

# A Greater Vision

by Sean McMullen

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The seven thousand foot hull of the Kondolae was nearly submerged, no more than a dark, smooth, undulating shoal in the glow before sunrise. With great, gentle gulps its two hundred foot mouth pumped water down the tubular muscle that was its hull, rippling contractions of polymer-braced collagen matting squeezing it along until it was vented, slightly warmer with the waste heat from thirty fusion power plants. It was named after the giant hunter of the Dreamtime who had been transformed into a whale.

The Kondolae was a long way north of its Antarctic harvesting area, where it could dilate the ridge along its back into a tube two thousand feet across to swallow icebergs for the meltworks in the south of Australis. It had been assigned to special duties for ten years now, awaiting the incident that would transform it from a powered ice barge into a shaper of history.

A small area of the deck slowly bulged up, then gaped open with a creaking like hemp rope being stretched. Three figures in dark environment suits stepped out onto the rubbery, undulating deck, then the hump closed and subsided. Wavelets washed around their feet, and from a distance it would have seemed as if they were standing on the water in the middle of the open ocean.

Nunga had been flown out to meet the Kondolae only a week earlier, once it had become obvious that the big submarine would really have to be used. He had the status of Counciliar Overseer, and he would be in charge of operations once the decision to strike had been made. That decision was not his, however. It belonged to Wirana, the wild card among the vessel's crew of nine hundred. She was the tactical navigator.

Nunga was in his late forties, and was full of the drive and aggression so common in those newly installed in positions of power. Mudati had been a captain for two decades. Nunga dyed a few individual strands of his black beard grey, to give an impression of age and authority. Mudati's hair and beard flared from the collar of his environment suit like a white halo.

"When will dilation start?" asked Nunga. "The breeze is gentle, it's perfect weather for the fog generators to raise a screen."

"There's plenty of time," replied Wirana, deferential but firm.

"We don't have time. We have between five and eight days, depending on the wind and the use that our quarry makes of it. This vessel takes a full day to dilate to maximum diameter."

"Premature dilation would be unwise," Mudati advised. "It would slow our progress and strain the power-plants."

"But if we strike at once we'll not have to move for more than a single day under full dilation. Tomorrow, just before dawn. That would be ideal."

"There are still six hundred miles before contact," Wirana said, then turned to stare out to sea.

Mudati considered the two opinions for a moment, then announced his decision. "I'm not convinced that there's any need to strike at all. I remember when we were shadowing Fernam Dulmo's fleet six years ago. The Elder's observer used the same arguments that you do, but the threat came to nothing."

Nunga folded his arms and scowled, his back to the dawn.

"Dulmo was just a cipher. This is different."

"The answer is no-- for now. Wirana, when do you think we might strike?"

"Perhaps in four nights, but no earlier."

"Four nights!" exclaimed Nunga.

"Nothing less."

Nunga trod the hatch stud, and the hatchway bulged clear of the water then stretched open. He stamped down the steps without taking his leave of either the captain or navigator. Mudati and Wirana were now alone under the brightening sky.

"He'll be onto the satellite link to complain about me just as soon as he reaches his cell," said Wirana. Mudati stood beside her then pointed up at Jupiter.

"This is your last quarter with us before you go there," he stated rather than asked. Wirana nodded.

"I'll be shuttled to lunar orbit about midsummer, to spend a few months of accustomisation aboard the Wondibingi before we leave for Jupiter."

"You should do well. In your two years' trial aboard this vessel you have been a model officer, well-suited to long voyages in isolation. How long is the Jupiter voyage?"

"Nine years, all up. I'll be forty four when I return."

"Ten years at the Academem, three years on the Lunar Orbit Assembler, three on the moon, two years of isolation experience with us-- your whole life has been a build-up to Jupiter."

Wirana looked up at Jupiter, gleaming brightly not far from Mars. "It's a chance to be first, to walk on the frontier. That's enough to gamble a life upon."

"How would you feel if it was cancelled?"

She looked down at the water swirling about their feet. "I know what you are leading to, Captain."

"Well then, explain. Why are you going out of your way to antagonise Nunga?"

"If he flings himself under my feet, he'll be stepped on."

"That's no answer. He's been mentioning you in his reports."

"He does not understand the frontier," she said slowly, looking now at the distant sails of the nao and its two attendant caravels. "Admiral Colombo and his crews have performed nothing short of a miracle to get as far as this, yet Nunga... you heard what he said, he called him the quarry, as if he was hunting a crocodile. People like to turn their enemies into *things* before they destroy them. That's what Nunga is doing."

"But nobody is going to be destroyed."

"Not bodies, not even souls, but something far more vital." She kicked at the swirling water. "I'm sorry, I should not be talking like this. It's not your fault. I feel... so isolated, like those men on the ships. I wish that they could have their discovery."

"And what would follow? Dozens more ships, hundreds, thousands, and on every ship hundreds of ravaging freebooters in search of easy gold, slaves and conquest."

"Conquest of what? Civilisations that practice human sacrifice?"

"Which the ancestors of these men were practising only two thousand years earlier. If it comes to that, need I remind you of what is going on in Europe at this very moment in the name of their religion? Their religion ignores the Land, they degrade the soil, drive species to extinction and torture their own kind. Not one of those ships has a soil chamber on board."

"So what happened in Australis after we arrived? Where is our megafauna? What happened to our coniferous forests?"

"But we learned, Wirana. Now it's our duty to teach but we're not ready, we need time and resources to turn their whole society around. Our planners never dreamed that they would develop so fast."

They had been through it all before, and it was not even a matter of convincing Wirana. They stood together, looking out after the little ships, waves washing over their feet with the undulations of the submarine's muscles. Colombo was on the frontier, somewhere that Wirana would be soon, yet she had to name the time to take his frontier away from him. She despised herself for it.

Mudati raised his binoculars and stared at the ships for a while. "Most of their journey is behind them now. Their ships are bearing up well, and the weather's good. They're rigged for speed. The birds flying about them should suggest that land is close, and its direction."

"I know, and there's been weed and flotsam in the water for days now. He must be certain of landfall, he'll not give up."

"If you're sure of that, why not advise me to begin dilation at once and get it over with?"

"Why not? To... allow him a little longer on his frontier, perhaps. I don't know."

The caravel Nina was ahead, being faster than the other two ships. Suddenly there was a puff of smoke, followed by a dull blast.

"They've seen us--" Wirana began, but Mudati held up his hand.

"No, that lombard was only fired as a signal. See there, a standard being unfurled at the Nina's masthead. A sign that land has been sighted."

"Impossible. They're still days away from the nearest island."

"True, but Admiral Colombo has undoubtedly offered a reward for the first man to sight land. I'm surprised that there have not been more false alarms already."

The Nina began to trim sail, to let the other ships catch up. Other signal flags were being hoisted now.

"I asked you and Nunga to come out here to try to bring you closer to the men on those ships," Wirana said as Mudati turned back to the hatchway. "I wanted Nunga to stop turning them into things. Is there anything wrong in that?"

"No. Are you coming below now?"

"In a minute or two."

She spent the time alone on the frontier that was not hers, watching the distant ships and looking up at Jupiter from time to time. Nobody questioned the need to strike, and as the tactical navigator it was up to her to name the moment. An atrocity awaited her signal. At last the edge of sun's disk blazed into view on the horizon, and Wirana descended into the submarine.

\* \* \*

Seafaring was an old tradition with Mudati's people. Sixty thousand years earlier they had built humanity's first rafts and crossed the waterways of the East Indies to discover and settle Australis. They had never lost their technological lead, even though their society had been inward looking for a very long time. Twenty thousand years before the Ziggurat was built at Ur, an Aboriginal philosopher had built the first steam engine. During the last ice age another had analysed ore from what had been called sickness country, and within a few centuries the refined uranium from that ore was used to drive their first nuclear powered trains and ships.

All the while the rest of the world made halting progress from nomadic hunting to Neolithic farming, and soon the first cities were raised on the land of the Middle East. As the Phoenician ships of Pharaoh Nechos II circumnavigated Africa, the first Aboriginal rocket thundered into space from the east coast of Australis.

In general the Aboriginals studied and monitored the rest of humanity with detached interest. Beyond Australis the progress of technology and civilisation had been much slower, but over the last three thousand years some new and frightening trends had been observed. Civilisations rose and fell in mere centuries, reaching unheard of levels of sophistication during their brief flowerings. Computer models predicted that there was a point at which the headlong leaps in progress would become self-sustaining, and would race past the painstaking progress of the Australis people in mere centuries. All that was needed was a new frontier.

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The Kondolae surfaced again at dusk, two miles in the wake of Cristoforo Colombo's fleet. The sea was smooth, with a light breeze. Wirana was in the chartcell when Nunga came in to check the status of the ships. He always verified her figures himself.

"Ideal sailing weather," Wirana remarked, trying to be pleasant.

Nunga just grunted. "Moonrise in a few hours, and clear skies."

For some moments he examined a trail of winking lights on the electronic wall chart, then picked up a monitor frame and studied it carefully.

"They've altered course twenty four degrees, they're steering straight for the closest islands. How could he have known?"

"From the flight of the birds," replied Wirana, weary of his visits by now.

"How would you know? You use computers and satellites to navigate."

"But I studied the history of navigation for this assignment. If I was navigating for Colombo's fleet I'd take the present course."

"He's good," said Nunga grudgingly. "If anyone can do it, Columbus can."

Wirana folded her arms and stared into the glowing screens, each with a different representation of the little ships and their status. She sensed a softening in Nunga, and almost without thinking she tried to build on it.

"Exploration is a precarious business," she said. "I feel sorry for all those men, so far into the unknown on those frail, tiny ships while we're down here, eating marinated crocodile steaks and drinking macadamia mash brandy."

Nunga scowled, and turned from the screen to stare her down.

"We have had our trials too. Narabinda lost half of his expedition in the cold, grey dust of the Moon while the Romans were having orgies and chariot races. My grandfather died when the tenth Mars probe crashed into the red deserts while Columbus was at his mother's breast. When the Wondibingi arrives at Jupiter *you* will be in danger too, from sulphur volcanoes and showers of radioactive particles. There's no reason to sympathise with the men on those ships. They may be very brave-- "

"Death from the dangers of the frontier is honourable. Being smothered by the obscene lie that this ship is about to commit is something else. We're prostituting sixty thousand years of medical and technical progress."

Nunga scuffed the sand overlay of the decking, unsure of whether to persuade or attack.

"It simply has to be this way. What you refer to as an obscene lie is the only chance for our world. If we just make Colombo's fleet vanish, others will try. They have to be convinced that there is nothing out here. Otherwise they will race out of control before we can educate them to develop in harmony with the Land."

"But we're enslaving the soul of their people."

"If they are given a huge, rich frontier just now they could well overtake us within five hundred years."

"Impossible!"

"No, eminently possible. Consider their muskets, falconets and lombards. Even though we had invented black powder rockets before the last ice age, these people invented guns before us. What weapon might they develop with nuclear power?"

"Why none, it's not practical. The smallest possible nuclear bomb would wipe out a city. How could you have the capitulation welcome and the reconciliation festival after a battle if all your enemies are dead?"

"They don't have those traditions, they never have. They have no honour, no ethics, they'd stoop to tactics that we would never dream of using."

She did not agree, and she did not reply. The conversation was annoying her, and she wanted Nunga to leave.

"They will take about four days to reach land," she said. "What else do you want to know?"

"Nothing. That means we must strike now, while the ocean is still deep enough to conceal us."

"There's a good depth almost to the islands."

"Act now! They're nine-tenths of the way across, it's obvious that they will reach the islands. If they had sailed in a more southerly direction they would have reached land already. They'll do it, there's no doubt at all."

"I want to know that he *could* succeed, even if he does not. Until I know that I'll not recommend dilation to begin."

Nunga raised his eyes to the ribs of the ceiling. "Of all the irrational, stupid-- I'm going to report this to the Elders! Six hundred of my specialist medical elders are being kept waiting on your whims. It's costing a fortune."

"If I let a bureaucrat like you frighten me, I'd be unfit for the Jupiter flight."

"Jupiter? You'll not even return to the moon, I'll see to it."

On the following day Admiral Colombo ordered his ships to steer west by north. The gigantic submarine and its own fleet of attendant submarettes also changed direction.

"He has doubts," reported Wirana at the quarter day review meeting. "Colombo has changed course to miss the closest islands."

"The mainland is still ten days away," agreed Mudati, "and the Gulf Stream will give him a strong northward vector. This may be the turning point, he may give up and turn east for home."

Nunga frowned but could do nothing but agree. Colombo could make his name immortal, but only if there was a strike. He was dependent on the Italian adventurer's whims, and he hated it.

The fleet was soon back on a west-south-west course, but the brief deviation had suggested that Admiral Colombo was uncertain. The main directive in Mudati's charter was the avoidance of intervention, so the mariners were to be given every chance to fail by themselves. The next day was a disaster, however. A good breeze took the ships a record distance for the voyage. Wirana nervously eyed the depth-sounder as the sea floor sloped up with the continental shelf. The Kondolae needed a depth of 2000 feet to navigate safely when fully dilated and submerged.

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Aboriginal history had its atrocities, but had generally been marked by steady, carefully thought out progress based on a love of their land. The Kondolae had taken decades to build, grow and shape, and was by now centuries old, typical of their approach to industry and technology. Mudati was the hereditary captain, the ninth so far. Their cities were numerous but not large, and they merged in with the landscape. Columbus could have sailed all the way around the Australis coast without noticing anything more than unusual rock formations, yet there was an advanced civilisation there. It was a civilisation with sixty thousand years of written history, and an advanced technology that had been blended into the land, rather than gouged out of it.

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Early in the evening Nunga called a meeting of all senior officers in the navigation cell, and arranged a satellite hook-up with the Elders Counciliar back in Australis. One wall screen displayed a transmission from the eye-cameras of a robotic albatross flying high over the ships. Their sails were trimmed for the strong wind, and they were moving fast.

"This is the greatest distance that they have sailed in one day for the whole voyage," thundered Nunga, partly for the benefit of the Counciliar Elders, whose heads were holographs behind transceiver screens. "We have to act now, we're probably too late already. The Captain is in flagrant violation of the charter for this voyage, and Navigator Wirana should be dismissed at once for gross negligence."

He sat down on the red sand of the floor. Wirana stood up.

"The ships cannot possibly reach land tomorrow, but will definitely sight some island the following day," she said firmly, addressing the screens rather than Nunga.

"You admit it!" spluttered Nunga, but the Captain motioned him to be silent.

"The Nina's lookouts will be able to see the trees of one of the islands around noon on what they call October 12th, if the present course is held." From the corner of her eye she saw Nunga's mouth begin to open, but she was ahead of him. "Thus tonight is the perfect time to begin dilation of the ice chamber. It will take a day to dilate and tomorrow evening will be the best time to strike."

For a moment Nunga was too shocked to respond. Victory at last, but victory too late. Captain Mudati allowed himself a little grin as he tapped a key to call the control node cell.

"Commence dilation at once, on my authority," he ordered.

Nunga got to his feet, fists clenched. "It's too late, they'll sight land before we are ready to strike. *One* change of course will throw our tactical navigator's calculations out. The whole *point* of this venture is to

prevent them seeing land."

"Your experience Captain?" asked an Elder.

"In that case we'll be forced to kill them in the conventional sense, and Navigator Wirana will have the deaths of ninety men on her conscience."

Wirana was shaken, but did not show it.

"Tomorrow night will be perfect," she continued, her voice level but her eyes blazing at Nunga.

"There's no moon until after midnight, the breeze will not be too strong-- and we'll have proved beyond any possible doubt that they could have reached an island. Our charter is not to intervene unless the danger of landfall is beyond question."

"It was beyond question a week ago," Nunga snarled.

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The ridge on the submarine's back began to expand into a second tube, open at both ends, but this one did not pump water. As it expanded the vessel sank lower to remain below the surface, and by morning the drive tube was six hundred feet below the surface while the carrier tube's roof was barely below the waves. The fusion powerplants were now straining to move the larger surface area through the water. A dozen submarettes that had been flanking the Kondolae now moved forward to form an arc upwind of the three ships. The seas were rougher than at any time during the voyage, as if anticipating the drama to come.

Wirana was in the navigation cell at sunset when Colombo changed course to sail west. The island of Guanahini was now dead ahead, and would be visible by moonlight an hour or two after midnight. Nunga was strangely composed when he heard the news.

"They must die," he said simply. "The opportunity has been missed, it's too late. They changed course, exactly as I warned."

"We will take six hours to surface," said Mudati, "and another half hour to strike. The limestone cliffs of the little islands just south of Guanahani will be visible to their lookouts by then."

"But we can cover them in fog from the submarettes," Wirana pointed out. "If we start generating the fog bank now it will be shrouding them a couple of hours before we need it to shroud our own approach, yet it will cut off their view of the island."

"It's too late," muttered Nunga sullenly. "There's not enough depth to let us travel safely."

"I'll be the judge of that," said Mudati, suddenly tired of Nunga's petulance.

Ahead of schedule the submarettes began to raise a thick fog, which rapidly rolled out over the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria. The Admiral quickly ordered the Nina to drop back, just as had been expected. The Kondolae was big enough to swallow whole icebergs, so big that surfacing was a major operation. Superconductor driven pump muscles flushed seawater from the ballast bladders low on the outer hull and the submarine rose out of the water and powered along like a floating aircraft hangar with a 700 foot high roof. At midnight it began to bear down on the patch of windblown fog.

Nobody on the ships realised that they had been swallowed, fog, seawater and all. At a signal from Mudati the ends of the tube began to close with a vast rumbling of artificial muscles, capturing a foggy pond and three ships. Within the tube the wind died, and the Kondolae's own fog generators now took over from the submarettes, filling its vast interior with clammy billows. The trapped water quickly settled to a calm sheet.

Robot manipulators, designed to handle millions of tons of ice, gently swung out from the internal walls and reached for the huddling ships. They were programmed to grasp the hulls firmly from below, yet give the sensation of floating. The water remaining within the huge tube was now pumped out while mist was blown past them from below. To the Spanish sailors it seemed as if they were plunging through a nothingness of thick mist, and the air was cooling rapidly.

\* \* \*

From an observation galley high on the hull Wirana looked out over the rapidly dispersing fog to the moonlit cliffs and trees that had been snatched away from the Spaniards. Mudati was standing beside her.

"He got within sight of them, yet he never knew," she said.

"Does that make you feel better?"

"History will record that he completed the voyage without knowing it, and all the world will know in centuries to come. That was the least that I could give my fellow explorer."

"So that was the reason for your delay."

"I gave the man immortality as an explorer. It might not make up for what Nunga is doing to him, but it's something."

"You may have lost immortality for yourself. There was a lot of truth in Nunga's reports on you. The Elders want no foolhardy adventurers on the Jupiter expedition."

"Exploration without risk does not exist. Crew the Wondibingi with sensible bureaucrats and they'd never risk leaving lunar orbit. I took a considered risk, based on experience."

"Just between you and me, Wirana, a majority of Elders believes that too, but at the inquiry please stress that you delayed for so long because of the magnitude of the moral issues at stake. Okay? Now, let's go down and meet Admiral Colombo."

"But he'll be dead!"

"Don't you even want to look upon the man that you fought for? Don't you want to see him in the flesh?"

"No more than I'd want him to see me on the toilet."

\* \* \*

They had sailed over the edge of the world, they were falling and doomed. Some began to pray, some fought each other blindly, but this did not last long. It became hard to breathe, and within minutes there was not a man left conscious.

Bartolome de Torres awoke shivering, cold sand beneath his naked body, waves washing around his legs. He sat up, surveyed a beach strewn with naked white bodies, some stirring. There were seven or eight dozen of them. The sky was dark, but there was a glow on the horizon. He looked up. Jupiter and Mars were high, so it had to be morning. He was on land, land beyond what seemed to be the edge of the world. He was naked, not a ring, not a boot.

He rose to his knees and began to pray, giving thanks for the deliverance that he had prayed for so fervently in that terrible region of cold and dark. Others were awake now, some praying, some cursing, and suddenly someone cried out "Look, look, the rock!"

Bartolome turned to follow the pointing finger. Gibraltar! An unmistakable form, there could be no two landmarks like it, yet... he glanced at the sky again. Mars and Jupiter were still close together, the moon was a mere sliver. No more than five days could have passed since they had sailed off the edge of the world, yet they had been sailing west for more than a month!

He had died. He had been stabbed in the throat by a crazed shipmate. He felt his throat: a little sensitive, but no wound. Abruptly he cried out as he realised that his teeth were no longer hurting. For the first time in years his teeth were not hurting. Someone nearby cried out that his gout was gone. A miracle, a whole succession of miracles! The crews of all three ships had been brought back to life and cured of all ills.

They had evidently been discovered by seaweed gatherers before anyone had revived, for a squad of cavalry was approaching, followed by a crowd on foot. Spanish armour, Spanish saddles, and they were hailing them in Spanish. He sat down heavily in the sand. They had been returned to Spain.

"We are all naked before God," said the man beside him, "and here we are naked."

"So have we been before God?" Bartolome asked. "I was dead, and now I live. My teeth have stopped hurting, too. A miracle, what else but a miracle?"

"A miracle. We have been saved. Brought back over the edge of the world, brought back to life,

brought back to Spain. Give thanks to God and His Holy Mother, rejoice!"

"But why us? We are just sinners. I killed a man, I was under sentence of death, then the King pardoned me to sail with Admiral. Then we fell over the edge of the world and died. Did God pardon us to come back to Spain?"

"We were surely brought back for a purpose," suggested his neighbour.

A strong subliminal suggestion suddenly broke through into Bartolome's consciousness.

"God pardoned us our sins to witness the edge of the world!" he concluded. "A kind God would not let honest seamen die in vain, sailing into waters from where there can be no return. We were sent back to give a warning to all Christians. The world is bounded, the edge lies far out in the Atlantic."

The men on the beach were naked but in good health, and in years to come it would be found that none of them could be infected with any disease. Those who avoided accidents would die well into their nineties, or even older. Soon blankets, cassocks and cloaks were being handed out, any clothing that could be found in a hurry. Their rescuers were beginning to suspect that something strange and wonderful had happened.

Columbo was led through to a horse, wrapped in blankets and walking unsteadily. His eyes were wild and staring, those of a man whose great vision has been replaced by something greater.

"God raised us up, brought us back to life," he shouted to the onlookers like a prophet newly arrived from the wilderness.

"Mother Church will make us saints," said Bartolome.

"Saints are made by good works," admonished his neighbour. "Come, we must begin the work that we were returned to do."

He helped Bartolome to his feet, and together they walked up the beach as peasants dropped to their knees before them, imploring them to accept their own clothing. Anything that they wore now would become a holy relic.

"God brought us back from the edge of the world as a warning to sailors," cried Bartolome. "Beware sailing too far west."

"Christ be praised, Holy Mother of God, save us all," the crowd shouted back.

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