

Curiosity

There must have been something wrong with the oxygen gauge, or with the oxygen tank. Even though it still read one quarter full, he was already hallucinating. At first he thought he was seeing Debbie, but now he knew better. He was seeing an angel in front of him. An angel with long golden hair, and a very naked and very decidedly feminine body. But an angel with no wings.

Vall'a had been stationed on Oceania for nearly seven Standard years, since just after she had turned fifteen. Of course, in her reckoning those numbers were different, her people's idea of a standard year was based on their planet's revolution around its large red star, not on the revolution of a small planet named Terra that circled around a rather insignificant little yellow star named Sol.

Oceania was named for the planet's most distinctive feature. Oceania's dominant lifeform was the Cetas, somewhat like a cross between a Terran dolphin and a killer whale, except for being over two hundred feet long when fully mature, much bigger than the biggest Terran blue whale. They were sentient, but having evolved in the water, and with no manipulative limbs, let alone fire, had never produced any artifacts, let alone developed any kind of technology. Their language, a complicated system of clicks and whistles, didn't even have any words meaning *artifact* or *technology*.

The planet followed a very complex orbit around its suns, a large but faint red sun and its smaller but far brighter white companion. The complex orbit caused great climatic changes, periods of intense heat followed by periods of bitter cold. Other than Oceania and a wide asteroid belt, there were no other planets in the system; the complex gravitational field around the two stars didn't lend itself to too many stable orbits. The asteroid belt was at the very edge of one such orbit, every revolution many of the rocks were pulled into one or the other of the suns. Tidal forces occasionally tore apart one of the remaining large asteroids. It was a very peaceful planet. Without any technology, there were no weapons. Killing was limited to what could be done with beaks, claws, and teeth. The denizens of Oceania did kill each other, but only for food. The ocean provided all of the food its inhabitants needed.

The ocean was practically the planet's *only* feature. A deep ocean covered the entire surface, except for a few volcanic seamounts that poked through the surface. Those islands were completely devoid of life, as evolution hadn't seen fit to develop anything for such a small niche. As a result, Vall'a was the only living thing on the entire planet that didn't live in the water.

Instead, she lived in a cave in the crater of an extinct volcano. Successive Protectors had improved upon the cave, making additional rooms and leveling floors by the simple expedient of hammering at the solid basalt with their fists. As a Velorian, Vall'a didn't need the cave for protection from the elements, but she did prefer to sleep dry. Since the planet was almost all water, rain and snow were not infrequent events. A lake at the bottom of the crater collected the rain and melted snow. Because the land surface was complete barren and devoid of life, the water did not stagnate, but remained pure for drinking. Like the surface, nothing lived in the fresh water. There was ample food available in the shallows around the island. The sea floor was a veritable jungle; plants grew in a riot of colors. Schools of fish grazed on the plants, or preyed on other fish. Mollusks burrowed through the mud, looking for worms and hiding from the predatory fish.

Vall'a knew that none of her predecessors had encountered ever Arions here. Oceania wasn't the type of world that attracted Arions; it just wasn't useable real estate in their eyes. But there was a sentient species here, and the one of the Arions' stated goals was to eliminate all other sentient species from the universe. It didn't matter that the Cetas presented no threat to the Arions, they *were*, and that was enough. And that was enough reason for a Protector to be here.

She knew that just because the Arions hadn't come here yet didn't mean that they wouldn't come today or tomorrow. Like all Protectors, she had grown up reading the stories about other Protectors battling the

Arions to save their planets. She especially loved the stories told by the scribe Shar'n about Kar'a Veloor, the Protector of Terra, and her daughter Xar'a Terra, who had actually been born on Terra. Ah, fabled Terra, the near-mythical First World. Kar'a had such adventures there, both battling the Arions and just living with and loving the people there, and being loved by the people there. Ah, the loving. Vall'a thought that Kara was so lucky, to have been stationed on a planet with other people. Even Kara's younger sister Lill'th'a Veloor on Tetra, home of the spider-like Tetritions, had a man to love her, the William. It wasn't that she was lonely, the Cetas were fun to be with. And she did love them, in a way, and they her. But since she had been here on Oceania, Vall'a hadn't even seen another creature with two legs and with two arms. As she had gotten older she had often wanted to put her arms around another person, to feel his arms holding her tight. Even as she lay in her cave at night using her hands to bring such warm delicious feelings to her body she dreamed about having somebody else bring those feelings to her, and about bringing those feelings to another.

Lieutenant (jg) John K. MacBeth came from a long line of naval officers. An ancestor served with Drake against the Spanish Armada. One served with Nelson at Trafalgar. One served with Jellicoe at Jutland in the First World War. One served with Harwood at the River Plate in the Second World War, against another ship named the *Graf Spee*, and later served on convoy escorts in the North Atlantic. One served with Matsuda in the New Zealand campaign in the Third World War.

When the Fleet left the oceans of Mother Earth and went into space, the MacBeths went with it. A MacBeth was the second-in-command of the first Ganymede expedition. Another commanded the second Alpha Centauri expedition. John, like most of his ancestors, had to continually tell acquaintances that despite what Shakespeare had written, nobody in his family had ever plotted against the Crown, nor against any lawfully constituted government they served.

John was the senior navigator on the frigate *Graf Spee*, based out of Tau Ceti. The *Graf Spee* was currently engaged in a routine patrol and exploration mission.

John enjoyed this posting. Navigation was his field, and the Skipper was a good man. He knew that he was not the first MacBeth to be serving with the Skipper, in his first tour of duty the Skipper had served on a ship commanded by one of John's uncles. But John didn't expect, and didn't receive, any special treatment because of that. If anything, the Skipper was especially critical of John. They had finished the outbound sweep and were just beginning the inbound sweep. Another two weeks and he would be back ashore while the ship was being refitted for its next mission.

Not that being ashore would be that much different from being onboard the *Graf Spee*. "Ashore" at Tau Ceti meant being in the space station orbiting the star. But there would be more people there, as well as fresh food from the hydroponic farms. With a complement of thirty men and women, the *Graf Spee* was not a big ship. There also wasn't much privacy on board. Maybe he could finally persuade Debbie to share shore leave with him. Then they could find some quiet corner on the station and he could navigate something besides the stars....

He had to tear his mind away from his daydreams and return to the task at hand. They were just approaching the wormhole for the passage back to Tau Ceti when they spotted another ship emerging from the wormhole. The *Graf Spee* immediately came to General Quarters; the wormhole was not yet cleared for civilian traffic, any traffic through it had to be Fleet, which this ship obviously wasn't, or pirates.

Or the ship could be alien. A First Contact situation! John fondly remembered an old flatscreen entertainment program called *Star Trek*, which often dealt with First Contact situations.

Through the telescope they could see what might be a stylized black bird, or maybe a bat, on a red field. There was no response from the other ship on any of the normal communication channels. They tried all of the other communication methods available, including colored lights. There was no response to any of the signals as the two ships warily approached each other.

Finally there was a response from the other ship. It wasn't an attempt at establishing communications, but its meaning was crystal clear nonetheless. An energy beam of some sort lanced out, nearly clipping off one of the *Graf Spee's* tail vanes.

The helmsman valiantly tried to steer her clear, but there was only one possible avenue of escape. John quickly fed the navigational data into the computer as they headed towards the wormhole.

Just as they were going in, another beam struck the stern. It didn't breach the hull, but the impact shook the *Graf Spee*, altering her course ever so slightly as she entered the wormhole.

Unfortunately, navigating through a wormhole requires precision. A minor error in the course entering a wormhole could eject you out the other side parsecs from your intended destination. Especially with a new, nearly uncharted wormhole such as this one, the *Graf Spee* was only the second Fleet ship to use it. Three automated probes had been lost before one was successful. That was why civilian ships weren't allowed to use it yet, the Fleet was still exploring and charting it.

As soon as they emerged from the other side, one look at the star screens told John that they were lost. The familiar navigational stars, the stars that he knew like the back of his hand, were nowhere to be seen. Three seconds later the computer confirmed it, as it too tried and failed to match up the stars. They were completely lost. They were in a system with a binary star. A white dwarf and a red giant circled each other. While that wasn't a particularly rare combination, he knew from the relative positions of other stars that they were well outside of known space. While the computer and the junior navigator tried to gather data, John went outside with the damage control parties to inspect the damage to the stern and to the tail vane. The stern was a little crumpled and charred, but still airtight. The vane was a total loss, however. Fortunately the designers of the ship had ensured that even with one jump vane out of action, the other three would still provide her with full maneuverability. Even with only two, they should have no problem navigating through the asteroid belt they were nearing. John didn't see the stray rock until too late. It hit his back, striking his rocket fuel tank a grazing blow and opening up a small hole. The fuel quickly vented through the hole, the reaction sending him out of control and away from the ship towards a bigger asteroid. The impact wasn't a hard one, but in the narrow confines of his spacesuit, it was enough to knock him unconscious.

Vall'a was in the water, frolicking with some of the young Cetas, while their parents watched. This particular group was composed of this year's new calves, still not thirty feet long. They loved having her scratch their bellies. And she loved playing with them, sometimes even lifting them completely out of the water for short flights. She also enjoyed rubbing against their bodies, their rough leathery skin feeling so good against her smooth skin. As usual she was completely naked. Though she had her Protector uniform in her cave, she hadn't worn that in years. There was nobody on this planet from whom she would need to protect her modesty, and the Cetas certainly didn't wear any clothes. There were some of the older calves swimming nearby, watching her, and asking her to fly them out of the water too, as she had done the previous year. Clicking her tongue in imitation of their speech she told them that she would fly with them tomorrow, but that today was for their younger siblings. As she lifted another calf up out of the water, she thought she saw something out of the corners of her eyes. Letting the calf gently back into the water, she hovered just above the waves and looked again, her bright blue eyes sparkling as she focused. There! She saw it again. At first she thought it was an asteroid, but then it changed direction. Nothing natural could change direction in space like that. It had also generated its own light; that hadn't been a reflection. It had to be a spaceship.

"*Skietra! Arions!*" was her first thought. "*They've come!*" Flexing her calves to generate power, she immediately accelerated in that direction. Once she was out of the atmosphere she flexed her thighs and buttocks to generate even more speed.

When John regained consciousness, he found himself alone. There was no sign of the *Graf Spee*. He couldn't raise her on his radio, whether that was due to damage or to the fact that the *Graf Spee* was out of his range, he couldn't tell. With all of the fuel for his maneuvering rockets vented into space, there was nothing he could do, even if there was someplace to go to. He was truly alone.

As he looked around again, he thought that the white star was closer than it had been before. A look at the oxygen gauge showed that he couldn't have been unconscious for much more than two or three hours. He still had three, maybe four hours of oxygen left in the main tank. And two hours in the reserve tank. Five, maybe six hours total.

He tried to calculate how long it would take before the heat from the star burned him to a cinder. He knew that the *Graf Spee* hadn't been moving that fast as the repair teams evaluated the damage. And the rocks that hit him probably hadn't been moving much faster than normal planetary speeds.

At the accelerations imparted by collisions with bodies moving at those speeds, even if he had started from rest with respect to the sun, it should be days before he burned up. Or rather, before his asphyxiated corpse burned up. And if he had started out in orbit around the star, it should take much longer, weeks or more. John had no way of knowing that the big chunk he had hit had been moving at much faster than normal planetary speeds. It was one of the remnants of a bigger asteroid that had recently been torn apart by tidal forces caused by the two stars. It had been on almost an exact minimum-time trajectory towards the white dwarf. John also did not know that the hole in his rocket fuel tank had aligned almost exactly with the trajectory, accelerating him directly towards the star. Instead of days, it would be hours. To occupy his mind, John thought back on the long line of officers in his family who had risen to command. He recited their names, names that every MacBeth learned as a child. The odds of John ever commanding anything of his own looked very slim. The odds of John continuing the line didn't look very good either. It looked like he was going to have to leave that to his brother and to his cousins. His name would be going on the other list back at the old family seat, the long list of MacBeths who had given their lives in service to the Fleet.

Strangely, his remaining thoughts were not about himself, but about the junior navigator on the *Graf Spee*. He knew that Ensign Marschal could do the job as well as John could. He had trained Ensign Marschal himself; the Ensign was a competent navigator, almost ready to be promoted to senior navigator. The young Ensign's biggest drawback was a tendency to be somewhat excitable. If the Ensign could only hold together, to not fall to pieces under the pressure, then the *Graf Spee* would be in good hands.

He knew the Skipper's first priority would be to find a habitable planet, to serve as a base of operations while Ensign Marschal and the navigational computer tried to find a way home. The safety of the ship and the crew came first; the Skipper wouldn't take any unnecessary risks just to rescue one man. Looking up, he noticed that the white dwarf was noticeably closer. He also noticed that it was decidedly warmer in his spacesuit. It was hot, as a matter of fact. Belatedly, he also recalled that Ensign Debbie Marschal wasn't an unattractive young woman. He would never be sharing shore leave with her now. That was his last thought before he passed out from the heat.

As Vall'a got closer she saw that the spaceship was gone. But there was a small object floating off into the void. Her eyes sparkled again as she focused in on the small object. She was startled to see that it seemed to be a man in some kind of spacesuit. She quickly flexed her left arm, changing her direction to intercept. What was a lone Arion doing in a spacesuit? An Arion Alpha wouldn't need a spacesuit in the vacuum of space any more than she did, and an Arion Beta wouldn't be alone on any kind of a mission. Was this some kind of Arion trick? But Arions weren't known for their subtlety, they just tended to land troops and invade the planet if they liked it or just blast away from orbit if they didn't. The only planet where they showed any signs of subtlety was Terra, and they had good reason for that. But that didn't apply to her Oceania. As she got closer she saw that it wasn't an Arion spacesuit, it was much too bulky, much too primitive. But if it wasn't Arion, what was it? What could it be? As she got closer, she saw that whoever was in that spacesuit was still alive. As she got even closer, she saw that it was a man. Definitely not an Arion, he had light brown hair.

Her initial fear that this was the beginning of an Arion invasion dissipated, to be replaced by curiosity. What was he doing out here? She knew that there were no humanoid species in this area of the galaxy. Skietra, there weren't any habitable planets around here, other than for her Oceania, and he certainly wasn't a native. If he wasn't Arion, what COULD he be?

And what was he doing this close to the white sun? He was moving almost directly towards it. As she flexed her legs to slow down, she floated up to him and took a good look at the spacesuit. In the harsh glare of the two suns she could see every little detail. The helmet was nearly spherical, a large clear section allowing the occupant a good view of his surroundings. She saw various controls and readouts on the suit, but the script was totally unfamiliar to her. She also saw that one of the tanks attached to his back had been holed. Reaching him, she put her hands on the clear section of the helmet and felt the smooth surface.

John was completely convinced now that he was hallucinating. Floating before him in the vacuum of space was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He would have thought that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, even if she wasn't completely naked. Her long pale blonde hair flowed around her face and fell over her shoulders. Below those shoulders were the two most beautiful breasts he had ever seen. Below those breasts her body tapered down to the narrowest waist he had ever seen, before flaring out to her shapely hips. Below those hips were two of the longest legs he had ever seen. Not even in his wildest fantasies had he ever imagined Debbie looking like this, and only in his fantasies had he ever seen Debbie naked.

How could a woman be out here in the vacuum of space? Completely naked, let alone without a spacesuit, and she had *flown* to him? How could a naked woman *fly* through space?

As she moved he could see the muscles rippling under her skin. She reached for him and moved her hands towards his helmet visor. As the angel touched his helmet, he knew that she had come for him. He looked up at her and forced a smile to his face. "I'm ready," he said, before passing out from the heat again.

Just as Vall'a touched his visor, the man looked up at her. He smiled and appeared to say something, though she could not hear anything in the vacuum. Then he passed out! Suddenly, somehow, she knew that the man had to be a Terran. Somebody from the First World! A Terran, out here on her world! And that other object, the one that had disappeared, that had to have been his ship. And he was much too close to the white sun. A fragile being such as he would not last long in this heat, no matter how well his spacesuit might insulate him. Putting an arm around his waist, she started flying them away from the sun and down towards the planet below, towards her island cave. Knowing that Terrans were quite fragile, and not knowing just how much acceleration his frail body could take, she took it quite slow, just barely flexing her calves. She tried to keep her body between the sun and the spacesuit, trying to shield as much of the heat from him as she could. She was relieved to feel the suit cooling as she flew further from the sun. As she flew down, she wondered why such a fragile species would come out this far into space. They must be very brave to come so far from their home. Or they must be very foolish to come into such a dangerous place. Or perhaps they were both very brave and very foolish at the same time.

She would have to include him in her Protector duties. And whomever was on that ship, if it ever came back. No, not *if* but *when*. When it came back. When they didn't find any other habitable planets in the vicinity, they would be back.

When they came back, she would be here. She would be here to Protect them. It was her duty. Just as she would Protect this man.

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