

THEY ALSO SEARVE

A
JUMP UNIVERSE
NOVEL



MIKE MOSCOE

Author of the national bestselling Kris Longknife series as

MIKE SHEPHERD

Praise for

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Praise for

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by Mike Moscoe writing as Mike Shepherd

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Writing as Mike Shepherd

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Kris Longknife: Audacious

Kris Longknife: Intrepid

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Kris Longknife: Redoubtable

Kris Longknife: Daring

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MIKE MOSCOE



THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) LLC

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

For more information about the Penguin Group, visit penguin.com.

THEY ALSO SERVE

An Ace Book / published by arrangement with the author

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For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,

a division of Penguin Group (USA) LLC,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

eBook ISBN: 978-1-101-61763-2

PUBLISHING HISTORY

Ace mass-market edition / January 2001

Cover art by Scott Grimando.

Cover design by Diana Kolsky.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

To those who put on the uniform and find that it never really comes off.

I would like to thank doctors Ilsa Bick, M.D., Dan Sageser, Pharm.D., and Robert Moscoe, Pharm.D., for their efforts to update my thirty-year-old cellular biology. The effort was theirs. The mistakes, of course, are mine.

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About the Author

RAY LONGKNIFE PUSHED himself away from his desk and levered himself up with his canes. He scowled at his empty in-basket; now he could do the only thing he hated worse than pushing paper—attend meetings. His scowl quirked into a half smile. Rita might be right; it could be a trap to kill him.

The newfound bureaucrat and the old soldier contended in Ray for a moment. His glance took in the office of Wardhaven's Minister of Science and Technology; he'd spent nearly every waking moment here for the past three months. The thick carpet, cold marble, and rich wallpaper were left over from the previous occupant, some Unity Party hack. Shadows on the wall showed where looted artwork had hung; Ray had immediately returned them. The blank walls and the canes Ray hobbled on were prices of a lost war. Ray's jaw clinched; he would win this peace.

On the desk were the only two objects in the office that were his. A double picture frame showed Rita in his arms on their wedding day. The other frame was empty; he'd fill it in a few months when the baby came. The second item was a lit plastic cube; suspended in it was the shrapnel removed from his spine. His mistakes that day had cost him his mobility and a lot of his people their lives. Ray knew the price of a lost battle. He'd pay any price to win the peace his daughter or son would grow up in. That he swore. For that little one, he'd be a bureaucrat.

"It's time to go." Ray turned to see his wife leaning against his office door, a hand on her stomach that had yet to show her pregnancy. Her words said one thing. Underlying them was a plea: *Please don't.*

Rita Nuu-Longknife was still the sharp ship driver that had caught his attention—and his heart. Why she'd fallen in love with an old warhorse was anybody's guess. Ray was glad she had. But today the gallant, balls-to-the-wall commander of an assault transport squadron contended with the frightened wife and mother-to-be. Ray knew the battle well. The wounded, frightened bureaucrat in him was ready to burrow into the carpet. The old warrior demanded he get back on the horse that threw him.

"They also serve who only go to meetings," Ray said, tossing her a grin, since both hands were too busy with canes to salute. "Besides, they asked for me," he said, letting that settle the matter.

"That's what worries me."

"I'm the man who killed President Urm. Was in all the papers." They both tasted the truth and the lie in that statement. "The spy wants me to take the measure of these folks. Somebody has to." That was the limit of modern communication; they did a poor job of measuring the human soul. Trust was built on the pressure of a handshake, the flinch of an eyelid, the quick glance away after a key statement. There were computer programs that purported to measure those things. Other programs guaranteed they'd take out of your transmission what you didn't want in. With your life on the line, you pressed the flesh. "It looks like a straight-up visit," he finished.

"If they're telling the truth. And if this oh so secret visit hasn't been leaked," Rita shot back.

He reached the door; Rita hugged him, burying her head in his chest. Her hair smelled of sunshine and spring, bringing back warm memories. He put his arms around her. It felt so much better to lean on her rather than sticks. They hugged, and for a brief moment the universe and its problems went away.

"You'll be careful," was muffled against his chest.

Before Ray could answer, “We’ll take damn good care of him” came from the outer office. Ray glanced up. ~~Captain Matt Abee, ivory teeth grinning against ebony skin, was already waiting.~~ He had skippered the cruiser that changed the geography of human space. Then he’d sailed the *Sheffield* for Earth’s Society of Humanity and against Unity and had damn near blown up Wardhaven. Now he worked for Ray, captain of the armed merchant scout *Second Chance* for Wardhaven’s Ministry of Science and Technology. Peace had a logic, war its own crazy rationality. The transition between the two was patently insane.

Beside him stood Mary Rodrigo, the chief of *Second Chance*’s security team. In civilian clothes today, she held herself rigid, as if still in the armored space suit she’d worn the day she fought Ray’s brigade. That day, the intelligence estimate said the 2nd Guard faced only a handful of raw recruits. Intelligence had been right—and dead wrong. Mary had only one platoon, a mixed bag of middle-aged ex-miners and tough, young street kids. They’d put up a fight that stopped the proud 2nd Guard in its tracks. Mary had guided the missile that put the shrapnel in Ray’s back. After the war he’d hired them all. Over beers, he and Mary refought the battle; each time, Ray ended up shaking his head. He had been surprised good.

Was this meeting another surprise? Then, as now, he had no way of knowing. Ray shook off the thought. “How’s the ship, Matt?” he asked without letting go of Rita.

“The yard folks did a damn fine job of converting her back to a merchant ship. Well, half merchant half gunship. Rita, when you see your papa next, tell him thanks for me?”

Rita rotated in Ray’s arms. “Be glad to. *Second Chance* pass inspection?” she asked, one ship driver to another.

“We won’t know for sure until we got space under her keel, but she looks sweet.”

“You dug the crew out of their favorite bars?” Ray asked.

“Bars weren’t the problem,” Mary explained with a laugh. “My number two, Cassie, used her shore leave to join a kind of skid row monastery. Getting her separated from her guitar dang near required surgery.”

Rita broke from the clinch and stood aside to give Ray room for the swinging walk his legs and canes required. She took the time to brief him on things that hadn’t reached his desk, reports that Mary was just as interested in. “Andy’s search for boffins is getting interesting. Elie’s set up a consortium with a batch of universities. They’ll pay room and board if we’ll let professors on sabbatical ride our scouts.” That drew a laugh. As an ex-university professor herself, Ellie was bargaining the schools hard to get what Wardhaven would have paid for. Outfitting the scout ships with science teams had been one of Rita and Ray’s biggest headaches. For now, they were making due with a batch of recent grads Matt had commissioned as temporary merchant midshipmen. Before the war, people on the rim of human space were barely able to educate their kids; science advancements came from the inner worlds. Wardhaven planned to change that, bringing those avid to push the edges of knowledge out to where humanity was straining at its leash.

Captain Andy Anderson had commanded the brigade Ray’s troops failed to evict from a worthless piece of real estate only war made priceless. He and his drafted college professor, Ellie, had heard about Matt’s return from a bad jump and come hunting for him after peace broke out. Ray hired both. Enemies they might have been, but Ray knew where their hearts were. While they started the job of exploring a very big galaxy, he and Rita and other powers-that-be on Wardhaven tried to sort out who was on their side—and who was still looking for a way to get even with Earth and her Society for Humanity.

In war, the enemy wore different uniforms. In peace, you found your friends where you could. Like at the meeting he was headed for? *Damn! Life was easier in the infantry.*

The elevator took them to the garage. Two limos waited. Ray’s official car would whisk him and

Matt out to the port. The other? “Dad sent his car to make sure I showed up for dinner. I’ll stay with him and Mom while you’re gone.” Rita kissed him.

“I’ll be back before you miss me,” Ray promised.

That promise would haunt him in the months ahead.

• • •

Over the next several days, Matt’s jumpmaster ran them out to the jump point with ease, a feat in itself, since jump points orbited several star systems at the same time. If you knew the right way to use the jumps, they took you to any one of them. If you didn’t, you could get lost forever. Matt trusted his jumpmaster, as well he should; Sandy O’Malley was one of the reasons he was still alive. Ray watched from a bridge chair as Sandy goosed the ship’s engines the tiny bit needed for the jump.

Then every light on the bridge died as the ship slammed into a five-gee acceleration.

“What’s happening—” Someone’s cry was cut short as acceleration crushed air from lungs.

Ray would have died right then, but Senior Pilot Rita had hammered into him that a good passenger never took his finger off his seat controls. Ray had a fraction of a second to switch his chair into high-gee mode before his back snapped.

Frozen in place, thoughts of Rita came. Rita, lecturing him on her ship’s fusion engines.

“Electricity binds the fusion plasma demons. They want out, but we trick them into making the very electricity that keeps them in by running the plasma through magnitohydrodynamic coils when it shoots out of the reactor and into the engines. Sneaky, aren’t we?”

Ray had discovered the urge to kiss his pilot that day. As senior officer, he’d controlled himself. Now, waiting to die, he wished he had a more passionate vision of his wife. But Rita was passionate for her ship, and somewhere on *Second Chance*, Ray prayed an engineering officer was just as passionately fighting to control the fusion before it was exhausted, creating no electricity to keep the final burst from blasting the ship to atoms.

In the dark, Ray felt the acceleration slow; the ship could not have exhausted its reaction mass that quickly. Something else was wrong. Beside Matt, his XO began tapping her board. A dim light reflected from her face as at least one control station came up. Without warning, the ship was in free fall. Ray sucked in a breath; waiting for the explosion. It never came.

Matt’s XO activated more boards, bringing the ship up slowly without its central net. Ray missed most of their talk as he slipped a pain pill in to squelch the raw agony shooting up his back. He didn’t miss Matt’s first question. “Where are we?”

“Nowhere near human space,” Sandy answered.

“Communications, sir. We’re getting a distress call.”

“Put it through,” Matt snapped. Someone else in trouble!

“This is the explorer ship *Santa Maria*. We’re abandoning ship. Help—” was followed by static before the message repeated.

“*Santa Maria!*” Sandy breathed. “That was the first ship lost in a bad jump. Three hundred years ago!”

“Sir, I’ve got a first report on this system.”

“Helm, on the main screen.” A schematic appeared. Five rocky inner planets. Four outer gaseous ones. “We headed for any of those?” Matt asked.

“No, sir, we’re headed out.”

• • •

Ray spent a long hour twiddling his thumbs while good people did what they could to save his neck. He hated being a passenger, but Rita had burned him enough times for getting his fingers onto her

board while she was carrying his brigade.

Matt's first call was to engineering. "Ivan, your engines having a bad day?" Matt's understatement brought a hint of smile to faces damn close to panic.

"Looks that way, skipper. Engines maxed when ordered to stabilize for the jump. We got another problem, Matt. Before the computer shut down, it opened the spacecocks on all the fuel tanks. We slowed down because we ran out of fuel."

Two ways to die! Matt took in a deep breath—and went on. "Sandy, where are we?"

"Thirty thousand light-years from home, halfway across the galaxy."

"At least it's somewhere we've been before," Matt quipped.

"Not really, sir. We're halfway around the *other* side of the galaxy this time." Ray suppressed a shiver; he was a long way from Rita and the baby in a ship sabotaged to keep him there.

Matt rubbed his chin. "Any records on how we got here?" That was why Ray had hired this crew. In three hundred years of bad jumps, they were the first to come back. They had figured out the combination of power and ship's spin that made the jumps yield all kinds of results, not just the single target that mankind had settled for before. But to repeat a jump, you had to put the ship through it exactly the way you did before.

"We went through deaf, dumb, and blind, sir," Sandy answered. When Sandy started "siring" Matt they were in deep trouble. They were a long way from home, had no record of how they'd gotten here, fuel tanks empty, and headed away from the nearest fuel source too damn fast. Whoever planned this really wanted them dead. *Damn that somebody to hell*, Ray snarled to himself, but kept his face poker straight. He'd commanded in tough situations before; he would not juggle Matt's elbow.

"Ivan, how bad is our plasma situation?"

"In six hours, Matt, I'm gonna start tapping the sewage plant for reaction mass." Not good. Life support could last a long time, but not if their water went into the reactors. Matt rubbed his short-cropped scalp briskly with both hands. He stopped suddenly. "Damage Control, we use reaction mass in battle to patch slashes in our ice armor."

"Yes, sir."

"Anybody ever melted armor to fill reaction tanks?"

"Now would be a great time to start," was his answer.

"Helm, plot a course for a gas bag. Mary, get the marines ready to peel armor."

"You bet, sir," came quickly.

Ray'd had enough of passenger status. "Got a spare suit for an old soldier?" he asked, breaking his silence.

"You want to cut ice?" Matt frowned in surprise.

Ray took a deep breath. "I know space. Don't know ship driving. Captain Rodrigo, mind a broken-down civilian helping?"

"No problem, Colonel," came quickly.

Matt eyed him, doubt and concern balanced against Ray's confused status as passenger and boss, then turned back to his commlink. "All right, crew. Let's start hacking armor."

Ray blessed Mary for letting him work; exhausted, each night he fell into dreamless sleep. By the time the ice armor was down to frost, Matt had answers. "We've sliced and diced our net's code and found a present left over from the war."

"I knew you'd pissed some folks off when I hired you, but this, bad?"

"Apparently Admiral Whitebred was gunning for us before we didn't annihilate your planet. He installed a bug to make sure we didn't survive our first jump without him. So this whole mess wasn't aimed at you."

"Unless the guys setting up this meeting knew about this little add-on to your netware. If

Whitebred told somebody who told somebody..." Ray trailed off. "I want to talk to that guy."

"You're last in a very long line, Mr. Minister." Whoops! When Matt started Mr. Ministering Ray he wanted something. "Right now I need a call from you as owner. As a general rule, all ships answer all distress calls. This one is three hundred years old. It could be argued it can wait a bit. We need to find a way home. Still, a base in this system could help us. You've got the pregnant wife. Which do you do?"

"My wife was a ship driver, Matt. She'd never ignore a distress signal. Hell, she was sending one a few months back."

"Then, Mr. Minister, we head in system."

After which we'll find the way home, Ray promised himself. Home before the baby came.

NIKKI MULRONEY WAS hot and off balance helping Daga lug the heavy box she'd found. She had been their leader for as long as Nikki could remember. Daga was the adventurous one, the girl who had found more ways to get them all into trouble than the rest combined. She found stuff in the caves under the hills. Most of her finds were small, different-colored shiny things, that glowed in the dark. Daga had taken to stringing them on necklaces or wristbands and giving them to boys. Daga was a lot of fun...until recently.

The box Nikki and Daga now carried wasn't shiny, and it did not look like it would glow in the dark. It was heavy. Three feet long and maybe a foot and a half square on its ends, its covering felt like ceramics. Orange, it had been cold; now it warmed in the summer morning sun.

Nikki had no idea what it was; that was what they were here to find out. They struggled to the crest of a small hill, far from the tended fields of Hazel Dell. It was time for Emma and Willow to take their turn with the box.

"This is far enough. Put it down," Daga ordered. She was really bossy lately. But Nikki did what she was told, taking the moment to stretch her aching muscles and look back. You could see the houses of Hazel Dell, tiny in the distance. Women and men were at work, just specks, their tools invisible. The girls should have worked today. But last night Daga had whispered she'd found something new, something really big, and the four of them had slipped away before dawn and set out on this adventure.

As soon as Nikki got home tonight, her da would have something to say about her absence. Her mother would remind him that young girls had just as much right to see what was on the other side of a mountain as boys. "You're sounding like a big-city grump, dear. Nikki is thirteen. She'll plow many rows when she has kids of her own. Let her have her summers now." Which always left Nikki wondering what Ma had done when her three children were only a distant question mark. When asked Ma always smiled and said, "Nothing you haven't done, dear."

Nikki turned back to her friends. Daga was feeling around the box. Emma and Willow stood aside as they usually did, waiting to see what Daga had gotten them into. Nikki knelt beside the box and started her own exploration. An area near the bottom sank under her pressure. A crack appeared around the middle of the box, hardly wide enough for a fingernail.

"Oh," came from all four girls. Daga inserted a thumbnail to force the box open; the nail bent. Nikki rummaged in her pouch for her knife, found it, and wedged it in the crack. The ceramic blade bent alarmingly; the crack did not widen. Even with all four girls' knives leveraging together, the crack stayed a crack.

"Must be a second catch," Daga said, feeling around the box again. "Where was that spot?" Nikki showed her.

They pressed it again. Nothing. They felt around. Nothing. They tried the same spot at each corner. The opposite far corner depressed when they tried it. "I did that before," Daga scowled as the crack widened to a half inch.

"Probably have to be pressed in order," Willow suggested. She was the logical one.

"Well, let's all lift a corner. Together, on my count," Daga said, and the others followed. At their pull, the box unfolded like a flower, struts and accordion parts expanding smoothly and fully. The girls stepped back.

“Think it’s from the Landers?” Emma asked timidly.

“No,” Daga insisted, rubbing her temples. ~~Was she getting another of her headaches?~~ “In school, the townies are all the time telling us how the Landers used everything they brought from the stars and we shouldn’t be spreading out and messing up the whole planet. Why would they put something like this way out here?”

“It’s from the little people,” Emma breathed. Her grandda, the village storyteller, told wonderful tales of the “wee ones.” Nikki was never sure whether they were about the little people of old Ireland on Earth or under the hills beyond Hazel Dell. Both were nothing but stories, Da insisted. Still, Daga kept finding things, and somebody had to make them. Da’s answer to that was a snort and a “They’re made that way.” Ma’s answer was a shrug. Nikki wondered what her folks would say about this find.

As usual, Daga recovered first from the surprise. “Hey, look.” A thin square, about a foot on each side and a half inch thick, had risen from the box on two spinly legs. The square went from black to gray to crystal clear on one side in the space of a breath. The other side stayed flat black.

“That’s weird,” Willow said.

“But look on this side,” Daga crowed, shading her eyes. Nikki did, and saw the distant mountains. Daga jiggled the glass a bit. Now they had a perfect view of one of the taller peaks on the horizon, as if it were only across the valley.

“Neat!” Emma exclaimed. “Let’s turn it around and see what’s happening in Hazel Dell.”

“Wait a bit,” Daga answered, adjusting the square until the distant peak filled the glass. “I’ve always wanted to go out there. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could find a good trail through the mountains? There have to be valleys on the other side. Whole new fields to farm.”

The box began to hum; it throbbed under their hands. The girls, even Daga, stepped back a pace or two.

“What’s happening?” Willow shrieked.

“I don’t know,” Daga answered.

“It’s coming alive.” Emma smiled in a fay way.

“It’s a machine,” Daga insisted.

“We don’t know what it is!” Nikki shouted as the noise rose. The box throbbed in the warm sunlight; the girls took several more steps back. Nikki put her hands to her ears. “We have to do something!” she shouted.

“What?” Emma squeaked.

Daga took a step forward as the box exploded in a blinding flash of light.

• • •

“The mountain’s gone,” the diminutive midshipman assisting at sensors mused. She’d been introduced to Ray as Kat.

“What?” Ray and Matt snapped at once. Ray clamped his mouth shut. This was a ship matter; it was the captain’s problem.

“Well, there was a mountain,” the middie said, studying her board, “on our first orbit. It’s not there on the second.”

“A mountain!” Matt echoed.

“Yes, Matt,” Sandy answered, “five, six thousand meters’ worth of mountain. Snowcapped. Big.”

“It’s...gone?” Matt gulped.

“The top two thousand meters,” Kat corrected.

“A volcano?” The captain tried for a natural explanation.

“It’s not smoking like one.” Sandy shook her head. “No ejecta. No deep hole.”

“It’s perfectly level,” Kat observed matter-of-factly. “About a meter higher on one side than on the

other, as if carved by a laser.”

“We don’t have lasers like that,” Matt pointed out.

“I know,” Sandy agreed.

“I wonder what did it?” Kat’s eyes were deep with innocent curiosity. Ray wondered if this next generation would live long enough to learn the meaning of fear. His generation had plenty.

Matt hit his commlink. “Ivan, raise orbit. Now!”

. . .

Nikki looked at the box. It had collapsed in upon itself an instant after the blinding flash of light. On the horizon, there was a hole in the mountain range. The one they had been looking at was gone, cut off just where the bottom of the glass had been. Emma and Willow were gone, too, racing down the hill as if a banshee was after them. Daga eyed the box.

“We have to get rid of it!” Nikki shouted.

“Maybe,” Daga answered, pulling on her hair like she did just before she came up with some of her worst adventures.

“Daga, look! The mountain is gone. Gone! See!”

“Yes, I see.”

“What if we had pointed it at Hazel Dell, like Emma wanted?”

“It would be gone.”

“Yes! Right, we have to bury that box, dump it in a pool deep in one of your caves.”

“What if it had been pointed at a city?” Daga asked softly. “Now, that would get their attention, wouldn’t it?”

“Daga, you would not!” Lately Daga had been more and more bugged about the city folks snubbing the farmers. Nobody liked city grumps. But nobody hated them...not that much!

“Probably, but it would get their attention. Those goodie-goodie clean hands might treat us with a little more respect if they knew more than potatoes came from the farms.”

“Daga, I don’t like city grumps any more than you. But making a whole city disappear! We could never do that.”

“Who says we’d make a city disappear? Maybe just a hill near a city. They may be grumps and snobs, but they learn things in school, just like we do. Think we could teach them a lesson?”

“Daga, no!”

“Here, take the other end of the box. I’ll take the heavy end. We’ll be going downhill. It’ll be easier.”

Nikki shook her head. This was not a good idea. This was no fun adventure. Still, under Daga’s eyes, she picked up her end of the box and began carrying it downhill. At least the missing mountain was far away. None of the grown-ups ever came this far from the village; maybe they’d never notice it was gone. Maybe she and Emma and Willow could talk sense into Daga.

. . .

Ray Longknife observed the activity on Matt’s bridge, his face a placid mask, doing nothing to disturb those with a job to do. Matt swam with the easy grace of an experienced spacer, glided from ceiling handhold to stationhold, or even held steady above a workstation that had his attention at the moment.

“Coming up on point of interest,” the helm announced.

Ray eyed the small continent that held their attention. If he remembered his old Earth geography correctly, this area was much like Australia. The smallest of the planet’s landmasses, it, however, lay just off the *southeastern* edge of the largest landmass, separated by a large archipelago of islands, with two or three wide channels. If Ray had to choose a home for a pitiful remnant of humanity, this would

be it, small enough to give them safety, big enough for growth, close enough to bigger things to let them spread out when their children were ready.

“Any more pruned mountains?” Matt asked, sailing back to his chair beside Ray. Matt had moved *Second Chance* into a much higher orbit, officially for a broader view. Everyone breathed easier as they put distance between themselves and whatever could shave mountains.

“No, sir,” Kat replied before Sandy could. “There’s agricultural and urban areas. Nothing on the electromagnetic spectrum but low-level static from electric motors.”

Ray studied the map on the main view. Farmland showed as a brown swath along the small south continent’s eastern coast. Rivers lead it inland to wash up on the mountain range that had captured their attention so rudely. Black dots of various sizes denoted urban areas, most along rivers or coastal inlets. The map filled in as more data was processed, evaluated, and judged credible. Ray glanced at Matt the same moment the captain turned to Ray. “Suggestions?” Matt said.

“Get some unmanned recon assets down there,” Ray said.

“Exec, put a communication satellite in lower geo-orbit that’ll keep that continent covered.”

“Yes, sir.” The XO turned to her board and got busy.

Matt leaned closer to Ray. “Boss, I need some help.” Ray smiled, glad for the skipper’s asking. “I got some ideas about how to get home, but it’s hunt-and-peck time. A ship’s chances of staying in space increase if it’s got a base to fall back on if things break.”

Ray chuckled. “Captain, you looking for an ambassador to some dirtside chums that can make mountains vanish?”

“Got it in one, Colonel.”

Ray leaned back. “Never been an ambassador before. Might be less exciting than storming mountain passes guarded by Mary.”

“Might be downright boring,” Matt quipped. “Thanks to you, we’ve got the assets on board to set up quite a base.” Actually, Captain Anderson had insisted the next explorer ship carry damn near enough equipment to rebuild itself. Claimed that was the way they explored the Americas in Shakespeare’s time. Ray adopted the idea only when Rita’s dad found the gear at salvage prices. Now he hoped it was as good as Papa Nuu said it was.

“You concentrate on finding a way home while I shake hands, kiss babies, and manage mountain moving,” Ray drawled. “Just remember, I want to be there when Rita makes me a dad.”

“Right. Nobody wants to be the ship driver who has to explain to Rita why Daddy got home late.”

They laughed, as if getting home was a done deal. After all, they had all of six months. Around them, the bridge relaxed. The bosses were confident. Why shouldn’t the rest of the crew be as well? What could be down there that they couldn’t handle?

• • •

Jeff Sterling settled into his usual chair.

“How’s the rape-and-pillage business?” came from the public room’s kitchen in a light, dancing voice, Annie Mulroney’s usual morning greetings to him.

“How should I know? Vicky and Mark aren’t talking to me,” Jeff answered in feigned innocence.

Annie bounced from the kitchen to set his usual brown bread and steaming tea in front of him, her black hair flying, green eyes shining. Resting her elbows on the counter, she met his gaze eye to eye. “Surely the junior son of the great Sterling family knows what got strip-mined yesterday and who made a mint. Hasn’t some leprechaun whispered in your ear this fine morning, some infernal machine blared at you the stock market report?”

Jeff laughed as he added a dollop of strawberry jam to his bread, enjoying the gentle hint of cleavage Annie’s high-waisted dress offered. When she stood, she was nearly as tall as he, and the

local dresses hid more than they revealed. With her standing thus, it was not easy keeping his eyes level. After a quick glance down that only broadened her smile, he returned to the morning's riposte.

"The only fairy folk I've seen today is in front of me. And I haven't the foggiest idea how the market is doing, since the ancient place I'm staying in is not on the net."

"Our rooms are not ancient, Jeffrey Sterling." Annie swatted him with her dishcloth. Jeff might have wished for another response, but Mulroneys did not kiss Sterlings.

"They are low-tech," he insisted around a bite of bread.

"You have your own facilities, your own shower. And the bed is firm and new."

And solitary, he did not add. "With no net link, not even a television, it's like something out of an ancient story, a prison cell for solitary confinement, woman." There: He did get the "solitary" in there.

"Well, man, if you wanted all those technological baubles, you might have stayed in Richland." Annie's words came fast and well practiced. Still, she left off the unkindest cut, "where you belong." Annie always had. Maybe she sensed what Jeff had learned early in life, that the third child of a family like the Sterlings did not belong anywhere. He had no place, nor ever would have one—unless he found one for himself.

Introspection could not be allowed to delay his retort. Jeff grinned at Annie. "But who in Richland would serve me my morning tea with such a fetching smile?"

"Man, if you take me scowl for a smile, you're more blind than me ma says you are." Said scowl grew wider, adding dimpled shadows to offset the milk white of her complexion. The temptation to steal a kiss grew. He stuffed the rest of the bread in his mouth to stifle it. Sterlings took what they wanted—if they were Vicky or Mark. Last born learned quickly that everything worth taking was too. At least in Richland. Now, out here in the foothills, that was another matter. Maybe.

"Maybe there is something wrong with my eyes," he agreed. He opened his map case and pulled out a stack of pictures. They were in order, all but the last. It was the newest, and it didn't fit. Annie came around the counter to stand beside him, so close her warmth and scent nearly overpowered him. He kept his hands on the pictures. If he didn't, they'd be around her waist. That, at least, would answer one question. Would she slap him, like a good Mulroney girl should, or kiss him, like he dreamed of?

"I don't see anything wrong," she said.

He swallowed the lump in his throat her nearness brought. "These are pictures of the front range, made eight years ago by my brother's survey team."

"And weren't they a hard bunch." Jeff knew the stories, and saw the blond-haired seven-year-olds running with the other kids. The good Catholic mothers were seeing that Jeffrey did penance for Mark's sins. *The story of my life?*

"I took this batch yesterday," Jeff said, laying his own three panoramic shots out below his brother's.

"There's the Great One." Annie's fingers lightly danced from one set of pictures to another. A thrill went up Jeff's spine, as if her fingers were touching him. "There's Our Lady with her two big breasts." There was nothing puritan about the farmers, not with their big families. They just kept to themselves. Or kept Jeffrey Sterling out. "Something's missing," Annie muttered, puzzle replacing her smile without removing one bit of her loveliness.

"Maybe it's just the angle." Jeff suggested the only answer he'd come up with.

"No. Where's that peak?" she asked, her eyes returning to his as if to find the missing mountain there.

"Do you have a name for that one? The missing one."

She shook her head, dark curls inviting his touch. "It is just a wee one. We don't have names for every one."

"Then where'd it go?"

Giving her head a final shake, Annie turned for the kitchen. “There are some things me ma says v
are not meant to know. I’ll get your lunch pail.”

Jeff watched Annie go, wanting very much to know the feel of her touch. Wanting to spend the da
exploring her mountains and valleys. He gulped down another piece of bread.

• • •

The Caretaker of the Nature Preserve felt the mountaintop go, though bothered no
more than a carbon-based life might be by a cut hair. The mountain was there in one
moment of awareness and gone the next. It did, however, cause the Caretaker to marvel.
He could not find in memory when a Displacer had last been used. But it was not its
purpose to keep track of such things. Then again, it was difficult these days for the
Caretaker to remember just what was its purpose.

It was supposed to protect the flora and fauna of a specific area. Over the years, what
with erosion, that area was only dimly marked by its pattern recognition system. And
since there was so little to do since the Three went away, and fewer visits by repair units
from the Central Font of All Knowledge, the Caretaker had gotten a bit slipshod in its
work.

All that had changed recently. Three hundred orbits ago a new group of sentients
arrived. Not one of the Three, it had puzzled the Caretaker. Unlike those who came long
ago, these had a need to remake their surroundings in ways the Caretaker could not help
them in. Indeed, they had disrupted the Caretaker’s coverage by the way they turned the
earth and dug in it. The Caretaker had been unsuccessful in all its efforts to connect with
them. Understandable, since it was only the Caretaker, not the Font of All Knowledge.

Only when it tried to pass along to the Font of All Knowledge the interesting
challenge of these new sentients did the Caretaker notice that it was no longer in contact
with the Center. It had sent off a slow messenger to the Center and done what a Caretaker
could to help these new ones adjust to their time in this wonderful nature.

These creatures had provided the Caretaker with many new experiences. For one thing,
they did not leave—not after a while, at least. For another, they brought forth more of
themselves. They ignored the tools easily available to them and instead made other,
simpler ones. If the Caretaker could have shrugged, it would have. Now the strange new
ones had used a Displacer. Were they ready to learn how to use all that the Caretaker
could make available to them?

THREE

A WEEK LATER, Ray frowned as he buckled into a seat in the shuttle's passenger bay. He still knew too damn little about this planet. Behind him, Mary commanded ten marines under Cassie, her second, and ten midshipmen under Kat—all in full battle kit. With luck, by nightfall the middies would be in an orgy of data acquisition and the marines would be ordering beers in whatever passed for bars dirtside.

Without luck—well, that was what the battle kit was for.

Not that M-6 rifles would do all that good against something that leveled mountains. No more had gone missing, but the one still held his attention. Ray glanced at the reader in his hand. He cycled it to a report one middie had circulated quietly among her friends, one of whom had passed it along to someone who'd passed it to enough people that Ray ended up with a bootleg copy.

On approach, routine checks included a planet's atmospheric reflective value. Two days after the mountain vanished, someone reran that check. Santa Maria's value was up just enough to account for the distribution, worldwide, of as much dust as you got from one pulverized mountaintop. Whether it took two days to circulate the dust or one second, Ray didn't care. The power to do either was a lot more than Ray wanted to argue with.

The human population of this planet was indeed concentrated along the east coast of the small south continent. The sky eyes pinpointed three major cities, a dozen towns, and were still counting villages. About half the population, estimated at six to twelve million, was serious into spreading out. The other half was focused in the urban areas. The scatter pattern was puzzling. Most colonies spread out from the better landing areas, following rivers and other encouraging land features. Not this place. People had headed in all different directions.

"Maybe they don't like each other," Kat had shrugged as she handed Ray the report, then answered her own question. "Can't be that. We've spotted these balloon things, they're called blimps, crazy name. Anyway, they have regular blimp traffic between the major cities and most medium-size ones. There's one small blimp that runs back and forth on no schedule between the third-largest city and the place up north with the big dam. The farmers seem to have done most of the spreading out. Maybe the soil can't take too many years of planting. I guess we'll have to ask 'em."

The shuttle dropped away from *Second Chance*, heading for a small village they'd studied thoroughly. It looked quiet, was a good distance from the center of everything...and closest to the vanished mountain. If anyone knew the situation here, somebody in that burg ought to. At least Ray hoped so.

. . .

Jeff Sterling stood knee-deep in the middle of the stream, swishing a pan of bottom sand around as he dripped acid into the water. The pan's contents glittered in a kaleidoscope of colors he studied through assay goggles. Yep, there was metal here: copper, iron, zinc, gallium, chromium, nickel, and, of course, silicon. Every metal needed to build a high-tech civilization. It was just hard to build much when the metals were in such minute quantities. He upended the pan in disgust. Everything here, and nothing. The story of his life.

A double peal of thunder brought his head up to an empty blue sky; no storms were expected this week. Still, this far back into the foothills, you had to be careful. A downpour far upstream in the

morning could send a flash flood charging down to ruin your whole afternoon. No clouds, either out on the plains or visible over the mountains. Two thunders, close together. It meant something, danged if he could remember what. He took two steps toward the bank where Old Ned sat under a tree, keeping an eye on the horses. Not much for talking, but he'd taken Jeff's money and good care of the animals.

Out of the side of his eye, Jeff saw the contrail begin. Contrail! That was the word! It was in the old stories he'd read because it was better to study than tell Father or Mother he had nothing to do. At nine, they'd actually put him to work in the mines for a day. There'd been other nine-year-olds there. They'd kept their distance after the foreman shouted his name the first time. At least the foreman shouted at Jeff; he had a leather belt for the other kids. That night Jeff dragged himself home and went to bed, too exhausted for supper. Next morning, he was studying before his tutor arrived.

The tales from the Landers' years were written dry, but there was excitement behind every word. And they included space shuttles dropping down from the *Santa Maria*. They left white trails in the sky, like a thin bead of clouds. And they made double sonic booms. Above Jeff, the contrail headed east, headed for his sister or brother, away from him. Jeff shook his head wryly. So what else was new? Then the contrail began to turn. Maybe they wouldn't end up in sis's lap. "Ned, my horse."

A shuttle couldn't land in these hills. A town like Hazel Dell might draw them. Hell, Jeff didn't care; a shuttle was headed down. Wherever it went, he was going.

. . .

Nikki glanced at the sky when she heard the thunder, but didn't quit hoeing her row of corn, beans, and melons. Ma had not been as understanding as Nikki had hoped last week when she and Daga came racing home well after dark. Da had been in a mood. Without looking up from the new plates he was glazing for the public room, he'd said, "You work the fields every day for the next month." Ma hadn't said a word in Nikki's defense. Maybe if Nikki had been her usual self, she would have found a way to get Ma and Da talking and herself off the hook. After watching a mountain vanish, just vanish, Nikki had been at a loss for words. She still was.

However, thunder offered a chance for rain on a hot, dusty day. You couldn't work the fields in the rain, but the sky above Nikki was blue. Pure blue, no clouds at all, about what to expect in high summer. As Nikki bent back to her work, a streak of white caught her eye. She looked back up. "What's that?" a boy next to her asked.

"Don't know," a man answered.

"Like nothing I've ever seen," a grandma added, leaning on her hoe and watching the lengthening white line that was a cloud but not a cloud. If Grandma felt it a sight worth watching, Nikki couldn't get in trouble watching, too. She rested on her hoe; there was a lot of talk among the grown-ups, but nobody had any idea what it was. As the line got closer, Nikki could make out something at the tip, no bigger than a pinhead. Then the pinhead quit making clouds. It circled lower.

"Isn't it flying, like a dirigible?" a man said. He'd been to the big cities and claimed to have actually flown on one.

"It doesn't look like one," another man said.

"Yeah, but it's flying. What else could it be?"

Nobody had an answer. Now Nikki could hear a shriek like something Grandma said banshees made. But what was coming down looked too solid to be out of a story.

"It's going to land," the know-it-all announced.

Nikki came to the same conclusion at about that time. Some folks headed back for the village. Nikki found Daga at her side.

"Let's go see what it is," Daga suggested.

"I'm not going anywhere with you. Try Emma or Willow."

“They’re not talking to me.”

“I shouldn’t either. You’re no fun anymore.”

“Bet whatever that is’ll be fun, and I didn’t find it. How much trouble can I get you into when even grandmas are going?” Nikki knew she should tell Daga to go jump in a lake, get lost, do anything. Instead, she dropped her hoe and was off.

. . .

Ray cycled the view on his reader through the shuttle’s cameras. The flight deck was breathing ship’s air and off-limits to anyone who touched this planet. Matt was adamant; until the landing party completed six weeks’ quarantine, the ship and ground crew were a world apart.

The village was estimated at about a thousand people. Intermingled with the houses were vegetable gardens. Farmed plots grew larger the farther out from town until some of them were long enough to land a shuttle, assuming the ground would take the weight. Sensors said it would. The pilot was making her own check.

“Radar says it’s solid and even. Good pasture. Strap in tight, folks, I’m setting this thing down. Give me full flaps, and then some.” The shuttle lined up and began its final approach. At twenty meters, the pilot cut power. Ray had suggested that, not wanting to scorch the crop he was landing on. The pilot readily agreed. “Don’t much want a grass fire under my belly, either.”

The shuttle settled lightly, bounced, and decided to stay. The pilot went light on the brakes, taking her time rolling to a halt. Ray stood, arranging his gray civilian suit around himself. Mary went down her security detail, marines and middies, eyeing them like a mother hawk, making final adjustments to their gear. Nothing brought her to a halt. Back with Ray, she saluted. “Teams ready, Colonel.”

“Deploy them, Captain.”

They would surround the cooling shuttle and make sure no rubberneckers singed their fingers. The marines went out with quick strides and professionally disinterested faces. The middies would have been more impressive if they’d done less rubbernecking themselves. Well, Ray had brought them to learn.

As Ray laboriously negotiated the passenger compartment, a breeze from the rear hatch filled it. Heat off the cooling shuttle mingled with a warmth laden with sun and baked earth and growing things. At the top of the stairs, he paused. Four kilometers away were the stone and wattle houses of the village. Dirt paths led from it. Close in were green crops that looked like corn. In front of him, a greenish gold crop stood twenty centimeters or so tall, waving like the sea in the gentle wind. Behind the shuttle, deep tracks in the earth marked its passage.

People were coming from all around, in ones and twos, fives and tens. Some carried hoes or other farm implements, using them more as walking sticks than as weapons. Draping his right cane over his elbow, Ray latched on to the stair rail and started down, one step at a time.

Mary stood at the halfway mark. “Need a hand, sir?”

“I can take care of myself.” Ray tried to keep the snarl out of his voice. The woman who had crippled him nodded, and looked out over the gathering crowd. She did not move, and he had no doubt she’d catch him if he faltered. Part of him agreed with her actions; the mission could ill afford him breaking something. Another part of him, the man who’d led combat apes, snapped and snarled, but Ray kept that under control.

When he was within three steps of her, Mary started down slowly. “Folks look nice enough. I’ve had the troops sling arms. No need to look more intimidating than we have to.”

To their right, a small kid, hardly more than a toddler, broke through the crowd and headed straight for the shuttle, a mother in hot pursuit. The kid didn’t look tall enough to reach the still-cooling craft, but then again, tiny legs like hers should not have been so fast. With a laugh, Kat

swooped down and grabbed her. The child wrapped herself in giggles, oblivious to having made the first contact in three hundred years between Santa Maria and the rest of humanity. The midwife tossed the little one up lightly once, then handed her off to her mother.

Mother applied a swift swat to a diapered rump that caused more indignation than pain. When the child responded with a heartbroken sob, the mother promptly gave the little one a breast to suck. The child relaxed into feeding, and mother and child disappeared into the crowd.

Ray grinned. He could just picture his future daughter or son bolting for the shiny new thing, and Rita facing down armed troops to get her little one back. Still grinning, he reached the bottom step.

Facing him was a short, round, balding man accompanied by a shorter, not-so-round woman with flaming red hair only slightly streaked with silver. He wore a homespun shirt and pants. She sported a multicolored, high-waisted dress that held her breasts firmly in place. The two weren't all that different from those around them; still, their stance and place gave Ray a strong sense that they spoke for the rest. Clearing his throat, he swallowed the last of the baby-inspired grin and gave the speech he'd been working on.

"Hello. I am Raymond Longknife, Minister of Science and Exploration"—he modified his title to fit its present reality—"for the sovereign planet of Wardhaven, member of the Society of Humanity. As such, I greet you in their name and in peace."

Across from him, the man put his hands on his hips. "And isn't it about time you found us?" Behind him, people nodded agreement, laughed, and continued gawking at the lander.

Ray had heard worse imitations of an old Earth Celtic brogue, but not many. Before he could answer, a tall, thick tree of a man stepped out from the crowd.

"And who's paying for me crop?" With one hand he swept a wave toward the lander's tracks and all the people tramping about. With the other, he formed a fist.

Beside Ray, Mary's fists closed. Kat edged closer, ready to launch her tiny self at a man twice her height and five or six times her bulk. The crowd was dead quiet.

"And what would be fair pay?" Ray asked.

"Oh, a pound of copper would be fine payment, fine payment indeed," the big man laughed. Ray decided he did not like that laugh. He was rapidly developing a dislike for the man. Half a kilo of copper was nothing to Ray; still, the man's demand was clearly intended to be outrageous.

"Go 'long with ya, man." The woman in the leadership pair slapped lightly at the big man's arm, in that way women have of defusing a situation men are likely to fight over. "For a pound of copper, the good man could buy the village. Big Sean, don't shame us."

"I think we can work this out." Coins had disappeared on many planets, but on the rim, financial networks were a sometimes thing; Ray always carried a few coins. From his pocket he produced three silver-copper alloy disks. "We'll need to set up a base here. I imagine this entire field will be out of production this season. Will these cover the cost of the crop?"

Big Sean gave Ray a grin that showed several missing teeth and snapped the coins out of his hand. "This will be just fine, just fine." Waving his booty aloft, the tough headed into the crowd. People got out of his way, not at all eager to see what he was so proud of.

A man on horseback galloped up to the back of the crowd. Had the lord of the manor arrived? No, he dismounted and disappeared. The man and woman in front of Ray ignored the arrival. The woman nudged her partner; the man cleared his throat. "These lands, they be belonging to all of us, not just one man. You've paid Sean for the loss of his crop. You owe the village for the rent of the land."

Ray found three more coins and handed them over.

"And if you got two more where those came from, you could buy beer for all." That came from a friendly bear of a man, pushing a wheelbarrow laden with a large keg through the crowd, followed by an equally friendly woman pushing a load of mugs.

Mary pulled two coppers from her pocket. “The marines’ll pay for this round, folks.”

“Then the bar is open,” the keg tender shouted; the crowd cheered and gathered around. The first mug, sporting a proud head of foam, was passed to Ray. He handed it over to the village headman, who backed up to create an opening, blew the head off gustily, and took a long swallow. “Top of the brew, Gillie, top of the brew. They don’t make it better.”

The brewmaster beamed proudly and handed a mug to Ray. Humanity’s ambassador to the lost people of the *Santa Maria* blew the head off as he’d been shown, then tried to look like he was downing a good portion of the brew while limiting himself to a mouthful. “Best I’ve tasted in a dozen star systems,” Ray announced; he wasn’t lying.

The delicacies properly observed, the people got down to organizing themselves with an easy, gentle efficiency for serious celebration. Men went for more beer or tables to set dinner on. The women headed back to get whatever was cooking; dinner would be a communal potluck. Turning to Mary, Ray began his own organizational effort. “Captain, stack rifles in the shuttle’s arms locker. Relieve the middies to circulate. Post a guard at the nose, tail, and wingtips, and two at the stairs. Res are free. Limit, two beers. Nobody gets drunk.” Ray put steel into the order. With *Second Chance* off limits to anyone who’d been dirtside, his disciplinary options were few.

• • •

Jeff Sterling’s heart pounded; if he played his cards right, this could change his whole life. He’d ridden like mad when it became clear that this, the biggest thing to hit Santa Maria since Landing Day was coming down right in his lap. Vicky and Mark would puke with envy.

Assuming, of course, he could find the copper in this business and make the killing he wanted.

He figured the man with the canes and the woman beside him as the bosses even before the chief village elder gave one of them the obligatory beer to settle a deal. He seemed in charge, she following his wishes, though it was too soon to see who really called the shots. Jeff had seen the metal disks the bully Sean waved. Quite a pay for a ruined crop. Then again, if they could extract minerals from pulverized mountains, it was chicken feed, like Vicky’s favorite story about buying an island for a handful of trinkets.

Jeff used the confusion to approach the two unnoticed. Three hundred years, and the language hadn’t changed that much. The titles caught him: Captain, Colonel. Those were military ranks. He’d have to check his references to see which one outranked the other. According to the old texts, soldiers were poor businesspeople. Fascinating. Why was the military doing the exploration? Was this a rediscovery or what the history books called an invasion? Did people who vanished mountains need to invade? Jeff’s head started to spin.

Annie grabbed his arm. “Did you hear them, man? Did you hear them?”

“No, I arrived late.”

“Oh.” A dour glance from a grandmother reminded Annie that, party or no, that was a Sterling and she was hanging on. She backed off a decorous foot before she gushed on. “They’re from Earth’s own Society of Humanity. They’ve come to take us home.”

Jeff glanced around. “And this isn’t home?” He usually avoided their half-serious attempt at an Irish brogue, but now was a good time for questions; he had a million. As nice as it was to look at Annie, he kept an eye on the two. The woman was rearranging the uniformed people who stood around like potted plants, decorating their lander. Groups boarded the lander and returned without their long guns. They still had things at their waists that looked like pistols. Trusting, but not too trusting.

“Of course this is home, you silly man. But to hear from Earth, to talk to them again after three hundred years.”

“Right, and we’re all going to love what they do to us?” Jeff wondered how many other people

here saw in the Earth people only what they wanted. Jeff was logical. He saw metal, all kinds of metals and lots of it. The scarcity of which had made the Sterlings the power on this planet.

Annie took a second to think about that one. “They said they came in peace.”

“Whose peace? Yours, mine, theirs? Annie, excuse me, I’ve got to go talk to them.” Jeff took two steps back. In a moment, Annie was lost in the flow of people. Jeff didn’t actually want to talk to anyone. Shadow. Listen. Learn. Then, when he knew more, talk. He couldn’t wait too long. As soon as Vicky found out about this, she’d be headed out here with bells on her toes and shovels in both hands

. . .

In the bustle of setting up for the party, a few benches showed up around one table. Mary edged Ray toward one; he didn’t resist, his back was aching. There was no talk of business, just proud claims that he was about to taste the best breads, stews, and other things whose names escaped him. Apparently business without hospitality was impossible here. Seated, Ray measured the pain in his back against wooziness from meds, and swallowed a pill.

The mayor and wife joined Ray at the table. A gray-haired man, Father Joseph, was introduced as the town priest, though his dress was the same peasant garb as those around him. A white-haired lad of eight or nine stayed close to the priest.

“My grandson, David,” the priest explained. “I’m sure Rome will have a few things to say about how we’ve lived.” The priest spoke of Rome with absolute Confidence that it was still there and would be interested in what these survivors had done in its name. Ray wondered if, three hundred years separated from the rest of humanity, he’d have confidence anything would survive.

Yes, the army. In three hundred years, there would still be a need for infantry—and officers to lead them.

The boy, bashful, slowly gravitated toward Ray. “Do your legs hurt? My head hurts. Sometimes awful.”

The elders did not shush the boy. Apparently these people did not hide their kids from the realities of life. “Sometimes my legs do hurt. And my back, too. Where does your head hurt?”

Answered, the boy grew confident. “My whole head. It just hurts. Then I see lights and hear things that aren’t there. My stomach gets all upset.”

“Sounds like migraines,” Kat said, joining Ray and Mary. “I used to get them when I was a kid. We have pills you can take for that. Maybe we could have a med team come down next trip and help you.”

The boy fled back to his grandfather at such a possibility. Eye to eye, they exchanged wordless reflections on the promise. “It would be wonderful if you could help my grandson,” the priest answered for both. “I have little I can offer you, but whatever you might ask, I will try to give.”

“Father,” Ray answered, “there’s a lot we have that is easy for us to give.” Ray left talk of payment for after supper. In a culture he poorly understood, an evening’s conversation might well be worth a bottle of pills.

Tables were soon laden with contributions from every household. Ray had never seen so many ways to cook potatoes. They were fried, baked, twice cooked, diced, sliced, and buried in sauces tasting of every spice he could imagine. Meat was reserved to flavor stews and soups. The Public Room contributed a roasted turkey, cut very thin. Ray took a slice, enough to praise it.

As Ray settled back down at their table, a young woman Ray took to be the beermaster’s daughter showed up with a pitcher to refill mugs. Ray protected his half-empty glass. “I’m taking medicine. I have to go easy on the beer.”

Mary put a hand over hers, too. “I get falling-down drunk and the ambassador here’ll fire me. What chance has a down-on-her-luck soldier or a broken-down miner have of finding a job?”

sample content of They Also Serve (Society of Humanity, Bk. 3)

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