

Relief Mission

Maddy was waiting for her new navigator and co-pilot. Her previous “Maps” was grounded as she was pregnant, and although she had had a new navigator assigned, things had been changed at the last minute. Maddy was a little annoyed that she was having to break in a new crew member and fly into a new airport at the same time, and he was late. She checked out the rest of her crew, and they were all fine and primed to go. Just as she was considering getting one of them to stand in for the pre flight checks the new navigator tumbled into the cockpit.

“Sorry I’m late, Boss” he said, while stowing his flight bag.

“Save it, Maps. Welcome to Blue Lady. Let’s get the checks under way.”

They swiftly ran through the checks, and Maddy was impressed by the way her new Maps ran through them, fast and precise.

“Well done, Maps. Please get us clearance.”

Maps called Ground and got permission to roll. Then the Ground crew pushed the big lifter backwards away from the terminal. The Ground crew backed off and disconnected external power and signalled all clear. Maddy nodded to Maps and he taxied the large plane along their assigned track to the end of the runway.

“Please give me control, Maps.”

“Control is yours, Boss. I’ll get clearance to take off.” He called the Control Tower and clearance came over both their headsets. Maddy taxied the plane onto the runway and set it up for the take off.

“Birds, two o’clock, Boss,” said Maps.

Ground also warned them, and asked them to hold.

“I see them,” said Maddy. “Thanks, Maps, Ground. Holding.”

The flock of small birds wheeled away. Ground repeated their clearance to take off.

Maddy accelerated the plane down the runway. This was an empty take off, with no cargo, so they gained speed rapidly. She could hear Maps reading off airspeed and distance quietly and calmly. She lifted the huge plane from the runway and they rapidly gained height. She and Maps went through the post take off drill, undercarriage, flaps that sort of thing. Once they reached cruising height she engaged autopilot and relaxed a little. Maps was checking out the course that had been loaded before take off, and checked with Ground for any variations. There were none. Maddy noted his efficiency. She switched off her mike.

“OK Maps, let’s get acquainted. What’s your real name?”

“Rod. What’s yours?”

She ignored his question. “Where are you from, Maps?”

He answered with the name of a small town few would have heard of.

“And have you stopped punching small girls?”

“What!! I don’t...” He took a good look at her. Dark skin with deep brown eyes. Her flight helmet covered her hair, but he would have bet that it was dark and curly. She grinned at him.

“Maddy? Maddy?!”

“Yep, that’s me. How have you been, Rod?”

“Grief, that was thirteen, fourteen years go. I never really apologized, did I? I’m really sorry that I gave you that black eye. I’ve been fine. I signed up for the Army but transferred to the Air Force a couple of years later. That incident was actually a turning point for me. I still go and see Smith and Jones now and then. Whatever happened to Jim? Do you know?”

“Yes, I married him! We had a boy, and adopted a girl. Jim’s at home looking after them. And yourself?”

“I married an Army girl. Two boys. She’s seconded up to The Castle at the moment, and the two boys are with her. I spent six months up there with her and flew in several times as Shotgun on the helicopters, but only once piloted one in. To be honest, I didn’t fancy it much. Not that I couldn’t handle it, of course, or I wouldn’t have been flying in even as Shotgun.”

Shotgun was second pilot on the helicopters. On the trip into The Castle, Shotgun had to keep his or her hands on the controls. It was a tricky flight.

Maddy said “I flew in there a few times, but I wasn’t too keen on it either. It’s exciting and even scary at times, but it’s short! I like the long trips and the heavy lifters. I flew some of the freight trips into the area that was hit by that big earthquake, and realized that I liked it. We also dropped paratroopers into the outlying areas, I remember. I was Maps on the lifter Red Dragon.”

“Anyway, Rod, we’ll have to catch up more later. I have to do my rounds. Maps, you have control.”

“Right Boss, I have control.”

Maddy got up to do her rounds of her crew, checking that they were OK, briefing them and chatting with them a little. Most of them had been with her for a while. She knew many of their families and some were friends when they were off duty. She had a good team. She reflected that the Cargoes would probably play cards later since this was an empty flight and they would have little to do once they’d checked that everything was shipshape. They’d all quickly learned not to play cards with her if they wanted to keep their money.

Maddy returned to the cockpit.

“I forgave you for the poke in the eye a long time ago, Rod. By the way, you actually did me a favour.”

“I did? What was that?”

“You signed up. It encouraged me to sign up too. Smith and Jones encouraged me as well, it’s true. I went on a trip with Nik, Queen Afua’s brother, to The Castle and discovered that I loved flying, but if you hadn’t signed up, I probably wouldn’t have done so myself. Everyone was pushing me towards a conventional career, which I would have hated.”

“Yeah, I can see that, Maddy. You’ve never been a conventional person.”

She laughed. “Thanks, I think! Anyway, I’m going to have a snooze. Wake me up in two hours, please, Maps.”

“OK, Boss.”

She was woken by a big bang. Rod was already checking the instruments, and it was obvious that something serious had happened to engine number three.

“I’ve isolated engine three,” said Rod. “Trimmed a bit to allow for the unbalanced thrust.”

Maddy switched on her mike.

“Boss here. Sparks, can you eyeball number three engine and report back. Go! Maps, what do we have?”

She heard Sparks moving behind the partition.

“Instrumentation tells the story. The engine is shutdown. Fuel leakage minimal, temperature high, but going down, fire retardant deployed in the engine. Looks like we had a blowout. Engine four is reporting OK, so no damage to sensors or cables. Fuel to four must be OK. Yep, sensors agree. Engines one and two both report OK.”

“Sparks here, Boss. Engine three is badly damaged on the fuselage side. There’s a big hole, missing parts of the cowl. Wing seems OK. We’re lucky we didn’t get any shrapnel. No sign of flames, no sign of fluid leakage.”

“Boss here, everyone. We have lost one of our engines. We going to descend to a lower level, the flight will be longer, but there’s no immediate danger of going down. It helps that we are flying empty, of course.”

She switched off her mike. “Maps, please let our destination know. They’ll probably want to put on a show, run out the fire trucks, and so on. Tell them there’s no need of foam.”

“OK, Boss. But I can’t control Ground’s actions of course.”

She nodded her agreement and listened to the to and fro between her co-pilot and the destination. Ground was checking that they had enough fuel to reach the airport. They did want to put on a show, but were, in Maddy’s opinion, being reasonably sensible.

She checked the configuration of her aircraft. Maps had already configured them for running on three engines. Rudder was slightly offset and the trim tabs had been tweaked. Good man!

Maps finished talking to Ground. “They are going to set things up for us. They have their own regs of course. I convinced them that we weren’t going to crash on them and they are not going to put down foam. They’ll have a fire truck there, and other emergency trucks, just in case.”

“Thanks, Maps, good job on the trim,” said Maddy. “Can you get us an ETA and a fuel plan? I’m going to talk to the team.”

“OK, Boss.”

Maddy did her round of the plane, telling her crew what she knew, which was that they were one engine down, would take longer to reach their destination, and were in no current danger. They would know that of course, having practised “three engine” landings. Sparks, in her cubicle behind the cockpit, had been listening to the cockpit conversation of course, so she was aware what was going on. The others had pretty much guessed.

No signs of panic, but she had expected that. Most of them had been flying for years, many of them with her. Cargomaster was even strapped in reading a paperback.

“Everything OK, Cargomaster?”

“Nothing I can do, Boss. So long as we’re not going down, I’m OK.”

Cargoes One, Two and Three were strapped in, their abandoned card game still on a rickety table in an open space.

“Best get that cleared up, guys,” she said.

“Right Boss. We were just waiting for things to settle down,” said Cargo Three.

Maddy nodded.

“Thanks. Stay strapped in as much as possible, please.”

She returned to the cockpit.

“Take a break, Maps. I have control. What’s our ETA?”

“You have control, Boss. About an hour and forty-five minutes. I told Ground.”

“OK, thanks. Have a nap. Are you happy to land her on three engines?”

“Yes, Boss, though it will be my first time, except for practice landings.”

“Me too.”

“You want me to land her?”

“Yes, I’ve had a nap, you’ll be having one for the next... mmm, one and a half hours. So you’ll be the freshest when we arrive. Any issues with that?”

“No, Boss. I get it now. OK.”

Rod set his seat back and dozed off. It was a trick you quickly learned in the forces.

Maddy woke him up fifteen minutes out. He accepted with thanks a coffee that Cargo One brought him from the small galley in the hold of the plane. Maddy brought him up to date.

She had already made contact with Ground, confirmed their height and speed, and Ground had started to talk them down. Ground were handling them with kid gloves, but Maddy didn't mind. She could understand their concern, as they were bringing in a damaged plane and obviously they hadn't seen the damage themselves.

"I'm going to hand over to you, Maps. Are you properly awake?"

"Yes, Boss. Fully awake and ready."

"OK, you have control. Bring her in!"

"I have control."

They did the pre landing checks together and switched out the autopilot. Maddy listened in to his conversation with Ground. Rod was bringing them in on a shallow glide path, while Ground conservatively preferred a steeper one. No reason for her to butt in. Rod's path was fine by her. Ground wasn't too worried either, from their tone.

Rod set her down like a feather.

"Watch for uneven reverse thrust," said Maddy.

"OK, thanks, got it, Boss."

"Well done, Maps, good landing."

Rod shutdown engine two. It was his call as he had control and it made the lifter easier to control on the ground. Maddy would overrule if she thought it necessary. Rod taxied the plane to the designated station away from the terminal, using engines one and four. They shut down the remaining engines, and switched the power to external when Ground connected them.

"Is it always this exciting to fly with you, Boss?" asked Rod. He had left the intercom on and someone snorted.

"Strike one against you, Maps!" But she was laughing. "And don't think I didn't hear you snort, Sparks!"

"OK, team, let's disembark. Let's go and look at the damage. We may get some interference from Ground."

Ground crew were supposed to keep everyone clear while the failure was investigated, but Maddy wanted to see the damage for herself. The crew disembarked and walked as a group towards engine number three. Two Ground crew were marking the area with cones and tape. Maddy walked up to the barrier and simply stepped over it, followed by her crew. The Ground crew just stared in disbelief.

"Hmm, most of the front and much of the on board side seems to be missing. No damage to the wing that I can see. There might be a nick or two further to the rear of the fuselage. OK, team, let's scam before the cops arrive."

Sure enough, as they were heading for the terminal, two Military Policemen came hurrying the other way. They gave Maddy and her crew a suspicious look as they went past.

Maddy stopped inside the terminal. "Right, Maps and I will have to report. I'd like to see you in the mess for a team debrief at, oh, seventeen thirty. OK, with everyone?" She got nods all round.

She and Rod strolled through to the Operations Centre and made their report. There would be an investigation of course, but the debriefing might not happen for a day or so.

At seventeen thirty the crew assembled in the mess and took over a table in a side room. It was a reasonably private spot, away from the main room but open to it.

“Firstly, our little bit of excitement today. Engineering are going to take the engine away for analysis, but the new engine won’t arrive until tomorrow and it will take at least a day to fit. Thanks for staying calm and out of the way, though I expected nothing less, having flown with you before. And thanks to our new Maps. That was a sweet landing.”

“Thank you,” said Rod.

“Secondly, we came down here empty, and most of you know what that means. We’re going to load up stuff and go somewhere. The ‘somewhere’ is about to be hit by a big storm and damage is expected. Casualties are expected. We’ll be hauling a bulldozer, medical supplies, some water and other bits and pieces. We’ll also have a few passengers, aid workers, mostly. Some medical people.”

“We’ll probably make quite a few trips in and out, hauling stuff. Most of the work will be for Cargomaster and Cargoes One, Two and Three, but we’ll all pitch in as usual. There will probably be volunteers for the loading too, but Maps and I will keep most of them at bay.”

She turned to Rod. “OK, Maps? Have you done this sort of things before?”

“Yes, Boss. I’ve been a Cargomaster and a Cargo on relief missions. I was on the earthquake one on Gypsy.”

“OK, so you know what’s expected. Good. Anything else, anyone?”

“Yeah, Boss.” said Sparks, an older woman with her hair plaited down her back. “I’ll have to check out the electrics after that blowout. If I have any trouble with Ground...”

“Give me a call. I’ll handle it. Now get out of here, everyone. Go and get a drink. Maps and I will join you in a minute.” They all filed out and staked a claim to one of the large mess tables.

Rod sat waiting. He wasn’t sure what this was about, but she was still calling him Maps, which meant work.

“Right, Maps, what are your plans? Are you planning to become Captain anytime soon?”

“No, Boss. I’m happy as Maps, for now. I’m not seeking early promotion. Being team leader doesn’t appeal to me much, but I want to keep flying. In any case, I’d need some experience before I could consider seeking promotion.”

“It doesn’t appeal to me much, sometimes, being team leader,” said Maddy. “Most of the time, though, I enjoy it.”

“Boss, can I ask if your old Maps is coming back anytime? I heard she was on maternity leave, so she’s going to out for a year? Am I just a temporary replacement?”

“Good question. She’s not likely to be back. Maria can’t fly while pregnant so she’s transferred to a desk job in the Capital until she has the baby, and then she will take time off. When she comes back it will be to the desk job but she hopes to have another baby fairly soon after the first. Don’t worry, it will be a few years, so you’ve plenty of time. In any case, she is unlikely to be assigned back to us.”

“By the way, Maps, you didn’t check out who was on the crew before you joined? That should have tipped you off that you knew me.”

“I didn’t have a chance, Boss. They asked me to switch planes at the last minute, and I was put on the scheduled transfer flight right away. That’s why I was late. But they told you?”

“Only about thirty minutes before we were due to take off. I wonder why the late switch?”

“They didn’t tell me.”

It turned out that there was no mystery. The navigator originally scheduled for Maddy’s team had broken an ankle and Rod was the nearest navigator who could be spared.

She looked over at her crew, who had just been delivered some large bowls of nachos. “Anyway, let’s go and join the team before they demolish all the nachos.”

Rod learned that the nachos were a team ritual paid for by Maddy. He also found that only the Boss, Cargomaster and Cargo Two drank alcohol. He decided on a light beer. He reflected that he had no idea of all their real names.

Maddy introduced Rod to the team. There was Jake, the Cargomaster, a burly man in his early forties. His brown hair was cropped short. Patty was Cargo One, an efficient blond, the leader of the Cargo trio. Rod thought she was maybe twenty-two. Young for the job, and that probably meant she was good at it. Mike was Cargo Two, a stocky guy with tattoos on his bare arms. He was maybe the same age as Rod. Cargo Three was Joshua, an older dark skinned man, late forties, greying hair with a wispy beard. And Sparks was apparently called Harry, short for Harriet. She was about forty he guessed.

“Rod and I knew each other as kids, but we’ve not bumped into each other since we were small. Rod?”

“Er yes, I’m a bit embarrassed to say this, but I once punched Maddy in the eye and knocked her down some steps.” Everyone gasped.

“Yeah, er, I and some other guys wanted her to sell some stolen gear but she wouldn’t have anything to do with it. It was the first, and only time we stole something. You know, I regret the whole thing from start to finish, but it happened, and I can’t take it back. I told the youngest of the other guys, who was Maddy’s age, to punch her, and he pretty much just tapped her on the shoulder. She got mad and started to fight the guy.”

“Sounds like the Boss,” said someone.

“I wanted to stop the fight, so I punched Maddy and she fell down some steps and got knocked out, and boy, was I scared. I thought that she would just run off. I wish we had gone to help her, but someone came and we ran off.”

Everyone was looking at him.

“Like I said, I regret the whole thing, wish it had never happened. Anyway, the local constable, Ken, who was a good man, sorted the whole thing out. Constable Ken had some sort of solution for the stolen stuff, and so that problem went away.”

“I was from an Air Force family, but my Dad had been killed in an accident on the ground. Some friends of Constable Ken’s, Smith and Jones, who were ex forces, spoke up for me. Smith and Jones suggested to me that I join up and so I did. There was no compulsion, and in fact, I wondered why I hadn’t thought about it earlier. Constable Ken pretty much cautioned me and let me off. It was an accident that Maddy got hurt, but that doesn’t excuse anything. It was my fault.”

Mike, Cargo Two, said “Well now, that trumps all our stories. Not that we are going air them all now. So you popped the Boss in the eye?”

Maddy laughed and said “Yes, Mike, that’s what happened. I expected Rod, Maps, to dress it up a bit but he didn’t. I’m impressed. Incidentally, the boy that hit me first was Jim, who became my husband.”

Harry, or Sparks, said “He obviously made an impression on you.”

Everyone groaned.

Maddy said “I didn’t blame Rod, never did, but I was mad about flying as a kid, and he gave me the idea of signing up and here we are. So, now you know more about your Boss than I’m really comfortable with!”

Mike waved that away. “Anyway, Rod, our new Maps, welcome. That was a sweet landing on three engines. We couldn’t see what was happening from the hold, of course, but it felt good.”

“I was trying to impress the Boss, of course. I couldn’t land Blue Lady roughly, even with one engine out, with her watching my every move.”

Maddy laughed. “Nice one. Anyway, I’m going to retire and phone my family. Good night all.”

After she had left, they all had another drink. Rod could see that they were a tight team and he wondered how well he could fit in. Most of their stories started with “Do you remember when...” or similar. He didn’t have any shared memories with them. Then he realized that today’s events would end up as a “Do you remember when...” He reflected that, as a flight crew they were a little older than the average for the Air Force, but about the average for the lifters.

Time would do it. Teams take time to meld. In the meantime... “I’m going to turn in. I have to contact my family. They don’t even know I’m down here. Goodnight all.”

“Goodnight, Maps, Rod” said Harry. “See you in the morning. We usually meet in the mess for coffee at ten if the Boss hasn’t scheduled anything. Don’t be surprised if she calls you at seven, though!”

Maddy called up her family on her communicator. It was one of the new ones, so was a bit bulkier than the OldTech ones. She put it on the table and pressed the video button and a bright sphere appeared above it. It bleeped for a while then Jim’s face appeared in the sphere.

“Hi, love, how’s everything?”

Jim smiled, “Love you, babe. Everything is fine here. The kids are still up. Kids!”

Two little faces appeared in the sphere, fighting for space. One was a boy, ebony skinned like Maddy, while the other was a fair skinned girl.

“Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!” They were jumping up and down and going in and out of the video sphere.

Maddy’s heart went soft. “Stop jumping up and down, sillies, I can’t see you!”

Jim came back into the picture. “They went on the pre-school visit today. They’ve got pictures to show you.”

Various paint daubed pieces of paper were shown to the video sphere. Maddy made the appropriate oohs and aahs.

“Did you like it, kids?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” More jumping up and down happened.

Jim came back. “They did fine. They’re looking forward to it.”

When the kids went to school, Jim could go back to teaching which he was missing. Maddy’s eyes misted. He’d given up so much for her career. She’d given up so much for her career.

Jim had a close look at the image. “Love you.” he said.

Suddenly she remembered. “Guess who my new navigator is?”

“Who?”

“Rod. Remember Rod? The one who blacked my eye all those years ago?”

“Yes, of course. That was the night you beat me up,” teased Jim.

“Huh! I thought he might be difficult, but it looks like he’ll work out fine. He opened up to the team about bopping me in the eye. He’s a good pilot too. Not as good as me of course.”

Jim made a rude noise.

“Where have the kids gone?”

“The kids? Oh, they’re chasing the puppy round the garden.” He looked sideways, anywhere but the sphere.

“The puppy? What puppy? Jim!!”

“Sorry. They twisted my arm. It’s not a bad thing, is it? I always wanted a puppy.”

“Just make sure it’s house-trained by the time I get back!”

“Yes, Boss.” He knew the forces slang.

“Anyway, we have about a month’s work down here I think, but we have a few days in the Capital scheduled after that, so I’ll be home then. Then another month, then a whole month at home!”

“Luxury! We’ll look forward to it.” Jim had obviously carried the communicator into the garden. The sphere showed two tiny images of the kids chasing a smaller image of the black and white puppy round and round the garden.

“Love you, love you all, good night!” she called.

“Love you, see you soon,” said Jim.

She hung up. “Love you, love you all,” she said.

Rod called his wife, Ellen, and she answered quickly.

“Hi, chook.”

She snorted.

“Hi love, how’s life in the air? You’re using that ‘chook’ line, so something’s going on,” said Ellen.

“It’s a bit complicated. I’ve been switched to another plane, a lifter. We’re going to be doing some relief runs. Have you seen the news about the big storm down south?”

His wife turned her head away and yelled “Stop that Brian. Give it back to Gerry. It belongs to him!”

She turned back to the communicator. “Sorry, Brian’s being a bit of a pain at the moment. Yeah, I did see that about the storm. You’re on that job? A lifter? Great! I know you like them. Any idea how long it will be until you get back?”

“The Boss said a month, then we get a break. Sorry.”

She waved the apology away. “What’s the new Boss like?”

“She’s good! It turns out I know her. I once gave her a black eye.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t my finest hour. I’ll tell you the story when I get home. The crew are good, but I’ve only known them for a day, so we have yet to gel as a team. We blew an engine on the way down, and the Boss got me to land it on three engines. I did a good job, though I say so myself. How’s it going at The Castle? Missing you!”

“Oh, it’s pretty dull, actually. Everything goes like clockwork. Communications are so much better since we installed the new gear. Missing you too.”

Ellen was an Army girl, a squaddie, in Communications, which up at The Castle mostly involved swapping out redundant “OldTech” for more modern “NewTech”, now that the boffins had come up with working replacements.

Ellen continued “We’re expecting a visit from the King and Queen next month.” She calculated in her head. “Probably while you are still on the relief runs. That means that everyone is running around tidying up, Communications included.” She snorted.

“Do the kids want to say hi?”

Ellen turned away. “Kids, get in here! Dad is on the communicator.”

“Hi, Dad. When are you back?” It was dark haired Brian, who had his father’s hair colour.

“Not for a month or so, sorry. How are you?”

“Good, good. Gerry won’t let me play with his dinosaur.” Rod knew this ruse. Appeal to the absent parent for sympathy.

“Brian, what does your Mum say?”

“She says to let him have it. OK.”

“See ya soon, Brian.”

“Dadddyyy!” It was fair haired Gerry, just like his mother. A model dinosaur was waved at the screen.

“I got to have a ‘jection,” Gerry yelled.

“Be good for Mum then,” said Rod, but it was too late, Gerry had gone, and Ellen came back into the picture.

Rod could still see the wide-eyed recruit he’d met and fallen in love with all those years ago. Ellen recognized the look and smiled.

“We’ve done pretty well haven’t we?” she said. “for ships that pass in the night. A month or two here and there.”

“I still love you. Do you remember, before communicators, the long, expensive phone calls.”

“Yeah, and waiting in line to call, and being hassled to get off all the time. Everyone was trying to use the one phone. When we got a communicator each, we didn’t know what to say to each other, we had so much time! Except, I love you.” She blew him a kiss.

“I love you too.”

Suddenly she turned and yelled “Gerry, don’t do that!”

She blew him a kiss and said “Sorry, gotta go, love you,” and hung up.

He ruefully closed his end of the connection. That was how most calls to his wife ended. He wondered if all service families were like his. He reflected that when he was home and his wife was away, that he’d often have to terminate the call rapidly because one of the kids was doing something that they shouldn’t. It was sort of funny, silly, and lovely at the same time.

Rod wasn’t called so he slept in. Flyers tended to take their eight hours whenever the chance came along. He knew that Army didn’t do things that way, from his time with them. They got up at six thirty whatever. After he got up, he mooched around the base “information gathering” or basically gossiping with anyone who had the time. He saw Sparks heading off to the plane but she didn’t see him. The engineers had got the damaged engine onto a trolley and were about to wheel it off.

He went to the mess for a late breakfast and one by one the rest of the crew, except Sparks and the Boss, came and joined him. Finally Maddy arrived. She grabbed a coffee and joined them.

“Sparks is busy so won’t be joining us. Maps, I saw you wandering around. Any news?” She knew “information gathering” when she saw it.

“Only that they are expecting another lifter sometime today. It will be bringing our new engine and some Relief Mission experts. They gave me some names, but they weren’t sure.”

“Good work. Yeah, they’re sending Buccaneer down here. She’ll fly in first after the storm as we won’t be ready.”

There was a stir among the team.

“They’re sort of like our friendly rivals,” explained Cargo Two to Rod. “They’re good, but we are better, of course. We even stole one of their best when our previous Cargo Three left.” Cargo Three looked sheepish.

“It’s a pity we won’t be going in first, but that’s life,” said Maddy. “I know you guys, and I know those guys. I know you’ll work together fine, but keep the competitiveness in check. It’s not about us. It’s about those people.”

She gestured at the screen where news reports showed the destruction on some small offshore islands. The storm was due to hit the mainland in a few hours. The television was warning people to leave the area, and also showed the roads out of the area full of cars.

“Sparks is busy checking our electrics and hydraulics. When Buccaneer arrives, she will be helping her Sparks with a problem that they’ve got in their electrics. It’s minor but a two man job, apparently. Maps, you’ll be on weather watch and route planning. You’ll need to talk to Ground. Cargomaster, the usual, liaise with Ground to get the cargo delivered to the Cargoes in the right order. Cargoes, also the usual, work with Cargomaster to fit the cargo into the hold. It’s all been pre-planned, as usual, so it will be a matter of dropping the right pallets in the right places and tying them down. Assuming they got the plan right, of course.”

“Everyone, you all know your jobs. I didn’t really need to spell it out, but this is going to be as big as the earthquake mission. They’re bringing in more lifters and transports over the next couple of days, so things are likely to turn chaotic round here. Let’s get things off to a good start. The main thing is to get Buccaneer into the air as soon as possible, so give her any help she needs.”

The drone of a lifter coming in to land filled the air.

“Here she comes now. Maps, let’s go and greet her. Everyone else, finish your coffee then carry on.”

Maddy and Rod waited just inside the terminal.

“Rod, did you ever fly on Buccaneer? I hadn’t heard that you did, and I know most of the crew that Ed’s had over the years.”

“No, I was a Cargo on Gypsy, and Cargomaster on Red Dragon while I was studying for my navigation exams. I was mostly on transports after that, but I’m glad to be back on a lifter. I enjoy the lifters. There’s more sense of team in the lifters.”

The sliding doors opened and a huge bear of a man and a small woman with the features of someone from the Eastern Province came through. They were followed by two others from the Buccaneer crew.

The big man turned to his crew. “Right guys, go and get settled in. See you in the mess at fourteen hundred.”

He turned and saw Maddy and Rod. “Hi, pipsqueak. Who’s this?”

Maddy laughed. “You great dumb bear! Rod, this is Ed, Boss of Buccaneer, the second best lifter in the fleet. The quiet refined lady is Sally, his Maps. Sally, Ed, this is my new Maps, Rod.”

“Hi Rod.” Ed’s hand engulfed his in a handshake, while Sally put her hands together and bowed. Rod bowed back.

“‘Second best lifter?’,” snorted Ed. “Hey, I hear you lost an engine on the way down. Tough luck. But, hey, we get to go in first, so it’s not all bad news.”

“You always were a lucky so-and-so, Ed. Oh well, we’ll help to get you in the air as soon as possible of course. The sooner you’re out of our hair the better. We have an engine to replace. Now go and report in. We’ll catch up later.”

“Yeah, sure. My Cargomaster and Cargo One are unloading your engine now. They’ll get it to the Ground engineers as soon as they can. Your Sparks is coming across to give mine a hand, as requested?”

“Thanks Ed. Yes, Harry will be across as soon as she’s checked out Blue Lady’s systems after the blowout.”

Ed and Sally passed through the doors to report in, and Maddy and Rod went to check out their aircraft. Sparks was gone, so she’d obviously finished her checks. Cargomaster and the Cargoes had

loaded the bulldozer, and were working on the other freight. Cargo Three was picking up the pallets and Cargo Two was directing him and checking the pallets off on a list. Cargo One was throwing cargo nets over the pallets and tying them down. Now and then Cargomaster would appear with a new list.

Maddy grabbed Cargomaster as he came through.

“How many passengers, Cargomaster?”

“About twenty this time, Boss. Here’s the list.”

“Is that who I think it is, Boss,” said Rod, pointing at a name on the list.

“Yep, Deanne, from our home town, Queen Afua’s friend. She came down in Buccaneer. Remember, she was deputy to the Crisis Coordinator on the earthquake job? She’s Top Dog this time. Let’s go and see how First Class is set up.”

“First Class” was a joking reference to the accommodation for extra passengers on the lifter. It consisted of a block of six rows of five seats, much like in a transport or in a commercial aircraft. It had been designed to be securely fixed to the floor of the hold in a clear spot. The passengers wouldn’t be comfortable in the noisy hold, but all seats had headsets so that flight information could be relayed to them, and these would reduce the noise somewhat. There were also packets of earplugs for those who needed them. Rod had travelled in the hold as Cargomaster and as one of the Cargoes so he knew what it was like.

“By the way, Maps, there’s a briefing in the mess for everyone down to your rank at seventeen hundred today.”

“OK, Boss. Yeah, I saw it in my calendar.” Rod reflected that the calendars on the computers made life a lot easier. Now, if they could only link that into the communicators somehow.... They could only send short messages to the communicators at the moment.

“Let’s go and see how Buccaneer is doing. We’re only in the way here.”

Deanne was preparing for the briefing. She was a striking woman who had just passed her thirty-second birthday. She’d been given this job by her friend Affie, Queen Afua, and her husband King Henry, a step up from her role in the earthquake Relief Mission. She had three problems. One was that she was young for such an important role, and the second was that she wasn’t forces. The Coordinator was usually from the forces. The third was that she was missing Peter, her husband, and her two girls. She decided to give them a call.

“Hello. Deanne?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m freaking out down here. Help, Peter!”

He laughed. “Go, my girl, go! You’ve nothing to worry about. You’re the best.”

“Says you! You’re biased!”

“Says me. Says Affie. Says Henry. Says Gloria! Says the kids. Says everyone! Oh, Smith and Jones passed through today. Spoiled the girls rotten. We went to the zoo.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I missed them. I’m still freaking out!”

“DON’T! You can do it. You. Can. Do. It! Freak **them** out.”

“Yeah, I can do it! But I so miss you, you’re my right arm. And the kids! I’m getting weepy. That’ll be a good look.”

“Go girl, wipe the tears and go get them.”

“Love you, see you soon.”

“Love you, bye.”

When Deanne arrived in the mess, she was wearing a plain t-shirt and jeans, with trainers. She'd pulled her hair back in a ponytail. She was intentionally casual and definitely not forces.

"Hi all," she said, "Welcome to the Relief Mission team. Welcome to Main Base. Now, I'm not military, and most of you are. But my husband was Army for a while, and I've worked with the military before. Many of you here have worked with me, and I hope I left a good impression."

A few people chuckled.

"We have plans for disaster relief, and those plans necessarily cross boundaries between services. My job is to help you execute those plans and to refine those plans for the next disaster. My job is to help untangle the procedural knots that will definitely arise. My job is to pour oil on any friction between services, should any arise. In my experience, and I was second in command during the earthquake Relief Mission which some of you were involved in, that won't be too much of an issue. My job is to direct the effort, and make sure that we do our best for those people down there."

"So I'm in charge. Please call me 'Boss' if you are Air Force, 'Chief' if you are Army, and 'Cap' if you are Navy."

That got her a chuckle or two.

"Now, as to details. Our Advance Base will be at the nearest undamaged airport to the disaster. The lifter Buccaneer went in today. Blue Lady was scheduled to go in first but blew an engine on the way down, so Buccaneer went and her passengers will set up our Advance Base. The local people will not have the experience in handling the amount of traffic that we are sending down there, so we will have to lend a hand. Don't forget that it is **their** airport, though."

"We have helicopters arriving tomorrow and they will refuel here before going on to the Advance Base. We'll deploy them from there as needed. We'll have to find a way to fuel them up directly at Advance Base, but it's not a big issue, they tell me."

"Tomorrow is going to be busy here and down there. We will have several transports coming in bringing troops and civilian volunteers. The King is coming down to see the damage for himself, but that won't affect us, except that we need to keep out of their way, and vice versa. We have a couple more lifters expected with necessary equipment and the air tanker Pegasus will be coming in with a full load of fuel. Ground will be really busy. Where's Ground?"

Someone at the front put up their hand.

"Here, Boss." This was an Air Force Base.

"Good. Ground decides who takes off and when. They have control out to the usual distances. Business as usual in other words, but the traffic will be several times normal. Any issues, I want to know about immediately. No excuses. Blue Lady will be going in tomorrow, assuming repairs are completed in time. I'm going down on her to scope things out, but I'll be back the next day. Buccaneer will probably be on her second trip by then, so I'll probably hitch a lift back with them."

Another chuckle.

"By the way, the main Navy contingent will be arriving the day after tomorrow, weather permitting. It's looking dodgy at the moment, though. They're sending the aircraft carrier Narcissus. Their choppers will be really useful, especially in the islands. I think, I hope, that they have their big lifting copter, the flying crane, on board. There's some civilian ships that might be of use, but I've no details yet. I'm trying to make contact with the Coastguards and they should have some vessels available."

She paused. "Any questions so far?" No hands went up.

"After that, it all depends on what we find down there. We need good intelligence. Everything goes through my office, but we need people to show initiative. Just don't go too far out on a limb. I repeat. Everything goes through my office. I will return here from the Advance Base after we've

had a quick look round. Some of my staff will be in Advance Base and any other bases we set up. Narcissus will be a major base too. Most of their attention will be towards the islands but they will have plenty of resource to assist on the mainland too. They have people and they have choppers.”

She paused again. “Any questions?” Had she gone too far? A silver haired Army man in the front row put up his hand.

“I worked with you on the earthquake job, and I’m pleased to be working with you on this job, er, Chief.”

This brought a laugh from the audience, though many of them nodded in agreement.

He continued, “I’m serious, though. That was an excellent summary, Chief. Let’s do it.”

Deanne mentally thanked him. “OK, you all would have received a summary of what I’ve said. As Alistair here said, ‘Let’s do it’! Meeting over.”

Later Deanne called home.

“I love you, Peter! I ruled them! An Army guy I worked with before gave me a hand, but I definitely ruled them!”

“I never doubted you. You don’t know how good you are. Look.”

He switched the communicator to video mode and carried it to the girls’ bedroom. The two kids were in the same bed, the older girl cuddling the younger one. Peter appeared in the view globe.

“That’s how I found them. I didn’t want to disturb them. Sweet, aren’t they?”

“Oh, you’ve made me cry. Rats! They’re so sweet.”

“Do you know what Fidget said to me today? She said ‘Mummy’s an important person’. I asked her if Daddy was as important. She thought a bit and said ‘Yes, but different’.”

Fidget was the older one’s nickname.

“At least you are important! Love her.”

“You’re important to us. But help all those poor people down there. They need you too.”

“OK, I will. I’ll do my best. But oh, it’s hard on my own. Love you all! Bye now.”

“Bye, my love. Bye.”

The next day Buccaneer came back from the advance camp. After unloading, Ed and Sally strolled over to see how Blue Lady was going. Maddy was off somewhere, but expected back any minute, and Rod had just picked up their flight plan. The engine had been replaced and tested, and the cargo was safely loaded and he had checked that the passengers were ready to board.

“Ready to go, Maps?” said Ed.

“Yes, Boss. How was it down there?” Strictly speaking Ed was not Rod’s Boss, but it seemed right.

“It’s a shortish runway, a bit of wind shear when we went in. My Maps put her down sweetly though, didn’t you, Sally? The local guys had done a good job of clearing their runways and taxiways, but they were only on the fringe of the storm. It was still pretty breezy, but improving. They’re not that good with cargo, but we got them organized in the end. They should be fine when you go in.”

“They expect to have casualties ready to be shipped out for treatment when you go in,” said Sally. “A local chopper guy is doing a great job, but they need more choppers down there fast.”

“They’re getting choppers tomorrow. We’ve got facilities for three or four casualties. We’ll be able to improvise if there are more,” said Rod.

“We’d better go and report in,” said Ed. He sighed. “With this sort of exercise you have to report everything twice. Once as usual and once more to the Relief Mission team. That’s life! What’s the top Boss like?”

“She’s good. She’s on top of everything. Oh, here’s our Boss.”

“Hi, Ed, Sally. Sorry, can’t stop to chat. We have to go. Maps, is everything in order?” said Maddy.

“Yes, Boss, of course. I’ll get the passengers loaded. Cargomaster!”

He and Cargomaster rounded up the passengers and got them seated and buckled in. Only one or two civilians, including the Top Dog, Deanne, who was talking with the silver haired Army man from the meeting. Cargo One was playing air steward, ensuring that the passengers were OK. Rod and Maddy swung up the ladder to the flight deck, nodding to Sparks in her cubicle.

“Right, team, Boss here. Check in Please.” The team checked in, in order, Sparks, Cargomaster, Cargo One, Two and Three.

“OK, let’s start the engines.”

She and Rod went through the usual pre flight checklist. They were open mic, so that Maddy’s crew could hear what was going on. She preferred it that way. She tweaked engine three a little so that it was the same as the other three. They went to internal power and got confirmation from Ground that they were clear to go. Ground pushed them back and lined them up with the taxi marks, and Maddy taxied them out to the end of the runway.

“Take her away, Maps. You have control. We’re loaded this time.” Rod knew that, but he’d rather have unnecessary reminders than something be forgotten.

“I have control,” he said, and started through the usual take off conversations with Ground. He got permission to taxi on to the runway, and permission to take off. He accelerated Blue Lady hard down the runway, listening to the Boss calling out distances and speeds. Blue Lady was definitely sluggish, but her speed was coming up fast enough to take off. Ground butted in to confirm. He lifted them off and climbed them away from the airport.

“Good girl!” he muttered to Blue Lady. He saw the Boss nod from the corner of his eye.

He and the Boss raised the undercarriage and set Blue Lady up for cruising and switched on the autopilot. Ground signed off and let them go. Rod switched his mic off.

“I saw you tweak engine three, Boss. Looks good.”

“Thanks, Maps. I was going to get you to check my work anyway. I’m going to talk to the passengers. Most of them came down in Buccaneer, so they should know what to expect and be OK. Cargo One doesn’t much like playing air steward, but she does a good job and doesn’t show it.”

“Doesn’t she? I’d never have guessed! She’s good.”

Maddy unbuckled and disappeared, and Rod settled in for the flight. The control sticks moved gently in unison as the autopilot made tiny adjustments. He played some music through his headphones, and after a bit Maddy came back and took the captain’s seat again.

“Boss, Buccaneer said that the runway is quite short at destination. I already knew, but it’s nice of him to mention it. A bit of wind shear. Sally says we might be taking some medical cases out from Advance Base.”

“Yes, Maps, the big bear is a nice chap. The rivalry between Blue Lady and Buccaneer is mostly kidding around.”

“It’s funny. There’s nothing like that on Gypsy or Red Dragon, and they’re pretty good crews too.”

“It’s probably because Ed and I went through training at the same time. The other Bosses were either earlier or later. And we both love the lifters. It’s more just a job for the others, I think.”

This was a short hop and so neither of them took a break. At the destination Maddy landed them on the short runway with no trouble.

“How was that, Maps?” she asked as they pulled into their parking position.

“OK, Boss, I guess,” said Rod jokingly.

“Just ‘OK’? Hmmph!”

“If you want a serious answer, Boss...”

“Go on then. Rod to Maddy. Not Maps to Boss.”

“Well then, Maddy. I couldn’t fault it. Could I do as well? I’d hope so, but I don’t know.”

“Hmm, I don’t think you are as competitive as me and Ed. You’re more like Sally who is a great pilot, but not competitive about it.”

Rod thought about it. “I think you are right. I just want to fly as well as I can, and I’m told that I’m pretty good. I don’t need to be the best.”

“OK Rod, good to know. Best switch back to work mode now. Let’s shut her down, Maps.”

Dee Dee was upset, very upset. He had been toddling around the main room of his house playing with his toys while his mother was making a cold meal. There was no electricity, because of the storm. Then there was a roar and a rumble and the wall disappeared and he was picked up and throw around by a torrent of water. He heard his mother scream and then he was swirled around and washed out through the remains of the wall.

He was bumped and bashed around but managed to keep taking gasping breaths of air. He was turned upside down and right side up, until finally the torrent dumped him on to an uprooted bush. He lay there for a while, coughing up water, and suddenly the bush tipped up and dumped him into a muddy puddle. He crawled out of the puddle and found himself in an open space with a roof covering most of it. He didn’t realize, since he was only a toddler, that the open space was a garage.

Earlier, above Dee Dee’s house, the storm had caused a slip. Rocks and boulders had washed down the face of the mountain and blocked the stream that flowed down the little valley and passed just below Dee Dee’s house. The stream that Dee Dee’s mother could normally easily step over had been flowing in a foaming torrent that lapped the little road below Dee Dee’s house, but suddenly it shrank to a mere trickle.

As the storm continued a small lake started to build up behind the blockage. More slips piled up on the accidental dam, and the lake continued to grow. The storm was beginning to ease after eight hours as the centre moved off the coast but the accidental dam started to weaken. First, small pebbles bounced out and trickles of water started to fill the stream bed.

Suddenly a whole section gave way and a vast wave swept down the little valley, bouncing from side to side and eventually slamming into Dee Dee’s house, ripping away a complete wall and most of another. It then continued down the valley damaging other houses on the way. Eventually the torrent poured into a larger stream, which absorbed the extra volume and carried it to the sea.

Dee Dee’s mother was swept out of the house and down towards the larger stream at the bottom but the torrent spat her out twenty metres down from her house. She washed up, with a broken arm, on the porch of a house which had itself missed the worst effects of the torrent. The elderly couple living there took her in, and made her as comfortable as possible. They planned to find help for her in the morning. She told them about Dee Dee, but there was no way that anyone would be able to get to her house that night. The elderly man tried to, several times, but wasn’t able to get beyond the first piles of debris.

Dee Dee crawled into the wrecked garage. He was crying and calling for his mother, but she didn't come. He'd lost his nappy somewhere as he was swept down the hill by the water. He crawled away from the wind and the rain and found a dog's bed. All he knew was that it was soft and relatively dry. He crawled into it and still crying, fell asleep.

When the next morning came, the storm had mostly passed and the rain had eased. The elderly man forced his way up through the debris from the storm to Dee Dee's house, but there was no sign of Dee Dee. Dee Dee himself was fast asleep in the garage on the other side of the road, and the old man didn't see him.

Later that morning the first Army patrol through the area came by in a truck which bore the name of a local firm. The sergeant had borrowed the truck from the owner, who was pleased to loan it to him. Sarg was marking off the damaged and devastated areas on his map when they came to the little side road that Dee Dee's house was on. He sent two of his privates up to survey the street.

"Killer and Brains, get up there and have a look. The rest of you, spread out and check out the end of the road here. Knock on all doors."

The end of the road was a tarmac area where cars could turn around, but as a result of the storm, the tarmac was covered in sand and pebbles brought down from the hills. Debris was also scattered around the houses, though the main structures seemed OK. A few of the windows had been blown out or smashed by the winds, and a tree had been knocked over here and there. It was quiet.

Sarg picked up the loud hailer and switched it on.

"If there are any citizens who have not evacuated, can you please make yourselves known?"

He repeated this message three times, in both his own language and the local language.

Eventually two old ladies emerged from one house.

"Hullo, sergeant. We are OK, thank you. Can we be of any help?"

Sarg was grateful that he didn't have to test his knowledge of the local language.

"Hi, ladies, do you know of anyone else who has not been evacuated round here?"

"No, sergeant. I think we are the only ones down here. Oh, but there might be some people up the little side road there. I think I saw some lights last night."

"Are you sure you ladies are OK? We can take you in if you like."

"No, thank you, sergeant. We have our gas stove and oil lanterns. We've got water and food for now. You see, we were both Army before we retired. We were well-prepared for the storm. It's been a bit like a trip down memory lane for us. We're OK, thank you."

Killer and Brains followed the small side road as it zigzagged up the hill. In some places the road was partly blocked by storm debris, from small boulders to rocks the size of a washing machine. Mixed in with the boulders were wood and bricks from the houses, chunks of concrete, even wires and pipes. They knocked on all the doors with no results.

They had just reached one of the higher houses when an elderly man came out. He said something in the local language and motioned them into the house.

"I'll carry on up the road," said Brains. "You see what he wants."

Killer went into the house and found the man's wife looking after Dee Dee's mother.

"Now what?" he said mostly to himself.

"Broken arm," said the man. Dee Dee's mother was cradling one arm in the other. She had other scrapes and scratches, but apart from the arm seemed mostly OK.

"Your daughter?" Killer asked.

"No, up hill."

“OK, we’ll take her down to the truck, OK?”

The man said something to the woman. At first she shook her head.

“She ... go look for baby,” said the man.

“OK, we’ll fix her up, then we’ll look for her baby. We’ve got a whole squad down there. Doctor too.”

He held up both hands with spread fingers, and the man spoke to the injured woman. The woman nodded reluctantly.

Killer carefully helped the woman up off the couch and guided her through the door. She stopped and looked up the hill. When she saw the debris in the road and the damage to the houses on the little road, she went to go up the hill.

“Dee Dee! Dee Dee!” she called.

“We’ll look, we’ll look,” said Killer. Killer had got his nickname because he had refused to squash a bug that had flown into one of the squad’s tents.

He guided the woman round the piles of debris and down the hill.

When he got near to the bottom he called “Sarg! Sarg! Casualty! She doesn’t know our language. She’s lost her baby up the hill somewhere. Brains is still up there.”

Sarg and Bones, the medic, came rushing over. All medics were called Bones of course.

“The guy up the hill said she had a broken arm, Bones.”

Bones had a look while Sarg talked to her as well as he could with his limited knowledge of the language.

“OK if I go back and help Brains, Sarg?” asked Killer.

Sarg nodded.

“Yeah. We’ll all come up when I’ve sorted out this lady. Hey, Boots, go and see if either of those two vets knows the language. I’m betting that they do.”

Boots hurried off.

Killer climbed the hill again, this time keeping an eye out for the child.

“...or its body,” he thought with resignation.

Dee Dee woke up. He was cold and hungry and thirsty. Mama was not around. He grizzled a bit then called out “Mama! Mama!”

She didn’t come. The dog bowl had some water in it, and he’d seen dogs lapping up water, so he put his head into it. He choked a bit and sat up and cried, but he’d managed to get a mouthful of water. He tried a few times and between the choking and snorting out of water managed to get some into himself. He stood up and tottered around for a bit.

“Mama?”

He toddled across the road. He somehow knew that he should be on the other side of the road. He stopped by some steps, then he sat down and crawled up them. There were only two steps, then there was an open paved area. He stood up wavering dangerously at the top. He looked around. It looked familiar to him as it was the area in front of the garage that his mother kept the car in. He was confused though, by the tree and other debris along the far side.

“Mama! Mama?”

The garage door didn’t open. It somehow did when his mother was there, but Dee Dee didn’t really understand. He sat down on the paved area and called “Mama! Mama!”

He heard someone making a loud noise down at the road at the bottom of the hill.

“Mama?” he said tentatively. But it wasn’t her. He didn’t understand Sarg’s announcement in either language.

Meanwhile Killer was making contact with Dee Dee's mother a few house below. While he helped her down to the main road, Brains was climbing up the zigzag between the two houses.

He knocked at each door, but no one answered. Finally he came to the house which had the garage that Dee Dee had sheltered in. The house itself was OK so he knocked. No answer.

The next house up was Dee Dee's. The garage of Dee Dee's house was on a level with the house where he had just knocked and Brains was just about to head up the slope when he saw movement in front of the garage. It was a small boy sitting on the ground, with a few scratches and bruises, but otherwise looking well.

Brains went up to the little lad and said "Hi, I'm Brains. Who are you?"

Dee Dee was confused by this strange man. He said "Mama?" He didn't understand what Brains said as he was too young and it was a different language.

Then he said "Dada?"

Brains, unaware that Dee Dee's mother was down below, said "So, you probably come from up the hill. Let's go and have a look."

He scooped up Dee Dee. Dee Dee was a little scared at first, but the man kept talking to him and he relaxed. His thumb went into his mouth.

Brains went round the corner, and whistled when he saw Dee Dee's house. The whole of one side had been washed out. All that was left was the remains of Dee Dee's bedroom and Dee Dee's parents' bedroom, and part of the bathroom. There was no point in going further as the front door had been washed away and Dee Dee's house was the highest up the hill. Brains called out just in case.

"I wonder where your Mama is," he said to Dee Dee. He was afraid that she was dead in the house or in the debris down the hill. He turned and started to make his way down the hill, and was just passing the house where the old couple lived, when he met Killer coming back up.

"Oh so you found the baby, Brains! His mum's got a broken arm and is down at the truck," said Killer.

"Oh good! I thought we had an orphan on our hands."

"Just one minute." Killer knocked on the door and the old couple came out. They were so pleased when they saw that Dee Dee had been found. Dee Dee waved at them, like he and his mother did whenever they saw them.

"Right, let's get him back to his mum," said Killer, waving good bye to the couple. He and Brains set off down the hill and met the rest of the squad just starting up the hill.

Dee Dee said "Mama! Mama!"

His Mama looked out of the truck, saw Dee Dee and shrieked "Dee Dee! Dee Dee!"

She was going to jump out of the truck but the medic made her climb down carefully. She ran towards Brains and Dee Dee stretched out his arms. Brains struggled not to drop him. She took him from Brains with her good arm and kissed him on the top of his head, talking baby language to him all the time.

Sarg looked at her then said to Brains and Killer "Good work, you two. What's it like up there? Anybody else up there?"

"Just an old couple. They're there on the map." Killer pointed out the location of their house.

"The mother and baby came from the top house, Sarg," said Brains. "Their house is badly damaged. It looks like it was damaged by water, probably a flash flood. Half of it was swept away. The other houses have a bit of damage, but nothing like that."

Sarg entered that information onto his map and his notepad.

“Yeah, upstream goes straight into the mountains. Unfortunate. They are pretty sheltered here, otherwise.”

He raised his voice.

“Right, well done lads. Our first sweep is completed. Let’s get these two back to base. The mother needs to have that arm looked at and the baby needs to be checked out too.”

Blue Lady, Buccaneer and the other lifters that arrived later, Red Dragon and Gypsy, started rotating trips into the Advance Base, interleaved with forces transports and civilian aid flights. Some of their cargoes arrived by truck, others by rail, and sometimes one or other of the lifters would make a trip north. As predicted it got chaotic.

Rod was helping Cargomaster sort out a snarl-up when suddenly someone called “Rod! Rod!”

He spun around. “Ellen? Ellen?”

A squad of Army personnel were emerging from a transport aircraft. One was waving at him.

“I’ll be right back!” he yelled to Cargomaster and sprinted towards the figure in green. It was Ellen! He picked her up and kissed her in spite of her huge backpack.

“What are you doing here? No, that’s a silly question. There’s a disaster to handle and that needs communications and you’re Communications. I’m so pleased to see you.”

“Walk me to the terminal, my love. I have to check in. I’m free from seventeen thirty. Shall we meet in the mess?”

They started to walk to the terminal. Cargomaster watched all this from a distance and sighed.

“Cargo One, give me a hand out here, please!”

Rod said “We’re ‘passing ships’ again, aren’t we? But it’s so lovely to see you. The boys are with your mother?”

“No, they are in my backpack,” she joked. “I’m here for two weeks but I’ll be at Advance Camp and beyond. I might see you when I rotate out. I might see you at Advance Camp.”

They came to the terminal doors. “See you at seventeen thirty?”

“Sure. Wild horses and all that.”

He kissed her and watched her go. Then he turned and went back to Blue Lady. Cargomaster and Cargo One had unravelled the snarl up and cargo was flowing into Blue Lady again.

“My wife. Sorry, Jake,” he said.

“I guessed, Rod, I guessed. You said she was Army. No need to apologize!”

Rod and Ellen met up in the mess, and were conspicuously left alone. Well, Rod introduced Ellen to his crew, and Ellen introduced him to her squad, but after that they found themselves alone in a side booth.

Rod thought that she looked so good. She was wearing a khaki t-shirt, camouflage trousers and Army boots. The mess was not the place to kiss her, of course, but they held hands.

Ellen couldn’t believe that they had managed to meet up. She’d hoped, when she learned that she was going on the mission, but wasn’t expecting it to happen. He looked tired, but he’d already flown into and out of the advance camp several times.

Rod and Ellen spent the evening together, catching up on happenings on both sides. She showed him pictures of the boys, told him of their escapades, and the school and kindergarten at The Castle.

“I’m applying for transfer from The Castle,” she said. “The boys are doing fine, but they are never outside. There is no ‘outside’ up there, and there’s so few other kids. Even if I have to get a desk job, I think that we should get out of there. There’s not much work anyway. Most of the time

it's just repairing communicators that people have dropped. That's why I was so pleased when I got this mission. Is that bad of me?"

"No, of course not. You're the best. Even the boys say so," he said jokingly. "But I think that there will be a lot of work in your line down here for quite some time. Why don't you see what the Army's plans are? They might agree to assign you down here. Or they might allow you a sabbatical. What do you think? I could always hitch a ride down here when I get a break."

"Do you think so? Oh, that might work. I'll try it. The boys would love it down here."

"Or I could sign up for a milk run and take on the boys for a while. It's about time I took a turn."

"Oh, no, you like the lifters too much. I've never seen you happier. I don't mind taking the boys, and it's easier for me to have them."

"You're amazing. No wonder I love you."

They wandered outside and found a convenient spot to kiss and cuddle. They used Ellen's communicator to talk to the boys at Ellen's parent's place. Brian wanted to know what a typhoon was and when Gerry heard that it was a big storm he ran around in the background making wind noises. Gran and Grandad came on and assured them that the boys were OK and settling into their new schools well.

Finally Brian came on and said "See you soon, Mummy and Daddy."

"Be good for Gran and Grandad," said Rod, and closed the connection.

Rod and Ellen looked at each other and laughed.

"Crazy kids. Crazy parents," said Rod.

"I'd better go," said Ellen. "We ship out at five thirty, and I've got to get my beauty sleep."

Rod sighed. "'Passing ships'. OK, love."

"Good night, my love," said Ellen.

They kissed and then Ellen reluctantly left for her barracks. Rod watched her go. She turned and waved as she went in the door, and he sighed. Then he returned to his barracks. Jake the Cargomaster was already there, lounging in his bunk.

"Good evening? Good catch up with your wife, Rod?"

"Yes, thanks, Jake. Boy that was a surprise! She wasn't allowed to let me know of course. It was lucky we were in Main Base when she passed through."

"Mmm, good enough reason to drop me like a sack of bricks I'd say."

"Sorry about that."

"Don't worry. I'd do the same if my wife suddenly appeared. Though that's unlikely as she's busy running the fish and chip shop. Now if there was a sudden shortage of fish and chips shops down there..."

The next day Rod heard the transport leave at five thirty. He turned over but his communicator pinged. Meeting at seven thirty. What was that about? He decided to get up anyway. He showered and dressed and made his way to the mess for breakfast. When he entered he was surprised to see Ellen sitting there with a coffee, looking worried.

"What's happened? Why didn't you ship out?" He held her hand.

"I don't know. I was told to step out of line when we were boarding. My backpack was unloaded and then they left without me. I'm to report to a meeting at seven thirty."

"Me too." He thought a bit. "Have we done something wrong by mistake? Oh no."

Rod grabbed a quick breakfast, and they sat holding hands reviewing the past evening, but couldn't see anything that might explain the situation. At seven thirty they walked up to the meeting

room, hand in hand. They separated, looked at each other and took a breath. Rod knocked on the door.

“Enter.” In the room were Deanne and the silver haired Army guy who was now Deanne’s deputy.

“Please sit,” said the Army guy. They sat.

“Have you seen these? The early editions of the daily paper.” He slid them across the table.

Ellen looked at the paper. On the front page was a picture of a guy in Air Force blues lifting and kissing a girl in Army green in spite of her huge backpack.

“Oh my!”

The headline said “Joining forces to help storm victims.” The text was standard stuff about the forces joining together to provide aid to the storm victims, and gave some details of the operation. Nothing was said about the picture. Rod was left speechless.

“We’ve reason to believe that the couple in the picture will be of extreme interest to the media. Do you know them?”

“Oh, that’s us,” said Ellen. “Are we in trouble?”

“Stop teasing them please, Alistair,” said Deanne, severely. “No, you are not in trouble. You weren’t to know that the media are down here to cover what we are doing, and you weren’t to know that one of their snap happy photographers was looking for a photograph to add ‘human interest’. He was taking photographs of the transport unloading, and you two gave him an opportunity he couldn’t turn down.”

Deanne was annoyed when Alistair giggled. “The Navy are so annoyed that they didn’t get a mention. They accused us of setting it all up!”

He giggled again.

“Please Alistair, I don’t want any inter-services friction. As it is I will have to smooth some seriously ruffled feathers.”

Alistair pulled himself together. “You’re right, Chief, I apologize. The question is, what do we do now? Our feedback is that everyone is going to want to know about the couple in the picture. Of course we checked up on you and know that you are a married couple. What we, the Chief and I, decided to do was to profit from it. We want you to do an interview with a news crew who happen to be on site. Is that OK with you?”

“What about the kids?” asked Rod. “They are going to check into our backgrounds and may find out about our kids. I don’t want them bothered.”

“Good question. Chief?”

“Smith and Jones. Rod, you know Smith and Jones, don’t you? I don’t know if Ellen does?”

“Yes, I do. Two huge cuddly guys. I liked them,” said Ellen. “We visited them at their inn, once.”

“They also do ‘huge scary guys’ quite well too,” said Rod, remembering.

“Well, I think that they can help out. They happen to be in the Capital at the moment and I can get them to your parents’ house, Ellen, by this afternoon, if that’s OK.”

“They really are nice guys,” said Rod. “Kids love them. Most people like them.”

Ellen looked at Rod then said, “We’ll do the interview if you think it will help. What should we say?”

“Just be yourselves. If you don’t want to answer something, say so. The media guys won’t mind, although they may ask the same thing a different way later. We’ll ask them to edit out stuff if necessary.”

So it was agreed. Rod and Ellen would do the interview. Deanne summoned someone to take them to meet the news crew. When they had gone Alistair started to chuckle again.

“Alistair!” said Deanne.

“I’m sorry. I keep remembering that Navy guy’s face!”

“Alistair, I hope that I won’t have to tell someone nearly twice my age to grow up!”

Alistair burst out laughing again. “Sorry, Chief, I’ll get over it.”

“Hmm, you’d better. The Navy guys arrive tomorrow.”

Rod and Ellen sat on the couch, with the interviewer in the chair opposite them. Two cameras loomed in their faces and a microphone boom bobbed over their heads. Ellen had her hair in a tight bun, which gave an elfin look to her face. Rod had slight beard which made him look a little rugged. He kept it short while he was on active service.

The interviewer said “Right, I want you to ignore the camera and the sound boom as much as possible. They may move around. OK?”

They nodded. Ellen took Rod’s hand.

“Here we go then. Sound? Cameras?” The interviewer got thumbs up.

“Hullo, today we will be talking with Rod and Ellen, the couple in that delightful picture that most of you will have seen by now.”

She turned to the couple. “Hi Rod, Ellen, thanks for talking with us today. I understand that you are in fact a married couple, and that the picture was the result of a surprise meeting?”

“Yes, we’ve been married nearly ten years now. I knew that Rod was on the relief mission, but I was only told two days ago that I was coming down here. I couldn’t let him know!”

“That’s a forces standard, is it, to keep deployments secret?”

“Yes, Rod was deployed down here earlier and he couldn’t tell me until he was here. But actually I guessed that he might be. I didn’t know he was on a lifter though, until he phoned me.”

“Rod, what is a lifter exactly?”

“It’s a large cargo carrier. For instance on our first trip into the devastated area we had a bulldozer on board.”

“So you were suddenly deployed down here, Ellen?”

“Yes. We touched down, and started to disembark,” continued Ellen. “Then I saw that Blue Lady was in. Blue Lady is Rod’s lifter. I knew then that I had a good chance of seeing Rod. We unloaded and I picked up my pack and put it on, and we all trudged off to the terminal. I saw Rod and called out to him and waved. It was like he’d been shot! He spun round, then he sprinted towards me. He picked me up and we kissed, and ... you know.”

“Someone took the picture.”

“Yes.”

“Rod, how was it for you? You didn’t know that she was coming, did you?”

“No, it was a complete surprise. She called my name, and it was an immense shock. I knew it was her immediately. I turned, saw her and ran. I think I shouted something to Cargomaster, the man I was working with, but I’m not sure. I ran and picked her up and kissed her. It was a wonderful surprise.”

“I hope you mind me asking this, but you have two children, don’t you? And a lot of the time one or the other of you is away. How does that work?”

“Well, quite well actually. The kids are at Ellen’s parents at the moment, but usually one or the other of us is at home, which is usually where Ellen is stationed. She’s stationed at The Castle at the moment.”

Ellen added “The kids are usually with me because the lifters go all over the country, but I usually work where I’m stationed. So it makes sense that they stay with me. We discussed all this

before we got married, before we had kids. We were a little worried about the kids, but they have coped OK.”

“What about when you are home together?”

Rod said “What about it? It’s wonderful. We had an idyllic sabbatical year at home after Brian, our eldest was born. We both got to experience the first year of his life and all the milestones that babies reach in their first year.”

“So, what drew you back to the service?”

Rod said “Well, it was supposed to be a two-year break but Ellen cracked first. She started linking up with old service pals, finding out what they were up to, and then she asked me if I minded her cancelling the rest of her sabbatical and going back to work. I couldn’t say no.”

Ellen added “Especially as he went misty eyed whenever a lifter flew over!”

“True! I lasted two more months and then I went back. I flew lifters for a while, then transports until a month ago, and then I was suddenly assigned to Blue Lady as navigator. I was really pleased to be back in a lifter!”

“How did you two meet?”

“I was originally Army. I’d just had my transfer to the Air Force approved, and was just at the mess having a final drink with my Army squad mates and in she walked. She looked fragile and vulnerable and beautiful. I invited her to join us and she did for a while. My squaddies made her welcome and she relaxed. Finally she said that she needed to find her own squaddies and so we did a tour of the mess until we found them. We kept in touch and in just over a year we got married.”

Ellen added “I walked into that mess, and I was terrified. It was all new to me, new clothes, new surroundings, new ways of talking, everything. Rod came along and helped me out. He was great. We hit it off right from the start.”

“So we have Army and Air Force cooperating on the Relief Mission. What about the Navy?”

Rod was annoyed. He said “I’ve seen a lot of negative comment about how the Navy is slow to respond to this crisis. It is unfair. Their carrier, Narcissus can only move so fast, but will be invaluable when she gets here, and we knew from the start that the storm might hold her up. No one guessed that it would head directly towards her! Not even the weather people. She got a real battering, I heard.”

“She has a chopper ‘flying crane’ on board which is an amazing aircraft, as well as a dozen or so other choppers of various sizes. She has a crew of around fifteen hundred which is more than the number of Air Force and Army personnel deployed to Advance Base so far. She will act as a base for aid to the islands and also a big part of the mainland.”

“Several Navy choppers have passed through Main Base on their way to the Advance Base already. Those guys have flown their aircraft a hell of a long way to get here, and they are much more difficult to fly long distances than transports or lifters. They will be invaluable. Several transports have brought Naval ratings from all over the country. And several smaller Navy vessels which were closer than Narcissus have already arrived.”

“I’m only a navigator on an Air Force lifter, but I think it is unfair, very unfair, to criticize the Navy over their response to this disaster.”

He paused. “I’m sorry, you can cut that bit out if you want.”

“Cut!” called the director and Rod was surprised to receive a round of applause.

The director said “Well done, both of you. Rod, I will check with the coordinator about your defence of the Navy’s response. My feeling is that they won’t want it included.”

Deanne and Alistair watched the raw footage of the interview with the director.

“Cut it,” said Deanne. “Everything he says is true, but it will have to come from our media liaison. They could probably almost quote him word for word. I’ll let Rod know. That was splendid.”

She turned to Alistair. “Maybe I should give him your job.”

Alistair chuckled. “He is right. Absolutely right. It was only the look on that Navy guy’s face that set me off earlier.”

Deanne thought a bit. “Show the full thing to the Navy. It should build bridges. I hope it doesn’t leak out though....”

Alistair burst out laughing.

Ellen was rescheduled to go to Advance Base on Blue Lady, but the interview had made them late so she and Rod ran to the plane and entered through the cargo entrance. The engines were already running.

Cargomaster said “Ah, here are the love birds. Better hurry Rod, or Harry will have your job.”

“Please stow this, Cargomaster,” said Rod, passing over Ellen’s pack. “You know where you can stow the comments, Jake!”

Rod and Ellen ran through the hold and swarmed up the ladder to the cockpit, waving to the Cargoes as they went. Sparks and the Boss were running through the pre take off drill.

The Boss heard them arrive and said “About time. Maps, break out the observer chair for our passenger. Sparks, let’s finish the drill and then Maps can take over. OK.”

Rob pulled out the observer’s chair which was rarely used. He belted Ellen into the seat and leaned forward to talk in her ear. His lips brushed her lips as he passed.

“This is a rare honour. Not even the bigwigs get to travel in the observer’s chair. Love you!”

He prepared to switch seats with Sparks. The Boss and Sparks came to the end of the checklist and Sparks squeezed past him, patting him on the back on the way through.

“Thanks, Sparks,” said Rod as he slipped into the co-pilot seat.

“You’re welcome, Maps,” came through the partition.

Maddy taxied the plane towards the runway.

“Ellen, if I call Rod ‘Maps’ it’s business, so please keep quiet. If I call him ‘Rod’ it’s OK to talk. OK?”

“Understood, Chi-, Boss.”

Maddy said “Heh! Nice. OK, Maps, let’s go.”

She talked to Ground and got permission to proceed. The usual chit chat between her, Maps, and Ground began. She taxied the plane onto the runway and started the take off run. Maps was calling out distances and speeds, with Ground chiming in now and then, and Maddy lifted them off and climbed them into the sky. She and Maps set the plane up for cruising and she switched in the autopilot.

“Well, we’re in ‘Rod’ mode now. Pleased to meet you, Ellen. How do you like the view from up here?”

“Thanks, Maddy, nice to meet you. Funny, I think of you as ‘Boss’ because that’s how Rod always refers to you.”

Rod and Maddy laughed.

“I bet you didn’t think that a kiss would cause so much trouble, did you?”

“No, and I didn’t think that it would get us on television.”

“What? I didn’t know about that. I heard that you got called up to a meeting because of the picture, of course. Everyone knows by now.”

“The big Chief, I mean big Boss, decided to head off any fuss and curiosity by getting us interviewed. It wasn’t too bad. That’s what made us late,” said Ellen.

“But I think that they will cut my rant at the end in support of the Navy,” said Rod.

Maddy said “Yeah, they’re really being unfairly treated. Still, it will go away once Narcissus arrives. I think they’re due today. The weather has hung around and is delaying them.”

“I might be going out to Narcissus and going on a survey tour of the islands. Crisis Control want to know what they are dealing with, out there. We have a number of Communications Packs to distribute. They are sort of like a packaged radio telecommunications station that’ll allow them to talk to the mainland and other islands,” said Ellen.

“I read about them,” said a voice through the partition. “They look pretty neat.”

“Do you want a transfer to Army Communications then, Harry?” said Maddy.

“Goodness no! They don’t get about like we do.”

They all laughed.

“‘Crisis Control’? Is that what they are calling it,” said Maddy. “It could be worse.”

They were on their way for about thirty minutes, chatting and relaxing when Ellen suddenly spotted something.

“What’s that out there?” she asked. “Another aircraft? About seven o’clock.”

“Hmm. Oh! Got it,” said Maddy. “See it, Maps? Er, Rod?”

“Dragon! Well I’ll be....”

Maddy called Ground Control.

“Ground. We have a dragon at...” She gave their location. “Is anyone in the area?”

“Blue Lady. Buccaneer is headed north. You’ll want to talk to her. She’s on....” She gave them Buccaneer’s frequency.

“Buccaneer, Buccaneer, come in please. Ed, Sally, we have news.”

“Blue Lady. Hi Maddy, what’s the panic?” It was Sally.

“Buccaneer. Sally, we have a dragon in our location, which is...” She gave Sally their location.

“Blue Lady. Maddy, we are a bit west of you. Ed is trying to locate the dragon. Please hold.”

“Blue Lady. Maddy, Ed has located the dragon. Yeah! We are well clear. We also see you, Maddy. You are closer than we are, but you are much higher than he is, of course. Thanks for the warning.”

“Buccaneer. Sally, no problem. Credit goes to our passenger, Maps’ wife. That is, Rod’s wife, Ellen.”

“Blue Lady. Maddy, send her our thanks and best wishes. Wow! She’s unique!”

“Buccaneer. Sally and Ed. Will do. Over and out.”

Maddy and Rod looked at Ellen.

“What? What did I do?” said Ellen.

“Well, if someone spots a dragon from the air, then everyone in the area is warned to keep away, to avoid any accidents. Not that there have been any. And they get free drinks for life from any Air Force person that they meet. Usually it is an Air Force person who spots a dragon, and in fact I’ve never heard of a non-Air Force person spotting a dragon from the air. Apparently Sally thinks so too. There’s only been about a dozen verified sightings in total,” explained Maddy.

“Oh, my goodness!”

“I knew my wife was unique.”

Smith knocked on the door of the house that Ellen's parents lived in. Ellen's mother opened the door.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"I'm Smith and he's Jones. I think Ellen sent a message to you about us."

"Oh yes, please come in."

Ellen's mother led them in and introduced them to Ellen's father.

"The kids are at school at the moment," said Ellen's father.

"Yes we know. Someone we trust is watching them at school. No one has tried to photograph them yet. I will come with you when you pick them up."

"Would you like a piece of cake, Mr Smith? Mr Jones? And a cup of tea?"

"Just 'Smith' please. I'd love a piece. And a cup of tea."

Jones nodded. "Me, too, thanks."

"Just so you know what the plan is, I will come to the school with you to pick up the kids and then we will stay outside the house. Jones will be at the back, and I'll be at the front. We don't want to confuse or upset the kids so we will keep out of your way. We want everything to be as normal as possible. This is excellent cake! Thank you."

So Smith sat in the car in front of the house. He had been there a few hours and nothing had happened, which didn't bother him in the slightest. Then a car came slowly down the road and stopped a little way away. A young lady with a sizeable shoulder bag got out and crossed the road. She walked up to the house and paused at the gate.

"Can I help you, miss?" said Smith. He showed his identification card. "Special services."

"Oh, you startled me. Here's my ID." She produced a press ID card. "I just want a short interview with the grandparents and photos of the kids." She patted her shoulder bag.

"Sorry my dear. They are the relatives of services personnel and under my protection. And you accidentally dropped a fifty dollar note on the ground."

"Whoops, so I did. How about you let me talk to them and then I can buy you a drink with it later?"

Smith shook his head and folded his arms.

She started to sob and said, "Oh no, my editor is going to be so angry with me. This is my last chance. He'll fire me!"

Smith was unmoved.

The girl said "Oh well, it was worth a try. It might have worked. Maybe. Bye!"

"Ma'am?" She looked back.

"Nice try!"

She smiled, gave a thumb's up, crossed back to her car, and drove off.

Smith pulled out an old-fashioned walkie-talkie radio.

"Jones? There's a reporter on her way to you. She's quite slick. Professional. First she tried to bribe me, then she tried to smooze me, and finally she tried the guilt trip. Over."

The walkie-talkie muttered something unintelligible.

"Yeah, pretty quiet. I'll check with Deanne if she wants us tomorrow. Over."

More gibberish came over the walkie-talkie.

"Yeah, we **could** take them all to the zoo tomorrow. You're a sucker for the zoo, Jones! Over and out!"

Rod and Ellen watched the Navy boat motor out of the lagoon and off towards its next assignment. Earlier, Ellen had almost reached the end of her first rotation, and had been due to go back to the Capital for two weeks, when she and Rod had been called to a meeting with Deanne.

“Ellen and Rod, we showed your interview to Navy, and Navy were so pleased that they wondered if they could do something for you. There’s a small uninhabited island that they want checked out, and they wondered if you two would do it. So basically they would drop you there and pick you up after two days. How does that sound?”

The two looked at each other, astonished.

Deanne continued, “They do want the island checked out, that part is true, but it is only tiny. Oh, and they have set up a brief interview with the press. They’ll take a few photos of you with the Captain of the Narcissus. Ellen, you are supposed to be rotated shortly. What would your squaddies think? Would they be OK with this? No jealousy issues?”

“No, no, they’ve been great about the photograph thing. They teased me about it of course. They should be OK. So I’d not go back with them? But the boys!”

“No, you’d not go back with your squad, but we would get you back home to your boys as soon as possible.”

“What about Blue Lady?” said Rod.

“Well, your Boss, Maddy, will allow you a few days leave. I’ve known Maddy for years. As a kid she visited me and Affie before Affie became Queen. Harry, your Sparks, is certified for the Maps role, and she can step in for a couple of days. She’s done it before. There’s a Sparks on one of the transports that your Boss knows who wants experience as Sparks on a lifter. He’s already done it twice before when your Sparks took leave.”

Rod said “It would be lovely, but...”

“But you don’t think you deserve it? Go for it! Navy want to do you a favour, and we can do without you two for two days! So, do you want to go?”

Rod looked at Ellen. “Yes, please.”

“Good! You have, um, thirty-five minutes until the Navy chopper lifts. Go!”

Rod and Ellen scrambled from the room.

“Travel light,” said Ellen as she shot off to her barracks. Rod shot off to his. “Travel light” she said. He quickly tossed some clothes and some personal items into his flight bag. Army knew how to handle these sorts of things, so he’d trust her to get the essentials. After a little thought he headed for the mess and bought a bottle of wine and a couple of other things and stashed them in his flight bag.

He ran to the big Navy cargo chopper just as the Cap was starting the engines. Ellen had somehow managed to bring **two** Army backpacks. Clever girl!

“I knew a flyboy wouldn’t know what to bring, so I packed for you.” she joked.

“I knew that you would handle it,” he said, lifting his tiny flight bag. “Just the essentials.”

The Navy guys checked that they were secure and put their bags under a cargo net, then the chopper took off. Once they were en route the Cap came down the steps and spoke to them.

“We’re taking you to the Narcissus, then we go on to somewhere else. The Narcissus guys will get you to the island. Nice interview, flyboy. You’re something of a hero to the Navy. Pity it couldn’t be broadcast, but most Navy guys have seen it by now.”

“Thanks Cap. Most flyers think that you were hard done by. I’m happy to have tried to set the record straight.”

“Most squaddies think that way too,” said Ellen.

The Cap returned to the flight deck and Rod and Ellen were left alone in the cargo area. They sat in the passengers' seats and held hands. They kissed a couple of times, then Ellen put her head on his shoulder.

"The boys," she said.

"They'll be OK. They're used to it. Give them a special treat. Take them to the zoo!"

"Smith and Jones have already done that. But I'll think of something."

Rod and Ellen were deposited on the deck of the carrier. Rod wore the extra Army backpack and carried his flight bag. Ellen sighed and pulled and pushed on the straps and it was suddenly more comfortable. A rating escorted them down to meet the Captain, who shook their hands and introduced them to two press people.

"Rod and Ellen," said the interviewer, "did you expect that your kiss would result in you getting this short break on an island?"

"No, and we are very grateful to the Navy for giving us this opportunity. We are really going to enjoy it," said Ellen.

"Captain, I understand that they are doing you a favour in checking out this island for you?"

The Captain laughed. "Well, it is true that we need the island checked out, and we are short of ratings to do these surveys, but the main reason that we asked them to do it is because of the photograph! Everyone has seen it. We thought that the Navy should do something for them. The island needs to be checked out, but it is only small. No one lives there, but it is possible that someone may have been swept there by the storm. It's very unlikely, though."

The Captain closed off the interview and escorted them to a hatch in the side of the carrier.

"Thank you for your help, Rob, Ellen. I hope you enjoy your time on the island. The Navy appreciates what you said in your previous interview, even though it was cut from the broadcast version. Most of the Navy has seen it in full by now. In addition, I thank you for the opportunity to publicize our part in the Relief Mission."

He smiled and shook their hands.

"You do know that the kiss was not a stunt, Captain?" Rod asked.

The Captain nodded wryly. "Yes, though we didn't at first, as I'm sure you know."

He opened the gate of the hatch for them. Wooden steps led down to a tender which was moored to the bottom of the flight.

"Thank you, Captain," said Ellen. She and Rod started down the steps. While the carrier was as stable as a table the steps moved a little with the waves. The pilot of the small craft at the bottom helped them transfer their packs to the tender, but Rod kept hold of his flight bag. As soon as they were aboard, the pilot loosed the mooring ropes and they moved away from the carrier.

"It'll take us about thirty minutes to get to the island," said the pilot.

"Thanks, Cap," said Rod.

The man laughed. "Thanks, but I'm a Coxswain. Nothing so grand as a Captain. This boat is a tender so I don't rate Captain."

They discussed the relative ranks in the Navy, Air Force and Army to pass the time. In particular, they discussed how Narcissus had many captains, but only one Captain, and the Captain of a small vessel might not actually be a captain. They saw some dolphins who rode the bow wave of the boat for a while and spotted wind riding gannets and albatrosses. They saw diving shags and cormorants.

Finally they saw their island. There was a hint of a coral reef around a lagoon, and the Navy guy expertly guided the boat through the reef and towards a silver sand beach. Behind the beach, the low scrub was dominated by coconut palms but further inland there were some other trees. The

canopy was filled with birds, and Rod wondered how they had survived the storm. It was impossible to see how big the island really was as vines, bushes and small trees quickly cut off the view.

The Navy man ran his boat up onto the beach and Rod and Ellen hopped out. They manhandled the Army backpacks up to the beach and Rod grabbed his flight bag. They pushed the boat out into the water and the Navy man waved and turned his boat to the hole in the coral reef. He disappeared around the end of the island and they were alone!

Rod kissed Ellen, then said "This is sooo good!"

Ellen kissed back and agreed. "But we need to get set up. Come on."

She pulled a tent from each pack and gave him one. "This one here, and that one there."

"One tent each?" said Rod.

She pulled his head down and kissed his nose. "One's for storage, silly."

"Oh."

"We don't know what sort of critters live here. They could lunch on us or our gear. Otherwise we could sleep under the stars."

They set up the tents. Ellen took five minutes on hers, then came to look at Rod's. She stifled a laugh then gave him a hand.

"You're so prepared, Army girl. I'm in awe, literally in awe."

"Well, move your butt and get the sleeping bags into that tent. And don't forget the sleeping mats. They're tied to the bottom of the packs."

"Yes, Chief."

By the time he'd finished, Ellen had set up a fire pit lined with rocks, found some dry wood and some grass for lighting it, and had set up a partial windbreak.

"That'll do for now. I want a swim," she said. She stripped off all her clothes and started to walk down the beach. She looked back. Rod was just staring.

"Come on, there's no one watching!"

Rod swiftly removed his clothes and followed her and soon they were splashing about in the lagoon. The water was warm and clear, and not too deep. Rod dived to the bottom and picked a shell and showed it to Ellen.

"It's got a crab in it, Rod!"

"Oh!" He dropped the shell gently back into the water, and when it reached the bottom it scuttled away.

"Let's get out now, or we'll be burned to a crisp."

They walked up the beach hand in hand, and got dressed. Ellen recommended that they wear their trousers and boots, "because of critters", but she wore a silky top. Rod wore his singlet. They rubbed sunscreen on each other which involved a lot of kissing and giggling. Ellen recommended that they both wore caps.

Ellen was definitely the Chief on the island, and Rod deferred to her obvious survival knowledge. She sent him off to look for coconuts. "Don't try to climb a tree. That's for the experts. Don't touch any plants. They may be poisonous. Watch out for spiny or spiky plants. Avoid any critters."

"Sheesh, I thought this was an island paradise! But everything is out to get us!"

"I'm going out onto the reef to catch something to eat. Don't follow me, please. Your flyboy boots won't stand up to it, and a coral cut can be dangerous."

"OK Chief. Coconuts."

Rod wandered off towards the nearest clump of coconut palms. Coconuts. Round brown hairy things. He didn't see any. There were plenty of yellowy orange things. Strange. He looked up at the coconut palm. Yellowy orange things. Ahhh! He picked up a few of the yellowy orange things. Hmm, some were more yellowy orange than others. He decided to bring some of the greener ones as well.

He did a few trips and ended up with a dozen coconuts of various hues. Then he went exploring, being careful to avoid the flora and the fauna. He came across a plant with huge long broad leaves, with clusters of pink fruit. He was fairly sure it was a type of banana, but he didn't touch it because of Ellen's warning. He made a mental note of it, though, and of other fruits that he saw.

Ellen was back when he returned. She had caught two fat fish and was gutting them on a flat stone. She nodded at the coconuts.

"Nice work. I was going to ask you to bring back some green ones if you could. Did you spot anything else?"

"Some pink bananas I think." He described the plant and the other fruiting plants he had seen.

"Oh, good." She'd retrieved a camp cooking kit from her pack. She put the fish pieces into the largest pan and put the lid on. "Let's go and have a look."

She confirmed that the fruit were bananas and they gathered some in Rod's cap. She identified one of the plants as having safe fruit and they gathered some of those too.

They strolled back to the camp site. Ellen got Rod to trim some of the outside of two of the greener coconuts with her machete and drill a hole in them with a tool from her kit.

"Coconut water," she said. "That's all it is really. Just water. Good if we don't find running water."

"So the coconuts we buy at home already have the outside trimmed off?"

"Yeah, basically."

Meanwhile she had trimmed the outside of some of the more mature coconuts and split them in two. She scooped out some of the white coconut pulp from a couple of them and squeezed the juice from it into the fish pan and another pan.

"Coconut milk. It's rough but it will do. Right, let's get cooking!"

Rod was slightly disappointed that she used matches to light the fire. He was half expecting her to produce a flint and steel. She peeled and simmered some of the pink bananas in coconut milk, and when they were soft, simmered the fish in the liquor from the bananas. She added a few herbs from a couple of small packets from her backpack. Then she served up the fish and bananas on two plates from the camp cooking kit.

"Be careful of the banana seeds. They're very hard."

Rod was amazed. It tasted wonderful. He told her so.

"Thanks. It's the first time I've done it. I've seen it done though. If we hadn't found the bananas it would have been just fish! We might find some more stuff tomorrow. But for today, I think we'd better top up with vitamin bars and fruit. It probably wouldn't matter for two days, but we don't know if we are getting enough vitamins and stuff. Could you open a couple more coconuts? We need to keep up our fluids too."

"I just remembered something." He went to his flight bag and retrieved the bottle of wine. He sat down next to her on the sand.

"That's why I love you," she said. She extracted two collapsible cups from her backpack. Rob leaned over and looked into it.

"Where's the portal to another dimension?" he asked. "You can't have got all that stuff from a single backpack!"

She laughed. "It all packs up very small. There's even some dehydrated meals in there! I was showing off, really."

He unscrewed the top of the wine and tipped some wine into one of the collapsible cups which immediately collapsed. They both laughed. He tried again, this time holding the cups in his hand. He passed one to his wife and they drank.

"This flyboy would be lost without his Army girl." He kissed her.

They sat and drank the wine with their arms around each other. Slowly the sun set, and the stars came out. It was a moonless night, and a great arch of stars glowed brightly overhead.

Rod turned the bottle upside down in the sand and said "Let's turn in."

Ellen switched on her torch as a lantern and they tidied up the camp site. They buried the debris from the meal and Rob rubbed the pans with sand and rinsed them in the sea and collapsed the cups. He put them in the storage tent to be properly dealt with in the morning. The Army packs went into the storage tent too.

Rob sat in the entrance to their tent and removed his boots and brought them inside, on Ellen's advice. "Because of critters". Then he made way for Ellen. She handed him her torch then sat in the entrance and removed her boots too and brought them in. She zipped up the tent, wriggled alongside Rod, switched off her torch, and put it in the side pouch of the tent. Then they reached out in the dark and found each other.

The next morning they woke with the sun and freshened up with a swim. They didn't bother wearing anything again. Rod wondered about jellyfish and other "sea critters". He decided to trust Ellen.

Back at their camp, they breakfasted on ration bars. Rod opened a pair of immature coconuts and they drank the water and brushed their teeth in it. He hoped that they would find water soon. But it was only for a couple of days, wasn't it? Rod thought of something.

"Don't you have water in your packs?" he asked Ellen.

"Yeah, well done, flyboy. I'm saving it. We have the coconuts, and water is precious if you don't have a source. I'm probably being over cautious."

They breakfasted on some Army rations.

"OK, let's survey the island for the Navy," he said. "It's about two hundred and fifty metres long, the guy on the boat said, so it should be around one kilometre along the beach. I'll sketch as we go."

"This way or that way, Mister Navigator?"

"That way, I think. But it doesn't really matter."

They set off. Rod was carrying the small bag of what Ellen called "some essentials". He had no idea what that meant, but he saw her put her machete in there. They went around a point of land and started to see fallen trees, flattened by the storm. Coconut palms, tree ferns, and other trees lay smashed and broken on the ground. Tree branches and whole trees bobbed in the surf or lay beached. As they got further along they found some more worrying debris, like smashed building timber and in one place, what looked like a roof impeded their way. A single boot had washed up at one point.

Fortunately that didn't come across any bodies or anything as distressing as that, though stranded fish made the beach stink in one place. As they got round to the opposite side of the island, most of the trees were flattened and trashed.

"I'm glad we had that night on the undamaged side," said Rod. "This is depressing."

"Yes, and this island is a long way from where the storm hit hardest."

They pressed on, climbing over debris in places, slipping in beached seaweed in others. They had to detour inland in a couple of places, but overall it was easy going.

Suddenly Ellen touched Rod's arm.

"What's that? Oh no!"

Fifty metres away something pink and small was being washed by the sea. Rod ran towards it, looked down on it. Ellen was not far behind.

"Oh, thank goodness for that!"

It was a child's life-sized toy doll. They spent a few minutes burying it in a sand dune. It seemed appropriate somehow.

"Think of all those poor people who find the real thing and not a doll," said Ellen.

"I know."

Ellen linked arms with Rod.

"It reminded me of our kids for some reason."

Her eyes glistened.

"Hey, hey! This is supposed to be a fun time. I miss them too. You'll be with them in a day or two."

"It's not that. I look at them or think of them and I want to keep them exactly as they are, even when they are being little horrors! I want to wrap them up in cotton wool. I don't want them to grow up. Then I think that's selfish. And I get mixed up and sad."

"I want to keep all three of you exactly as you are."

They walked on and she gradually cheered up again. Rod reckoned that they were getting near the camp when they reached a little stream.

"Oh good. We're lucky. Islands this size don't often have running water," said Ellen, and produced an inflatable water container from her bag of essentials. She filled it from the stream, popped a couple of pills into it, sealed it and gave it to Rod to carry. They rounded one more last turn and their camp appeared at the centre of the next bay.

"Home sweet home," said Rod.

He rinsed off the pans and other stuff that they had used the night before and made sure that they were clean. Ellen meanwhile took off her boots and trousers and went wading for crabs. Rod relaxed and watched her. When she came back with four crabs she got Rod to go and get some more of the fruit that they had had the night before and some coconuts. She had to cook the crabs one by one in the biggest pan.

"Of course if we were here for a week, I'd figure out something better," she said.

She passed the cooked crabs one by one to Rod to extract the meat. He removed the bits she instructed him to, and cracked the claws and legs to get the meat from those. Soon he had a small pile of crab meat and Ellen sent Rod off to get some of the plantain fruit that she had seen on their trek.

"Sort of like small green bananas" she said," said Rod to himself. "Ah, those look like them."

As he reached towards them a spider half the size of his hand dropped from the tree, onto the ground and ran away.

"Hey!" he said drawing back his hand. He looked carefully at the bunch of fruit that he was going to pick. No visible spiders. He pulled the bunch of fruit from the tree without incident.

"Are these the ones?" he asked Ellen. "I saw a huge spider on them."

She was cooking a crab curry with the help of a packet of dried curry sauce. Rod's mouth watered.

"Yeah they're the ones. Peel them, chop them up, and put them in some boiling water."

When the plantain was cooked she got him to mash them, and added some herbs and a dash of salt and pepper. Rod tasted them.

“Yum! Why doesn’t the mess serve food like this?”

“It has to be cooked over an open fire on a desert island, with only your life partner as companion. That’s why.”

“Wise woman. I’m totally in awe of your survival skills. How many times have you practised this?”

She pretended to count on her fingers. “This is the first time.”

“Really? That’s doubly awesome.”

“We’ve done lots of training and seen demonstrations, but this is the first time for real.”

“I’d have been stumbling around, thirsty and hungry, probably with sunburn, by now.”

“And probably covered in spider bites.”

He pounced on her and pushed her back on the sand. She shrieked, and he kissed her. He felt her arms around his neck as she kissed him back. He reflected that the Army squaddies were trained in unarmed combat, so he could have been spitting out sand by now. He broke off the kiss and looked at her. She pulled his head down and kissed him again, then pushed him away.

“The curry!”

For a second he considered letting the curry turn to charcoal, but then he let her up. They dined on curried crab and mashed plantain, and drank coconut water as they did so.

“Mmm, nice. We can pick some fruit as we go,” said Ellen.

“Go? Where?”

“Monte Verde. The highest point on the island of course! That’s what I’m calling it.”

Rod was quite happy with that plan. He figured it would take about an hour there and back. He was wrong. “Monte Verde”, as Ellen called it, was only a dozen or so metres high, and they didn’t know where it was located. Secondly, away from the beach the bush was thick and tangled. Thirdly, they kept stopping to look at a flower or an insect, or just about anything that looked interesting.

They decided to just move uphill if they could, and took turns with Ellen’s machete, not so much cutting a path as removing the worst obstacles. They carefully climbed several coral outcrops and finally reached an open space with just one enormous tree fern at the highest point and decided that this place was “Monte Verde”. It was open on one side, but only because a couple of tall trees had been blown down by the storm.

The view was not very pleasant. On the other half of the island the rare clumps of trees which had survived the storm stood out from the general mayhem. Falling trees had pulled down other trees and damaged yet others in their falling. Split limbs and split tree trunks showed white, like bones. Tree ferns which had lost all or many of their fronds stuck up like poles from debris. Many of the trees which were still standing had broken limbs. Rod made a quick sketch map for the survey, which was the reason and excuse for them being there.

“One last thing,” said Ellen.

She pulled an item from her pack of necessities.

“Here goes!”

She pressed the button on the small air horn, and birds took flight in fright. They listened quietly for some time, then she repeated the signal. Still no response. Then a third time. Nothing.

“Phew! I’m pleased about that,” Rod said.

She nodded.

They were a little subdued as they retraced their steps, because the desolation was such a contrast from their side of the island. The island would repair itself over time of course but it was sad to see, and there were inhabited islands closer to the track of the storm.

"I've been too busy to take much notice of the damage," said Ellen. "It's chopper in, fix the gear, chopper out. I've seen damaged houses and fallen trees, temporary bridges and so on, but we've been fixated on repairing stuff and moving on. Somehow the damage to this lovely island brings it home to you. In the future, I'll have to look around more when we go in."

"I've not seen any of it," said Rod. "Apart from some debris at the airport, this is the only storm damage I've seen. There's the television coverage of course, but that doesn't seem so real."

The mood lifted when they got down to their camp. The sun was descending towards sunset and the low angled light picked out the waves and coloured them orange. Rod announced that he was going to provide the meal for the night. Ellen was intrigued.

"What on earth are you going to cook, flyboy? You don't know a thing about living off the land."

"Aha! There's more than one way of solving a problem." He went to his flight bag. He pulled out two packages and handed them to Ellen. She unwrapped them and her mouth dropped.

"Pizza! You packed pizza?"

"There's more. What's pizza without beer?" He produced four cans.

"I brought two survival packs and you brought pizza and beer? Oh and that bottle of wine from yesterday! I love you, you crazy man!"

"There's even more."

He handed her another package. She opened it.

"Hahahahahaha! You brought chocolates to a desert island? You're unbelievable!"

She jumped up and put her arms around his waist and kissed him.

"Can we set up an oven to heat the pizza?" he asked worriedly.

"Don't worry, crazy man. We'll do it on a flat rock over the fire and I'll cover it with some foil. That should do it. If it doesn't I'll think of something. If you'd warned me, I could have set up something to chill the beer."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but anyway, that stream isn't far. Put them in there for now."

She gathered some wood and dry grass for starting the fire. She lit it and searched her pack for foil, unpacked the pizza and wrapped individual slices in foil. She found a nice flat rock and bridged the fire with it. Then she put the wrapped slices on the stone. Of course there was a risk that the rock would split but she didn't think it likely. When the slices were ready she sent Rod off for the beer.

It was rather nice, sitting on the beach, eating pizza and drinking beer. She snuggled up to Rod and he put his arm around her.

"This is either crazy or brilliant. I can't make up my mind."

"Well, you said to travel light. I figured that meant you would take care of the essentials. So I brought a few luxuries."

She had paused with a pizza slice halfway to her mouth. "I take it back. You figured that out in minutes when we were rushing for the chopper? It's brilliant. Want another slice?"

They finished off the pizza and Rod opened the chocolates. They finished off their beer and contentedly munched on the chocolates. Ellen couldn't help chuckling every so often.

"Pizza. Beer. Chocolates. Wine. On a desert island. Wait until I tell my squaddies!"

"You're not going to tell them, are you?"

"Of course. You'll be famous!"

“Noooooooo!”

“Of course, I’ll leave out bits. Like the swimming. And the tent.” She looked sideways at him.

“Oh good.”

“Except with my girl pals.”

“What!”

She laughed at him, and he retaliated by kissing her. The sun had gone down and the star river arched across the heavens.

“Let’s tidy up, Rod and turn in. What time do the Navy arrive?”

“Ten hundred hours, he said.”

So they tidied up and retired to the tent. But they didn’t go to sleep right away.

Next morning they woke to a grey dawn, but they still went for their swim. They romped around like kids, dunking and splashing each other, until it began to rain lightly. They walked up the beach and dried themselves and got dressed. They ate some Army ration bars and washed it down with some coconut water.

They broke camp. Ellen made the tents and cooking gear and all the other stuff disappear magically into the two backpacks. Rod put the empty wine bottle, the beer cans and the packaging of the pizzas and the chocolates into his flight bag.

Soon only their footprints showed that they had been there. They settled down with their backs to a log while they waited for the Navy boat.

“That was fun. Should we do it again, sometime? You were awesome.”

She shook her head. “It wouldn’t be the same, would it?”

He sighed. “You are right, of course. The chocolates wouldn’t have the same effect.”

She giggled. “Chocolates. On a desert island. Crazy. And brilliant!”

The Navy boat appeared round the headland. The Coxswain expertly negotiated the reef and ran the boat up the beach. He took their backpacks and Rod’s flight bag and helped them board. As he pushed the boat off the sand he asked if they had had a good time.

“Heavenly,” said Ellen, hugging Rod.

“I saw the other side of the island when I was coming in. It’s been hit fairly hard.”

“Yes, we went round there. But the other islands would have been hit harder.”

“Some have been completely flattened. I don’t know how the people survived. Some didn’t.”

“It’s the kids that worry me. The ones that have lost their families. The ones that have been killed.”

Rod put his hand on his wife’s arm.

The boatman nodded. “Yes, I’ve seen both sorts. I’ll not talk about it.”

He stared pensively into space.

“And we were just having a holiday!” said Rod.

The boatman turned. “You’ve been down here for a month, right? You’ve got kids at home, right? Or so I heard. I bet you’ve been working twelve hours or more a day, seven days a week. Am I right? You’re a flyboy. How many people have you brought in to help? Probably hundreds.”

“I’m on the lifters. We’ve been bringing in food and equipment. Oh, we took out some medical emergencies too.”

The boatman nodded. “We’ve handed out some of that food. Some people had not eaten properly for a week. You, girl, what line are you in?”

“Communications.”

He nodded again. "We rely on you to give us links to outlying places. We sent a chopper in to bring out a pregnant lady with complications the other day. The medicos were only able to let us know she needed to come out because someone put in a comms link the day before."

He patted Ellen's hand. "Don't feel guilty about taking a break. No one can work so hard for long as we have all been doing without taking a break. Where is your squad at the moment?"

"Er, they're on a break."

The boatman laughed. "Oh, so you're not feeling guilty about taking a break. You're feeling guilty because you enjoyed a break, with your husband, on a desert island, away from your squad!"

They all laughed.

"Thanks, Cap," said Rod.

"Coxswain," said the boatman.

Rod and the crew were ordered to a special meeting at the Main Base. They entered the meeting room to find Maddy looking scraped and bruised, with her arm in a sling, and very, very angry.

"What the..." said Rod.

"Sit down, please, team," said Maddy.

They sat, silently.

"As you can see, I'm in no shape to fly, so the Boss of Blue Lady, for the next ten days will be Rod. Harry, you will be Maps. Jake, you will be Sparks. I know that you want to get certified and you are already qualified. Patty, you will be Cargomaster for now. Cargoes, you will all move up one. You will be one man down as I don't want to bring in a ringer for just ten days. Besides, no one suitable is available. Cargoes and Cargomaster, you'll have to cover the shortage. Any questions?"

Cargo Three, Joshua, looked around, then tentatively asked "What happened to you, Boss?"

"Maddy. Rod is Boss from now on, Josh. And Rod is going to find this funny, but what happened to me was that I fell down some steps and got knocked out."

She glared at Rod. Rod stared at her. He struggled. The others could see him shaking. But in the end he burst out laughing. Maddy watched him stone-faced. Then her mouth twitched. Then she sniggered, and then the whole team were laughing out loud. They all knew Rod's history with Maddy, how he'd once punched her in the eye and knocked her down some steps.

When everyone quietened down, Maddy said "Thanks Rod. I knew you would laugh and I didn't know if I'd laugh along with you or throw something at you. Well, crew, no one did it to me this time. I just stepped back onto thin air and got knocked out. I've lightly sprained my shoulder and I've been rostered off for the next ten days. So, guys, look after Blue Lady for me. Now, get out of here! I'll see you in the mess."

The crew wandered out, telling Maddy to "get well soon". Rod didn't move. He waited until the door shut.

"Are you really OK, kid?"

"What do you think?"

She was back to grumpy. Then she sighed.

"Sorry, Rod. I hurt, in spite of painkillers, and I hate being stood down! I'm going to Advance Base and on to a holiday resort that they want to use for accommodation for aid workers. I'll be Boss of a team of locals and volunteers cleaning it up for ten days. Grounded for ten days! I'll go mental!"

"It's a pity we've just had a break, isn't it? Contact me anytime and I'll give you all the news."

“Ed said the same. He was there when I fell, and he called the medics. Oh, yeah, we’d just been told that the big Boss is taking a break in few weeks, and Alistair is stepping in for a month. He’s good. I’ve worked with him before. I meant to tell the crew, so please pass that on.”

Rod walked around the table and gave Maddy a gentle hug.

“Get well soon, pal. I don’t want to be Boss for long. It’s not my style.”

“You know something? I really like it. Oh well, let’s get along to the mess. I think that the crew will be wanting to buy me a consolation drink. Though it will be a soft drink for me!”

Maddy stood on the steps of the Administration Block of the resort. The girl was there again. She was about ten years old, and she was working with the team of volunteers cleaning out the units. Most of the units had had the windows blown in and they were full of sand and vegetation carried in by the wind and sometimes there was more human debris, like clothing and parts of peoples’ houses. Occasionally the volunteers would come across some dead animal, such as a seagull or a fish. The fear was of course that they would come across a human body, but that was unlikely. All the locals in the area had been accounted for.

Maddy, and the supervisors before her, took a relaxed approach with the local volunteers. They often had family issues, and disappeared to repair their own houses or neighbours’ houses or relatives’ houses. She no longer inquired. But the girl had been here every day since Maddy had started here.

She had filled an absurdly large wheel barrow and wheeled it to the rubbish tip and with an effort up ended it. Then she wheeled it back to the unit she was working on and started loading it again.

Maddy walked over to the child. “Hi, what’s your name, dear?”

The girl looked at her and spoke a sentence in the local language. Then she thought a bit.

“Name? Name, Annali.”

“Your name is Annali? Annali?” Maddy pointed at her.

The girl grinned. She thought a bit. “Me, Annali. You name?”

“My name is Maddy”

“Maddy? You Maddy?”

“Yes! I’m Maddy. Where is your mother?”

Annali abruptly turned away. “Me work.” She grabbed the shovel and started loading her barrow and wouldn’t talk to Maddy any more.

Maddy sighed and returned to her office. Her shoulder was returning to normal and she no longer used the sling. She religiously did the exercises the physiotherapist had prescribed for her, and she was happy with her progress. But she still missed being in the air or preparing to be in the air.

At the end of the day she was paying out the workers with vouchers and cash. She paid Annali and the girl gave her a weak smile. On an impulse she handed over the payout to her assistant, one of the volunteers from up north, and trailed the girl.

Annali headed down towards the beach, then walked away from the local town. Maddy didn’t have much cover but the girl didn’t look behind her, so Maddy continued to trail her down the beach. The girl suddenly seemed to disappear, but Maddy realized that she had ducked into a shelter made of driftwood.

Maddy was approaching the shelter when suddenly she heard a wail. She rushed forward and stuck her head into the shelter and saw Annali holding a small boy in her arms. The child was limp. Maddy shoved her way into the shelter and felt the child. He felt as hot as a furnace, but he was still breathing.

Maddy pointed at the two of them, then herself, then out of the shelter. After a second or two of hesitation Annali nodded. Maddy grabbed the boy and carried him out of the shelter which fell apart after her. Annali followed her.

“Come on, Annali,” Maddy said.

She ran back to the resort, put the boy in the back of the jeep that had been assigned to her and belted him in. She belted Annali in next to him, hopped in the driver’s seat and started the jeep. She roared out of the resort and down the road to the town. She sped through the town, out the other side and spun into the car park of the field hospital.

She leapt out and unbuckled the two kids and picked up the boy and rushed into the hospital. They were triaged by a nurse and after a few minutes called in to see a doctor.

“Hmm, I’ll fill him full of antibiotics, but it’s hard to tell what he has got. Has he been coughing? Drinking unfiltered water?”

“I don’t know,” said Maddy. “I don’t speak the language.”

She brought Annali forward. “She does.”

The doctor spoke to Annali in the local language and she replied. They went back and forth for a while, then the doctor sighed.

“She tells me that he has been OK, but they have been drinking unfiltered water. She also tells me that her family were all killed when their house was blown down during the storm. She’s registered as an orphan, but avoided being shipped out because she was scared they would take her brother away. There’s a few like her around.”

“Can you do anything for him, doc?”

“Sure, I’ll give you some tablets, but you do know what you are getting into, don’t you?”

Maddy considered. “Yes, doc. I’ve been here before.”

She was thinking “Oh Jim, I’m sorry, my love. I’m sorry.”

She loaded the kids into the jeep. The doctor had injected the boy with antibiotics and given her some pills for him. He’d also quickly checked over the girl and, literally, given her the thumbs up, but still gave her antibiotics and some pills, just in case. Maddy drove back to the resort in a sort of daze. What had she done? She settled the kids into a spare bed. The boy was already feeling cooler, and Annali passed out straight away.

She picked up her communicator and pressed the code for her husband. She was crying before the call connected. A globe of light appeared with his face in it.

“Hullo Maddy. How’s things?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.”

“What? What’s up my love? Tell me.”

All he could see was her face, streaming tears.

“Oh, my dear, I’ve found another one.”

“Another one? What do you... Oh! I see. Oh, Maddy!”

“She’s called Annali and she, she, she has a younger brother.”

“Oh!”

“Do you hate me?”

“No, no, of course not. Let me get used to the idea a minute.”

He paused. “Are you sure about this? Really sure?”

She sniffed up her tears. “Yes, yes. I’m sure. I wasn’t sure until I called you, but then I was.”

“Well then, I’d better buy more beds.”

“What? Are you OK with it? Oh, I love you!”

“Well, no, I’m not OK with it at the moment. But I will be. I will be. I just need to get used to the idea. Bring them home, my dear. We’ll figure something out.”

“You’re amazing. Truly amazing.”

“To think that I’m still paying for hitting you all those years ago!”

It was a private joke.

“By the way,” he said, “Is she that beautiful child behind you?”

She whirled. Annali had woken up and was looking at the glowing sphere in amazement. Maddy pulled the girl to her and hugged her.

“I’ll explain when we can talk to one another properly, Annali,” she promised.

She told Jim she loved him again and signed off. Annali mimed a phone, and Maddy said “Yes, it’s like a phone.”

She lay the child down and stroked her hair. It was long, straight and dark, unlike her own hair which was jet black and tightly curled. Annali’s skin was brown, but not as dark as Maddy’s ebony skin. Annali went to sleep and snored slightly. Maddy checked on her brother. Even asleep he looked better.

The next day Maddy started the adoption process. She asked around and found the number of the adoption service jointly provided by the relief forces and the local people. She spoke to a very helpful man there who promised to send her the appropriate papers. He asked to speak to Annali.

Annali took the large old-fashioned phone and held it to her ear. Maddy could see that she had seen phones before and knew what they did, but had never used one.

Annali and the adoption service man started an extended conversation in the local language and Maddy was lost. Something the man said caused her to look at Maddy in shock and tense up. She shook her head and said something into the phone. A bit more to and fro on the phone occurred and suddenly she nodded vigorously, shrieked, dropped the phone, and flung herself into Maddy’s arms and wrapped her arms around her neck.

Maddy picked up the phone and said “What the heck just happened.”

It was a bit hard with the girl wrapped around her neck. She shifted her onto her lap and she could breathe again.

The man at the other end was laughing. “I talked to her and basically got her details. She and her brother are orphans, that’s confirmed. No known relatives. So we can start the process of adoption. As for what happened, I asked her if she would like to go home with you. She basically said ‘no’, because she thought that I meant just her and not the two of them. My fault. Then she thought that you wanted her as a servant. I explained what adoption was and got shrieked at. I presume, therefore, that the answer was ‘yes’?”

Maddy laughed. “Yes, she is wrapped around my neck at the moment. I’m going to have a job to get her to let go. What’s the process we have to follow to get her adopted?”

“Well, we have to foster her while the process is going on and it usually takes three to four months. But don’t worry, we can foster her with you and your spouse while that happens. That can be done in about a week.”

Maddy explained the situation, that she was on sick leave and due to go back in two or three days. The adoption service guy said that it would help if she could remain there until the fostering papers were signed, and Maddy said she’d fix it. Then she got the adoption service guy to explain it all to Annali.

Rod and the crew were shocked when Maddy extended her sick leave. On the next trip down to Advance Base, he left the crew to it and hitched a lift in a Navy chopper to the helipad close to the resort and then borrowed a jeep and drove there. He drew up at the Reception area and went looking for Maddy.

“What are you doing here, Rod,” she asked. “Who is looking after Blue Lady?”

“I left Harry supervising the loading. We leave at noon tomorrow, so I’ve only time for an hour or so here. I, well, the whole crew want to know what’s going on! You extended your leave!”

“Yeah, well, my shoulder’s not quite right yet.”

“Rubbish! I don’t believe you! You’d lie through your teeth to the medic to get back on board!”

“Rod, I want you to meet someone.” She took him to her quarters.

“This is Annali, and this is Puli.”

Rod crouched down and gravely shook hands with the two serious looking kids. “And? They’re locals, aren’t they?”

“Jim and I are adopting them. Well, actually, we are fostering, then adopting them. But I have to wait for the fostering process which will take another few days, so I extended my leave.”

“Phew, don’t do that to us, Maddy! We wondered if you might be abandoning us! Actually, none of us seriously thought that. Harry guessed it might be something like this. You have history.”

“Ah, yes.” Maddy and Jim had already adopted a girl after the earlier earthquake Relief Mission.

Maddy showed him round the resort. Almost half of it had been cleaned up and while some of the accommodation needed some repair, the place was looking a lot better than even a week ago. They came around the end of one unit and came across a playground. The kids ran ahead and clambered over the climbing nets and slid up and down the slides. Maddy and Rod stood watching.

“They are almost back to normal kid mode,” she said. “Oh, I wish I could pay Jim back for all the sacrifices he has made for me and my career. And my kids.” She teared up a little.

Rod nodded. “Yeah, Ellen and I have been lucky. She’s been able to keep up with her career, even though she has the kids with her most of the time. But she lets me fly all over the country and I’m so grateful to have her. And lucky.”

He turned. “Any way, Maddy, I have to go, otherwise I’ll be stranded at Advance Base.”

“Let the crew know I’ll be back as soon as I can. I miss them and I miss my other child, Blue Lady.”

“Will do, Boss.” Then he gave her a hug and headed for his jeep.

About a week later Buccaneer landed late in the morning at Advance Base and started to unload. Ed and Sally had just reported in when suddenly a voice said “Have you got room for some hitchhikers, you big bear?”

Ed turned around and said “Hi, pipsqueak. I heard that you had picked up some followers. Is this them?”

Ed waved at them. “Hi kids!”

They looked a bit dubious. Then Sally said something to them in the local language and they smiled at her. Annali replied and Puli and Sally chuckled.

“What did you say,” said Ed suspiciously.

“Only not to be afraid and that you were a big um, it’s a thing like a marshmallow on a stick that they eat down here.”

“What did the little girl say?”

“Um, that we’d need a big stick for one that big!”

Ed guffawed.

“Seriously Ed, we’re scheduled as passengers on Buccaneer on your return trip. You’re going back this afternoon?”

“Yeah, it’s a quick turn around today. Traffic seems to be slowing, at least our sort of traffic. It’s mostly people being shipped backwards and forwards now. Gypsy and Red Dragon went north permanently the other day. I wouldn’t be surprised if they use Buccaneer and Blue Lady to ship stuff directly into Advance Base soon. And probably the other lifters too.”

“Well, yes, hopefully we’ll see each other at Advance Base for a while. Blue Lady is on a rotation back home. I don’t know how he managed to arrange it, but Rod’s waiting for us to get there. I suspect that we won’t get rotated back to Main Base. Aw, I’ll miss you, you big bear. And you too, Sally, of course. Still, we’ll leave you to it. See you in the mess later?”

“Yeah, but take Sally with you. We don’t have enough going north to need both of us, and it looks like she can help you entertain the kids.”

Sally looked up from talking to the kids and smiled. “Sure. I miss mine. Have they had a burger yet?”

Annali said “Burger? Fries?”

They all laughed. “If they haven’t had one they’ve heard of them.”

“Oh yes, I got them some the other day. The local fast food joint had a reopening party, although maybe they’ve had them before the storm,” said Maddy.”

Maddy and Sally shooed the kids towards the mess. As an Advance Base mess, it wasn’t a typical forces mess. Far more civilians were to be seen than was usual. Many more children were around, and it was like a cross between an airport waiting lounge and a fast food restaurant.

“You’re not from round here, are you, Sally? You’ve got an Eastern Provinces accent. How come you know the local language?”

Sally laughed. “Yes, in a way I am from round here. I and my family live in the Capital, but my parents moved here from the Eastern Provinces when I was ten. Hence my Eastern Provinces accent. They are up the coast and only got the edge of the storm. Their chicken house was blown over, but the chickens all survived. Annali said ‘You speak funny’ when we first talked. I speak three languages!”

They bought some food for the kids and themselves. Annali chose to have a local dish and fries, while her brother wanted a burger. Sally chose a local dish, and Maddy went for a curry, these days a pretty universal dish. Ed and the crew came in later and created chaos in the kitchen, changing their minds and changing them back again. Sally just sighed and kept talking to Maddy and the kids. Sally was the quiet centre of the typhoon that was the Buccaneer crew.

Annali went up to Ed, poked him, and said something in the local language. Sally laughed.

“What did she say?” asked Ed.

“She just called you a marshmallow.”

Ed pretend to growl at her, and she shrieked and hid behind Maddy. But she was laughing.

“Big bully,” said Sally, laughing.

Ed looked at his watch. “Thirty minutes guys. Maddy, you and your lot need to join the rest of the passengers. We’ll see you later.”

Maddy and her charges were duly loaded along with the rest of the passengers into Buccaneer’s belly by their Cargomaster and took their places in the “First Class” of Buccaneer. She’d not travelled this way before, because on earlier trips as a passenger or a Cargo on the lifters she’d been seated in a crew seat. Annali and Puli were looking a little anxious, on either side of her, but she held their hands and they sat quietly. It was understandable since their only previous flight was in a

chopper when they flew to Advance Base from near the resort. They looked around wide-eyed at the mostly empty cargo space and started when the plane started to move.

Maddy thought that they looked so cute with their headsets on as ear protectors. Buccaneer took off and climbed to cruising altitude and Sally came on the intercom and told people that they could move around, but should remain seated and belted in as much as possible. Then she repeated it in the local language. Useful, Maddy thought. None of her people could speak the language, so far as she knew.

Maddy looked around at the passengers. Many of them were locals, and one or two had been injured and were, she thought, being transferred to hospitals further north. One was on a stretcher with wheels, which Maddy guessed was one of the special ones for such transfers. In the seat at the end of the row was an Army nurse. A few Army people and one lone Navy rating comprised the rest of the passengers.

Sally came down from the cockpit and did the rounds of the crew, as Ed had decided to take control of Buccaneer for the trip to the Main Base. She checked with the nurse about her patient and then had a quick word with the passengers, in their own languages. She got to Maddy, and Maddy took her headset off.

“How are the kids, Maddy?” Sally asked.

“OK, I think. They were a bit surprised when we started moving, but I’d told them what was going to happen earlier on, so they were relaxed about it.”

Sally mimed taking the headphones off to Annali, and spoke to the girl in her language. Annali replied and made flying gestures. Sally nodded.

“She’s fine, quite excited even. She’s disappointed that she can’t see anything. Shall I take them and let them look out of the portholes?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Do you mind if I go and chat to Ed for a minute?”

“No, go ahead. He’d like that. I’ll tell the kids what’s happening and where you are going.”

Annali said something. Sally laughed. “She obviously picked up on some of that. She asked if she could see the big marshmallow too. I’ll tell her he’s busy at the moment. That’s true enough on this short hop. Maybe later.”

Sally took the kids off to where they could look out of the aircraft. Of course, lifters did not have many portholes in the cargo areas. Maddy shinned up the ladder to the flight deck.

“Hi, Sparks, Phil,” she said as she went past his cubicle.

“Hi Maddy.”

Ed had his headset on.

“Hi Ed,” said Maddy. She didn’t call him Boss as was her instinct as she wasn’t crew on this flight.

“Oh, hi Maddy. Dumped the kids over the side have you?” Maddy ignored him. She was looking around the cockpit. It’s familiarity soothed her. He waved her into Sally’s seat.

“Oh, I’ll be glad to get back to Blue Lady,” she said.

Ed just nodded. No jokes. He knew what the lifters meant to their Bosses.

“You think I’m crazy taking on two extra kids, don’t you?”

Ed looked at her. “No, pipsqueak. I don’t at all. I’ve seen some of the injured and orphaned kids flying through, as you have. I understand why you want to adopt them. They look so darn cute and vulnerable. Jim’s OK about them?”

Maddy grimaced. “That’s the first thing I have to sort out back in the Capital. But yes, I think he will be OK. He was shocked at first, but then came round to the idea, and the two kids are really looking forward to meeting Annali and Puli. But I won’t know for sure what he really feels until I

get there. Oh, he'll love and cherish them, there's no doubt about that. But I rather dumped them on him, figuratively speaking. I have to put that right."

"So, you might be in the doghouse, my friend? Oh, I know Jim, and my guess is that he will be OK."

"But he liked teaching too. He's given up his whole career for my sweet baby and my sweet orphan from the earthquake. I am so indebted to him. Anyway, I'd better get back to them."

"So long pipsqueak. You fly out when we arrive, so we might not bump into one another for some time. Keep in touch."

"Will do, you big bear. Or should I say big marshmallow!"

Maddy returned to her seat, and Sally brought the kids back shortly after. Annali concentrated and said "Good ..." and looked at Sally and said a word.

"View" said Sally.

"Good view," Annali said to Maddy. Puli shot out a string of words in his language. Then he put out his arms and pretended to be a plane.

Annali said "Puli... like plane."

Maddy congratulated the girl. She was trying hard to learn how to speak the language, but was still in the early stages. She understood more than she could speak.

Maddy said goodbye to Sally, and Sally returned to the flight deck. Maddy wasn't sure when she was going to meet with the Buccaneer crew again. She hoped it would be soon as they would both still be flying into Advance Base.

The plane landed and taxied to its assigned slot and Buccaneer's Cargomaster ensured that their baggage would go out first. A driver with a luggage cart was waiting and whipped their baggage away to Blue Lady. Maddy and the kids walked up to the passenger doors where Jake, Blue Lady's Cargomaster met them.

"Welcome back, Boss," he said. "Are these your waifs and strays?"

He gravely shook hands with them both.

"Yes, of course, Cargomaster. Let's get them buckled in."

There were no passengers on this trip, so Annali and Puli were going to sit with the crew. There was a chorus of welcomes from the Cargoes as Maddy and the kids arrived which Maddy returned.

Cargomaster called the flight deck and Maddy heard the engines starting up. Maddy and Cargomaster buckled the kids in and Maddy gave them the thumbs up. She was surprised when Cargomaster took the seat between them and held their hands. He nodded to her.

"I've got this Boss. Go and drive the bus. You know you want to."

"Thanks, Jake," she said. She planted a kiss on his forehead, which could be considered slightly inappropriate as she was the Boss, and gave the kids a thumbs up and got one back from them.

Then she raced up the ladder.

"Hi, Boss. Just finishing the pre-flights," said Sparks. She was in the Boss' seat, while Maps was in his usual seat. Ah, so it was all pre-arranged!

Sparks and Maps finished the pre-flight checks and Sparks climbed out of the Boss seat.

"All yours. Glad to have you back. Mind you, he did quite well," said Sparks, nodding over her shoulder at Maps.

Maddy slid into the Boss' seat with a sigh. It was like coming home.

"Hi, Boss, welcome back. We missed you. Do you want to take control?"

"Yeah, thanks, Maps. I have control."

Maddy started the dialogue between Blue Lady and Ground. Blue Lady was pushed back and Maddy taxied her out to the end of the runway. The chit chat continued and Maddy lined her up and

started her take off run. Rod called out distances and speed, and Maddy lifted her off the ground. The usual to and fro continued until Ground let them go and they set up for cruising. They switched the autopilot on and Maddy passed control back to Rod.

“Oh that felt so good. So good.” Maddy stretched. Rod laughed.

“I must see how the kids are going,” Maddy said and started to get up.

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” said Sparks from behind her partition. Harry could hear the conversations in the cockpit and by peeking round her partition, she could see into the cargo hold.

Maddy looked down into the hold. Jake the Cargomaster was sitting between the two kids and now and then putting a hand on the arm rest. Whichever kid was on that side was trying to put their hands on his, and usually missing as he snatched his hand away. Both were giggling themselves silly.

Maddy climbed down the ladder and Jake noticed her, and the two kids triumphantly claimed his hands.

“Jake! Jake! Gotya!” and “Maddy-mummy” they called.

“Hmm, seems I needn’t have worried,” she said. “I didn’t know you were so good with kids, Jake. You don’t have any, do you?”

“No, we never got around to it. But we have heaps of nephews and nieces. They’re always round at our place. After all, it is over our fish and chip shop, and all kids love fish and chips.”

“Have you thought of fostering? I hope you don’t mind me asking.”

Jake waved that away. “Yeah, maybe. I love the lifters, particularly Blue Lady, but since you mention it, it might be time to move on.”

Maddy made a face. “Not too soon, I hope? You’re a great Cargomaster, and you’re now qualified as Sparks.”

Jake said “Oh, it won’t be too soon, but I’ll be talking to my wife during the break. I won’t drop you in it, but it might be time for you to start looking. Being qualified as Sparks may be useful in civvy street. Patty’s looking for a step up. Ow!”

Puli had pulled the hairs on the back of his hands. Jake pretended to be grumpy and Puli giggled. Annali reached out towards Maddy.

“You want to come with me, love? OK.”

Maddy released Annali’s belt and helped her from her seat. Annali hugged her and then pulled her hand towards the flight deck.

“Oh, you want to see what I’ve been up to, eh? OK. Will your brother be OK, do you think?” Puli was still trying to catch Jake’s hand.

Annali nodded. “Puli OK,” she said.

Maddy and Annali climbed the stairs to the flight deck. At the top Annali stopped and looked into Sparks’ cubicle.

“Hullo, I’m Sparks. Who are you?”

“Annali. Sparks?”

“Yes, that’s right, Annali.”

Maddy waved at Sparks and they moved into the cockpit.

“Rod, you’ve already met Annali at the resort, haven’t you.”

“Hullo Annali. What do you think of the view?”

They were heading slightly west of north and the sun was setting in an orange band off to the left- hand side. Above the orange band the sky was white, fading into blue and then to a darker blue higher up in the sky. There may have been a star or two starting to appear.

Annali wasn’t sure of the word. “Pretty?” she said tentatively.

“Yes, that’s right, very pretty. She’s getting good isn’t she?”

Maddy agreed. “She understands a lot more than she actually says, don’t you, dear?”

Annali nodded.

“That’s my seat there. Do you want to sit there a while? Don’t touch anything.”

Annali sat in the seat and goggled at all the buttons and dials.

“Put your hands on the yoke. Can you feel the plane flying herself?” said Rod.

Annali let go as if she had been shocked. “Tapu!” she said.

“Oh, no, it’s OK! It’s not tapu!” said Maddy. She tried to think. “Ah, it’s like the car. The jeep. It changes gear by itself. It’s not tapu.”

“Not tapu?” Annali tentatively put her hands on the yoke again.

“Like the jeep. I.... Silly!?” She laughed. Maddy wasn’t sure if she totally understood, but it was clear that she understood a lot.

Maddy took her back to the cargo hold. As she went past Sparks she said “Hi, Sparks!”

“Hi, Annali!”

Down in the hold Cargomaster had reclined his seat and Puli’s. The boy was fast asleep and Cargomaster appeared to be asleep too. He opened one eye and winked at Maddy, indicating that he wasn’t really asleep. He carefully raised his seat. Maddy knew that he rarely slept even on long flights. Maddy got Annali buckled in and tilted her seat back, then she pointed to herself then the cockpit. Annali winked, then pointed to her brother and put her finger to her lips. Maddy gave her the thumbs up and went off to the cockpit.

Maddy slipped into the Boss’ seat and buckled up.

“Are you OK for a while Maps?” He’d been flying for about an hour. “Can you take her for another hour?”

“Sure, no problem. I had a snooze while we were waiting for Buccaneer.”

“Wake me in an hour, please,” she requested.

“Sure, Boss.” He calculated in his head. “You’ll take the middle stretch then? Leaving me the last leg?”

“Yup. That’s the plan. OK with you, Maps? We’ll get in about midnight.”

“Sure, Boss.”

Maddy settled down for a nap. She wondered if Jim would bring the kids to the airport. He usually did. Pretty soon she was asleep. Rod tuned his headphones to a comedy channel. If anything happened that needed attention, the system would interrupt. He reviewed the flight plan on the cockpit screen. Hm, change to more northerly heading in twenty minutes. Probably avoiding a commercial. He watched the stars come out and tried to orient himself by them just for practise.

“Cargo One, this is Maps,” he said over the headphones. “Any chance of a coffee?”

“Maps, Cargo One. OK, Cargo Two is on that today. I’ll get him to bring you one up.”

“Cargo One, Maps. Thanks, Patty.” Rod settled down for his stretch.

An hour later he woke the Boss and handed over control. He’d already requested a coffee for her and Cargo Two had delivered it. They chatted about the flight, and he told her the heading and height and other flight details, but he knew that she would check the flight plan herself.

He got up and moved to the top of the steps to the hold, at the back of the cockpit. He nodded to Sparks and looked into the cargo hold. Cargomaster was sitting reading a paperback between the two kids who were fast asleep. The Cargoes were quietly playing cards and chatting. He yawned.

He went back to his seat and reclined it. The Boss’ mind was elsewhere, though she glanced at him as he came back in. He quickly fell asleep.

“We’re about an hour and a half out,” said the Boss when she woke him. She waited until he was fully awake before handing control to him, and then went to check the situation in the hold. The kids were still asleep. The Cargoes were dozing and Cargomaster gave her a wave.

“All OK, Sparks?” she asked.

“Yes, destination Ground called warning about possible course changes, but they’ve not come back with anything definite. It’s on Maps’ list.” Sparks received out of control range messages. When they got within control range of destination Maps would get them directly.

Maddy went back to the cockpit. Maps glanced at her as she sat down. She sighed.

“Do you think I’m crazy, Rod? Picking up two kids in my travels?”

“Three isn’t it?” said Rod, referring to the girl that Jim and Maddy had already adopted. “Nah. Not crazy. Or if you are it’s a nice crazy. Jim’s the crazy one, taking you on, Maddy.”

Maddy chose to take him half seriously. “I’ve made him give up his career for mine and for my kids. I owe him so much.”

“Nah, again. If he didn’t want to do it, if he didn’t like it, you’d know. He’d be depressed and irritable and generally unhappy, and from what you’ve said, he’s none of those. He obviously wants you to be happy, just as you want him to be happy. I’ve not seen him for over ten years, but I remember him as a relaxed sort of guy, and I don’t suppose he’s changed much.”

“Thanks, Rod. Whenever I talk to him about it he tells me not to worry. He says he’s happy as things are and to see me doing what I want and watching the kids grow up. But I still worry.”

Rod made a rude noise.

“You need to get your head down, Boss. I’ll wake you in an hour.”

“OK. Sparks said that destination Ground said there may be some course changes, but that they haven’t come up with anything yet. Typical Capital stuff I suspect. Commercials getting in the way.”

Rod nodded. He’d already seen it. Maddy reclined her seat and dozed off. She had been told that everyone dreams, but she could never recall any of hers.

Rob woke her up thirty minutes or so out from the Capital. Blue Lady was already threading the busy airspace around the Capital. They would land at the shared commercial and military airport so had to fit in with the commercial flights. Life might become easier for both commercial and military crews when the new military airport was completed, he reflected.

“Are you OK to take her in, Maps? You’ve just had two fairly long stretches.”

Rod considered. “I’m OK to land her, but if you want to...?”

“No, you take her in. I’m OK with that. I’m just off to check the kids. Sparks, can you please listen in with Maps and assist with the Ground chit chat and the pre landing checks?”

“Sure, Boss.”

Maddy was surprised that Annali was awake and playing cards with Cargomaster. It looked to her like some variation of ‘Snap’. They stopped playing when they saw her coming down the ladder.

“Annali, we are nearly there. We are about to land.” Maddy mimed the aircraft landing. “We need to wake Puli up.”

Annali nodded, then said a word that she recognized. “OK, then, let’s wake Puli up and get him to go too.”

She unbuckled Annali and they woke up Puli and she took them off to the cargo level toilets. Then she took them back to their seats and buckled them in. Annali explained to Puli that they were landing and Puli made plane noises and talked to her in their native language.

“Thanks, Jake,” Maddy said, and he nodded.

She kissed the kids and went back to the cockpit.

“Thanks, Sparks and Maps. OK, what do we have?”

Maps looked at her. “You seem to be a bit tense, Boss. Are you OK?”

“Yes, Maps, that’s why I want you to fly her in. I’m worried about Jim’s reaction, Rod. Harry, keep listening. I know you do anyway. I don’t want any mistakes. Make sure I don’t make any, guys. Anyway, what do we have?”

“We’re following a commercial, slightly slower than we usually travel, Boss. All lined up. Autopilot is off. The commercial’s pilot is ex Air Force, on transports. I spoke to him. I don’t know him, but he should be good.”

“Good, I’m patching myself in.” Maddy heard the chit chat between Ground and the commercial in her headphones. Occasionally Maps called in an update. The commercial landed and taxied away and switched radio channels. The chit chat became between Maps and Ground. As they lost altitude the lights of the Capital flowed beneath them.

Maddy spotted the lights of the airport ahead and felt the slight swaying as low altitude winds nudged them gently from side to side. Maps lowered the undercarriage which increased the sway a little. He tweaked the trim and lowered the flaps and stuck like glue to the glide path. Ground had no comments but fed back his altitude and speed to him. Maddy checked them, as she was supposed to do. Maps took them down almost to ground level and then glided them in the last few metres, and they touched down like a feather. He immediately braked and reversed thrust.

“Nice landing, Maps,” said Sparks and the Boss, simultaneously.

“Thanks, guys,” said Maps, laughing.

They taxied Blue Lady to the military side of the airfield.

“We’re assigned to the maintenance area,” said Maps.

Ground was already directing them there. Blue Lady was scheduled for a maintenance check and would be grounded for a month. None of the crews liked it much when their aircraft came up for maintenance.

Rod taxied them over to the maintenance area and went through the shutdown process with Maddy. Maddy sighed.

“OK, let’s hand her over to the screwdriver and spanner brigade. Disembark, everyone!”

Maddy, Rod and Sparks exited through the crew gangway while the rest unloaded themselves from the cargo exit. A military bus ran them and their luggage over to the military terminal. Maddy asked them to wait while she and Rod checked in and formally handed Blue Lady over to maintenance, and then they rejoined the rest.

“OK, guys, you know the drill. We have a month off and you will be notified three or four days before we are rostered on again. You have to reply or someone will chase you down, probably me! We will have one day to check out Blue Lady’s systems before we do our first run. Let’s go and meet our public!”

They grabbed their luggage from the bus and loaded up hand trolleys and passed through the security gate to meet their greeters. Jake, the Cargomaster, wasn’t being met by anyone so he gave Maddy a hand with the two kids. The others dispersed to meet their families and partners.

Maddy spotted Jim with the two kids, Ollie, her own flesh and blood, dark skin and curly black hair, and Em, her adopted daughter, fair skin and long blond hair. She ran forward and threw herself at Jim and wrapped her arms around him and kissed him and he kissed her back. Then she kissed the two kids, who had been jumping up and down shouting “Mummy, mummy, mummy!”

“Oh Jim, this is Annali and Puli.” The two southerners were clinging to Jake’s hands. They looked terrified.

Jim bent down and said to the two “Hullo, you two. Welcome to the family.”

He took their hands and drew them to him and hugged them. Ollie and Em grabbed their mother’s hands and hugged her.

Jake said “I’ll bring your bags, Maddy.”

They all went out to the car park and Jim led them to a big people mover.

“What! A new car? Oh.... Of course.” Their previous car wouldn’t have fitted all six of them. A furry black and white face appeared at the window.

“Oh, I forgot about the dog.”

They loaded up all the kids into the car, and Jake stuffed the luggage in the back. The dog jumped all over everything and everyone, sniffing away. Eventually it settled down behind the front seats.

“Can we give you a lift, Jake?” asked Jim. “We have room, I think.”

“No thanks. I have my motorcycle stored at a friend’s place just down the road. I’ll be fine. See you in a month, Maddy.”

He waved them away and then picked up his bags and strolled off whistling. He could almost taste the fish and chips already.

Jim drove away from the airport and Ollie and Em fell asleep. Jim said that they had been bouncing around like mad things all evening. They were keen to see their “new brother and sister”. Annali soon dropped off, but Puli surprised them by suddenly saying “Maddy-mummy, Jim-daddy!”

Maddy looked at Jim, then put her hand on his shoulder. “He’s not called me that before! Maybe he’s coming out of shock. It must have been terrible for him and for Annali too.”

When they got to the house Jim drove the car straight into the garage. He transferred the three younger kids to their beds, but when Jim was moving Annali, she woke up.

She said “House,” and gestured around her.

“Do you want to see round? OK,” said Jim.

He took her round the house, talking to her all the time, showing her all the rooms, including the bedroom she was to share with her brother for now. Maddy brought all the bags in and dropped Annali’s small package next to her bed. The dog followed them everywhere.

“Brush teeth?” said Annali, retrieving her toothbrush from her bag.

Maddy showed her the bathroom and where to put her toothbrush, and the girl brushed her teeth. Maddy put her in her bed and Annali became drowsy. Maddy kissed her on the cheek and the girl held her for a minute, and then turned on her side and went to sleep.

It was two in the morning so Maddy and Jim went to bed. Maddy held Jim tight.

“I’m the world’s worst person,” she said. “I leave my family for months on end, and when I do come back I bring more kids. I’m trouble! How can you put up with me?” Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Jim hugged her. “Of course you aren’t! We all love you, and I bet we will love Annali and Puli too. It was a bit of a shock when you told me about them, but, love, we will find space in our hearts to love them too. Ollie and Em are so excited that we are adding to our family!”

“But what about your teaching? You were so looking forward to going back to teaching!”

“Well, the three youngest are all five years old, and will be scheduled to start at primary school full time next term. Annali’s ten so she will be in primary school full time too. She’ll be there for another few years. I can work while they are at school. I might even work at their school. It

depends. We'll need to work on their language of course, and maybe Annali and Puli might have to stay home for the first term or so, but we can handle it. I don't see a problem, really."

"Oh, you are wonderful! I don't deserve you."

She let her tension come out in tears. Jim held her until she stopped crying and she started to snore lightly. He carefully moved her back to her side of the bed, then he got out of bed and checked on the four children. He paused by Puli's bed and put the blankets back over him. He checked on Annali. She was sucking her thumb like a baby. He brushed her hair out of her eyes and she mumbled in her sleep. The other two were fine. Even the dog was snoring in his basket in the kitchen. Jim returned to bed.

Over the next few days Annali became more and more withdrawn, and wasn't sleeping well. Puli on the other hand fitted in well. Often he, Ollie, Em and the dog were racing around the house playing some raucous game, even though Puli didn't yet speak their language, while Annali sat pondering on the sofa or in her bedroom. Jim and Maddy were worried about her, and while she still hugged them she seemed distracted. Finally Jim decided that they needed help, so he contacted the adoption agency. Through them he contacted a girl at the university who came from the same region as Annali and Puli and spoke their language.

The girl, Chandi, came to visit. While Maddy took Puli, Em, Ollie and the dog to the park, Jim sat and talked with Chandi and Annali. With a little prompting, Annali described her experiences during the big storm, while Chandi relayed her story to Jim.

"I was at home with my family when the storm struck. We had had big storms before," said Annali through Chandi. "My father was a fisherman and thought that we could ride out the storm. He was worried that if we left home that all our possessions would be stolen. My mother and Kavita, my older sister, helped him put boards over our windows. He tied down his boat with strong cables to two large trees."

She took a break and came and sat on Jim's lap.

"When the storm came it was much worse than he expected. The sea came up to the house and the waves were breaking on the house, even on the roof, I think. The boards were ripped off the windows and the windows broke. Water was coming in everywhere. Part of the roof blew away. I couldn't tell if it was rain or the sea, but the house filled with water and the walls came down and a tree hit the house. Puli and I were in a hole where one wall was still standing and stuff had been washed in on the other side. A tree trunk was over our heads. I don't know where it came from.

"The wind and the rain and the sea kept washing and blowing in. We were wet and cold, and later thirsty and hungry. I wouldn't let Puli go out. After what seemed to be days the waves stopped washing in and the wind stopped blowing so hard. Puli wanted to go out but I wouldn't let him at first.

"We crawled out eventually and I found my mother. She was dead. I felt her. She was cold. A little way away was my sister Kavita. She was dead too, under a pile of timber and other stuff that had blown in. Puli didn't seem to notice. He found some tins and also some rice, but it was wet. Besides we had no way of cooking it.

"Some soldiers came by and took us to a camp. There was water but no food. Some big boys took my cans. Eventually some soldiers came and gave us cooked rice and some other food. Puli ate all his and I gave him some of mine. I wasn't hungry. Later I was sick, but I got better.

"A few days later a man came round and took our names. He said that my father was dead too. He said that we were going to be shipped out, boys on one flight, girls on another. I decided it was

my job now to look after Puli, so we slipped out of the camp when no one was looking. I found out later that the man was wrong and they wouldn't have separated us, but I didn't know that.

"We went down on to the beach. There was a lot of stuff on the beach. I saw part of my father's boat, a bit with the name on. It must have been smashed to pieces. I made a small shelter with some of the stuff on the beach, and we made a bed with some big leaves that had blown in on the storm. That's where we stayed for a while. Some people gave us food a couple of times but Puli was always hungry.

"Then the soldiers started cleaning up the resort. There was a man directing them and he paid me to help clear out the units. Puli stayed at the beach and I told him to hide if anyone came. We went back to our house a couple of times. My mother's body and my sister's body had gone. We searched but we couldn't find anything belonging to us. The storm had swept it all away. I cried a lot.

"Later the man left and Maddy-mummy came and directed the soldiers. Other people who lived nearby came and started helping. They had all lost their houses. One of them said that he had seen my father dead. Maddy-mummy said that the resort would be used by people who would help rebuild the houses. I wondered if they would rebuild ours, but I didn't want to go back to live there.

"Puli was sick because of the bad water. I left him in the morning to work at the resort, but when I got back he was much worse. I thought that he was going to die. Maddy-mummy had followed me and took us to the hospital and they gave Puli medicine and he got better."

She smiled for the first time.

"Maddy-mummy made us stay with her. She got us food and looked after Puli. She wanted me to stop clearing the resort, but I thought it was important so I helped.

"Maddy-mummy said she wanted to adopt us. I didn't know what that meant and Maddy-mummy got me to talk to someone on the phone. He explained it. I was so pleased that I hugged Maddy-mummy. I wouldn't let go.

"Then we came here. It's so nice here. So nice!" She started to cry.

"What's the matter? Please, Chandi, ask her what's wrong. Is it her parents and her sister?"

Chandi had a job getting the girl to answer. Finally she nodded and started speaking again. Chandi translated.

"Yes, yes, it's my mother and father and sister. I miss them and I will never see them again." Annali paused.

"I was happy before the storm. I was doing well in school and my mother and father were proud of me. Puli was just starting school. Kavita was doing well at school too and had a part-time job at the resort. We were happy! My father was talking about getting someone to help on the boat. He was so busy. Then the storm. I never had time to say goodbye!"

Annali wailed against Jim's shoulder, and he patted her on her back. She sobbed for some time then spoke again.

"After the storm I had to look after Puli. There was no time for anything else. Then he got sick, Maddy-mummy took us in, and we came here. There was no time!"

She wailed again.

"Chandi, how do people from Annali's region remember the life of someone," said Jim.

"With candles and flowers, usually," said Chandi.

Jim took Chandi and Annali into the garden. He picked some flowers and they went back into the house. He rummaged around in a drawer and pulled out a small silver tray. He went into another drawer and pulled out two candle holders. He found some of the scented candles that Maddy sometimes used, and one fat red candle that they had been given for some reason.

Annali saw what he was doing and clapped her hands in excitement. Jim took some red crepe paper and lined the tray with it, and put the big candle on the paper. On either side he put the two candle holders with the scented candles in them. He arranged the flowers around the candles. Then he lit the candles. He asked Chandi to get Annali to write the names of her father, mother and sister on some slips of paper.

Annali wrote the names carefully on the slips of paper, then surprised Jim by carefully setting light to them, one by one. Her eyes were bright with tears but she didn't cry.

"You know we'll have to blow them out later, don't you? After the others have seen this," he said to Annali. She nodded.

Right on cue Maddy walked in with the three younger kids. Jim explained what they were doing to Maddy, Ollie, and Em, and Annali talked to Puli. Then Annali wrote the names on paper again and got Puli to burn them, and finally Annali blew out the candles.

"Thank you," she said to Jim. He hugged her.

"Thank you," she said to Chandi. She hugged her.

She said something to Chandi.

Chandi said "She's asking for a vase for the flowers."

"Finished," Annali said, as she put the flowers in a vase. Jim put the candles and other stuff away. Annali seemed a lot more cheerful.

"I think she'll have more of these sad moments. We'll have to keep an eye on her," said Jim, after Chandi had gone.

Annali hugged them both and said "Mummy, Daddy, from now, I... not sad."

"Oh, that's nice, sweetie! So nice. Now, who wants ice cream?" asked Maddy.

"Ice cream!" squeaked Puli.

"Well, at least he knows what that means!" laughed Jim.

Maddy and Jim and the kids spent a glorious month visiting all the sights and attractions around the Capital. Annali's language was coming on by leaps and bounds and even Puli was quickly picking it up. Annali and Puli were fascinated by the Zoo, and would have visited it every day if they had the choice. The Aquarium made Annali a little glum, since it reminded her of her fisherman father, but she soon cheered up. As a special treat they all went up in a cable car to the top of the local hills, a spot which was known as Moose Mountain. They had a meal in the restaurant at the top and watched the lights come on all over the Capital. They saw an aircraft fly in, and Maddy could tell that it was a lifter, but not which one. Something in the sound made her think of Gypsy, but she couldn't be sure. Then they rode the last cable car back down to the bottom.

It all had to come to an end sometime, and Maddy received her orders on a Monday. She was to report to the airport on Friday and pick up Blue Lady for a flight directly in to the Advance Base. The last week was always flat for her. Some of her attention was always towards her return to service. Rod and Ollie and Em were used to it by now, but Annali found it a bit strange. Maddy sat down with her and tried to explain, but she wasn't sure if Annali understood.

Maddy and her crew started flying into the Advance Base with essential supplies for the relief work. They hauled in food because most food crops in the area had been destroyed, and carried a lot of building materials. Now and then they had the occasional job which was not related to the Relief Mission. Maddy called home frequently and Annali got better and better at the language. She would soon be able to go back to school. Nothing much seemed to worry Puli. He went to school with Ollie and Em and his lack of language didn't seem to bother him.

After five weeks Blue Lady's crew was rotated off for two weeks. Maddy was dying to see Jim and all the kids again. She practically raced through the formalities and flew through the security gates and into Jim's arms. She kissed him thoroughly and then turned her attention to the kids. Annali ran into her arms and the others sort of attached themselves to both of them.

"How have they been, Jim?"

"Oh, you mean since last night when you last talked to us, silly?"

"You know what I mean!"

"We've been fine, Mummy," said Annali, laughing. "I can speak quite well, now. I've been practising?"

"Oh well, then smarty," said Maddy, "How is Puli doing? Can he speak 'quite well'?"

Annali thought a bit. "He is speaking... not so well?"

"Close, 'he is not speaking quite as well' would be better." Annali filed that away.

"Yes, but he is...fitting in well at school." Annali said, with some puzzlement.

Maddy waved to Blue Lady's crew and the family moved to the car park and loaded themselves into the car. Jim hadn't brought the dog this time.

"Jim, do you mind if I sit with Annali in the back?"

"Of course not! Let's switch Puli's seat. He likes to ride Shotgun. He might become a chopper pilot one day."

"Not a lifter pilot? Not a Maps or a Boss? Oh well."

Maddy held Annali's hand all the way home. The girl held Maddy's hand in both of hers, and chattered away like any ten-year old girl. Maddy's fears faded away. Of course, she would have to check with Jim, but all seemed well.

"How was the new improved Blue Lady," asked Jim.

Maddy snorted. "She wasn't that different. Harry had a few changes in her department and Rod was up to speed with those. No real changes for Rod and I. I didn't get a chance to check out Sparks' changes, but Sparks said that they weren't significant. Still, I have to get her to show me soon. Cargomaster, Jake, might be leaving. I have a dilemma. If he leaves I can promote Cargo One, Patty, but I have to send her off on some courses. Patty's not certified as a pilot and has to be if she wants to be Cargomaster full time. She wants to become a pilot eventually, anyway. I might bring in a ringer for Cargomaster and operate one man down for a while, while Patty is doing her courses."

Puli said "Blue Lady" and made plane noises. Everyone laughed.

Jim said "Curry for tea tonight. Guess who made it?"

"Annali?" She looked at Annali who nodded.

"Daddy helped!"

"Phfft!" said Jim. "Not much. I did the rice."

The tea turned out to be very nice. Annali served them up their meals out of the slow cooker, and Maddy was impressed by the taste and said so.

"My mother's recipe," said Annali and a brief frown touched her expression.

"Annali, you must tell us if you feel sad. It's important."

Annali smiled. "I will, Mummy. I'm OK."

When they were alone in bed Jim stopped cuddling Maddy for a minute.

"I've got a letter to show you." He hopped out of bed and got the letter. It requested that they all attend an interview in two days time in which the adoption of Annali and Puli would be discussed with a representative of the local government of down where the kids came from and an adoption services officer. Maddy's heart missed a beat.

"I don't remember doing this with Em's adoption," she said.

“Apparently it’s a new thing. I hope it’s just routine. I asked Chandi if she would come over tomorrow and she agreed. We need to discuss it with the kids.”

“Oh damn. Oh darn. Oh rats.”

“Exactly. Sorry to spoil your first evening back.”

“Just hold me, Jim. Just hold me.”

“Yes, Maddy. Yes, Boss.”

The next day when Chandi arrived Annali immediately realized that something was up.

Jim gathered all the kids together. “Right kids, we have to talk to you about the adoption of Annali and Puli. I’ve asked Chandi here to translate everything into Annali’s and Puli’s original language, so that there are no misunderstandings.”

They all looked grave. Jim paused as Chandi translated.

“We all have to go to a meeting tomorrow to talk about it with someone from where Annali and Puli come from and someone from the adoption people.”

Again Chandi translated.

Annali said something and Chandi translated “Will they decide tomorrow if we can be adopted?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.”

Annali gulped and said something. She was close to tears. Chandi translated.

“If they decide that we can’t be adopted, well, we have been happy here. We at least have that.”

“Oh, sweetie, if they do decide you can’t be adopted then and there, they won’t take you away right away, and we will fight to change their decision. We will appeal.” Chandi translated.

Maddy held out her arms and Annali rushed into them. She didn’t cry, but she held on tight.

All six of them presented themselves at the meeting venue the next day. The meeting was to be held in one of the older buildings which fronted onto the central park, often called the King’s Park. The entrance to the building was flanked by ornate columns and inside the building gleamed with well-polished ancient wooden staircases and panelling. Small chandeliers hung from the ceilings of the corridors, and old and sometimes worn carpets deadened footfalls. The whole feeling of the building was old and grand, but for all that, comfortable and welcoming.

They rose in a modernized elevator to the fifth floor and were directed by a receptionist into a small but pleasant room overlooking the park. Seated behind an ornate table were the two officials that they were there to meet. One was an older lady dressed in the fashions of the south, with flowers tucked into her hair in the southern style. The other was a man with grey hair, dressed in a business suit. A young man was seated to one side and a row of chairs faced the table.

“Good morning to you all. Please be seated. My name is Koh, and I am chairman of the adoption committee. This lady is Leah, and she is here to represent the interests of the people from the area that was struck by the storm. This young man, Alex, will act as translator if necessary, though Leah also knows both languages.”

“Firstly,” continued Koh, “I understand that you, Maddy, are the pilot of an Air Force aircraft. Am I correct?”

“Yes,” said Maddy. “I’m pilot and captain of a cargo transport called Blue Lady.”

“Ah, a lifter! So I should call you ‘Boss’? My son is in the Air Force and flies in lifters. I expect that you are away a lot?”

Maddy laughed. “Maddy will be fine. And to answer your question truthfully, I am away a lot, but I keep in constant contact with my husband and kids through phone or communicator.”

“And you, Jim, you’re a teacher?”

“Yes, at least I was until Maddy had Ollie. Then I stayed home to look after him. Then we got Em, so I had two to look after,” replied Jim. “They started school this year, so we were thinking that I might go back to teaching again.”

“What about the two new recruits? Are they in school yet?”

“Puli is, though he doesn’t speak the language very well yet. In spite of that the teachers tell me that he is doing well. Annali is still learning the language and is in a transitional class. She is probably going to be mainstreamed next term,” said Jim.

“Hmm,” said Koh. “What do you think about having a new brother and sister, erm, Ollie?”

“Great!” said Ollie, bouncing up and down in his chair. “Puli plays games with us, and Annali plays games sometimes too!”

“Em, do you like Puli and Annali too?”

“Yes,” said the quieter Em. “Puli plays at fighting with Ollie. I don’t always like to do that. Sometimes I like to play with my dolls, and Annali plays with me sometimes. She’s nice.”

She thought a bit. “Puli’s nice too, for a boy.”

Koh laughed a little. “Puli, would you like to be Em’s brother and Ollie’s brother?”

The translator translated the question to Puli. Puli responded with a long string of his native language.

“Whoa, slow down,” said Jim.

“He says ‘I want to be Ollie’s brother for ever and ever. And Em, too, though she’s a girl. Hmm, and then he went on about Ollie’s play swords, and something about digging in the ground. Oh, buried treasure, I think.’”

“Annali, what about you?”

Annali grabbed Maddy’s hand. She couldn’t answer at first, but Koh encouraged her and she answered.

The translator said “We are happy here, Puli and I. We would be sad to leave but at least we have been happy, and we can remember that, if we have to go.”

Annali said more and the translator translated. “If we have to go, I must be with Puli. He has no one but me.”

“Good heavens! We’re not trying to split you up or take you from Maddy and Jim. We’re trying to make it official! Leah, do you want to have a word?”

“Yes, please, with Annali,” said Leah. “Annali, you don’t come from the Capital, you come from the south, don’t you? What do you think about the Capital?”

Annali, through the interpreter said “It’s great! So many shops, so many things to do. It’s crowded sometimes and noisy, but I don’t mind. I want to go back to school though. I’m getting better at the language. I love Maddy-mummy and Jim-daddy. I love Ollie and Em. They’re like Puli to me now.”

“And what about home, where you come from?”

“I don’t think of it as home any more. Ever since the storm it hasn’t been home. I saw my mother and my sister dead. Home is what it was before the storm. I don’t want to go back, but look!”

She put a small stone and a sea shell on the table.

“I picked these up before I came up here. I want to remember where I came from, even if don’t want to go back. When I’m grown up, I might want to go back, I don’t know. But I don’t want to forget my mother and father and sister. We were a happy family. Before the storm.”

She retrieved the stone and the shell and put them in her pocket. Koh and Leah looked at each other.

“Very moving. It reinforces our opinion,” said Koh.

Koh signed two pieces of paper and slid them over the table to Maddy and Jim.

“What are these?” asked Maddy.

“Why, the adoption papers for Annali and Puli. You are now officially their parents.”

Maddy burst into tears. They all stood up.

“Thank you, thank you,” said Jim. “We didn’t know if you would agree to the adoptions or not.”

Koh was surprised. “It said that the adoptions had been approved in the letter you received.”

Jim said “No, it just invited us to a meeting.”

“Really? Can I see?” Jim showed him the letter.

Koh read it and showed it to Leah and she gasped.

Koh became grave. “I’m sorry. This is terrible. You were sent the wrong letter. I will investigate and whoever is responsible will be in real trouble.”

He walked around the table and said “Permit me.”

He gave Maddy a hug and patted Jim on the back.

“I’m so sorry. You can make a complaint if you wish. I am certainly going to take some action. Let me just take a copy of your letter.”

He disappeared through a door for a short time and then gave the original back to Jim. Then he raised his arms.

“Now, get out of here! Congratulations! Go and celebrate! I’ll send you a copy of the correct letter, signed by me. I’m so sorry!”

“Thank you so much,” said Maddy as they left.

They all walked to the lift in a state of shock. When they reached the ground floor they walked out of the ornate entrance into the sunlight and paused.

“So, how are we going to celebrate?” asked Jim. This sparked a furious debate, but the result was never really in doubt. They went to Jake’s Fish and Chip shop.

Later that night when they were lying in bed, Maddy said “Well, we’ve done it. That was pretty horrid. Should we complain, do you think?”

“Mmm, no, I don’t think so. I’ll send a letter to Koh, and just set out what happened. He was pretty angry.”

“I know one thing....” he said.

“What? What?”

“If you come across any more waifs or strays, we’ll either have to move or extend the house. Ooof!”

Then followed a mock fight or tickling match which only ended when they were both out of breath.

“I love you, Jim.”

“I love you too, Maddy.”

Deanne walked up and down anxiously as she waited for the transport to arrive. Alistair smiled as he watched her.

“They won’t come any quicker if you do that, Chief,” he said.

“Oh, Alistair, I can’t help it. And call me Deanne. We’re off duty.” She sat down.

“I’ve seen you waiting as cool as a cucumber for some bigwig to arrive, my dear.”

“Yes, but that was business.” She jumped up and started pacing again. Alistair hid a smile.

Finally the drone of an aircraft filled the little airport. If anything Deanne grew more tense.

“Deanne... You have to calm down. You’ll faint or something.”

“You’re right, Alistair. You’re right.” She managed to calm herself a little.

Peter appeared behind the security gate. He had Pixie by the hand and Fidget was walking beside him. Both girls had pink backpacks and Pixie held a large teddy bear. Peter steered his trolley through the gate and Deanne ran to him and hugged him. Alistair was gravely shaking the hands of the two girls.

“Hullo Miss Fidget and Miss Pixie, I’m Alistair. I’m very please to meet you.”

Deanne crouched and hugged both girls to her.

“Hi, my lovelies. How are you?”

“Mummy, mummy.” Kisses and hugs.

Alistair and Peter had introduced themselves and were waiting for the Mummy hugs to finish. Deanne held both of the girls by the hand and led the group out of the airport. Deanne and the girls climbed into the back of Alistair’s jeep, while Peter joined Alistair in the front, and Alistair drove to the gate which was opened at his approach by a Naval rating. Alistair drove to the small hotel that was Deanne’s accommodation. Alistair and a couple of other high rankers had accommodation there too.

Deanne unlocked the door and Alistair and Peter brought the bags in.

“Er, Deanne, I’ll leave you to it. Do you still want to meet for tea?” asked Alistair.

“Yes, of course. We’ll see you and your wife in the mess at six. OK?”

“Right, Chief!”

Alistair made a mock salute, since they were off duty, and left.

Deanne took the kids off to settle them in and Peter started making coffee. He looked in the fridge. Fizzy stuff only. He sighed. Oh well, it was only for one night. There was always water.

Deanne came in and thankfully accepted her coffee. The girls came back in and were allowed one fizzy drink as a treat. Pixie came and sat next to her mother, and Fidget, true to her nickname, kept switching from Deanne to Peter and back again. They started catching up on important things, like when the cat fell in the mud and Daddy tried to wash her and got a big scratch and the cat shot through the house and through the cat flap so fast it broke. And how Fidget got a star on her homework. She was very proud really, but sniffed that “stars are for babies”. And Pixie claimed to have won a star but couldn’t remember for what.

Deanne relaxed, enjoying the company of her family. It had been a busy couple of months, nearer to three actually. It should only have been one month, but she had been suffering from what Gloria, her friend and mentor, called her biggest flaw – an inability to let go. Alistair finally went over her head, which meant that he spoke to Queen Afua, otherwise known as Deanne’s friend Affie, and King Henry, otherwise known as Affie’s husband. Deanne would get no sympathy there.

Deanne came up with a compromise. She felt that they needed accommodation for all the volunteers and forces personnel who had arrived to help with the clean-up. The Advance Base was a little too far out to be useful in these later stages, and while the carrier Narcissus could accommodate the forces personnel, they had to be shipped in and out every day, by chopper.

Alistair kept telling her about a resort hotel quite close to the centre of the worst hit area with around thirty cabins. The cabins weren’t too badly damaged but there was debris from the storm all over the resort, the main building block had collapsed and some of the services like electricity, water and drainage needed to be checked and fixed. There was also a field and a golf course at the back which could be used for tents and some of the Army’s self-contained container units for ratings. The resort was being cleaned up, but the task was going slowly.

Deanne proposed that she take over the clean-up of the resort with the help of her husband. After all, hotels and the restoring of them was their speciality. She could have her family with her too.

Alistair would take over the running of the Relief Mission for a month. He was a capable man and Deanne had come to rely on him as her second in command. She didn't know that he had conspired with the Queen, Deanne's friend Affie, to keep mentioning the resort, and also keep mentioning the need for accommodation.

So Deanne and Peter and the two girls had their evening meal with Alistair and his wife. Alistair was his usual humorous self and his wife was friendly and gracious. Alistair had brought his wife into the Relief Mission because she wanted to help. She was part of the volunteer group that arranged the distribution of clothing and bedding to the devastated areas. The kids called her Auntie Penny.

Deanne had been impressed by the steady and orderly stream of aid packages that flowed from Penny's group, and told her so. Penny laughed and revealed that she had been the distribution manager for a chain of supermarkets.

"But I didn't often get to work in the warehouses," she said. "It's been fun. I've even got to drive a fork lift!"

Deanne reflected on how much easier it made it for everyone if people knew what they were doing. She had a good team. She cast her mind back two and a bit months to the beginning of the operation.

At the first briefing, when everyone left, she'd pulled out the Army guy who spoken up for her.

"Hi, I remember you from the earthquake effort, don't I, Alistair? Thanks for helping me out there."

"Good to work with you again, Chief. Do you need a bag man?"

"That's an excellent idea, Alistair, but let's call it 'deputy' rather than 'bag man', shall we?"

"Sure, Chief. Let me think." He paused. "Yes, I can shuffle my people a little and that should work. I suggest you send a letter to my Chief to get his formal approval, which shouldn't be a problem."

"Right, I'll do that. Have you got some time now? I'd like you to familiarize yourself with what I've got set up so far. Any suggestions are welcome."

"I'll just let my guys go, and I'll be available."

He had a quick word with a couple of younger Army guys who had lingered by the door, they nodded and left.

"OK, this airport has a great conference area and I've taken it over. It's paid for by the disaster fund sponsored by King Henry. We'll set up our Main Base and the Operations Hub here and you and I will have desks here. We'll need planning people and logistics people and just plain people. We'll spin off chunks of the work to other rooms, much like we did on the earthquake mission. We need to mix up Army, Air Force and Navy. That should aid the inter-service communication, but that shouldn't be a problem anyway, from my experience. There's always rivalry, but rarely conflict. Oh, and we'll get Army to set up a mess, so that we don't overload the airport facilities."

"Sure, Chief."

"But I don't really need to tell you, Alistair. We've been through this before, haven't we?"

Deanne described the set up she had thought up. It was based around the feedback from the earlier earthquake mission, with a few tweaks by Deanne to suit the situation down here. Alistair had a few suggestions but overall he agreed with the set up.

"We fly down tomorrow in the lifter Blue Lady to have a look for ourselves. Buccaneer has taken in an advance party with food water and tools, to make sure they are ready for us to set up our

Advance Base there, and we will take more supplies in Blue Lady with us. Blue Lady is also taking a bulldozer down. It's mostly going to be Army at the Advance Base to start with, and we'll feed the Navy guys in when they arrive. And any Air Force crew who are aren't actually flying," said Deanne.

Alistair nodded. "Yes, the Army are ready to go in after Buccaneer. They'll go in on a transport. Some to set up the Advance Base and some to help the locals and distribute the supplies. There will be casualties from the storm and we'll help the locals with those too."

The advance party and the first wave of the Army into Advance Base were his people of course.

"The important thing will be to find out who needs help and where. We should be able to visit up to two hundred kilometres east and west, but we won't be able to reach many of the islands. Unfortunately they may have to wait for Narcissus to arrive," Deanne said.

"What about the local authorities, Chief?"

"If it is anything like the earthquake disaster, they will not be of much use for at least two days. Once we get communications in there, we can help them pick themselves up."

Alistair nodded. "Yes, I agree. The key is to visit as many places as possible, see what the situation is, and then get food and water in there."

The next day Alistair and Deanne flew down to the Advance Base on Blue Lady. Maddy came down from the flight deck to say hullo, but they were both busy, so they didn't chat long. At Advance Base the passengers disembarked and Deanne looked around.

"If we move those tents over there we will have more room for storage tents over here. But that's further away, so...."

"Deanne!" said Alistair.

"What? Oh, 'don't try to do it all myself' you mean? Sorry!"

"That and 'let the experts do their job'. The Army is trained for this! Let my guys do their job."

"True. Let's find the chopper pilot."

Deanne and Alistair were flown east down the coast. The devastation was obvious. Bridges were washed out, houses were flattened, trees reduced to splinters or felled. Debris blocked roads and surrounded many buildings. In places people came out and waved to them.

"We'll get to you, hang on," muttered Deanne. Alistair patted her shoulder warningly. She nodded to him.

As they flew further east the devastation became less. The pilot told them that even further east, whilst they had problems, local authorities had things mostly under control.

"We still need to get someone to check, Alistair," said Deanne. "To see what they need."

"Definitely." He made a note.

As they flew back to Advance Base, Deanne and Alistair studied the maps.

"I think that if we go west we will see much the same. Should we perhaps go out to the islands? What do you think, Alistair?"

"Let's discuss it with our pilot after we land, but basically, I agree."

So, in the afternoon, their pilot flew them out to some of the closer islands. The devastation on the smaller ones was terrible. All the trees were flattened and no houses remained. People came out and waved at the chopper, and the pilot dipped to acknowledge them. They flew to some larger islands, and they could see the remains of some of the bigger buildings and the damaged roads and bridges. A few sheltered trees had survived. Again people came out to wave at them and the pilot dipped to acknowledge them.

“It’s a pity, most of these people will have to wait until Narcissus arrives. Those further out will too,” said Alistair. “Let’s hope they can find some water and food.”

“Yeah. The Navy has a couple of smaller ships near here and there are some civilians ships around that can help. But Narcissus is the best bet by far.”

They flew back to Advance Base. Deanne and Alistair dined at the mess and found themselves at the top table. The Army commander of the base asked Deanne to say a few words., so she stood up and gave them her assessment of the situation and emphasized the fact that the local people were depending on them. She described her quick tour and what she had seen, and acknowledged their work so far. When she sat down she got applause from her audience, which surprised her a little.

“They’re pleased that you came down here and have seen the problems that they are going to face. They like it that you have bothered to find out for yourselves,” explained the commander.

“We’ll still need the detailed reports from you guys,” said Alistair. “We’re depending on it.”

And everyone nodded.

Next morning they met with the commander of the Advance Base and compared notes. He had some ideas on how to expand from the Advance Base into the devastated areas. They pored over maps of the area and the commander pointed out some key areas he wanted to target. Deanne emphasized logistics - how they could get the necessary resources into those area and distribute them to the surrounding areas.

A plan evolved. Obviously it would be modified depending on what they found when they went in, but Deanne thought that it would suffice for now. The commander of the Advance Base seemed to be prepared to modify the plans according to what they found. Alistair had picked him for the job of Advance Base commander, well before Deanne had made Alistair her deputy, and Deanne was impressed by him.

Deanne and Alistair returned to Main Base in Buccaneer, travelling with the crew, since they were, as Deanne had put it, hitching a ride. Almost all the “First Class” accommodation was taken up by medical personnel and their patients. Three medical trolleys were fastened to the floor of Buccaneer.

“We can only carry those patients who will not be affected by the altitude,” Ed explained to them. “If they will be affected by altitude, such as those with internal injuries, they will be transferred by helicopter, since they fly lower than we do.”

Deanne talked to one of the doctors.

“We have two main sorts of injuries,” he said. “There’s those who have broken limbs, head knocks or other injuries caused by loose debris, and there are crushing injuries, where something has fallen on them. Some have both sorts, of course. One woman had a broken ankle and had a wall fall on her. She went out with the first batch of casualties in a chopper, but there were some in a worse state than her on the chopper, and they are just the ones who made it.”

“Yes,” said Deanne, “The Army is starting to help with those who died. We have a makeshift mortuary at Advance Base and there’s an existing graveyard near there too. It’s hard on the relatives, who mostly live right on the coast, but something has to be done. It’s very hard to be respectful and be fast, as we are having to be. At least we won’t need mass graves. That would be horrible. Some of the kids who were killed, poor things, are being buried at home! It’s not ideal, and we are trying to sort that out.”

When Deanne and Alistair got back to Main Base they co-opted an Air Force woman and a Navy man, who had similar ranks to Alistair. Someone named them the “War Cabinet” and the name

stuck. It was their job make plans at the high level and to pass on orders and decisions mainly but not only to their own services. They set up groups to execute the plans, and to make detailed plans at lower levels and report back to the “War Cabinet”.

Deanne and Alistair set up an information gathering group. All formal reports, informal reports and gossip was fed to them and their job was to take all the information and distil it for the War Cabinet to make decisions on.

Some people were disappointed to be assigned to this group, but Deanne pointed out to them that they couldn't fix something that they didn't know about. She requested that they construct a map of the affected areas and colour code it. She wanted red for areas that had not been contacted, yellow for areas that had reported in, but couldn't be reached by land and so on.

She fixed up a copy of the map in the Main Base mess and it proved very popular. People could see the red and orange areas shrinking steadily. Initially most of the islands stayed red, but when Narcissus arrived they rapidly changed to other colours.

“Yes, it's great, a real step forward, but now we have to change those other colours to green. Keep up the good work,” Deanne said to the mess in general when the last of the red disappeared. Of course, while food and water going out was the priority, troops were also helping in the clean-up.

Although the whole area was under martial law, Deanne tried to include the local people in all discussions. There were the local people on the ground of course, the mayors and the councillors, and even the Mystic pastors and the school teachers. She made sure that they all had contacts within the Relief Mission team.

She started including local people in her teams where possible. One boy, who was probably around twenty had started to produce a map of the services in the area, the water, sewerage, electricity, roads and so on and marked any known problem areas red.

“Where are you from?” Deanne asked him. He pointed to a place on the map near one of the major roads along the coast.

“I was an engineering student,” he said. “But the college is not open, so I came up here to help out. My family stayed down on the coast to start the clean-up. My big brother said that I was in the way.”

Deanne got the impression that the boy was not fond of his big brother, and that the feeling was mutual.

“Was this your idea?” She waved at the maps.

“Yes. Do you think it is good?”

“Yes, very good. But you are trying to put too much into one map. You need two or even three maps. I'll get some people to help you. You speak the language well, by the way.”

He laughed. “My mother is from the Capital. We are bilingual, Chief.”

Deanne said jokingly “Call me ‘Boss’. You can be my ‘Maps Boy’.”

The nickname stuck, even though he was a civilian. Maps Boy thought up a way of making the maps transparent, so they could overlay them, which helped a lot with the planning. For instance they could overlay the roads map when planning to take food and water into a village or cluster of houses, and they could see at a glance which bridges or roads needed to be fixed.

Deanne's priority after making contact with the outlying areas was to see that they got the food and water that they needed. The responsibility for that lay with her logistics people. They kept tabs on the transports, the people and the goods, and tried to ensure that they got to people in need in good time.

Deanne herself, Alistair and the Navy guy and the Air Force woman, together with Maps Boy, some of the planners from the logistics team, and a few others formed the core team. Many others

came and went as rotations happened and needs of the Mission changed. Maps Boy's maps showed that they were getting aid through to places as the orange colours spread across his maps. These maps were also pinned up in the mess.

Deanne had received a call from Alistair one day at 3:30 am. "Sorry to wake you up, Deanne. Better get up here, Chief."

Deanne scrubbed up and dressed within ten minutes. She hurried to the conference room. Alistair was there with an annoyed looking Navy man. She looked at the number of rings on his arm and the amount of fruit salad on his uniform pocket and inwardly sighed.

"What's this about, er, Commodore? What's the panic?"

The Navy man wordlessly shoved a newspaper to her. It showed a picture of a man in Air Force blue picking up and kissing a girl in Army green.

"I want to know why the Navy was left out of this publicity shoot. The accompanying article doesn't even mention the Navy! I must protest!"

Deanne said "This is the first time I've seen this photo. I knew nothing about this, though parts of the text seem to have come from our bulletins. We've had various media teams around but they are mostly based down on the coast. Someone passing through Main Base must have taken this. It certainly wasn't a publicity shoot. How did you get this?"

"The Navy will not reveal its sources."

"Hmm, my guess is that someone's relatives in the newspaper's print shop supplied you with a proof copy." She had looked at the paper and there were one or two blank spaces.

The Navy man looked a little deflated. "So this was not authorized? What are you going to do to put this right?"

"Well, I already put out bulletins for the press every day. They go through our media people, obviously, and I will send out a special bulletin concerning the Navy's involvement. We'll put in some pictures with a couple of Navy guys and girls prominent in them. Raring to go! Get your media people to give us a call. Believe me, we understand the weather issues that have delayed Narcissus, but when she arrives, which we know will be soon, she will be invaluable, and we acknowledge the assistance that Navy has already provided, especially the helicopters which have come so far. We'll put this right. Please reassure your people."

"Thank you," said the Navy man quietly. "We would appreciate that."

Deanne got someone to show him out. She made sure that it was a Naval rating. She was not worried about what the rating might say, as the Navy guys stationed at Main Base and those passing through knew that their presence was welcomed and valued.

As soon as the Navy guy was safely away Alistair started making noises. Deanne was worried that he was choking at first but eventually he burst into laughter.

"Did you see his face?" he said.

"Alistair! This is serious. Stop that immediately!"

He controlled himself with an effort. "It was his face! Oh dear, so sorry Chief."

"Alistair, the latest Army contingent leave at five thirty. Please pull that girl from the flight. Also locate the Air Force guy. I want them in a meeting at seven thirty. And I want to know everything about them."

"But, Chief, how do I..."

"Just do it, Alistair. Just do it!"

"Yes, Chief."

He reflected that Deanne had to take this seriously, as he would have done in her place. She was rightly annoyed with him. He couldn't resist a chuckle, but hurried off.

Two weeks after the start of the mission, Deanne had called a meeting of all staff at seventeen hundred hours in the mess.

"Thanks to you all for coming. This is an update on the Relief Mission so far. We are two weeks in and the first week we delivered food and water at least once to all areas that need it. We now have a reliable route to all areas and islands."

She paused for the cheers. When they had quietened down she continued.

"The Navy has done an excellent job of reaching the outlying islands, and their amphibious helicopter has been invaluable. So has their big lifting chopper, their flying crane."

"Of course, other stuff has been going on too. Some of the areas have had blankets and clothes and other stuff delivered and some of the storm damaged roads have been repaired, so far mainly the roads needed to distribute food and water and the blankets and other things. And the lifter Gypsy brought in a full load of Portaloos!"

That brought a laugh.

"There are two main roads which provide access from the rest of the country to the region. Unfortunately a bridge was swept away on one road and slips have taken out the other road. Army and civilian construction people are working on both problems and Army has provided a temporary bridge for one route and that artery will be open tomorrow, they tell me. In the meantime, some Army trucks have been able to get in to some areas by more roundabout routes."

"Unfortunately the other route will be out for longer. Again, Army and civilians are working on it, but they can give me no time frames. Weeks rather than days, then, but I know that they are working as fast as they can."

"I've requested photographs, so that the people at Main Base can see some of the problems that our people down there are up against. We will post some in the mess and if anyone wants copies to send to friends and family, just ask."

"We still need to ensure that water and food continue to reach everyone, and we still need to ensure that everyone has some sort of roof over their heads, even if it is only canvas."

This raised a chuckle from the Army people who were used to being under canvas.

"But people are no longer starving. Most people are no longer without shelter. Those with medical problems are being treated. The local people are starting to regain contact with the rest of the world. In fact some people are returning to the area using the smaller roads, such as those up and down the coast."

"I'd like to share with you the next steps. Firstly, we need to continue what we have done so far. I've already said that, but it's worth repeating. Secondly, we need to help people to sort out their houses. Thirdly, we need to fix up the infrastructure or help the local people to do it. Fourthly, we need to get the region fixed up to where it was before."

"The region is famous for its seafood, and it's a big money earner for them. We need to repair and open the harbours. We need to help the locals repair or replace their boats. They need them to feed themselves. They need them to kickstart their economy. Some of that is down to central government and is not our direct concern, but some we can help with, like the repair of slipways, moorings and so on. I expect Navy will take the lead in that, but Army can help out there too."

"The region is a favourite holiday destination. Who has had a holiday here?"

Quite a few people raised their hands.

“Good, you’ll be keen to see things get back to normal. Don’t think that it is demeaning or a waste of resources to clean up a golf course, or even a mini putt course. This region needs its holidaymakers to get their economy running again, and while they won’t be coming this year, next year they will need to be accommodated. Don’t think that it is beneath you to clean up the tourist accommodation! Your families may want you to bring them here for a holiday next year. You never can tell.”

A ripple of laughter ran around the room.

“Of course the priority is to get the infrastructure sorted out and the people housed and fed. But don’t be surprised to be asked to do other things. I’ve emphasized this point because I’ve had feedback, both formal and informal on this point. It is important. See, we do listen.”

This got another chuckle.

“Now this is a long term project. The earthquake disaster was five years ago, and some things are still being fixed up, up there. Some forces people, mainly Navy, are still working up there. But here, just as up there, the forces will eventually be scaling back their support. I don’t know how long we will be in control here, but in the earthquake case it was about eighteen months. The local authorities will gradually be given more and more control, of course, as the infrastructure is repaired.”

“But we’ve made a great start. Who here is Navy?”

A dozen of so hands went up.

“Navy has done a great job in the islands. Since Narcissus arrived, they have ticked off the last islands from the list. They’ve also helped us tick off some of the more remote places on the mainland. They, and others, are bitching that they didn’t get here earlier. We had no warning that the storm was going to spin into their way, and big as they are they got quite a battering from it, even though they avoided the worst. ”

“Now the Navy guys here in Main Base, they’re not on the front line and they are bitching about that too.”

This elicited catcalls and whistles.

“But their input to the intelligence and planning processes is invaluable. I’m impressed by the way that the three services and the locals have worked across service boundaries here in Main Base to enable us, all of us, to deploy the men, the food and water, and the experts across the whole region.”

“Who is Army?”

Many of the remaining hands went up.

“Army. Army provides the muscle, don’t they? We send them in, they get the job done. No worries. But often we don’t know exactly what we are sending them in to. They repair a bridge. OK. But the repair reveals a broken sewer. They get down in the muck and fix the sewer. This actually happened yesterday.”

“They’ve also seen horrible things on the ground. They and Navy in the islands. Dead bodies of children and adults. People overcome emotionally by the disaster. Severely injured people. You’ve seen the television footage, but what they’ve seen is far worse.”

“And Air Force, the lifters bringing essentials in, the transports bringing in people, the choppers from all services going out into the remote areas and bringing help to people who are desperate, hungry and thirsty.”

“Who is Air Force?”

A few hands went up. Most were out flying or at Advance Base.

“And finally, let’s not forget the people we are here for. Where are the locals?”

About a dozen people put up their hands.

"I don't need to tell you what we are here for. You guys were battered by the storm, but you're putting things right and we are here to help you. We'll be here for a long time but you will be here forever."

"Right. We are doing most things right. We are doing better than right. We are doing things excellently. But we strive to do things even better. I don't need to tell you that. I've seen you all striving. I've seen people working late into the night. That's OK if it is to meet a deadline, to load a lifter. But it's not OK to do it every night. I don't want burn outs. I don't want people collapsing from exhaustion. So, Chief, or Boss, or Cap, watch your people. And watch yourselves."

"Look after yourselves. Strive for the best, but look after yourselves. I know that's a mixed message, but go and do it anyway. Now, this meeting is over, so enjoy a beer, or juice, or whatever, grab some food, and try to relax for the rest of the evening. Thanks everyone!"

The applause told her that it had gone down well. Alistair popped up at her elbow and said to her "Nice one, Chief."

Deanne called home on her communicator.

"Hullo, love. How are you doing?" said Peter.

"Tired. But OK. You? And the girls?"

"Just fine. Missing you of course."

"Just did a pep talk. I think I'm getting the hang of this making speeches thing. We're doing well down here. What are they saying on the television?"

"Mm, not a lot. Some pictures from the islands. Bridges being repaired. It's dropping down the list."

"That's not a bad thing overall. It'll keep the press away. Are the girls around?"

"Fidget's having a sleep over at her friend's house. Caitlin. Hey Pixie, come and talk to Mummy."

"Mummy, mummy, mummy. How're you? I'm fine. Fine, fine, fine," she sang.

"I'm fine, fine, fine, too."

"Fidget's at Caitlin's. They've got a parrot!" Big eyes asked a question. Mmm. Not now, Pixie! Change subject!

"How's school?"

"Good." It was always "good" with Pixie. She left school at school, unlike Fidget who couldn't stop talking about it at home. But teachers told them that Pixie was doing fine. In that respect Pixie was more like Peter than her, just as Fidget was more like her than Peter.

"Can I talk to Daddy again? Hi love, I'm so busy during the day that I forget to miss you crazy lot. Then evening comes and I switch from missing you to thinking about work and back again."

"How are you sleeping? I know you. You get wound up in things. I'll have to talk to Alistair again."

She laughed. "Oh, I sleep fine. Really. Unless they wake me up in the middle of the night for something. But that's only happened twice in two weeks. I know Alistair reports on me to you and Affie. And to Henry for that matter. That's OK by me."

Peter said "Hey, did you know that Alistair knows Gloria? His wife is a friend of hers."

"Oh, groan, so I'm being reported on to Gloria too!"

"All reports say you are doing fine. Alistair says you are fine."

"Mm, he's a nice guy. With an annoying sense of humour."

Peter laughed.

“Oh, has Affie been in touch yet? She want to know if you reckon that they can come down.”

Deanne considered. “Oh, my almost sister! I miss her. It’s still chaotic, but we don’t want to leave it for too long. Let me think. I’ll get in touch with her.”

Deanne’s planning brain kicked into gear. “Mm, unless. Mm. And there’s... Of course... Erm. Later, I don’t want to think work. I’ll talk to Alistair.”

“Can we please switch back to normal language?” said Peter wistfully.

“Oh, sorry my love. How’s your family?”

“They’re good. Following your exploits with admiration of course. My mother and father are fine. Still bickering. Now they’re bickering about moving somewhere ‘more convenient’. Robin and Ben have had the drive done at Home Farm.”

“Really! Now that is real news. How many years?”

“More than twenty. Maybe nearer twenty-five since the first pothole. Letty’s at a conference. Not unusual.”

“Send them all my love! Anyway, I’d better go. I love you! Hug the girls for me. Oh, here come the tears.”

“Love you. I’ll give them lots of hugs.”

Deanne always signed off with tears. Sook! Still she wasn’t as bad as Affie! Now, about a visit from her.....

Private Andrew otherwise known as Private Podge whistled as he cleared the path between two houses. He was pleased with his squad’s work. The squad had cleared around most of this group of houses, and there was now road access too. Much of the rubble was being dropped in the middle of the road and Private ‘Harry’ Harris would load it up with his bucket loader whenever the truck came by.

Most of the rubble was water-borne pebbles, stones and sand, but some of it was man made stuff like fences and even whole walls, bricks and mortar and wood. Sometimes electrical cables and water pipes, broken pottery pipes or similar meant that he had to stop digging and either pull out the offending item or cut it out first.

He was a burly boy, by far the broadest in his squad, but in spite of his nickname, he wasn’t fat. All his bulk was muscle. Consequently he moved much more rubble than his squaddies did. He dug his shovel into the pile of debris he was tackling and dumped a load onto his barrow which sank a little on its tyre. Then something in the pile shifted, and something flopped out of the pile.

“Sarg! Sarg!” he yelled. He put the back of his hand to his mouth.

“What is it, Podge? What have.... ?” The Sarg swore.

He looked at Podge. “Are you OK, boy?”

“Yes, Sarg.”

Sarg called his coordinator’s number. “Yeah, yeah, we have a body, location... Right.”

Sarg looked at Podge again. “You OK to get the body out with me, Podge?”

Podge nodded.

The body had been hidden for two weeks, so decay was advanced. However insects had not been able to get to the body as it was covered by debris, and the body had putrefied but looked reasonably intact. The smell though was horrible. The Sarg put on a face mask and Podge did at first, but took it off. The body was that of a child, but it was impossible to tell the sex at first glance. It was wearing sneakers, jeans and a t-shirt. The t-shirt had a faded picture of a unicorn on it. Ah, girl then, probably.

“What’s that under her arm, Sarg?”

"Looks like a dog. A toy one? No, there's a bone sticking out. Pet then," said Sarg. He noticed that the squad had gathered around.

"Back to work everyone!" called Sarg.

The squad reluctantly returned to their tasks. Sarg checked his lists. "No missing persons noted in this area. I wonder who she is?"

"Blue t-shirt, I think, with unicorn, blue jeans, sneakers, small dog. There're some clues there. I think she's got long hair."

"You are taking this well, Private Podge."

"Yessir."

"Are you going to break down later, do you think? I need to know."

"Don't know, sir. First time I've dug up a body, sir."

"OK, no need to be so formal, Podge."

"OK, Sarg. Nerves. Sorry. Someone's coming to pick her up?"

"Yep, twenty minutes. Do you want to carry on, Podge? On the other side of course."

"OK, Sarg."

Podge carried on clearing on the other side of the mound that held the body. At first he was worried about finding another one, but eventually that worry faded. He kept thinking about the little girl. In his mind she had a typically local face, heart shaped, with glowing brown skin, brown eyes and dark hair. She carried a small puppy of indeterminate breed. She said something to him but he couldn't understand her.

Podge stood up for a breather. Hmm, maybe he'd better talk to Sarg if this kept up. Just then the recovery team arrived in a four wheel drive. Podge stopped to watch the recovery. Sarg came up behind him and patted him on the shoulder.

"Still OK, Podge?"

"Yes, Sarg, thanks."

They watched gruesome business of moving the body to a body bag. Then the recovery team zipped it up and carried it off on a stretcher. It looked so small on the stretcher, thought Podge. The recovery team left, and Podge noticed that they had left the small dog's body behind.

He took his shovel over to a nearby tree and dug a small hole. Then he used his shovel to lift the remains of the dog and placed them in the hole. He filled it in and tamped down the grave with his boots. Then he cleared the mound that had contained the body and continued clearing down the road.

As he worked he considered his state of mind. He was naturally introspective, so this was not new to him. It worried him a little that the image of the girl kept coming to him. He'd mention it to Sarg later.

Sarg said "The body didn't worry you, did it? You seemed to cope well, Podge."

"No, Sarg, it didn't worry me too much. I'm not afraid of dead things. I'm a farm boy and I've watched my father butcher animals. The decay of the body was horrible, but it didn't worry me either. Occasionally we'd find a sheep or a goat that had died somewhere inaccessible. Once it was a heifer who had disappeared and we found her a week later stuck in a gully. It's the smell, that's the horrible thing. I think I was a little shocked, but that was more surprise than anything.

"And I have seen dead people before. We had a van and car crash just at the end of our drive, and there was a young girl dead and her father dead in that. That was the first body I've found though."

"But this young girl is on your mind?"

"Yessir, Sarg."

“Are you religious, Podge?”

“Nossir, Sarg. I’m not a Mystic, a believer, I don’t go to chapel. I don’t believe in ghosts. I think it’s my mind telling me something, not any spirit or anything.”

“Very wise, Podge. Very wise. Well, son, I don’t think that there is anything for you to worry about. As you said, it’s just your mind trying to tell you something. Just see how it goes. Keep me informed, right?”

That night his squaddies bought Podge a beer. There was the usual ribald banter that happens in a squad, but they were all fairly quiet that night. When he got a chance Podge swapped his beer with Sarg’s nearly empty glass. Sarg just nodded. He knew that Podge rarely drank alcohol. Podge had pulled the same trick before, and he knew that Sarg knew.

Podge went to sleep that night and dreamed of the little girl. She was smiling at him, and he smiled back in his dream. She said something that he couldn’t understand and held out her hand. He held out his hand but couldn’t touch her. She said something else, then turned and skipped away, with a small dog running around her feet. He’d have this dream every couple of days from then on, for a week or two.

He told Sarg.

“How do you feel? In the dream, Podge?”

Podge reflected. “Hmm, it’s not scary. I don’t feel guilty. It’s almost as if she is thanking me. She smiles at me.”

Sarg was not worried, but kept an eye on him. Podge seemed happy enough. He was always slightly reserved and this did not change. He got on well with the rest of the squad, giving as good as he got when teased, but he never initiated the teasing. But this was how he always had been.

Time came for the squad to be rotated. They were transported to the Main Camp and found that they had a day there before they shipped out.

Sarg pulled Podge to one side. “Come with me, Podge.”

Sarg led him through the maze that was Main Camp. They entered the terminal building and headed for the conference suite where the Mission’s administration was housed. He and Sarg entered a big meeting room filled with people at desks.

“We’re inquiring about a Jane Doe, found about a week ago,” Sarg said to the Army sergeant at one desk.

“That’s recent. It might even be the latest.” The Army guy raised an eyebrow, then typed something into the computer. He swung the screen round so that they could see it.

“Jane Doe #139, age ten, estimated, height, not given, race, not given, and so on. Is that where she was found?”

Sarg and Podge checked. “Yes,” said Podge, “that was where she was found. Has she been identified yet?”

“Well, no. Otherwise she’d not still be a Jane Doe.”

“Are there any kids missing?” asked Sarg.

“Well, not in that area. They will be getting around to doing a thorough check of the records eventually.”

“Can you look for us, please?”

“Well,” the Army clerk looked around. No one was watching. “OK, but I’m not supposed to.” He winked at them and tapped some stuff into the computer.

“Hmm, we’ve not actually got many girls that age notified as still missing. Only three in fact.”

He tapped more stuff into the computer.

“Any distinguishing marks? No? Distinctive clothing? T-shirt with unicorn. OK. Not much help I think, but we’ll see. Any items found with her? No?”

He turned the screen towards them.

“Well, this is the first one.”

It was a picture of a chubby girl, grinning at the camera.

“No,” said Podge. “I’m fairly sure she was slimmer.”

“OK, second one.”

This girl was slimmer, it was true.

“Could be I guess,” said Podge.

“Last one,” said the Army clerk. “Taken by Granny when she visited from the Capital recently, it says.”

The girl was smiling into the camera. She was wearing a blue t-shirt with a unicorn on it. She had blue jeans and sneakers. The only thing that differed from Podge’s mind picture was that she was fair skinned and blond haired. She had blue eyes.

Sarg looked at Podge. “That’s got to be her. If there was a dog in the picture we’d be certain.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” The Army clerk clicked through some other photos. “Let’s see. Ah! Here.”

The picture was of the same girl, different clothes, holding out a stick for a small fluffy dog. Sarg sighed.

“Well now,” he said.

“If you are sure, I can cross-reference these. I’ll mention the clothes and the dog and eventually the details will be copied over. Hmm, Natalie. Probably Nat for short. It’s a shame.”

“Thanks, Sarg,” said Podge to the Main Base man.

“You’re welcome. It might bring some poor family some closure.”

He smiled and shook their hands.

As they walked back to the barracks Podge said “Thanks Sarg.”

He dreamed that night that the girl appeared and waved at him. It was a pleasant dream. She said something in the local language and skipped off, pausing now and then to wave at him. The dog was running alongside her. He dreamed of her now and then over the years. The funny thing was that she always had the brown skin and dark hair usual in the local people, and her eyes were brown. The mind is a funny thing.

After the meeting Deanne started to move the Relief Mission from simply providing food and water to a repair and fix mode. Some repairs had already been made to the roads so that food and water could be provided to the outlying areas, but many of them were temporary and rough and ready and had to be fixed up properly. Deanne and her team worked with the local mayors and community leaders to work out which roads needed to be fixed up first.

Maps Boy’s colour coded maps showed the problems and part of Deanne and Alistair’s job was to ensure that people, materials and machinery got to the right places at the right times for them to be fixed. Forces personnel, mainly Army, worked alongside civilians to fix the roads, and the power, and the sewers, and the water mains.

By the time that a month had passed, green was slowly spreading over the maps. Alistair calculated that it would take two years for Maps Boy’s maps to be completely green at the rate that they were going, but Alistair was aware that some tasks would take longer than that, and some would be quickly completed once they got around to them.

Alistair noted that Maps Boy was looking ragged, so he made him take a week off. Maps Boy didn't go home however. He went to some friends up the coast and helped them with some repairs on their house. When he came back and saw what had happened to his maps, he was a bit annoyed to find that things had slipped in his absence. He soon got things back into shape, though, took more care to explain to people how his maps were constructed, and he acquired staff to help him. Alistair watched all this and nodded to himself. Maybe he would suggest that Map Boy join up, after this was all over. Alistair was always looking for talent.

The local people were returning home from wherever they had fled. Some returned from up the coast or down it. Many had relations just out of the area. Those who had gone north, inland, started to come back now that one main artery was open, and trucks started to trickle in to restock the supermarkets and shops and reboot the local economy.

Alistair began to be worried about Deanne. She was supposed to rotate out after one month, but as time went on she showed no sign of being about to take a break. She looked tired. Alistair did what he had to – he went over her head.

He dialled a number that he had been given for such circumstances. The phone rang and a female voice answered.

“Hullo, Queen Afua speaking.”

“Your Majesty, this is Alistair from the Relief Mission.”

“Hullo Alistair, please call me Affie. Ma'am if you prefer. This is about Deanne? She's not going to take a break unless we make her, is she? I've been getting reports.”

“Yes, she's ignored all my hints, Your... Affie. So I went over her head, as arranged.”

“Excellent! She's my friend and I'm not going to let her make herself sick. We have a plan. You know there's talk of moving people right down to the coast and billeting them there?”

“Yes, we talked about that. There's a resort down there and we think that we could get about two hundred people in there, mostly Army. It's being tidied, but not fast enough. So, that's the plan, is it?”

“Yes, you guessed it. We get Deanne down there to have a break, but she gets to tidy up the resort and get the accommodation set up for the relief workers. We get Peter and the kids down there too. They will make sure she doesn't get too involved in the tidy up.”

“I'll step up nagging her to take a break and I'll keep mentioning needing people on the front line and using the resort for accommodation. We already have people in there tidying up, as you said. But it needs a bit of coordination and that's what Deanne and Peter are best at – rescuing failed or failing hotels, or so I'm told. With any luck she will suggest it herself. If necessary I can threaten to talk to you, em, Affie.” He wasn't quite comfortable calling her that.

“Yes, excellent. If she turns stubborn, definitely call me, please. I'll send her a note, just asking how she is.”

“Sure. But who will take over as Chief while she is away?”

“I'm sure you can handle it, Alistair. She has a lot of faith in you. But you've been working two months without a break too. Will you be OK?”

“Oh, yes. Being deputy is easier than being Chief by a long way, and I don't get so wrapped up in things as Deanne does. Thank you for your trust in me. I may be in need of a break when Deanne gets back though!”

“Yes, we've figured that in our plans too. Don't worry about that.”

“Oh. There are plans on top of plans. I didn't realize.”

“Yes, and we should have included you in some of them earlier. I'm sorry about that.”

“That's OK, em, Affie. I'll say goodnight then. And go and implement the plan!”

And so it came to pass. Alistair started to put the pressure on for Deanne to take a break. He kept mentioning the need for accommodation for the relief workers and how unfortunate it was that they couldn't use the resort yet.

One morning Deanne and Alistair met for breakfast in the mess.

"OK, I give in. I'll take a break," said Deanne. "But I'm not leaving completely. I'll go down to that darn resort you keep mentioning and get it organized for accommodation for the Relief Mission. Is that OK by you? It's my original line of work, well me and Peter anyway."

"You're the Chief, Chief. It's a good idea to get Peter along. He can bring the kids down too. They'll keep you from working too hard. It's supposed to be a break."

"Hmm," said Deanne looking at him, with some suspicion. "Yes, it would be nice to have them around. Let's draft something that hands the reins over to you. You're OK with that too?"

"Yes, Chief. Thank you, Chief."

"Just keep your sense of humour under control, Alistair. That's all I ask."

"Sure, Chief." Alistair chuckled. "Being deputy means that I can indulge my sense of humour a little. Sorry Chief. Being Chief means that I can't. Oh dear."

Deanne sighed. "This all seems a bit slick," she said.

She could see Affie's hand in it. Alistair just laughed.

So Peter and the two girls came down in a transport, and Deanne and Alistair met them at the airport. They were to spend one night at Main Base, then fly down to the coast the next day. They met with Alistair and his wife Penny for an evening meal.

"So, let me congratulate you on the success of your plan, Alistair. You've succeeded in getting me to take a break. Affie's going to be pleased with you," said Deanne.

Alistair chuckled. His wife just raised her eyebrows.

"I always did think it was a bit transparent. All that scheming for nothing!" Alistair said.

"Well, you did give me the idea and if I hadn't agreed, I'm sure that Queen Afua and King Henry would have put on their crowns and ordered me off the job."

She reflected. "But it was nice of you all to be concerned for me. I need a break. At least you didn't threaten to set Gloria on me!"

"That was our last resort," said Peter.

"Oh, so the conspiracy was wider than I thought!" Deanne laughed.

"Mummy, mummy, mummy," sang Pixie. She was singing almost everything at the moment.

"What is it, sweetie?"

"Can I have chicken nuggets, please, please, please? Is this a special occasion?"

Deanne and Peter tried, as do all parents, to restrict their girls' intake of junk food, with variable success.

"OK, it's a special occasion. Tell Fidget."

Fidget was deep in conversation with Alistair. Goodness knows what about. They all ordered their meals and Fidget wanted to go with an "adult" meal so ordered a risotto. She agreed to ordering a small one though.

Pixie wolfed her chicken nuggets and fries. "Mummy, mummy, mummy," she sang again, "Can we have ice cream, pleeeeeease?"

"You'll have to wait. Everybody is still eating."

"Awwwww!" Pixie went into a sulk, but Deanne ignored it and Pixie soon came out of it.

"You will let me know if anything important happens, Alistair, won't you?" Deanne asked.

“No,” said Alistair.

“What? Why not?”

“Because you will be officially out of the line of command. You have given me the job, and I know you trust me. This is only nerves. We will handle it. I will handle it, OK?”

“Oh. Yes, you are right. Sorry. I never want to let go!”

“I might, only might, let you know some of the news, but probably not much more than you will see on the television.”

“Yes, Chief!” said Deanne.

Alistair started to chuckle and then burst into laughter.

Deanne sighed. “Alistair, have I told you how annoying your sense of humour is?”

Penny said resignedly “I used to threaten divorce, but it just made him laugh harder.”

Pixie was quietly singing “Ice cream, ice cream, ice cream.”

“OK, OK, we’re finished. You can order your silly ice cream, Pixie!”

After they had eaten their desserts Pixie and Fidget started to get sleepy.

“OK, Alistair. It’s all yours. We have to take these sleepyheads to bed, and then we will be off in the morning.”

“OK, Deanne. Have a good time down there. I think you will have some unique problems,” said Alistair.

“Well, they all have ‘unique problems’. That’s the fun of it. Good night, Penny. Good night, Alistair. We’ll see you in a month or so.”

In the morning they breakfasted at the mess and then presented themselves at the airport terminal. They were going down in an Army transport, so it was much like travelling in a commercial aircraft, but without frills. The cabin crew did give out coffee and tea during the short trip, but it was Army style, dark and strong. The girl who served it to them apologized for it.

“Oh, don’t worry about that! I’ve been drinking this stuff for two months now. I’m used to it. My poor husband isn’t though! What’s your name and your rank?” asked Deanne.

“Lily, ma’am. Corporal. My role is ‘Cabin One’. I’m in charge of the passenger cabin. Fred and Jan down there are my number Two and Three. They’re corporals too. Can I get the kids something to drink? Soft drink? Fizzy drink? Water? Milk?”

“Pixie? Fidget? Do you want some water?”

The girls nodded.

“Please,” said Fidget.

Cabin One came back with some bottled water.

“Thanks,” said both the girls.

They landed at Advance Base and transferred to a chopper for the short hop to the helipad near the resort. When they arrived at the helipad an efficient Army Sergeant allocated them a jeep and gave them directions to the resort. Deanne looked around. The helipad had expanded to a small base, with a couple of containers and some caravans. She resisted the urge to rearrange things in her mind.

It was only about a quarter of a kilometre and they were soon rolling up to the Reception Block at the resort, which seemed to have come through the storm almost unscathed, except for a couple of boarded up windows. A young Navy officer came out to meet them.

“Hi ma’am. I’m George. I’m the latest in a long line of supervisors for the clean-up. I’m due to rotate out in three days, after I’ve handed the ropes over to you. I’m here because of stress. I flew

choppers into some of the islands and things are a bit rough out there. I'll be glad to get back into it though."

"Hi, George, call me Deanne, please. I guess that I'm here because of stress too! This is Peter, my husband and the two young ladies are Fidget and Pixie."

"OK, Deanne. I've moved out of the owner's apartment so you can move right in. Let me give you a hand with those bags."

Deanne and Peter settled into the apartment and Pixie and Fidget squabbled over the beds like all kids do. When it threatened to escalate into full scale warfare, Peter stepped in and cooled tempers and sorted it out. Then they all went to look around the resort with George.

"We've got electricity from the generator, but to conserve fuel we have to shut it off at night. I'm hopeful that we will get electricity soon, because they've got it just over there, behind the golf course," said George. "Drainage is not sorted yet, so it's portable toilets I'm afraid. It's going to be some time before we are connected again, I think. We're OK, but there're problems down the line. We have mains water, but it's still recommended that you boil it or use tablets in it. The phones work and have done all through, amazingly. Unfortunately the main buildings, which contained the bars and the restaurant were very badly damaged, and may need to be rebuilt from scratch."

They walked between the units and Deanne was pleased to see that the damage to the units was quite light, except in the seaward rows. These had been battered by the storm swell, and wind had blown some Phoenix palms onto them. A few of the units in the middle were completely flattened, and while there had been some attempts to clean up the mess, it was apparent that much of the effort had been directed at the easier, less damaged cabins. Most the site was covered by storm debris, and that appeared to be the main issue. She and Peter discussed approaches to the tidy up as they went, and George commented too, based on his experience.

"The workforce is mixed," said George. "There're some locals who tend to come and go a bit as they have to fix up their own houses, and there're some forces people, often those who have been injured or stressed and can't cope with the front line for the moment. Anyone who can be spared, really."

He stopped by a large rock which partially blocked the access way. Tyre tracks showed that people had been in the habit of driving onto the grass to get around it.

"We call this the 'Rock of Ages'," he said. "Because it will be ages before we can move it. Sorry about the bad joke."

"That," said Deanne, "will have to go. And not only because of the bad jokes."

A few days later Peter swung the jeep round the corner, expecting to have to drive onto the grass, but the rock had gone. He smiled. He later found that it had been moved to near the children's playground, where the kids enjoyed clambering all over it.

George showed them the main buildings, and indeed they appeared to have folded like a house of cards. Or dominoes, thought Deanne. What looked like extensions to the main building had also collapsed on themselves. So, only the Reception Block, which also contained some accommodation for staff, had survived.

"It looks like this was in the 'too hard' basket," said Peter, echoing his wife's thoughts.

"We have to remember that we are here to provide accommodation," said Deanne, with a hint of regret.

"Yeah, but we can at least look at it."

They smiled at each other.

They came to the playground, and Fidget and Pixie immediately ran over and started playing on the climbing frames and slides. There were mounds of mud, sand and gravel around the edges so someone had taken the time to clean it up a little. A couple of small locals were also playing on it.

“Kids of locals who are working here,” explained George.

He waved to them, and they called “George, George!”

“That’s about it. There’s a small golf course over the back, but it needs a lot of work. And the swimming pool is full of debris. The plant room for the pool was completely swept away.”

“We’ll be using the golf course for Army accommodation for now, tents and shipping containers, that sort of thing,” said Deanne. “But we want to be able to reinstate it eventually, so we’ll have to do it carefully. Is there anything else?”

“Oh, there was a boat house belonging to the resort down on the beach, but I don’t know what state it is in. Someone said it was a wreck. It’s probably a write-off.”

The next day, Deanne and Peter took the girls and drove back past the helipad. They passed a small row of shops, some of which had been severely damaged by the storm. A tree trunk from a palm blocked the frontage of one shop, which appeared to have been a small general store, but a sign directed people around the back.

In front of the next shop a small car was almost hidden by sand and gravel, mixed with vegetation and other unidentifiable items. It looked it had been a small clothing store.

The next shop, though, was less damaged. Much of the glass and plastic frontage was missing, probably smashed by the storm and then removed by the owners. The smell of frying attracted the attention of Fidget and Pixie.

“Chips! Chips!” said Pixie. “I want chips. I need chips!”

Deanne laughed. “Maybe on the way back, guys. Maybe!”

They drove further on and the road which had been running one hundred metres or so inland started to run along next to the beach. Here the going was harder and they had to drive around obstacles, such as trees, seaweed, gravel, sand, and in one place a big chunk of the seawall. Tangled street lamps and seats stuck out of the piles of gravel and sand. At one place the tarmac of the road had been ripped up and had been roughly patched with gravel and sand. Peter carefully drove the jeep over the temporary repairs.

Back from the seawall and the road, a broad area of grass was covered by debris from the storm. The sward, which would have been ideal for picnics and ball games and other holiday activities, was only visible in a few places. Elsewhere it was veined by strips of sand, gravel, seaweed and other debris. Flowerbeds, where they could be seen, were devoid of flowers, and the palm trees for which the area was famous had mostly been felled by the storm and washed away. Some had fetched up against the buildings on the landward side of the area of parkland, and some were piled up in a big heap where the Army had dumped them to be dealt with later.

Many of the buildings on the landward side of the grass strip had suffered severe damage. The windows that hadn’t been boarded up were mostly smashed. Some of the roofs appeared to have been damaged, some were covered by tarpaulins.

There were people about. People had returned from wherever they had taken shelter or been evacuated to, and businesses were opening, sometimes amid the debris. People were patching up their homes or shops, others were clearing the debris from in front of the buildings. Several shops had hand written signs which read “We are open” or similar.

They passed an open corner store. In the broken window there was a sign which read “We accept cash or tokens.” Deanne and Peter wondered whether they were running on stock that they had in

from before the storm or if they had managed to resupply somehow. They debated calling in, but decided not to, this time.

They reached their objective, which was the town centre. They turned into the High Street, and could see the tidemarks on the walls where the water had flowed at the height of the floods. The usual piles of debris dotted the area, but the road was clear. Quite a few shops were operating, and people were cleaning up. There was even a truck in the main street emblazoned with the logo of the local authority. The workers in their high visibility vests were shifting some of the debris from the road.

“Look, that cafe is open,” said Peter. “Shall we pay them a visit?”

“Sure. I hope that they have coffee.”

“And cakes!” said a voice from the back seats.

“And cakes. Maybe.”

They parked the jeep and wandered over to the little cafe, and took seats at a table in the interior. The frontage of the cafe had tape over a large crack in the glass. There was no door. Inside there were signs that the water had penetrated. Two fridges had their doors propped open and were empty. Broken chairs and tables were pushed into a corner and the two remaining tables had an assortment of chairs, some the usual cafe style, some obviously borrowed from the living rooms at the back.

The proprietor came from behind the counter.

“Hullo, welcome, what can I get you?” he said.

Then he started as he recognized Deanne.

“Excuse me, aren’t you the lady from the television? The Army lady? My friend has a generator and we saw you on his television, I think.”

“Yes, I am, but I’m not Army,” laughed Deanne.

“Hello, I am Achmed. I’m very pleased to see you. Your soldiers are wonderful. They came through here and cleared the big trees and much of the sand and other stuff. They opened the road for us, but there is still a lot to clear up, as you can see. But what can I get you? Coffee? We have milk or bottled water for the little ones. My cousin brings me milk fresh every day, because we do not have a refrigerator working yet.”

“Yes, we will have coffee please, and you girls? What do you want?”

“Milk, please,” said Fidget.

“Fizzy! Fizzy, please,” said Pixie.

“I’m sorry, I’ve sold out of fizzy drinks, ma’am” said Achmed to Pixie. “Oh, and I’m sorry, my friends, the coffee is made on a stovetop as we have no power for the coffee machine. Also, I have some biscuits if you would like them, but no cakes or anything else that needs much cooking. We only have a barbecue out the back.”

Achmed brought them their drinks and a plate of biscuits.

“How are you coping, Achmed? It’s a pity the electricity is out. How long do they expect before the electricity is restored?” asked Peter.

“Ah, they don’t know. They are very busy, I know, even though the soldiers are helping them. They say soon, but they’ve been saying ‘soon’ for a long time. I just wait and hope.”

“Have you applied for a grant from the Relief Fund yet?” asked Deanne.

“Well, I would, but I don’t know where to ask. The phones don’t work yet, so I can’t contact anyone. The Postal Service works but is slow. The soldiers are helpful, but they don’t know either.”

“I’ll get someone to do something about that. Are there any empty shops? We could set up a booth or something. Don’t look at me like that, Peter. I’m not working, I’m information gathering! Alistair can handle it!”

“So, how did you survive the storm, Achmed?” asked Peter. “Did you stay here, or did you evacuate?”

So Achmed told his story.

Achmed had heard about the coming storm and talked with his wife. They decided that, because of the kids, they would have to get out, and his wife Kalila called her cousin up the coast. Achmed couldn't locate any boards to cover the windows, so he taped them instead. He put their four chickens into their hutch and bolted the door. He wasn't sure if they would survive, but they couldn't take them along.

His wife gathered up all their valuables and as much bedding and clothing as she could, then she and Achmed loaded it all into their small van and headed west along the coast with their three children.

They began to run low on fuel, and the service stations that they passed were either full of cars or had “Out of Petrol” signs. Fortunately Achmed's van had a diesel engine, and when he pulled into one of the service stations which displayed a “No Petrol” sign, they still had diesel fuel left.

It was slow going at first as everyone headed out of the storm area, but as they got further west traffic started thinning out. They were about one hundred kilometres from home and Achmed thought that this was still a bit too close to the centre of the storm. It wouldn't be as bad out here, if the storm stayed on the projected course, but he thought that if it changed direction slightly, those who stopped here might be in trouble.

Gusts of wind hit the small van as they travelled on. The edge of the storm had arrived, and its centre was projected to make landfall later that night. Rain started to fall, at first lightly, then more heavily and finally in torrents. Achmed couldn't see the road, so he pulled off at a convenient place, and they all tried to get some sleep. They were somewhere near one hundred and fifty kilometres from home, and while Achmed would have liked to have been further away, it would have to do.

The kids dozed off pretty quickly, but gusts of wind shook the van and kept the adults awake. Achmed held Kalila's hand and she was shaking.

“Don't worry, Kal, we are safe here,” he said, trying to reassure her. He thought that they had come just far enough.

Suddenly there was a crack and a loud crash in front of the van and a tree branch appeared in the windscreen. His wife screamed. Achmed pulled out a torch and hopped briefly out of the van. A large tree branch had fallen just in front of the van and one of the side branches had touched the windscreen.

He climbed back into the van and told his wife.

“Safe here, are we?” she said, then promptly fell asleep. He looked at her in amazement and affection, then tried to get to sleep himself. He dozed through the night, waking whenever the van was shaken by a violent gust of wind.

Next morning the wind had died down a bit and the rain had similarly eased off. Achmed backed the van away from the tree, and they could see that they had missed disaster by only a metre or so. Kalila sucked her breath in through her teeth but made no other comment.

Kalila took over the driving and they stopped at a fast food restaurant for breakfast. It looked like they were out of the worst hit area as the place still had electricity. Achmed's wife was much happier this morning, glad to be away from the storm. They drove to her cousin's place arriving just on lunchtime.

Kalila's cousin had a large house near the beach, and Achmed and his family had visited a few times before. There was a small flat over the garage that Kalila's cousin rented out in the summer and she put them in there. Achmed liked his wife's cousin, who was married to a cheerful man who worked for the local government. They had three kids of their own and neighbouring kids often came around.

Kalila told her cousin that they were only going to stay one night. They needed to let the storm die down and then they would head back home to sort things out at the shop. Her cousin urged them to stay, but Kalila said that they couldn't, not this time.

They all had a light lunch out on the back lawn. Six kids created chaos around them as they talked and ate. Occasionally a kid would stop, grab something to eat, and race off again. In the afternoon they walked to the beach where, even this far west, the waves were wilder than usual, and driftwood was everywhere.

Achmed said "Do you need wood for the fire pit?"

They agreed that it would be a good idea to gather some of the driftwood, so each adult picked up an armful. Even the kids struggled back with one or two pieces of wood. When they got back they had a sizeable pile of wood between them.

That evening they watched the news on the television, and the devastation was depressing. The town where Achmed and his wife lived was shown, and they could see that water was flowing down the High Street from the break in the seawall. Achmed and his wife held hands as the cameraman, in a small boat, passed by their little cafe. There was no sign of the door to the cafe and water could be seen lapping into it. Kalila cried quietly into Achmed's shoulder.

It was a sombre evening meal, and the mood was not helped by the weather which had turned drizzly. They ate inside, sharing flatbreads, rice, and meat and vegetable dishes in the style of their culture. The adults indulged in a beer and the children drank mango yoghurt drinks.

Kalila's cousin hugged her and tried to lift her mood, but Kalila was missing home and anxious about the shop.

When they went to bed Kalila said "Perhaps we shouldn't have come. Perhaps we made a mistake! The shop didn't seem too bad except for the door."

Achmed stroked his wife's hair and the back of her neck under her braided pigtail. She liked it and he had found that it relaxed her. She turned her back to him and he pulled her into his arms. She loved to "spoon" with him. He kissed her on her cheek.

"It's too late to have doubts, my love. We'll go back tomorrow and sort things out. The main thing is that you and the kids are safe. Nothing else matters."

"And you, my love," she said drowsily. "And you."

He carefully moved her to her side of the bed. "Sleep well, Kal. Sleep well."

"And you. And you."

Kalila woke the kids up in the morning. The twins were, as usual, snuggled in the same bed. It was hard to make them stick to their own beds.

"Wake up, girls. Time to get up."

She moved on to her son's bed. One of her cousin's boys was in there. Oh well. She gave him a shake anyway. She went downstairs and made her way to the kitchen. She smelled waffles and bacon. Mmm. She presumed maple syrup would be present.

"Morning," said her cousin. "Northern breakfast this morning. I hope you like it?"

"I love it," she said. "By the way, one of yours was in a bed in the flat. I guess that my one was in the house somewhere?"

“Yep, noticed that. Do you want an egg too?”

“I do, please,” said Achmed, coming up behind his wife and encircling her with his arms.

“That’s a yes from me, too, please.”

The kids started to pour in and all selected some sort of over-sugared cereal. There was the usual bickering and pushing and shoving as the kids got their breakfasts, which was mostly ignored by the adults.

After breakfast Achmed and his wife thanked their hosts and loaded the kids back into the van and set off to the east. Their hosts lent them a small gas barbecue and some food, mainly stuff that didn’t need fancy cooking and would last without refrigeration.

“I really like your cousin and his wife. They’re nice people,” said Achmed.

“Yes, we need to visit for longer, next time,” said his wife. “It’s a pity we don’t have enough room to have them to stay. Maybe we could rent a beach-front place for them for a week?”

“Mm, we’ll see. I like our little cafe, but maybe it’s time to look for a bigger place.”

“Maybe. We have to get through this first.”

They rolled east into improving weather and increasing destruction. Now and then they came to a place where they had to detour. In one place the road was partially blocked and traffic was detouring onto the grass verge on both sides of a large tree trunk, but they got around that. In another a bridge was washed out and they had to detour several kilometres from the main road. It rained on and off.

Finally though, thoroughly exhausted, they passed the resort and came to the seafront road, less than two hundred metres from the town centre. Part way along, the seawall had collapsed and the road had been completely washed away.

“Oh, no!” said Achmed’s wife. “So near and yet so far!”

“Well, I’m sorry to do it to the grass, but we are going through!” said Achmed.

He swung the van onto the grass and drove around the blockage. He smiled at his wife.

“Nothing can stop us, can it!” They laughed.

Achmed swung the van into their parking spot. At least he would have done, but for the pile of storm debris that filled half of it. He sighed.

He forced the back gate open enough for them all to get through and shut it behind them.

“Oh no,” said Kalila. The chicken hutch was completely smashed by the storm. She gingerly stepped over the storm debris and the remains of the chicken hutch. She didn’t see any bodies.

Something behind her said “Bwck?” There was a chicken behind a piece of the debris from the storm. Another chicken head popped up. “Bwck?” Then a third. “Bwck?”

Oh well, three out of four wasn’t too bad. Kalila hoped that the fourth chicken had been swept far away. She didn’t fancy finding the dead body in the yard.

They made their way through the debris to the back door. Suddenly a brown form shot out of its shelter near the door. “Bwck! Bwck! Bwck! Bwck!”

Make that four out of four! A miracle! They removed enough of the debris to open the back door. Inside there was no noticeable damage. The flooding had not reached this far apparently. So far so good. This room was mainly storage, so it wasn’t that important. It meant that much of their dry stock had survived, though.

The next room was their living room, with the little kitchen off to left, and stairs to the bedrooms off to the right. Still no damage. Wait a minute! There were water marks in the carpet by the door to the shop. It smelled a bit damp.

Achmed opened the door to the shop and a mess of tables and chairs, cans of drink, pieces of glass, cables and pieces of wood tumbled in. Kalila kept the kids away as Achmed cleared the mess and dumped it into the back yard.

“Best we make the yard out of bounds for now,” he said to his wife. “Why don’t you check the upstairs?”

He checked that he could open the door to the shop and shut it, then he tried to make sense of the tangle in the shop itself. The main counter seemed OK from this angle, but the snacks cabinet had disappeared. The source of some of the glass, no doubt. The cooking equipment didn’t look damaged, probably protected by the counter, but he would have to get the electrics checked when the power returned. The fridges were not running of course as the power was out. The upright drinks fridge was on its side and the front might have been smashed. He hoped not. He could see over to the shop door and it was a tangle of furniture and sand, seaweed, and bits and pieces of wood. In the middle of the shop he could see the linoleum tiles, so it looked like there had been a small whirlpool in the shop.

His wife came up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll clean it up and it will look much better. What’s a cafe but a big empty space?”

He patted her hand.

“You’re right. I’m just tired. At least the chooks survived! That’s a miracle.”

He forced his way over to the front stock room. The door opened inwards so he pushed some of the debris away so that it wouldn’t fall into the room. He stepped in and looked around. Water had seeped under the door a little, but apart from that, everything seemed OK. His spirits lifted. At last some good news! Of course the stuff in the freezer would have to be thrown out. He grabbed a couple of beers from their personal supply, along with a couple of big bottles of water.

His wife said “It’s OK upstairs. Two broken windows in the bathroom and a bit of water and rubbish in there. The bedrooms are OK. I looked down into the main road and it’s blocked by Phoenix palms and other trees. Also some metal stuff, maybe the park benches, and sand and pebbles.”

“Ah well, that will give us some time to sort out the house and the cafe. And the yard. And the car park.” He sighed.

“Yes, and all on dry bread and water,” laughed his wife.

He smiled. “You’re right, my dear. Let’s walk down to the beach with the kids and look around. The weather is OK at the moment.”

They went out the back way, past their little van, and wandered along the service road towards the beach. Some of Achmed’s neighbours were out and about and he waved to them. The wall at the back of the bank was lying flat on the ground, but the bank itself seemed OK. The guy from the clothing shop was piling up storm debris on the small patch of common ground behind the hotel’s back wall.

“Hi, Achmed,” he said. “How did you do in the storm? You went up the coast didn’t you?”

“Hi, Phil,” replied Achmed. “We were fine, but it was a long drive. Did you stay here?”

“Yes, it was a bit scary at times. The whole place was shaking. My wife and I got much of our stock upstairs but still lost quite a bit. Had a window blow out upstairs, but the shop window survived somehow, thank goodness.”

“Yes, we lost the door to our place. All our shop furniture got bashed around. I’ve still got to check it.”

“Well, we aren’t going to get many customers for a while, because the High Street is blocked. Oh, I rescued one of your chickens! It was wandering around out here, so I grabbed it and tossed it over the fence.”

“Thanks, Phil. They all survived somehow.”

They walked on down the road and out between the two shops on the landward side of the green strip that ran along the seafront. The shop windows on both sides were broken and sand and tree branches and other debris filled the window display areas. No one was in sight in either shop.

They crossed the small road in front of the shops, then the green strip, and then the beach road. They went up the steps onto the small promenade that ran along the top of the seawall. The beach beyond the seawall was nothing like the smooth stretch of sand that they remembered. Whole trees, bushes, tree limbs and branches almost covered the beach. A nearly continuous line of smaller pieces of wood, some new, some bleached by the sun, stretched as far as could be seen to the east and west. Round the larger pieces, the sand had built up on the landward side and had been sucked away at the seaward side so that the beach was all ridges and troughs.

They could not have climbed down onto the beach if they had wanted to. The stairs down onto the beach stopped at the second step and reinforcing rods protruded from the concrete. The metal handrails had completely disappeared.

A hundred metres or so away to the west of where they were, the seawall had been breached. The storm driven waves and the storm swell had broken through and gouged out a huge bite of the road and the green beyond it. This was the obstacle that they had driven around on their way back. Fractured pipes jutted from the broken ends of the road, with water pouring out of them. Some were likely to be sewers, thought Achmed.

They walked back home, and the kids picked up on the sombre mood. As they were crossing the small road in front of the shops, Achmed’s son pulled on his arm.

“Ice cream?” he asked tentatively.

“Oh, my love, there won’t be ice cream for a while,” said Kalila.

The boy burst into tears. He didn’t understand what was happening. His mother picked him up and carried him home. The twins didn’t cry, but they were quiet. Achmed held their hands and they all walked home.

Achmed couldn’t feed the chickens as usual as their feed had vanished, so he gave them some water and left them to it. Not much else he could do. They’d probably find enough to keep them going. The family sat around the table and ate a cold meal. Achmed and Kalila shared one of the beers Achmed had brought from the store room and the kids drank from the bottled water. Tomorrow he’d set up the barbecue out the back.

It was getting dark so Achmed’s wife lit some candles. The kids were fascinated. Candles were for birthday cakes, not lighting!

“Oh, look what my cousin sent!” said Kalila. She brought out a packet of chocolate covered marshmallow biscuits. Everyone got one, including Achmed, who didn’t usually eat sweet biscuits.

“We’d better save the rest. Don’t know when we will be able to get more,” said Kalila. She put them away. They put the kids to bed and sat together on the sofa in the living room by the light of the candles. They stared at the blank eye of the television. Achmed laughed.

“I wonder what we are missing,” he said.

“Not a lot, I think,” said Kalila. “Let’s go to bed.”

The next day Achmed tidied up the yard. Well, “tidied” was not the right word, he thought. He moved some of the rubbish into piles so that they could safely walk around out there. He kept

having to move chickens out of the way. In the end he pushed some timbers into the ground and fixed some of the panels from the hutch to them so that the chickens were at least contained. When he had finished it did look a lot tidier, though he didn't know what he was going to do with the piles of rubbish.

His wife helped him some of the time, though keeping the children busy and out of the way made it hard for her to help much.

"Let's go for a walk along the seafront shops," suggested Kalila. "You need a break. The kids need to get out. So do I!"

So they put their son into his stroller, went out of the shop by the missing front door, walked towards the sea front, and then turned west along the little line of shops. The owner of the kebab shop was there, shifting the sand, pebbles and seaweed towards the kerb. Achmed stopped to talk shop.

"Yeah, I found most of my equipment was broken when I came back. My yard is full of junk and my car park space at the back is half full of trees and branches."

Achmed nodded.

"It's the same for me, but the High Street is blocked. You're on the front and should be able to open again fairly soon, shouldn't you?" said Achmed. "My cooking equipment seems OK, but I'll have to check it."

The owner sighed. "Yes, I'll open, but I'll have to make do, because the electricity is still out and anyway, there will be few customers for a while. I'll have to use traditional methods. Well, everything by hand, on a bottle gas stove, anyway. My Mum would be proud of me!"

Further down the road the shops ended and a line of small cottages fronted onto the road and the green. Many of these were rented out to visitors during the summer, but the usually pretty line of houses were in a bad state. The gardens were full of debris and many windows were smashed. Decorative trees had been uprooted and tossed around. Fences had been flattened. Who knew when someone would have the time to sort them out?

The next day the Army arrived. They came with a bulldozer and a squad of twenty men. They used the big machine to pull the trees from the High Street one by one and left them on the green area along the front. When Achmed saw what the bulldozer did to the grass, he was less worried about his tyre marks. It could all be fixed, he reflected. All it needed was some effort and some time.

An officer walked down the street, knocking on all the doors and handing out leaflets.

Achmed said to him "Hullo, and welcome. You are doing a wonderful job of clearing the road. I was worried about that."

"Good morning, sir. Yes, we'll be clearing the main roads first. I'm afraid that the minor roads and access roads like the one round the back may take us some time to get around to. We suggest that you put any rubbish on the side of the road. We'll be coming round again sometime to pick it up, or the local council will, maybe. It will be a slow process though."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

"No problem. The leaflet tells you about the Relief Fund and how you can claim for damage and loss of income and so on. But you'll probably be too busy cleaning up at first, I'd guess. Oh, and when we have cleared the road a truck will come by with water and food for anyone who needs it."

Achmed told Deanne and Peter that things were gradually getting better. He'd started making coffee again because the soldiers always asked him for it when they came through. They'd made him a present of a tin of Army coffee and showed him how they liked it. He'd been able to get milk from

his cousin when his supply of milk powder and long-lasting milk ran out. He'd been able to clear out most of the stuff that the storm had brought in, from the shop and the back yard.

"Would you like to meet my wife and son?" he asked. "My daughters are at school! It reopened this week."

"We'd love to," said Deanne.

"Kal! I'd like you to meet someone," he called.

Kalila appeared from the back with their son on her hip.

"Oh, my goodness, you were on the television. The Army lady!" she said.

Deanne laughed. "I'm not Army. I'm not even forces! How do you do?"

"Very well, thank you. The soldiers have been wonderful. They cleared the road of trees and other stuff."

"You both speak our language very well, Achmed. How come you know it so well, if you don't mind me asking," said Peter.

"Most people down here speak it a little, because so many northerners come here on holiday. But Kalila comes from the capital and her first language is the northern one. She was studying languages at Central University when I met her," said Achmed. "I learned it at school. I did a special language course because my family were sending me to the Capital University to study engineering. But when I went there, I met Kalila and everything changed. We got married and moved here to open a cafe. Both our families were very angry with us."

"Yes," said Kalila. "They almost disowned us. They were paying for our university courses and they said that we threw it all away. I was supposed to become a translator and Achmed an engineer, and we opened a cafe instead! They were furious. My relatives blamed Achmed, and his blamed me!"

"They came around in the end. When we made a success of our first place, which was a 'hole in the wall' next to the library, we moved to here on the High Street. That was when we had the twins. In a way our relatives were right, of course. But we were doing well until the storm."

She sighed.

"We'll do well again," said Achmed, hugging his wife.

Deanne said "Well, we're setting up the resort as accommodation for the troops and volunteers who are working to help sort things out. We could use lots of local people out there. And when we give the resort back, they will need locals to run the place. Keep it in mind. We'll be distributing leaflets shortly."

She'd only just thought of it, but it would be a good idea. Peter didn't turn a hair. He knew how her mind worked.

"Anyway, we'd better be going," he said. He tried to pay for the coffee and biscuits but Achmed refused any payment.

Kalila said "Wait a minute," and disappeared out the back. She came back with two marshmallow biscuits and gave them to Pixie and Fidget.

"The last two," she said.

"Oh, no, not your last ones! We couldn't!" said Deanne.

"You'll be doing me a favour. I have three kids."

"Oh, and two into three doesn't go!" laughed Deanne. "OK, well thank you."

"Thank you," echoed Pixie and Fidget.

Suddenly the lights came on. They all cheered.

Achmed said "You must be a good luck charm! Oh, that's great!"

On the way back to the resort Peter said “That’s a good idea to get the locals to run the resort. The volunteers and the Army will be more use in the tidy up than in providing food and accommodation.”

“Yes, we’ve seen it before, haven’t we. Whenever we’ve revived a hotel, the locals have always provided almost all the staff. Sorry, I got that idea then and there. I didn’t have time to run it past you.”

A couple of days later Deanne called Alistair on her communicator. He seemed his usual self.

“How’s it going, Alistair,” Deanne asked.

“It’s all falling apart because you aren’t here, of course,” he replied, laughing.

Deanne laughed. “OK, Alistair, I can’t help myself. I do have some feedback from the coal face, though, if you are interested.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Deanne said “This isn’t like the earthquake. We haven’t had total destruction in an urban area, brick and stone houses. We have mainly small towns and isolated villages, especially on the islands. The houses are mostly wooden. Much of the problem down here is damage, not destruction, and debris from the sea, not collapsed buildings, though there are plenty of those, I’ve heard. The destruction was caused by trees down and wind and wave damage. And there was warning. People could choose to leave or remain. There’s been flooding, from the storm surge, from the swollen rivers, it’s true, but in most cases that has drained quickly away.”

“And the people! In the earthquake case people were reluctant to return, scared of more quakes, more deaths! And there were the aftershocks. It was less traumatic for them down here, if you can say that about people who have had their houses collapse around their ears. People down here are used to storms. Of course this was a huge one, and many people paid with their lives. Some houses have been flattened or flooded or even swept away. Roads have been smashed and travel has been made difficult, almost impossible, but people have been returning from day one. They have no electricity, no sewerage, no water, but they’d prefer to be home.”

“I saw a man, today. He had only half a house left, if that. He was busy making temporary repairs. He waved as we went past. Cheerfully. You are in control, but I think that we need to bring in electricians and carpenters, builders and all sorts of tradesmen, even before we finish fixing up all the infrastructure. The Army is good at that sort of stuff, but we need skilled volunteers too. In the earthquake case, it was a case of clearing the ground and building from scratch in many cases, but here we have at least something to work with. Or fix up. It’s up to you, of course.”

“Oh, and I don’t want to make you think that they aren’t suffering. They are. I don’t want to minimize the disaster. It’s big. Very big. But it’s different from the earthquake one.”

Alistair replied “Mmm, I thought that we’d concentrate on roads, electricity, and water. OK, Deanne, I trust your instincts, well, your knowledge, actually. I’ll see what I can do. Anything else?”

“Well yes, actually. I’ve talked to a man here who wants to claim against the Relief Fund, but with communications the way they are, he doesn’t know how to. How about we send someone in and station them in, say, the local libraries, or maybe the schools, to take in peoples’ claims? And to publicize it, I suggest leaflets. The Army are already using that method.”

“Excellent idea. I’ll look into it.”

“How is it going though, Alistair, seriously?”

“Seriously, you’ve only been away a few days. Things haven’t had time to go wrong! Let it go!” He laughed.

“Oh, you are so right, Alistair. I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“Deanne, your ‘feedback’ is great. We should have travelled down there more often, and maybe that should be figured into the generic plans. And everything is going fine at the moment. If it makes it any easier, people approve of your leave, and keep asking why I didn’t make you take it earlier. As if I could do anything about that!”

He tried to sound aggrieved, but couldn’t help chuckling.

“Thanks, Alistair.”

“You’re welcome, Deanne. Just enjoy yourself down there and come back refreshed.”

“I will, Alistair. I am. Oh, by the way, the people down here call me ‘the Army lady’!”

“‘The Army lady’? Do you want me to put out a press release to say that you are **not**, definitely **not**, an Army lady?”

Deanne looked suspiciously at Alistair. He looked serious, but his lips twitched, he snorted, and then burst into laughter.

“I knew that you’d find that funny, Alistair! I’ll talk to you in a couple of days. Bye!”

Affie, Queen Afua, went looking for her husband, King Henry. Henry saw her coming and became defensive. She had a certain look about her.

“Affie, my love, did you want something?”

“Henry, Deanne was going to arrange for us to go to the disaster area, but she hasn’t. So it is up to us. Apart from your solo trip down at the beginning, they haven’t seen us down there. What are we going to do? We need to show our support.”

“We? Um, yeah, I agree. You could contact that sidekick of hers, Alistair.”

“Good idea. We’ll take the boys down, by the way.” She walked over and looked out of the window.

Henry sighed and pushed his papers aside. He came up behind her and put his arms around her. She leaned back against him.

He nuzzled her head and said “I need to get away too, with you and the boys. We haven’t been out of the Capital for months. We were supposed to go to The Castle, but the storm put an end to that. Too busy. You’re right. We need to go and see how they are doing down there. There’s lots of reasons to go down there. Where are the boys?”

“Swimming lessons. I’ll call Alistair now.” She turned in his arms and kissed him thoroughly, then headed out of the door. Henry looked after her, then back to his papers, sighed, and followed after her. She heard him coming and linked arms with him.

“You are a manipulative little thing,” he said, kissing her on the head.

“Oh, I’m sorry, my love. I think that it is important. And simply discussing it and agreeing to it is no fun! I’m not manipulative, am I?”

He ignored the question.

“You are right, though, my dear. It is important. That’s what makes it so annoying when you finagle me like that,” he said.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

They went to Affie’s office and Affie set up a call to Alistair.

He answered. “Alistair.”

“Hi Alistair, this is Affie. I have Henry here. I’d like to talk to you about Henry and I and the boys coming down there. Deanne was going to arrange it, but I guess it slipped her mind. I know what she is like when she gets the bit between her teeth. Tunnel vision.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, I mean, Affie. I’ve just been talking to her, down on the coast. She had some good feedback for me, but, as planned, I didn’t tell her anything about how things are going. Things are going pretty well, actually. So, you are coming down here? I’d guess you want things as informal as feasible?”

“Sure, Alistair, but ‘informal’ is very hard these days. Let’s try for ‘not too formal’. Dress uniforms are out, for example. I’ll be wearing jeans and sneakers. Henry will be dressed in his working uniform. OK, Henry? I’d hope that everyone would wear working clothes.”

Henry was nodding in the background. He would butt in and overrule her if he disagreed with something, and she knew that.

“We can manage that. I’ll send out an order. Is there anything in particular that you want to see?” Alistair asked.

“We’ll leave it to you, Alistair. Some of the places that have been fixed up, and some that haven’t. People. The islands. By the way, we prefer ‘Ma’am’ and ‘Sir’ to ‘Majesty’ but it doesn’t matter too much. The media will be asked to behave reasonably, by the way, and not get too close.”

“Thanks for that,” said Alistair. “We have no control over them of course, but they’ve been good at keeping out of our way if we ask them nicely. So, I’ll go and work out a schedule for your approval, if that’s OK?”

“Yes, but you’d better do it through our Private Secretaries, I think. We’ll warn them. They need to be in on it.”

Alistair called Deanne. “Hullo, Deanne, Alistair here. I have some news. The King and Queen and the two princes are coming down to the disaster area shortly. They’ll leave the boys at the resort with you.”

“Oh bother,” said Deanne. “I was supposed to organize a trip for them. Thanks, Alistair.”

“No problem. They want it to be as informal as possible. That’s going to be hard. The Army likes to put on a show. For that matter so do the Navy and the Air Force.”

“Don’t worry, Alistair. Just tell everyone it is a ‘working visit’. Tell the top brass that there will be no parades or banquets or guards of honour, because that would be disrespectful to those poor people we are trying to help. And it would be, of course.”

Alistair nodded. “I agree. Good idea.”

So Henry, Affie, young Henry their eldest son, and Peter their youngest son travelled down from the Capital into Main Base in Blue Lady on one of her scheduled trips. Henry and Affie had refused to go down in a private jet, and no transports were available. Fortunately, there was just enough seating room for them, the boys, and four of their staff in the big lifter. Affie and a few of her maids had packed a suitcase for each of her family, because if she had left it completely to the palace staff they would have had three or four suitcases each. As it was, all the other supposedly ‘essential’ stuff made a decent sized pile. She sighed. She missed the days of travelling light.

Blue Lady’s Cargomaster welcomed them on board, in accordance with Henry and Affie’s “informal as possible” edict. All the baggage had been loaded ahead of them.

“Good afternoon, sirs and ma’am. Welcome to Blue Lady. We’ll get you seated and the Boss will be down as soon as we are airborne.”

The crew seats were lined up along the sides of the fuselage. He seated Affie and Henry and the two Princes down one side and the two security men and the two secretaries were facing them. He instructed them on safety procedures.

"I suggest you keep the headsets on all the time as hearing protection. It gets noisy in the cargo hold. If you want anything, just wave. Cargo One over there is charge down here when we take off."

He took a seat next to Henry. Cargo One and Cargo Two were seated opposite and Cargo Three was next to him. Shortly the engines started up and they felt the lifter start to move. The aircraft accelerated and they climbed into the air. They climbed and banked for a while, then the aircraft levelled off.

All the while the travellers could hear the chit-chat between the pilots and Ground, as Maddy preferred an open mic. The two boys were fascinated, though the only one who had any idea of what was going on was Henry, who had spent some time in the Air Force, and even for him, it flew past too fast.

"Closed mic," announced Maddy, and only she, Rod, and Harry were patched together.

"OK, Maps, you have control. I'm going down to see the passengers. I'll give them the grand tour if they want it."

"I have control. OK, Boss."

Maddy climbed down the ladder and passed down the line of seats, having a word with her crew members as she passed. When she got to Henry and Affie she mimed taking off the headsets.

"Good afternoon, ma'am and sir. How are you finding the trip so far? It's a bit noisy in the hold, isn't it?"

"Hi, Boss," said Henry. "We've not travelled in the hold of a lifter before, but we are used to travelling in choppers to and from The Castle and they are pretty noisy. But we've got this for five hours? We'll survive."

Maddy laughed. "Well, you can't get out half-way, sir."

Affie said "They tell me that your name is Maddy and that you come from the town that I come from. Is that right? I seem to remember my brother, Nik, bringing two friends to The Castle and one of them was a young girl called Maddy. Was that you?"

"Yes, ma'am, that was me. It was on the trip to The Castle that I discovered that I loved flying. When I grew up I joined up at the first opportunity. I wanted to fly choppers at first but then found that I preferred the easy going teamwork of the lifters. Now I'm the Boss of one!"

"Oh, that's great! Nice to meet you again, Maddy. Can we get a look around? I believe they call it the grand tour. The boys have been nagging me to ask."

"Sure, ma'am, but we will have to do it two at a time. If you'll excuse me, I'll complete my round of the passengers and crew. It's customary on lifters. I'll come back later."

Maddy checked up on the rest of her crew and the security men and the secretaries. All were as comfortable as they could be in the noisy hold.

"Who is on the coffee run today," she asked Cargo One who ran the rota.

"That's me," sighed Cargo One.

"OK, please leave it until after I've given the Princes the grand tour."

Cargo One nodded.

Maddy took Affie and Prince Peter up to the cockpit first. She introduced Sparks in her little cubicle, and then they went into the cockpit proper.

"We've seen the cockpit of a transport aircraft before," said Affie. "Yours seems a lot more roomy, I must say!"

Maddy laughed. "Yes, ma'am, but the controls are much the same, and in much the same places. Our fuselage is wider than most transports, which give us more space and a better view. Oh, by the way, my copilot and navigator, my Maps, also comes from the same town as us. Rod?"

“Hi, ma’am, yes I do. I’ve known Maddy since we were kids. It’s coincidental that we both ended up on Blue Lady.”

“Do you want to sit in my seat, Peter?” asked Maddy. “Please don’t touch anything.”

“Petey,” said Affie. “We usually call him Petey.”

Petey slid into Maddy’s seat and looked around in awe.

“If you put your hands on the yoke, the control column, you will feel the plane flying itself.”

Petey put his hands on the yoke. “That’s the autopilot, isn’t it, ma’am?”

“Yes, quite correct. What do you think?”

“I think I want to fly a lifter when I’m bigger! Can I?”

Maddy and Affie laughed.

“If you do well in school, yes, it’s possible that you could become a lifter pilot,” said Rod.

Affie said “He’s been mad about flying since his first flight. He has pictures of aircraft all over his bedroom. He makes models of planes from pictures and data sheets.”

Maddy said “He sounds like me, after my first flight. When I visited The Castle with Nik.”

Affie persuaded Petey to give up Maddy’s seat and Maddy took control of Blue Lady. Rod took Affie and Petey back to their seats. Then Rod escorted Henry and little Henry up to the cockpit, but little Henry wasn’t that interested and they soon left. One of the security men came up for a look.

Maddy asked him “Do you know Smith and Jones?”

The security man was surprised. “How do you know about them? They are legends in the service.”

Maddy said “Oh, Rod and I met them when they retired to our town. Of course, they’ve never completely retired, and I know that they still do the occasional job for the King and Queen.”

The security man laughed. “I thought that was only a rumour. Are you sure?”

Maddy was suddenly concerned. “Please can you keep that to yourself? I’m not sure that I should have mentioned it.”

The security man laughed again. “Don’t worry, my dear. You didn’t mention any specifics, so all you did was add to their legend. Please don’t say any more. I can now say that I’ve met unspecified people who believe that Smith and Jones still do jobs for the King and Queen. We know how to manage secrets in the security service. Don’t worry. By the way, from your reaction, I can tell that you are sure!”

“Oh no!” Rod and Maddy looked at each other.

“As I said, don’t worry. I’ll be discrete. I won’t ask you for details. It’s not appropriate.”

“You remind me of Smith and Jones. That’s the sort of thing that they would say,” said Maddy.

“Why thank you, Boss! That’s quite a compliment. Anyway, thanks for the tour. I’ll leave you to it.”

He went back down to his seat.

“Phew!” said Maddy. “Remind me never to underestimate a security person again. They have brain muscles to match their body muscles, it seems.”

Blue Lady flew in to Main Base to a restrained welcome. Alistair had done his best to rein in the formality of the welcome, but Affie and Henry had to shake hands with a bevy of the high rankers at the base. Alistair extracted them as soon as he could and took them off to the hotel.

“Thanks, Alistair. I can see that you tried to make it low key,” said Affie.

“Thank you, ma’am. The Army is not really set up to do ‘informal’.” He chuckled.

"I'm afraid that you will be expected in the mess at nineteen hundred hours, erm, seven o'clock. I could say that you are tired, etc, etc?" he said.

"No, we'll be there. No speeches though. We're tired, etc, etc."

She winked at him and he laughed.

"That's OK, ma'am, sir. I'll send someone at ten minutes before, to drive you back to the mess, which is on the airfield. Is that OK?"

"Yes, thank you, Alistair."

Affie and Henry and the boys were picked up by a rather tense Naval rating and driven to the mess. Henry tried to chat with the rating, but he was overawed by his passengers. Henry shook his head. He strongly approved of Affie's desire for informality, but sometimes they ran into someone like their driver.

Alistair introduced Affie and Henry and the boys to his wife, Penny, then the party moved into the mess. Affie looked around. It contained the usual plastic topped tables and metal framed chairs. Up one end, though, someone had covered several of the tables with white tablecloths and had set up cutlery at each chair. Water jugs and glasses completed the setup.

"I'm going to have some fun," said Affie, and ignoring the obvious set up, joined the queue waiting at the counter and took a tray.

"Oh no!" said Henry.

"Oh, Mum!" said little Henry.

Henry still led the boys over to the counter and grabbed a tray. He could hear Alistair chuckling behind him as he and his wife also joined the queue. Affie ignored all the confusion that she had caused and ordered for herself and the kids, and let Henry order for himself. They loaded their trays and proceeded to the checkout.

Alistair said to the checkout operator who was looking confused and anxious, "Don't worry, Sergeant, I'll give you a voucher for this."

Affie looked around. A group of Army squaddies got up and left leaving one squaddie just about to start on his dessert.

"Please, can we join you?" said Affie. The squaddie paused with a mouthful halfway to his mouth and nodded.

Affie sat next to the squaddie, and the others sat down around him.

"Hi, squaddie, what do they call you?"

"Speedy, ma'am. I'm Private Speedy on account of..."

"On account of you being slow at everything?"

"Not everything, ma'am. Just eating. I like to savour."

"Where are you from, Private Speedy? You have a Capital accent I think?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've been down here two months, with my squad, and we are rotating back to the Capital. I want to come back though. There's lots to do down there."

"Please carry on eating, Speedy. You're on duty now?"

Speedy continued eating his dessert. "No ma'am. We ship out in an hour."

He finished his dessert and looked at Alistair.

"Go on, Private. And thank you," said Alistair.

"Thank you, sirs, ma'am. Goodnight sirs, ma'am."

Private Speedy sped off speedily enough.

When he was well away Alistair laughed.

"Poor lad," he said. "He was terrified. I'll make sure his commander knows that he did well."

“Thanks, Alistair. I suppose I’d better make amends.”

She stood up and rang a spoon against a glass. Instantly the mess went quiet.

“Good evening to all of you. Thank you for your hospitality. I really appreciate you all trying to behave as normally as possible.”

Henry stood up and put his hand on her shoulder.

“We appreciate it, I should say,” continued Affie, smiling at him. “I apologize to those who set up a special table for us. Right now they are probably pretty angry with me.”

She gestured at the tables with the tablecloths. This raised a brief laugh.

“I apologize to them. I’m sorry. I wanted to break through the formality. You people are doing the real work. We are just visitors. Though I’d like you to know that we are working very hard behind the scenes to provide the money and the resources that you need.”

“I want you to know that people throughout the country are in awe of your achievements. Your deeds have been broadcast to everyone everywhere. But, although that is nice, and the recognition is well-earned, ultimately, it doesn’t matter. It’s the people that you are helping that really matter.”

“I know that you all want to help out, make a difference. Some of you have already done two rotations down there. You all care. You want to give one hundred and ten percent. That’s great! That’s amazing. But look after yourselves. I had to make my friend Deanne, who you all know, take a break! I don’t want anyone to over-do it, so, like I said, look after yourselves. Anyway, I’ll sit down now and let you get on with your meals. Thank you for doing your best for the poor people down there.”

The mess broke out into applause for Affie’s little impromptu speech, and then everyone politely continued where they had left off. Alistair and his wife chatted with Affie, Henry and the boys as they finished their meals.

“Let’s go, Alistair. Thank you for the meal,” said Henry. “I apologize for my wife. I’d no idea that she was going to pull that stunt.”

He didn’t seem to be too worried, and Alistair just smiled.

“Oh, Henry! I don’t apologize for what I did. It was fun. I feel sorry for those who set up the tables for us, and the cooks who presumably cooked something special for us. Alistair, please, please apologize to those people. Maybe we can meet them on the way back, and I can apologize in person?”

“Don’t worry, ma’am, Affie. I’ll have a word with them. It should be possible to meet them on the way back. If we stick to the agreed schedule, you’ll have lunch and evening meal here. We could make the lunch-time one private and the evening one an open buffet?”

“That sounds good to me, Alistair,” said Henry. “Affie? Will you behave?”

“Huh! OK. Though I think that Alistair found it as funny as I did.”

Penny nodded. “He sure did. I’m surprised that he didn’t burst out laughing. I think that Henry and I have similar burdens to bear.”

She acted so glum that they all laughed.

The next day Affie, Henry and the boys flew down to Advance Base on a transport. They were first off the aircraft, and the Chief of the Base met them and greeted them. He escorted them to the terminal and a squaddie was assigned to carry their bags. They passed through the security gate and Affie heard someone call “Affie, Affie!” She ran towards the call and hugged her friend Deanne.

“How are you, kid?” asked Deanne.

“Oh, not so bad, kid. And you?”

“Fine. All the better for seeing you.”

Henry was left holding the hands of the two boys, and thanking the Base Chief, while Peter was holding the hands of his two girls. They both raised an eyebrow. The two families milled around for a bit then Peter herded them out of the door, and the security guards and the secretaries followed. Deanne and Peter had organized a small bus and a group of squaddies loaded all their luggage into it for them. Affie and Henry thanked the Chief again, and he saluted them and watched them drive off. They were scheduled to spend more time in Advance Base on the way back.

Deanne said “We can drive down to the resort now! They fixed up the road only the day before yesterday. No more of the short chopper trips from Advance Base! Of course, you’ll leave from the chopper pad on your tour. Are you still going to leave the boys with us at the resort?”

“Yes, that’s the plan. We’ll leave one of the security guys and one of the secretaries here. They’ve already drawn straws.”

“Of course. We’ll get them and the boys digging the debris out of the cabins.”

“What?” said Petey.

Little Henry just smiled and nodded. He knew that Deanne was teasing. “OK.”

“I’m teasing, Petey. You can help if you want, of course.”

Petey considered. He nodded. “OK, Auntie Deanne. I’d like to help, but I’m not very big yet.” Everyone laughed.

Fidget said “Can we go and visit Achmed tomorrow, Mummy?”

“That’s a good idea, Fidget. Is there anything happening tomorrow that needs us both, Peter?”

“No, not really. The gravel for the track might arrive, but I can handle that. The hire generator might come too, so nothing that needs your planning brain.”

He was quietly teasing her, she knew. She’d missed his support and attention to detail in the storm Relief Mission job. Though Alistair was good, he was not Peter, who could pick up on the nuances of her plans and make them happen seemingly effortlessly. Peter’s steady input to their plans served to temper Deanne’s more speculative ideas, but more often than not they came up with a single unified vision. They were a formidable team, and accordingly she stuck her tongue out at him, and he laughed.

They drove down the road to the coast, avoiding the few obstacles that still hadn’t been cleared from the road. At one point, where a bridge had been swept away, the temporary road dipped steeply down to the temporary bridge and up again on the other side. The small bus made it fairly easily, but police were stationed by the bridge to assist the bigger trucks which had started to make runs into the disaster area. They stopped briefly to talk with police contingent.

“The kids will all be sleeping in our unit, if that is OK. Affie and Henry, you get the next unit over and the rest of you get the next one. Do you have any concerns?” said Deanne, directing her question to the security guys.

“No, it should be OK, Deanne,” said one of the security guys. “One or other of us will be patrolling round most of the time, and we have one or two little devices we will deploy for extra security. Plus, we are taking other measures. Please don’t ask about them though!”

The kids were excited that they were going to be sleeping with their “cousins”. Deanne was not worried. She’d looked after them all before and knew that they would settle pretty quickly when the time came for them to go to bed.

They drove past the chopper pad which had been the only easy access from the north to the resort and town up until now. Affie and Henry would leave on their tour from there the next day. The driver pulled up in front of the reception area of the resort and everyone piled out and Deanne and Peter directed them to their units.

“Please all of you come over to our unit when you are ready,” said Deanne. “We are getting food brought in. Our friend Achmed will be bringing it in at six thirty. Come over before if you want.”

Pixie jumped up and down and said “Achmed, Achmed, Achmed. I want squids. I want squids!”

“Sounds good, Pixie,” said Affie. “Do you like squid then?”

“I like saying it,” said Pixie. “Squid, squid, squid!”

Everyone laughed.

They all gathered at Deanne and Peter’s unit well before six thirty. The local workers had gone home and the Army people had retired to their own units or to the tents on the golf course so the place was quiet. The weather was warm so Peter opened the sliding doors to the patio outside, and brought over some pool chairs that had survived the storm inside a storage building. The pool was still full of rubble so they weren’t needed. The kids had rushed off to the playground.

“What is it you keep looking at,” Affie asked one of the security men.

“Sorry ma’am,” he said. He showed Affie his device which had a screen showing a small picture of the kids playing on the playground equipment. “I have to keep an eye on them. It’s my job.”

“Oh,” said Affie. “I presume you have an eye on me and Henry too?”

He said “I can’t say.” But he nodded slightly. “It’s a difficult balance, ma’am. We don’t like to spy of course, but we have to do our jobs.”

Affie nodded. “That device looks like Oldtech. Almost like an Oldtech communicator. I’d like to look at one, if you are not using it sometime. Just to keep my hand in, and only if you don’t think it will compromise security. You could check with your superiors if you like.”

He laughed. “Well, my superiors’ superiors are you and the King, but I would like to run it past them, just for the record. I’ve read about your talent for Oldtech, ma’am. It’s legendary. As far as I’m concerned, you are welcome to have a look.”

Achmed arrived with food for them all. Rice and flatbreads, little packages of vegetable dishes, pork dishes and beef dishes. Sauces, dips and pickles. Squid dishes and other seafood dishes. He put the yoghurt drinks, the beers, and the soft drinks in the fridge.

“Look what I have,” he said, holding up a tub of ice cream. “A truck came through today to supply the supermarket, the first one since the storm. We’ve had supplies that have been flown in of course, and the occasional small truck, but this is the first time we’ve been able to simply go in and buy stuff from the supermarket. Oh, Gordon had to ration customers to one or two of some items, but he let me have two tubs of ice cream.”

“Oh, that’s great, Achmed. So supplies are beginning to get through by road,” said Deanne. “I hope you kept the other tub for your kids!”

“Oh yes, of course I did. My life would not have been worth living if I’d put it in the shop! By the way, it was the girls’ idea to give you the second tub.”

“Aww, that’s nice of them. Achmed, may I introduce my friends Affie and Henry?”

Achmed started. “Oh, my goodness. I’m very pleased to meet you, your Majesties.”

Affie came forward and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you, Achmed. We are not being formal tonight, so we are Affie and Henry, or if you prefer, ma’am and sir. We’re down here for a few days to see things for ourselves. We don’t have much time, but if we can fit it in we will visit the local town.”

Achmed collected himself. “That would be nice, ma’am, but for now please enjoy my food.” He excused himself and left.

Deanne called the kids in and the security man put his device away. The second security man was nowhere to be seen. The security man helped Deanne fetch plates, cutlery, and glasses, and opened the food parcels.

Pixie said "Squids, squids, squids."

"Do you want some then, Pixie," said the security man, showing her the squid dish. Achmed (or maybe his wife) had cooked it in its ink, so it was jet black. Pixie looked at it suspiciously, but tasted a piece when encouraged.

"Mmm, no thank you. I don't want any squids, squids, squids, thank you." The security man gave her a thumbs up for trying it, and she went off to find something more to her taste.

Everyone filled their plate and they sat down to eat. Henry got beers from the fridge for those who wanted them and fixed the kids a drink while he was at it. Affie had a yoghurt drink.

"Mmm, Achmed is a very good cook," said Deanne. "His food has been getting better and better as he's been able to source more ingredients."

"Is it him, or his wife who cooks?" Affie asked.

"Do you know, I don't know. I never asked. If we go down there tomorrow, I'll find out. My guess is that they both do."

Next morning Affie and Henry woke up to a day of grey skies. They showered and dressed, and Henry made them a coffee.

Affie stood up and kissed him on the nose. "So quiet! Luxury!"

He put his arms around her.

"Yes, we'd better go and see what's happening next door, I suppose. We leave at ten, don't we?"

Next door was gentle mayhem. Peter was cooking pancakes at the stove while Deanne was steering kids to drinks and seats and ensuring that differences were defused before they became warfare.

"Hi, Affie, say good morning, kids," said Peter.

"Hi, Affie, Henry," said Deanne. "Where's your sock, Fidget? You had both on a minute ago. What do you want on your pancakes, Henry? Jam, or maple syrup? No, we don't have chocolate milk, Pixie. You'll have to make do with plain milk. Petey, you'll have to wait until everyone's had their first round of pancakes if you want more."

"I'll have maple syrup on mine, please, Peter," said Henry senior.

"And you, Affie?"

"Oh, yes please, jam on mine."

"What are the other guys doing for breakfast?"

"Oh, one of them knows one of Army guys who are up at the golf course. They've gone up there for breakfast. We leave at nine forty-five to catch the chopper, so they have some time. If I know Army they're having the full bacon, egg, sausages thing. If they can source them that is," she said thoughtfully.

The rest of their party arrived as they were just finishing up. It turned out that they had had a full breakfast at the Army tents.

"No mushrooms, though," said one of the secretaries, sorrowfully. "They aren't high priority, so they've not been brought in yet."

"They should talk to Achmed. He got some from somewhere for that meal yesterday. There's quite a barter network going on down here," said Deanne.

"Yes, the Army guys told me. They've already tapped into it, though basic Army rations don't buy a lot."

“Hmm, I’ll tell Alistair. Maybe he’ll get the Army guys to add a few luxury items to their supply packs.”

Affie and Henry kissed the boys and told them that they would be back in a couple of days and they and a secretary and a security guard went off to catch the chopper. They sat in the second row of the Navy chopper and an Army general sat in the Shotgun seat in the front and pointed out the areas of damage. They flew first over the little local town. Henry noted that they were being followed discretely by another chopper. Ah, that would be the press, no doubt.

“Down there, the whole High Street was flooded. Part of the car park was washed away as you can see. The flood took out the back end of the library over there, and those houses over there were crushed by trees. The Fire and Rescue Service cut the trees away, as you can see, but the damage to the houses needs to be fixed.”

Affie asked “What happened to the people in those houses? Did they escape?”

The general checked his list. “Well, they were evacuated to the local school. Almost all of them that is. They are all back home, so far as I can tell.”

“They’re living in their broken houses?” asked Henry, surprised.

“Yes, all except those in the two at this end. Those houses are too dangerous.” He looked at his notes.

“Ah, yes, the families in those two houses are living with relatives, not far up north.”

“How many houses were damaged round here, General?” asked Affie.

“Well, pretty much every house was damaged a little, ma’am. I think round here about half had significant damage, that is, damage to the structure. Maybe ten percent were damaged to the point that they couldn’t be lived in, and ten to fifteen in the area were completely demolished, mainly on the sea front.”

“How many were killed?” asked Henry.

“We think about twenty round here. Nearly two hundred across the whole region. We don’t have accurate numbers for the islands yet, and there are still people who are missing, and we also have a few bodies that haven’t been identified. There were about the same number who had significant injuries, many of whom we shipped out.”

The pilot said “The islands were probably the hardest hit, with all the houses flattened on some islands. But you are going out there later, aren’t you, ma’am and sir?”

“Yes, we are. Thank you, Cap,” said Henry.

“Can we head east now to the first stop, please, Cap?” asked the general.

“That’s the harbour, isn’t it? Hold on folks.”

The pilot dipped the nose and the chopper headed off eastwards up the coast.

“There’s lots of trees down,” said Affie.

“Yes, most of them didn’t do any damage in falling, ma’am, unless they fell on a house. But limbs ripped off by the wind damaged buildings and power lines. Some trees got blown or swept into rivers and caused blockages and that has caused bridges to give way,” said the general.

They set down about one hundred metres from the harbour, and the press chopper landed nearby.

The general deferred to the pilot. “You know about this, don’t you, Cap? We were talking about it on the way down.”

“Yes, thanks, General. Well, one of the directives from the top of the Relief Mission is for Navy to help repair the harbours and landings. That makes sense since they are so important to the region, and it will help them get going again. So here we are rebuilding the sea wall and the seaward

breakwaters. That will give some protection from the waves and we can then repair the jetty and the boat ramps.”

“Yes, to get back on their feet the locals need help to get their fishing industry up and running. Not to mention the tourist boats, for the fishing and sight seeing. Has all that been rebuilt?” Henry pointed at the breakwater.

“Yes, sir. Almost all of it. They dump recovered stuff on the bottom and then top it off with big boulders. Then the concrete topping goes on. The jetty and the boat ramps are much the same. We may need to move a few underwater boulders if they are in the way. The original breakwaters and seawall were broken up by the storm and are scattered around the area.”

“How do you think it’s going, Cap?” asked Henry.

“Oh, it’s going good, sir. I’d rather be out in the islands, but I’ve been spelled back here. That’s good, as it is intense out there. But you’ll see that for yourselves, later.”

They stopped for a quick cup of coffee at the Navy’s land base at the harbour. It was much like a coffee cart or food truck. As had been pre-arranged the press took a few pictures and interviewed the general and the captain. Then the royal party re-boarded the chopper and travelled further down the coast. Next stop was a small school which had reopened. The press chopper shadowed them discretely.

“Did you leave when the storm hit,” Henry asked the teacher.

“Yes, sir. I went to my daughter in the Capital, but I came back after two days. Some of the people had started to come back by then and the Army came by and we cleaned out one of the two classrooms. We’ve been using it to teach those children whose parents have returned, which is most of them now. The Army cleaned out the other classroom but it was damaged and we couldn’t use it. Then a week or so ago a volunteer came along who was a builder and he is fixing it up.”

The press took a few pictures and then the teacher showed them the damaged classroom. They surprised the volunteer who busy ripping out some of the damaged structure.

“Where are you from?” Affie asked him.

“From the Northern Provinces, ma’am,” he said. “I came down here to help out. There’s lots of people helping out in the towns, but I decided to come out here. I’m staying with a fisherman who has lost his boat. He helps me out sometimes, but he’s rebuilding his own house, so he isn’t here today.”

He nodded to the general. “The forces guys are providing the materials, but what we get can be ‘hit and miss’ at times. That’s not their fault of course. They’re doing what they can. We tell them what we need and they try to get it for us, but it really depends on what’s available.”

After a few photographs, the royal party returned to the chopper. The general said “We’re going to head out to Narcissus now. Have you ever seen her, sir and ma’am?”

“Yes,” said Henry. “I have, but my wife hasn’t. Narcissus is a magnificent vessel, isn’t she?”

The chopper passed over the coastline and headed out to sea. A number of small islands passed beneath them and finally they passed over one of the larger islands in the chain, and behind the island was Narcissus. She dwarfed the little local boats and canoes that surrounded her. Even the ferry which travelled between the islands was tiny in comparison. Henry wondered for a minute how the ferry had survived the storm, but she had, which was a tribute to the resourcefulness of the Islanders.

The chopper eased in to land on the helipad, and Affie was pleased to see that only two Naval officers were on hand to meet them, though a couple of other Navy personnel were on hand to supervise the landing.

“Welcome, sir and ma’am,” said one of the officers. “I’m Captain of the Narcissus. This is my deputy, who is also a captain. Welcome. Will you, please follow me?”

“Hi, Captain,” said Affie. “What’s your name, Captain?”

“William, ma’am. Though I’d prefer ‘Captain’ in front of the crew.”

Affie laughed. “Point taken, Captain. Sorry. Let’s go.”

The Captain said “We heard about your, ehem, distaste for protocol, ma’am. However, on the Narcissus we have separate messes for officers and ratings. How would you like to play this?”

“Thank you, Captain,” said Affie. “I appreciate your consideration. I’ve no intention of playing any tricks on the Navy. Henry, what do you think?”

Henry pondered. “Can we make an appearance in the ratings mess for the evening meal? We’ll eat lunch with the officers this time, though. Is that OK, Captain? Maybe we will reverse that on the way back?”

Affie and Henry had talked about this. Henry had pointed out that her earlier bit of fun was fine the once, but she shouldn’t make a habit of it. It probably wouldn’t work on the Narcissus anyway. She readily and happily agreed, which to Henry was a bad sign. He didn’t need to worry, though. Affie had decided to behave herself for now.

Affie found the short stay on the Narcissus fun but tiring. She and Henry made sure that they saw as many of the crew as possible, but they couldn’t see everyone. When she found out that the ship not only had the usual intercom system, but also what amounted to a small broadcast station, she wanted to see it. Henry crossed his fingers but Affie behaved herself. She and the female officer running the station spent a half hour or so taking and playing requests, then they had to leave.

The Captain and his officers showed their guests over the ship, which was, of course, impressive. Affie suppressed her normal tendency to become the centre of attention, which was something that she and Henry had had to work on when she became Princess and later Queen.

Things were going well until they reached the electronics and technical section of the ship. Affie was amazed by the equipment that the ship boasted. She and the technicians were soon talking what seemed to be a foreign language.

She and one of the technicians had their heads deep into a drawer that they had pulled out from a rack of equipment when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Affie!” said Henry.

“What?” she said.

He looked annoyed. The Captain was standing behind him, with a stiff expression on his face.

“Oh, so sorry Captain!” she said. “I truly am. Sorry Henry.”

She turned to electronics guys and girls. “Sorry, guys, this a fascinating place you have here, but I have to go. Maybe I can come back another time.”

“Affie,” said Henry. He paused.

“What, Henry? I’m so sorry about that incident in the electronics section.”

Henry waved that away. “The Captain is OK about that. I reminded him of your well-known prowess in the area. I also mentioned that you rarely had a chance to indulge your interest in it these days. We were talking about squeezing in a longer session with them for you on the way back.”

“He’s proud of his ship, isn’t he? A bit stiff though. Nevertheless, I like him. I don’t think that I’d better spend time there on the way back. Best that we meet as many of the crew as possible. We could maybe visit Narcissus another time? Maybe bring the boys? I’d like that. I like Narcissus. Anyway, what were you going to say?”

Henry paused.

“We’re probably going to see some rough stuff, this afternoon and tomorrow. You’ve been my Queen and my wife for long enough that I don’t think that you will collapse into a blubbing mess in front of people, but you can react badly in private afterwards. Remember the earthquake victims?”

“Yes, my love. This job can be tough. I’ll bear your wise words in mind. It might help.”

They kissed, then they left the small stateroom for lunch with the officers.

The chopper hovered over the small town, so that they could see the extent of the damage. In some places there was complete devastation, just piles of rubble and broken trees. In other places a single wall stood up from the debris. A big Mystics chapel stood solidly upright surrounded by the carnage, but the roof had been impaled by a large tree. A bulldozer was clearing debris from a road or track.

Henry could see people moving among the ruins. Makeshift shelters dotted the scene, and people paused to wave at the chopper. They seemed to be pretty cheerful, all things considered.

The chopper veered away and landed in a clear area just outside the town, and the small press chopper landed a short distance away. Henry climbed out, followed by Affie, the secretary, and the security man, and they were met by an Army major in fatigues. He loaded them into a jeep and they took off for the town. Affie liked the major. He’d met them with a quick handshake and there was no unnecessary chit-chat. He gave them a running commentary as they drove through the town – how many casualties, how many injured, what they were doing, what was needed most, and so on. They drew up outside the Mystics Chapel.

“This is our temporary hospital. Actually we were lucky that the Chapel survived more or less intact. Unfortunately the little shop was flattened. The Chapel has been very useful, and we had about twenty to thirty people sheltering in here the night after the storm. We’ve got about half a dozen patients in here now, some waiting transfers to the mainland.”

They all climbed out and were greeted by the Mystic Pastor, an older Islander woman with greying hair. The major grasped her hands and kissed her cheek in the Mystic way, so Affie did too, and everyone followed suite. The Pastor was a bit restricted by the sling on her arm.

Inside the chapel the embedded tree trunk almost reached the altar and most of that end was roped off. The beds were lined up, and the patients and staff were waiting to see the visitors.

Affie and Henry toured the little makeshift hospital and chatted with the patients and staff. Except for an elderly doctor the staff were all Army or Navy. The press quietly followed them, taking photographs.

“What’s wrong with the boy on the end, Major?”

“Broken bones in his legs, possibly a broken pelvis. We don’t have an X-ray machine so we’re not sure how much damage he has sustained.”

“Why wasn’t he shipped out as a priority?” Affie asked, shocked. “It’s been nearly three months!”

“He’s next to go. We’ve set the bones in his legs, and immobilized his pelvis area, in consultation with specialists on Narcissus and elsewhere. He’s quite mobile now, but still needs to be checked by the doctors in the hospital on land, just in case. We shipped his sister out last week. We think that

she may have sustained nerve damage to her back, though she still has some feeling in her toes.” He looked a little grim.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Affie. “I didn’t think. It was just a knee-jerk reaction!”

“That’s OK, ma’am. We have a daily radio conference with the Chief MO on the Narcissus, myself and Doc over there,” he said gesturing to the elderly doctor. “We’re aware that there are other patients on other islands who are higher priority. The Chief MO makes the decisions on who comes out and when. I wouldn’t like his job.”

“I’m sorry,” was all that Affie could say.

The major showed them round the town. The school was still operating, but teaching was taking place outside, which was apparently ‘business as usual’. Several Navy personnel were repairing some of the damage to the school building, and people waved at the royal party as they walked through the town. They seemed to be cheerful as they patched up their storm ravaged houses. The royal party stopped to chat to some of them.

“Are there any orphans?” Henry asked.

“Yes, but they’ve mostly already been adopted by relatives. Sorry to be so vague, but my Adjutant takes care of that. She’s an Islander herself, and understands the Islander ways. But it is all documented.”

“What do you need most, Major?”

“We need water. The Army and later the Navy have brought in plenty of food, for now, and the local people are very capable of rebuilding. The Army and Navy are being a great help. But our water pipeline from the hills was destroyed, and that’s a big job. We’ve been existing on the bottled water shipped in by the Navy.”

“We’ll see what we can do.”

“Thank you. Now I’d better get you back to the chopper.”

“You identify with the Islanders, don’t you, Major?” asked Affie as they were boarding.

“Affie!” said Henry.

“That’s OK, sir. Yes, ma’am, I do. That’s the risk of an assignment like this, isn’t it?”

“See you tomorrow, Major,” said Henry. “Thank you.”

They flew back to the Narcissus and ate their evening meal in the ratings mess. As usual, Affie was her usual relaxed self, and Henry was content to sup his beer in the background. Then Affie found out that the ratings were keen on Backgammon. She trounced them, one after another.

Then a rating called Greg arrived, and the other ratings called for him to take her on. They played best of seven, and Affie shot out to a two-nil lead. Greg frowned and concentrated and soon he was three-two up. Everything was silent as Affie and Greg concentrated on the match. Affie won the next game, and it was all on the last game. The tension was high. People shushed other people for talking and jostled for a view of the board. Affie fought hard, but in the end was forced to concede.

“Great game, Greg,” she said. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome, ma’am,” said Greg. “You’re good. Probably the best I’ve played in a long time.”

Henry said to her later, “Did you throw that game, Affie?”

“No!” She was scandalized.

Henry recalled that to Affie there was life and death, and there was Backgammon, and it was unclear which was the most important.

"I was lucky in the first two games. He didn't take me seriously, and then he won the next three. I won the next one, and I think it was my best game, really. Then he shut me out in the last game. He should have won four-one or four-two I think. I enjoyed that!"

"But you lost! And you hate losing!"

"There's no shame in losing to someone who is ranked a Master."

"He's ranked a Master?"

"Yes, I recognized him immediately, but he didn't recognize me at first, because I don't play under my real name, and I don't play face-to-face matches. For obvious reasons. After the first two games, he looked at me, and I knew that I was in trouble. He'd recognized my style."

"Phew. So where do you rank in this hidden world of Backgammon players?"

"Well, I'm nineteenth or twentieth I think. Greg is three or four. I wouldn't normally get to play him, as he's much higher than me. I've only done it once or twice before. It was a privilege to play him face to face."

"He'll keep your secret?"

"Yes." There was no question in her mind.

"Anyway, Affie, tomorrow we visit some of the smaller islands. The major was telling me that all the casualties have been shipped out of where we are going, but we may see bodies. There's an Army detail digging graves, but they won't have finished."

"Yes, it will be grim. But let's focus on the living, shall we? After giving due respect to the dead, of course."

"Actually, Affie, we've not seen the worst stuff. Those things happened early on, just after the storm, but it does mean that we can see some of what they need to get up and get going again."

She nodded. "Yes, that's a relief, isn't it? We went in so much earlier after the earthquake. Even the patients in the hospital seemed pretty comfortable."

So the next day, Henry and Affie stood watching a burial, along with the major, their security man and their secretary. A media representative and his camera man quietly filmed the scene, as a Mystic Pastor said prayers over the grave and topped it with a wreath of dark glossy leaves. A truck with three shrouded bodies on it stood to one side. One body was noticeably smaller than the others.

Then the major guided them through the small settlement. There were only a half dozen houses, most of which were completely flattened. They turned the corner of a wall which somehow still stood, and found two of the Islanders trying to raise a ridge-pole, with some difficulty. A woman with a bandaged shoulder was helping them ineffectively. A young boy was watching them with the air of wanting to help, but he was too small.

Henry and the media man stepped forward and with their added strength the pole was quickly raised. The boy bowed to them.

"Thank you," he said.

"Oh, you speak our language," said Affie, pleased. "Is this your house?"

"No..." answered the boy, then broke off to talk in the local language to the older of the two men.

"My father's father," he said, pointing. "His house. I live here now."

"Where are your parents?" asked Affie, afraid of the answer.

The major spoke quickly to the boy in the local language.

"He's an orphan, ma'am, but not as a result of this storm. His parents died at sea when he was small. He was lost for two days after the storm."

"I drink water from..." He plucked a small leaf. "Banana..."

“Oh, you drank water from a banana leaf?”

“Banana leaf,” he confirmed.

His grandfather said something.

“The boy lived on dead fish from the storm. Raw, of course, but fresh,” translated the major.

“Can you ask him where the other people from this island are?” asked Henry.

The boy picked up the sense of the question and pointed out to sea. He said “Other island. Helping...”

He mimed lifting the ridge-pole.

The old man, who obviously understood their language, but couldn’t speak it, spoke in his own tongue.

“They’ve gone over to another island,” translated the major. “They may move there permanently. The old man wants to stay here, and so do the boy’s Aunt and Uncle. They are able to contact their relatives via radio, now that the Army have replaced their set.”

“What if the radio breaks down?” asked Henry.

The boy and his grandfather both smiled and made paddling motions, and the boy said something.

“They’ll go by canoe. They will build a new one, or repair the old canoe. They need it to fish.”

“Oh, of course!”

As they walked back to the beach Affie asked “Are there many like them? Living on an island by themselves? They looked cheerful enough, didn’t they?”

“Most islands have at least two or three families. We’ll continue to go round all the islands now and then. Or until we are deployed somewhere else.” He looked at Affie and Henry.

“That won’t be for some time,” said Henry. “No promises, but I think I’ll see if we can arrange a permanent presence in these islands. But it won’t be the Army, I’m afraid. You may want to transfer to the Navy or the Coastguard, Major.”

The Major smiled at Henry’s suggestion. “You never know, sir. I might just do that.”

Henry and Affie and their party visited two more islands. They couldn’t visit the smallest, as they could only visit those islands that the choppers could land on, but they discovered much the same on all the islands that they visited.

“They’re cheerful people,” commented Henry. “It would be easy to think that they didn’t need much help, but there are...”

He checked with the major. “...about a third of them off the islands in hospitals. Some of them have been flown to the Capital for treatment. They are more battered than it seems at a casual glance. You’ve been feeding this information back to the Relief Headquarters?”

“Yes, sir, and they have been listening. I spoke to a guy called Alistair. Told him that the islands had different needs to the mainland, and he said that he’d heard that from the Navy. We had a wave of medics come through, shortly followed by the Army communications people. But now it’s mainly the Army providing manpower to repair stuff.”

“We know Alistair. You’ve been here from the start?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve been through two rotations. It was grim at first, still is now and then. But most bodies were ferried to the Narcissus’ morgue early on, and the burials are mostly completed now. There are still people unaccounted for, but I doubt we’ll find their bodies.”

After the King and Queen returned from the islands, Affie and Deanne were strolling through the resort.

“You know, I’ve been helping these people as best I can, but I’d never met any of them until I came down here,” said Deanne.

Affie nodded. “They’re nice people. And grateful. I think that they are going to put up a statue to you.”

“What? Oh, you’re joking. Don’t do that!”

“Yeah. They’re resilient people. What they need now, apart from the occasional food parcel because their crops have been destroyed, is muscle power. Clear the roads, help them with their houses, that sort of stuff. Oh, and the Islanders need boats. They’re perfectly capable of building their outrigger canoes, but they need something for now. Anyway, I made a list, and so, good lad, did my secretary. I’ll send them to you. Or Alistair.”

“Yeah, I’m keen to get back there and take up the reins again. And send Alistair off on a break. He’ll not like it but he’ll see the humour in it.”

“Oh, well, back to the grind, tomorrow. And you two weeks later.”

“Yeah.”

They sighed in unison, just like they did when they were kids.

“I think it’s a good idea,” said Peter.

“What?” said Deanne, startled. They had been sitting quietly in the loungers on the patio of their unit. The girls were asleep.

“Oh, I don’t know exactly, but it has something to do with the resort.”

“What has?”

“Well... What’s the name of the guy that owns it?”

“Mr Chiu?”

“Yeah, I saw you talking to him. Deep in conversation you were. And you’ve been measuring things with your eyes. I’d swear you were pacing out that open area at the back.”

“I see. Well. He wants to sell up. His kids have moved north, and he wants to follow them. He’s a bit disillusioned actually. The resort meant a lot to him.”

“Did you discuss a price?”

“I thought that I’d raise it with you, first. What do you think?”

“Hmm, we haven’t had a big project for a while.”

“... and we’ll be doing Mr Chiu a favour.”

“Yeah, and you’ve already made up your mind.”

“No, I haven’t! Well, I would really like to do it.”

“Hmm, market price, pre-storm, plus ten percent? Subject to the usual check and things?”

“Of course! I may be keen but I’m not silly! That might be a bit cheap, actually.”

“Yeah. We don’t want to cheat Mr Chiu, do we? We’ll see what he wants for the place. The kids will be OK?”

“They’re already using local words in their speech. They’re great friends with Achmed’s lot.”

“So the plan is that I stay down here, with the kids, and start planning to buy and repair and renovate the resort, and you will go north to run the Relief Mission.”

“Yeah, that’s about it. What do you think?”

“Like I said, I think it is a good idea. How often will you be able to get back?”

“Mmm, I’ll talk to Alistair. About every two weeks, I think. We’ll rotate it. I’m sure he will agree.”

She stretched out her arm and grasped his hand.

“You’re sure?” she asked.

“Yes. We can pour some money into the local economy, and get it back again fairly quickly. It will boost the area. Next year we can expect an influx of visitors, as people discover, well, remember how nice it is down here. I’d say that we’d start an advertising campaign over winter, and they should start to roll in next summer. Only a few at first, it’s true. I’ve seen the books, and Mr Chiu was making a profit, even although he wasn’t managing it very well.”

“You’ve looked at the books? You’ve already looked at the books?!”

“Of course. I know the way your mind works, my dear. Besides, I was already thinking along the same lines.”

She laughed. “We’re a good team, aren’t we?”

“The best.”

Achmed wheeled his son along the small row of houses on the front. The green was looking better after a rowdy, but good-natured, Army squad had made a good start on cleaning it up before they were moved on to something else. The local council were carrying on, but more slowly.

The houses, though, were still looking battered. There was debris in the gardens, some windows were roughly boarded over, and tarpaulins flapped from some roofs.

There was an old gentleman, a local from his looks, standing and looking glumly at the row of houses.

“It’s a shame, isn’t it,” said Achmed.

“Yes, yes,” said the old man. “I own some of them, you know. I rented them out in the holiday season and it gave me a small income.”

He sighed.

“But even with a Government grant from the disaster fund, I don’t think that I can afford to repair them. I might have to sell them.”

“That’s too bad,” said Achmed, “though a friend of mine was in the same position. He has a house on the front on the other side of the High Street. He got a guy to come down from the Capital and the guy was fixing his house in exchange for a working holiday. The guy from the Capital brought his family, and my friend was paying for the materials and a small amount towards their food. They seemed to enjoy it. He even gave them a voucher for a future holiday because he wasn’t able to pay the going rate.”

“That’s a good idea, my friend.” The old man smiled and shook his hand. “A very good idea. My son is a recruitment consultant in the Capital. I’ll get him on the job. You know, maybe we could help some other people too. Thank you! Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome!” said Achmed, and strolled back home.

Annali stopped and looked around.

“I don’t recognize anything!” she wailed.

The promenade walk curved away around the end of beach.

Her fiancé held her hand. “Well, it has been, what, twelve years since you’ve been here?”

In front of them was a white stone memorial of the “Great Storm”, as it was called. A stylized tree and two wooden spars impaled a representation of a huge breaking wave. It wasn’t the most of attractive of memorials, she thought. A metal plaque inscribed the local language and the northern language gave details of disaster.

Annali rubbed the metal with her finger. "The seawall used to stop way back there. There were no breakwaters this far up. I don't know where I am!"

"You said that the resort is still there, and we saw that, over there. Does that help?"

"Yeah. No!"

Her fiancé turned to an older man who was silently looking out to sea.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you remember what it used to look like round here?" he said in the northern tongue.

The man smiled. He answered in the northern language but with a southern accent.

"Yes, I do, young man. I used to live here before the storm. I was badly injured in the storm, and was taken to the Capital, and I live there now. I've been back a few times, but I lost my family in the storm, and I only come back to remember them."

He was silent, and Annali and her fiancé fell silent too.

"There used to be a row of houses here. You'd call them shacks, I think. I had my own boat and we were happy. My two girls were in school, and my little son was just about to start school. Then the storm came, and everything changed."

Annali grabbed her fiancé's arm.

"No!" she gasped.

"My house was right here, the closest one to the town."

"Dad..." said Annali, in the local language.

The old man looked at her.

"I'm Annali"

"Annali? Annali? They told me you were dead!"

He looked shocked.

"They told me you were dead, too!"

"Ah, I was badly injured and shipped to the Capital. I woke up with someone else's name attached to my bed."

Annali wrapped the old man in her arms.

"Dad... Puli survived too. He's at University in the Capital. My Mum and Dad... Oh, we were adopted, after the storm. Oh!"

The old man patted her hand. His eyes glistened. "Don't worry, Annali, my dear. I have a new family in the Capital too. My wife, my second wife and I run a restaurant. I have two sons. You have two half-brothers! It will be OK. But I'd like to get to know you and Puli again, and your new parents. After all these years!"

Annali relaxed.

"Dad," she said in the northern tongue, "I'd like you to meet my fiancé."
