

# Oxygen Rising

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*"Oxygen Rising" was published in Asimov's. This space opera novelette takes place after an act of terrorism, and along the way, as the characters travel, covers some of the same territory that Sparhawk does in his story earlier in this book, but with a lighter touch. Garcia entertains, but there's a kind of commentary on the side that reminds us of Robert A. Heinlein's entertaining and instructive adventures.*

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"Hey, human, time to earn your pay!" Curled in a feline crouch, a silver comlink clipped to his furry ear, the Super-Cat flashed Derek a toothy grin. Tawny fur showed through gaps in the bioconstruct's body armor, and his oxygen bottle had a special nosepiece to accommodate the saber-tooth upper canines, huge curved fangs whose roots ran back to the eye sockets. This deep in the highlands of Harmonia, even *Homo smilodon* needed bottled air. Cradling a recoilless assault cannon, the SuperCat had small use for ceremony, letting everyone call him Leo.

Derek grunted, getting paid being the least of his worries. Lying prone, sucking oxygen, he fixed his gaze on his bug's viewfinder. He had close-cropped hair, a somewhat fit body, and a fashionably biosculpted face—if you liked your humans pretty much unaltered—just a stylish nose-job, xl-ten thousand night vision zoom lenses, and straight white teeth. His bug sat perched on a heap of shattered glass a dozen meters ahead, tight-casting to the viewfinder's whip antenna, letting Derek see in all directions without getting out of his hole—always an advantage.

Rain fell in a weepy drizzle, turning everything gray, the ground, the clouds, and the surviving tall glass towers. Through the viewfinder, Derek saw a fairy city gone to seed, with great glass towers lying smashed on the wet greensward, broken into glistening shards by the cometary impacts. Others stood snapped in half, their shining interiors exposed to the downpour and turning green with algae.

Water had been rare when the city was built, but now it was everywhere, soaking shaky foundations, making the dead city unsafe even when folks were not shooting at you. Whoever named the planet Harmonia had a horrible sense of humor.

"Make sure no one shoots me in the back," Derek suggested, and the SuperCat just grinned, his clawed finger resting lightly on the cannon's firing stud—if Leo blew you apart, it would not be by accident. Rising slowly, Derek stood up, alone and virtually unarmed—nothing deadly anyway, just a pair of hypo-rings, and a sleep grenade tucked behind his waistband. Printed across the front and back of his body armor in bold white letters were the words DO NOT SHOOT THIS MAN!

Twenty or so meters in front of him lay a smoldering Bug-mobile, a big one, with its gutted turret askew and the port legs missing. Forty meters beyond the squashed Bug, a bunker was dug into the base of a fallen tower, concealed by rubble and fast growing green tendrils—even Derek's special zoom lenses could not make it out. Only deadly accurate fire had revealed its position. He took a big jolt of oxygen, gave a jaunty wave, and set out toward the bunker, his tiny bug scurrying through the low foliage behind him. Passing the smashed Bug-mobile, Derek did a swift medi-check, deciding that the two Greenies in the burned-out turret were beyond help.

("Stop," commanded a gruff voice on his com-link.)

He stopped, sucking oxygen, four paces beyond the smashed Bug, staring at the Gekko ghost town. "Anything you say."

("Are you human?" asked the voice from the bunker.)

"Hope so." Some folks set a high bar for humanity. "Want to see my chromosomes?"

("Are you Peace Corps?" asked the voice.)

"That would be nice, wouldn't it?" Derek wished he was, since then he would be peace-bonded, sacrosanct, and wired for lie-detection. "Sorry, just another civilian."

("Then what are you doing here?")

Good question. What was he doing in a nameless ruined city, on a chamel-house planet with unbreathable air, where angry folks aimed heavy weapons at him? Feeling like a deranged tourist, he told the voice, "Talking to you."

("Why?" the voice sounded more surprised than suspicious.)

No mystery there. "They figured you would shoot a Greenie."

(That got a good laugh from the bunker. "No shit.")

"Rank favoritism," Derek admitted, taking another whiff of oxygen. "I got the job just for being human, in clear violation of the Charter of Universal Rights."

(That drew another chuckle. "Come on in then. Can't shoot you just for being human.")

Not yet anyway. As Derek walked toward the concealed bunker, his bug ran up the back of his boot and tucked itself into the boot top. Augmented vision picked out the recessed pressure-sealed gun ports, cleverly concealed and shielded—but he did not see the camouflaged bunker door until it opened before him, revealing a gas-tight airlock. Stepping gingerly through the recessed door, he waited while the lock cycled, then entered the damp, dark bunker, which had several inches of water on the floor. Blast shields flanked the door, and gunners lay prone in niches on either side of him, peering into their gun sights. Air inside the bunker was Earth-normal, and Derek took deep grateful breaths. Not all of the planet was as bad as the highlands outside—but damn near. ("Stay by the door," warned the voice.)

Derek stayed, aiming not to antagonize. New to diplomacy, Derek still guessed that the voice would take time to materialize—not to seem overeager. Even trapped in a tiny bunker on a hostile planet, any sensible negotiator pretended to have something to do. Taking his own advice, Derek turned to the nearest gunner, a young athletic, brown-haired woman in a Settler militia uniform, staring into the sights of an assault-cannon, and asked her in his friendliest diplomatic voice, "Where are you from?"

"Right here," she replied, without taking her head out of the sights.

"I mean before. Off-planet," Derek nodded toward the heavens, hidden by layers of steel and concrete.

Withdrawing her head from the hooded sight, the woman stared suspiciously at him. She had a frank, natural face, with no trace of biosculpt, just wide intelligent green eyes and brown freckles sprinkled across her nose. "Portland, Oregon," she replied evenly. "But I was born in Eugene."

"Really?" Derek was impressed. "That's on Earth?"

"Yes," she stared at him like he was crazy. "Pacific coast of North America, in what used to be the United States."

"Amazing." He shook his head at the incredible distance she had come—some two hundred light years—just to end up next to him. "What is it like? In Oregon?"

"Nice, real nice," she looked past him at the wet blank wall of the bunker, as if remembering something far away. Her Universal had a charming other-worldly quality, so quaint and old-fashioned that you could tell with your eyes closed that she wasn't a Greenie. "Tall trees, lots of people, sweet breathable air—a lot nicer than here. Have you ever been to Earth?"

Derek shook his head. "I don't even know anyone who has been to Earth. You are my first." Struck by the immense distance between them, though only centimeters apart, all he could think to say was, "You've come a long way, good luck."

"You too." She stuck her head back in the sighting hood, leaving him looking at the back of her brown uniform, which had a dark sweat-stain along the spine, but was tailored to curve neatly over her rear. It felt strange to stand next to a young woman—a heavily armed one at that—who you had absolutely nothing in common with, except that she was human. Had she killed those two Greenies in the squashed Bug? Possibly, but there was no polite way to ask. He noted that the niche next to hers was vacant, blown to smithereens by a direct hit on the gun port. Greenies got lucky with that one. So did she.

Another pressure door dilated, and a big balding middle-aged man stepped out, with small alert eyes on either side of a long sharp nose. He wore the same brown militia uniform as the girl gunner from Eugene, only his had general's stars on the shoulders—totally unneeded, since the fellow exuded authority. His voice was the one that had come over the corn-link. "General William D. Pender, but you can call me Bill, everyone does."

Everyone insystem knew Big Bill Pender—the Greenies had already condemned him in absentia, and he headed Leo's humans-to-shoot-on-sight list. Taking the offered hand, he admitted, "Derek's all the name I got."

"It will do." General Pender eyed him carefully, asking, "Where are you from, Derek?"

"Just about anywhere," Derek shrugged. "I was born in transit, Archernar to Alpha Crucis, on the survey ship *Ibn Batuta*. And I guess I've been outbound ever since—you're only the second person I have ever met from Earth."

"Proud to represent the planet," Pender beamed. "So what do you have to say?"

Derek took a deep breath. "I wish I were Peace Corps, but I'm not. I'm just here to save lives, human lives, as many as I can. You have given the Greenies a good thumping, and they no longer think they can take this place by direct assault."

Pender chuckled, leaning back against a blast shield. "Happy to hear that."

"*Bad* news is that the Greenies plan to just blast you to atoms. There is an Osiris missile in orbit with an antimatter warhead, aimed right where we are standing. I'm your last chance to get anyone out of here alive."

Pender took the news evenly, well aware that the Greenies were losing patience. "So what's the deal if we leave?"

"No deal, I'm afraid." Derek didn't try to con Pender; whatever happened next, he was talking to a dead man. "You give up your guns and come out. Greenies already have a blanket amnesty for women and kids—most women, anyway." He did not want to get the gunner from Portland's hopes up, since the women and kids amnesty did not apply to her. "But the best I can promise you and your troops is civilized treatment and a fair trial."

Big Bill shook his bald head. "You're not offering much."

"I am not offering anything, just passing on the Greenies' terms." Derek knew how bad that sounded, like being a messenger boy for *Photo sapiens*. "Look, they could have sent a holo. Or just a warhead. I volunteered for this, and I'm here in the flesh to show I understand the seriousness of what I'm saying. Innocent human lives are at stake—including mine. That is who I speak for."

Pender grinned. "You volunteered?"

"Sounds stupid, doesn't it." Derek grinned back. "I won't lie, I'm getting triple hazard pay just for being here—but no amount of pay would drag me to ground zero if I didn't think it was right. Send out the kids, at least."

General Pender smiled pleasantly at him, like a veteran poker player who'd bet his limit on a busted flush, but was too much of a pro to show it. "Stay here, you deserve an answer."

Derek watched Big Bill Pender disappear through the inner lock, then he turned to the gunner in her niche. "So, what did you do in Portland?"

"Nothing," the woman did not take her head out of the sighting hood. "That's why I came here—two years out of grad school, and way overqualified for any job I could hope to get. There are dance clubs in Portland where the hostesses all have advanced degrees. Colonizing the stars sounded romantic, a chance to do something with my life, like in ZPG commercials."

Everyone makes mistakes. "Try not to judge the cosmos by Ares system," Derek suggested, "some parts are amazingly lovely."

Pulling her head out of the hood, the woman brushed brown hair out of green eyes and asked, "Is it part of your job to be nice to me?"

"I'm a negotiator," Derek declared blandly, hiding behind business. "It's my job to be nice to everyone."

But the Portland woman was not buying. "Doesn't your training..."

"Who said I was trained?" Derek hated to start off relationships on a lie.

That got a grin, a major accomplishment given the circumstances. "There must be something in the negotiator's code of ethics against flirting."

"Heavens, I hope not!" Derek returned her grin. "They couldn't pay me enough. What's your favorite place on Earth?"

"That's easy, the Olympic Peninsula, it's grand and homey at the same time; we used to camp there when I was a kid. Or maybe Paradise Island, a holo-playland off Hawaii. I went there with my boyfriend for high school graduation..." She stopped and stared hard at him, asking, "It doesn't bother you to get personal with someone you're negotiating over?"

"Not if she's human." And here was the real thing, straight from Earth, fresh and unpretentious, not at all cowed by her current disastrous position. He could easily see how humans had gotten so far.

"So, what do you think?" the Earthwoman switched subjects. "Are we getting out of this alive?"

"Hope so." He meant it. Derek figured that Pender would let non-combatants go—but that would not do the gunner from Portland much good. Right now she had an assault-cannon and layers of steel and concrete between her and the Greenies. He was asking her to surrender her weapon, and turn herself over to folks who were driving humans off Harmonia—except for those they executed. At best, she faced a fair trial, though she wouldn't see any *Homo sapiens* on her jury.

General Pender returned with the women and kids, including his wife, Charlotte, a white-haired woman in a militia colonel's uniform—she too was condemned in absentia. Pender spoke for the group. "We took a vote—first time I ever resorted to polling the staff, but we had to be sure. Charlotte and I are staying, but you can take the kids, and anyone else who wants to go."

"Thanks." Derek meant to get going before anyone changed their minds. "Come on, kids, who wants to meet a real live SuperCat?" No one leaped at the chance, but with the help of some scared mothers, he herded the children to the door, picking up the smallest orphan boy to hurry things along. As the pressure lock cycled, he called to Leo, "Hey, we are coming out with mothers, kids, and non-combatants. Don't shoot."

("Well done, human," Leo sounded pleasantly surprised.)

He looked over at the Portland woman, lying in her niche, asking her, "Are you coming out?"

"Maybe." Her head was back in the sighting hood, covering the exit of the kids. Hoping this was not the last he saw of her, Derek entered the lock.

When the outer door dilated, Derek sent his bug scurrying ahead of them, and gave the boy in his arms a squirt of oxygen, asking, "What's your name?"

"Brad," replied the boy, staring wide-eyed at the burned-out Bug-mobile and the two dead Greenies. According to Pender, Brad's parents had been killed by Greenie orbital bombs. Greenies preferred fighting from five hundred clicks up.

"My name's Derek, and we get to go first." He tried to make stepping into the line of fire sound like an honor.

Brad asked suspiciously, "What's a SuperCat?"

"You'll see. His name's Leo and he's really neat, but don't put your hand in his mouth." Derek stepped back into the rain, wading out into low wet vegetation, he and Brad both trying not to show their fear. No one shot at them.

"What's that?" Brad pointed at the smashed Bug-mobile.

"Sculptorian Symbiots," Derek took a drag on his oxygen, "the most advanced xenos known to man—we call them Bugs, using them for anything dull or dangerous." Calling out an all-clear, he led the gaggle of moms and children out of the lock and away from the shattered glass tower, over to where the mechanized battalion was dug in at the city's perimeter.

("Greenies have brought up pressurized Bug-mobiles for them," Leo told him. "This all there is?")

"Hope not." Now came the hard part. Everything so far had been scary, but up-beat, Derek risking his life doing good—and getting paid on top of it. Now bad things would happen that he could not stop. "Hear that, Brad?" He gave the boy some oxygen, then took a snort himself. "We get to ride on a Bug."

Big double-ended sixteen-legged Bug-mobiles were hunkered hull-down at the edge of town. Sculptorian Symbiots came in all shapes and sizes, from slim four-armed centauri-ods used for semi-intelligent tasks like cleaning toxic spills, to these big double-bodied, sixteen-limbed types not much brighter than a smart-car. Bugs were true xenos, hive creatures, working for food and water, and the chance to propagate themselves on new planets—the highest known form of non-human life in this part of the galaxy. But Bugs might think that humans were the dumb ones. Survey ships in the Far Beyond had discovered whole Bug planets, whose original inhabitants had also found the Bugs to be obedient tools—but now existed only as DNA samples.

Greenie males wearing loincloths and battle armor casually emerged from the Bug-mobiles to collect the prisoners. Women shrank back and kids started to whimper. Brad fought back tears. Not that Greenies were particularly frightening—not compared to monstrosities like Bugs and SuperCats. *Photo sapiens* were pretty much human, but with photosynthetic algae in their skin and somatic cells, giving them a bright green color that glistened in the rain. Otherwise they were small, graceful and lightly built, with handsome faces half-hidden by rebreathers—which showed that they needed as much air as humans. But Derek was handing these women and kids over to enemies who were driving them from Harmonia. Greenies had killed their fathers, husbands, and brothers, and, in some cases, their sisters and mothers as well, making specious any lectures about how we were all the same under the skin. Which Derek knew was not even true.

Brad refused to be handed over, clinging to Derek until Leo came up. Clapping Derek on the back, Leo gave Brad a close-up look at saber-tooth canines, saying, "Good job! It would have cost me to bring them out the hard way. Want steady work?"

Quieting at once, Brad sucked oxygen. Somehow the sight of this tawny monster with a toothy smile calmed him, dispelling any fear of mere Greenies. Derek shook his head. "No thanks, the job I got is bad enough."

"Too bad." Leo shook his head, taking a big snort of oxygen. "I like to get my hands on humans. Greenies are just not the same. They are smart enough, and follow orders happily, they just don't have that, well, you know..."

"Killer instinct?" Derek's gaze stayed fixed on the bunker door, while Brad stared wide-eyed at Leo. Men in brown militia uniforms emerged from the bunker to be disarmed by Leo's troopers, who turned them over to the Greenies.

"Exactly," Leo declared, pleased to have hit on just the right term. "Why is that?"

Derek continued to study the door, sucking oxygen as the last seconds of truce ticked away, willing her to come out. "Greenies are too cultured," he told the SuperCat. "We humans are the wild stock."

"Is that so?" Leo did not sound convinced. "I'm pretty cultured myself."

Derek laughed dryly, still staring at the door, seeing three men in flight suits appear, an older guy and two teenagers. Still no gunner from Portland. "You were crossed with wild carnivores; they got the genes for Greenies out of a cantaloupe."

Leo sounded shocked. "Really, a cantaloupe?"

"Just a figure of speech," Derek assured him, praying for the door to dilate again.

"Still, it explains a lot," Leo decided. Derek's heart leaped as he saw the Portland woman emerge from the concealed lock carrying an oxygen bottle, trudging toward the big Bug-mobiles. He waited to see which Bug-mobile she chose, and saw her come straight to theirs. Good sign.

Taking a big swig of oxygen and hoisting Brad onto his shoulder, he stepped into her path, saying, "Hi, Portland. Glad you came out."

Stranded in Ares system, facing internment and a war-crimes trial, the failed settler shrugged. "I hardly had a choice."

"None of us did," he admitted. "My name's Derek."

"I know." She nodded, not offering hers.

"What's yours?" He could get it from the Greenies, but he wanted to hear her say it.

"Tammy," Brad announced loudly. "That is Tammy."

Tammy smiled, but did not speak. Looking up, Derek thanked the boy on his shoulder, then handed him to Tammy. "Keep him away from the Greenies if you can."

Tammy took the boy, and climbed onto the covered carrier atop the Bug-mobile, with Brad looking up at her, saying, "I saw a SuperCat!" Rising up on their sixteen legs, the Bugs swiftly bore the prisoners away toward the landing field. Derek had to stay.

The truce had expired. Satisfied that no one else was coming out, Leo signaled to the heavy weapons, and an armor-piercing missile slammed into the bunker door, blowing the outer lock to pieces and blocking the entrance with rubble. If Tammy had been at her gun port, she would have been dead, and Derek would have killed her, since negotiations had revealed the concealed entrance. With Pender and his people sealed in, Leo pulled his troops back before the Osiris missile arrived. Taking shelter in the armored Bug-mobiles, they waited—but nothing happened. Leo glanced at Derek, asking, "What's taking the Greenies?"

Derek nodded toward the landing field, "They are waiting for lift-off."

"Lift-off," Leo arched an eyebrow. "Whatever for?"

"Women and children aboard that transport know the people in Pender's bunker," Derek explained. "Greenies will not blast it until the transport lifts and the people aboard can't hear the bang or see the flash."

Sure enough, the transport lifted from the field behind them, and while it was still a silver spark overhead, climbing for altitude, an Osiris missile falling from orbit obliterated the bunker with a boom so big Derek felt it through his boots, seeing the last of the glass towers shatter into diamond dust, while a mushroom cloud rose up into the rain.

"How like the Greenies!" Leo took a long disgusted snort of oxygen. "They don't mind blasting Pender to pieces, just not in front of the females." SuperCat females were the traditional hunters, the ones who taught the cubs to kill, and were more likely to use fang and claw than the males, who favored automatic weapons. Leo dropped Derek off at the shuttle bay, thanking him again, and pulling a bracelet from his wrist, saying, "This is for your trouble, and the trouble you saved me."

Derek turned it over in his hands, recognizing Home Systems work, a thin gold and jade communicator-cum-companion, voice activated, with a giga-bit memory, and enough microprogramming to play music, translate Bug signals, and teach you Classic French cooking, all at the same time. Mercs like Leo kept their personal savings as flashy but useful items that could be sold or bartered if need be. Derek tried to turn it down, pointing out, "I'm obscenely well paid."

"But not by me," the SuperCat replied, leaping back aboard the armored Bug, and waving good-bye. Leo apologized as he sealed the Bug's turret, "Have to go kill more humans!"

Derek disembarked on the *Harmonia* the huge colony ship used by the Greenies to settle Ares system. *Harmonia* had once been a human ship, the colony-class *Trinidad*, used to settle the near Eridani—but colony ships almost never returned to the Home Systems, and were either cannibalized at their destination, or kept heading outward under new owners. This one not only changed owners but peoples, serving as a habitat in the Delta Eridani, then being bought by Greenies to colonize Ares system, renamed *Harmonia* to match the planet. At the docking port where humans had once assembled to set foot on new worlds, Derek saw naked Greenie kids gathered at huge view panels to watch the ships coming up from the surface. You could see it on 3V, but kids liked to be there, seeing the passengers get off. Especially Greenie kids. Greenies wanted to do everything first-hand, liking game-playing, group participation, dancing to live music, and making love. To Greenies, 3V entertainment was an oxymoron, dull as counting seams on the bulkhead.

*Harmonia, ex-Trinidad*, was back to being a habitat, temporary housing for thousands of Greenie colonists, waiting for room on the slowly expanding surface settlements. Oxygen levels were rising rapidly as super-plants spread over the surface, but Greenies were not Gekkos, bred for Mars-like conditions—Greenies needed air as much as humans, otherwise they would not have come to *Harmonia*. Right now a lot of them didn't have much to do, which made Greenies restless. Kids were not the only ones who came to see the shuttle unload. Dressed in skimpy swaths of fabric and ready smiles, a pair of young Greenie women were eyeing the incoming passengers, looking for excitement. Seeing Derek, the taller of them stood up on jade bejeweled toes and called out, "Hey, human, ever had a Greenie?"

"Or two?" suggested her curvy girlfriend.

"Sorry," Derek apologized, never liking to offend friendly young females. "I've got a Greenie girlfriend."

Striking a pose, the tall one put a hand on her hip and tilted her head. "So you know what you are missing."

Her girlfriend added, "If she doesn't treat you right, let us know."

Sex was about the biggest thrill Greenies could imagine, and they liked doing it with ordinary humans. Which some folks found sinister, since any children produced were Greenies—one more part of the great Greenie plot to take over the galaxy. A lot of humans hated Greenies, wanting them all dead—but not Derek. He got on amazingly well with Greenies. How could he not? Greenies were polite, easy going, and compactly built, making most of them smaller than him; while their women were forward and attractive. Besides the algae in their skin, they had altered hormone levels with predispositions toward heliotropism and nudity, plus numerous other "improvements." Hard working and cooperative, Greenies



had no interest in religion, politics, nor spectator amusements, and they never got cancer or 3 V addiction, nor felt any guilt over sex. In short, there were just enough differences to make normal humans wonder if they were dealing with people, or a biology project gone amok. Or our evolutionary replacements.

His quarters were on J-deck, which was done up like a Japanese garden, a deep misty canyon with elegant dwarf pines growing under a blue hologram sky. Each leaf and rock was set just so, and raked paths connected apartments with balconied entrances, set like Shinto temples in the canyon wall. He awoke each morning to bird calls and the splash of water on stone.

Mia greeted him at the door, rising on her toes to kiss him hello. Her skimpy costume showed large sweeps of smooth green skin, and her tiny jade tongue slid easily between his lips, feeling small and tingly in his mouth. Her compact body pressed against him in all the right places. Guys joked that if you closed your eyes, Greenie girls felt totally human, especially on the inside—but Derek liked to know who he was kissing. He enjoyed seeing Mia's gold hair lying on her light green neck and cheek. But most of all, he enjoyed Mia's enthusiasm for him, and the way her deft fingers immediately started searching through his clothes for skin. Had he called ahead she would have met him at the shuttle port, and kissed him there—showing the girls at the dock-side just how it was done.

Mia had little to do right now, except to enjoy him. She was a mammalian ecologist, waiting for the biosphere below to expand before going to work dirtside. Up here, they could only monitor oxygen levels and make ecosystem projections; pretty dry stuff, but luckily for Mia, they were her life's passion. He handed her the bracelet, saying, "Here, knock yourself out."

Delighted, Mia put it on her wrist, admiring the way the gold and jade shone against her skin. Greenies were not all the same shade, and Mia had light grass-green skin. Though Greenies were almost hairless between the tops of their heads and their pubes, Mia had tiny gold flecks of body hair, which Derek found quite fetching against her light emerald skin. You had to be really close to see them—but that was part of the fun. He told her, "It is from the Home Systems, maybe even Earth."

Her amber eyes went wide. Bred for deep space colonization, few Greenies ever saw the Home Systems. Earth was the closest thing they had to heaven, the far-off home world of their revered and feared creators, full of strange sights and god-like wonders. "Where did you ever find it?"

"Got it off a SuperCat." As soon as he'd seen it, Derek had thought of Mia, since it matched her skin, and because pricey talking jewelry was the sort of toy Greenies would enjoy, but not think to make themselves.

"Sounds dangerous." Mia took him back into her arms, forgetting the expensive microelectronics on her wrist, happy just to have him safe. Being a mammalogist, she knew all about SuperCats, another flashy toy Greenies would never have made themselves.

"And then some." Derek felt a touch of panic at the thought of how he had faced suicidal gunners, walking straight toward that grim bunker. Mia relaxed into him, feeling solid and fragile at the same time, soothing his fears, reminding Derek that he had survived. He told her, "I talked to Big Bill Pender."

"Tender himself?" Mia shivered, shocked at how close he had come to a mass murderer.

"Yep, but he's dead now." Strange that the comfortable, jovial fellow who spared his life in the bunker was now dead, blasted to photons.

"I know," Mia whispered, "I heard it on the Net." Mia could barely imagine killing another thinking being on purpose, much less blowing up a whole bunker full.

"I got a bunch of kids out, adults too," Derek reminded himself, showing that you could do good by taking stupid risks.

Burying her blonde head in his shoulder, she sighed softly, "You are so sweet and brave, and you deserve a reward." Mia kissed him again, making it plain what that reward would be.

Derek did not complain. Since Mia had moved in, his personal life had gotten happier and livelier, without any apparent downsides. Mia had supreme self-confidence, always showed her feelings, and never feared to speak the truth, taking complete charge of his life by giving Derek whatever he wanted, coping easily with each situation that arose. With three advanced degrees and nothing much to do, Mia found it a snap to fix his meals and manage his affairs, deftly setting out dinner, rice balls and vat-grown sushi, accompanied by a warm bottle of saki. Greenies got off on "authentic"

Earth cuisine, though Mia refused to eat vertebrate flesh unless it was vat-cultured. Derek relaxed, finally feeling like the conquering hero—too bad he had to go back down in a couple of dozen hours and do it all again.

After dinner, Mia disposed of the dishes and settled into his lap, so they could both drink saki from the same cup. Derek told her, "I talked to a woman too."

"A human woman?" Mia asked, playfully starting to undo his sweaty tunic, knowing full well what he meant.

"From Old Earth." Derek smelled lilac perfume wafting out of the jade hollow between Mia's breasts.

Mia arched a blonde eyebrow. "I never met someone from Earth."

"Straight from Portland, Oregon, but she was born in Eugene."

"Really?" These were mythical places to Mia, ancient homes of her creators—just talking about them excited her. Greenies never had to ask themselves, "Where did we come from?"—knowing the date and place where they were first created, down to the minute. Squirming pleasantly in his lap, Mia asked, "What was the Earthwoman doing here?"

Tammy was probably asking herself that very question, sitting in orbital detention light years from Eugene, while Derek drank warm tangy saki with a semi-nude mammalo-gist curled in his lap. "She was a door gunner with an assault-cannon."

"How ghastly!" Mia shrank back, no longer the least excited, repulsed at the thought of antipersonnel weapons. Greenie women would not touch a killing machine, nor be with a male who did—the main reason why Derek carried nothing more deadly than a sleep grenade. Despite her three degrees, Mia could not comprehend why humans invented weapons to begin with, accepting it as some unexplainable original sin of her creators. She asked, "Are all human females so ferocious?"

"She didn't seem ferocious." Maybe Tammy *was* though; maybe, to Mia, all true humans were unspeakably savage. "She was guarding the bunker door, the first place they blasted. If I hadn't talked her out, she would be dead now."

Mia nodded gravely, "And she put down her assault cannon?"

Derek nodded. "That was part of the deal." Prisoners were not allowed personal artillery.

Glad to hear the gun was gone, Mia snuggled back up against him, saying, "You are such a good man."

"Why so?" Mia's total rejection of violence always made Derek feel like a terrible beast, knowing that she would rather die than harm another thinking being, leaving her defenseless against people like Pender who wanted all Greenies killed, sight unseen. Would knowing Mia have changed Pender's mind? Probably not.

Mia looped light green arms around his neck, her gold hair falling half across her smiling face. "You risk your life for others. You bring me presents, and you are so thoughtful."

Too thoughtful at times. Soon Mia was going dirtside to live an ecologist's dream, creating a balanced planetary ecosystem teeming with plants and animals. By then, Derek's work dirtside would be done, and he would go back to being a vacuum hand. So was he merely a pleasant interlude to Mia, before the serious business of life began? A sort of in-depth xenobiology experiment? Or maybe just a pet she could fuck? Greenie women could control conception, and she was choosing not to breed by him. He cocked an eyebrow, asking, "As good as a Greenie?"

"No," Mia laughed at the thought, "you are not like a Greenie in the least." Undoing his tunic, she played with his chest hairs, saying, "And I like that. I like that a lot." Leaning down, she licked the sweat off his chest with her small green tongue. Mia especially liked the taste of him, saying he was wild and salty, while Greenie sweat was designed to be bland and inoffensive. "I really love that you are human."

"Do you?" Derek stripped the fabric off her slim light-green torso, pressing Mia's warm body against his bare chest, knowing that this smart, dedicated mammalian ecologist would do pretty much whatever he wanted—so long as it was physiologically possible. She enthusiastically explored his favorite quirks and fantasies. Being a devoted mammalogist, Mia vastly enjoyed making love to the most fearsome mammal in the known universe, thrilling to the feel of his savage power inside her. What true scientist could resist being so intimate with her subject? He whispered, "Do you like making love to a dangerous beast?" The most dangerous beast. "Is that it?"

"A little," Mia laughed, clearly liking how he manhandled her. Even at half his weight, her calm sure confidence came off like a challenge, begging him to puncture her smug Greenie superiority.

Taking firm hold of her buttock, Derek suggested, "Perhaps you would prefer a SuperCat?"

"Ugh, too hairy," Mia protested, "and those horrid teeth! They are real beasts, who do not know good from evil. You know good and evil, yet you choose good. That delights me."

Derek too. He kissed her soft acquiescent mouth, at the same time sliding out of his trousers. When he released her tongue, Mia whispered, "What is her name?"

"Who?" He kicked his pants onto the tatami deck.

Mia wiggled atop him, her groin grinding rhythmically against his. "This Earthwoman, from Portland."

He never knew what Greenies would say next. "Her name is Tammy."

Mia grinned, so excited by his seeing an Earthwoman she had to drag Tammy into bed with them, metaphorically at least. "Did you make love to Tammy?"

"No time." Derek could barely believe they were discussing this. Tammy had been hard put to even talk to him; at best, he hoped to hire her to help with his job.

"You will." Mia dismissed his protest; after all, he was only human, and a man at that. Parting her thighs, she sank down onto him, drawing him deep into her. Maybe Greenies were the same under the skin. Mia's head might be wired wildly different, and her skin might turn sunlight into blood sugar, but, on the

inside, she felt just like a woman. Or so Derek supposed—never having done this with a human female.

### *Portland Woman*

Greenies needed no death penalty, since they never killed each other, and genocide was such a preposterous concept they had no laws against it. So the trial took place on the surface, on a lowland LZ, under military law, with Leo for a judge. The defendants were the last to leave Pender's bunker, the trio in flight suits and Tammy, who turned out to be on Pender's staff, an operations assistant doubling as a door-gunner. All were charged with murdering more than ten thousand Gekko civilians in a nuclear strike near the end of the fighting. The older man had piloted the strike craft, and his two teenage sons had served as weapons officer and crew chief. Tammy's office had given the order.

Liking to work outdoors, Leo held the trial in a deep green valley floored by stands of elephant grass and tall tree ferns—a hint of what Harmonia would be like when terraforming was complete. Brightly colored birds called from atop the tree ferns. Derek refused to sit on the jury, so it was made up of SuperChimps, SuperCats, and Greenie males—since no female could vote for death. Learning that Derek would not serve on the jury, Leo asked, "Will you be defense attorney then?"

Derek shook his head. "That would be racist." Why have him do it, just because he was human? Derek had no training as a lawyer, and no particular sympathy for Pender's people. Nor for Gekkos, so far as that goes. Let some earnest young Greenie try to get them off.

Tammy immediately volunteered, stepping up and saying to the SuperCat, "I will defend myself and the others—if they want me."

Prosecutors objected, claiming, "It creates conflict of interests for the defense attorney to be a co-defendant." The prosecutors were Gekkos. Not real ones, who could not tolerate the humid oxygen-rich atmosphere of the lowlands; instead, they appeared as holograms beamed down from orbit—grim humanoid bio-constructs, stretched-out versions of Greenies with horny skin, big bald heads, and barrel chests; bred for dry, low-g, low-oxygen worlds, like Harmonia was before real humans arrived. The Gekkos suggested, "Have the unindicted human do it."

They meant Derek, who had already refused. Leo turned to look Tammy over, lazily eyeing the Earthwoman in her worn militia uniform. Disarmed, defeated, but not the least downcast, Tammy looked calmly back at the SuperCat, not afraid to defend herself, against him, or anyone. Leo liked what he saw, saying, "Charges against you are dismissed without prejudice. Prosecutors may try to revive them before another judge—but not me. Until then, do your best. Since this is your first case, I'm sure the prosecution will agree to give you leeway..." He glanced at the Gekkos.

"Dismissed?" Speed-of-light lag made the hologram prosecutors seem slow and insensitive, as well as insubstantial. "This human is a dangerous war criminal, responsible for the deaths of thousands of sentient beings..."

"So you say." Leo yawned, showing off gleaming canines. "But this human was not aboard the strike craft, and not in the chain-of-command, since Pender gave the launch order himself..."

"And he never held a staff vote," Derek volunteered, though he only had Pender's word on that.

"These are all points to be proven," the Gekkos insisted, outraged at any attempt to shortcut justice. When Derek's comments arrived, the Gekkos added, "Who is he to talk?"

"You just tried to make him defense attorney," Leo pointed out. Giving another toothy yawn, the SuperCat told his court, "Case against the defense attorney is dismissed. Intercepts show Pender gave

the launch order, and the strike craft carried it out. This court has neither the time nor patience to prove things everyone knows—stick to points in dispute."

The Gekkos objected again, but Leo overruled them, then turned back to Tammy, smiling broadly, telling her, "No Greenie is going to sentence a defenseless female to death anyway. So do your damndest, and if you screw up, the court will understand, being amateurs ourselves."

Tammy thanked him and went to consult with her former co-conspirators. When she was done, Leo let the holos lead off, describing the strike in some detail, time, location, and numbers killed—stressing that most of the dead were infants and females. Then the chief prosecutor went from defendant to defendant, asking each one what he had done. The pilot tried to take all the responsibility himself, knowing he was dead, but hoping to save his sons, declaring adamantly, "I alone got the orders, and I alone carried out the strike."

Nobody much believed the desperate father, but the hologram Gekko happily pocketed the abject confession, then turned to the weapons officer, asking about the strike craft's armament, getting a complete description of the Artemis air-to-surface missile, and its antimatter warhead. Then the Gekko asked, "Did you know there were non-combatants within the kill radius?"

Nodding, the teenager admitted that he did, and that he armed and aimed the missile anyway, adding rather lamely, "We were told they were not people."

"By who?" demanded the indignant Gekko.

Shrugging, the boy carefully avoided looking at his anguished father. "Everyone."

Grimacing, the Gekko went on to get similar answers from the young crew chief, concluding his case. Which made it Tammy's turn. Picking the pilot to start with, she asked about the general military situation, showing that the human settlers were outnumbered more than a hundred to one, and losing badly. "Gekkos had us surrounded and pinned down, suffering steady casualties. Gekkos moved easily over the surface, while we huddled in our bunkers, or went about in vehicles, making ourselves ready targets..."

Prosecutors objected, arguing that military considerations had nothing to do with the murder of non-combatants. Leo casually overruled them; at best, the SuperCat considered the trial a tedious evasion of responsibility, but he meant for everyone to have their say. "Go on," he instructed Tammy, "though I doubt this line of testimony will do you any good."

Thanking Leo, Tammy got the pilot to describe the military installations in the target city, showing that the Gekko guerrilla bands bleeding the settler militia were based among non-combatants. But the Gekko prosecutor responded by asking if the strike craft carried smart-munitions, which the weapons officer admitted it did. "Then why did you not use them?" asked the Gekko. "Confining the strike to military targets."

"Tender ordered us to use the Artemis," replied the pilot. Clearly, Pender had wanted a high body count—which was now likely to cost the strike team their lives. Summing up the prosecution's case, the hologram Gekko pointed out that the dead included hundreds of humans as well, internees and POWs, held under humane conditions. Unlike Pender's people, the Gekkos had taken prisoners and treated them reasonably well, until other humans obliterated both them and the Gekkos.

Tammy finished up with a passionate plea for mercy, claiming that the killing could stop here, if they were willing to take a risk for peace. Pender was dead, and his cause was dead. Harmonia was going to the Greenies—punishing the defeated would not make a difference. Derek's heart went out to her, facing an Alice in Wonderland jury of brainy apes, toothy felines, and green-skinned men. He could tell Tammy

had seen her fill of fighting; two light centuries from home, and one of only two humans on Harmonia who were not either under capital indictment or cowering in caves and bunkers, waiting for Greenies and SuperCats to dig them out. Her plea for peace and forgiveness reminded Derek of Mia. His Greenie girlfriend had said the same exact things when they first got together, wishing to personally plead with Pender for a cease-fire—not knowing that the Humanists would have shot her out of hand. For some people, humanity was just skin-deep. Despite Tammy's Portland-white skin and militia uniform—complete with an empty holster strapped to her thigh—there was more similarity between her and Mia than the Humanists, or even a lot of Greenies, would admit. Defeat had wrung all the settler arrogance out of Tammy, making her sound like little blonde-green Mia; smart, open, honest, and utterly helpless in the face of force.

Tammy must have moved the Greenies on the jury too, because they acquitted the teenage crew chief—refusing to put to death someone who had merely been along for the ride. His father and brother were not so lucky. Everyone waited glumly while the verdict was virtually appealed to an off-planet court—in this case the officers of the armed merchant cruiser *Eclipse*, sitting in a special courts martial. Not even the Gekkos were happy, having seen Tammy and the crew chief get off—and not trusting the naval officers, most of whom were human.

Verdicts came back confirmed, much to the Gekkos' surprise. Derek expected it, knowing naval officers had scant sympathy for the Humanist militia—bungling amateurs who gave war a bad name. Gekkos made the common mistake of assuming that all humans were the same.

Judge Leo carried the sentences out personally. Life and death were all that mattered to a SuperCat, and he would never have sat in judgment if someone else was going to execute the sentence. What would be the point? He asked the father how he wanted it done. Lips drawn, the human replied that he wanted his son to die first, "But I don't want to see it."

Leo understood, telling him, "Say your good-byes." Which the dad did, first to the crew chief, then to the son who would die. Then the father watched his son obey his final order, marching off without a misstep, disappearing behind a screen of tree ferns, where Leo shot him.

When Leo came for the father, the human said a final good-bye to the Gekkos. "I'm glad we killed every one of you assholes."

Watching the father go, Derek knew how the man felt. Ceremoniously shooting them for destroying a smallish city did seem ludicrous, since humans had gone on to kill every Gekko on the planet. Vastly outnumbered, and clinging to a few dwindling isolated settlements, Pender's people knew that even antimatter warheads would not win for them—so the Humanists countered with their ultimate weapon. When the settlers first arrived after two centuries in transit and found Harmonia inhabited by Gekkos, plans for terraform-ing the planet were put on hold. Facing complete defeat, Pender ordered the terraforming into immediate operation. Deep-space teams at the edge of Ares system crashed water ice comets rich in CO<sub>2</sub> into Harmonia, producing surface water, rain, and green-house gases. At the same time, Pen-der's biotechs released superplants into the thicker wetter atmosphere, sending oxygen levels soaring. Mounting oxygen and humidity killed all the Gekkos that didn't flee off-planet. *Homo sapiens* had again come out on top, against daunting odds, and on alien ground. Proving that humans were a dangerous species to tangle with—for those few that did not already know.

Tammy took away the surviving teenager, acquitted of all charges, but still rendered a homeless orphan by the courts. Derek let her go without a word, guessing that this was not the moment to offer her a job working for the new masters of Harmonia.

He caught up with Tammy in orbit, where settler families waited to be shipped outsystem. Trust Greenies

to design the perfect transit camp, turning the main hold of a C-class freighter into a hologram tropical isle, complete with warm sunlight, sea breezes, and righteous waves. Folks lived in thatched treehouses and palm huts, while a dropshaft in the island's center led to more standard decks—for those who tired of paradise. Tammy sat on the beach staring out to sea, having traded her militia uniform for a gaudy sarong and a hibiscus blossom tucked behind her ear. Other refugees lounged about in various states of undress, and children splashed in the surf beneath a bright hologram sky—including Brad, who Tammy turned out to be watching. Someone upwind was roasting a pig, while teenagers lovingly smoothed and sanded balsawood surfboards.

Sitting down in the hot sand beside Tammy, he watched a blue breaker slam into the beach, sending glittering spray flying through warm tropical air. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted Tammy had nicely rounded breasts, even if they weren't green. "Is this what Portland is like?"

Laughing, Tammy looked over at him, the first time he had coaxed more than a smile out of her. "No, this is not Portland. Not even close."

"Really?" The Charter of Universal Rights said that internees must be kept in conditions "approximating" their home world—and Greenies scrupulously obeyed such conventions, not wanting to deny anyone their rights. "Earth is not like this?"

"Parts of it are." Tammy's smile faded, and she stared evenly at him, an intense questioning look that surprised Derek—it seemed like Tammy needed something from him, but would not say what. Which Derek found strange. Greenie females were very upfront about their needs; if they wanted something they said so. All Tammy said was, "What are you doing here?"

Good question. Derek was not sure what he was doing, but he did want to see more of Tammy, so he tried to start on a positive note. "You were amazing, standing up to the court like you did, saving that boy's life..."

"But not his father and brother." Tammy sounded bitter, looking back at Brad, another orphan. By utterly wiping out the Gekkos, Pender and company had assured that the blame would forever fall on Tammy's people.

"You did wonderfully." Derek meant it; he had talked to Tammy on a whim, but everything she did since drew him in. Her plea for peace, her caring for homeless kids, her bravery before armed SuperCats. "Leo would have killed that boy, as easily as the others. You saved him, when I was afraid to even try."

"You, afraid?" Tammy's smile returned, as if she could not really believe him. "I thought you were the nerveless negotiator who walked unarmed into the muzzles of machine cannon."

"Only in my spare time," Derek explained. "Normally I'm a vacuum hand, a pilot. Greenies grabbed me for this job because I was the only human they could easily get a hold of."

"Yet you took the job," Tammy reminded him, "idiotically going into grave danger just to save complete strangers."

And winning points with Tammy. Derek could tell by how her smile widened, making this the moment to ask, "Idiotically? I hope not, because I fancied you might join me."

"Join you?" Taken aback, Tammy acted like she had started to trust him, but now was not sure.

"Working for Greenies?"

"*Photo sapiens* do pay me," Derek admitted, "but that's not why I do it." He nodded toward Brad,

splashing in the surf with the other children. "That's who I do it for—there are still a lot of innocents dirtside, and a woman would be very helpful in getting them out safely, especially an Earth-woman."

Tammy looked at him with that same questioning stare, like she wanted something from him—but all she said was, "Do you know how hard it is to lose everything? To see good friends blown to bits for no reason?"

Looking out to sea, Tammy watched hydraulically produced waves roll out of the hologram horizon that hid her prison wall. "This all started out as a grand adventure, founding a new world beyond the stars—but when we got here someone else had moved in, and no one would honor our claim." Gekkos had gotten in ahead of the human colonists, and there was no law to make them leave. Human attempts to assert their centuries-old claim had led to friction, then fighting, and finally genocide. "Sure it's all our fault, but what could we do? Our ships were one-way jobs, built to be cannibalized at our destination, so we couldn't even go home. Those of us who opposed fighting were dragged in anyway, once the killing began. I started by organizing peace vigils, and ended up as a door-gunner—don't think that was easy."

Hunched up, her arms around her legs, she laid her head down on her bare knees, looking back over at him, saying, "Now we're defeated, despised, and deported, and it will all go to the Greenies." Surviving Gekkos had sold their now useless claim on Harmonia to the Greenies, and there was scant support for letting the human settlers keep a planet they had acquired by mass-murder. "Greenies are going to just waltz in and take what we made, because they are so good and we are so evil."

Derek agreed, Greenie goodness could get to you—witness this island-paradise-cum-prison. Greenies were adept at making you feel grateful for doing what they wanted. "I don't think you are evil," he told Tammy, "only human. That's why I offered you the job—this is something that must be done by *humans*. If Greenies could do it, we wouldn't be having this talk."

Still staring straight at him, Tammy told him tersely, "I can't betray my people."

"I'm asking you to help save them," Derek pointed out.

Again he got that questioning look. By now, Mia would have said what she wanted—and then some. Tammy just said, "I'll work for you, but not for Greenies. The first time I have to take orders from a Greenie—I'm gone."

"Absolutely," Derek agreed. He could talk to the Greenies, being very good at that.

"And don't try to pump me for info," Tammy warned him. "I will talk people into coming out, but I won't help kill them. Understood?"

Derek nodded. "Understood."

Tammy looked hard at him. "No hypno-probes. No brain scans."

"I'm not even wired for lie detection," Derek reminded her. He liked the give-and-take of talking to Tammy, enjoying an edge you never got with Greenies. With Mia, everything was so pleasantly simple, that were it not for her green skin and weird way of thinking, there would be no mystery at all. With Tammy, it was a challenge just to get agreement, before she piled on more bizarre conditions. "We go dirtside at 1630 hours tomorrow. Can you be ready?"

"Sure." It was not as if Tammy had much to do here. Nor did she bother to ask about the pay—when you were being paid to get out of jail, how much hardly mattered.

Getting up to go, Derek surveyed the white sweep of tropical beach edged with treehouse cabanas. "So



this is not Portland?"

"More like Paradise Island," Tammy told him. "Minus the holo-rides, dance arenas, sex-clubs, and love grottos."

Earth sounded like an amazing place. He remembered Tammy saying that she had been to Paradise Island with her boyfriend—and liked it a lot. He asked, "Do you still have the boyfriend?"

"Sure." Tammy nonchalantly watched his reaction, but by now, Derek was enough of a negotiator not to show disappointment. "Back in Portland," she added, making them both laugh. Oregon was so far off that laser-mail took four hundred years to get a reply. He left before she could ask if he had a girlfriend.

All he told Mia was that he had hired Tammy. His Greenie girlfriend was pleased, saying her good-bye to him on the temple porch of their bonsai garden apartment, with wind chimes tinkling overhead. "Be careful," Mia pleaded, "I'm not done with you. And take care of Tammy too."

"Tammy?" He was surprised by her concern for Pender's former aide.

"Yes. Tammy will be alone among men and weapons. She will need a good man to watch over her, and you are the best I know." Mia gave him another kiss, then let him go.

Billions of years ago, when Ares system was still forming, a Rhode Island-sized rock had slammed into Harmonia's northern hemisphere, carving out the Hyperborean Depression, sub-polar lowlands a thousand clicks across. Ringed by dry ragged, highlands, the lowlands were slowly filling with rain water that would one day submerge everything but the central volcanic peak thrust high up into the thin air. Glass remnants of Gekko towns shone amid silent green swamps and marshes inhabited by herds of hippos who were busily converting the greenery into fish food and fertilizer. Humans had brought all sorts of useful animals with them to fill out Harmonia's slowly emerging ecology, though Greenies would now tailor the world to their tastes, and Mia would be the one coming down to catalogue the hippo herds.

But first the swamps must be made safe for Greenies. That was for Leo and Derek to do, and now Tammy. Riding down on the shuttle, Derek sat beside his new teammate, excitedly listening to stories from Earth. So much time, so many wonders. How strange that most of human existence had been confined to that one tiny planet. He asked Tammy, "Why did you leave?"

"There are forty billion people in the solar system, most of them on Earth," Tammy explained. "Crowds like that can be lonely. I wanted to live on a world like Earth was when there were not so many of us."

And now they were going down to root the last human remnants out of Harmonia. Tammy sighed, saying, "Weird thing is, I still get laser-mail from my sister Mary, who must be two hundred years older than me by now. It was all sent when Mary was in her twenties, birth announcements, Christmas greetings, that sort of thing—nothing very personal. Sometimes I miss Portland, but there isn't a lot you can do with a doctorate in Humanities, except leave the planet."

"You have a doctorate in Humanism?" Derek was shocked to discover they gave degrees in intolerance and racial superiority.

His surprise amused Tammy. "Humanism and the Humanities are totally different. My specialty was Dead Languages—Latin, Sumerian, Japanese, that sort of thing."

Fascinated, Derek asked, "So, do you speak English?"

Tammy smiled. "All my life."

"Say something in English," he suggested. Many of the settler holdouts came from North America, and English would be a good way of proving she was not a Greenie.

Tammy said something short and unintelligible, but her quaint accent made it sound fetching, even romantic. Derek asked, "What does that mean?"

Her smile turned mischievous, and Tammy told him, "I asked, do you have a girlfriend?"

Suddenly, Tammy's English sentence didn't sound so quaint and fetching. Mia was not due down from orbit for days, so a chance meeting was unlikely, but Derek could not lie to Tammy, not after her sometimes painful honesty. Trying to hide behind a nonchalant grin, he told her, "Only if you count Greenies."

Tammy's smile faded, and Derek saw that he had lost something in her eyes by sleeping with a Greenie. "Her name is Mia. But I doubt she considers me her 'boyfriend'— not the way humans think of it. . ."

Tammy would not even look at him, totally uninterested in the love life of Greenies. They had a cold, silent planet-fall, sitting side by side and saying nothing.

Orbital scans showed humans scattered throughout the Hyperborean Depression, with solid patches in the marsh supporting farm plots, producing melons, squash, patches of corn, pigs, and chickens. None of which worried the Greenies much, since the whole swamp was slowly becoming a sea bottom. Why dig people out of a place that would soon be underwater? What worried the Greenies was a water-tight bunker complex dug into the base of the central massif, and signs of fortifications farther up.

Leo's light armored battalion landed near the biggest bunker entrance, carving out an LZ with wide zones of fire. No one opposed them. In fact, Derek got the impression that the swarm of armored infantry and turreted Bug-mobiles sent everyone scurrying for cover. Having said virtually nothing since planetfall, he and Tammy approached the main bunker, a steel blast-shield dug into a green hillside, with ELVIS SAVES spray-painted in English above the entrance. His electronic bug scurried ahead of them.

Young women wearing long print dresses, beehive hairdos, and black eye shadow greeted them at the bunker door, looking askance at Tammy in her brown militia uniform, beneath body armor that read, DO NOT SHOOT THIS WOMAN! Tammy shook her head and grinned for the first time since that frosty fall from orbit. "Presleites! Good luck! You're going to wish you were dealing with Pender."

"What do you mean?" Derek asked warily, pleased to have Tammy talking again.

"You'll see." Tammy shook her head. "Church of Elvis, so just watch your back."

Smiling women ushered them into the neatly carpeted bunker, showing a cold shoulder to Tammy. Inside was a hologram-maze of long fluorescent corridors lined with numbered rooms, all done in the same white-and-gold motif, with heavy white drapes where the windows should be. Lower levels were reached by boxy elevators. Unable to tell if this was some illusionary defense, Derek asked Tammy, "Is this typical Earth-style architecture?"

"From a zillion years ago," Tammy told him. "This is programmed to resemble a Las Vegas hotel casino in early postatomic Nevada. Before the state was made into a waste dump."

"Really?" That explained the numbered rooms, but not the annoying music in the elevators. "What was Las Vegas?"

"Resort in the desert—don't ask me why. Presleites adore this style of architecture, which has a sort of energetic charm," Tammy admitted. "Living like this would drive normal folks crazy, but it doesn't seem

to bother them much."

Led into an inner bedroom with the same white-on-white motif, Derek was confronted by a middle-aged matriarch wearing a blue sheath dress beneath a black bouffant hairdo. Studying them from under her heavy eye shadow, the woman introduced herself as Ginger, asking suspiciously, "Which side are you on?"

"Neither," Derek announced hopefully.

Women around him smiled wide, and voiced a happy, "Hallelujah!"

"Praise the King. We have been waiting for someone to come to their senses," Ginger explained. "When we saw her we were afraid you might be Humanists."

"Funny, I thought *you* would be Humanists," Derek admitted.

"Hell, no! Elvis didn't believe in race war. His only begotten daughter married Saint Michael, who bleached his own skin, showing it was no shame to be any color—even white."

Women around Derek chimed in with another chorus of, "Praise the King."

Derek turned to Tammy. "What are they saying?"

Tammy shook her head. "Too hard to explain. But these people gave Pender no help at all. They are way too wrapped up in their religion to worry about the Gekkos, or anything else."

Derek believed it, but the Greenies wanted the whole central massif evacuated and combed for weapons. Nor did Derek blame them, since orbital surveys indicated a tunnel complex that could hold enough warheads to blow a hole in the thin atmosphere and scatter radioactive debris all over the planet. Greenies were courteous, but not crazy.

Of course, the Presleites did not see it that way. "We have done nothing," Ginger complained. "We can't just give up our homes to Greenies."

"You can't stop them," Derek pointed out. Greenies were going to get what they wanted, even if Leo had to dig the humans out of their tunnels.

"Really?" Batting black lashes, Ginger smiled to her companions, who drew plastic stingers out of their print dresses. Negotiations had taken an alarming turn for the worse, and Ginger primly informed him, "Hating war doesn't make us pushovers."

Apparently not. Staring into the round black muzzles of the stingers, Derek was quick to point out that shooting him would do no one any good.

"Shoot you?" Ginger acted like the thought had never entered her head. "You have earned an audience with the King. These stingers are just to show we are serious. Some people think polite tolerance is a sign of weakness." Ginger nodded at Tammy, to show who she meant.

Tammy merely shrugged, taking no responsibility for Presleite opinions. Just when Derek thought things could not get any stranger, a holo flickered into being in front of him, a handsome dark-haired young man, wearing a sparkling white and gold suit, with a wide belt and a huge golden buckle. He had lively blue eyes and an engaging smile, and his appearance was greeted by another round of "Praise the King!"

Bowing to his audience, the hologram winked at Ginger as he straightened up, then swung about on his

blue suede shoes, saying to Derek, "Howdy, son. Don't worry, these gals won't drill you—they're just my fan club. The pistols are only for protection."

Derek assured the holo that no one need fear him.

The King's virtual grin widened. "Pleased to hear you come in peace."

"Peace is my profession," Derek agreed cheerfully.

"So you talk to both sides?" asked the King.

"I try." Derek knew he was speaking to a sophisticated program of some sort, broadcast from deeper in the bunker—but he was willing to talk to empty bulkheads if it would avert killing.

Turning serious, the King asked, "And do the Greenies say these folks got to go?"

Derek nodded. "At least until this area can be thoroughly searched for contraband." Code intercepts had revealed that Pender had been working on a doomsday device—fitting his personality perfectly.

"When your search is done, will they be allowed back?" asked the virtual Elvis.

"If it were up to me, they would be." Derek could not answer for the Greenies.

"I bet it would." The King's smile broadened. "And in that case, what if I just gave you this place?"

"Give it to me?" Derek imagined he had misheard the holo.

"If I just gave it to you, the Greenies wouldn't take it away. Would they? You're pretty well in with them?"

"Maybe," Derek admitted. Greenies ran the planet, yet were bound by the Charter of Universal Rights to respect claims by other races. In theory, anyone who did not aid Pender was as good as a Greenie. Whether that applied to holo-programs modeled on long-dead singers was another issue, but juries of bioconstructs had notoriously generous notions of what was "natural."

"And would you let these people live here?" Elvis asked, as his fan club shyly lowered their pistols, smiling to show their dimples.

"Of course, but..."

"Then nothing could be simpler," the King declared. "You seem a decent man, not overly scared by women or guns."

"For one thing," Derek protested, "I don't want the responsibility."

"Of course not." Elvis laughed, shaking his dark locks. "What fool wants responsibility? Sane folks run like hell from it. But take it from the King, sometimes you gotta face the music."

Elvis took them on a virtual tour of the bunker, followed by his fan club, turning off the hologram Vegas Hilton, to reveal living quarters, hydro-ponies, recycling, power supply, and families hiding in blast shelters—but no big stock of weapons, except for the personal sidearms that most adult Presleites carried, just to be safe. "An armed society is a polite society," the King explained amiably.

Satisfied that this was all true, Derek put in a call to Leo, arranging a peaceful evacuation. For which the hologram deity thanked him profusely, and zip-signaled a contract for Leo to witness, turning the whole

central massif over to Derek, along with all its contents—then, in a blink, the King disappeared. Elvis had left the bunker.

While Leo's battalion searched the lower reaches of the mountain, Derek took Tammy upslope to check out the command complex at the summit, including an auxiliary reactor, big blast-shelters, and what looked like a launch silo. For that, they needed oxygen, since the Presleite tunnels did not connect to the complex above, and they would be climbing into a dead zone, where the air was still too thin to support life. Pretty appropriate, since the coolness between them continued. He had not heard a kind word from Tammy since he had told her about Mia; which he might have expected, but still did not enjoy. Accustomed to Greenie girls, Derek had been lulled into thinking that Tammy might have a similar easy attitude. No such luck.

Derek had to be satisfied by inspecting his new digs, with his bug crawling ahead of him, searching for signs of trouble. If the Presleites had not killed any Gekkos to get this mountain, Greenie courts would likely award it to him. And Derek saw absolutely no sign of Gekkos on the mountain, which was only slowly becoming habitable as the oxygen level rose. The nearest glass ruins were shining dots far out across the green swampland, on what would one day be sea bottom.

His bug saw no sign of life in the complex atop the mountain, which seemed to be on lock-down mode. Power emissions were minimal, and most of the tunnels lacked life-support, standing with ports gaping open atop an almost-airless mountain stuck up into the frigid stratosphere. At the top, Derek called down to Leo, saying he was checking out his high castle. Leo gave him a go, and Derek sent in his bug ahead of them. Tammy closed the ports behind them, turning on the lights and air.

Derek found his new digs impressive, going to the command deck and getting the 3V tour. It had obviously not been built by the Presleites, but it was not Gekko work either, and the King's claim to the mountain went all the way to the summit. So long as the place was truly abandoned, and they found nothing to link it to Pender, this high-tech castle was as good as his, to do with as he pleased. Though what he really wanted was a ship to pilot. Who could he find to swap a starship for a mountain-top retreat?

3V showed the silo to be empty, but Derek decided on a visual check. Heavy blast-shielding allowed Greenies in orbit to "see" the buried silo, but not what was inside. Tammy led him to the silo lock, and equalized pressures, flooding the huge shaft with breathable air. He sent his bug in ahead.

As he expected, the silo was not empty—that would have made things too easy. But there was no doomsday device either, thank heaven. Crouched at the bottom of the shaft was a gravity drive starship, a sleek fast Fornax Skylark, ready to leap into orbit. Just the sort of ship he wanted. Way too good to be true.

Signaling Tammy to step back, Derek decided to alert Leo on a secure channel. This silo had to be sealed tight and escape into space cut off, before anyone dared approach that ship. Recalling his bug, he hissed to Tammy, "Now's when we call in Leo's people."

"No, I don't think so," Tammy replied evenly. Derek turned in surprise, and saw that Tammy was holding a gun on him, which dear sweet Mia would never have done. He could barely believe it, but a plastic fire-and-forget stinger had somehow materialized in her hand. Derek opened his mouth to protest, but before he could get a word out, Tammy shot him.

### *Thor's Hammer*

Derek awoke in a sealed cubicle aboard ship, wearing a slave collar. His sleep grenade and hypo-rings were gone. There was absolutely no light—but he didn't need xl-10,000 night vision zoom lenses to

know he was in a sealed box. His comlink had vanished, but he still had the pilot's navigation chip embedded in his skull. Inertial sensors showed Derek was accelerating at about 20-gs, something you could only do in a fast starship, like the Fornax Skylark he had seen hiding in the shaft. Simple logic said that he was aboard that ship, headed rapidly outsystem. Pity he waited so late to resort to logic.

Fingering his slave collar, he found it was standard issue, fitted for tracking, paralysis, lie detection, emotional motivation, and who knows what else? There were no ill effects from the stinger, so the fire-and-forget hornet must have been set on SLEEP. Such a stinger could just as easily have killed him, or put him in a coma. Tammy, it seemed, wanted him alive and conscious—for the moment, at least. He remembered how she had stared at him over the sights, not angry, or gleeful, just giving him that same even look she shown him in Pender's bunker, when she first pulled her head out of the assault-cannon's sighting hood. Greenies had warned him that Earthwomen were dangerous, but it took Tammy to convince him.

He told his nav-chip to work out pursuit vectors, assuming all available vessels gave chase as soon as the Skylark burst out of the silo. Results were not good. Greenies had nothing that could catch it, just a couple of interstellar yachts converted to escorts that might do 10-gs at a stretch. Backing up the Greenies was the armed merchant cruiser *Eclipse*, a naval vessel with the legs to run down the Skylark—but not anytime soon. *Eclipse* had been nosing about upsun for signs of slavers or Humanist hold-outs, while the Skylark was going like lightning in the opposite direction. Even if *Eclipse* dropped everything to pursue, half of Tartarus system lay between them, which would mean a long stern chase into the vastness of interstellar space.

Of course, no one might be chasing them at all. Whoever was running this ship were bound to be diehard Humanists. Greenies and the Navy might figure that Harmonia system was far better off without such fanatics, and any attempt at pursuit would smack too much of wanting them back. Leaving Derek an unwilling passenger on a ship full of lunatic pariahs headed who knows where.

Presently, his door dilated and Tammy appeared, a smirk on her face, casually holding a slave-remote in place of the stinger. "Sorry to put you through this," she told him, "but it couldn't be helped."

"Oh, really?" Derek could easily have avoided all this.

"Don't act so pure," Tammy snorted. "All the time you were romancing me, you were fucking a Greenie."

"You should try it sometime," Derek suggested. A good Greenie-fuck might be just what Tammy needed, to help her loosen up a bit, and maybe get to know the neighbors.

"Come with me," she told him, motioning with the remote. "Or I will have you carried."

Derek went gladly, eager to get out of the shielded cell and see what was happening. As soon as he left the cubicle, systems traffic confirmed his guesses. Greenies had not even bothered to give chase, but *Eclipse* was shaping to match orbits deep in interstellar space, with billions of kilometers to make up, leaving Derek pretty much on his own for the moment. Tammy ushered him into the Skylark's salon, which was tuned to a view of tall sandstone spires and vast distances. High overhead was a hologram Sol, and the cabin deck was made to look like the adobe roof of a pueblo sweat lodge, covered with bright colored rugs, and sitting atop a lonely mesa.

Three men in brown Humanist militia uniforms sat atop the sweat lodge in deck chairs molded to their bodies, ignoring the hologram vistas around them, glaring at Derek instead. They did not look defeated, just mean. All three of them had recoilless machine pistols at their hips, which seemed a bit much millions of kilometers from the nearest threat. One asked curtly, "What is he doing here?"

Tammy shrugged, saying, "I wanted him to see."

"Whatever for?" demanded the militia man, dramatically resting his hand on his holster, though the nearest Greenie was by now millions of clicks away, and the Gekkos were mostly dead.

"I have hopes for him." Tammy smiled at Derek as she said it, then added, "And this far from home, we need all the help we can get."

"We'll be bringing in Presleites next," protested an older man wearing colonel's tabs.

Tammy shrugged again, saying, "Tender would approve."

Everyone looked sharply at her, surprised to see Tammy being so free with the approval of a dead man, whose opinions had split the system and all but depopulated a planet. "Boss met him on the last day," Tammy explained evenly, "and liked him a lot. Told us not to shoot him."

Men laughed at that, but it put Pender's authority behind keeping him alive. Tammy added evenly, "Pender ordered me to give up and go with him, and to recruit him if possible. He was my best hope of getting here."

All news to Derek, who did not join in the general hilarity at how easily Tammy had included him in the plans of a mass murderer. Mia had feared that without him Tammy would be alone among men with guns, showing just how right a Greenie could be. However, dear sweet Mia neglected to say what Derek was supposed to *do* surrounded by all those guns, especially with Tammy on the other side.

"But why listen to me?" Tammy asked. "You can hear the Boss himself."

Pointing with the remote, Tammy triggered a holo, and Pender himself suddenly appeared, looking fit and relaxed. Grinning, he addressed the dwindling faithful, saying cheerfully, "Guess I'm dead, otherwise you wouldn't be seeing this. Funny, being dead is not near so bad as I imagined. Only drawback is that I can't see or hear you. That's why I ordered up this holo of Monument Valley, so we could all be seeing the same thing. Pretty, isn't she? And some day Har-monia could still look like this..."

Pender stared into the virtual distance, a dead man admiring a fake landscape, then turned back to the business at hand. "Well, even in hell there is still work to do. Code name for this project is *Mjollnir*..."

Pender's holo proceeded to rattle off coordinates that Derek's nav-chip identified as a location in outer system near the leading Trojan point of the gas giant Cadmus, a spot intersected by the orbit of an asteroid called Cassandra. Why Pender should be so concerned to pass on this data was a mystery to Derek—but the reasons were bound to be bad.

When he was done, Pender paused to survey the holoscape one last time, knowing that having delivered his message, he really was dead, no longer able to affect the world of the living. In fact, each passing second left him farther behind. Pender's smile widened, and he said to no one in particular, "Well, it was worth it. Now give 'em one more good whack for me."

In a blink, Pender was gone, and they were all staring into the empty holoscape of Monument Valley. Surveying the tall spires and painted desert, Derek wondered if this was someplace on Earth, but did not dare ask. Everyone else seemed to understand immediately what Pender meant, and what was going to happen. They asked him only one ominous question before returning him to the sealed cubicle. "How long before all humans are totally off the planet?"

"Not long," Derek admitted. Human evacuation was his specialty, and there was small point in lying so long as he was wearing a slave collar. "Ten days at most, more likely a week. But you can never be sure

you have gotten everyone."

Militiamen got a grim laugh out of that. Then Tammy took him back to his sealed cubicle, and he was shut off from the cosmos. Time passed, precisely recorded by his nav-chip. Food arrived, and a personal recycler in the corner shipped his wastes to hydroponics. Halfway to Cadmus' leading Trojan point, the drive fields reversed and the Skylark started decelerating. *Eclipse* would have to decelerate as well, in order to match orbits. Working out high-g trajectories in his head, Derek decided that *Eclipse* could cut the distance considerably, but still would not catch up until they were long past the leading Trojan point. Whatever was happening there, *Eclipse* could not stop it.

So much for the Navy. If anyone was going to stop the Humanists, it had to be him. Terrific. He had finally found his own people, only to discover that they were homicidal lunatics. Mia thought that most of human misery came from inventing weapons, and by now Derek was willing to agree. No sane Greenie would carry out what looked like a suicidal mission of mass-destruction at the behest of some dead murderer. Male or female, young or old, stupid or smart, the first thing a Greenie would ask was, "Why in the world are we doing this?"

Yet no one on that mesa top questioned anything, except to pointedly ask when the "humans" would be off the planet. Pender's people were probably already offplanet, leaving a sprinkling of peaceful independent types like the Presleites, who had somehow managed to avoid the war and its aftermath—so far. Mia was probably already down there too, taking samples from the hippos and worrying about what had happened to him. While these maniacs plotted something fatal for her and every Greenie on the planet. Not to mention all those hippos.

Acceleration fell almost to zero when they reached a spot corresponding to the current location of Cassandra, a two-hundred-klick rock named for a Trojan princess. Cassandra meant "Entangler of Men." Or so his nav-chip said. She had certainly entangled him.

Tammy came to get him, his remote in hand, the stinger in a hip holster, and a smirk on her face. He tried to lodge a strenuous protest, but she pressed MUTE, saying, "We don't have time to argue. Right now we are in a sealed room, and can't be overheard. Outside, we have to be ready to act together. Okay?"

Unable to speak, and not knowing exactly what Tammy meant, Derek nodded anyway. What choice did he have?

"Good." Tammy pressed UNMUTE. "So, have you guessed what project *Mjollnir* is about?"

"Pender wants you to smash this asteroid into Harmonia, killing as many Greenies as you can." Why else rendezvous with a useless rock far away from anywhere?

"Right." Tammy nodded grimly. "Thor's hammer, smashing our enemies to bits."

"But even if you could anchor this Skylark to the rock, you could never get past *Eclipse*." An armed merchant cruiser carried special landing teams trained to liberate hijacked ships, and root out slaver bases.

Tammy shook her head. "There is no need to get past *Eclipse*. Buried in the rock is a high-g tug, the *Atlas*, originally used to tow ice comets for terraforming, but hidden here ever since. Once the tug has been programmed, the Skylark will take off, drawing the *Eclipse* into deep space."

Derek had to admit that it would probably work. Cassandra was a dense stony-iron asteroid, perfect for hiding the powered-down tug. With the Skylark speeding away, *Eclipse* would continue the chase, telling the Greenies to check out Cassandra. By the time low-g Greenie ships arrived, the asteroid would be



accelerating downsun and impossible to stop. Cassandra striking at high acceleration would almost split Harmony in half, destroying every structure, and blowing a huge hole in the thin atmosphere blanketing the world in dust and ash. Only algae would survive. He bitterly told Tammy, "I believed you, when you told that jury that they could stop the killing."

"I absolutely meant that," Tammy insisted.

"Then how can you be doing this?" Derek demanded.

"I *am* trying to stop it," Tammy protested, looking like she thought it should have been obvious. "That's why I need you. All I have is a Humanities PhD, and I know absolutely nothing about piloting a high-g tug."

"So you want *me* to?" Derek could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Dragging a runaway asteroid behind us..."

"To keep it from hitting Harmonia," Tammy reminded him. "And maybe save your Greenie girlfriend."

Mia was undoubtedly dirtside by now, but that just made it all the worse. "How could you not tell me?" he demanded. "How could you have let things get this far?"

"I had to be first to get here," Tammy told him primly. "Tender sent back-up messages in case mine didn't get through. And if I'd told you my plans, you wouldn't have helped."

No lie. He stared in exasperation at the Earthwoman, aghast at what she had done. "Why not just turn them in?"

"And give the Greenies one more victory to gloat over?" Tammy looked disgusted. "Too many women and kids died from their 'precision' bombing for me to do that. This is something that humans had to do. If Greenies could do it, we wouldn't be having this talk."

Derek had nothing to say. He would have gladly left all this to Leo's light battalion, but maybe he was too used to bioconstructs doing his dirty work. SuperChimps to do the heavy lifting. Leo for the dangerous stuff. Bugs to take out the toxic waste. Dear sweet Mia to make his meals and share his bed.

"This is all so easy for you—isn't it?" Tammy asked. "Having the moral high ground, while we ordinary humans do the suffering."

"Not really," Derek told her, having seen far more grief and mayhem than he had ever imagined—none of it of his making, but folks still expected him to *do* something about it. "It's damned hard on me at times."

"Me too," Tammy agreed, handing him his sleep grenade, at the same time giving his hand a warm squeeze. "Back in Pender's bunker, you were so anxious to know who I was, and how you could help me. Well, this is who I am, and now is when I need you."

Well said. He took the grenade and the squeeze, noting Tammy was wearing his hypo-rings. By now, he knew that there were reasons why negotiators did not consort with the enemy, not if they meant to remain neutral.

Derek followed Tammy out of the cell and into the Skylark's lounge, which was no longer atop a desert mesa, showing a seascape instead. The tug's crew was coming aboard, looking more like tired mariners emerging from the sea than vacuum hands coming out of hiding. Two large armed men in militia uniforms waited by the lock to escort them onto the tug. Feeling their gaze on him, Derek realized that Tammy had them perfectly fooled. They were all set to leap to her aid, while she walked stinger on hip into the tug,

planning to betray them. Having been there himself, Derek could sympathize with their upcoming surprise.

Inside the lock, the ocean motif was replaced by the standard ship's airlock. As soon as the lock closed, and started to cycle, Tammy opened an emergency kit on the wall and took out two oxygen masks, putting one on and handing Derek the other. He put on the mask and set off his sleep grenade. One shocked militiaman reached out to stop him, but Tammy seized his wrist, triggering her hypo-ring. He joined his sleeping companion on the deck.

When the lock opened, the two of them stepped into the deserted tug. Decoupling the lock manually, Derek dashed to the command couch. Without bothering to buckle himself in, he slammed the drive into full acceleration, shooting sunward, and, at the same time, rotating the whole rock to port. Fields could not fully compensate, and Derek had to cling to the couch with one hand, while snagging Tammy with the other, keeping her from tumbling into the controls.

Hanging onto Tammy, he stopped the roll at 180 degrees, so that the mass of the asteroid was between them and the Skylark as they dropped toward the inner system. Fields stabilized, returning cabin gravity to 1-g, and Tammy landed in his lap.

He looked down at her, and she looked up at him. Suddenly they were safe, and alone. No armed Humanist militia. No Leo and his light battalion. Just the two of them, safe, secure, and together, with two hundred clicks of rock and iron between them and the men Tammy had so neatly betrayed. Tammy sat up in his lap and kissed him, a long lingering kiss that showed that she had been waiting for it almost as long as he had. Her mouth felt cool and exciting, not as delicate as Mia's, or as eager to please, but with a wild willfulness that Derek had never tasted before. Their lips parted, and Tammy smiled, asking him, "Was that as good as a Greenie?"

"You are nothing like a Greenie," he told her. No Greenie girl had ever put him through half of what Tammy had done to him—but then, no one had ever suggested that Earth women were easy. Especially Humanities majors from the wilds of Portland, or Eugene. But that just made him want her all the more—too bad that frantic calls were coming from *Eclipse*, wanting to know why one of the leading Trojans had broken loose, and was accelerating rapidly down-sun. Speed-of-light lag meant that the Greenies did not even know anything had happened—yet.

"Don't answer that," Tammy told him, shutting off the comlink.

He reached out to call *Eclipse*, to explain the situation and send them after the Skylark, which was headed outsystem at high acceleration. But Tammy stabbed a button on the remote, and his arms went limp, nerve-blocked by his slave collar. Tammy shook her head, saying, "Told you not to answer. Let them stew a bit, we need time to ourselves."

When he started to protest, Tammy pushed MUTE and kissed him again. His anger at being helpless was mollified by what she did with her tongue. Then she pushed UN-MUTE, and asked, "Was that not better than talking to the Navy?"

It was, but Derek resented the lack of mobility, demanding, "Turn my arms back on."

Tammy sat up in his lap, smiling gleefully. "Only if you promise to be bad."

Greenie girls did not treat you like this, and, for the first time in his life, he truly wanted to lay hands on a woman, and none too gently either. "Come on, turn me on."

"Whatever you say." Tammy pressed a button, and one body part leaped alert. Squirming suggestively, she ground her rear into his lap, asking, "There, how about that?"

Still not what he wanted. Derek pleaded, "Let me use my hands and legs."

Tammy looked serenely at him, stripping off her hypo-rings. "Only if you promise to quit acting like a Greenie."

"Damn you." Derek could not believe what this woman had put him through. "That's better." Tammy turned the rest of him on. Until *Eclipse* matched orbits, they were utterly alone, two hundred light-years from Earth; a splendid place for getting acquainted. Derek discovered that despite all her strange actions and dangerous ways, Tammy was indeed just like a Greenie girl on the inside.

*Eclipse* brought the idyll to an end. Naval officers, some of them human, came to take over the tug and send Cassandra sailing outsystem, where the wayward Trojan would no longer be a threat. Then they returned Derek to Harmonia, where he and Tammy got a royal reception from grateful Greenies, who could not do enough to show how thankful they were. Making it the perfect moment to press his claim to the Presleite property, and to get a promise that the Presleites could return to it, along with anyone not actually convicted of war crimes. Which the Greenies readily agreed to, being eternally optimistic about humans' ability to better themselves.

Derek was there when the first shuttle landed, standing in the rain on a low plateau in the central massif overlooking the green Hyperborean swamps. Women in black bouffant hairdos, and men with sideburns, shades, and white dinner jackets trooped out of the shuttle—all armed, just in case. With them came their children, as well as Brad and the other orphans from among Pender's people, like the teenage crew chief that Tammy had gotten acquitted. And any adults who were willing to live among Greenies and Presleites.

Immensely happy with how things were going, Derek stood at the base of "his" mountain, surveying the sweep of changing landscape from the bare mountain peak above to the emerald swamp lapping at the lower slopes. Someday that swamp would be a blue sea, and the mountain flanks would be lowland jungle, blending into highland forest, then alpine pasture. Air would become breathable all the way to the top, so the whole mountain and the surrounding highland rim would be habitable. Only the crater floor, where Gekkos had built their cities, would be lost to the sea. That part of Pender's plan had worked admirably. His deluge would go on for decades, and the Gekkos would never get a second chance.

Derek saw a lone slim Greenie, wearing nothing but a gold sarong and a grin, walking nonchalantly up from where the hippo herds were grazing. Zoom lenses showed Derek that it was Mia coming cheerfully up to congratulate him. She stopped right before him, and rose on her green toes, kissing him warmly. "I knew you would do right," she told him, "and keep Tammy safe."

"Not everything went totally as expected," Derek admitted ruefully. Doing right nearly came out all wrong.

"Don't worry." Mia kissed him again. "I told you I wasn't done with you. And I dearly want to meet Tammy too."

Why did Derek think his troubles had just begun?