

Uncharted Territory

Connie Willis

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CONNIE
WILLIS



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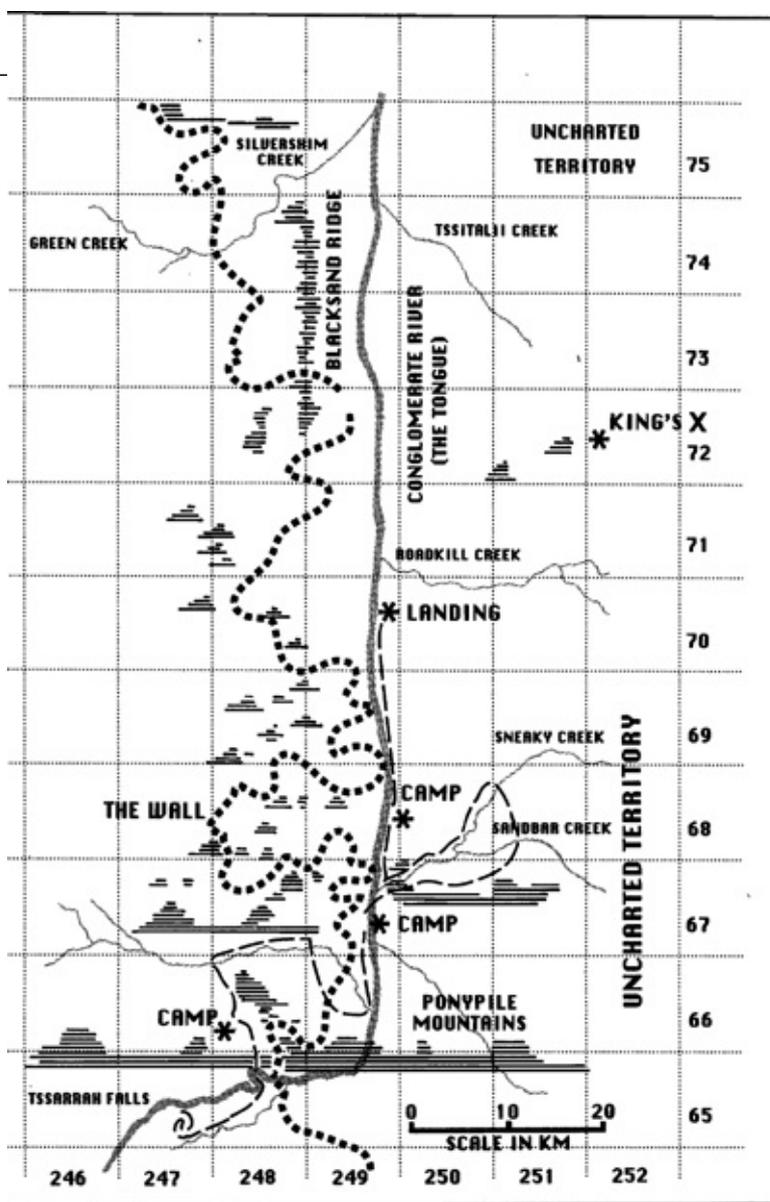
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Expedition 183: Day 19

We were still three kloms from King's X when Carson spotted the dust. "What on hell that?" he said, leaning forward over his pony's pommelbone and pointing at nothing that could see.

"Where?" I said.

"Over there. All that dust."

I still couldn't see anything except the pinkish ridge that hid King's X, and a couple of luggage grazing on the scourbrush, and I told him so.

"My shit, Fin, what do you mean you can't—" he said, disgusted. "Hand me the binocs."

"You've got 'em," I said. "I gave 'em to you yesterday. Hey, Bult!" I called up to our scout

He was hunched over the log on his pony's saddlebone, punching in numbers. "Bult!" shouted. "Do you see any dust up ahead?"

He still didn't look up, which didn't surprise me. He was busy doing his favorite thing, tallying up fines.

"I gave the binocs back to you," Carson said. "This morning when we packed up."

"This morning?" I said. "This morning you were in such an all-fired hurry to get back to King's X and meet the new loaner you probably went off and left 'em lying in camp. What's her name again? Evangeline?"

"Evelyn Parker," he said. "I was not in a hurry."

"How come you ran up two-fifty in fines breaking camp, then?"

"Because Bult's on some kind of fining *spree* the last few days," he said. "And the only hurry I've been in is to finish up this expedition before every dime of our wages goes for fines, which looks like a lost cause now that you lost the binocs."

"You weren't in a hurry yesterday," I said. "Yesterday you were all ready to ride fifty kloms north on the off-chance of running into Wulfmeier, and then C.J. calls and tells you the new loaner's in and her name's Eleanor, and all of a sudden you can't get home fast enough."

"*Evelyn*," Carson said, getting red in the face, "and I still say Wulfmeier's surveying the sector. You just don't like loaners."

"You're right about that," I said. "They're more trouble than they're worth." I've never met a loaner yet that was worth taking along, and the females are the worst.

They come in one variety: whiners. They spend every minute of the expedition complaining—about the outdoor plumbing and the dust and Bult and having to ride ponies and everything else they can think of. The last one spent the whole expedition yowling about "terrocentric enslaving imperialists," meaning Carson and me, and how we'd corrupted the "simple, noble indigenous sentients," meaning Bult, which was bad enough, but then she latched onto Bult and told him our presence "defiled the very atmosphere of the planet," and Bult started trying to fine us for breathing.

"I laid the binocs right next to your bedroll, Fin," Carson said, reaching behind him to rummage in his pack.

"Well, I never saw 'em."

"That's because you're half-blind," he said. "You can't even see a cloud of dust when it's coming right at you."

Well, as a matter of fact, we'd been arguing long enough that now I could, a kicked-up line

of pinkish cloud close to the ridge.

“What do you think it is? A dust tantrum?” I said, even though a tantrum would’ve been meandering all over the place, not keeping to a line.

“I don’t know,” he said, putting his hand up to shade his eyes. “A stampede maybe.”

The only fauna around here were luggage, and they didn’t stampede in dry weather like this, and anyway the cloud wasn’t wide enough for a stampede. It looked like the dust churned up by a rover, or a gate opening.

I kicked my terminal on and asked for whereabouts on the gatecrashers. I’d show Wulfmeier on Dazil yesterday when Carson’d been so set on going after him, and now the whereabouts showed him on Starting Gate, which meant he probably wasn’t either place. But he’d have to be crazy to open a gate this close to King’s X, even if there was anything underneath here—which there wasn’t. I’d already run terrains and subsurfaces—especially knowing we were on our way home.

I squinted at the dust, wondering if I should ask for a verify. I could see now it was moving fast, which meant it wasn’t a gate, or a pony, and the dust was too low for the heli. “Looks like the rover,” I said. “Maybe the new loaner—what was her name? Ernestine?—is jumping for you as you are for her, and she’s coming out here to meet you. You better comb your mustache.”

He wasn’t paying any attention. He was still rummaging in his pack, looking for the binocs. “I laid ’em right next to your bedroll when you were loading the ponies.”

“Well, I didn’t see ’em,” I said, watching the dust. It was a good thing it wasn’t a stampede; it would have run us over while we stood there arguing about the binocs. “Maybe Bult took ’em.”

“Why on hell would Bult take ’em?” Carson bellowed. “His are a hell of a lot fancier than ours.”

They were, with selective scans and programmed polarizers, and Bult had hung them around the second joint of his neck and was peering through them at the dust. I rode up next to him. “Can you see what’s making the dust?” I asked.

He didn’t take the binocs down from his eyes. “Disturbance of land surface,” he said severely. “Fine of one hundred.”

I should’ve known it. Bult could’ve cared less about what was making the dust so long as he could get a fine out of it. “You can’t fine us for dust unless we make it,” I said. “Give me the binocs.”

He bent his neck double, took the binocs off, and handed them to me, and then hunched over his log again. “Forcible confiscation of property,” he said into his log. “Twenty-five.”

“Confiscation!” I said. “You’re not going to fine me with confiscating anything. I *asked* if I could borrow them.”

“Inappropriate tone and manner in speaking to an indigenous person,” he said into the log. “Fifty.”

I gave up and put the binocs up to my eyes. The cloud of dust looked like it was right on top of me, but no clearer. I upped the resolution and took another look. “It’s the rover,” I called to Carson, who’d gotten off his pony and was taking everything out of his pack.

“Who’s driving?” he said. “C.J.?”

I hit the polarizers to screen out the dust and took another look. “What’d you say the

loaner's name was, Carson?"

"Evelyn. Did C.J. bring her out with her?"

"It's not C.J. driving," I said.

"Well, who on hell is it? Don't tell me one of the indidges stole the rover again."

"Unfair accusation of indigenous person," Bult said. "Seventy-five."

"You know how you always get mad over the indidges giving things the wrong names?" said.

"What on hell does that have to do with who's driving the rover?" Carson said.

"Because it looks like the indidges aren't the only ones doing it," I said. "It looks like no Big Brother's doing it, too."

"Give me those binocs," he said, grabbing for 'em.

"Forcible confiscation of property," I said, holding them away from him. "Looks like you could've taken your time this morning and not gone off in such a hurry you forgot ours."

I handed the binocs back to Bult, and just to be contrary, he handed them to Carson, but the rover was close enough now we didn't need them.

It roared up in a cloud of dust, skidded to a halt right on top of a roadkill, and the driver jumped out and strode over to us without even waiting for the dust to clear.

"Carson and Findriddy, I presume," he said, grinning.

Now usually when we meet a loaner, they don't have eyes for anybody but Bult (or C.J., she's there and the loaner's a male), especially if Bult's unfolding himself off his pony the way he was now, straightening out his back joints one after the other till he looks like a big pink Erector set. Then, while the loaners are still picking their jaws up out of the dirt, one of the ponies keels over or else drops a pile the size of the rover. It's tough to compete with. So we usually get noticed last or else have to say something like, "Bult's only dangerous when he senses your fear," to get their attention.

But this loaner didn't so much as glance at Bult. He came straight over to me and shook hands. "How do you do," he said eagerly, pumping my hand. "I'm Dr. Parker, the new member of your survey team."

"I'm Fin—" I started.

"Oh, I know who *you* are, and I can't *tell* you what an *honor* it is to meet you, Dr. Findriddy!"

He let go of my hand and started in on Carson's. "When C.J. told me you weren't back yet I couldn't wait till you arrived to meet you," he said, jerking Carson's hand up and down. "Findriddy and Carson! The famous planetary surveyors! I can't believe I'm shaking hands with you, Dr. Carson!"

"It's kind of hard for me to believe, too," Carson said.

"What'd you say your name was, again?" I asked.

"Dr. Parker," he said, grabbing my hand to shake it again. "Dr. Findriddy, I've read all your —"

"Fin," I said, "and this is Carson. There's only four of us on the planet, counting you, so there's not much call for fancy titles. What do you want us to call you?" but he'd already let off pumping my hand and was staring past Carson.

"Is that the Wall?" he said, pointing at a bump on the horizon.

"Nope," I said. "That's Three Moon Mesa. The Wall's twenty kloms the other side of the

Tongue.”

“Are we going to see it on the expedition?”

“Yeah. We have to cross it to get into uncharted territory,” I said.

“Great. I can’t wait to see the Wall and the silvershim trees,” he said, looking down at Carson’s boots, “and the cliff where Carson lost his foot.”

“How do you know about all this stuff?” I asked.

He looked back and forth at us in amazement. “Are you kidding? Everybody knows about Carson and Findriddy! You’re famous! Dr. Findriddy, you’re—”

“*Fin*,” I said. “What do you want us to call you?”

“Evelyn,” he said. He looked from one to the other of us. “It’s a British name. My mother was from England. Only they pronounce it with a long *e*.”

“And you’re an exozoologist?” I said.

“Socioexozoologist. My speciality’s sex.”

“C.J.’s the one you want then,” I said. “She’s our resident expert.”

He blushed a nice pink. “I’ve already met her.”

“She told you her name yet?” I said.

“Her name?” he said blankly.

“What C.J. stands for,” I said. “She must be slipping,” I said to Carson.

Carson ignored me. “If you’re an expert on sex,” Carson said, looking over at Bult, who was heading for the rover, “you can help us tell which one Bult is.”

“I thought the Boohteri were a simple two-sex species,” Evelyn said.

“They are,” Carson said, “only we can’t tell which one’s which.”

“All their equipment’s on the inside,” I said, “not like C.J.’s. It—”

“Speaking of which, did she have supper ready?” Carson said. “Not that it makes any difference to us. At this rate we’ll still be out here tomorrow morning.”

“Oh. Of course,” Evelyn said, looking dismayed, “you’re eager to get back to headquarters. I didn’t mean to keep you. I was just so excited to actually meet you!” He started off for the rover. Bult was hunched over the front tire. He unfolded three leg joints when Evelyn came up. “Damage to indigenous fauna,” he said. “Seventy-five.”

Evelyn said to me, “Have I done something wrong?”

“Hard not to in these parts,” I said. “Bult, you can’t fine Evelyn for running over a roadkill.”

“Running over—” Evelyn said. He leapt in the rover and roared it back off the roadkill, and then jumped out again. “I didn’t see it!” he said, peering at its flattened brown body. “I didn’t mean to kill it! Honestly, I—”

“You can’t kill a roadkill just by parking a rover on it,” I said, poking it with my toe. “You can’t even wake it up.”

Bult pointed at the tire tracks Evelyn’d just made. “Disruption of land surface. Twenty-five.”

“Bult, you can’t fine Evelyn,” I said. “He’s not a member of the expedition.”

“Disruption of land surface,” Bult said, pointing at the tire tracks.

“Shouldn’t I have come out here in the rover?” Evelyn said worriedly.

“Sure you should,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder, “ ’cause now you can give me a ride home. Carson, bring in my pony for me.” I opened the door of the rover.

"I'm not getting stuck out here with the ponies while you ride back in style," Carson said. "I'll ride in with Evelyn, and you bring the ponies."

"Can't we all go back in the rover?" Evelyn said, looking upset. "We could tie the ponies to the back."

"The rover can't go that slow," Carson muttered.

"You've got no reason to get back early, Carson," I said. "I've got to check the purchase orders, and the pursuants, *and* fill out the report on the binocs you lost." I got in the rover and sat down.

"I lost?" Carson said, getting red in the face again. "I laid 'em—"

"Expedition member riding in wheeled vehicle," Bult said.

We turned around to look at him. He was standing beside his pony, talking into his log. "Disruption of land surface."

I got out of the rover and stalked over to him. "I told you, you can't fine somebody who's not a member of the expedition."

Bult looked at me. "Inappropriate tone and manner." He straightened some finger joints. "You member. Cahsson member. Yahhs?" he said in the maddening pidgin he uses when he's not tallying fines.

But his message was clear enough. If either of us rode back with Evelyn, he could fine us for using a rover, which would take the next six expeditions' wages, not to mention the trouble we'd get into with Big Brother.

"You expedition, yahhs?" Bult said. He held out his pony's reins to me.

"Yeah," I said. I took the reins.

Bult grabbed his log off his pony's saddlebone, jumped in the rover, and folded himself into a sitting position. "We go," he said to Evelyn.

Evelyn looked questioningly at me.

"Bult here'll ride in with you," I said. "We'll bring the ponies in."

"How on hell are we supposed to bring three ponies in when they'll only walk two abreast?" Carson said.

I ignored him. "See you back at King's X." I slapped the side of the rover.

"Go fahhst," Bult said. Ev started the rover up and waved and left us eating a cloud of dust.

"I'm beginning to think you're right about loaners, Fin," Carson said, coughing and smacking his hat against his leg. "They're nothing but trouble. And the males are the worst, especially after C.J. gets to 'em. We'll spend half the expedition listening to him talk about her, and the other half keeping him from labeling every gully in sight Crissa Canyon."

"Maybe," I said, squinting at the rover's dust, which seemed to be veering off to the right. "C.J. said Evelyn got in this morning."

"Which means she's had almost a whole day to give him her pitch," he said, taking hold of Bult's pony's reins. It balked and dug in its paws. "And she'll have at least another two hours to work her wiles before we get these ponies in."

"Maybe," I said, still watching the dust. "But I figure a presentable-looking male like Bult can jump just about any female he wants without having to do anything for it, and you notice he didn't stay at King's X with C.J. He came tearing out here to meet *us*. I think he might be smarter than he looks."

"That's what you said the first time you saw Bult," Carson said, yanking on Bult's pony's

reins. The pony yanked back.

“And I was right, wasn’t I?” I said, going over to help. “If he wasn’t, he’d be here with these ponies, and *we’d* be halfway to King’s X.” I took over the reins, and he went around behind the pony to push.

“Maybe,” he said. “Why wouldn’t he want to meet us? After all, we’re planetary surveyors. We’re famous!”

I pulled and he pushed. The pony stayed put. “Get moving, you rock-headed nag!” Carson said, shoving on its back end. “Don’t you know who we are?”

The pony lifted its tail and dumped a pile.

“My *shit!*” Carson said.

“Too bad Evelyn can’t see us now,” I said, holding the reins over my shoulder and hauling on the pony. “Findriddy and Carson, the famous explorers!”

Off in the distance, to the right of the ridge, the dust disappeared.

Interim: At King's X

It took us four hours to make it into King's X. Bult's pony keeled over twice and wouldn't get up, and when we got there, Ev was waiting out at the stable to ask us when we were going to start on the expedition. Carson gave him an inappropriate-in-tone-and-manner answer.

"I know you just got back and have to file your reports and everything," Ev said.

"And eat," Carson muttered, limping around his pony, "and sleep. And kill me a scout."

"It's just that I'm so excited to see Boohte," Ev said. "I still can't believe I'm really *here* talking to—"

"I know, I know," I said, unloading the computer. "Findriddy and Carson, the famous surveyors."

"Where's Bult?" Carson asked, unstrapping his camera from his pony's saddlebone. "And why isn't he out here to unload his pony?"

Evelyn handed Carson Bult's log. "He said to tell you these are the fines from the trip in."

"He wasn't *on* the trip in," Carson said, glaring at the log. "What on hell are these 'Destruction of indigenous flora.' 'Damage to sand formations.' 'Pollution of atmosphere.'"

I grabbed the log away from Carson. "Did Bult give you directions back to King's X?"

"Yes," Ev said. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Wrong?!" Carson spluttered. "*Wrong?!!*"

"Don't get in a sweat," I said. "Bult can't fine Ev till he's a member of the expedition."

"But I don't understand," Ev said. "What did I do wrong? All I did was drive the rover—"

"Stir up dust, make tire tracks," Carson said, "emit exhaust—"

"Wheeled vehicles aren't allowed off government property," I explained to Ev, who was looking amazed.

"Then how do you get around?" he asked.

"We don't," Carson said, glaring at Bult's pony, which looked like it was getting ready to keel over again. "Explain it to him, Fin."

I was too tired to explain anything, least of all Big Brother's notion of how to survey a planet. "You tell him about the fines while I go get this straightened out with Bult," I said, and went across the compound to the gate area.

In my log, there's nothing worse than working for a government with the guilts. All we were doing on Boohte was surveying the planet, but Big Brother didn't want anybody accusing them of "ruthless imperialist expansion" and riding roughshod over the indidges the way they did when they colonized America.

So they set up all these rules to "preserve planetary ecosystems" (which was supposed to mean we weren't allowed to build dams or kill the local fauna) and "protect indigenous cultures from technological contamination" (which was supposed to mean we couldn't give 'em firewater and guns), and stiff fines for breaking the rules.

Which is where they made their first mistake, because they paid the fines to the indidges and Bult and his tribe knew a good thing when they saw it, and before you know it we're being fined for making footprints, and Bult's buying technological contamination right and left with the proceeds.

I figured he'd be in the gate area, up to his second knee joint in stuff he'd bought, and I was

right. When I opened the door, he was prying open a crate of umbrellas.

“Bult, you can’t charge us with fines the rover incurred,” I said.

He pulled out an umbrella and examined it. It was the collapsible kind. He held the umbrella out in front of him and pushed a button. Lights came on around the rim. “Destruction of land surface,” he said.

I held out his log to him. “You know the regs. ‘The expedition is not responsible for violations committed by any person not an official member of the expedition.’ ”

He was still messing with the buttons. The lights went off. “Bult member,” he said, and the umbrella shot out and open, barely missing my stomach.

“Watch it!” I jumped back. “You can’t incur fines, Bult.”

Bult put down the umbrella and opened a big box of dice, which would make Carson happy. His favorite occupation, next to blaming me, is shooting craps.

“Indidges can’t incur fines!” I said.

“Inappropriate tone and manner,” he said.

I was too tired for this, too, and I still had the reports and the whereabouts to do. I left him unpacking a box of shower curtains and went across to the mess.

I opened the door. “Honey, I’m home,” I called.

“Hello!” C.J. sang out cheerfully from the kitchen, which was a switch. “How was your expedition?”

She appeared in the doorway, smiling and wiping her hands on a towel. She was all done up, clean face and fixed-up hair and a shirt that was open down to thirty degrees north. “Dinner’s almost ready,” she said brightly, and then stopped and looked around. “Where’s Evelyn?”

“Out in the stable,” I said, dumping my stuff on a chair, “talking to Carson, the planetary surveyor. Did you know we’re famous?”

“You’re filthy,” she said. “And you’re late. What on hell took you so long? Dinner’s cold. I had it ready two hours ago.” She jabbed a finger at my stuff. “Get that dirty pack off the furniture. It’s bad enough putting up with dust tantrums without you two dragging in dirt.”

I sat down and propped my legs up on the table. “And how was your day, sweetheart?” she said. “Get a mud puddle named after you? Jump any loners?”

“Very funny. Evelyn happens to be a very nice young man who understands what it’s like to be all alone on a planet for weeks at a time with nobody for hundreds of kloms and who knows what dangers lurking out there—”

“Like losing that shirt,” I said.

“You’re not exactly in a position to criticize my clothes,” she said. “When’s the last time you changed *yours*? What have you been doing, rolling in the mud? And get those boots off the furniture. They’re disgusting!” She smacked my legs with the dish towel.

This was as much fun as talking to Bult. If I was going to be raked over the coals, it might as well be by the experts. I heaved myself out of the chair. “Any pursuants?”

“If you mean official reprimands, there are sixteen. They’re on the computer.” She went back to the kitchen, her shirt flapping. “And get cleaned up. You’re not coming to the table looking like that.”

“Yes, dear,” I said and went over to the console. I fed in the expedition report and took a look at the subsurfaces I’d run in Sector 247-72, and then called up the pursuants.

There were the usual loving messages from Big Brother: we weren't covering enough sectors, we weren't giving enough f-and-f indigenous names, we were incurring too many fines.

"Pursuant to language used by members of survey expeditions, such members will refrain from using derogatory terms in reference to the government, in particular, abbreviations and slang terms such as 'Big Brother' and 'morons back home.' Such references imply lack of respect, thereby undermining relations with the indigenous sentients and obstructing the government's goals. Members of survey expeditions will henceforth refer to the government by its proper title in full."

Evelyn and Carson came in. "Anything interesting?" Carson asked, leaning over me.

"We're wearing our mikes turned up too high," I said.

He clapped me on the shoulder. "I'm gonna go check the weather and then take a bath," he said.

I nodded, looking at the screen. He left, and I started through the pursuants again and he looked back behind me. Ev was leaning over me, his chin practically on my shoulder.

"Do you mind if I watch?" he said. "It's so exc—"

"I know, I know," I said. "There's nothing more exciting than reading a bunch of memos from Big Brother. Oh. Sorry," I said, pointing at the screen, "we're not supposed to call them that. We're supposed to use appropriate titles. There's nothing more exciting than reading memos from the Third Reich."

Ev grinned, and I thought, Yep, smarter than he looks.

"Fin," C.J. called from the door of the mess. She'd unstripped her blouse another ten degrees. "Can I borrow Evelyn for a minute?"

"You bet, Crissa Jane," I said.

She glared at me.

"That's what C.J. stands for, you know," I said to Ev. "Crissa Jane Tull. You'll need to remember that for when we go on expedition."

"Fin!" she snapped. "Ev," she said sweetly, "can you come help me with dinner?"

"Sure," Ev said and was after her like a shot. All right, not that much smarter.

I went back to the pursuants. We weren't showing "proper respect for indigenous cultural integrity," which meant who knows what, we hadn't filled out Subsection 12-2 of the minerals report for Expedition 158, we had left two gaps of uncharted territory on Expedition 162, one in Sector 248-76 and the other in Sector 246-73.

I knew what the 246-73 gap was but not the other one, and I doubted if it was still a gap. We'd been over a lot of the same territory the next-to-last expedition.

I called up the topographicals and asked for a chart overlay. Big Bro—Hizzoner was right for once. There were two holes in the chart.

Carson came in, carrying a towel and a clean pair of socks. "We fired yet?"

"Just about," I said. "How's the weather look?"

"Rain down in the Ponypiles start of next week. Otherwise, nothing. Not even a dust storm. Looks like we can go anywhere we want."

"What about in charted territory? Up along 76?"

"Same thing. Clear and dry. Why?" he said, coming over to look at the screen. "What've you got?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "Probably nothing. Go get cleaned up."

He went off toward the latrine. Sector 248-76. That was over on the other side of the Tongue and, if I remembered right, close to Silvershim Creek. I frowned at the screen a minute and then asked for Expedition 181's log and started fast-forwarding it.

"Is that the expedition you were just on?" Ev said, and I jerked around to find him hanging over me again.

"I thought you were helping C.J. in the kitchen," I said, cutting the log off.

He grinned. "It's too hot in there. Were you sending the log of the expedition to NASA?"

I shook my head. "The log goes out live. It transmits straight to C.J. and she sends it out through the gate. I was just finishing up the expedition summary."

"Do you send all the reports?"

"Nope. Carson sends the topographicals and the F-and-F; I send the geologicals and the accountings." I asked for the tally of Bult's fines.

Ev looked uneasy. "I wanted to apologize to you for driving the rover. I didn't know it was against regs to use nonindigenous transportation. The last thing I wanted to do on my first day was to get you and Dr. Carson in trouble."

"Don't worry about it. We still had wages left over this expedition, which is better than we've made out the last two. The only things that really get you in trouble are killing fauna and naming something after somebody," I said, staring at him, but he didn't look especially guilty. C.J. must not have gotten around to her sales pitch yet.

"Anyway," I said, "we're used to trouble."

"I know," he said earnestly. "Like the time you got caught in the stampede and nearly got trampled, and Dr. Carson rescued you."

"How'd you know about that?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? You're—"

"Famous. Right," I said. "But how—"

"Evelyn," C.J. called, dripping honey with every syllable, "can you help me set the table?" and he was off again.

I got 181's log again and then changed my mind and asked for the whereabouts. I checked them for the two times we'd been in Sector 248-76. Wulfmeier'd been on Starting Gate both times, which didn't prove anything. I asked for a verify on him.

"Nahhd khompt," Bult said.

I looked up. He was standing next to the computer, pointing his umbrella at me.

"I need the computer, too," I said, and he reached for his log. "Besides, it's almost dinnertime."

"Nahhd tchopp," he said, moving around behind me so he could see the screen. "Forcible confiscation of property."

"That's what it is, all right," I said, wondering which was worse, being stuck with the bayonet of an umbrella or another fine. Besides, I couldn't find out what I needed to know with all these people hanging over my shoulder. And dinner was ready. Evelyn pushed the kitchen door open with his shoulder and brought out a platter of meat. I asked for the catalog.

"Here you go," I said, standing up. "Nieman Marcus at your disposal. Go at it. Tchopp."

Bult sat down, shot his umbrella open, and started talking to the computer. "One dozen

pair digiscan polarized field glasses,” he said, “with telemetry and object enhancement functions.”

Ev stared.

“One ‘High Rollers Special’ slot machine,” Bult said.

Ev came over with the platter. “Bult can speak English?” he said.

I grabbed a chunk of meat. “Depends. When he’s ordering stuff, yeah. When you’re talking to him, not much. When you’re trying to negotiate satellite surveys or permission to set up a gate, *no hablo inglais*.” I grabbed another hunk of meat.

“*Stop that!*” C.J. said, bringing in the vegetables. “Honestly, Fin, you’ve got the manners of a gatecrasher! You could at least wait till we get to the table!” She set the vegetables down. “Carson! Dinner’s ready!” she called and went back into the kitchen.

He came in, wiping his hands on a towel. He’d washed up and shaved around his mustache. He came over close to me. “Find anything?” he muttered.

“Maybe.”

Ev, still holding the meat platter, was looking at me inquiringly.

I said, “I found out those binocs you lost are gonna cost us three hundred.”

“*I lost?*” Carson said. “You’re the one who lost ’em. I laid ’em right next to your pack. What on hell’s it three hundred?”

“Possible technological contamination,” I said. “If they turn up on an indidge it’ll be five hundred you lost us.”

“*I lost us!*” he said.

C.J. came in, carrying a bowl of rice. She’d switched her shirt for one with even lower coordinates, and lights around the edges like the ones on Bult’s umbrella.

“You were the one in a hurry to get back here and meet *Evelyn*,” I said. I pulled a chair off from the table, stepped over it, and sat down.

He grabbed the platter out of Ev’s hands. “Five hundred. My *shit!*” He set the platter on the table. “How much were the rest of the fines?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I haven’t tallied ’em yet.”

“Well, what on hell were you doing all this time?” He sat down. “It’s plain to see you weren’t taking a bath.”

“C.J.’s cleaned up enough for both of us,” I said. “What’re the lights for?” I asked her.

Carson grinned. “They’re like those landing strip beacons, so you can find your way down.”

C.J. ignored him. “You sit here by me, *Evelyn*.”

He pulled out her chair, and she sat down, managing to lean over so we could all see the runway.

Ev sat down next to her. “I can’t believe I’m actually eating dinner with Carson and Findriddy! Tell me about your expedition. I’ll bet you had a lot of adventures.”

“Well,” Carson said, “Fin lost the binocs.”

“Have you decided when we leave on the next expedition yet?” Ev asked.

Carson gave me a look. “Not yet,” I said. “A few days, probably.”

“Oh, good,” C.J. crooned, leaning in Ev’s direction. “That’ll give us more time to get to know each other.” She latched onto his arm.

“Is there anything I can do to help so we can leave sooner?” Ev said. “Loading the ponies or something? I’m just so eager to get started.”

C.J. dropped his arm in disgust. “So you can spend three weeks sleeping on the ground and listening to these two?”

“Are you kidding?” he said. “I put in four years ago for the chance to go on an expedition with Carson and Findriddy! What’s it like, being on the survey team with them?”

“What’s it like?” She glared at us. “They’re rude, they’re dirty, they break every rule in the book, and don’t let all their bickering fool you—they’re just like *that*.” She crossed one finger over another. “Nobody has a chance against the two of them.”

“I know,” Ev said. “On the pop-ups they—”

“What are these pop-ups?” I said. “Some kind of holo?”

“They’re DHVs,” Ev said, as if that explained everything. “There’s a whole series of the about you and Carson and Bult.” He stopped and looked around at Bult hunched over the computer under his umbrella. “Doesn’t Bult eat with you?”

“He’s not allowed to,” Carson said, helping himself to the meat.

“Regs,” I said. “Cultural contamination. Asking him to eat at a table and use silverware is imperialistic. We might corrupt him with Earth foods and table manners.”

“Small chance of that,” C.J. said, taking the meat platter away from Carson. “You two don’t *have* any table manners.”

“So while we eat,” Carson said, plopping potatoes on his plate, “he sits there ordering demitasse cups and place settings for twelve. Nobody ever said Big Brother was big on logic.”

“Not Big Brother,” I said, shaking my finger at Carson. “Pursuant to our latest reprimand, members of the expedition will henceforth refer to the government by its appropriate title.”

“What, Idiots Incorporated?” Carson said. “What other brilliant orders did they come up with?”

“They want us to cover more territory. And they disallowed one of our names. Green Creek.”

Carson looked up from his plate. “What on hell’s wrong with Green Creek?”

“There’s a senator named Green on the Ways and Means Committee. They couldn’t prove any connection, though, so they just fined us the minimum.”

“There’re people named Hill and River, too,” Carson said. “If one of them gets on the committee, what on hell do we do then?”

“I think it’s ridiculous that you can’t name things after people,” C.J. said. “Don’t you Evelyn?”

“Why can’t you?” Ev asked.

“Regs,” I said. “‘Pursuant to the practice of naming geological formations, waterways, etc. after surveyors, government officials, historical personages, etc., said practice is indicative of oppressive colonialist attitudes and lack of respect for indigenous cultural traditions, etc.’ Hand the meat over.”

C.J.’d picked up the platter, but she didn’t pass it. “Oppressive! It is not. Why shouldn’t we have something named after us? We’re the ones stuck on this horrible planet all alone in uncharted territory for months at a time and with who knows what dangers lurking. We should get something.”

Carson and I have heard this pitch a hundred or so times. She used to try it on us before she decided the loaners were more susceptible.

“There are hundreds of mountains and streams on Boohte. You can’t tell me there isn’t

some way you could name *one* of them after somebody. I mean, the government wouldn't even notice."

Well, she's wrong there. Their Imperial Majesties check every single name, and even if we tried to sneak past them was a bug named G.J., we could get tossed off Boohte.

"There's a way you can get something named after you, C.J.," Carson said. "Why didn't you say you were interested?"

C.J. narrowed her eyes. "How?"

"Remember Stewart? He was one of the first pair of scouts on Boohte," he explained to Ev. "Got caught in a flash flood and swept smack into a hill. Stewart's Hill, they named it. . . . *memoriam*. All you've got to do is take the heli out tomorrow and point it at whatever you want named after you, and—"

"Very funny," C.J. said. "I'm serious about this," she said to Ev. "Don't you think it's natural to want to have some sign that you've *been* here, so after you're gone you won't be forgotten, some monument to what you've done?"

"My *shit*," Carson said, "if you're talking about doing stuff, Fin and I are the ones who should have something named after us! How about it, Fin? You want me to name something after you?"

"What would I do with it? What I *want* is the meat!" I held out my hands for it, but nobody paid any attention.

"Findriddy Lake," Carson said. "Fin Mesa."

"Findriddy Swamp," C.J. said.

It was time to change the subject, or I was never going to get any meat. "So, Ev," I said. "You're a sexozoologist."

"Socioexozoologist," he said. "I study instinctive mating behaviors in extraterrestrial species. Courtship rituals and sexual behaviors."

"Well, you've come to the right place," Carson said. "C.J.—"

C.J. cut in, "Tell me about some of the interesting species you've studied."

"Well, they're all interesting, really. Most animal behaviors are instinctive, they're hardwired in, but reproductive behavior is really complicated. It's part hardwiring, part survival strategies, and the combination produces all these variables. The charlizards on Ottiyal mate inside the crater of an active volcano, and there's a Terran species, the bowerbird, which constructs an elaborate bower fifty times his size and then decorates it with orchids and berries to attract the female."

"Some nest," I said.

"Oh, but it's not the nest," Ev said. "The nest is built in front of the bower, and it's quite ordinary. The bower is just for courtship. Sentients are even more interesting. The Inkic males cut off their toes to impress the female. And the Opantis' courtship ritual—they're the indigenous sentients on Jevo—takes six months. The Opanti female sets a series of difficult tasks the male must perform before she allows him to mate with her."

"Just like C.J.," I said. "What kind of tasks do these Opantis have to do for the females? Name rivers after them?"

"The tasks vary, but they're usually the giving of tokens of esteem, proofs of valor, feats of strength."

"How come the male's always the one who has to do all the courting?" Carson said.

“Giving ’em candy and flowers, proving they’re tough, building bowers while the female ju sits there making up her mind.”

“Because the male is concerned only with mating,” Ev said. “The female is concerned with ensuring the optimum survival of her offspring, which means she needs a strong mate or a smart one. The male doesn’t do all the courting, though. The females send out response signals to encourage and attract the males.”

“Like landing lights?” I said.

C.J. glared at me.

“Without those signals, the courtship ritual breaks down and can’t be completed,” Ev said.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Carson said. He pushed back from the table. “Fin, if we’re gonna start in two days, we’d better take a look at the map. I’ll go get the new topographicals.” Fin went out.

C.J. cleared off the table, and I threw Bult off the computer and set up the map, filling in the two holes with extrapolated topographicals before I went back over to the table.

Ev was bending over the map. “Is that the Wall?” he said, pointing at the Tongue.

“Nope. That’s the Tongue. *That’s* the Wall,” I said, sticking my hand in the middle of the holo to show him its course.

“I hadn’t realized it was so long,” he said wonderingly, tracing its meandering course along the Tongue and into the Ponypiles. “Which part is uncharted territory?”

“The blank part,” I said, looking at the huge western expanse of the map. The charted area looked like a drop in the bucket.

Carson came back in and called Bult and his umbrella over, and we discussed routes.

“We haven’t mapped any of the northern tributaries of the Tongue,” Carson said, circling an area in light marker. “Where can we cross the Wall, Bult?”

Bult leaned over the table and pointed stiffly at two different places, making sure his fingers didn’t go into the holo.

“If we cross down here,” I said, taking the marker away from Carson, “we can cut across here and follow Blacksand Ridge up.” I lit a line up to Sector 248-76 and through the holo. “What do you think?”

Bult pointed at the other break in the Wall, holding his hinged finger well above the table. “Fahtsser wye.”

I looked across at Carson. “What do you think?”

He looked steadily back at me.

“Will we get to see the trees that have the silver leaves?” Ev said.

“Maybe,” Carson said, still looking at me. “Either way looks good to me,” he said to Bult. “I’ll have to check on the weather and see which one’ll work. It looks like there’s a lot of rain down here.” He poked his finger at the route Bult’d marked. “And we’ll have to run terrain. Fin, you want to do that?”

“You bet,” I said.

“I’ll check the weather, and see if we can work a route through some silvershims for Ev here.”

He went out. “Can I watch you run the terrains?” Ev asked me.

“You bet,” I said. I went over to the computer.

Bult was on it again, hunched under his umbrella, buying a roulette wheel.

“I’ve got to figure the easiest route,” I said. “You can come back to the mall when I’m done.”

He got out his log. “Discriminatory practices,” he said.

That was a new one. “Why all these fines, Bult?” I said. “You saving up to buy a—” I was about to say “casino” but the last thing I wanted to do was give him any ideas. “To buy something big?” I ended up.

He reached for his log again.

“I need the computer if you want me to enter those fines you ran up with the rover today,” I said.

He hesitated, wondering whether fining me for “attempt to bribe indigenous scout” would be worth more than the rover’s fines, and then unfolded himself joint by joint and let me sit down.

I stared at the screen. There was no point in running terrains when I already knew the route I wanted, and I couldn’t look at the log with Bult and Ev there either. I started tallying the fines.

After a few minutes C.J. came in and dragged Ev off to convince him Big Brother wouldn’t catch him if he named one of the hills Mount C.J., but Bult was still hovering behind me, his umbrella aimed at my back.

“Don’t you need to go unpack all those umbrellas and shower curtains you bought?” I said, but he didn’t budge.

I had to wait till everybody was bedded down, including C.J., who’d flounced into her bunk in a hide-nothing nightie and then leaned out to say good night to Ev and give him one last eyeful, before I could take a look at that log.

I figured Bult would be in the gate area, unpacking his purchases, but he wasn’t. Which meant he was still “tchopping,” and I’d never get time alone on the computer. But he wasn’t in the mess either.

I checked the kitchen and then started over to the stables. Halfway there I caught sight of a half circle of lights out by the ridge. I didn’t have any notion of what he was doing clear on there—probably trying to collect fines from the luggage, but at least he wasn’t hogging the computer.

I walked out far enough to make sure it was him and not just his umbrella and then went back into the mess and asked Starting Gate for a verify on Wulfmeier. I got it, which didn’t mean anything either. Bult could make more selling fake verifies than he makes off us.

I asked for a trace, then checked on the rest of the gatecrashers. We had beacons on Miller and Abeyta, and Shoudamire was in the brig on the *Powell*, which left Karadjk and Redford. They were out on the Arm.

The trace showed Wulfmeier on Dazil until yesterday afternoon. I thought about it, and then asked for the log and frame-by-frame coordinates and leaned back to watch it.

I’d been right. Sector 248-76 was next to the Wall, about twenty kloms down from where we’d crossed, an area of grayish igneous hills covered with knee-high scourbrush, which was probably the reason we’d skirted it.

I asked for an aerial. C.J.’d sideswiped 248-76 on one of her trips home. I put privacies on and asked for visuals. It looked the way I remembered it—hills and scourbrush, a few roadkill. The visual said fine-grained schist with phyllosilicates all the way down. I asked for

the earlier log. That expedition we were south of it. It was hills and scourbrush on that end too.

The schist we'd found on Boohte wasn't gold-bearing, and there were no signs of salt or drainage anomalies, so it wasn't an anticline. And we'd had good reasons for missing it both times—the first time we'd been following the Wall, looking for a break, and the second time we were trying to avoid 246-73. I couldn't see any indications either time that Bult was avoiding it. Even if he was, it was probably because the ponies would balk at the steepness of the hills.

On the other hand, we'd gone right by it twice, and you could hide almost anything in those hills. Including a gate.

I erased my transactions, took the privacies off, and walked back to the bunkhouse to talk to Carson.

Ev was leaning against the door. He looked so sappy-eyed and relaxed I wondered if C.J. had broken down and given him a jump. She used to and then tried to get the loaners to name something for her afterward, but half the time they forgot, and she decided it worked better the other way around. But I figured the way she was looking at him at dinner it was just possible.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked him.

"I couldn't sleep," he said, looking out in the direction of the ridge. "I still can't convince myself I'm really here. It's beautiful."

He had that right. All three of Boohte's moons were up, strung out in a row like a string of beads, and the ridge was a purplish-blue. I leaned against the other side of the door.

"What's it like, out in uncharted territory?" he said.

"It's like those mating customs of yours," I said. "Part instinct, part survival strategies, way too many variables. Mostly, it's a lot of dust and triangulations," I said, even though I knew he wouldn't believe me. "And ponypiles."

"I can't wait," he said.

"Then you'd better be getting to bed," I said, but he didn't move.

"Did you know a lot of species perform their courtship rituals by moonlight?" he said. "Like the whippoorwill and the Antarrean cowfrog."

"And teenagers," I said, and yawned. "We'd better be getting to bed. We've got a lot to do in the morning."

"I don't think I could sleep," he said, still with that dopey look. I began to wonder if I had been wrong about him being all that smart.

"I saw the vids, but they don't do it justice," he said, looking at me. "I had no idea everything would be so beautiful."

"You should be using that line on C.J. and her nightie," Carson said, poking his head around the door. He was wearing his liner and his boots. "What on hell's going on out here?"

"I was telling Ev how he'd better get to bed so we can start in the morning," I said, looking at Carson.

"Really?" Ev said. The sappy-eyed look disappeared. "*Tomorrow?*"

"Sunup," I said, "so you'd better get back to your bunk. It's the last chance you'll have at a mattress for two weeks," but he didn't show any signs of leaving, and I couldn't talk to Carson with him hanging over me.

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