

The Hastillan Weed by Ian Creasey

Ian Creasey was born in 1969 and lives in Yorkshire, England. His fiction has appeared in various venues including *Oceans of the Mind*, *Gothic.net*, *On Spec*, and *The Mammoth Book of Legal Thrillers*. His spare time interests include hiking, conservation, and gardening--anything to get him outdoors and away from the computer screen. He puts his knowledge of these activities to very good use in his first story for *Asimov's*.

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"Since we have so many new faces," I said to the half-dozen volunteers, "I'll start with a tools talk. Safety points for the spade--the most important is that when you're digging, you push with the ball of your foot."

I picked up a spade from the pile, and demonstrated by digging up a bluebell growing by the hedge. From the large bells all round the stem, I knew it was a Spanish bluebell, a garden escapee that if left unchecked would hybridize with the natives. Too late now, though. You can tell the British bluebell because the flowers are smaller, deeper blue, and they're usually on one side of the stem, so the plant droops under their weight as if bowing down before its foreign conqueror. There's hardly a wood left in England where you'll see only native bluebells.

"Or you can use your heel on the spade." I heaved the invader out of the earth and tossed it aside, knowing it would safely rot. "But you should never press down with the middle of your foot. The bones in the arch are delicate, and you can injure yourself."

I turned to the alien. "Of course, that may not apply to you. I guess you know where your weak points are, if you have any."

The Hastillan picked up a spade with her grey, double-thumbed hand. "Your lawyers made me pledge not to blame you for any accidents. But I know how to dig. I have a Most Adept Shoveler ring I can show you." Her translator spoke with the neutral tone of a BBC newsreader, so I couldn't tell whether she was joking.

"That won't be necessary," I reassured her. "I'm sorry about the lawyers, but everyone has to sign to say they understood the safety talk. Liability insurance costs a fortune these days." I handed out a pile of forms to the human contingent. Head office had already cleared the alien. What was her name again? Holly and brown rice ... *Olibrys*.

"When you're carrying a spade, you keep it down by your legs, parallel to the ground, holding it at the point of balance." I demonstrated, balancing the spade on one finger before an arthritic tremor made me hastily clutch the shaft with a full grip. "This is so that if you fall, the spade goes harmlessly off to the side. You don't swing it around, or carry it over your shoulders, because if you tripped you could chop someone's head off. And then we'd lose our no-claims bonus."

As I mentioned each incorrect use of the spade, a hologram made comic pratfalls to illustrate the dreadful consequences. "When you're not digging with it, you don't hang it on a branch, or lean it against a tree, or leave it in a trench with the handle sticking up. You place the tool flat on the ground, in an out-of-the-way spot, with the blade pointing downward--so that if anyone does tread on it, they don't have a Tom and Jerry moment." Holographic cartoon characters chased each other round the flitter park, tripping over spades and treading on rakes that sprang up to whack them in the face.

"Any questions on the spade? No? We also have mattocks and bow-saws in the flitter, and I'll instruct you on those if we need them. But for now, if you've all signed your waivers, we can get on and attack some weeds."

I counted the forms to make sure everyone had signed. Six volunteers--it was the biggest Sunday group

I'd run for years. Maybe I could entice some of these newcomers into coming along regularly. It would be good to chat with new people. When you live alone and all your old friends have died or emigrated, it's hard to get any conversation except with voice-activated appliances.

Everyone picked up a spade, and we headed down toward the river. It was a beautiful day to be outdoors. The sun blazed through fleecy clouds gambolling across the sky, and the whirling wind turbines atop the valley showed there was plenty of breeze to cool us while we worked. Yellow flowers of lesser celandine shone in drifts under the trees. Lower down, the trees gave way to brambles and great swathes of ramsons, their small white spikes just beginning to bloom. I tore off a leaf and crushed it under my nose, inhaling the scent of wild garlic.

The path turned left by the riverside. Small patches of darkness began to appear among the bluebells, like drops of poison spilt in the undergrowth. The blotches grew bigger, along with the plants that made them. Tall dark fronds sucked in light like succulents drinking every drop of desert dew, not wasting a single red, blue, or green photon. The shadowy fern swallowed the color of the spring countryside, leaving only darkness growing by the river.

I clutched my spade tighter. "Here we are," I said. "This is Hastillan blackweed."

One of the new volunteers stared at the weed as if it were Satan wearing a Manchester United scarf. "The alien plot to conquer the Earth," he said, delivering the line as though he'd been saving it up all morning.

At my age I don't recall names so well as I used to. We'd had a round of introductions before the tools talk, but the effort of memorizing one alien had squeezed out all the humans. Yet his "Save the Memes" T-shirt jogged something in my brain. Tim, was it? Jim?

Whoever he was, he turned to Olibrys with a menacing expression. "What does it do?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. The translator's neutral tone made it sound as if she didn't care.

"Will it poison the atmosphere? Or infect us with a fatal disease?"

"Kim," I said, "there's no need for that attitude. We're all here today for the same reason: to get rid of the blackweed. Olibrys has come to help, so if you can't be friendly, be polite. And if you can't be polite, shut up."

"It's Keith. And this stuff must be evil, or we wouldn't be cutting it down."

I sighed. "No plant is evil. It's just disruptive in the wrong place, which in this case happens to be the Earth. As for what it does--you can see what it's doing. It grows faster than the native plants, so it shades them out. And here it has no enemies or parasites, so nothing keeps it in check. Most wildlife won't eat it, which is just as well because it's poisonous.

"But none of that's unique to blackweed. Introduced plants have been causing havoc for centuries. Rhododendrons look lovely in the garden, but out here they poison sheep. We battled Japanese knotweed for decades before we finally got rid of it. On the other hand"--I walked a few paces to a small bamboo-like stem--"with Himalayan balsam, we eventually had to give in. Bee-keepers like it, because bees love Himalayan balsam, but conservationists hate it because it promotes erosion, and crowds out other plants, and doesn't support water voles or other mammals. Yet it's so well established, there's nothing we can do.

"That's the key point. The quicker we tackle the blackweed, the more chance we have of stopping it. So

let's get on with it, shall we?"

The volunteers did not look especially eager to start. "You say it's poisonous?" said a woman with thick-framed glasses and hair the vibrant copper of dogwood in autumn. On the walk down, her shiny new boots had been baptized with mud.

I've always found the Scottish accent particularly sexy. No doubt she'd be more eager to talk if she thought I wasn't trying to poison her.

"It's not lethal to humans--but I recommend you all wear gloves. Did we bring the gloves?"

"Right here," said John, the only one of my few regulars who'd come out today, and the only one of the group with enough sense to wear a sun-hat. He put down a bucket full of gloves of all colors, textures, and states of disrepair. John and I had already snagged the best pairs before we set off.

I donned my gloves and demonstrated digging up one of the weeds. "Don't start too close to the plant, or you won't get all the roots. Everything needs to come out, or it'll just grow back." With a practiced wrench of the spade, I had the intruder out in no time. It still looked menacing in death: a black tangle on the green moss, looking *wrong* because it combined features that had never evolved together on Earth.

"Because they're poisonous," I continued, "we can't leave the dead plants to compost down. Please pile them up somewhere open and level, so when we finish I can bring the flitter down and we'll load them in.

"If you have any questions, speak to me or John. We're both qualified first-aiders, by the way. And if you didn't catch it before, my name's Ben." As I said this, I looked at the Scottish woman and smiled.

She said, "Why are we digging up this stuff by hand? Why can't we just use weedkiller or something?"

"The only chemicals that kill the blackweed are so toxic we'd rather not slosh them around a riverbank. This is the safest control method." I paused. "Any other questions?"

"What time's lunch?" someone called.

I laughed. "Spoken like a true volunteer. I'll give you a shout around one o'clock. Anything else? Okay, let's spread out and do some work."

While I talked, I'd edged toward Olibrys. "Let's go up the valley," I said. "That's where the bigger weeds are." I thought it would be politic to separate her from Keith and his friends.

I let Olibrys go in front, so I could get a good look at her while we walked. It was the first time I'd seen a Hastillan in the flesh. On TV they tend to look pale and fragile, but Olibrys exuded strength as she strode on ahead. She probably shaded two meters--a few centimeters taller than me--if you included the cilia that rippled on her head like a restless crown, poking up to sample the air, then drooping again in a complex cycle. Her narrow waist gave her a slightly insectile appearance from behind, an impression heightened by occasional iridescent glints from her greyish skin. She wore a stiff blue something-or-other around her upper torso--I barely know what women's fashions are called, let alone alien garments. A shawl? A shell? I wondered what she had under it. Not breasts, of course. Indeed, I only assumed she was female because her translator had a woman's voice.

As we climbed a short incline, the river growing louder as we approached the weir, I checked the steps and revetments I'd put in a few years ago. The wood was beginning to rot--we don't use chemically-treated timber--but I figured it would last another year or so. We had more pressing priorities right now.

At the top, a clump of young blackweed blocked the path. I glimpsed a thin black filament trailing from an enormous frond growing by the river. A stolon, we'd call it in an Earth plant. Back home, my strawberries were doing the same thing: spreading by sending out runners that rooted wherever they could. The only difference was that slugs kept munching my strawberries, but not even slugs would touch the blackweed.

"Now you can show me your Most Adept Shoveling," I said to Olibrys.

It's a good thing I'm well past the age of being competitive, because she was strong and fast and tireless. Her muscle-power propelled the spade blade-deep into the earth with one smooth push, as if she were shoveling sand, rather than thick Yorkshire soil full of stones and roots. Soon, the entire clump of blackweed lay limp beside the path.

I glanced back down the valley at the other volunteers, who weren't working nearly as hard. Some of them had yet to start, finding it necessary to warm up to the task with a long chat. But John looked to have things in hand, as he pointed out various thickets of weed, and sent a group across the bridge to clear the other bank.

Olibrys and I tackled the huge parent frond by the waterside, digging on opposite sides. Unable to read her body language, I couldn't tell whether she enjoyed the task or resented it. I reckoned her presence was probably a PR stunt by the Hastillan embassy, a conciliatory gesture after the fuss we'd kicked up about the blackweed, but I couldn't complain about her work-rate.

I wiped sweat from my brow, and Olibrys opened her snout wide and panted like a dog, as we vanquished the giant weed, then grubbed up all the roots. Afterward I took a refreshing drink from the river--it always tastes so much better than tap water--and rested on a moss-encrusted rock. Looking at the dead weed, I noticed pale specks where berries had started to grow. The blackweed didn't rely solely on stolons, but also flung its pollen to the wind. Soon a crop of large orange berries would appear, and float downstream to choke yet more riverbank with weed. Others might be eaten by birds, who'd excrete seeds before succumbing to the poison. We had to get rid of as much blackweed as we could, before the berries ripened.

"So how did this stuff get out here?" I asked Olibrys.

"Biocontrol breach," she replied.

The Hastillan ambassador had used the exact same phrase. "What does that mean?"

"It means that our anti-contamination procedures were broken."

"How exactly?"

"I don't know," said Olibrys.

"Does anyone know?" I asked, trying to remain patient. The embassy had been apologetic but evasive. If Olibrys was going to be out here all day, I'd keep asking until I got an answer.

She paused, staring at a twig caught in an eddy below the weir. "There's nothing more I can say."

"Don't you think we deserve an explanation? This is our home!"

"You live here? I thought--"

"I live on this planet, yes. And I've been a woods warden in West Yorkshire for thirty years." Twenty of

them unpaid, I added to myself.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I do think you deserve an answer. But I've been asked not to talk about it."

I threw a stone into the river with an angry splash. "Don't you see how bad that looks? It makes people like Keith think you really are trying to poison the Earth."

"That's what I told my mother," said Olibrys. "She's embarrassed, that's all, and she asked me to keep quiet. But I don't want to lie. I'm not a diplomat, so I shouldn't have to."

"Your mother?"

"She's the ambassador. The embassy is one big family--sisters, cous-ins.... "The translator beeped to indicate another, uninterpretable concept. "They bring their offspring with them. And of course the kids get bored, stuck on a primitive world with nothing to do. So they come out here and get high."

I frowned, wondering if the translator had spoken correctly. The Yorkshire moors aren't especially high, not compared to the Lake District. Or did she mean--"The blackweed is a drug?"

"That's right. The embassy is all overseen--surveillance everywhere--so we can't do anything at home. But there are no monitors out here. It's just like the backwoods on Hastilla. Chew the berries, spit the seed, spread the weed ... and come back next year."

I stood up, and pointed to the patches of blackweed smothering the valley. "You people planted this here deliberately, just so you could get high?" My voice trembled with outrage. I hadn't been so angry since someone fly-tipped garbage on the orchids.

"I'm sorry," she said. "They're only kids. They didn't know it would spread so fast. I've never seen so much blackweed in my life. On Hastilla it's rare: that's why people spit the seeds, to encourage it."

I grabbed my spade and moved to the next blackweed. As I stabbed the blade into the earth, each blow shook the fronds and made them spill pollen from feathery catkins. Fueled by anger and adrenaline, I wrenched the interloper out of the ground with one mighty heave. Olibrys worked alongside me, creating a vast pile of weed. I had to hastily spread the heap before it toppled into the river.

I'd assumed the blackweed's introduction was an accident. I could forgive the aliens that: we humans had made enough mistakes on our own planet that we could hardly criticize someone else's. But a deliberate introduction--the wanton despoliation of countryside I'd stewarded for decades--made me want to scream.

Dark paranoid thoughts crossed my mind. The blackweed was rare on Hastilla; it grew well here. Drugs are always a profitable crop. Maybe the Hastillans planned to turn Earth into a blackweed farm, so the whole home planet could get high.

Yet the embassy had seemed genuinely contrite when we complained about the weed. And Olibrys stood beside me, rooting out the plants far faster than I.

In the silence between us, birds squawked to defend their territory.

"I appreciate your coming out here to help dig this stuff up," I said at last. "I guess that won't make you very popular with the berry-eaters."

"No, it won't," said Olibrys. "They've already accused me of careerism and crawling to my mother, of caring far too much about some primitive little planet's habitat and government."

I laughed. "Which of those is true? Why are you really here?"

"I felt we had an obligation," Olibrys said, making me wonder if she'd originally helped plant the weed. She continued, "We are guests here, even if unwelcome. Though if you all feel so strongly about protecting your home from alien infestations, I'm surprised there aren't more people out here today."

"Conservation hasn't been fashionable since space travel came along. Now that we have access to other planets, this one's become disposable." I thought of my friends who'd emigrated. "Is that how it is with your people? Do you have much environment left on Hastilla, or is it all cities and wasteland?"

"There's hardly any wild habitat. That's one reason the blackweed is rare. Of course, kids try to grow it in their gardens, but the monitors put a stop to that."

She turned the conversation to Earth, asking what we did for fun. I talked about booze and football and nightclubs, and all the other things I dimly remembered. I enjoyed chatting with Olibrys; her translator didn't have all the latest slang and catchphrases that infested young people's conversations like weeds.

As we talked, we continued digging. It's a curious paradox that conservation so often involves destruction. Over the years I've felled rhododendrons, burned gorse, pulled ragwort, cleared Himalayan balsam, destroyed GM escapees--all plenty of practice for rooting out alien drug crops.

My aching muscles told me it was lunchtime. I walked back down the path, looking for a suitable space with convenient rocks for us all to sit on. My old bones don't like squatting on the ground; I like to perch on a tree-stump, or a rock with enough moss to cushion my scrawny backside.

Some of the volunteers had clustered into a gossipy knot. "Anyone fancy a cup of tea?" I called. They nodded eagerly. "Then go get me some dry wood."

I filled the kettle from the river. As people brought back wood, I heaped up the smallest, driest scraps. In the flutter I had a gadget that would zap water to an instant boil, but there's something primal about building a fire. It always reminds me of going camping as a boy, of the year I spent in Canada, of all the cups of tea drunk on all the volunteer outings over the decades--the hedge laying, the wildlife surveys, the footpath repair--all the unsung things that keep the countryside alive for those who come to drop cigarette butts and throw beer-cans out of flutter windows.

I got the fire going--I'm not above using a modern gadget for that--and put the kettle on. It's a tall hollow cone with the water in a sleeve surrounding the central fire, so it heats up quickly when flames start licking out of the top. I dropped a couple of larger twigs down the chimney next to the spout.

As usual, I didn't need to shout, "Lunchtime!" Drawn by the fire and the prospect of a hot drink, the volunteers started to bag the least uncomfortable rocks to sit on. I had already placed my rucksack on the mossiest stump. John fussed with the brew-kit, and I let him sort out everyone's drinks. He knew what I wanted: black tea, no sugar, none of that fancy herbal crap.

"I saw a few piles of blackweed on my way down," I said to the group. "I think we've made a good start. How are you finding it?" In truth the volunteers hadn't done much yet, but I've found that it's best to praise them--then they're more likely to come back. It takes people time to get used to hard work, especially soft office drones who've never done anything more strenuous than ten minutes on an exercise bike.

"It's hard getting those roots up," said a young guy in a Leeds Rhinos shirt, as he tucked into his sandwiches.

"Yes," I said, "but we're lucky they don't spread underground. If the blackweed sent out rhizomes, like bracken, we'd never get the stuff out."

"We should never have let it here in the first place," said Keith. "How come we even let these aliens walk around without a biosuit, shedding microbes everywhere they go? We have more virus protection on our computers than we do on our biosphere--but we could survive without computers a lot easier than without a biosphere." This tripped off his tongue with the ease of a well-rehearsed slogan.

"How long have you been caring about the biosphere?" I demanded. I don't normally argue with the volunteers, but I couldn't let this pass. "I haven't seen you out here before. You didn't notice when this riverbank got choked with Himalayan balsam--why are you so concerned about Hastillan blackweed? You think the blackweed is the only problem we have? If you care about the environment so much, there's plenty of other ways you could help."

"But the aliens are the biggest threat we face. If these Hastillans can breathe our air, we shouldn't let them anywhere near it. We should make the Earth a quarantine zone."

I looked to Olibrys to see how she was taking this, but of course I couldn't read the expression on her snout. In any case, her attention was taken up by someone trying to give her a book. I heard her say, "--no need for Jesus." Another volunteer sidled over, offering to sell Olibrys the pyramids of Egypt.

I smiled ruefully, realizing that we only had so many volunteers today because they'd heard an alien would be coming. They all had an agenda. Well, at least I could get some work out of them. Maybe the experience of doing something useful for once might give them a taste for it.

"Okay, if everyone's finished their lunch, let's get back to work."

I went down to the river to get some water to put out the fire. As I climbed back up the bank, I heard a cry of "Ouch!" from Olibrys's translator, followed by a fusillade of beeps.

"Sorry," said Keith in a distinctly unapologetic tone. "I'd help you up, but I don't want to get germs on my hand."

I dropped the kettle and ran to the path, where I saw Olibrys picking herself up from the ground, brushing dead leaves from her carapace. "What happened?" I demanded.

"She tripped over my spade--the one I'm using to remove unwanted alien organisms," said Keith. "Have you got any bleach so I can sterilize it?"

"His spade--" Olibrys began, then stopped. Her agitated cilia slowed to a stately wave, as if exercising diplomatic restraint.

"Was your spade placed flat on the ground with the blade pointing down?" I asked Keith.

"Guess not," he said, his voice oozing self-satisfaction rather than regret.

"Then you've violated the safety instructions. Please leave the site immediately. You'll be liable for any costs arising from this incident." I turned to Olibrys. "I apologize for this. I assure you, his speech and behavior aren't condoned by myself, Yorkshire Green Action, or--"

Keith flapped his arm in disgust. "Whose side are you on?"

"The countryside," I said. "Olibrys has hacked out far more blackweed than you. All you've done is cause trouble."

I raised my voice and addressed the others. "Speaking of hacking out weed, we still have work to do. Let's get on, please. The sooner we start, the sooner we finish."

With a clang of spades and a mutter of conversation, most of the other volunteers began drifting away.

"John," I said, "would you please escort Keith back to the flitter park."

"No need," said Keith. "I'm leaving." He stalked off down the path, then yelled back over his shoulder. "You'll find out I'm right. Remember measles! Remember smallpox!"

The Scottish woman had been staring at the confrontation as if transfixed.

"What did he mean by that?" I asked.

"I think he meant, 'Remember what happened to Native Americans when Europeans brought measles and smallpox,'" she said. "Don't you think he has cause for concern?"

"I don't know. I'm not a doctor."

"But what about the ecosystem? Are aliens poisoning the Earth?"

"Well, the blackweed grows here, so obviously there is an issue. But Olibrys came out to dig it up, and incidents like this won't help us get Hastillan co-operation in future. Someone's going to have to apologize to the embassy as it is." Head office could deal with that, I thought.

"What do you think the blackweed really does?" she asked, looking at me with an intent gaze.

Flattered by the attention, I was about to relay what Olibrys had claimed, that it was just alien dope. But then, as the sun came out from behind a cloud, I spotted a metallic glint on the frame of her glasses.

"Are you a journalist?" I said.

She nodded. "Freelance. My screen name is Susanna Munro"--she paused to see if I recognized it, which I didn't--"and today I'm working on 'Ten Alien Plots to Conquer the Earth' for the Conspiracy Channel."

I sighed. "So Keith was playing up to the cameras. I guess it takes TV to make someone that rude and aggressive."

Susanna looked hurt. "I just record what's already there," she said, with the air of a well-worn justification. "Conspiracists are usually outspoken--at least, the ones who want to get on TV are. But we've had his viewpoint. Now I'm interested in yours." She tapped her glasses, reminding me that they were recording.

"My view is that we need to stand up and get rid of the blackweed"--I brandished my spade for the camera--"not sit around arguing about why it arrived or what it really does. There are more important things to worry about."

"More important than alien schemes to conquer the Earth?"

"More important than hypothetical schemes, yes. There's plenty of real, practical environmental problems to solve."

She waved a dismissive hand. "If you want to talk about global warming, save it for the Nostalgia Channel."

"Do you freelance for them as well? Because there's a lot I could say." I stopped, realizing I was in danger of coming across as a haranguing obsessive like Keith. No doubt Susanna's raw footage became fodder for all kinds of clip shows--a parade of earnest Cassandras, each with their own pet peeves.

"They mostly use archive footage," she said. "Like experts talking about the next ice age, or the oil running out, or the population time-bomb. Environmentalists are always crying wolf."

"Yes, but there are wolves out there--metaphorical ones, anyway. The real ones mostly died."

"And don't those wolves include the Hastillans?"

I turned away and pointed to Olibrys. "Why don't you ask her?" I said, weary of the fruitless debate. In a lifetime of watching TV, I've never seen talking heads change anyone's mind.

"Oh, I intend to." Susanna's voice softened, and she touched my arm. "If I gave you a hard time, don't take it personally--it's only television. I do take your point. That's why I've been digging up blackweed, too."

I appreciated this apology, even if it were only a journalist's veneer of human feeling, designed to dissuade me from objecting to the footage.

The work continued. Olibrys dug alongside everyone else, doing her best to ignore the rugby-shirt guy talking about the golden lights he saw back when his mother disappeared. I sent him over the bridge to attack the weeds on the other side.

As the volunteers grew used to the task, they speeded up, creating heaps of dead blackweed. Some of the larger fronds bore catkins, and even a few early berries. We were just in time, helped by our research on the environmental cues that spurred the blackweed's life-cycle.

The group spread out along both sides of the river, as we searched for remaining clumps of weed. I knew we wouldn't clear the entire valley today. But if we could keep attacking the weed faster than it spread, we'd succeed eventually.

I felt relaxed enough that I took time out to give an impromptu flower-ID course, pointing out red campion and wood anemone, and talking about classifications and how to use field guides. Susanna asked me about the bracket fungus sprouting from dead trees like pairs of ears. I couldn't help wondering if she were merely humoring me to garner footage for "Eccentric Englishmen" or somesuch. And yet--if someone wanted to record me for posterity, who was I to keep my knowledge to myself? I enjoyed the attention, and as usual I was tempted to prolong the day's work, since I only had my empty house to return to. But they're volunteers, not slaves, and you can't overwork them if you want to see them again.

About four o'clock, I headed to the flitter so we could start loading up the weed, ready for the incinerator tomorrow. Hovering over the river, I could see the difference we had made. On last month's survey trip, I had seen dark blotches all along the banks. Now the darkness was concentrated into piles of dead weed. In the gaps left behind, nettles and stitchwort and sanicle would grow--but mostly Himalayan balsam, in long pink ribbons edging the river.

Most of the volunteers stood by the bridge, waiting for me to set the flitter down. I wondered where Olibrys was, then saw her upriver. She was scrabbling through a blackweed heap as if she'd lost her wallet. I saw her put something in her bag, but to my surprise she kept on searching, while occasionally lifting her head as if to spot anyone approaching along the path.

I reached for the binoculars. As I focused on Olibrys, I glimpsed what went into her bag--something

small and orange. She was searching through the blackweed for the few nearly-ripe berries.

I zoomed over and landed the flitter, not caring that the front scraped an alder and the back squished down into a bog. Then I leapt out, hurting my knees as I landed, and shouted, "Put the bag down!"

Olibrys turned toward me. "It's not what you think," she said.

"How do you know what I think?" I demanded.

"You think what they all think--Keith and Susanna and all the people who daub graffiti on the embassy walls. You're a nasty suspicious lot, and this is a nasty primitive horrible little planet." Olibrys's translator was expressionless as always, but something about her furiously roiling cilia reminded me of my niece exploding into a tantrum.

Just because she was taller than me and worked twice as hard, I'd assumed Olibrys was an adult. Silly, of course. Maybe she was more like a teenager. Or maybe I was reading too much into the combination of alien body-language and a toneless translator.

"I'm not like Keith," I said. "I don't think you're evil"--not without more evidence, I thought. "But it doesn't look good, pocketing the berries. What were you going to do, find somewhere else to plant them?"

"No. I just wanted to get high with my friends." She paused, and I waited for her to compose herself. "They've been saying I'm climbing the career stairway, crawling to my mother and the natives. You don't know what it's like when there are so few people your own age, and they all start ignoring you, and making comments behind your back that you're meant to overhear. When I saw that a few berries were ripe, it looked like a chance to win them over. I could say I'd saved the last harvest, and we could celebrate together. Can't you let me keep them? These are the last!"

"You said when you chew the berries, you spit out the seeds so the blackweed grows again."

"We won't do that. I promise."

Could I believe her? She had certainly worked hard today, but maybe that was just a ruse to get me to trust her. Even if I credited her intentions, could she control all her friends--the ones who'd planted the weed out here in the first place?

The volunteers were filing up the path, on their way to help load the blackweed into the flitter. I had to make a decision quickly.

I felt sorry for Olibrys. I could imagine the tensions within a small embassy, the isolation of being ostracized. Hell, I know what it's like to be lonely. But my loyalty was to Earth, to the countryside. I couldn't let her walk away with the berries in her bag, not when they might sprout into yet more blackweed blighting the land.

I held out my hand. Olibrys's cilia drooped like wilted flowers. "I understand," she said. "I would do the same for my homeworld." She handed me a plastic box half-full of orange berries. "That's all of them."

"Thanks," I said. Then I thought that my translated voice probably sounded as expressionless to Olibrys as hers did to me, so to make sure she knew I meant it sincerely, I said, "Thanks again--for everything you've done today."

As Susanna and the others approached, I quickly hid the berries inside my coat, to protect Olibrys--and myself--from the journalist's gaze.

People began heaving dead fronds into the flitter. The river gurgled tirelessly, but we were weary when we finished loading the dark cargo. The breeze had picked up, and the sun cast long shadows of wind turbines down the moors. I called the group together for a few final words.

"I appreciate all your efforts here. Clearing the blackweed is an important job, which will help the ecosystem and stop wildlife being poisoned. On behalf of all the birds and water voles, thanks again." I tried to catch people's eyes as I spoke: Olibrys, Susanna, all the conspiracists and missionaries attracted by the lure of the alien.

"But there's plenty of other things that need doing. Over the coming months, we've got coppicing, pond maintenance, GM pollen counts ... lots of exciting things, if not as glamorous as alien killer weeds.

"Next week it's footpath repair, and I hope you'll come along. Until then, thank you and good night."

The volunteers dispersed, walking back to the flitter park much muddier than they'd arrived. Olibrys lagged behind, trudging up the path, brushing against nettles because she didn't feel their sting, or didn't care. I felt a pang of empathy, realizing that she had no reason to rush home. I imagined how she'd hoped that by tonight she'd be popular again, whereas now she only had more loneliness to return to.

I called out instinctively. "Olibrys!"

She turned round and returned to the bridge, where I stood gazing at the rushing water. This spring, it would carry no blackweed berries downstream.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I guess it's hard for you to go home empty-handed." I hesitated, wondering what else I could say. "I've seen your embassy on TV. It's just a few buildings, but there's a whole world outside. And it's not all nasty and primitive, or full of people like Keith. Some of it's beautiful."

"I've seen the brochures," said Olibrys.

I remembered that the Hastillans were rich from licensing their technology. Of course the embassy would be deluged with offers from travel agencies, tour operators, and the like. I had little to offer Olibrys that she couldn't buy herself if she wanted it.

Except--"When we were researching the blackweed's life-cycle, we built a habitat to replicate its natural environment. Back at the YGA centre, there's a Hastillan dome with the same atmosphere, the same heat and light as your home planet. If you wanted somewhere to hang out, somewhere to get away from your elders, I could let you use it."

"Really?" said Olibrys. "I think some of my broodmates would like that. It sounds just the place for those who are always complaining about the smell of your air." Her double-jointed arm made a sweeping gesture into the wind. "But what would you want in return?"

I could think of lots of things. I wished Olibrys would come back next week, become a regular volunteer, and endorse a message about the importance of looking after your planet. But as I opened my mouth to ask, I realized I was being just as selfish as everyone else who tried to use Olibrys for their own ends.

Instead I said, "What do *you* want?"

After a long pause, her translator chirped and said, "I want to believe, to connect, to embrace...." I couldn't tell whether Olibrys had said three things, or whether one alien verb had been approximated three different ways.

"I know that's hard," she went on. "But it means a lot that you asked. All I really want is to make the best

of things. I'm here, after all. I just don't know what the best of it is."

I sympathized. "I never found that out myself."

We fell silent for a few moments. Far upstream, I saw a kingfisher darting over the shallows.

"I guess the thing to do is to keep looking," I said, thinking how long it was since I'd done so. "You don't find what you don't seek."

"Where would you suggest I start?" Olibrys asked.

The translator's monotone gave me no clue whether this question was genuine or sarcastic. But I felt I owed her the benefit of the doubt.

I said, "Earlier, you asked what we did for fun. That seems as good a place as any. I could show you a few things--" As soon as I said this, I realized that the delights of my allotment, or my collection of Northern Soul classics, might prove a little staid for star-hopping adolescents. "If you'd rather hang around with people your own age, I could introduce you to some of my younger relatives. My nephews and nieces have some interesting hobbies. And if you find anything you really like, you can introduce it to your friends: be a trend-setter."

If I could induce the Hastillans to develop a more positive attitude to Earth and its people, maybe they wouldn't be so cavalier about spreading blackweed everywhere. Yet I also wanted to make a genuine connection, unsullied by ulterior motives. I wanted to reach out to Olibrys, to learn how to get past the toneless translator to discover how she really felt.

"It would have to be something even better than eating blackweed," she said, "if it were to make the brood enjoy being here, rather than sneering in the embassy or feeling homesick in your Hastillan dome."

"I can't promise that." I didn't know what effect the blackweed had on the aliens. "But I can promise there's a whole lot of things you can try. There's a big world out here, full of people who love letting their hair down." I looked at Olibrys's cilia and wondered how my metaphor would translate.

"You would be my native guide?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, already looking forward to the prospect. It would be a great chance to get out more.

"Then I'm willing to look where you suggest," she said. "Call me at the embassy when you have some ideas."

Olibrys held out her hand. I removed my gloves, and clasped her hand in mine. Her grey skin was smooth and hot, and her thumbs gripped like pincers, leaving painful red marks next to my liver-spots.

"Safety points for the handshake--" I began.

"You have delicate bones?" said Olibrys. "I'm sorry. It'll be a long while before I earn my Most Adept Diplomat ring."

"I'll do my best to help you with that," I said, as I demonstrated our way of waving goodbye.