"

"Me? You're the captain. It's your duty. Just fake some regret."

“Fake regret? Are you kidding? It’s a terribly sad situation. This poor stowaway and her son now have no future.”

Obregon made a steeple out of his fingers and rested his chin on the apex. “How much surveillance of their home planet have we actually done?”

“What’s the use? Its condition is worse than any we’ve seen where there’s been a nuclear conflagration. Nothing is left. I’m not liking that sly old expression.”

“Guess you’re an empath too, Lester. In spite of physiological differences, Neri and Humans aren’t that different. Excavations on the Rangers’ home world showed even they left hidden caches in case the Rangers who fled ever returned.”

“The Rangers’ Mother World wasn’t destroyed by a nova. The Tali ‘cleansed’ it for their own use.”

“No matter. If I read the reports correctly, those information caches would have survived anything less than complete destruction of the Mother World. I can confirm that with Loves Rapids.”

“Never mind. I get your point. You’re suggesting there were other arks. More might be around besides those on Charity.”

“We can’t help the slaves on Charity directly because of the Protocol, but it says nothing about finding other Neri who would do exactly that.”

“If their arks weren’t equipped with FTL drives, they might still be en route.”

“In that case, we could change the route.”

“And you might just end up enslaving more Neri.”

“That wouldn’t be good.”

Wilson half stood, bracing himself on Obregon’s desk. “We’re debating this without the most important person present. Let’s ask Hali what she thinks.” He frowned. “After I tell her that her home world’s a cinder.”

“You’re on a lucky streak, you know,” said Edgerton as the *Brendan* approached the Neri’s ark. They had found several caches on the Neri home world, each indicating that five arks had been launched. They had chosen the one heading for a star where the direction of travel wasn’t that different from the one for the ark sent to Charity.

“It never carries over to the casinos when we’re on shore leave,” said Obregon with a smile. He put his arm around Hali. “Maybe our stowaway is my lucky charm.”

“There is no such thing as good or bad luck, Obregon” Hali said. “Intuition is the ability to take known data and project it beyond where logic can’t go. You have that ability. I don’t.”

“But you have other abilities. You’re nervous, aren’t you?”

“You’re also a weak empath. Yes, I don’t know these people. Imagine, they have gone through the same number of generations on this ship as we did on Charity. They might even consider my son and me their enemies.”

“I’m guessing they have a minimal crew that changes periodically while everyone else is in cryosleep. That’s a common characteristic of early interstellar voyages.” Obregon squeezed Hali’s shoulder. “You’ll have to convince that crew to reroute to Charity.”

“They might not be able to,” said Edgerton. “Let alone want to do so when they hear about the situation on that awful planet.”

“That will depend on their technology,” said Obregon. “They would be completely outnumbered by the Masters, as was the case of the first ark.”

“Our wise ones tell us we were enslaved because we were unwilling to fight. I think I can change that. I’ll have to change that. But we’ll only need a foothold on Charity this time, I’m sure.”

Obregon saw Edgerton nod and smiled. Perhaps his friend and colleague saw the whole thing as an interesting experiment in xenosociology. Obregon didn’t know what to make of it, except that helping the Neri out in any manner might be justified, in spite of the ITUIP Protocol.

SAMPLE

Intern
Sanctuary, 4015
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“Lester, I don’t need an intern.” Carlos Obregon crossed his arms and tried to look stubborn.

The captain of the starship *Brendan* knew that his Chief Medical Officer had a point. He waved off his objection, though.

“SEB says you do, and I agree with them that we need to train new medical officers all the time. They pair interns with experienced officers all the time. Weren’t you an intern once?”

“I did my internship in a New Haven hospital. I once made the mistake of diagnosing an SEB VIP’s ailment who then showed his gratitude by convincing me to sign on. In those days, fleet medical officers were stolen from the civilian population.”

“Okay, let me put it another way: Don’t you think you have some obligation to train young people?”

Obregon indicated the young woman’s hologram appearing between them. “This intern already has experience. She could be a medical officer on a smaller ship right now and probably do a good job.”

The captain nodded. “I agree. She seems a bit over-qualified. It’s out of my hands, though. I can do nothing about it. Neither can you.”

Obregon thought a moment. “There are times when I could use some help, but those are probably times when an intern would just get in my way.”

The captain shrugged. “She’ll be boarding sometime this afternoon. You’ll have to talk to her. The faster you get her up to speed, the faster you’ll be rid of her.”

“Not until we have planetary leave again. That could take forever.”

“Or it could be in three standard months if we have a particularly stressing mission. And remember, you’ll be signing off on her being qualified for a regular post. That’s a major responsibility.”

“Can I wash her out if she’s not qualified?”

The captain frowned. “Don’t look for trouble, Carlos. Not being able to train a qualified intern won’t look good on your own record.”

“And here I mistakenly thought that the candidate’s performance would determine their future postings.”

“I’ve chosen a few classic texts for you to peruse,” said Obregon.

Julie Chen floated in a lotus position before his desk. *Showoff*, he thought. *I could do that too, but I have a bit more decorum in zero-g. Brendan* wouldn’t spin up the artificial gravity until just before going FTL.

They were already in the far reaches of the solar system where crewmembers had enjoyed a short leave on Sanctuary. The captain had ordered an FTL drive inspection that required the zero-g environment.

"I'm starting you with Wave Searcher's *Physiology of Known ET Genotypes* and Blamak's *Sentient Lifeforms and their Circulatory Systems*."

"I've already studied those texts. I remember you wrote a chapter in Wave Searcher's book."

"Fine. Look at the other texts then. Things are pretty quiet on the way out. The going gets rough when we have to explore an unknown planet and decide if it's okay for colonization."

"Can I also poke around sickbay? I'm not familiar with the Model 5 Portadocs. I did my training on Model 7."

Obregon had been asking for upgrades for a long time. *Yeah, rub it in, woman.*

"Whatever. Just stay out of my way."

"Will we be trading off for planetary duty?"

"That's up to Lester. I mean, the captain. We'll probably go down together on the first few shuttle trips. You won't learn much staying safely onboard *Brendan*. Oh, and one other thing, Dr. Chen. We're always on call. In case of an emergency, whether on planet or on *Brendan*, delays in treatment can imply deadly consequences. We might normally live for hundreds of years, so dying is a big deal."

"Understood. What should I wear for dinner at the captain's table?"

"What you have on is fine. We're informal unless we have VIPs on board. And we don't...and won't."

But upon entering the solar system corresponding to their first stop, a planet designated E-1701, a VIP did arrive onboard. An emergency pod carrying Prince Chala Yonbini was detected via its emergency beacon. His parents' royal luxury yacht had developed a malfunction in their intra-system drive after they popped out of FTL. The sixteen-year-old had barely escaped. Some of *Brendan*'s crew had boarded it and found everyone else dead inside—the parents and three servants.

"We'll get you back to your home planet," Chen told the boy. "It will take a while."

"I really don't want to go back there. My uncle can have the throne. It's a boring life being an old-fashioned monarch on a backwards planet. My father hated it but felt obligated. I don't feel obligated."

"I don't think you have any choice. We certainly don't. We have to return you."

"What am I supposed to do when that happens? I'll be out of here in no time."

Chen checked the porta-doc readout again, and then winked at him. "What about now?"

"I was enjoying your great bedside manners and beaming smile," he said. "Any chance you want to replace our court physician? That old man is an ugly fool in comparison. You could even become my consort."

"Not a chance. Let's get you out of there."

Chen watched Chala dress. *A body of a man, but still a boy*, she thought.

"You didn't answer my first question," he said, pulling on jersey, shorts, and sandals, standard garb for crewmembers while aboard *Brendan*.

She thought about that question a moment. "Maybe the captain can give you something to do. Do you have any special interests? Talents?"

"I'm good at electrical and mechanical things." He made a sad face. "My father always said that was beneath my status, so I had to play around with them on the sly."

Yet he misses his father. “Come along, then, and you can meet the captain.”

After the FTL drive checkout, *Brendan* left ordinary space and began its hops, skips, and jumps through the multiverses on their way to their first destination. Obregon read journal articles; Chen studied many things and made sure she knew everything there was to know about operating a sickbay.

Three subjective weeks into the journey, the captain visited Obregon’s small office just to the side of the sick bay.

“Got a minute, Carlos?”

Obregon looked up from his tablet screen. “For you, Lester, I’ll give you two.”

The captain smiled. “I want to talk about Prince Chala.”

“Just call him Chala. Everybody else on board does. And he’s even asked crewmembers to do so. Besides, I don’t believe in any of this monarchy crap. Earth’s monarchs weren’t often good guys, and even the good ones were parasites.”

“Oh, please, always spouting historical references.” Obregon was a history buff, among other things. “I don’t care about history. I’m more into what our future might bring.”

“Stop sermonizing. What about Chala?”

“He was looking for something to do, said he had an interest in electrical and mechanical stuff, so I told him to go visit Mencheb. They hit it off.”

“That old Tali? I’m surprised. He’s such a grouch.”

Mencheb had the job of keeping *Brendan*’s shuttles in tip-top shape. They were essential for exploring and studying a planetary surface. Generally they made many trips ferrying scientific crewmembers and supplies down to the surface and bringing them and their samples back onboard.

“Maybe we’re missing something,” said the captain. “Anyway, Mencheb told me the kid has real talent. He needs an assistant. Because he hates surface duty, I was thinking of sending him along in the first landing party.”

“A bit young, I’d say. Did he ask to go? I think he’s enamored with Chen. She’s going, but that’s part of her training.”

“I didn’t know about the romantic interest, but he didn’t ask. I thought of it after reading Mencheb’s glowing report.”

“There’s no future in it. He’s a king, after all.”

“So let him have some adventures. It will be subjective months before we can return him to his planet. And I believe he dreads that. Let’s give the kid a break.”

“So why tell me? You’re the captain.”

“You also serve as consultant for mental health issues. Will he stand up to stress on the surface? Given your comment about the infatuation, maybe not.”

Obregon shrugged. “I never checked his profile. The portadoc automatically produced one, but I never looked at it. I’ll check. I certainly don’t want him to endanger himself or other members of the crew.”

“You are one lucky fellow,” Chen told Chala as she received a box of supplies from him. “I was surprised when you showed up for surface duty.” Chen put the box on the back of rugged terrain vehicle. The RTV was almost full and would be driven to their campsite about two kilometers away by one of the security personnel.

He nodded. “Mencheb has taught me a whole lot. I know these shuttles inside and out now. But I was surprised too. What a great opportunity! But why are you here? You’d think Obregon would come on the first trip.”

“Part of my training. He’ll be monitoring my performance from orbit.”

“Will Mencheb monitor mine?”

“Maybe. But not likely. These shuttles are in great shape, right?”

“The best. Mencheb knows his stuff. I’d like to take him back to my planet so I could continue to learn.”

“That would be like learning a hobby, I guess.”

Chala made a face. “Yes. I guess that’s true.”

Three days into the first landing mission, Chen had her first case: a security detail member took sick.

“Portadoc won’t help you,” said Obregon from *Brendan*. “I’ll come down on the next shuttle. We’ll need some old-fashioned lab work to find out what’s ailing him.”

Three days and five patients later, Obregon’s shuttle came down. It had a hard landing, though, and there were injuries. Worse, the shuttle’s aerodynamic controls had malfunctioned and caused the hard landing. Chala went into action.

Chen and Obregon tended to the injured. She already had the first problem solved. In her field lab, she’d discovered a new planetary parasite that loved Humans. She thought it was a plant parasite, but there were also many small animals around too, food for a few voracious predators.

“Good job finding the vector for that parasite,” said Obregon, checking the field portadoc that contained a scientist with a broken leg. “This expedition seems to be having a bit of bad luck. How’s the kid doing with the shuttle?”

“Mencheb sings his praises. I think he wants Chala to be his assistant.”

“Not happening.”

“Why not? Chala’s home planet isn’t part of ITUIP.”

“But we’d want to maintain good relations with them. Stealing their king wouldn’t accomplish that.”

Chen shrugged. “I have no use for monarchies.”

“I agree. In general, ITUIP doesn’t either. But we have a few ceremonial ones even among ITUIP planets. Sometimes a planetary population loves all the pomp and circumstance.” He shut off the porta-doc and gave the scientist a thumb’s up. “You can get out now.”

“I need some lunch,” said Chen.

“Be right with you.”

Chala stood with hands on hips and stared at the burned wiring in the second shuttle.

"This isn't good," he said to Mencheb via the com unit plugged into the side of his head. "Maybe I'm jinxing us?"

"Nonsense," said the Tali. "Primitive superstition. Equipment deteriorates. Those shuttles are fifty years old if they're a day. Our maintenance schedules are rigorous, but wiring problems are hard to detect. I have the same problem with the RTVs. Some have burst into flames. The important question is: Can you fix it?"

"I might need some help."

"I conferred with the captain. With two out of three shuttles out, he doesn't want to risk sending another one down if he can avoid it, so I'm stuck here for the time being. Let's see what you can do, Chala. I have confidence in you."

Chala shook his head. *I don't. I'm in deep water and sinking fast.* "Which shuttle should I try to fix first?"

"I'd go with the rewiring job. The first shuttle's controls will be more complicated to fix. Get the second in flying condition, and I'll come down and help you with the controls of the other one."

Chala downloaded the wiring diagram with his com unit and went to work.

"Never been on the surface this long for an expedition," said Obregon, sipping his tea. "These scientific types are dedicated. They're going about their business as if our way back to orbit were secure."

"You're a scientist too, and they're all pros," said Chen. "This planet presents some challenges, which means they're finding it interesting. They're having fun."

"Doctors are more artisans than scientists. Or maybe engineers. We know how to put people back together again. The challenge comes when you meet people with completely different anatomies and/or mental processes. I once had to operate on a fellow who insisted that his shaman be present. You'd never have that experience on New Haven."

"Is that what convinced you to come to work for SEB?"

"In part. But maybe I'm just lazy. Between planets, I can do a lot of reading and listening to music. Crewmembers are generally healthy. What about you?"

"More the first. And an affair that ended badly."

"Another doctor?"

"No, an engineer."

"Engineers have their place. What would Li have done without Holst?" Obregon was referring to Annie Li, the theoretical physicist and mathematician who had helped develop the theory of the FTL drive, and Ian Holst, an engineer who had made it practical. "They're a bit dependent on their recipe books, just like we are."

"You mean, following a protocol. Situation X requires solution Y?"

"Yes. We're not very creative, generally speaking. What's on his mind?" Chala was walking toward them. "You look tired, my prince. How's it going?"

"I'm taking a break. I can't tell wires apart when I'm bleary eyed."

"No one else can do it," said Chen with a smile.

"I'm not sure whether to be flattered by a beautiful maiden or to wonder about your degree of confidence in me."

"I have confidence in you too," said Obregon, winking at Chen.

The second shift of the exploration party returned to *Brendan* with Obregon on the shuttle with its wiring fixed. Another shift came down on the same craft along with Mencheb. Chala and he took three more weeks to fix the controls of the first shuttle.

The mission continued for two more months when everyone returned to the ship; it left orbit and headed out of the solar system. En route to their next stop one evening, ship's time, the captain invited Obregon to join him at the dinner table. Chen and Chala were there, along with Mencheb.

"What's the wine for?" said Obregon, taking his seat next to the captain. "Is this some special occasion? Maybe I should be in my dress uniform."

"We're celebrating three, no four, different events. First, everyone's healthy and so are our shuttles, the first thanks in large part to Dr. Chen, and the second thanks in large part to Chala Yonbini. Second, the mission went well. After scanning all the reports, I think we can add another planet to our catalog of planets available for colonies, with that pesky parasite and its vector duly noted." He nodded at Chen. "Third, I've approved Dr. Chen's request to remain on *Brendan* as Dr. Obregon's intern." He smiled at both Chen and Obregon, who first frowned and then smiled. "Finally, I've approved Chala's request to become Mencheb's temporary assistant until we can drop him off for further training at one of SEB's technical schools. He won't be returning to his home planet." Mencheb gave a Tali's grunt of approval. "Now, shall we dine?"

After the main course and much pleasant banter, Obregon leaned over to whisper in his captain's ear. "You didn't ask me about Chen. And what about returning Chala? The monarchists on his home planet might be upset."

"About Chen, this isn't a democracy, Carlos. She did well, and you can use the help. About Chala, I'm sure his uncle will do just fine as king. Now eat your awful dessert and shut up."

Old Planet
Hundreds of Light-Years from Earth, 4069
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“What’s your take on this, Obregon?”

Carlos Obregon, Chief Medical Officer in the crew of the SEB survey ship *Brendan*, looked up from his tablet where he’d been watching a demo of a new surgical technique for the ETs called Rangers. It didn’t matter to him that the starship didn’t currently have any of the little fellows among its crewmembers. The doctor liked to keep up with techniques to prepare for all eventualities, and he had saved ET lives as well as Human lives because of this preparation.

Captain Lester Wilson wasn’t smiling on the ship-to-planet widescreen that filled most of one wall in the tent that served as temporary galley and meeting place for the planetary survey team.

“Too early to tell, but Zoltan’s probably right.” He winked at the new Chief Science Officer Zoltan Karnoy. “Team’s going to have to do some precise dating, but the ruins are thousands of years old at least. But why ask me?”

“You’re the senior person down there,” said Lester. “Zoltan’s new at this.”

Obregon saw Zoltan’s frown. *New as Chief Science Officer, but the fellow has experience. What’s with Lester?* “He’s expressed the general consensus of the scientific team.”

“There’s no residual radiation,” said Zoltan. “There would be, even if a nuclear exchange occurred a million years ago. Self-destruction is out. And it looks to be a good climate for an ITUIP colony.”

ITUIP was the International Trade Union of Independent Planets, a loose confederation. Being a history buff, Obregon considered it modeled after the old European Union on Earth, the Humans’ home planet. *But I also know how that ended!*

“If it’s such a good E-type planet, why did the previous owners abandon it?” said the captain.

“Maybe they joined the Swarm?” said Zoltan, smiling at the huge screen.

Obregon blasted his own frown toward the scientist. *And they say I’m too much the historian!* He hadn’t heard that collective intelligence mentioned for a long time. It had played an important role in early near-Earth history.

Lester didn’t ignore the comment, though. “That’s a possibility. Keep checking the planet out for future colonization, but also have some people figure out what happened to the previous inhabitants. We need to be thorough.”

“Meeting in the main tent,” Zoltan said, sticking his head into the tent that Obregon used as a temporary sick bay.

Obregon had just finished up a minor surgical procedure on Tialok, their Tali shuttle pilot who also flew one of the three small tricopters used for optical and SAR mapping, among other things. He smiled at the pilot who was now recuperating in the portadoc. “Lucky you. You’re missing what surely will be another boring meeting.” He patted the big, furry head and tweaked the Teddy Bear ears, but the Tali was still under anesthesia. “Not that I would want to take that kind of fall to get out of a meeting.”

Obregon walked there with Zoltan. George Edgerton, their xenosociologist, was at the head of the table, shuffling some handwritten notes and glancing at his tablet. He had served on *Brendan* almost as long as Obregon.

The doctor was prepared for a boring session where the science team presented data and tentative analyses of the same. Normally he would stay on board *Brendan* and send his intern down to a planet's surface, but Julie Chen, who had been with him for years, had just left to become Chief Medical Officer on another survey ship. They still didn't have a replacement. Lester's answer was always, "I'm working on it," but Obregon hadn't even seen a list of candidates. He expected it to be a slow process, though. The starships were the fastest mode of communication in near-Earth space, and Obregon compared that process to the Pony Express, something else he'd studied about Earth's history.

George began with his analysis of the ruins, reporting on results from his subteam that included xenoarchaeologists and other social scientists with whom Obregon chewed the fat because of his interest in history, which often related to archaeology.

"We've located the ruins of some large buildings that might have been temples," George said. He described the site in detail and their plans to excavate there for a while. When he finished, Zoltan passed the baton to the survey team leader, a Tali named Wotang.

That was when Obregon took out his tablet and started reading some medical articles. He only looked up when Zoltan directly asked him a question.

"How is Tialock?"

Obregon put the tablet in sleep mode and looked around the table. "He'll be able to fly us back up to *Brendan*, but don't look for him to help with the survey piloting a tricopter. We'll have to ground one."

Zoltan nodded. "No problem. There's more ocean area than land. We'll cover all of it before George and his minions finish their dig."

"I can speed that up," said Riley, the Security Chief. "I can pilot a tricopter."

"You'll have to put someone else in charge of the security detail here," said Obregon. "I don't want to walk around armed to the teeth."

Zoltan smiled. "Not much on this planet that's dangerous, except the terrain at times. By the way, the whole survey team should take Tialock's fall as a lesson. Loose shale and stones can be tricky in a 1.2 gravity field." He looked around the group. "Let's get back to work. The quicker we finish, the quicker we'll be back aboard *Brendan*."

While Obregon did his duty by checking Tialock from time to time, he went out with Edgerton and his group too. He sat on one of the massive marble stones and watched others dig.

"You could help, you know," said Edgerton, sitting beside him after a few hours work.

Obregon held up his hands. "These do fine work, my friend. None of the crew would want me to hazard any damage to them, not while I'm the only medic in a many parsecs-diameter sphere around this planet."

"Most of the time, only the portadoc's all that's needed."

"And Tialok is an example of when we need more. And who sets up the portadoc for optimum healing? I need an intern. You should put some pressure on Lester."

"The captain doesn't listen to me much. He's always chomping at the bit to get on to the next planet."

“Now there’s an interesting expression. I don’t suppose you know what it means.”

“As a matter of fact, I do. You’re not the only history buff around here. I’m comparing Lester to an ancient Earth animal called a horse. With the bit and reins, Humans would steer them. I guess the primitives tortured animals back then.”

“When they weren’t torturing their fellow Humans. What’s Xena found?”

A tall woman with short brown hair was waving wildly at Edgerton and yelling something.

“Too far away. If you can get off your butt, let’s go and see what they found.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Obregon, admiring the mural on a wall in the temple room the scientists had broken into. “You say you’re a historian, George. Do you recognize these people? Zoltan was right.”

“I don’t, so how do you know he was right?”

“These little fellows called themselves the shipbuilders—in their language, of course. Brent Mueller’s wife Jenny Wong was kidnapped by one of their ships, and they were instrumental in saving ITUIP from that criminal mastermind Dimitri Negrini. After that, they just disappeared. Looks like they made a habit of that. This must be their home planet.”

“That’s quite a bit of extrapolation from very little data,” said George. “And you’re suggesting they joined Swarm?”

“They disappeared somewhere. What’s interesting is that they played important roles in Human history, from the nuclear exchange between Colombia and Venezuela in 2078, old calendar, to stopping Negrini in 3073.”

“They caused that nuclear exchange?”

“Not them. Some idiot playing with one of their toys.”

“Okay, you’ll have to fill in the details over ales on *Brendan* sometime. What caused them to abandon this planet?”

“Still the unanswered question,” said Obregon. “There’s no information in this mural. The shipbuilders look celebratory, almost happy, in fact.”

The survey team, with Riley’s help, finished before George’s. The captain gave the latter three more standard days, after which they would have to leave the excavation to future scientists. Obregon was bored, so he convinced Riley to take him on a leisurely flight over a nearby city that was just as much in ruins as the one where George’s group was working.

“You can see things from up here that aren’t obvious down there,” said Obregon. Riley nodded but said nothing, concentrating on piloting the vehicle because they weren’t actually that high.

“That’s not a temple,” Obregon observed at one point. “It’s a defense installation. Missile silos, to be precise. I’m surprised the survey fellows missed them.”

“They probably had no idea what they were,” said Riley. “I sure didn’t.”

They studied the five rows of equally spaced indentations at the city’s outskirts, twenty-five silos in total.

“Wouldn’t they protect each city that way?”

“Maybe the other silos filled in with rubble. Or this is just for space defense. The question is: who did the shipbuilders need protection from? Can you land this contraption?”

“Of course. There’s a flat space right down there. Hold on.”

Before they got out of the tricopter, Riley reported in to both *Brendan* and Zoltan back in the camp. They then headed for the closest silo. There wasn’t much to see until Obregon spotted the entrance to a bunker.

“We shouldn’t go down there,” said Riley. “Remember Tialock. I need to get the OK from Zoltan.”

Zoltan didn’t give them the OK. He told them to wait for backup. Obregon’s interest was flagging by the time they arrived.

The bunker provided new information in the form of data cubes. Humans knew how to manage those ever since they’d been found in the shipbuilder’s crashed ship on Saturn’s moon Helene that had contained the remains of three different ET species. In fact, Humans had co-opted some of that technology to improve their own data storage. They all gathered around Obregon’s tablet after a techie figured out how to read the ETs’ data cubes.

Most of the content was data, in fact. Just numbers. But a few contained interesting videos of another world showing ETs who were unknown to ITUIP, not the shipbuilders.

“Who are these guys?” said Zoltan.

“Maybe the enemy,” said Obregon. “Lester, can you have someone search the archives for an astrosociological thesis by a Human named Asako Koboyashi.”

“A relative of the Takahashi?”

“I don’t think so. Ashi is a common surname ending.”

The planetary group waited for about ten minutes. Lester then came online.

“Found it. ‘A Sociological Analysis of Fistian Culture and History,’ by Asako Kobayashi. Erudite stuff about some new ETs who later joined ITUIP. It’s about one hundred standard years old. How’d you know about this? And why is it relevant?”

“Fistians are like Earth horses George Edgerton and I were discussing not long ago, except they have two arms besides their four legs. Some crewmembers might have met them from time to time. I was figuring out what special surgical techniques I’d need to tend to those fellows. The relevance is at the end.”

“You mean in the conclusions? Seems like a lot of a ET specie’s superstitions gone wild.”

“Yes, that was my initial interpretation. Dr. Kobayashi translated the Fistian name to Marauders. Can you transmit her sketch of a Marauder?”

Lester did so, and Obregon heard the sharp intakes of breath. They were all looking at a whole city of Marauders on the data cube’s video file.

“Now we know why the shipbuilders fled their home planet. They probably figured their defenses weren’t enough to stop these bellicose ETs.”

“You can determine all that from that video of city dwellers going about their business?”

“No. The correlation of the sketch with the denizens of that city tells me that the Fistians’ superstition gone wild is reality. We might be close to the Marauders right now, assuming those ETs are still around.”

“What do we do about that?” said Riley.

“Maybe make some preparations,” said Obregon.
Zoltan could only nod.

SAMPLE

Dr. Carlos and the Earth Woman
Earth, 4083
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Carlos Obregon took the shuttle down from the space docks, leaving starship *Brendan* behind. As an amateur historian, the ship's chief medical officer wanted to see some historical sites. It was his first visit to Earth.

He said that to the robocar carrying him from the spaceport on Long Island into the city, holding on for dear life as the car wound around stagecoaches and buggies drawn by horses. *Clones*, he thought, remembering that the Tali invasion of Earth had led to the extinction of many of the planet's original species. He also asked if Earth's government had ever decided to return Manhattan to the original tribe that sold it.

"No tribes, no Manhattan," said the car's small AI.

"What do they call the island then?"

"New Amsterdam is the official name."

"Not back far enough. Old Amsterdam was somewhere in Europe, I believe."

There was silence from the AI. *Maybe "Europe" isn't in its memory?*

"Interesting. The city is still Earth's capital, right?"

That started the AI on a historical spiel that distracted Obregon from the winding trajectory the robocar was following. *Guess our onboard AI isn't up-to-date on all the changes!* The only thing Obregon recognized in the spiel was that the city became the capital after Humans defeated the Tali invaders.

They entered the city over a new bridge.

"Stop here!" Obregon soon said.

"We have a bit farther to go, sir," said the AI.

"I said stop!"

He leaned forward and let the robocar's AI read his SEB ID chip.

"Thank you, sir. Space Exploration Bureau's ID is recognized and charges confirmed. Lots of people want to go into space."

So the AI editorializes! Before the robocar could explain why, Obregon hopped out and walked back to the statue he'd spotted.

He patted the iron bull's head and tried to imagine what it had been like back in the 21st century.

"Are you lost?"

An android cop approached the good doctor.

"Not really," Obregon said. "Just seeing the sites."

“There are many to see. Our city is full of history.”

The android started listing them. Obregon held up his hand, not wanting another spiel.

“I have my own edited list, thank you,” he said, tapping the side of his head where his comlink connected him to a local network.

“Then have a good day, sir.”

The city was now more like a bustling village than the more populated capitals of Novo Mondo or New Haven, two of the original Human star-colonies. Obregon found a quaint cafeteria with selfservice and no androids.

“I noticed you selected havenberry juice and pie,” said a woman in line behind him. “Are you from off-planet?”

“Is it that obvious?” he said with a smile.

“Havenberry juice as beverage and havenberry pie for dessert? Most people couldn’t afford that, and most Earth people don’t like it. Havenberries are a bit tart.”

“That’s what sweetener is for.”

There was only one table left in the busy cafeteria. Obregon offered to share it with his inquisitor.

“Clarissa Saunders,” said the woman, extending a hand.

He shook it. “Carlos Obregon, Chief Medical Officer from the starship *Brendan*. I’m on leave for a few days.”

“I run an art gallery not far from here. Do you like art?”

“Depends.” He raised the glass of havenberry juice. “Making wine from this is an art.”

She made a face. “We have few varietals left here on Earth, or wineries, thanks to the Tali invasion.”

Some old wounds don’t heal, he thought. “I suppose I’m more into history than art, but that includes art history, of course.”

“All the works in my gallery are recent. Art history on Earth also has a gap due to the Tali.”

“Okay, I recognize that’s a sore point for some people here, but my new intern is Tali. A quite capable fellow.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to generalize. I’m sorry.” She smiled. “Would you like to visit my gallery. It’s only a few blocks away.”

Why not? I want to see a bit more of Earth’s once great city.

Obregon walked through the gallery as Clarissa explained some of the artworks. He wasn’t focusing too much on them and thinking more about the area’s history. *A lot fewer people now. And why is it called SoHo?* He asked Clarissa.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Some neighborhoods here have strange names that sound peculiar in Standard. A lot of history was lost during the Tali occupation.”

That again. Obregon frowned. *Time to change the subject.*

“Is this light sculpture a local product?”

"You have good taste. That was imported from South America and is quite expensive. The artist lives in Santiago."

"It looks like a copy of a work I saw in the museum in First Landing."

"First Landing?"

"Capital of the planet New Haven. The sculptor was a lady called Makes No Ripples."

"That's a very strange name."

"She's a Ranger. They were there on the planet before Humans arrived."

"She must have copied this Torres piece then."

"I doubt it. The piece on New Haven is contemporary with the Tali invasion of Earth. I doubt your Mr. Torres is that old."

"You must be incorrect. I can't imagine any ET making something so beautiful. Now, if you don't mind. I have some pieces to curate before I open for the after-lunch crowd."

"Sure. Nice meeting you, and thanks for the personal tour of your gallery."

On the street, Obregon wondered about the woman's change of mood. *You just can't read anyone anymore, Carlitos.*

Dr. Carlos and the Emergency Medicine
Halek Empire, 4075
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Carlos Obregon was on the bridge of the starship *Brendan* when it happened. They had just dropped back into ordinary space-time and were entering a new solar system.

Even the AI couldn't react fast enough to avoid the collision because the planetoid was only a few hundred kilometers in front of the ship. It managed to keep the ship from vaporizing, though. The crash threw everyone on the bridge back against the rear bulkhead. Emergency lights came on; atmospheric leaks were plugged by nanomachines as sirens started to howl.

Obregon didn't see or hear any of it. He and others in the control room were unconscious.

Obregon, who had been standing nearest the bulkhead, awoke first. He went to work, checking for vital signs. Three crewmembers were dead, including the XO and navigator. He needed to get the others to sickbay and into portadocs ASAP.

As he and other s carried the survivors—not an easy task because there was no longer any artificial gravity—Obregon wondered if they were still on course, or the ship and planetoid were one object flying off in another direction.

"Backup navigators are needed in engineering to check our course."

"Already here," someone said. "Glancing blow. Ship's okay. We'll correct course."

"Good. I'm done giving orders. I have ER work to do."

"I'm here too," said Captain Lester.

"Good. I'll tend to my patients."

It turned out that the ship's integrity was sound—nothing a bit of repair work in the ITUIP shipdocks wouldn't fix—but the AI reported problems in its software for perform the ship's dances among the multiverses to get from star to star.

"That's problematic. If there are any planets in this system we can colonize, we might want to do that." Obregon winked at Lester. "Maybe time to retire."

"The AI is performing its self-diagnostics. Hope is not lost."

"Who said it's lost? I'm going to retire one day. Might as well be here."

"I'm listening," said the AI. "And FYI, we are being hailed."

"Can you translate?"

"No. There's no language like this in my databanks."

"Put them on the screen," said Lester.

A thin, bipedal ET appeared on the screen. He looked Human enough if one ignored the pale, greenish skin, pointy ears, and lack of nose and lips. Or was it a she?

The AI was right. The language was a sing-song mess of chirps and glottal stops. The ET spoke for a few moments and then stopped. He made a very Human gesture of raising its six-fingered hand but only showing his index finger.

“I think he’s realized we don’t speak his language. He’s adjusting.”

This observation came from Shallow Diver, a Ranger crewmember and the only ET present in the *Brendan’s* meeting room. The AI could translate the Ranger’s strange native tongue.

“I’ve linked with their AI,” said *Brendan’s* AI. “Not a bad chappy. We’ll be set in a moment.”

Chappy, thought Obregon. *Where the hell did that come from?*

“I beg our vistor’s pardon,” the ET announced. “We welcome you to the Halek Empire. This solar system is on the boundaries of our domain but you will be comfortable on the fifth planet. We might also be able to repair your ship. Do you need a tow?”

“Guess we won’t be colonizing here after all,” Obregon said with a smile.

Lester put a finger to his lips and then turned to the screen.

“My name is Lester. We represent many worlds of many diverse species that have formed a trade union.”

“My name is Trifo. We know your Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets, mostly rumors. Our empire is also home to many species. I represent but one. You are far from home. Explorers no doubt. We welcome you. Let us meet on the fifth planet in peace.”

“Lead the way,” said Lester.

“Maybe it’s a trap,” said Shallow Diver after the screen went blank.

Obregon wondered if the Ranger was a bit paranoid and remembering the invasion of his home planet long ago. Humans had some problems with the Tali too. But this new ET didn’t look anything like a Tali.

“I think it’s worth a chance to get everything repaired,” said Lester.

“I concur,” said Obregon. “I’m going below to check on my wounded. Let me know when we arrive. I wouldn’t mind some R&R on solid ground.”

Probably not happening. ER medicine calls me.

As the shuttle sped toward the surface, Obregon kept his eyes on the planet.

“Could be Earth centuries ago,” he observed. “Pollution, over-population, overuse of natural resources—you name it, they’ve got it.”

“Always the historian,” said Lester.

Obregon grunted. He hadn’t wanted to come, but Lester thought it might be confusing to their hosts if Obregon’s Tali intern went instead. The landing party was all Human.

Unintentional xenophobia on the captain’s part? An expression of Human exceptionalism?

Lester wasn’t into history, but even he had to know that Humans would still be taking centuries-long treks around near-Earth space if a Human/Ranger pair of scientists hadn’t come up with the theory for the stardrive now in use.

Besides, Obregon was no diplomat. Of course, his Tali intern would be even less diplomatic. *Maybe that’s Lester’s excuse?*

The shuttle landed on the larger of the two spaceports on the planet. The emissaries from the Halek Empire drove out to meet them in three-wheeled, top-heavy vehicles. Some stepped out and bowed to the Humans. A few others remained inside. After the bows and a few words of greeting, the ETs gestured toward the vehicles. The drive into the city took an hour and was complicated by a traffic jam caused by a huge accident.

“All hours of the day,” said one emissary, “our traffic is heavy.”

“If all your Empire’s planets are like this,” said Obregon, “you’re in big trouble.”

Stanton, their xenoanthropologist, glared at Obregon, and then turned to the ET. “Dr. Obregon is simply expressing his surprise that this planet on the edge of your empire is so populated,” he said.

“We don’t have that many explorer ships like yours to find new planets to colonize. Not yet. We are interested in hearing how you prioritize the species who are allowed to establish colonies.”

Prioritize? Obregon asked himself. *Our official policy is chaos. We find the planets, and whoever can colonize, does so, sometimes without even telling us.* He kept his thoughts to himself, though.

They pulled up in front of a stark building that didn’t look much like a meeting hall to Obregon. Recalling his history again, he remembered an old sepia photo of the Berlin HQ of the Gestapo in the Brendan’s databanks. *Ugly history; and ugly, threatening building. Why do I have a bad feeling about this?*

They got out of the vehicle and were immediately surrounded by ETs bearing arms that looked lethal.

“What’s going on?” said Stanton.

“We are holding you hostage. We want the technology on your ship.”

Obregon sighed. *There’s a first time for everything!* “From now on we visit only unpopulated worlds,” he whispered to Stanton in Old English. “That’s our mission, after all.”

Stanton nodded. “We object to this treatment,” he told the emissary. “We consider this kidnapping and blackmail. Even the weapons on our ship, which are defensive, can turn this city into rubble.”

Brendan’s AI translated into the ET language, and there was a stirring among them. The ones with the weapons focused their aim.

“Would the captain of your ship risk losing some of his crew?” said the emissary.

“Yes,” said Obregon. “He knows the rules of ITUIP. Show them, Lester.”

“Targeting that uninhabited island just offshore,” announced the AI in Standard and in the ETs’ language.

The ETs gasped as the island was vaporized.

“We don’t want to fight with you,” said Stanton. “Take us back to our shuttle, and we will leave you alone to your own development. Your Empire won’t be interfered with, but it will be quarantined by ITUIP.”

“There is no empire,” said the AI in Standard to members of the *Brendan’s* delegation. “I have broken into several planetary databases. This one planet has a development comparable to Earth’s 21st century, the exception being that it has been united under an autocratic worldwide government. They have no stardrive and are just beginning to explore their solar system.”

Fine, thought Obregon. *Why didn’t the damn AI figure that out before?*

Obregon looked up. "You could have just apologized through the comlink," he told Lester.

The captain took a seat in front of Obregon's little desk. "We needed repairs. We'll have to visit the farthestmost J-type planet now and land on its moon. It has a biosphere and the materials we might need. Instead of a few weeks, we might be here six months."

"Understood. Let's explore that moon while we're at it. If we go to war with these people in the future, we might need a base."

"The ITUIP Protocol will stop that from happening. Once we leave, the solar system is quarantined." He tapped his fingers on the edge of the desk. "How are our wounded?"

"Maybe more pissed than I am. Our instructions are to avoid already established ET cultures that don't have starflight. There's a reason for that."

"I know, I know. Circumstances dictated that we bend the rules a bit. What's your real problem?"

"War. As a student of history, they're not good for either side. Earth had enough of them, right up to the end of the Tali's control of the planet. For me, war is contrary to everything I believe in as a doctor."

"Fine. Some of us can't bury our heads in the sand."

Obregon smiled at that old adage. "I'm not burying my head anywhere. I just don't want it turned into havenberry jelly. Now get the hell out of my sickbay, Lester. I have patients who still need me and a ton of medical reports to dictate to our wonderful AI."

Lester left, shaking his head.

Dr. Carlos and the Lost Love
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Carlos Obregon performed a decent dive and surfaced in the turquoise water where bubbly froth from the waterfall floated in clumps.

“Not bad, doc,” Gina Kal said, splashing water toward him. “I’m impressed.”

“My home planet was a bit like this, you know. At least in the summer.”

“I’ve never been to New Haven,” said the exobiologist. “I don’t like crowded planets. That’s one reason I joined SEB.”

Obregon treaded water. “Good E-type planets aren’t that common. That’s one reason the Space Exploration Bureau keeps trying to find them, and that, dear lady, is why you and I have interesting employment.” He ducked his head below the water and smoothed back his hair. “I guess you feel at home here then. No one except our landing party present. Only grass feeders and their predators.”

Kal scrambled onto a rock in the middle of the pool and stretched in the sun, her naked body glistening with the jewel-like beads of water. Obregon felt an ancient stirring in his loins and sighed. A few centuries separated their ages. A romance with her wouldn’t normally be a problem, but the only thing they had in common so far had been their mutual desire for a day off from exploring the pristine planet. Kal had suggested the swim.

She had become a good friend during their work days together at camp, her field close enough to his to break the ice between the new crewmember of the starship Brendan and its chief medical officer. He had pegged her for a loner, a curious lady who had trouble adjusting to the rest of the crew. That wasn’t unusual, though. The captain chose professional skills over personalities. Sometimes that led to personality conflicts. But two days on E-4013 had changed things between the two.

One day later, Gina Kal was in the camp’s medical tent; she was running a high fever. “Must be a local bacteria or virus,” said Dr. Carlos’s Tali intern on board Brendan. His face showed no expression. Tali’s faces never showed expressions, but the intern’s ears were twitching, body language for stress and worry.

“I’m working on it,” said Obregon. “Lester doesn’t like it at all, of course.”

The captain had already put the camp in quarantine. No one would be allowed back on the starship until Obregon (1) determined what the contagion was, and (2) came up with a way to combat it. No one else had taken sick, though. That gave Obregon a clue. Another one was that he wasn’t sick either.

He returned to the pool and took samples from the water and the rock where Gina had been perched talking to Obregon. A suspicious sample from the rock was the culprit, just as he expected.

“The contagion is from that gray muck on the rock,” he announced to his intern a day later. “Reilly says it’s everywhere. Those grazers with that listless appearance are full of it. The predators might be too.”

“You work fast, Carlos. What can we use against it?”

"I'll need your help up there. We need an old-fashioned antibiotic engineered to go after this stuff. That should be doable in a few days. I'll send you data as I get it. You'll have to send a probe down with the antidote."

He went to check on Gina again. She was clear-eyed and smiled at him.

"I guess your defenses are good," Obregon told Gina. "I'd like to take a sample of your blood and see how you managed that."

"Life is all around me, within me," she said. "Your friend Gina has a beautiful mind. Our horizons have expanded."

Still with a fever? He took her temperature. *No, she seems fever-free.*

He took the blood sample and went to his field lab. The contagion's cell count dominated over her white blood cell count. *If anything, the infection is worse!*

"You're still infected," he told Gina. "I don't understand why you don't have a fever."

"I-we have a symbiotic relationship now," Gina said. "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I-we can do many things together now. Do you understand, Human doctor?"

Obregon frowned. *Has she gone crazy? Is the contagion eating away at her mind?*

Days later, the strange symbiotic creature called Gina had become spent more and more time away from camp and wasn't present when Obregon injected the engineered antibiotic in the exploratory party, including himself. They weren't infected, but caution prevailed. He couldn't find Gina, though, to inoculate her.

Where the hell is she? He decided to go look for her.

Climbing to the top of a hill near camp, he spotted her on the plain below, riding with the herd, on top of one of the grazers with her hair streaming behind in the breeze. He beckoned to her.

"You've become an extraterrestrial Lady Godiva," he said as she rode up to him.

"You're always talking about ancient history," she said. "I-we find it amusing."

"Stop this I-we business. I need to kill that crap in you."

She dismounted and poked him in the chest. "I-we will not submit. I-we do not like feeling alone."

"Never alone? That contagion has taken over your mind."

"Not taken over. Joined. I-we will not return to Brendan."

"I can't leave you here alone on this primitive planet."

"Not primitive, Obregon. Different. The Gina has felt alone all my life. Now she's not. I-we are together now." She tapped her head.

He reached for her, but she shied away and jumped onto the creature again.

"Tell the captain Gina quits so that I-we can live." She rode off.

It wasn't long before the captain lifted the quarantine. The shuttle came for the landing party.

“Coming aboard?” said Reilly, Brendan’s head of security.

Obregon looked at the hill. “Give me twenty minutes.”

“It’s useless,” said Reilly.

“I know. But I have to try.”

He climbed the hill again and saw her. She was hugging one of the grazers. It seemed like she was talking to it. He waved at her. She jumped onto the animal and climbed the hill toward him.

“I-we know you’re about to leave. You are friends, but my-our place is here. Do you understand that yet?”

“Are you sure you want to do this, Gina? Last chance to change your mind.”

“I-we are happy with our symbiotic relationship. I-we can populate this world together.”

“I’m not going to try to guess how you’ll manage that. I understand the ‘we’ part, but is that part exploiting the ‘Gina’ part?”

“The Gina-part has free will so she can terminate the symbiosis at any time. She doesn’t want to feel alone anymore.”

“We are born alone,” said Obregon, “but we have others around us we can draw closer to. How close is a matter of personal choice...and maybe the environment.”

“When a human being feels lonely, the attainable closeness is often not enough. The Gina-part is happier here, Obregon. She needs the we-part. We need each other.”

He nodded and walked away, wondering what strange future was in store for his friend. Only at the camp did he stop and look back to where Gina was mounted on the ungulate. She waved and rode off down the hill’s far side.

I’ve seen many strange things in my career, he thought, but this might be the strangest experience I’ve had. He sighed. He looked toward the shuttle. Reilly was gesturing toward him. *Now I’m the one who feels lonely.*

Note from Steve: You have just finished the short story collection, *Dr. Carlos Obregon, Starship Brendan's Chief Medical Officer*. I hope you enjoyed it. We know it's hard to write a review of a collection, but if you can, or at least mention it to friends, please do so.

If you enjoyed reading this free PDF, please check out the list of other ones available—you'll find it on the "Free Stuff & Contests" web page at my website <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

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More than Human: The Mensa Contagion

Pop Two Antacids and Have Some Java (collection)

Fantastic Encores! (collection)

Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape (Volume One) (collection)

*To be published

**Bridge novels between series

Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas

About the Author



Steve Moore writes sci-fi, mysteries, and thrillers, short stories, blog articles, and book and movie reviews. He has written many novels, one for young adults—his list of works includes four series. He also has three short story collections. His stories reflect his keen interest in the diversity of human nature he has observed in his different abodes across the U.S. and in South America as well as in his Latin and European travels for work and pleasure. His interests include music, physics, mathematics, forensics, genetics, robotics, and scientific ethics. He also has an active blog where he comments on current events and their meaning to the U.S. and the rest of the world and posts opinions about writing and the publishing business of interest to readers and writers alike. He and his wife now live just outside New York City. For more details, visit him at his website <http://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.