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"Dance of the Yellow-Breasted Luddites" is set in the same future as an earlier story, "The Practical Ramifications of Interstellar Packet Loss" (SFAge, September 1998).

## DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES

WILLIAM SHUNN

Hannah Specter crouched in the blind with a flutter in her stomach, waiting for Deacon's signal. It was always like this for her, introducing a new species into the preserve. Watching strange breath and blood and behavior mesh with the chaotic dance of life in this harsh land filled her with a joy she'd never known before coming to Sutter's Mill—a joy almost great enough to drown the ache that was the rest of her life.

But anxiety tempered the joy. As usual, the decision of what species to send next had been reached with no semblance of common sense. Hannah was not the most experienced Rescue Star operative, but even she knew that randomly jumbling species from disparate ecosystems was a recipe for disaster. Case studies on that

i66

WILLIAM SHUNN

subject dated clear back to Earth, and there the natives had only had access to species from their own planet.

But more immediately worrisome was the sketchy data on the *hrkleshira* themselves. Deacon, the new xenobiologist, had recorded his observations during transit, but little other source material existed. Equally deficient was the literature on the *hrkleshira's* original habitat. Dry geological briefs summarized data gleaned from space, while the accompanying survey maps offered nothing but blurry images of shale-covered hills and scraggly forests. Though the lack of data was frustrating, it wasn't unexpected; the *hrkleshira* came from a world deep in Exclaimer space.

Choking down a dry cough, Hannah raised her peepers and peered out at the distant spot where Deacon would release the *hrkleshira*. Their blind was constructed of limbs broken from indigenous shrubs, and the creosote stink of their sap clogged her lungs with a taste like crumbled asphalt.

Beneath her faux-cotton shirt, a runnel of sweat tickled her spine. Scalp prickling, she retracted her hair to one millimeter, its shortest length. The hair net, seamlessly integrated with her scalp, was one of the many frivolities that had landed her on Sutter's Mill, working off her debts in service of Rescue Star. Her accelerated training in xenoecology was not entirely adequate to the tasks at hand, but at least it was cheap, and it might even be useful when her term was up and she could return home to Netherheim. To Fatima.

Stubble hair made the dust-clotted heat only somewhat more bearable. She imagined the *hrkleshira* broiling in their enclosures. "I hope they can take this climate," she said. "It's not exactly as temperate here as Cretacea."

"Cretacea is scarcely temperate," said the spindly Exclaimer beside her, its voice startlingly loud.

Hannah sighed. "It's called hyperbole, Jack," she said. She hadn't bothered to learn the alien's actual

name. To her it was so many unpronounceable consonants.

The alien snorted, but Hannah didn't know what that meant.

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 167

*"The hrkleshira will do better in this climate than either you or I, with suitable supervision."*

Hannah winced at the loudness. The *ykslamera*—or Exclaimers, as humans called them—came from a world with a thin, tenuous atmosphere, and had evolved capacious lungs and powerful voices. Those assigned to posts in human space were bio-engineered to cope with the greater atmospheric pressure, but their voices usually remained unchanged.

"Can't you keep it down?" Hannah said, lowering the peepers. "They can probably hear you clear out there."

The Exclaimer snorted again. Its gray skin reminded Hannah of a mushroom, and its face was wide and lumpy like a frog's. When standing, it towered over her by half a meter; sitting, the alien's stalklike legs caused its knees to stick higher than its head. It breathed in gasps and seemed uncomfortable in the heat, and a scent like dry mildew rose from its skin. *"The hrkleshira are gifted with excellent vision,"* it said, *"but they hear well only in a narrow range."*

"Perfect," muttered Hannah. "They'll be able to see me strangling you, but they won't hear you scream."

*"Excuse me?"*

"Oh, wipe it." Hannah raised her peepers. A recent treaty revision meant that Exclaimer observers would now accompany every endangered species resettled from their worlds, and one of Hannah's jobs was to pump this one for all the intelligence possible. But the damn thing didn't volunteer much, and their few exchanges left her feeling like she'd given away more than she gleaned. She was too keyed up to play the spy game now, even for the sake of the *hrkleshira*.

She flexed her throat mike. "How're things at ground zero?"

"The *hrkleshira* downsettle, most," said Deacon. His voice was a gentle bass rumble, and she envied his easy mastery of the alien phonemes even as she struggled to parse his dialect. "The outtide distress eases, it seems."

168

WILLIAM SHUNN

"Wait," said Hannah, "they're settling down?" "That corrects."

"And . . . their distress from the ride out is easing off." "As I said." Deacon sounded impatient.

"Sorry," she said peevishly. Deacon came from Friarhesse, a religious colony whose founder had constructed an artificial dialect meant to help its speakers achieve a mental state more in harmony with the thoughts of God. For Hannah, all it achieved was a headache. "I just want to be sure I understand what you're saying." "I unknow why it problems." "Uh . . . right," said Hannah.

"Anywise, the time soon readies. Spy my position?" Hannah sighed and scanned the horizon. A landscape of rocky ground and scrub brush leapt into focus as she switched diopters. She panned across low hills and dry washes, but the only sign of human encroachment was a drone ore prospector, huge and red and bulbous, about three clicks away. She smiled at the sight of a clutch of zori deer grazing

happily on saw grass in the middle distance, then continued her sweep.

When she was sure she'd looked past Deacon's position several times, she relented and switched to autopilot. Immediately the scene in the viewfinder jumped to a copse of gnarled old trees, beyond which glistened the perspex windscreen of Deacon's groundrover. Deacon himself crouched in the saw grass at the base of the trees, his red beard brown in the shade. Beside him sat the wheeled dovecote with two dozen *hrkleshira* inside.

"I have you, Deacon," Hannah said. "Got an estimate on time?" "Five minutes, moreless—so far as concerns the *hrkleshira*." "What do you mean?"

"The *hrkleshira* calm in sufficiency." Deacon hesitated. "But I fear the environment un welcomes, her enow."

"The banshee here says the climate's fine. And you've got the feed and water troughs set up, right?" "Unmeant."

#### DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 169

"What *did* you mean, then?"

"You spied the machineworks, a kilometer thence?"

"The prospector?"

"Must be."

"What about it?"

"It can reposition?"

Hannah shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Why?"

"An observation from shiptime. Certain machineworks out-stress the *hrkleshira*. They insanify nearwise."

Hannah shook her head. "What are you saying? That machines make them crazy?"

"That corrects. Some machineworks, anywise."

"Well, the prospectors are out of our jurisdiction. We couldn't move them if we tried."

"Try you have?"

Hannah took a calming breath. With Jongnic Bontemps's recent reassignment, she was the acting senior operative on Sut-ter's Mill. Deacon might have more experience overall—and he was definitely in competition for her job—but she knew this outpost. "The prospectors are property of the Natural Resources Ministry, and we have no control over where they go. They're not dangerous. Every other species does fine around them. The *hr*— *hrkleshira* will have to do the same."

"Yes, but repositioning has attempted? You have asked?"

Hannah ran a hand over her sweaty scalp, sighing. "We're here at NaRM's sufferance, Deacon. One of our directives is not to be a nuisance and jeopardize our operation."

"Pardon begged, but it legals every habitable planet to home a wildlife preserve. How can NaRM jeopardy us?"

"Goddammit," Hannah said, so angrily that even the Exclaimer turned its head, "the preserve doesn't have to be *here*. If we piss off the wrong people, they might pack us up and move us to one of the ice caps. We have to worry about the welfare of *all* the animals, not just the flavor of the month."

1/0

WILLIAM SHUNN

"Blasphemy unnecessary." Deacon sounded more rankled than chastised. "*I* merewise—"

Hannah rolled her eyes. "Miles, have you been listening to this?"

"Of course, Hannah," said Miles<sub>0</sub> from the base, his voice eager and amused and eerily childlike.

"Will you assess for Deacon the chances of getting an ore prospector moved off the preserve?"

"Sure thing." Hannah could picture the little big-brain steeping his fingers in thought. "See, Deacon ol' buddy, Sutter's Mill is a veritable treasure-trove of heavy metals, from gold on up, but the ore's scattered in traces all over the surface. NaRM spends a shitload here on satellite surveys and AI cycles, calculating the most cost-effective routes for these roving ore prospectors. The prospectors themselves have limited intelligence—they're able to stray a bit if they encounter obstacles or surprisingly rich ore deposits, but for the most part these survey paths are programmed as much as a year in advance, and they're crucial to the Ministry's projections for metal production. Any change costs mucho dinero and makes NaRM a distinctly unhappy little brat, so we leave his messes alone, no matter how bad they stink." He emitted a spine-tingling chuckle. "And when you're in the crapper long enough, it stops smelling so bad."

"Thanks, Miles. Hear that, Deacon?"

"Heard." The mellow voice smoldered underneath.

"I've been here almost two years," Hannah said. "I know the territory like you don't." The Exclaimer regarded her with its wide, unblinking eyes, and she fought the urge to snap at it too. Her hands shook. As poor a job as she did at avoiding them, she hated confrontations. "Are the, uh, the damn birds ready to release?"

"*The hrkleshira are not birds,*" said the Exclaimer. Hannah waved it to silence.

For a moment, she thought Deacon was not going to respond. "Cooing audibles," he answered at last. "The *hrkleshira* wellseem.

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 1/1

Respiration and pulse are low and even crossboard, say the monitors."

"That's good, right?"

"Pardon?"

"I'm joking," said Hannah, raising the peepers again. She raised her elbows to unstick her shirt from her underarms. "So let's do it."

As she watched, Deacon touched a control in his hand. A crack appeared down the center of the dovecote, and a pair of two-paneled doors folded back from the matrix of pigeonholes within. One, two, four, then more than a dozen pebbled red heads peeked out into the sunlight, blinking oversized blue eyes.

Hannah held her breath. The *hrkleshira* had been hunted nearly to extinction by the Exclaimers, who, rumor claimed, prized the small creatures for the euphoric properties of a secretion from their brains. Whether or not that were true, a small population had been rescued, and this, after a journey of many light-years, was their first exposure to their new home.

The boldest of the *hrkleshira* stretched its body to its full length of twenty centimeters. It unfurled delicate leathery wings, flapping them for balance, and flexed its neck to reveal the supple yellow skin of its breast and underbelly. The little creature danced back and forth on its wiry hind legs, then bounded into the air.

It fell several centimeters before its wings caught the breeze. It flew a rapid loop before the dovecote, and the other *hrkleshira* darted out to join it. A toroid cloud of small red-and-yellow bodies formed—curiously chaotic, but conveying a definite sense of pattern and intent.

She realized she was holding her breath. "That's beautiful," she said softly. "It's like an electron cloud."

"*They are certainly., challenging creatures,*" said the Exclaimer, and this time Hannah scarcely noticed the loudness of its voice.

As the cloud of *hrkleshira* drifted higher, a tendril broke off

1/2

WILLIAM SHUNN

and dipped toward the water trough. A handful of the creatures skimmed the water, making strange motions with their mouths. Hannah tightened the focus of her peepers, but she saw only one *hrkleshira* taste the water as they streaked past.

"Are they making any sounds?" she asked.

"Squeaking evidences," Deacon said. "But it whelms the norm in volume and frequency."

"Can you put it on?"

Deacon patched two external mikes into his audio feed while Hannah watched the breakoffs rejoin the main group. By the time any sound came through, the entire flock was wheeling higher into the sky. Hannah heard a few moments of rodentlike chattering before the creatures had flown so high and far that the mikes could no longer pick up their calls.

"Unforget to write," said Deacon, with a trace of bitterness.

"I've got them, don't worry." Hannah had switched her peepers to tracking mode; if she kept them pointed in the right general direction, the visuals would stay locked on the tracers implanted beneath the creatures' wings. A broad grin spread across her face as she watched the *hrkleshira* rise higher and higher, describing an ever-widening spiral through the warm air. "Mommy's watching."

The *hrkleshira* flew intricate and almost hypnotic patterns for several minutes. About two and a half kilometers from Hannah's position, however, the flock suddenly fanned out into a broad V and flew north, as unswerving as an aircraft following a guidance beam.

"The prospector," said Deacon. "They pinpoint and arrow."

"What? Are you sure?" Hannah asked.

"As warned," Deacon said with exaggerated patience. "The *hrkleshira* unlike certain machineworks."

Hannah glanced at the Exclaimer, but it only stared back with its huge froggy eyes. Raising the peepers again, she focused forward to the prospector, unwilling yet to admit that this really was the *hrkleshira*'s goal. The prospector towered six meters above the

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 173

desert floor, its red dome capping an undercarriage of trundling tank treads, robotic arms, and sensors of every type imaginable. Though the treads remained motionless, several of the arms were extended, taking samples from the ground.

As Hannah watched, the *hrkleshira* dive-bombed into view in single file. Sensor extensions on the prospector swayed like fronds in an ocean current, tracking their approach. Just when it appeared they would smash into it, the *hrkleshira* curved sharply around the red dome. Time after time, the line circled the machine, rising and falling in waves, like thread winding itself around a bobbin.

Then suddenly, as one, the *hrkleshira* began to dash themselves against the smooth hull of the dome, scrabbling at the curved surface with their broad, clawed forefeet before darting out for another go. Hannah sat frozen, unable to speak, as the surreal scene played out before her in stark silence. One creature battered itself so hard against the dome that it left behind a smear of blood—no more than a small shiny patch on the red metal, but one that made Hannah's heart race and shocked her out of her stupor.

"Oh, jack me!" she exclaimed, bursting from the blind and running for her groundrover. "Do you see that?"

"Seen," said Deacon's grim voice in her ear.

"Miles! Get NaRM on the horn! If that thing's got defensive systems, see if they'll turn them off!"

"Roger," said Miles. "I'll try."

"Deacon, get out there and start collecting those birds. I'll be as close behind you as I can."

"Underway already."

Hannah leapt into the driver's seat. She pounded her forehead on the steering column, then sat for a moment in despair. When she straightened up, she felt the Exclaimer's alien gaze upon her, devoid of any recognizable emotion. It hadn't moved from the blind, but simply sat watching her.

174

WILLIAM SHUNN

Hannah made an obscene gesture. "And the ship you rode in on," she hissed, throwing the rover in gear.

The base was white and ovoid, like a giant egg planted in the ground, its long axis thirty meters end to end. Gentle hills rolled away to the east of the structure, rising in rumpled ridges toward the distant brown mountains. Trailing a plume of tawny dust, Hannah braked to a violent stop beside Deacon's rover, which was parked out front. He and the *hrkleshira* were nowhere in evidence.

By the time Hannah had reached the prospector, Deacon had already managed to collect more than half the little creatures. Hannah had retrieved her net from the backseat of the rover and joined him. The nets had been provided by the Exclaimer; nearly two meters in length, each ended in a wide hoop that rimmed

a bag of thin, sticky plastic. A beeper on the rim of the hoop attracted the *hrkleshira*, making it relatively easy to scoop them out of the air.

"Your hunters use these?" Hannah had asked the alien earlier that day. "That had hardly seems sporting."

"*Committed sportsmen, no,*" the Exclaimer had answered. "*The slothful—perhaps.*"

And which would you be? Hannah had wondered in silence.

When the *hrkleshira* were gathered and deposited in the back of Deacon's rover, he had driven directly back to the base, a trip of about ten kilometers. Hannah had returned to the blind to pick up the Exclaimer.

The alien now unfolded itself awkwardly from the passenger seat. Hannah stalked to the entry portal without waiting for it to catch up. Three blue-furred picholeins—sleek, ferretlike scavengers from Serendipity which could mimic human speech—burst out of the weeds nearby, chattering *shoo I shoo! shoo!* as they scampered away. From around the near curve of the base came the answering whoops of the urks in their pen. Hannah smiled despite

#### DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 175

herself as she pushed her way inside. It wasn't as if the picholeins would respond to the urks' mating calls with anything but abject terror.

The central passageway, narrow and poorly lit, smelled of machine oil and plastic, but at least it was cool. The upsloping ceiling and random piles of boxes gave the place an air of impermanence. In a storeroom on the right, feed for a score of different species was kept, including a year's supply of unperishables for the humans. White hexagonal containers covered with indecipherable chicken-scratches—the Exclaimers' written language—were stacked outside the door, waiting to be stowed. Hannah didn't care to examine the nutrients inside.

Soft bleating issued from the infirmary on the left. Inside, a young zori deer recuperated from two crushed rear legs and a broken pelvis. Jongnic had been tending to the deer, which he had named Ujamaa, for six weeks before his reassignment. He had left her in Hannah's care upon his departure. "Good Ujamaa, good girl," she murmured as she passed. "Mommy'll be back soon."

At the end of the corridor, she emerged into Central Command, a high, broad room littered with a melange of computer equipment, feed sacks, flimsy maps, rover parts, and empty crates. "All hail," she said.

"Hannah!" said Miles<sub>70</sub>, pushing his wheeled chair back from the control console. He hopped down from the chair while it was still rolling, an impish figure one meter tall, and bowed so low that Hannah could see the serial number tattooed on the back of his bulbous head. "I've got to hand it to you. That was one hell of a show. When those birdies started doing the kamikaze thing, I was laughing so hard I thought I'd piss myself." He looked down. "Uh-oh. I think I did!"

Hannah's mouth twitched as she tried not to laugh. Deacon was at a console across the room, studying video from the afternoon's fiasco, and though he didn't look up, his brow was deeply

#### WILLIAM SHUNN

furrowed. "Better stow it, Miles," she said, indicating Deacon with a flick of her eyes.

Miles<sub>70</sub> winked broadly and pushed his chair back to the console. "Oh, by the way," he said, "you got an

ansiblegram while you were out. From your poppa bear."

Hannah's stomach tightened. "Thanks," she said, heading for the door to the team's quarters.

Deacon looked up. "The Exclaimer unevidences," he said, masking his unhappiness rather ineffectively.

She glanced around, only now realizing that the alien had not followed her inside. "Oh, damn. Miles, can you spot him out there?"

"It," said Miles, clambering up into his chair. His small hands flew over the console, and in a few moments the view from an outside camera spot winked into life on the flat surface of the console. "Looks like our favorite stick figure's paying the Zero squadron a social call."

Hannah and Deacon came together to watch the high-angle shot over Miles<sub>70</sub>'s shoulders. The Exclaimer was just latching the door to one of the mesh cages in which *hrkleshira* were housed. It folded itself to the ground and sat, knees jutting above its head, staring into the cages.

"What did he just do?" Hannah demanded.

Miles<sub>70</sub> shrugged. "It was just taking its arms out of the cage when I tuned in."

"Did he extract aught?" Deacon asked. "Insert aught?"

"It did *naught* as far as I saw," Miles<sub>70</sub> said with a grin.

Deacon nodded, as if expecting that answer, but a horrible notion had occurred to Hannah. "There's no blood on him, is there?" she asked.

Miles<sub>70</sub> looked at her skeptically. "Do *you* see any blood? I don't see any blood."

"No, um, apparatus lying around?"

"Hannah," said Deacon, "what on earth implies?"

"Count them, Miles."

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES *T.JJ*

"Huh?"

"I want to know how many there are. Count them."

Miles<sub>70</sub> sighed dramatically. "You da massah, massah."

The *hrkleshira* were housed in six cages, piled three high in two adjacent stacks against an exterior wall of the base. Miles<sub>70</sub> brought up two additional views of the cages, one from either side.

"Hannah," said Deacon, "what thoughts—"

She shushed him brusquely.

Miles<sub>70</sub>'s eyes flicked rapidly across the three screens. "One hundred thirty-seven," he said.

"Shit," said Hannah. "Are you sure?"

"I counted eleven times, just to be safe."



"That's seven missing. Goddamn that alien bastard. He's eating their brains."

As Hannah whirled toward the door, Miles<sub>70</sub> burst out laughing. "What?" she snapped.

Deacon rolled his eyes. "The missing *hrkleshira* we tended infield—the injured. I infirmaried the seven. They safestest."

Hannah's cheeks burned. Seeing her flush, Miles<sub>70</sub> fell out of his chair, rolling on the floor and holding his stomach as his high-pitched cackles filled the air.

She took a deep breath. "Miles, I want you to keep an eye on that thing. I want to know *anything* he does not out of the ordinary."

Miles<sub>70</sub> sat up. "That'll be just about everything," he said, wiping his eyes, "But you got it, boss."

Deacon had returned to his seat, shaking his head. "*Brth-klashikort* planetsides to help us," he said, "not to selfgratify."

His flawless pronunciation only made Hannah angrier. "What's that gibberish—his name? And what are you, his girlfriend? What makes you think you know why he's here?"

"No." Deacon pursed his lips, his dark eyes burning. "I sole-wise . . . intuit."

"Oh, great, you *intuit*," said Miles<sub>70</sub>, climbing into his chair

1,8

WILLIAM SHUNN

and chuckling all the while. "You two are a real pair—Paranoid and Freakazoid."

"Shut up, munchkin," said Hannah. "Deacon, this *observer* comes from a species that's been known to wipe out whole human colonies for no better reason than target practice." "Eighty years have truced us," said Deacon. Miles<sub>70</sub> shook his head. "Cease-fired, not truced." "Exactly," said Hannah. "So what makes you think we can trust him about *anything*, let alone not to shoot up on birdie extract?"

"Our shiptime ampled, if that he intended," Deacon said. "I mosttime cryoslept. Prevention unabled."

"Maybe Exclaimers can go years between fixes. We really don't know anything about them, or their physiology."

Miles<sub>70</sub> raised his hand. "Oooh, teacher, teacher. Yeah, um, I read that we don't even know if they're subject to addiction in the same sense that we understand it."

"Thanks, Miles," said Hannah. "You're a big whelp. Help. The bottom line is, I don't trust him, and I don't want him screwing up this project."

Miles<sub>70</sub> nodded. "Let alone the cease-fire." Both Deacon and Hannah looked at him curiously. "What?" said Miles<sub>70</sub>, putting on an innocent expression. "It's just some idle speculation I picked up on the nets. Wirehead chatter from NaRM."

"Spill," Hannah said.

Miles<sub>70</sub> shrugged. "There's some talk from the xenopsycholo-gists that maybe the reason the *ykslamera* agreed to this animal-rescue program in the first place is to demonstrate to themselves what a bunch of

hopeless incompetents we humans are. And if they decide *that*—well, maybe they'll have no compunction about attacking us again."

"Great," said Hannah. "Glad to hear there's no added pressure." Deacon turned back to his console. "Ridiculy."

#### **DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 179**

"Okay, whatever," said Hannah, though her stomach was beginning to hurt. "This doesn't change the most important thing, which is that we have a job to do, and that job is to figure out how to introduce the *her*—*herk*—*her-klesh-eera* into the wild here without endangering them or letting them endanger themselves to too great an extent."

"The Exclaimer can help," said Deacon.

"Maybe, maybe not," said Hannah. "It's a roll of the dice I don't care to make, so here's what we'll do. I want to go over exactly what happened out there, review the tapes and everything, right here in fifteen minutes. Humans only. I want theories from both of you, and suggestions as to what to try next. Until then, I'll be in my quarters."

Deacon stood to intercept her as she headed for the far door. "Hannah, may I word with you, pardon?"

"When I get back," Hannah said.

He indicated Miles<sub>70</sub> with a jerk of his bristly chin. "Private-wise?"

Hannah sighed. "All right. Ten minutes, my quarters."

"You gratify," said Deacon.

"You wish," Miles<sub>70</sub> muttered.

Filled with increasing disquiet, Hannah left Central Command and shut the door firmly behind her.

Hannah read the ansiblegram four times, then closed the message window on her desktop and sat thinking.

**TO: Hannah Specter, Rescue Star, Sutler's Mill**

**FROM: Derek Koepp, Eigencity, Netherheim**

**DATE: 67.08.14.13.37.25 NLST**

**PREPD: <=256char**

**SUBJ: Big killing!**

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WILLIAM SHUNN

Sweet H! Sold nu novel 4 2x ask. Can cover yr debts EZ w/yr bless, just say word. /Met Fatima @last. Keep this !! Nuts 4U & Mrs U2. Approval!/Say word&come home soon!/L, D

She shoved herself back from her console and stood. Her quarters were too small to pace effectively, so she drummed her heel impatiently on the floor. I travel four light-years from Netherheim, she thought, and serve nearly two years of my pledge, and they've still only just managed to meet. God.

To be fair, Fatima had spent the first three years after Hannah's departure in coldsleep—as long a sabbatical as she could afford to take from her job, and a career risk even at that. That wasn't what was really bothering Hannah, though, as she well recognized. The real issue was her father's continuing attempts to manipulate and subordinate her. Much as he thought he could still apply a salve to her wounds and make everything right for her, he couldn't, and he simply refused to accept that fact. Her debts were her debts. She would take care of them herself.

Instantaneous faster-than-light communication had been around for less than a decade; pioneered by the megaconglomerate Celestial Messengers, the process was so expensive that most private citizens could afford to send only brief text messages, if they could afford to send anything at all. According to this message header, her father had paid for Hannah to send a response of up to 256 characters. So how to refuse Derek's offer in that short a space without having to dip into her savings?

She wished she could do it in just two short keystrokes— NO—but she couldn't bring herself to be that mean-spirited. She loved Derek, and she knew he meant well. That was the problem.

She was still lost in thought several minutes later, compulsively extending and retracting her hair, when Deacon knocked. When she entered her quarters, she had removed her safari vest, which bore her insignia as acting senior operative. She slipped it back on and said, "Come in."

#### DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 181

Deacon entered. Hannah's quarters were closer to the outer rim of the dome than his; she was pleased to see that the low ceiling forced him to stoop slightly. Hannah could move about comfortably, but once she had greeted him with a nod she sat back down in her chair and waited for him to speak.

For a moment Deacon seemed at a loss. His eyes swung left to right, settling briefly on the twenty-first-century painting displayed on the east wall. The work of E. Riley, it depicted a blasted orange landscape, perhaps Mars, diagonally traversed by an endless line of power transmission towers. A naked Christ figure hung bloody and crucified on the foremost tower, his skin charred black at the wrists and ankles by crackling electricity. As Deacon stiffened, Hannah recalled that the Stewardship of Friarhesse were gnostic Christians. She suppressed a grin. She was an atheist herself, though one of her mothers had tried to inflict neo-Catholic doctrine upon her as a child.

Turning away from the discomfiting painting, Deacon's eyes fell on the 3D snapshow of Hannah and Fatima that sat atop Hannah's footlocker, which had been taken in a holobooth at the Him-melburg Municipal Zoo on Netherheim. "Fineseen couple," he said. "You espouse him?"

"Her," said Hannah, perversely pleased.

Deacon recoiled. "Pardon?"

Hannah normally preferred not to discuss her relationship, letting images like the snapshow project a half-truth that discouraged unwanted male attention. But with Deacon Greenleaf, Hannah felt a contrary urge to shove her preferences in his face.

"Fatima's my unbonded partner," said Hannah. She ran a hand through her hair, which was now about ten centimeters long. "That image was taken in her male phase, but she's female far more often."

"Christbless," Deacon murmured, almost too low to hear.

"She's got extensive biomods, and she rates F<sub>g</sub>M<sub>1</sub>. She works as a cop, so it's useful for her to be able to shift genders at will. And

WILLIAM SHUNN

since I've got a low but definite bisexual orientation, it works out for me, too."

Deacon's hands opened and closed, as if he were physically grasping for a change of subject. "Your, ah, father messaged. All wells with you homeside?"

"Actually, he's only one of my fathers, but he's fine. Thanks for asking." Hannah viewed the color rising in Deacon's cheeks with satisfaction. "I was raised in a fivehand. They all contributed DNA, but Derek's the only one who really maintained an interest past adolescence."

"A hazard of time with parents of the unwombed," said Deacon coldly. "Childperil contraindicates the practice. But pardon— businessward."

Hannah's calm smile froze. "Yes ... of course," she said, feeling sand suddenly shifting beneath her feet. "Businessward. What is it you wanted to talk about?"

Deacon clasped his hands behind his back. "I comprehend your seniorstatus, respect your planetside experience."

Hannah nodded. "Thank you."

"But it unnecessary to downdress me so infield. Professional embarrassment."

Hannah considered her response. "I was maybe a little too forceful," she said, "and I shouldn't have sicced Miles on you like I did. He can be—well, 'gleefully cruel' would be putting it mildly. I apologize." She drummed her fingers on the desktop, frowning. "But two minutes before release is hardly the time to raise an objection of the magnitude you did."

"Better than never."

"Better to have shared your observation a lot earlier."

"But I righted. The test should have aborted."

"You think you were right?" Hannah shook her head. "I don't agree."

"Why? The *hrkleshira* insanified. They sillybeat themselves, bloodied themselves. We could have prevented."

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 183

"Yes," said Hannah. "And then what?"

"Elsewhere release. Away from machineworks."

Hannah rose. "Two problems with that, Deacon," she said. "First, the birds don't respond that way with *all* machines, right? They didn't go nuts around the rovers."

Deacon was holding himself very still, but his beard bristled and his brow was tightly clenched. "Correct."

"Can you predict exactly what kinds of machinery *are* going to set them off like that?"

He hesitated. "No."

"Can you even state with certainty that only machines are capable of setting off this reaction, and that it's not, say, a natural behavior that evolved in response to something from their home environment? Something that might also exist or be mimicked on this planet?"

His eyes slid back and forth, focused on some shifting point above Hannah's head. "No."

"Okay, so there's *something* out there that makes the *hurr—klesh—eera* go kamikaze, as Miles put it." She felt her voice sliding toward harshness, but kept it under control. "We're not doing them any favors if we just release them somewhere else and hope the problem never manifests again. We could wander out someday and find the ground littered with a hundred bruised little bodies and never understand why it happened."

"Which is solewise why—"

Hannah held her hand up. "Which is why we do field tests like this. Your instinct to protect the *her—kleshira* from injury is very noble—and believe me, I don't like seeing hurt animals any more than you do—but if we don't give them the opportunity to show us what their vulnerabilities are, then we put them at greater risk later."

"Fine, granted," Deacon said, low in his throat, looking over her head and not directly at her. "Point two?"

Hannah sighed. "The second point is that there really isn't a

184

WILLIAM SHUNN

*place* we could release the *hrkleshira* where the prospectors might not eventually show up."

"*Brthklashikort* knows the needed answers," Deacon said after a few moments of silence. "I certain."

"Not this again," Hannah said. "I'm sure he has the answers, too. I just don't think we can trust him to share."

"I differ."

"I know."

They stared at each other for several seconds.

"Let's try to figure this out on our own," Hannah said. "Pump him for what information we can, but not consider it reliable. If we're still stuck in a few days, we can reevaluate. How's that?"

"Earplay timebeing, glean what possibles slywise?"

"That's the plan."

Deacon considered. "It suits—timebeing."

"Yes, for now."

"For now." With a course of action agreed upon, Deacon seemed to relax a little. "Brainpicked him on your trips fieldward and baseward, you did?"

"I—I tried," Hannah lied. "It's not easy to pin him down. To be fair, he offers a lot of information, but it never seems to be anything really applicable."

"Agreed!" said Deacon, a sudden brightness filling his eyes. "I theory he advises us maxpossible within raceloyalty boundaries, no more."

"Could be. But if that's true, it's an awfully small boundary."

Deacon was nodding, almost smiling. "Small, yes. But he wellmeans, I certain. It possibles even that he cryptics us help."

"Cryptics? Like giving us coded messages?"

"Clues, hints—subtlewise."

"I don't know," said Hannah. "He hasn't said anything really cryptic to me."

"To me mayhap he did, shipboard. I spoke him Christwise, of

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 185

our Gospels and Apocrypha. Scripture fascinated him, and post-study he dubbed the *hrkleshira* Christianlike."

"You were trying to convert an Exclaimer?"

"Not convert. Jointshare, comprehend botheach."

Hannah couldn't resist a poke. "Onward Christian birdies, huh? Well, I can't imagine what he meant by that. Can you?"

"Not at all." Still, Deacon seemed quite excited by the puzzle.

Which probably meant she should quit while she was ahead. "Well, if you have any brainstorm about it, be sure to let me know. Maybe we can get Miles thinking, too."

"Bigbrains," said Deacon, his expression clouding. "More abomination." He turned, almost abstractedly, to examine the snapshow of Hannah and Fatima again.

"Yeah, well, you might want to avoid expressing that opinion in front of him. He can be a vindictive little cuss, and you *know* someone like him has powerful friends."

"Highfriends? What manner of—"

A chime sounded. "Receive," said Hannah loudly. "Over?"

Miles<sub>70</sub>'s voice emerged from Hannah's console. "I hate to interrupt your little tryst there, boss, but I think I just earned myself a bonus. You have to see this."

"Whose brilliant idea was this again?" came Miles<sub>70</sub>'s exasperated voice.

"It was *your* extraordinarily brilliant idea," Hannah said brightly from behind the wheel of her rover, "and I love you for it."

"Yeah, sure. Not that it's going to get me anywhere," Miles<sub>0</sub> muttered. "Jesus, I'm broiling alive out here. What is it, slow-roasted bigbrain julienne on the menu tonight and no one bothered to tell me? I swear to

God, air-conditioning was not a creature that evolved by mere chance."

i86

WILLIAM SHUNN

"You can cope. You're a big boy."

"How would *you* know?"

"You'd be amazed how much information there is in your personnel file."

"Oh, it *constantly* amazes me."

Sort of a silly joke for her to have made, since Miles<sub>70</sub> probably did know more about the contents of all their files than she ever would. Hannah didn't know how she felt about that.

As she approached the top of a long rise, the rover bounced roughly over a rock she failed to spot in time. The *hrkleshira* complained with loud squeakings from the dovecote in the back. She worried for a moment that they would go crazy on her, but after a moment they quieted down again.

"Have you spotted it yet?" asked Miles<sub>70</sub>. "I'm guessing you should almost be there by now, but it's hard for me to be sure with nothing but these damn peepers for input."

"Oh, come on. You probably have it figured out down to the centimeter and the second."

As the rover crested the ridge, a long vista opened up to view, low scrubby bushes peppering an inclined plain of yellow dust and shattered rock. Vagrant breezes tossed sheer veils of dust into the air. Less than half a kilometer away, at the bottom of the slope, a twisting confluence of shallow dry washes thrashed across the landscape. A cluster of the knobby trees known as hagfists curled their knuckled roots into the earth on an island between the washes; jutting from among them like an upthrust red finger was the broken-down prospector she sought.

Hannah shook her head with a grin. "Like I was saying . . ."

Prowling through what were supposed to be restricted NaRM records, Miles<sub>70</sub> had managed to track down the location of a broken-down prospector that had not been judged worthy of salvage. The site lay nearly 140 kilometers northwest of the base, and the drive across the uneven terrain had taken Hannah most of the morning. She had dropped off Miles<sub>70</sub> and his telemetry gear at the halfway

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 187

point, and even then the mountains to the east had been no more than a smudge on the horizon. Her aloneness in these vast surroundings exhilarated her. Several times she had felt a tightness in her throat and a stinging in her eyes as she drank in the stark beauty all around her.

Downslope, Hannah spotted an outcropping of rock large enough to cast a shadow even this close to noon. She angled the rover toward it and pulled up just short of the shade. She tied a bandanna around the lower half of her face, slung the peepers around her neck, settled the radio stud tightly in her ear, and climbed out into the dry heat.

It took half an hour of lugging, tinkering, and heavy-duty sweating to get things set up the way they had been at the release site the day before. As she hauled the dovecote into position, snapped together the water trough, and filled it from the tank in the back of the rover, she stopped thinking so much about the landscape, stopped hearing the occasional complaints of the *hrkleshira*, and spent the time brooding

over how she would respond to her father's financial offer.

When all was ready, Hannah flopped down beside the dovecote in the shade of the boulder and radioed Miles<sub>70</sub>. "I think I'm all set here," she said. "The birds are quiet, and we've got a straight line of sight to the prospector."

"It's about goddamn time," said Miles<sub>70</sub>. "I've been ready here for a couple of hours. Shit, I must have sweated off five kilos in this heat."

"The only place you could afford to lose five kilos is your head. Miles. Now, how about Deacon and the Exclaimer?"

"Yeah, they could stand to be separated from their heads, too."

"You know what I meant."

"Oh, *that*. They're fine, they're ready." Because of the distances and terrain separating them all, Miles<sub>70</sub> was not only monitoring both halves of the test from his location but also manning the communications link. "And from what I can hear, they've been

i88

WILLIAM SHUNN

just chattin' up a storm all morning. Want me to patch the Jesus freak in?"

Hannah's stomach clenched. Was Deacon ignoring their agreement? "Wait. Chatting about what?"

"Jesus. *About* Jesus, I mean. What else does the Apostle Paul Bunyan ever discuss?"

Whew. "Okay, yeah, patch him in."

"Here we go," said Miles<sub>70</sub>. "Okay, listeners, we have Hannah from Himmelburg, Netherheim, on the line with us. You had a question for our religious expert, Hannah?"

"Shut up, Miles. Deacon, what's the situation there?"

"All readies," came Deacon's gentle voice. She could hear the faint rumble of machinery in the background. "*Brthklashikort* wards the dovecote. I ward the prospector, oversight. Should the *hrkleshira* oncemore attack, I can prevent injury themward."

"That's a good idea," Hannah said, wishing she'd thought of it. "Miles, you're picking up all twenty-four birds on your channels?"

"Twelve of yours, a dozen of the other," said Miles<sub>70</sub>. "Oh, but wait a second. I'm only seeing eleven of Deacon's."

Hannah caught her breath. "*What?*"

Miles<sub>70</sub> cackled. "Just kidding. I've got all twelve."

"Monsterling," Deacon muttered.

"One of these days I'm going to thrash you good, Miles," said Hannah.

"Is that a promise?"



"No." She pushed herself to her feet and withdrew a remote control from a pocket of her vest. The smell of hot dust was thick in her lungs. "So I guess there's no reason to keep waiting. Deacon, can the Exclaimer hear me?"

"No, but I handsign."

"Okay, then signal on my mark. Three . . . two . . . one ... mark."

"Mark," Deacon repeated.

#### DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 189

Hannah touched a pad on the remote, and the doors of her dovecote folded open.

Only half the pigeonholes were occupied. She and Deacon had decided to put only as many *hrkleshira* at risk as they had on the first trial, and that number had been split between the two of them. They had also selected only *hrkleshira* that had not been part of the original experiment.

Again the sauroids stretched their sinewy red necks, spread their wings, exposed their yellow breasts and bellies. Again they bounded into the air, by ones and by twos, their wings laboring to grasp the wind. Again they gathered in a loose torus, drifting this way and that as they rose further from the ground. Squeaks and rustles sounded in faint counterpoint to the soothing sough of the wind.

Hannah smiled at the glimpses of yellow that flashed like sun-fire from within the busy red formation. "The way they flock," she said, shaking her head in wonder. "It's remarkable. More like insects than like terrestrial birds. God."

"Yeah, very stirring," said Miles<sub>70</sub>. "This week on *Wild Universe*, the dance of the yellow-breasted Luddites."

Unexpectedly, Deacon laughed. "Yellow-breasted Luddites. I like."

"Anything going on where you are?" Hannah asked.

"The *hrkleshira* flock, drift," said Deacon. "Wait. . ." His voice fell. "They arrow. Meward."

"Well, get ready to scoop them up." She watched her group float uncertainly through the air, maybe twenty meters away. "My guys aren't doing much, just sort of drifting back and forth, like they don't know where they want to go."

"So!" Deacon said. "Machinesounds indeed insanify."

The *hrkleshira* seemed to make up their minds as Hannah watched. They drifted back toward her, descending, then settled to the rim of the water trough. Three or four of them craned their

190

WILLIAM SHUNN

necks down to taste the water, flapping their wings for balance. A few more hopped down to the ground to investigate the rocks and

the dust.

"Well," said Hannah, "at the very least we can agree that it's probably not the size, color, or shape of the prospector that's setting them off."

"No, I think it's Deacon's personal hygiene," said Miles<sub>70</sub>.

But Deacon wasn't responding. Hannah could hear him grunt and strain as the *hrkleshira* dove in toward the prospector and he tried to catch them in his sticky net.

She sat down again in the diminishing shade of the outcropping, content for the moment simply to watch her small flock and to soak up the sound of their contented chirping.

"What's the deal, guys?" she asked softly. "What are you crazy birds thinking?"

That evening, Hannah went to the infirmary to check on Ujamaa. She closed the door behind her. The zori deer, a delicate, tan-skinned quadruped about the size of a Great Dane, stumbled to her feet and bleated plaintively. "Shh, girl, shh," Hannah said. "Mommy's here."

The sharp scent of antiseptic filled the air. Ujamaa's cage sat on the floor at the back of the infirmary, beneath the incubator with five lavender skingko eggs inside. As Hannah undid the latch, the recuperating *hrkleshira* cooed and squeaked from their enclosure. Hannah knelt as Ujamaa limped forward to crane her head cautiously through the cage door.

"It's okay," said Hannah. "Come on, girl."

With shaky steps, the animal crossed the floor and licked Hannah's face with its snakelike tongue. Hannah wrapped her arms around Ujamaa's neck. "Good girl! Good Ujamaa! Mommy loves you, yes."

Ujamaa had appeared on their doorstep near death one day, out

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 191

of the blue. Whoever had brought her there—most likely someone from NaRM—hadn't stuck around to answer questions. The deer had probably crossed paths with a large vehicle, maybe a prospector, but Jongnic had decided it was best not to probe too hard. Nanodocs had knitted Ujamaa's bones about as well as could be expected; it remained to be seen if she would ever walk well enough to return to the wild.

Hannah leaned back against the examining table, and the deer curled up with her head and forelegs in Hannah's lap, softly bleating. The cooing of the *hrkleshira* soothed Hannah's overstressed nerves, and a bittersweet smile touched her lips as she stroked the tufts on Ujamaa's head. It was so like a child's daydream that she half expected the skingkos to burst out of their eggs and break into song.

She laughed at the image, but then without warning tears were streaming down her face. Ujamaa bleated in confusion and licked Hannah's cheeks. Despite the deer's presence, she had never felt more lonely in her life.

She was still sitting there half an hour later when Miles<sub>70</sub> came looking for her. "Hannah?" he said, cautiously poking his oversized head around the corner of the table. "Hannah, hey, are you okay?"

Ujamaa had fallen asleep in Hannah's arms, but now she bleated in alarm and tried to struggle to her feet. "Shh, it's okay," said Hannah, stroking the deer's head as she hastily tried to wipe her tacky face. "Yeah, yeah, Miles, I'm fine, I was just. . . you know."

"Right, okay." Miles<sub>70</sub> nodded his head solicitously. "I just stopped by to let you know you got another ansiblegram." "Oh, you're kidding. Not my father again?" "No, it's from that, um—boyfriend of yours. Fatima." Elation and alarm warred inside her. "Fatima?" "I didn't stutter, did I?" He turned to leave. "So anyway, it's waiting for you whenever you're ready."

1,2

WILLIAM SHUNN

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 193

"Hang on there," Hannah called.

Miles<sub>70</sub>'s head reappeared around the corner of the table.

"Come around here, Miles," she said. "I want to talk to you a minute."

Reluctantly, Miles<sub>0</sub> waddled around in front of her, her eyes not quite at his level, his eyes not quite meeting hers.

"Why did you come all the way down here?" she asked. "Why didn't you just signal me?"

"I wanted to see all the nice animals." Miles<sub>70</sub> reached a hand out toward Ujamaa, who drew her head back warily against Hannah's chest.

"I didn't think you even liked animals," said Hannah.

Miles<sub>70</sub> tucked his hands into the pockets of his child-sized jumpsuit. "Hey," he said brightly, "I'll bet you didn't know something else about me. My namesake, Miles Covio, was one of the guys who originated the theories that led to the development of the ansible."

"You're right," said Hannah, "I didn't know that. And I didn't care."

"Yeah, well, the whole Miles series is based partially on his DNA, so you *should* care. And did you know that the term 'ansible' itself actually originated on Earth, in the twentieth century, in the writings of—"

"Miles, I don't think I've ever mentioned Fatima to you by name."

"Well, you know us bigbrains," he said, shifting on his feet, "the way we pick things up, piece things together ..."

Hannah shook her head. "You were listening in yesterday while I talked to Deacon."

Miles<sub>70</sub> gaped in mock umbrage. "Hey, can I help it if the walls are thin?"

"No, but you can help it if the walls are *bugged*." Hannah ran a hand through her hair, which she was wearing only a couple of

centimeters long. "Jesus, Miles, how long has this been going on? Ever since I've been here?"

He was silent.

"God, is this just for your own amusement, or are you working for someone? Miles?"

He looked her in the eyes, more soberly and directly than he ever had. "Don't make me answer that,

Hannah," he said. "You suspect enough about me already."

Hannah's mouth opened slowly. "Oh, jack me. You broke into that conversation yesterday when you did because it was right when I was telling Deacon . . . shit. You don't think he's . . ."

"No, not really. I just don't like him. And I only distrust him as a matter of habit, not because he's a threat."

Hannah looked down in thought, stroking Ujamaa's head. "And what about me?"

Miles<sub>70</sub> feigned great interest in the *hrkleshira*. He studied them closely, hands clasped behind his back. "Let's just say that it hasn't hurt your career any to have a friend filing positive reports on you. Positive and *accurate* reports, by the way."

"Miles, I..." Hannah took a deep breath, feeling disconnected from reality. "Whoever you work for, that's your business. I can just compartmentalize you as our technical liaison and not worry about who or what you're actually liaising *with*. But Miles—who do I work for?"

He didn't look at her. "Rescue Star, of course. A volunteer organization allied closely with the human World Union. *Closely*, Hannah. And that's all I have to say."

Hannah nodded dumbly, and Miles<sub>70</sub> slipped out of the room. He closed the door carefully behind himself.

She was returning Ujamaa to her cage, still assimilating the conversation, when the door opened again. She turned. The Exclaimer, *Brthklashikort*, stood just inside the entrance, head and shoulders hunched below the ceiling, hands dangling far below its knees.

194

WILLIAM SHUNN

"Yes?" said Hannah neutrally.

"*Can you accompany me out back, please?*" it asked. "*Deacon Greenleaf has made an observation of some concern.*"

Ujamaa cowered at the far end of her cage, bleating in terror at the sound of the Exclaimer's voice.

Hannah latched the cage. "I'll be right there," she said. "Can you just *please* try to keep it down?"

The Exclaimer nodded once, silently.

"They undrink," said Deacon, pointing to the mesh cages.

Hannah squatted on her heels, peering at the *hrkleshira*. "Do you mean they're *not* drinking, or that they're drinking and then vomiting it back up?"

The Exclaimer folded itself to the ground beside her. "*It means they're drinking almost nothing.*"

The sun was setting over the mountains in the east; shadows lengthened, and a cooling creosote scent blew in on the evening breezes. Nearby, the urks stamped, lowed, and snorted in their pen.

Hannah opened the nearest cage and picked up a *hrkleshira*. Heavy and dry, like a bag of sand in her hands, it did not try to get away, but only watched her from one eye with a lethargic distrust. "How long

have they been like this?" she asked.

"They downsettled afternoonlong, singlewise," said Deacon. "Leastwise, solong as I observed postreturn. But I unperceived the problem until shortage."

"Damn." Hannah stroked the supple skin of the little creature's throat. "Have you tried changing their water? Maybe there's something bad in it."

"Tried, yes. They roused briefwise, sniffed the new water, then resullened." He shuffled in place. "I fear, themward."

"Yeah, me too," Hannah said. She set down the *hrkleshira* and turned to the Exclaimer. "How long can they survive like this, without drinking?"

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 195

*"Without water they'll eventually slip into a hibernative state. Or perhaps 'comatose' is the more apt term,"* The alien regarded her levelly from its globular eyes. The dying sun reflected from them like a bloody portent. *"It can be very difficult to successfully rouse them again once that happens. Eventually they die."*

"So how long until they're . . . hibernating?"

The Exclaimer tapped its spindly fingers rapidly up and down its lower legs. *"Two days. Perhaps three, but I would not count on that."*

Hannah latched the cage, though there wasn't much danger of any *hrkleshira* escaping. "So what do we do? Is there any way to make them drink?"

*"Likely."*

"But you're not going to tell us, right?"

The Exclaimer only stared at her. The light of the setting sun vanished from its eyes, and cold shadows engulfed them all.

Hannah jerked herself to her feet. "Can you at least tell us this much? Does what they're doing now have anything to do with the way they reacted to the prospector?"

*"Likely,"* said the Exclaimer.

"Likely. Christ." Hannah flung a hand out toward the cages. "Only three dozen birds have been out to that site, but nearly twelve dozen are here dehydrating. What the hell's the link?"

"Gentlewise, Hannah," said Deacon, touching her arm. "I rehearsed this himward already."

Hannah shrugged his hand away, but regretted it as soon as she saw the hurt look in his eyes. "Shit," she muttered. "Okay, gang, let's have a powwow in fifteen minutes. Central Command. I want ideas from *everyone* on what to try next. You too, Frogman."

She stamped off through the shadows like she meant to rip open the twilight itself.

196 WILLIAM SHUNN

In her quarters, Hannah brought up Fatima's ansiblegram:

Yr pop tres charming. Insisted on pay 4 this. We want U back soon! Pis say Y to him. Only way we can afford bond./Miss U so<sup>3</sup> much! I take  $E=mc^2$  cruz ASA I know yr ETA. Cant live w/o U./L<sup>oo</sup>, F

She wiped her eyes. Fatima and Derek were teaming up to get her back to Netherheim, but despite the fact that their manipulations were so transparent, she was tempted, oh so tempted, to just give in. How could two people nearly forty trillion kilometers away—just specks in an unimaginably huge and empty vastness—exert such an influence on her?

Hannah knew how much Fatima must be hurting. What Fatima was offering would mean the end of her law-enforcement career in Himmelburg. To go for a relativistic cruise—the best way to kill time next to coldsleep, which was dangerous to repeat more than once a decade—would mean taking another long sabbatical, and Fatima didn't yet have the seniority. But if Hannah left Sut-ter's Mill without completing her pledge, her job prospects would hardly be brighter.

Not to mention how badly she would miss Ujamaa and all the other animals, *hrkleshira* included . . .

"Why did you have to bring this up *now*?" she asked the silent snapshow on her footlocker. "I've got work to do."

She blew her nose, straightened her clothing, and returned to Central Command.

Deacon shook Hannah gently by the shoulder. "All readies," he said. "Coffee included."

Hannah sat up abruptly, breathing the thick scent of coffee and blinking in slow motion. Deacon set a cup down on the console beside her. She had fallen asleep. "What time is it?"

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 197

"Ninth hour," said Deacon. "The audio processing completes, and Miles zombies. Testing time readies."

"Great, great. Give me a minute or two." Hannah tasted the inside of her mouth and winced. She blew on the coffee and tried a sip. "Not bad. Hey."

Deacon smiled. "I gratify."

The previous night, the three humans had tried everything they could think of to get the *hrkleshira* to drink and to solve the mystery of the prospector, while the Exclaimer offered the occasional elliptical comment. They had separated the *hrkleshira* into smaller cages, exposed them to various machines both inside and outside the base, added what *Brthklashikort* assured them were flavorful nutritional supplements to the water in different combinations in different cages, and more, but they were no closer to a solution by the wee morning hours than when they started.

Hannah's final idea had been to record the typical sounds the prospector made during operation, separate the various waveforms into their component elements, and expose the *hrkleshira* to each in turn to see if they could link any individual sound to the violent reactions. Deacon volunteered to drive out and make the recording, after which Miles<sub>70</sub> had worked through the rest of the night on the signal processing. Hannah tried to pass the time by studying the scant literature on Cretacea. She read and reread the source materials until she thought her eyes would bleed, but shale, shale, and more shale was all she could recall upon waking.

Haggard and red-eyed, Miles<sub>30</sub> wandered in from the forward passageway. "Morning, Sleeping Beauty," he said in a slurred voice. He scratched his armpit. "I managed to separate twenty-two different channels out of that recording for you. I got schematics from NaRM—that wasn't easy, you owe me big—and I managed to match most of the sounds to actual physical systems inside the prospector. You got your

power cells, your servomechanisms, your scoopers, your sifters, your hydraulics, your cooling system, your

198

WILLIAM SHUNN

heating system, your sonar system, your bloody fucking basic *solar* system worth of shit crammed in there, so have fun with your little mix tape, babe. I've got a wet dream with my name on it waiting for me. Good *night*."

"Thanks, Miles," Hannah said as he shuffled off. "You're a star."

"Yeah, a red dwarf."

After Hannah finished her coffee, she and Deacon wheeled a rack of audio components out back to the cages. The Exclaimer was there already, sitting on the ground like a strange origami construct. If it had suffered any ill effects from its long sleepless night, she couldn't tell.

The Exclaimer moved aside, and a picholein which had been sitting beside it scampered away. "*So the next experiment is ready to begin,*" the alien said.

"Just about." Hannah peered into the cages as Deacon affixed a trio of flatplate speakers to the side of the dome. The *hrkleshira* seemed even more lethargic than before—and was it her imagination, or were they losing color? "So tell me, now that we've spent so long preparing. Is this even worth trying?"

"*I believe there may be something to be learned from the attempt, yes.*"

Hannah rolled her eyes. "Fantastic. And what we'll probably learn is that we've wasted an entire night, right? Okay, Deacon, let's get started."

They cycled through each of Miles<sub>70</sub>'s twenty-two audio channels, holding for a full minute on each. Hisses and splutters, revving and grinding, humming and thrumming all played in turn, but the *hrkleshira* did no more than stir. At the end of the run, Deacon began trying the sounds in pairs, holding for only fifteen seconds on each.

Before the end of an hour, Hannah was ready to quit. It would take far more time, by many orders of magnitude, than they could

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 199

afford to cycle through every possible combination of channels. The Exclaimer had already made itself scarce, probably to escape the crushing boredom.

Hannah wanted to rage at the *hrkleshira*, pick them up and shake them and beat some sense into their tiny heads. It's only water, for God's sake! All you have to do is drink it! If you don't, you're going to die! But there was no point in getting angry with them. It wasn't their fault they were dying—it was hers for not being a proper steward, for not having done everything in her power to help them.

But she was finally ready to take that next step.

"I give up," she said to Deacon. "It's time to try it your way. I'll go talk to the Exclaimer."

Deacon's very bones seemed to sag with relief. "Godthanks," he said, closing his eyes and nodding.

Hannah took a deep breath, straightened her safari vest, and knocked at the door to *Brthklashikort's* quarters. *"Come in,"* it said from within, with perfect audibility.

Hannah opened the door. The Exclaimer rose from a flat mat at the far end of the room, removing a pair of opaque goggles from its face. This room was the closest to Central Command; its high ceilings permitted the Exclaimer to stand erect. *"Hello, Hannah,"* it said. *"I've been hoping you would seek an opportunity to speak to me one-on-one, though I didn't wish to push."*

The alien's elaborate courtesy set Hannah's teeth on edge. "I didn't want to push either," she said. "But I don't have a choice at this point."

*"I wish I could offer you a chair, but I'm far more comfortable sitting on the floor, so I don't have any handy. Please accept my apologies."*

"Don't sweat it," said Hannah. "There's plenty of floor." And

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WILLIAM SHUNN

not much else, she noted. Except for the mat and a couple of hexagonal crates, the Exclaimer's quarters were as barren of decoration as a monk's cell.

The alien folded itself down again, setting aside the goggles. It wore what she guessed were input gloves on its hands, though they were less substantial than the sort she was used to. *"I was just reviewing what material I have on the hrkleshira and their habits and environment,"* it said.

"Probably enough to fill a small library," said Hannah, sitting down with her back against one of the crates. "I don't suppose I could take a peek?"

*"Oh, you're welcome to, but you wouldn't understand any of it, and the presentation would probably induce illness."*

"Maybe you can just digest it for me."

The Exclaimer drummed its fingers up and down its legs. *"Hannah, I will give you all the assistance that is within my compass,"* it said, *"but I think you have intuited the limit to which that extends."*

Stomach clenching, Hannah shook her head. "We need more than that," she said. "I'll freely admit that I don't grasp the politics that have created the situation here. All I know is, there's a bunch of animals out there, completely apolitical, that are going to die unless we get more help from you than we've been getting."

*"Let me assure you, first,"* said the Exclaimer, *"that I have no wish to see the hrkleshira come to any harm. I'm rather more . . . shall we say, 'progressive' in this respect than are many of my fellows."*

"Then help us," Hannah said.

The Exclaimer raised a hand. *"Please. I have no wish to see harm done, but I also have a High Commission to which I must answer, and no chance of concealing my actions from it even were I to overstep the bounds to which I have sworn myself. It is a precarious line I must walk, between the health of innocent creatures and the requirements of the government to which I owe fealty."*

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 201



"Life is more important than any government."

*"What life? The lives of a few animals, or the lives of my entire race? Or of yours?"* The Exclaimer spread its arms in a surprisingly human gesture. *"I have observed your game of chess. I know that your government understands the concept of sacrificial pawns as well as mine."*

Hannah clenched her eyes. "Screw your government and mine both."

The alien stilled its hands. *"Do you not see that government— mine, yours, any race's—is a phenomenon as natural as specia-tion? Is it less deserving of life than are the hrkleshira?"*

"I don't see how the two can even be compared," she said, confused.

*"// you cannot, and if you are a representative member of your race, then I don't see how humanity will survive much more expansion. Any race which lacks such self-awareness is certain to generate friction with those which do not."*

Hannah's simmering anger began to boil. "How can you accuse us of a lack of self-awareness? How much do you even *know* about us? You've only been here a few days."

*"I've been among humans since the beginning of my voyage here,"* said the alien, *"and all the observations I have made only bear me out. Take your own group here. Miles, the small human with the large head, thinks to make up for his physical shortcomings by projecting a facade of cynicism and bravado, but doesn't perceive that he only puts up a wall between himself his fellows by doing so—and that's not even taking his obvious sexual attraction for you into account. Deacon Greenleaf sublimates his fear of openness and change and learning and growth into single-minded devotion to a god whose greatest accomplishment was getting himself gruesomely killed, and therefore denies himself any chance of achieving the apotheosis he seeks."*

*"And you, Hannah—you act as incomprehensibly as either of them, always finding the most difficult and laborious angle from*

202

WILLIAM SHUNN

*which to attack any problem. You do it so effectively, I can only imagine the behavior is deliberate."*

The Exclaimer stopped talking long enough to slip the goggles back over its eyes. *"In that respect, I find it impossible to understand why, yet at the same time perfectly comprehensible that you have not yet penetrated the mystery of the behavior of the hrkleshira. For they are, in that very peculiar, self-defeating way, your soulmates."*

Hannah was on her feet, nails pressed into the palms of her fists. "Where the hell do you get the nerve? You can sit there and make your pithy pronouncements all you like, but at the end of the day you're as lost and ineffectual as the rest of us! Look at you, stuck on Sutter's Mill with a bunch of humans you find beneath your contempt. If you're so much better than we are, then why aren't you somewhere more responsible in this vaunted government of yours? What does that say about you?"

The alien made curious gestures in the air with its gloved fingers, staring into an artificial realm Hannah could not begin to imagine. *"I hold neither you nor your colleagues in contempt. As I said, I differ from most of my race in that I am capable of mustering an unusual level of sympathy for members of other species. That is why I'm here."*

It turned its head to stare directly at Hannah; finding herself at the blind focus of those opaque goggles made her skin crawl. *"You really can have no concept of contempt until you've witnessed the reactions of many of my peers to your human talk of 'endangered species.' As some of your fellows so interestingly phrase it, this to us is a clear case of the pot calling the kettle black."*

"So that's it, huh?" said Hannah, planting her fists on her hips. Her pulse pounded behind her eyes. "That's all the help I'm going to get?"

*"Hannah, my sympathy is not infinite, and your repetitive-ness grows tiresome. You know everything you need to know, and*

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 203

*what you may not know, you have access to in the materials supplied to you by your superiors. Now please, don't force me to become as tiresome as you. Leave me to my studies."*

She opened her mouth to fire one parting shot, but the alien had already stopped paying her any attention.

Still, she made a firm point of slamming the door behind her when she left.

Hannah lay tossing on her bed for an hour before her anger began to ebb. She finally began to realize that despite its insults the alien might really have been trying to tell her something useful.

"Okay," she said to herself, swinging her legs off the bed, "everything I need to know is in the stuff I've already read. And the stupid birds do everything the hard way."

But what did that mean, that the *hrkleshira* did things the hard way? Dying of thirst when there was water right in front of them wasn't just doing things the hard way—it was suicide.

The hard way, the hard way. Just like her . . .

Nuts. That's what she was for paying any attention to the goddamn alien. Totally nuts. Grasping at straws.

Just like her.

The hard way.

"Shit," she said. Rubbing her eyes, she padded over to her console and woke up the desktop. She sat down, hung her head. As she idly rubbed the back of her neck, she tried to marshal her thoughts.

Fact one: the *hrkleshira* went crazy around ore prospectors and beat themselves bloody against them.

Fact two: the *hrkleshira* wouldn't drink water when it was placed right in front of them.

Fact three: the *hrkleshira* did things the hard way.

204

WILLIAM SHUNN

Wait, she was confusing facts with opinions now. She sighed and rubbed her head vigorously with both hands. The hard way. She was digging for answers the hard way . . .

Hannah suddenly raised her head. "Jack me black and blue," she said, eyes wide.

She brought up the geological survey of Cretacea and paged through it rapidly. When she found the information she was looking for, she sat back in her chair, a smile playing at the corner of her mouth. A solution seemed within reach, but if she were wrong she might spend several hours testing an invalid theory—hours the *hrkleshira* didn't have . . .

Moments later she had several different translations of the Bible open on her desktop, including the King James 1611, the Douay-Rheims, the New English, the Mons Olympus, the New Alpha Centauri Prime, the Joseph Smith, and the weirdly poetic Friarhesse Low Synod version used by the Stewardship. The exact phrase she recalled from her childhood occurred in every version but the Alpha Centauri and the Friarhesse, and even in those it was strikingly similar.

Hannah bookmarked the passages and sent her desktop back to sleep.

She found Deacon out back near the cages. He was sitting in the Exclaimer's favorite position, arms wrapped around his knees, staring at the listless *hrkleshira*. "Ah, Hannah," he said, greeting her dully. The sun stood almost directly overhead. Sweat matted his hair and beard, and he looked pale and drawn. "Why sits *Brthklashikort* here sooft, suppose you?" He shook his head. "I unimagine."

"I don't know either," said Hannah, though she finally had a suspicion. "Listen, can I ask you something?"

Deacon shrugged, mirroring the lethargy of the *hrkleshira*. "Surewise."

#### DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES

205

Hannah sat down near him in the dust. "Remember you were telling me about something cryptic the Exclaimer said to you on the ship?"

It took Deacon a moment to focus, but then he nodded his head. "I recall."

"I think you told me it compared the *hrkleshira* to Christians. Is that right?"

"It corrects. Coursewise, I uncomprehend the why."

"That's okay, Deacon." She leaned forward. "Did it say anything else? Or do you remember what you were saying that prompted its comment?"

Deacon squinted, thinking, then shook his head. "No, I regret. I unrecall the antecedents."

Hannah licked her lower lip. "Deacon—had you perhaps said something about Jesus being the source of living water? Or 'quick-water/ maybe?'"

For a long moment, Deacon said nothing, his eyes focused inwardly. "Mayhap," he said at last. His voice grew stronger, and he nodded, wonder dawning in his eyes. "Factwise, that corrects. I preached him Christ as quickwater's source, as lifesource eternal. How guessed you?"

Hannah shrugged. "Something that, uh, the Exclaimer said to me gave me the idea, that's all. I was just curious." She feigned a look of concern, but as she spoke she was surprised to realize that her concern was genuine. "You don't look well, Deacon, and you're not even wearing a hat to keep the sun off. Go inside. I'll watch the birds."

"But... I.."

"You've been awake I don't know how long now, and we need you sharp. Get some sleep. That's an order."

Deacon nodded, then slowly got to his feet. "Comprehend we must," he said. "Soon. Or the *hrkleshira* forever sleep."

"We'll figure it out, don't worry."

206

WILLIAM SHUNN

Hannah stood as he shuffled past. As soon as he was out of sight, she wiped a rivulet of sweat from her temple, opened the topmost cage, and reached inside.

Time to put her theory to the test.

The sun hung a hand's breadth above the eastern horizon as Hannah made the last adjustment to the recycler. "How does that look?" she radioed.

"It looks like a bunch of yellow dust and some rocks," came Miles<sub>70</sub>'s exasperated voice. "You knocked the damn peepers over again, Hannah. I can't see shit."

"Oh, sorry." She scooted out from beneath the elevated water trough, setting aside the wrench in her hand, and righted the peepers. She propped a rock beneath the forward sights so Miles<sub>70</sub> would be able to see up to the crude apparatus she had attached to the bottom of the trough. "How's that?"

"Can you give me a little more elevation? Okay, now a couple of degrees to the right. . . there!"

Hannah stretched her arms. She was covered in dust and sweat and engine oil, and her back ached, but she felt good. "Well?"

"Looks good, as far as I can tell. Only thing to do is give it a try."

Hannah stood up. "Well, all right. Here goes."

She had propped up one end of the trough so it sat at a slight angle to the ground. She wrestled the water tank from the back of the rover and filled the trough halfway, keeping an eye on the prospector that rumbled slowly through the underbrush two hundred meters away. She was about four kilometers north of the original release site, which was how far the prospector had ranged in the time since.

"Well, no leaks," said Hannah. "That's a good sign." She flipped the switch on the recycler that Miles<sub>70</sub> had helped her scrounge

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 20/

together from odds and ends. There were coughing and gurgling sounds, and the water began to churn at the upper end of the trough. In a few moments there was a nice little flow running from the top end to the trough to the bottom.

"Well?" said Miles<sub>70</sub>. "I can't see jack from ground level."

Hannah picked up the peepers and pointed them down into the trough. "How's that?"

"Excellent, Hannah! Looks perfect. Better get the rest set up now, because you've got visitors coming in about fifteen minutes."

"Roger," she said. "I couldn't have done this without you, you know. I already owe you two or three, but if this works I'm going to owe you . . . hell, a *lot*."

"If this works, you'll make senior field operative for sure, and then you can really start paying me back."

Hannah grinned. "Gladly, my friend. Gladly."

She went back to the rover and retrieved the solar collector that would keep the recycler running indefinitely. When that was deployed, she began gathering rocks, which she placed carefully in the bottom of the trough. She kept adding rocks until the water threatened to overflow the bottom end of the trough. The water turned cloudy and brown with dust, but after a few minutes the filters had rendered it clear again. She had created an artificial streambed two meters long, with clean water babbling cheerily over ore-veined rocks.

As Hannah stood back to admire her work, a rover appeared in the distance, trailing a clouds of dust like a bridal train. She went back to work.

She was just wrestling the dovecote into position when the rover drew near and stopped. Deacon and the Exclaimer emerged. The alien, with its long, loping stride, reached her first.

"*Interesting apparatus, Hannah!*" it said, bending over the trough with its hands propped on its bony knees. "*You've been hard at work.*"

Deacon caught up a few moments later. His hair stuck out every

208

WILLIAM SHUNN

DANCE OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED LUDDITES 209

which way, but at least he seemed to have gotten some rest. "Miles said you experiment freshwise. He bade us come." He caught sight of the splashing water in the trough. "Hello. What evidences?"

Hannah smiled. "You're just in time to find out."

She raised her remote control and clicked. The doors of the dovecote folded open.

For thirty seconds, nothing happened. Hannah could see the listless *hrkleshira* mounded in their pigeonholes like lumps of dead clay. But then something seemed to penetrate their fog. First one, then another and another, began to stir. Quizzical squeaks and chatters emerged from the dovecote, and two *hrkleshira* poked their heads out into the twilight.

Hannah realized she was holding her breath, and she forced herself to exhale.

In another few moments, fully half the *hrkleshira* were alert and bobbing their heads at the ends of outstretched necks. Their yellow breasts caught the last fires of the dying sun. Then the chattering squeaks crescendoed, and the *hrkleshira* took to the air.

Hannah's breath hitched. The cloud of red-and-yellow bodies coalesced briefly into its familiar shape, drifting and spinning like an exotic flower unfolding in an airborne whirlpool—and then, one by one, the *hrkleshira* swooped down and away, out of formation.

They alighted in the trough's rushing streambed.

The first ones to land began vigorously scratching at the rocks with their clawed feet. As more and more *hrkleshira* joined them, they dipped their supple necks to the water and drank. In moments, the entire flock was splashing around in the trough, pawing the rocks, drinking, and squeaking loudly enough to drown out the sound of the recycler. They paid the distant prospector no attention whatsoever.

Hannah found herself swept into a broad hug by Deacon, who planted a bristly kiss on her cheek. "Quickwater!" he said, grinning broadly. "How the *hrkleshira* similars the Christian! You *genius*, Hannah!"

"*Insightfully done, indeed,*" said the Exclaimer, who stood a few meters away, bobbing slightly as he watched the *hrkleshira* cavort in the water.

"Yes," said Miles<sub>70</sub>, for her benefit alone. "You done good, kiddo."

Surprised, she felt herself blush.

"How figured?" Deacon asked, holding her at arm's length and studying her with a rapt expression. With his crazy red hair, he resembled some ecstatic Biblical prophet rejoicing in the sunset.

"Well," she said with a glance at the Exclaimer, "I just started wondering if there was some kind of evolutionary reason why the *hrkleshira* should start refusing water, if it might be a survival trait in some way. I took another look at the geological surveys from Cretacea, and it turns out they come from a region of the planet where it's hilly and there's lots of groundwater. Hilly and *shaly*, I might add. Lots of flat loose rock everywhere."

Deacon cocked his head to one side. "They solewise take their water 'on the rocks'?"

"Deacon, was that an actual ;'ofce?" She smiled at the sight of his reddening face. "Not exactly, I don't think, and, uh, *Berth*-what's-your-name, you can correct me if I get the details wrong. It's standing water that turns them off, probably because it's more likely to get brackish and polluted. When I stirred up the water in their cages, that actually made some of them start drinking."

"Clever," said Deacon.

"But frequently on Cretacea, actual moving water, *living* water, is flowing just *under* the surface of all that loose shale. I think the *hrkleshira* use some kind of sonar—since they only hear well in their own vocal range—to locate trickles of living water below the surface of the rock. When they find it, they dig for it."

Deacon was nodding now. "Seen, seen. And prospectorward, what we mislabeled insanity was truewise . . ."

"It was really just them trying to dig through the skin of the dome. What they detected was the sound of coolant circulating

beneath the surface. That's why they bypassed the standing water in the trough. They wouldn't let themselves drink it when living water seemed to be so close at hand."

The Exclaimer folded itself to the ground. *"Excellently reasoned, Hannah,"* it said, *"and all very correct. You've done well."*

Hannah turned again to watch the *hrkleshira* cavorting in the trough, yellow breasts bright in the last light of day, and she permitted herself to feel a moment of joy.

Hannah snapped on the headlights as the rover jounced across the twilight landscape. She flexed her throat mike, severing the radio link with Miles<sub>70</sub>. "There's still one thing I'd like to know," she said.

After gathering the *hrkleshira*, she had sent Deacon back to the base alone in his rover. The Exclaimer *Brthklashikort* sat folded into the passenger seat beside her. *"Yes?"*

"Well, two things, really. First, how *all* the *hrkleshira* became affected when only a few of them were exposed to the prospector—and next, what you were doing out there with them so often."

*"Watching, monitoring, no more,"* said the Exclaimer, turning its blank globular gaze on her.

Hannah nodded dubiously. "Overtly maybe," she said. "But are you sure there wasn't more to it than that?"

The Exclaimer straightened in its seat as much as it could. *"I'm intrigued. For instance?"*

"For instance, oh ... communication of some sort? Something very subtle. Maybe even telepathy."

*"Telepathy?"* The Exclaimer drummed its long fingers on its legs. *"You're joking, surely."*

Hannah shrugged. "Some of the reports I saw, even some made by Deacon himself, noted how preternaturally coordinated some of the *hrkleshira's* actions seemed to be. I've observed it myself. Maybe they actually do have some kind of crude group

telepathy at work, sharing survival information, or maybe it's simple instinct that lets them pick up on behavioral cues from the rest of the group. But whatever it is, you must know a lot more about it than any of us do, and you may even know how to strengthen or weaken those signals." She paused to steer them around a large boulder. "Maybe even to the point where you could keep them out of hibernation for longer than they ordinarily would have stayed without water."

*"Or perhaps I might have been driving them to it prematurely."*

"Perhaps," said Hannah. "But at this point I would tend to doubt it."

The Exclaimer stared straight ahead out the windshield. "Not *all your people would.*"

"But *telepathy*, man!" Hannah pounded the steering column in her excitement. "If it exists, do you realize what an amazing *miracle* that is? Come on, please, you have to tell me if I'm right."

For several moments, the alien sat in silence. *"Hannah,"* it said at last, *"you're rushing to conclusions again, as you so often tend to do. The true miracle lies not in telepathy or any other fanciful process, but in the mere fact that widely disparate species can communicate with one another at all, whatever the mechanism."*

It turned its huge eyes toward her. *"Humans are easily startled creatures, as are my people. We wouldn't want to upset the balance of that delicate, fragile, vital mechanism with wild speculation*

*in paranoid ears. Correct?"*

Chastened, Hannah watched the dusty ground churn through the cones of her headlights for nearly half a kilometer. Finally she said, "In that case, I'll just say thank you. Thank you for all the help you've given us. *All of it.*"

*"You're very welcome,"* said the Exclaimer. *"And thank you. Thank you for listening beyond what was said. It was a braver act than I hope you will ever have cause to realize."*

Hannah nodded without understanding, wanting to ask for



212

WILLIAM SHUNN

clarification but somehow afraid that to do so would be to betray some fundamental and tragic racial flaw that only an Exclaimer could see.

They finished the rest of the drive in silence.

In her quarters, Hannah extended her hair to its greatest length and lay on her bed with it pillowed around her head in a comforting nimbus. She stared at the dim ceiling, feeling pleased and proud and strong, but for some reason completely unable to sleep. After a while, she realized what she needed to do. She rose, crossed the room, and woke up her desktop. She fussed over the wording of her two ansiblegrams for a very long time, though in the end she said much the same thing in each. Her message to Fatima, however, contained an extra invitation that Derek's didn't:

Nixed da's offer. Hard way / go, but debts R mine alone, catharsis mine. No I can proxy./Bsides, love work & animals here 2 much. MayB promotion, more \$, but still @ least / yrs pledge. Cant predict return date yet./MayB we find way U join me?/L^°, H

;, The *Kill Rift* and |of short stories, | (both recently | *Leather Required*,

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^ntatively titled *Wild*

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Schow has written w,^., ' television and film,

scripting, as he puts it, "the unsavory activities of such social lions as Leatherface and Freddy Kruegen" as well as The *Crow*. Most recently he's written for Showtime's The *Hunger* and completed a script for James



Cameron's production company. Schow's original on-line fiction can be found at <http://www.gothic.net>. He lives in the Hollywood Hills with Christa Faust.

With the messages queued for transmission, Hannah put her worries about the future aside and slept peacefully, at least for that one night.

## **BLESSED EVENT**

DAVID J. SCHOW

It wasn't exactly an argument that drove Detective Lieutenant Dion Curson out of his house at one in the morning; it was more like a recurrent migraine no one had warned him about when he first said "I do" to his bride, Sondra, whom he loved without reserve.

Sometimes, *almost* without reserve. Like tonight.