

Field DayFIELD DAY  
by Jeff Verona  
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When Tevi said that she was a native speaker of Esperanto, I knew there was going to be trouble. "Didn't the EC office tell you we're going to Sovereignty?" I asked.

"They are not speaking English on Sovereignty?"

"Of course they do. It's their only language"

"There will be no problems." Tevi's small, dark face was calm. "I speak English."

"Not like a native, you don't. And these Sovereignty people will react badly to that."

"I see." She pursed her lips. "They are an old habitat, then."

"One of the oldest. Part of the first wave, in fact. Sovereignty went up when the Earth's Lagrange points were still fashionable territory."

"No one is too old to learn wisdom," she said. "Also, they are to educate their children, as everyone must."

"Just as our job is to make sure the kids are being taught. But that's all we're here for, Tevi." I lifted a finger in warning. "These people have made their minds up. They don't like bureaucracy or government, and they won't like us. Don't try to convert them."

Tevi floated before me, calm and placid. Light winked off the beads and shells braided into her thick hair. "Thank you for the advice, Doug. I shall instruct by example." Her eyes shifted in and out of focus as she consulted her clock implant. "We are three hours from the deceleration burn. I shall examine our records of Sovereignty's curriculum." With the grace of the habitat-born, she twisted sideways and kicked herself across the module. The bright colors of her clothing flashed like the feathers of a tropical bird.

I admired the ease of her motion. Small-breasted and wide-hipped, she had the perfect body for space. Compact with a good center of gravity. As a native of Luna, I could never be completely comfortable in zero-g, and I was too big for space. Two meters of height and an athlete's build were great when I competed in the lunar pentathlon, but aboard ship my arms and legs were too far from my center. All the time I was bumping in things, fumbling objects, making endless small adjustments in my movements. Tevi, however, moved like a dancer. Young, earnest, sure of herself.

Which meant trouble. I'd been an Educational Compliance Officer for a dozen years. Tevi was new to the job; this trip to Sovereignty would be her first on-site inspection. I'd already given her The Lecture, told her that as ECOs our sole job was to make sure the children were meeting the educational

standards. That and only that. To observe, not to judge. She'd nodded her agreement, but behind her clear eyes and her flawless dark face was an impenetrable wall of righteousness. She probably didn't even know it was there, since she had grown up on Harmony, one of the utopian habitats on Earth's Trojan points. As a society founded by rich and earnest people dedicated to stamping out racism, nationalism, and ethnocentricity, they took

pride in their perfectly balanced culture, and they were eager to share its virtues with everyone else. Even those who didn't want it.

The Lagrange and Trojan points contain two hundred and seventeen different habitats, each with a distinct culture and government. The only things holding

them together are the Registry and Educational Compliance. Most people accept

the Registry as a necessary evil—someone has to play traffic cop, after all—but they loathe the EC. "Meddling" and "incompetent" were the highest praise I'd been given by my clients. Sure, in theory everyone agreed that children had to be educated to some minimum standard, a standard that had to

apply across all of space. Unfortunately, everyone thought their kids were doing just fine and that the other guy was the problem. Then there were the ultra-libertarians, like Sovereignty, who opposed the EC on principle. I'd been dreading this trip for weeks. Breaking in a new partner was bad enough, and Tevi, with her odd accent and earnest beliefs and coal-black skin,

would be a true challenge for myself and the good people of Sovereignty.

Two hours and half to deceleration. I grabbed a handful of blue nylon webbing

and tacked myself to a couch, hoping to catch a quick nap before we docked.

My

eyes closed. Silence, at first, then the faint whisper of the climate-control

system. I breathed deeply, tasting cool air and a small sour tang of sweat, the faint funk of humanity that no air recycler could ever quite banish. Ship-smell.

A shudder awoke me. Glancing up, I saw Tevi standing against a console, one foot braced on a bulkhead. "We are docking," she said.

"All right." I twisted out of my chair, moving carefully in the false gravity

of the declaration burn. "Got your badge?"

Tevi touched her fingers to the copper badge above her left breast. She smiled. "Mi havas git." She shook her head. "I am sorry. Yes, I do."

Another

smile. "I am nervous, Doug."

"You'll do fine." Gravity ended abruptly, and the ship trembled as the docking

ring locked into place. "Just keep your ears open, all right? Let me handle the introductions."

Like many of the older habitats, Sovereignty was simply a truncated can, four

kilometers long and one kilometer in diameter, whose spin generated about one-eighth gravity along the inner surface. Its mimetic alloy skin gleamed like quicksilver on the sunward side, then became dead, heat-radiating black

on the shadow side. The terminator crept spinward, rippling like a snake's scales. We docked in the center of one end of the can and rode an open-cage car "down" into gravity. My stomach flip-flopped the entire way, and to fight

back vertigo I studied the interior in quick glimpses. Flashes of living green

indicated farms and atmosphere factories. Blocky shapes marked buildings, and dots scurrying between them resolved into people as we descended. The bulk of a fusion plant covered the other inner lid of the habitat. Waste energy from the reactor, directed down a central spindle, illuminated everything. Tevi sat across from me, eyes closed, lips moving silently. Chanting her mantra in Esperanto, no doubt. As the car settled onto the inner surface of the habitat my stomach finally relaxed, and I drew a deep breath. Tevi opened her eyes as I fumbled with the latch and swung the car door outward. "You're with Educational Compliance?" The speaker was a stump of a man with close-cropped dark hair and black button eyes. He wore coveralls in a mottled green-and-tan pattern. "That's right. I'm Doug Hammond." I offered my hand; the man just stared, and I pulled it back. "And this is, ah, Tevi." The eyes narrowed. "Tevi who?" "Tevi daughter of Maya daughter of Ruth daughter of Sheri." Tevi touched her forehead and heart as she spoke. Button-eyes grunted. "I'm Patrick Henry Yardmore. Follow me." We'd only taken a few steps when a voice to our left called "Patrick! Patrick Henry!" We turned to see a tall, fair-haired man bearing down on us. Our stumpy guide snapped to attention. "Mister Lee, sir. These are the Educational Compliance officers, sir. I was—" "Taking them to see me." The tall man smiled. "Yes, I know. Thank you, Patrick. I was able to get away from the meeting sooner than I anticipated." Extending a hand to me, he said "I'm Jeb Stuart Lee." We shook. "Mister Lee," I said. "Jeb, please." "Jeb, I'm Doug Hammond, and this is Tevi." I nodded to my partner. "Welcome to Sovereignty," Jeb said. "Do you need anything brought from your ship? Patrick can help." I glanced at Tevi. "Would you like to help Patrick fetch our gear?" As I spoke, I twitched my fingers in a shooing motion. Her eyes flickered. "Of course, Doug," she said smoothly. "Patrick, you will follow me, please." Patrick glared at Jeb. Then, stiff-shouldered, he followed Tevi back to the car. As it rose toward the docking ring, Jeb began another apology. "We're not used to visitors here on Sovereignty," he said. "Or having people check up on you," I said. His smile slipped. "Well put. We file our curricula and our standardized test scores with the Registry every year, Doug. There's no need for EC to come visiting." "I agree," I said, spreading my hands. "But you know how a bureaucracy is. They want an on-site inspection. We're not here to cause trouble, Jeb. We won't get underfoot, and we'll be gone in a couple of days." "Good." Jeb's wristband suddenly began to beep. "Ah, hell, I've got another meeting. Would you mind waiting here for your partner? We'll talk again later." With a quick wave, he bounded off. I've met many Jebes in my day, and many Patrick Henrys. The Patricks don't bother me. They don't like the EC, and they don't disguise the fact. The

Jeb's

are another story. Always smiling, always reassuring, always ready to clarify

things to the traveling ECO. People like Jeb Stuart Lee are why I travel to out-of-the-way habitats like Sovereignty. Sure, I can check all their data through the Registry; in fact, the EC would prefer it. That's why I don't do

it. The real story is always out in the field.

The slap of leather on leather broke my train of thought. A gangly kid stood

beside a shed ten meters away, kicking a small bag into the air and studying

it intently. I looked up and saw four of the bags rising and falling above him

in delicate, slow arcs. The kid pushed a shock of blonde hair back from his eyes and squinted upwards, catching the next bag on an elbow and flipping it

up again. He was maintaining a pattern—two rising, two falling—as he kept the

bags airborne with elbows, knees, and ankles.

I loped over to him. "Nice work," I said.

The kid spun toward me and goggled. I hopped into the air, caught a falling bag on my ankle, and lifted it skyward. The kid recovered himself and kneeed the next bag, finding his rhythm again. "I'm Doug Hammond," I said.

"Jefferson Partridge." His blue eyes darted between me and the bags. "You one

of those ECO people?"

"Yes." I watched him kick a bag. "You like school, Jefferson?"

"It's okay." He pursed his lips. "I'm not cutting, we're done for the day."

"I'm not here to scold anybody." By now I'd caught the rhythm of the bags, and

as Jefferson drove the falling bags upward I made my move. Launching myself skyward, I caught the rising bags at the top of the arc and forced them

even

higher with my elbows. I tucked and tumbled, opening myself enough to catch the falling bags with my knees and loft them up before tucking again and dropping to the ground. The kid stared, open-mouthed. I bowed. "I used to

do

the lunar pentathlon," I said. "Not any more, though."

Jefferson found his voice. "Wow. What happened?"

"Messed up my knee." I pointed up. "The bags?"

"What? Oh!" In a flurry of elbows and knees, Jefferson set the pattern again.

"You from the moon?"

"I'm a loonie, yeah," I said, smiling. "You know, the best I could manage when

I was a kid was three bags."

"There's less gravity here," Jefferson said.

I nodded, watching the bags, not looking at him. "Do the kids around here play

football or tumble tag? Anything like that?"

"Sure, we got a couple of football teams."

"I coach in a league back on Luna," I said. "I'd like to see your team sometime."

"Hello, Doug?" Tevi came up beside me. "Patrick Henry is putting our gear away. You will introduce me to the young man?"

"Tevi, this is Jefferson Partridge," I said. "Jefferson, meet Tevi, my partner."

Tevi bowed over steepled hands. "A pleasure, Jefferson Partridge." She swept

her gaze over the boy. "A fine young man, I am sure."  
Jefferson blushed. The bags dropped to the earth around him, and he  
scrabbled  
to pick them up. "Thank you, ma'am. I gotta go. Chores." He bobbed his head  
at  
me and loped off.  
"Such politeness," Tevi said.  
"I wish he wasn't so polite," I said.  
She cocked her head at me. "I am not understanding."  
I sighed. "Tevi, if you act like an authority figure, the kids will treat  
you  
like one. Everyone gets on their best behavior, and everyone clams up.  
Problems get hidden."  
"You think there are problems on Sovereignty."  
"I think that if there are problems, the adults certainly won't let us know  
about them."  
"Mister Jeb Lee seemed a nice man," Tevi observed.  
"I'd trust Mister Jeb as far as I could throw him. On Earth."  
"Duplicity," she said, nodding. "I learned of such a thing on Harmony, in  
ethics class."  
"Well, you're about to get some practice to go with your theory," I said.  
"Just watch how you talk to the kids. Be a big sister, not an adult."  
"I shall." With her chin, she pointed back the way she came. "Patrick Henry  
waits to show us our quarters."  
"Let's not irritate the man any further," I said. "After you, Tevi."

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The next morning, I watched the students play football while Tevi inspected  
the school. One of the teachers—a young woman with a spray of acne on her  
forehead, barely older than her students—introduced me to the kids, then  
left  
me on the playing field. The children ranged in age from five to fourteen,  
and  
they all had the loose-limbed gait of those native to very low gravity. I  
gave  
the younger kids a ball and let them kick it around the field while having  
the  
older kids do drills on footwork, dribbling, and passing. Then I stood back  
and watched.  
The smaller children quickly forgot about me as they shot across the field,  
laughing and shrieking, chasing each other and the ball. Inevitably there  
were  
collisions and roughhousing, and some of the bigger kids tried to hog the  
ball, but they were all playing. No one was being ignored or pushed aside.  
I  
took my slate from my pocket and jotted a few notes about socialization and  
age-group dynamics. These kids were fine, but the youngest ones tended to  
be  
bubbly and resilient regardless of how they were raised. Any real social  
problems would show up in the older kids. As I crossed the field to join  
the  
older group, I glimpsed a familiar shock of blonde hair. It was Jefferson.  
He  
dribbled the ball, fired a pass across the field, then trotted to the back  
of  
his line.  
"Jefferson!" I called.

Several of the kids in Jefferson's line glanced up as I approached. "Uh, hi,

Mister Hammond, sir," he said.

"Pretty good footwork," I said.

"Thanks," he muttered, ducking his head.

I stepped up to the front of the line and signaled for the ball. Then I motioned for the kids to draw closer, and they formed a loose circle around me. "I know your teacher told you I'm with the EC," I said. "But I also coach

league football on Luna, and I wanted to show you some set plays. I'll need some helpers, though." I pointed to Jefferson, then to two boys and two girls

at random. "We'll go three on three. Everybody watch us go downfield a couple

of times, then split yourselves into groups and follow our lead. Okay?"

"Yes, sir," they said. If nothing else, they were obedient and respectful of authority.

I led Jefferson and a girl down the field, running a give-and-go against the

other three kids. Soon everyone joined in. A buzz of conversation arose, and

under its cover I chatted with Jefferson. "Where are the older kids?" I asked.

"The teenagers?"

"Working," he said. "You get out of school when you turn fifteen."

I remembered the young teacher I'd seen earlier, who didn't look much older than fifteen herself. "Do the adults have football leagues?"

He shook his head. "They stay busy with the militia."

"What about the women?"

"Football isn't for ladies," the boy said.

A flash of distant color caught my eye. Over by the schoolhouse, I saw Tevi standing with several of the teachers. "Gotta go," I said. I corralled one of

the kids and had him take my place, then loped over to my partner.

Two of the teachers were very young indeed, hardly more than girls, and as I

drew near I could see that their cheeks were blotchy and their noses red. One

of them snuffled loudly as I approached, and the other wiped tears from her eyes. The other two teachers stared at me frostily as I approached. "Is there

a problem?" I asked.

Big mistake. Tevi, who was puffed up like an angry robin, turned on me.

"These

women have no qualifications to teach," she said. "They have no training.

Several of them know not the subject matter." She glared at the crying girl,

who swallowed and took a shaky breath.

I turned to one of the ice maidens. "You are using an approved curriculum, aren't you?"

The woman, a raw-boned brunette, nodded. "We use the Daimer curriculum, Stage

One through Five. With some modification to the history material, of course."

"Of course," I said. I already knew that—I'd seen their reports to the Registry—but I wanted to give them a chance to show they were doing right.

"Thanks for your assistance, all of you. I need to consult with my partner now. Oh, and your students are well-socialized. Good interpersonal dynamics,

and their behaviors are age-appropriate."

The ice maidens thawed slightly, and the crying teacher smiled. "Thank you,"

the fourth teacher said. She sniffed and wiped her nose.

With a smile and a nod I hooked an arm around Tevi and spirited her away. When

she tried to speak I tightened my grip, and a few minutes later I marched her

into our quarters. Then I spun her to face me. "Just what the hell were you trying to do back there?"

She rubbed her arm. "Those teachers, as they call themselves, are a disgrace.

They read lectures from the screen, and the computers do all the testing and grading."

"Remember what I told you on the ship, about observing but not judging?"

Well,

you're crossing that line."

"Our duty is to see that the children are educated properly. This is not happening." Tevi stalked across the room and dropped into a chair.

"Our duty is to see that EC guidelines are being met. Are the students making

the grade on the standardized tests? Are they being taught from an approved curriculum?" I paused. "Well, Tevi?"

She spat out her reply. "Yes."

"Then officially they're in compliance." I crossed over to Tevi and sat beside

her. "But unofficially, I agree with you. These kids are being shortchanged."

Glancing around the spartan room we'd been given, I added "And something about

this place rubs me the wrong way. Did you know they have a militia?"

"Militia." Her brow furrowed. "People with weapons? An army?"

"That's right."

"Why? Do they fight amongst themselves?"

"I don't think so. Groups like these often have a persecution complex. They want weapons to protect themselves from outsiders. Usually the government.

And

right now, we're the closest thing to government representatives around."

Her eyes widened. "We are in danger?"

"Maybe," I said. "Let's tread carefully, okay? Be polite. No accusations."

She muttered something under her breath, then nodded. "You give good advice,

Doug. Sometimes I forget I am here to learn from you as well as to do the work."

My face grew hot. "Thanks, Tevi. It's hard for me to hold my tongue, too, and

it took me a while to learn that tact is the biggest part of this job."

We spent the balance of the afternoon compiling our preliminary report. A message came through from Jeb Lee, asking us to join him for dinner, so I dug

out my one decent outfit and readied myself. Tevi dressed in layers of glittering cloth, transforming herself into a resplendent, gleaming jewel.

Patrick Henry, who came to take us to Lee's home, could barely keep his eyes

in their sockets.

Jeb Lee greeted us like a politician, all smiles and handshakes, and complimented Tevi effusively on her outfit. The other members of the dinner party, all community leaders of one stripe or another, tried not to stare

at

her. Knowing that they were male, I was sure that they appreciated the ample display of bare skin Tevi's outfit provided. Knowing that they were Sovereignty, I was sure they were mortified that the delicate, smooth skin was black.

Dinner was served by a corps of silent, severely-dressed women who flitted about like ghosts, trading plates and filling glasses. I showed my thanks with words and smiles, but the women acted like I was invisible. The men ignored them. Over the soup, I asked the florid-faced man next to me where the spouses were.

"Our wives?" His spoon paused in midair. "At home, of course. This is business, they don't need to be here. Besides, they've got to look after the kids. Mine does, at least."

Across the table, Tevi's smile froze into place.

I extended a leg beneath the table and gave her shin a warning poke.

"Perhaps

I saw one of your children today during our inspection. Well-behaved, they were. Athletic, too. You've got some good football players here. Are there any

senior leagues?"

"Leagues for football?" He stared at me. "We're adults, Mister Hammond. We have more important things to do than kick a ball around."

"Still, everyone can use a little exercise." I glanced at the man's generous stomach

He finished the last of his soup. "Militia duty keeps me in shape."

"Of course it does," I said. "One of the youngsters mentioned the militia to me. Some kind of self-defense force, is it?"

"The militia—"

"The militia is Sovereignty's business." The speaker was an elderly, thin-faced man. He wore the same mottled dun outfit as Patrick Henry, and his

white hair had been shorn close to his scalp. "It doesn't concern the EC." I shrugged. "Just curious."

"You shouldn't be curious about matters that don't concern you," said the elderly man, in a voice like a snake slithering through dead leaves.

"Sovereignty was founded to get away from that kind of curiosity, from bureaucrats and governments who wanted to know too much about the private business of free citizens. While you are in our house, Mister Hammond, you will respect our rules."

I swallowed past the sudden lump in my throat. "Of course, sir," I said. "I meant no disrespect."

His face utterly still, the man continued to stare at me. "No one ever does,

Mister Hammond. Not if they are wise. But disrespect comes when some people think they know more than others, when they cross lines that they are too blind to see. When that happens, they need to be educated as to where the line lies."

Every other conversation had died as the old man spoke to me. "I certainly understand the importance of education," I said, as I touched the EC insignia

on my chest.

As the man's eyes narrowed, I realized I had made my second mistake that day.



"The EC is not interested in education," he said. "Rather, you are interested in seeing our children jump through your hoops like so many trained dogs. We do not appreciate it, Mister Hammond. You may have authority to do as you do, but you have no inherent right to it. And we accept that authority only because we must."

At the head of the table, Jeb Lee cleared his throat. "General Bradley, these people are our guests."

The general shifted his gaze first to Tevi and then to Jeb. "Perhaps the EC's attitude toward us is reflected in their choice of representatives." Jeb's smile flickered from pleasant to carnivorous. "They have ears, general."

The man beside me fumbled for his wine glass. After a pause, the general nodded. "So they do." He returned his attention to his plate and didn't speak again throughout the meal.

Jeb took over the conversation then, steering us through polite channels and asking about our inspection. I expected Tevi to light into him, but she merely pointed out that the EC had resources for teachers as well as students, and that perhaps Sovereignty could use those resources. She also asked why there weren't any male teachers, a question which inspired much sudden business with napkins and wineglasses. I told Jeb we'd need another day to finish looking around, and then we'd leave. His shoulders relaxed. "Good," he said. "I'm sure you have more pressing matters to attend to."

When dinner broke up, Tevi waved aside Patrick Henry, saying that we could find our own way back to our quarters. The fusion spindle had been damped down to a faint glow, the closest it could ever come to true nighttime darkness, and we took a minute to get our bearings before heading out. "Who was that old man?" she asked.

I shuddered. "Their militia leader, I guess. I wouldn't want to cross him." "Nor I." She looked up for a long moment, then frowned. "Doug, are you seeing those men?"

I glanced up to where she was pointing. My stomach heaved as I tried to focus on the far side of the habitat, because whenever I could actually discern the spin of Sovereignty, my sense of up and down went haywire. I glimpsed a group of ant-like figures in dark outfits before dropping my chin to stare at the floor between my feet. "I see them."

Born of a habitat herself, Tevi had no problems with the perspective. "They are doing training exercises, I think."

"Perhaps they're part of the militia."

"The militia trains at night?"

"Maybe." I drew a breath as my stomach settled into place. "Luna doesn't have an army, Tevi. I don't know how they operate."

She said nothing further as we returned to our quarters, but occasionally

she

glanced up and back, following the distant figures. Then, just as I opened the

door of our quarters, a soft voice asked "Mister Hammond?"

"Jefferson?" I said.

"Yes, sir, it's me." He was standing in a shadow formed by an angle of the building, nearly invisible save for his pale hair. "Sir, I have to tell you something." His voice was strident, high-pitched.

"Would you like to talk inside?" I asked.

After a moment, he nodded yes. I swung the door open and he ducked inside, with Tevi and me close behind. I found the panel and turned the lights on.

"Jefferson, you remember Tevi, don't you?"

"Yes'm," he said, gulping and bobbing his head.

"Please sit down, Jefferson," Tevi said, gracefully folding herself into a chair by way of example.

He sat heavily on the couch. "I thought I should tell someone," he said.

"Tell us what, Jefferson?" I settled into the remaining chair.

The words tumbled out in a rush. "They've got a bomb. They're going to use it.

Someone should stop them." Jefferson was on the edge of his seat, trembling.

Before I could say anything Tevi rose and settled down beside the boy, wrapping one arm around him and stroking his hair with the other. I opened

my

mouth to warn her that eleven-year-old boys didn't want mothering, but Jefferson relaxed against her. After a moment he wiped his eyes and gently lifted her arm away. My mouth snapped shut

"Sorry." Jefferson sniffed loudly. "My brother Kyle, he's in the Space Forces,

and he was bragging to me about it earlier. But you don't think they'd do it,

do you? I mean, really blow it up?"

"Blow what up?" I asked, in my most calm and adult voice.

"The Registry, of course." Jefferson looked surprised. "What else?"

"They are blowing up the Registry?" Tevi said, aghast.

Jefferson nodded. "Kyle said it serves them right for always spying on us."

"The Registry is not a spy," Tevi said.

"Then why do we have to put their beacons on Sovereignty and our ships?" He looked genuinely curious.

"Jefferson, there's a lot of stuff in space," I said. "Without those tracking

beacons, and without the Registry to monitor them, space travel would be impossible. Ships wouldn't be able to plot their courses, and there'd be all

kinds of collisions. We need the Registry. Do you understand?"

He nodded automatically.

I sighed. "It probably doesn't matter anyway. The Registry maintains a picket

line of surveillance satellites on itself. Sovereignty isn't the only bunch of

crackpots—er, the only habitat that's thought of this trick. Your bomb won't

get close enough to do any damage."

"Kyle said it didn't have to get close." Jefferson fidgeted in his seat.

"He

said it was a fission bomb, and it had an ee em pee."

I levitated out of my chair. "An atomic bomb!"

The boy looked suddenly scared. "We have an old fission reactor, from back when they first established Sovereignty. They got plutonium from it."

Tevi's skin had turned dusky grey. "A breeder reactor. Doug, if they have enough plutonium for a bomb—"

"They don't have to be accurate with it," I finished. "Get the bomb in the general vicinity of the target, detonate it, and the resulting electromagnetic

pulse turns the Registry into a hunk of orbiting junk."

"Is that bad?" Jefferson asked.

"Very bad. People will die." I glanced at Tevi. "We have to warn the Registry."

"Yes." She stood. "We will go now."

I held up a hand. "Not so fast. Patrick Henry might be outside, watching us.

We'll wait until morning, then we'll say we have to get more inspection equipment from our ship. That's when we send the warning."

Tevi pursed her lips, then nodded.

Turning to the boy, I said "Jefferson, you were very brave to come here and tell us this news. Now I need you to do one more thing. Like I was telling Tevi, when you leave here, you might be confronted by Patrick Henry. Tell him

you came to ask me a question about football, okay? If he asks any questions,

play dumb and stick to that story. Can you do that?"

He nodded, face pale. "Yes, sir. I can do that, sir."

I clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Good man. You'd better get going, now."

I walked him to the door, stood in the doorway saying goodnight long enough to

attract Patrick Henry's attention if he were watching, and sent the boy away.

I spent the night packing, filling out reports, and updating my private log.

I didn't sleep much. When "dawn" arrived, I found Tevi waiting in our common room. She was soberly dressed in a tight-fitting tan outfit, and her gear was

smartly packed. We exchanged bare greetings and made our way to the lift station.

Patrick Henry and two other men were waiting at the station. Putting on my best smile, and holding Tevi firmly by the wrist, I walked up to the short man. "We'd like to take the car up to our ship," I said.

Patrick Henry stared at me. His eyes were the dead black of lunar shadows.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, turning the last word into an insult. "Per

General

Bradley's orders, you are not to be let off the station."

Still smiling, I said "Where can I see General Bradley, then, so we can talk

this over?"

"The general's a busy man. Why don't you go back to your quarters and wait until he can send someone for you?"

Beside me, Tevi bristled. "This is an outrage," she said. "You cannot hold Educational Compliance Officers as prisoners. There will be severe consequences."

The two men to either side unlimbered their splat guns. They wore the same camouflage fatigues as the short man, and they had the same dead look in their

eyes. Patrick Henry waited a moment for the threat to sink in, then turned on

Tevi. "I don't care who you are out there, missy, but on Sovereignty you're nobody. So why don't you get your ass back to your quarters and plant it there?"

"Let's not waste the man's time, Tevi," I said, solidifying my grip. "We'll contact General Bradley from our quarters, and I'm sure this issue will be resolved." My muscles screamed their tension as I turned my back on the

armed

men and walked, stiff-legged, away from our ship.

"How are we to warn the Registry now?" she whispered.

"Let's not talk about this in public," I murmured. A squadron of men in fatigues trotted past; I drew Tevi to one side and watched them go by.

"Looks

like all of Sovereignty is on alert today."

When we reached our quarters I opened the door and swept her inside. "All right, now we need to—Jefferson!"

Jefferson stood in the center of the common room, eyes downcast, his hands knotted before him. "Mister Hammond, Miss Tevi...I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Tevi asked.

The boy raised his head to look at us, and Tevi gasped. One of his eyes was swollen shut by a purple bruise, and he had a cut on his cheek. "I got past Patrick Henry okay, but when I got home Kyle was there. He asked me where I was, and when I wouldn't answer...." Jefferson spread his hands. "I told him.

I'm sorry."

Anger ignited inside my chest, sending waves of fire and adrenaline through my

body. With a deliberate breath, I banked the rage. Later, I told myself.

Aloud, I said to the boy "Jefferson, you don't have to apologize for anything.

You were very brave. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I asked you to do more

than I should have."

While I was speaking, Tevi opened her bag and removed a first aid kit. She seated Jefferson, examined his injuries, then pushed the edges of his cheek wound together and covered it with a suture strip. "For your eye, we must wait

for the swelling to go down," she said. "I can do nothing now."

"That's okay," he said. "I put some ice on it earlier. It's not as bad as it

was."

"These people are animals, to treat a child so," Tevi said.

I let the comment pass. "Jefferson, do you know when the bomb will be set off?"

He shook his head slowly. "Sometime today. Don't know when."

"Then there may still be time to get a message away." I hunched down beside him. "There are other airlocks on Sovereignty, aren't there?"

"Yeah. Lots of them."

"And I bet you know where they all are, don't you?"

He fidgeted. "Maybe."

"Well, when I was your age I knew every airlock in my home caves on Luna,"

I

said, smiling. "Even the ones that I wasn't supposed to know about."

"I suppose I know about a few of those." He grinned.

"Good. We need you to take us to one of them. An unguarded one, close to where

our ship is docked. And we need to avoid the patrols."

The boy's expression sobered. "I can take you there, sir."

"No, Doug," Tevi interjected. "Already Jefferson has been hurt. We cannot expose him to more danger."

"Do you have a better idea?" I asked. "The clock is ticking."

Her mouth tightened into a slash. "I do not like this, Doug."

"Neither do I, but it's what we have to work with." I stood. "Jefferson, you

ready?"

"Yes, sir." The boy hopped to his feet.

As Jefferson led us through the back ways of Sovereignty, I felt a constant

prickle between my shoulder blades, as if at any moment a slug from a splat gun would strike me. The silence of the habitat was oppressive. Everyone except the militia had holed up, and I was sure that any second someone would

spot us. I glanced down each cross-street we passed, expecting a patrol to spring out at us anytime. Once I saw Tevi doing the same, and we exchanged nervous smiles. With the single-mindedness of youth, however, Jefferson forged

ahead without sparing a glance from his route. Suddenly, the boy stopped. "We're here," he said.

"Where's the airlock?" I asked. We were standing at the edge of an atmosphere

plant, long rows of nutrient tanks full of plankton.

He pointed. "There."

Set among the nutrient tanks was a low rectangle, which appeared to be a spot

the tank farmers had missed. Tevi dropped down beside it. "A coffin lock," she

said. Her fingers traced the edge of the rectangle and caught something. She

tugged, and a control panel swung open. "The escape suits should be nearby,"

she said, studying the panel.

"Over here," Jefferson said. He loped to the far end of the rectangle and pried a panel free. A puff of dust swirled up.

I dropped down beside him. "I bet this thing hasn't been opened since they built the place," I said.

He nodded. "I hope the air's still good."

The rack behind the panel was filled with escape suits, fist-sized navy blue

lumps of pressurecloth that were deflated and folded for storage. Tucked at the end of the rack were a series of skinny tanks the length of Jefferson's forearm. I drew one free and checked its tag. "Well, this one's full.

Pressure

regulator looks good, too." I frowned. "But it only holds fifteen minutes of

air."

"Will that be enough time?" he asked.

I reached for an escape suit. "It'll have to be."

Tevi appeared beside us. "The lock is ready." Her eyes widened when she saw the rack of gear. "Those suits are ancient."

"Let's just hope they work," I said, as I pulled the tab on the suit in my hand and tossed it to the floor. The pressurecloth woke up, uncoiling

itself

into torso, arms, and legs. "Help me hook up this air tank, will you?"

She laid her slim hand over mine. "Doug, how much experienced are you with freespace maneuvering?"

"Not much," I admitted. "Twenty hours, heavily supervised. I didn't grow up in

the Big Empty."

"Give me the suit," she said. "I have over eight hundred hours, solo."

"It's yours." I stepped aside and let Tevi don the suit. While Jefferson and

I

watched, the suit fitted itself tightly to the contours of her body, gloves and boots forming as she touched wrist and ankle. An escape suit was little more than a pressure membrane designed for a quick passage between two

areas

of atmosphere, like a crippled station and a rescue ship. After giving the suit a couple of tugs, Tevi did a backflip. "All snug," she said.

She looked like she'd been dipped in midnight. "Ready for the tank?" I

asked.

Tevi nodded. I fitted the air tank against her spine and held it in place while the suit formed a seal against the cylinder, then attached a short length of tubing to the nipple the suit grew against the back of her neck. Within seconds, a transparent sphere bubbled up and around Tevi's head. She took a few deep breaths and gave me a thumbs-up.

I leaned close to her helmet. "The comm laser should be aimed at the Registry," I said, loudly and slowly. "Squirt them a general distress signal

and a warning, and set it to repeat. Okay?"

Tevi nodded and said something that the helmet distorted into nonsense. She spoke again. "Protektu knabo," she said. "Protect the boy."

"I will," I said. "Good luck."

The lock's operation was simple: two buttons. I pressed the first, and the lid

of the coffin slid sideways, revealing a man-shaped space half a meter deep.

Tevi slid into it, face down, and I pressed the second button. The lid slid back, and the entire lock shuddered as it depressurized. A green light flashed

as the outer door had opened. "She's out," I said.

An instant later a raucous howl pierced the air. Jefferson stumbled back, clamping his hands over his ears. "What's that?" he shouted over the din.

"Emergency alarm." We fell back through the rows of plankton tanks, until the

scream of the siren was bearable. "It must have triggered automatically when

the lock cycled." I touched the boy's shoulder. "Jefferson, you have to get out of here."

"Why?"

"Because we're about to have company, and I've got to stall them long enough

for Tevi to get off the warning."

"I'm staying," he said, as he planted his feet.

Abruptly, the siren died. I checked my watch. A little over a minute had passed. Give her eight or ten minutes to get to the ship, a couple more minutes to sound the alert....I shook my head. Not enough time. As soon as they caught us and saw Tevi was missing, they'd board our ship.

"What are we going to do, Mister Hammond?" Jefferson looked up at me, his eyes

wide.

I glanced back at the coffin lock and the rack of escape suits, then down at

the boy. "Are you willing to follow me lead, no matter what I do or say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's get back to the lock, then," I said. "But you'll have to play along with me, okay?"

His face sobered. "Yes, sir."

"Good man. Follow me." I dashed back to the lock, unfurled an escape suit, and

began to put it on. I had one sleeve to go when six armed men came charging through the plankton tanks, weapons drawn. "Freeze!" shouted one of them. Jefferson ducked down on the far side of the lock. I kept struggling with the

suit until two of the men came up and grabbed my arms, twisting them behind my

back. They pushed me down before a young man with a scraggly blonde beard. He

stared at me and frowned. "You're that Educational Compliance cop, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said shortly.

"What were you trying to do, Mister Cop?" The blonde youth yanked my chin up.

He really was terribly young, and I almost laughed at the thought of these near-children playing soldier. But their weapons were real enough. "I was trying to get to my ship," I said. Glaring in Jefferson's direction, I added

"And I would have made it, if that stupid kid hadn't set off the alarm."

"Kid?" My captor glanced across the lock, where Jefferson was slowly getting

to his feet. The man goggled. "Jefferson?"

"Hi, Kyle," Jefferson said in a small voice.

"Get over here!" Kyle shouted. His voice broke on the second word, and the rest of the patrol laughed until his stare silenced them.

Jefferson dragged himself before his brother. He didn't look at me, but silently I urged

him on. This was working out better than I'd hoped. "I'm sorry," he said.

Kyle's hand lashed out and caught Jefferson across the cheek. "What's the matter with you? I told you to stay away from this guy!"

"I didn't mean to," Jefferson said meekly.

"I bet you didn't." Kyle's hand balled into a fist. "Maybe I didn't beat enough sense into you last night."

"That's enough," I said. "It's me you want, not him. Anyway, it wasn't like he

was any help. Dumb kid cycled the lock before I could get the suit on."

The patrol laughed again, and this time Kyle joined them. "You're right about

that, mister," he said. "Jefferson here is a waste of oxygen. Aren't you, boy?"

"If you say so," Jefferson said, his voice barely audible.

I forced my shoulders to relax. I could easily break the grip of the men who

held me, but it was still six against one, and I couldn't risk getting

Jefferson hurt. "I guess you're going to take me to General Bradley," I said.

Kyle took the bait. "That's right," he said. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers.

"Wait a minute. You had a lady cop with you, didn't you? A nigger. Where is she?"

I met his gaze squarely. "Back at our quarters. This isn't a job for a woman."

He nodded. "That's true. Maybe you cops aren't as dumb as you look." He raised

his voice. "We'll escort the prisoner to General Bradley. Jefferson, you're coming with us."

As the guards dragged me to my feet, I caught Jefferson's eye and gave him a

quick smile. I moved along without protest, for with every step I was buying

time for Tevi. Kyle marched us down the habitat toward the far end of the cylinder, where I'd seen the fusion plant earlier. The area was thick with uniformed men. Our little patrol stopped outside a square blockhouse, and

Kyle

told us he would go talk with the general. I made myself as comfortable as

I

could and stole glances at my watch. Already ten minutes had passed; with luck, Tevi was aboard our ship.

Time flowed inexorably: five minutes, then ten, then fifteen. The other men in

the patrol gathered to gossip, paying cursory attention to me and ignoring

Jefferson completely. I caught the boy's eye, tapped my watch, smiling broadly, then swallowed the smile as Kyle reappeared. "The general will see you now," he said.

Kyle looked a bit pale, and having met Bradley myself I felt a twinge of sympathy. The young man led us into the building, which hummed with activity.

We passed three security checkpoints and were ushered into a long room where

dozens of men intently studied a five-meter display screen. Prominent among them was the general, whose slight form somehow managed to fill the room with

an aura of authority. Kyle stepped forward. "General Bradley, sir?" His voice squeaked.

Bradley glanced at me. "Where's the other one?"

"In her quarters," Kyle said. His voice grew a bit stronger. "This isn't work for women."

Bradley turned his gaze on the youth. "Did you check?"

Kyle wilted. "No, sir."

"She's not there," I said. Heads turned in my direction. "She alerted the Registry to your little game about ten minutes ago."

"The airlock," Kyle said. "She was the one who used the airlock." His face twisted. "You lied to me!"

"Did I?" I shrugged. "Sorry about that."

Kyle lunged. I stepped into his charge and smashed my elbow into his face, then delivered a double-handed blow to the back of his neck as he crumpled forward. The men around me fumbled for their sidearms. Then Bradley raised his

hand, and all motion ceased. He glanced at the fallen soldier. "Lunar pentathlon?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I should have guessed." Bradley turned to the display screen. "We haven't launched the missile yet. Changing its trajectory will only take a moment.

The

Registry will still fall."

"They're on alert now." I said. "They'll have a lock on anything moving within

a million kilometers. And if Sovereignty does launch, things will go much worse for you. All you've done so far is conspire and threaten. If you actually attack, your neighbors will come over and peel this habitat open." Bradley's face tightened. "If they board Sovereignty, we'll fight."

"Why board it?" I said. "They can just descend on your hull with cutting torches, like they did at Archangel Habitat. Do you want to see your families

die, your children?"

"From time to time, the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of patriots," Bradley said. "We came here to be free, but you people won't leave

us alone. As free men, we would rather die than be ordered around by the likes

of you."

"Does everyone on Sovereignty feel that way?"

"We stand united in our cause," he declared. The soldiers beside him nodded their agreement.

"What about him?" I pointed to Jefferson. "How does he feel?"

"He's just a child."

"What about your wives and daughters, then? While they're busy watering the tree of liberty, who will be enjoying its fruit?"

"Sovereignty was founded on an idea, Mister Hammond. If we must sacrifice



ourselves to that idea, we will."

"Ever thought about what will happen to your idea when you're all dead?" I shook my head. "You want to be remembered as free men and martyrs, but you're

going to be remembered as terrorists. There's nothing noble in what you're planning, general. Murder in the name of freedom never is. The EC exists to make sure people remember that. Launch that missile, and you'll only make it stronger."

The images on the screen slowly crept past. Otherwise the room was silent, motionless. Then Bradley's shoulders slumped. "Why can't you leave us alone? "Because we're human," I said. "Because we can't leave each other alone.

Every

time a group goes to the frontier to leave the world behind, the world eventually catches up with them. You can argue against that world, you can fight it, but you can't keep it out. Destroying the Registry isn't striking

a

blow for freedom, general, it's just a dramatic way to commit suicide. Is that

what you want?"

Bradley took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, his aura

of command evaporated, revealing a tired, frail man. "No," he whispered. Raising his voice, he said "Stand down, everyone. Stand down."

Kyle found his voice. "Sir?"

"We can't fight this war with bombs, son. They can't destroy ideas."

Bradley

gave me a wintry smile. "As you can see, Mister Hammond, I have read my history. Return to your ship, and if you can find room in your report to

look

kindly on an old fool, I'd appreciate it."

Over the pounding of my heart, I nodded. As Bradley began issuing orders, I laid a hand on Jefferson's shoulder and guided him out of the building. The patrol still lingered around the entrance, and when they saw us return they looked puzzled. "Where's Kyle?" asked one of the soldiers.

"War's over," I said.

They stared at me blankly.

"You boys ever thought of starting a football league?" I asked.

The patrol began to argue amongst themselves. I tapped Jefferson on the shoulder. "I'm going to see Tevi. Want to come along?"

"Sure." Jefferson grinned. As we crossed Sovereignty, he said "Mister

Hammond,

you said you were an athlete once."

"Right," I said. "Lunar pentathlon."

"Just what is that?"

"It's sort of a celebratory event," I said. "Back during the fight for

Lunar

independence, a group of patriots went on a dangerous mission to take out an

enemy communication post. So we hold five athletic events that commemorate their mission." Raising a hand, I counted off the events on my fingers. "A five hundred kilometer run. A crater climb. An orientation course with

using

no equipment, just the stars, the sun, the Earth, and the horizon. A long jump." I paused at my thumb.

"Well?" he said.

"During the original mission, the patriots had to fight their way through the

enemy post before disabling it. So we hold a martial arts competition. I was

always pretty good at that."

We had reached the open-cage car leading up to the ship. Jefferson hesitated.

"Come on up," I said. "After all, you may want to leave this place sometime."

The boy swallowed. "I don't do so well with heights."

"That makes two of us." I swung into the car and patted the seat beside me.

"Come here, Jefferson. We'll help each other up." And so we did.

Field Day marks Jeff Verona's third appearance in Neverworlds. He and his wife live in the wilds of Iowa, where they just purchased a house with a white picket fence. His email address is <mailto://jverona@pcpartner.net>.