

the end of the world was just the beginning...

THALASSA

THE WORLD BENEATH THE WAVES

Second Edition



M. JONATHAN JONES

Book One of the Tethys Trilogy

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the world beneath the waves

SAMPLE

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, incidents and dialogues are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Author's note

Moanna rhymes with *Joanna* – from the word *moana* ‘sea, ocean’ which is common across Polynesian languages, and is also a name in those cultures; (despite what Disney would have you believe, there is no long ‘ā’ (ah) sound in this word).

Thalassa – the Earth after the Flood – rhymes here with *molasses* and *Alaska* (from the Greek θάλασσα ‘sea’, a word of ultimately unknown origin).

Tethys – the known and inhabited region of Thalassa – rhymes here with *ethics* (from the name for a Greek goddess).

This revised second edition excludes the prologue and the first two chapters and one scene later in the book have been rewritten. Apart from that, one error has been corrected, some mangled syntax has (hopefully) been unmangled, and minor stylistic changes have been made. Plot-wise, nothing major has changed.

For more on Thalassa, visit www.mjonathanjones.com.

M. Jonathan Jones

Dedicated to Y, for making me think I could do it,
and to E – best of all things.

1

Moanna was running out of time. She pressed her face against the glass of the window, and the endless, everlasting weight of the ocean pressed back. The light was dying. Pale shimmers still filtered down from the poisonous hell at the surface, stirring the sea as they came, but they were no longer unchallenged; the Dark was creeping up from the depths.

How had it got so late?

Moanna left the window at a jog. Past the ladder up into the steering-module, past the family shrine and the staring statue of the Blue Lady, through the hatch into her bedroom. Except calling it a *bedroom* was at least half a lie: two paces one way, two paces the other, that's all the actual room there was. Come to think of it, there was no proper bed, either.

She slid open the glass of her sleep-vault so that she could dress without banging a knee or an elbow and pulled on her pressure-suit. As she turned to leave she caught the flash of blue eyes in the mirror.

Ultramarine eyes.

She would be fine. She had been out in the ocean at dusk a hundred times before. Darker. Deeper. It wasn't herself that she was worried about.

Out of her room, really running now, she took the turn to the MANTA-bay. As she passed the Blue Lady again, she gave her a touch for luck. Not that she believed in the Goddess of Liberty, as she was also called, with her pointed crown and the flaming torch she held high. Most Pioneers prayed to her for protection out in Deeps, but not Moanna. Not really. Just a silly superstition.

Then down the long central corridor of the Morgans' H-Pod, through one hatch after another all the way down to the MANTA-bay. The lights flickered on, and the two MANTAs in their storage-racks seemed to stand to attention. Fifteen feet tall, they could be statues themselves, half-human, half-fish, built of metal, glass,

and plastic to honour some other ancient Pioneer god of the Deeps.

One of the MANTAs was Moanna's. The other MANTA had belonged to her older brother Jason. Nobody quite knew what to do with Jason's MANTA; it was a reminder of a past stopped short, of a gap in the future, and another thing for Moanna to pat as she went by.

Jason Morgan was dead, lost in a Militia sub somewhere out in *aqua incognita*. He had been dead for nearly a year – a long time set against Moanna's age of fifteen. Sometimes, it still felt like he would come home. Moanna wondered when that feeling would fade, and whether she really wanted it to.

She ran past the two empty racks – Moanna's parents had taken their MANTAs with them to the sea-grass prairies for the harvest – and then she was at the access ladder.

The reflected glare of the lights slid up and over the bullet-nosed canopy and across the smooth, hydrodynamic body. Moanna checked her MANTA over. All the steering-fins looked fine, no weeds or line snagged around them, and the ballast-vents were all clear. Then she unplugged the umbilical-cables and climbed up the ladder. At the top, she dipped her head under the curving canopy and stepped inside the body. Her legs slotted down until the instrument-displays came up to her waist – no need anymore for the pedal extensions that she had used as a child.

Moanna strapped herself into the flight-harness and powered up the MANTA's systems. One by one, they winked online. With the quick, fluid movement of daily practice, she tugged the extendable helmet out from the high collar behind her head, slid the clear plastic visor down over her face, and fastened it at her throat.

The hydraulics whined as she pulled down the transparent canopy, slamming it hard and locking it. There was a hiss as the cockpit pressurised. All the lights were green: it was time to fly.

Moanna hit the launch button.

"Launch-sequence activated," a recording of her mom's voice burred through the loudspeaker. "I hope you remembered to go to the bathroom."

Moanna checked the straps of the flight-harness one last time. Behind her MANTA, the in-lock hatch to the launch tube slid open.

“And did you wash your hands?” the recording asked.

Motors growled, and still sitting in its rack, the MANTA rumbled backwards into the vertical launch tube. The hatch closed, sealing Moanna inside.

“Launch in ten seconds,” her mom’s voice said, and the lights in the launch tube started to flash.

Then Moanna heard them all, a chorus of Morgan voices, shouting the countdown together as the water rushed in – her younger, gap-toothed self, her mom and dad, and a barely teenaged Jason, his voice wobbling between high and low. She remembered the day they had made that recording; Jason counting out of order so they had to keep re-doing it, her own fits of giggles, and the horror of hearing what her own voice sounded like.

Blue-green and bubbling, the water climbed rapidly up the strengthened glass of the canopy. Lots of people hated being in a flooding launch tube, but Moanna liked the rising note as the sea rushed in and filled the empty space. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, every time.

“Five!” She turned on the MANTA’s flight-lights, and the launch tube blazed white.

“Four!” Water flooded the chamber completely, muffling the recorded countdown.

“Three!” With a thud and a click, the out-lock hatch rotated open.

“Two!” Moanna released the docking-clamps that pinned her MANTA to the rack.

“One!” A last swirl of silvery bubbles spiralled upwards, and she hit the thrusters, racing them up the launch tube and out into the ocean.

Up and up the MANTA went, fifteen, twenty, thirty feet above the untidy shape of the Morgans’ H-Pod. Moanna flexed the steering-fins and put the MANTA into a lazy spin. She shifted into horizontal flight as she passed back over the out-lock hatch and watched it close automatically beneath her.

Hanging suspended in the flight-harness, she glanced right and left through the bullet-shaped canopy. Deep purple-blue surrounded her, with the silver-white beams of the MANTA’s flight-lights stabbing out ahead. As she circled, she looked along the path they illuminated.

Half a day's flight to the west were the Morgans' sea-grass prairies out in the wilds where her parents had been for a week already, and just beyond the meadows, the deep, dark water of the Mississippi Trench. Beyond that, if the old legends were true, the seas eventually ended and the rocky mountains of the Great Plague Deserts pushed their poisonous heads up above the surface. Behind Moanna were the Colony's coral mines, and then hundreds of miles further to the east, more legends: the rising slopes of the Appalachian Islands. North: nothing as far as any Tethyan knew, just *aqua incognita*, unknown water. Right where the Morgans' H-Pod sat on its flat coralcrete perch was just about as far beyond the Frontier as any Tethyan had ever dared to settle.

Through the shifting bands of the salt-water currents on Moanna's left, away to the south, the Colony of MacGillicuddy's Reef came into view. It was speckled with shimmering lights, sprawling across the rocks and ridges like a massive metal starfish. It had grown so fast in the last few years, unrecognisable from the small hitch-up it had been for most of Moanna's life, and more changes were coming. If the plans of the politicians in Capital Colony worked out, the Reef would soon become the newest and northernmost member of the ever-expanding Tethys Federation.

Moanna turned towards it.

Strands of twinkling dots moved between the manufacturing and trading sectors as cargo-sub and shuttles approached or left the docks. There was the odd MANTA too, and maintenance-teams flitted like little parasitic fish across the Colony's jumble of pressure-hulls, fixing leaks. Far away in the murk, so distant that its shape was not really visible, was the High Hub, the tower at the centre of those radiating limbs, where people as wealthy and as well-connected as Jenn and Douglas Anderson lived.

Except where was Douglas Anderson now?

Nothing. No lights broke away from the glittering constellation of the Colony to head in Moanna's direction.

Dammit! Had Douglas gone on ahead already, looking for her? Maybe. Or was he trying to impress her, waiting to surprise her? That thought almost made Moanna smile. But the Dark was deep-

ening all around her: it was no place for a dry-walker Colonist to play the daredevil.

“Are you going out to check your lobster traps?” Jenn Anderson had asked Moanna earlier that day, thirty-hours away at the end of a crackling teletalk-line in Capital Colony.

Moanna gave herself a mental kick for being so unguarded. She should have realised what it had meant, that question, so innocent-sounding.

Jenn hated the Andersons’ family visits to Capital Colony, Moanna knew that. Anyone else would have been excited at the thought of a trip down there, to the old, established deepwater Colonies on the edge of the Florida Deep. But not Jenn. She called Moanna every day, seeking sanctuary from the boredom of endless shopping visits and official engagements, and that day had been no exception.

So Moanna had thought it was a fair question, asking about something that reminded Jenn of her life at home on the ‘wrong’ side of the Frontier.

And then Mrs Anderson had got involved. Moanna knew Jenn’s mom had to be worried to consider sending Douglas out to keep an eye on her. He was eighteen, a cadet in the Federation Navy, and he had returned with his father from Capital Colony the day before. Mrs Anderson was very fond of Moanna, but even so she normally tried to limit any time that Douglas might spend in her company. Just in case.

And Mrs Anderson was worried. Even after five years of living beyond the Frontier, she still wasn’t used to life in MacGillycuddy’s Reef. Down in Capital Colony there were miles and miles of fencing and wide areas of carefully managed banks dotted with habitation-condos. Most settlements were linked together by dry-walk connections or tunnel-trains, so that even a trip in a shuttle-sub was regarded as a hazardous inconvenience. As for MANTAs, south of the Frontier they called them ‘iron coffins’.

Now Douglas was out on his own at dusk, sent to baby-sit someone who had spent her entire life out in the Wet! Moanna was annoyed by the arrogance of it – the stupid, well-meaning, dry-walker arrogance.

She couldn't wait any longer. She flipped her MANTA around in the water, kicked the thrusters to full power, and headed for the Perimeter. She soon passed the sentry-pods and the fluttering weeds that marked the Perimeter fences, all of it left over from the last Wire War. Further south, on the Federation side of the Frontier, such defences had long since been salvaged. Up on the edge of *aqua incognita*, where sharks and pirates lurked in the unknown waters, the fences had been kept for safety's sake.

As she angled her fins away from the Perimeter, Moanna armed the anti-shark spines on her MANTA. She looked around warily, but *aqua incognita* was as empty as ever – just the fish and the flotsam and the restless souls of the billions who had died with the Old Earth more than a thousand years before.

The land rose beneath her, drowned summits that must once have been low hills far from the sea, and the waves at the surface painted broken ribbons across the coral banks.

Moanna glanced up. The surface was so different from the tranquil waters of the Deep – turbulent and wrathful, a sign of the Hell that people said was beyond them.

No-one from the Tethys Colonies had seen the sky for more than a thousand years, and most Tethyans didn't believe it existed at all. Water all the way up, they said, until you got to Hell itself where the Sun burnt down with its shining rays, peeling the skin from your body, scorching out your eyes, and boiling away the seas to fill what was left with poisonous gasses. Papa Noah had led their ancestors under the waves away from all that.

Moanna stared at the kaleidoscope patterns of greens and blues that furled and furrowed overhead. Only a hundred feet away, but a thousand years of fear and superstition lay between her and the surface.

As she rounded a saddleback seamount and flew out above the plateau, the waters widened, opening to her sight. Still nothing. No MANTA. Where could Douglas be? There was nowhere to hide out there. Nowhere except...

The knot of fear in Moanna's stomach tightened, and she headed off at full thrust towards the dusky twilight of the lower slopes.

The wreck was ancient, older than anything anyone had ever seen before. A Sixer sub, the official survey team had said, sunk

during the last Wire War. Except the waters around MacGillycuddy's Reef had been far from the frontlines – no battles had been fought there. The fact that the wreck had remained unsalvaged said it all. Every other sunken sub vanished quickly, stripped for all the raw materials that the Colonies needed. But this wreck had lain untouched for as long as Moanna could remember, encrusted with coral and fringed with wafting anemones.

As she got nearer, the vastness and complexity of the wreck became clearer. It didn't look like a sub, or any other kind of vessel that Moanna could imagine – it was too angular for that, with tiers and platforms and jutting structures that could have been towers. Or legs. Perhaps it had once been an island of iron, rearing up into the air above the waves.

Whatever it had once been, back in its distant Ante-Diluvian past, wherever the tsunamis of the Tectocalypse had beached it, on some sun-scorched scar of the Old Earth waiting for a storm to send it back into the water, it was danger. It teetered in the silt and the sludge, halfway to falling into a trench. That's why neither Moanna had ever explored it. Now she angled her steering-fins and sped towards it.

Moanna's flight-lights dragged their cloudy beams across the accumulated growth of years untold. Fish flitted among the tangles of weed and the rusted skeleton that remained.

There! Where the corals fringed the supports between two platforms, there was a bare patch, as if something had collided with them. Moanna went closer and saw a fleck of blue-white paint of just the shade that was common on the newer Y-fin MANTAs; like the one that Douglas owned. Moanna lined herself up on the opening, careful that her fins wouldn't catch the edges, and darted inside.

All around her the angles were lopsided. The way that the wreck clung halfway-to-hell on the brink of the Deepwater Dark didn't help, and any internal order had been crushed by some ancient act of violence. Flickering fronds covered every surface inside, blurring the hard edges of the old structure.

Moanna could feel a film of sweat forming on her forehead. She nudged and jostled and kept going, threading her way through a maze of shadows and half-seen spaces. If she had thought to set a

way back, trailing a mooring-cable, it would have done no good: the twists and turns of her MANTA would have tangled her in her own lifeline. Moanna would just have to worry about getting out again once she had found Douglas.

Luckily, that was going to be easier than she had hoped; there was a clear trail of signs for her to follow. Disturbed sediments blurred the beams of her flight-lights, and all around her were bald scrapes and scratches among the carpet of slowly wafting stalks.

Moanna was so focused on the trail, she didn't see the shapes moving in the shadows. Something sudden and unseen lashed out at her, sending her MANTA spinning. Moanna fought for control. Her steering-fins scored a line across the iron insides of the wreck, and she collided with a bulkhead. The jolt brought her MANTA to a stop, and she stared out through the canopy at whatever had hit her.

Moanna saw the toothy grey -white snout and smiled.

Dolphins! Just dolphins.

They whistled and clicked at her, swishing their tails and rolling over in the spotlight glare of her flight-lights. One of them came closer, nudging and nuzzling the MANTA apologetically.

"Yeah, OK, I know... You just wanted to play," Moanna waved inside the canopy.

The dolphins hooted some more, and with a little bow of their neckless heads, they scooted out of the wreck, heading for the open water.

Moanna found her way back to the trail. Turn by turn, she followed it deeper. Then through an opening up ahead she heard the frantic noise of thrusters. One last turn into a narrow space, a cage inside a cage, and there was Douglas, his MANTA lodged at an angle in a mesh of girderwork.

Douglas looked up as Moanna appeared. His eyes were wide, his lips were drawn back in a dry grimace, and his skin was deathly-pale. But he was breathing, and his MANTA was intact. Moanna breathed her own sigh of relief: the only bubbles stirring up the water were from his vain attempts to free himself. Douglas was terrified but nothing worse than that.

"Hang on!" Moanna mouthed at him. "I'll get you out!"

“STAY BACK!” the communication-lantern on Douglas’ MANTA blinked at her in rapid photophore, and Moanna could see him shouting at her. “SHARKS!”

Moanna urged her MANTA forwards and with a gentle *thud*, she and Douglas were kissing canopies, face to face. It was oddly intimate, despite the double layer of toughened safety-glass between them.

“Get back, Mo’! Sharks! You have to leave me!” Douglas’ voice was all weak and brittle through the glass.

“Leave you?” Moanna smiled again. “To a hero’s death and the merciless attention of some playful dolphins?”

“Dolphins? No, Mo’! Sharks! They were big and grey with mouths full of teeth and they chased me in here...”

“... And they were dolphins. They chased me too.”

“Dolphins?” Some of the urgency had left Douglas’ expression. Spots of colour crept out from his cheeks towards his ears. “They were dolphins? Really?”

“Really. Trust me.”

Moanna had never been attacked by sharks herself, but her dad had, and Pioneers saw both sharks and dolphins often enough to know the difference. And to know that dolphins did what no Tethyan could – they breathed air at the surface.

Douglas looked so sheepish that Moanna decided to spare him any more embarrassment. She didn’t even tease him about what he was doing out there on his own, waiting for her.

“You OK?” she looked at him from under her eyebrows.

“Fine. Nothing a laundry visit won’t fix.”

Moanna gave a grimacing laugh. “You boys and your obsession with MANTA hygiene!”

A pale smile parted Douglas’ lips, but his own laugh was dry and breathless.

“Wait. Let me see how I can get you out,” Moanna said. She drew back in her MANTA, stirring up the sediments as she circled inside the narrow space.

Douglas’ MANTA had slipped tail-first between some girders. It was wedged tight against a column on one side, and one steering-fin had dislodged a crossbeam from its fixture. The crossbeam had fallen across the tail of the MANTA, a gentle pinch that held the fuselage of the vehicle fast, but hadn’t punctured it.

Moanna finished her circuit.

"I'm going to try to cut through a girder to free your fins," she said, facing Douglas again with their canopies touching.

"Can't you just attach a mooring-cable and pull me out?"

"You look pretty well wedged in there. And you twisted as you came to a stop: your fins are jammed."

"OK," Douglas said. "Cut me out."

"There are going to be some crazy vibrations going through the wreck; it's weak enough without me cutting anything important," Moanna glanced at the girders with concern. "So you be ready to follow me when you're free – we might have to move fast."

"Aye aye, sir," Douglas said, giving Moanna his best Navy-cadet salute.

"Just be ready, alright?"

She sidled off to one side. Reaching down to the control-panel in the sill at her waist, she took hold of a lever, and an external flap opened just beneath the canopy of her MANTA. A manipulator-arm extended itself. Holding the arm out straight, Moanna cycled through the attachments on the end, past drills and grab-claws and welding implements, until she found the circular saw.

She tickled the thrusters, easing her MANTA a little closer to the girders. Concentration furrowed her brow. She licked her lips.

One strut needed to be cut through to give Douglas enough wriggle-room to get free. That was the easy bit. The tricky bit – the cross her fingers and hope bit – was that Moanna had no idea what larger, heavier, more vital elements of the structure might be supported by the strut. It was going to be like taking one card out of a house of cards and hoping that the rest of it didn't fall down.

"Right," she said to convince herself, because she knew that there was nothing else she could do, and she pressed a button.

The saw buzzed with a furious burst of bubbles, and Moanna touched the whirring teeth against the strut at what looked like its weakest point. The sawblade juddered, and its whizzing note became a growl as flakes of rust and ancient paint shot up in a flickering cloud around her. Slowly and carefully, she cut through the strut.

It groaned. It sagged. It buckled a bit. Then it buckled a bit more.

Something at the other end of the strut was pressing on it. Something heavy. Something that would give way if Moanna cut

any more. But she couldn't stop what she was doing. If she did, the saw-blade would jam where it was. She had to keep going.

The saw slowed as the weight pressing down through the strut shifted. A horrible, grating-grinding noise hacked through the water, setting Moanna's teeth on edge.

Suddenly a section of the strut fell away.

"Now!" she cried.

Douglas jiggled his MANTA free, flexing his fins with relief.

"THANKS, MO'."

"MY PLEASURE," Moanna signalled back. "DON'T DO IT AGAIN."

The two of them looked at the strut that now ended six feet above the floor. It seemed astonishing that Moanna had been able to saw through it without anything bad happening.

The wreck creaked. A low, ominous creak. There was a gentle rumble in the distance. And then a catastrophic crash that sent the rust-flakes spinning.

Without warning the ceiling came down at them. It crumpled in sudden spasms, tightening like a vice. The huge metal finger of another girder stabbed through the ceiling.

The two MANTAs turned on the spot. Moanna hit the thrusters and hoped that Douglas was behind her. A doorway shrank suddenly to half its height. She felt her fins scrape the lintel, but she kept going.

Douglas followed blindly as Moanna led the way: through a gash in the bulkhead, a corkscrew climb up something that might once have been a stairwell, along a narrow passage, and another, down into a chasm between two platforms...

Diving, twisting, turning, the two of them didn't care where they went, as long as it looked safe. Fish darted along with them through a blizzard of fragments; a thousand years of slow decay that wheeled and whirled and sent them dizzy. And all the while, the booming of buckling metal was a fin's length behind.

Then at last the water cleared, and they reached a space deep within the wreck where its bare bones were still strong enough to hold back the collapse.

Breathless, soaked with cold sweat, Moanna and Douglas hovered beside each other, waiting for what might come next.

A minute went by. Or maybe it was just a few seconds.

Around them, the grumbling died away; the ancient platforms shrugged themselves into a new shape and grew still.

Moanna took a breath. A careful one, as if even that small movement might provoke the wreck into action again.

She chanced a quick glance at Douglas. He panted through rounded lips, looking more terrified than ever.

For another minute they hung there in mid-water, and then she smiled.

“We did it!” she cried, and the pressure inside her found its way out in a little laugh. Douglas allowed himself a smile too.

“WHICH WAY NOW?” he signalled.

Moanna turned in the water. The labyrinth of the wreck extended out into darkness on all sides. If there was any way out, there was no sign of it. Her thrusters whirred and she bumped up against the canopy of Douglas’ MANTA.

“Kill your flight-lights.”

“But it’ll be dark!” Douglas glanced nervously at the wreck, as if it was just waiting for the cover of darkness to attack them once more.

“Kill the lights,” Moanna repeated. “Fix a cable onto my mooring-hook. I’ll lead us out.”

Still Douglas hesitated. It seemed like utter madness to give up anything that could help them to find their way out.

“But...”

Moanna cut him short – the more words that came next, the worse things would be.

“Look, it’s just.... I can’t see properly with the lights on, OK?”

Moanna held Douglas’ gaze for a second with her ultramarine eyes. He nodded, and with what looked like a prayer on his lips, he reached for the switch.

The darkness that rushed into the interior of the wreck never filled it completely, not to Moanna. Shimmers of light found their way in from somewhere, and she turned her head as she steered the two of them through the shadows. She watched the subtle variations of colour flicker and fade, turning the blue shades of the sea a deeper blue, and blue-purples, white-blues, green-blues, even yellow-blues. A whole new palette painted the Depths – simbral, kuceel, and other colours that hadn’t yet been given names by the Pioneers who could see them. Without really understanding how, Moanna knew which way they needed to go.

Slowly, the wreck opened up, like a puzzle unfolding. Ahead of them, the buckled bulkheads gave way to open water, and at full-

thrust they soared towards it. The fading light of the ocean-evening seemed dazzling after the wreck's dark spaces.

"THANKS AGAIN, MO'," Douglas signalled. "LUCKY U GOT US OUT OF THERE."

The comment was well-intentioned, but he stared a little too long at Moanna as he said it, the way people often did when they saw her and her ultramarine eyes for the first time, and she looked away. They both knew that luck had nothing to do with it. A bruised silence followed, lasting just a little too long for either of them to break it.

Douglas was the one who finally gave in.

"THAT OLD SIXER WRECK IS DANGEROUS. MAYBE THEY SHOULD JUST PUSH IT OVER THE EDGE."

"SIXER?" Moanna forgot in an instant her feelings of discomfort. She knew what Colonists like the Andersons thought – what they were *supposed* to think. There was no room in Tethyan Orthodoxy for the view that the Ante-Diluvian world was anything other a savage and uncivilised wasteland, technologically backward, doomed to disaster, even before the Tectocalypse. But she and Douglas were alone and unobserved – surely he could see beyond the lies; the wreck had been built for a very different world than theirs.

"Sure. WHAT ELSE COULD IT BE?" he asked.

Another silence crept between them, longer, deeper.

This time, Moanna broke it first. She could have challenged Douglas and his wilful dry-walker ignorance. She could have defeated the lies that he had been told, that he himself was telling. But she didn't, and she despised herself for her cowardice.

"SO, LOBSTERS?"

Douglas gave her a grateful nod. "LOBSTERS."

And with the wreck in the darkness still plainly visible to her ultramarine eyes, Moanna turned towards the plateau where the Morgans' lobster-creels were waiting.

2

The next morning, Moanna woke early and slid back the glass on her sleep-vault. She padded through to the kitchen-diner in her bare feet, where the unwashed dishes of the previous day still littered the scene. She rattled around in the cupboards looking for a clean mug. There weren't any, so she picked up the nearest dirty mug and gave it a quick rinse. Her fingers smarted a little under the hot water where she had got a few ice-burns from flash-freezing the lobsters the night before. It was a small price to pay for their escape, and the least of her concerns.

The lobster-catch had been good, and she and Douglas had towed the buoyant creels back to the Morgans' H-Pod, the traps floating up behind their MANTAs and jostling each other like untidy balloons.

Neither Moanna nor Douglas had really known what to say to each other on the return journey. The incident with the wreck should have brought them closer together, and in a way, it had done: it was a secret that they would share, for now and forever. But at the same time, it had made the differences between them more clear and more distinct than ever before. Saying 'goodbye' had felt stilted and faltering, as if they had both known that things had changed.

Sitting in the processing-module that night, Moanna had barely been concentrating as she bagged up the lobsters. For distraction, she had turned on one of the Colony's cable TV channels to watch an old videofilm. But she hadn't really been paying attention. Before she had really been aware of it, the videofilm was over, and an unnaturally effervescent young woman had been giving the pressure-forecast for the next day.

"...and because of ongoing maintenance work, separate low pressure warnings have been issued for all sectors between Porbeagle Avenue and the East Coral Causeway. Decompression times of sixty to eighty minutes are expected if you're heading that way. Suit up safely, and have a nice day."

Then the TV screen had faded to black and the cable-channel had shut down for the night. It had been a mundane ending to a very unsettling evening, and Moanna, left alone with her worries, had turned in.

As she ate breakfast in her favourite window-seat the next morning, those worries returned. In a way, they never truly vanished; they were only diluted when her parents were around, blurred and obscured by the Morgans' Pioneer lifestyle – the daily routines, the talk around the table, little rituals and sayings from a culture older than the Federation. It was a culture that dry-walker Colonists like the Andersons didn't share.

Oddly, when her parents weren't around, Moanna wasn't sure how much of that culture she really and truly shared herself. The Reef was not yet integrated into the Federation like the nearest Colonies of Donovan's Deep or Jackson's Drift, but Moanna's life wasn't the isolated and wandering existence of most Pioneers.

She was Pioneer-born and raised – her ultramarine eyes told that tale – but her home was and always had been MacGillycuddy's Reef. Her dad didn't understand that. As the Reef had grown, his grumbling had become more frequent. He checked the Morgans' H-Pod's engines and landing-legs regularly, saying how they should just head off into the blue away from everyone.

"We're Pioneers," he always said. "Out there in the prairies is our home."

Moanna couldn't bring herself to disagree. Not after the arguments there had been about Jason joining the local Militia. Not after him dying in its service.

Jenn Anderson, of all people, understood how Moanna felt. Jenn had been born in Capital Colony to people from the élite of the Tethys Federation, but she had spent the most important part of her life beyond the Frontier, and that had left its mark on her. Jenn was another mis-matched mixture, a mirror-image to Moanna's feelings of belonging and not-belonging. With Jenn around, Moanna felt more at ease in her half-and-half world. But with Jenn far away in Capital Colony and her parents out of contact in the sea-grass prairies, Moanna no longer knew where she belonged.

As luck would have it – bad luck, in this case – Moanna didn't have the luxury of sitting around with her worries. She had been so distracted the night before that she had run one of the lobster-creels into the flash-freezer with its floats still attached; two of them were jammed immovably in the guide-rail, and the others were in shreds. She would need to fix it, and that meant a trip to the chandlers-store back at the Reef.

But first, she had something to do. Not for herself; for Jason. She was going to make an offering at the family shrine to the Blue Lady.

A belief in the Blue Lady was something else that Colonists like the Andersons didn't share. They believed instead in Papa Noah, the saviour of their ancestors, who had led them into salvation below the waves at the end of the Old Earth. For Pioneers, Papa Noah was a humble messenger, a vehicle of the Blue Lady. For Colonists, the Blue Lady was nothing more than a myth, a cult figure. And Moanna, stuck again in her half and half world, believed in neither.

The Goddess of Liberty was more laid-back than Papa Noah, a grown-up kind of goddess, and she didn't demand constant attention like some needy teenager. There were no priests, no sacred books, no rigid sets of rules telling anyone how to behave. She was just there, always there, ready to offer hope when there was no chance of help, and protecting the Pioneers from the demons and demi-gods of the Dark.

Even so, Moanna still felt a bit apprehensive about the ritual she was about to undertake. Her parents and Jason spoke to the Blue Lady like she was someone they really knew; to Moanna, she was just a statue.

She opened one of the drawers in the metal base to the statue and wrote Jason's name on a strip of tissue-paper. Then she opened another drawer and took out a box of matches and a tiny dark brown splinter of Deepwood. The splinter was exquisitely smooth, surprisingly heavy for its size, an expensive fragment of the Old Earth that had grown under the Sun and the sky until the tsunamis and ash-storms of the Tectocalypse had buried it.

Moanna wrapped the splinter of Deepwood in the tissue-paper and rang the bell on the altar.

"Um, yeah, so... It's me, Blue Lady... Moanna Morgan," she fumbled with the slip of paper and almost tore it. "I just wanted

you to... (no, wanted was not right – you don't tell a goddess what you want) ...I was just going to ask you if you could look after my brother, Jason Morgan... his soul, I mean, down there in the Dark.”

She stared at the empty eyes and the parted lips of the statue as if she was waiting for an answer. But the Blue Lady said nothing.

“Anyway,” Moanna went on. “That would be really kind of you. So if you could do it, I'd be grateful. Thank you.”

Still no answer. No voice in her head. No feeling of succour and support. Just a statue.

The match rasped across the strip of sandpaper on the side of the box and flared into flame. Moanna touched it gently against the wrapped-up parcel of the Deepwood splinter, and laid the match and the parcel in a tray at the Blue Lady's feet. The splinter of Deepwood smouldered for a little while before the flames raced over it, filling the H-Pod with its rich, earthy fumes. The ventilators juddered on to carry away the smoke, and somewhere it was mixed with carbon dioxide from the scrubbers and wastewater. Then it was pumped out through the vents, cast away with the currents all the way to the Blue Lady herself, wherever she was.

Moanna watched the smoke drift, and her mind drifted with it; it reminded her of clouds.

She had seen clouds once. Not for real, of course. They had been gritty images in a copy of an old illegal Ante-Diluvian video-film that Jason had brought home, and they had looked beautiful, not bestial. Not water and not air, but both and neither at the same time. Most of those films were fakes, but this time there had been something different about it. Moanna had been transfixed by the swirling, smoky shapes of clouds that she saw floating above the people and their air-free existence. How could they all walk around with their eyes on the ground, she thought? If she had been an Ante-Diluvian, she would have spent all day looking up.

But that was all long ago now. Long ago and far away, in that country of the mind where the dead still walk; Jason was lost out in *aqua incognita*, and only the Blue Lady knew where.

For a few moments longer Moanna stood there in front of the statue, feeling a bit silly, as if she was play-acting. It made her feel like a cheat and a fraud.

“Sorry, Jase,” she mumbled to herself, but quietly so that the Blue Lady couldn’t hear her.

Ten minutes later, Moanna was hanging from the flight-harness of her MANTA, soaring towards the outstretched arms of the Colony. The sea still had traces of the violet-blue hue of dawn, but it was getting lighter by the minute – it was going to be a nice day.

By the time she reached the nearest docking-station jutting up above the pressure-hulls of the Colony, she could see one or two other MANTAs coming in for work from. Very few people lived in H-Pods outside the Colony proper anymore. Most lived in the new sub-urbs that had been built inside the rapidly extending pressure-hulls, so there was not much traffic at the docking-station. The revolving launch- and landing-rack was stationary when Moanna got there, and she slipped her MANTA into the first place. The conveyor-belt chugged into life automatically and carried her through the out-lock hatch, through the airlock, and into the docking-station itself.

“Morning Mr Simmonds,” she said, lifting the canopy and climbing out of her MANTA.

Mr Simmonds, the docking-attendant on duty, looked a bit startled to see Moanna so early during the harvest holidays. “What’s up, Moanna?”

“I forgot to pick up some spare parts yesterday,” she explained. Which was almost true.

Mr Simmonds nodded, and peered at her closely as he handed her the docking coupon. She hadn’t slept well, and it showed. “You look like you’ve been partying all night while your folks are at the harvest.”

“Something like that,” she tried to smile.

Mr Simmonds gave a wheezing little chuckle and a wink. “Don’t you worry. I won’t tell.”

“Thanks, Mr Simmonds. I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll polish your MANTA while you’re here,” he replied, “put a dab of wax on those fins. Looks like she could do with some.”

“Thank you,” Moanna said, as breezily as she could, and with a wave she walked off down the passageway to the lower levels.

Below the docking-station was one of the main traffic-routes for the sector, as well as the local stop for the tunnel-train to the Un-

der Hub, the central intersection between all of the Colony's arms. Normally, the turnstiles for the train were blocked with people lining up to head in for work. It was Sunday, so there were only one or two people hanging around, and even they didn't seem to be going anywhere in a hurry. But Moanna didn't need the train. She left the interchange and turned right, walking down some stairs to the street below.

Down on the street, the bright electric lights became fewer. Everything was bathed in the dim green glow of bioluminescent algae pumping slowly but constantly throughout the Colony in transparent pipes. Rows of access-hatches to individual habitation-units stacked up all the way from the main street to the vaulted arches of the roof, flanked by tier upon tier of narrow, inward-facing windows. It was a way of life that Moanna couldn't really imagine, even though it was carrying on so close to her own.

The streets were deserted. The only people Moanna saw were from a maintenance-team as they inspected a leaking wall-plate. A gentle flurry of sparks fell like white-hot feathers as one of them welded the leak shut. Then the habitation-units fell back and the street opened out into one of the purpose-built shopping and service zones which were typical for the newer sectors of the Colony. Moanna crossed the wide space of a piazza dotted with tables and small purple-leaved bushes planted in pots, and went into *Alana's Aqua-Cultural Supplies* to buy some new floats.

After buying the spare-parts she needed, she popped into a bakery and bought herself something that she could eat with minimal preparation later on. And then she did something she had not planned to do.

Three times she walked past the white-painted hatch with the red cross on it before she finally summoned up the courage to see her plan through: she was going to get coded.

Coding was another one of those dividing-lines between Pioneers and Colonists. Taking the step of getting herself coded wasn't exactly a rash decision – it had been on Moanna's mind for months and everyone at school was talking about it. Even so, it was not something she could just do. Her parents would be annoyed if they found out, and Jenn, too, always the rebel, would give her a hard time. But then again it was easy for someone like Jenn to be different.

A few people were sitting in the doctor's surgery when Moanna pushed open the hatch and ventured inside. The waiting-room smelt of antiseptic and collective unease. Behind the counter, a receptionist was wearing a white and blue pin-striped pressure-suit with her hair held back in a neat bun. The receptionist smiled at Moanna as she stepped closer.

"Good morning. Do you have an appointment?"

"No," Moanna replied. "I'm sorry. This was kind of a spur of the moment thing... I've come to be coded."

The receptionist smiled again. "That's fine. We're not very busy today. Here, fill in this form to take through with you, and I'll call you when there's a slot free with the nurse. It shouldn't be too long."

Moanna went to find a chair and sat there filling in details and ticking boxes on the form. She had hardly finished when the receptionist called out to her.

"Miss," the receptionist pointed to a door on her right. "The nurse will see you now. Last door on the left."

Moanna took her form with her and went in the direction that the receptionist had indicated. A long corridor stretched out ahead of her. One of the doors along its length opened and a young man came out, looking pale as he headed for the exit. Behind him, down at the far end of the corridor, another door opened and a nurse leant out to call Moanna inside. For a second, Moanna hesitated: it was her last chance to turn back. But then she strode forwards into the room.

"My name is Ellen," the nurse said, closing the door behind them both. "Please take a seat."

Moanna sat down, and the nurse slipped into the seat at the desk opposite her.

"Have you completed the form?" the nurse asked.

"I... uh... didn't fill in the address," Moanna said as she handed it over.

The nurse gave her a knowing look. "Well, we don't have to send the results out. You can stop by and collect them... Moanna," she added, looking for the name at the top of the sheet of paper.

"Yes. That would be best. My parents aren't keen on coding, you see."

"You're from a Pioneer family?"

Moanna nodded, feeling more nervous than before.

"I thought so," the nurse said. "Your eyes give it away. We don't see many like that in-Colony. Are they just blue or...?"

"No," Moanna looked down at the floor, away from the querying stare. "They're ultramarine. At least, I think so. My mom has ultramarine eyesight, and so did my brother."

"I'd say there was a good chance of you having ultramarine too, then. Blue eyes are hardly ever just blue among Pioneers. So you've never have your vision tested?"

Moanna shook her head. "My brother had it done, when he joined the Militia."

"I see," the nurse smiled at her encouragingly. "And do you know what his results were?"

"Three-fifty, I think he said. Something like that," Moanna watched as the nurse made a note on the form. "Does that make sense?"

"Yes. That sounds about right," the nurse replied. "N-three-fifty we call it. That's an extended visual range, beyond three hundred and fifty nanometres, into near-ultraviolet. How's your low-light vision?"

"Pretty good," Moanna said, shifting in her seat, and thinking back to the inside of the wreck the day before.

"Just good? Or really good?"

"Really good, I suppose."

"That all fits," the nurse nodded without looking up. She ticked a few more boxes on the form. "The mutations usually pattern together."

Mutations. The m-word. It made Moanna's skin crawl. "Will that be much of a problem?" she asked.

The nurse looked up from the form. She adopted her most professional smile and fluttered her eyelashes a few times. "Well, you know, Moanna, DNA-coding is a complex business made very simple. From a *medical* perspective, it's just grouping everyone together who's got similar gene profiles, and matching them with the least-similar groups to keep the population diverse and healthy. That's straightforward and scientific. It's just numbers, really."

"Yes. I understand," Moanna knew all that already. Coding had been essential in the early days, when the Tethyan population had numbered only a few thousand. Only now that the population

of the Federation numbered more than half a million, let alone countless thousands of Pioneers, the necessity of coding was disputed. The science of it wasn't what she was worried about.

The nurse smiled at her again, looking as reassuring as she could. "Your brother was in the Militia?"

Moanna nodded.

"The military have started to appreciate some of the low-light benefits of ultramarine vision. But for civilians," the nurse paused, as if she was trying to remember the correct, sanitised, and legally-sanctioned turn of phrase, "the Federal Coding Agency is still reviewing the evidence."

"I see," Moanna knew what that meant; if there were any benefits to ultramarine vision, they had originated outside the very process that was supposed to keep the Tethyan population healthy. How could ignoring the rules have a good side?

"In this Colony," the nurse went on, "Federation rules don't yet apply. Coding is voluntary and the results are anonymous and not legally-binding. There's no prohibition on anyone marrying or having children with someone outside their DNA-matched groups if they want to. If you decide to ignore the coding advice, no-one can refuse to give you or any of your offspring a job, or deny you medical care, or anything like that, either. In other Colonies... Well, different rules apply. Have your parents ever been coded?"

"Yes. But they weren't matched, so they eloped out here beyond the Frontier."

"How romantic!" the nurse said. "Well, listen, Moanna, I can give you a leaflet to read about all the legal issues, if you want. Maybe go away and think it over?"

For Moanna, remembering that little bit of Morgan family history had brought with it a pang of conscience. Getting coded suddenly felt more like a deliberate and calculated betrayal of her parents, rather than something she was doing for herself.

"No. No. I'm sure," she said. "I'm here now."

I'll go to the harvest with them next year, Moanna told herself, to make up for it.

The nurse nodded briskly. "Alright then. We can test your vision today too, if you think you're ready. It won't take long. It's just a few visual games; pattern-matching, seeing whether you can spot objects against different backgrounds, and things like that."

“Sure,” Moanna nodded unenthusiastically. “How long will the results take to come through?”

“The vision test: three days. Coding will take longer, about three months or so. I know, I know,” the nurse gave a sympathetic nod. “It *is* a long time. We still don’t have a testing-centre here, so the results have to come from the facility at Jackson’s Drift.” She put Moanna’s form to one side, and stood up to prepare the equipment. “Anything else?”

“Well, yes,” Moanna said. “Does it hurt?”

The nurse laughed. “That’s usually everyone’s first question! No. Not really. It’s just a blood-test. You’ll be fine, Moanna. Just relax....”

3

Mike Hagiwara was the start of it. Good old Uncle Mike. Moanna's parents had known Mike since the early days of the Colony, since before even Jason had been born, when they'd first turned up at the scattered settlements of MacGillycuddy's Reef in a stolen sub, with no money and even less of an idea about how to make any. Mike was older than them, and he'd been around, so he helped them out. He loaned them an old harvester-sub so they could go and stake a claim to the sea-grass meadows where now the dust from the coral mines had killed everything back.

Mike Hagiwara and the Morgans had been close, and even when he got married and then divorced, and his engineering business took off, and the Colony grew and the farmwork took up more and more of the Morgans' time, he had still been a frequent visitor to their H-Pod. But Moanna and her parents hadn't seen much of him during the past year; Uncle Mike had only visited them twice since Jason's funeral. Or what passed for a funeral when a sub exploded out at sea.

Moanna left the docking-station at MacGillycuddy's Reef in her MANTA, gleaming like new from the polishing that Mr Simmonds had given it, and with a sticking-plaster on her arm from the coding blood-test. The test hadn't taken long, or the assessment of her ultramarine vision that had come afterwards, but her arm throbbed. Or maybe she just thought it did, and the throbbing was really her conscience making itself felt.

What's done can't be undone, she thought to herself, but she didn't have to go and pick up the results. There was still time to leave things as they were.

As MacGillycuddy's Reef blurred behind her and she came flying in towards Morgans' Mount, the ridge where the Morgans' H-Pod sat on its broad, flat, coralcrete perch, Moanna could see that they had a visitor. The light above the guest-lock hatch blinked on and off: someone had docked.

Like all Pioneers, the Morgans had a guest-lock attached to their H-Pod, a small airlock and habitation area with enough

room in it to land a couple of MANTAs. The guest-lock was freely accessible to anyone who came to visit, or to passers-by who got into trouble. Out in the ocean, a locked hatch could mean suffocation or drowning, and many a Pioneer owed his or her life to someone else's guest-lock. The guest-lock had air, food, and water, and enough tools to fix most minor problems, but access to the rest of the H-Pod was by invitation only.

At first when Moanna saw the light, she wondered whether Douglas had come over, but she dismissed that idea. He would probably have called first, and waited for an answer if she was out. She piloted her MANTA back to the launch tube and keyed in the access-code using the blunt-ended fingers of the grab-arm. The out-lock hatch opened, and the launch-rack rose up ready to take her and her MANTA back inside.

Moanna started undoing the straps of her flight-harness even before the in-lock hatch slid open, and she was ready to spring down the ladder as soon as the launch-rack came to a halt. An unexpected visitor was a real rarity, and she was half-worried and half-excited. She unfastened her pressure-helmet and almost sprinted down the long corridor past the processing-module towards the guest-lock. A light flashed there too to show that someone was inside, and on the security-monitor she could see a grainy grey image of a portly man pacing up and down inside the small space. She recognised him immediately.

"Hey, Uncle Mike!" she bellowed into the intercom, making the less than sprightly figure leap a couple of feet into the air.

"Hey, Mo'!" Mike Hagiwara said, coming close to the camera and speaking into the mouthpiece. "Happy heart-attacks to you too! You gonna let me in?"

"Sure. Sorry," she punched in the code to open the in-lock, and Mike ducked down under the low coaming of the hatch and stepped inside the H-Pod.

"Miss Moanna Morgan!" he said, standing open-armed to give her a hug. "You're getting taller every time I see you. Nearly as big as me! In some dimensions, anyway. Keep it that way; I don't recommend the others."

Mike spread his hands across the bulging belly of his pressure-suit and laughed, but Moanna thought he looked just a little slimmer than before, and very tired. There were dark rings around his

eyes, and the skin above his beard was as grey as his hair. But he was laughing, the same as ever.

"I heard you got your grade five!"

"Yeah. A few months back." Moanna closed the hatch to the guest-lock.

"What? *Months* already? And you didn't get your grade six yet? What's keeping you?"

Moanna was used to Mike's teasing. "Yeah well, you can't do more than one grade in a calendar year anymore. You want some coffee? Or tea?" she gestured in the direction of the habitation-module.

"Tea, thanks. I'm off the coffee. You know me: never refuse a free drink," Mike ambled along behind her as she led the way.

The two of them reached the kitchen-diner area. Moanna stopped mid-stride as she realised that there were no clean mugs to drink from. And that was because the entire place was littered with the less-than-welcoming sight of three days' worth of unwashed cooking and eating implements.

Mike stopped dead behind her and took a long, slow look around at the mess and clutter, then he slapped himself theatrically on the forehead.

"The harvest! You're on your own! Spot the engineer! I wondered where the harvester-sub was: I should've realised."

"Yeah. Sorry. It's gotten a bit out of hand..." Moanna picked two mugs out of their hiding-places and carried them over to the sink to wash them.

"Hey, don't apologise," Mike said, pushing a plate and various other bits of debris to one side so that he could sit on the couch near the TV. "You should see my place! Is this stuff recent? I mean, this slice of pizza you left over here looks like it might still be good."

Moanna started filling the kettle with water from the filter. "Last night. Is that recent enough?"

"It'll do," Mike tried to lever the slice of pizza away from the ketchup that had glued it to the plate, and then gave up.

"You want a knife?" Moanna asked him, hunting around. "And there's some mexi-chilli jellyfish flakes somewhere too..."

"No. I'm not hungry. Not really. Eating's just habit with me. Can't you tell?" Mike gave a little laugh, and pushed the plate

away with the pizza still attached to it. "So, you didn't go to the harvest this year?"

Moanna paused in what she was doing. She felt her arm throb a little again.

"No," she replied, drying the mugs. "You know, Uncle Mike, there's school to prepare for with the exams coming up. And the new harvester has an integrated baler. With that, mom and dad don't need a third person on board taking up room, water, and air."

"I see you got your reasons all rehearsed," Mike said with a smile.

"Besides," Moanna added, in full flow, "someone has to bring in the lobsters. We can't just ignore three weeks' worth of catch."

Mike nodded. "I know how it is. Things haven't gotten any better since they started talking about us 'joining' the Federation."

He shook his head dolefully and started on a well-practised rant about tariffs and taxes. Moanna kept quiet. Mr Anderson, Jenn and Douglas' father, was the Federation Negotiator from Capital Colony who had been posted to MacGillycuddy's Reef to work with Governor Khan on full accession into the Federation. Talks had been ongoing for years, and the prospect of joining the Federation had never been popular with many Pioneers – they had their reasons for living out beyond the Frontier, after all. A flood of immigrants from other Colonies had arrived, taking up jobs and valuable habitation space, but so far, benefits were harder to spot. Taxes were getting higher, and so were prices. Coding was an issue that never went away, and Governor Khan had been forced to strip the local Militia of some of its duties and hand them over to the outsiders in the Federal Navy. People were not happy. Even the ones who muttered (quietly) about Khan being corrupt and autocratic preferred his style of leadership to what the Federation promised. At least Khan was seen as one of their own.

"Are you busy?" Moanna asked, changing the subject the moment Mike paused for breath. She brought over a tray with the drinks and a plate with some cookies, and sat down.

"Can't complain," Mike said, taking the steaming mug of tea. "Well, of course I can..."

"That's good," Moanna cut in, and deftly pushed the cookie plate a bit nearer to where Mike was sitting. "That reminds me.

One of the creel-hoppers has a bent guide-rail, and dad's been meaning to bring it over to the workshop," she smiled at him. "I don't s'pose you'd mind taking a look while you're here, would you, Uncle Mike?"

Mike Hagiwara fixed her with a beady eye. "Your dad's perfectly capable of fixing a bent guide-rail himself, Mo', so don't try that one on me... How did you do it?"

"I... uh... ran one of the creels in with the floats still attached. Last night. It still works, just about."

Mike laughed heartily. "Sure I can fix that. Your secret's safe with me. Just lemme have one of these delicious cookies – did you make these? – and then we can go take a look."

"Mom and dad will be sorry they missed you," Moanna said, taking a sip of tea and a cookie for herself.

"How are they both doing?" Mike asked. It was more than just a casual enquiry, and Moanna knew it, even without the searching look that he gave her from under his eyebrows.

"So, so."

"And you, Mo'? How're you getting on?"

"Yeah, some days... Some days I think he'll just come home. I can't believe it's nearly a year. When they salvaged the wreck, that made it a bit more real. Hearing about the things they recovered."

"Yeah," Mike put his mug down on the table, a little too heavily, so that the tea slopped against the sides. He pursed his pale lips and played with the handle of the mug. "Yeah. That must've been tough. Did they find anything personal? Any keepsakes?"

Moanna shook her head. "No. The wreck was too badly damaged, and after nearly nine months lying out there in the currents... I don't think anybody got anything personal back. The accident report said that the crew's quarters were gone." She tried to smother the thought of cold, black water rushing in, and the passageways filling up with it, foaming and churning. "So, you know..."

"Yeah," Mike muttered. "I know... Well, I can imagine... Sorry I haven't been around much."

"That's OK, Uncle Mike. It can't've been very easy for you either, knowing Jase since he was born, and all," Moanna could see how troubled he looked.

Mike put his half-eaten cookie to one side and stared down at his feet. "Yeah. He was a good kid."

"They just collided with the reef out there. An unforeseeable and unpreventable accident. Human error. No reason for it. Just an accident," Moanna repeated the emotionless words from the official report. They were oddly comforting in their bland way, making it all seem less real, less important

As soon as she had said it, Moanna wished that she hadn't. Mike sat uncomfortably upright, the lines on his face etched deeper. She remembered suddenly what she should not have forgotten: that Mike had been employed to work on re-fitting Jason's Militia patrol-sub, the *Syracuse*, for what had turned out to be its final, fateful mission.

"Oh," she said, realising how he might misunderstand her comment. "I'm sorry, Uncle Mike. I didn't mean..."

"What? Oh, right... No. That's OK, Mo'..."

"No, really... Stupid of me..."

And for a few moments the two of them talked over each other, both reassuring, both apologising, until the tussle of words stuttered to an embarrassing stalemate.

The silence reached breaking point, and Mike stood up, looking more agitated than ever.

"Mo', listen. I came by because I have something to say... I wanted to tell your folks. Maybe you're too young, so I was gonna leave it when I saw they were at the harvest, but now I'm here... It's been playing on my mind and I can't just go. If I leave and don't say, I might never have the heart to do it. And it needs to be done."

Moanna swallowed. She'd never seen Mike Hagiwara look so serious. Or so ill. "What is it?"

Mike took a deep breath. "I went to the auction, the auction of the salvaged parts from the wreck. And I bought some stuff. Some of the compressors..."

Moanna nodded. She thought she understood perfectly: Mike felt bad about profiting from the cheap gear that the salvage teams had recovered from the wreck of the *Syracuse*; that was why he had given them a wide berth for the last few months. "I understand, Uncle Mike. Resources are scarce. Too scarce to waste. Every wreck that can be salvaged gets recycled. It's normal."

For a moment, Mike Hagiwara seemed like he would take that. He looked at Moanna's face, so sympathetic, so wanting to find something to soothe his nerves, and he almost wanted to just leave things as they stood there and then. To nod and agree, and sit and drink his tea and eat his cookie, despite the solid feeling in his stomach, and then to go and fix that creel-hopper and make a few jokes. Just like it was before. Good old Uncle Mike. But he couldn't. He wasn't going to lie anymore.

"No. That's not it, Mo'. You see," his eyes wandered around the room, looking anywhere but at Moanna. "Those compressors... See, I was supposed to replace the old compressors on the *Syracuse*," he spoke rapidly, trying to get the words out as fast as he could. "But the new ones arrived late. Too late to fit. So I left the old ones on-board."

There was a silence, as keen and as cutting the blade of a knife. Mike seemed surprised at how much silence there was now that he had finally spoken those words, but Moanna just stared, hardly blinking.

She felt something well up inside her, cold and hard and angry. "You left the old compressors installed on the *Syracuse*? Even though they were supposed to be replaced? You let Jason leave, you let the whole sub go out there on a mission without the right parts...," her ultramarine eyes narrowed. "What did you do with the new compressors, Uncle Mike? Did you keep them back to sell them on to someone else at a profit? Did you?"

With a jolt as if he had been slapped, Mike seemed to come out of his daze. He shook his head. "No, Mo'. That's not what I'm saying. Those compressors were *older*, but not *old*. Two years, tops. Compressor failure can't've caused any explosion or navigation failure. You know that... An eleven year old can fix a compressor. Besides, they had back-ups."

"What did you do with the new compressors, Uncle Mike?" Moanna repeated, getting slowly to her feet. Her legs felt like they could hardly bear her weight, but with all the turmoil inside her, she couldn't just stay sitting there.

Mike Hagiwara looked as guilty as any thief and liar she'd ever seen, but he shook his head, his face flushed. "Sit down, Moanna. That's not it... Hear me out. The compressors they salvaged and sold at the auction, they weren't the old ones, not the ones I left on board. They were new, brand new. Same model as the ones

that came in too late for me to fit. And this is where it gets really weird: they even had the serial numbers from the new batch. Exactly the same. But those compressors can't have been from the new batch. They should have been old because..."

"... because you kept the new ones back and sold them on to someone else," Moanna finished, her arms crossed tight in front of her.

Mike gesticulated, pleading with her, little specks of spittle flecking his moustache. "Moanna, I'm not proud of that, I admit that, but the compressors didn't cause the accident. Dammit, you *know* that. Listen to me! Think about it! The *Syracuse* went out with *old* compressors, and nobody knew, nobody except me. Then they find the wreck, or say they did, and it had *new* compressors, just like it was all written down in the official records, just like the job-sheets said. Don't you see, Mo'? It's a fake! The whole thing is a fake. The salvage teams working for Governor Khan and the Militia didn't ever find the wreck of the *Syracuse*, but they wanted the wreck they found to look like it was the *Syracuse*. Don't you get it?"

"Why? Why would they do that?"

Mike shrugged. "I dunno. Routine patrol, they said. Maybe it wasn't so routine after all."

Moanna stared at him. Words, thoughts, crowded her head, the past year, starting to unravel. She marched over to the kitchen-counter and back again. She knew Mike was right: the compressors on the *Syracuse* couldn't all have failed at once, and even if they had, there was no way compressor failure could've caused an explosion or anything serious on a Militia sub with a fully-trained crew. But she was mad at him because for a few dollars extra in his pocket he had dared to fudge something that affected Jason. And because after months of anguish, he was the only person she could blame.

"You know what they said at the time..." Mike went on.

"Who exactly is 'they'?"

"People. The guys down the docks."

"What did 'they' say?"

"They said the *Syracuse* was heading north-east, out into *aqua incognita*," Mike paused long enough to give Moanna a significant look. "They say it went out looking for Roanoke."

Moanna laughed scornfully, an angry, dry, match-strike of a laugh. "What? You're going to tell me the *Syracuse* was sunk by ghosts now? Any boat goes missing, and the whisper is it's Roanoke that's to blame. It's a dead Colony, lost for how many hundred years? No-one's been there since the First Wire War. No-one even knows anymore where 'there' is..."

"I'm not saying it was ghosts, Mo'," Mike said, grateful that he had deflected some of her anger. "Whatever happened at Roanoke... If the Roanokers were foolish enough to draw Plague air down from the surface, like they say they did, then that stuff could still be deadly today. You gotta admit it's weird how many rigs go out north-east and never come back. And north-east is where the *Syracuse* was headed... That's what Finn Astaire said."

"Finn Astaire? And how would he know?" Moanna glared at Mike, her anger bubbling over again. "Even the crew didn't know where they were going! Jason didn't!"

Mike shrugged again. "I'm just saying... All I know is, that wreck was a fake."

"If what you say is true...", Moanna hardly dared to believe what it might mean. If the wreck was a fake then there *was* no wreck. Maybe there had *never* been a wreck. Maybe the *Syracuse* didn't end up with her brother in the Deepwater Dark at the bottom of the ocean.

She shook her head to stop that thought in its tracks. No. Jason was dead. She hated the idea, but it was almost better than hoping he was alive. No sub ever came back after going missing for a year. If the wreck had been faked, if Mike was telling the truth, then Governor Khan certainly didn't think the *Syracuse* was coming back. There was no point faking a wreck only for the *Syracuse* to wander into port somewhere.

"I swear it's true," Mike said. "Every word."

"Then you have to go to someone. Talk to the TV. The papers. Make something of it. Find out what really happened."

"Uh-uh," Mike shook his head vehemently. He stepped backwards, his hands raised to stop that idea. "No way. You know what Khan is like. You've heard the stories. He's not called 'Cut-throat' Khan for nothing. Half the coralcrete underpinning the Hub is filled with what's left of people who crossed Khan. I've known him since the early days, since the Reef got started. He wasn't the first to show up trying to take things over, but he made

damn sure he was the last! And he hasn't changed, Mo', not one bit! Khan is head of the Militia, Khan sent the *Syracuse* out on its last mission, and Khan's the one who ordered the salvage-operation. If he doesn't want anyone to know they never found the real *Syracuse*, you can bet it's because he was up to no good in the first place. He won't take kindly to people who try to find out the truth. He's a gangster, Mo', a complete crook!"

"Takes one to know one!" Moanna spat at him.

"You mustn't tell anyone!" Mike implored her. "Please!"

"Not tell? Not tell?! Then why did *you* tell, Uncle Mike? To make your conscience feel better? What did you think I would do? Or mom and dad?"

Mike grabbed her hands, and Moanna struggled to get free. But he held on tight, his face more ashen than ever, all the fire burnt out of it.

"Listen to me, Moanna. I screwed up, but I did *not* cause any accident. You're a smart kid, you *know* that. I dunno what happened to the *Syracuse* or why, and I don't think I want to know... I had to tell you what I knew because it's been eating away at me, and if you hate me for it then maybe that's all I deserve. But you mustn't tell anyone about this! Not anyone! Not because of me, but because if Khan finds out someone suspects the truth... You mustn't, OK? You really mustn't. I've seen what happens to anyone who crosses Khan."

Moanna pulled away from him, drawing back into the kitchen. "I think you better go now," she said flatly. "Thanks for stopping by. I'll be sure and tell mom and dad you called."

"No, Mo'," Mike said. "Listen to me. Think about it..."

Moanna met his gaze, that imploring, guilty gaze, and then turned away again. She raised a hand in farewell. "Goodbye, Uncle Mike."

End of Sample