

SANGHA

by Susana Lindsay

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ISBN: 978-0-9925627-0-0

For my daughters

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A series of disparate influences inspired this tale: my older daughter's love of cartoon heroines wearing wrist computers, the chance discovery of a research article on business ownership, and an abiding interest in meditation. A history of the U.S. Federal Reserve also prodded my grey matter a little. I hope you enjoy the fusion.

This is a work of fiction, so any character resemblance to your friends or relatives is purely coincidental. Mine, however, may, or may not, be represented.

My thanks and gratitude to Maya, friends and relatives who read and criticised my early efforts; your help was invaluable. Thanks also to Phil, my persnickety editor, IT guru, strongest critic, husband, and father of my daughters. Without you this would not have happened.

Chapter One

Ashanna von Kaylink raced down the broad corridor towards the *Cousteau's* Central Dining, hurtled through the swing doors, and paused. She scanned the bright, white cafeteria, looking for Ingmar. Near the window-wall overlooking the

ship's botanic gardens, a slim figure rose from his seat. Grinning, Ashanna manoeuvred between tables to join him. "Ingmar." She hugged the young man. "The message said to meet you here. It is an assignment . . . isn't it?"

"Yup," Ingmar's mobile face returned her grin. "It's the AE322 survey, and if the preliminaries are even half accurate we should get dirt-side on this one."

"Ha!" Ashanna entered her coffee order on the table menu before returning her attention to Ingmar.

"Riordan asked for this meeting so we could assess one another, but I'm confident we know each other well enough to be co-workers again." He grinned. "We'll be gone for three months, unless we're recalled or the situation demands otherwise."

Ashanna nodded, remembering their previous joint assignment almost six years earlier. She again saw herself as a freckle-faced, young woman, not long out of graduate school, falling into an easy, and sometimes intense, duet with the young biologist. Ship board responsibilities and surveys had intervened. First of all, her compilation of a Ling/Galactic Standard dictionary for the delightful Ling people of Adram monopolised her time. Then Ingmar led a six-month survey on rugged, uninhabited Hawken, where linguists were superfluous. That expedition completed the break. With philosophic acceptance of the past, Ashanna sat back, arms folded. "When's briefing?" she asked, and then in a rush, "What's the E.T.D? Who else is on the team?"

"Hey, hey, one at a time," chuckled Ingmar, waving her down. "Today at 1500 hours, I don't know, and Sigil Wicke."

Ashanna accepted her coffee order and sipped, sighing with appreciation as the first taste awoke her senses. "Sigil Wicke? Who's he?" Ashanna wrinkled her brow. "Is he that new geologist, dark hair, with glasses?"

Ingmar nodded. "That's the one. So you don't know him either?"

"Not yet, but I think we're about to." She jerked her head towards the door. Swivelling in his seat, Ingmar saw a tall, slightly-stooped figure paused at the entrance, eyes ranging the room. Ingmar waved his empty coffee mug to attract his attention.

"I'll order more coffee to grease the wheels," muttered Ashanna, as the geologist wound his way between tables towards them.

A fresh pot of coffee and a plate of warm, nut wafers eased any initial tension between the three. Ingmar Hons introduced himself as the senior member of the survey, Ashanna second. Sigil, a newcomer to exploratory space surveys, was junior, despite the delicate fan-work of wrinkles radiating from his brown eyes to his greying hairline. In a somewhat halting manner, Sigil told of his early working life in the Museum of Natural History in Buenos Aires. When the national government was overthrown, funding ceased, and Sigil was forced to take a job with a mining consortium. This was his third survey.

"I thought the survey probes eliminated the need for geologists," said Ashanna, as she popped a dunked wafer into her mouth before it disintegrated in her coffee.

"Just about," agreed Sigil. "Assessing and mapping from space are well established, but we still have to verify accessibility and stability of the terrain."

Leaning back in his chair, Ingmar loosened the fastenings at the neck of his ship suit. "There'll be three separate surveys in this solar system, for the third, fourth and fifth planets. AE322 is the fourth. Geologists have been selected for the fifth as well, so either policy is changing or there's an increased need for minerals."

"There's been a recent increase in accidents during the initial mining stages," Sigil told them. "Perhaps safety rather than need has prompted the increase, possibly a bit of both."

Ingmar nodded. "Well, briefing is at 1500 which should just about coincide with our entry into the system."

Six hours until briefing, Ashanna noticed, her eyes falling on the chronometer above the door as she glanced across the dining room. The vast hall was dotted with small groups and individuals, either breakfasting or holding meetings such as their own. She smiled and nodded at several she knew.

Returning her gaze to her companions, Ashanna relaxed, laughed, then leaned

forward, elbows on the table. "This hasn't sunk in yet. I apply for every survey job going, yet this is only my sixth in six years and most of those were re-visits, not first contact." She selected another wafer. "Linguistics and xenology aren't popular skills for survey work until crunch time. That means life. I'm excited, scared and excited."

Ingmar smiled; he knew the implications. His specialities of biology and xenobiology were standard qualifications for a mission such as this, but Ashanna's inclusion was significant; their department heads presumed the existence of intelligent life. In his ten years aboard the *Cousteau*, his earlier assignment with Ashanna was his sole experience of a 'first contact' survey. He remembered the thrill, his fear, and his growing respect and trust in Ashanna's skills. There was an earthiness, an acceptance of reality, Ingmar supposed, that enabled her to cut through superficialities, regardless of culture. With the enthusiastic naivety of a child, Ashanna concentrated on similarities rather than differences. That, combined with incredible language skills, helped her succeed. Ingmar smiled as he noted Ashanna's unruly mass of amber curls, still untamed after six years aboard the prestigious, publicly-funded, exploration ship. With clear eyes the colour of clouds on an overcast day and a smattering of freckles across her straight nose, her freshness and energy still beckoned. Ignoring that particular train of thought he turned to Sigil. "Were your previous surveys on inhabited worlds?"

Sigil blinked behind his lenses. "No, the first was on the largest of Crespa's three moons, which had no breathable atmosphere. The second was on Hawken, where I believe you carried out the primary survey. Hawken, incidentally, is now open for colonisation and mining, but neither project involved sentient life."

"Have you given that much thought?" asked Ashanna. "For instance, how do you think you'll react if we find city-constructing, hairy mammoths or aggressive, wart-covered, triple-eyed humanoids?" She crossed her eyes and screwed up her face at them. Ingmar guffawed.

"Naturally I've thought about it," Sigil replied, with a tight smile. "I did a xeno introductory course. However, until I experience different life forms or cultures, I'm afraid I don't have an answer." Ashanna thought he sounded prim, and she sensed his unease.

"Fair enough," replied Ashanna. "If I'm included on the team though, an encounter is likely."

"Do you think they'll be aggressive?" asked Sigil.

Ashanna shrugged. "We aren't armed to look fashionable."

Ingmar broke in. "The survey you did on Hawken was large; am I correct?"

"Yes, fifteen of us," Sigil told him.

"That's because we already knew it was uninhabited. There were two scientists and two marines on our primary survey, even though intelligent life was low on the list of probabilities." Ingmar refilled his coffee mug. "If we suspect intelligent life, survey numbers are kept to a minimum. And if it's highly probable, even marines aren't sent, they're too trigger happy."

Sigil shook his head, sullen. "You'd think this would have been mapped out by now. Why should we have to go into this blind?"

Ingmar's brows knit in puzzlement at Sigil's comment, and Ashanna looked troubled. Had the man no idea? In all the history of space exploration, no one had developed a technique to predict what an alien civilisation might be like, let alone their appearance, habits or intelligence . . . Ashanna's thoughts trailed off as she refocussed on Sigil. "No, we have no idea. We're dealing with the unknown." Ashanna watched him. He seemed tense and defensive. "Sigil, we can't expect our preconceptions and habits to carry us through. It's only by attempting to discard judgement and prejudice that we can communicate with whoever we meet and hope for enough common ground on which to build a positive relationship."

Sigil sat back, arms folded across his chest. "What are you trying to say?"

Ashanna sighed. Was the man being particularly obtuse or was her explanation too convoluted? "Just this: provided these beings are intelligent, my job is to build a bridge of understanding between our cultures. If I can't set aside my personal beliefs and judgements to some degree, then I'll always be seeing my own

preconceptions rather than the beings themselves. On another world with different climatic conditions, with perhaps different physiology, a different set of values will have evolved, as important to them as some of the petty, cultural standards to which we cling.”

“You can put aside your beliefs and judgements? What’s left if you do?” Sigil was sceptical. “It’s not possible.”

“I’m aware that my outlook colours all I see and do,” Ashanna replied, unruffled. “We are children of our environment, physically and socially. I can’t escape that. To some extent though, I can be a detached observer. When I see how different some entities are, like the methane breathers out past Sirius, and the conditions under which they have evolved, it becomes obvious that our points of reference have little or no relevance. It’s more a setting aside of what I expect their responses to be. They may be unpredictable. Does that answer your question?”

Sigil nodded. “I think so.” He sat very still, hands clasped around his coffee mug. He had an uncomfortable feeling that this assignment would not be simple. “Must I be involved with them? I am a geologist not a social scientist.”

Ashanna shrugged. “You may have no choice.” She looked at Ingmar for support, but he merely reached for his fourth nut wafer.

“It seems like the previous expeditions on uninhabited planets were less complicated,” mused Sigil.

“They are,” agreed Ingmar, at work on his wafer. “They’re also less frustrating and much less challenging.” He grinned with infectious enthusiasm.

“So, you enjoy the challenge?” asked Sigil.

“Certainly. I might have more assignments than Ashanna, but hers are guaranteed not to be boring.” His eyes sparkled at Ashanna. “Never boring.”

Sigil readjusted his glasses on his nose to include both Ingmar and Ashanna within his vision. “As I’ve had no experience of higher life forms, other than *Homo sapiens*, my inclusion is also unusual.”

“It is,” agreed Ingmar. “However, HB Mining is partially funding this survey.”

Ashanna’s glance at Ingmar was sharp. She hadn’t realised that the second largest mining company in the galaxy was involved. Business interests were not supposed to exert any influence on surveys. Sometimes, however, external funding could subtly change the emphasis. As she opened her mouth to speak, Ingmar interrupted.

“Look,” he said. “If there’s anything you want to ask before the briefing, contact me. Right now, I’m off to finish what I can of my current work load.” He drained his mug and, with an engaging smile to take any sting out of his desertion, rose and left.

Ashanna sighed and leaned back in her chair, sipping the last of her coffee. Sigil looked preoccupied so Ashanna made her excuses and followed Ingmar.

For some time, Sigil sat staring through the vast window-wall, thinking, while his coffee grew cold. A sliver of water spilling into a rocky pool caught his eye, and in the distance a gardener stooped, clipping dead blooms from a bed of golden perennials. Sigil picked at the last of the nut wafers. How did Ashanna expect him to give up his judgements, his knowledge of what was right and what was wrong? Where would he stand with that stripped away? He was not an unintelligent man, but to imagine himself unfettered by the standards he had accumulated during his life, left him feeling hollow and empty. He wondered whether the social mores and ethics, written and unwritten, upon which he, and he presumed others, based their lives were what comprised a human being. What was left when Ashanna discarded hers? Could she really do that? With a faint grimace he finished his cold coffee and, after a final glance towards the green serenity of the gardens, wound his way from the dining room.

He ambled along bright corridors, some almost deserted, others full of the bustle of any busy community: flight crew, scientific staff, technicians, and porters guiding small, laden hovers, all going about their chores. Like himself, most wore ill-fitting, dun-coloured, ship suits, other than flight crew in their silver-grey suits with banded epaulettes to show rank. Off-duty personnel sported brighter plumage.

Perhaps he was posted to the wrong survey. No, geologically, he considered AE322 the most promising in the system. Perhaps Ashanna was wrong and they would not meet any other sentient species. The door to Sigil's quarters slid open as his fingers pressed the touch pad. He voice-activated his computer link, requesting all available data on planet AE322.

Ashanna caught up with Ingmar in the corridor outside the dining room. "You were a bit rough on Sigil weren't you?" Ingmar rounded on Ashanna before she could speak.

"Better now than when it's too late," she snapped. "I don't think he should come. He's too insular."

Ingmar's quiet professionalism had always reassured Ashanna. He strode beside her, digesting her words. Unbidden, Ashanna remembered a rather entertaining, and not so professional, evening they had once shared. She hoped Ingmar had outgrown his penchant for testing field specimens first-hand. Poisonings and belly aches were unpleasant, inconvenient, or could even be fatal. "The results are generally quicker than lab analysis," he had told her in justification. Ashanna shook her head and put aside the memory.

"Are you sure?" Ingmar sounded concerned. "Can you make that judgement after that single exchange?"

"No, I'm not sure. It's my initial impression. Did you notice his body language, his defensiveness?"

"No, I can't say I did. Look, he's employed by HB Mining and they've provided funding for this survey. If we reject Sigil, we might also jeopardise the trip."

"There's supposed to be no compromise, no tainting of scientific work by politicking or business," Ashanna fumed, her long strides matching Ingmar's as they moved into the widening corridor towards a bank of lifts. "I guess it isn't that easy, is it?"

The two stopped while Ingmar pressed the 'down' button. "No, it's not." His tone was conciliatory as he laid a gentle hand on Ashanna's shoulder. "I'll tell Riordan. If you doubt Sigil's suitability his inclusion must be discussed."

"Oh, I do doubt his suitability." Ashanna spread her hands. "I haven't decided either way, yet. Sigil might perform brilliantly in the field. His defensiveness might be his natural fear of the unknown. If I decline his selection I might do him an injustice."

"Can you work with him?"

Ashanna shrugged. "Maybe. I might be mistaken."

"This warrants a discussion with Riordan, okay?" Ingmar gave her shoulder a small shake before he stepped towards the opening lift doors.

Ashanna waved as she continued towards her quarters. From that brief contact with Ingmar, the gentle hand on her shoulder and the way he looked at her, Ashanna realised he still nurtured hopes of rekindling their past. She would have to dampen any ideas he held on that score; friendship and a good working relationship were quite sufficient.

In the privacy of her quarters, the prospect of her waiting adventure rekindled her excitement. Ashanna let out a whoop and twirled a pirouette before calling up all the information on AE322.

At the sound of her voice, the *Cousteau's* computer projected a holographic display in the centre of her room. Ashanna settled into a well-padded armchair, marvelling at the beauty of the small planet before her. She spun the projected globe which glowed blue and white with green and red-brown land masses, a living jewel in the blackness of space. By zooming in, the survey points were highlighted, as information scrolled down the projection. Ashanna read attentively, refreshing her memory: fourth planet from the sun, typical elliptical orbit, one moon, days shorter than Earth's with years a little longer. Temperatures and gravity were lower than on Earth but within Earth norm. "It'll be like living at two thousand metres . . . great skiing," mused Ashanna. Masses of data from varying intervals of time, distance and depth helped round out the picture of carbon-based life forms, including warm-blooded creatures. Ashanna smiled in anticipation. There was no mention as to why the creatures were presumed intelligent.

Chapter Two

Silence swept through the assembled crews when the Chief Survey Officer, Mike Riordan, entered the briefing room. A forward leaning stance, hands clasped behind his back and an intense expression on his beaked face made Ashanna grin as, in turn, he pinned each survey member within his sharp focus. His brilliance in the field left Ashanna awestruck. In their entire history of exploration, no one but he had brought eleven inhabited planets into the Federation. Fuelled by his own deep hunger for exploration and discovery, in which he considered field workers an extension of himself, his demands for work of the highest calibre motivated and inspired those working under his authority.

Once Riordan ascertained that all had availed themselves of the public information on their respective assignments, his briefings were short. A wall screen displayed an image of AD322, the hotter third planet. This turbulent sphere, rendered uninhabitable by high temperatures and a molten core, oozing canker-like, through every fissure, was encompassed by three moons, each pitted and hollowed like termite-ridden timber. It would be a difficult, uncomfortable assignment. Two scientists, and three marines, were the crew for this planet.

“There are no indications of higher life forms, Janus,” Riordan addressed the team leader. “So unless you can pull off another of your surprises, you’ll find yourself communing with vegetables,” Riordan managed a grin. “Coralla, you should be happy enough with so much volcanic activity to study and Kresky, Daw and Fiori, I appreciate your commitment to safeguard and support this mission. Your commander will brief you further.”

Riordan switched his attention to Ingmar, Ashanna and Sigil sitting together. “I assume the three of you have introduced yourselves?” They nodded, exchanging glances. “Good. Out of the mass of information you’ve accessed, one piece was an anomaly. You noticed the presence of heat-tagged creatures?” Did Riordan always treat sentences as questions wondered Ashanna, nodding her reply. “Their exact size is unknown, but easily within human norm,” he continued. “They are much smaller than the dinosaurs of the Mesozoic era and display no tendency towards herding, unlike smaller animals we observed on the plains. Their movements were random. Sometimes small groups of these larger life forms appeared to be travelling together, but just as often there were individuals. They were observed only on the largest continent, mostly in the south and south west, and their numbers were low.” Riordan waved his hand across a broad coastal area on the map which he had called up on a wall screen. “They were also recorded in the mountains, and on one occasion there appeared to be a massing of them on the west coast, which was not present on subsequent passes.”

“They threw a party,” interjected Ashanna, with a merry smile.

“Perhaps.” Riordan fixed her with one of his eagle stares and wagged a finger at her. “Don’t let your love of a gathering lead you into hands-on experiences too soon, though. They might roast their guests of honour. Now the anomalies of which I spoke, were here, here, and here.” Riordan’s long finger stabbed an area at the foot of the main mountain range just inland from the gathering place, then other sites near the ranges on the main continent. His shaggy brows knit together in a frown. “At these points there were no instrument readings whatsoever. The creatures entering those areas effectively disappeared. The inability of our probes to penetrate is consistent with shielding, which of course points to intelligence. It’s possible, of course, that some hitherto unknown natural phenomena could be responsible, but it’s these anomalies, Ashanna, that warrant your inclusion. The results from your previous assignments have been exemplary. I trust your intuitive good sense will not betray you.” Ashanna flushed at Riordan’s unexpected praise before he moved on. “Ingmar, as one of our most experienced explorers you’ve been appointed leader. We’ll discuss details later.”

Sigil was next to receive Riordan’s unflinching gaze. “As the representative for HB Mining, do you have a specific task or tasks to perform for them?” By

contributing funds to a project, industry frequently won representation on surveys. With few exceptions, the compromise worked to the advantage of both parties. Sometimes corporations had tried to dictate terms, but the severity with which they were censured and penalised discouraged such attempts; the fines were hefty and concessions few.

“Well, no.” Sigil was a little surprised to be asked. “Didn’t you receive a copy of my instructions? They’re quite general . . . to ascertain the accessibility of any potential commercial deposits, and a long list of desirable minerals, mostly the usual suspects.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. Do you have any other instructions . . . some which are not so general and of which I am unaware?”

“No,” Sigil replied. “I haven’t received any secret orders if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good. I didn’t see a problem with those I saw. You don’t come under my direct jurisdiction as far as the actual research you carry out, but you are an active member of the team. Preserving indigenous life forms in their natural habitat takes precedence over any commercial interests of either government or private enterprise. We annihilated enough species through ignorance and greed in our earlier days of space exploration, to our great loss, regret and shame.” An expression of such sorrow crossed Riordan’s face that Ashanna wondered if he spoke from direct experience. “This commitment by the Federation overrides all projects in every field of study.

“During this survey you are required to accept Ingmar’s judgement. If there is intelligent life, you will both accept Ashanna’s judgement.” He included Ingmar in his glance. “Intelligent life amongst the stars is rare, and this opportunity must not be jeopardised. I hope you recognise the privilege you’ve been granted in being accepted for this survey. Do you agree to work under these conditions?” His attention returned to Sigil.

“Yes, of course.” Sigil confirmed.

After discussing the fifth planet in the system, Riordan threw open the meeting to individual questions and discussion until he again addressed the group. “You are the elite,” he said, surveying the group. “You, and others on this ship, are the brightest minds in the galaxy; the best in your respective fields. You wouldn’t be here if you were not. But mere knowledge and intelligence are not enough for these assignments.” Riordan’s gaze rested on Sigil. “Those brilliant minds of yours must be broad and flexible so you can cope with confrontation, with the unknown and the unpredictable. You’ll need bravery, fortitude, virtue, and a generous spirit. Luck helps too, of course,” he said, with a grin. “Those qualities, plus your individual, specialist skills are the reason you have been chosen for these assignments. I’m sure you will excel.

Departure time for the AD322 team is in forty eight hours, AE322 and AF322 will follow at forty eight hour intervals. Before then, renew your pilot credentials on scouts and hovers. Medical is expecting you all for full check ups. I’ll transfer any sensitive information to you immediately prior to departure . . . AND . . .” A toothy grin creased Riordan’s face into miniature rift valleys. “Let’s hope we can name at least a couple of these planets.”

Until colonising prospects were estimated, new planets were given provisional numbers, not names. To name a planet meant the beginning of a new phase in its development. Of course if AE322 was inhabited, Ashanna thought it would already have a name. Her hopes were high.

A chime from Riordan’s comms pad interrupted the excited group as they prepared to leave. “Wait.” Riordan was frowning at the message he had received. “We may have to delay our departure times. The data coming in from the new probes isn’t matching the original.”

“Which data? Does it affect all the assignments?” asked Ashanna.

“I don’t know,” replied Riordan, still frowning. “I’ll notify you all as soon as I learn more.”

With mutual good wishes for their respective projects, they parted company on a more subdued note. Ingmar stayed behind. Ashanna knew he would voice her

concern about Sigil's inclusion in the survey team . . . if it was still viable. She did not want 'her' survey cancelled.

She soon received calls from both Riordan and Ingmar. "I thought I'd call about Sigil before checking on that alert," said Riordan, before Ashanna had a chance to ask. "Ingmar told me of your reservations." With Sigil's psychological profile on hand for reference, Riordan quizzed her much as Ingmar had. He endeavoured to allay Ashanna's concern: Sigil's nervousness was apparent during initial interviews, but disappeared with growing familiarity; in tests, he performed well under pressure as well as being a competent geologist; his profile showed no tendencies to alarm the psychologists or any overt indications of antagonism towards alien species or cultures.

"So his defensiveness is a nervous habit that will disappear in time?" Ashanna wanted to make quite sure she understood.

"According to these results," agreed Riordan. "You might schedule a couple of meetings with him prior to departure just to be sure. You have four days . . . maybe even longer now."

Ingmar's call followed Riordan's. "Riordan has already talked to me," Ashanna assured him. "He suggested another couple of meetings with Sigil. Do you want to be in on those?"

"Would you prefer to tackle him alone?"

"Why don't we do something together, like a picnic at the beach in order to bond better?" she asked.

"Sounds good. Shall I extend the invitation to Sigil?" They made plans and times for the following afternoon.

"Any ideas on Riordan's alert this afternoon?" Ashanna asked.

"Whatever it is, I wouldn't give it more than a few more minutes before it hits the in-system newsfeed." Ingmar was silent for a moment. "Here it is. Damn. It's the metallics. The system's been stripped."

"Not again." Shock and disappointment numbed Ashanna. "Why do they do this?"

"It's free. No bidding for rights, no taxes, and who's going to catch them?"

"But these are new worlds. We know nothing about them."

"It's all profit. It must be a huge operation," said Ingmar, noticing the scale of the theft. It was a familiar, unfortunate phenomenon, occurring in newly charted systems between initial surveys and the follow up. The perpetrators of these unlicensed mining endeavours had, to date, not been identified.

"Do you think they'll cancel our survey?"

"I hope not. It seems to me they should go ahead. They'll want to discover what happened." Ingmar sounded optimistic.

That evening, taverns and cafés were full of the news. The system had indeed been mined by persons unknown. Asteroids were shattered and two moons had been heavily mined. Planet AF322 had been mined, but being larger, had not been stripped. AE322 also showed signs of less extensive mining on one of the two smaller continents. In spite of these events Ashanna, Ingmar and Sigil saw no reason to change their plans for the next day.

* * *

A chamber of immense proportions, its domed roof patterned with ever changing holograms of clouds moving through blue sky, was drenched with the warmth of artificial sunlight. A sharp, salt smell and the whoosh of gentle waves on sand assailed Ashanna's senses even before she stepped into the complex. Ingmar and Sigil, both fit and lean, were there, stripped down to swim shorts. There were days and times for nude bathing, but this was not one of them. Ashanna waved as she trudged towards them, then kicked off her shoes when fine sand seeped inside. Wiggling her bare toes in the warmth she ran the rest of the way. This already felt like a different world. "We should do this more often." She chuckled. "What a marvellous feeling." She stripped off her baggy ship suit to reveal a brief, turquoise, swim suit.

"Yes, it reminds me of holidays when I was a boy," said Sigil. "The ocean smell transports me every time." He laughed and Ashanna saw a younger man emerge

from the serious, middle-aged geologist of the previous day.

There were others at the beach: couples, parents splashing in the shallows with chubby toddlers, and a small group of children on, what looked like, a school outing. When Ashanna commented on the group, Ingmar's response was wry. "And I bet they'll have to write an essay titled, 'A Day at the Beach,' after this. On Agricola we always had to."

"No." Ashanna was sceptical.

"We always had to write a similar one after summer holidays," commented Sigil.

Ashanna snorted. "I guess being schooled at the lunar base had some advantages after all. There were no beaches to write about." She laughed as she continued looking about: at the shore birds, their splayed digits sinking into the wet sand with each step; at gulls swooping, raucous and indignant, chasing one another over morsels; at thick kelp, mostly submerged, heaving amphibian-like, in the waves; and seaweed, shredded and dried by the warmth, skirting the high water line. She sighed and relaxed. This was such an enjoyable change from her usual hectic schedule.

Wading through the ebb and flow at the water's edge, the three managed to avoid the splashing toddlers. They discussed the ramifications of discovering the system already mined until they reached the end of the cove, where they draped themselves over a warm expanse of flat rock. High above, restaurant and café windows overlooked the beach. Clouds played across those surfaces too, so the patrons were also under the illusion of dappled sunlight.

"Ashanna, you're concerned about my ability aren't you?" Sigil surprised her with his directness.

"Well, yes, I am," she replied, shielding her eyes from bright sunlight glinting off the lively sea, in order to focus on him.

"I thought about what you said." He paused, and Ashanna gave an encouraging nod. "To live and work together I know we should trust each other, but all I can promise is my best, imperfect as it may be. Yesterday I considered resigning from this survey, however, AE322, in my estimation, still holds the most promise for HB Mining, and I'm employed to act in their best interests."

"Not at the expense of relationships with sentients, though. That has priority." Ashanna was firm, without animosity. "That position may have been compromised by this recent mining intrusion, but mineral exploration can always be done after relations are established."

"Is that what you're asking me to do? Wait?"

Ashanna was revising her impression of Sigil: taking the initiative in such a positive manner was a good sign. Still, an uneasy feeling lurked and she sensed tension in Sigil's posture. "No, not at all. I merely want to know that you won't panic too easily when the unexpected happens."

Sigil shrugged his white, bony shoulders and picked at the dry sand caught in cracks between the rocks. "I have no way of knowing."

"No, you don't. You're an unknown factor, and that's the problem. We're always trying to protect ourselves from the unknown or the dangerous, and your inexperience presents us with an area for concern." She favoured him with a rueful smile. "We all had to start somewhere."

"Is there a solution?" Sigil's worry appeared genuine.

"Not an easy one that's fair." There was still no positive way to identify a successful field worker. Ashanna recognised the stalemate. "Come on, let's swim."

They slithered off the rocks and wandered down to the water's edge. "Did you live a sheltered life on Earth?" Ingmar asked Sigil.

Sigil winced; he was still on trial. Either of these two scientists could exclude him from the survey, but he realised his honesty about his unknown responses had struck exactly the right tone with them. "I suppose I did. I didn't leave there until I landed this job with HB. Everyone on Earth is pretty well homogenised. My family, however, is perhaps more conservative than others. It takes effort to step outside that mould." He dived under the water, emerging to shake his head, spaniel fashion, wetting Ashanna and Ingmar. "What about both of you? How did you arrive at these jobs?"

Ashanna settled into the water without diving under, while Ingmar splashed water up his arms and over his body. "Other than a few childhood holidays, I only lived on Earth during my postgrad years," answered Ashanna. "I grew up on Earth's moon, and you know how pervasive alien cultures are there . . . the largest Immigration Department in the galaxy. My poor, suffering parents were always extricating me from cross-cultural scrapes, in spite of tolerance for the young of any species." Grinning, she splashed a sheet of water over Ingmar with the broadside of her arm, and he too sank up to his neck. "Xenology and linguistics are the natural extension of my misdemeanours and indiscretions."

"My situation was different again," said Ingmar. "I'm from a farming community on Agricola, in the Jansky system, with a lifestyle similar to that of Earth hundreds of years ago. I love open space and anything organic, which led me to biology . . . though I'm not too fond of septic systems."

The three chatted, swam, then lazed on the sand until they saw that the waves had risen to a one and a half metre swell. They grabbed shaped, plaswood boards and paddled out beyond the shore break to catch the waves. Energy and enthusiasm in no way compensated for a lack of proficiency as they tried to surf. The three fell, laughing and spluttering, after each attempt, until tired, hungry, and waterlogged, they towelled themselves dry and collapsed in deck chairs at the outdoor café, at ease with one another.

"Well Sigil, providing this survey goes ahead, I do believe you'll do your best," said Ashanna, biting into a hot savoury, its flaky pastry falling into the folds of her towel. She brushed off the crumbs.

Sigil nodded. "I only hope it's enough."

"That's what each of us hopes every time we go dirt-side," replied Ingmar. "I know I'm always afraid that this next one will be the one that goes wrong. And there's always the possibility that even the most seasoned field worker will crack."

Chapter Three

Warren Tullberg put his head in his hands and knuckled his eyes. He'd had better days than this. There was still no word from *The Reed*, the newest, fastest, scout ship in the HB Mining fleet and the business types kept pestering him for information he didn't have: wanting to place calls to their brokers, buy futures, sell futures, re-route ships, make assessments, make more money. Warren was not sure what they did. His thoughts about that were sketchy and few, before deciding his brain was too fuzzy from hours in front of his screens. And why, he wondered, when HB Mining was supposed to be so big, powerful and rich, was he stuck with antique screens that irritated his eyes and fuddled his brain? After all, fitting screenless, holographic displays in ships was common.

He flicked to a favourite newsfeed to distract himself: 'The final stage of the Holman Hub is expected to be completed next week. During its initial ten years of operation only the most rudimentary conditions and services have been offered. Its completion will herald state of the art docking facilities, five star accommodation, and retail outlets on a true, galactic scale. Business and political leaders from across the galaxy are expected to attend the official opening.'

They'd installed that HBnet routing node just in time for the opening, Warren realised. He often wondered why HB Mining ran their own private network. HBnet was a consummate beast and one of the reasons he took the job; it's not often one had the chance to run an intra-galactic network, not that he'd found any technical necessity for such lavish expenditure. He thought it probably just bragging rights for a grandiose miner . . . trying to keep pace with Orion Industrial, the largest galactic trader. Warren's attention was again caught by the newsfeed: 'It is thought ion storms in the Procyon region may be responsible for two merchant ships failing to arrive at Hoyle Station on schedule.'

'The government of President Lothi, of the Republic of North East Africa, has not responded to opposition calls for him to take action over civil unrest which threatens to de-stabilise the country.'

‘In local news: Last night’s king tide flooded the southern port town of Top. Almost two thousand homes and buildings were flooded, but no lives were lost, thanks to the efficient and timely evacuation of residents in the affected area. Clean up is already under way.’

Warren wondered how many HB officials would attend the Holman Hub opening, before he noticed response times to the Aikon sector were slowing. He checked the node statistics and redirected traffic to the backup trunk until the backlog cleared; a permanent fix needed to be postponed. Again his mind drifted to HB Mining, its function, methods, and origins, of which he had scant knowledge.

Warren shook his head, thankful he was not management material. However, he and others like him, were vital to maintaining HBnet’s galactic communications. He was a lowly technician and liked it that way, his job uncomplicated by the politics ambition requires. His mind shied from the nuances of deals and favours, much preferring technological problems over human ones. He ran a hand over his chin stubble and returned to the data streaming onto his screen from ships all over the galaxy, but not from *The Reed*. This, he could manage: chasing traffic anomalies, predicting ship movements, and redirecting their data on more efficient pathways. You just couldn’t automate the galactic-wide changes thrown up by space travel, time delays, and quirky human behaviour, especially with course changes arranged directly between management and the ships . . . couldn’t they at least let the network engineers know?

Warren checked the network load to the Aikon sector then closed down his terminal before anything else caught his attention; it was time to clock off anyway. He stood, stretched and headed towards the door just as it opened. Boris Kagan, one of Warren’s least favourite executives, stuck his head around the door.

“Ah . . . any news on *The Reed*?” Boris’ florid, middle-aged face frowned, his worry obvious.

Warren shook his head. “No, it’s definitely late.”

Boris grunted and left.

As Warren strolled towards the cafeteria he wondered where *The Reed* was and why it was weeks overdue reporting. Would that make the galactic news or just the local news? These scout ships, he knew, jumped all over the galaxy making reports that led to financial contracts and investments. He might work for a mining company, but its business was money.

The largest, wealthiest companies owned whole planets, and HB Mining owned Felix, the planet where he now lived and worked. HB, Warren knew, owned several planets as well as numerous asteroids and moons. Their headquarters were established on Felix a century ago, ostensibly to be nearer their major sources of raw materials, but everyone knew it was to avoid taxes. When you own the planet to whom do you pay taxes?

In the cafeteria, Warren selected a tray, loaded it with the ‘soup du jour’, salad, a burger, and a large coffee. He resisted selecting chips too, as his sedentary job made him careful to not over-indulge. To counteract his inactivity, Warren jogged along the beach opposite his home several times a week. He sighed as he slipped into a sunny window seat with a good view of the vid newsfeed on the back wall. While he ate, he watched footage of the tidal damage in the southern town of Top as residents and volunteers swept and shovelled debris.

He felt stale today. As a farm kid on Agricola life had seemed so full of promise, with dreams of space travel and technology. Now that he was a tech on another planet, almost half way across the galaxy, the excitement was stretching a little thin when all he did was monitor network flows and deal with incompetent vendors and technicians. He finished his meal and headed back to town to his HB-funded quarters to shower, watch more newsvids, sleep, and do the same again the following day. The high point of his evening was to exchange messages with his cousin Ingmar, the other member of his family to leave Agricola for an off world career. Did Ingmar ever feel stale in his job aboard the *Cousteau* or was he still stimulated and challenged? Did he regret leaving Agricola? It was Ingmar’s encouragement that had helped Warren decide to leave, to seek adventure and change, to learn new skills and meet others from throughout the galaxy, but the

challenge on Felix appeared to be over.

“Are you positive there’s nothing from *The Reed*?” asked Boris the next day when he poked his anxious face around Warren’s door, this time accompanied by a hard-eyed individual who, Warren knew, was from Security.

Boris, Warren thought, wasn’t looking quite as dapper as usual; his hair needed cutting and his shirt looked none too fresh. Perhaps *The Reed*’s disappearance was more significant than Warren suspected. “There’s nothing,” Warren replied. “Look, since you started asking two weeks ago I’ve put a trace on *The Reed*’s code.” He shrugged. “Nothing’s come in.”

Boris ran a hand through his sandy-coloured hair and looked away. “Yeah, yeah.” He sighed then looked back at Warren’s screen array. “It’s just hard to believe that with all of that . . .” he nodded in the direction of the screens. “There’s nothing from *The Reed*.”

“Have you back tracked through its communications to follow its trail?” asked Warren.

“That’s the problem. Everything checks out at its last verified port of call, but since then . . . nothing. I can’t believe there’s nothing.” He flounced out of the small communications room, which felt larger to Warren once Boris’ agitation and nervous energy were gone.

Several hours later, Boris again poked his head into Warren’s room. “Find anything yet?”

“No, sorry. Why, what’s up? What’s so special about *The Reed*?” Warren raised his eyebrows and cocked his head, inviting an explanation.

“Mmm.” Boris was non-committal. “When information is late the rest of us are late,” he added.

Warren shrugged. “Maybe it got caught in a storm. The newsfeeds say ion storms might be delaying ships in the Procyon region.”

“Ha! There’ll be one if it does get caught.” Boris flashed a feral grin and left.

Now what did he mean by that? The next day, requests for all of *The Reed*’s previous communiqués came in from at least six different departments. Warren extracted them and forwarded them. He supposed an investigation to locate the ship was under way, but no press releases about the missing ship had been broadcast in the news media. After digging out the communiqués, Warren noticed a bouncer. “Not again,” he moaned, shaking his head. He called a tech colleague within his own department. “Hey, Shabeet, did you get that Aikon routing update through yet? I’m still getting Mr. Kornwald’s traffic bounced. He’s been on Crespa for weeks.”

“Are you still worried about that? Our new ‘self-healing node-grow technology’ will take care of it for sure.”

“Yeah, right.” They both laughed. “Node grow is no grow. How long will it take that Sanfran tech to get out there?”

“They shipped a drone out with the gear on the *Sorbonne* last week,” Shabeet told him.

“That won’t make Crespa for another fortnight! Kornwald’ll be having little green men . . .” Warren was not happy. “We’ll have to get authorisation to go ex-net.”

“No way.” Shabeet was adamant. “I already tried that: no external routing of Mr. Kornwald’s traffic, full stop.”

“Oh rats!” Warren huffed a bit, but knew nothing else could be done; Gary Kornwald would just have to live with the consequences of traffic delays, and techs would take the blame.

He decided to take a break, see if there was any scuttlebutt about *The Reed*, and perhaps check out job opportunities in some other part of the galaxy. In the cafeteria, with coffee and a snack in hand, Warren, as usual, positioned himself to watch the newsvids: ‘In a statement, President Lothi of the Republic of North East Africa announced that troops were called in to quell a few unruly demonstrators on the streets, so law-abiding citizens could go about their business in peace. When asked, he denied there was a national emergency.’

‘Movie great, Adele Pallmer, died last night at her home in Switzerland. She will

be most remembered for her roles in 'Space Warp', 'The Last Great War, But One', and 'Antic'. She was one hundred and eighty four years old.'

'In local news: Finance minister Bruno de Moffitt, received cuts and bruises to his face last night when he was assaulted at a city night club. Two men, both in their twenties, have been arrested.'

'Three fishermen reported missing in their trawler following the king tide in the port town of Top two days ago, have not yet been found, despite an extensive search.'

"May we join you?"

Warren turned. "Mariella, Luci. Sure." He grinned and waved a hand in the general direction of the other seats at his table.

Two youngish women, both assistants to several of the financial managers, grinned back. "What's new?" asked Mariella before sipping her chai.

"Same old, same old . . ." Warren nodded at the news screen. "There are more 'suits' than usual asking about *The Reed*, though. Boris sticks his head into my little mouse-hole a couple of times a day. That's piqued my curiosity a bit."

Mariella snorted. "Yes, they've got their knickers in knots over that one. So why is Boris visiting you rather than messaging? Is he a friend of yours?"

"No, not a friend. I figure it's either because he doesn't believe me or because my room is en route to the bar. Why are they so worried?" asked Warren.

"Well, it is one of their new toys isn't it?" replied Mariella. "They wouldn't want to lose it so soon."

"It's not just that," chimed in Luci. "That little ship has very interesting assignments, slipping into various systems for samples and information on their special projects."

"That makes sense with such a high tech ship." Warren was thoughtful when the girls nodded. "And then they do what? Why is Boris so anxious?"

"Well," Mariella offered Warren and Luci some pretzels from an open bag. When they both declined she popped one into her own mouth before continuing. "Sometimes *The Reed* returns with expensive little items that I wouldn't mind seeing on my fingers or around my neck."

"I'm sure you'd look good in them too," commented Warren, after an appraising glance at Mariella. She was attractive, in fact both she and Luci were attractive in that poised, well-groomed manner of confident, intelligent, thirtyish women. Warren felt scruffy in comparison, *was* scruffy he reminded himself, with his loose, comfortable clothing and stubbly chin. But then he wasn't working for their managers and directors in the way Mariella and Luci were. "So where's *The Reed* supposed to be and why did Boris say there'd be a storm if it got caught? Caught by whom or what?"

"Boris said that?" Mariella winced before glancing at Luci.

"Must be one of the dodgy deals if Boris is involved," Luci answered.

"Dodgy deals? What dodgy deals?" asked Warren, startled. "This is the second-largest mining company in existence. I thought it was legitimate, solid, and profitable."

"Well, of course it is." Mariella washed down her pretzel with some chai, making a face when she decided that the two were not a good combination. "There are some 'one offs' around the edges that are a bit suspect, though."

"By all that's green and crumbly," exclaimed Luci. "How long have you worked here Warren?"

"A year."

"In your little cave. Sometimes I can't believe how compartmentalised everyone is. And this is head office. There's so little communication between departments." Luci continued in this vein for several minutes; it appeared to be a heartfelt complaint. "Why do so few know what's going on?"

"I suppose we all have our jobs and we do them," said Warren. "Why? What is going on?"

Luci leaned across the table to explain. "HB is huge. It has agents everywhere, planet side and on ships. HB knows what's where. It gets the jump on everyone else. They can predict trends - no, they create trends, influence markets, and mine

the innards out of everything, even before a new system is open.”

“Mine a system before it’s open? But . . .” Warren was stunned. He looked from Luci to Mariella for confirmation then back at Luci when Mariella twitched her lips in a little half smile. “Are you sure?”

Luci inclined her head. “They also manage to get hold of some pretty hot stuff.”

“What? If that’s all true, I’m not surprised no one knows what’s going on.”

Warren was somewhat shaken. “That’s illegal.”

“Probably,” Luci conceded.

Warren pressed on. “How do you know?”

Mariella rolled her eyes and explained. “You know Luci and I are assistants to the execs. They’re always rotating, moving on or up; whatever they do. Someone has to maintain continuity, bring each new one up to date so they can slot in and get on with their jobs. We know a lot about what happens.” She paused, thinking. “What surprises me is that most of them don’t realise how much they tell us or how much access we have.”

It was obvious that Mariella and Luci had a completely different perspective of HB from Warren. Now Warren’s perception of the company was also changing. The young women were two of the first people he had met when he arrived on Felix. They seemed to like the younger man and often shared a meal table, but Warren had not given their actual duties much thought. He realised he had slotted them into ‘filing and making appointments’ positions, of which he was now a little ashamed. “If you know so much sensitive stuff you could be a real threat to HB. Why haven’t you reported any of this?”

“To whom? HB owns Felix. We’d be unemployed with no place to live. Besides, most of it is legal and our jobs are not boring, like yours must be, alone in your little cubicle all day. We’re not a threat either, we’re just dumb secretaries,” commented Luci with a wry smile.

Ouch! At least he hadn’t thought they were dumb. “You wouldn’t have to stay here. There are thousands of planets to choose from. And you aren’t dumb. I’ve often wondered why you’re assistants rather than managers or directors. You’re smart and you’ve worked here long enough for seniority.” Warren knew both women had been employed by HB for almost ten years.

Mariella rolled her eyes. “Warren, I do not want to make their decisions. HB owns Felix. It’s the biggest employer on the planet. Luci and I grew up here, our families are here.”

“My family lives on Agricola, but I left.” Warren sighed. He knew others sometimes found leaving their familiar lives quite daunting. When his break time was over, Warren rose to leave, then turned back. “Please, be careful.” The girls’ revelations worried Warren and he wondered whether or not they were accurate. He knew industrial espionage was common, but Luci and Mariella had accused HB of activities that went far beyond that. How much of the daily traffic he facilitated was reports on stolen goods or plundered planets? Were the women mistaken?

Back at his work station, Warren checked the newsfeeds before returning to his duties, determined to look for clues to these possible activities . . . and there was still nothing from *The Reed*.

* * *

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