

RSVP

by Edward M. Lerner

Mission Commander Green waited, ill at ease, beneath the hot glare of the media lights. Life was simpler on the bridge of his starship. Nervously, he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. His palms were cold and clammy.

Flashing cameras heralded the entry of the committee into the hearing room. Anxious spectators fell silent. The lawmakers took their places, arranged files, set out their portable computers, poured glasses of water. Anticipating the crack of the gavel, Green took the center chair at the witness table, his crew seating themselves behind him.

He recited his oath. Cameras flashed anew as he gave his prepared statement. Using videos from the recent mission, he recounted the familiar events. The hearing would explore the details, but the evidence seemed incontrovertible.

Yet despite the mountain of data that informed their recommendation, he felt he had somehow failed.

The chairperson began the questioning. "Commander, did your mission follow the agreed-upon protocols?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"More than once?"

"All the protocols. Repeatedly, and in various sections of the planet." He had been so sure of a different outcome. "Time and again, for years."

"Including overflights and interviews with random natives?"

"Yes," Green agreed. "Those were among our procedures. We also flew by and alongside their primitive conveyances."

After keying a note, the chairperson changed topics. "Commander, tell us about the natives."

"Ma'am, their settlements are widely distributed. Their largest population centers almost reach the size of small cities. A few regions exhibit capabilities analogous to an early industrial stage of development."

Query followed query as legislators took their turns. He had thought himself emotionally prepared for reliving the experience. He'd been wrong.

Memories inundated him. The primitive craft that enigmatically ignored or turned to flee from the mission's aerospace planes. Aborigines who crashed their vehicles in irrational panic. The natives who lapsed into hysteria or unconsciousness at the mere sight of him. The end-of-mission recourse to improvisation: Buzzing population centers. Hovering above cultivated areas scribing elaborate patterns with a pressor beam.

"Commander?"

Behind him, the audience buzzed expectantly. What had he missed? "Ma'am?"

She rapped the table until the murmuring stopped. "Commander, how do you interpret these observations?"

Green sensed the gaze of his crew on his back. The scrutiny from the front of the chamber required no such imagination.

The natives had offered no systematic response. They showed little evidence of curiosity. What could he conclude? "Despite their use of tools, the most evolved life forms of our nearest interstellar neighbor are not yet intelligent."

"And?" the chairperson prompted.

