

## Notes

Jake ... Lead

Josh.. Stoker

Maria ... Steward

Mike .. Other boiler man

Henry ... Outlaw

Paula.. With Henry

Taken.. Foremen and Paula then Jake and Maria. Rescue attempt.. Josh and Henry

George – officer at farm

Motivation??? Free the planet??

How are they surviving??

Baddies.. all taken

Progressively find out more about planet? Big Animals?

Survey incorrect – has been changed?? Other Communities??

Move on. New zone. What's there? Abandoned farms??. Why???? What can they find?

Needs conflict – what does the navy send... armed transporter??

Needs balance – either side could win?

Do they need to go back to the flowers – rescue some others???? No....

Henry's plan.??

Call home. Fails because he sends his own message. – but he gets one back.???

Find out about extra ship landings.

Sends message to inform about drug shipments – but also tries to blackmail.

## 1 Coal

Jake shovelled the last of the coal into the boiler, but as soon as it was gone another load arrived. Seeing the foreman watching him he ignored the rising pain in his arms and reached forward again. But the ship lurched and the heavy furnace door swung into his leg throwing him across the stoke hold. This was not what he had seen in the pictures, but they were from earth and they used oil.

On his feet again he could see the other boys laughing at him. They had been on the ship for months or years and had muscles to show for it. The foreman was swearing at him for not latching the door properly and the pile of coal was still there. [The vents were blowing down fresh air from deck level, but the heat of the day was building and even this could not cool him.][move up to para 1] Twice more the four-wheeled trolley came and tipped its load of coal in front of him. Twice more he drank from his filthy water bottle, seconds of relief before the foreman was there with his stick. But then he collapsed onto the hot iron floor.

"They get half an hour to bury their dead" Someone was talking to him. It sounded female. His eyes would not focus.

"What? Dead?"

"The stokers, they bury their own. They get ten minutes to carry them up, ten minutes to sew them up and ten minutes to let them go. Any longer and the engine would stop and we'd be at the mercy of the wind and the sea."

"Why? I'm not dead am I?"

"No, but if you had been they would have got half an hour."

He was beginning to see now. He was on deck, sitting propped up against a bulkhead. He had seen the woman before when they embarked. She probably worked in the officers' saloon. She looked kindly enough and was holding a bottle out to him. He looked up.

"No, it isn't rum. Only the officers get that."

He gasped his thanks after a deep gulp of the water.

"Hurry hurry. Foreman wants you back."

"I can't"

"You must. You have their respect. The way you went down. You never cried out. You never stopped."

"They were laughing at me."

"And they will again. But I heard them when they carried you up. Say nothing. You must go now."

He fell again in the afternoon. But they had had their game and after that they let him shovel out the ash pans in the boilers as they were drawn down in turn. It was even more dusty and hotter when he had to climb right inside to hammer clinker from the bars. However the ash was lighter than the coal and barrowing it away to the hoist was a relief.

Then it was eight hours off. Just time for a bowl of stewed meat from some unknown animal and into a foul smelling bunk, still warm from the last man. Shaken awake he saw it was dark. At least the air from the vents would be cooler.

Ten days at sea and they made port. Suddenly they were free. The trimmers had come on board to spread the ore in the hold from where it was dropped by the massive shear-leg cranes. But they were stokers and only one boiler was needed to run the donkey engines and pumps so most of them could go ashore.

The pier was made of tree trunks driven into the mud. As the ship rocked and pulled

on its lines the whole structure swayed. The ran along it keeping clear of the rails where the locomotives were shunting in long lines of wagons. At the dockyard gate he expected to be stopped but the guards stood back and let them go through.

"Nobody argues with a stoker." The boy grinned at him. The woman had been right. Respect might lead to camaraderie and even friendship.

There was nothing to see of the town. It looked the same as the one they had sailed from after he had chosen ships over the other choices of factories, mines or farms. A few mean buildings spread along the sea shore and the nearest were taverns. Suddenly they had drinks and for the first time they faced each-other expecting conversation.

"You look posh. Were your parents rich or something?" This was Josh. He was big and looked fit. He had told Jake to keep the rag over his mouth to avoid silicosis from the coal.

"Yes, we had good times." He had to concentrate not to remember it too clearly. If it all came back he might give in. "We had lots of stuff. Good food. Good holidays. How long have you been here?"

"Two years near enough."

"Yes. Just in two years it's got even better. Since it got below four billion. There's plenty of food now."

"With all that money. Couldn't they have done something?"

"No, nobody can. It's all rumours but it's not possible. My friend, he was second-born as well. I knew I couldn't escape when he was shipped out to Port Alpha six months ago. Only first born can stay and there's no way to change it."

"Unless you're a boy with a younger sister." This was Sam. He had always looked worse than the others and Jake could see why now. The gender imbalance. Suddenly it had come up as a problem with their plans for a perfect world.

With the ice broken and the beer strong and plentiful the conversation turned to the inevitable: escape.

"It looks easy but they've no need to put guards around the town. There's nothing to eat out there. Every single thing is poisonous."

"You believe that?" Jake had to know.

"I know that. I've seen the bodies."

"What about the farms? They work don't they?"

"Thousands of miles away."

"What about fish?"

"All poisonous. Have another jug of ale."

The rest of Jake's money, three weeks' pay, went on a bottle of rum. It looked real, not from earth of course, but real enough.

The officers' quarters were high up on the bridge deck where stokers never went. As soon as he was half way up he saw an officer blocking his path.

"I brought this for her." He held it out in its paper wrapping. "She works here. She helped me when I was down."

"Who, Maria?" He took it and shook his head when he saw inside. "Wasted on her."

"But you will give it to her."

With a shrug the man was gone.

It was twenty two days out with a full load and eighteen back with ballast. That was the best

they could do, but this time the weather was foul. They had been at sea for twenty five days. That was twenty five days of eight hours on and eight hours off with the ship rolling crazily. The captain was blaming the stokers for giving him inadequate steam to hold course into the wind. They blamed the first mate for being drunk when he signed off the manifest when the stevedores had only loaded half of the ballast, leaving the ship blowing about like a cork in a whirlpool.

Jake was fitter than he had ever been in his life. In just a few short months he had built muscles a stoker could be proud of but in this weather he needed more than strength. A rope around his waist tied to a cleat on the bulkhead behind him kept him from falling into the furnace but he still had to stand and shovel. If he fell he had to get up before the next wave. Each lump of coal into the boiler was a victory but then there were always more, spreading across the floor as fast as he could gather them up.

Then he saw it. The boiler plate above the fire door was starting to glow red and he was sure he could see it bulging out towards him. He dropped his shovel, slipped the rope from his waist and ran. The foreman swung out with his stick but missed as he dived through to the boiler room.

"Boiler four" He shouted. "Running dry." The boiler man was sitting on the deck leaning against the hull side.

"Running dry" he shouted again, but then he saw it all. The empty bottle and the stain of vomit down the man's overall.

By now the foreman was after him with the stick but he was quick and ran to the feed pump. Even in a storm he should have heard the continual clack clack but now it was silent. He grabbed the valve above it and started turning it.

The foreman stopped, stick held high, eyes wide. Two turns and the valve was closed. Seeing nothing else he grabbed the stick from the foreman's hand and, wedging it against the engine base, levered the shaft around. Opening the valve again he saw it start to move, and then it was going again. He opened the valve right up so the engine raced until the pump shuddered as it started to draw water.

The foreman said nothing. A sharp application of his stick had the boiler man on his feet, running forward to check his water levels.

Two days later, with the storm abated, he was called to the bridge.

"Where did you learn to manage a boiler?" The captain asked, an imposing man with a fine grey moustache. "Tipping the piston off top dead centre; you must have learnt that somewhere."

"A friend. His father had a steam boat on the river. Then I read about it, they told me you had them here."

"So you had rich friends did you? How did you land up here?"

He hated this remark. He had heard it so many times before. Could his family really have paid to save him from this hell? He had always fought with his older brother. Was that part of it? The thought of it was burning him up. He looked enviously at the Captain. Far older than anybody around him, he had chosen to come and when his work was finished he could take his money and go back.

"As a boiler man you will be paid the rate for a skilled hand." He had missed the start of what the man had said.

"Do you understand me rich boy?"

"Yes sir. Yes I am confident I can do it."

Curious stares followed him off the bridge.

The stokers said they were happy for him but said little after that. In port he went ashore with the engineers and even a junior officer all keen to hear his story.

"We heard there's plague on Alpha." The officer said when he told where his friend had gone.

"How did you hear that?"

"Just rumour." He looked around and said quietly. "The guard ship in orbit up there gets data bullets with the ore haulers. Sometimes the crew get bored and come down in one of the skiffs. Anyway they talk to the girls. The captain must know but they only rotate crews every six months so he lets them."

"Doesn't he care?"

"No, nobody cares what we know. We're not going anywhere are we?"

"How bad is the plague?"

"Apparently they'd pull out completely if it wasn't for the manganese. Nowhere else has it."

"Are there many dead? Can't they stop it or cure it?"

"They said it was too expensive. Besides there was a whole city in Africa somewhere being shipped out for trying to hide children, so they had plenty of replacements."

This time, his wages bought some bedding. Not new but freshly laundered to go on his bunk in the compartment with the engineers.

Maria was there, in the corridor outside, watching him with his arms full of blankets.

"Why the bottle?"

He looked up. "He gave it to you? I thought he took it."

"Nobody steals from a stoker."

"I wanted to say thanks."

"What did I do? Just some water."

"Water and kindness."

A hint of a smile as she turned, dark hair clinging to the back of her coat.

Mike had told him they were going to the coal mine. Mike was the other boiler man; they had time for a few words at the change of shift. He had over-heard one of the officers talking about it; but he could tell there was a change without being told, as they hurried by with distant looks.

"I guess they're just worried about having to find their way into a different port." Jake shrugged. "Wouldn't look very good if they couldn't find the entrance."

Mike hurried on over to the steam gauges to start his shift.

The port was new. Timber jetties with bark still clinging to the piles and scarcely anything ashore except the vast brown heaps of coal. Jake saw the chief engineer and the captain standing at the rail staring at them.

"We can't load that rubbish." The engineer's voice carried easily over the noise of the docks.

The captain turned to face him "We load what we're told to load."

"It's brown coal, useless and dangerous." But the captain had turned away.

They went looking for a place to drink but found nothing but gangs of boys with overseers driving them on to move the coal. In each boy he saw himself six months before,

weak and terrified. It took them a full three days to load the ship.

The rain came just as the hatches were being closed, the first mate shouting at the deck hands as they slipped and fell where the dust had turned to slurry. The captain was looking down as the water streamed down onto the coal, a look of fright and distraction. He personally supervised fixing the tattered tarpaulins tight over top as each hold was closed.

Life was harder for the stokers. Bad coal needed bigger fires. Jake's gauges were low all the time.

Three days out from port and the foreman called him through to the stoke hold. One of the wagons had arrived fresh from the bunker and the coal in it was smouldering. The chief engineer looked resigned when Jake ran into his office.

"Is this what you meant by brown coal being dangerous? I heard you telling the captain."

"You've got a nerve, I saw you listening to our conversation."

"It was loud enough. Why is it dangerous?"

"You've seen it. Spontaneous combustion when it gets wet. Now get back to your boilers."

"What about the coal in the holds?"

"It's all sealed – not like your bunker. No air means no fire. Now get out."

Mike had already heard when he came down. "They keep checking those tarpaulins." he said. "Endlessly walking round and trying to seal every possible hole."

## **2 Abandoned**

The banging woke Jake in the night. It was coming from the officer's quarters above. Loud and incessant, somebody banging at a door; and he was sure he could hear Maria shouting. Running out on deck he saw they had slowed down and changed course. Up the companionway he found the outer door locked, but the banging was louder now. Knocking gave no result. Looking out he could see the ship was turning in circles. Retrieving a heavy spanner and was soon inside.

It was deserted. First the ward room, and then the cabins leading off it, and finally the bridge. The banging was from a cupboard off the galley. One blow from his spanner and it was open to reveal a sobbing Maria.

"It's burning. They took the boat."

He didn't wait. He ran outside and round to the lifeboat davits. One was gone and even from a distance he could see a gaping hole in the other.

Within minutes they had all gathered on the deck. The officers had all gone with a number of the crew. They had checked the rotten planking on the remaining boat, the tarpaulins over the hatches which were already too hot to touch and several bottles of rum from the ward room which were being passed round.

Mike had put a life jacket on, only to be laughed at. "Poisonous stinging fish." A stoker shouted out. "You'll be floating ok but dead with it."

Jake saw Josh looking at him. All the stokers were staring at him. "You're supposed to be clever." Josh said. One by one everybody else fell silent. Even the bottles were held still.

"You'll have to keep steam in the boilers. But." He paused. "But if we could do this we could escape. We have a ship full of coal. We could go right around this world."

A silent acknowledgement was indicated only by a slight nod of the head as they

returned to the stoke hold, ignoring the heat from the deck plates beneath them.

The charts were little more than large printouts from satellite images with scarcely any added detail. They were covered with dirt and lines in various colours with dates scribbled beside them.

"I saw him looking at this one yesterday." Maria said, leaning over it. "When I brought his coffee." Slowly it made sense to Jake, their normal course to the old mine with endless points and dates along it and then the one new course with just one set of dates ending with a line marking a short crossing to a harbour.

"They'll be on dry land within a day"

"They've been talking about it ever since the coal got wet." Suddenly she turned and held his arm. "I kept asking them to take you."

There was land beyond the port which showed no marked towns or villages. He set the course and ran down to help Mike with the fire pumps.

They went to each hold in turn to find the hottest and lifted the hatch using asbestos gloves from the engineering store. For a moment they just saw glowing in the dark below but then a fireball shot up into the half-light of dawn throwing them back against the rail. It took an hour with the pumps at full power to subdue it. By the time they had finished he could feel the mass of water flowing across each time the ship rolled, making it struggle to come upright again. He ran along the deck. The plates were buckling above two more holds. Paint was flaking off the hull, the plates bowing out between the bulkheads.

The stoke hold was hellish. Grabbing a shovel he tried to help. The coal was already smouldering in the trollies. The ventilators fanned it into flame as they shovelled it, burning their arms and blowing smoke in their faces. Seeing the others still working he could not stop.

Josh was coughing, tearing the rag away from his face, breathing in desperate lungfuls of foul air. Jake turned to him but he waved him away. One shovel-full at a time. He kept on. Each time the deck tipped he could feel all the water trying to capsize them and trap him in this tomb. Each time it came back he tried even harder to build his fire.

"Number three hatch is buckling."

He looked up through the smoke. A deck hand was shouting at him.

"Flood it." He shouted back. But the man did not move.

A minute later he was helping them lift the hatch. Feeling guilty. The stokers abandoned.

They jumped back from the fireball and started flooding it. Looking ahead through the cloud of steam he tried to believe he could see land.

He shouted to Mike. "When we get there we open the seacocks into the holds." Mike hesitated. "Smash the pipes if you need to. Get it ready."

Back on the bridge Maria was staring ahead. It was land, possibly ten miles, possibly fifteen.

"Will we make it?" She looked up at him with trust in her eyes.

"No, it's an hour maybe two. The stokers can't take it."

For a moment she held him tight with both arms, still looking up into his eyes, and then stood back, black with coal dust.

"I'll go down."

"You can't". But he knew she must as she ran for the door.

Looking ahead he thought he saw a bay with a faint outline of steep hills to either side. When he checked, it was there on the chart. Welcoming and ideal but impossible to reach.

Without warning there was a massive clap of thunder and less than a minute later the storm struck. He should have been looking out. It was his job, his command.

The ship heeled in the squall. He ran outside to call Maria back, but she had gone. Then the rain came, huge sheets of water making massive clouds of steam. It was pouring onto the deck, gathering in pools and out through the scuppers onto the hull sides. More and more came and the steam subsided, and suddenly he had hope.

Back down to the stokers and Maria was with them shovelling coal. Without the strength she could do little but seeing her there and feeling the cooler air from the ventilators they redoubled their efforts. He stayed and worked with them as the squall threw the ship from side to side. He knew that each load took five minutes. He was counting them. The air became hotter and the ship rolled less and he knew the storm had passed.

Maria was still there, half-visible through the smoke, managing six loads before falling back against a trolley. On his shoulder she felt light and fragile as he ran up the steps. Laying her down on the deck he gave her water and remembered when she had done the same for him.

Now the bay was close, they could all see it. But another hatch was giving way. The storm had left calm water behind it and the ship now lurched slowly from side to side, a bit further each time as they flooded the hold. Passing the headland he ordered the boiler fires quenched and the dazed stokers came up to see them drift in towards the shore. Judging the depth he went down with Mike to see the big iron boiler feed pipes he had smashed and as they opened the sea cocks the water jetted in past them, up to their ankles by the time they got to the steps.

They were just on deck as the ship touched the sand. Jake watched anxiously as the water rose up as the hull settled, relaxing as it reached just below where they were standing. All three moons were in alignment, it would be a very high tide.

“Do these poisonous fish go right up by the beach?” Josh was looking ahead. “How are we going to get ashore without stepping in the water?”

“You’ve spent too long in your stoke hold.” Jake replied. “You need to get out a bit more. We’ll see to that. I’ll go first and if they eat me you can stay behind.”

Looking at the rising water in the bottom of the boat which had leaked through the tarpaulin they had stretched over the holes; he saw that this was not much of an offer. They had only taken five minutes to row to shore and it was already over the floor boards.

But as they came in they saw a small landing stage built out from the side of the bay. It was just a pile of sticks and stones but clearly man made.

Josh picked up his gun and scanned the shore line. He was still nervously inspecting the trees as they moored up. He reluctantly put the gun down and stepped out of the boat to help as they dragged it up out of the water and turned it over.

The forest looked just like ones he had seen on earth right down to the ferns along the top of the beach and the moss on a fallen tree.

“Don’t be fooled.” He said. “It may look ok but the whole lot is poisonous.”

“You worry me with that gun.” Jake replied. “I shouldn’t have told you when we found it. Have you ever tried to fire one?”

Josh ignored him and kept looking around. “They’ve got a path here, leading into the woods. They could be watching us from anywhere.”

“Wasn’t it just a few weeks ago you were telling me that nobody survives out here?”



Jake replied as he watched two of the men start to cut down a small tree. "You just said it's poisonous. So somebody escaped and made this. It's quite old. They'll be long gone."

Making planks from the tree was hard work with hand tools. By the time the first ones were ready the tide was fully in and out in the bay the only sign of the ship was the bridge deck standing out of the water with the funnel on top like a light house. Jake kept looking at the path.

"Now we've checked they aren't going to get wet feet over there in the ward room, let's have a look round."

"Why look for trouble?" Josh replied. "We could have this boat fixed in a couple of hours and go back."

"We're already in trouble. Let's have a look."

The path led up through the trees following the bank of a small stream. Jake had taken a branch from the tree and cut it off to form a club. "If anything moves I'll hit it. Don't shoot it unless you have to." He looked back at Josh waving the gun from side to side. "And please don't shoot me."

"Where are the big lizards?" Josh asked after a few minutes of climbing. "I was told they got you as soon as you went into the trees."

"Perhaps it was all propaganda, but don't bet on it. This might be the lizards' favourite path down to the bay."

The path continued upward. It was bare hard earth with scattered leaves but no trace of a footprint. There was a break in the trees and Jake looked back out across the bay. It was just like a brochure for Caribbean island with the green of the forest stretching down to the white sandy beach.

Minutes later they came to the brow of the hill and looking over they saw an open meadow and there was a man sitting on a log. He was wearing a ragged uniform of a ship's officer but his grey beard was neatly trimmed and he looked fit.

"Hello. We wondered if you'd come up."

Josh held the gun out in his trembling hand.

"If you shoot me you'll starve."

Jake pushed the gun down. Josh still stood motionless with it now pointing at his feet.

"With your engines stopped your freezers will be out and your food won't last a couple of days. Probably wasn't much in them anyway. I doubt you've got much in tins. I can show you what you can eat."

"How do you know?" Jake stared at him, unable to move.

"We do know. Otherwise we wouldn't be here, would we? What is it you've got in your holds that was on fire? It made some incredible explosions when you lifted the hatches and let the tide in; didn't it. We could see the steam from miles away."

"Coal, rotten dirty coal that catches fire."

The man stared at him. "You've got a whole ship load of coal. Leave it on the tide for a week or two and it'll soon settle down. A whole ship load. It could go anywhere"

"You can have some. As much as you want." Jake looked nervously at Josh, his gun looked useless.

"A ship. All flooded but with the sea cocks open it will drain enough on a good tide and all the holds full of coal. You really did a brilliant job bringing her in. Absolutely perfect, exactly the right spot. It was you wasn't it, I take it you are the captain, now I mean, I see one of the boats has gone. Presumably the old man took that with his mates and left you to it. I bet he'd never believe it in a million years if he found out what you've managed to do. Holds

on fire and the remaining boat rotten through. Anyway I don't suppose he will. They won't bother sending out a drone to look for you if he tells them you didn't stand a chance."

He suddenly looked up as if he had just noticed they were there.

"Forgive my manners. Will you join us for some food? Would you like to invite your friends down at the landing stage, and maybe the rest of them out at the ship? We have plenty. It's easy to find when you know how."

"I know what you're thinking." The man had introduced himself as Henry and was looking at Jake as he looked at the food. The meat was grey with a shade of green and the vegetables, if that was what they were, were bright yellow. The plates and the forks were wooden and only the knives were crudely shaped from metal.

Henry took a slice of meat from his plate and ate it. "I'm afraid it's all there is but actually it's not too bad."

Jake tried some and had to agree that it tasted somewhat better than it looked.

"It's ok. We won't try to poison you and steal your ship because we couldn't get it going without you."

Looking around at Henry's "outlaw band" as he called them Jake could see why. There were only three men, five women and some very young children. The adults were the survivors of a group which had apparently escaped from a mine complex four years before. They sat apart, silently watching the newcomers as they ate their food.

"And we don't poison ourselves because we've got a full printout of the first survey of the planet which analysed everything to see if it was edible. We know which animals to hunt and which parts of them we can eat. Nobody has come to any harm since we got together and came here."

Jake's immediate thought was that they hadn't come to a lot of good either. They were sitting on logs outside a crude wooden screen across the mouth of a cave where the outlaw band lived. Glimpses inside showed little more than piles of leaves and dry grass, which they presumably slept on.

Preferring the comfort of the bunks they had struggled to carry up to the ward room ahead of the rising tide they thanked Henry and his band for their hospitality, promised to meet again in the morning, and returned to the ship after the meal.

Jake awoke to see the sun streaming in through the bridge windows. Stepping carefully between the sleeping crew he looked out to see the tide low and the deck well clear of the water. The open hatches revealed the piles of brown coal. With the tide out the beautiful sandy beach was even closer.

"Looks brilliant. Ideal for a leisurely swim". Josh has stepped up behind him.

"Our Henry never mentioned fish. I wonder what his magic book says about them. Do you think they're all poison."

"Only takes one. But it would be handy if we could eat some of them. Could we have a look at this book?"

"Doubt it. He won't trust us any more than we trust him. It's his one trump card. Maybe in a week or two. We've got to stop three weeks for the next big tide."

Looking down to the other side they a great plume of brown where water and coal dust was jetting out through the sea cocks.

"At least we'll have nice clean coal." Jake watched it spreading across the bay. "Should be just fine after a month of that."

“That’s what Henry said. He sounds as if he knows what he is talking about. Can’t see why he would try to trick us on that one.”

“You don’t trust him do you?”

“Do you? For all I know he’s already told the navy about us. He could have all sorts of [phones and] stuff in the back of that cave. Why would he be here anyway at that age? If he was a volunteer he wouldn’t be out here in the wild. He must have done something serious back home [explain].”

More people were emerging now, some from the officer’s cabins to either side. Twenty [??] people in the small ward room left little space but they crowded in wanting to hear what was happening.

“I don’t know any more than you.” Jake said when the talking stopped and they looked at him. “If you want me to be in charge I’ll do my best but all I can say is watch out and let me know if you see anything. We have all survived so far and our aim is simply to survive some more.”

“The worst they can do is to eat us.” Someone shouted back cheerfully.

Henry was waiting for them near the beach with two of his men and a pile of crude spears made of tree branches with pointed ends. “We need to hunt every day.” He said. “The meat will only last for a few hours unless you get your freezers going.”

The small animal looked like a mixture of a hamster and a rat. Jake raised his spear but Henry waved it back. They watched it wander through the trees apparently unaware of them. Henry pointed to his ear and they saw that it had no sign of any at all. Following the animal at its leisurely pace through the forest Henry kept them a few yards behind it.

Suddenly it disappeared and Henry and his men threw their spears into the undergrowth and rushed in after them. Under a bush there was a vast spider with a body the size of a man’s head. The rodent was struggling against the grip of one of its claws on the end of a thin hairy leg almost a yard long. The body was still moving despite the two spears embedded in it and the green fluid oozing out.

Jake looked at it, his head spinning. “It wasn’t?”

“It’s ok. Not poisonous. It’s the only one in the book.” Henry replied.

“Why not the rat? Even that?”

“Deadly, head to tail.”

Josh walked closer but had to turn his head away. “Survival, that’s what you said. Just survival, nothing more.”

That evening they had plates and cutlery from the ship but appetites were limited. The hunting method was as effective as it was simple and there was plenty for all if they wanted it.

When people had eaten all they could Jake produced bottles of wine from the ship and some glasses. There weren’t enough to go round but they all joined in the toast.

Jake raised his glass “To survival.” [Jake offered]

Henry replied “Your health sir, Survival and revenge.”

### 3 Re-floating

The air in Josh's mask smelt of grease from the pump and rubber from the hose. He looked down towards the steps through the small glass face plate. Even after a month of flushing by the tide the water was thick with coal dust. But he had been down these steps a thousand times before; he knew the feel of each one. He counted the last and was down on the boiler room floor. It was difficult to move, covered from head to foot in thick jacket and trousers tied at the ankles to protect him from the stinging fish and aquatic worms. His feet went down onto the steel plates but as soon as they did he floated up. The weights around his waist were only just enough to make him slowly sink down again. His eyes gradually adjusted to the gloom as the shaft of light from the hatch way above him struggled to penetrate the black water. Swimming with his arms he moved slowly across. Suddenly the hose snagged, pulling him backwards falling to the floor. As he went down it pulled at his mask snatching it away from his face. Blinking as the dirty water hit his eyes he launched himself after the train of bubbles snaking away towards the steps. A fish swam by, turning towards him before he beat at it with a gloved hand. He grabbed the mask and pushed it against his face, waiting for the air pressure to force the water out before gulping the hot dirty air. Fumbling for the strap he found it loose but not broken and fixed it back around his head. Now he pulled gently on the hose and felt it come clear of the corner of the hatch where it had snagged. This time he made it across the boiler room. His face plate was filthy with the coal dust but he could feel his way to the first sea cock. They had tried to time it for slack water but he could feel it beginning to flow in, pushing him away. He held onto the handle, a great wheel almost a yard across. With no weight he couldn't turn it. He reached out with his feet for the second valve to hold on and stretching horizontally between the two and pulled with all his strength on the top of the wheel. Gradually the month of accumulation of sand and debris was pushed aside and he managed to move it. Jake and Mike had told him: Six turns on each valve that's all it needs; but neither of them would have been strong enough for this. Even two years as a stoker had never prepared him for this. [expand] By the time he had closed the first one he was struggling to move. He could feel the water flowing in faster through the other. This time it was more difficult, he had to pull on the bottom of the wheel, straining his muscles to their limits. He had been down a full half hour by the time he was back at the surface and hands reached down to help him out to lie down on the deck.

The tide rose and the ship lifted off the sand, floating precariously with the holds still deep in water. Crew at the bow paid out the anchor chain, working the capstan manually with long spikes. A long rope reached to the shore where the rest of the men, with Henry's band helping pulled it slowly closer. Finally the tide turned and they could go no further. With no tell-tale plume of water to guide them, they had to guess the right time for Josh to go down. Too early and water would rush in past him, throwing him against the boilers when he opened the valve. But too late would be even more dangerous sucking him into the valve as the water flowed out.

It had only been three hours since he had last been down. Three hours to rest and try to calm his nerves. This time he pulled plenty of hose down with him as he went. This time he knew how to get across to the valves. But this time he could see the dim shape above them. He stopped, straining to see into the gloom. It was a vague outline, floating motionless. He had to go forward, one step. It moved, a tremor that spread from a blunt head to a forked tail. He could see its length now, a good fifteen feet. It must have been drawn through the valve by the pressure of the tide. Now injured and dangerous.

One more step. He could see the jagged tear in its pointed dorsal fin.

But he had to open the valves. Delay would gain nothing. He drifted slowly up to them, watching. He reached over his head for the first wheel. The bubbles from the vent on his mask were drifting past it. It shook its tail fin, hitting against the hull side with a boom that echoed around him. He turned the wheel. He felt water flowing out, drawing him in towards the jagged edge of the broken pipe.

A loop of his air hose floated past and the shark opened its mouth to reveal double rows of pointed white teeth. He pictured it tearing through it in seconds, drowning him. He froze, listening to his heartbeat. He opened it more. The pressure increased. He had to continue.

One valve was open. He moved to the second. He saw it move. In a flash it was over by the boilers, turning on him. Even in the half-light he could still see the teeth. He threw himself forward as it came. Lashing out with his feet he felt one land on the rubbery skin.

It had gone. He looked round, expecting a second attack. Then he saw it. A thrashing tail, the front of its body stuck fast in the open valve.

By the time he had the second valve open [expand] the pressure was drawing it through, tearing the damaged fin from its body. Climbing exhausted back to the deck he watched as it was finally thrown clear from the side of the ship in a spurt of skin and blood.

Again he had just a few hours before he had to go down and close the valves, but by this time the water was far shallower. On the next tide the water was right below the first boiler and they could light it and start the long process of pumping out and washing down.

The ship rode at anchor in the middle of the bay; a thin wisp of smoke rising from the funnel into the calm early evening air. A patina of rust was already visible, forming on the forward hull sides where the fires had burned the paint away but inside all was in good order. The engines, compressors and generators had all been painstakingly stripped down and cleaned. The boiler feed pipes that had been smashed to open the sea cocks to the hull had all been welded back into place. Coal had been moved from the nearest hold to fill the boiler feed bunker. The crew quarters and galley had all been washed down and cleaned and the freezers were all working and full of spider meat.

Only three men were on board to keep watch and attend to the machinery, all the rest were gathered for their evening meal in front of the cave.

"We shall sail west to zone 43." Henry said. "There are bound to be free people there. It was another of the zones they suggested in the survey for settlement. They will know of others. We can sail on, gaining strength as we go."

His band behind him all looked on mesmerised.

Jake said nothing.

"Well young man, does that sound good to you? When we have enough people we could free the whole planet."

"How would we do that? They have drones, how could we fight them? And what would we do if we could? They would just destroy the whole planet. Please can we make a plan to survive, not to die?" He looked back at Josh who just shrugged. He had heard this discussion every night since they re-floated the ship.

"Where is the fire in your soul? They have betrayed us. We must get our revenge."

"You can come with us but we shall not fight." Henry looked resigned. Jake took this as agreement but he felt guilty having said it. In the night they slipped anchor.

It had been Jake's decision and his alone. He hadn't dared to discuss it with anybody

in case Henry found out; and if Henry had found out he would have stopped them. He hadn't dared to discuss it with his crew in case they made a lot of noise. Working with just one boiler they had crept out with the tide into a calm sea. He explained it to them as best he could when they gathered on deck at first light.

"The ship's navigation computer is locked into the console by the helm." They were looking up at him, some angry, some just confused. "The officers had tried to force the lock but must have run out of time so they just took the terminal. But we found a spare terminal, just a small touch screen, when we emptied the stores to bring them up to the ward room. It was all flat but when we got the generators going we charged it up."

"And we found a copy of Henry's report in the memory." Maria shouted out. [more description of meeting]

"They kept the passwords on a bit of paper and Maria took it when she saw they were going." Jake was looking nervously at them. "If you all think we should go back, then we shall."

In the brief silence all they could hear was the engine running slowly below them.

"Where are we going?" Josh asked, betraying some of his disappointment in his faltering question.

"He doesn't know." Maria replied.

"We shall hold this course for another day." Jake said. "It will keep us clear of the shipping lane. If the navy come looking they will find us anyway so it makes little difference. There's only one terminal but as many of you as possible can look at the report. And this timer tomorrow you can decide where we go and.." He paused to look down at Josh. "Whether you still trust me to try to take you there."

During the day Jake found time to speak to each one of the [twenty] crew. None admitted to being sent out as criminals and they all looked young enough to have been sent out as second, third or even fourth-born or, cruellest of all, several were first-born with a younger sister and selected by lottery like Sam. Some of these were even sure that their parents had paid one of the illegal clinics to make sure their first-born was a son.

He joined the small group around the screen on the bridge. It still seemed odd to him for so many people to be gathered round a simple device that would hardly have interested a child on earth. It was designed to navigate the ship using the positions of the moons because nobody had put in navigation satellites. The document viewer was very basic and would just scroll slowly through the enormous document.

One of the stokers was sitting at the front by the console and people kept asking him to move on to the next page. They were in the chapter on food sources and found what Henry had seen about the spider meat. Then they moved on to the land surveys with maps of the different continents. Several of the maps showed virtually no detail.

"Looks like they got lazy." Maria remarked.

"Why bother." Jake replied. "Once they had the mines mapped and ways to get the ore out nobody cared about the rest."

"I thought they were supposed to survey the whole thing."

Nobody replied. The stoker moved it on to zone 43. The map was blank.

"Anybody know why Henry wanted us all to go there?" He asked.

#### **4 Mutiny**

Jake was on the bridge with two of his new officers. He turned the helm to take them across the shipping lane and asked the engine room for more speed.

"We'll have to learn more as we go along." He said, straining his eyes to see the horizon in the falling light. "The main thing is to keep awake and keep alert for the full eight hours. It's at least three weeks to zone 43 and that's a lot of time on watch."

They had previously been stokers but they were well educated and also had experience of handling boats. He was sure they would be quite as good as he was at the job.

Maria appeared with some mugs of coffee. Their supplies of coffee powder and dried milk were in good shape but he knew they must run out eventually so he tried to savour it as he drank.

The second meeting had gone well. It had been even shorter than he expected. Everybody had agreed to have him as captain with his choice of officers and to head for zone 43. Everything there was to discuss had apparently already been discussed as they read the report.

Then he noticed it. The engine speed had not increased. If anything it was decreasing.

"The intercom's packed up." He said, walking to the door. "I'll go down and tell them and check it while I'm there."

Out in the evening air he could see a perfect sunset and he went down the steps to the deck. There were stairs leading directly down from the bridge but he liked to go outside. Walking over the hatch he took the companionway down to the engine room. The engine was gleaming despite its weeks under water and was turning steadily but slowly. He started walking across to check the intercom but couldn't see anybody. Hesitating he looked around. The whole engine room seemed deserted. He thought he heard steps behind him and was just turning when he felt the blow on his head.

He woke to see Maria looking at him. He seemed to be lying on his back in a hot place with dim lighting.

"Are you ok?" It was difficult to hear above the noise of the boilers.

"I must have hit my head on something."

"No. They hit you."

"Who?"

"They did. The others."

He felt able to sit up. His head ached but his mind was clear. He was lying on a mattress at the back of the stoke hold. In front of him stokers were shovelling coal into the boilers. Around him other people were lying on mattresses.

"Where are they – the others?"

"Outside.." She looked up to the closed hatch leading up to the deck. "They say that if we don't keep the boilers going they'll weld it shut."

He soon saw the simplicity of the arrangement. The way through to the boiler room which led on to the engine room had been bolted from the far side. Food and water was lowered down to them through the hatch.

"The foremen were the ringleaders." Josh explained. "There weren't many of them but they turned off the intercoms so nobody knew they were coming. They had that gun and some knives and got us all in small groups."

"What do they want?" Jake asked. "Why didn't they just ask? I was only Captain because people seemed to want me to be."

Maria looked at him. "That's the point most of us did." She paused and looked away. "I don't know what they want but I'm pretty sure I know what they don't want. They don't want you or the rest of us telling them what to do."

"But I kept asking them what they wanted."

"They don't work that way." Josh replied. "We did try to tell them that we could change our plans if they asked."

Within an hour Jake was fit enough to take his turn at the boilers. Many of the others had not been stokers before and they had to keep the steam pressure up so he had to do more to make up for them.

By the end of his shift he had made a plan so they would have the same number of experienced stokers on each shift.

"Is that it?" Josh asked.

"Yes. That's my plan. I hope we all agree on it."

"But what happens next? How do we get out?"

"We don't. We wait and we survive."

The stokers who had stopped to listen to his reply said nothing and went back to work. If escape was mentioned again he never heard it.

A day later the engine was stopped and they heard the capstan working to lower the anchor. Soon the hatch opened and they called for Jake.

Kissing Maria on the cheek and promising to be back as soon as he could he climbed the ladder to the deck. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight but then he saw they were back in the same bay. The foreman from his shift of stokers and three other men were standing in front of him. They had kitchen knives in their belts and were carrying wooden clubs. One of them pushed him with the end of his club.

"You don't look like much of a captain to me brave boy."

He had already decided not to respond. Survival was all. They quickly took him to the stern where the boat had been lowered from its davits. He tried to walk holding his head high but he was shaking and stumbled over some loose rope. The foreman laughed and hit out at his legs so he fell to the deck.

One of the others dragged him back to his feet. "No time to waste. Get moving, you've got a job to do."

Down in the boat he was sitting facing the foreman.

"What do you want me for?" He tried to sound calm.

The foreman glanced at the others before replying. "Just do what you're told."

They had anchored further out than before and he saw that the ship was out of sight of the headland in front of the cave. It was still only a few minutes later when they came close to the beach. He could smell the rotting leaves in the forest behind it when they ran hard into the shingle by the landing stage.

He was marched up the path with the foreman behind him. He had to carry on. Carry on and survive. They reached a clearing just below the top.

The foreman turned to him. "Ok. Listen carefully. If you get this wrong even you can guess what will happen to your friends." Again he looked to the others. "But I don't suppose you could even guess what will happen to you." This time the others grinned at him and held out their clubs for effect.

"What you do is you walk towards Henry's cave. We want him out of it. If anybody asks what happened you say that the ship dragged its anchor in the night and was swept out to sea and we had some trouble finding the bay again. Get it?"



“What do I do then?”

“Nothing. Leave the rest to us and you’ll get along fine.”

He stood up to go but one of them grabbed his jacket and pulled him down. “Not yet. You go when we say go.”

All the others went off leaving him alone with the foreman.

“This is stupid.” He said. “If I just went up and asked him Henry would come to the ship.”

“You don’t get it do you. This isn’t one of your posh games of cricket. This is real life and you’re a loser with all your talk of just surviving. Now shut up because if the boss finds you talking he’ll kill you.”

They sat in silence until five minutes later the foreman finally looked at his watch and told Jake to go.

He walked up the path onto the top of the ridge looking round to see if he could see the others. He couldn’t see them but there was plenty of cover to either side. There was no sign of anybody else until he came into sight of the cave mouth and saw two of the women outside it. They didn’t notice him at first but looked up when he was still 50 yards away. As soon as they saw him one went into the cave and the other waked over to meet him. He told her the story.

She assured him that Henry would be out in a minute and they sat down on one of the logs.

He couldn’t help scanning the bushes around him.

“You look nervous.” She said. “It’s all right. He won’t be angry once you tell him what happened. It wasn’t your fault that the anchor slipped was it?”

He couldn’t think of anything else to say so they sat in silence. She had long brown hair and was nervously pulling at as loose strand of it. He was staring into the undergrowth and sweating in the hot sun.

Finally Henry appeared at the cave mouth with two of the women. Jake stood up and walked towards him. Henry came forward slowly and Jake saw that he was also scanning the bushes. As soon as they were close he started to tell his story about the ship. Moments later the men came running out from the undergrowth shouting to each other. Within seconds three of them had had grabbed the women and the rest of them were running towards him.

Henry was fast. Before Jake could react he had a knife at his throat.

“Leave them go or I’ll kill him.”

One of the men was pointing the gun at him. “Go ahead.” He shouted back.

“No.” Jake gasped. “They’ve taken the ship. I’m not with them.”

Henry looked at the men all around him and lowered his knife. One of the men grabbed him and pushed him to the ground. He tried to shout out but the fall had taken his breath. A rag was pushed into his mouth and his hands tied. Leaving the foreman on guard, the rest of the men ran into the cave.

The foreman told Jake and the two women to sit down.

Henry was struggling and kept trying to catch Jake’s attention. The foreman raised his knife. “If you run or shout out I’ll get at least one of you. We can follow the others in a minute and kill them if the forest doesn’t.”

They sat down. In just two minutes the rest of Henry’s band were led out of the cave with their hands tied.

Back at the boat, with his hands tied behind his back, Jake was told to sit in the narrow seat in the bow behind the foreman who was rowing. Henry was in the stern next to one of

the women.

The foreman was pulling hard on the oars, occasionally looking over his shoulder to make sure he was on course for the ship.

Henry was shaking his head and rubbing it against the seat back and finally managed to spit his gag out of his mouth.

“Why did you tie my hands?”

The foreman looked up startled to see him talking but said nothing.

“Why tie me up? I want to help you?”

The foreman gave a sharp tug on the oars. “That’s easy. You can help us with your hands tied.”

Two more powerful strokes of the oars and they were round the small headland and could see the ship. The men on deck were using one of the davits to lower a small platform of rough planks over the side.

“You expect me to stand on that while they raise it up?” Henry sounded nervous now. “Why not release my hands so I can climb the ladder.”

Jake looked round. The platform had no rails around it and was swaying as the ship moved in the light swell.

“No need to stand on it.” The foreman smiled as Henry looked relieved. “You can sit down if you want.”

“But I’m on your side. I would have helped you take the ship from him and his cheating friends.” He gestured towards Jake as best he could with his hands tied. “I could have showed you all the things I had in the cave.”

“They never cheated us, they weren’t smart enough. Did they cheat you? You can discuss it with them in the stoke hold.”

The platform was down near water level as they drew up alongside. A man was at the bottom of the ladder to catch the boat.

Henry looked at the crudely nailed planks and the old ropes suspending them from the hook at the end of the cable. “I’m not going on that. It’s dangerous.”

The foreman pulled his knife out from the strap on his belt.

They huddled near the centre so the platform hung level. The foreman pushed the boat away and they swung out and bumped back against the side of the ship. Jake managed to push his shoulder up against one of the ropes, reaching down with his fingers to try to hold on at a gap in the planks.

Henry looked up at the rusting side of the ship. “You can’t lift us up there.”

Jake was looking down. Even in the murky water around the ship he could see shapes moving and the occasional fin with bright red spikes all along it. “Better up than down.”

“If your mate carries on they might be tempted.” The man on the ladder waved his hand and gave a thumbs up and the hoist started up with a jolt. Henry was thrown sideways against Jake but the rope held him at his shoulder. Henry managed to get upright again. “You know these people, can’t you talk to them.”

“Get your shoulder under a rope.” Jake replied. “If you want to talk you can try later.”

At the top the davit was swung inboard and they were tipped out onto the deck and marched along to sit by the hatch to the stoke hold. One at a time their hands were untied and they had to climb down the ladder into the hold.

Maria held Jake and the others gathered around. Henry looked at the boilers, which were damped right down with the coaling doors shut.

“Don’t worry; there’ll be plenty to do when we set sail.” Jake said. “We badly needed

another hand down here. It'll take a few days but you'll soon get used to the work."

Henry went to sit alone at the far end of the hold and they left him there until all the others had come.

"We've got some time while they load all your gear from the cave." Jake said. Only one person was needed to keep the auxiliary boiler stoked and the rest had gathered near the coal chutes. "The first thing we need to know is what is was you had in that cave."

Henry looked around at his band all looking at him. "Paula?"

"She showed them everything." One of the women replied.

"Everything?"

"Yes I saw her taking them off down the track to the other caves. Anyway what difference does it make? I wouldn't be any use to us just sitting there."

"I suppose so." He looked at Jake.

"We had a disagreement. In time I'm sure we would have..."

"Just tell us about the kit. All of it."

"There was... There's a trailer with tracks. It has batteries and a motor so a man can walk with it. We piled it up with everything from the stores that we could fit on it."

"Will they be able to load it with that hoist?"

"Yes should be." He paused again but then, with one final look for reassurance from his band he listed off everything they had. There were several guns and a lot of ammunition and a vast array of equipment for digging, building, cooking and everything else he had thought they might do.

"No phones?"

"No. There wasn't anybody I could think we would want to call."

"And I guess it might have been a temptation for someone like Paula." Jake added. "If she falls out with her new friends upstairs and uses the ship's radio we could be in real trouble. Let's hope they've ditched it."

## 5 Zone 43

The stoke hold was quiet. After weeks at sea the engines had been shut down for several hours. The auxiliary boiler had been banked up but as far as they could tell even the main generators were shut down so virtually no steam was needed. Just one dim light bulb showed that somewhere in the engine room a small dynamo was running but even that seemed to be getting fainter.

Henry was sitting in the corner he had made his own, well away from the others. The rest of his band who had been brought from the cave had soon been accepted into the crew. Henry had done his share of stoking and eaten his share of food but in all the weeks he had said little.

"Do you think we are at that sector 43?" Jake asked, sitting down near him, but not too close.

Henry looked up. "What difference is it to you, suddenly interested in my opinion?"

"Where do you think the others have gone?"

"We all heard them lowering the boat. So I guess they've gone in the boat."

Jake gave up and went away but soon Henry stood up and walked over to one of the ventilator ducts. The fans had stopped and only a trickle of air was coming through.

"Any idea what we should do if it stops completely?" Jake asked. "If the wind stops we'll suffocate down here. It's hot enough already."

Henry tipped his head back to smell the air. "If you want my opinion." He said slowly. "They won't be back for a long time. They might not come back at all."

By this time everybody had gathered round. He looked round at them, seeming pleased to have an audience but not continuing.

"How do you work that one out?" Jake asked.

"Did you read what the survey had to say about sector 43?" He asked. "When you found it on your computer did you actually read it? Did you understand what it said?"

"Just cut to the chase." Somebody called out. Henry looked up and turned as if to walk away and said. "I could have told them. I could have warned them about it, but they never asked me."

"That's not our fault. We were here for you to ask." Jake replied.

"But you never did ask, you just gave me a shovel and told me to get on with the stoking." He replied, but then continued. "If you understood the names of the plants they found here you would realise what they can do. They are hallucinogenic."

"He'd know about that." One of the women called out. Henry turned sharply to look at her but she continued. "That's why he got sent out. He used to make them."

"Everything I did was completely legal." He replied, almost shouting at her. "You know and I know that if I had been tried and convicted I would have been sent to a penal colony. No charges were ever brought against me. When anything was made illegal I stopped making it. I was just making things that people wanted to buy. My rendition was completely illegal and when I get back, and I shall get back, I shall make them pay for it, right up to the highest levels of government."

"OK let's leave that." Jake cut in. "It's not our fault either. Please tell us what you can about these plants."

"When they are in flower, and by the smell I guess they are, they are hallucinogenic as I said. The effect will wear off in time if you get away from them or if it gets dark and the flowers close before you're right under. My guess is that those men arrived here at night and went ashore at first light. They would have been in among the flowers when they opened soon after sunrise. Serves them right. They should have asked me. They'll be dead in a few days. We should try to get the boat back but leave them there."

"Let's go for it." Josh called out and took one of the heavy iron ash rakes and went up the ladder to the hatch.

The noise was deafening as he swung the rake at the edge of the hatch where it was bolted. It was soon obvious that there was nobody outside to stop them but after half an hour he was exhausted but had only opened a tiny gap beneath the rim. Some of the others tried to force the door through to the boiler room but it was as a thick watertight bulkhead closure and they made no progress at all.

Two others took turns at the hatch, using the rakes and stoking irons to deliver massive blows until at last they had a gap wide enough to get a wedge in. The next man went up. With the hatch raised he had cooler air blowing in and he hit it harder and faster. But then he stopped, dropping the rake and swinging back on the ladder. Jake ran to the ladder and caught him before he fell, struggling back down with the man on his shoulder. His eyes were wide with terror. Seeing Josh dash up to take out the wedge he cried out and Jake had to hold him down.

"Bad trip." Henry said, calmly walking over. "Flowers must be in full bloom. We should get those boilers going so we can get out of here as soon as it gets dark."

"Can't do that." Jake replied. "They might not have any water in them. We need to

get into the boiler room first.”

Henry stared at him for a minute, looked around at the others and then turned smartly around and went back to his corner.

They closed the ventilator ducts right off and next time they wedged the hatch open they stuffed rags in the gap. It took a further two hours of back-breaking work in the burning heat and near darkness before the hatch was levered open by two men together on the ladder straining on a stoking iron. They let it drop back as soon as it came free but in the seconds it was open they saw that the sun would soon set.

The hulks stood out in the moonlight against the motionless black of the sea. Driven to the shore by storms of long-forgotten winters they formed a jagged outline against the tranquil beach. From the wing of the bridge they could make out three of them, all once the same as their new arrival but all now jumbles of rusting steel with masts leaning, wheelhouses collapsing and hull plates bursting to spill loads of ore onto the sand.

Just beyond them, tantalisingly close, they could see their lifeboat, moored up and deserted. But there was life in the trees and flowers behind, shapes moving without lights among the dim outline of structures whose only clear identity was narrow spires which formed dark silhouettes against the night sky. Seeing the hulks, the spires, the silent moving shapes they wondered if they were illusions created in their minds by the lingering honey sweet smell of the flowers. Quietly asking each other what they saw gave them confidence to quell their terror.

They could hear the noises of the ship: Pumps running at full speed to fill the boilers. Men working on deck; breaking up furniture to build a raft. Even the faint sound of the stokers down in the hold moving coal ready to light the fires seemed to echo across the silence of the bay to tell men and animals alike that they were working to try to escape the fate of the hulks.

“We must get the boat.” Jake repeated almost as if to convince himself rather than anybody else. “This ship should have two, we really can’t set sail with none. We’ll go in. Watch us. But if we’re not back by the time you have enough steam to sail then go, boat or no boat.”

The raft looked fragile at the bottom of the ladder. Four old metal drums lashed together with the boards from an old bunk. The smell was stronger down at water level. Sickly cloying it seemed to be caught between the water and the hull side where what little breeze there was could not penetrate. Jake went first with Maria following to sit beside him. As soon as she was on board they took the loose planks that served as paddles and started for the shore, glad now of the noise from the ship which masked any that they were making.

The slender spires loomed towards them and then were suddenly gone, blocked out by the mass of the hulks. Passing close they saw the remains of a ladder where the crew had climbed down only to stay and watch as their ship fell apart in front of them. Then there was a gaping hole where a whole hull plate had given way to the force of a storm revealing a stoke hold. Staring in, Jake only realised he had stopped paddling when Maria spoke.

“Almost there.” She said softly. “Just keep going a bit longer. I’m still fine.” That was what the report had said. The drug had more effect on men. That was why she was there: so he didn’t become a moving shape at the edge of the forest.

Finally they were at the boat, left almost out of the water by a falling tide. The drums under the raft bumped onto the shingle and Jake stepped off into the water, almost immediately feeling creatures biting, chewing and scraping to try and find a weakness in his sea boots. It took both of them to push the boat in, struggling at first but getting easier as it

slid into the water. A few minutes later and they were in it with the raft secured to the stern so nothing went to waste. But the shapes had moved forward, a group of them, now visibly human with something held between them. Jake sat on the thwart, neglecting his oars, and even Maria was mesmerised by their slow progress to the water's edge dragging their bundle [murmuring]. Reaching the shore line, one beamed to him with a raised arm and he was trying to see more when the moon suddenly emerged from behind a cloud and it was all clear. The bundle was another person, arms and feet tied and held between two others. The captors were unrecognisable with long matted hair hanging down over their faces but for an instant the captive managed to raise her head and look at him with big round eyes glistening in the silver light. It was Paula. Seeing him she struggled, frantically shaking her head and body. But it was no use. They were holding her tight and he could see they were about to throw her head first into the sea.

Without thinking he pulled his gun from his belt and fired over their heads. The sound of the shot echoed off the hulks and around the bay making everything stop so completely that it was followed by several seconds of complete silence. Even Jake stopped still, suddenly shocked by what he had done. Paula looked up again as the murmuring around her ceased and the grip on her body slackened. But they did not drop her and when those few seconds passed she could feel them holding her even tighter than before, backing away from the shore line. The murmurings became more distinct as real speech and others were called forward, running into the shallow water. Jake grabbed his oars and began to row but the raft was still resting on the sand and they saw it and grabbed it, pulling him in by the securing rope.

He fired again, lower this time but still not aiming to kill. His bullet hit the timber of the raft, throwing splinters at them and almost releasing the rope, but it was far too late, they already had the rope itself. Maria jumped up from the stern as they drew the boat close, running straight at him. He leaned to fire past her, aiming straight for the man who now held the end of the boat. His head flew [back] and he collapsed [backwards]; but the others ignored him. Three of them now had the boat and jerked it towards them throwing Jake [backwards] off his seat to land on the floor boards with Maria. He felt the boat scrape up onto the beach, rocking crazily as more and more joined in to pull it up. Before he could find his gun again bearded faces appeared over the side and filthy arms reached out.

The sudden sense of purpose melted away as fast as it had come. He was a bundle now, with Maria and Paula, abandoned on the beach as meandering figures came and went, some stopping to kneel and press a foul smelling face close to his and mouth incoherent sounds. Finally another group appeared, clean shaven and still recognisable as the foremen from the ship. Seeing the three bundles, a spark of recognition came to their blank eyes and they picked them up and dragged them up the beach. Soon the rounded pebbles gave way to larger stones and he heard Maria cry out as one cut into her. It made no difference and for a few yards he felt the skin being torn from his back where his jacket had been ripped away. Then they reached the flowers. The stems were as thick as his fingers, Jake saw them above him and felt them on his head as he was dragged through. At the end of the stem there was a flower pod and suddenly one burst under his back spraying out thick viscous nectar splattering over the remains of his shirt. His pain vanished as, moments later he smelt it, thick and overpowering.

On the bridge the one pair of binoculars was being passed around. They could no longer see any sign of Jake or Maria. A few people seemed to be wandering aimlessly on the beach. The boat and the raft lay deserted.

“They are surviving over there, despite what Henry said.” Josh said, after scanning the edge of the flowers where they had gone in. “That’s what Jake wanted to do. To survive. If those ones on the beach can survive the hallucinations then he can too and he’ll still be there when we can make a new boat and get him”.

Henry was standing at the back of the crowd. Some turned to look at him, and to everybody’s surprise he admitted he had been wrong. “Yes they are surviving.” He said thoughtfully. “There’s something going on out there that I don’t understand. Everything I know about drugs like that says they should be dying.”

“But you were right about most of it. We do appreciate that” Josh replied quickly

With good steam pressure they sounded the ship’s horn but there was little reaction from the beach; so men went forward to raise the anchor. The young officers that Jake had selected just three weeks before set a course out of the [bay].

It took them two days to reach another [bay] where Henry had checked the local plants to make sure there were no bad ones he recognised. For the whole 2 days they had been struggling to make a sea-worthy raft, because it would be needed for many trips to the shore.

Using the tools from the ship’s stores and some fire axes they felled several trees with trunks thick enough to make planks. These were floated out to the ship and lifted onto the deck. At the same time the stokers made a simple forge and were soon producing fastenings out of some old metal chairs. In the back of the workshop they found an ancient cutting laser that looked as if it had been salvaged from an early orbiter that had crashed or been broken up on planet. The coding protocols were long obsolete but they managed to get it to make simple straight cuts along the tree trunks; producing clouds of smoke and steam as the generator struggled to take the load. The planks had black and almost glass-like surfaces, too hard to cut with saws, and had to be shaped with the fire axes.

Henry and two who had been in his band in the cave set about making charcoal. All the available steel drums had been used to make rafts but they found a large metal box which had been used for spare engine parts, filled it with off-cuts of wood, sealed it shut and heated it above the forge. By the time the new boat was taking shape they had enough to make filters in primitive masks made from old overalls.

## **6 Rescue attempt**

After five nights away they were once again entering the bay at sector 43. It was near midnight but the moonlight was enough to see the shore and the satellite maps were accurate. They anchored in the same part of the bay. The deck crew from the anchor capstan came into the bridge, quickly closing the door behind them and tearing off their masks which were already covered in sweat after just a few minutes of use. Henry had been out with them.

“I think it works.” He said as he took his off. “Can’t be sure with the vapour being weak at night anyway.”

The beach was deserted with the boat and raft still there, seeming untouched. The new boat was launched in minutes. Water leaked in between the planks and came even faster with six men on board. But they were ready for it and one bailed out while two others rowed. At least the open seams were tight enough to keep the fish out.

It only took five minutes to reach the shore with the men rowing hard. As soon as they hit the shingle two jumped out and ran to the other boat. Stopping for just a few seconds to retrieve Jake’s gun which was lying in the rain water in the bilge they quickly tipped the

water out and launched it. Ten minutes later they were back at the ship with two boats and a raft. There was still no sign of life that they could see, just the line of spires over the outline of the flowers.

With the new boat safely hanging from the davits and the raft on deck Josh, Henry and four others went back to the shore. Quickly pulling their boat out of the water they moved up the beach in single file with guns ready.

It was easy to see where Jake and Maria had been dragged through the flowers and just a few yards in there was a small area where everything had been trampled. The track leading on was less clear but seemed to turn to the right heading for the spires. They couldn't miss the sweet smell of the nectar but the charcoal filters seemed to make it less seductive and threatening.

Speaking through the masks was quite difficult but, after a very quick search revealed no sign of what had happened, they moved on by silent agreement. The path was narrow now. Some flowers had been crushed, but most were still standing at either side to head height. Long thin leaves with a slightly moist upper surface and thousands of tiny thorns beneath brushed against them leaving the stem swaying with the weight of pods the size of apples. In the dim light it was impossible to avoid the thorns, which quickly detached from the leaves to remain embedded in clothing and exposed skin alike. Even the masks could no stifle the noise when somebody cried out as one brushed part of their face left uncovered by the mask; leaving what looked like a sudden growth of beard with a trickle of blood emerging from beneath it.

Another hundred yards and they emerged into much larger a clearing with the first of the spires looming above them. They could see it now, an enormous spear made with the trunk of a sapling mounted in a vast crossbow made with an even longer timber. A platform around the top of the spear held it in place, giving the impression of a tower and keeping it, pointing straight up. The structure seemed well built, the many poles and planks held securely with lashings of some root or vine. Josh looked up to see what the spear was pointing at and saw huge birds high up in the dark sky with long talons, circling ready to descend and kill. He cowered back towards the trees and saw the others doing the same. They looked at each other and then back at the sky and saw nothing but stars.

The clearing was deserted, it was clean and tidy but the owner clearly had business elsewhere and, as they stood, they heard the first signs of it. A diffuse but insistent sound, just audible, like a large crowd all murmuring together but rising and falling in tone to a set rhythm.

The sound was coming from inland and a wide and well-trodden path led towards it. It took them just two minutes to extract the last of the thorns, secure their masks even tighter, check their guns, and set off with Josh leading. It led slowly uphill winding past enormous tree trunks but then keeping on in the same direction. Other paths joined it which looked as if they came from the rest of the structures at the top of the beach and soon it was a broad clear way leading straight ahead. Suddenly Josh stopped and kneeled [down].

"That's how they cleared it." He said, brushing away some short spiked grass. "There are excavator tracks under here. Stoned or not stoned, they get things done."

Henry looked and then slipped his mask [back] for a moment. "Don't try that." He said quickly slipping it [back]. "Somewhere over that ridge ahead they're burning that nectar. Smells a bit different if you do that, incredibly powerful." He stopped and seemed to sway a bit. "It's been a while." He said before taking a tentative step forward. "Masks on, no more sniffing the breeze."



Moving on they could see the clouds of smoke rising from the valley beyond and billowing down towards them leaving a bitter taste in the mouth even through the filters in their masks. Keeping going was difficult, dark forms seemed to rise up and then vanish in front of them.

Just then there was a shout from the forest just beside them. They turned, guns ready. "The fire." The voice came again, closer now and with the sound of breaking branches. "The fire. The fire." [And] then they emerged. Three men. Even in the moonlight deep cuts could be seen all over their bodies where they had pushed through the trees. But they took no notice. Pushing Josh aside [as] they ran past him, [clarify directions] looking at nothing but the path and the smoke, now even thicker ahead.

[Then there was] more sound [from] both sides. Slower and more purposeful. Even more rustling of the thick ferns. Giant spiders emerged [remind re size]. Rank upon rank were coming out all down the path. They took no notice of the people, marching blindly up towards the smoke. Henry was the first to go down. He had blocked the way of a spider [and] rather than go round him it had climbed up. Another had followed [and soon] he was on his knees with a procession [of them] climbing over. Soon they were all down, long hairy legs pushing endlessly on their backs, never stopping as they went forwards. For two hours they came until at last the numbers dwindled and the men could stand up.[clarify direction]

Henry looked back behind them. They could now see the outline of the bay and the ship in the pre-dawn light.

"We've got to have a look." Josh said. "Then we can go back and plan. But we must try to see where they've been taken."

Finally they stood looking down into the valley. The light was increasing so they could see the full outline of the stockades that filled the wide open space. Some were full of spiders, others had animals that looked like sheep the size of horses but some were full of people. In each one there was turmoil at the inner edge as people and animals alike struggled to get closer to the smoking fire.

At the outer edge there was a complex system of pens with wide entrances. The last stragglers could be seen going through and being sorted to go into the right stockade.

"Look at the ones doing the sorting." Henry said, taking in the scene. "See the masks. They've lit the fire to get everything in to eat the spiders and shear the sheep."

"And God knows what with the people." Josh added. "Jake and Maria will be in those pens somewhere."

The last few were now in the stockades and the sorters pushed the heavy gates shut and barred them. But then, as one turned they could see him grab one of the others and point back up the track.

They were running now, back down to the beach as fast as they could go. Looking round they saw their pursuers coming over the ridge, a big group, more than twenty.

They could see ahead now. The track went on down to the beach. It would mean cutting across to get back to the boat. They went for it. Then they heard an engine behind them.

It was bumping down the track past the sorters who had jumped aside. A mine inspection truck, battered and rusty, with wide tyres and at least six men in it. Henry raised his gun and fired a burst of three rounds. The truck slewed off to one side as the tyre burst, crashing into a tree.

Then they were running again. Running down the last of the track and across the beach.

“How the hell are we going to get them out now?” Jake asked as they rowed back to the ship. “They’ll be waiting for us next time.”

“Guns are pretty rare around here”. Henry replied. “I think I’m the only person who’s got any. Anyway don’t you see? It’s the smoke that’s brilliant. We could take out whole towns with that.” [needs actual rescue]

## 7 The Farms

They could almost feel the guard ship looking down at them [like an eagle at its prey]. Every speck on the horizon would surely be a drone coming into view before the beat of the four big propellers could be heard above the wind. But they had to get close enough to see the shore with their own eyes, not just an image on a screen. The landscape, the green hills, the farms, the promise of fresh food instead of the foul-smelling meat from the ship’s freezers.

Jake turned the helm and the ship veered away up the coast, past the headland and away from the inviting harbour to bays where the forest came right down to the high tide mark. They chose one that looked deep and sheltered on the satellite image, anchoring as close as they dared to a rocky outcrop crowned with massive spreading trees.

“How long do we wait?” Josh asked, still scanning what he could see of the horizon.

“A day or two.” Henry replied. “But they’re stuck up there week after week and only allowed down for a few days a month. They soon get bored of checking the cameras. Anyway, if they have seen us, the drones will surely be here in a few hours.”

A day or two became one and the following morning they were landing and climbing the sharp black rocks to look down on the ship with its rusty hull sides glowing in the sunlight. Dense undergrowth with vines as thick as a man’s arm hanging from low branches blocked their route inland. They checked and re-checked the survey data that said that the thorns on the thin yellow stems that grew up between them were not poisonous but still the men with machetes wore thick leather gloves. By dusk they had just cut their way through to the higher ground. The ship looked insignificant now and in the bay beyond, just visible over the shoulder of the hill, they could see another like it at the dock side. Behind it a few streets of squat buildings soon gave way to the regular square fields.

“We could soon take that.” Henry grinned. “There’s no sign of guards. Go straight for the tower with the microwave dishes and we could get them before they call the Navy.”

“No guards.” Jake replied. “But nobody else either. Can you see anybody at all or anything actually moving?”

They all looked. The binoculars were passed around. The wharf had pallets on it, all carefully stacked. The ship had its forward hatch covers off. The crane over the hold stood ready, its hook swinging slowly in the light wind. Big sliding doors on the warehouses could be seen wide open. In the streets of the town small lorries with wide tyres for the soft farmland stood ready.

“That one seems to be full of apples and the one beyond looks like grain of some sort”. Jake lowered the binoculars and passed them to the man behind him.

“Perhaps they’ve all gone in for tea.” Henry suggested. “Not a bad time of day to go in and take it.”

Back on the ship the grey meat tasted worse than ever.

It took two more days to reach the fence. It was high and close linked with coiled razor wire on top and a clear roadway along both sides. They approached carefully using the cover of the forest but still saw nobody in the fields. Jake went up to it carefully touching the tensioned wires with the branch of a tree.

"I'm not sure. It may be alarmed. Let's go round a bit and see if we can find somewhere it's damaged."

They smelt it before they saw it. They all knew what it was, somebody had been burning the flower pods.

"They shouldn't be here". Henry said. "The survey was quite clear. The flowers were only in sector 43. That's where the climate was best for them."

"If it gets any stronger we'll have to go back and get the masks." Jake hesitated. "Wait here. I'll go ahead."

Just over the rise of a low hill he saw the remains of the fire. The neat square fields of crops ended and there was a large area, blackened and smouldering. In the centre there were burned out buildings with traces of smoke still rising from them. All around were fields where it had burned right out leaving no trace of what had been there. At one edge there was a partly burnt field with the remains of a cereal crop in it. [Nearby] the fence was broken through, deep rutted tracks showing where heavy vehicles had been driven across it.

Searching the ruins, while keeping out of the lingering smoke, they could see that several fields had been planted with the flowers and somebody had deliberately set them on fire. There were even signs of a fire break which had been cleared to stop it spreading.

"Then the wind must have changed without warning." Henry was looking at the partly burned field. Now he was close he could see it was barley. "They never expected it to spread in this direction and they never expected the smoke to come this way."

"So suddenly the smoke hit them." Jake guessed. "We've seen what that can do. So the whole lot just got into their trucks and charged out into the forest."

Setting off for the town they soon reached a substantial farmhouse and stopped to look inside.

"Everything just dropped where they stood when it hit them". Henry was looking at the kitchen with a half-prepared meal on the table. "They knew what it was and had already decided what to do if it happened. Drive into the wind and keep going."

Jake sat on one of the wooden chairs. "It's so ordinary, not like the mining towns." He looked out through the window at the barns and fields. "It's like home. A person could live a decent life here. Why did we get sent to the mines?"

"Just luck. They don't need many here and they all survive so nobody can get transferred."

When they reached the town they saw that it was also very like a small town on earth. There were two neat streets of bungalows with well-tended gardens leading down to the warehouses and offices of the port. The computers in the offices had all shut themselves down so there was no way to check if any final messages had been sent but, as far as they could see, the entire population had just dropped everything and gone.

A big plan of all the fields, fixed to the wall showed the area planted with the flowers marked as "special crops".

A day later the ship was moored safely in the harbour. Josh had been sent out to watch the break in the fence. "If you see them coming back just get back here as fast as you

can.” Jake had told him. “Don’t let them see you. They may see the second ship in the harbour but that shouldn’t worry them.”

They came on foot in the early afternoon. [describe what they are wearing] A ragged group of around a hundred. Some were limping and two were on make-shift stretchers but most seemed well able to walk along the road past the fields. Henry had found more guns and when ten armed men stepped out from behind buildings they made no attempt to challenge him.

“I’m not paid to fight. My contract is five years of running these farms and shipping food, not getting shot at.” George was a large man with a well-trimmed grey beard. He looked unhurt but his clothes were torn. “Who are you? We weren’t expecting another ship until next week. You’re not the navy are you? Come to rescue us.” He looked around nervously at the strange group with the guns.

“We are free men and women.” Henry replied confidently. “We come and go as we please.”

“If I was you I’d go then. Take the food you want and clear off before the real navy shows up. They’re bound to see something odd with us going off-line for so long. I don’t suppose you’d want to try your luck against an armed transporter.”

“Could you just tell them it broke down for a while?” Jake asked. “We didn’t mutiny on that ship, we were abandoned.”

George hesitated. “I see your problem.” He looked around at the guns again. Most were now pointing at the ground but Henry held his firmly with his finger on the trigger. “I guess I could find a way. My report will make it clear. I had no choice.” Henry nodded and turned the gun away.

The wounded were taken to the medical unit. A party was despatched with ropes and winches to recover the vehicles from the swamp they had driven straight into in the next valley.

[abrupt change] “As soon as they told us to grow those flowers I knew there would be trouble. Just telling me to make sure none got stolen was pointless, how was I supposed to stop it?” George was sitting with Jake, enjoying large steaks of real beef in the canteen next to the warehouses. It was a simple, functional building, but it was clean and airy and well looked after.

“Did they warn you about the scent?”

“Only vaguely. But we found ways to deal with it. You can spray them to stop the flowers opening. But some of the men started stealing the pods. There were accidents. They just walked out in front of the harvesting robots. Things like that. There was this girl. Lovely girl. She got addicted so quickly. I had to do something. I was going to say that the fire was an accident.”

They looked around at the others in the dining area, many had faces covered in fine cuts from the thorns in the forest. “You shouldn’t have much trouble convincing them of that one.”

“We had no idea how bad the fumes would be. We thought that if the wind changed we could just drive clear. That stuff is truly evil. If I had realised what it was like I would have dumped the seeds as soon as they arrived on the ship. There is nothing good about it, nothing at all, it was just terrifying.”

## 8 Attack on the village

[needs link – deciding what to do - setting up village – finding food]

Josh heard the three lumbering transporters long before he saw them. Their massive jets spewed out black smoke as they came in and hovered over the ship. The guns, jury rigged under their stubby wings, spoiled their sleek lines. They could no longer accelerate into orbit and dock with the guard ships but the little skiffs could do that job and the transporters had a new job, fighting.

Signalling the warning to Jake, he watched them over the ship. The crew must have been told not to sink anything that could be used so they moved on to look for a place to land. The only clear space was the beach. A massive cloud of sand and water flew up, blocking his view for several minutes, but then he saw them, all down, in a rough line a few yards apart. One settled badly to one side in a soft area and a second in shallow water with small waves lapping against the landing gear. None of this delayed the troops. Loading ramps crashed down, throwing up yet more sand and water and the all-wheel drive mine trucks with heavy machine guns welded across the backs shot out. The gunners were thrown down as they swerved around to head up the beach but seconds later they were up, firing across the tops of the cabs into the forest. More and more came from the huge transporters. He counted at least thirty, with gunners and troops in each, all racing up the track.

Jake watched from his trench until they were directly below him and fired, Henry and his men followed. A gunner was hit, falling backwards. But others fired back, bullets ploughing into the trees around him as the trucks crashed to a halt and men jumped out. He ran. Further up the slope and then down into the ravine behind. He could hear them. Officers shouting orders. Men cursing as they climbed. Shots came through the undergrowth but he glanced back and nobody was hit. Then they were at it, the plank bridge, and across, throwing it down into the torrent below.

Two men came out onto the far bank. Easy targets. But their body armour was good and when they were hit they just fell back and then they were back in the trees. More orders were shouted. Jake knew what they had seen. The road curved around. They could see it from the satellite maps. They could cross further up. He ran.

The trucks came up to the logs, massive tree trunks, felled right across the track. Soon Jake was in position, high above them, firing down.

“The body armour.[he said] We’re wasting our time.” He was shouting across to Henry in the next trench.

“Aim for their heads.” Just as he said this one man fell. Different from the rest, his head was covered in blood.

But they were coming again. The troops. Running up through the trees. And below them the drivers were fixing chains to the logs.

This time they escaped through a hidden pathway, diving down through a mass of thorns and running away to one side and setting fire to it as they went. It was everywhere, oil soaked rags flaring up, setting off the tinder dry brushwood. When they reached the top they looked behind. Gusts of wind were fanning the flames. They saw the men, forced back, gasping in the smoke.

“They’ll come as soon as it dies down.” Henry fired one more shot, making a man fall onto a burning log.

“No, they’ll know we’ll be gone. They’ll go on to the village. We’ve got to stop them next time. We must. It’s the village.”

The trucks were soon at the final barrier. The officers were shouting, they had seen the map. The village was just beyond it. This time it was logs and brushwood, already burning when they arrived.

Jake and Henry were well beyond it, firing through the smoke. The trucks were firing back to give cover, the heavy machine guns slicing straight through undergrowth and small trees. Gangs of troops threw the ends of the chains into the fire to drag the brushwood away from the logs.

With the wind behind him Jake saw them finally get a chain onto a log. A lucky shot. One man fell, but others rushed in to take his place. They were all moving in now, ignoring the smoke, more chains had been found.

"We can only hold it a few more minutes,[he said] let's hope it works." [Just as he said this] He saw the first of the darker smoke coming up from the bottom of the barrier. It only took a few seconds. There were shouts of terror. Men were running back. One of the trucks charged at the logs, crushing the men in its path.

## 9 Moving inland

The transporter took off, rising out of a cloud of sand and steam and then black smoke as its main jets powered it off towards the horizon.

"The directors really won't like us for burning them". Maria said, looking at the smouldering remains of the other two transporters and a pile of mine trucks. "But I suppose we did send most of the men back with nothing worse than a sore head".

"If only they would just leave us alone." Jake watched the trail of smoke bowing away across the waves. "I know they can't officially because all the rest of the bonded labour would try to join us but can't they just forget us?"

"The only reason they left Henry alone was because they didn't know he was there. Losing two transporters will make them a lot more cautious but if they know where we are they will try again – and this time they'll know about us burning the flower pods and bring gas masks."

"But they seem to leave sector 43 alone."

"Leave it alone?" Henry had walked up to them from the shoreline. "Where do you think they got the seed from to send to the farms? Where else do you think they are sending it? Other planets perhaps? And some pods with it?"

"And they'll know that we'll have guessed what they are doing." Maria said. "So they'll want us caught."

"Or killed." Jake added. "So we need to get out of sight for a bit."

Henry looked at him. "How long is a bit? You tried setting up your silly little village back there. I told you they would come. OK you did well keeping them out of it but Maria's right. They'll be back and you won't stop them next time."

"But have you got a better plan?"

"Yes" Henry said. "This time I really have".

The ship took a long time to die. Jake and Josh watched from the headland.

"After all you did to rescue it." Jake said, watching as the flames roared out of the open hatches. "But if we'd left it for them they would have thought we were giving up."

"We rescued ourselves. And we're doing the same again now. Which one do you think will go first? My money's on number three."

“Just as well you haven’t got any.” Jake replied as a massive cloud of steam rose from number three hold showing that the hull had been breached. Flames still shot from the others until two more were flooded and the whole ship settled, and finally sank with one last implosion sending out steep breaking waves in all directions.

“I wish them luck searching for that from their satellites.” Josh replied as the last traces disappeared and the water in the bay was calm again.

Following the river inland they made good progress. In places they had to cut a path using chainsaws they had found in one of the transporters but, most of the time, the mine trucks could push their way through the undergrowth between the trees. Finally they reached the ridge and saw the land beyond. Rising up one last set of rapids the river now flowed slowly between tall grass banks.

Near the base of the valley the heavy trucks left clear tracks in the soft earth but further up the rolling hills the turf was harder and the wide tyres left few marks. Henry consulted the maps in the survey report and they set off in the dusk along a low ridge. Moving at night without lights was slow because only one moon was above the horizon. Then, quite suddenly, all three were well up it was so bright that they worried that the satellites might track them and had to seek cover under the trees.

## 10 Ostriches

“You never said there was anything that big.” It was just an hour after sunrise and Jake was looking at two large footprints in the mud by one of the numerous streams they had crossed in the night.

“Don’t expect me to tell you everything.” Henry replied. “You can read the survey report just as well as I can. Now we’ve got the readers you could read the whole thing.”

“You had months to go through it. Anyway, how big is it, and is it edible?”

“Looks like an elephant with three toes.” Josh was leaning down to look closely. “And it was here not long ago, they’re still not full of water.”

“Three toes and large.” Henry paused. “Yes, probably edible if I remember right.”

They ran up the bank, following the direction of the toes. On the ridge they found more prints, but beyond there was dense forest.

“It can’t have got through there.” Jake was leading along the ridge, skirting the trees. Soon he found a path, leading in, hard packed earth.

“Looks like their favourite route to the water hole.” Josh said.

The path was almost twenty feet wide, winding through the trees, scraped clean of all plants and covered with small gouges, as if giant fingers had pushed into the hard surface. “Safety catches off, those are claw marks.” Jake moved more slowly, looking around at the trees and up at the thin line of sky visible above him. Then, as quickly as they had entered, they were out of the trees.

“Don’t form groups, the satellite might see us.” He called back to the others as he emerged into the light and started across the grassland. Finally he saw them. They looked like ostriches, long legs, feathered bodies, long necks and large beaks. Raising his rifle he took careful aim at the head of one near the centre and fired. The shot rang out over the valley, and nothing happened. A few seconds later they turned and started running towards him. Then, with long outstretched wings, they took off and flew at him.

“Run.” Henry shouted.

He started to run back towards the woods but then he stumbled. Turning he saw them, still flying gracefully towards him. What had looked like big birds, the height of a man, before were still getting larger as they flew. He scrambled to his feet and carried on running. Catching up with the others at the edge of the trees he saw them pointing, and turned again. One vast bird now seemed to cover half the sky. He was in past the first trees when it landed. Looking cautiously round a massive scaly trunk he saw two legs on the grass beyond. They were white, perfectly straight, and the size of telegraph poles, reaching up to a vast feathered body scarcely visible through the high tree branches.

"They didn't look much in the distance did they." Henry was calling from a nearby tree. "Must have been about five miles away when you tried to shoot them, bit far for a rifle."

"You knew, from the survey?"

"Bit obvious from the footprints."

Now a head appeared. The size of a pig and supported on a long sinuous neck it curled in through the trees, the huge beak rooting out small bushes and tossing them away. It reached round one side of his tree. He stepped back a pace but found himself looking into a vast blinking eye. Then, with a sudden flurry of leaves it was round the other side, the beak snapping at his shirt. Then it was back, but he was ready, stepping back just slightly he fired the rifle straight into the big gleaming eye.

It snapped shut and then the beak opened and let out a long screech, he could even see the tongue wavering inside it as the noise bellowed out. The head started thrashing about, the tree trunk shook as the beak crashed into it. The wings were open again, reaching across the line of trees, opening, closing. Then it fell, the body came down almost gracefully, landing on the grass in a cloud of fine feathers.

"Fine shot sir." Henry said. "I'll just need to check what it says in the book but I think we should have a nice break from those military rations. Hopefully his mates will be away before too long."

There were many legs and heads visible now. The beaks pushing against the motionless body.

At the camp they had heard the shot and were waiting anxiously with their guns loaded.

"You might have called us. We didn't know whether to call you." Mike said, clearly pleased to see them. "How were we supposed to know you didn't need help?"

"The radios are for emergency use only." Jake [replied]. "That's what we agreed and what we meant by emergency only is basically never. Not with those satellites up there. Any good at butchering ostriches?"

Mike looked blank but two of Henry's men volunteered.

"How about you?" Henry asked. "Going to give us a hand? Might be a bit messy but you could get a hell of a feather to put in your hat."

Jake hesitated.

"Still a bit soft are we? Don't worry, a bit longer on this planet and we'll soon get you used to a bit of blood."

Keeping clear of open ground they drove one of the trucks over to the carcass. Some of the other birds were still by it but when Henry sounded the horn they moved back. Jake couldn't look as they cut it up, loading up large joints of meat and a few of the enormous wing feathers. Even at a distance the other birds loomed over them, motionless, watching with their enormous eyes and following when they drove back.



The ostriches stood and watched, almost as tall as the trees, looking from the grassland around it into the small copse they had used for cover.

"Why are you so worried about smoke?" Henry asked as Jake used small gas rings to cook the meat. "There's plenty of wood round here for a fire and we don't have many of those gas canisters."

The meat was cooking slowly over the small gas flames.

"I'll have a bit from the middle of the pan thank you." He added looking at the raw looking pieces near the edge. "If you think a bit of smoke is going to draw attention you've got no idea what's out here. People have been escaping from the mines for years. All we need to hide is the trucks."

"So you're saying that this plan of yours takes us past a load of outlaws?"

"Don't worry, our feathered friends will keep them away."

More birds had been arriving and, by the time they had built a fire to prepare some large well-cooked steaks, the forest of thick white legs formed a continuous ring around the copse. Through gaps in the canopy they could see the huge heads and beaks, motionless against the sky.

"Do you think they know what we've done?" Maria asked finishing the last of her large plateful. "What will they do when we try to leave, will they come after us?"

"Hope so." Henry [replied]. "That was the best meal I've had in years. We can head off across the plane with the larder running along behind. Do you think they lay eggs?"

"But what do they eat?"

"Real ostriches only eat grass and shrubs." Jake [replied]. "And they don't seem to have any teeth."

"They also eat lizards and things. Try not to look like a big lizard. Don't suppose they eat trucks." Henry observed, and went off to sleep in the back of one parked nearby.

Jake tried to sleep despite the temptation to keep watching the enormous legs all around. During the day many heads also appeared among them as they cropped the grass in a wide swathe in all directions.

Dinner was cold meat before loading the trucks. When the engines started the ostriches stopped feeding and looked down, and one blast of the horn made them move quickly out of the way.

Even above the noise of the trucks they could hear the hundreds enormous feet pounding the ground behind them. Jake tried to get the convoy moving faster but the noise just grew louder as they loped along. Suddenly, after hours of following, one took off [needs to gain speed before take-off] , swooping gracefully past and then seeming to fly straight at them as it came back, only rising just clear of the cabs at the last second, and then it was gone, shooting off to one side. A minute later it was back circling and then the whole group turned and ran off to the side where it had gone.

"Where have they gone?" Jake asked.

"Away hopefully." Maria [replied].

"Not bloody likely." Henry [replied]. "There's food for weeks there. The moons will be up in a few minutes so we'll have to stop anyway."

The trampled grass was easy to follow and after half an hour's walk they found the flock eating.

"What do you think those are?" Henry asked, looking at the tall plants. Every bird had its long neck curved down and was furiously pecking at them. "Haven't we seen them before?"

They moved cautiously closer. The birds ignored them and carried on eating. Soon they were just a few feet away and saw one of the seed pods being swallowed whole.

“Do you think they get high on them or just enjoy the taste?” Henry turned to run away as the last pod was grabbed and the flock started to go back.

“A few flocks of these would soon put zone 43 out of business.” Jake said.

“You could probably stop them. Try burning a bit of it.”

“God no, never.” Maria [replied]. “Don’t burn it. Don’t do anything to it.”

The birds followed for the last few hours of darkness but their pace seemed less steady and when they stopped, everybody watched transfixed as they gracefully sat down, slowly bending their legs with a brief flap of the wings; landing neatly in small groups. Then, one by one they curled up their necks, resting their heads on their backs.

Surrounded by the sleeping forms, the dawn meal of more freshly cooked steak was eaten quickly and soon almost everybody was asleep.

Jake was woken by Mike. “They’re being killed.” He said. “Come and see.”

The sun was high and it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust as he looked out from the deep shade of the trees into the glare of the grassland. Then all he could see was blood. One of the groups was being torn apart. Two animals, resembling foxes with thick legs were moving from one neck to the next and tearing it open without stopping to eat. Their long fur was matted red, even their tails had long streaks of it on them over a silver grey. [more detail of foxes]

“Should I shoot them?” Mike asked. “I couldn’t miss from here.”

“Don’t get fooled by distances, like I was.” Jake [replied]. “Those things are as big as horses. And make sure you kill them. They’d take one of us down in seconds.”

They moved forward, checking their guns, ducking behind the motionless birds. The foxes took no notice. Soon they could hear the sound of tearing flesh and smell the blood and see the full size of the beasts and the two rows of pointed teeth as their mouths hung open, dripping blood.

Together they raised their rifles and fired. With so much blood it was impossible to see the damage but the animals staggered slightly turning towards them. They fired again and again, the shots ringing out until both heads had dropped down into the gore around them. Jake turned and ran, with Mike following. All around them birds were stirring. Heads were rising slightly, looking around with eyes still almost shut. Wings flapping gently out and then back. But none moved, and by the time they were back to the shelter of the trees all was quiet again.

“That was pretty risky. I wouldn’t have tried it.” Henry was leaning against the cab of one of the trucks. “If those birds had stood up you’d have been lucky to get out.”

“We couldn’t just leave them at it.”

“We only need a few for food. They foxes will get the rest some other time when they get stoned again.”

“They wouldn’t be here if it was that easy for the foxes.”

“You don’t get it do you?” Henry turned to look at the sea of sleeping birds, even the patches of blood looked peaceful now. “How to wreck a balanced ecosystem. Just add humans. Those people in zone 43 have been cultivating those flowers and probably modified them a bit to make them grow better. Now they’re spreading like weeds. The ostriches hadn’t seen them before. Your effort was gallant but futile. Let’s get some more sleep.”

Jake was woken again by gunshots. This time Mike was quick to explain that they were just protecting the ostriches again and there was no need for him to get up. A few more hours of interrupted sleep and he went out in the fading light to see what had been shot.

"We checked around the outside of the flock." Mike said as they stopped by the carcass of a rat the size of a large dog. "That's how we found these guys, quietly munching their way through them. The vultures don't seem to kill them, they only go for the dead ones."

Jake looked up to see the circling shapes. At first they looked quite normal until one flew close enough for him to see its true size.

"The only other ones that actually kill them are the lions."

Jake froze, clutching his rifle.

"That's what's odd." Mike added casually. "The lions are normal size, and by the time they had eaten a couple they were pretty dopey."

"So much for the larder." Henry was kicking one of the ostriches, still asleep after ten hours. "They won't wake up and the meat wouldn't be any good for a few days until they're cleared out the drug." He looked around him. Nobody was moving. "Don't say you soft idiots want to wait here and protect them until they wake up. You've got to wake up yourselves, you've not been here long enough. This planet is rough, survival of the fittest and devil take the rest." Still nobody moved or met his gaze. "Ok, just one more day, can we agree on that? No more. We could do with a break to fix up the trucks a bit. But don't waste too much ammunition."

"It's going to take quite a few of us to guard them all until the moons show." Jake found himself addressing the whole group, gathered to see what was happening. "Just this one night. If they're not fit to move this time tomorrow we'll have to leave them."

The birds formed such a tight group they had some difficulty finding a route out for the trucks. The light had almost gone by the time they had six of them evenly spaced around the outside. "Don't get out unless you have to." Henry had told them. "You'll look like a better dinner for a fox than a pile of feathers. When somebody pulls up behind you wait two minutes and then drive slowly round to the next one. Only get out if you see them being killed and can't shoot from the cab. If you're in trouble sound your horn."

The starlight was faint and the moon-less sky almost black. Jake and Josh sat silently with the windows part open listening. To his side Josh, could hear the ostriches breathing, a slow wheezing noise that sounded continuously at the same level from the hundreds of them together. To the other side there was nothing apart from a faint breath of wind just discernible above the sounds of the ostriches.

"Is this really ridiculous?" Josh asked quietly, straining his eyes to try to see into the void.

"Henry's wrong. If we all get hard and cynical like him this place will never be anything more than a nightmare." Jake paused. "What was that?"

They listened. He silently raised his rifle, scanning the grassland with the night-sight. He saw them then. No way to judge distance. Two eyes glowing in the night, showing green in the sight. Just a faint blur around them.

Silently he pulled the window down so Josh could get a clear sight. There were more eyes now, four pairs. Moving steadily up and down on the image."

"Coming closer." He whispered. "Can't see what they are."

Then they heard gunshots, echoing across from towards the camp. Tw shots, a pause,

a fast volley, ten shots or more, but no horn. The eyes went, ducking down.

He watched, scanning to either side.

“Must have gone, I’ll keep watching, turn yours off, save the battery.”

Moments later they were up. All four of them. Running forward, closer. Jake shot at the eyes. One down. As he shot the second Josh was with him. He didn’t count the shots. Instinct told him to keep firing until they were all down.

“Do we go and look?” Josh asked. “What were they?”

“Not now.”

Minutes later they heard an engine pulling up behind them. Jake ran back to pass on the message of what had happened and then they were moving forward.

As the moons rose the trucks had to return to the cover of the trees. Some of the men had managed to climb up them, giving a clear view across the plane in the silvery light. Jake slept fitfully, the sound of the rifles in his dreams.

“Only two more killed and they’re waking up.” Mike greeted him in the pre-dawn light. “Just a couple of rats got through, nothing else. Want to see what you got? You’ll need to ride out in a truck in case one wakes up as you walk by.”

Driving through they could see the long necks beginning to twist and turn, enormous un-focussed eyes blinking at they passed. The truck left them in a group and hurried back out of sight. “We’ll pick you up here in half an hour. We’ll be watching you from up the trees so we’ll know if you have any problems but make sure you don’t get jumped by a fox or something.”

They knew roughly where they had been parked from the direction of the sunrise and soon found the tyre marks in the grass.

“I’ll go in and look and you watch out.” Jake said moving towards a patch of low scrub. “One of these could just about hide a fox if it crouched down low enough.”

He moved up cautiously, parting the branches with the barrel of his rifle. Finding nothing they moved on, over the brow of a low rise that concealed a shallow depression beyond. Then they saw them. They ran down to see. Four bodies, spread out on the grass in pools of blood. A man, a woman, and two smaller ones. Wrapped in loose black robes hiding their bodies and faces, all but their eyes. The man carried a crude spear made out of a scrap of metal bound onto a tree branch. The others just carried branches, crudely cut as clubs.

“We can’t even bury them.” Jake said, “not without...” his voice trailed off.

They walked back in silence.

“Find what you got?” One of the others asked. “We got two foxes and a rat.”

“No.” Jake replied. “We couldn’t find ours. Maybe we missed. Not very good shots.”

That evening all the birds had stood up but one. When they eventually moved it they found an enormous egg, eventually departing with it in the back of one of the trucks cushioned in blankets to keep it warm.

“That’s pathetic.” Henry said, looking at it. “Sooner or later you guys are going to learn the hard way about being soft.”

## 11 Uplink

“Why here?” George was looking at the low hills that stretched out to the horizon with small patches of woodland, but nothing to distinguish them from the hundreds of miles of similar hills they had driven past.

“Henry says he’s sure we’re under the ascent path of the transporters. He reckons they come right across here, fully loaded, on their way up to the marshalling orbit. Says he needs about 30 seconds to get a fix with a laser and upload the message.”

“Do you really think anybody will read it?”

Josh paused. “It’ll need some pretty careful editing. If he starts describing that lot, they’ll just assume he’s been smoking the stuff.”

They watched fascinated. Having the ostriches following them for long nights driving across the open country had got the different groups from the ship, the farms and Henry’s settlement talking. When they talked they made plans and when they stopped they tried them.

A single ostrich was separated out from the group by waving a particularly large and succulent looking branch from a bush at it. As it reached down, opening its enormous beak to swallow the tasty morsel, the person waving it had to drop it and run, but others came forward with a tarpaulin and ropes. Just at the critical moment, the whole head was covered and, unable to see, the beast froze. The first person to climb a neck had done it for a significant wager, but now there was no shortage of volunteers to demonstrate their skills at holding onto fistfuls of the fine feathers to haul themselves up. As soon as the climber reached the main body, the head was uncovered. The birds had often forgotten about the meal by this point but, even if they paused to eat, they soon raised their heads only to find a rope around the base of their neck and a stick beating against the side of it. This being such an unexpected sensation, it never seemed to occur to them to use their almost unlimited flexibility to reach around and peck at the source of this irritation. All they could think of was to run away from the pain and, by changing their angle of attack, the riders found it possible to steer them.

The ostrich swept by the truck Henry was working in. He looked up in silence from his collection of cables and connectors leading to the rack of electronics and the laser tube. They could almost see the sarcastic comment forming in his exasperated expression as the cloud of feathers shot off across the plain with two more, rider-less, in pursuit.

“Even if it doesn’t get deleted before leaving orbit and somebody does read it, are they actually likely to do anything?”

Josh watched the three birds charging off towards a nearby copse. “He says that if they find out that drugs are coming in from the colonies they’re bound to act. They’ll send troops out here and clean this whole place up. He’s going to give them hard data on dates and times when the shipments of pods went out. He says his message will be loaded so as soon as the transporter is connected to the home network it will go straight out to the news media.”

They were round the copse now, striding out one leg at a time, heads low, reaching forward. The rider was holding tight to his rope and beating the neck as hard as he could.

“They’re giving evens that he beats them, and two to one that he falls before he jumps off.” Jumping off was the dangerous bit. You had to find something soft, like a pond or some bracken, to land in.

“How many circuits?”

“Two, I think. The riders are getting better. Should have some of them nicely broken in by the time we run out of fuel for the trucks.”

They were walking away from Henry’s truck, out of earshot. “Do you really trust him? One moment he’s the life and soul of the party but the next he’s nowhere to be found.”

“No”. Josh replied simply, making George turn sharply to look at him. “I don’t trust him at all. We agreed on the wording of a message but he will probably change it, and I don’t think he’s as clever as he says he is about how he’s going to load it.”

“So what do we do?”

“We help him all we can. Have you got any better ideas? The only alternative is just to carry on living as squalid outlaws until we get found and attacked again.”

The racers were back. The rider was beating furiously at one side of the neck he was holding on to but still they swung wide around the camp, charging out into a valley beyond before finally turning towards the copse again. He was still leading but he was a big man and, as it climbed the low slope, his mount seemed to be flagging slightly, carrying his weight. But it kept going, still leading as it went out of sight behind the copse. A cheer went up as the first man with binoculars to see them emerge again called out that he was still mounted and still winning. Thundering back down to the camp even the other birds in the great flock were all watching with fascination. Then, passing the camp at breakneck speed it spread its wings and flew.

A collective gasp from the crowd was matched by screeching from the flock. The man held his arms high in victory for a few seconds before returning to frantic work with his club. Moments later, having seemingly made its point that it could win the race with energy to spare, the bird was down again, landing in full view of the crowd right by an area of marsh where the man jumped off, throwing up a shower of water as he landed.

The truck skidded and stopped. The heavy rain had made the thick grass tear out, filling the treads with a soft blue-green mulch leaving them impossible to steer on flat ground and quite useless on the steep slope.

“We need some volunteers to come with us.” Josh shouted above the noise of the engines. “We’re going up to the top to check that we really can get down to the sea.”

Henry had been right about the flight path. They had had to wait for two weeks and Josh was thinking of giving up but then the transporter came. They couldn’t have missed it. They could hear the distant roar for a full two minutes before they saw it, pouring out thick black smoke which spread rapidly, blotting out the horizon. Far more heavily loaded than the ones they had seen used for the troops it struggled for every inch of altitude. By the time it was overhead Henry was ready with his laser, searching out the transponder under the vast silver fuselage. Just 10 seconds later they all saw the brief red flash as it acknowledged the upload. By this time the noise was deafening and they could see brilliant orange cones of flame behind the main engines, turning to blue and then black. As it had gained speed the smoke cloud had become more thinly spread, but soon it settled on them leaving a bitter taste as they breathed it in.

Several men came forward and soon they were walking ahead, leaving the others to try to dig the trucks out. It took them longer than they had expected. The first ridge hid a small plateau surrounded by the tops of the hills and covered with delicate white and blue flowers. Finally they climbed up the far side.

“Keep down”. Jake said. “We know it’s supposed to be empty but don’t make a silhouette on the ridge.”

“It’s just sea.” Henry replied, walking on alone. But then he quickly ducked down. As they crawled up to join him they saw a vast plain, stretching out to the horizon, with different size and shapes of land apparently set out as fields.

Henry looked round at them looking back at him. “No I didn’t. I got the flight path right and I got this one right as well.”

“So what happened?” Josh asked. “What do we tell the others about their nice place to build a village by the sea and maybe even some edible fish?”

But Henry wasn’t listening. He was scanning the fields with his binoculars. “Can’t see a thing.” He kept looking. “Like when we arrived at the other farms, no people, but this time no buildings either. No roads, no machines, nothing. And the fields look a bit of a mess.”

“We’d better go back.” Josh said, moving well back before standing up.

Jake and Josh had to admit that they weren’t good calculating their position without navigation satellites but they went through what Henry had done, checking it off the sun and the moons and had to agree that he was right. The survey maps were wrong.

“Anybody up in orbit would see it”. Henry said, looking a bit relieved that they hadn’t found an error in his navigation. “It must be deliberate; somebody has changed the maps so nobody finds the farms.”

“But how did they get people and machines out there?”

“What people? What machines?” He put his display screen carefully back in its case. “Why bother hiding them when it’s supposed to be sea anyway? And if they’re not hidden there are none there.”

It took them two days to get the trucks up the rest of the slope. The ostriches loved the flowers and ate them all.

Soon after they had set up a camp under the sparse tree cover [repeat] they were

down, setting out across the flat land. But what had looked like fields from a distance now looked abandoned. The pattern which had seemed so clear was now hard to see. The ground was covered in low brush and the only indication of the layout was thicker stems in the growth along what they had taken to be field edges. Moving along the close-cropped grass on the hillside they saw no sign of a road or track of any kind.

“Not exactly inviting is it?” Josh said, picking a mass of short black thorns out of his leg where he had tried to push through. “Can’t blame the animals for leaving it to grow. Looks like somebody spent a good few years growing this lot to keep them out.”

“But the first ship hadn’t landed a good few years ago.” Henry replied. “There was nobody here to plant it.”

Working with machetes and bush saws they started to cut a path through beside one of the lines of larger bushes and trees. Just making a path through the lower growth was hard work. Endless lengths of thorn covered stems sprang out at them; however carefully they tried to cut them back. Even the thinnest trunks were tough and took time to saw through. Soon Jake was asking why they needed to go through.

“Let’s try this.” Josh replied pointing to one of the large bushes that was growing in the thick barrier next to them. “Could you cut it down?”

“We’re not going through there are we?” Jake asked. “That’s even worse that this direction.”

“No, but let’s cut it and count the growth rings. It’s been planted in a nice even row with the others so it didn’t just land there by accident.”

The trunk was hard but they took turns at sawing, stood back when it fell out across their path into the field and then gathered around the stump.

“This system has only got one sun so that means only one summer growing season every planetary year and only one growth ring.” Josh didn’t look up, he was counting. “So this was planted at least thirty earth years before the first ship landed.”