

Generation Gap

by John G. Hemry

Different phases of life require different approaches. The hard part is knowing when -- and how -- to change.

"Is it real?" From the observation deck of the Generation Ship *_Terra_*, a compartment of cold, gray metal relieved only by wide display screens, the blue/white/brown world below seemed like one more video simulation played out within the confines of the ship's computer systems.

"It's real." Greg Tyre nodded toward the image. "I went to one of the airlocks, suited up, and went Outside for a look. It's there."

Frowns creased brows all around him as the crowd reacted. "Was your walk authorized?"

"Why does that...?" Greg bit off his reply as he saw the frowns deepening. "Yes. I'm a ship maintenance and repair tech. I can authorize a walk whenever needed to examine the hull. I determined it was needed."

Most of the frowns disappeared at the reassurance and attention returned to the globe on the displays. Greg turned at a touch on his sleeve and saw Jane Fernandez had come up next to him. She leaned close to whisper. "Oh, dear. You might have broken a Rule, Mr. Tyre."

"Yeah," he murmured back. "Why get manic over that when we're looking at the planet our great-grandparents set out to reach?"

His answer came not from Jane but from a large man who shook his head, eyes narrow with disapproval. "Those Rules kept us alive and got us here, young man. Continue conforming to them."

Greg smiled back at the man. "Yissur." The man glowered at the youthful slurring of the respectful reply, made a clear show of reading Greg's nametag, then turned his back.

Greg felt a tug on his sleeve, following as Jane led the way out of the crowded compartment. As they closed the hatch behind them, Jane pointed back inside, made a gagging motion, then laughed. "I am going to be soooo glad to get off this thing. What do you suppose it'll be like?"

"A planet? Like the simulations, I guess."

"Oh, get real. It's got to be different. Come on, let's go to Port One and watch the screen there."

Port One, the first recreation lounge on the left side of the ship, displayed the same image on its display screen. A crowd of young men and women were scattered at the tables, eyeing the vision with rapt attention. "Hey, Jane. Greg," one hailed them. "It looks like Earth, doesn't it?"

Jane shook her head. "Different land masses."

"I don't mean in *_details_*."

"Then don't ask a planetary geologist for an opinion." Jane laughed again as she took a seat. "I still can't believe it. A real planet where I can actually practice geology."

Greg smiled and nodded. "Yeah. It's weird. We've been scheduled to arrive here about this time ever since our great-grandparents set off. But it never seemed real, not until we actually got here."

"It still doesn't -- " Jane's reply was cut off by the image of the planet vanishing, replaced by the Seal of the Community of _Terra_ Township and a loud fanfare of trumpets. "Oh, hell. What's Mayor Magetry got to say?"

The community seal slowly faded in time to the trumpets, replaced by the lined face of Mayor Magetry. Magetry looked slowly back and forth, as if scanning his audience, which he could indeed be doing if he chose to use the surveillance cameras in every compartment. "This is a good day." A low groan emitted from the young adult audience in Port One. Magetry had begun every speech of his career as mayor with that phrase, and since he'd been continuously reelected since his father stepped down, it had been a long career. "We have fulfilled the dreams of our ancestors by reaching this planet."

Jane cocked an eyebrow at Greg. "I thought our ancestors' dream was to establish a colony here."

"Me, too."

Magetry's face held a warning frown, now. "I must caution against irrational exuberance, against any weakening of the bonds and Rules and Traditions which have kept us happy and healthy over this long journey. The planet must be examined. Evaluated. A landing party will be sent out after due time. Until then, continue in your duties, praise our ancestors, and trust in the procedures which have brought us this far, and will take us further. If need be." Magetry's face spasmed in a brief smile, then faded out to another trumpeted chorus.

"Inspiring," Greg noted. "Why is that robotic assist the mayor, anyway?"

"Because he's always been mayor," Jane pointed out. "Just like his daddy."

"Yeah. Mayor-for-Life Magetry. Heaven forbid the voters should elect anyone else. They've always voted for a Magetry. Why change?"

Jane grinned and called out the question to the crowd. "Why change?"

The other young adults in the room smiled with the same mixture of mockery and bitterness as the crowd yelled back: "It's always been that way!"

Someone pounded on the controls to the display until the image of the new world reappeared. While a few, brief cheers rang out, Carl Chang came in, spotted Greg and Jane, and headed for their table. "Private party?"

"Nope. Have a seat. How's life in social paralysis?"

Carl managed to look pained. "Social programs, if you please."

"Same difference."

"Not to me." Carl looked around conspiratorially. "I caused a real ruckus in there, you know. I moved somebody's pencil box to the other side of their desk."

"Don't let Magetry find out," Jane advised. "Did you hear his little speech about irrational exuberance?"

"I couldn't miss it. What'd you expect Magetry to say?"

"I dunno. Some hint he's happy about reaching the planet we've been heading for all our lives, maybe?"

Carl shrugged. "Why should he be happy?"

Greg gave him a puzzled look. "I'd think that was obvious."

"That's 'cause you're young. At least in ship terms. You're, what, close to thirty years old? Change isn't totally scary to you. I'll bet it'll be a lot scarier when you actually encounter change."

"What's so bad about change? I'm sick of Rules, sick of Traditions, sick of having people watching me every second to make sure I'm not deviating from the social norm."

Jane nodded. "Ditto."

Carl spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Look, you guys are always joking about my job in social programs. But all I'm doing is helping to carry out the original vision for this ship. As are the people who are watching you. You know what the _Terra_ is, right? I mean, as a social unit?"

"Paralyzed." Greg pointed at the display. "Did you view the last update we got from Earth? I couldn't even understand some of the stuff they were doing and talking about, until I saw some five minute segment of people who acted and talked like us. And you know what? That segment was part of a popular _historical_ drama that's all the rage back on Earth these days."

Carl nodded, obviously unsurprised. "Sure. Like you say, we're paralyzed. By design. What do you get when put a few thousand humans into a social unit and isolate them? You get a small town. The most socially conservative way of living known to mankind. Small towns don't change, because the social pressure is all aimed at conformity. That's us. Change comes to small towns as a result of outside influences. New people moving in, new ideas coming in. How much of that do we have?"

"None."

"Right. We live like our great-grands did, because there's nothing forcing us to change." Carl leaned forward, speaking softly. "Even ideas. The updates from Earth get censored, you know."

"Everybody's heard that."

"Because it's true. Don't let any disturbing stuff enter the community. And guess what? Most of our little community is as happy as can be with that." Carl chuckled. "There's also the social system whereby people marry and have kids late. That's why people our age are regarded as 'young.' It all builds stability. People used to worry about breakdown in social order on generation ships like this one. But, really, they tend to the exact opposite. Social stability."

"And," Jane added, "if they start to veer from that, social programs gets them back on track."

"Um, yeah."

"Do you ever feel guilty?"

"A little. People can be happy without being happy in a socially conforming way. But not on a ship where carelessness or accident or riot could literally kill us all. Which is why we have Rules instead of just rules." Carl smiled briefly at the displayed image of the new world. "But, down there, we can relax, I guess. Maybe I won't feel any duty to keep people in line."

"What'll you do, instead?"

"Try to help people like Magetry cope, maybe."

"I'm sure he's planning on running that planet just like he's run the _Terra_ all our lives." Greg smiled at the thought. "But down there we'll be able to leave if we want. Form our own town if we want."

Carl seemed disconcerted by the thought. "I ... suppose. But it'll be just a few thousand humans against a whole world, you know. We'll need to stick together. Do what's best for everyone."

Jane eyed Carl appraisingly. "You sound like an elder. A conforming elder. As Greg and I were just saying, our ancestors' objective was to establish a human colony in another star system. It wasn't to keep things from ever changing in our society."

"I explained -- _" _"

"Something we already knew. We had to do it to stay alive and keep the ship from

breaking apart. Fine. We made it."

Carl smiled once again. "Hey, no offense. I understand. Will you be going down with the survey missions?"

"I hope so." Jane's attention swung back to the image of the world below. "I can't wait."

* * *

"Why are you going instead of me?"

Greg smiled in what he hoped was a placating manner. "All I know is the shuttle pilot wants a maintenance tech along, and I got picked. Really, Jane. I had nothing to do with it."

"It's not fair!" She glowered at him, then spun on her heel to stomp away. "At least bring me back a rock!" Jane yelled over her shoulder.

"Sure. No problem," Greg assured her back just before she left the room. He took a deep breath, checked his tool kit, then headed for the shuttle docking bay.

"Tyre? I'm Trey. Shuttle pilot." A woman perhaps two decades older than Greg stuck out a hand and grinned. "I've gotten some of your stuff because of typos."

"Is that why you picked me?"

"Partly. I was familiar with the fact you existed. But I also wanted someone young enough to still be able to think independently."

"Excuse me?"

The pilot raised her eyebrows. "You don't understand?"

"Well, yeah. I just didn't expect that from, uh..."

"An old broad? I'm not that old, kid. And I'm a pilot, which means I value having someone with a good brain backing me up." She shook her head, gazing at the airlock leading to the shuttle bay. "You can train somebody to the point they stop thinking. Yeah, you do understand, don't you? All we've ever dealt with on the Terra are the same things, over and over again. I expect to deal with something new on that planet."

Greg smiled. "I sure hope so, ma'am."

"Give me a break. I'm not that old. It's Gayle." She checked her watch. "Come on. The schedule of events calls for our passengers to arrive in exactly twenty minutes, so I'm sure that's exactly when they'll all show up. Let's get some checks done."

The airlock felt no different from any of the airlocks Greg had used to access the outside of the Terra's hull, but instead of open space it led into the bay of the shuttle. A dozen seats, six to a side, filled the upper part of the bay, while a hatch labeled "cargo" led to a lower area. Gayle Trey led the way forward through another hatch into the small cockpit, then indicated the seat next to her. "That's the flight mechanic's position. Strap in tight when the time comes."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry."

"You'll get over it. So will I." She rubbed her cheeks with both palms, eyeing the navigational display. "We've been surveying the planet from orbit since we arrived, you know. We'll be landing on a plain not far from a major river. It's in what should be the planet's temperate zone, and looks well suited for a colony." Gayle grinned indulgently at Greg, who suddenly realized he had a huge smile on his face. "Really looking forward to it, huh?"

"You bet."

A chime announced the arrival of the passengers. "Wait here."

Greg pretended to study the instruments while Gayle led the survey team into the shuttle bay, then frowned as he heard a sharp voice. "Rules require the senior qualified

mechanic in cases such as this."

"No, they don't," Gayle replied in a polite but unyielding tone. "The Rules state the senior qualified individual should be used if all other factors are equal. As pilot for this mission, I decide whether all other factors are indeed equal. It is my judgment that Mechanic Tyre is best qualified, and the Rules give my judgment priority."

Mumbles, grumbles and the rattle of seat harnesses being fastened were the only other sounds until Gayle returned and sealed the hatch. "You ready?" she asked Greg.

Greg belatedly realized he hadn't strapped himself in and fumbled with the straps, trying to sort out the tangle. "Blast it."

"It's not that complicated." Greg flushed as he saw Gayle watching him with an amused expression. "A bit nervous?"

"Hell, yes."

"Me, too. I've never actually flown this thing in atmosphere or a planetary gravity field. Just simulations. It ought to be interesting to see how accurate the simulations are, huh?"

Greg's eyes widened. "Uh, yeah."

She checked some readings on the panel before her, then smiled thinly. "Every month I've come in here and run system checks. Every month. Just like my dad did. Just like his mother did. Now I finally get to use it. I get to do something with it."

"It sounds like you're looking forward to it."

"Damn straight. Let's go."

Greg's stomach protested the shuttle's movement. A lifetime on the massive Terra hadn't prepared him for the lurches and swings of a much smaller craft. He gulped, praying he wouldn't lose his last meal, and glanced over at the pilot. Gayle sat, her eyes locked on the display, her hands gripping the controls ever so lightly.

The shuttle skipped across the upper atmosphere, shedding velocity and losing altitude, the outside image on the display growing wavery as turbulence and heat distorted the view. Gayle pushed the shuttle lower, easing up slightly as its structure vibrated under the strain. The sky grew bluer, the land more defined. Something white shot by in a flash, startling Greg, followed by another. "Clouds," Gayle breathed, like someone who'd just seen a miraculous vision.

Greg fought down a wave of panic as the planet's surface jumped toward them. Gayle touched the controls gently, correcting the shuttle's approach to the open field, as grass and other vegetation shot by close underneath. The forward braking thrusters fired, reducing the landing velocity, then the shuttle transitioned to hover before gently coming to rest.

Greg waited impatiently while the survey team painstakingly tested the planet's atmosphere. The atmosphere had already been sampled a dozen times by automated probes, but none of the team seemed willing to trust that data. Finally, the leader signaled approval and the shuttle's exterior hatch was cracked.

"What do you think?" Gayle had followed Greg out of the shuttle and stood beside him now, looking around.

"It's ... overwhelming." New sights, new sounds, views running off to an horizon which seemed impossibly distant. "I've been in Earth-based sims, but this is ... is ... so much more."

"Yeah." She bent to feel the grasslike stalks beneath their feet, then jumped backwards as something small and grayish scuttled away from her hand. "A bug! Look! A bug!"

"Really?" It looked like the pictures he'd seen of bugs, anyway, though Greg had an

impression of ten legs instead of six before the creature vanished into the surrounding field. "Does it bite?"

"It didn't bite me."

A shout echoed from where the survey team had huddled together. "Look out!" The team scattered in all directions, one member waving frantically toward Gayle and Greg. "Life-forms! Insectile life-forms! Look out! They're in the grass!"

"I guess they found a bug, too," Greg remarked. He eyed the ground uneasily, shifting his feet. "How many are there? Am I standing on one?"

Gayle took a step back onto the shuttle's ladder. "Maybe. Hey!" She swung one hand in a frantic motion as a small, gray object fluttered erratically near her head. "Another bug. A flying one. Bug repellent. We need bug repellent."

"That's right. We have the formula for that, don't we? If it works on bugs here." Greg brushed his hair back in annoyance as a breeze flipped it over his eyes. "Somebody's got the vent fans set too high."

"Vent fans?"

"Yeah, the -- Oh. That's, uh, wind, right?"

"Right. It sets its own speed." Gayle squinted around. "Annoying, isn't it? I want to turn it down, too. Setting up house on a plain might not be a good idea if wind's a problem. What's that shining over there?"

Greg followed her gaze. "Water, I think. Isn't that where that river is?"

"Uh-huh. Good call."

Several survey team members came to cluster near the shuttle, one nervously staring toward the river as well. "That's dangerous, you know."

"Dangerous?" Greg questioned.

"Running water. Rapids. Undertows. Aquatic predators. Mud flats. Very dangerous."

"It looks sort of pretty from here."

"So does a neutron star from a distance. That doesn't mean you want to get near it."

"Floods," another stated.

"Right. Rivers can flood. Maybe we want to be someplace higher. The mountains? Aren't there fewer insects in the mountains?"

The first surveyor checked his data unit. "Yes. At least, that was the case on Earth. But it's colder in the mountains. And, uh, landslides."

"Landslides?"

"Falling rocks and soil. And snow slides. Same thing, in winter."

The surveyors headed slowly away from the shuttle again, scanning the grass as they carefully placed each foot.

Greg watched them, then jerked back as another bug zipped past his face. "Gayle? Do we have any of that bug repellent on the shuttle?"

"I sure hope so. Let's find out."

"I wonder why we didn't think to put it on before we left the shuttle?"

"Probably for the same reason we didn't think to wear hats." Gayle squinted into the sun. "That's a little too bright to be comfortable, too. Maybe we could get, uh..."

Another surveyor, gingerly walking past, looked over at her. "Sunburn. Yes. Painful."

"How do you know if you're getting sunburn?"

"Check your first aid manual for depictions of radiation burns. A sunburn is simply a relatively mild form of radiation burn. And that means it can lead to skin cancer. You should minimize exposure."

"Radiation burns? Just from walking around?" Greg shaded his eyes. "Is there

anything down here that isn't dangerous or annoying?"

The surveyor paused, as if taking the question absolutely seriously. "We're still checking the planet out."

Some hours later, the surveying team gathered back at the shuttle. Some of them, those with the fairest skins, showed the blush of what the alarmed medical team member announced to be the first traces of sunburn. An additional hour was spent exhaustively searching for bugs which might be hiding in anyone's clothing or equipment. The flight back proved uneventful, more tiring than exciting after the labors of the past hours. Yet, as the survey team filed off the shuttle and back into the hull of the _Terra_, their spirits obviously rose. "We're back!" the team leader announced happily. "Everyone, get your reports filed as soon as possible."

Greg watched them leave. "Gayle?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Back on the planet, those team members looked unhappy and uncomfortable the entire time. Now, they couldn't be happier."

"What'd you expect? They're home."

Greg looked around at the metal making up the surfaces all around. "Yeah, but ... not anymore. We have to think of that planet as home."

"That's not going to be easy, Greg. Even for younger types."

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"How long are they going to take to evaluate this planet?" Jane demanded. "It's been three weeks since you went down and nothing's happened. They haven't even staged one of their stupid contests, like 'let's name the planet.'"

Greg shook his head. "I don't know that any more than you do."

"At least I have my rock. Thanks for bringing that back, anyway." She slapped the table top. "They haven't even sent down any more survey teams! They're just analyzing and reanalyzing the stuff gathered by the first team."

"The automated probes on the surface are still sending back data -- _"

"If we wanted to examine this world by automated probes then humans didn't need to come out here in the first place!" Jane subsided, then glanced around Port One. "Where's your buddy Carl?"

"I thought he was your buddy, too."

"Well ... where's he been?"

"I heard from him real briefly. Apparently you're not the only one chafing at the bit to get on the planet. Social programs is working overtime to keep everyone calm, productive and happy."

"Ugh. I'm sorry, Greg, I used to like Carl a lot, too, but the more I think about his job..."

"I know. But Carl's doing it for good reasons. He doesn't buy into it as an end-all like the elders in social programs."

"He didn't when he started out. That was years ago."

Greg frowned down at the table. "I don't think he's changed that much."

"You -- Who's that?"

Greg followed Jane's gaze to where a woman had entered the room, her maturity making her stand out next to the twenty-somethings who usually frequented the lounge. "Gayle Tyre. The shuttle pilot who took us down to the planet. She's good people, Jane."

"I remember you told me that. What's she doing here? Did she take a liking to you or something?"

"She's a little bit older than me, Jane."

"Some women like that. So do some men."

"Not this one. Besides, I prefer planetary geologists to pilots. I got you a rock, didn't I?"

"Be still, my heart."

The pilot scanned the tables until her eyes settled on Greg. Gayle beckoned Greg silently, eyed Jane for a moment appraisingly, then gestured her along as well. Greg and Jane exchanged glances, then rose to follow the pilot out of the lounge. They walked swiftly and silently through a procession of hatches and passageways until they reached a small compartment whose walls were lined with shelves holding pieces of equipment. When Gayle had sealed the hatch behind them, she waved around. "Junkyard. Stuff that can't be fixed and has been stripped of everything worth cannibalizing."

Greg stared around in amazement. "It can't be fixed?"

"This ship's a closed system. Eventually, even our stockpiles run low, even our repair and fabrication facilities run out of certain materials. And, no, the general populace isn't told. It might cause 'alarm.'"

"I don't understand. If it's a closed system, how can we run out? We recycle everything."

"Because it's a real-world closed system, kid, not a theoretically perfect closed system. Even if our recycling processes were 99.9 percent effective, we'd still lose something in every cycle. And part of our closed system deals with living creatures like you, me, and the veggie decks, none of which are incredibly efficient consumers of material. Some of the stuff in every cycle is just too hard to recover." She scuffed at the deck. "The vent filters can't pull in everything, either. Someday they may get desperate enough to run vacs over every square centimeter of surface inside the Terra in hopes of recovering enough lost dust containing critical elements. But even vacs let dust get away."

"Why'd you bring us here? Just to tell us that?"

"Because the surveillance gear in this room is also busted. It's been cannibalized to keep the cameras and mikes going in other rooms, where seditious youngsters like yourselves gather." The pilot slumped against the nearest wall. "The town council's made a decision."

"About what?"

"The future. Theirs and ours. The planet's been declared unsuitable for habitation."

"What?" Jane seemed to be in shock. "Why?"

"All kinds of reasons. Weather. Mercy, it can rain down there. Or get cold. Or hot. The wind blows. Right, Greg? Bugs. Animals. Plants growing all over the place. Tectonic activity. You might get earthquakes."

"That's just like Earth!"

"It's not being judged by people who've ever lived on Earth, young lady. It's being judged by people who've spent their entire lives, like their parents before them, inside a world where the temperature is always maintained at a comfortable level, there's no bugs in the beds, the plants are all kept in pots and the only storms are emotional."

"But ... but..." Jane looked at Greg helplessly. "Any planet will be like that. Any livable planet. They can't evaluate a living world by the criteria of a climate-controlled ship!"

Gayle grimaced. "You saw them, Greg. On the surface. How'd most of the landing party react?"

"As if they'd been dropped into the first-stage recycling tanks. I sort of understood that. I mean, it was all so uncontrolled. So wild. But they were looking for a reason to reject the world, anyway, weren't they?"

"Yeah. You're pretty smart for a kid." Gayle grinned at the mocking reference to Greg's relative youth. "Those reasons are just an excuse. They don't want to change. Anything."

Jane stared at the pilot. "Like Carl told us. Stability is the primary virtue, the primary imperative, in the society of the _Terra_. Actually setting up a colony on that world would change everything, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, yeah. People who didn't like Mayor-for-Life Magetry could actually go somewhere else and set up their own town. The Rules wouldn't have to be Rules anymore." Gayle raised her hands as if grasping at invisible controls. "I could fly. Across a world. See new things. Let my kids fly, too, instead of endlessly training so their descendants could someday fly."

Greg remembered the air rushing past the shuttle's hull, the wild ride to the surface. "I can understand that."

"But it's more than that. Moving down onto that world means leaving this controlled little man-made world of ours. We'd have to deal with lots of stuff that we can't control. Like weather, just to give one example. That's a big change for us, too."

"Our ancestors did that. So can we. Why are you telling us this?"

"Because I don't want to put up with it and I don't know what to do! I've been living on this ship too long. My brain's almost hardwired. You guys can still think for yourselves, right?"

"How long have we got to think of something?"

"Twenty hours. That's how long it's supposed to take to get the course calculated and the main drives ready to propel the ship toward the secondary objective. Magetry and the others know some people will be unhappy with leaving here. They plan on announcing the decision just before they light off the drives so there's no time for anyone to do anything."

"The secondary objective." An alternate world in an alternate solar system. "It'll take the ship more generations to get there. We'd never see a planet again, would we?"

"No."

"And when the ship finally reaches that secondary world, whoever's in charge then, Magetry the Sixth or Seventh or Tenth or whatever, will decide that's unsuitable, too, won't they? And try to head for some tertiary world."

"I'd bet on that, yeah."

"Just try to keep things the same. Until the ship breaks too bad to fix and our descendents die in the middle of nowhere." Greg found himself laughing, then noticed the expressions on the faces of the others. "It's so damned ironic. Our ancestors set this up. They wanted an extremely stable social environment. Nobody rocking the boat, nobody trying to change things, and all so their descendents could someday reach another world and establish a colony. But they forgot that their stable social system might backfire at the critical point. Why should a system built on stability want to change things? Especially when the ship they built is so predictable and comfortable compared to the conditions we'll encounter on the planet? They worked so hard to make sure it'd succeed that they set this colonization attempt up to fail."

"We follow the Rules," Gayle pointed out. "Our ancestors could have set a Rule that we had to land on the planet. No options."

"But what if the planet really had been some hell-hole? Then Magetry and all his supporters might be shoving us into the landers regardless of what the surveys found." Greg looked toward Jane. "We've got to do something."

"Something? What kind of something?" Jane waved around to indicate the rest of the

ship. "We can't take over. The security force won't back us, and a majority of the people on board will either support Magetry or refuse to oppose him. Even a lot of the younger adults. Most people don't want to rock the boat. We don't have to take a poll. You _know_ that's true."

"Yeah. I do. I'd guess anywhere from one quarter to one third of the people on the _Terra_ would feel like we do and be willing to do something to actually oppose leaving." Greg looked away, his gaze focusing on a forlorn piece of equipment, broken beyond repair, perhaps doomed to sit in this room as long as the _Terra_ existed. Just like the human inhabitants of the ship. Something he'd said earlier tugged at his mind. The landers. "Then we have to leave."

"Leave? Just accept Magetry's decision and sit while the _Terra_ heads for another star system?"

"No. I mean we have to leave. Leave the ship."

"What?" Jane took a moment to let the thought sink in. "How?"

"The landers. We all got taught about them in school. The flight and landing sequences are automated. Each one's got a bunch of supplies and equipment on board. And they'll each carry a hundred people down, right? We just take a few."

"A few? How many do you think will go with us?"

"I don't know. And we have less than twenty hours to somehow collect a group of people who feel like we do without letting anybody know we're breaking the Rules."

Gayle shook her head. "That's not your only challenge. You can't just waltz onto the colony landers. There's interlocks and alarms and system passwords. Those need to be bypassed or isolated. The landers can be warmed up in about an hour's time if they're like the shuttles, but you need to keep the ship's control room from knowing you're doing that."

"What about the people we're leaving?" Jane asked. "If we take the landers, what happens to them?"

Gayle shrugged. "They'll be fine. There's enough landers to take down almost the entire population, and each of them has an assortment of redundant colonizing gear on board. They're one-way transport, remember? Only the shuttles were designed for multiple ground-to-space flights."

"Are we also taking one of the shuttles?"

"Damn right we are. That's mine."

Jane checked her watch. "Twenty hours. There's no way you and I and the few other people we can trust can sound out literally hundreds of other people to see who wants to go."

"We don't have to ask everybody -- _"_"

"We have to ask a lot of them! I don't want to leave someone who really wants to go. And we'll need every person we can get. We'll need them for their skills, and their ability to do manual labor, and just for simple genetic diversity. Right?"

Greg bit his lip. "There's only one way to do this. We handle it like a propagating message. I sound out two people, who each sound out two people, and so on."

Gayle frowned. "That's very risky. If the wrong person hears, we can be stopped."

"What else can we do? Besides, one virtue of life on the _Terra_ is we _know_ our neighbors. Look, we'll use a password. Nobody gets the password until whoever sounds them out is sure they're with us. Up to that point, the discussion can just be written off as discontent and Magetry will think that'll be undercut when the _Terra_ leaves, right? But anyone we're sure of will get the password and be told that when they get it they need to

head for the landers."

"So what's the password?"

Greg hesitated, thinking of how they'd be violating the Rules which had governed their entire lives, and leaving the controlled comfort of the Terra for a future of uncertainty and toil on the planet beneath them. "'Forbidden fruit.' That'll be the password that we're leaving."

* * *

The elder standing watch at the hull systems panel glanced down at Greg. "You found that problem, yet?"

"Almost."

"I hadn't noticed anything wrong."

"It showed up during a remote diagnostic." Greg tried to keep his voice calm, almost bored. "Maybe it was just an intermittent thing, or a false reading, but the Rules say you have to follow up. Even if it is the middle of the night and I should be asleep with most everybody else."

"That's right. It's good to see you kids taking the Rules seriously."

Greg offered the watch stander a hopefully sincere-looking smile, then continued the careful job of bypassing the alert systems which would otherwise provide warning the landers were being accessed and powered up. A final connection, a final check, and he nodded with real satisfaction. "That's got it."

The elder was already losing interest. "Everything's okay, now?"

"Just how it needs to be." Greg left the area, trying to suppress a wild grin, then checked the time. Three hours. He'd already bypassed the secondary watch panel, as well as the panel in the main control room where an unacknowledged alert would eventually present itself. He headed for the lander access area.

"Jane? How's it going?"

His friend twitched wildly at the question, then glared at him. "Greg Tyre, do me the favor of not sneaking up on me!"

"Sorry. I've finished the alert bypasses."

"Great." She raised her data unit and punched in a command. "I've sent out the password. People should start showing up real soon. Gayle's already got people here ready to start warming the landers. Nobody asked what you were doing?"

"A couple of people. I gave them a remote problem detection story and they didn't question it."

Gayle Trey and a couple of others came to join them. "Why should they? Nobody makes waves on the Terra. Nobody breaks the Rules. Not if they know what's good for them and don't want to be shunned by their neighbors."

A short woman standing beside the pilot and dressed in the deep blue of the security forces smiled tightly. "And they'd usually get caught, because their neighbors would tell. Don't worry. I'm an old friend of Gayle's, and I'm on your side. I've seen how the Terra's society works from the enforcement side. I don't like it. I want my kids to have freedom."

Jane nodded. "Did you rig the surveillance systems for this area?"

"Yes. They're showing an endless loop of the last hour's recorded activity instead of actually monitoring the area. And since that hour included absolutely no activity, everything will look fine to my soon-to-be former co-workers."

Greg exhaled heavily, staring at the security woman. "I never thought of that. I guess we're lucky you're coming along."

Another smile. "I suppose so. You'll need cops on the surface, too, I expect."

A large man pushed his way forward. "Hopefully not." He glared around. "In case anybody cares, I've severed the control lines running from all remote locations to this area. Even if they find out what we're doing, they won't be able to stop us at the last minute by powering down the landers or something." Another glare. "I'm tired of people telling me what to do." The man turned and made his way toward a lander entry bay.

Greg glanced at Jane and spoke softly so his voice wouldn't carry. "Did you see the look in that guy's eyes when he said he was tired of people telling him what to do?"

"Yeah. I guess freedom from conformity may have its downside in terms of some people."

People began arriving in the lander area, in small groups for the most part, including families urged on by one or both parents. All moved furtively, constantly glancing around. Gayle greeted a few, exchanging thumbs-up gestures. "More pilots. Good people to have," she advised Greg.

"I bet. I noticed a family resemblance."

"I told you my kids would get to fly."

"Have you noticed the ages of these people?"

"You mean the mix of elders and youth? Sure. There's more younger ones, but not everybody gets beaten into conformity by age." She eyed the stream of arrivals, biting her lower lip. "There's a lot. Has anybody been keeping count?"

Jane rubbed her forehead and consulted her data unit. "I've counted five landers filled and ready to go."

"Huh. And there's at least a couple of hundred more lining up. Looks like we might get up to a quarter of _Terra_'s people. Cool."

Greg shook his head, staring at the people jostling into the access area. "Won't security see these people? I mean, they've got to be noticing all the traffic through the corridors."

"Depends if they're awake and watching or not. My friend the cop says they usually watch movies on this shift because nothing ever happens. And why should they expect anything different to happen tonight?"

"What if somebody told the wrong person?"

"If that'd happened, security'd already be here, right?"

"Or they'd be massing just out of sight."

The pilot shrugged. "If they charge, we slam the hatches and bolt. Too bad for those still outside, but I've no intention of letting the social programs people work me over."

"I can't blame you." Greg grimaced. "Social programs. There's somebody I forgot to tell."

Gayle checked her watch. "You've got maybe forty-five minutes before we're scheduled to go. But we might have to go earlier."

"I know. But I can't leave a friend."

* * *

Greg ran, along corridors which grew steadily more familiar, until he reached Carl's room. He hung on the buzzer until Carl, blinking sleep from his eyes, opened the door. "Carl. The town council decided to leave this planet and head for the secondary objective. We're bolting the _Terra_. Taking some landers. Come on."

Carl stared back at him. "You're not serious. Are you?"

"Yes! Come on. We're leaving soon."

"Wait a minute. Who's 'we'? How many people are you talking about?"

"I don't know exactly. Hundreds. Come on. This is our only chance for freedom, for

change."

"Greg, if the council made the decision to leave, then they represent the entire populace. We have to respect that. We have to work together. No individual can put their wishes ahead of the group's, ahead of everyone else on the _Terra_."

Greg reached for Carl's arm. "Drop the social program cant, for heaven's sake. Let's go."

Carl's own hand came up and grabbed onto Greg's. "No. Let's go inside. Security has to know. It's for the best of everyone. Really."

"Let go of me!" Greg yanked back against Carl's grip, realizing as he did so that getting free would require a big fight, one certain to attract the attention of the security cameras monitoring this area. "Carl -- _" _

"Greg, you can't do this."

A lifetime of resentment suddenly surged to the surface. "Don't tell me I can't make my own decisions, you son of a bitch!"

"I'm not -- _" _ Carl's eyes widened in surprise. Greg felt a smooth tube run next to his body, then Carl's body spasmed. Greg broke free, his own arm and hand tingling from the shock transmitted through Carl's grip, and turned to see Jane standing behind him with a security stun baton in one hand.

She stepped forward and jabbed the tip into Carl again, ensuring he was unconscious, then pushed his body inside and slid the door closed. "I told you so. Good thing Gayle told me you'd gone to get a friend, and I decided to come here in case this happened."

"Where'd you get that thing?"

"Gayle's security friend lent it to me. Come on. We've only got a few minutes left, even assuming this incident didn't attract anyone's attention."

They ran. An occasional person saw them, watching with curiosity as Greg and Jane hurtled by. As the entrance to the lander area came into view, they saw there were still a couple of dozen people funneling in. A moment later, pulsing red lights flared to life and speakers shouted out words which echoed through the quiet corridors. "Security alert. Security alert. Seal all hatches. All inhabitants of _Terra_ remain in your current location. Warning. All landers are nonfunctional. I repeat, all landers are nonfunctional. Do not attempt to use them. Warning."

Gayle leaned out, her expression worried, then smiling as she spotted Greg and Jane. "What a relief. Get in here. Everybody!" she shouted, as some of the others hesitated in almost instinctive obedience to the orders the speakers had given. One man paused, then turned and ran back the way he'd come. The others crowded in, Greg last. Gayle physically pulled him inside, pushing the hatch shut even as she did so. "They're right behind you. Get this thing sealed."

Greg put his shoulder to the hatch, helping her slam it shut, then hastily punched the button sealing the hatch tight. "How do we keep them from opening it before we get to the shuttle? They've got to have an override."

"They do," Gayle confirmed. "Jane, you still got that stun baton? Thanks." She popped the access on the hatch controls, shoved the baton's tip inside among the circuitry, then flinched as sparks and smoke flew. "Hopefully that'll buy us a few minutes. Let's go."

Another dash, across the short distance remaining to the shuttle bay, while the last families who'd made it inside hurled themselves into the nearest landers. The large man who'd boasted of severing the control links was standing in one lander's hatch, laughing in

booming tones. "They tried to shut everything down! They couldn't! I stopped them! I finally beat the bastards!"

"Great," Gayle yelled. "Get in that lander and go!" She paused at the entrance to the shuttle, punching an intercom. "All landers depart immediately. Hit the launch control. The landers will seal their hatches and stagger their launches automatically. The landing area's already programmed in." She glanced back. "There goes that hatch."

Greg followed her look, watching as white hot metal flared away on all sides of the hatch. Off to one side, he could see some of the lander hatches sliding shut with agonizing deliberation. Then the closing airlock shut off his view and he was scrambling for a seat along with Jane and a few other stragglers.

The last buckle had barely been snapped when Gayle's voice sounded through the shuttle's intercom. "They're at the airlock. Everybody better be ready, because we're out of here!" The shuttle lurched, falling free from the _Terra_. "Okay, I see four, no, five landers already out. There goes number six. I don't think they can stop any of them, now."

In her seat, Jane seemed to be simultaneously laughing and sobbing. "We made it. We're free. We're free."

Greg stared at the shuttle's walls around him. Free? Somehow, that felt more different than anything he'd encountered on the planet they'd soon land on.

* * *

A long plume of light strung across the night sky, as if a comet were passing close to the planet. Greg stood silently watching that light, along with hundreds of others. The evening breeze felt milder than during his first visit to the planet, but also colder.

"They're leaving," Jane murmured. "They didn't even try to get us back. No promises. No threats. They're just leaving."

"They're probably glad to be rid of us. All the malcontents. Magetry's probably as happy as he's ever been."

"He can't be happy about losing the landers and all the supplies and equipment in them."

"It's not like he could've gotten them back. And all those supplies and equipment are to support a colony. Our colony."

"I guess." Jane lowered her gaze to the land around them. The wind made rushing noises as it passed around the bulk of the landers. Someone swore and slapped at an insect. "I hope those supplies include warmer clothes. It's a little cold."

"Yeah. Jackets and coats." He pulled her close. "I hope this helps for now."

"A little. What do we do now?"

"Figure out who's in charge. We'll need some sort of leadership. Decide how to govern ourselves. Decide if this is the best place for the colony or if we should shift the landers. Gayle says they can lift long enough to move maybe a hundred kilometers if need be, and we probably want to be closer to a forest so we don't have to haul lumber a long ways. Get the lander incubators going for the animal zygotes in deep freeze -- _"

"Thanks, but I meant you and me when I said 'we.' Do you want to get married?"

"Sure, as soon as -- _" Greg smiled. "I was going to say, as soon as we both hit thirty. But we don't have to wait anymore, do we? That Rule's gone."

"Like a lot of others, I'm sure. Did we do the right thing, Greg? There's maybe a thousand of us here. Maybe a few more, but that's a lot smaller colony than the ancestors planned on, and we're completely on our own. What'll tomorrow bring, and the day after?"

"I don't know." He stared at her, then started laughing. "For the first time since I was born on the _Terra_, I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't know what I'll see. Isn't

it great?"

She laughed, too, and hugged him. "Yeah. But I know one thing tomorrow will bring for sure."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to find some more rocks. I've got a lot to learn about this world our kids are going to inherit."

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