



Illustrated by Christine Kornacki

No Stranger to Native Shores

Matt McHugh

“You wished to see me, Minister?”

A lone figure stood in the center of the auditorium, an amphitheatre with sloping sides and row after row of indentations that at the moment were occupied by only a few senior officials.

“Yes, Nurse. Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

The minister’s words were formed with the respect due a superior, though he was many levels above Nurse Beta in station. *Always the diplomat*, she thought.

“How is the child?” he asked.

“Doing well,” Betta answered.

“Well-nourished? Healthy? Interactive?”

“Yes to each.”

“Different in any way recently? More agitated? As if anticipating something?”

“I have noticed no such changes, Minister.”

There was a low conversation between the minister and an aide. Betta heard the quiet pops and clicks, but it was too soft for her to make out words.

“Nurse Betta,” he began again, “What I am about to tell you requires absolute confidence. Will you agree?”

“I will.”

“Yesterday, a vessel similar to the one used by the child’s people descended into the grasslands, less than a half-day’s walk from our border. Salvaged instruments of the original vessel reacted to its approach. This is undoubtedly an expedition from off-world come to discover what became of the first.”

Betta tingled with anxiety. What she long dreaded was happening: the aliens were returning to take away her child.

* * *

“Do they know we’re here?” asked Senator Cowley.

Susan Tristam Cowley, first-tier Senator of the Allied Human Territories, stood a discreet distance from the operation center of the *Outreach*’s planetary lander. Before her, members of the excursion teams bustled about, tweaking instrument displays and muttering in low, excited whispers.

“They have modulated transmissions typical of communications networks,” replied Excursion Commander Tung. “With this planet’s huge electromagnetic aura, it’s tricky to discern the signals from background noise, but we haven’t seen the spike in chatter you’d expect if a large population knew of our arrival.”

During the months of open space travel, Cowley had maintained politely informal contact with the *Outreach* crew but eavesdropped on every meeting she could. Now, aboard the lander resting on the surface of a new world, she felt it time to assert herself.

“What’s the size of the native population?”

A woman some twenty years Cowley’s junior—the chief excursion technician . . . what was her name? Boris . . . Bor . . . bor-something. Borissen. That was it—swiveled in her chair and pointed to a monitor.

“The orbiter is still surveying,” she said. “But they estimate three-hundred-million in about eighty major concentrations.”

“City-states, scattered across the archipelagos that pass for continents on this planet,” said the head of the sociobiology team, Dr. Cho. “There are patterns of sea-faring traffic that suggest alliances. The outpost we’re near is isolated on a small island chain, with no more than a few thousand inhabitants.”

“And just the one technological species?” asked Cowley.

“It certainly seems that way,” answered Cho. “We have orbital images of them. From above, they appear oval-shaped. Two meters long by a meter wide. Think of their bodies as proportioned about the same as your hand, palm flat, fingers tight. They walk low to the ground, half a meter tall judging by shadows, with rocking characteristic of a four-legged gait. We can infer a good bit about their biology since they inhabit a world not far off terrestrial norms—but beyond that, other than the intelligence apparent from their architecture, we know very little.”

The senator nodded. “My sister and her husband never made contact. The last report said they had begun descent when their instruments registered a massive electrical storm. Then nothing. That was seven years ago. I’ve never held any illusions they survived, but I’d like to know what happened.” She turned to Tung. “Commander, let me know when you’re ready to go E.V.A. I’d like to be among the first to encounter the natives.”

* * *

“Good morning, Hopper,” said Nurse Betta, as she entered the habitat. The alien child—nicknamed “Hopper” because of what it could do with those two astounding long legs—stood tall, reaching high above its head with its equally amazing forelimbs. It was placing a block on top of an elaborate tower, one of dozens it had built around the room.

“Hi, Betta,” it answered, focused on its work.

“What are you building?”

“The lost city of Kellik.”

“How do you know about that?”

“You told me,” it said, folding in the middle to straighten a low wall. “From the epic of Tyto.”

“Of course. I recall now.” Betta squatted. “Hopper, will you come here, please.”

It let out a loud breath, something it did to express annoyance, then came and squatted before Betta, touching its fingers to Betta’s mouth manipulators.

“The minister wants to see you.”

Its body twitched. “I get to go out?”

“To the auditorium, yes.”

“Do I have to wear the harness?”

“Not if you promise to be good. No running around.”

“I promise! I’ll stay right by your side the whole time!”

Hopper began an impressive display of its namesake, bounding about and making its distinctive sounds. Betta beamed a little at the show of joy, but the gravity of the situation soon pulled her back.

“Hopper! Stop! Please, this is very serious. I need you to do as I say.”

Betta signaled for the door to be opened (there was a combination lock on the interior they no longer used; Hopper had figured it out ages ago). The habitat door rolled aside, and Hopper stepped into the lobby, where it greeted the orderlies by name, sharing jokes and familiarities.

“Come along now,” she said, touching its dangling fingers with her manipulators.

* * *

Betta led Hopper through known corridors until they made an unfamiliar turn.

“Where are we going?” asked Hopper.

“To the viewing gallery.”

The gallery? The mysterious space behind the shiny window in the assembly hall dome; Hopper had never been there before. Going anywhere new was usually a welcome adventure for them both, but for some reason Betta was nervous, her vibrations irregular.

They went up a curved incline to the observation gallery. The marvel of the room was an enormous window, set at an angle. Leaning against it, Hopper could see straight down to the amphitheater below, watching as people assembled in rows. It was exciting to be up high like this, but as the ceremonial speeches bubbled on in the hall, Hopper became bored.

“Why am I here?”

“Hush please,” said Betta. “Just watch.”

Hopper listened and watched and fidgeted with the tedium. Then, light spilled down the center aisle below as the main door opened.

The shadows appeared first. Long shapes stretching up the aisle. Then, in came the figures. Three of them. Walking on two legs with two dangling limbs. A big round head on top, towering over the people squatting in the amphitheater.

It took a few moments for Hopper’s mind to reach the obvious conclusion.

“They’re like me!”

* * *

Senator Cowley walked down the aisle into the arena. It was an impressive space, an ornate dome over a sloping bowl with teardrop-shaped indentations where row after row of the native creatures squatted. The room was basically like any assembly hall she’d ever seen, though she had the disconcerting sense of being enclosed in a ring of predators waiting to pounce.

Just like any assembly hall, she thought with wry amusement.

The natives spoke in a percussive pops and clicks. The sounds came from six orifices, three

on each side of the protrusion that marked their heads. The biologists believed they didn't breath through those orifices—instead having nasal cavities on their backs, like a dolphin blow-hole. They seemed to have no vocal chords, but instead smacked their lips as they gulped and belched air. A sharp, flatulent *brap* was sometimes used for emphasis. The linguists hadn't gotten a word from it yet, so communication was managed with broad gestures. Humanity had encountered a handful of intelligent species so there were some protocols, but mostly it was improvisation, terrifying and thrilling in equal measure.

Senator Cowley, Commander Tung, and Doctor Cho stood listening to the babble, data recorders hidden in their jackets scanning the room. At a pause apparently meant for a response, Cowley set down the drone they had prepared as a gift. It unfolded a gossamer membrane of screens and commenced a two-and-a-half minute montage of the most uplifting music and art humanity had to offer (curated during some of the most bitterly contentious meetings she had ever witnessed). The biologists were certain the natives had hearing and vision, though could only guess at the spectrum they sensed. The show seemed a little condescending to Cowley—glass beads to make the local chieftains *ooh* and *ahh*—but there was no mistaking the awed hush in the room.

When the encounter seemed ready to end, she and her shipmates were led to a room outside the hall. The ceilings were so low they had to crouch until Cowley gave up diplomatic pretense and sat cross-legged on the floor, the others readily joining.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“That was very productive,” said Tung.

“How?” she replied. “We still can't communicate. All we did was greet some bureaucrats and participate in a ceremony. We didn't learn anything of consequence.”

“So you're saying, Senator, bureaucrats and ceremony are inconsequential?”

In the few months she'd known him, Cowley had secretly chuckled overhearing instances of Commander Tung's sarcasm. She wasn't sure how she felt having it aimed at her.

“I've studied every known instance of first contact,” said Dr. Cho. “And I agree that went swimmingly. We've been ‘taken to their leader’ as it were, and know they value ceremony, hierarchy. We've basically been shown their parliamentary processes.”

“Are we sure they have the wreckage of the *Bellerophon*?” Cowley asked.

“There's no doubt the ansible is in this complex,” said Tung. “The crazy electrical properties of this world don't affect the quantum entanglement at all. We can pinpoint its location to the millimeter. But we don't yet know anything about the ship. It might have been blown to atoms. They might have it intact in an underground hangar.” He looked at Cowley, all flippancy gone. “I can't even speculate on remains.”

“I'm not here for bodies,” she said, a bit more sharply than she intended. “Yes, this expedition is personal to me, but not sentimental. The opportunity to reach a new species is worth risk, though my sister may have rushed ahead prematurely. If we can establish a connection to this world, history will redeem her decision. That's what this means to me. I'm sorry if that makes me a little harsh sometimes.”

“You're not harsh,” said Cho. “You're passionate. We all respect that. And we're all with you. This world will be part of your family's legacy.”

* * *

“Can I meet them? Can I meet them?”

Hopper, again living up to its name, bounded around the room, disregarding the respect due Minister Geddek and his entourage, to Betta's great embarrassment. To his credit, the minister pretended not to notice.

“We must first learn more about the new visitors, young one, but I think it will be possible soon.”

Hopper babbled words of excitement in between its unique hoots and yowls. Betta had forgotten that in those noises there was language. To her ear, the aliens' voices were like the call of sea creatures or bowed instruments. Giants who spoke with music. How could Hopper not be enthralled by them?

“What are they like? What did they say?” Hopper practically rushed the Minister.

“They were courteous and observed decorum,” said the Minister, discreetly signaling his good humor to Betta with a gentle pulse. “Beyond that, we know little. We don’t understand them. I was hoping you could help.”

Hopper stopped bouncing. Even with its inability to transmit pulses, it was obviously vibrating with excitement.

“How?”

“We made recordings of their speech. I was hoping you could translate.”

Hopper seemed unsure but was willing to try. Betta was asked to remain behind as an orderly led Hopper away.

“You’re certain it has no memory of its people?” asked one of the council members.

“Not that it has ever said. It was so young when we found it. There’s little surprise it remembers nothing.”

“But it retains its original language?” asked the Minister.

“Some,” one of the researchers replied. “Much of the alien equipment was destroyed, but there were a few items still functional. From the child, we were able to understand the written symbols and several hundred words of the language. Without that guidance, we’d have nothing.”

“What we’ve learned of their science,” said another researcher, “has put us years ahead of the central nations, and we have many innovations still unreleased. But, if it’s discovered what we have and how we obtained it, that will be the end of our profitability. Or worse.”

“We must assume they mean to reclaim what they lost,” said Geddek. “But the great question remains: do they know of the child?”

“They see and hear very well,” answered a researcher. “In the hall, they reacted to changes in light and sound most of us would never notice. But they seemed completely unable to detect or project shifts in charge or polarity. We even had the nurse bring the child to the viewing gallery, and they gave no indication they could sense it. I don’t believe they know of the child’s existence.”

“For the time being,” Minister Geddek said, “it needs to stay that way.”

* * *

“There’s the ansible,” said Chief Borissen, pointing to a pulsing X on a 3D schematic assembled from soundings of the complex.

“That’s underground?” asked Senator Cowley.

“Given the kind of storms you get on this planet, it’s no surprise three-quarters of their construction is underground. But that makes it difficult to get accurate scans.”

“From readings taken in the assembly hall,” said Dr. Cho, “We believe the natives not only sense electrical and magnetic fields, similar to some terrestrial birds and fishes, but generate them. It’s possible they’re using that ability to hide things from us.”

“Like what?”

Commander Tung replied. “An ansible works by maintaining an entangled photon with a sister device, so action on one registers instantaneously on the other. But it’s just a dumb device, like a telegraph. Someone has to key in data for transmission.”

“So?”

“So, since the earliest days of the exploration fleet, largely without the knowledge of the crews, ansibles have been outfitted to connect to ship’s operational logs.”

“You mean it spies on them?”

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose. There’s a huge volume of routine onboard analysis, and despite instantaneous transmission, ansibles process data very slowly so the intelligence algorithms tend to only forward information considered out of the ordinary.”

“So?”

“So, there was an anomalous incident reported by the *Bellerphon*’s ansible.”

“What do you mean by anomalous?”

“Four years into their mission,” said Tung, “Your sister and her husband experienced a birth.”

“A what?”

“A birth. They had a child. We still have little idea what cosmic radiation does to infants, so deep space births are officially discouraged. That hasn’t stopped them, of course, but when reported, expeditions are typically directed to return. So your sister chose not to disclose hers. She edited the primary log after the fact without realizing an account had already been transmitted.”

Dr. Cho slid a chair over for the senator. She lowered herself into it in something akin to a dream state.

“The child would have been about three terrestrial years old when they arrived at this planet. They reported monitoring conditions from orbit for a week, so they knew about the severity of the storms. As a precaution prior to descent, they built a gel pod.”

“What’s a gel pod?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. A pod that contains gel—nearly a meter of it—to protect a body from shock and heat. They can withstand catastrophic impact, or eject and soft land if needed. The specifications they used were for one occupant, smaller than an adult.”

“Are you saying it’s possible my sister had a baby that survived the crash?”

“No,” replied Tung. “I’m saying it’s probable.”

* * *

“A B C D E F G H I J K . . .”

Hopper sang the song for the hundredth time as two technicians, Dedara and Prush, showed the symbols on a light display.

“What does the second one say?” asked Prush.

“It’s Bee,” replied Hopper wearily. “It says buh. Buh-buh-buh . . . just like our first intonation.”

“And what’s the first symbol?”

“Ay. Aaaaayyyy. It’s like song-breathing, but from here—inside my mouth—rather than from my nose.”

“And what’s that?” Dedara projected an image onto the display.

“That’s ‘Apple.’ A-P-P-L-E. Starts with a song letter, two second intonations, a tongue bridge, and another song letter.”

“And what does it mean?”

“I don’t know!” Hopper shouted, then turned the control dial to flip through the images. “It’s that thing!” A picture of an apple with a creature threading through it came up. “Worms live in it.”

“Let’s listen again, shall we?” said Prush. He played back the recording from the assembly hall where the alien had spoken. It was so fast, sounds running together until it was a blur of noise. Hopper listened, fascinated, frustrated, as they ran the recording over and over.

“They said ‘We are here,’ then something about learning, like ‘We want to learn.’ I can’t tell what’s between. Later on, they talk about traveling on a boat or on many boats, maybe? Near the end, they say ‘friendship’ and ‘cooperate.’ That’s all I can understand.”

“What about this?” Prush played something different. In the hall, only one had spoken and there was the large room’s distorting echo. Now the recording was much more clear, and Hopper was thrilled to identify three separate voices.

Something-something Bellerophon something.

“Wait!” cried Hopper. “Play that back!”

The technicians replayed the portion several times, until Hopper said,

“I’ve heard that before. Bellerophon.”

Dedara tried to repeat the word, “bLLrffhn,” making a mess of it without the song sounds. “What does it mean?”

“It’s a ship,” answered Hopper. “It’s my father’s ship. My mother lived on it.”

The techs stood still, vibrating surprise.

“How do you know that?” asked Prush.

“I’m not sure. I . . . I can hear it. It’s dark. I can see black sky with stars through a window. Someone is telling me a story about Bellerophon, a hero who fought monsters. The ship is named for him. Your father built it, and we live on it.”

Hopper's mind was adrift, hearing echoes where no sounds had been made, sensing invisible fingers on skin.

The tunnel door rolled back, and Betta shuffled in.

"Betta?" Hopper asked. "Are those strangers my parents?"

* * *

"Why wasn't I told?" demanded Cowley.

"Expeditions this far out are costly," replied Tung. "When you began to agitate in the Senate for an advanced timetable, fleet orchestration didn't want to give you any more leverage."

"It's been seven years! Don't they even care about a lost child?"

"As I said, children are against policy," continued Tung. "That's for safety. We travel in folds of space-time created by dark matter resonance, an origami universe riddled with holes that open and close in ways we barely understand. Ships have been crushed, ripped apart, and—worst of all—stranded. Pathways we thought were stable have blinked out of existence, and there you are, a million light-years from humanity with the ansible pinging back every moment of your despair."

"You have a way with words, Commander."

"Just trying to make a point. Your brother-in-law commissioned the *Bellerophon* to chart dark matter corridors, not to traverse them. In the course of that work, they found a pathway that conducted the radio noise of an inhabited world. They chose to go through. Alone, in a scout ship, with no support team, and only an unmanned space frame for an orbiter."

"You're saying they shouldn't have gone."

"I'm not judging their decision. As you yourself said, contacting other species is worth risk. It's why I do what I do. But, because of what happened, all we know about the natives is they're armadillo-lizard things that make popping sounds and transmit electromagnetic pulses. They may have been studying our technology—and our biology—for years. Senator, we are on a new world at a great disadvantage."

Cowley hung her head.

"My sister was rash. I can't deny that. But, we are here. Now. What can we do to regain some advantage?"

Borissen spoke up. "We know where the ansible is, and managed to get some test signals through the interference. We found intact data arrays from the *Bellerophon*. We just needed to boost the connection."

"The natives may be clever enough to block our sensors," said Tung, "But there's something they've forgotten about us."

"And that is?"

Tung smiled. "We can fly. There's a few flying species we've seen along the shorelines, looking for all the world like seagulls. We sent out half a dozen ornithopting drones designed to mimic their appearance. We got one close enough to nullify the interference, and the others to form a relay chain, boosting the signal back to us. We were able to access logs from the ship's entire operational history."

"You have the data now?" asked Cowley.

"We've already begun analysis."

"Can I access it from my private terminal?"

"We can make it available if you wish," Tung replied.

* * *

"Where did I come from?" Hopper asked.

Betta sensed distress from Hopper, a kind it had never shown before. The council had long ago scripted an answer for that question, but Betta found the words a bitter labor to speak.

"There was a ship," she began. "Like a great, metal boat that could float in the sky. It came down during a storm and hit the ground. There was nothing left but broken pieces. But we found a piece that wasn't broken. Not a scratch. You were inside."

Hopper was still, stricken. Its strange face, its peculiar signals—Betta had learned to read them as naturally as she could anyone's. But now they were different, as if a wholly new idea

was forming in its mind.

“I’m not from this world. I’m from the stars.”

“Yes, my child, that is true.”

“And those strangers. Those are my people.”

Hopper’s face contorted, its eyes squeezing out fluid in a way that once alarmed the entire staff, but Betta had come to know was a natural release of anxiety.

“Are they going to take me away?”

Hopper squatted and made the strangled hoots it used in the throes of grief or pain. Betta came forward, lowered her head, as Hopper leaned over and wrapped its arms across Betta’s back, the embrace they shared when words failed to soothe their unease.

“I won’t let them take you,” said Betta. “No matter how you came here, this is your home. You are my own, do you hear me? My own.”

Now Betta’s emotions ran away, and she began to gasp, her labored breathing synced to Hopper’s sobs. She felt the vibrations of Hopper’s muscles, the gentle sizzling of its brain—spawned on a remote star among alien strangers—yet so much like her own, with patterns startlingly familiar and wondrously new. Hopper was no stranger, and she was no mere caretaker. Let the councilors and researchers project whatever condescension they wished. She loved this creature.

“I won’t let them take you.”

* * *

Five minutes later, Cowley had the wall display in her cabin filled with a spiderweb grid representing every shred of data from her sister’s ship.

“Medical,” she said.

The web reconfigured. A stack of event icons stamped with a caduceus splayed like playing cards. She parsed them against a timeline. A little over three years into their excursion, an exam for complaints of nausea. Eight terrestrial months later was another redacted medical session. In a series of overlooked records were synthesis requests for epidural anesthetics and protein-infused lactose. A digital shadow in the unmistakable shape of a newborn.

“Gel pod.”

Now the display reeled to the gear-and-circuit heraldry of engineering. Cowley flipped through specifications for an emergency gel pod. She found records of its manufacture by ship-board fabrication, fitted to a human about one meter tall.

She scanned entries. Her sister and brother-in-law spent nine days in orbit surveying the planet. Cowley had listened in on enough atmospheric science meetings to know this world’s storms—while monstrous—were predictable. Electrical storms built up in distinct west-to-east funnels that took a few hours to form. Once committed, a lander’s full descent from orbit took less than thirty minutes. It was easy enough to time a calm interval.

Her sister may have been rash, but she was meticulous. Her brother-in-law even more so. And with a child on board—placed in the safest environment imaginable as a precaution—how was it possible they had so severely miscalculated a landing window?

It wasn’t.

There were still pieces of the mystery Senator Cowley couldn’t see, but she was certain of one truth.

The ship did not crash.

It had been destroyed.

* * *

“How do you know that?” asked Tung.

Senator Cowley explained what she’d found—and didn’t—in the logs.

“We came to the same conclusion from different evidence.”

He pulled up a map of the native complex and pointed to a long, low building, half sunk into the ground, at the heart of the settlement.

“Geo-position data from the logs confirm the *Bellerophon* touched down safely right there. That’s a plateau on top of a huge iron vein. We think it was selected for them.”

“Selected?”

“In orbit, your sister transmitted a series of sequential radio pulses intelligent creatures would recognize as not random. She received a patterned response sent directly from that spot. There’s no linguistic content, but it seems like a clear invitation to land.”

Tung zoomed out, showing the complex and the surrounding terrain. A second image appeared next to it with only forested hills.

“That was taken by your sister. It’s this area as it was seven years ago. Compare that to the view from our orbiter today. All new construction. They built this entire complex around the ship.”

“How did they destroy it?”

“Lightning is my guess,” said Tung. “They lured it to land on a giant natural conductor. The *Outreach*’s orbiter crew has reported colossal strikes near big cities to structures running deep into the ground. They know how to use lightning rods very well.”

“Could a bolt of lightning destroy a ship?”

“Typically, no. But conditions on this world are unique. There’s ionization so extreme here that it could generate literally hundreds of strikes in seconds. All they’d have to do is create enough ground differential and they could call down a machine gun of lightning bolts, spear-point surface-of-the-sun temperatures, over and over. It only has to pierce one plasma tank, and that’s it.”

“So the aliens are hostile,” said Cowley.

“We’re the aliens,” said Cho. “Perhaps they felt they had one chance to stop an invasion.”

Cowley turned on him. “You’re defending them? They lured a single ship to a deathtrap! That’s not the action of a peaceful race. That’s the work of savages. Savages!”

The room went quiet. Cowley beheld the stunned faces of Tung, Cho, and Borissen—felt the stares of silent crew all around.

“No more! No more technological espionage!! No more cloak-and-dagger diplomacy. I want to know where my sister’s child is! Now! We go in and get it. Whatever it takes! NOW!”

No one moved as the echo of her voice died in the corridors. She felt heat flush in her face—her anger starting to give way to humiliation—but her long experience with the unrepentant machinations of politics told her this was not the moment to apologize.

“I agree,” said Tung softly.

Cowley looked over. Tung’s expression was taut with challenge, but he simply summoned an image on the large monitor.

“In the assembly hall, our microwave recorders were blocked by shielding in the walls. But a thermal scan showed this.”

Cowley recognized the ornamentation in the dome, rendering in a translucent digital sketch. Behind what was apparently a window, formed in a spectrum of yellow-green, was the ghostly silhouette of a human figure, fingers splayed against the glass.

“This is a small outpost,” said Tung. “But reinforcements from other islands could arrive at any time. If we wait, we could lose what advantage we have.”

He shifted image to show a storage hold with drones unpacking themselves.

“An armed team stands ready to go, Senator. On your command.”

* * *

“How many?” asked Minister Geddek.

“Three ships,” replied a technician. “Two approaching the main harbor, one circling around to the northern shores.”

“Are they armed?”

“They are battleships, Minister, with full platform guns. They do not, as yet, seem to be powered.”

“And you’re sure they’re ours?”

“They are emitting the signals of our capital.”

“At least it’s our own nation,” said an aide. “We can negotiate favorable terms.”

“You don’t have much experience with negotiation, do you?” said Geddek.

The words had barely left his mouths when a frantic guard barreled into the room.

“Minister! The aliens are attacking the complex!”

Geddek blurted an undignified, “What?”

“They arrived at the border in a flying craft. They are now on foot, along the central thoroughfare. There are ten. The three who came before and others. They walk like the aliens but emit very powerful signals. We believe they are machines, weapons of war.”

“Have they harmed anyone?”

“Not yet, Minister. But they continue to advance and they have a . . . a swarm.”

“A swarm?”

“Insects or small flying creatures. They precede and surround them. Our instruments fail as they draw close.”

Minister Geddek contemplated the current predicament. Battleships from his own people on one side. Invaders from the stars on the other. This was shaping into a most rare and momentous day.

Greatness is founded upon such days, he thought.

“Should we arm and resist, Minister?”

“No. Let the come.” He turned to the aide. “Let’s give them what they want.”

“What is that?”

“The child, of course. Bring the nurse to me at once.”

“Yes, Minister. And what of the capital’s ships?”

“We give them what they want, as well,” said Geddek. “We give them the aliens.”

* * *

Tung, Cho, and Senator Cowley stood at the entrance to the domed building housing the assembly hall. They were surrounded by half a dozen combat drones walking spryly on two legs—lithe as gymnasts, armored like tanks. In the air around them hovered hundreds of miniature robots, whirring softly on tiny aeroprops. Some sought out and neutralized electrical signals, while the bulk remained overhead, forming a canopy over the party with a net of fine filaments capable of conducting lightning safely into the ground. The sky overhead was clear—the next storm tracking hours away—but no one was foolhardy enough to feel impervious.

Cowley was wondering if they would need to cut through the door, when it rolled aside.

“A trap?” she asked Tung.

He shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe they learned their lesson the first time.”

Cowley started to nod, then caught herself. “What lesson? They successfully lured and destroyed a spaceship.”

“And a bigger one came. Wisdom is acknowledging one’s mistakes.”

Cowley saw his sidelong glance, the hint of smile. In it, she recognized the accountability due to her outburst, and an offer of forgiveness. She put her hand on his shoulder.

“Shall we take the risk?” she asked.

“It’s why I do what I do,” he replied.

* * *

The intercom in Hopper’s habitat chirped a signal Betta had been anticipating: she was being summoned to Minister Geddek.

“Hopper, come here.” She spoke softly, but with a pulse of urgency she hoped that Hopper could somehow understand. It did, moving quickly to her side.

Betta rolled back the habitat door halfway and called out.

“Dedara. Prush. There’s something wrong with the display.”

The technicians shuffled in.

“What is it?” asked one.

“The control won’t move and the light is flickering.”

“I told you it was failing,” said Prush.

Dedara buzzed annoyance. “You did not. When?”

The two bickered as they walked over to the panel. Betta nudged Hopper out of the door, then, rolled it shut and pushed in the exterior bolt.

“Now! Come with me,” she said to Hopper. They quickly moved along the tunnel. Betta turned back once to see Dedara and Prush peering from the port window, radiating bewilderment. She turned a corner, resolved to never again look back.

“Where are we going?” asked Hopper.

“Somewhere safe,” she answered. Betta knew a way outside of the complex through the maintenance tunnels. Beyond that, well, she would think of something.

“I can’t see.”

“Put your hand on me,” said Betta. “I can feel the walls. Stay close.”

They wound through the dark corridors, Betta navigating by her sense of current conducting inside the walls. Those lines would lead them to the main generator room. There was a utility entrance that opened to outside. No one would be watching it. There was no reason to. It would be empty.

Please, let it be empty.

The overhead lights in the tunnel flared. Two guards stood in the distance. They advanced toward her, bearing discharge arrays on their backs. The weapons could cause death. Or simply pain. They were inactive, but Betta sensed their batteries humming with full charge.

Hopper is fast, thought Betta. Hopper can get a way. If I push one guard into the other, the weapons will misfire. I can dig my toes into their eyes. I can throw my body against the emitters. They can kill me, but Hopper will escape. Hopper will get a way. Hopper will ...

The guards parted, and Minister Geddek stepped between them.

“It’s time for you and the child to come with me.”

“No, Minister.”

“What was that?”

Betta was trembling with fear. She had never defied the minister before. She wondered if anyone ever had.

“I will not let you take the child,” said Betta.

Where Betta had expected anger, Geddek only pulsed sympathy.

“Nurse Betta, I can understand your attachment, but you must understand the urgency of the circumstance.”

“Can’t you understand? This is the only home Hopper has ever known. You can’t surrender to strangers like this. It’s wrong. It’s cruel! I won’t let you. I won’t!”

Betta’s body vibrated rage and despair. Loyalty. Loyalty and obedience. These were the principles of her people. She was raised in them. She believed in them. And at this moment, she despised them.

“Cruel?” said Geddek softly. “Do you wish to know what cruelty is? A vessel from another world called to us—an astounding opportunity for learning—and I was given the order to deceive it, to destroy it. I followed those orders against my conscience.”

Geddek faltered. He radiated an emotion Betta had never sensed from him before. Shame.

“For my loyalty, I was given the right to scavenge the wreckage, to sift through pieces of the most magnificent thing I had ever seen, knowing I was the cause of its destruction, the death of its pilots. When we found in that wreckage one surviving thing, I was ordered to kill it.”

Betta’s heart gripped.

“That order, I disobeyed,” said the minister. “I transmitted a falsehood then gathered to me those I believed I could trust. For the most part, I think I chose wisely.”

Geddek reached out his feelers and touched Betta’s, a familiarity he had never offered in years past.

“Cruelty, Nurse Betta, is fate’s indifference to whether you do right or wrong. Now, the force of from our home shores closes in to finish where I failed—and strangers from the stars return to claim what I took from them.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why destroy explorers from beyond our world?”

“Because they are not the first,” said Geddek. “It is mostly legend, but there is evidence, shared only among our most learned orders. A hundred generations ago, beings descended from the skies, possessed of vast knowledge and power. And they brought upon our ancestors

enslavement and slaughter. It is, truth be told, a tale many, including myself, had dismissed as myth—until Hopper’s people arrived.”

Geddek lowered his head in a gesture of resignation.

“In my folly, I thought I could keep and exploit the last survivor of the strangers’ craft. That only brought more upon us. Now, our people rush to destroy them, but I believe the cycle will only repeat. If there is a chance to save us, it is for Hopper to return to its people and them to leave before ours arrive.”

Betta had no argument to offer in protest. All she could manage was to return the minister’s touch and whisper, “Please.” A word of ache and longing, the only thought she could form.

“I’ll go,” came Hopper’s voice behind her.

Hopper squatted and touched her feelers with one hand, then put out the other to Geddek’s.

“I’ll go with them,” it repeated.

* * *

The electrical dampening had put out all lights inside the natives’ building. The drones cast a blue glow, filling the corridors with shadowless luminescence. Cowley marched in the middle of the formation, expecting an ambush at every turn. When they approached the auditorium entrance—just as the front gate had—the door rolled away.

Inside, the aerobots swelled to fill the space, quivering like stars against the arched ceiling. They amped up their illumination and the raiding party walked down the center aisle where, just a day before, they’d been welcomed as ambassadors.

On the opposite wall, a smaller door slid open. Several natives entered. To her eye, the creatures were impossible to distinguish, except some wore braids of shiny fabric draped over their broad backs. They seemed obvious emblems of status, and the one with the most elaborate set, the obvious leader. It now approached, flanked by others who bore devices on their backs. Tactical had identified them as weapons and, although neutralized, the wearers crouched down and let them roll to the floor in an unmistakable gesture of disarmament.

The drones parted, Tung and Cho dropped back, and Cowley stepped forth alone to meet the native leader. Standing, its head only came up to her knees, yet it bent forward in a deep, prostrate bow. Cowley knelt, then bowed fully as well, touching her forehead to the floor before sitting back on her legs—an imitation of the squat she’d seen the natives do.

Again, the door in the far wall opened. Into the room walked another native with a human by its side.

In the cool blue light, Cowley saw the pale, naked girl. Scrawny, but not malnourished. Clean, but with a riot of uncombed hair. Walking tall, but her fingers holding the thin tentacle-whiskers of the creature by her side. She took small steps to sync with the short-legged stride of her companion.

The native stopped, and the girl continued. She came forward, fear and resolve blended in her eyes. She knelt, bowed, then squatted and said in a sing-song, nursery-rhyme voice:

“He-llo moth-er.”

Susan Tristam Cowley—first-tier Senator of the Allied Human Territories, who had breathed the air of a hundred worlds and ventured farther than all but a handful of the trillions of souls spawned on planet Earth—beheld a little girl with her dead sister’s face and wept like an infant.

Hopper was startled by the mother-creature’s reaction. Tears that had always meant pain or sadness seemed to have a different meaning here. It reached out long arms and fingers and pulled Hopper into an embrace, and they cried together. Soon, the mother pulled away and said:

“Can you . . . *something-something*.”

“Can you . . . ?” Hopper repeated the sounds, projecting the question. It took a few more tries back and forth before they hit upon the word “talk.”

“Yes, I talk,” said Hopper.

The mother made some more sounds. Hopper imitated and questioned until the phrase “who take care” emerged from the exchange.

“Betta take care of me.”

Hopper called over Betta. The mother said Betta's name, making such a mess of it Hopper could not help but laugh. They sounded out the word together until the mother got it almost right.

"Tell Betta thank you," it said.

"It says, 'Thank you' to you," Hopper said to Betta.

"Say 'you are very welcome,'" replied Betta.

Hopper turned to the mother and said: "Betta says you are welcome a lot."

"You can communicate with them?" Minister Geddek asked.

"A little bit."

"Tell them there is danger coming, and they must leave in their ship right away."

Hopper struggled for the words. "Trouble. Big trouble and hurt. Near. Coming. Will be here soon."

The mother seemed confused. Hopper tried repeating but couldn't find a way to say it more clearly. The mother spoke to its people, then held up a picture slate that shimmered with light. It showed an outline, an island in the sea, with lines and dots all over. Hopper could make no sense of it.

Minister Geddek nudged forward and the mother showed him the slate, pointing to the dots.

"Is this trouble?" it asked Hopper.

"It wants to know if those dots are the trouble you're talking about."

"Tell it yes," said Geddek.

Again, the mother spoke to its people, then took Hopper's fingers in its hand and said: "We must go."

* * *

As Commander Tung watched Senator Cowley bawl, he was grateful all eyes were on the reunion so no one noticed him dab away a few tears. He was interrupted by Borissen's voice in his earpiece.

"Commander, we have an issue. Look at your monitor."

Tung unfolded his display and saw a satellite photo.

"What am I looking at?" he asked.

"That's the island chain the complex is on. Those wedges you see converging are heavy seagoing vessels, each with over a hundred natives. They appear to be stocked with all kinds of electrical discharge weapons and we're guessing those big things on the decks are magnetic projectile accelerators."

"Battleships?"

"Notice of our arrival must have been more extensive than we thought."

"How soon?"

"Two are already at the mouth of the main harbor. The third seems to be circling to the opposite side of the island. Hundreds more creatures could be at the complex in a few hours, but I'm guessing we're already the range of those big guns."

"Can the ships be neutralized?"

"The weapons, maybe. But not the personnel. Barring lethality, that is."

"What's the consensus?"

"Departure. At least to orbit."

Tung heard the girl's babyish voice say "Big trouble." He called over Cowley and Cho and showed them the monitor tracking the natives' advance.

"Ask her if this is what she meant."

Cowley took the monitor and showed it to the girl. She tried to explain, but it was, unsurprisingly, like talking to a three-year-old. Cowley then turned to the native with the braided sash. After it had some *pop-click* exchange with the girl, the girl clearly said:

"Yes, this is trouble."

"That settles is," said Tung. "We need to go. Senator, tell the girl we need to go."

"She's coming with us," said Cowley.

"That's glorious but we need to go before—"

There was a rumble like distant thunder and Tung felt vibrations from the floor.

“What was that?” he asked loudly.

“They fired,” said Borissen in his ear. “One of the ships launched a projectile that hit the hills just above the complex.”

Tung felt a second rumble-vibration.

“And another,” said Borissen. “That was the second ship. It hit almost exactly the same spot.”

“That’s opposite of where we parked, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. We’re completely on the other side of the complex.”

“So either two lousy shots at us, or two perfect shots not at us.”

“What does that mean?” asked Cowley.

“Good question.” He knelt down, showing the screen to the girl and the head native. Speaking slowly and pointing, Tung said to the girl, “Ask him why your ships shoot there?”

The girl relayed the message. She had a rapid-fire conversation with the leader that sounded like a bucket of ball bearings dumped down a flight of stairs.

“He says because he told lies,” said the girl.

“What lies did he tell?”

Pop-pop crak klik blub pep-pep.

“He lies about me.”

Bib-pop bubbub

“And about you.”

“Are your people trying to hit our ship?”

Klik-plop bika bika-tik buh-lup

“Yes.”

“But our ship is here. Why do they shoot here?”

Brap-bub-plip buka-til lok-tep-klik

“Because he lied about where you are.”

“Why do they want to hurt our ship?”

Crik thub frt buh-peck ticka dock ful luf gek

“They want another one. A broken ship is a whole lot rich.”

“Do you have our broken ship, the *Bellerophon*?” asked Tung.

The girl’s eyes went wide, but she relayed the message without delay.

The leader turned toward Tung and bobbed its head once, a clear “Yes.”

“Can you take us to it?”

“Why do you want to see that now?” asked Borissen.

“I have an idea,” replied Tung. “And I’ll need you for it so get here. Quickly.”

* * *

It took Borissen three minutes to prep a skiff, six minutes of flight time, and ninety-seconds of sprinting through the corridors to join the others in the amphitheater. Two guards reacted to her arrival with startling speed, rolling like pill bugs to get their bodies in front of the gold-robed leader. So far, she’d only seen remote images of the creatures. Up close, they were like dark, prehistoric beasts—leathery ankylosaurs that moved with the grace of otters. She stood, fascinated.

“Come on,” said Tung as he grabbed her elbow and tugged her. They followed some of the natives through a tunnel, descending through a twisty labyrinth, until the corridor opened to a vast warehouse. All around, dangling from scaffolding and wires, were fragments of the *Bellerophon*.

Half a dozen of the native creatures stood nearby, staring at her.

“Ask if they have this,” said Tung to a naked little girl Borissen realized—in a thunderous revelatory flash—to be Cowley’s niece. He showed her an image of the primary navigation console. The girl made a racket of drumbeat sounds with her mouth, and the creatures converged. Tung carefully held the monitor so each in turn could see.

The natives led them up a ramp to a frankensteined reconstruction of the panel.

“Does it work?” Tung asked Borissen.

ANALOG

“Um,” said Borissen.

“Can you use it to contact the space frame?”

“Uh, I don’t . . . um . . . I mean . . .”

Borissen crouched and examined the panel. It had been cut into pieces and gutted, its innards spread between. But everything seemed connected, with a network of silvery strips contrived into something resembling an oversized circuit board.

“They say it works,” said the girl. One of the natives stepped on a panel, and the console came alive, system readouts sputtering on scarred monitors.

Borissen tested the controls. It had been jerry-rigged with brilliant creativity and screamingly wrong assumptions. But enough of the central interface survived to give her a partial status inventory and queue up a handshake command. A weak signal managed to piece the sky and echo off the *Bellerophon*’s orbiting space-frame, three hundred kilometers straight over their heads.

“I have it,” said Borissen, more than a little amazed.

“Good,” said Tung. “Bring it down. Right where they shot before.”

“What are you doing?” asked the Senator.

“They want another one of our ships. Let’s give them one.”

“The space frame?” asked Cho.

“Why not?” replied Tung. “The *Outreach* has a fully staffed sister orbiter, but the *Bellerophon* was a scout ship. Its orbiter is just a big empty shell for wormhole travel, with a few automated systems and thrusters. Let them have it as a prize and think it was us.”

Catching on, Borissen said. “You want me to remotely pilot a space frame to a controlled crash?”

“I know you enjoy a challenge.”

Chief Excursion Technician Karen Borissen stood in a secret hangar on a foreign world before a smashed control panel with an audience staring at her in expectant silence. Commander Tung. Dr. Cho. Senator Cowley. Alien creatures with inscrutable expressions. And a naked girl.

“I’ll give it a go.”

* * *

Cowley leaned in with the crowd around Tung’s monitor as they watched as images relayed from orbit showing the *Bellerophon*’s filigree space frame smack into a hillside and tumble like a broken kite.

“Nicely done,” said Tung.

“I can’t take credit,” Borissen replied. “The *Outreach* orbiter crew ran the calculations and pushed it to descend. All I did was activate some deceleration thrusters.”

“I think the locals will have a fine time picking through the pieces,” said Cho.

Cowley crouched down to her sister’s daughter, pointed to the fabric-draped leader and said, “Tell him it worked.”

The girl did so. Cowley thought she heard patterns in the exchange similar to ones she’d heard earlier. Language beginning to declare itself.

“He says thank you.”

“Tell him we must go now.”

Again, an exchange. “He says yes you must.”

The one named Betta pushed up to the girl. They conversed, the discussion growing more rapid, more heated. Betta leaned its body against Cowley. The creature’s broad back was firm and leathery, with a mist of fine hairs bristling as if in a static charge.

“She wants to go too,” said the girl.

“She can’t,” answered Cowley.

“She wants to come a lot. With me.” The girl wept as she spoke.

Cowley looked into the inscrutable black rectangles of Betta’s eyes. Betta lifted a set of thin tentacles dangling near its mouths and held them up, waving like sea grass in a gentle tide. Cowley reached out, and the feelers threaded through her fingers. Its mouths made a string of soft clicks.

“She will go with you,” said the girl.

Cowley turned to Tung. For the first time since she'd known him, he seemed indecisive.

"The pathways to this world may close," was all he said.

"If she comes with us, she can never come back here," said Cowley to the girl.

"She knows," the girl replied. "She says she wants to go again."

Tung turned to Cho, hands spread in bewildered appeal.

"It's not unprecedented," said Cho. "Personally, from an intelligent species we may never have the chance to visit again in my lifetime, I'd love to have an ambassador. But that's pretty damn selfish of me. Otherwise, this world is lost to us."

"I'll stay."

Cowley looked to see Chief Borissen squatting among the natives.

"I'll stay," she repeated. "What they've done here is incredible—" she gestured to the cobbled wreckage around the room, "But all wrong. They need help. They obviously know how to care for a human, and I have a working ansible. Even if the pathways close, I'll never be out of touch."

For the second time in her acquaintance, Cowley saw Commander Tung appear at a loss.

"You can't . . . seriously . . ."

"I applied to the scout fleet years ago," she said, then nodded to Cowley, "Just like your sister. There's a very long waiting list. Here's my chance to jump the line. The prime human liaison to a new species. My own chapter in the history books. No way I'm letting that go."

Her face tightened to a subversive smile. "Besides, I won't be alone," she said. "I've already talked it over with one of the orbiter crew. Navigation Engineer McBride agreed to stay if I did."

"McBride?" asked Tung. "Which one is that?"

"The cute one."

Cho actually laughed.

* * *

With an army of natives en route, goodbyes were swift. Through the girl, Tung and Cowley managed to craft a story with the leader. The aliens arrived and mounted an invasion of the complex. Acting in defense, the natives transmitted the location of the alien craft, and it was destroyed by a volley from the battleships. The wreckage from this second vessel would be brought to the complex, and from its autopsy would come even more profitable discoveries—all licensed exclusively to the capital shores, of course.

Even with the stunted translation, Cowley could tell this leader was a shrewd operator. The girl had pronounced the name as something like "*geh'duhDUH-eck*"—all stuttering glottals and stops—and it seemed to hold a level of authority somewhere between feudal lord and university dean. This philosopher-king Geddek seemed well-pleased with the outcome, and the native technicians surrounding Borissen were all but ecstatic. They babbled excitedly as they showed her images on some kind of light projector with pages from a child's alphabet book.

Cowley, Tung, Cho, Betta, and the girl rode in the skiff back to the lander. The armored and aerial drones stayed behind at Borissen's disposal. Just in case.

As the lander ascended, they tracked the descent of McBride's shuttle. When they cleared the atmosphere, Cowley activated a monitor wall and squatted—hand-in-hand and hand-in-feelers—between Hopper and Betta. Together, they watched the indigo-and-ivory swirled planet recede against the star-pricked blackness of space.

"That is my home?" asked the girl.

"Yes," replied Cowley. "The home where Betta took care of you. Come with me, and I'll show you both new, amazing places."

"What's 'amazing'?"

"It means something that makes you feel surprised and happy about how big the world is," she replied. "Both of you are amazing to me."

Betta said something.

"She asks did you know my mother?"

"She was my sister."

"Betta says she's sorry."

ANALOG

“Tell her thank you. I remember my sister, your mother, when we were children and she first heard about the exploration fleet. The chance to travel to other worlds, to meet new people. It was all she ever dreamed about her whole life. You—both of you—are the fulfillment of her dream.”

“What’s ‘fulfillment’?” asked the girl.

Senator Cowley draped one arm over her niece’s shoulders and lay the other across Betta’s back, feeling a tingle of static. In the screen, the *Outreach*’s orbiter came into view, a wireframe bird’s nest opening to embrace them.

“This,” said Cowley. “This is fulfillment.”

Matt McHugh was born in suburban Pennsylvania, attended LaSalle University in Philadelphia, and after a few years as a Manhattanite, currently calls New Jersey home. Website: <http://mattmchugh.com>.