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They Toil Not

Waking up in an unfamiliar place, it can be hard to remember where you are. Elwin Sinclair saw dim red indicator lights. Was he in a strange hotel? Or some high tech bar room after a lively night? He was on the floor, and he felt like he'd been slugged.

Memory flooded back, and he closed his eyes against it. He was in the control room of his wrecked space ship. The one intact cabin in the whole pile of sudden scrap.

They'd hit the atmosphere with that awful noise. For a split second it was a whisper which exploded into a shuddering, bone-jarring thunder. There'd been the sharp crack that could only be tanks ripping away. Iris had managed to fight the ship into a gliding fall, so when they smashed and scraped along the ground, one room stayed sealed.

And then, after a few seconds gulping in shock that they were still alive, they found out that they weren't. They were just two dead losers walking.

They'd lost two water tanks. That was okay. There was water on this planet. What there wasn't was air, not real air. Just methane. The four other tanks they lost were all oxygen. The oxygen distiller and the rebreather were jagged pieces of junk. They had three weeks of oxygen in one reserve tank. That was it.

Three weeks. The fastest possible rescue ship would arrive in two months.

Well, at least they would die together. He wondered whether that would make it better or worse.

For thirty desperate, sleepless hours after the crash, they'd cobbled together fixes for leaking liquids and broken everything. He knew he couldn't have said why they were bothering, and he didn't ask Iris. They just went through the motions like automatons, until they could finally lay their bone-weary bodies down on makeshift pallets and sleep.

Ironically, there was oxygen on this stinking hellhole of a methane planet. They'd managed to make one low-resolution scan during their careening descent, and the map showed some kind of oxygen in odd, scattered patches.

Probably silicate rocks. Without the distiller it wouldn't be a bit of good, but fussing with rocks could at least give them something to do for the next three weeks besides think about ... things.

No complaints. No regrets. It was the first rule of emergency survival.

Something scraped against the outside of the thin, buckled wall of the control room. Elwin stopped breathing. There was plant life down here. The scan had told them that much. Plants didn't scrape walls. Or they better not.

He took a breath, carefully. There couldn't be any animals here. Methane atmospheres supported blobs of cells at best. Traces of hydrogen sulfide made the air thoroughly revolting, but that didn't change anything. There couldn't be things that scraped at doors.

It scraped again.

On the other hand, truth could be as strange as it pleased. It was only fiction that had to be realistic. Which meant there was an animal out there. If it was an animal. There was an eerily purposeful feel to the tapping and scraping noises coming from the ruined cabin.

Carefully, so as not to wake Iris, he got up, and silently struggled into the tough, recalcitrant skin of his envirosuit. Not waking someone was the kindest thing anyone could do at this point. Besides, she'd been knocked about badly in the crash and he was enough of a medic to know that she absolutely had to sleep. His fingers worked the fasteners. He attached a breather tank and braced himself for the smell of rotten eggs that no filter could seem to keep out. He snapped the clear globe of the helmet into place.

The jury-rigged airlock opened toward the smashed cabin. Elwin didn't move. He looked everywhere. Nothing moved. Slowly, he stepped out. Starlight shone through the hull breach. There seemed to be nothing there but twisted bunks, broken cabinets, and sharp, ripped metal. His stunner was on maximum, enough to kill an elephant. His eyes hunted through every corner and crevice.

Then something walked across his boot.

He leaped and swallowed a strangled cry. It had far too many legs. It was shiny black. It was as long as his arm. It was swivelling some of its many eyes at him. He froze.

He shifted stealthily to point the stunner at it, when suddenly it vanished through the crack and away.

He moved toward the gaping hole in the hull to make sure it was really gone. Thousands of stars almost close enough to be suns blazed in the sky, lighting the bleak landscape like several full moons. An endless rolling plain of black rock stretched to the dim horizon. Ghostly mists twined above shallow depressions holding dark water reflecting the glaring stars. Not for one minute, one second, would they let him forget how close to the galactic center he was--and how far from rescue. Elwin stood there, looking at the empty, deadly world, searching for monsters hidden in the dim blue light.

Surrounding every pond and puddle, and sprouting from each damp crevice were diseased-looking growths like overgrown lichens. At one of these growths,

he spotted starlight glinting off a jointed carapace. It was the huge centipede again, moving as it took a bite of a purplish plant and still swivelling its eyes. Looking at it more closely, Elwin saw the small mandibles working the plant. The monstrosity ate plants. Nonetheless, he made no move. If he knew anything about ecology, there would be carnivores around to feed on the herbivores.

He barricaded the hull breach with more wreckage, then maneuvered back through the flimsy lock, struggled out of his suit, and eased himself gratefully back onto his pallet.

When he woke, a whole night's worth of sleep later, it was high noon in the long twenty hours of daylight.

Iris was still asleep. The medic in him was glad. The human being in him had to sit on his hands to keep from waking her and reassuring himself.

He was studying their one map, pretending he was doing something, figuring out a route to the closest patch of oxygen, when he heard her stir in a way that didn't sound like sleep.

He turned and saw that her beautiful sea-green eyes were open and that his Iris, his love, was with him again. In an instant he lay beside her, holding her, his face buried in the curve of her neck.

"Iris, Iris, Iris."

"Winner," he heard her breathe.

For a second, nothing else mattered. For a second, it felt like everything might be all right. Maybe there was a reason why lovers made the best exploration teams. Then he wondered what they were going to do about her nickname for him.

He pulled back a bit, looked at her brown skin, and stroked her white hair glinting like spun silver with red highlights from all the hysterical indicators. She touched his black cheek as if she'd never seen him before either.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Much better, I guess. Instead of being pleased I'm alive, I'm starting to worry about what this is going to do to our balance sheet for the year."

Elwin returned her wry smile. They both knew exactly what she was doing: being encouraging. As if they had to worry about this year or any other year. God, he'd missed her during those long hours of silence.

"I've been looking at the map," he said. "There's some kind of oxygen about five kilometers away."

She didn't say anything about how pointless it was without a distiller.

"They say angels watch over fools and drunkards. Maybe we'll be lucky."

They packed rope, food, water, and their only portable NMR, damaged in the disaster. The boxy little thing could no longer identify complicated molecules, but plain oxygen should be within its scope.

"Hey," said Iris, hefting her pack, "that's way too light. You forgot my water."

"No. I've got it. Now get your pack on."

"I'll be okay, Winner," she said gently. "I've got a headache and a bit of a left-

over concussion I think, but that's it."

He shook his head.

"Get your pack on. Don't think that just because you're the skipper, you can get out of following medical orders."

They set off across the blazing noonday landscape. The methane sky glowed electric blue under a fierce, hard, violet-tinged sun. Neither of them looked at the long gash in the ground with their poor, broken ship at the end. They walked through rubbery shrubs and past stagnant ponds on the rolling black plain. Bits of lava broke off underfoot and made the going treacherous no matter how musically it clinked in the ear mikes. Sometimes they could see shiny exoskeletons reflecting light as animals slunk through the growths and pastured around ponds.

"Most of the animals must be nocturnal," said Elwin, making conversation against the engulfing silence of the place. "You see a lot more at night."

Iris nodded. "Probably getting away from the daytime radiation flux." Suddenly she turned toward the closest pond. "What was that?" She walked over to it. "Look!"

The pond was full of shiny blobs. Little ellipsoid bubbles ringed with eyes swam through the water.

"How many eyes have they got!" Iris exclaimed. "Hold still, you. I'm trying to count."

"Seven," said Elwin, kneeling down at the side of the pond to get a closer look. One of the critters shot a tentacle out from a slit between two of its eyes and tried to sample him, making him jump back.

"Fast little blighters. They're almost cute, aren't —"

And then he leapt even further back as a meter-long grazer with about fifty legs ambled up and tested his boot for edibility. It was as shocked as he was and disappeared in a blur of legs.

"Ye gods and little fishes," he said, his breathing echoing loud in both their suit radios, "just when I think I'm starting to get used to the place." He leaned on a thigh-high wineglass-shaped plant, but it was too soft and bent and a mass of jelly blobs spilled out.

He pushed it back upright, and both he and Iris peered into its depths. The remaining whitish egg-shaped blobs had seven closed eyes ringed their middles beneath a thin milky covering.

"Incredible," she muttered. "They must be the young. I wonder how they get out of their wineglass nests and into the water? They must be able to float through the air, at least for a while."

"Look at all those," said Elwin, pointing. The pond was ringed with what he'd thought were plants. The smallest ones were the size of mushrooms, and there were foraging crab-like creatures working on some of the tender young button "plants."

"I guess a lot of them don't make it," said Iris, looking closely at the shoreline. "You know, I think the adults must lay eggs, or whatever, at the edge of the

water, and then when it recedes, they grow into —."

"Ye gods and little fishes," Elwin said again, staring at the NMR. He'd pointed it at the water to see how much dissolved oxygen it had.

"What?" said Iris looking up from the embryonic jellyfish-like blobs.

"They're oxygen. Those critters. They're half oxygen. They must store the stuff since there isn't any to breathe. They'd blow up if you set a match to them."

Iris rocked back on her heels.

"Holy cow I wonder if there'd be any way to get the oxygen out"

"Chop them into bits and let them disintegrate?" Elwin didn't really believe it himself.

"Can you imagine the smell ... ?"

They were completely absorbed, heads bent together over the NMR, when the thing leaped.

Elwin screamed.

It looked like a scorpion out of a nightmare. A claw as long as his arm had his leg in a vise grip. He fell. It swung its other claw toward his now accessible neck. Iris lunged toward him, but tripped and fell. She was drawing her stunner as she went down, and as soon as she was on the ground, she shot.

He was struggling to get at his stunner, and Iris was back on her feet in an instant. The thing was huge, bigger even than Elwin. The main part of its body was the size of a large dog's, but held almost to the ground on jointed legs that steepled up. It did not like the stunner, and waved its free claw around, ready to deal with this new threat. Meanwhile it raked its straight, pointed, vicious-looking tail over the ground, as if it might suddenly arch it and sting.

Elwin finally got his stunner out of its holster and shot the thing, holding the gun against its exoskeleton. At the same instant Iris loosed another charge on it. It jerked visibly, and let go. Elwin scrambled away from it and fired again, followed closely by Iris. It held its ground, waving its horrible claws. It must not find soft prey very often.

With both stunners on maximum, they continued firing until its limbs began to jerk. Finally, it gave up. Crawling backward, making a sinister whispering sound, it hid behind some giant lichen-like growths. They could still make out the shiny bulbs of its faceted eyes as it tracked them, just in case it got another chance at them.

"I am not," said Elwin when his breathing had slowed down enough for him to speak, "going to get off this planet without heart failure." He could hear Iris still panting. "Gods. That was enough of a charge to kill a herd of bison."

"We can hope there aren't any others about," said Iris between gasping breaths. "My stunner's going to take a couple of hours before it's recharged. How could that monster absorb enough juice to burn a house?"

"The exoskeleton probably conducted most of the charge straight to the ground. Good old guns are what we need."

"Yeah, right. And we'd recharge them with what? The year's worth of lead shot we towed in our dinghy?"

"Only real antiques use lead," Elwin said, as they picked their way past groves of things hanging like rags and big enough to hide more of the giant scorpions.

They argued about guns in a mutual attempt to avoid other topics, checked their map, and looked over their shoulders a lot. That was why they almost fell over the edge when they reached it.

"Ye gods," whispered Iris as they knelt at the edge of the chasm, looking down, breathing carefully.

It was wide and filled with fog. Elwin threw a stone down. When they had stopped listening for its impact on the bottom, they heard a faint tick, and then later another, fainter one. It was bouncing on its way down.

Salvation might be five kilometers away, but some of those kilometers were impassable.

"We're going to have to find our way down to get to that oxygen pocket," stated Elwin tonelessly. "Once we process the low-res scan at fog-transparent wavelengths...and squeeze enough 3D information out of it to see canyons, we'll probably be able to find a way down."

"We also need a way up," Iris pointed out.

Yes, that was true. That thought had occurred to him.

"And once we get there, for all we know, it's just a mass of those jellyfish. It may not be worth the risk."

It definitely wasn't worth the risk. But it was something to do.

"We can give it a try," said Elwin, staring at the impassable gorge. "I doubt it could be jellyfish. They wouldn't show up on a low-res scan. It has to be something a lot bigger." He was the medic, biologist, and chemist of the duo. And he put on his envirosuit in the middle of the night when someone had to check for burglars. Iris did physics, math, and navigation. And moral support. Which made her the captain.

"That makes sense," she said. "Oxygen is definitely a priority worth lots of risk. If the track gets too steep, we can always go back."

Just five bloody K, he was thinking. Just on the other side —. His eyes suddenly widened.

"Hey. What's that?"

In the distance against the chasm's far wall of gray rock was a drift of pinkish globules floating on the white mist in the fierce light of the sun. There were hundreds of them.

"Let's just hope we've got fully charged stunners when we find out," said Iris. "We better return anyway." She tapped her radiation monitor. "The flux is so high, some of the sensors on the outside of our suits could start frying in another hour or two. We're going to have to travel at dusk."

When they set out again a few hours later, dusk was kinder to their radiation monitors, but more draining to their souls. Depression seeped out of the dark landscape, unrelieved by the neon sky or the arc-welder sun. Eerie growths of molds loomed up in the twilight night, hiding the gods-only-knew-what under their shapeless shreds.

Elwin and Iris walked in silence, carrying fully charged breather tanks and an extra stunner apiece. They could see carapaces rustling the undergrowth everywhere they looked, but the desire to avoid each other seemed to be mutual. It couldn't last, of course. A spider-like animal the size of a serving platter boiled out of a bush and came racing toward them. It was covered in bristles. They could see its eyestalks moving.

They both stopped, lifted their stunners in unison, and – made small strangled noises of shock. From behind, flying barely above their heads, came one of the big globular floaters they'd seen at a distance.

This one was not at a distance. It was bigger than a fuel tank. It stopped, hung in the air, and looked at them with one blue eye as large as their heads.

"Remember," Elwin heard Iris saying very quietly, "the little critters had tentacles. These look a lot like them, and I bet they have tentacles too. Keep your finger on the trigger."

"I'd sort of figured that out myself," he muttered back.

"Well, if you've also figured out how to move away before it can shoot one of those tentacles at us, be sure to tell me."

But they didn't have to figure it out. The enormous balloon creature turned away from them toward the spider. The spider reached as far up as it could, standing on its four back legs. It was almost as tall as Elwin's hip. He could see Iris's stunner, wavering between the huge floater and the awful spider.

Now the floater did stretch out a tentacle. It held something, and the spider ate from its "hand."

Elwin hardly dared to breathe. The spider munched contentedly. When it finished everything in one hand, the floater produced another tentacle with more food. Then it drifted off over the wide plain and dropped into the canyon. That canyon was their goal.

"Wow," was all he managed to say.

They continued on to the chasm, Elwin going first. After about five minutes, Iris said,

"That looked just like feeding squirrels in the park."

He'd been thinking about it as they trudged along.

"It did, but looks can mean anything. It could also have been fattening the spider up for something. Or maybe it's just something those floaters do. Ants feed aphids, you know. It doesn't have to be a sign of intelligence."

"True."

After another five minutes, she added,

"But it sure looked like feeding squirrels in the park. E-ew."

He turned around to see what had caused that sudden comment, and saw

Iris pointing at a decomposing mass of exoskeleton about twenty meters away. Even at a distance, they could see it had been one of the giant scorpions, and they could see that its back had been smashed with a boulder that was embedded where it fell.

"Gods. . . ," he muttered. "There's nowhere for that to fall from." The implication kept expanding like ripples in a pond. He might as well say it out loud. "Something dropped that from a height."

He could see Iris nod.

"You still think those floating things aren't intelligent?" she said.

"It's getting harder. But they don't have to be any smarter than a crow to do something like that."

"Crows are pretty smart," muttered Iris, as they resumed their hike toward the canyon. "And if they were as big as a house, I wouldn't want to be carried off by one."

Elwin stopped abruptly, and he felt Iris bump into him.

"Get your stunner out again," he said flatly. "One of them's coming toward us. And it's carrying rocks this time."

"Uh-oh."

If the thing was smart enough to fly high, it would be outside stunner range, but on the flat plain there was no way to get out of rock range.

However, it didn't gain much altitude. It threw one rock at them from a distance, but whatever it was planning, it missed them. The whole thing was ineffective and odd. The rock rolled almost to their feet. The creature drifted away again.

"This is really bizarre," said Elwin, tracking the disappearing shape. "Maybe that was just some kind of warning shot or display or something. If it comes back with a mass of its buddies, we could be in real trouble."

They stood there for a while, but no more floaters appeared, and Iris suggested they push on. "The sooner we find out if there really is some way to get oxygen, the better."

There was no arguing with that. Their track took them toward a small brook, lined with larger plants, and spilling water over the lip of the cliff. The bottom of the canyon was so far away, there was no noise from the waterfall.

Suddenly a floater four times the size of the first one loomed up over the rim of the canyon. Elwin braced himself for a whole flock, but it was just the one. It didn't seem to be carrying rocks, although he couldn't see its back half, and it didn't do much. It flew at them and away making pinging noises.

Now what?

Elwin had his stunner ready. Iris had her stunner ready. But it just flew back and forth, looking like it was worried about something.

"It's not doing anything," she said. "Let's try moving on a bit. Maybe it'll go away."

It didn't go away. It flew back and forth faster and pinged louder.

"Maybe it's defending territory," Elwin said. "Let's go a bit to the left, and see

if it calms down."

"That'll take us closer to those big plants," Iris pointed out. "Which always seem to have Things in them, around here."

It didn't help, in any case. The floater started ringing like a firebell. They stood still again. Finally, it seemed to become exasperated, and dove toward the filmy shreds of one of the tallest plants.

Everything happened so fast, Elwin only knew what he'd seen after it was over.

The floater shot skywards like a balloon from which the air was suddenly released, and a huge scorpion-monster fell back from its useless leap, clacking its claws in frustration.

Elwin and Iris stepped slowly backward, away from there. The last they saw of the floater, it was much smaller than it had been and it eyed them as it dropped back down into the canyon. It was a very meaningful stare.

"You still think they're not intelligent?" Iris finally asked.

"Um, no," he answered. "Not only that, but it looks like that thing saved our lives at the risk of its own."

"I thought you were going to start saying that it's no different from dolphins lifting drowning people."

"Possibly. But dolphins don't carry rocks and feed squirrels. You know, those floating things live in that canyon. Maybe we don't want to go down there till we know more about them."

"That would be good if we could afford it. But our only chance of surviving is to find a source of oxygen, so"

"So we push on."

"That's what I think."

They pushed on. They found the tumbled rocks leading into the chasm, a path the low-res scan hinted might go all the way down.

"No highway," was Iris's only comment.

They roped themselves together and started down. The track got narrower and narrower. The vertical wall on one side and the sheer drop on the other kept closing in on them. The fogs that filled the abyss made seeing harder and harder and the rocks more and more slippery. Night inside the misty chasm was utterly black, and only the image projected onto the globes of their helmets showed the greenly glowing track ahead.

They had been climbing down for about two hours when Elwin began to fear they would have to turn and climb the whole weary way back. The "track" degenerated into slope of steep scree, and the rocks underfoot were already none too steady.

"Looks bad, doesn't it, Iris?"

"Mm. But the track picks up again on the other side. We've crossed worse."

Elwin shook his head, but said nothing. Maybe the planet was sapping his will to struggle on, or maybe they really should turn back. He couldn't tell.

"We'll have to cross at a trot and head up so that we stay level as we slide

down," Iris continued.

Elwin looked at the scree. What if they couldn't trot fast enough and they really started to slide? What if they fell?

It was faster than suffocating to death.

He took up some of the slack in the rope and said,

"OK. You call out the pace."

They set off, sliding with the stones downward but mainly moving forward.

"We better try to climb a bit," said Elwin steadily, "or we'll come out on the cliff below the track." Balance on the sliding rock was too difficult for him to look back, but he could hear her breathing loud in his radio. She stopped calling out the pace. He tried to make sure he didn't go too fast for her. He hoped it wouldn't come to him having to pull both of them. "Just a few more meters, love. Almost there. Keep heading up."

"Get-ting. back. will be. even. more difficult," said Iris between breaths, but her pace did not slow down.

He heaved himself onto a ledge on the other side of the scree and pulled on the rope to help Iris forward. She almost fell onto the ledge, but she reached it.

Suddenly they both felt the rock make a slight jerk.

They looked around, trying not to breathe. No avalanches anywhere. Yet.

Then a sudden, loud ringing noise shredded the silence and two enormous apparitions loomed out of the mist, hanging in space in front of them.

These were as big as the larger one they'd seen, but they seemed even bigger because they were closer. Long, white, writhing tentacles snaked out from the slits between their eyes and ended in smaller tentacles spread out to grab the stranded humans.

"They seem to be smart enough to try to pick us off when we can't run away," said Iris, reaching for her stunner.

Elwin reached for his at the same time.

The rock they sat on made an engulfing grinding sound, broke from the wall, and started sliding down the steep slope.

In that first millisecond of panic, before he could even gasp, the two floaters dove at them, plucked them off the sliding boulder with ropy tentacles, and started falling into the canyon like elevators with broken cables. Iris's scream echoed in Elwin's ears, mixed with his own.

Above them part of the cliff burst into a sheet of flame.

There was nothing below them but thin mist. The tentacles like nylon rope cut into his armpits. Elwin swallowed carefully and tried not to breathe.

The rock they'd sat on burst into its own ball of flame, lighting up the mist with hellfire as it bounced down the slope. Smaller fiery missiles broke off it now and again and started flash fires that were over almost as soon as they started.

The whole chasm was now full of the ringing sound, like a schoolyard with one fire bell per demented student. A bomb exploded with a blast Elwin could feel as well as hear. He realized it must be the rock blowing up when it hit the

ground below. Fragments of flaming destruction lit up the fog. The ringing sounded like screams. Huge spherical floaters jetted up, away from the fires, but almost as quickly disappeared back down again.

Ground could be glimpsed through the mist, coming up lethally fast. The two floaters, much smaller now, compensated by reinflating to slow their descent.

What did they want with him and Iris? Had they saved his life? And hers? Or were they carrying them to a lair?

If the floaters were like the jellyfish, they were half oxygen. In which case it had been incredibly dangerous for them to get that close to the explosive rock and rescue the two humans.

Elwin briefly caught sight of a lake illuminated by will-o'-the-wisp flames dancing all over its surface. His shoulders ached from his weight hanging from the tentacles gripped around his chest. Vague shapes appeared through the mist below: bulbous shapes of large plants, and tall spindly columns covered with little domes.

The domes hadn't grown. They'd been built. They must have been built by the creatures carrying them. Which nailed the question about how intelligent they were. Even he wasn't going to try to argue that this was like termites building mounds. These creatures – beings, he supposed – definitely knew what they were doing. But what *were* they doing?

Floating now at the gentle pace of a landing balloon, they passed over a room-sized version of the jellyfish wineglasses. Inside were small versions of the floaters, eyes closed under the milky covering, just like their animal cousins.

Maybe the balloon beings were taking all this trouble in order to make specimens of them. But if not, and if he and Iris survived, how were they going to climb all those vertical kilometers back up to their ship?

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Elwin felt himself falling. His balloon being had simply let go of him. Iris landed almost on top of him as they both fell into a spongy plant that broke under their weight.

Elwin sank onto the messy stuff like squished mushroom and for a while felt proud of himself just for breathing.

The two floaters disappeared into the mist, making a musical pinging sound.

Apparently the floaters didn't want to eat them or make specimens out of them. Not yet.

There were pools of water and rivulets everywhere, but unlike the high plateaus, vegetation was so thick not a speck of rocky ground was visible. There was no way to see what might be living in or under the plants. Some of them were lichen-like castles of fantastic pipes and disks that could have hid armies of bugs. Others were enormous tub-like growths, except they sprouted tufts and twigs in unpredictable places. Any one of them could have hidden an entire giant scorpion. None of the plants had leaves. Instead, they extruded themselves into unearthly shapes, or formed ghostly sheets and filaments that floated in a breeze no one else could feel. Color in the helmet's night vision was nev-

er good, but all the plants appeared to be reddish or purplish.

"We're both still alive," said Iris.

"Yes," said Elwin.

"They saved our lives."

"Yes," said Elwin.

"The question," he continued after a while, "is why."

There was another silence.

"Did you see those dome-y things?" he asked.

Iris nodded. Her warm face was the brightest thing in the surroundings in the night vision of Elwin's helmet.

"If they've invented houses and engineering, I wonder what else they've done," he said. "I wonder what kind of weapons they've invented?"

"Could be more than rocks. They're not behaving like Stone Age tribesmen who try to kill everything they don't understand." Her voice was cautious with fear that this was bad and hope that it was good.

That was the problem, as far as Elwin was concerned. It could be either. The fear was a side effect of being helpless – he knew that – but that didn't stop it from also perhaps being justified. He changed the subject.

"How about that lake we saw coming down?"

"The burning one?"

"That's probably our oxygen source. I wonder if it explodes every once in a while, when the oxygen builds up. And," said Elwin, getting to the real point, "how often that happens?"

"Why would it explode? It looked just like quietly burning marsh gas to me."

"I expect it is sort of like marsh gas, except in reverse."

"In reverse?"

"Well, instead of bacteria producing a bit of methane for all the oxygen to burn up, I bet this is bacteria making a bit of oxygen which gets used up pretty quick by all the methane around it."

"How could that build up enough to explode?"

"It's a long shot, admittedly."

"In that case, I guess we could go see?" She made it a question as she cautiously explored the underbrush directly in front of her with her boot.

"I guess." The last thing he wanted to do was risk meeting another giant scorpion, and the plants down here were big enough to hide armies of them. Although, now that he and Iris were on the lookout for them, maybe it wasn't as big a problem.

"I have to admit, that scorpion-thing barely scratched the envirosuit. It could have squashed my leg off below the knee, but that's another matter. So, even if it's a mat of tarantulas down there," he peered unhappily at the flat plates of lichenoid in front of him that hid the ground, "all they can do is throw themselves at us."

They stood up and trudged off, pushing through the plants gingerly at first. It didn't take too long before that felt like too much work, and they just walked

through them, leaving a smashed trail behind. The growths were mostly flimsy, like fungus, and they hid nothing worse than grazing things with too many legs. The balloon creatures must have cleared out all the more dangerous animals.

"If we ever get back up there," said Iris after a while, "we could also go back and check those explosive rocks. That had to have something to do with oxygen too."

Neither had mentioned the hopelessness of scaling sheer cliffs. Until now.

"Yeah. Probably silane compounds. You can't get air out of silanes without major equipment. They just explode." After a pause he added, "We seem to be surrounded by oxygen – stinky jellyfish, exploding rocks – and we can't get at any of it. We might as well be Ancient Mariners."

They passed one of the wineglass-shaped "plants," but unlike the little ones by the pond, this one was surrounded by a chest-high fence. They peered over the top, and both recoiled.

At the foot of the wineglass nest lay a decomposing scorpoid monster, its hard, faceted eyes still shining, but its carapace broken by a large hole.

"Whew," whispered Iris.

"Fertilizer, don't you think?" said Elwin equally quietly.

"I guess." She sneaked another look at it. "Maybe that's what they want us for. Maybe big chunks of fertilizer are so hard to find, it's worth picking them off burning rocks."

"Or attacking the most dangerous animal on the planet." Elwin glanced at a nearby cairn of rocks. "Maybe that's what those are for. Ammunition to get fertilizer."

"Could be," said Iris. "Crude but effective." She continued too steadily, "They could pick us up any time and any where, except inside our ship. Maybe they're just letting us walk around until they need us."

"We'd be pretty useless, because they'd have a hard time tearing open the envirosuits," said Elwin. "But they don't know that, of course."

"They might get them open. They're used to things with tough outer shells."

"Oh. Yes."

Uneasily, both humans looked up into the mist. There could be ten floaters up there and they would never know it. "I'll bet they can see through that stuff a lot better than we can," muttered Iris.

A sound like distant bells came through the mist. Elwin and Iris hefted their stunners and pushed their way through the meaty plants even more cautiously. The sound became clearer until the elongated columns of a dome were visible. Seven floaters were holding onto the thin posts, weaving in and out, flying up and down, and chiming as they moved. If they saw the two humans, they gave no sign of it. Their music was breathtakingly beautiful in the same complex way as a forest full of birdsong.

Elwin and Iris edged past, keeping behind plants as much as possible. The hike so far had been easy: flat ground, flimsy plants, and no monsters.

"I wonder what they build those domes for," said Elwin. "The things wouldn't provide shelter with just that tiny roof fifty meters up in the air."

"And the ponds," continued Iris. "Have you noticed the ponds?"

"You mean the edges?" asked Elwin.

She nodded. "They've all got these, well, *artificial*-looking raised edges, like the side of a swimming pool."

"No wineglass nests forming mini-forests either."

She turned and stared at him.

"Are you saying that's not just landscaping? That it's – it's floater *birth control*?"

"Hard to see what else it could be," said Elwin.

"Next, we'll find out they read minds and teleport," muttered Iris.

Evidence of the floaters thinned out. Their spindly domes and their well-tended nests disappeared, but then a pond with several of the beings came into view. Elwin and Iris crouched down behind a many-armed lichen.

There were seven of them, deflated to minimum size so that the ridge running around the widest part of their bodies was wide and curved up. They twirled and circled slowly on the pond, their huge eyes closed. They touched each other along the undersurface of their ridges for as long as their slow dance would allow, and the tempo of their twirling quickened slightly afterwards. They ignored the humans completely.

"If they wanted us for food," Elwin muttered, "they'd need big mouths. I don't see any mouth."

"Doesn't mean they don't have one," Iris pointed out. "You can't see the slits over their tentacles either, when they're closed." And then she added, "Some things just sit on you and secrete digestive juices, don't they?"

Wonderful, thought Elwin.

They could see the lake's fires and smell it, despite their suits' filters. A flatulent giant on a bad diet couldn't have been worse. It was a desolate place. Nothing grew on its banks and it had the blasted, acrid look of a chemical slag pool. The NMR, held near the surface, told them it was indeed exuding oxygen.

They knelt at the shore. As his eyes adjusted to the faint trceries on his helmet, Elwin realized he was seeing small bubbles rising from the lake mud and breaking the surface. A flame suddenly sprang up a few feet away, causing instant whiteout on his whole helmet. It vanished as suddenly as it came. Iris stuck her envirosuited hand into the soup, and scooped a handful of muck from the bottom. That liberated a whole mass of bubbles and started a flame right under their noses. They both rocked back.

"Definitely bacteria," he said. "I'll take a sample. Maybe we can get it to grow on the ship." He wasn't particularly hopeful, and there was no reason why he should be. Even if they could get it to grow, they probably breathed oxygen a lot faster than the bacteria could make it, at least in the few dishes that would fit into the one intact cabin. And the mud would stink worse than shit.

He collected the samples carefully, taking as long as possible, so that he

didn't have to face the moment when the only thing left to do was pretend to go back. He found himself fighting despair again. Their ship was nothing but a slower way of dying, but even that was out of reach. There was a bloody great cliff between them and it. And all they had to show for it was a handful of disgusting mud.

"We should have turned back at that damned scree," he started muttering, as he stowed the vials. "All we've got is glop, bruises, and no way back. Gods, why didn't I —"

"Elwin," said Iris with an edge to her voice, "Finding fault does —"

"— not equal finding a solution." He completed Rule Three for her and added, "I know. But I just keep kicking myself —"

"That's why I'm captain," Iris interrupted. "I send us into things, and then you get us out of them. Except, of course, when you start sitting down on the job." She stood over him, her head on one side and her hands on her hips, in a comically exaggerated pose of displeasure.

"Aye, aye, Captain." He leaped up. "I'll be getting started right away." Then in a more normal voice, "Sorry, I can't tug a forelock through the helmet."

"Feh," said Iris. "The insubordination I have to deal with. Well, carry on."

He smiled a bit. She was always able to make him smile, even if it was sometimes only on one side of his mouth. He returned to business.

"How much air have you got?"

She checked her helmet readouts.

"About thirty hours, give or take five depending on exertion."

"Me too. OK. We'll go toward our side of the chasm and work south along the wall in the general direction of our ship until we see a way up. After four hours, we'll rest and try to sleep in these damn suits, then we'll go for another eight. And so on." He left the end unspoken.

"Sounds like a plan."

They pushed their way through endless, chest-high plants until they saw everything lightening in their night vision, which implied something warmer than mist ahead. Elwin peered through the mist and finally he saw it. It was a wall. They'd reached the cliff, which was so uncompromisingly cliff-like right here, it had to be doing it on purpose. His heart sank. Iris's heart must have done some sinking too because she sat down on the rocky rim next to a pond and said,

"I think I better rest for a while before we start looking for a way up."

Elwin peered toward Iris's face, trying to see if she was all right. She was never the first to rest. But their helmets masked both his worry and the answer to his question.

In silence they trudged south. They thought they found a possible track upward, but it became vertical, and they had to go back down again. They found another, and the same thing happened. They found a third, and again they were back on the canyon floor a couple of hours later and many hours tireder.

They could hear chimes near and far, but nothing pursued them out of the

mist. Finally, they crawled onto one of the toughest kinds of plate-like lichens and sucked on the tubes leading to the nutritious swill in their suits' food reservoirs. Then they slept.

They woke and found the long planetary night was still not done. They trudged again, and finally sat down on the ground, leaning back against back to rest because all the plants there were slimy. Physically they were tired, Iris especially because of her injuries, but mentally they were worn to near-nothing. Facing death with receding hope was more debilitating than anything mere exhaustion could achieve.

They sat there, slumped, when the floaters came back. There were tens of them, possibly hundreds hidden in the mist.

"Oh holy crap," muttered Iris. "We can't shoot them all."

"I'm too tired to shoot them all," muttered Elwin.

The floaters were rising, one by one.

"Wouldn't it be nice to be able to do that," he said, not too tired to feel bitter. It didn't help that some of them would float over to the two humans, ping at them, and then rise.

"What the hell are they doing?" Iris said. "Saying goodbye?"

"Whatever it is, I wish they wouldn't. It feels like they're going 'nyah, nyah,' except it comes out 'ping, ping' in the local dialect." Elwin leaned more heavily on Iris and closed his eyes.

More and more of the floaters rose. None of them did more than ping at the humans, but they were pinging with increasing frequency. That made it sound like they were building up to something. The suspense even more than the noise kept both him and Iris awake.

When there were hardly any floaters left, two huge ones hung around near the humans and pinged so continuously, they sounded like electric bells. Then they floated closer.

"Now what?" said Iris, sitting up straighter so that Elwin lost his balance.

The beings snaked out a few tentacles each.

Elwin sat up straighter. Slowly, he and Iris both unholstered their stunners. The beings came closer, tentacles extended. However, they moved so gradually, it was hard to decide when to shoot. Besides, at the first distress call, hundreds would come swooping down. And there was also something very difficult about shooting a being who was looking straight at you without obvious hostile intent.

When the floaters suddenly snaked out an extra few meters of tentacles and hoisted the humans up by their armpits, it was too late. Shooting the creatures then would have meant a fall to the rapidly disappearing ground.

"Great," said Elwin.

"We're going in the right direction," said Iris.

Yes, but for how long? However, he said nothing. There was not one single, solitary, useful thing to say. He couldn't even point out how nice the view was, because there wasn't any through the fog.

Why were they lifting them? Where were they taking them? It had to take a lot of energy. They weren't going to be doing this for nothing.

Looking at the glistening skin of the floater carrying him, Elwin thought it looked much redder than it had before. He knew he was getting a tad hysterical from exhaustion and stress, but he found himself snickering at the thought of these creatures turning red in the face from working too hard, like some out-of-condition weekend athlete.

"What are you giggling about?" came Iris's voice in his ear mike. He could barely see her and her balloon being through the fog. He jerked his mind away from the thought of what to do should they become separated.

"Oh, just a bit punchdrunk. Mine's turning red."

And then suddenly they popped out of the fog into overwhelming light that turned his helmet black all at once. It was going to take it a minute or two to adjust to such an enormous change. Meantime, he couldn't see anything. He dangled from ropy tentacles by his sore shoulders, kilometers from solid ground, and he couldn't see a thing.

Since it was the worst thing that could happen, he was half-expecting it when it did. The tentacles let go, and he fell.

But not for long. Before he could do more than panic, he landed in a squashy plant, just as his helmet started clearing.

He was on the plateau. Iris was disentangling herself from another messy plant, about ten meters away. The floaters were hanging in space, pinging at them.

"Winner. Could you get your butt over here kinda fast? I need help."

He went from lying there, disoriented, to top speed without even thinking.

"Tank," she said when he reached her. "Seems to be leaking somewhere."

Gods. All they needed was to lose any of their precious oxygen. The floaters hung there, pinging, but he couldn't be bothered with them right now. Rapidly, but never desperately, he searched for the fitting that had been knocked loose in the fall and was now making that quiet, maddening, hissing sound.

The floaters above them were ringing like alarm bells all of a sudden.

"Got it," he said. "Hold still. I'll try to tighten it back up."

It took some doing, with nice flammable oxygen leaking into methane air the whole time, and the floaters ringing and bouncing like maniacs. Finally, he got the connection solid again, the hissing stopped, and the balloon beings floated away.

One of them, the redder one, Elwin now noticed, seemed to be visibly struggling, tentacles writhing. It was turning bigger and pinker by the minute, until the other one grabbed its tentacles to hold it down. It seemed to be towing it back into the canyon.

He and Iris both watched them go, and saw other floaters rise up to help hold the red one down. They held it on the edge of the whole sea of globular creatures, floating as before, basking in the hard light. They were all pinkish now and they all had their eyes closed.

"I wonder why they come up here to sleep," said Iris. "There didn't seem to be any predators down below. You'd think they'd be more comfortable at home, as it were."

"I don't think they're sleeping, love. Or rather, I don't think they're only sleeping. Have you noticed how all the plants here are reddish? There's only one thing they could be doing. They're photosynthesizing."

"They're *plants*? Floating *plants*?"

"No mouths. We didn't see a single garden or farm. They don't hunt. We didn't see any fights, or anything that looked like a territory. It would make sense if they're plants."

"I'll ... be ... damned." said Iris slowly. "I wonder if that's why they lifted us up here. They figured we'd starve to death without light."

Neither Iris nor Elwin said much when they finally got back to the ship, nor when they collapsed to sleep on their pallets.

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Elwin jerked awake. A loud noise of something hitting the hull echoed through the cabin. Rocks, it sounded like. Not pebbles or stones, but whacking young boulders. Life, he said to himself, is just one damn thing after another.

He felt Iris wake from the noise. They stared at each other silently in the soft red cabin glow.

Elwin suited up, armed himself with their most thoroughly charged stunner, and stepped into the airlock. Iris was putting on her suit to follow him.

As he peered through the cracked hull, he could make out ghostly whiteness. He gripped his stunner tightly, edged toward the opening — and drew in his breath. A fleet of blue-eyed balloons out there was throwing rocks. The opalescent skins of the huge creatures glistened all the colors of the rainbow in the starlight. Their eyes were sky blue in the light and deep indigo in shadow. The chimes of the crowd were too melodious to feel threatening. But they were throwing rocks.

A greasy-looking black rock landed almost at his feet. It seemed to sparkle around the edges where it hit the ground. He shook his head, and made a few adjustments to the helmet vision settings. Another rock bounced off the ship, and definitely sparked when it hit the ground.

Come to think of it, if they could hit those scorpions, they could probably hit him if they wanted to. So they must not want to. They were just trying to get his attention.

Well, they'd succeeded.

Iris came out.

His "Could you —" bumped into her "What the —."

"Go ahead," she said.

"Could you get the NMR?" he asked.

"Sure thing." She came out with it a moment later, but when he tried it on one of the greasy rocks, he decided the sensors were fried. It was reading pure oxygen.

He pointed the device at Iris. It said she was mainly water. He pointed it at the ground underfoot, which the machine said had a lot of silica.

"That's funny," he said. "It seems to work on some stuff."

The NMR continued to insist that the rock was solid oxygen.

Solid oxygen didn't exist.

"Elwin," said Iris in an awestruck whisper. "What if it's true? The floaters are throwing those rocks at us. Not just any rocks. Those rocks. There's nothing like that lying around here."

"Yeah," he said. "I know. It doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe it does. They noticed when I got that leak in my tank last night. What if they know what oxygen is and brought us some?"

"That seems far-fetched in all kinds of ways. And why would they do it?"

"I don't know. But they saved our lives when they yanked us off the rock. And they carried us up when they all needed to go up for their 'food.' And that first one risked its life to warn us about the scorpion. It's like they're taking care of us."

"I wonder if they see us as a bigger version of those spiders they feed?"

"I haven't seen them risking their lives for the spiders."

"You know, way back when, yesterday?, there was that one who threw that rock at us. To us, actually, now that I think about it. I wonder if it somehow smelled the oxygen when it flew over us. They must be pretty sensitive to any trace of it, given that they'd explode. I wonder if it was trying to give us oxygen, way back then already?"

"It's amazing."

"Too amazing. They'd have to be chemists to know about oxygen, and big-hearted enough – I mean, do they even *have* hearts? – to put their lives on the line for perfect strangers. People don't even do that with *people*."

"Well, they're not people."

Yes, thought Elwin, but then they were supposed to be worse than people, not better.

"Let's go inside and find out what this rock is. If it really is solid oxygen People have been trying to make that for centuries."

He turned and stepped back through the broken hull, but he didn't hear Iris following. When he looked, he saw her pointing at one of the rocks and making a sort of thank-you bow to the floaters. As if they could understand that.

They were pinging and not throwing any more rocks. They were almost lined up, looking at her.

Maybe he should show some manners too. Who knew what they could understand? He stepped back out and bowed. The pinging rose a bit in pitch and volume, and the floaters bobbed up and down.

"They're imitating us!" cried Iris excitedly. "They're trying to bow! They're trying to speak our language!"

"If you say so," he muttered.

The rock, when they tried to dissolve it in their cabin, away from any methane, proved resistant to everything they tried. Water, alcohol, ammonia, nothing dissolved it. It released a bit of oxygen when it was smashed, but otherwise it held on to every atom of the precious stuff. Elwin tried pulverizing it, but he would have been willing to bet that the effort used more oxygen than it produced.

"Well," he finally said, sitting back, discouraged, "all we have to do is learn how to breathe rock."

"Something breathes that rock," said Iris. "I mean, where is all the oxygen coming from that those jellyfish are storing, and the floaters, and probably every critter on this planet?"

"We know those lake bacteria free up oxygen, probably by breaking it down in some way from the silicate rocks."

"Then why shouldn't those bacteria break down this rock?"

"Oxygen is really toxic, Iris. I can't imagine any form of life that could deal with the pure thing. It'd be like living in a vat of chlorine."

"Oh. I assumed the bacteria made this stuff. If it's not biosynthesized by something unique and weird ... I mean, if it's made by a physical process, you'd think people would have figured out how to make solid oxygen by now."

You would indeed. It had to be the bacteria that made the rock. Or formed it, in any case.

"This must be fossilized oxygen-making bacteria," he said slowly. "The oxygen doesn't kill them, because they're already dead. They store it for their own use in tiny quantities, but the dead ones rain down on the bottom of the lake for billions of years, and the oxygen granules are the only thing that doesn't break down. Finally, you wind up with a whole layer of the stuff. That would make sense."

After a moment, he added, "If they're storing it for their own use, they have to have the enzymes to break it down. They're sure as hell not trying to make rocks."

As he spoke, he pulled his lake mud sample out of the locker, diluted it with enough water to make it see-through, and dropped a bit of the rock into it. Within seconds, tiny bubbles formed on the surface and started spiralling up.

The electronics that still worked clicked and hummed in the control room, but otherwise there was complete silence.

"Gods. We're going to make it," said Elwin very quietly. "Dear gods," he whispered, bowing his head, "we're really going to make it. All we had to do was figure out how to make air out of rock. And we've done it."

They sat there, holding each other for a moment during which time stopped.

"That's just the beginning," Iris pointed out. "Can you imagine what a difference solid oxygen would make in breather tanks? Something the size of your

fist would last you all day. And think about the engine technology...!"

"And the medical applications," Elwin added.

"Winner, we're not just going to survive. We're going to be rich. Rich! We can buy a new ship! We can do anything! We could retire if we wanted to."

"Now all we need is to find out everything there is to know about that rock," Elwin said. "How it forms, where the deposits are, how many different kinds of bacteria make it." He was scribbling madly on the one functioning data pad.

"It would be a lot easier if we could get the balloonists to ferry us around. They probably would. They seem very friendly."

"Friendly, yes. But how are you going to tell them what you want? Ping at them?"

"Why not?"

Elwin acquired a dreamy and calculating look, both at once.

"Can you imagine," he said, "if they'd waft us over the landscape while we got real scans instead of this crap?" He waved the flimsy with the much-maligned map on it.

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They set off as dusk fell, after they'd had their full eight hours of sleep. The near-forty hour days were very disorienting. They had the rock in Elwin's pack, in case they needed to point at it, and further than that they had no plans except to jump up and down, yelling, at the first floater they saw.

It worked surprisingly well. The balloon beings seemed to be a curious lot. It didn't take long before there was a whole group of big ones surrounding them. Not so long ago, it would have been worse than intimidating. Now it was merely useless. Try as the two humans might, they couldn't communicate what they wanted. Drawing pictures was apparently foreign to the floating beings. Pantomime didn't work. At one point Elwin picked Iris up and carried her, to demonstrate. The big balloon creatures blinked gently and stared, but that was it.

Iris tried something more direct. She stretched out her hand to a particularly robust-looking individual. Clearly not understanding, but polite, the being extended a reciprocal tentacle. When Iris hung on to it, the alien inflated and nearly pinwheeled and threw her.

It was obviously bad manners to hang on to people without being invited. Several minutes passed before the floater's offended gonging settled down.

Elwin was ready to give up. "We'll just walk," he said. "It'll be faster."

But Iris persevered. She tried for hours that night. And the next night. And the next. "I'll just think I'm getting somewhere," she'd complained at last, "and the one I'm trying to talk to goes jetting off somewhere, like it suddenly remembered an appointment. It's maddening." Elwin didn't point out that he always

knew it would be hopeless. He tended his growing oxygen farm, and tried to convince himself he could see detail he hadn't noticed before in their one map.

On the third night, her voice came suddenly over the cabin radio.

"You've got to come out, Winner. I think they've got it. I really do. Bring stuff. I don't know how far they'll take us."

Carrying a couple of packs and a new breather tank for Iris, he maneuvered his way past the bent metal of the hull breach that was now their regular door.

She was right. The creatures did have the idea. Two of them, their tentacles entwined to make a seat, were waiting for him. Iris was already floating, almost hidden between the two balloon beings carrying her. He had to call her down to pass her the pack and breather.

He eyed the strange seat dubiously. Could he really step into that animated industrial elastic by choice? Carefully he edged himself onto the cradle of four intertwined tentacles. He wobbled fearsomely on this rubbery perch, but the beings almost immediately whipped out two more tentacles and grabbed his arms, steadying him. Anxiously, he looked over to Iris to see if she was wobbling as badly. She was holding on with just one hand, using the other to try to point out to the room-sized creature on her left where she wanted to go. Good old Iris.

On each side of Elwin an immense globular bulk blocked his view except for the strip between them. Next to his head, and about the same size, was one of the being's immense eyes, looking at him. Sometimes the eyes would slowly blink. It felt like a message, but he didn't have the key. The floaters inflated silently, their arms effortlessly strong. Something about them felt like age, hundreds of years of it. Maybe it was their complete calm in the face of occasional aliens, as if they'd seen everything before.

The whole flock had dipped into the canyon and Elwin was making scans along the floor, when he saw the first of the huge wineglass-shaped nests with baby floaters in it. He was pointing it out to Iris, when all the beings chimed together.

"Kang!"

He saw her turn to the huge eye on her left and point down experimentally.

"Kang!" they all said again.

"Kang?" he heard her say. It seemed a bit pointless, since the suits didn't have external speakers.

But the beings had extraordinary ears, somewhere on their bodies.

"Kang! Kang, kang, kang!" they repeated in great excitement.

Elwin pointed to himself.

"Human," he said.

The beings just chimed.

A bit disappointed, Iris and Elwin tried again.

"Hu-man," they said slowly.

"Wait a minute," said Iris, listening carefully to the answering chimes.

"They're saying 'ung-mang.' I think they've actually got it. They've just got a bit

of an accent."

"I think you're right," said Elwin slowly. Then he pointed at them.

"Nging-ang," they all chimed unhesitatingly.

"Ing-a, huh?" said Iris.

"Nging-ang," the chorus repeated, with a hint of correction in their tone.

"Nying-la," said Iris carefully. She had a bit of an accent too.

"Nging-ang! Nging-ang!" they chimed.

Elwin made the effort to get it right.

"Ng-ing. Ang," he said slowly, and they seemed happy.

What with the language lessons, Elwin kept forgetting to properly aim the scanner he was cradling as they floated back and forth over the landscape. They were out of the canyon again and flying over the plateau on the other side. This certainly beat hiking. And, he thought as he watched the real-time image scroll by on the scanner's little screen, a lot safer.

"You know what, Iris? You can pick out those scorpion-things hiding in their plants. They show up perfectly. We could map every one."

"Ooh. Where?"

He pointed, Iris leaned over to look, and the Nyingla grew curious. When they realized what the two humans were interested in, they made firebell sounds. It was all the same firebell sound. "Tang-arrrr" was apparently their name for the creatures.

Suddenly, the thing was dead, smashed by a boulder dropped by one of the floaters. Elwin hadn't even noticed the being going down for a stone or getting ready to throw it. The floater's aim was perfect. The scorpion had never known what hit it, since its whole idea of safety was to hide in bushes, and it was defenseless against bombs from above.

"There's another one," said Elwin, pointing at a second clump of filmy bushes. A minute later, that one was dead too. The Nyingla were bouncing up and down, pinging excitedly. They seemed tickled, well, pink. They also seemed to have it in for the scorpions in the worst way.

"I bet they'd wipe them out, if they could," said Iris.

"It's a big planet. They've got a ways to go. Meanwhile," he said, pointing at another lair, "I know just how they feel."

The humans scanned. The Nyingla killed scorpions. Everyone was happy.

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Two months passed by and Elwin found himself checking the ship's silent communications console much too often, but whether in anticipation or regret, he was no longer able to say. He had friends among the Nyingla now. He even had his own pet spider.

Iris kept looking up and scanning the skies these days, which was about as

pointless as checking the console. They were outside, waiting for the small flock of Nyingla to show up with whom they had conversations almost every night.

"It could be any day now," said Elwin, when he saw Iris look up again.

"Mm-hmm," she agreed slowly. "You know, I'm desperate for a real shower, and water that doesn't feel like it's been through our kidneys fifty times. I've been dreaming about strawberries and cream. But aside from that, I'd almost rather stay here. I love watching the Nyingla dreaming on the clouds. I love listening to their songs."

"Yes," he said.

After some minutes, he added,

"Once people get here, and everyone knows about the oxyrock, they'll grind this place up, hauling it out."

"Well, it's a big planet, like you said, but I know what you mean. It'll take a while before people can synthesize enough of it, and a few trillion folks on few thousand planets can use things up awfully fast."

"Yes," he said.

"For all we know," said Iris, "the rescue ship has been and gone. They might not find us, if the only working part of our beacon is the little red indicator light we get to admire. We ejected the orbiting screamer, so they'll know this is the planet, but they might not recognize our crash site from space, at this point."

Plants had already filled in some of the gash, and there was a film of some kind of fungus clinging to parts of the ship. "If they can't spot a great lump of metal on a planet of nothing but rock, they'd be incompetent."

He couldn't see Iris's expression through her helmet, but her silence implied that incompetence was not unheard of.

Then a row of floaters flying in formation crested the rim of the canyon, and the two humans moved on to other topics.

It wasn't easy, learning the Nyinglan language, because the floaters had a way of all talking at once. It was very hard to get the concept across that they had to chime in unison or the humans weren't going to get it.

Elwin tried for the umpteenth time to explain the idea of a map, and where he wanted to go to scan for oxygen, but all the Nyingla did – he was talking to his friend named Da-ling – was sing at him. They had to have *some* sort of symbolic thought, no matter how primitive they were, because they knew how to build domes. He pointed again, and it sang, but this time, because there was only one for a change, he noticed that the melody was the same.

"Oh, Gods," he muttered. He tried a third time, but another couple joined in and turned it into a beautiful, incomprehensible symphony. He had to start over.

"One at a time!" he muttered, but that never did any good.

"What?" he heard Iris ask.

"I show the same picture, and they sing the same song. They seem to use

sound representations rather than visual ones, which may be why they never understand pictures."

"*That* would explain —"

But Elwin interrupted in his frustration.

"I'm trying to test the idea, but I can't get the extras to pipe down. One at a time," he said to Da-ling. "One at a time!" He even tried physically pushing some of them away and waving one arm demonstratively. "One!" he kept saying.

"One?" hummed Da-ling.

"One! Yes! One, dammit."

"One? You have two minds. Two?"

"What?" he said, staring at the enormous blue eyes contemplating him. "Two Gods Hey, Iris, this one seems to think I must have two minds, probably because I have two eyes. Do you think that means what I think it means?"

It turned out it did. One of them finally grasped the concept of sitting still, on the ground, while Elwin waved the medical scanner over it. They had seven brains, and judging by the brainwaves, each one functioned independently. No wonder they all talked at once.

They all started doing it again when they understood that humans had only one mind. Huge blue eyes all around Elwin and Iris gazed at them with what looked exactly like sorrowful compassion. The Nyingla seemed to be devastated at the thought of being so alone in the universe, with nothing but one mind to keep you company. Iris tried to reassure them that there were other humans out there, and that some of them would even come looking for the two of them. She pointed from the sky down to the ground in one big swoop.

Da-ling blinked sagely and pointed at their ship.

"Like that?" it asked.

Well, no, hopefully not like that, but Elwin nodded. The floaters knew what nods meant, at this point, but he wasn't sure that he could make them understand the distinction between crashing and landing.

Iris was waving her arms around some more, trying to make the point that the rescuers could land anywhere. To Elwin, she added,

"If we could get the Nyingla to keep an eye out for the ship, we'd have a better chance of being found." From force of habit, she even began drawing in the mud at the edge of the pond near their ship, showing the globe of the planet and a dot of a ship on the other side--when she remembered that pictures meant nothing to them.

She pointed at imaginary ships, swooping down in all directions, and the Nyingla pointed at each others' eyes.

"Great," she said, exasperated. "I guess they're saying they can see ships too. So much for that idea."

"I've never seen them do that before," said Elwin slowly. "Remember that for them, eyes equal minds."

"So they're saying they can see them telepathically." Iris was far from con-

vinced.

Da-ling began looking toward the rim of the canyon, as if waiting for something, and a moment later a new Nyingla crested the thermals rising there.

"They sure seem telepathic about some things," muttered Elwin.

The new floater and Da-ling twined a couple of their tentacles together and touched flanges. They looked like two lovers meeting after a long separation. Then they started pointing at each others' eyes.

"I'm beginning to think you're right, Winner. They do mean something by it. But what?"

Both floaters looked toward the canyon, and a third one appeared over the rim, joined them, and the tentacle twining was repeated.

"I wonder if we're seeing the receiving side of Nyingla suddenly jetting off in the middle of conversations," said Elwin. "It sure looks like Da-ling called the others here. Maybe they can make ultrasonic sounds our equipment hasn't been tuned for."

Meanwhile, the group of three was pointing at each others' eyes again. One of them had a scar on its flange, a nick taken out of it, as if the being had gotten too close to one of the scorioid monsters at some point.

"Iris," said Elwin slowly, "they're not pointing at just any old eyes. Each one of them always points to the same one."

"So?"

He didn't answer her. He took out the medical scanner instead and the three Nyingla, as if they knew the drill by now, settled gently on the ground.

"Da-ling's brainwaves near – let's call it eye 'one' here – and its friend's brainwaves behind the eye its pointing at are in a kind of synchrony. Every so often, they'll have identical waves pass through."

"They share *minds*?" Iris's voice ended in a near-squeak.

"Who knows? They might just be tuned to each other in some way, like mothers are supposed to be when their babies wake up in trouble at midnight."

When the Nyingla understood that the humans had finally grasped the simple concept they were trying to communicate they were visibly pleased and bounced around a bit, gonging in a gratified way.

Da-ling extended a tentacle to point toward the horizon, except that the curve was unmistakable. Tentacles are much better than arms at suggesting they're pointing around the curve of the planet. Then it pointed at its friend's eye again, and the friend floated leisurely away, heading off into the wild black yonder. The great white globe of the floater was visible for a long time in the strong starlight.

After a great deal more pointing and misunderstanding, Elwin and Iris realized that what Da-ling meant was that its friend would keep watch for falling spaceships somewhere on the other side of the world, and if there was a ship, Da-ling would know about it instantly.

"Ye gods," Iris breathed. "But"

"But they don't have to take anything," Elwin finished her thought for her.

They could just float off to the other side of the world without taking one single solitary thing. He wondered how it would feel to need nothing at all.

"But," said Iris again. "But ... why?"

It took much less time to get that point across. The Nyingla could imagine nothing worse than being separated from your circle, and if members of your circle were to come looking for you on the other side of the planet, well, somebody had to tell them where to find you.

"If separation is the worst thing," said Elwin to Da-ling, "your friend will be separated from you for us for who knows how long."

Yes, that was so.

As they talked into the far reaches of the Nyinglan night, it became clear that to Da-ling, to every Nyinglan there, sharing minds was only one end of the scale. At the other end, the most distant relation they could imagine among two sentient beings was what humans would feel between brother and sister. Everybody was family. That was why they risked their lives for two complete aliens.

"You know," said Iris to Elwin, as they both contemplated the new universe of Nyinglan minds, "now we can be sure that if that ship ever gets here, they'll find us, but I'm beginning to think it'll be very boring to be rescued."

Except that they'd run out of food, Elwin agreed. Maybe fricasseed scorpion would turn out to taste like chicken.

Which reminded him that he was starving. They'd been talking a good eight hours.

"Let's go inside and get something to eat," he said. "My suit's food reservoirs aren't empty, but I'm tired of that slop anyway."

Once they managed to make the Nyingla understand why they wanted to end the conversation for now, the rolling plain of the high plateau echoed with loud gongs, which turned out to be Nyinglan laughter. The idea of an intelligent being eating! Like one of the hardbodies! Like an animal!

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Three months had gone by since the crash. Elwin was standing outside, absently patting his envirosuit pockets for something to feed a new mother with ten squirming baby centipedes on her back, when he heard a high-pitched whine.

He knew that sound. It meant something. It —

"Iris," he shouted into his helmet. "It's a ship! A ship! I can hear it! It's a ship!" He almost tore his envirosuit on the jagged metal of the hull breach, leaping inside. He didn't wait for the airlock to cycle. To hell with losing a bit of oxygen.

She was already on the radio when he got into the control room.

"This is EI-901. Do you read?"

Silence.

"This is EI-901. Do you read me? Come in please. This is EI-901."

Silence.

"Transmitter's completely kaput," she said. They pulled on their suits in seconds.

They spilled out of their broken ship. There, not a kilometer away, just outside the legal safety limit, stood a perfectly parked atmosphere-rated shuttle. As they began running toward it, the door opened out and down, forming a ramp. A long, spindly, etiolated figure waved at them from the door.

"Human beings sure look funny," said Iris as they waved back.

When they approached the shuttle, their suit radios began to pick up an insistent, strident noise, like a jackhammer in slow motion.

With a shock, Elwin suddenly said,

"That's music."

A loud crackle came over their suit radios.

"Good to see you two! When your emergency beacon was the only thing transmitting, even up close, we got *real* worried about what we were going to find."

The two women piloting the shuttle helped them salvage everything they could from their crashed ship.

"What's all this?" one of them asked, looking at the muddy flasks and dishes lining the control room.

"Oh, just a biology experiment I was keeping busy with," Elwin muttered. A bit later he said to Iris quietly, when they were alone in the control room, "I don't know that I *want* to retire."

The more time went by, the less Elwin and Iris said. Humans seemed very noisy. On their last trip across the rocky plains to the shuttle, Elwin and Iris both took longer than they needed to, and both kept staring at familiar hills and pools. It was daytime, and no Nyingla were about. Most of the hardbodies were hidden too.

"I hope one of them adopts Ophelia," mumbled Elwin, referring to one of his pet spiders.

The shuttle rose from the plain. The world receded into a globe.

"Seems like a horribly dull place to be stuck for three months," said one of their rescuers. "Find anything here?"

Elwin waited for Iris to answer.

"Not much," she said. She told them about the scorpoids – Elwin could see her almost say *tang-arr* – and the jellyfish and the grazing meter-long centipedes.

But that was merely strange, so it was logged, and nobody returned to the world where the Nyingla floated like pink pearls on white mist under a methane-blue sky.

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