

A LONG CURVED BLADE

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Laying in his two-person bunk with a pillow over his head, Douglass could still hear the sounds of lovemaking drifting through the frictionless air ducts. These air ducts were perfect for carrying sound, and thanks to them nothing that went on in the capsule was private. The woman who was moaning was his wife. The man --- well, that was no secret. It was Cromwell, the weatherman.

Doug listened, feeling sick and hopeless --- then another sound caught his attention. A distant warbling cry, a chorus of voices. Then a woman's voice was sobbing over the communications system. Her voice rang through the metal of the capsule. "It was a skike, another damn skike," she was saying. "It killed a boy." Doug rolled off his bunk and wriggled into his jungle gear, stepped into his boots, and grabbed his rifle. He pushed through his door and hurried out into the circular hall, heading for the front door.

Leo Calderon, the expedition leader, was sealing off the capsule as Doug came trotting up. He looked at the dirty jungle clothes and the gun in Doug's hand and said, "No, you're not going

out there."

"Who else is out? Selene is out there!"

"Selene and Lipton are safe in the village. There's no need for you going out."

"It killed a child."

"I don't care----"

"Goddamn it, it killed a little kid!" Doug shoved past the older man and pulled the quick release lever. The doors slammed open and he leapt out into the dirt and leaves, the million insects.

"Douglass, come back here!"

Doug trotted down the path, flipping his rifle on and glancing at its scanner.

"Douglass! That's an order!" Leo was shouting. "You come back here now!" His voice grew distant, then faded out altogether. Doug didn't notice, he just kept running. The village was right ahead, he could see it through spiral leaves and odd horizontal limbs. There was a wooden gate with an elaborate mechanical latch --- every piece meticulously carved from wood --- he let himself in and ran toward Lipton, who was holding a rifle but was so pressed by the colonists that he could only point it straight up.

"Where's your wife?" Doug yelled.

"Over there by the body," Lipton yelled back. "She saw it happen, the boy was protecting her."

Doug pushed his way through another crowd and found Selene on the ground hugging her knees and crying. In front of her was the

gory mess that had been a colonist boy, about 11 standard years old. Doug recognized him, he remembered giving the child a candy bar, and was then chewed out by Cromwell, Leo, and his own wife for "introducing alien food into their diet" and "interfering" with their studies.

"The attack was here?" Doug asked. "Inside?"

Several of the colonists nodded. One, who was called Jahk, pointed to planetary west and said, "Th'skike it dug right through th'floor fence 'n right there."

"Show me."

He trotted with several men to the hole where the skike had entered and then exited after the kill. The colonists had covered the ground of their village with a tight crisscrossing of wood everywhere inside the fence, and the skike had dug up underneath and broke its way through. It was a big one, bigger than the one that usually haunted this area. Doug set his rifle to scan the tunnel, and followed its path to the edge of the fence and beyond. "It's a short tunnel," he told Jahk. "It ends right out there."

"Th'other end we'll go 'n we'll wait there," Jahk said. He was armed with a beautifully crafted crossbow with deadly obsidian-tipped arrows. Doug followed him and the other colonists through a gate and out to the hole, where they stood with weapons pointing.

Doug was fiddling with the knobs on his scanner. "It's not in there," he said. He took a few steps to the edge of the jungle,

scanning. "Out there," he said, his voice hushed. "About thirty meters."

"You c'n see it?" Jahk asked him.

"My machine can. It's out there, not moving."

"It listens s'nd smells us," Jahk said. "Th'skike is safen 'n 'n 'n th'jungle."

"It thinks it's safe." Rifle forward, Doug pushed his way into the foliage. "I'm going to kill the thing. This time I am going to kill it." He ducked his head under a branch, moving forward, the tart scent of sap burning his nostrils. The colonists were right behind him, following close.

The beast heard them coming and retreated. Doug watched it with the scanner, creeping forward, breathing shallow. This was the skike's environment, the skike's territory. Even with his energy weapon and his motion scanner Doug knew he was at a disadvantage here. This beast weighed at least one standard ton, a multi-legged, twelve-eyed creature with a large brain and quick reflexes. The colonist's name for the creature was a perversion of the English word "scythe" --- two of its forelegs were scythe-shaped blades a good 1.2 meters long, double edged and razor sharp.

Doug reached a clearing and stopped. The colonists behind him stopped and spread out, weapons drawn and ready. The beast was a mere 20 meters ahead, invisible in the foliage. Doug braced himself against a frame tree to keep his aim steady, peering through the screen at the curtain of leaves and branches in front

of them. The skike was there, just beyond. The bolt from the energy weapon could burn right through to it, but if Doug didn't hit its brain it would be a wasted shot. As he watched, it began to circle to the right, trying to get behind them. He could hear it in the warm, heavy air; the rustling of leaves, twigs snapping. The scanner showed it as a vague blob on the screen, growing sharper.

Doug realized why it was circling. It wanted to cut them off from the village. "Back," he said between his teeth, "back off!" They moved back the way they'd come, and all the while Doug was aware that the thing could leap through the hanging foliage and slice him to pieces without him firing a shot. The colonists, spooked, turned and ran.

Hearing them, the skike moved faster.

Doug was walking backwards, his gun pointing toward the beast. If the damn thing would step into a clearing, he thought, that would be the end. I'll murder it. Instead, the foliage grew thicker. Doug could only see a few meters before broad spiral leaves obscured his vision. Damn it, he thought, this is not good.

He sidestepped to the left, circling around. The skike was 15 meters away now, passing him. It can leap this far, he thought. And just as he was thinking that, he stepped on a dry fallen limb and it snapped. Not too loud of a snap, but just enough. The skike stopped, listening. Doug scrambled backwards, panicking. He

stumbled into a clearing and turned and ran. He could hear the skike moving behind him. It was coming fast, he could hear the crashing and scraping as it moved recklessly through the underbrush.

Doug turned and dropped, raising his rifle. He could see it, it was light brown like the color of the tree trunks, looking like a bundle of thick branches moving, raising and lowering, and two shiny black blades raised on thick, strong arms, raised to strike. Doug fired the rifle, blasting off one of the thing's legs. The skike went rolling and scrambling around the clearing, slashing at the air. In his panic Doug fired two more times, missing the creature entirely, and when the creature stopped and Doug could get a bead on the mass of black eyes, he pulled the trigger and the gun did nothing. A red light came on, telling him to wait fifteen seconds for the capacitors to recharge.

The beast raised its blades and came toward him.

Doug let out a cry and turned and ran.

He heard crashing behind him, the sound of the beast pursuing, but it fell behind. The wound was slowing it down. There was a beep as the rifle was ready to fire again, and Doug slid to a stop and turned around, rifle raised. The skike was nowhere in sight. The scanner had it 40 meters away and fading as it retreated into the deep jungle. Doug considered following it, but his nerves were shot. He couldn't bring himself to do it.

Feeling bitter, he turned and made his way back to the village.

#

It was only when Douglass arrived back at the capsule did he realize how much trouble he was in. Leo Calderon, biologist, anthropologist, was also the expedition commander. He was general, king, judge and jury, and god as far as the expedition was concerned. Douglass had disobeyed a direct order in leaving the capsule after Leo had sealed it off.

Doug's wife, Janet, was standing beside Cromwell Flack as Leo ranted and raved and stripped Doug of all rank and privilege. During the tirade Doug stood silently and stared into his wife's eyes. She was a stranger, now. Janet Nerro, with a PhD in Human Sciences, was willing to do anything to win a place on this Technica expedition, even willing to convince a lowly technician, a repairman, into thinking she was in love with him. Lowly as he was, Technica considered Douglass the best qualified "engineer" for the expedition and preferred that he be married to maintain the stability of the team. Any woman scientist being considered for the expedition would surely lock her place in on the team by marrying him. Cromwell Flack, the eminent climate expert, was above all this --- he was allowed to join the team without bringing a wife, which upset the balance. Seven team members instead of eight, and four of them men. Out of all of them, Douglass was the only one who was not a scientist. He was only

along to keep everything running for the duration.

Six more years, Douglass thought. Six.

". . . you are not to interact with the colonists," Leo was raging at him, "you are not to speak with them, you are not to look at them! Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"You are not to go into their village, you are not to go into the jungle. Until further notice, you are confined to the capsule. And you no longer have any access to Technica weapons!"

"Yes sir."

"Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you have any questions?"

"No sir." Actually, he had a lot of them, but didn't have energy to bring them up.

"You're dismissed, Mr. Dunhill. Go to your cabin."

Doug nodded, but he was still staring into his wife's eyes. She had no expression at all, she simply stared back. He turned and walked stiffly out of the commons, out into the circular hall. He passed the thin metal door to his cabin and went instead to Cromwell's, letting himself in and closing the door behind himself. He sat silently on the bed and waited.

Cromwell and Janet didn't show up right away, so Doug took the opportunity to use Cromwell's data terminal. Cromwell was going to be furious to find him in here, but Doug couldn't imagine himself being in more trouble than he was already in. Using the

terminal's screen, he brought up a summery of the expedition.

TECHNICA MISSION #2786-855

FAILURE OF COLONY AT DROXFORD 2

Cromwell and Janet entered the cabin as Doug was reading through the already familiar text. Cromwell merely made a disgusted face at finding him in the room. "Douglass," he said, "get out."

"I want to read you something."

"Get out."

"Just listen to me. Please."

Cromwell sighed and crossed his arms. Janet stood looking uncomfortable. She stared into his eyes, though. Either she was totally without shame, or Doug had married a cyborg. He was beginning to wonder.

"The duration of the mission is seven years," Doug said, reading from the data. "The object of study: Native adaptation of the descendants of failed colony sent off three-hundred-seven years before. Expedition goal: To determine why the original colony failed, and find a solution to the problem. Prepare a preliminary report for Technica recolonization effort." Doug turned the terminal off. "We've been here for eleven months, right? So what have we found?"

"I'm not going to waste my time discussing it with you."

"I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to her. She's my wife, I have a right to talk to her, don't I?"

"This is childish, there is no point to it," Cromwell said.

Doug shrugged. "Janet, please, talk to me."

"Obviously," Janet said, "we've only been here eleven months, our findings are inconclusive."

"Inconclusive? We're to determine why the original colony failed, and find a solution to the problem. Well, we know why the colony failed! The skikes have been killing them off for over three-hundred years! And it's obvious how to solve the problem . . . we move the colony to an area where there are no skikes."

"We are not going to move the colonists. I'm not going over this with you again."

"The longer you wait, the more of them are going to be killed!"

"Doug, listen to me. You're not a scientist. You think you know, but you don't know all the facts. You're jumping to a conclusion! All evidence must be considered. The colonists must be studied and their social structure mapped out. Their customs and their evolutionary adaptations must be analyzed. To do that, they must remain as they----"

"They have to be killed off one by one so you can determine exactly why they're dying?"

"This has gone far enough," Cromwell said. "Out of here, now."

"Cromwell, stuff yourself."

"Alright, I'm going to go get Leo." Cromwell stormed out of the room.

"Doug," Janet said, "maybe you are right. Maybe. But you go and move them, and we start fresh somewhere else --- it may happen all over again with another ten-thousand colonists because we jumped the gun and we didn't find the truth."

"There is a perfectly habitable island system a thousand clicks from here with no skike population whatsoever," Doug said.

"They'd have all they need, and no----"

Leo burst into the room. "Douglass!" he yelled.

"They'd have no need to fear!" Douglass said to his wife.

Leo and Cromwell grabbed Doug by the arms and half-dragged half-carried him to his cabin, tossed him in, and locked the door from the outside.

#

For the next three and a half weeks Douglass was incarcerated in his cabin. He was allowed to go from the cabin to the bathroom, but that was it. When he was pulled out to fix something, he was to fix it and then return to the cabin. Lipton and his wife Selene would spend a few hours a day with him, and his wife would occasionally visit. Janet would tell him the situation was unfortunate, and assure him it would end soon as long as he continued to cooperate. Lipton and his wife openly detested Doug's

treatment and would daily make protests to Leo for it to end. Leo remained stubborn because he wanted his word to be law, and because he thought Doug should be taught a lesson.

One night in the middle of the third week a large delegation of colonists carrying torches came from the village. Doug watched from his view port, wondering what it was all about. All the scientists were out to meet them, and after a few minutes Lipton opened Doug's cabin door and stood smiling at him. "You're out, my friend," he said. "You're free."

"Oh, what, Leo wants me to fix something? That's great. Tell Leo that he can take whatever broken thing it is and stick it up his butt, because I'm on strike."

"No, the colonists have come for you. They've made you part of their tribe."

"What?"

"After that day you went chasing that skike into the jungle, they decided you were a member of their tribe. Selene and I kinda leaked the news that you were being locked up out here, and they've come to get you."

Doug grabbed his jungle gear and followed Lipton outside. The leader of the colonists, Kinjon, was prominent among the delegation; two warrior women stood one to either side of him holding flaming torches. He held out his arms and embraced Doug, and called him brother. "Y'r th'bravest g'damn man of r'people," he said, with some significance. "C'm on w'us."

Doug shrugged, and wordlessly followed.

The delegation returned to the village, where two huge bonfires lit the area in orange, flickering light. Naked men and women did a thrusting, gyrating dance to high, warbling flute music. The scientists followed, everyone but Cromwell using one instrument or another to record the event. To Doug, the whole thing smacked of a fertility rite.

They sat in a circle around the two bonfires and watched the dancers flirting with the flames. It was nerve-racking for Doug to watch, he was sure someone's hair was going to catch on fire --- or worse. The heat was making him sweat. He felt like he was being barbecued.

Someone knelt down beside him. It was Jahk, one of the warriors who'd followed him out after the skike. "Y'r new w'us, I got'ta 'splain things t'you."

"Okay."

"Th'girl straight 'cross fr'm you is Shrew. She's c'm t'age, 'n this's her's. You been chosen, you'n her first. Your s'posed t'go b'tween th'fires 'n claim'n her." On the other side of the circle, obscured by the shimmering of hot air, was a very young girl dressed in a loose gown of woven web straw. It had an almost silver look to it.

"Jahk, run that by me again. I don't think I understand."

"Run past you?"

"What?"

"Y'want me t'run past you?"

"No. I want you to tell me what this is all about. I don't understand."

"Shrew's c'm t'age she's s'posed t'get preggers. Th'people need y'r children 'cause y'r smart'n brave."

Selene must have seen the look of panic in his eyes. She knelt down on the other side of him and said into his ear, "This is their version of a 'coming out' party, Doug. You're not marrying her."

"She's so young!"

"This is their society. They're in a race with death. They keep all their women pregnant, and their children grow up faster."

"Yeah, but she's so young."

"You d'n like her?" Jahk asked.

"Well, yes, I mean I like her fine, but, it's just that----"

"Go through with it, Doug," Selene said. "There's nothing wrong about it. You'll be honoring them and you'll be helping us. We'll need your experience for the records, in fact your uploaded memories will become an important part of our report."

"Oh, great."

"This is science, Doug. I'll go over and explain to Shrew that you're nervous about all this --- maybe she'll make it easier on you."

"What are you going to tell her?"

"I'll tell her you're a virgin." Selene stood and walked around the fires to the young native girl.

Jahk was incredulous. "Y'never stuck it down?"

The flute music was growing wilder and more intricate, and the dancing females, most of whom were pregnant, started coming up to Doug and shaking and gyrating in his face. The men were treating the young girl across the way with the same attentions. Then they pulled away and parted, making an erotic pathway between the two of them. The fires were roaring like a monster.

Shrew stood up, her dress shimmering. Jahk pulled Douglass to his feet and gave him a shove toward her. As Doug was taking his first step, he saw something very large and fast move behind Shrew, and the crowd began making panicked motions. It was a skike. Doug saw it raising its blade-like forelegs up and pausing, and, before he could react, it brought them down in sharp, spasmodic motions. The flute music was replaced by screaming. He saw Selene pushing Shrew away and then go down under one of the creature's thrusts.

He heard someone screaming his name. Doug turned and saw his wife holding his rifle. She threw it at him and he caught it.

Doug walked between the two fires, the rifle raised. People were in his way, colonist warriors firing point-blank at the skike with their crossbows. The arrows would either glance away or sink in only enough to anger the creature. "Move!" Doug shouted. "Move out of the way!" They parted before him and he had a clear shot. His rifle blazed. Several of the creature's legs and part of its torso exploded, and it rolled over twice and scrambled off away from the fires. He fired at it again, hitting it in the back. It

let out a long piercing shriek, but kept crawling. Doug walked along behind it, waiting for the capacitors in his rifle to recharge. Several of the colonists, including Jahk, followed respectfully behind him.

"It'n burrow! It'n burrow, right there!" one called out.

Doug looked ahead to where the skike was heading. A dark hole in the earth. He walked to the side of the creature, which was mostly dead, and aimed at the mass of black eyes. The gun was recharged and ready to fire. He let loose with one more shot and killed it.

A motion caught his eye. There was movement at the mouth of the hole. As he was turning a tangled shadow of legs erupted from the hole, springing toward him. Doug shot it dead center, blasting a large hole through its most vital area. It reeled, balanced for a moment on hind legs; the skike towered above him, then fell over on its back and lay there with quivering legs. "I killed you!" Doug yelled at the thing. "Do you understand me? I killed you! I killed you!" He kicked one of its more energetically quivering legs.

Beyond the two dead beasts, one more emerged from the hole. It seemed to size up the situation, studying its two dead companions, then backed down into the earth. It kicked dirt after itself, blocking the entrance.

Doug walked up to the hole and looked down. The dirt still moved as the creature below packed it tight. He turned and looked at the colonists, who were staring at Doug with open awe.

Jesus, he thought. He stepped back from the hole, and moved away from the dead skikes. He was breaking out in a cold sweat, and he was shaking. The others! He'd seen Selene go down, and Lipton and Cathy. Doug turned back toward the bon fires and the panicked colonists and broke into a run.

#

The two men kneeled and prayed. They had done all they could do for her, maybe saved her life. They didn't know for sure; they wouldn't know for years.

Lipton was crying. His wife, Selene, was now in hibernation until Technica came back to pick them up. Leo and Cathy, the leader and his wife, were both dead. Cromwell and Janet were in another part of the capsule hyper-waving the news to Technica. It was just the four of them now.

"Can't we do anything else?" Lipton was mumbling. "Can't we do something more?"

Doug didn't know what to say to the man. The only MD on the expedition was Selene. Doug certainly wasn't a doctor. "We have to trust the automed," he told him. "This is the best chance Selene has. We have her in stasis, her mind is still intact, her body can be repaired once we're back in civilization. But for now, this is the safest thing we can do."

Lipton was rocking back and forth, his arms crossed in front

of his chest. "I can't just leave her frozen for six years,"

he said, his voice cracking. "I just can't."

"It won't be six years to her," Doug said.

Lipton nodded wordlessly, and continued rocking. He's in shock, Doug thought. He needs some sort of anti-shock injection. Doug stayed with him for a while, then silently got up to check with the automed about shock medication.

"I'm glad you killed the goddamned thing," Lipton said.

Doug paused, looking back. "I'm glad I did too," he said awkwardly.

"The colonist chief, he said they only killed one before."

"They're tough animals."

"He said they came back the next night and killed half his people."

"What?"

"The skikes came back, a whole bunch of them, and slaughtered half their people."

"Who told you this?"

"Kinjon, their chief."

Douglass felt faint. "The skikes retaliate?"

"I guess so. Maybe last night they were retaliating because you'd hit one." He was staring at Doug with a haunted expression.

"But that was weeks ago," Doug said.

Lipton shrugged.

"You think that's possible?"

Lipton shrugged again. "The colonists would know best."

"You think they'll come back?"

"I don't know."

"You think they will, don't you?"

"The colonists think so."

"That means I . . . it means I brought them, that I . . ."

"You couldn't have known, Doug. Nobody blames you. Kinjon would have killed it himself last night if he'd been able to."

Lipton's expression turned savage. "I'm glad you killed it."

"I killed two of them, Lipton."

"Two?"

"There were three altogether, and I killed two. The third one got away."

"That one will probably bring more."

The two men stared at each other. Doug was feeling more and more desperate. At that moment Cromwell entered the room.

"Technica sends us their condolences," Cromwell said. "But they said that there was no way to speed our departure. The next hyperspatial window is still years away. We're to carry on as best we can."

"What did they say about Leo's death?" Lipton asked.

"They said what you'd expect someone to say when they learn of a death. Since I'm the senior here, however, I've assumed command."

"They put you in charge?" Doug said.

"I've assumed command."

"But they didn't tell you that you were in charge."

"It was implied."

Doug didn't doubt it, but still it galled him. "How are you with a blaster, Cromwell?"

"I don't touch the things."

"Well, that's just great. There's a possibility that the skikes are coming back tonight, maybe more than there were last night. What do you propose to do about it."

"Do about it?"

"Yeah, do about it. What do we do about the skikes?"

"We can't do anything about the skikes. We're here to observe, not to take action. We do nothing. We stay in the capsule until further notice."

Doug turned to Lipton. "I knew he was going to say that. I just knew it."

Lipton nodded unhappily.

"You feel up to shooting some skikes?" Doug asked him.

Lipton took a breath, staring at him. Then he stood up. "I'll kill as many as I can."

"You're not going to do anything of the sort," Cromwell said.

Doug swung on him. "We damn well are," he said. "I'm tired of this do-nothing nonsense."

"You'll do what you're ordered to do, Douglass! You're insubordination is the cause of this situation!"

"Don't give me that crap."

"I'm giving you an order, technician! You're confined to your

cubicle." Cromwell pointed in the direction.

Doug turned red, and took a step toward Cromwell. Lipton stepped in front of him, and pushed him back. To Cromwell, Lipton said, "You can't give him orders anymore."

"What? What did you say?"

"Doug's a member of the colonist tribe," Lipton said. "He takes his orders from Kinjon."

"That's ridiculous!"

"No its not. You know what that ceremony was about."

Cromwell was silent for a moment, shifting mental gears.

"Well, if he's no longer part of the expedition, he no longer has access to technica equipment."

"He does if Kinjon says he does," Lipton said. "Kinjon is the utmost authority on this planet, and he doesn't recognize Technica as a separate state." Lipton had a wild look in his eyes, like he wasn't under control anymore.

"Lipton, don't be a fool!"

"That's the way it is, Cromwell." Lipton took a threatening step toward the man.

"We'll see about that," Cromwell said, backing up a step.

"We'll see what Technica thinks about it." He turned and quickly left the room.

"A meteorologist in charge of our expedition," Lipton said.

"The thought makes me ill."

While Cromwell was busy in communications, Doug and Lipton

opened the weapons rack and armed themselves to the teeth. They left the capsule and commandeered the observation flyer, which was nothing more than a flat platform with a railing. When the villagers saw them coming there was a big commotion, and Doug had to shoo them out from under the craft so that they could land.

Kinjon came out to meet them, and Lipton addressed the man. "We need two of your bravest so we can go out and kill the skike before they can come back."

"I go w'you myself," he said. "Jahk too."

"We brought extra weapons, so you can learn to use them."

"Good." He nodded, appearing very pleased. Doug and Lipton helped him up into the flyer, then the warrior named Jahk.

"Hold on to the railing," Doug told them, and they nodded and held on. Doug sent the craft drifting into the air, across the village and over the jungle.

Cromwell's voice came over the com unit, but Doug switched it off.

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They made a spiral path around the village, extending outward, flying for hours with the scanners finding nothing. Then, several miles out, they ran across a dozen of them in a group.

"This is perfect," Lipton said. "We'll wipe 'em all out at once and be rid of them."

"Yeah," Doug said, speaking with more confidence than he

felt. He let the flyer drift silently down to treetop level, and set it to hover. They'd shown the colonists how to handle the weapons, and the two picked up on it quite fast. Point and shoot --- there really wasn't much to it, the energy blasts fired perfectly straight. They each picked a target and fired. The skikes screamed.

Doug discharged his rifle three times, killing two and wounding one, then stopped to let it recharge. Most of them were dead, the rest wounded. Doug's rifle recharged and he killed the last one he'd wounded, and then there was another one. He killed it first shot --- the skikes had no natural enemies that attacked from above, their brain cases were easy targets. But, then there was another one. Doug was losing count. He fired on it as well, wounding it, and then there were two more. Only then did he realize there was more than the original twelve. More were coming into the little clearing from the east.

He told the others to stop firing, and turned his scanner to the east. He swore. "There's hundreds of them!"

Lipton looked over the scanner reading. "Looks like more than that. The scanner must be malfunctioning."

"No, it's not." Doug raised above the tree-tops and sent the flyer east. There was a large clearing ahead, and it was all brown. It looked like acres and acres of fallen logs, but the logs were moving.

Now it was Lipton's turn to swear. "Thousands of them," he

said under his breath.

"Tens of thousands," Doug said. He was watching the scanner.

"They're all heading that way."

"All of them?"

"All of them. They're heading toward the village."

The men stared at each other, and then Doug said, "Lipton, how many women and children do you think the orbital can transport at a time? In the passenger compartment and also in the cargo bay?"

"A lot of children could fit. A lot of the smaller women, too."

"It's about a hour-and-a-half round trip to the Calos Islands, plus say a half an hour to load and unload. Call it two hours even."

"It's possible, then. We should at least start. Women and children first, and some men to take care of them, in case . . ."

Kinjon was following their thoughts, and he nodded. "You go first," he said. "I want you and Jahk with them."

"Jahk can go, but I have too much only I can do."

"What are you thinking about?" Lipton asked.

"The defense system. On the capsule."

"What?"

"I'm going to move it to the village."

"Can that be done?"

Doug nodded, and turned the craft around.

At the village, Kinjon and the warrior Jahk leapt to the

ground to immediately ready their people for the ordeal. Doug then flew the craft over to the capsule, and told Lipton to prepare the orbital for its mission as a sky ferry.

"Doug Dunhill!" called out Cromwell's voice. "By the authority given to me by Technica, I am placing you under arrest."

He came walking up to the flier as Doug was shutting it down.

"That's fine, but you're going to have to wait a few days."

"I'm not waiting a second."

Doug looked up at the man, and realized Cromwell was aiming a pistol at him. Janet was standing behind and to the side of Cromwell, looking cool and unemotional. She said nothing.

"There are thousands of those skikes heading right for this place," Doug said.

"Right," Cromwell said.

"I'm telling you the truth. If you don't believe me, ask Lipton."

Cromwell smirked. "Why should I believe him?"

"What, is he under arrest too? Are you and Janet carrying out the rest of this mission by yourselves?"

Just then the orbital rose into the air beside the capsule, startling both Cromwell and Janet. "What's going on?" Cromwell exclaimed. "What's he doing?"

"We're evacuating as many colonists as we can before the skikes get here. And I'm taking down the defense system and setting it up on the tower in the middle of the village."

"You're doing no such thing!"

"You'll have to kill me to stop me."

Janet stepped forward. "Doug, you can't be serious. You can't take down our only means of defense."

"Well, what about them?" He motioned toward the village.

"What are we going to do, jam all 400 of them into the capsule?

It's a bit small, don't you think?"

"But..."

"The only other answer is to move the capsule into the village, and it's a little heavy for that. It was meant for one trip, down, and not back up."

"You're not taking the defense system," Cromwell said. "And I'll kill you if I have to."

"Okay, kill me."

Cromwell grinned, and raised the pistol to eye level. "I will, I warn you. Now go to your cabin like a good little tech."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm giving you one last chance."

"Cromwell," Janet said, "Cromwell, think about this."

"I'm in charge here."

"Cromwell, Doug has a good point."

"He does not! What are you talking about?"

"We can't let the subject of our study die off right before our eyes."

"You believe him?"

"Yes, I do. Doug has never lied to me."

"He's not lying to you, he's lying to me!"

"Cromwell, I'm not going to let you shoot my husband."

"Your husband? Now he's your husband again?"

"He's never stopped being my husband."

Both men gave her looks.

"Well," she said.

"Look, Cromwell, are you going to kill me or what? I mean, I'm in a hurry, I'm sure you understand."

"You're not taking the defense system."

"Do we have to go through this again?"

"You're not taking it."

"Okay, shoot me in the back, then." Doug walked off toward the capsule.

Cromwell raised the gun.

"Cromwell!" Janet said. She forced his arm down with her's.

As the two began a shouting match, Doug made his way up to the capsule's pointed roof with his tools. He disassembled and removed the automatic energy weapons, placing each piece carefully in a sack hanging from his shoulder. The two were still shouting at each other as he finished with the weapons and started on the computer system.

The orbital glided back from the village and hovered over Doug. Lipton popped the hatch and poked his head out. "Got a load, all the kids and some women. Jahk refused to go, though --- he wants to stay and fight."

Doug nodded. "Didn't really expect him to go, did you?"

"Not really." He waved.

Doug waved back.

Cromwell took a moment out from his heated argument to yell at Lipton. "You bring that thing down here at once!" He fired a round at the orbital, the slug bouncing off the heat shield with a dull thunk. Lipton hurriedly closed the hatch and sent the craft into the sky, heading toward the coast.

Cromwell turned the gun on Doug and fired. Doug lunged back and away from Cromwell, putting the cone-shaped top between them. There was a loud thud and the sound of someone hitting the ground, and he thought, Goddamn, he killed Janet! He peeked over the cone and saw Janet standing over Cromwell, who was face down on the ground. Janet was holding a large rock.

"Do what you have to do," she called up to him. "I'll make sure I haven't killed him."

"Why don't you just hit him a few more times," Doug said.

"That would be murder."

Doug shrugged, and resumed his task.

By the time he had dismantled the entire defense system and transferred it and a spare energy supply over to the village, Lipton was back with the orbiter for another load. "The skikes are close," he told Doug. "They'll be here before I'm back again. How's it going here?"

"I'm having problems. I can't mount the guns as solidly as they should be, so the targeting is going to have to continually

recalibrate itself."

"What does that mean?"

"It's going to be slow and inaccurate."

"Well, it'll be better than nothing."

Doug shrugged.

Somebody called out a warning. Doug and Lipton swung around, saw a skike just outside the village fence. It was quietly walking along the perimeter. Colonists were running toward it with their crossbows, and Lipton was going for a rifle. Doug muttered, and hurriedly tried to finish what he was doing. The next time he looked up the skike had retreated off into the jungle with several arrow shafts sticking out of its legs. Testing us, he thought. Seeing if we'll strike it with lightning.

There was more yelling from another side of the village.

Several more skikes were strolling along the outside of the fence to the west. Lipton went running across the village but Doug waved him down. "Don't worry about it!"

"What?" Lipton said.

"Get the rest of this load in the orbiter and don't worry about it."

Lipton nodded, and ran off.

Doug hurriedly finished up his connections and then climbed down the tower. Next he had to hook up the power supplies and get the computers going. A few of the colonists yelled as one of the skikes, angry about being pelted with arrows, began digging under

the fence. "Lipton!" Doug yelled.

"What?" Lipton was helping several pregnant women into the orbiter's hatch.

"There's one over there have to worry about."

Lipton wordlessly picked up his rifle and ran. A few minutes later heavy booms rolled across the village. There were screams. Doug looked around and saw that there were several more around the fence, on all sides. Many of them were digging. Doug looked at his rifle which was on the ground a few feet away, but he decided against it. He couldn't shoot all of them. He had to finish what he was doing here and now.

Jahk, the warrior, blasted away at one of the beasts with the rifle Doug had given him. Kinjon was on the other side of the village, blasting away. They were blowing holes in their village fence as they aimed for the skikes beyond. Doug forced himself to look down, to concentrate on his work. It was impossible, he kept on looking up.

One skike broke ground inside the fence about 40 meters away from Doug, and it was immediately surrounded by colonists. It sliced several of them to pieces as Doug watched. He couldn't stand it anymore, he grabbed his rifle and ran out to it. It followed several of the colonists as they ran, and then turned and seemed to study Doug as Doug aimed the rifle. Then it jumped, and Doug blasted as it hurled at him in mid-air. He had to jump to one side to avoid it landing on him. He shot it again to make sure it was dead, then ran back to the tower and the computer system

underneath.

Five more connections and it was done. Now it needed to be recalibrated. The skikes were attacking too soon! There wasn't time. Doug turned it on, and set it to recalibrate on anything that moved. At the last moment he realized it would be firing on the colonists as well.

From the top of the tower came a rapid staccato of stunning blasts, and dirt and fire sprayed out from the impact points, killing at least two warriors and wounding a skike. Doug shut it down and shouted, "Run toward me! Run for the center of the village! Run, now! Now! Move it! Mooove your f***ing asses!"

More skikes were breaking through the ground. Some of the colonists understood and ran, some didn't. Doug couldn't risk leaving it off any longer, the skikes would overrun the village. He turned it back on and watched, grimacing. The weapons system blazed and thundered, rapid fire, and he saw Lipton leap for cover. There was a burst near him, but it didn't hit. Thank god it wasn't calibrated, Doug thought. He began working with it, pointing out to the computer the differences between skikes and men, and with more and more accuracy it began shooting at only the skikes, and hitting them too.

It took a while, but Lipton managed to crawl back to the orbiter. He tried to shout something to Doug, but Doug couldn't hear it above the blasts. Over the next few minutes the firing slowed as it ran short of targets.

"The orbiter!" Lipton was shouting. "Will it fire on the orbiter?"

Doug shook his head. He'd already locked that out of the computer.

Lipton stuffed as many more women that would fit, ran out of women, then stuffed in a few of the younger men. The orbiter was jammed. It was never meant to hold that many people. Lipton waved at Doug and closed the hatch. The defense system paused for a moment as the orbiter lifted into the sky, then resumed with new energy as a hoard of the beasts charged out of the jungle and, piling one on top of the other, crushed the fence. The computer control was more accurate than Doug expected, it killed the skikes as fast as they could show themselves. For ten minutes the skikes poured in and died, then another charge came from another direction, and those skikes poured in and died. Forty-five minutes later they pulled back, retreating, and for the first time in almost two hours the defense system fell silent.

Doug checked the power supplies. They were taking up most of the flyer's deck space --- the flier was floating alongside the tower and moored to it like a boat at a dock. The supplies were drained all the way down to 23%, but were recharging. Thank god they retreated, Doug thought. Another half an hour and the guns would have stopped firing for the lack of power.

The sun slowly sank out of sight, and Doug took two of the flier's emergency flair globes and released them into the sky. It was enough to cast everything in a pale glow for most of the

night. Next, he hooked the flier's power supply in line with the others to help speed up the recharge. He really didn't have any other choice.

The defense system fired. Doug jumped, startled, and looked in the direction it had fired. At first he didn't see anything, but then he realized he was looking too far away. Ten meters in front of him there was a hole in the ground. The defense system had caught a skike coming up from a burrow. This far in? he thought. They can dig right up to the base of the tower!? Goddamn it!

Jahk was not far away. He was looking at the hole too. "They're digging up underneath us," Doug said to him. "Get everyone up on the roofs of your huts, and get as many up into the tower as you can." Jahk nodded and started yelling orders.

Lipton returned in the orbiter and picked up another load. He was fitting more in than he or Doug thought they would, but the flight was taking longer. "That island is beautiful," Lipton said. "It's a wonder why they didn't settle there in the first place."

"They wanted room to grow, and no one knew about the skikes."

"Well, you were right about the island."

It wasn't much of a comfort. Doug had known all along he was right --- he'd been there. Now it was a question of whether or not he would live to see it again.

Lipton finished loading up the orbiter and was off. Doug watched the luminous trail as it shot across the night sky,

wishing he was on it this time. Then he thought about Janet and Cromwell in the capsule, and realized they were over there without a defense system. He climbed into the flier and turned on the communications unit, and called out his wife's name.

"Doug! Thank god!" she said immediately.

"How're you holding up over there?"

"The jungle is one big mass of skikes!" she said. "They're so thick around the capsule you can't see the ground. Doug, how are you going to get us out of here?"

That's a good question, he thought. "Is there any danger of them getting inside? They shouldn't be able to get through that metal alloy with anything less than a laser torch."

"We're safe so far," she said. "Just scared and feeling trapped."

"How's Cromwell's head?"

"He's got a mild concussion, Douglass, but you didn't answer my question."

"I'm busy keeping skikes out of the village grounds, Janet. You're just going to have to sit tight, you're safer than anyone right now." The defense system fired practically at the tower's foundation, the beam so close to the flier that it gave Doug radiation burns. A skike writhed in death spasms in a hole almost straight down. "Gotta go," he told his wife, and turned off the communicator. "Jahk!" he yelled. "They're going to be coming up right under us! They'll be coming up inside the huts!" And on the other side of huts, too, he thought. The defense system won't be

able to shoot at something it doesn't see.

The defense system fired once, twice, again almost at the base of the tower. Some of the colonists were yelling; a skike had come up between two of the huts. As it wandered out and in sight of the defense system it was killed.

Doug eyed the huts. Jahk was jumping from one roof to another, yelling. There was muted screams from inside some of them. As Doug watched, the hut that Jahk was standing on collapsed and fell. A skike grabbed his frantic body and pulled him underground before the defense system could strike.

"Jahk!" Doug yelled, but his voice was drowned out by the blasts. He'd raised his rifle, but there was nothing to shoot at. There was nothing he could do but fidget.

The tower wavered. He looked down, seeing nothing . . . but Doug knew. This was it. The skikes were under the foundation. He looked up to see a few more of the huts fall. Yes, the skikes were learning all right. They were learning how to win.

There was a jolt that nearly threw Doug down to the ground. Even over the blasts he could hear the sharp cracking of timbers. Doug leapt into the flier and began ripping connections loose, yelling for the men who were up there with him to climb in. Only two made it, then the foundation sank, undermined, and the tower was falling. The top of it hit the flier on its way down, sending it spinning out of control across the village. Doug and the two other men hung on. Doug's rifle flew right off of his shoulder and

down to the ground, lost.

The gyros kicked in and stopped the spinning, leaving him dazed. The defense system was dead, but there were still blasts. A few men were still left with rifles, leaping from hut to hut and firing away. Gotta get them on board, he thought, and staggered to the controls of the flier. Flashing lights indicated damage. Just keeping the flier in the air was draining the power supply at an alarming rate. Hell, Doug thought. Hell and damn.

He nudged the flier toward the closest huts, collecting several men, then over to the common building where there were several more. "Hang from the sides," Doug told them after no more could fit in the flier. "Just hang on." There was an electric whining sound from somewhere in the flier, and he could smell hot metal. The thing was not meant to hold this much weight. Hell with it, he thought. Better to die of a fall than to be chopped up by those beasts. He looked down to see the village grounds were black and swarming with them, indistinct and nightmarish in the pale light of the dying flair globes. Maybe, he thought, if we fall on one we'll take it with us.

There was a buzzing and a large red light flashed on the control panel. The flier was now on emergency auxiliary power and was demanding that he land immediately. Yeah, right, Doug thought. Land where? Instead, he sent the craft up into the sky, a platform jammed with men, men hanging over the sides, men hanging from men. Doug could hardly move. They got up above the level of the flair globes and drifted out over the jungle, which was black and

crawling with shapes. The whole skike population of the continent must be here now, he thought. One good fusion blast and maybe the mainland could be colonized. The thought was almost funny. If there was a fusion self-destruct on the flier he would have used it. Instead, the best he could hope for is to smash a couple of them when the flier dropped.

One of the men hanging onto the side lost his grip and fell. He dropped silently, lost into the murk of the night. Doug continued, uninterrupted. This is it, he was thinking. This is how it happens. Death by falling, sudden and quiet. I won't yell when it happens, I won't close my eyes. I'll go face down staring at the ground.

Another red light on the panel was flashing erratically, trying to get his attention. He glanced down and saw it was a proximity alert. Proximity? he thought, confused. He was certain it was a malfunction. He looked around doubtfully for something close to them and saw the orbiter approaching, door open. Lipton was yelling, "Be careful! Climb in one at a time!" He moved the door right up to the edge of the flier and the men began climbing in, turning and helping others in. Doug watched with a stunned calmness. He had been prepared to die. He was still prepared to die. Finally it was just down to himself and another man, and that man was Kinjon. Kinjon gripped Doug's arm with a strong hand and pulled. They weren't in the orbiter longer than a minute when the flier dropped. It just disappeared silently and was gone.

Doug looked after it with a sense of wonder.

#

It was a bright, windy day when they returned to the mainland. They avoided the village, not really wanting to see it, and circled around from behind, coming down carefully through the trees. There was not a skike in sight.

Janet and Cromwell were outside the capsule, waiting nervously. They scrambled aboard as soon as the hatch opened. "Come on!" Cromwell was saying. "Get this damn thing in the air. Let's get moving!"

Lipton stared at him with hatred but remained silent.

Doug disabled the controls with a password and said, "We came here for something besides you."

"What?" Janet said. "For Selene? She's still in stasis, nothing's going to bother her."

"Yeah." Doug and Lipton climbed down out of the orbiter without an explanation, and walked over to the capsule. Doug unlocked the door and they entered.

The automed unit was warm, quiet. Inside part of it was Selene, laying in a dreamless, timeless solitude. Both men stood in front of it for a few minutes, then Lipton began taking off his clothes.

The automed held room for one more.

They didn't say anything to each other. They just shook

hands. Lipton climbed in and it cycled shut, and Doug waited around to make sure he went into stasis without any problems. I'll see you again, Doug thought. When Technica comes back, I'll say goodbye. Not now.

He left the capsule, locking the door behind him. Lipton wanted to be with his wife. He wouldn't have survived the next six years without her, knowing she was all alone in this jungle, a thousand kilometers away. Doug had approved. If he'd had Selene for a wife, he would have done the same.

Doug's wife was in the orbiter, waiting. He climbed in and shut the door, and stood staring at her where she sat, far away from Cromwell. He didn't say anything. He hadn't made his mind up about her, yet.

It was Cromwell he spoke to. "I am now in charge," he said.

"That's what you----"

"Shut up!" Doug yelled.

Cromwell blustered. "If you think----"

"Shut up!"

"I am----"

"Shut up!" Doug approached him menacingly. "From now on you do exactly what I say, and right now I want you to keep your goddamned mouth shut."

Cromwell swallowed and looked down at his scuffed shoes. He remained silent. He didn't look up.

Doug returned to the front, unlocked the controls, and sent

the orbiter off toward the sea.



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