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Communion Of Minds  
by Sheila Finch  
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"Someone down there!" Jaz announced.

Greer Yancy leaned toward the forward port to see where the shuttle pilot pointed. "Where?"

Before Jaz could answer, Dedrick shoved her aside and crowded against the pilot's shoulder. He'd already taken off his seat-web, claiming the too-tight webbing dug into his flesh. The man ate shipboard food with as little discrimination as a pig, Greer thought, having sat at table with him for six weeks.

"Don't see anything!" Dedrick complained.

"Two o'clock position. Right in front of those low, bushy things," the pilot said. "Something wrong, though. He's moving peculiar."

She managed to get a glimpse beneath Dedrick's raised arm. They were now skimming the planet's surface at the level of spindly, tree-like growths, over a narrow landing-strip. On the ground in a patch of brilliant sunlight, she saw a figure waving at them. Or maybe shooing them away. The gesture was oddly spastic, open to interpretation. Then the figure broke into a halting run as if he wasn't in complete control of his limbs, darting across the clearing and disappearing into trees.

Greer scanned the surface for ents -- friendly or otherwise. Bridging the chasm between human and alien languages was a routine task for a xenolinguist assigned to a starship, even a freighter like the City of Sao Paulo. Too routine. This rescue mission -- in response to a fragmented distress call the Sao Paulo had picked up -- was the most promising event of a two-year voyage. She braced herself against the seat-web and prepared for touch down.

The shuttle landed, then rolled to the brief line of trees that marked the margin of the sandy clearing. Thin as broomsticks, they rose naked for perhaps thirty feet, then suddenly sprouted spiky tops like fistfuls of scarlet knives, a color so vivid it hurt her eyes. Other than sparse clumps of the neon-hued trees and low, thorny growths resembling purple tangles of barbed wire, the planet was dun-colored. Beautiful in its arid way, she thought, rather like her native Mojave Desert in mid-August.

"Yuck!" Dedrick said. "Who the hell picked this dump for a colony?"

Dedrick was middle-aged, a successful engineer who rated everything on a planet in terms of its suitability for building bridges, dams, aqueducts, hydroelectric power plants. At dinner every night, he'd boasted about disasters and accidents on projects that he'd survived by a combination of skill and nerves.

"Research group," Iversen put in. The fourth member of the hastily assembled rescue team was small, soft-spoken, younger than Greer, a medtech on his first assignment who so far hadn't faced a situation more serious than the upset stomachs of the \_Sao Paulo's\_ crew. "Astronomers and astrophysicists, Library says."

"What'd they do?" Dedrick said sourly. "Run out of sunblock?"

Jaez opened the shuttle's hatch. A blast of hot, dry air hit them, tinged with a rusty, iron smell like blood.

The man who'd waved at them suddenly reappeared. He was over six feet tall and thin to the point of emaciation. His dark hair and beard were long and unkempt, and his clothes looked as if they'd once belonged to someone much shorter. His movements fascinated her. He seemed to be trying to come forward and move back at the same time, each limb obeying a different order and then contradicting it in mid-motion, like someone who'd lost the automatic control functions of his brain and had to move each part by conscious thought.

"Neurological damage," Iversen observed.

"Frigging lunatic!" Dedrick said. "Christ! It's hotter than hell down here."

He pushed past Jaez to stand at the top of the ramp. Jaez muttered under his breath. The veteran pilot's dislike of the engineer had been obvious from the first. Dedrick had insisted his skills would be useful to the crew on this mission. To Jaez's dismay, the captain had agreed.

"H -- H -- Hi!" the tall man said. His mouth worked crazily as he spoke. "Th -- Th -- Thank G -- G -- God that you c -- came! Didn't th -- think m -- message w -- w -- would get -- "

He seemed at war with himself. Trained to pick up the nuances of movement and gesture that reinforced or contradicted speech, meanings skewed out of the ordinary, Greer thought his body struggled to undermine what his tongue wanted to say.

"We're here to help you, pal!" Dedrick stood at the bottom of the ramp, wiping sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. "Tell me what you need."

"Where's everybody else?" the young medtech asked.

"D -- Dead," the man said. "All dead. Th -- Thirty men and w -- w -- women. I -- I -- I am the l -- last -- "

He broke off as if the effort were too great.

"Jesus!" Iversen said.

Jaez moved down the ramp and deliberately placed himself between the tall man and Dedrick. "My God, man! What happened here?"

Now the man shook his head, an alarming gesture that seemed capable of unhinging the head entirely from his neck. "Crops all d -- died. Nothing grew. C -- Can't eat the native f -- f -- "

"Native flora?" Jaez guessed.

"Native viruses a problem?" Iversen asked.

It seemed a good guess to Greer. The reaction the medtech's question provoked startled her.

"N -- N -- No! No! No d -- d -- disease! This -- This is -- Tried to -- Tried to ee -- ee -- eat -- Rats! -- Tried -- "

He stopped suddenly, arms still in mid-gesture, mouth slack. The shuttle's crew stared at him. Seconds blinked by.

Then he moved again, and it was as if they were looking at a different person.

"Sorry," he said, hands relaxed against his hips. "I have these unfortunate -- episodes, for lack of a better word. Name's Jim Sharnov."

After a moment's hesitation, Jaez introduced the team. They stood awkwardly now in the fierce sun, none of them sure what to do first. The talk turned to the colony in trouble.

"We ran out of food. Nothing we brought with us would grow here," Sharnov said. "And our systems didn't tolerate the native vegetation."

"Hostile ents too?" Iversen asked.

"No. No aliens at all."

"That lets you out," Dedrick said to Greer. "Too bad! I'd hoped to get to see you do some work for once."

She knew he was scornful of the Guild's work. Well, so was she right now. She'd expected so much more of her career -- adventure, excitement, a chance to make a difference. How juvenile her ambitions seemed now. The Guild had been too successful; there were no adventures left for a lingster in the Orion Arm. Certainly not one so untalented that she'd graduated bottom of the class.

Something brushed against her shin; she glanced down. A large dog with thin, matted coat and prominent rib cage gazed up at her. It looked sick. She moved a few inches away.

"Where'd that come from?" Jaez asked.

"That's Sammy," Sharnov said. He smiled as if he'd learned to pull up the corners of his mouth but not to experience any emotion behind the gesture. "We weren't supposed to bring pets along, but one of the women smuggled him in her personal luggage. He was only a puppy then, of course."

"Hey -- I like dogs!" Iversen said. But he made no move to touch it.

The dog flopped down on the coarse sand, large amber eyes staring at Greer.

"We brought some food supplies," Jaez said. "Not much, though. Couldn't tell what you might need. But we'll get you a meal right away."

"I'm all right," Sharnov said.

"But you look -- "

"I said I'm all right!"

Jaez opened his mouth to reply. Shut it again.

"So how'd you manage to survive when the others didn't?" Dedrick wanted to know.

Sharnov's mouth pulled sideways in an odd grin. "Guess I'm better at adapting."

"We couldn't see your compound coming in," Iversen said.

"South of here -- about a kilometer. In a larger stand of trees for shade."

The dog whined softly at her. She overcame her reluctance and stroked the fur behind his ears. She'd had plenty of dogs as a child, hybrids most of them, products of domestic bitches in heat and amorous coyotes that roamed the desert she'd grown up in. They'd had a lot to offer that pure-breeds lacked. This dog was about the size of a Labrador, with a short, brindled coat and drooping ears. His eyes were huge and luminous.

"Ought to search for possible survivors anyway," Jaez said. "Iversen, go ahead with Doctor Sharnov. Dedrick -- "

But Dedrick was already striding away with the other two. Jaez muttered at the engineer's retreating back, then opened the cargo hatch and contemplated the meager emergency supplies they'd brought with them. She felt embarrassed for him, but it wasn't her job to put Dedrick in his place.

She strapped on the small field pack that contained the vials of neurotransmitters every Guild lingster used when working. She obviously wasn't going to need it here, but training dictated it not be left behind.

The dog followed her to the compound which was hidden in a denser stand of the broomstick trees; she didn't see it until she was almost on top of it. She doubted the sparse foliage offered much real shade to the small group of low buildings.

When she reached the first hut, Sharnov leaned out the doorway, bowing, the rictus grin on his face again.

"Welcome to my humble home."

Again his oddness prickled. She went past him into the interior where Dedrick and Iversen were inspecting a rumbled printout. The hut contained little other than a folding table where an old computer terminal sat beside a pile of empty dishes. Probably too old to do the work a lingster would need to achieve interface, she thought. Just as well there were no indigenous entities around.

It was cooler in here than outside but not much; the air was stale, carrying the faint traces of decay. Looking up, she saw gaping holes in the roof through which the sun poked arrows of light. Jaz followed her and set down the small crate just inside the doorway.

"Look at this," Iversen said.

"I want you two to make a sweep of this compound," Jaz said. "Make certain there's nobody else here. Don't want to leave anybody behind."

"Take a look at this first!" Iversen pointed to an entry.

"D -- D -- Damned c -- cur!"

Startled, she glanced round in time to see Sharnov kick the dog in the ribs. The mongrel yelped sharply and jumped away from the man's twitching leg.

"G -- G -- Get away from m -- me! Leave m -- m -- me alone!"

Sharnov appeared to be in the throes of a seizure. His entire body spasmed; his mouth opened and shut, gulping air; his eyes rolled back in his head. The dog raced away, tail between his legs, almost knocking down Jaz who still stood in the doorway.

Then the jerking movements stopped. The man turned away from the fleeing dog and spoke almost apologetically.

"He brought fleas with him."

\* \* \* \*

Sharnov was only pretending to eat.

Greer studied him; in the absence of ents, she applied her training to observe this strange human. The scientist held the nutriwafer to his lips, his jaw moved, but she was certain no crumb entered his mouth. She'd heard of starving men lacking strength to eat, but the man who'd aimed that kick hadn't been weak.

"You mentioned 'rats' earlier," she said. "Some kind of little animal?" Sharnov stared at her blankly.

"That's right," Iversen agreed. "When we first got here. You said 'Rats.'"

"You obviously misunderstood," Sharnov said.

The medtech looked as if he were about to say something, then thought better of it.

"There's nothing that big around here," Sharnov said. "A few bugs. Otherwise, not much."

That couldn't be true, she thought. Obviously the dog had found something to keep himself alive when the food ran out.

"Elsewhere, perhaps?" Jaz mused. "In other climate zones?"

"We came to do astrophysics. Not zoology."

Greer watched Sharnov. She was certain she was right: he wasn't actually eating anything. He did, however, reach for a cup of water and lift it to his lips. When he set it down again, his eyes met hers over the empty cup. She'd seen that intense, flat gaze before, in the eyes of saints and lunatics. Which one was he, she wondered?

The hut was a furnace even though the planet's sun now hung low in the sky. No power to run the air conditioner or the computer any more, Sharnov explained. After a while, he excused himself and went outside.

Jaz and Iversen talked over what they'd found so far: Every building in the compound had been ruined except this one. A few steps away, Sharnov had indicated the shallow graves of famine victims. The colonists' logbooks they'd found in other huts corroborated Sharnov's story of unexpected failure of crops brought from home, the experiments with native plants that proved worthless because humans couldn't process alien protein. There were no more survivors.

But most puzzling of all was an entry in one log that hinted the colonists had died by their own hands.

"Maybe they thought that was better than waiting for the inevitable," Jaz suggested.

"Don't like this planet!" Iversen said. "I grew up by the North Sea. Give me snow any day."

"Don't know why they didn't eat the dog," Dedrick observed.

"Shut up!" Jaz said, anger smoldering in his dark eyes.

Iversen interrupted smoothly, defusing the tension rising between the two. "No meat on the dog, anyway. But the sooner we take off the better. Makes my flesh creep down here!"

Jaz was still glowering at Dedrick. "Don't have enough supplies to stay long. But we don't want to miss any important data that might explain what happened here. Let's get going!"

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

Jaz smiled at her. "Not much work here for a lingster, Greer. You're in luck."

The men went outside.

Twilight had spread dull red shadows over the barren ground, pooling like blood in the ruts made by the colony's vehicles and abandoned equipment. Everything was shattered and rusting. A line of radar dishes lurched off into the distance, tilting crazily, broken struts angling. The heat still hammered mercilessly.

Unless a lingster was actively working, Guild rules said, evening was the time to practice the emergency protocols. She'd had a lot of time for practice. Maybe it was time to recognize she'd never amount to much as a lingster. She had no special talents. That was why she'd ended up assigned to a freighter; nobody else wanted her. Maybe it was time to leave the Guild.

The mongrel sat patiently outside Sharnov's hut, first scratching himself, then licking the sore place. Fleas, Sharnov had said. And would they give rise to the same cycle of parasites when their eggs were ingested as they did on Earth? A poster seen in a veterinary office on a long-ago trip with one of the coyote-half-breeds came to her mind, detailing all the stages of mutation from surface flea to intestinal worm. The dog's emaciation suggested worms. Another reason she was reluctant to touch him.

Something crashed to the ground near the hut.

Sharnov stood by the water tank a few yards away from the hut, holding an ax. He appeared to be wrestling with himself. The ax swung wildly, sometimes grazing the edge of the tank, sometimes missing his own leg narrowly. Pipes that had led out of the tank lay broken and scattered over the ground at its base.

"Hey!" She started to run towards him. "What're you doing?"

He got in another swing. The blade rang against metal. Then he jerked to face her.

She slowed, suddenly aware of the non-existent protection of her thin clothing. His body was jittering as if he had a severe case of palsy. Anger and agony skidded across his face in turn.

"Are you all right?"

\_Stupid question!\_ She stood far enough away to run if he should decide to aim the ax at her. The dog growled.

Sharnov shuddered and collapsed to his knees. She ought to call Iversen. But before she could get the medtech's name out, Sharnov pushed himself up again. She stared as he dusted the dirt off his clothes.

Then he gave her that emotionless smile. "Must be the heat."

"Is there -- I mean, there \_must\_ be something wrong?"

"Why do you say that?"

"The way you've been acting. It's obvious something's the matter."

His mouth twitched at one corner. "No."

Iversen and Jaz came running towards them.

"What's up?" Jaz demanded.

"We heard something," Iversen said. "Everything okay?"

"You took a r -- risk, coming d -- down h -- he -- here," Sharnov said. His face muscles twitched.

"Well, yes, but -- " Iversen said.

"Anything could h -- happen. Any th -- thing at all."

"Like what?" Jaz said.

Sharnov didn't answer, but his lips were spasming again. Greer knew his tight mouth was holding in the stuttering voice that gave something away he didn't want known.

"Maybe you'd better let me take a look at you?" the medtech said.

Sharnov stalked away between the ruined buildings of the compound, his gaunt shadow stretching before him.

"What the hell's wrong with that guy?" Jaz said.

"Seems sick, to me," Iversen said, his voice rising. "Maybe we shouldn't be so quick to take him back up until we're sure? What if it's something contagious? I don't have much experience with alien viruses."

Jaz shook his head. "Keep your voice down!"

There was danger here, but she couldn't define its contours. No point in saying anything to Jaz just yet. Sammy whined softly and trotted after her.

The tree trunks were in darkness by the time she arrived at the top of a little rise, only their spikes luminously crimson in the slow sunset. A subtle, quick realignment of shadows caught her eye. At the base of one of the trees something small and shiny black scuttled out of sight. She sat down on the warm earth, resting her back against one of the trees. Sammy lay down with a sigh beside her.

The irony of it was, she'd loved every minute of her xenolinguist training; she just hadn't been very good at it. She'd relished the excitement of the always-present element of danger when an interface opened between alien languages. \_Never let emotion color the interface, the Guild taught. That way lay psychological breakdown. And sometimes, the resulting storm of the unfiltered universe swept the unwary lingster away into madness. One of the first lessons was the emergency protocols. Most lingsters hoped they'd never have to use them; Greer had hoped she would.

She closed her eyes. \_Step One: Let go, let go of fear, let go of anger

....

After a while, she opened her eyes, relaxed and refreshed. Like meditation, practice of the protocols steadied and rested the mind.

Now the land was flooded with grey moonlight from the nearer of the planet's two satellites. From where she sat, she could see the shadowy humps of the compound, and farther away the shuttle. Twilight shrouded its contours.

She sat up; her eyes had caught a gleam in the shuttle's interior. Perhaps Jaz had gone back to fetch something. Whatever it was, the light was extinguished now. Absently, she patted the dog's head.

Although at first she'd been struck by the planet's superficial resemblance to her native desert, it was eerily different at night. In the Mojave, her sensitive ears would've picked up the tiny flutterings of night birds, the squeak of small rodents hunting in darkness, and the soft pad of predators that preyed on them. Here the night was utterly silent.

She jumped as something throbbed. The noise came from the direction of the parked shuttle. Scrambling to her feet, she stared in confusion as the craft suddenly rolled forward, gained speed, then leaped up into the night sky. She stumbled down the little hill towards the compound, the dog at her heels. Thorny bushes whipped her ankles and stung her hands.

Jaz, Iversen and Dedrick stood open-mouthed in the doorway of Sharnov's hut, staring at the vanishing starspeck of the shuttle.

"He left us! He goddamned left us!" Iversen said.

"He won't get far," Jaz said grimly. "I code-locked the nav-com. Force of habit!"

The starspeck went nova as they watched.

\* \* \* \*

The radio transmitter which had beamed the original distress signal up to the \_City of Sao Paulo\_ had been destroyed. They stood in the roofless communications hut at sunrise, staring at the tangled wreckage.

"You're an engineer," Jaz said to Dedrick. "Fix it!"

"How'n hell do I do that? The bastard totalled it!"

"Try!"

"If you hadn't been so goddamned clever locking the nav-com, we wouldn't need a transmitter!"

"Anybody knew anything about shuttles, they'd have known immediately not to take off. How was I to know -- "

"Your captain would've guessed something was wrong the minute that asshole stepped out of the shuttle. Now he'll think we blew ourselves up!"

"It's done now!" Jazez shouted. "We need another solution!"

The day promised to be unbearably hot and the only shelter was Sharnov's hut. Tempers had been getting worse as the sun rose and their desperate situation sank in. Greer wondered how long it would be before they began slugging each other.

"I don't understand why he did it," Iversen said. "Why couldn't he wait?"

"Maybe he thought we'd find out he murdered all the others," Jazez suggested grimly.

"He made damn sure we wouldn't be radioing the news any time soon!" Dedrick muttered.

"Maybe there're parts stashed somewhere," Jazez said. "Or maybe you can cannibalize something."

"I'll do what I can." Dedrick moved irritably about the com-hut, the sour stink of his sweat trailing him. "Don't want to stay down here eating those goddamned nutriwafers!"

"Damn well have to if we don't figure out something before the Sao Paulo leaves orbit," Jazez said.

"It scares me," Iversen said. "You ask me, there's something about this place. Some reason he didn't want to be around when we found out."

Dedrick scowled at the young medtech. "Got to have some organization if we're going to survive. Iversen, you -- "

"Wait a minute," Jazez said. "I have command here."

Dedrick turned his back on the pilot. "Make a ration plan for the food and water, Iversen. Have to be tight. Don't know how long it's going to take me to rebuild a transmitter."

Iversen shook his head glumly but moved out of the hut.

"Yancy, you -- "

Jazez grabbed Dedrick's arm. "Something wrong with your hearing, Dedrick?"

The big man swatted the pilot's hand off as if it were a fly and looked at Greer. "You take search detail. Round up anything -- absolutely anything! -- we could use. Don't bother your pretty little blonde head second-guessing. Just bring it all to me."

"Ignore that, Greer!" Jazez said. "I'll give the orders."

"How're your building skills, Jazez? Can a pilot patch a roof? Could be here for a while. Going to need better shade."

Jazez swung at him but missed as the engineer stepped away.

She caught Jazez's arm as he prepared to try again. "Arturo! Let's just get on with surviving until someone comes for us."

Jazez scowled but followed her advice, leaving her alone with Dedrick.

She gave Dedrick a hard stare. "You're not making the best use of your personnel, Dedrick."

"How's that?"

"Someone ought to be hunting up new sources of water."

"This is a desert, Yancy, in case you haven't noticed."

"I understand a hydroengineer might find it hopeless. But these plants are getting water somewhere. Probably underground sources."

He gazed at her. "Think you can find 'em?"

She nodded.

"So what're you waiting for? I'll take scavenger detail. Maybe I'll find something useful."

Sammy was outside again, waiting. He walked beside her as she set off

towards a clump of trees.

\* \* \* \*

The food ran out on the fourth day, in spite of Iversen's careful rationing. Greer suspected Dedrick had something to do with that.

Dedrick had given up trying to repair the transmitter and the generator, both smashed to pieces along with the contents of the huts and the buildings themselves. "\_Looks like they had a war going on here,"\_ Jaz had commented. "\_Can't see how starving people had the strength to do something like this."\_ "\_Or why,"\_ Iversen had put in. The younger man's face was grey, the skin stretched taut over his bones with strain.

She sat in the sparse midday shade of the punctured water tank, trying to keep distance between herself and Dedrick. Sammy lay at the edge of the shade. Apparently he didn't suffer from the sun's burning rays as much as she did. She watched him absently scratch one ear. Something that had bothered her when she first met the skeletal dog came back into her mind. He continued to live while the colonists had died.

"Sammy? Are you catching rats?" Maybe if there was something on this planet he could eat, they could too.

The dog swivelled a long ear to listen to her, but his gaze was off into the distance.

"Yancy!"

Dedrick stood over her, sweating profusely. He was holding her fieldpack in one hand.

"These work like vitamins? Got to eat something."

"Give them back, Dedrick. They're not food."

"Yeah? Well I've heard what you lingsters take when you're working. Maybe a few psychedelics would help pass the time."

"You're a fool. They'd kill you."

"Rather I ate the dog? Going to have to, some day soon."

As if he understood Dedrick's words, Sammy growled.

"Maybe you should build some traps. Catch the rats that Sammy's obviously eating."

"What rats? Nothing like that here. Sharnov said so."

"He had to be wrong. Sammy's eating \_something\_ -- "

"Dogs like that don't need much food. Had hounds when I was a kid. Used to forget to feed 'em for days. They managed."

Stay calm, she told herself. Anger only depleted her limited energy.

"You could at least \_try.\_"

"What you want me to put in 'em, once I get 'em built? Cheese?" He tossed the pouch away and slouched off.

She heard the crack of glass as the pouch spilled its contents on the ground.

\* \* \* \*

The traps Dedrick built out of salvaged scraps and baited with insects and bits of vegetation stayed empty.

On Iversen's advice, they conserved energy by moving around as little as possible. If they had to go out in the daytime, they covered their heads and bodies in blankets and cloths stripped from the abandoned huts. At midday on the eighth day, they were lying in Sharnov's hut, hardly able to breathe because of the stifling heat full of body odors, but glad for shelter from the burning sun. Dedrick had rolled up his bush jacket to support his head, revealing dark patches of sweat under his armpits.

"Damn!" Dedrick said. "I can taste roast beef."

"An enchilada -- that's what I crave," Jaz said.

"Baked potato with butter and sour cream and chives."

"Or perhaps a tamale -- "

They'd rapidly exhausted the meager amount of water she'd been able to find. If she could summon the strength, she should go back out into the desert and search again. The surface might be baked rock-hard, but like the Mojave, there had to be underground sources that fed the broomstick trees and the

barbed-wire shrubs. Her father had taught her the basic elements of survival when she was young, a necessary skill for a kid who'd thought the desert was her own backyard.

Jaez stirred. "Where's Iversen?"

"Who the hell cares?" Dedrick muttered.

The pilot's anxiety infected her. She tried to remember when she'd last seen Iversen. Soon after sun-up, she decided, when she'd awakened from a dream of eating in the refectory of the Guild's Mother House on Earth -- mounds of crusty bread -- sweet butter -- creamy cheeses -- apples and pears piled high in a polished wooden bowl. The young medtech had been sitting up beside her, staring out the door at the red-streaked dawn sky. \_"They're not coming back for us,"\_ he'd said. \_"Captain'll think we died in the shuttle explosion."\_

Jaez struggled to sit up, disturbing the dog as he did. Sammy had taken to lying with them in the hut, his head by her feet.

"Ought to kill that dog and roast it," Dedrick grumbled, his eyes following the dog out of the hut into the blast of sunlight. "Lot of people consider dog meat a delicacy."

"Shut up!" Jaez said.

"Marrow in the bones should be good."

Jaez scrambled to his knees. "Gotta find Iversen."

"Wait until the sun goes down, Arturo," she advised.

"May be too late. He could die -- "

"So could you."

"Let him go," Dedrick said. "One less to feed."

The pilot shot him a look of pure hatred. But he lay back down beside her and they both drowsed off again. This time she dreamed of roast goose and baked apples with cream -- midwinter celebration in the snowbound Mother House.

At nightfall, they found Iversen's body just outside the wrecked shell of the communications hut, his wrists slit. Dried blood caked the ground where he lay, a scalpel in his fingers. Dedrick pried it loose.

\* \* \* \*

Back in the hut, Jaez and Dedrick argued about the need to bury Iversen. Bugs would do the job in time, Dedrick said. Hours later, he got up and went outside.

She lay with her head at the door of the hut, watching the first blood-stained fingers of dawn on the horizon. To take her mind off the death that waited for her, she thought about the planet and the doomed colony. There was a puzzle here whose solution -- if she could only fit the pieces together -- would yield a way out. It was hard to concentrate, she felt so weak and exhausted.

The dog licked her hand. It was comforting to have him playing the role of friend and protector canines had assumed since the beginning of history. Sammy scratched himself vigorously. Fleas, she thought. And rats. Rats carried fleas and fleas carried the Black Plague. Was that the answer? Had the colony died of some unknown plague? But Sharnov denied it was disease that killed them.

Something about the dog. One of the puzzle pieces. He'd been little more than skin and bones when she first saw him. But he seemed no worse now. How was he managing to stay alive?

"Arturo," she said. "Have you ever seen this dog hunting?"

Jaez mumbled something. Alarmed, she glanced at the pilot. He was in bad shape, his brown face turning yellow. But he managed a feeble grin as she raised her water container to his lips.

"He has to be finding something to eat, but I never see him do it."

As if he understood her words, Sammy slapped his tail against the dusty floor of the hut.

A shadow fell over her head. She glanced up and saw Dedrick in the doorway. Immediately, the dog's hackles rose and he crouched beside her as if ready to spring at the man's throat.

"Bugs got him already. He was crawling with 'em." Dedrick said.  
"Couldn't use a damn thing."

"What you ... talking ... 'bout?" Jaz said, his voice a painful wheeze from a parched throat.

"Stupid to let it go to waste."

Then she saw what he was holding in his left hand. She screamed.

The engineer looked down at Iversen's severed hand that he was holding by the thumb. Clotted blood showed at the wrist, but it had been cleanly cut. The medtech's scalpel glinted in the top pocket of Dedrick's bush jacket.

"Long bones would've been better." Dedrick swayed tiredly on his feet as he spoke. "Supposed to taste like pork. This is pretty dry. Couldn't get the bugs off the rest of him."

Jaz struggled up. "You ... sick bastard!"

Dedrick tossed Iversen's hand aside. "He stank already. Better to use fresh."

She suddenly realized he'd been holding his right arm behind his back. She struggled to her knees just as the hand came slowly round, shaking with effort. Dedrick had a laser-gun.

"Where you ... get ... that?" Jaz croaked, his eyes wide.

"Found it. Under the floor in one of the huts. Just didn't tell you about it."

"Put it ... down!" Jaz ordered.

"Found something else. Transponder they hadn't smashed up. Works, too. Somebody'll pick up its signal, sooner or later. Just got to stay alive until then."

"How ... gonna ... do that?"

"Got to eat," Dedrick said.

A brilliant sliver of light streaked across her retinas. The dog howled. When she recovered, she saw Jaz sprawled at Dedrick's feet. Now the engineer had the scalpel in his hand.

"Arturo!"

"Save your breath." Dedrick tore the pilot's thin uniform tunic. "He was on the way out anyway. Anybody could see that." He went to work with the scalpel. "Liver's the best part for quick energy."

She turned away just in time to prevent herself from vomiting all over Jaz's body.

\* \* \* \*

"Got to build a fire and cook this meat before it spoils," Dedrick said later. "Soon as the day cools off."

She didn't answer him. She was sitting on the floor in a corner, knees hugged tight to her chin, feeling numb, drifting in and out of sleep. The cloyingly sweet smell of fresh meat hung in the still air.

Sammy huddled beside her, his eyes following every move Dedrick made.

His meal seemed to have revived the engineer's strength. "Don't know why you're so squeamish. The Incas used to eat the liver and heart of their enemies. Or was it the Aztecs? Didn't taste too bad. A bit strong. More like old moo-cow than beef cattle."

She covered her ears.

"You do what you've got to do to survive."

"I'd rather die!"

"You won't have much choice. I'm just trying to help."

He sat down across from her. Sammy growled and she tightened her fingers in his matted coat.

"We could've started with the dog," Dedrick observed. "But there's not much meat on it."

Her fingers felt tendons in the dog's shoulder moving, the fur on his neck rising.

"So we would've ended up at this point anyway."

"Why don't you shut up?"

He turned a puzzled expression towards her. "I don't get your problem,

lady. I'm aiming to get us out of here alive. But it's going to take time, and meanwhile we need to eat. Jaz was dying anyway. You got a better idea?"

The dog trembled under her fingers, every muscle taut with concentration. She glanced down at him and the yellow eyes turned to gaze back at her.

She could have sworn she heard him say, *\_Wait.\_*

Hunger was already causing hallucinations, she thought wildly. She had to stay rational. She dug her fingernails deep into her palms, the pain shocking her out of the dream-like state she'd been drifting into. She took several deep breaths and considered the situation.

Dedrick had found a transponder that worked. For a moment, she felt almost hopeful. Then reality set in again: She was already severely weakened -- But she could never bring herself to touch human flesh -- So she'd be dead by the time a ship came.

If one ever did.

Dedrick stood up. He leaned over her. "I'm going out to collect wood for a fire. If you change your mind, I left some meat already cut up."

Sammy stood too, growling, daring him to touch Greer.

"Forget it, mutt!" Dedrick gazed at Greer for a moment. "I never cared for nuns anyhow."

The dog snarled.

"Ought to shoot that thing right now." His hand moved to his belt where he'd stuck the gun.

Sammy leaped at his throat.

He screamed and went down under the dog. The gun slid out of his grasp and clattered on the floor. Dedrick and the dog rolled over and over as if they were playing. She pulled herself out of shock and reached for the gun which lay a few feet from her hand.

"Get the fucking thing off -- "

The words turned into a sickening gurgle. She stood up, holding the gun with both hands. The engineer and the dog lurched against Jaz's partially dismembered body. The dog was shaking the man like a terrier with a rat.

She closed her eyes. Forced herself to open them again. Aimed --

Before she could fire, there was a small sigh -- And Dedrick's head flopped back, the neck broken. He lay still, next to the body of his victim. The dog pulled away and shook himself. Drops of blood flew off his jaws and splattered the wall.

She thought she was going to vomit again, but there was nothing left in her stomach to come up.

\* \* \* \*

She woke from a dream of eating trout her father had caught on a camping trip when she was ten. The taste of fish remained on her tongue. She could still smell the wood smoke, still feel the warmth of the campfire.

She was sitting against the wall, legs stretched in front of her. Sammy sat beside her, his breath warm on her cheek as she opened her eyes.

"Eat me," the dog said. His mouth didn't move.

She'd gone beyond hallucination. She was dying.

The dog tilted his head, ears alert as if she'd spoken aloud. "Not necessary to die," he said. "Eat me. Gain strength. Wait to be rescued."

"What -- are you?" Her voice croaked in her dry throat.

The big mongrel bared his teeth in a canine smile. "Friend!"

She groaned and closed her eyes. Almost instantly sleep pulled her back to the frying fish.

When she woke again, it was evening in the hut and the dog had moved a little way off. He sat upright, paws placed neatly together, staring at her. Something glinted on the floor in the twilight and she lowered her head to look.

The scalpel lay by her feet.

She snatched her feet away and hugged her knees as if the thing would burn.

"I offer a way."

"Dogs can't talk!"

The dog blinked slowly at her but said nothing.

"I'm delirious -- because I'm starving."

Imaginary conversation with a dog was more exhausting than she would've supposed. The dog was an alien, she thought. No -- the alien was a dog --

It didn't matter. Sleep dragged her down again.

When she woke, she had no idea how much time had passed. She felt as if her head were stuffed with something grey and sticky. Thoughts came in slow motion. It took effort just to look down. The scalpel was lying right under her fingertips. Without thinking, she closed her fingers over it. Then she looked at Sammy. He returned her gaze steadily.

At the other side of the hut, the pilot's body was crawling with long, metallic grey bugs. She didn't look to see if this was happening to Dedrick too. Her gorge rose at the thought.

She had to do something to stay sane. Think! she told herself.

Think, if you want to get out of this alive!

Something had happened to the scientists in this colony. They'd gone mad, smashed everything around them to pieces, then they'd killed themselves. Sharnov had acted as if he were mad, but Sharnov hadn't died. There was a missing piece.

Thinking exhausted her. She leaned her head back against the wall and stared at the patched ceiling of the hut. The pattern of twilight and purple shadow looked like a grape vine loaded with fruit. Memory served up the taste of their thick, sweet juice to torment her.

Something moved in a dark corner of the hut. Paused. Scuttled away. She caught sight of a stubby grey body, long snout, no visible ears, an extra pair of legs. No tail. Sammy growled.

The hut now held the cloying smell of two rapidly decomposing bodies. She would have to do something soon before the rats ate them.

But her mind veered off on another tangent. Aliens reproduced in all manner of ways. Some she'd seen needed a host to nurture their young, like the Terran spider that laid her eggs in a live but immobilized wasp. If the colonists had been used like the wasp -- but not immobilized -- it might explain the destructive spree they went on before they died.

It would be so easy to go to sleep ... slip quietly away ...

The smell of frying bacon filled the hut -- She shook herself awake again. She saw the faces of famine victims on a war-ravaged planet, sitting apathetically by a dusty road, ribs poking out from the skin, eyes glazed and sunken. It had never occurred to her that in their minds they might fantasize about food.

Sammy licked her face. She forced herself to sit up straighter. There had to be a way out of this. She had to survive until a ship came.

Her hand still grasped the scalpel.

She looked at Sammy. He scratched vigorously for a moment, then sat motionless, eyes huge as moons in the dim light, staring at her. She thought of the poster: Fleas eating tapeworm eggs, dogs swallowing flea eggs, larvae infesting their tissues, tapeworms developing in the intestines, eggs excreted to be eaten by fleas, starting the cycle all over again. Dogs were the unwilling hosts in this progression of parasites.

If a particularly malignant parasite had invaded the colonists, the result might well be madness -- a desire to wreck everything in sight -- until death occurred.

But Sharnov didn't die -- Somehow, he'd hung on to a shred of sanity long enough to plan his escape -- And he didn't need to eat --

It didn't matter. She wasn't going to live long enough to tell anybody what had happened. She was dying.

Sammy whined softly at her. The surgical knife was cool under her fingers. Eat me, she'd hallucinated Sammy saying. Man's best friend giving his life willingly so that a human might live. She felt sick with misery.

She pushed herself slowly onto her knees, legs trembling under her, willing the muscles to work. She had to choose: starve to death before a starship picked up the signal and came to investigate, or do the unspeakable.

The dog watched her crawling towards him, neither fear nor curiosity in his gaze.

"I'm sorry -- I have to do this -- "

But as soon as the scalpel touched the dog's fur, she couldn't go on. She sat down on the floor, crying weakly, her arms around his shoulders. Sammy nuzzled her cheek.

\_You got a better idea?\_ Dedrick had asked.

Maybe tomorrow.

Tomorrow she'd be too weak to lift the scalpel at all.

She rolled slowly onto her knees. "I love you," she said. "Forgive me."

He didn't bark or howl as she stabbed him, thrusting the scalpel deep between the ribs. He only let out a sigh as he slumped to the floor, as if something tortured had been set free.

\* \* \* \*

It was hard to get the first mouthful of still warm flesh down, hard to ignore the iron stench of blood. But she managed it. Her jaw ached as she chewed, and her dry throat gagged as she swallowed. The meat was tough, stringy, strong-flavored. Her stomach reacted violently to the first swallow, rejecting it, but she persisted until something stayed down.

She concentrated on the idea that Sammy had wanted this, that it hadn't been a hallucination, that he'd somehow offered himself as a sacrifice so that she might live. In return, she ate reverently, as if she were taking communion.

She felt the alien presence in her stomach almost at once. Something live grew, hatched --

She went berserk with terror -- kicking the remains of the dog's corpse -- screaming till her throat hurt -- banging her fists and her head against the wall till a hole appeared. This must've been the way the colonists felt, smashing their equipment in rage and horror. Making war on themselves. Slaughtering themselves rather than live with the consequences of what they'd done.

Sharnov -- at least the part that was still sane -- had tried to tell them that the starving colonists had eaten "rats." And so of course had the dog. The spider and flea analogies had been false. This was a symbiot that needed to co-exist with its host not kill it, moving up the food chain as it was eaten and then taking over its host.

She'd been right about him the first time -- the insane and the holy were both inhabited by an alien power. But humans had a terror of being possessed. The horror of her situation overwhelmed her again.

She had another thought. The dog had eaten the alien and not gone mad. She willed herself to stay calm and think this through.

One good thing emerged in the aftermath of eating: her strength was coming back. It didn't exhaust her any more just to think. She sat quietly, anguish and terror ebbing away in the face of the inevitable, the irremediable. What she'd done could not be undone, but she knew now she wasn't going to die unless it were by her own hand.

And if her suspicions about the way this alien somehow altered its host's body chemistry to use photosynthesis were correct, she wouldn't need to eat any more of Sammy's carcass. She wouldn't need to eat anything ever again.

Lingsters handled situations as bad as this in difficult interface. She'd been taught to face the unfiltered universe and survive. There just hadn't been a need to use that training until now. The resolve to survive calmed her. Fear ebbed slowly away.

She wasn't prepared for the alien's arrival in her mind.

Panic struck at the first tickle of utter otherness that slid through her thoughts.

Her Self tangled -- smothered -- She struggled to hold on -- Something crawled slowly through every cell of her body -- undulating along the nerve pathways --

The alien was sentient. She wasn't prepared for this. She was going insane.

\_Never let emotion color the interface.\_

She dragged herself back from the brink of terror. She couldn't give up now. She had to be alive when the transponder's signal reeled in a passing starship. There must be a way to survive with the alien inside without losing herself. The dog's simpler consciousness had allowed him to host the alien without going mad.

The Guild had given her a life-raft. She would use it.

She began to recite the emergency protocols.

\_Step One: Let go of anger\_. Clear the mind so the alien couldn't mount its ambush from the undergrowth of her emotions. And in the clarity that emerged there'd be a solution, a way to co-exist, to survive.

\_Let go of anger. Let go of fear.\_

Pain lanced through her head -- Chaos loomed -- void --

\_Step Two: Let go of thought.\_

Something cold slithered -- engulfing -- Something ripped -- burst --

\_Rise above.\_

\_Let go of Self.\_

The ground opened -- swallowed her -- suffocating -- roaring -- She raised her arms -- shot up into light.

\_Step Three: Hold the image.\_

The shockwave smacked into her. Neon colors raged out of her eyeballs -- Images for which there were no human correlation --

The tide went out. Chaos ebbed.

\_Hold fast the image.\_

Slowly, the tangled nightmare softened, pain fell away, the storm passed and calm returned. Her heartbeat slowed. She would endure. Every day she would wrestle this thing and endure. Human and alien.

Hybrid.

She thought of the hybrids she'd known in her childhood. They'd been strong, the best of both breeds.

She sat on the floor of the hut, staring out at the pink dawn sky shot with acid yellow rays of the rising sun. The alien was a survivor too. To wage war on the alien would kill them both, as the colonists had learned.

They would survive together now until a ship found its way here, no matter how long that took. Every day they'd have to compromise. She'd learn how to integrate the alien consciousness with the human till there was something new, better than each alone. Together, they would forge a communion of minds.

And then they'd go home to the Guild.

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