



Illustrated by Tomislav Tikulin

Flyboys

Stanley Schmidt

To the offworlders, he was “Bob,” but to himself he was “Longlooker.” But since this narrative has been adapted for folks like the offworlders, let’s stick with “Bob.”

On this day above all others, Bob hoped he could live up to his hard-earned “Longlooker.”

Hanging from a ceiling perch on the most exclusive balcony in Surfcrag (“Ottertown,” to the offworlders), he beamed with pride at his only son (called Bob Junior, since he had not yet earned his real name) perched on the edge of the balcony. Junior gazed out over the starlit sea crashing far below, his wings quivering slightly with anticipation. Not long before, Bob would have considered Junior’s position alarmingly precarious, but now he was ready for it.

Bob hoped.

Surrounding them on the balcony were a few of Junior's best Zoey friends, both male flyers and female swimmers. One of the latter, Coppersmith, lay with her streamlined body and tail stretched out on the balcony railing near Junior, sometimes gently stroking his wings with her nose and foremost hands. Junior's mother, whom the outworlders called Sylvie, was there too. Also his sister Goldie and several of the teachers who had guided his growth from his birth to this, his crowning moment at Surfcrag.

One by one they made their way to touch him and speak soft words of farewell and encouragement, some in Hetalk, some in Shetalk. Then they all drew back and fell silent.

Junior pivoted on the rail, his back momentarily to the sea and the world beyond, to sweep his eyes over them one last time. "I'll be back," he said. "But now . . ."

Wordlessly he turned back to the sea, and Bob spoke his one important line in the ceremony. "Lead me there, son. Make me proud."

Then Junior leaned forward and released his grip on the rail. For a moment he fell toward the sea, but almost instantly swooped upward and flew strongly out over the waves. Bob followed, a respectful few seconds later, as the cheers of the assembled well-wishers faded behind them.

* * *

It feels so strange, Junior thought. For years he had anticipated this moment, imagining it as one of pure, unalloyed triumph and glory. In reality there was nothing pure or unalloyed about it. Instead he marveled at the rush of feelings pulling him in many directions. The glory and triumph were there; he had been to Bob's lodge before, but on those flights Bob had led, and Junior followed at a respectful distance. He had gone as a guest, an outsider briefly visiting an alien land to which he was told he would "someday" belong, but knowing that in a few hours or days he would return to the familiar security of his female-run crèche in Surfcrag. Now "someday" had become *now*. Before this night was over, he would have to start thinking of Highcastle as home and trying to carve out a niche for himself in it.

Meanwhile, he must not let his mind wander. He forced himself to concentrate on the flight. He knew the way to Highcastle: out over the sea, with starlight glinting on its waves, then veering right toward the orange-glowing lighthouse tree that marked Point Peril, then up the left canyon at the base of the point. Two more turns up narrower and narrower gorges, then a steep climb to the head of the last one, with cliffs pressing ever closer in on both sides, till they converged in a dark opening at the very top. Scraggly trees wreathed the cave mouth, and anyone perched either in those or in the portal itself would have a far-flung view down the maze of canyons, with almost no risk of being noticed by anyone above or below.

Now Junior's gaze was focused inward. Starlight and echoclicks guided him straight through the exact center of the door to a perfectly controlled landing on the floor beyond, leaving just enough room for Bob to land behind him.

Which he did, with a triumphant cry that echoed off the stone walls. Within moments, the big room filled with adults like Bob, all their eyes converging on Junior. "Welcome, Junior!" they chorused, and one, standing before the others and wearing gaudier ornaments, repeated it alone, in a voice as powerful as the others combined.

That kicked off another ceremony, welcoming him as the lodge's newest resident and now, finally, one of them. The speechifying seemed to go on forever, filling Junior with pride and exhilaration—and awkward embarrassment, especially when he had to say a few words of gratitude, hope that he could be worthy, etc. Not only did the flowery oratory feel out of character, but after a life spent almost entirely among Shespeakers in the crèche, he doubted that his Hetalk was up to their standards.

But they seemed tolerant, even pleased by his efforts, and by the final burst of applause, his confidence and pride had almost pulled themselves back together. As the other residents dispersed into the tunnels radiating from the antechamber, he was beaming.

He hardly even noticed when one of the adult residents came up to Bob and said quietly, "I need to talk to you about the aliens."

"Later," Bob interrupted. "Maybe tomorrow. This is a special time for Junior and me. Don't spoil it."

The words rankled. It was almost dawn, but even though he and Junior were soon hanging in comfortable sleeping positions in an alcove off one of the tunnels, Bob didn't sleep well, and he knew Junior didn't either.

They made it fitfully through the day, and as the lodge began to come back to life at nightfall, Highguard again collared Bob in a moment of relative privacy. "I really need to talk to you about the aliens."

Bob shrugged exasperated resignation. "If we must. Why me?"

"I think you know," said Highguard. "You know more about them than any of the rest of us." He paused slightly. "You may not know it, but some say you sold us out to them."

"Yes, I do know that," said Bob. It was one of the reasons he hadn't been looking forward to this day as eagerly as he should have. "I don't agree. I also know that some consider me a hero for helping to work out an arrangement for us to coexist peacefully with them."

"They're wrong," Highguard said bluntly. "I speak for a good many friends who think your 'peaceful coexistence' is a huge mistake. It was pushed through in haste, and it's not a long-term solution. We want to undo it before it's too late. And we want your help."

If Bob had had eyebrows, he certainly would have raised them. "Oh? What's your better idea?"

"What we had before. This land is ours. We know how to make that work. We don't need aliens here. We don't need *humans*." He tried to pronounce their name for themselves, but even Bob could tell that his effort was grotesque. "They don't fit into our world. We want them out of it."

Bob shuddered. He thought he saw Junior pass nearby, pausing briefly, and hoped he wasn't hearing this. "And how do you propose to make that happen?"

"Make them go home," said Highguard. "Back to wherever they came from."

His voice lacked conviction, and Bob suspected even Highguard knew how untenable his suggestion was. "They can't," said Bob. "They came from a different world, somewhere out there." He gestured toward the cave ceiling and the sky beyond. "They can no longer use the means they used to come here. Since they can't go home, they have to try to make a home here. We can help them, and they can help us."

Highguard spat contempt. "What a pile of dung! Do you actually believe that?"

"I do," Bob said quietly. "I've come to know some of them. I believe they're telling the truth, and I sympathize with their position."

"Suppose," said Highguard, "I accept their story about another world, and the idea that they could use some magic to come here but not to go back. I've heard the stories, too. I know they didn't come directly here from their so-called world. They went first to another part of *this* world, far beyond anywhere we've been. Why can't they go back there?"

"Because," Bob explained with forced patience, "another group of their kind with very different ideas came after them and overran their original settlement. That's why they came here."

"Their problem, not ours. If they can't go there, let them go to some other part of this world."

"That's not a long-term solution either. The other group is growing very rapidly. Eventually they may take over their whole continent."

"And then the world?" Highguard sneered. "Far-fetched, but suppose it's true. If that group can do it, why not the ones here? That's why the only real solution is the one we're proposing—and why we need your help to pull it off."

Bob stared at him in disbelief. Finally he said, "Are you suggesting that we wipe out their colony?"

"It's the only way. And we need your help because you know them better than any other male."

"Some of the females in Surfcrag know them too," Bob pointed out. "Sylvie and Goldie, for instance. And Smith, and—"

"Not the same," Highguard interrupted. "Females live safe in their towns. They seldom get out where the humans are doing their damage, as we do. I suppose their knowledge could help, but you're the one we need the most. You know their strengths and weaknesses. You're in the

best position to help us defend against the one and exploit the other.”

“Not going to happen. Some of them wanted to do the same thing to us. It’s no better if we do it to them. I won’t be a party to it.”

Highguard glared. “I’m disappointed in you. You don’t seem to take your name seriously. I’d think a ‘longlooker’ would have more vision.” He paused, then looked pointedly at Bob. “And I’d hate to see your son suffer for your shortsightedness.”

“Is that a threat?” Bob glared just as pointedly at Highguard. “You and I can agree to disagree, but leave my son out of it. This conversation is over.”

With a thrust of legs and a few flaps of wings, he distanced himself from Highguard as fast as he could.

* * *

Junior had become interested in the conversation as soon as he heard Highguard say, “Make them go home.” He hung around, out of sight, to hear the rest. But the final exchange, with its ominous reference to him, chilled him to the core.

Bob shot out of the alcove in such agitated haste that he almost careened into Junior without noticing him, and kept going. After a quick glance to confirm that Highguard had headed the other way, Junior caught up to Bob. “Dad!” he called out, not too loud. “What was all that about?”

Bob stopped. “Don’t concern yourself about it, son. Highguard is still miffed that he’s no longer lodgemaster. Sometimes it makes him talk crazy.”

“How can you tell me not to concern myself? You said yourself that he was threatening me. How can I ignore that?”

Bob looked into Junior’s eyes for a long time, as if trying to see the situation through them. Finally he said, “You’re right. We were going to join a work crew collecting delicacies for Surfcrag, but this is more important. Let’s go flying, just you and me. I need to show you some things.”

He took off from the cliff’s edge, and Junior followed. *But I’m not just a follower any more*, he reminded himself. *We’re equals now*. He pulled ahead and flew alongside his father, even though he let the latter set their course.

This time they flew not toward Surfcrag, but along the coast in a different direction, a stretch unfamiliar to Junior. “You met a few of the humans when they visited your crèche, but you haven’t really seen where they live. Do you remember the night when we all went out to a place with big towers and a huge gathering of us and them, and stayed till after the sun rose?”

“Vaguely,” Junior answered. “I was pretty young then. I didn’t really understand what was happening. Just big crowds and a lot of talk. Humans stayed together, and our kind stayed together but mostly apart from them. It was boring, and I didn’t know what it meant.”

“We’re still finding out what it meant,” said Bob. “If anything.”

They were approaching a big, flat, open place high on a mountainside, and as they got close Junior saw a forest of towers sprouting from the ground, with big blades rotating around horizontal axes at their tops. “Windmills,” Bob said. “The humans built them. They use wind power to drive their machines, down there in their settlement.” He banked and gestured with a wingtip toward a lower plateau dotted with smaller, squat-looking structures. “We’ll look at those later. For now, let’s get a closer look at the windmills. But not too close. They’re dangerous to our kind.”

Junior followed as Bob veered almost but not quite directly toward the nearest windmill. At first Junior was fascinated, but fascination quickly gave way to an eerie discomfort. Like most flyers, he had been enjoying snacking on the delicious foodbugs darting around in the air throughout their flight. They seemed particularly abundant here, in a rich variety of flavors and textures, but their numbers diminished rapidly close to the windmill. Junior wondered why—and then he noticed a growing high-pitched whine that grated on his ears and drowned out his echoclicks. The closer they went, the louder it got, and the more he felt like turning and flying the other way. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“The humans call them ultrasonic generators,” said Bob. “To us they’re just noisemakers. The humans set them up to warn us so we wouldn’t get too close. The foodbugs don’t like them

either, so they stay away too.”

He spiraled out to circle over the windmill field, not too close. “When the humans arrived and built their settlement here, they didn’t have the towers—just the houses down there. When the towers went up, they were big trouble for us. They didn’t have the noisemakers, so some of us flew right into those whirling blades and were injured, a few even killed. The same thing happened to the foodbugs. This was always a good area for them, so a lot of us came here to graze on them. Suddenly that was dangerous. Even when we learned what the towers were, and why we should steer clear of them, vast numbers of our foodbugs were being killed, so they were harder to catch.”

He gulped down a few mouthfuls as if to reassure himself that the supply was still good. Junior did the same, but he was eager to hear the rest—and how all this related to him and Highguard. “So what happened? There seem to be plenty now. And there’s no way I’m going to fly close enough to a tower to get clobbered when they’re making that horrible racket.”

“Exactly,” said Bob. “That’s the idea. In those days you would have been terrified up here—and rightly so. We didn’t know what was going on—who or what the humans were, where they had come from, why they were here, why they were doing devilish things to hurt us. We wanted to get rid of them, but had little idea how to do it. Highguard wanted to destroy them and their settlement. Most of us thought that was too drastic and not necessary. We almost never saw them; whenever we flew up here or into their settlement, we saw their works but not them. If we didn’t see them, we figured, maybe they didn’t see us either. So maybe we could scare them off without revealing ourselves. We ‘haunted’ the humans, sneaking into their settlement at night and destroying their structures by means that left little trace.”

“Did it help?” Junior asked.

“Not much. We didn’t see any change in the wind towers. Then a few of them ventured out at night to see what was going on. We didn’t let them see us, and we could tell they were getting scared. A couple of us got overzealous and a couple of humans were killed—by accident, but they didn’t know that.”

“They didn’t see how it happened?”

“No, but it bothered us as much as them. We weren’t trying to kill anybody, or even hurt them. We just hoped to scare them off, and hurting or killing them, even accidentally, scared us. More and more of us felt that that approach wasn’t working, so we tried something new. One night some of us hid out near their settlement, and when one of them came out, we snatched him and took him back to Surfcrag to try to communicate. All of us, both male flyers and female swimmers. Our first effort wasn’t very successful, and another of us was injured, but they got interested in communicating too.”

Bob paused for a big gulp of foodbugs. “We did learn to communicate, better and better. But there were tensions and mistrust among both them and us. It culminated with a big fight, and finally we worked out an uneasy truce, an arrangement for all of us to share this land.

“Most of us were relieved, and even hoped that some good would come of it for both sides. That was what that big sunrise to-do you sort of remember was about. We were celebrating the peace agreement and trying to make sure everybody would take it seriously enough to make it last.

“But not everybody was happy with it. When Highguard was in charge, he wanted to get rid of the humans altogether, so we voted to replace him. He still wants the same thing, agreement or no agreement. He wants me to help them—and I want nothing to do with it.”

He stopped for a long time, during which he and Junior silently circled the wind towers one more time. *But what do I have to do with it?* Junior thought, aching to say it but sensing that Bob didn’t want to say any more now.

Finally Bob said, “Let’s go look at the humans’ houses.” He banked and flew downslope, toward the ocean. On a flattish area near the shore they circled over a cluster of low structures, obviously constructed and right out on the surface, exposed to the open sky.

Junior, feeling relief as the grating shriek of the windmill noisemakers faded and vanished, scanned the houses with starlight and echoclicks, but they were so dark and quiet they almost

seemed deserted. “What a strange way to live,” he said. “I’d feel very vulnerable like that.” He paused briefly. “And where are they? Don’t they *do* anything?”

“Only during the day,” said Bob. “I know; really odd. But their eyes are very different from ours.”

Junior thought of what he’d heard about them, and his brief encounters with the few who had visited his crèche. So much was strange about them! “I’ve often wondered . . . Don’t they have two sexes, like us?”

“Two sexes, yes. But not like us. Theirs are so similar it’s hard for us to tell them apart. But in other ways . . . they’re more like us than you’d think. Come on, Junior. Time to go back.”

* * *

When they got back to Highcastle, Bob was relieved to find the place nearly deserted. “Where is everybody?” Junior asked as they landed.

“Out doing their jobs. Scouting, patrolling, gathering, things like that.”

“Shouldn’t I be doing that too?” Junior asked. “If I’m going to be a full member of the lodge, I should be doing my part.”

“They’ll make allowances,” Bob assured him. “They know you’re new and need to find your wings. It’s perfectly normal for a newbie’s father to help with that. If they ask what we were doing, we can say we were patrolling and scouting. It’s true.” He hauled up on a stone perch and gestured for Junior to do the same. “So how are you finding the adjustment, son?”

“Too early to say,” Junior said, as if he wanted to say more, and at the same time didn’t. “I thought I’d be spending more time with them, and less with you.”

“That will come. Do you miss the crèche?”

“Part of me does. Part of me doesn’t. I felt at home there, after being there most of my life. I knew everybody, and I liked having both sexes around. Especially—” He stopped abruptly, as if embarrassed.

“Coppersmith?” Bob said gently.

“Yes. I think she might be the one I want to . . . lifepair with. And now I’ll hardly ever see her.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for that later,” Bob assured him; but he felt embarrassingly insincere as he said it. He remembered when someone older and supposedly wiser had told him the same thing, and turned out to be wrong: somebody else got to her first. “It’s that way for all of us. Once we grow up, females stay in the coast towns, and males move out to the lodges. We don’t see each other much, but the times when we do are special. That’s just the way it is.” He noticed a subversive corner of his mind wondering, *But does it have to be?* He’d seen how human couples—even families!—spent almost their whole lives together, and tried to imagine what it would be like to have that much time with Sylvie—and Goldie.

“I suppose,” said Junior, sounding unconvinced. His voice and expression brightened a little. “And there is that part of me that *doesn’t* miss the crèche. The older I got, the more out of place I felt. When I was little, most of the people around me were close to my age, except the teachers. All the resident teachers were females, so I got to hear plenty of good Shetalk, but not much Hetalk. There were often adult male visitors, and the older students had learned enough to help some; but I got here having a much better idea of what good Shetalk sounded like than Hetalk. You know what’s been worrying me since we got here?”

“What, son?”

“Was I good enough when I had to speak to the group after we got here? Or did I sound like an ignorant baby?”

Bob laughed sympathetically, but he remembered having the same feelings when he got here at Junior’s age. “You did just fine,” he said. “If that’s your biggest worry, we can both be very happy.”

* * *

Bob hoped that would be the case, but feared that it wouldn’t. He was allowed to keep his hope through a good day’s sleep, but as crews were beginning to form and disperse at nightfall, Highguard again pulled him aside. “A moment of your time, Bob, please. I want to apologize if I made you feel uncomfortable last night.”

Bob stopped reluctantly. "I appreciate that," he said stiffly. "And yes, you did."

"I'm sorry. But this is too important to just ignore because talking about it is uncomfortable. I said from the start that we needed to take decisive action—"

"And you were voted down. It's been settled, Highguard. Let it go."

"I can't. It's not too late for another vote. Please hear me out."

"I'll listen," Bob said with a twitch of his wingtips making it clear he wasn't happy about it. "But not for long." A few wingspans away he noticed Junior waiting for him. "Go on with your crew," he called out. "I'll catch up shortly." Junior did as instructed, and Bob turned back to Highguard. "Shortly," he repeated.

"I'll try to be brief. I know some of you thought I was too eager to do too much, but not many of you have been through what I have. Do you remember *why* I was pushing so hard to drive the humans off or wipe them out while it would still be easy?"

"Not specifically," Bob admitted.

"That hurts. My son was one of our members who was killed by a windmill before we understood what they were. Can you imagine what that's like? I know you have a son—"

"I told you to leave him out of this!"

"Take it easy. I only bring him up to help you understand why this is so important to me. I was one of the first to have a run-in with the windmills. Try to picture yourself on my wings that night. Enjoying a beautiful starlit night, gentle breezes, flying with a group of my fellows through one of our favorite areas, taking in foodbugs with no rush at all since there were so many . . .

"But something was wrong. We couldn't tell what, at first, but the foodbugs seemed . . . sparse. Not enough to be immediately alarming; just enough to feel a little out of kilter. Then there was an unfamiliar noise, a sort of whirring hum; not terribly loud, but subtly uncomfortable. My echoclicks were odd, too. There was something out there that didn't belong, something fixed in one spot, yet moving. How could that be?"

"Gradually it came to me that it was spinning. And there were others like it, all over the high plain—"

"The windmills?" Bob asked.

"Yes, but none of us knew that then. To us they were just something unknown, but big enough to make us very uncomfortable.

"Then, suddenly, I found myself too close to one. The echoclicks off those moving blades were so different from anything we'd experienced before that we didn't know how to interpret or react to them. Before I knew what was happening, the clicks grew frighteningly loud and distorted and something was glinting and flashing at the edge of my sight.

"Then something whacked me on the tail and sent me spinning out of control, whirling toward the ground. I regained enough control to land without too much damage, but the wind was knocked out of me and I lay there in an undignified heap, with dead foodbugs all over the ground around me. I looked up just in time to see Highguard Junior—he didn't even have his real name yet—careening down like I had, but one wing was broken and bent at a horrible angle." He stopped, emotionally unable to continue for a moment, and looked pleadingly into Bob's eyes. "Imagine yourself in my place. Imagine that was Junior you saw plunging out of control, maimed who knew how badly."

Bob couldn't help doing that, and the thought made him shudder almost uncontrollably. "I'm so sorry," he said, softly and inadequately. "I really can't say how much. I could tell you I know how it must have felt, but I doubt that I do." He paused long, searching. "I would have felt it just as badly. Likewise your own injury and your loss of your mate when they bombed the Way In."

Highguard looked hard at Bob. "You do? Good. Then you must understand why I feel so strongly that the humans must go. And you must feel it too."

"No." Bob looked away. "I can agree that what happened to you—and Highguard Junior—was a terrible thing that nobody should have to go through." He looked directly into Highguard's eyes. "But it was an accident, it wasn't all of them, and it wasn't all of us. We know what the problem was, and we've taken measures to prevent its happening again. What happened was

bad, but it doesn't justify what you're suggesting. Even if it did, we have ways of making group decisions. We've used them. I'm sorry you didn't like the outcome, but you'll have to live with it. Maybe you could even learn to see it as an opportunity."

"Maybe," Highguard echoed with obvious contempt. "Groups can make mistakes, too. When they do, sometimes somebody else has to correct them." He flexed his wings in preparation for flight. "I see I'm wasting my time here. You're flying blind, Longlooker. I can't do that. I don't want to see anything happen to your son any more than I did my own."

He flew off without another word.

* * *

Bob tried to put Highguard's persistent wrongheadedness out of his mind, with limited success. His thoughts kept coming back to it all night, but working with Junior helped. They had a good night, finding even more than they'd expected of the light, valuable flavorings they planned to take back to the ladies of Surfracrag. And they got a bonus, unexpectedly stumbling onto a rich new deposit of one of the ores the Surfracrag artisans used to produce metals for their industry. Too heavy for the flyers to carry much of, but located in a spot the Surfracraggers wouldn't find too hard to reach with their carts and dragonhorses.

Exhilarated, their crew worked long and hard through the night. It was tiring but rewarding, and not just in terms of what they accomplished. Bob could see his son beginning to relax and fit in, acting like "one of the boys" and being increasingly accepted as such by his coworkers. More than ever before, Bob began to feel as if he and Junior were fellow adults, colleagues, and almost equals, rather than just father and son. It filled him with pride on many levels. It meant he and Sylvie, and Junior's teachers and peers at the crèche, had done a good job.

When they returned to Highcastle just before dawn and hung themselves up for the day, Bob felt a sense of contentment so deep it almost made him forget Highguard's disturbing behavior. Just before they fell asleep, Bob touched Junior's nearer wing with his own, and Junior didn't push it away as he might have a year ago.

Bob fell into sleep quickly, their wings still resting lightly on each other, and he slept as hard and long as they had worked through the night.

* * *

So hard and long, in fact, that when he woke he was startled to see how completely dark it was. Good sleeping perches were always in places that blocked out most daylight, but a *little* found its way in by reflecting off the walls and around bends and corners. One of the triggers for waking up was when that residual light dropped below a certain minimum, which was noticeable even through closed eyelids. One of the pleasures of waking up was watching the faint light continue to fade, ultimately down to levels that allowed night vision but didn't let the visual overwhelm the audible.

It was so dark now that Bob knew right away that he'd slept through that transition. Something was wrong. "Junior," he said quietly. "We've overslept. We had a big night last night, but we've got to get going."

No answer. He no longer felt Junior's wing, even when he tentatively moved his own.

"Junior?" he repeated, louder.

Still no answer. Growing uneasy, he looked directly at where Junior had been.

The space was empty and cold.

Bob felt chilled, figuratively as well as literally. More abruptly than usual, he dropped from his perch and began scuttling about the area on feet, hands, and wingtips, looking into every alcove and periodically calling Junior's name.

No one answered—and he saw no one else. Apparently everyone else, including Junior, had already set out for the night's work.

Why would they do that without waking him to make sure he went along?

Why would *Junior* do that?

Increasingly frantic, he explored the whole lodge, looking for anybody who could explain what was going on—or any message about where Junior had gone.

He found nothing.

With a concerted effort, he forced himself to be calm, to think about what he knew and what he didn't.

He knew nobody else was here, and nobody had told him where they were going.

But he did know where he and Junior had expected to go tonight: with a team making a more thorough survey of the ore deposits they had found last night.

So he'd start there. He stepped off the outer ledge into space and flew a beeline to the site.

Most of the team was there—but not Junior. And nobody knew where he was.

Bob began flying spirals outward from there, calling Junior's name, occasionally dropping into another work site to ask if anyone knew where his son was.

No one did.

After a while, Bob landed on a ledge to rest, trying to control his breathing and his thoughts, to think of something else he might try.

When a half-formed thought surfaced, he didn't like it. He remembered Highguard's last words last night: *I don't want to see anything happen to your son any more than I did my own.*

Was he expressing sympathetic concern for Junior's future—or hinting that he might *make* something happen to him if Bob didn't cooperate?

He'd already made one veiled threat before. . . .

Heart pounding, Bob repeated his rounds of work sites, this time looking not for Junior, but for Highguard.

But nobody knew where he was, either—or a handful of others.

* * *

"Where are you taking me?" Junior asked at last. They'd been flying quite a while, and it had been some time since he'd seen any of the Highcastle work crews or established sites.

"You'll see soon," Treetop assured him. "We're almost there."

"We told you we'd show you something special," Cliffmaster reminded him. "You're old enough now. You won't be disappointed."

"And you told my father where we're going, like you promised?"

"Of course," the other two said together. "A promise is sacred, and he knows where we're going. He saw it himself when he was your age."

Junior said nothing, but he began to feel uneasy. He felt almost as if he'd been kidnapped, though of course he hadn't. He'd followed Cliffmaster and Treetop of his own free will, because they were respected elders in the lodge and seemed to be offering to let him in on some special privilege in recognition of his new maturity. It had felt entirely right, at the time.

It was feeling less so by the minute.

"There it is," Treetop called out, pointing ahead. Junior probed the area he was indicating with eyes and echoclicks. A cliff loomed ahead, reminding him at once of Highcastle. A few bursts of echoclicks confirmed that there were several holes in the wall, including a big one, almost concealed by trees, like the "landing platform" at Highcastle.

"Another lodge?" he asked.

"Yes," said Treetop. "The guys who live here call it 'High and Mighty.'"

"And we're here to do something with them?"

"Some of them. As we said, we want to show you something."

"Not a 'thing' something," Cliffmaster added. "An idea."

He had led them to the biggest opening in the cliff wall, and now swept through it, executed a smooth stall over the floor just inside, and stepped out of the way as soon as he touched down. Treetop followed, and then Junior, just as he had done on his triumphant entrance as the newest citizen of Highcastle.

But this time he saw no crowd of friendly faces waiting to welcome and cheer him. At first, in fact, he saw no one. "Where is everybody?"

Even before he finished the question, a couple of figures emerged from dark alcoves at the back of the room. He didn't recognize them, but Treetop introduced them. "Junior, I'd like you to meet Strongwing and Longflight. Strongwing and Longflight, this is Bob Junior. His name will

tell you who he is.”

What does that mean? Junior wondered. But the newcomers’ greetings seemed friendly enough, and he returned them in the same spirit. Evidently they’d heard of him, but he couldn’t help wondering why and how. They looked considerably younger than the others—not much older than Junior himself.

Then a third shape stepped out of the deep shadows, and this one he recognized right away. “I believe, Junior,” said Cliffmaster, “you know Highguard.”

“I’ve heard of him.” Junior didn’t try to hide the chill in his voice. “We’ve barely met, in person.”

“We must remedy that,” said Highguard. “I’ve been watching you. I see a lot of potential in you. You can do great things, Junior. We’d like to offer you an opportunity.”

“Why did you have to bring me here to do that? Why couldn’t you do it at home, in Highcastle?”

“Not everyone there is sympathetic to our goals. We thought privacy would be an advantage for our initial discussions.”

“Why the secrecy?” said Junior, hoping he wasn’t being too bold. “What do you have to hide?”

“No need to put it so harshly.” Highguard took a step closer. The other five seemed to be spreading themselves out around him. “We just think it’s best that we avoid possible interruptions by others while we lay out our position.” He paused. “How much do you know about the humans?”

“I’ve heard stories,” Junior said stiffly. “I met a couple briefly in my crèche. I don’t know any well.” *I’d like to change that*, he found himself thinking.

“You’re telling me how much personal contact you’ve had with them. I’m asking you how much you know *about* them. Where they’re from, why they’re here, what they want. That sort of thing.”

“Only what I’ve heard. Supposedly they came from another world, somewhere beyond the sky, by some way we don’t understand. Supposedly they can’t go back because it doesn’t work any more. So they have to stay here.”

“Do you believe all that?”

“Unless I see a reason not to. I haven’t so far. I heard it from somebody I trust.”

“Who’s that?”

“My father. And my teachers at the crèche.”

“And are you comfortable with that?” Highguard asked.

“With what?”

“With the humans being here.”

“I have no problem with it. They haven’t bothered me—or Dad.”

“They’ve bothered me,” said Highguard, with a palpable undertone of simmering anger. “Did you know they killed some of us?”

“I’ve been told that *some* of them killed *some* of us. I’ve also been told that the deaths were accidental—and some of us killed some of them, too.”

“They killed my son,” Highguard said. “That may have been accidental—or it may not. They also killed my lifemate, and injured me. Those definitely were not accidental. I’ll never forgive them.” He stared into the shadows and the past for a while. “I want you to think about something, Junior. Do you remember a big gathering of our kind and their kind just before dawn a few years ago?”

“Vaguely.”

“Did you understand what was going on?”

“Not really. But I’ve heard explanations since then. It was to celebrate because we and the humans had reached an agreement to prevent the misunderstandings and hostilities—and accidents—that happened when we first came into contact. To make sure that they and we can both live here safely, without harming each other.”

Highguard made an approving gesture. “Well put. Do you think it’s a good idea?”

“Living peacefully together? It’s a lot better than the alternative. Where are you going with

this, Highguard?"

Highguard beamed even more. "Ah, a splendid question! You're a bright one, Junior." He leaned closer, confidently. "You say it's better than the alternative. There's more than one alternative."

"There usually is," Junior granted cautiously.

"You," Highguard said, "seem to see the alternatives as peaceful coexistence or continuing mutual hostility, likely leading to destruction of one or the other." Junior tried to interrupt, to object that Highguard was putting words in his mouth, but Highguard wouldn't yield. "Please, let me finish. I heartily agree that everybody living together peacefully would be a wonderful thing. When I was as young as you, I even believed it was possible. But I've learned. That morning you remember, we reached an agreement. If everybody kept it, it would be lovely. But what if somebody didn't? What if the humans decided we were in their way and they'd be better off without us? What if they tried to wipe us out to prevent future problems?"

"I—"

"They did try that once, Junior. There was fighting, even killing. That's why both sides tried to reach an agreement, and why they made such a big deal of it when they did. But what's to make everybody from now on stick to it? If they break the agreement, what do we do?"

"I suppose we'd have to fight," Junior said uncomfortably. "Are you suggesting that we should break the agreement first?"

Highguard looked shocked. "Did I say that?"

"Not to me," said Junior. "But it sounds like you're leading up to it." After a brief pause, he added, "And you did say it to Dad."

Highguard again looked slightly taken aback, though not really surprised. "Perhaps I did."

"He thinks it's a bad idea."

"And I think it isn't. And so we come to the opportunity we promised to show you. Junior," Highguard said earnestly, "your father is a fine fellow, but he's from an older generation—"

"So are you."

"—and the old often cling to ways and attitudes that have outlived their usefulness. Your dad means well, but we—" he gestured around at his associates "—think he's not thinking clearly about the future. *Your* future, Junior. It's easy to imagine this so-called agreement blowing up and destroying our civilization. That should matter to all of us, but more to you than to your father. He'll be around for part of the future, but you'll be here for a lot more of it. You need to ensure that future, not only for yourself, but for your entire generation, and the ones that will follow. Do you want them to live in a world that was once ours, but has been taken over by aliens?"

"Of course not," Bob said. "But—"

"Then you need to do all you can to make sure that doesn't happen. We're offering you a chance to be a leader, Junior, and you'll find that has rewards you can't get from anything else. You know, in the old days, before even your father was alive, we flyers weren't just scouts and gatherers. We were *fighters*, Junior. We could be *heroes!*"

He said it with such enthusiasm, which Strongwing and Longflight obviously shared, that Junior said coldly, "And you think that was good?"

"It was *great!* You know, Junior, we've been spoiled by too many years of peace. Before our times, we had enemies. Everybody had enemies, and everybody had to be on guard against them. They were Zoeyes like us, but different groups had their own turfs, their own towns for gals and lodges for guys. Some of them didn't even have towns and lodges. They divided things up differently and did things differently. But each group had its own place.

"Except sometimes one group had something another wanted, and tried to take it. The victims fought back. It kept us all on our toes, drove us to get better and better at the things we did. I'm not sure how we got from that to the quiet world we have now, but I know there were rewards in the old ways that few have tasted now. The thrill of victory, of defending your own people or vanquishing somebody else's—"

"How do you know?" Junior interrupted. "You weren't there."

"But I've tasted them," said Highguard. "Recently, during the troubles that supposedly ended

with that dawn. As I said, the humans did try to wipe us out, and we stopped them. There was a tremendous satisfaction in that, along with the losses and the pain—”

“Some of the humans tried to wipe us out. Others helped you stop them.”

“But we were the decisive force, and there was a feeling from that that I’d never experienced before. Glory, Junior, glory. You’ve probably heard the word, but never felt the reality. Now you have the chance. We made the difference in that last battle because we had a numerical advantage they never suspected. We still have it. We should act while we do, to make sure the humans who want to get rid of us never have another chance.” He paused for effect and declaimed, “We want you to lead us, Junior.”

“Or to be your puppet. What do you really want from me, Highguard? And why me?”

“We want you to lead us,” Highguard repeated. “We want you because you have all the advantages of youth, and you could fire up people of your generation. We need their support, and they’d relate to you more than to us. You also know more about the humans than probably any other young male Zoey—because you’re the son of Bob and Sylvie. That knowledge could strengthen our cause immeasurably.”

“Indeed I am their son,” Junior said proudly. “And because I am, I know there’s more to the humans than you realize. I know that what you want to do is wrong. Thanks for thinking of me, but I won’t be a part of it.” Without waiting for an answer, he turned toward the open door and started a takeoff run for it.

As if on cue, all the others converged in front of him to block him from getting there. Behind him he heard Highguard saying, “No, wait, Junior! Hear me out—”

Junior had started his run quickly, and they hadn’t anticipated it. The portal opening was big, and he was in the air before they could stop him. He barely cleared their grasping hands below him and the roof above, and was out into the open air at breakneck speed.

Behind him he heard Highguard calling out, “Not a word of this to anyone! We need to talk some more. You’ll agree with me in time. . . .”

He heard Strongwing and Longflight taking off behind him as Highguard’s voice faded with distance. But he was younger than any of them, and he had a head start—and no intention of losing it.

He flew as he had never flown before—but not toward Highcastle.

* * *

Junior had a good sense of direction, and though he’d never been to High and Mighty before, he’d paid attention to the route his “benefactors” had followed from Highcastle. And he knew intimately the route from Highcastle to Surfcrag.

So he had no trouble envisioning and flying a direct course from High and Mighty to Surfcrag.

Mostly he flew it straight, true, and fast, though he couldn’t resist adding a couple of curlicues around obstacles to confuse his pursuers. They worked only briefly, so in the end he just poured on the speed, though his muscles and lungs were beginning to ache.

He looked back several times; they were still with him. Then he saw the starlit sea just ahead, and redoubled his efforts along the cliffs that rimmed it. The first openings of Surfcrag appeared, and then the one he wanted.

Or rather, the jutting rocky point just before it. With a dizzying turn around that, he sped through the door and landed in an ungraceful but grateful heap just inside.

And just in time to look back out and see Strongwing and Longflight whiz past, still at full speed and on course, probably wondering what had become of Junior.

* * *

He gave them little time to figure it out or to find him. This was a delivery entrance used almost exclusively by males with ties here: unmarked, inconspicuous, and little known to outsiders. Chaotic-looking piles of animal, vegetable, and mineral matter filled most of it, providing plenty of hiding places. But distance would give even better protection. As soon as he managed to pick himself up and fold his wings properly, he was out of that chamber and racing through corridors, with several seemingly random turns.

There were so many he’d like to talk to about the dilemmas he faced! Where to begin? There

were at least three teachers in the crèche who might be helpful, but it was the middle of the night and teaching was in full swing. He didn't want to create a panic by barging into a room full of teachers and youngsters of both sexes in his exhausted and disheveled state. Better to talk first to one knowledgeable adult he trusted implicitly.

That meant Mom. Her workshop was not far from here.

He passed several adult females in the corridors, including a couple he knew, but gave them only the tersest of greetings. None of them commented on his obvious haste and preoccupation, though they must surely have noticed it.

He found Sylvie in her shop, absorbed in tinkering with a new variation of her steam engine. He rushed right in after a hasty "Here I am" from the hall. He closed the door behind him as he said, "Hi, Mom."

She looked up with a quick kaleidoscope of emotions on her face: surprise, confusion, delight, and deep concern. "Junior?" she said, in Shetalk, since that was what she could speak. "What are you doing here? You just left. What brings you back so soon?" She looked him up and down, and the concern became dominant. "What happened to you?" She hop-slithered down off her workbench and skittered over on her four short legs to paw and sniff at him.

"I'm all right," he said reassuringly, in He-talk (since that was what *he* could speak). "But something's come up. Maybe a danger for all of us. I need to talk to you." He gestured toward her bench. "Why don't you climb back up there and make yourself comfortable?" As she did, he hopped onto one of the room's two male-perches so they could talk on each other's eye level.

"Okay, first," he said, "you want to know what happened to me because I look like I've been through some ordeal. It's not quite that bad, but I've been flying longer, harder, and faster than I should without a break. Two guys were chasing me. Bad guys, in my opinion, and I think you'll agree."

"What? Did you get in some kind of trouble?"

"Not exactly. But they'd like to pull me into some, and I refused. They didn't like that, and they were afraid I'd tell somebody what they're up to—as I'm doing. We Zoey's have an agreement to live peacefully with the humans, right?"

"Right." The question was rhetorical; Sylvie had played a key role in negotiating that agreement.

"Well, there are a bunch of guys in at least two lodges who don't like it. They still want to destroy the human settlement."

Sylvie looked incredulous. "What? That's all been settled. Both the Council of Towns and Lodges and its human counterpart agreed that any more violence was absolutely unacceptable. Even if the idea deserved consideration—which it doesn't—the Council would have to approve it. There's no way that's going to happen."

"Good. But these guys don't care. They know the Council would never agree, so they're not even going to try that route. They want to wipe the humans out on their own."

"What? An illegal conspiracy?"

"Exactly. They wanted to drag me into it because of what they think I can learn about the humans from you and Dad. They tricked me into getting alone with a group of them so they could try to talk me into it. Then they tried to keep me from leaving. I took the first chance I saw to slip out and fly back here. Two of them came after me, and I was just barely able to outrun them." He shuddered. "I don't know what they would have done if I'd stayed, or if they'd caught me. But I don't think they'll dare come in here, so I'm probably safe for now. But only for now. We have to figure out what to do about these guys. I don't remember the fighting before the agreement very well, but I don't think we want to go back to it."

"Indeed we don't," Sylvie said grimly.

"I hope you and your colleagues on the Council will have some ideas."

"So do I—and we may not have much time. If this gang is serious, and they think you've tipped their hand, they may move ahead faster than they'd planned to." She looked intently at him. "Meanwhile, we have even more urgent problems. How much does Bob know about all this?"

“Basics, but not details. He’s probably worried sick, and I don’t even know where he is. And he doesn’t know where I am.”

“What?”

“I first got wind of all this,” said Junior, “when I overheard the guy who seems to be the ring-leader talking to him about their plot.”

“Anybody I know?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Highguard. Used to be lodgemaster at Highcastle. Seems to be unhappy that he isn’t any more.”

“Ah, yes,” Sylvie said with obvious distaste. “He was a thorn in our sides during the negotiations. I’m not surprised. So why was he talking to Bob about this? I thought you were the one they wanted to recruit.”

“I was their second choice. They really wanted Dad, because obviously he knows more about the humans than I do. When he turned them down, they turned to me. I think Highguard thought if he could sway me, I could sway Dad, or at least get information from you and him. I suspect their next move would be to use me as a hostage to blackmail Dad into helping them.” He paused, reluctant to say his next words. “Dad probably thinks they abducted me just for that. He probably thinks they’re holding me now.”

“He may even fear that they’ve killed you—or will soon.”

“Exactly,” Junior said. “So we need to get word to him that I’m alive and not cooperating. But I don’t know where he is. My guess is that he’s looking for me, and has no idea where to look.”

“My guess,” said Sylvie, “is that he’d first go after Highguard, since he suspects he kidnapped you.”

“Yes,” Junior agreed. “But he doesn’t know where Highguard is either. He didn’t try to give me his spiel in Highcastle. A couple of his henchmen lured me off to another lodge—High and Mighty—to talk about what sounded like a legitimate offer. I know, I was too gullible. I haven’t had much practice at being an adult. But the point is that Highguard had made some veiled threats about me, and when Dad found both Highguard and me missing, he must have assumed the worst.”

“Oh, my,” said Sylvie. She lay for a long moment with her eyes closed in deep thought. “I’ve sometimes envied some of the humans’ technology, but if ever there was a time we needed it, it’s now.”

It seemed to Junior an oddly abrupt change of subject. “How so?”

“They have remote communication devices. Little gadgets they all carry around that let them talk to each other even when they’re far apart. Imagine how much less traumatic this would be if we all had those. You and Bob could have talked to each other directly as soon as all this started. You could tell each other where you were and figure out how to get together. Or do whatever needed to be done.”

“But of course we don’t have that,” Junior said bitterly.

“No, we don’t. I’ve hinted, to some of my human friends, but they say it’s better if we keep developing our own technology instead of having them hand us theirs without working for it. I see their point, but I wonder. Are those really the only choices?” She stared wistfully into space, then said abruptly, “Doesn’t matter right now. We have a big problem, and we’re going to have to solve it for ourselves. Going to have to think about this for a while . . .”

* * *

Eager as Junior was to start his search, there was one thing he had to do—and wanted to do—first, before leaving Surfcrag.

Coppersmith was no longer in the care of the crèche, but had gone over to the other side. She was still there, but working as a caregiver herself, at least until she found a job she liked in industrial development or aquaculture. When Junior walked in, she was on the floor playing with some of the smaller kids, of both sexes, while clusters of older ones stood around playing games or chatting, some accompanied by female teachers or male guests. She looked up and her face registered a mix of surprise, delight, and apprehension. “Junior! What are you doing here? I’m glad to see you, but . . .”

It's not normal for a guy to come back so soon after moving out.

"Something's happened," he said. "Not much time to explain. Can you slip away to talk privately for a few minutes?"

"Uh . . . I think so. Hang on." She scuttled across the floor to confer confidentially with a colleague, then came back. "Okay. There's a room next door we can use."

With only one door to the corridor and a small window opening into the air above the waves, that felt much safer. "It's a nice surprise to see you again," Junior assured her, "though I'm not happy about how I got the chance. You mustn't tell anybody what I'm about to tell you, unless you absolutely have to. It could get me even deeper into trouble now, but might be necessary to get me out of it later."

"Disturbingly cryptic," she said, "but you know I'll do whatever I can or must for you."

As briefly as he could, he told her how Highguard and some cronies in at least two lodges were plotting to destroy the nearby human settlement, and how they had tried to recruit first Bob and then Junior to help them.

"Oh, no!" Coppersmith sounded alarmed. "You didn't agree to anything, did you?"

"Of course not. But they got me out to another lodge on false pretenses and tried to give me a hard sell."

"They kidnapped you?"

"Not exactly—but in effect, yes. With the help of my own gullibility. I think I've learned better now. When I didn't give them what they wanted, they tried to block me from leaving, but I managed to escape and get here before they could catch me. I don't think they know exactly where they lost me. I'm sure they won't be kind if they find me again."

"You think you're really in danger?"

"Absolutely."

"And they really want to kill the humans?"

"As if they were no more than vermin."

"That would be horrible," Coppersmith said, just audibly. "They're the most interesting thing that's happened here in my lifetime."

"Mine, too. And I've liked some of the few I've met."

"Me, too. We could learn so much from them, Junior! They're from a whole new world, farther away than we can imagine. Just think of the stories they must have to tell. I want to hear them." Her tone changed abruptly. "And I can barely imagine how they must feel, stranded so far from home, with no way to go back." She was silent, pensive, for quite a while. "So what are you going to do? Hide out here till the danger passes?"

"Who knows when that would be? Besides, I don't know where Dad is, but he's probably worried and looking for me. I don't know where, but I have to find him, so each of us knows the other is okay."

"What ever made these guys think you'd want to help them, anyway?"

"I don't think they thought I wanted to, but they hoped they could persuade me. I still don't understand why they wanted me, specifically, except that they hoped to exploit my relationship with Dad and his with the humans. They also thought I could help them recruit more guys of our age. I can't imagine why he thought I would have any special influence with them."

"I can," Coppersmith told him. "People like you, Junior. They listen to you, and they respect you. That can be a tool or a weapon, and if you sympathized with these guys, you might well sway others to join in." She made a distasteful expression. "So don't even let anybody think you might be interested. Not that I think any of our friends would want to fight because Highguard's paranoid."

"Neither do I. We're all going to have to do what we can to stop them. But first I have to find Dad." He drew her into a tight embrace, which they both held for a long time, as if trying to absorb as much as possible of each other's presence to tide them over til their next meeting.

Then he stepped back, whispered, "Till later," hopped onto the windowsill, and flew out into the night.

* * *

Bob, too, was thinking wistfully about human communicators. If he and Junior each had one, Junior could have called him as soon as he knew he was in trouble. Since they didn't, both of them were working blind. All Bob could do was fly around calling Junior's name, and that had gained him nothing except a sore throat.

What else could he do? He perched for a while on a high ledge, with a sweeping view in which he might notice any unexpected motion, either in the air or in the valley below. None came, but his thoughts churned.

His best guess was that Highguard had kidnapped Junior and was holding him to pressure Bob into helping him realize his crazy dream of wiping out the humans. But if that was the case, why had he made no apparent attempt to contact Bob? It wouldn't have been that hard. He'd been back to Highcastle several times, as well as to two other lodges and several work sites. Zoey's of both sexes had loud voices—though they had their limits, as he was painfully aware—and males could carry messages fast. So why had no messenger come to demand his cooperation as a price for Junior's release?

It didn't make sense. Endlessly rehashing it just led him to even less pleasant possibilities, like Highguard's killing Junior just for spite.

That didn't make sense either. He couldn't hope to get away with it, and what would it gain him anyway?

There were less grim possibilities, too, and Bob clung to the hope they offered. Conceivably Highguard had abducted Junior, but Junior had escaped. But then where would he have gone? He wasn't in any of the places Bob had checked.

Could he be somewhere out in the forest, injured and with no way to call for help? Or . . .

How about Surfcrag?

If Junior wanted a refuge from Highguard, that would be a good choice. Highguard and his coconspirators would be less likely to go there than to any of the male haunts. Highguard no longer had a mate there, and had lost favor as a visiting role model in the crèches. If he had gone, his arrival would be viewed with suspicion. He would be watched closely, and subdued if necessary.

So if Junior had gone there, he should be safe. If he hadn't, Bob didn't want to worry Sylvie or Goldie or Coppersmith unnecessarily.

He needed to keep checking leads, and he'd thought of one more—a long shot, and dangerous on more than one level.

But he'd have to try it.

* * *

He waited until as close to dawn as he dared before flying into Breakaway, the human settlement he'd shown Junior from the air. The sky was already pink and glowing brightly enough to make him take out the dayglasses he always carried in the tiny emergency kit he wore just below his throat. He could have avoided that by coming earlier, but he didn't want to wake Luk and Liona Zakowitz, and he would have had to put them on anyway when he went into their house. Humans needed bright light as much as Zoey's needed darkness.

The little freestanding house grew rapidly in his sight as he descended toward it, and he was relieved, but not surprised, to see no humans out and about. He settled into a shadow next to Luk's front door and waited quietly until he heard stirrings within. When those had gone on for a while, he knocked on the door and waited directly in front of it. From his point of view, nothing changed, but he knew that the house's occupants would see the door turn transparent, giving them a clear view of whoever was outside. It was one of many human tricks that many Zoey's warily regarded as "magic," but Bob and his gadget-oriented kin knew as technology that made them drool.

A few seconds after he knocked, he heard footsteps inside, and then the door opened. "Bob!" Luk exclaimed cheerily, but Bob only knew that because he had learned to recognize the humans' name for him. He didn't understand the string of "English" that followed, but he knew from past experience that it meant, "Come in and make yourself comfortable while I turn on the translator."

So he did. Luk, much taller than any Zoey of either sex, and with a normal posture balanced precariously on two long legs, had been eating breakfast at a table with Liona, the female with whom he shared this house on an everyday basis. With familiarity he had learned to tell them apart, but to Zoey eyes humans were all so similar that it was hard to distinguish individuals or even sexes. They even ate the same food!

Liona had remained seated at the table and nodded a wordless greeting to Bob. Luk set a little box on the table and touched a pad on its side. He emitted some more English, and the box said, "Good morning, Bob. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

The translators were another human invention, and they'd come a long way. Bob remembered when there was only one, and only one woman who knew how to use it. Now several households had one, often configured, like this one, to handle speech anywhere within earshot. "I'm not sure you'll find it a pleasure," Bob said, "though I am glad to see you, as always." The box made English noises that Bob was assured meant the same thing.

"And we're glad to see you," Liona said through the translator. "Is there some kind of trouble?"

"I'm afraid so," said Bob. "For me, and probably for all of you. I doubt that you can help me with mine, but I thought I should at least warn you about yours. I'm sorry to be a bearer of bad news."

Both humans looked concerned, insofar as Bob could read human expressions—and he was much better at it than he used to be. "What happened?" Luk asked.

"Long story," said Bob, "but I'll try to keep it short. I could get into serious trouble for telling, so I must ask you, emphatically, not to tell anybody I was here. Not humans, not Zoey's."

"You can trust us," Liona assured him.

"I'm counting on that," said Bob. "There's a group of male Zoey's plotting to attack you folks. They think your kind is a danger to our kind, and they want to get rid of you—like some of you once tried to get rid of us."

"But the treaty—" Luk and Liona said at once (which gave the translator a bit of a hiccup).

"These guys don't care about the treaty. They know our Council would never approve what they want to do, so they're plotting to do it on their own. They're the ones I could get in trouble with for tipping you off. But if they actually act instead of just talking, I thought you should know so you can defend yourselves."

"We appreciate that," Luk pondered. "When Corcovan's gang of hotheads took it upon themselves to attack you, they greatly underestimated your numbers. Now they know that you have us so outnumbered—"

"And so do *our* hotheads, which is why they have the nerve to think they can wipe you out."

"They don't know what kinds of weapons we have available, some of which could make the numbers irrelevant. We don't *want* them to know—not because we want to keep a secret advantage, but because we don't want to use those things. Ever." Luk deliberated some more. "You said you could get into trouble with these guys by telling us about their scheme. How do you know about it? Surely you weren't one of them. . . ."

"Oh, no!" said Bob. "But they wanted me to. They thought I could help them because of what I knew about you. When I refused to have anything to do with them, I became a liability to them."

"Then Junior disappeared. I think they kidnapped him, or worse. I'm not sure what their thinking is because nobody's approached me directly. But Junior is missing, and I need to find him, and I've run out of places to look." He tried to stop himself from saying it, but couldn't. "If only we'd had long-distance communicators like you people!"

He regretted it right away, but Luk just said, with apparent sympathy, "Yes, that might have helped. I'm sorry you didn't. But you'll develop them, eventually. You already have an impressive start—"

"And how long will that take? Can you imagine how little consolation that is to somebody in my position?"

"No," said Luk. "I probably can't. I'm so sorry. But it's not that simple. If we gave you too much technology all at once it would disrupt your lives in ways you can't imagine."

“Right now,” said Bob, “I’d be willing to risk it. Besides, you’ve already given us some help and it didn’t destroy us. You helped us adapt Sylvie and Goldie’s steam engine to boats, and it helped us save ourselves from your hoodlums.”

“That’s true.” Luk seemed to be mulling something, as he often did. “You know, there may be a way I can help you find Junior. No guarantees, but it’s worth a try.”

* * *

“This is a minicopter,” Luk said, leading Bob to a strange contraption parked on the edge of the settlement. Junior had seen them before—humans often used them to cover appreciable distances quickly—but he’d never seen one this close before. It had a streamlined hull made of some material he didn’t recognize, polished as smooth as anything Sylvie and her techie colleagues could make. A sheet of enviably transparent material made up the front, showing four seats and a small number of devices whose function Bob couldn’t identify. Sticking out of the top was a shaft with odd blades sticking out in several directions. “It can be stealthed when we want it to be,” Luk added. “Watch this.”

He somehow, with no visible effort, opened a side door, stepped inside, and sat down in one of the seats. The whole craft, including Luk, disappeared. The only evidence that it had ever been there was a disconcerting blurriness in the air where it had been. Bob gasped, and then it all reappeared. Bob stepped back out. “Like it?”

“Very impressive,” said Bob. “But what does it have to do with me?”

“We can go for a ride and look for Junior.”

“I’ve already done that,” said Bob. “I can fly, you know.”

“You sure can,” said Luk. “And very well, too. You can hardly imagine how much I envy you that. But this can cover a lot more ground, without tiring you out. And it’s fun.” He made what Bob thought he recognized as a grin. “We can go whenever you’re ready. Right now, if you like.”

For an instant that sounded very tempting, Bob was aching to get this done—to find Junior and give him any help he needed. But . . .

“The timing’s not right,” he said. “It’s the same problem we keep having: you guys are diurnal and we’re nocturnal. If we go now, nobody will be out and about. We’ll be wasting our time.” Then he brightened. “Or maybe not. Flying around in broad daylight won’t accomplish much, even if you stealth the copter. But I know one place where Junior may have gone, and if he’s not there, we’ll know to start searching when it gets dark.”

* * *

Luk was right that riding in the copter was fun, though Bob’s capacity for enjoyment was severely limited by the circumstances. The seats and controls were designed for humans, of course, so Bob couldn’t use the seat belts. Per Luk’s suggestion, he just scrunched in and held on tight, though the ride was so smooth that was hardly necessary. And the overhead rotor spun so fast it became invisible even without stealthing.

It climbed fast, and covered ground so quickly that the trip to Surfcrag seemed to take no time at all. What took longer was landing and then taking a dragonhorse cart into the town through the Way In, the narrow slot canyon that connected Surfcrag’s seaside bowl to the outside world. Fortunately a cart was waiting at the entrance, though there was no driver and the dragonhorse was asleep, its head covered with a dayhood to keep excessive sunlight out while letting it see if necessity arose.

Bob gently woke it, though its lack of enthusiasm was obvious. He and Luk boarded the cart—this time Bob had the advantage, since some of the seats were designed for him and none for humans—and the horse pulled them unhurriedly through the canyon and through the impressively carved facade into the dark city itself. Bob stopped the cart long enough to remove the horse’s dayhood and his own dayglasses, and for Luk to put on his nightglasses.

“Is Sylvie going to be angry about our waking her up?” Luk whispered (a slight challenge to his translator) as they resumed rolling through the dark corridors.

“Not at all,” said Bob, not making quite as much effort as Luk to be quiet. “This is an emergency. Junior is her son as much as mine. She must be as worried as I am, unless he’s here.” He thought a second and was surprised that he hadn’t thought about it before, but, “She must be

worried about me, too.”

That was an understatement. When they reached her apartment Bob announced himself softly outside the door, then opened it. Before he and Luk were fully inside, Sylvie, looking a little groggy, launched herself into his arms and threw hers around him. He wrapped his wings reassuringly around her, and her face tried to burrow into his chest. He marveled for the umpteenth time at how such different bodies could fit together so well and feel so good. “It’s you, it’s you, it’s you!” she kept saying. She loosened her grip just enough to look into his eyes. “Did you bring Junior?”

“I’m afraid not. Sylvie, I have terrible news. Maybe not as terrible as I fear, but not good. He’s disappeared. I’ve been looking all over for him. I think he may have—”

“I know, I know,” she said. “He came here because he couldn’t find you but he was worried about you and figured you’d be worried about him.”

“He got that right. He came here, you say.” It took a moment for the relief of that to sink in. “What did he tell you?”

“He told me about Highguard’s plot. They tried to recruit him to help them. He managed to slip away and came here because two of the plotters were in hot pursuit, he didn’t know where you were, and he thought he’d be relatively safe here.”

“Good thinking,” Bob said with paternal pride. “He was here, you say, but he isn’t now. Where did he go?”

“Don’t know,” she said. “He didn’t either. He went to look for you, with little idea how to go about it.”

“I know the feeling,” said Bob. “I’ve had the same problem looking for him. But Luk is going to help me.”

Sylvie looked at Luk as if just noticing him for the first time. “Oh, hi, Luk. I was so excited and relieved to see Bob here and safe that I couldn’t think of anything else. You have new ideas about Junior?”

“Sort of,” Luk said modestly. “I don’t know how effective they’ll be, but we’re going to try.”

* * *

Bob and Luk went back to Luk’s house and tried to get some sleep during the rest of the day. As soon as the sun sank below the horizon, they took off in the minicopter. “I’d fly it stealthed,” Luk said as they gained some altitude and started along the coast, “but I assume you want Junior to notice us if we get close to him.”

“That’s right,” said Bob.

“Of course, flying at night it will be pretty hard to see even without stealthing—unless I turn on some outside lights.”

“Not for us,” Bob reminded him. “Night is our natural element. In fact, I’d rather you didn’t turn on the lights. If they’re very bright, they’d blind him.”

“Wouldn’t want that. We can cover ground pretty fast, so let’s start with a quickish scan at low altitude and moderate speed. I’ll use an image intensifier with outside cameras so I can see the ground on this screen here. I take it you can see pretty well just looking through the window?”

“Yes, no problem there.” Bob found the view fascinating but so far unrewarding. He had no problem seeing the ground, but Junior was a small target and wouldn’t necessarily stand out, especially in heavy vegetation. The copter covered ground faster than Bob could have with just his own wings, and he could easily imagine situations in which that would be a big advantage—to say nothing of less tiring. But he wasn’t seeing Junior, and was growing less and less confident that they would, even if they passed close to him.

Some distance down the coast, Luk made a sharp U-turn and started back, farther inland. Bob could understand why he wanted to use his gadgets to improve his view; the terrain was rugged and sudden contact with it undesirable. Luk seemed to make a deliberate effort to keep some distance from the one town and one lodge he knew about, presumably to minimize being noticed by denizens who were outside; but of course he didn’t know how many others there were, or where they were located. That could give Highguard’s gang an advantage, if or when they decided to attack, so it was important to stop them soon.

Luk made a few passes back and forth, roughly parallel to the coast but each time farther inland and higher up the mountains. Nothing caught either his eye or Bob's. "Let's try something else," Luk said after a while. "If you think we've covered a wide enough area, let's go over it again, but slower and lower. The night is young." The engine, already amazingly quiet, grew even more so as they eased toward the ground and then resumed the back-and-forth pattern along the coast, roughly retracing their route so far. Bob marveled at yet another unexpected capability of the copter: it could fly not only faster than he could, but much slower. It could even hover in one place.

Bob, with the eyes of a nocturnal aerial predator, saw even more this way, but still no Junior. He wasn't even sure what to look for. If his son was looking for him, would he most likely be down in the forest or on a road? On a high ledge, or flying around as Luk and Bob were doing now, but without benefit of a copter?

In some of those situations—most of them—he'd be quite hard to see.

It was discouraging.

"When I tried this on my own," he remarked to Luk, "I got so desperate I was flying around just yelling his name, hoping he'd notice and yell back. I'd like to try that again, but I just don't have the throat left for it. I doubt he'd hear me over the copter, anyway, even though it's quieter than I thought it would be."

He thought he saw another grin on the pilot's face. "I can help," Luk said. "How loud would you like it to be?" He waited but Bob didn't understand at first. "Go on, try it. You don't even need to shout. Just say what you want to say."

Bob felt skeptical, but half-heartedly said, "Junior."

And almost jumped out of his seat when he heard a voice from outside the hull, loud even through the barrier, boom, "Junior!"

"Amplifier and loudspeaker," Luk said. "Want more?" He touched something on his control panel.

This might work! Bob again said Junior's name, this time with more enthusiasm but still without strain, and again it thundered forth, even louder. Bob could even hear it echoing off the hills.

He laughed and looked as hard as he could at every outcrop and open space in his sight. "Junior!" he said, and this time he was shouting, sore throat or not and even though he no longer needed to. "JUNIOR!"

He paused to gather strength and was about to shout it yet again when he was startled by a sudden motion in his peripheral vision. If he hadn't been enclosed in the cabin, he might have fallen from the sky.

It was Junior, flying circles alongside the copter, just far enough away to stay clear of the rotor and its downdraft, looking straight at Bob and frantically waving his arms.

* * *

Bob leaned closed to the side window and waved back, yelling excitedly, "It's him! He heard us and flew up to—" He broke off abruptly as he realized that Luk's loudspeaker was still bellying his every word all over the valley. Fortunately Luk noticed too and turned it off. They didn't need it any more.

Wings holding him aloft and legs trailing behind, Junior gestured with his arms toward an exposed ledge near the top of a nearby hill and started flying toward it. He looked back a couple of times to make sure the copter was following, then made a beeline for the ledge and landed gracefully on one end of it. Luk followed, carefully put the copter down on the other end, and shut the engine off.

As soon as the rotor had returned to visibility and come to a stop, they both got out and ran toward Junior, who was also running. The Zoey's legs were a lot shorter than Luk's, but they all got to the middle of the ledge at the same time. "You're alive!" Bob and Junior exclaimed at the same time, and then they said nothing for a while but just pressed together as if to reassure themselves of that, son's wings folded, father's wrapped around both of them.

Then Junior said, "We can't stay here long. It's not safe. Everybody in the valley must have seen and heard you coming. If Highguard saw where you landed, he's likely to be headed this

way now, and there won't be any witnesses to anything he does."

"You think he might try to . . . silence you?" Bob asked.

"Too late for that," Junior said with a wry expression. "I've already told Mom what he's up to. But he may not know that, though he can probably guess since a couple of his followers followed me almost to Surfcrag and can probably figure out that that's where I went when they lost me. So yes, they might. In fact . . . look there!"

He pointed toward a nearby ridge. Bob saw three strongly flying male Zoeys in the sky above it, headed straight this way, and felt sudden fear. "Back into the copter," he said. "Now!"

All three of them sprinted the short distance to the vehicle and got inside as quickly as they could. Luk was already running up the engine as Bob closed and sealed the door, and as they lifted straight up, the three Zoey flyers swooped down and landed at the other end of the ledge. They didn't look happy, and as the copter started forward, they took off again, apparently trying to surround it and throw themselves against it, as if that could stop it.

But before they could do that, the copter was whizzing off, far faster than they could fly. Bob looked back and saw them trying to follow, but falling behind so quickly they soon gave up.

Junior, who had never been inside one of the humans' copters before, was laughing giddily. "This is so cool! They don't have a chance of catching us in this!" He sobered quickly. "But where do we go from here?"

"Surfcrag," Bob said at once. "This isn't just about protecting us. We have to stop Highguard's plot for the sake of everybody, both Zoey and human."

* * *

"I'm way ahead of you," Sylvie said when they got to her.

Again they'd had to land at the outer end of the Way In and ride a cart through the canyon to the city. It was a big step down in comfort, and halfway down the canyon, Luk had grumbled, "You people need a *heliport*, right on top of the city."

Bob didn't know what he meant, since the translator came up dry on a key word. But he figured that could wait till later, assuming Luk was serious about whatever it was. For now, what mattered was giving Sylvie a full briefing. He'd started doing so when Sylvie amiably cut him off with her "way ahead" speech. "You told me enough when you were here before for me to get the ball rolling. I rounded up as many of the council as I could as soon as you left. Not an official quorum, of course. There wasn't time to collect anybody from other towns, though we did have a couple of visiting flyers who were able to fetch some councilmen from nearby lodges. We got enough to gather opinions from a fair sampling of both townfolk and lodgefolk. Everybody agreed that we can't diddle around trying to decide what to do. They also agreed that it could be tricky, since technically these conspirators haven't actually done anything yet." She looked at Bob, Junior, and Luk in turn. "Anything new I should know?"

Junior told her how Luk and his flying bullhorn had helped him and Bob find Junior (or vice versa). "Unfortunately," he finished, "it also tipped Highguard's gang off to where we were, and they followed us in to our meeting point. We were barely able to take off before they grabbed us."

"You think they wanted to grab you?" said Sylvie. "To what end?"

"They might have killed us if they had the chance," said Bob. "To keep us from telling you and the council about their plot. They didn't realize both Junior and I had already done that."

"But they didn't actually attack you?"

"No," Bob and Junior said together.

"Hmm. From a legal standpoint, it might be better if they had—assuming you'd been able to stop them."

"It's not enough to know they were planning to?" Bob found that hard to believe. "And that they were planning to attack the humans on their own initiative, without council approval? That would be a clear violation of our treaty."

"Debatable," said Sylvie. "If the council voted to attack the humans, on officially recognized behalf of all Zoeys, that would be a clear violation of the treaty. If a handful of us attacked on their own, is that a treaty violation, or just a crime within our own culture, to be handled among

ourselves like a murder or theft? I'm not sure the treaty makes that clear."

Bob tried to make sense of it, with limited success. "When Highguard was trying to recruit me, he said the treaty was cobbled together too fast. Maybe he was right. There seem to be a lot of loose ends."

"Oh, yes," Sylvie granted easily. "He was right about that. It *was* put together too fast. It doesn't have enough teeth. But both sides had just been through a trauma and felt a need to get some protections in place fast. It's the best we could do on short notice. It will need fine-tuning. Meanwhile, it's what we have to work with. We can either try to stick to the letter of it, which will badly cramp our style; or we can claim emergency conditions force us to take some liberties with it and hope those lead to changes that will help us when similar situations arise in the future."

"When?" said Junior. "Don't you mean 'if'?"

"I wish I did. But I don't think anything we can do will guarantee that malcontents of either species will never stir up trouble again. Yes, there will be problems that have to be stamped out from time to time, but maybe we can get better at both preventing and stopping them.

"For better or worse, we're the ones who have to make the first attempt. Being on the council myself, I don't favor trying to stop violation of the treaty by violating it ourselves. And I have to think about what options the council is more or less likely to accept."

Bob asked, "Since time is of the essence, mightn't we be able to convince them that we have to use the quickest and most direct method?"

"Not necessarily. People who make laws are reluctant to break them unless they can profit from it and they can't find another way. So they're most likely to accept something that follows the letter of the law. Unfortunately, the only plan I've thought of that does that is this. We let the plotters go ahead and attack Breakaway—maybe even subtly encourage them, so we don't waste too much time wondering when they're going to strike—and we catch them in the act. That way we have an ironclad case for a violation of both the treaty and our laws, and we can arrest them with complete confidence."

"I don't like that one at all," said Luk, who had been quietly listening and refraining from comment.

All the Zoeys looked at him. Sylvie said, "If I were a complete stickler for the law, I might say you have no voice in this matter. But since what's at stake is an agreement for the mutual protection of your people and ours, I say you do. Please voice away."

"Thank you," said Luk. "I'm sorry to butt in, but we're talking about my home and family and friends. What if Highguard's hooligans move in and do a lot of damage before your enforcers can stop them?"

"That worries me, too," said Bob. "Some of those people are my friends, too. Even if they weren't, I don't see that Highguard and his guys—or any of us—have any right to do what they want just because of what they vaguely fear might happen sometime in the future."

"Neither do I," said Sylvie. "Off the record, of course. I reserve the right to say whatever I need to when I'm actually meeting with the council. But right now, we're just brainstorming what I *should* say in that meeting. And don't worry, Luk, I have no intention of using your town as a bargaining chip."

"So what *can* you do?" Luk asked.

"Well, unless someone has a better idea of how to make sure we can catch them in an illegal act, the only alternative I see is tell the council we have credible information that there's a conspiracy to attack humans without provocation. That would be a clear violation of the treaty and, more important, put not only humans but Zoeys at risk. The humans would naturally retaliate, and soon we'd be back in another war. I'm pretty sure nobody on either side, except for a few hotheads, would want that. So we need to round up all the conspirators we can identify, bring them before the council, and figure out the best way to make sure they don't do it, now or later. Can you back me up in all that, Luk?"

"I sure can."

Sylvie looked at each of the others in turn. "Bob?"

“Yes.”

“Junior?”

Junior hesitated a little. “Can you really get away with that? Detaining them without accusing them of having committed a crime?”

“It’s a borderline area,” Sylvie admitted. “Like the intertidal zone where the humans think we evolved and where we still build our towns. If our civilization evolved from such a place, maybe better laws can, too. If we can convince the council there’s an imminent large-scale danger, I think we can get them to agree to a preemptive strike to nip it in the bud.”

“It’s a little scary,” Junior said slowly, “but considering the alternative, I’d say—go for it.”

* * *

It was far too late to convene even a quasi-quorum that night; dawn was fast approaching. But Bob and Sylvie agreed that the problem might be too urgent to observe the usual customs of night and day. Many dayglasses came out of storage, and Zoeyes of both sexes set out to work through the day, despite disruption of their sleep schedules and discomfort with bright light, to round up enough council members for a meeting. Males, who could fly much faster and to places females couldn’t go on foot or in their carts, would carry word of what was going on to as many towns and lodges as they could reach. Females in other towns who got the message in time would use carts on tunnel-like forest roads to come to Surfcrag.

Hearing the plan described, and watching what little he could see of it being put into motion, Bob couldn’t help thinking that this was yet another example of a case where Zoeyes could function much more effectively if they had human technologies like aircraft and long-distance communicators.

If they had copters, females could fly, too.

And someday they would, he told himself with determination. If the humans wouldn’t give it to them—and there might even be some validity to their reasons, he granted grudgingly—Zoeyes could develop it themselves. It might take a lot of time, patience, and perseverance, but the fact that humans had done it proved that Zoeyes could too.

Meanwhile, there were more urgent problems. Deep in thought after their last hasty planning meaning, Bob gradually became aware of somebody touching his shoulder, and turned to find Junior standing next to him. “Dad?”

“Huh?” Bob focused his attention on Junior. “Sorry, son. I was just thinking.”

“So was I. What if Highguard’s gang attacks Breakaway before the council can decide what to do about them?”

“Do you really think they’d move that fast?”

“I’m sure they’d like to,” said Junior. “They told both of us what they want to do. They know I slipped away and disappeared right outside Surfcrag, so they must at least suspect that I spilled the beans to somebody inside. If they really want to carry out their plan, they’ll likely figure they’d better do it fast, before somebody stops them.”

“Well thought out,” said Bob. “But there are other angles. We don’t know how many conspirators there are. If there are only a few, they can’t wipe out Breakaway by themselves, and they’d need a coordinated strike on a bunch of places at once. Just setting fire to one or two of the humans’ houses won’t do it. They’ll have to figure out something better, and that will take time.” Seeing Junior’s slightly crestfallen look, Bob added, “But they know they don’t have much, so they’ll have to balance haste and prudence, and we don’t know how good they’ll be at that. So your concern is well placed. What do you suggest we do about it?”

Junior looked surprised to be asked his opinion, but he didn’t take long to give one. “I think you and I should fly to Breakaway and guard it through the night, in case one of them jumps the gun and starts burning houses.”

“Luk will be there, and he knows what’s going on. You don’t think he can handle it?”

“I think it’s good to have him there. But he normally sleeps all night, his night vision isn’t very good even if he can stay awake, and he doesn’t know how Zoeyes think as well as we do. Plus, he can’t fly without a copter. That can go either faster or slower than us, but we’re more maneuverable in tight quarters. So I think it’s up to us.”

“Good points all,” said Bob, sincerely impressed. “Let’s go.”

* * *

The wait, laden with uncertainty, felt longer than it was. It didn’t take long for Junior and Bob to fly to Breakaway and find an inconspicuous but strategically placed perch to use as a watchtower for the rest of the night. But there wasn’t much left of it, and it felt strange sitting still, trying to remain alert but doing nothing. That was very different from how flyers were supposed to spend their nights, and to Junior, at least, it felt very wrong.

Then the eastern sky began to lighten: time to get to somewhere dark and secure to sleep through the day. Luk would have to take care of watch duties for the duration, but he knew that. He’d been in on that last hasty planning meeting before Junior and Bob left for Breakaway and had a pretty good idea what was going to happen.

Junior’s first thought was that they would go back to Highcastle for the day and try to pretend everything was normal. But nothing was normal, and he quickly realized Highcastle would be too dangerous. He didn’t know what pretext Highguard, Cliffmaster, and Treetop had used to explain their absence when they lured him off to High and Mighty, but they would surely have had to get right back to Highcastle to avoid arousing suspicions.

They would be there now. It would not be safe for Junior and Bob to sleep in the same cave with them while everybody else was also asleep.

So for now, it was back to Surfcrag, to at least pretend to sleep.

The next night promised to be even worse. It would be an entire night, during which Bob and Junior had no way of knowing how the effort to gather the council had gone, or what was happening during their deliberations.

But it turned out not quite as bad as they had feared. Only a couple of hours after midnight, Junior heard the familiar sound of approaching wings and stiffened. So did Bob. They each had a couple of weapons, light enough to fly with but useful only in close combat. Neither wanted to use them; both knew they might have to.

Junior relaxed a little when he saw that it was Seaskimmer, a middle-aged citizen of Highcastle who had been like an uncle to him as he grew up. “Seaskimmer!” he exclaimed with relief. “I’m so glad it’s you. What’s up?”

“The council has met,” Seaskimmer said. “It didn’t take as long as I expected for them to decide you were right. They agreed that there’s a credible threat of a conspiracy, and what they did to you, Junior, was so close to abduction they plan to consider it such. It helped that some of us in Highcastle remembered the night you, Highguard, Cliffmaster, and Treetop all disappeared for a while. They came back with lame-sounding excuses for where they’d been, and you didn’t come back at all. Then Bob went out looking for you, really worried. It was pretty obvious that something fishy was going on, and the more we look back at it, the fishier it smells.”

“So what’s going to happen now?” Bob asked.

“We’re going to have a roundup,” said Seaskimmer. He suddenly let out a loud call, and over the next minute or so some twenty other flyers materialized out of the forest and gathered around them. “You know some of these guys; the rest are from other lodges. We’re going to gather up the conspirators in Highcastle, another group is going after the ones in High and Mighty, and we’re going to take them all in to Surfcrag for questioning. Just between you and us, we think the questioning will lead to a lot more.

“And we want you two right in the front of our group when we go after the Highcastle gang, so they’ll know why we’re there when they see us coming.”

* * *

They weren’t actually in Highcastle, of course. It was a work night, and Seaskimmer knew that all three of their targets were on the same crew, gathering spices from a particularly rich patch in a forest clearing. Bob and Junior flew right up front in Seaskimmer’s posse as they skimmed low over the trees, so they wouldn’t be noticed by anyone in the clearing until they got there. Junior was impressed that Seaskimmer had planned it all in such detail. Selena was gibbous tonight, so the landscape was almost as bright as Junior would want it without glasses.

He recognized the place as they approached. Seen almost edge on, the clearing seemed little

more than a narrow gash in the forest canopy when it first appeared, but then it widened gradually.

At a visual signal from Seaskimmer, the group began to peel off, members flying around the periphery of the clearing to space themselves along it and then fly in along radial lines to converge at the center.

Then, at a second signal from their leader, they all accelerated suddenly to triple their former speed and descend rapidly toward the work crew, which had only five members. Most of the attackers were spaced equally around the circle, but Bob and Junior stayed close to Seaskimmer, one at either side, zooming in like a spearhead made of three able bodies with weapons ready. Junior felt his heart speed up as Seaskimmer let out a bloodcurdling shriek. Highguard looked up suddenly, saw Seaskimmer, Bob, and Junior converging on him, and went pale. He turned quickly as if to take flight or run into the forest, but he couldn't do either fast enough. His quick spin just showed the rest of the posse appearing suddenly over the treetops and coming in fast from all directions. The three leaders pounced on Highguard simultaneously, knocking him down and pinning him to the ground. Other members of the group similarly took down Cliffmaster and Treetop, and the remaining two workers took off into the woods.

Nobody had to use a weapon, but the captors needed all their strength to hold their victims down until they quit struggling. Seaskimmer did an enviable job of keeping his voice calm and strong as he said, "This is an official arrest. We were sent by the lodgmaster of Highcastle and the Council of Towns and Lodges to take you in for questioning and whatever subsequent actions they may deem necessary."

"For what?" Highguard demanded indignantly. "This is an—"

"I think you know," Bob and Junior said together, without raising their voices.

"Your questions will be answered—and you will answer theirs—when you're before the council," Seaskimmer told the captives. "For now, all you're going to do is this. When we release you in a minute, we're all going to fly to Surfcrag, in a formation with you three at the center and the rest of us surrounding you. We're all armed. If any of you do the slightest thing that looks like an attempt to break out of that formation, we will fix it so you can't fly at all. Then we'll keep you here until a cart can come out to haul you in like a sack of ore. Understood?"

After a considerable silence, all three said grudgingly, "Understood."

"Good. Then let's be on our way. To Surfcrag!"

* * *

Junior half-expected at least one of them to try something stupid and try to break away as soon as their wings were unpinioned. He was a little surprised, and considerably relieved, that none of them did. If they had, one or more of them—possibly even him—might have had to follow through on Seaskimmer's threat. He wouldn't have liked that—or, what scared him even more, maybe he would have.

The relatively uneventful flight gave him time to reflect on what had happened back in the clearing. One group of individuals ganging up on another and subduing them by physical force—that was the sort of thing that supposedly had been males' main function, back at the dawn of known history and earlier. Long before Junior was born, Zoey's had learned enough about sharing a continent to move beyond that. How easy would it be for civilization to revert to that state?

Too easy, Junior now thought for the first time in his life. Never before had anyone of his acquaintance participated in, or been a victim of, a raid by one group against another. Not until the brief but daymarish war with one group of humans. That night when Highguard had tried to sway Junior to his cause, he had talked about how good it felt to participate in such a raid and vanquish a foe.

He would never have expected it, but Junior had felt some of that excitement during his own brief participation in the strike in the clearing. It was scary, of course, but it was also exhilarating in a way he'd never felt before. For the first time he understood, at least dimly, what that quaint old word "glory," which Highguard dragged out and dangled before him like bait, meant.

He hoped never to feel it again—and he especially didn't want others to feel it and decide it

was something good, to be sought out and relished over and over.

* * *

There was too little night left for any final resolutions, and in any case, they were still waiting for more council members to arrive from outlying towns and lodges. So when captors and captives got to Surfcrag, there was little that their hostesses could do except record their arrival and move the prisoners into detention quarters. Bob and Junior thought about going back to Highcastle for the day, but were still uncomfortable with the idea. “I agree,” Sylvie said as soon as they mentioned it, “and so do the council folk I’ve talked to. We have five alleged conspirators in custody, and no idea how many others there may be. By going back to Highcastle now, you could be putting yourselves in danger. Also, when we have our hearing tomorrow night, we’ll want you two to testify, and also some of your compadres from Highcastle. Until then, we’d rather you and they have as little contact as possible. So, on behalf of the council: please stay here till this is over.” Her tone switched abruptly from official to family member. “And, on behalf of me, it will be so nice to have a night alone with you, Bob. It’s been too long. And Junior, you know you’re always welcome in our spare room.”

* * *

Actually, while Junior had known that intellectually, it had been a long time—since his pre-crèche childhood, which he barely remembered—since he’d actually spent a day in that room. But it did feel good to have the whole family together for the first time in so long. Even his sister Goldie came over for the predawn meal. Sylvie must have been planning it for some time. She had plenty of good food, including old favorites, on hand for both male and female diets.

Junior slept well through the day, enjoyed the nightfall meal with his parents, and then went off with them to the Anteroom, the modestly named grand chamber at the main entrance to Surfcrag. Tonight all the doors were barred. What was about to happen was not a public entertainment, but a solemn official proceeding.

Junior had not been to many of those, and was fascinated at how different the room looked from its usual condition. Normally it was a welcoming public space, the gateway between Surfcrag and the outside world for almost everyone coming or going, and the major hub of activity for those who lived here. Tonight, in contrast, few were coming, going, or crisscrossing, except to go to their designated spots. A central area lit by ceiling lightdisks almost as bright as full Selena was conspicuously empty at the moment, but held five round platforms waiting expectantly for perching males. Three distinct seating areas surrounded that, forming a larger ring.

On one side stood a double arc of long, raised platforms, each occupied by a female council member. Sylvie lay on one near the center of the inner and lower arc, resting on four feet and tail while her head and hands were raised so she could observe intently and gesture or manipulate.

Another third of the circle held round platforms similar to those in the center ring. A male council member sat atop each of those but one when Junior came in, and shortly after he took his seat, the last councilman swooped in through an inconspicuous elevated door and landed skillfully on the last platform.

The remaining third of the circle was also filled with male-platforms, with Bob and Junior on two of the closest ones to the center. They knew most of the others: fellow residents of Highcastle, with whom they exchanged small talk before the official business started.

The outermost parts of the room, with the projecting perches many males found most comfortable when they were going to be there for a while, remained dark and empty.

Junior was growing restless and anxious when one of the council ladies whom he didn’t know drew herself up and whistled loudly for attention. When she had it, she spoke loudly and clearly in Shetalk. “Thank you all for coming. As you know, this is a hearing to determine the extent and seriousness of a possible threat to all of us that has recently come to our attention. Bob and Junior, of Highcastle”—she gestured to indicate that they should wave a wing to identify themselves—“have alleged that an unknown number of flyers are conspiring to attack the human settlement called Breakaway with intent to destroy it and its inhabitants.

“As you also know, our hard-won treaty with the humans strictly forbids any such aggression by either side. If allowed to happen, it would destroy the foundation of our ability to coexist

peacefully, and hopefully exchange mutual benefits, with the humans. This must not be allowed to happen. Our task here is to determine three things: the extent of the threat; what can be done to eliminate it; and what punishment, if any, we can and should administer to the conspirators for actions they have taken so far.

“To this end, we have summoned five of the alleged conspirators to gather before you and answer any questions you may have. . . .”

A door at ground level opened quietly to admit Highguard, Cliffmaster, Treetop, Strongwing, and Longflight—not flying, as flyers would normally enter a ceremonial occasion, but walking, low on the floor, escorted by four armed females. Two of them even carried some of the ancient and touchy firearms that had been resurrected, and used reluctantly and with trepidation, during the Human War.

The accused took places on the platforms in the center circle, lit a bit more brightly than most Zoey's found comfortable. Their female guards surrounded them, all facing inward, standing ready to act on a moment's notice if needed. The council leader introduced them by name, one by one, and then asked Bob to recount for the assemblage what he had already told Sylvie. Then she asked Junior to do the same. Then she asked each of the Highcastle witnesses about what they remembered of their accused colleagues' recent behavior in general, and in particular on the night when they and Junior disappeared without explanation.

By now it was all too familiar to Junior. He'd said and/or heard it all many times, but the council was painstakingly thorough.

He supposed he should be grateful for that. But he'd forgotten how *boring* official deliberations could be, and he often found himself wondering whether they would ever come to any sort of a point.

When they did, it still took a while to tell what it was. Fishwizzardess, the council leader, announced, “I think we have almost enough information for the council to make its decision. Before we do so, it's only fair that the accused have an opportunity to present their side of the story. Highguard, since we've established that everybody who knows anything about the conspiracy—”

“The *alleged* conspiracy, your honor,” Highguard interrupted before he could stop himself.

“As you prefer,” Fishwizzardess said imperturbably. “The alleged conspiracy. Since everybody recognizes you as its leader—its *alleged* leader—we offer you now a last chance to defend yourself against the charges.”

“Thank you, your honor,” Highguard said, drawing himself up with as much dignity as he could muster while everyone knew he was seething inside. He had, after all, been a lodgester; he knew how these things worked. “First, I would like to remind the esteemed councilfolk that ‘charges’ seems an excessively strong term for what you can actually justify. I remind your honors that not one of the witnesses has even alleged, much less proved, that any of us has committed any act of aggression.”

“That's true,” Fishwizzardess granted. “Though we're seriously considering declaring your attempt to force Junior to listen while you tried to indoctrinate him as *de facto* abduction, and charging you accordingly. But that can wait. You were saying?”

Obviously miffed, but covering it fairly well, Highguard said, “I was saying, your honor, that none of us has actually broken any law—or treaty.”

“Technically true,” Fishwizzardess granted. “But we've established beyond reasonable doubt that you were planning to. Whether or not we have laws against such planning right now, the potential consequences of what you were planning are so grave that we simply cannot allow them to happen.

“The council has already heard enough about this, and deliberated enough before this session even began, that I can tell you right now what we've decided.

“Because of the technicality you've so astutely called to our attention, we cannot punish or continue to hold you for violating any law currently on the books. However, we can declare you to be extreme security risks. You will be released to return to your home and works, but your colleagues will be monitoring your behavior at all times. If we get word of any conspiratorial

talk or actions, you will be reported and brought back before us. By that time, I'm confident the lack of laws against such plotting will have been remedied, and there *will* be appropriate punishments available, which we can and will use. Those could include such options as solitary banishment or death.

"Furthermore, it's quite obvious that you are most unhappy with Bob and Junior for their role in bringing you here, and understandable that you are at this very moment undoubtedly thinking about revenge. Any action against them that looks like an attempt at revenge will be dealt with in the strongest possible way. If anything should happen to either of them under mysterious circumstances, it will be assumed that you and your gang are responsible unless and until we see ironclad proof that you aren't.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, your honor. But may I make a final statement before we go our separate ways?"

Fishwizzardess considered briefly before saying, "Why not?"

"Thank you, your honor, and ladies and gentlemen of the council." Highguard's platform didn't allow much room for pacing, but he stood as high as his short legs would allow and paced anyway, striking oratorical poses at every opportunity. "I have heard and accepted your judgment, so obviously I will not be doing any—any *more*, if you prefer—of the plotting I have been accused of doing. But I want to make a statement, and I want you to remember it when you leave here, and tomorrow, and next year, and as far into the future as you can still remember.

"You've made it clear that *I* won't be able to eliminate the scourge of humans from among us. But I think history will make it clear that *somebody* will have to do it eventually, or our way of life, and possibly we ourselves, will perish. These people have abilities beyond our understanding, and they've shown themselves willing to use them against us. Their numbers will grow; their advantage will grow; our chance to hold our own will be lost unless we seize it soon.

"I think the council has made a serious mistake tonight, but it can't hold for long. The young among us will not long tolerate being subjected to such dangers by their elders' poor judgment."

He stopped and sat down.

"Very interesting," Fishwizzardess said noncommittally. She turned to the witness gallery. "Bob and Junior, would you like to say anything?"

Junior sat, heart pounding, waiting for his father to respond to the unexpected request. But Bob just said, "I defer to my son to speak for both of us."

And suddenly it felt *right*. Junior stood up, as Highguard had done, but he didn't pace. He just stood calmly and let his words speak for themselves. "Thank you, Father—and your honor, and members of the council. I'm sorry Highguard feels that way, but with all due respect for him and his experience, I think I am better qualified than he to speak for what the young among us want." He paused and let laughter ripple through the assemblage, then continued, "We do not want what he wants. We want peaceful, interesting futures, and if those futures include new neighbors from a world very different from ours, we look forward to learning from them—and in return, perhaps, helping them learn about this world.

"We all know the humans have many abilities that we don't have—yet. Some very simple ones could give us huge advantages. The events leading up to this moment could have played out much more easily, and probably better, if we'd had their instantaneous communicators, for instance. Their mechanized flight capabilities were a tremendous help in coordinating—"

"If *I'd* had those things," Highguard muttered, quite audibly for all, "things certainly would have played out differently."

That, too, produced a wave of laughter—and a stern warning from Fishwizzardess. "Quiet. You've had your say. Let the young man have his."

"And the technology may not be the most important part," Junior continued. "Just try to imagine the very different world the humans lived in, and the very different experiences they must have had. Aren't you interested in hearing their stories—and telling them yours? I certainly am."

He looked directly at Highguard. “Highguard, sir, a few nights ago you tried to get me to join your cause. You spoke of the joy and glory of fighting and crushing enemies. You wanted me to feel that joy and glory, and inspire others of my generation to feel them too, so they would help you.

“Well, last night, I did feel a little of that, as a member of the group that brought you here for this hearing. It did feel good, in a way—and it scared me that I thought so. I didn’t know I had that in me. I don’t *want* to have it in me. I certainly don’t want to incite anyone else of my generation to find it in themselves.

“So, Highguard, you *have* inspired me to inspire them. I’m going to go around to all the lodges I can reach, talking to the young males in them about the dangers of your vision—and the potential promise of mine.

“And I have a very dear friend who will be more than happy to do the same for young females in all the towns she can reach. She can’t fly—but I’m really good at carrying messages.”

* * *

A few nights later, when things had settled down a bit and Bob and Junior had caught up on sleep and fallen back into the routine of work and friends in and around Highcastle, Junior flew back to Surfcrag alone. It was very different this time: an unhurried flight with just enough Selenalight to complement the starlight, nobody chasing him, and the chance to spend a quiet night just visiting with Coppersmith.

It was heavenly. She wanted to hear all about his recent harrowing adventures, and he wanted to hear about hers on the rocky shore and in the hot labs and workshops. Through it all they managed a good deal of affectionate banter and touching.

Eventually, after they’d been regaling each other for quite a while, and then just lying together and stroking each other, he said quietly, with carefully rehearsed nonchalance, “Oh, by the way, Coppersmith, there’s one more thing you might be interested in.”

“Oh?” she said. “What’s that?”

“They’ve given me my real name.”

“Oh, wow!” Suddenly excited, she asked, “What is it?”

“Well, you’ve probably noticed that most flyers’ names have a connotation of aggression or dominance. Things like ‘Highguard’ and ‘Cliffmaster.’ Well, mine’s not that flashy. But I like it.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense. What is it?”

He waited a few seconds, then said quietly, “Peacesaver.”

And she beamed as proudly as he did.

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Stanley Schmidt (PhD, Physics) was the editor of Analog for a long time (34 years!) and enjoys writing for it just as much now as he did before he became editor in 1978. A small selection of Dr. Schmidt's accomplishments include the Hugo Award for Best Editor: Short Form, the SFWA Solstice Award, and the Robert A. Heinlein Award. When not reading Analog just for fun, Dr. Schmidt can be found hiking, traveling, and playing various sorts of music. Find more information about Stanley Schmidt on his website: <https://sfwa.org/members/stanleyschmdit>.