

All the Things You Are

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You wouldn't think they'd be so dumb. Here they were, in the biggest spaceport in the country, with hundreds of holo cameras covering every inch of the place, and these three jerks actually think they're going to get away with robbing the currency exchange.

Okay, so they got a couple of ceramic pistols past our security devices and reassembled them in the men's room, and all right, another one managed to sneak a couple of steak knives out of one of the restaurants, but hell, did they think we were just going to sit on our hands and let them waltz out with their loot?

I hadn't seen much action during my four years in the space service, and after all those months of intensive training I'd almost been hoping for something like this. I'd been at OceanPort for three weeks, and was wondering why they even bothered with a live Security team, since their automated systems were so efficient that they discouraged anything worse than spitting on the floor.

Well, now I knew.

The men with the pistols were holding the crowd at bay, and the guy with the knife had grabbed a girl—not a woman, but a kid about twelve years old—and was holding the knife at her throat.

"Don't move on them," said the voice in my ear. "We've got to get the girl away from them unharmed, and we can't have them shooting into the crowd."

That was Captain Symmes. He was just spouting the routine and stating the platitudes: they've been identified, we can trace them wherever they go, they're dead men walking, so don't endanger any bystanders. If we don't nail them here, we'll nail them somewhere up the road. They have to eat, they have to sleep; we don't. Whatever they think they're going to escape in, we'll sugar their gas, rupture their jets, fuck with their nuclear pile. (I kept waiting for him to say we'd also put tacks in their track shoes, but he didn't.)

"Show yourselves, but don't approach him," said Symmes' voice. "If they're going to take a shot at someone, better us than the civilians."

Well, it was better us if we remembered to put on our bulletproof longjohns. Most of us had, and the ones who hadn't were too frightened to say so. An enraged Captain Symmes could be one hell of a lot more formidable than a ceramic bullet from a homemade pistol.

I stepped out from my station, and found myself about fifty yards from the trio. The crowd parted before them like the Red Sea before Moses, and they slowly made their way to the door. Then something caught my eye. It was a well-dressed middle-aged man, not fat or skinny but not especially well-built. While everyone else had moved away, he had simply turned his back and taken just a step or two.

Damn! I thought. It's too bad you're not one of us. You could just about reach the son of a bitch with the knife.

And even as the thought crossed my mind, the man spun around, chopped down on the knife-holder's arm, and sent the weapon clattering to the floor. The little girl broke and ran toward the crowd, but I was watching the man who'd freed her. He didn't have any weapons, and he sure didn't handle his body like an athlete, but he was charging the two guys with the guns.

They turned and fired their weapons. He went down on one knee, his chest a bloody mess, then launched himself at the nearer one's legs. The poor bastard never had a chance; he picked up four more bullets for his trouble.

Of course, the bad guys never had a chance, either. The second they concentrated on him, we all pulled our weapons and began firing—bullets, lasers, long-range tasers, you name it. All three were dead before they hit the floor.

I could see that Connie Neff was running over to the girl to make sure she was okay, so I raced up to the guy who'd taken all the bullets. He was in a bad way, but he was still breathing. Someone else had called for an ambulance. It arrived within two minutes, and they loaded him onto an airsled, shoved it in the back, and took off for Miami. I decided to ride with him. I mean, hell, he'd risked his life, probably lost it, to save that little girl. Someone who wasn't a doctor ought to be there if he woke up.

OceanPort is eight miles off the Miami Coast, and the ambulance shuttle got us to the hospital in under a minute, though it took another forty seconds to set it down gently so as not to do any further damage to the patient.

I'd pulled his wallet and ID out and studied them. His name was Myron Seymour, he was forty-eight years old and—as far as I could tell—retired. Still had the serial number of the chip the military had embedded in him when he enlisted. The rest was equally unexceptional: normal height, normal weight, normal this, normal that.

He didn't look much like a hero, but then, I'd never seen a real bonafide hero before, so I couldn't actually say what they looked like.

"Good God," said an orderly who'd come out to the ship to help move Seymour to the emergency room. "Him again!"

"He's been here before?" I asked, surprised.

"Three times, maybe four," was the reply. "I'll swear the son of a bitch is trying to get himself killed."

I was still puzzling over that remark when Seymour went into surgery. He came out, heavily sedated and in grave condition, three hours later.

"Is he going to make it?" I asked the same orderly, who was guiding the airsled into a recovery room.

"Not a chance," he said.

"How much time as he got?"

He shrugged. "A day at the outside, probably less. Once we hook him up to all the machines we'll have a better idea."

"Any chance he'll be able to talk?" I asked. "Or at least understand me if I talk to him?"

"You never know."

"Mind if I stick around?"

He smiled. "You're walking around with a badge, three lethal weapons that I can see, and probably a couple of more I can't see. Who am I to tell you you can't stay?"

I grabbed a sandwich in the hospital's restaurant, called in to OceanPort to make sure I wasn't needed

right away, then went up to the recovery room. Each of the patients was partitioned off from the others, and it took me a couple of minutes to find Seymour. He was lying there, a dozen machines monitoring all his vital functions, five tubes dripping fluids of various colors and consistencies into arms, an oxygen tube up his nostrils, bandages everywhere, and hints of blood starting to seep through the dressings.

I figured it was a waste of time, that he was never going to wake up again, but I stuck around for another hour, just to pay my respects to the man who'd saved a little girl's life. Then, as I was about to leave, his eyelids flickered and opened. His lips moved, but I couldn't hear him, so I pulled my chair over to the bed.

"Welcome back," I said gently.

"Is she here?" he whispered.

"The girl you saved?" I said. "No, she's fine. She's with her parents."

"No, not her," he said. He could barely move his head, but he tried to look around the room. "She's got to be here this time!"

"Who's got to be here?" I asked. "Who are you talking about?"

"Where is she?" he rasped. "This time I'm dying. I can tell."

"You're going to be fine," I lied.

"Not unless she gets here pretty damned soon." He tried to sit up, but was too weak and sprawled back on the bed. "Is the door unlocked?"

"There isn't any door," I said. "You're in the recovery ward."

He looked genuinely puzzled. "Then where is she?"

"Whoever it is, she probably doesn't know you've been wounded," I said.

"She knows," he said with absolute certainty.

"Was she at the spaceport?"

He shook his head weakly. "She wasn't even on the planet," he said.

"You're sure you don't want me to ask at the desk?"

"You can't. She doesn't have a name."

"Everyone's got a name."

He uttered a sigh of resignation. "If you say so."

I was starting to feel sorry I'd stuck around. I wasn't bringing him any comfort, and his answers weren't making any sense.

"Can you tell me anything about her?" I asked, making one more attempt to be helpful before I packed it in and went home.

I thought he was going to answer, he certainly looked like he was trying to say something, but then he passed out. A couple of minutes later all the machines he was hooked up to started going haywire, and a

couple of young doctors raced into the room.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"Out!" ordered one of the doctors.

They bent over the bed, going to work on him, and I figured I'd only be in the way if I stayed there, so I walked out into the corridor. Before long they emerged from the room.

"Is he dead?" I asked again.

"Yeah," answered one of them. "Were you a friend of his?"

I shook my head. "No. I just brought him here from the spaceport."

The doctors walked down the corridor, going to wherever doctors go when they've lost a patient, and a couple of orderlies showed up with an airslid. One of them was the one I'd spoken to before.

"I told you he wouldn't last a day," he said. "Why do these guys think they can charge into a stream of bullets or lasers and come away in one piece?"

"These guys?" I repeated.

"Yeah. This is the second one this month. There was this guy, maybe three weeks back. He stumbles upon a bank robbery, and instead of calling the cops he just lowers his head and charges these four armed guys." He exhaled deeply and shook his head. "Poor bastard never got within twenty yards of them."

"Was he D.O.A.?" I asked.

"Close to it," replied the orderly. "He was sure someone was coming to be with him, and was desperate to make sure everyone at Admissions knew where to send her."

"Her?"

"I think it was a her." He shrugged. "I could be wrong. He wasn't making much sense. I thought he couldn't remember his name for a couple of minutes. Turns out he was right and I was wrong. Daniel Daniels. Funny name." His companion started shifting his weight uneasily. "If you don't have any more questions, we've got to schlep this guy down to the basement for an autopsy. We were on our break, but we're a little short-handed this week."

I stepped aside to let them go into the room, and decided it was time to return to the spaceport. But just for the hell of it, I stopped by Admissions before I left and asked if anyone had inquired about Seymour.

No one had.

When I got back to my office, I was still curious, so I had the computer hunt up with little there was on Seymour and on Daniel Daniels. Seymour was easy; born and raised in Miami, went to college here, spent nine years in the space service, honorably discharged after getting shot all to hell in a firefight on Kobernykov II, informally known as Nikita. Came back home, got a real estate license, and was selling beachfront property until two years ago, when he suddenly seemed determined to prove he was either a hero or bulletproof or both. Since then he'd tried to throw his life away three different times; the first two times the hospital made him keep it, this time they didn't.

Daniels was harder. There were actually four Daniel Daniels living in Miami at the start of the year. You'd think their parents would have had a little more creativity. Two were still around. One had died of relatively natural causes at the age of ninety-three. And then there was the one the orderly had told me about.

He was thirty-three years old. Dropped out of school at sixteen, signed a couple of minor-league soccer contracts, got cut both times, joined the space service when he was twenty, served seven years, got out on a medical discharge, and had been going from one menial job to another ever since.

I checked the medical discharge. He got it after catching some serious flak on Nikita. He recovered physically, but he'd been seeing a shrink for depression for four years before the night he tried to take on a gang of teenaged hoods and got turned into an animated cinder for his trouble. It took them a year to put him back together with a brand-new epidermis—and damned if he didn't go out and do something equally suicidal a month later. Even the police weren't sure what happened—they found him after all the shooting was over—but he was filled with so much lead of so many different calibers that he had to have taken on at least six armed men.

And that was it: two unexceptional men who had nothing in common but the town they lived in and the planet they'd served on, each willingly faced certain death for no apparent reason—and then, when they were saved, went right out and faced it again.

I was still pondering it when Captain Symmes called me into his office to give him my report. I told him what I'd observed, which matched all the other reports, and then figured I was done.

"Just a minute," he said as I was turning to leave.

"Sir?" I said.

"You accompanied him to the hospital. Why?"

"I was hoping he might be able to tell me why he willingly put himself at such risk," I answered. "I thought maybe he knew something about the men we killed."

"And did he?"

I shook my head. "We'll never know. He only regained consciousness for perhaps a minute after surgery, and then he died."

"I wonder what the hell made him do it?" mused Captain Symmes.

"I wondered, too," I said. "So I ran computer checks on him and on Daniels . . ."

"Daniels?" he said sharply. "Who's Daniels?"

"Another man who threw his life away the same way," I said. "But the only things they had in common were that they lived here and they both saw action on Kobernykov II."

"Kobernykov II," he repeated. "Is that the one they call Nikita?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, that's interesting," said Captain Symmes.

"What is, sir?" I asked.

"About two years ago I was running security at Marsport, and the same kind of thing happened. Four men were robbing one of the restaurants there, and this guy, he was just waiting for his flight to Titan, decided to take them out single-handed. They shot him before he got close to them. We nailed all four of them before they could harm anyone else, but the man had taken too many bullets and energy pulses. He died a few hours later." Captain Symmes paused and frowned. "I had to fill out a report, and that meant I had to find out who was killed. The reason I'm mentioning it at all is because he spent some time on Nikita."

"Medical discharge?"

"Yes," he answered. "Curious, isn't it?"

"Very," I said. "Do you know if that was the first time he'd risked his life like that?"

"No, I don't," said Captain Symmes. "I assume you have a reason for asking?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Give me a minute and I'll check the record. Like I said, it was two years ago."

He activated his computer, instructed it to pull up the file in question, then told it to run a biographical search on the dead man. Eleven seconds later it had the answer.

Creighton Mortenson Jr. had willingly faced what seemed like certain death on four separate occasions. Only after he'd miraculously survived the first three did Fate finally deliver on its promise at MarsPort.

"Captain," I said, "what would you say if I told you that Seymour and Daniels had also tried to throw their lives away prior to actually succeeding at it?"

"I'd say that something very interesting must have happened to them on Nikita," he said, and instructed his computer to produce a readout of Kobernykov II. He studied it for a moment, then shrugged. "It's about three-quarters the size of Earth, lighter gravity, a bit less oxygen but breathable. During the war with the Patruka Alliance we found they were using Nikita as an ammunition dump, we landed a small party, we blew the ammo dump, each side suffered serious casualties. The few survivors were scattered all the hell over; we found them over a period of maybe three weeks, and eventually they rejoined their main units. There's some plant and animal life there, but no humans and no Patrukans."

"I wonder what the hell went on there," I said. "Most men who get shot up in wartime don't ever want to experience it again—and here were three men who went out of their way to walk into enemy fire or its equivalent again."

"Have your computer hunt up the survivors and ask," he said.

When I went back to my office I filed my report, then tried to find the survivors of Nikita, as Captain Symmes had suggested. The Patrukan War was over, so all the documents and records were declassified, but it didn't help much. We'd sent in a covert team of thirty men and women. It was an exceptionally bloody action. Twenty-five died on Nikita, and the other five—which included Seymour, Daniels and Mortenson—were wounded pretty badly. Evidently they'd become separated, and each managed to survive on his own until a rescue mission arrived a few weeks later.

I tried to track down the other two survivors. They'd both courted Death until it inevitably caught up with them.

There was nothing in any of their histories to indicate that they were either exceptionally brave or

exceptionally foolish. Except for Daniels' depression, none of them was being treated for any emotional or psychiatric problems. As far as I could tell, none of them kept in touch with any of the others after they were discharged from the service.

And within six years of the firefight on Nikita, every one of them was dead, having placed themselves in what could only be termed suicidal situations until even the best surgeons and hospitals could no longer keep them alive.

I reported my findings to Captain Symmes the next day. I could tell he was as fascinated as I was.

"What do you suppose could have made them throw their lives away?" he mused. "And if they were so damned set on dying, why didn't they just put a gun to their heads?"

"There's one way to find out, sir," I said.

He shook his head. "I can't send you to Nikita," he said. "We're OceanPort security, and Nikita is more than a thousand light years from here."

"But if there's something on the planet that caused this behavior . . ."

"Forget it. If there was anything in the food or water or air, the space service or the navy would have found it."

But I couldn't forget it. How do you forget a bunch of totally dissimilar people with one brief shared experience who suddenly act in the same, totally self-destructive manner?

Each evening when I got off work I'd go back to my quarters and try to find out more about the planet and the survivors. The problem is that there simply wasn't much to find. They'd been there for three weeks, maybe four at the outside, there were only five of them, the planet had been deserted by the Patruka Alliance after the battle, and no one had been back since.

And then I thought of the one line of inquiry I hadn't considered before. We were no longer at war, so I wrote a couple of Patrukan historians and asked them if they could supply any accounts, not of the action on Nikita, but on the whereabouts of the survivors.

It took a week before I got an answer, but finally one of them, a being called Myxophtyl—at least that's the way my computer translated his name—informed me that of the four survivors, two had died of natural causes, and two had died heroically, one saving a child who had wandered into the enclosure of a herd of vicious carnivores at a local zoo, the other trying to protect a Mollute who somehow offended a crowd of Patrukans that had instantly turned into an ugly and bloodthirsty mob.

"It didn't just affect humans, sir," I reported to Captain Symmes the day after I heard from the historian. "Whatever's on that planet affected everyone."

"I know that look," he said. "I'm as interested as you are, but as I told you before, I don't have the authority to send you there."

"I've got vacation time stored up," I said.

He checked his computer. "Your vacation's not for five months."

"Then I'll take a leave of absence."

"Think it through," he said. "Nothing on that planet harmed anyone. Do you really want to go there, bore

yourself to tears for a week or two, come home, and then one day decide to prove that you're invulnerable to bullets and lasers?"

"No," I admitted. "No, I suppose I don't."

I thought it was the truth when I said it, but with each day I became more obsessed with what could have turned otherwise normal men into weapon-charging suicides. And in the back of my mind I kept coming back to Captain Symmes' question: if they really wanted to die, why not just put a gun to their heads, or take an overdose? And then I remembered Myron Seymour lying on his bed in the recovery room. He didn't want to die; he wanted to see this woman he was sure would somehow know he was in the hospital. Okay, he may have been fantasizing about the woman, but he wasn't fantasizing about wanting to live.

I'd never thought of myself as obsessive, but as the next three weeks sped by I found myself obsessing over the mystery of what happened on Nikita, and finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I told Captain Symmes that I was putting in for a one-month leave of absence, and that if I didn't get it I was fully prepared to quit my job.

"Don't be foolish," he said. "That's an awfully big step to take, just to chase a fantasy. Besides, I already reported your findings to the navy and the space service. I'm sure they'll look into it."

"I'm sure they will, too," I said. "Just not necessarily in our lifetimes."

"What are you talking about?"

"We've got ten or twelve minor wars going on right now," I said. "They've got more important things to do than examine a planet that nobody's set foot on in six years."

"I gave them all the details," said Captain Symmes. "If they think it's important, they'll get out there pretty damned fast."

"And if they find whatever it is that caused this behavior, they'll make it Top Secret and won't declassify it for a century," I shot back. "I want to know what happened."

"I'm not going to talk you out of this, am I?" he said after a long pause.

"No, sir, you're not."

"All right. You've got a month, starting tomorrow." He handed me a small cube. "There are no direct flights. This'll get you free passage on any ship owned by Earth or its allies."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

"The codes will vanish in exactly thirty days, so don't stay any longer than that unless you're prepared to pay your passage back."

"I appreciate this, sir."

"You're a good security man," he said uncomfortably. (Praising people always made him uncomfortable.)
"I don't want to lose you."

"You won't," I promised him. "I'll be back in less than a month with the answers to what happened."

"Good health," he said.

"Not good luck?"

"I think you might be luckier if you never find what you're looking for," said Captain Symmes seriously.

The non-traveler tends to think that between FTL speeds and wormholes you can get anywhere in the galaxy in a day's time, but of course it isn't so. Wormholes go where they want to go, not where we want them to, and even when you're traveling at multiples of light speed it's still a big galaxy. It took me a day to get to Antares III, where I changed ships and proceeded to Buckingham IV. I laid over for a day until I could transfer to a ship that took me to Mickeleen, and from there I had to charter a private ship for the last leg of the journey.

"I want you to burn this location into your mind," said the pilot when the small ship touched down on Nikita. "I'll be here in exactly ten days. If you're not at this spot, I have neither the time nor the inclination to embark on a one-man planetary search, which means you'll be stranded here, probably for the rest of what remains of your life. You got that?"

"Got it," I said.

"You sure you have enough supplies?" he asked, looking at my pack.

"Food and water for twelve days, just to be on the safe side."

"If you're not here ten days from now, there won't be anything safe about it," he said. "It could be decades before another ship touches down here."

"I'll be here," I assured him.

"You'd better be," he said.

Then the hatch closed and he was gone, and I was alone, the first human to set foot on Nikita in six years.

I felt good. Hell, at 82% of Earth's gravity, everybody feels good. This was exactly the kind of world they used for recuperating heart patients. The oxygen content was a little light, but the gravity more than made up for it.

The world itself seemed pleasant enough. There was a brownish, grasslike ground cover in most places, a few clusters of oddly shaped trees here and there, and a type G sun that provided plenty of daylight without making Nikita uncomfortably hot. I saw a few small, rodentlike animals peeking at me from behind shrubs and trees, but when I turned to get a better look they ducked into their burrows.

I knew there was water on the planet. There were a pair of freshwater oceans, and a quartet of snow-topped mountain ranges that produced rivers with their runoff. My research told me that it smelled bad and tasted worse, but that it was drinkable. I had no idea if there were any fish, but I suspected there were. One thing we've learned since first reaching the stars is that life not only takes the strangest forms, but sprouts up in the oddest places.

According to my charts, I was about four miles from the site of the conflict, which is to say, the ammunition dump. I was retracing the steps of our team. They'd actually started on the far side of the planet, maybe three thousand miles away, and taken a high-speed aircar here under cover of night, but they'd gone the last few miles on foot.

I looked for signs of a camp, but then realized that a covert attack team wouldn't make a camp, but would just continue to their target before they were spotted.

The ground was level, not overgrown at all, and I just kept walking until I came to it. It wasn't hard to spot. There was a raw crater close to five hundred yards in circumference and maybe forty feet deep, the remains of the ammo dump. Evidently the rescue ships on both sides couldn't handle both the living and the dead; there were skeletons of both men and Patrukans littering the place, picked clean by small animals and even smaller insects. The Patrukans' bones had a blue-green tint to them; I never did find out why.

I walked the area. It must have been one hell of a battle. There was absolutely no place to hide, nothing to duck behind. A night attack shouldn't have made any difference: if the Patrukans had FTL ships and pulse cannons, they sure as hell had all kinds of vision aids that could turn night into day. I remember once, when I was a kid, standing at the top of Cemetery Ridge and wondering how Pickett ever got his men to charge up the long, barren slope where they were just sitting ducks; I felt the same way looking at the site on Nikita.

The other thing I wondered about was how surviving this kind of battle could give anyone a taste for charging men with loaded weapons or otherwise risking their lives. They should have been so grateful they lived through it that all they wanted to do was celebrate each day they were still alive.

Those were my first impressions. Then I began analyzing the site as a soldier. You wouldn't want to get too close to the dump, because you didn't know what was in it or how big an explosion it would make. And you didn't want any survivors picking your team off, so you'd have tried to surround the place so you could shoot any Patrukan who lived through it. The crater was more than a quarter of a mile across, so you'd want your men stationed perhaps a mile and a half across from each other, or given the accuracy of their weapons, maybe even farther. Say, two miles or a bit more.

I studied the area again. Okay, from a minimum of a one-mile radius, and a distance of more than a quarter mile from each other along the circumference, I saw how they could have gotten separated. If you're wounded, your first inclination is to retreat to safety, not to stay within range and seek out your teammates. Then, once you felt you were safe, you couldn't be sure all the enemy were dead, and your wounds were starting to stiffen up or worse, and the last thing you'd do is go looking for the other survivors.

So each of the five men was essentially on his own until the rescue team arrived, and it hadn't arrived for another week. Did they have a week's supply of food and water? If not, could they live off the land? Did they have any medication at all? How badly were they wounded, and how had they managed to survive? I didn't know, but I had ten days to figure it out.

Then I reminded myself that that was just the first part, the easier part, of the problem, and that I had a little less than ten days to figure everything out.

The sun started dropping lower in the sky—the planet had a nineteen-hour day—and I decided that I'd better make camp while I could still see. I pulled my stationary bubble out of my pack, uttered the code words that activated it, waited a few seconds for it to become a cube seven feet on a side, and tossed my pack into it after removing some rations. I ordered the door to shut, then picked up a few branches, gathered them into a pile, and set fire to them with my laser pistol. I tossed three H-rations into the flames. They'd roll out of the fire when they were properly cooked, and I decided to eat them without any water or beer, as I sure as hell didn't want to run out of drinkables in seven or eight days and have to partake of the nearby river.

I looked out across the barren plain, wondering why sentient life hadn't taken hold here as it had on so many hundreds of similar worlds. Nature always seemed to find a reason to endow one or two species with brainpower, no matter how weird or unlikely they looked. But there had been no reports of any sentience on Nikita. In fact, though the Patrukans mentioned larger animals, the human attack party hadn't seen anything bigger than the little rodentlike creatures I'd seen, but that made sense: no carnivore is willing to risk getting injured unless the odds are greatly in his favor, because an injured carnivore will usually die of hunger before he heals enough to hunt again. So when they saw the aircar, or even the men themselves, any large predator would have steered clear of them.

Or did it make sense? There were five badly wounded men scattered around the landscape, hardly in any condition to defend themselves, and yet they went unmolested until the rescue ship arrived. That implied that the Patrukans were wrong and there weren't any large carnivores, but I couldn't buy it, because life gets bigger on a low-gravity world, not smaller.

I decided it could wait for tomorrow. What lived on Nikita didn't have anything to do with what I'd come here to learn, and I certainly wasn't going to go looking for large carnivores in the dark.

My attention was taken by each of the H-rations crying "Done!", one after the other, and rolling up to my feet, where each in turn popped open.

I started on the Ersatz Stroganoff, finished it off, then attacked the Mock Parmesan. By the time I was done I was too full to eat the third one, and ordered it to close itself again.

"I will be safe for sixteen Standard hours," it announced. "After that I will self-destruct so that no one becomes ill from my contents. The self-destruction will be silent and will not adversely effect any men, even if one is holding me at the time."

It fell silent and clamped shut.

I looked up and saw Nikita's three moons, all of them quite small, racing across the sky. I'd been stationed on Earth for a couple of years, and I'd gotten used to our own large moon making its stately way across the sky. I'd forgotten how fast the smaller moons can travel.

I dictated the day's experiences, findings and thoughts into my computer. Night fell while I was doing so, and when I was finished I decided to take a little walk to work off my dinner. I left the fire burning so I wouldn't stray too far and could easily find my way back. then headed off to my left.

When I'd gone half a mile I decided I was far enough from my makeshift camp, and began walking in a large circle around the fire. I'd circled it once, and was circling it a second time when it went out, and I figured I'd better go back and get a few more branches to start it up again. I'd covered about half the distance and was passing a thick stand of trees when I heard a hideous alien roar behind me.

I turned to face whatever it was, but something was already leaping through the air at me. The moons were on the far side of Nikita, and I could barely see its outline. I ducked and turned, and the bulk of its body sent me flying through the air. I landed about six feet away, felt my leg give way and heard the bone snap. I rolled over once and reached for my laser pistol, but it was too quick. I still couldn't make it out, but it didn't seem to share that problem. Claws raked deep into my arm and the pistol fell from my hand. Then it was on top of me before I could even reach for my sonic weapon. Teeth raked my face and neck. I reached out, seemed to find a throat, and did my damndest to hold it at bay, but it was a losing battle. The creature was on top of me, and I could tell it weighed at least as much as I did. It kept pressing forward, and my blood-soaked right arm was starting to go numb. I brought my unbroken leg up hard, hoping it was a male and that it had testicles, but it didn't seem to have any effect whatsoever.

I could feel hot breath in my eyes and on my cheek, and I knew I had about four seconds left before it overpowered me—and then, suddenly, it was yelping in pain and fear, and it wasn't atop me any more.

I listened for the snarling of something even bigger—something that would turn its attention to me next—but whatever was attacking my attacker was absolutely silent.

Then there was a high-pitched screech, and I could hear the creature race off. Then my momentary savior turned to me, just as one of the moons came up over the horizon. Blood was streaming down into my eyes from a gash on my forehead, and the moon wasn't very big or very bright, but I could see something approaching me, could hear the rustle of its feet across the grass.

I finally got my good hand on my sonic pistol and held it unsteadily in front of me.

"Stay back!" I mumbled.

I fired a shot, but even in my semi-conscious state I could tell it was well off target. I tried to steady my hand and fire again, but then everything went black. My last thought was: What a stupid way to die.

Except that I didn't die. I don't know how long I was unconscious—maybe nine or ten hours, because the sun was high in the sky when I woke up.

"Don't try to stand," said a lilting female voice in perfect, unaccented Terran. "I had to splint your leg."

I rubbed some crusted blood from my eyelashes, and noticed that my right arm was heavily bandaged. A damp cloth began dabbing at my eyes, and I was able to focus on the person who was holding it.

She was a pretty young woman, in her early twenties, certainly under thirty, with a slender body, long red-brown hair, high cheekbones, and light blue, almost colorless, eyes. She looked familiar, but I knew I'd never seen her before.

"Who are you?" I asked weakly.

"My name is Rebecca," she said with a smile. "And you are Gregory Donovan."

"I thought I left my ID in my bubble."

"You did."

"Then you opened it," I said, frowning. "It's only supposed to open to my voice command."

"I haven't opened it," she said. "Now try to rest."

I was about to argue with her, for she was obviously lying, but suddenly all my energy vanished and I lost consciousness again.

It was very late afternoon when I awoke the next time. Rebecca was sitting on the ground, staring at me. I got to take another look at her, and decided that she was more than pretty—she was gorgeous. I couldn't find a single feature I'd improve.

She was dressed in an immaculate white blouse and khaki slacks that fit her like a glove, which seemed as unlikely as being cared for by a beautiful Terran-speaking girl on a planet that supposedly had no

sentient life forms.

"Welcome back," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Rested," I said. "What kind of shape am I in?"

"Your arm is badly infected, your leg is broken in three places, and you have some serious wounds around your face and neck."

"What the hell happened?" I asked.

"You were attacked by a . . . the closest I can translate it into Terran would be a Nightstalker. It's the largest carnivore on Nikita."

"It can't be," I said. "Something bigger drove it off."

"Trust me, Gregory," said Rebecca. "The Nightstalker is Nikita's largest carnivore."

I was too weak to argue, and it didn't make any difference anyway. Something had driven the Nightstalker off, and I didn't much care if it was a bigger carnivore or an enraged microbe.

"How long have you been here, Rebecca?" I asked.

"With you?" she said. "Since last night."

"No, I mean on Nikita."

"All my life."

I frowned. "My computer didn't say anything about a human colony here."

"There isn't one."

"You mean you were stranded here as a child?" I asked. "Were your parents with you?"

"My parents lived here," she said.

"Are they still alive?" I said. "I've got a ship picking me up in nine days . . ."

"No, they aren't alive."

"I'm sorry. Well, at least the ship can take you and me off the planet."

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

I thought about it for a moment. "Not really. I'd like something to drink, though."

"All right," she said. "The river's just a quarter mile away. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"They say the water's pretty awful. I've got water and some electrolyte mixtures in my bubble."

"If you prefer," she said.

"See?" I said accusingly. "I knew you'd been in my bubble."

"I told you: I haven't entered it."

"If you're telling the truth, then you won't be able to get into it now. It's programmed only to respond to my voice pattern uttering the proper code words."

"I will get them and be right back," she said.

And sure enough, she was back just a minute or two later carrying three containers. I chose the one that would give me the quickest energy boost and tried not to think about how she got the bubble to let her in.

"I think you should eat in another hour, Gregory," she said. "You need strength to fight off the infection. I'll go through your supplies in a few minutes and see what you have." She flashed me a smile. "I'm a very good cook. Maybe I can figure out how to combine your H-rations to make them taste like duck in orange sauce."

"Why did you say that?" I asked.

"It's your favorite, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," I replied. "How did you know?"

"You just look like a duck in orange sauce man to me."

"What the hell is going on here?" I demanded. "You know my name, you know my favorite food, you can get a voice-coded bubble to open to you, you know how to splint a leg and patch me up, and you speak without an accent."

"Why are you complaining?" she asked. "Would you rather I had left you broken and bleeding on the ground? Did you want me to bring you water that you find all-but-undrinkable? Should I find H-rations that you hate?"

"No, of course not," I said. "But you're not answering my questions."

"Yes, I am."

"Here's another," I said. "What the hell are you doing here in the first place? It's a big planet. How did you happen to find me just in time to save my life?"

"Serendipity," said Rebecca.

"Serendipity, hell," I said. "And while I'm asking questions, what saved me last night?"

"I did."

"You patched me up," I said. "What saved me? What drove the Nightstalker off?"

"Is it important?" asked Rebecca. "You're alive. That's what matters."

"It's important to me," I said. "I don't like being lied to."

"I haven't lied to you, Gregory," she said. "Now be quiet and let me check the wounds on your arm and neck."

She walked over and knelt down next to me. There was a sweet smell about her, almost a perfume, that seemed to suit her exactly. She examined the gashes on my neck, and although they were badly swollen and clearly infected, her cool, sure fingers didn't hurt at all.

"It's still seeping," she said, getting to her feet. "I've treated your dressings with native herbs and leaves that promote healing. I'll change them after dinner."

"What kind of dressing are you using, and where did you get it out here in the middle of nowhere?"

She pointed to a satchel a few feet away. "I'm always prepared."

A wave of dizziness spread over me, and I spent the next couple of minutes trying not to fall over on my side. I don't remember what happened next, but when my head cleared she was sitting next to me, steadying me with her body. It felt good, and I pretended I was still dizzy so she wouldn't move away. I think she knew it, but she stayed there anyway.

"How long before I can walk?" I asked at last.

"I'll make you some crutches in three or four days," she said. "After all, you'll need some practice if you're to get to your contact point in time for the ship that's picking you up."

"So I'm stuck here for three days, maybe four," I said unhappily.

"I'm sorry," she said sympathetically. "I'll try to make you as comfortable as possible, but you're very weak and your temperature is dangerously high. I'm afraid you're not going to be able to see much of the planet."

"What makes you think I'm here to explore Nikita?" I asked sharply.

"Why else would you have come?" replied Rebecca. "I'll help you into your bubble tonight. You'll have to stay there; you're too weak to move any farther than that."

"I know," I admitted with a sigh. "It's going to be a boring few days. I wish to hell I'd brought some disks to read."

"We can discuss our favorite books," she offered. "It will make the time pass more pleasantly."

I don't know why I was surprised that she read—I mean, hell, everybody reads—but I was. "Who are your favorites?" I asked.

"Cisco, Jablonski, and Hedburg."

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed. "Those are my favorites too! At least we'll have something to talk about after dinner."

And we did. We talked for hours, and not just about books either. I'd never felt so comfortable with anyone in my life. We talked about hopes and dreams, about regrets, about everything. It was amazing: she seemed to mirror my every thought, my every secret longing. And when we'd fall silent, it wasn't an uncomfortable silence, the kind you feel you have to speak into; I was just as happy to look at her as listen to her. She'd grown up on an alien world thousands of light years from Earth, and I knew almost nothing about her: where she lived, what she had done with her life prior to saving mine, even her last name—and yet my last waking thought was that I was already a little bit in love with her.

I don't know how long I slept. I woke up when I felt Rebecca applying some salve to the gashes on my cheeks and neck.

"Don't move," she said gently. "I'll be done in another minute."

I held still until she was through, then opened my eyes and realized that we were inside my bubble.

"I'm surprised you could drag me in here without help," I said. "I must really have been out of it, not to wake up while you were moving me."

"I'm stronger than I look," she said with a smile.

"Good," I said. "Give me a hand up, and let me hobble out into the fresh air."

She began reaching out for me, then froze.

"What's the matter?"

"I'll be back in ten minutes," she said. "Don't try to stand without me; you could damage your splint."

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Are you all right?"

But she had already run off into the nearby stand of trees, and I lost sight of her.

It was puzzling. The only logical explanation was that she'd eaten something rotten and she was going off to be sick, but I didn't buy it. She'd run too gracefully, and she'd shown no discomfort, not the least little bit, prior to leaving.

I decided to try getting up on my own despite her orders. It was a disaster. The way my leg was splinted I simply couldn't do it. As I tried to position it, I realized that the bandages were soaked and foul-smelling. I rubbed a finger against them, then held it up. It wasn't blood, just something yellow-greenish. I didn't know whether that was a good sign or a bad one.

That's some carnivore, that Nightstalker, I thought. I wondered why it hadn't taken over the planet. Then I realized that except for Rebecca, who wasn't native to Nikita, I hadn't seen anything much larger than a raccoon or a possum, so maybe it had taken over the planet. It seemed a reasonable conclusion, but I'd served on just enough alien planets to know that reasonable and right often had very little to do with each other.

Then Rebecca was back, as immaculate as ever. She took one look at my leg and said, "I told you not to try standing up without me."

"Something's wrong with it," I said. "It smells bad, and it's wet."

"I know," she said. "I'll fix it. Trust me, Gregory."

I looked into her face and found, to my surprise, that I did trust her. I was alone and possibly dying a zillion miles from home, being tended with leaves and herbs by a girl I'd known for only a few days, and I trusted her. I had half a notion that if she told me to walk off a cliff I'd have done it.

"While we're discussing health," I said, "how's yours?"

"I'm fine, Gregory," she said. "But I'm flattered to know you were worried about me."

"Of course I was," I said. "You're the person who's keeping me alive."

"That's not why you were worried," she said.

"No," I admitted, "it's not."

There was a momentary silence.

"Well, are you ready to hobble outside?" she asked. "I'll help you to that tree. You can prop yourself up against it when you sit, and the branches and leaves will shade you from the sun. It can get very warm here at midday."

"I'm ready," I said.

She took my right hand in both of hers and pulled. It hurt like hell for a minute, but then I was on my feet.

"Lean on my shoulder," she said as she helped me turn toward the bubble's entrance.

I half-hopped, half-hobbled through it. The tree was some forty feet away. I'd gone about half that distance when my good foot went into some kind of rodent hole, and I started falling. I reached out, grabbing for her blouse, and then the strangest thing happened—instead of grabbing cloth, my fingers slid down her naked skin. I could see the blouse, but it wasn't there. She pivoted, trying to catch me, and my hand came into contact with her bare breast, slid over her nipple, down a naked hip and thigh, and then I hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud! The pain was excruciating.

Rebecca was beside me in an instant, positioning my leg, putting her hands under my head, doing what she could to comfort me. It took a good five minutes for the burning in my leg and arm to subside, but eventually it did, at least enough for me to consider what had happened.

I reached out to her shoulder, felt the cloth of her blouse, and ran my hand down the side of her body. The texture of the cloth changed when I got to her slacks, but there was no naked flesh—yet I knew I hadn't hallucinated it. You hallucinate after you're in agony, like now, not before.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" I asked.

"You fell."

"Don't play dumb with me," I said. "It's unbecoming in someone as smart and lovely. Just tell me what's happening."

"Try to rest," she said. "We'll talk later."

"You said yesterday that you wouldn't lie to me. Did you mean it?"

"I will never lie to you, Gregory."

I stared at her perfect face for a long minute. "Are you human?" I asked at last.

"For the moment."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I am what I need to be," she said. "What you need me to be."

"That's no answer."

"I am telling you that right now I am human, that I am everything you need. Isn't that enough?"

"Are you a shape-changer?" I asked.

"No, Gregory, I am not."

"Then how can you look like this?"

"This is what you want to see," she said.

"What if I want to see you are you really are?" I persisted.

"But you don't," she said. "This"—she indicated herself—"is what you want to see."

"What makes you think so?"

"Gregory, Gregory," she said with a sigh, "do you think I created this face and this body out of my imagination? I found it in your mind."

"Bullshit," I said. "I never met anyone who looked like you."

A smile. "But you wish you had." And a pause. "And if you had, you were sure she would be called Rebecca. I am not only everything you need, but everything you want."

"Everything?" I asked dubiously.

"Everything."

"Can we . . . uh . . . ?"

"When you slipped you caught me off-guard," she answered. "Didn't I feel like the woman you want me to be?"

"Let me get this straight. Your clothes are as much of an illusion as you are?"

"The clothes are an illusion," she said, and suddenly they vanished and she was standing, naked and perfect, before me. "I am real."

"You're a real something," I said. "But you're not a real woman."

"At this moment I am as real as any woman you have ever known."

"Let me think for a minute," I said. I stared at her while I tried to think. Then I realized that I was thinking all the wrong things, and I lowered my gaze to the ground. "That thing that drove the Nightstalker away," I said. "It was you, wasn't it?"

"It was what you needed at that instant," she answered.

"And whatever pulls the leaves down from the treetops—a snake, a bird, an animal, whatever—that's you too?"

"You need a mixture of the leaves and the herbs to combat your infection."

"Are you trying to say that you were put here solely to serve my needs?" I demanded. "I didn't think God was that generous."

"No, Gregory," said Rebecca. "I am saying that it is my nature, even my compulsion, to nurture those who are in need of nurturing."

"How did you know I needed it, or that I was even on the planet?"

"There are many ways of sending a distress signal, some of them far more powerful than you can imagine."

"Are you saying that if someone is suffering, say, five miles away, you'd know it?"

"Yes."

"More than five miles?" I continued. She simply stared at me. "Fifty miles? A hundred? The whole damned planet?"

She looked into my eyes, her face suddenly so sad that I totally forgot about the rest of her. "It's not limited to just the planet, Gregory."

"When you ran off for a few minutes, were you saving some other man?"

"You are the only man on the planet," she replied.

"Well, then?"

"A small marsupial had broken a leg. I alleviated its suffering."

"You weren't gone that long," I said. "Are you saying that an injured wild animal let a strange woman approach it while it was in pain, because I find that very difficult to believe."

"I did not approach it as a woman."

I stared at her for a long moment. I think I half-expected her to morph into some kind of alien monster, but she just looked as beautiful as ever. I visually searched her naked body for flaws—make that errors—some indication that she wasn't human, but I couldn't find any.

"I've got to think about all this," I said at last.

"Would you like me to leave?"

"No."

"Would it be less distracting if I recreated the illusion of clothing?"

"Yes," I said. Then "No." Then "I don't know."

"They always find out," she said. "But usually not this quickly."

"Are you the only one of . . . of whatever it is that you are?"

"No," she replied. "But we were never a numerous race, and I am one of the very few who remains on Nikita."

"What happened to the others?"

"They went where they were needed. Some came back; most went from one distress signal to another."

"We haven't had a ship here in six years," I said. "How did they leave the planet?"

"There are many races in the galaxy, Gregory. Humans aren't the only ones to land here."

"How many men have you saved?"

"A few."

"And Patrukans?"

"Patrukans too."

I shrugged. "Why the hell not? I suppose we're all equally alien to you."

"You are not alien," she said. "I assure you that at this moment I am every bit as human as the Rebecca of your dreams. In fact, I am the Rebecca of your dreams." She flashed me a smile. "I even want to do what that Rebecca wants to do."

"Is it possible?" I asked curiously.

"Not while you have a broken leg," she answered, "but yes, it's not only possible, but natural." I must have looked doubtful, because she added, "It would feel exactly the way you hope it would feel."

"You'd better bring the clothes back before I do something really stupid that'll mess up my arm and leg even worse," I said.

And instantly she was clothed again.

"Better?" she asked.

"Safer, anyway," I said.

"While you're thinking deep serious thoughts, I'll start making your breakfast," she said, helping me to the shade of the tree, then going back into the bubble to find some H-rations.

I sat motionless for a few minutes, considering what I had learned. And I came to what seemed, at least at the time, a surprising conclusion. She was my dream girl. She was drop-dead gorgeous—to me, anyway. We shared dozens of interests, and she was as passionate about them as I was. I felt comfortable with her, and knowing that she was really something else didn't disturb me half as much as I'd thought it would. If she was Rebecca only when I was around, that was better than never having a Rebecca at all. And she cared for me; she had no reason to say so if it wasn't true.

She walked over and handed me a plate filled with soya products that were designed to look and taste like anything except soya products. I put the plate on the ground and took her hand in mine.

"You don't shrink from my touch," I noted, stroking her arm gently.

"Of course not," she said. "I am your Rebecca. I love your touch."

"I don't shrink from yours either," I said, "which is probably a little more surprising. I'm sitting here, touching you, looking at you, smelling the nearness of you, and I don't give a damn who you are or what you look like when I'm not around. I just want you to stay."

She leaned down and kissed me. If it felt like anything other than being kissed by a human woman, I sure as hell couldn't tell the difference.

I ate my breakfast, and we spent the morning talking—about books, about art, about theater, about food, about a hundred things we had in common. And we talked in the afternoon, and we talked in the evening.

I don't know when I fell asleep, but I woke up in the middle of the night. I was lying on my side, and she was curled up against me. I felt something warm and flat on my leg, not a bandage. It seemed to be . . . sucking is a terrible word; extracting . . . some of the infection from my leg. I had a feeling that it was

some part of her that I couldn't see; I decided not to look, and when I woke up in the morning she was already gathering some firewood for warming my breakfast.

We spent seven idyllic days together at that campsite. We talked, we ate, I began walking on a pair of crutches she made. Four times she excused herself and ran off, and I knew she'd picked another distress signal out of the air, but she was always back a few minutes later. Long before those seven days were up I realized that, despite a broken leg and a shredded arm, they were the happiest days I'd ever spent.

I spent my eighth day with her—my ninth on Nikita—making my way slowly and painfully back to the spot where the ship would pick me up the next morning. I set up my bubble after dinner, and crawled into it a couple of hours later. As I was starting to drift off I felt her lie up against me, and this time there was no illusion of clothing.

"I can't," I said unhappily. "My leg . . ."

"Hush," she whispered. "I'll take care of everything."

And she did.

She was making breakfast when I awoke.

"Good morning," I said as I emerged from the bubble.

"Good morning."

I hobbled over and kissed her. "Thank you for last night."

"I hope we didn't damage your wounds."

"If we did, it was worth it," I said. "The ship is due in less than an hour. We have to talk."

She looked at me expectantly.

"I don't care what you are," I said. "To me you're Rebecca, and I love you. And before the ship arrives, I've got to know if you love me too."

"Yes, Gregory, I do."

"Then will you come with me?"

"I'd like to, Gregory," she said. "But . . ."

"Have you ever left Nikita before?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Whenever I sense that someone with whom I've been linked is in physical or emotional pain."

"But you always come back?"

"This is my home."

"Did you visit Myron Seymour after he left Nikita?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" I said. "Either you did or you didn't."

"All right," she said unhappily. "Either I did or I didn't."

"I thought you were never going to lie to me," I said.

"I'm not lying, Gregory," she said, reaching out and laying a hand on my good shoulder. "You don't understand how the bond works."

"What bond?" I asked, confused.

"You know that I look like this and I took this name because I was drawn irresistably to your pain and your need, and found the name and the image in your mind," she said. "We are linked, Gregory. You say that you love me, and probably you do. I share that emotion. But I share it for the same reason I can discuss your favorite books and plays—because I found them where I found Rebecca. When the link is broken, when I'm not in contact with you any more, they'll be forgotten." A tear rolled down her cheek. "And everything I feel for you this minute will be forgotten too."

I just stared at her, trying to comprehend what she'd said.

"I'm sorry, Gregory," she continued after a moment. "You can't know how sorry. Right now all I want is to be with you, to love you and care for you—but when the link is broken, it will all be gone." Another tear. "I won't even feel a sense of loss."

"And that's why you can't remember if you made it to Earth and saved Seymour?"

"I may have, I may not have," she said helplessly. "I don't know. Probably I never will."

I thought about it. "It's okay," I said. "I don't care about the others. Just stay with me and don't break the link."

"It's not something I can control, Gregory," she replied. "It's strongest when you need me most. As you heal, as you need me less; then I'll be drawn to someone or something that needs me more. Perhaps it will be another man, perhaps a Patrukan, perhaps something else. But it will happen, again and again."

"Until I need you more than anyone else does," I said.

"Until you need me more than anyone else does," she confirmed.

And at that moment, I knew why Seymour and Daniels and the others had walked into what seemed near-certain death. And I realized what Captain Symmes and the Patrukan historian Myxophtyl didn't know: that they hadn't tried to get themselves killed, but rather to get themselves almost killed.

Suddenly I saw the ship overhead, getting ready to touch down a few hundred yards away.

"Does anyone or anything need you right now?" I asked. "More than I do, I mean?"

"Right this moment? No."

"Then come with me for as long as you can," I said.

"It's not a good idea," she said. "I could begin the journey, but you're getting healthier every day, and something always needs me. We'd land at a spaceport to change ships, and you'd turn around and I'll be gone. That's the way it was six years ago, with the human and Patrukan survivors." Her face reflected her sorrow. "There is so much pain and suffering in the galaxy."

"But I need you even if I'm healthy," I said. "I love you, damn it!"

"And I love you," she said. "Today. But tomorrow?" She shrugged helplessly.

The ship touched down.

"You loved each of them, didn't you?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I would give everything I have to remember."

"You'll forget me too, won't you?"

She put her arms around my neck and kissed me. "Don't think about it."

Then she turned and began walking away. The pilot approached me and picked up my gear.

"What the hell was that?" he asked, jerking a thumb in Rebecca's direction—and I realized that he saw her as she truly was, that she was linked only to me.

"What did it look like to you?" I replied.

He shook his head. "Like nothing I've ever seen before."

It took me five days to get back to Earth. The medics at the hospital were amazed that I'd healed so quickly, and that all signs of infection were gone. I let them think it was a miracle, and in a way it was. I didn't care; all I cared about was getting her back.

I quit my job at OceanPort and hired on with the police department. They stuck me behind a desk for a few months, until my limp disappeared, but yesterday I finally got transferred to the vice squad.

There's a major drug deal going down tonight: alphanella seeds from somewhere out in the Albion Cluster, ten times as powerful as heroin. We'll be mounting a raid in about four hours. The buyers and sellers both figure to have plenty of muscle standing guard, and it's likely to get pretty hairy.

I hope so.

I've already locked my weapons away.

Mike Resnick is the author of many books and stories.