**Enemy**

**By Steve Bates***First Published in “Frontiers: Then, Now, and Beyond”*

Inscrutable specks of light materialize amid the void. They acquire white, yellow, red, blue or gray hues; they swell; they streak beyond the field of view, like embers flung from a primordial forge**.** Every now and then, the image freezes. A circle appears around a star: blue for low; green for medium; white for high. Having completed its dispassionate evaluation of the possibility of life on a planet circling that particular burning ball, the deep-space probe announces its presence to the next sector of the galactic quadrant. The search never changes, never ends.

On adjacent screens, flashing lights track distant scout ships, and rolling readouts reduce their mission status to rote sentence fragments. Janielle searches for patterns and meaning in the pastiche of colors and characters. She could entrench herself here for hours, dancing with digits and pixels and light-years and mission closures. But she is exceedingly late for her appointment, and further delays won’t help.

*This is going to be bad. The only question is: How bad?*

The command center—a transparent, 200-foot-wide sphere in the center of the 12-sided space station—provides an unfiltered, 360-degree view of the cosmos. The few people on duty at this hour seem oblivious to its silent magnificence. How many worlds out there has she investigated from the discreet, sterile distance of her orbiting ship? A couple dozen, certainly, in her 15 years with the Service. There’s a special joy in documenting a sentient species that is imagining grand cities or taking its first baby steps into space. So much more rewarding than delving into the brutally cold or radioactive remains of a civilization that met some cataclysmic fate. Regardless of what her drones discover about a planet, as soon as her report is dispatched to the command center, she must race off to tackle a new assignment. In their lifetimes, Janielle and the other 20-plus scout ship pilots could not begin to scrape the surface of the fecundity that the galaxy conceals.

Still, sometimes she wonders: What are we accomplishing? We scrutinize a civilization for a few weeks or months, never returning to determine how it has developed and what lessons it has learned. Or, what lessons we might learn from it.

A shiny surface provides a sobering reflection: a stained blue-and-white uniform, tangled auburn hair, sunken brown eyes and the pasty, gaunt physique typical of spacers who lack fresh food and genuine sunlight and who neglect their exercise regimens. Janielle takes a deep breath, straightens, assumes an austere expression and steps in front of the portal to the largest private workspace in the command center. Scanners identify her to the occupant as Scout First Class Janielle Coulombe.

“Enter,” says United Exploration Service Director Paul Tavistock, not disguising his sour mood. The portal opens silently.

“What in Hades were you thinking?” he blurts out before even inviting her to sit.

She grimaces as she sinks into a chair. Paul stands behind his massive fake mahogany desk, a fortress of unnecessary mass that flaunts its owner’s power. His hands are clasped behind him, as is his habit when he is unhappy. His crisp uniform is complemented by a pompous white, black and gold brimmed hat akin to headwear sported by sea captains on ancient Earth. Tall and chiseled, he might be considered handsome if he would attempt even half a smile. Janielle recalls that he used to smile frequently, before he became chained to a desk.

Paul is everything that Janielle is not—and everything that she once wished she could be. Brilliant. Successful. Influential. It took years for her to realize that he lacked a crucial spark, a drive to discover his own path and purpose. Despite their differences—or, maybe, because of them—Paul has been one of Janielle’s biggest advocates, steering many plum assignments to her. There have even been rumblings that she might be under consideration for a promotion to a supervisory position.

But all that could change. She has never pulled a stunt like this before.

“It was my judgment that making brief contact with one member of the intelligent species on 40 Rilidana A was the humane thing to do,” she says in a formal tone. “If you have read my report summary—”

“Of course I have read your summary!” the director bellows. His frown deepens as he realizes that he has overreacted, and he eases himself into his faux leather chair. Their eyes are level now. It’s a subtle indication that he considers Janielle to be almost an equal.

She folds her hands in an expression of humility. “I am sorry if my actions have reflected poorly on the Service.”

“We do not reveal ourselves to pre-industrial species because of the danger that we will alter their development. Have we not drilled that into your DNA?”

“Yes, you are right. It’s just… You remember what it was like when you were in the field. These are species—people—who are struggling to survive. It’s so hard not to help when we have the ability to do so.”

Paul reflects on his more than two decades of dashing across the quadrant, cataloguing an astonishing variety of intelligent lifeforms. He never questioned the wisdom of the Service mission: build the database while remaining invisible, and leave any contact to the diplomatic corps. “We must not allow our emotions to affect our decisions.” He unclenches and extends his palm. “Let’s see the full report.”

She hands him the data wafer. On a huge view pane to her left, the tapestry of stars and galaxies fades and 40 Rilidana A appears. The planet is sadly uninviting, with pale patches of brown and green interrupted intermittently by shallow, silver-colored seas and unsightly clumps of gray clouds.

“Upon approaching the planet, I followed standard protocol,” Janielle begins. “Long-range scans detected no electromagnetic signals, industrial activity or significant terraforming. After moving into orbit, I sent stealth drones to the surface to search for sentient lifeforms. I modified the drones to resemble insects native to 40 Rilidana A—bugs with flat bodies, dozens of tiny legs and three pairs of wings that can hover and dart. After it became apparent that there was only one intelligent species on the planet, I had drones monitor interactions among the inhabitants to translate their language.”

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Two figures march through waist-high brown grasses near the edge of a pristine forest. Their scarlet skin stands out like a volcanic eruption under the bright sun. Wearing tan uniforms made of animal hides, the soldiers have ample muscles, nearly-round heads, flat noses and pointed ears.

Suddenly, the larger of the two men halts. He fumbles with his shoulder pack to withdraw an arrow without taking his eyes off a point just beyond the tree line. Then he draws his bow and fires. The arrow falls harmlessly about 60 yards away, just short of the woods.

“I saw one of them!” says Dacso.

“What did it look like?” asks his buddy, Karill.

“He was big, really big,” exclaims Dacso, holding the three claws of his right hand several inches above his head. “He was bright yellow, had three or four arms and moved faster than the breeze.” Dacso catches his breath and continues: “I just missed him.”

All the Scarlets have memories of furtive, amber-colored people moving among trees or hiding in caves, but the recollections have a fuzzy quality, like a scene from a story someone else recounted late at night around a fire. There is no word for dream in the Scarlets’ language, because they do not dream.

Karill has heard no sound and has seen no movement that would suggest the presence of the enemy this morning, but he doesn’t want to get on his friend’s bad side by speculating that some combination of boredom and Dacso’s imagination is getting the better of him. Karill asks: “Do you think we should look for him?”

“No. I scared him away. Would you mind retrieving my arrow? I’m running low.”

“Not me. It’s your arrow. And, if the enemy really is close, I don’t want to be the first victim.”

They remain on heightened alert as they complete their morning grid search, part of the Scarlet mission to locate the other side’s stronghold and launch an all-out assault. Every Scarlet male old enough to handle a weapon is a soldier. Leaders lecture the troops regularly about the urgency of rooting out and destroying the enemy.

It’s us or them. It’s been that way as long as anyone can remember.

Dacso and Karill mount a rocky hillside dotted with towering, pale green plants that are endowed generously with fearsome spikes. They press claws to their hearts in salute as they pass two guards and enter the massive complex of caves and tunnels that is the home of the Scarlets. The largest naturally occurring caves on the planet, they have been expanded extensively over the generations by people excavating the soft stone for new lodgings and places to store food and armaments.

The men proceed through a dim passageway to the Great Hall, the largest chamber in the complex. Thirty feet high and three times as wide, the room is brightened by a central firepit and by rectangular openings in the outer wall. The thatched coverings for those windows and for ceiling ventilation shafts are open, because it is a warm, dry day. Scents of smoke, dung and sweat cling to the still air as women and children carry wood, stones, hides and other materials into the hall. Dacso and Karill acknowledge several Scarlets who are crafting spears, bows and arrows. The pair approach the firepit and salute General Arek.

The general listens intensely to Dacso’s description of the enemy, which has become even more embellished in the intervening hours. Arek, who is shorter than most adult Scarlets and has deep furrows in his forehead, nods, then asks: “Did you see any five-claw marks?”

“We saw some a few days ago along the river bank, but none today,” says Karill.

Arek dismisses the soldiers. Staring into the fire, the general is so tormented by the latest signs and rumors of spies and enemy encroachment that he does not notice droplets of sweat forming and running on his dark red skin. The flames dissolve, and Arek sees several people trotting in a loose formation before him on a grassy path near a river or stream. They are about the same size as the Scarlets, but their skin is the color of the sun when it sets on a cloudless evening. They are Golds. They are the enemy.

But something is wrong. His arms are yellow, like those of the Golds. Each of his hands has five digits, not the three of the Scarlets. Instead of curved, hard claws, these fingers are nearly straight and much softer, with what appears to be a patch of tough tissue on the ends.

*This cannot be me*.

The world blinks, and Arek is back in the Great Hall. He glances around. No one seems to have noticed his momentary incapacitation.

Except his wife, Ilana. She is on the heavy side, a few inches taller and several years younger than he, but her skin is the same brilliant shade of red. “What ails you, Arek?”

“It was a vision. A disturbing one,” he confesses. Arek has learned not to withhold anything from Ilana.

“Is it like your previous ones? Watching the Golds?”

“Yes, but…” His gaze is still directed inward, and he is consumed by a sickening sense of disloyalty. “I seemed to be moving among them.”

“Were they carrying weapons?”

“No.” He spits into the firepit. “Is this some trick of the enemy, some effort to confuse us?”

“I cannot say,” says Ilana. “But I would put nothing past them.”

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Paul drums his fingers on his desk. “What about that girl you got involved with?”

Says Janielle: “Hold on, she’s coming.”

\* \* \*

Kalina’s pouch is full. There are no more woody shrubs to test as material for brushes. There are no more promising flowers, fruits, seeds or barks to sample for pigments. There are no more reasons to remain in the field. Reluctantly, Kalina begins walking home.

She executes a perfunctory salute as she reaches the cave complex just before nightfall. The two sleepy guards make no attempt to return the gesture. Most Scarlets are seated in their cramped, dank personal caves, eating or talking. The conversations typically turn to their deepest fear—that the enemy will attack during the night. Soon, exhaustion will overtake the Scarlets and they will surrender the evening to bedding consisting of feathers and hides. They will sleep fitfully, despite the strong protection that the cave complex offers.

Only Kalina will remain awake.

Still a few years short of maturity, she feels her otherness more painfully every day. She endures constant reminders in the cold stares, the thinly veiled expressions of pity, the heads turning abruptly to avoid looking at her. There is no word for mutation in her language. Her family and the others of her species understand only that she has four digits on each hand and foot and that her skin is a sickly orange-brown.

When she was born, Arek, who is her father, declared that Kalina was an abomination and should be banished to perish in the wild. But her mother resisted, claiming that Kalina must have been delivered to them for a reason. He relented, but the couple have questioned that decision in their minds nearly every day. The Scarlets do not trust Kalina to make weapons or provide any other form of assistance in the war effort, so she is excused from tasks that everyone else must undertake. This only adds to the resentment that Scarlets make no effort to hide from her.

Kalina crosses the Great Hall, passes into a tunnel, turns into a second and reaches her family’s personal cave, where the evening meal is in progress. Her parents do not react as she approaches the fire hesitantly and sits on the hard floor. Kalina neither speaks nor moves until Arek and Ilana have finished eating. Only then does Kalina pull a few scraps of meat from a bone and drink a cup of water. She retires to a dark recess of the cave and places her pouch next to her bedding. She is not sleepy, but she usually lies down when her parents do so, staring at the dying fire and wondering what she can possibly do to earn acceptance from her family and her community.

Without warning, Ilana springs to her feet, paces stridently toward Kalina and grasps the pouch. The woman examines the contents briefly, then pours them onto the fire and tosses the empty pouch into a far corner. Exotic colors flood the cave for a few moments. Still, no one speaks. Kalina waits for Arek and Ilana to drift into sleep, then retrieves the pouch and leaves the caves.

She hikes down to the river, the light of two moons making the paths fairly easy to navigate. With a walking stick in hand in case an animal decides to pick a fight, she follows the river for half an hour, then detours toward a steep hill and climbs halfway up. She slips behind a massive boulder and enters a tiny, well-hidden cave. On a thin bed of feathers and hides, she weeps.

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“So, she is shunned and mistreated by the Scarlets. Does that prompt her to betray them?” asks Paul. His tone is slightly less harsh than earlier in the meeting. Janielle wonders if he is becoming intrigued by the Scarlets and the Golds.

“We’ll see.”

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The girl raises five fingers, a symbol of welcome and peace. Kasper, a young guard with radiant yellow skin, declines to return the gesture as she passes him. She follows a curved tunnel to a well-illuminated chamber where men and women are fabricating wooden barricades. Several of them look up, but not one smiles or greets her. A young boy notices her, points and shouts: “Scarlet! Scarlet!” The boy’s mother hushes him and ushers him down a tunnel.

*It takes a child to say what others merely think.*

She tries not to betray emotion as she moves to a vacant portion of the chamber, opens her pouch and teases apart the stiff fibers of a plant that she discovered this morning. A woman named Shari takes a seat facing her, cross-legged on the stone floor.

“You left home early today, Aliz. You must be careful. We have found fresh evidence of the work of the enemy. Some of our barricades were moved during the night. And, three-claw prints have been seen near the entrance to the caves.” One of the kindest and most respected women in the Gold community, Shari does not treat Kalina as a pariah. But she is an exception.

“I left early because I love watching the sun rise,” says Kalina. As the years have passed, she has become accustomed to being called Kalina at times and Aliz at times. And, she has become highly skilled at lying. She wishes that she could be honest with her family and with everyone else. But there are so many secrets buried within her, and so much that she does not understand. There is no one in whom she can confide.

Nearby, Shari’s husband, Sander, is preparing to send several young men out to search for food. The Golds have no formal leader, but Sander is recognized as a wise man, and the Golds seek his counsel frequently and find comfort and inspiration in his words. “Try to remain within a few hundred yards of the caves,” he advises the hunters.

“We have cleared out all the animals and edible plants nearby,” says Bela, one of the biggest and strongest young Golds.

“Providence will send something our way,” says Sander, who places his hands on Bela’s shoulders in a display of affection and confidence. But Sander’s expression is somber.

As the men depart, Sander approaches the girl. “It is time for you to help with our defensive efforts, Aliz. You are old enough and strong enough to contribute.”

“I could be a scout,” she responds. “I would not mind taking long trips to look for the Scarlets.”

Sander shakes his head and lowers his voice so other Golds will not hear him. “It’s too dangerous. If they capture you, they will torture and kill you.” He picks up two pebbles and tosses them aside in frustration. “I fear that the Scarlets will attack us soon enough. We choose not to fight because that is our way. We trust in our barricades. Perhaps someday the Scarlets will realize that we can share this world.”

As Kalina formulates a response, Sander appears to be peering at a distant horizon. He is watching a phalanx of people with red skin and three pointed claws on each hand. They are carrying bows and spears and moving rapidly across the sun-dappled forest floor. One shouts, but Sander can’t make out the words. The scene vanishes as suddenly as it appeared.

Shari stands, places a hand on Sander’s shoulder and says softly: “Did you have another vision?”

He shakes his head vigorously, attempting to clear his mind and to deny the experience. Periodically, Golds have hazy recollections of red men bearing weapons of war. However, the Golds invariably endeavor to dismiss these images, to persuade themselves that the enemy is not close. It’s an essential coping mechanism in a world of constant danger, constant fear. To reveal a vision of the Scarlets publicly is considered offensive.

Kalina gives Sander a moment to regain his composure, then addresses him: “I will be happy to help with the defenses in any way I can, father.”

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“How can Kalina have two fathers?” the director inquires. “She must be leading a double life.”

“Yes. The situation is heading toward a crisis.”

\* \* \*

Kalina employs rocks and sticks to crush and mix berries and other ingredients in order to produce the color she seeks. It takes half an hour, because the light is so faint in the remote, seldom-traveled tunnel. She tests the strength of the brush she has cobbled, then dips it into the paint. She dabs some on the rock wall and draws a vertical line. The paint is runny, so she mixes more crushed, dried petals into it. Several strokes later, the figure is complete. She repeats the process with the second color. Then she gathers her materials and hides them under flat stones.

She turns and sees Dacso, in full military uniform, staring. She wonders how long he has been watching her. His expression is difficult to interpret, but she knows that he is always seeking opportunities to ingratiate himself with Scarlet leaders. Kalina greets him as casually as she can manage with a “Good day, soldier.”

“You must be the spy,” Dacso states, his eyes not wavering from hers. “How long have you been sending messages to the enemy?”

“No, Dacso, I am no spy. I am trying to learn to make images of things. I’m just embarrassed because the results are so bad.”

Dacso shakes his head. “You never belonged here. If your father wasn’t the general…” He doesn’t need to finish the sentence. He turns and races down the tunnel, slowing only to avoid banging his head on a low ceiling.

Before long, Dacso is back, a respectful distance behind Arek. The general runs his claws over the freshly painted figures. One is red. One is yellow.

“Are these people?” The yellow isn’t the exact shade of the Golds in Arek’s visions, but it’s close enough to conjure disturbing emotions.

“Yes.”

“You will cease these efforts immediately,” he barks. “And you will not leave the caves without my permission.”

He marches away without looking at Kalina.

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“The girl is trying to tell them something with her drawings, I take it,” says Paul.

“Yes. For Kalina, the truth is simply too enormous to put into words.”

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The ashes in the central firepit are still glowing. Kalina adds twigs and chopped wood to build a comforting fire, which casts ghostly shadows across the vacant chamber. The figures she draws are large and bold, and they take form quickly on the cave wall. One red person with three claws on each hand and foot. One yellow person with five fingers and five toes. The figures are standing side by side.

Kalina is dozing by the firepit when day breaks and people begin to appear in the hall. A couple of Golds stare at the drawings. Soon, a substantial crowd forms. They point and whisper, their faces awash with wonder and confusion and fear.

Sander confronts Kalina. “Is this your work, Aliz?”

“Yes,” says Kalina, proudly.

He points at the red figure. “Is this the enemy you depict?”

“There is no enemy.”

It takes Sander a moment to process what his daughter has said. He raises his eyebrows. “So, you are a traitor, living in my home all this time, under the loving care of me and your mother.” The other Golds shuffle their feet nervously but do not speak or move toward her.

“I am no traitor. I am different than all of you, but not as much as you think.” Kalina is not certain how far she can take this. She is not sure what her people will believe.

“Banish her!” demands an old man.

“Kill her!” shouts a young woman.

Sander faces the crowd. “We are a peaceful people. If we kill this girl, we are no better than…” He turns back to Kalina.

“I am sorry that it has come to this,” he says, his shoulders sagging. “We must protect this community at all costs. Go forth from this place,” he commands, “and never return.”

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“The next segment is difficult to watch,” Janielle warns. “Difficult, because it was recorded with very low light, and also because it’s literally quite painful. I have sped up the playback so that the night passes in about two minutes.”

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Sander and Shari are sprawled on beds in their personal cave. They pass into sleep, but soon their bodies quiver, as if they are having seizures. Their foreheads shrink slightly, their arm and leg muscles expand, their oval ears form points, and their hands and feet morph dramatically—each turning into an amorphous hunk of flesh and then re-forming with three rigid claws.

During the process, their skin color transitions from yellow to red. The Golds are now Scarlets.

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Paul begins to pace. “I take it that the next night, the Scarlets transform back into Golds. Arek and Sander are the same person, and Ilana is—what’s her name?”

“Shari. Yes, this happens every night. Neither side knows—they have no way of knowing. When they are Scarlets, their memories are almost entirely of their days as Scarlets, and it’s the same for the Golds, except for the occasional, jarring recollections of their other selves. Some strange roll of the evolutionary dice has them alternating days between single-minded warriors and gentle protectors. Only Kalina knows their true nature, and only because of her unique mutation. She is stuck halfway between the Scarlets and the Golds.”

“Fascinating,” says the director as he approaches the view pane. “Their settlement—the Scarlets and Golds must share the same Great Hall and even their private living spaces. Don’t they see things that belong to their opposites? Surely, the Golds are troubled by the stockpiles of spears and arrows. And, don’t the Scarlets wonder about the defensive barricades?”

“The Golds take some bows and arrows out to hunt animals for food, and the Scarlets will place a barricade or two outside the caves at night. However, each side does notice day-to-day changes in the stockpiles of these armaments, as well as in other features of the common areas and nearby territory. These are interpreted as the work of enemy spies or traitors, fueling a cycle of paranoia and increasing expectations of war.”

Paul is deep in thought. “What about childbirth? If a Scarlet woman gives birth, does she remember that event the next day when she is a Gold?”

“Good question. My drones did not record a birth while I was in orbit around 40 Rilidana A. However, I am aware of no orphanage or practice of abandoning newborns. The adults surely have a strong instinctive attachment to the children, who must be born with skin colors and other traits that are in synch with those of their parents. This species’ minds and bodies experience extreme stress every night, and they awaken groggy and with considerable pain each morning. They must have extremely poor short-term memories.” Janielle breaks out a sly grin. “Who knows, maybe they believe in storks.”

“Storks?”

“Old Earth legend.”

Paul rolls his eyes. “Is this when you intervened?”

“Not yet.”

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Kalina spends a restless night in her secluded cave, a cheerless cavity barely large enough for bedding and a firepit. There is no overhead ventilation, so she builds only modest fires, and only when she is cold or is cooking a small animal that she has caught in one of her snares. She knows not to start a fire during the daytime, when the smoke might alert someone to her location.

She rises about two hours before dawn. Only one moon is up, so she walks deliberately to reach the cave complex safely. Two sleeping guards are nearly transformed from Golds to Scarlets as she passes them, sidesteps barricades and strolls to the Great Hall. She stokes the fire and goes to work.

The Scarlets entering the chamber after dawn examine the wall art silently, a few touching the markings hesitantly and glancing quizzically at Kalina. There are four yellow figures—representing two adults and two children—with five digits on each hand and foot. Four comparable red figures possess three claws on each extremity. In the center of the illustration, a Gold appears to be holding hands with a Scarlet.

It doesn’t take long for Arek to learn of Kalina’s creation. He storms into the Great Hall and stares dumbfounded at the drawings. He sees Kalina standing next to the figures, attempting to appear brave. If the general’s face could turn any redder, it would do so.

“What have you—” he shouts, his voice cracking. He takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He sees his soldiers—and the women and children—staring at him, wondering how he will respond to this bizarre display, this apparent challenge to his authority.

“You are my daughter,” he says before spitting demonstrably into the firepit. “How can you justify this disobedience, this madness?”

“I do not intend to offend anyone,” says Kalina. “I am different than all of you. But this difference allows me to see that which you cannot.” She pauses, her heart pounding, unsure if she can get out the words. “The Scarlets and the Golds are one and the same.”

Gasps and muttered curses echo through the hall.

“Tonight, as you sleep, you will transform into Golds,” she continues. “The next night, you will change back to Scarlets. And so on. I have seen it every night of my life.”

“It’s a lie!” screams an elderly Scarlet.

“This is heresy!” proclaims another, eliciting many expressions of agreement.

Arek lets the crowd resentment build before responding to the girl. “You might believe that you can confuse or divide us with your ridiculous colorings and statements, but we are united and strong. This offense cannot stand.” He juts his jaw defiantly. “Kalina, daughter of Arek and Ilana, I sentence you to death.”

Many Scarlets shift their eyes to Ilana, wondering if she will beg for her daughter’s life. She remains impassive. The hall is eerily silent.

“Dacso and Karill,” says Arek, “take Kalina outside and execute her.”

The soldiers shift uneasily on their feet. They scan the faces of their friends and neighbors, seeking clues as to how they should respond. They were never close with Kalina. However, they have never killed anyone.

Kalina also scrutinizes her people, but few of them meet her gaze. She turns and walks slowly out of the hall, down a winding tunnel and into the daylight. She resists looking behind her to determine if she is being pursued.

*If they intend to strike me down, I cannot stop them. But I will not give them the satisfaction of witnessing my fear.*

Rain begins to fall, and she realizes that footprints would be easy to follow, so she doubles back repeatedly upon the paths and through woods and open countryside. As she walks, she recalls her exchanges with the Scarlets and the Golds, wondering if she did the right thing. Her mind and heart ache in equal measure by late morning when she slips behind the boulder that hides the entrance to the cave that must become her only home.

Within minutes, she passes into deep sleep.

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“I understand now,” says Paul. “You got involved so that you could save her life.”

“That was not my motive,” responds Janielle. “In fact, my actions might have endangered her further.”

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Kalina wakes to a cold and insistent rain.

*Probably a good thing*. *It will wash away my tracks.*

By late afternoon, hunger forces her to leave the cave. She is setting up snares at the bottom of the hill when a shining, three-dimensional image coalesces before her. In its center is a figure almost her size, like a person, but it is neither Gold not Scarlet. All but the tan-colored face and long hair is obscured by wondrous blue-and-white clothing. The holographic figure reaches out two arms slowly. The voice is translated into Kalina’s language.

“Be not afraid. My name is Janielle. You are seeing an illustration of me. I am located high up in your sky—too far away for you to see me in the flesh.”

Some part of Kalina tells her that she should be frightened, that she should run away. But she is enthralled by the apparition.

“I have been watching you,” says Janielle. “I understand the plight that you find yourself in. I admire the way that you tried to tell your people—both the Golds and the Scarlets—their true nature.”

Finally, Kalina finds words. “Are you a god?”

Janielle laughs. “No. Far from it. I am a person from another world. You have seen the stars twinkling in the sky at night. My people have found ways to live among those stars, very far away. But I am not so far from you, and I want to help.”

Kalina looks askance at the hologram. “How can you help when my people fear me and wish that I were dead?”

Janielle points toward a spot on the ground between them. “You see that rock with sharp, straight edges? It is not a rock at all, but a machine.”

“Machine?” The word has no equivalent yet in Kalina’s language.

“It is a tool,” says Janielle. “It displays pictures, like your drawings. But these are better pictures, lifelike and moving ones. They show the Golds changing into Scarlets and the Scarlets changing into Golds.”

Janielle instructs Kalina how to use the device to play back the images. “You may show these pictures to your people, if you wish to take the personal risks in doing so. Or, you may ignore this tool and remain here in relative safety. The choice is yours.” Janielle smiles, raises five fingers and concludes: “It is time for me to depart. I wish you good fortune.”

“Will I see you again?”

“No.”

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The director paces briskly, hands behind his back. “Did Kalina show this video to any of her people?”

“I do not know. I left the solar system after that encounter.”

“Do you really think that the Scarlets or Golds would be swayed by the video? They have no reason to accept that the images reflect actual events. If they are anything like humans, they will believe what they want to believe.” Paul stops pacing and pivots to face Janielle. “Besides, it probably helps these people to think that they have an enemy—someone to blame for whatever goes wrong.”

“I expect that things will change when Kalina’s species develops writing.”

“I’m not so sure. But that is not our problem. You are. You not only revealed yourself, you left an item of advanced technology with a pre-industrial species. These actions represent serious lapses in judgment.”

Janielle looks down at her lap. “I am not the first scout to interact with a budding civilization being investigated.”

“Yes, but most of those contacts were unintentional, and steps were taken to mitigate them.”

“Director, the species on 40 Rilidana A has the highest level of unnecessary angst and focus on war of any that I have encountered. It’s painful to see the manner in which they fear their own selves. In a way, they embody the conflict that exists in every sentient species our Service has encountered—as well as our own. There is a constant tension between their natures—the intense and warlike versus the passive and philosophical.”

Janielle realizes that this has become personal. “When I joined the Service, I wanted to be the scout who found the better species, the people who never had—or who managed to eliminate—that compulsion to compete, to fight, to take what others have by force even when they have no rational reason to do so. Perhaps such a civilization would not last; survival of the fittest and all that. Yet it seems that people who are not at war with themselves would be less inclined to go to war with others and could use their energies for the common good. Somewhere out there, there must be a world where the inhabitants can harmonize the strength and determination of the Scarlets with the serenity and grace of the Golds.”

“If war for survival is the nature of intelligent species, neither you nor I nor the entire Service can change it.”

Janielle sees no point in arguing. “What should we do about 40 Rilidana A?”

Paul moves behind his desk, places his palms on its surface, leans forward and locks eyes with Janielle. “You will return to this planet. You will extract the video device without being observed. You will study this species from orbit, without any form of contact, for a full year—longer, if necessary. You will report monthly, directly to me, on any and all signs of impact from the technology. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

By the time Janielle is ten paces from the director’s workspace, her smile can be seen halfway to 40 Rilidana A.

END