

Sandtrap
by
Nicholas Waller

Lin Adenuka stared out as the arc of the planet grew slowly to fill his soloship's viewport. He had grown tired of many things but never this, the sight of a new world, round and full and apparently immovable against the deep. Now, finally, it was to be given a chance at a history of its own. Or a second chance, perhaps.

48-274C. Churned, it had been nicknamed. A dull name, but it wasn't the prettiest planet he'd seen. A million shades of amber and brown, topped and tailed with dirty white ice, and all mashed up. It was hard to imagine that there had ever been life - even low-temperature rock microbes - on that forbidding, beaten-up surface. There was no indigenous life now, of course, and a thin, unbreathable atmosphere, but the place had potential for a productive future. Ripe for comet-seeding; when there was water there'd be seasons.

One of General Construction's most promising system overhauls, if only a minor local difficulty could be fixed.

It was fiddly, political and possibly career-threatening. There were several ways to get it wrong; the easiest would be to dither. Got to get in there hard, make a splash, shake things up. Tread on some top toes, go softly softly with the rest. Flush out the real truth. And then strike hard.

He sighed. He was getting too old for this. Too many idiots were ready to help you screw up.

This Vannan, for instance, the security officer. His Incident Report was pedantic and clumsy, raising more questions than it answered. Who did he think he was kidding? He made it harder to marshal the information satisfactorily. Vannan should have left the bodies in situ, for a start. Still, perhaps on the ground that hadn't been possible. Staff morale, lab gossip...

Adenuka reviewed the case. Three researchers killed in a quake-generated rock slide while out on an extended field trip. An accident, that was the published conclusion. Dr Kolade Teiss, field geological surveyor. His assistant, Dawn Ray. And, somewhat oddly, Dr Erica Sobhy, the base medical officer. What was she doing there?

Vannan had not thought it worthy of mention. Vannan would be the way in.

And there'd be at least one other person who knew what was really going on, besides Vannan and Dau Peke, the base commander. He ran his eyes down the list. Someone on the jump crews, perhaps, though they all seemed to be off-world. Peke's administrative assistant, Dhama Salabi - she should have a finger on every string in the place. Jan Lei, the survey's analyst, collator of Teiss' field work. Gabi Barakat, the young bio-modeller and, more relevantly, a part-time assistant to the dead medical officer. Though she too barely featured in Vannan's report, perhaps she knew more than anyone guessed. Perhaps everyone did.

Chimes softly sounded.

"Base One has a lock-on," said ainode. "And they give us one minute to identify ourselves."

Adenuka smiled. What did they think they could do to him? But he sat up. Time to tell them he was coming.

"Two seventy four-C Base," he said. "I am Arbiter Adenuka on board Police Ship *Extreme Clarity*. Top priority, Code Red, Arbiter business. Planetfall imminent. I require complete cooperation. In particular, I want an up-to-date breakdown of base personnel, histories, job descriptions, rosters and site procedures; plus any relevant statements concerning your recent serious fatal incident. Interference with my mission is an offence that will result in sanctions. I wish to be met by Security Officer Vannan."

He signed off. That would cause some consternation, people running around, mining for the information he wanted and the protocols for the situation. Some Arbiters preferred to arrive unannounced, but that could be dangerous. Construction companies were jealous of their rights and liable to shoot at unknowns. *Clarity* could respond with devastating firepower, of course, but that would defeat the purpose of coming in the first place.

"Entry initiated," said ainode.

Adenuka checked his webbing and then lay back and closed his eyes. Nothing to do for a while.

Under automatics, the police ship dropped screaming through the thin atmosphere towards the surface of the planet, arcing towards Survey Base One. Adenuka relaxed into his harness, enjoying the feeling of the G-forces building up on his body as the ship descended. Somehow it always felt like coming home.

The landing was routine and on target, the shrieking winds inaudible inside. Adenuka checked his screens. Even after the sandstorm had blown itself away, Adenuka could see little evidence of the base itself, apart from a few dish antennae on the ridge.

"Welcome to Churned, Arbiter," came a tinny voice over the comm. "I am Vannan. Security. I hope you had a good trip, sir."

A bright blue tank on large spring-mesh wheels was trundling across the apron towards the ship.

"It was fine, thank you."

"Um... I am to take you directly to Base Commander Dau Peke. If that's all right."

"Of course."

The tank drew up and a salt-and-pepper haired, stocky middle-aged man in an oxymask clambered out.

Adenuka slowly and deliberately went through the checklist for safing his ship. By the time he had finished, stowed everything loose away, dressed in heavy outer clothes and checked and donned his own oxygen mask, Adenuka could almost hear Vannan's impatience radiating over the link. He smiled, and picked up his pack.

"I am ready now," he said. "OK ainode, she's all yours."

The main hatch opened, and Adenuka felt as though he had been transported to a high mountain as the warmth of his cabins dissipated in the

cold, clear air. The distant horizon was crisp and virginal, worn rocky mountains amber in the setting sun.

He descended the ramp carefully. Just before he stepped off the ship and onto the apron he deliberately checked that his pistol was at his belt. People would be watching.

Vannan stepped forward. Adenuka held up a hand to stop him. He then walked slowly round *Clarity*, giving her a visual once-over. It was technically unnecessary, but gave him a chance to get his land legs and have a look round the field. There was only one other ship on the ground, a motherland shuttle over on the far side, ugly and squat. His own ship was a sleek thing by comparison, streamlined as though sculpted by millennia of flowing water. When he got a chance to look at her like this, standing proud on the surface of a new planet, silvery and elegant against a lumpy natural world, he never ceased to marvel that he was allowed to run this fabulous vehicle as though it was his own personal charger.

Of course, there were risks he had to take, and a price to pay. Compromise, for instance.

He tapped one last weapon panel and stepped back. Perfect, of course. Ainode would have told him if it had been otherwise. But it gave everyone an opportunity to appreciate the resources he could summon up at will. He was the projection of legal power into the raw, lawless wilderness and people had to believe in him. It had once amazed him how much frontier police work was actually a con trick, a form of theatre.

Satisfied, Adenuka turned away and walked towards Vannan. The security officer seemed nervous. Good.

"Arbiter. Welcome, sir." They shook hands. Vannan gestured awkwardly the tank with his free hand. "We recommend you keep your mask on, on board."

"Is this a new requirement? Since the, ah, accident?"

"Yes," said Vannan.

Adenuka pulled himself up and into the tank with one smooth movement, as though he had been doing it for years. Vannan clambered in after him, and turned clumsily to tug the hatch shut. It was gloomy inside, tight-packed with storage bins and racks for research equipment and with only bare, tubular seats. Up front sat the youngish, rangy driver in his command bubble.

"OK Allan," said Vannan. "Let's be off."

"Allan?" said Adenuka.

"Dr Allan Arras, sir," said the driver crisply. "It's an honour."

The tank set off, churning up red sand from the dead world.

As they crested the ridge dividing the base from the port, Adenuka looked out ahead intently, gauging the accuracy of his briefing data. Looked good. A wide, shallow valley, with the main Survey Base accommodation and lab domes nesting near the south wall like so many fragile eggshells. The squat power generator was over to the north, solar collectors and hydroponic farms spread out in the middle. All the other buildings appeared to fit their stated function. Garage and workshops for the tanks. Hangars for the flitters. Satellite ground station. Repair shops, observatory facilities, sample stores. Medic station. It looked spartan and functional, as suited a temporary operation. Little sign of feather-bedding.

"How many work here?"

"Uhh, sir, Dau Peke told me I should refrain from detailed..."

Adenuka looked at him calmly.

"Um...forty six, sir, all told, including support staff..."

"Is that before - or after?"

Vannan stared out ahead of him. "After." He turned to Adenuka. "Look. Sorry to be so forward, but do you mind telling me why you've come here? My report-"

"Please give me the full cooperation I requested, Officer Vannan."

Vannan looked away, reddening. "Certainly."

Adenuka nodded. Vannan was a worried man, with good reason: he had caused the law to become interested, and that meant trouble for someone. The driver was clearly aware of it too, looking as though he was paying no attention.

"Allan Arras? Is this the same tank-type involved in the accident?"

"To Dr Teiss?" he asked.

"Are there other accidents I should know about?"

"No sir, sorry. Yes, this is the same type."

"Did the explanation for the accident convince you?"

He hesitated, too long. "Well, yes sir."

Adenuka glanced at Vannan, whose expression was stony. "Of course, you didn't investigate the site personally, did you Allan. But tell me - were you surprised that a tank was involved?"

"Yes. We trust these things completely. Sometimes the wheels or bearings go, you know, or the engine - mechanical stuff. But the hull splitting? Still, I guess we're out on the edge here. Can't guarantee nothing will go wrong."

The tank rumbled in among building units and hab-and-lab blocks. Close up, the Base's temporary nature was all the more apparent, like a million research camps before it, a jumbled collection of pre-fabs and tunnels and dishes and pipes and solar cells and cables and antennae and domes and bits of abandoned junk, all the detritus of a planetary survey command centre. No big surprises. And all together in one place, so it could be kept under control.

As the tank turned off the central track Adenuka caught a glimpse of a small moon just above the horizon, white and distant and rising full.

"That's the only natural satellite?"

Vannan nodded. "For this planet, yes."

"Any personnel deployed there?"

"No. Well, Dr Teiss surveyed it, of course."

"Did he now. Any joy?"

"We could have set up a station but it's not worth forming it. Not yet, anyway."

"Did you wonder why?"

"Airless. Waterless, even underground. No He3 to speak of. Low gravity, too - an atmosphere would leak away. And finally, there are bigger, better candidates in the system."

The tank pulled up outside the main entrance lock, a silvery semi-circle of steel and white plastics. Arras released the hatch and Vannan and Adenuka clambered out. Adenuka looked round curiously. It was an austere place to

spend years of your life, but he supposed it had its rewards for those sick of the crowded worlds.

And one day, in the far future, this world too would be teeming with life. If nothing derailed the project.

"Allan," said Vannan, leaning back inside the tank. "The Arbiter's conversation is classified, of course-

"Oh, I don't think that's true, is it?" said Adenuka, smiling. "No, Allan, let your colleagues know I'll be talking to you all. Give you time to get your stories straight, eh?"

Arras looked briefly at Vannan, then Adenuka. "Yes, sir."

Vannan shut the hatch and slapped the hull twice. With a high whining of the motor, the tank turned and pulled away, kicking up dust from its huge wheels.

"Any personnel elsewhere in-system?" Adenuka asked as he watched the tank fade into the shadows of the valley wall.

"A shifted crew manning our mother ship. She's in orbit, six people on board. And a shepherd ship running the first comets down on Churned."

Vannan pulled at the bulky outer airlock door and showed Adenuka in. "Six on that, too. As you'll find out, we're only weeks away from the primary impacts."

"Why didn't you mention those personnel before?"

"Offworld since well before the accident. They weren't relevant."

Adenuka was glad to be able to remove his sweaty oxygen mask as soon as they cycled through the airlock. He shook his head and ran a hand through his damp hair.

"I'll judge what I think is relevant," he said, as they headed off down a long institutional corridor, greyly lit with flat fluorescent panels. "Are there any other crew you've failed to mention? No personnel on the ice caps? No field trip out in the high deserts?"

"No," said Vannan. "The other field missions were called back after the accident, for review of procedures."

"And no one from the operation has left the planet since the accident?"

"No! And the records will show-"

"The records can be amended, Mr Vannan."

Vannan visibly bit the inside of his cheek. Not professional police material, thought Adenuka. You have to compartmentalise your thoughts and emotions.

"Mr Vannan," said Adenuka, conversationally. "Do you do something else apart from security?"

Vannan looked at him. "Everyone has to double or triple up somehow... we wouldn't get far if we didn't. Me, I'm mainly in facilities management. Resources and logistics, that sort of thing." He stopped. "Here we are. Dau Peke's office."

He knocked on the door and at the loud acknowledgment from inside, he pushed the door open and ushered Adenuka in.

The office was not a bad size, functional rather than spacious. Already standing on the far side of his desk was a moon-faced man with piercing blue eyes. Next to him was a tall, olive-skinned woman, introduced as Dhama Salabi. Adenuka nodded at them both and sat down without shaking hands. Peke, momentarily surprised, sat too. After a moment's hesitation, so did Vannan and Salabi.

"I never thought I'd have to greet an Arbiter here," said Peke. "But you are welcome... Of course I would rather... I felt our, ah, investigation covered the facts adequately..."

"I'll come to the point, Commander." said Adenuka, firmly. "Your attempted investigation of this incident has explained little, allayed no fears and left several open ends. It's one of the worst reports-"

"Just a minute!" said Vannan.

"One of the worst reports of its kind I've seen. Your staff know something is wrong. I suspect they don't buy the accident story."

"But-" said Dau Peke. Adenuka raised his hand.

"My preliminary open report, which will be released to the staff, states that at first sight it appears Teiss, Sobhy and Ray were murdered as a result of as yet undetermined intercorporate rivalry, espionage or worse."

"That's madness!"

"Nonetheless, it's done."

"That allegation could spark a big dispute with Heavy Planets or TranScor!" Dau Peke leaned forward. "We're at a very sensitive stage of the planetforming of this system. Colossal investments have been made. The engineering is at a critical point. We are about to start raining comets down on the planet, for god's sake! It's a very large energy deficit that this corporation does not take lightly. We don't need even the suspicion of violent conflict with our competitors and in fact we do not accuse them of these or any other criminal acts."

"I am aware it is in your interests to implement a cover up. I also remind you that my level of accreditation is red."

Dau Peke sighed. "I hope you've thought this through."

"I am imposing a block on all out-of-system traffic," said Adenuka. "I want to see all staff who can be spared from essential duties." He looked over at Vannan. "Perhaps you could see to that, now."

Vannan rose to his feet and left, reluctantly.

"Mr Vannan is not the best security chief I have ever met," said Adenuka once the door had closed.

"It's not a role that takes up a lot of time," said Dhama Salabi.

"Normally. We don't want to burden our research workers with it."

"How about you?" said Adenuka.

She shrugged. "I could take on the portfolio, but it fits Vannan's other duties admirably. In our case, security is usually more about monitoring pressurisation and maintenance standards. That and the odd incident of drunkenness."

"And what about your md-lasers and your nukes?"

"Those too, of course. But they're an insurance facility. No one person has authority over them. They have never been used."

"And Vannan is trustworthy," said Dau Peke.

"As we're on the subject of resource management..." said Adenuka, leaning back.

"We have collated the personnel and other records you requested," said Salabi, and handed over a chip. "Plus all the images of the accident site."

"Thank you. You may leave us,"

"But -"

"It's all right, Dhama," said Dau Peke, soothingly. "I'll talk to you later."

Salabi walked out in stony silence.

"I see she is used to being your eyes and ears, Commander," said Adenuka.

"She is also the public face of our AI, in fact... a lightning rod. We keep our aicore at a low profile here. People are suspicious. And superstitious."

"Even scientists," said a strange voice from the walls.

Adenuka looked up. "Aicore? Have you contacted my ship ainode?"

"Of course. But as Commander Peke says, I keep a low profile here."

"Yes," said Peke. "Now, how do you plan to proceed?"

"High profile," said Adenuka. "You may be sure I will clear this up quickly. But I will not associate with Salabi or of course the aicore, for the sake of credibility with the staff."

"Good plan," said the aicore. "I will stay in the background."

Dau Peke looked at Adenuka appraisingly. "Hmm. How much do you really know?"

"More than you think. Less than I'd like."

"What is your agenda, if I might ask?"

"No. But I do wish to confirm that your trusted staff are you, Vannan and Salabi and no one else?"

Dau Peke looked surprised at first. He stared hard at Adenuka, then smiled warily. "Yes, Arbiter. If I read you right."

Adenuka stood, and this time shook hands. "Discretion, Commander. Watch what you say."

"Arbiter," said Peke. "You have my complete cooperation."

Adenuka had just a few moments to spend in the tiny room he had been assigned, on the excuse of dropping off his pack and checking in with the ship ainode. After scoping the place for bugs, he put aside the incident site pictures - not much point of that - and swiftscanned the files on the Base, the research programme, the planetforming timetable, the organisational framework and the individual personnel.

Now he was able to stride into the lecture theatre with apparent confidence.

He was impressed. It was the largest pressurised space on the planet, indeed, the entire solar system. Practically the whole staff had managed to cram into the room, standing around the walls or perching on tables. Even Dau Peke was there.

Vannan gave Adenuka a list of personnel, marked with the four people who were absent on essential duty.

"No field trips have gone out in the last few minutes?"

"Of course not!"

Adenuka smiled at him encouragingly, then turned to face his audience.

They mostly looked concerned, as well they might. It was a rare day when an Arbiter, the longest and potentially most violent arm of the law, intruded into people's working lives. Just the fact he was there meant some high authority took this incident extremely seriously. Adenuka hoped that would encourage a mistake under pressure. Whoever he was looking for - and he was sure there was at least one person to hunt down - was an amateur, not a meticulous criminal with nested plans and several avenues of escape. No, if

there was any conspirator still here he was trapped. And trapped doing some mundane job, too. It could be anyone.

"You know why I've come. The circumstances of the deaths of your three colleagues are not clearcut." He paused. "You may think it unusual that an Arbiter is here to investigate an apparent accident. But we take the upholding of the law on the frontier as seriously as in the heartworlds." He leaned forward for emphasis. "The idea is that ten billion souls will one day make Churned their home. We need to get to the truth of what has happened here, to ensure that this development is based on the soundest possible foundations of property and human rights, not to mention morals." He paused. "You may think that legalistic. Even cultish. But I believe that at the heart of this incident there was murder, plain and simple. It can not and will not stand."

He scanned the audience. Most of them looked surprised, even shocked. Some seemed bemused, unsure what was going on. Allan Arras nudged one of his colleagues, as if to say, see, I told you so. Peke and Salabi blanched, but said nothing.

Two of the group looked particularly intent, both sitting forward. Interesting. They were two of the people Adenuka had picked out while still in transit: Jan Lei, the experienced analyst of Professor Teiss' field work, and Gabi Barakat, the modeller and assistant to the medic, Dr Sobhy. These two had worked closest with their dead colleagues.

Adenuka leaned over to Vannan, pointing at the personnel printout. "I want to see everybody. But these two first."

Gabi Barakat was edgy, twisting her water cup between her fingers as she sat in the makeshift interview room. Vannan sat on the edge of his seat, ready to make notes. Adenuka switched on his legal camera and sat casually on the steel desk, smiling sympathetically at Barakat. She was attractive in a fresh-faced way, with her big eyes and her straight dark hair falling free. She also looked pale and nervous and under some stress.

"Dr Sobhy was important to you?"

"Important? To my career, of course. I respected her. And personally I liked her a lot."

"Did she have any enemies?"

"Not... well, no."

"Was her death on the field trip an accident?"

Barakat glanced at Vannan. "Well, we don't have any evidence otherwise, you know. No one saw the site..."

"You didn't see the bodies?"

"There were no bodies, as such," said Vannan. "Completely carbonised."

Barakat seemed to go even paler.

"Mr Vannan," said Adenuka. "Please refrain from making comments. Now, Gabi. Following the death of Teiss, Ray and Sobhy, you say you, as the ranking medical officer, were not allowed to inspect the remains?"

"Well, MO in name only. More of a paramedic. I'm no pathologist..."

"You claim no one else saw them?"

"Mr Vannan. And Commander Dau Peke. And Salabi, I think."

"Didn't that strike you as odd?"

Barakat looked uncomfortable. "Well, yes."

"Did you make an effort to see the bodies?"

"We were told there were none. As Mr Vannan said."

"Did you believe him?"

Gabi Barakat bit her lip and spoke carefully. "I had no reason to doubt him. I am not an expert... on the conditions of the accident."

"Did you see the wrecked tank?"

"No. I understand it was largely obliterated. The bits have not been brought back to base."

"Still out on site? Schedule a visit for me, will you Vannan? I ought to see the place for myself."

"You've seen the reports and the 3Ds, haven't you?" said Vannan.

"That's not the point," Adenuka said, allowing an edge of irritation to show.

"Um, I am sure on worlds with bigger teams and more resources such incident investigation would have... you know. Higher priority," said Barakat.

"Yes," said Adenuka. "And maybe you knew already that it was murder, and didn't care to pry too closely?"

"Of course not!" she said. But she seemed rattled. "What do you mean?"

Adenuka smiled, and checked down at his notes. "Now, Gabi, why was the medical officer out on a geology field trip?"

Barakat seemed surprised but relieved at the shift. "It was unusual, but not unprecedented. She liked to monitor all the work environments first hand, get an idea of safety implications, stress. Bad practice, and good. She saw it as part of her job. And she did some research analysis. She was familiar with communications and satellite management..."

"Like I said," said Vannan. "We double up a lot round here."

Adenuka turned to him. "Please, Mr Vannan!" He turned back. "Anything more, Gabi..? Any other interests?"

"What do you mean?"

"Professionally or otherwise. Did she have any goals or plans, other than the ones you've mentioned?"

"No."

"Any expressed wish to retire to some luxury planet?"

Despite herself, Barakat smiled. "No. She lived for her work."

"Did you go on any of these trips yourself?"

"Yes I did. It was great to get out in the field."

Adenuka slammed the desk so hard that Barakat jumped. He leant forward until his face was inches from hers. "So when did you suspect your friends were passing information to another conglomerate?"

"What?!"

"Spying for GC's competitors? Betraying you and your colleagues? Planning sabotage?"

"That's a lie!"

"How do you know?"

"I - I don't believe it!"

Adenuka sat back down on the desk. "That's not really enough, you know. Not for a court of law."

"But I'm positive there's nothing like that!"

"And when were you recruited?"

"Recruited? For what?"

"For spying missions of your own."

"That's ridiculous!"

"All right," said Adenuka, smiling suddenly. "Now, just how well did you know Dr Kolade Teiss personally?"

Barakat looked at him in surprise, then down then at her twisting hands. Her nails were bitten. "I knew him well."

"Just 'well'?"

"Well."

"Look at me, Dr Barakat."

She looked up. Adenuka stared at her, hard. She tried to hold his gaze, but couldn't, and looked down again.

"Good lord!" said Vannan.

"I won't trouble you any more right now," said Adenuka, gently. "You may leave."

Barakat, surprised, got up and left without looking back.

"But Arbiter," whispered Vannan urgently. "Why let her go now? She knows more!"

Adenuka looked at him coldly. "Please allow me to conduct my own investigation. Now, who's next."

Jan Lei was tiny and bustling and confident. Adenuka invited her to sit, appraising her. Brisk, experienced and doubtless with a sharp tongue. She glanced suspiciously at Vannan, then at Adenuka.

"Dr Lei, you collated the data and analysed the results for Professor Teiss and the survey team, correct?"

"Yes, Arbiter."

"Did you see any unusual data?"

"Unusual? No. Just data. Normal geological, physical readings. Details, here a peak, there a trough. Filling in the orbital streams." She relaxed, as if giving a tutorial to first year students. "What we do is hardly cutting-edge stuff, Arbiter. We ensure there are no big surprises so that the planetforming programme goes smoothly. After all, engineering a planet is a major undertaking, and as you said in another context, it has to be on a secure foundation. A lot of that is pretty routine work."

Adenuka smiled. "You can spare us my own lecture, Dr Lei. Now, did you see any particular packets of information from Professor Teiss intended - for other eyes?"

"Outgoing packets? For whom?"

"Other development corporations, like Heavy Planets. Maybe wreckers and saboteurs. Or environmentalists."

"Industrial espionage, you mean?"

"Perhaps..."

"Dr Teiss was a spy? Not a chance. But if your theory was correct, how would I know?"

"Maybe you worked with him?"

Lei glanced at Vannan. "This accident - there's definitely something weird about it. But spying? No."

"Why not?"

"You're asking me? Well... I know that a plausible conman is just that - plausible. But listen. If this was about spying, why kill them? Who killed them?"

Their own masters? Commander Peke? A third party? Someone playing very very hard. It doesn't make sense."

"What other jobs do you do, Dr Lei?"

"Eh? Oh, I take a turn on the farm. I'm even trained up to operate the port, though I've never had to bring in a ship. And nets and comms stuff."

"Stuff... like satellite comms?"

"It goes with the territories."

"No extra income earner from an outside source?"

"Outside..." Her eyes narrowed. "Certainly not!"

"You were in on this!" said Vannan suddenly, prodding a stubby finger at her. "You set the satellite uplink! Or hacked the shuttle comms!"

"What satellite uplink is that?" said Adenuka, turning to him.

"There must have been one. To get the big discovery out..."

"What Big Discovery?" said Lei.

Adenuka stood, suddenly, pulling a small rectangular device from his belt. "Officer Vannan, you're under arrest for espionage in general -"

"What?! Come on, sir!"

"And particularly for the murder of Dr Teiss, Dr Sobhy and Dr Ray."

"But you know it's-"

"Silence, or you will be incapacitated."

"It's nothing to do with-"

Adenuka touched his device to Vannan's neck. He collapsed onto his chair, crumpled and slowly slipped off sideways, his head hitting the ground with a bang. Jan Lei stood, her chair clattering to the floor as she stepped back, staring, horrified.

"Neural stunner." Adenuka holstered his pistol and got down to his knees to check on Vannan's pulse. "He'll recover to answer questions."

"Vannan was a spy?" said Lei from the wall.

"You don't believe it?"

"Well... Frankly, no."

"Security officer gives you lots of opportunity, but it is hardly the most discreet cover."

"And a killer? Him?!" Lei shook her head. Adenuka shrugged.

"He got found out... by Dr Teiss, I'd guess. Vannan had to kill him and cover his tracks."

Lei seemed fascinated despite herself. "And the others?"

"The medical officer was the only one capable of properly informed suspicion of the cause of death, so she had to die too." Adenuka stood and wiped his hands on a tissue, thinking... "Dr Ray was probably just unlucky. In the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I wouldn't have thought Vannan capable," said Lei, looking down at his body. "He's such... such an officious bureaucrat, you know?"

"No one liked him? Or trusted him?"

"Dau Peke's man. Or Salabi's, anyway, so he made us all think. Always reporting things to her." She shook her head. "I guess that was to keep us all at a distance... the cunning bastard. Who was he spying for?"

Adenuka sat down on his desk again. "I'm afraid cannot discuss any more details." He looked down at Vannan. "How does one call secure medical assistance here?"

Adenuka let Vannan stew under arrest. He took a chance and let Peke and Salabi fume a little too. As he had expected, he found everyone else's tongues looser now, and over the next few days he heard a lot.

Trev Zamanin, for instance, one of the hydroponicists, was surprised to hear Vannan was involved in industrial spying, but now she thought about it, the more likely it seemed, as he had been nearing the end of an undistinguished career. To kill three colleagues just to protect himself was of course beyond contempt.

Allan Arras now agreed that he was in fact suspicious of the accident, as he'd hinted on the drive in. It always looked deliberate. He'd been out there, seen it. Gin Grah, who had overall responsibility for the survey's air and ground vehicles, was relieved that there was no lingering blame over poor maintenance. She'd never doubted herself. She had always thought the accident story was nonsense.

Why had no one raised these concerns publicly, or with the senior managers? asked Adenuka. Jan Lei thought no one wanted to believe there was a killer about. Stef Robun from tech support thought nobody wanted to rock the boat at this difficult late stage of the planetform project. Hasem Candakar, the lone-wolf meteorological modeller, said no one trusted the management.

What about the actual technical aspect of Vannan's illicit communications? How did he do it?

Ron Felan, the lead communications officer, said there were no records of official channels being used. Viv Patorus, part-time inventory manager and full-time soil engineer, did now think that he'd noticed some missing spare comms components, but there wasn't enough wrong to bring to anyone else's attention. Yes, maybe stock control was not as good as it could have been, but everybody was working crazily hard, rushing to meet the deadline, and anyway everything was going to be abandoned and destroyed soon enough when the stream of shepherded comets came raining down with their life-bringing water. He hadn't suspected larceny, only over-enthusiasm.

And, Adenuka asked, how did anyone think Dr Teiss might have uncovered Vannan's secret off-world communications? Could anyone else be involved? Any other examples of strange behaviour amongst the crew?

Everyone had a theory about somebody, now that Adenuka had blown the lid off the accident story. Allan Arras, said someone, he spends a lot of time out in the tanks. Dhama Salabi, she was a strange person; never quite got a handle on her relationship with Vannan or Peke. Smit thought Grah spent too much time talking to the plants. Almost everyone thought Candakar had plenty of time alone to get up to all sorts of wrong-doing.

Patently Adenuka worked through the entire crew, sifting their ill-informed comments and ideas and prejudices, searching for hints of their deeper feel for what was really going on, knowledge they might not realise that they had or had divulged. He pushed no one, he just worked steadily, ploddingly onwards.

No one, it seemed, much to say about the assistant medical officer and junior all-round researcher, Dr Gabi Barakat. Discreet, affable, she was well-liked. And how close to Kolade Teiss?

Eventually Adenuka so arranged it that he ran into Gabi Barakat at one of the drinks dispensers at a junction of the main dome's main corridors. Still pale and drawn under the dim, functional lights, she seemed marginally more at ease. She wore her hair bunched up on top of her head, as though willing now to let people see her.

"How are you?" asked Adenuka, kindly.

"Better," said Barakat. She sipped her drink. "I was glad you arrested Vannan. Glad, but surprised. Is this crazy? I had an idea it was something to do with him." She closed her eyes.

Adenuka shook his head wearily. "So many people say that, now..."

"Yes... I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you make your suspicions plain before?"

Barakat bit her lower lip. "I didn't trust anyone."

"Even me?"

"I thought you might be working with him."

"Dr Barakat!"

"And Peke and Salabi. The spying charges... I thought we - they - were being set up."

Adenuka took her hand, squeezed it. "Why should anyone want to do that?"

She looked at him, searchingly, for a moment. "No reason. Natural paranoia."

"If we'd wanted to do that... wouldn't we have just accepted the accident report?" said Adenuka. "No, strange as it may seem in these cynical times, our duty is to a higher ethic than the well-being of a corporation or its officers, no matter how mighty or how big the investment..." He stopped, as if embarrassed. "Be that as it may, as you can imagine, I'm not very popular with GC, disrupting operations like this. Nor will I be with the people Vannan was spying for, when he has finished telling us everything, and their reputation is tarnished." He gazed down the corridor as if looking into the future. "But my authority and my discretion are absolute."

Barakat looked around to see if anyone was listening. "Arbiter," she said, low. Then stopped.

Adenuka smiled. "Is there something else?" he said.

She bit her lip again. She seemed burdened with worry, as if carrying something that she wanted to put down.

"I didn't realise the power of the arbiters," she said, finally. "And it makes me proud, strangely. I knew it was going to be tough out here. I'm glad there are people like you around to keep an eye out."

She turned as if to go, but reluctantly. Adenuka gently put a hand to her shoulder. She turned back to him.

"That wasn't it, was it, Gabi?" he said, a tiny smile touching the corners of his mouth. He looked deep into her big eyes. She seemed on the verge of tears.

"If Vannan was spying..." she said. "Well, that is odd. A coincidence." She stopped again, biting her lip.

"Gabi. There is something you would like to tell me."

She let a long breath out.

"Kolade... Doctor Teiss told me not to tell anyone. Absolutely no one at all." She looked at him intently. Adenuka felt she was searching the lines of his

face for something, and apparently decided she had found it. She nodded to herself, as if she'd made a decision. "Things have changed."

She leaned close to him. "Is there anywhere we can go where we will be private?"

"The interview room? It is shielded..."

"No. I need to show you what Kolade Teiss was really working on."

"Your office, then? Or his?"

"In the field."

They left early next morning. It was good to get outside, away from those endless poky rooms and white labs and dully-lit corridors. Once he had heard where "the field" was, Adenuka decided they should take his ship. Technically they would still be stuck inside a small control cabin, albeit one with panoramic screens, but he felt a palpable sense of liberation as Gabi drove him back up to the landing apron, away from the domes, and Dau Peke and Vannan and all the sniping workers in their hutches.

He could almost taste the high thin air at the back of his throat, feel the wind in his hair and the sun on his face. The silvery lines of *Extreme Clarity* reflecting the golden earth in the morning sunlight was a joy to see and it made him glad to be alive.

And he was not yet too old to appreciate the wide-eyed look Gabi Barakat gave when she saw the ship for the first time.

"Wow," she said, muffled in her oxymask, as she parked up the tank near the fire depot. They clambered out and for a moment Gabi could only stare.

"We'd better get on," said Adenuka, gently, and took her by the elbow to guide her across the apron. He beamed like a proud parent as they walked towards the ship, his ship: her long nose sharp and questing, her power pods and weapons bays holding unimaginable energies.

"Impressive!" said Gabi. *Clarity* was nothing like standard functional spacecraft, which by comparison were clunky power stations in the sky. Two swept wings and a sleek fuselage completed the picture.

"This is just the sort of ship I imagined when I signed up for survey work in the first place!" said Gabi, sounding like he felt, a prisoner let out, cheerful and carefree.

It was good to get her away from the claustrophobic, paranoid warren of the research base. Adenuka smiled. "If you find you're unsatisfied with your current career, you could always apply to join us..."

Gabi turned, surprised.

"People come to the Service from all backgrounds," he said. "Very few of us were actual city beat police officers."

She grinned behind her mask. "I suppose so... I hadn't even thought of it!"

They stepped up the ramp, Gabi almost reverently, as if entering a temple. And once inside, the main cabin was indeed like some high altar, full of lights and screens and burnished metal and fat comfortable G-seats and elegant, ergonomic controls.

"I don't believe it," said Gabi, running her hand carefully over a highly-polished dark brown material on the command chair arm. "Is that wood?"

"Yes," said ainode, coming to life, to Gabi's surprise. "Though I am not made of such substance myself. It is purely decorative."

"Don't be so dismissive, ainode!" said Adenuka as he checked the air and removed his oxymask. "We have a guest."

Gabi looked at him quizzically. "Just my ship AI," said Adenuka. "He's virtual crew."

"Don't be so dismissive yourself," said ainode, actually sounding huffy.

Gabi laughed. "I love it!" she said.

Adenuka smiled as he sat in his comm chair. He suspected it was the first time Gabi had laughed for ages. Still, they had work to do.

"Better get strapped in," he said sounding like a concerned parent. Perhaps too much.

"Oh, sorry, of course." Gabi clambered into a seat alongside and fumbled with the strapping. When she was ready she breathed out, then looked over to Adenuka and gave a thumbs up sign.

"You had better give us the coordinates," said Adenuka and ainode, simultaneously.

Gabi reddened.

Within half an hour *Extreme Clarity* was descending from the edges of space, flying over a wide plain towards a pair of blasted mountain ranges nearly half a world away from the survey base. Gabi's eyes were shining.

"How do you like the ride?"

"Fantastic," she said. "We could have used this." She shook her head. "If we'd had a ship like this instead of that tank, then they'd all still be alive. And..."

"And what?"

"Arbiter, you will see soon."

Through the viewscreens they could see the harsh, sandy, rocky landscape rolling by. From their vantage point thousands of feet above, the land appeared anonymous, like the surface of a hundred thousand worlds of rock eroded by sun and keening winds. They drifted slower, over the first mountain range, revealing a high valley between it and the next range.

The ship came to a hovering rest a thousand feet high and a thousand feet away from a crumbled cliff.

"Right," said Gabi, tense. "We're almost here. Can we translate... Right a little... down a bit; down; down. Left, left. STOP!"

Gabi stared at the viewscreen and turned to Adenuka. "Do you see!"

Adenuka peered into the screen. "I'm afraid I don't quite..."

Gabi jabbed a finger, pointed at a dark shape.

"Magnify, ainode," said Adenuka.

The image area under Gabi's finger zoomed, a dark semi-circle becoming more obvious. The entrance to a cave, or tunnel. "It looks very symmetrical," said Adenuka. "And artificial."

"And big... though you couldn't get the ship in there."

Adenuka stared at the screen.

"Did Dr Teiss carve this?" But he knew the answer.

"No. Nor anyone on the prime reconnaissance, or first landing and survey. And no one from the research base."

"Then ...Perhaps you had better show me."

Adenuka directed ainode to land the ship as close by the valley wall as it deemed safe. Then he and Gabi, masked up, wearing heavy boots and carrying flashlights and rope, descended the ramp and headed across the smashed rock towards the mysterious cave.

"This was Dr Teiss' first real clue," said Gabi, breathing hard as they clambered the last few feet. They stopped and stood gazing up at the opening in front of them, perhaps 30 feet high, the tunnel disappearing beyond into inky blackness under the mountain.

"Of what?" said Adenuka.

"His first clue that this planet had once harboured intelligent life." She looked at Adenuka; almost challenging him, he thought. "The first evidence of intelligent life we have ever discovered anywhere in the Universe."

Adenuka shivered, as though he could feel a chill from the depths of the planet. He felt almost paralysed. But Gabi walked on, into the darkness. Adenuka followed her as she strode further in, shining her torch on the ancient tunnel walls.

"Dr Teiss found it through personal analysis of satellite imagery after the processing," she said, as if conducting a student seminar. "Can't leave everything to computers. He then made a one-man field trip out here. He knew the political and commercial implications of such a discovery. Not to mention cultural... Didn't want to get others involved. Into trouble." Her voice tightened. "Into danger."

"Yes," said Adenuka, finally. He stopped, turned and looked back briefly at the bright light streaming in from the entrance. "I can understand that. He did get you involved, though."

"Eventually. Me. And Dawn Ray, his assistant. She was also killed."

Gabi walked on, into the darkness. Adenuka found he had to resist the temptation to scurry to catch up.

"But not Dr Erica Sobhy? Your boss? She also... died."

"No. Not her. Not anyone else."

"Are you utterly sure? What about Vannan?"

"Vannan? Certainly not."

"Dr Teiss may not have told you everything..."

"But -"

"People can have hidden sides, you know."

They had to stop. The tunnel was almost blocked by rock, but it did not look like a natural roof fall.

"There's a narrow way through, deeper inside..."

Adenuka shook his head. "I am not as young as you."

Gabi sighed, staring at the wall.

"Absolutely no one else here knows. But we sent the info out encoded, by tightband, buried; looped, linked, packet-switched, embedded, stegged, you name it. Soon the nearer Worlds will know, and then everyone. And it'll be too late to suppress."

"So Dr Teiss believed - you all believed - that if this information was issued publicly, through normal channels, it would be suppressed. Its originators destroyed."

"He was right, wasn't he?" said Gabi, sadly. "He knew how the world worked. General Construction have invested a fortune in this place. They wouldn't want to give up millennia of revenue stream, bring the whole project to a halt, for the sake of some archaeological dig." She turned and grabbed Adenuka by his jacket. "It doesn't matter to them that it is the single most important cultural discovery in our history!" Her torch was reflected in her eager eyes, making them glint. "But they didn't count on an Arbiter being here! Think! Proof that we are not utterly alone! Proof that other civilisations have lived and may still live in the Universe!"

Gently, Adenuka prised her fingers off.

"Sorry," said Gabi, abashed.

"I'm convinced." He indicated the rockfall. "What do you think this place is, exactly?"

"A high-level nuclear waste storage tomb. It's a granite batholith, geologically stable for hundreds of millions of years."

Adenuka shook his head. "So... Life! And not simply some squitty little rock microbes."

"And given the condition of the world, the loss of the oceans, all life could have ended here aeons ago..."

Unbelievable. Who among those ancient alien builders of this structure - little more than a sewer for a nuclear septic tank - could have imagined that other people would follow them, hundreds of millions of years in their future?

"Who were they? What were they like?"

"Well, that's hard to say."

Adenuka bent down, picked up a stone, weighed it in his hand. "Did they originate here, or come from somewhere else?"

"We think - Dr Teiss thought - from here. From this rock and sand. And earth and water, when there was any."

Adenuka touched one wall. He could feel nothing through his gloves, but he imagined the planet once throbbing with life. Like his own world, Stodon, the Garden World. But everything now was turned to ashes and dust.

A self-indulgence. He could not afford to drift off like that. Still, this was a rare privilege indeed.

"Sorry, Gabi. Why did he think that?" And he remembered something. "You said this was the first clue to intelligent life. It's a pretty big one, but what others are there here?"

She paused. "The other big clue is not on the planet at all."

Adenuka sensed a note of jubilation in Gabi's voice.

"What do you mean?" he said, carefully.

"It's on their moon. We found their lunar base."

Adenuka's eyebrows raised. That was a surprise.

They upped ship as soon as they could get back. Gabi gave the coordinates and ainode was planning a trajectory out of the atmosphere and on to the slow-revolving moon even as the ship took to the air in a blast of lifting force.

Traffic control - Dr Ren Vu, in fact, on duty today - contacted them to declare that off-world travel had been banned and where the hell did they think they were going?

Adenuka let ainode report that they were in fact the Arbiter's ship and it was rescinding the grounding order in this one case; it even apologised. That satisfied the ground, and they heard no more.

Gabi smiled. "There seem to be many advantages to being an Arbiter. Among them the re-writing of rules to suit yourself."

Adenuka laughed. "Yes, Gabi. But of course we try to act responsibly."

"Of course." She nodded, and bit her lip. Perhaps she was embarrassed, or nervous. She stared at the viewscreens.

Adenuka turned to watch too. The airless satellite loomed, growing implausibly fast as the ship made good time free of the atmosphere. The place looked unpleasant and dangerous, a strange beacon for primitive people to try and reach. He wondered briefly about those mysterious aliens who'd made this journey incalculable ages ago. How long had it taken them, what vehicles and power systems and communications had they used? And what had they thought when they looked back on their own birth-planet for the first time, their feet planted on a new world?

And where else might they have gone?

Throughout this system?

Out to the stars?

No. If they had made it that far, surely they would have survived. And perhaps prevented us from achieving our own destiny, preempting our existence by colonising the galaxy, planetforming our own home worlds. Snuffing out our lives before they even started. Usurping our destiny.

Good thing for us they have gone extinct.

Or perhaps they're still out there somewhere, waiting, sleeping.

Or uplifted to some higher realm, even, that hoary old idea which explained to the ignorant where all the teeming civilisations that should have filled the galaxy and the universe must have gone.

He felt a chill.

"Excuse me," said ainode. "We are landing. Please ensure you are secure."

"That was quick!" said Gabi.

They stepped out into the airless landscape, swaddled in pressure suits. The bright sunlight scattered off the land, harsh and glaring. Up in the black sky the amber world they'd just left hung, a thin and mysterious crescent.

With no audience to impress, Adenuka did not bother with his theatrical walk-around of *Clarity*. He did glance at her, though, as they set off. She was an impossibly shiny silver, utterly strange and modern in contrast to this primal land that had remained unchanged from near the beginning of time, and yet essentially the moon and the ship were made of the same constituent elements. The difference was the organising power of intelligence; such a rare occurrence in the universe.

He turned to go after Gabi, who was already loping eagerly towards a low hill. She was following other tracks and footprints, dark grey against the light soil, as though they were wet. He caught up.

"I take it these are Dr Teiss' tracks?"

"Yes."

"No-one else?"

"Not for ages. I mean really ages." She breathed deep, clearly excited, gazing round her at the airless ash.

"Not even you, I guess?"

"No! If I had gone offworld... well, it would have been noted."

"You seem to know your way around..."

In answer, Gabi tapped her head. "Kolade got me to memorise the data, maps and images. Safest way."

Adenuka looked round. "And no tracks from the, ahh, original visitors?"

"No. Bombardment by micrometeorites and cosmic rays obliterated everything eventually. According to Kolade, even at their original landing sites there was nothing left to see, except a slight chemical change in the surface soil..."

Gabi slowed as they came to a looming cavern carved into the low hill. It was obviously as artificial as the tunnel they had investigated earlier, but smaller.

"What is this, another nuclear dump?" said Adenuka.

"No. The main way in to the base."

"And if there were no visible clues, how did Dr Teiss find this place?"

"There are clues." Gabi waved her arm across the landscape. "Hard to see now, from this level, but several of the outlying structures of this establishment are clearly geometrical - designed - and made of long-lasting materials. They were pinged by the detailed mapping survey Dr Teiss undertook."

"Pinged, identified - and suppressed, I suppose."

"Yes. And no."

Adenuka stood there, looking at the tunnel into the hill. Millions or hundreds of millions of years before strange creatures had stood here, looking down on their birthworld and outwards to the stars. It was hard to believe, frankly. Now, all that apparently remained was this simple monument.

"Let's go in," said Gabi. "I think I know the way..." She turned on her helmet lamp, and led into the gloom. Adenuka turned his light on too, and swung it round as he walked, sending the beam bobbing over the smooth rock surface. Every now and then the light shone in through a dark opening to a room beyond. For some reason, he felt an extra chill, as though there were ghosts in these black corridors, hiding in the dark corners.

And it also reminded him of the General Construction base down on the main planet, swept of people. Different builders. Same sort of building.

"To confirm, Dr Teiss was absolutely sure the builders came from... from... down there. 274-C."

"From Churned? Yes," said Gabi.

"No chance they were outsiders like us - from far away? Setting up an observation post?"

"No. For a start, of course, we have never encountered such a people. The setup seems too small. And finally..."

Gabi paused.

"Finally what?" said Adenuka, after a bit.

"We're coming to that." Gabi stopped in front of a doorway and seemed to check it, mentally. She turned and looked him in the eye. He noticed her eyes were shining, and she was breathing deeply... it looked as if she believed she was about to receive some spiritual revelation. "This is it, the place. The

key evidence. This is the single most amazing artefact we could possibly have hoped to find."

Adenuka stared back at her. She turned, and walked in through the doorway. She turned up the power and raised the lamp to splash light over the far wall.

At first, Adenuka could not make out what he was looking at. But eventually it resolved itself into some kind of deliberate and very large visual image. It was like a huge mural collage, perhaps. Interlocking pictures and graphics had been carved deep into the flattened rockface, perhaps with a laser. A work of art and information, but hard to read.

"It's great to see it for real," Gabi breathed. "We've made some preliminary analyses," she continued, more businesslike. "Necessarily furtive. This commemorates not the Churneders' life on their own world itself, but their pioneering visits here, to this moon."

She pointed at one section. "That's a bipedal alien in a pressure suit, out on the surface. This could be one of their first explorers..."

Adenuka stared. He had to take her word for it.

Gabi indicated a large circular graphic. "This is undoubtedly a map of this satellite, with what we think are the initial landing sites or bases marked. We've investigated some of them... that's how Kolade found the chemical markers."

"And this?" said Adenuka, pointing at a small rectangle enclosing two other circles filled with irregular shapes and surrounded by geometric patterns. "Another map?"

"Yes. A map of the hemispheres of Churned. As it was when it had oceans. It fits. Despite the geologic changes, we can make a correlation."

Other sections of the fresco, explained Gabi, showed images of primitive space craft, and a representation of a planet that could only be Churned as it once was - and would be again, Adenuka reminded himself: a living world, viewed from space.

It struck him that this image probably represented this entire people's one and only real mark on the universe. It was as though all the billions of years of life and evolution and history and energy and industry and power and hopes and myths and dreams of their planet had combined to raise a pyramid of endeavour that had resulted in only this - a drawing on a cave wall on a dead satellite.

The work, the culture, the civilisation implied by this one image and where it stood was staggering.

"We have enough now." said the ship's AI booming in their helmets, startling them. "Arbiter, you may terminate the interview."

"Ainode..." said Adenuka, suddenly uncomfortable. "Just a moment. There must be more to find out."

"No. The investigation is finished. Terminate."

"What's going on?" said Gabi.

"I am sorry, Gabi," said Adenuka.

"Sorry for what? What did it mean?"

"The investigation I am conducting - it was really into these reports of alien life Dr Teiss had made..."

Gabi looked confused. "You knew already?"

"Yes."

"But what about the spying charge... and Vannan?"

"Vannan certainly killed Dr Teiss and the others. If he had known about you, he'd have killed you too. His real problem was obliterating the evidence clumsily."

"What do you mean?"

"We knew about some of Dr Teiss' findings. They were intercepted by the base aicore and out-system ship ais, and channelled. They will never seep out to the wider world. That were why I was sent. To shut down any remaining avenues. Because the lives of billions of people will not come to be if we do not colonise this system."

"Arbiter, there is no point," said ainode. "Why discuss it with the witness?"

"Because we are people, and we tell stories to one another," said Adenuka, sadly. He waved at the ancient collage lasered in to the wall. "These were people too, and this connects us to them! They told stories to explain what is happening." He smiled, but mirthlessly. "We're more like them than we are like you, ainode."

"It is not policy. Terminate her now. We must get you back to Base."

Adenuka drew his pistol. Gabi's eyes widened.

"This is not the first time alien life has been discovered, Gabi," said Adenuka. "It is in fact the fourth."

"I don't understand!"

"I am sorry, Gabi," said Adenuka. He pointed his pistol straight at her face. "Really I am. I wish things could have been different."

"What are you doing?"

Adenuka fired, twice. Gabi's helmet shattered and her skull exploded in a froth of red mist. She fell back unstrung to the floor, oddly slowly in the low gravity.

"I'm sorry," said Adenuka softly, to himself. Without thinking he tried to wipe a watering eye, but his glove hit his helmet.

"All right, ainode," he said, louder. "I'm ready. What action do we take on Churned?"

There was no answer from ainode.

Adenuka stood in the strange silence, gazing at the carving on the wall, wondering what ancient minds had stood here before him. Ainode was taking his time.

"Ainode? What is the decision on Dau Peke and Vannan? Salabi and the rest of them?"

But still there was silence, for long moments. It was very unlike the ship ai to act like this... Had something happend outside? Communications down? He turned to the open doorway.

"Sorry," ainode said, finally. "Policy is developing in view of this moonbase. We are terminating all of them... it is safest. A shepherded comet will obliterate them all. Terrible accident. Once the aicore is backed up, of course."

Adenuka sucked in his breath. "I am getting too old for this business," he said.

Ainode was silent again. Adenuka stared at the collage on the wall as if trying to burn it into his memory: the maps of the world and the brave alien

pioneers in their primitive ships, little better than toy sailing boats on a vast ocean.

Then he turned and took a step towards the exit, back to *Extreme Clarity*. He suddenly wanted to go home, put his feet up, retire and look at his gardens and never have to arbitrate in another wild sector of the diaspora again.

The tiny ship status screen fixed inside his helmet suddenly bleeped. Adenuka glanced down to read the data, and stopped in surprise.

"Ainode! Why is *Clarity* lifting?"

There was a brief moment of silence from ainode. Then: "New policy coming through."

Adenuka started to run, but too late. A series of hammering explosions smashed the moonbase, Adenuka and the ancient image and turned them all to tiny bits of dust.
