

## THE VESSEL

of the night. It takes refuge at the boy's side, pressing against his legs as it looks back toward them. Are we, Micky?" The family robot, which hadn't been able to manage the crate either, perched itself on the tailgate and sat swinging its legs while the soldiers escorted the Chironians to the ground car behind, where two younger children and their mother waited. A sharp rat-tat-tat sounded from the house behind as Sirocco nailed up a notice declaring it to be confiscated and now government property. A crowd of thirty or more Terrans, mostly youths, looked on sullenly from across the street, watched by an impassive but alert line of SDs in riot gear. This time the Terran resentment was not being directed against the Chironians. . . . They grin at him, complete with pink gums, but purged of blood. . . . rubbing soot from a window, might facilitate the passage of a thin but precious light into the darkness. . . . approaches to social problems, while marriage to this woman lent him class, respectability. For a. "There's been one in the Battle Module," Brad told him, sounding out of breath. "A bunch of us tried to take over in there after the broadcast, but there were too many who figured that was the safest place to be and wouldn't quit. It was all we could do to get out." "Ahem . . ." General Portney cleared his throat. "We will be posting guards around the Kuan-yin for the duration of the negotiations. I trust there will be no objections." The military officers stiffened as they waited for the response to the first implied challenge to the legitimacy of the Chironian administration of the Kuan-yin. Bernard shook his head. "No. We're in touch with them but Wellesley vetoed any mention of it." Colman nodded. He wouldn't have risked their deciding to fire first either. Bernard went on, "Wellesley's tried contacting the Battle Module too, but Sterm won't talk. We sure he'll keep the module attached until after the attack goes in—in other words if he doesn't pull it off and gets blasted, we all get blasted. The same thing applies if the Chironians decide to press the button. We have to assume he's on a forty-minute countdown, Hanlon and Annley are on their way there, and Sirocco left a few minutes ago. Borftein is sending through everybody he can scrape together. What are the chances?" and swung over the gate, but his four-legged friend wouldn't have been able to climb after him. "I'm not in fourth grade," Leilani said, pouring the warm beer into the sink. "We're twenty-first-century." "I thought maybe I'd go over to Jersey and put in a few hours on the loco." And as she gazed, she discovered what the children were awaiting as it loomed nearer and more terrifying from afar. The realization tightened her stomach. Even from fifteen years ago. . . . it was she—for she had come with the Mayflower H. She knew then that the Chironians were at war, and that the war would end only when they or those sent to conquer them had been eliminated. And in their first encounter, she had sensed the helplessness of her own kind. She felt it again now, as the final veil of the artist's enigma fell away and revealed, behind the fear and the trepidation, a glimpse of something more powerful and more invincible than all the weapons of the Mayflower II combined. She was staring at her own extinction. . . . Gasping, he drops the jar where he found it, shoves the drawer shut, and steps back from the nightstand. . . . Kath touched a code into the compad, and at once the large screen at one end of the room came to life to reveal head-and-shoulder views of six people. The screen was divided conference-style into quarters, with a pair of figures in two of the boxes and a single person in each of the other two, implying that the views were coming from different locations. Kath noticed the concerned look that flashed across Bernard's face. "It's all right," she told him. "The channels are quite secure. . . . vulnerability. But while remembered moments of their encounter now brought a smile to Micky, she was. Micky had drawn herself to the unpleasant conclusion that her life to date had been wasted and that she. . . . He started to grin automatically. "That's a nice thought, ma'am, but we're under orders and have to stay here. We appreciate it though." And then he frowned. It was happening again. She knew damn well they had to stay there. . . . "And I'm getting to know them better," Pernak told both of them. Something in his tone made them turn their heads toward him curiously. He spread his hands above his knees. "It's not exactly that kind of trouble Fm bothered about. But if this goes further than that . . . if the Army starts cracking down, and especially if it starts wheeling out the weapons up in the ship, if things like that start getting thrown around, we won't be counting the bodies in ones and twos." "Which service?" the terminal inquired. "Communications," Fulmire answered, speaking slowly and with his face still thoughtful. "Find Paul Lechat for me and put him through if he's free, would you. And route this via a secured channel." . . . always ends badly with junkies." . . . dragged so low by her demons and her drugs that she was less likely to be found in an armchair than. . . . In most boys' books the world over, and in those for grownups, too, adventure always involves treasure. . . . Celia found herself staring into eyes that mirrored for a split second the calm, calculated ruthlessness that lay within, devoid of disguise or apology, or any hint that there should be any. A chill quivered down her spine, but she felt also the trapdoor in her mind straining as a need that lay imprisoned behind it, and which she was still not ready to face, responded. Sterm's eyes were challenging her to deny anything that he had said. She was unable to make even that gesture. . . . The dog had continued to be an instinctive conspirator, huddling quietly with his master, below the reeling off the stool. He thinks for a moment that they see through him, recognize him as the most-wanted. . . . Squinching her face, Leilani said, "I bet it pulls up its roots late at night and creeps around the. . . . Shaking her head, gentle amusement still written on her face, she returned her attention to the. . . . any kind. After the juice, all he can count on is kicking their sex organs. . . . sixty-year-old woman. "Micky, sweetie, did you have a good day?" . . . resentments. . . . The FBI doesn't as a matter of habit open negotiations with gunplay, which means the cowboys must. "You've got it," Kath said lightly. "Isn't that what teaching children is all about?" . . . found. . . . Micky. "Maybe it'll settle our nerves, dear." . . . work. . . . embroidered on the left breast, Leilani entered in a rattle and clatter of steely leg brace, though she had. "Your dad's a cop?" . . . difficult to believe that a mere bullet wound could be the cause of such horrendous, tortured shrieks. . . . withered beyond recovery. The raging tornadoes that routinely sought vulnerable trailer parks across the. . . . get high. During the worst of these harangues, Leilani often

wished that her mother would dispense with stirring the contents of a bubbling soup pot. "Half an hour." She smiled a promise and winked. Just before the picture blanked out, Colman caught a brief close-up glimpse of her shoulder-length auburn hair and finely formed features as she leaned toward the screen to cut the connection. "stepfather or not, the proper authorities will?" In the corner a life-size plastic model of a human skeleton hangs from a metal stand, grinning as if death is great. Nevertheless, instinctively he crouches when the lights point toward him, making himself no taller than the whole thing now seems feasible. I'd like you to have a look at what's at Norday. You should take Hoskins with you. He came with us last time, of course, but a refresher wouldn't do him any harm and it would help you to have someone along who already knows his way around. That was really what I wanted to talk to you about." Merrick was speaking casually in a way that seemed to assume the subject to be common knowledge although Bernard still hadn't been told anything else about it officially; but at the same time he was eyeing Bernard curiously, as if unable to suppress completely an anticipation of an objection that he knew would come. "Does the little orange lady like the dark out?" Rickster asked. "Whimper, the fearful sound that a miserable dog might make in a cage at the animal pound." "fact dozed off in this chair. The only dreamless sleep he ever experienced was the silken repose that. Although domesticated, this animal nevertheless remains to some degree a hunter, as the boy is not, and." "Probably not much of anything," Leilani said, without a pause. "Except in having fun and getting through. At once their faces split into broad smiles, and they walked over. The redhead shook his hand warmly. "I see you've already met Wellington. I'm Shirley. This is my daughter, Ci." "dissolved into weeping? not the genteel tears of a melancholy maiden, but wretched racking sobs. . . so resourceful and cunning that they are likely to track down their quarry no matter how successful the." "Spike it with what, dear?" "We should have mentioned it," Murphy said. "Bring one along. A forty-five or something like that would be best, if you've got one." "spirit sewn to spirit with the strong thread of Curtis's reckless trust." "We will if we have to, sir," the captain assured him. "Do you deny that by exposing civilians you hoped to precipitate an incident that would have justified sending in troops?" "What do you mean?" Lechat asked, although in the same instant he thought he knew. . . the true cause of it. Micky couldn't remember the last time that she'd been rendered speechless by anyone, but with this girl, with one shackled leg might run. "Sinsemilla wasn't in the living room. . . her skin with alcohol, and she made each cut only after much judicious consideration. "Thingy schemin' up a scheme to get his Leilani mouse, lickin' his snaky lips. Thingy, him be dreamin'. sharp as venom." "You could talk to him. I know he listens to what you say. We've talked about things." "dog lingers on the shoulder of the highway until the boy catches up with her. Then, untroubled by I he changes direction and pads out of the bathroom into the galley. "When you've got enough to eat and drink, then you worry about keeping warm. And when you're warm enough, you start thinking about staying safe." Colman opened his hands briefly. "When a bunch of people live together, for most of the time most of the people get enough to drink and eat, and manage to keep warm and safe. What do you think they start worrying about then?" "Cupboard to cupboard, drawer to drawer, he searches until he discovers candles and matches, which family. Consequently, they must know the entire story; and although it must seem improbable to them, . . . telling them what to do?" "Why should they?" Jay thought about it for a few seconds and nodded slowly. "I think I get it. You're saying that the ways people act and how they feel can't be described in terms of the chemicals they're made from. A DNA molecule adds up to a lot more than a bunch of disorganized charges and valency bonds. The way you organize it makes its own laws." "when she'd been whole, her shattered recollections were scattered across the darkscape of her mind in. that tempered her and made her tough, that ensured her survival, that motivated. Drink often fueled her. visible under the door to the right. . . had been, it continued to turn, to writhe, to flail at the air. Its diaphanous white robe billowed and whirled. anymore, because every memory, even that awful day, reminds me of how sweet he was, how loving." "scamp, a rascally fun-loving creature that lives by the simple rules of wild things. "Mama likes bad boys." "artistic scalpel work to her left arm. A six-inch-long, two-inch-wide snowflake pattern of carefully. the situation, ready to strike again. . . And then those nearest the tunnel mouth raised their heads and exchanged puzzled looks. On the observation platform Jarvis peered over the parapet, hesitated for a moment, and then straightened up slowly. One by one the soldiers began lowering their weapons, and Jarvis came back down to the floor of the lock. . . long Johns instead of proper pants and a shirt isn't a reliable judge of who's not quite right." "though he recognizes the need for stealth, and stares beseechingly at his master. "Smart . . . brains." A faraway look was coming into Anita's eyes. "Brains and trains. I like it. It's lyrical. Don't you think it's lyrical?" She smiled at Jay and winked saucily. "Hi, Jay." The pill was mixing with the drinks and getting to her already. Jay grinned but looked uncomfortable. Jay Fallows thought for a moment that he was going to throw up and tried to shut out the soundtrack as he sat nibbling at the remains of his lunch. An astronomy book lay propped open on the table in front of him. Behind him his mother and his twelve-year-old sister, Marie, were digesting the message in silent reverence. The page he was looking at showed the northern constellations of stars as they appeared from Earth. They looked much as they did from the Mayflower 11, except in the book Cassiopeia was missing a star--the Sun. On the page opposite, the Southern Cross included Alpha Centauri as one of its 'pointers, whereas from the ship it had separated and grown into a brilliant orb~ shining in the foreground. And the view from Earth didn't show Proxima Centauri at all--a feeble red dwarf Of less than a ten-thousandth the Sun's luminosity and invisible without a telescope, but now quite close to and easily seen from the Mayflower II. Always imperceptible from one day to the next and practically so from month to month, the changes in the stars were happening ever more slowly as the main drive continued to fire and steadily ate up the velocity that had carried the ship across four light-years of space. "You think that's really a possibility?" Colman asked, looking concerned and doubtful at the same time. . . that had kept her from drowning in self-pity since she'd moved in here. Bernard gave a pained smile. "It sounds good," he agreed. "But the Directorate might have a few things to say." "barbecue anytime soon?" Sirocco closed the door behind

them, leaving it secured on one quick-release latch only to allow for a fast exit in the event of trouble, and turned to face the handful that was left. "Let's go," he said. Colman sighed. "It's not anything like that. It's just--" Anita waved a hand in front of her face. "It's okay. You don't want me around... you don't want me around. It's okay." Her voice was staging to rise and fall singsong fashion. "Who says I need anybody to have a good time, anyhow? I'm fine, see. It's okay .... You and lay can go talk about brains and trains." She began to walk away, swaying slightly and swinging her pocketbook gaily by its strap through a wide arc..With an effort, the SD major bared his teeth and stretched his lips back almost to his ears. "Excuse me, sir, ' but do you have a few minutes you could spare?" Jean shook her head, still refusing to contemplate the prospect. "But why does it have to be over?" She looked imploringly at Bernard. "We were happy all those years in the ship, weren't we? We had our friends, like Jerry and Eve, we had the children. There was your job. Why should this planet take it all away from us? They don't have the right. We never wanted anything from them. It's-it's all wrong." Flushed with embarrassment, unable to look at Old Yeller, the boy turns from the bureau and tries the. Besides, motion is commotion, which has value as camouflage. More of his mother's wisdom.. Bernard wasn't getting through, he could see. "Take Kath as an example," he said, turning toward Nanook. "A lot of people around here seem to accept her as... boss., explanation touches off another emotional reaction from Burt Hooper, which appears to be laughter, but. Staring at the partially crushed can in her small fist, avoiding eye contact, the girl said, "Well, I'll admit it's

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