

Prequel to The Clan Chronicles

Brothers Bound

by Julie E. Czerneda

First published in *Sirius: the Dog Star* (2004) edited by Alexander Potter and Martin H. Greenberg, DAW Books Inc. I present this story here for your reading pleasure, and to make sure you don't miss any part of The Clan Chronicles. While I hope you enjoy “Brothers Bound,” I ask you to please respect that I in no way relinquish my rights to this story, characters or worlds.

I wrote this in 2002, shortly after finishing the third Trade Pact title, To Trade the Stars. Alex had asked me for a story for his wonderful anthology featuring dogs in science fiction. I believe he expected something about Esen, my shapeshifter from Beholder's Eye, who spends her fair share of time on all fours. But I had something else in mind.

I knew I'd be putting the Trade Pact and the Clan aside for the next few years, while I wrote Species Imperative, though I'd be back. In the meantime, I wanted to lay the foundation for what was to come. How? By exploring a time not just before the Clan, but before Humans were particularly important, before the Trade Pact itself. Thus, in “Brothers Bound” you will encounter the Hoveny Concentrix for the first time, but not, dare I say, the last.

At the same time, I was interested in showing how the role of Humans within the Trade Pact might have evolved, why we could be so very good at being in the middle of alien squabbles. I'm rather proud of us, as you'll discover.

And of course, for Alex, there had to be a dog. - Julie

Operating manuals called it the Biointerface, shortened in use to bio'face. Those enamored of the tech called it words like loyalty, devotion, and love.

The matter of names was of some importance to those who wrote grant proposals and promoted the spread of Humans through the ranks of the First.

What anyone else called this inconvenience didn't matter at all to First Triad newcomer, Sai Vasilo Aris.

The damned dog was just another reason he didn't fit in.

“Hey, Vasi! You can't bring it with you,” Baoltor yelled again, too loudly. Interested heads turned. There wasn't much to do at the staging area, and any disturbance had its merit as entertainment. Baoltor seemed oblivious to Vasi's embarrassment or, more likely, failed to read the emotion. Dains weren't the most empathic of species. Instead, he continued: “I'm not sitting in the same transport with that stinking thing all the way to Crilliton --”

“Shut up, Baoltor, and make room,” Vasi ordered calmly, though he agreed heartily and would have left the beast in the field barracks had it been within his power. His hand signal, no more than a lift of two fingertips, sent the canid leaping from the muddy street into the side door of the transport, filthy paws scrambling for purchase.

The curses that followed were varied and creative, but brief. Their Triad -- Vasi, Ebbet, and Medya, now splashing up to join him – outranked any of the others already crammed inside. Professor Emeritus Y Ebbet, of the 114th Siring by Raken, was on sabbatical from his duties as Chair of Concentrix Studies at the University of South Amilt, on the Queeb world for “Useful Non-breeding Citizens.” His work on Aeande XII had gained widespread recognition in its first field season, so much so that any Triad he formed led all subsequent research here. And no right-minded Queeb in a position of power, even an academic like Ebbet, would tolerate public disrespect of his allies – by anyone else. Vasi was sadly familiar with the quick scorn able to drip from that forked tongue, given how he seemed to fail almost every one of Ebbet’s high expectations.

When Ebbet’s Triad had lost its Finder in an early spring flood, the being fatally stubborn about retrieving artifacts from a supposedly dry streambed, Vasi had been pulled from his training to replace her. He’d have refused, if he’d thought it would do any good. To be unproved in the field, then dropped in as Senior Finder over all the teams on a project? Of course, Triads were professionals. His skills were undeniable, if untested. These and other platitudes from his instructors failed to console him. Vasi knew too well what they wouldn’t say. Those professionals would pounce on any weakness as an excuse to send him packing.

It only got worse. On arrival, Vasi found he was the only Tidik insystem. From the moment the tug parked his transport in Aeande’s Shipcity, he’d been surrounded by beings incapable of understanding the most basic signals of courtesy, let alone any higher level concepts. Every interaction was confined to the shallow meanings of Comspeak, that bastard tongue of traders and merchants.

Why him at all? Vasi could still taste the bitterness of that ultimate insult, delivered within the first hour of his landing on this world. His skills hadn’t mattered. Ebbet’s Finder had been a Human, bio’faced with one of their beasts. The beast had survived its partner’s misjudgment and Ebbet valued the animal’s abilities so highly he’d insisted he must have another such pairing. No Human was available fast enough to suit him – but a Tidik Finder-in-training, with sufficiently similar neural physiology, was.

As easily fly without wings as refuse. It was accept the implant and be bound to the creature, or be sent from Aeande XII in disgrace. Vasi had had no choice. Not if he wanted to ever be part of a Triad. Not if he ever wanted his chance to solve the puzzle of the Hoveny Concentrix -- the single greatest mystery in explored space.

The Triads were First research teams, made up of individuals possessing the necessary skills of Analyst, Recorder, and Finder, drawn from three presumably complementary species. The diversity was deliberate. There had been too many paths taken by the myriad cultures that had formed the Hoveny Concentrix -- let alone the unknown biological constraints of its mysterious members -- to make any one present-day species the optimum researcher. The greater the diversity in a research team, the First administrators reasoned, the more likely it would contain some being capable of understanding whatever they found.

There was also the expectation that working in such teams would promote greater understanding of one another and so foster peace. None of the species loosely allied in this quadrant of space were technically at war – at this moment. Few, however, could

claim closer association than limited trading agreements or the sharing of derogatory jokes aimed at the newcomer Humans. That might have remained the state of things, but for a mutual fascination concerning the vast civilization which had preceded them all, leaving puzzling ruins throughout their systems. The First formed almost unnoticed, an ongoing research collaboration conducted with deceptive informality by academics of all species, the name an acknowledgment of a level of cooperation that had never been managed before.

To date, the only concrete result of that cooperation was that no member of a Triad had actually killed another. Insulted, misunderstood, proposed inappropriate physical union, and found ways to brawl, yes. Still, Triads worked, and well. They were, after all, researchers with a purpose: to find out why the powerful Concentrix had failed, eons before those now studying them had done more than mark scent and howl.

Which was something the canid appeared to be doing now. Vasi sighed, grabbing the door frame of the transport and heaving himself inside as the multi-species’ cursing renewed almost as loudly as those throbbing, mournful cries. Perhaps the animal was disturbed to have been shoved to the very back.

The instant his eyes met those brown ones, the howling stopped. Vasi felt an unwelcome flood of happiness. It wasn’t his. The canid was somehow programmed to respond this way to him; the bio’face freely passing its simple emotional reflexes into his mind. Too freely.

Damn dog, Vasi thought again, turning his back on his personal curse. The only empty seats were the last two, near the beast. Ignoring those, he walked up the side aisle to the frontmost seat behind the driver and stood waiting. The Tolian occupying the spot beside Ebbet dropped his crest and, with a sidelong look out his emerald eyes, rose and moved aside. Ebbet made an approving noise in his throat as Vasi joined him. They both obligingly slid closer to the sidewall so Medya, who’d followed Vasi, could squeeze in with them. Being a typical Brill, she didn’t so much share the seat as prop some of her ample haunch along its edge.

Being a typical Brill, she was laughing. “You didn’t tell us you’d taught it to sing, Sai Vasilo,” their Triad’s Recorder observed. “And so quickly, too.”

“I didn’t tell you it could pass noxious fumes out of two orifices at once, either,” Vasi replied, his voice even as always. A Tidik trait, the inability to infect speech with emotion. The slender plates on either side of his neck vibrated with frustration.

Oblivious, Ebbet blinked all six eyes in what seemed random order and chuckled. “That much we all know. Especially after it eats raw omio roots. You didn’t mind my little addition to its supper, did you, Vasi? I thought you’d enjoy getting to know your new partner’s spectacular talent for yourself.”

Vasi didn’t bother to respond. Queeb humor was infamous; they had great difficulty comprehending why other species weren’t as amused by bodily functions or disparaging remarks about ancestry. They had even more difficulty with the concept of reverence for the dearly departed. Such interspecies’ insensitivity was one reason so many Queebs worked in waste management or became archaeologists. It also explained the common saying: never tell a Queeb where your family was buried.

The transport lurched forward, obedient to a schedule that had little leeway for latecomers and a driver likely resentful of both muddy feet and alien beasts. She appeared to be taking out such resentment on her passengers. Vasi braced himself, noticing the others did as well. Still, there were sounds, several which could be of laughter; the four Triads presently on Aeande XII were comprised of nine different species, so it wasn't always easy to tell. They shared a reason to be happy, if not common ways to express it. Vasi himself eagerly anticipated a night away from slogging up mountains and digging through mud barely thawed from winter. The gleeful bedlam in the transport grew louder as the vehicle swayed into the first switchback leading down to Crilliton.

Gleeful except for a sudden yip. Vasi winced as the bio'face transferred the flash of pain. Without intending to, he was on his feet immediately, pushing his way over Medya's soft leathery thighs, his extended nails digging into the nearest seatback for support. Standing and trying to move down the aisle was like trying to slope the mountainsides of home, only without the help of skis. The transport hit a pothole and abruptly lurched to one side. As Vasi hung on to avoid landing on Baoltor's lap, the Dain scowling a warning, he smiled to himself. Perhaps more like sloping on the heels of true spring, when the hills sprouted rocks to threaten all four knee joints.

The canid seemed equally experienced at bracing itself. It had backed against the last, still-vacant seat, the front pair of its four legs splayed out to provide the most stable possible platform. The setting sun peered through the clouds and into the mud-streaked windows, beams darting here and there as the transport leaned from side to side. The light revealed the long, pink tongue hanging from the creature's gaping mouth. A streak of bright red lay amid the foam along one edge.

The wounded tongue seemed of no concern. More accurately, the pain of having bitten itself was smothered under waves of joy through the bio'face as the beast noticed Vasi's approach. It lost all sense, crouching to sway its thin body in an uncontrolled spasm of greeting, its tail banging against the seat. Having thus lost any stability, the next turn of the transport to follow the hairpin of the road sent the beast flying down the aisle.

Vasi grunted as the creature slammed into his lower abdomen, suddenly compressing a few body parts not meant to be so abused. As he gasped and licked tears from his lips, the beast leaped up again, apparently viewing this contact as welcome.

The creature was more practiced at the bio'face than Vasi, but he'd learned enough to force disapproval from his mind into its, particularly when he felt this motivated. The happy squirming slowed and stopped, the beast dropping to the floor and doing its utmost to lie on its back submissively, even as the transport swerved madly around the next bend. Vasi had to reach down and grab it so it didn't roll back into the seat support and harm itself. He might be a member of a First Triad -- but this beast was more important than he was. Everyone, starting with Professor Emeritus Y Ebbet, of the 114th Siring by Raken, had left that in no doubt whatsoever.

The handling wasn't affectionate, but the creature responded as though he'd caressed it, rope-like tail banging against his boots. Vasi did his utmost to ignore the emotions rippling across the bio'face.

He turned and, grabbing seats for purchase, began pulling himself forward again, only to halt in dismay as Ebbet's face appeared over Medya's lap. The Queeb's voice was

unfortunately loud: “Finder Durgin held it on her lap, during rides like this. Protected it from the bumps. Shouldn’t you, Sai Vasilo?”

Vasi froze in dismay. The beast was dripping with mud and smelled worse than usual. He was wearing the only fine clothes he’d brought to Aeande XII, in hopes of finding some attractive being interested in mutual stimulation at the bar -- or at least a dance or two.

Judging by the laughter in the transport, those were hopes he should abandon now.

Damn dog.

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“I concur with Finder Vasilo. We should go here today.” Medya’s ivory-tipped finger dimpled the surface of the image displayed on the map table. “Our records of the uppermost area are incomplete.”

Ebbet considered this thoughtfully, tilting his head as though the angle made some additional information available only to a Queeb’s multiple eyes. Vasi would have taken it for affectation in anyone else, but he had nothing but respect for the scholar, Queeb or not. Well, respect and an ongoing sense of humiliation. How could he possibly contribute himself to this fine Triad, except as the keeper of that beast?

He might be smarting over last night, which had been every bit as demeaning an experience as he’d feared – including a regrettable incident involving a bodily function -- but Vasi couldn’t help but be excited by the red-stained area under Medya’s fingertip. It was high-risk. The slope indicated challenged any he’d seen on his homeworld, but the potential ... he leaned closer, sure he wasn’t imagining a curved outline, a suggestion of something buried, possibly a structure more elaborate and intact than any found thus far. Looking for such clues was his job, as was getting them there safely. Vasi found it hard to keep the flaps under his chin still. “The forecasters are calling for gusty winds out of the northeast, Professor,” he made himself say. “Clouds are already forming on the peaks. I’d be remiss not to warn of the potential for a sudden snowfall.”

“There’s always potential,” Medya growled. “It’s spring, for Grasis’s sake. One minute we’re huddling around heaters, the next there’s mould growing over my butt.”

Vasi shuddered quietly. The Queeb roared with laughter, disturbing the canid’s sleep. Its brown eyes puzzled at the three of them, then closed again. The beast had better manners than some, Vasi admitted to himself. Despite his initial skepticism, it obeyed the signals he’d been told to use and would stay curled on the floor until required for its task. Curled on the floor as close to his boots as possible, but Vasi had learned nothing would discourage its desire for such proximity. If ordered to lie by the doorway, the creature would pretend to comply, then somehow be lying nearer each time he checked until almost underfoot. The creature only seemed content when in imminent danger of being stepped on – or, as now, when the Triad began to move. Vasi found himself fascinated by how the sound of Medya clearing off the map table was enough to bring the canid’s head and ears up to attention, its furred body tense with anticipation, eyes riveted on him.

That anticipation shivered through the bio’face – likely both ways. Vasi preferred outside and active himself and, though he had his reservations about the weather, he felt

his own ears stiffen with excitement. The find they could make today? What questions might it answer about the Hoveny? How many more might it raise? He couldn't wait to see.

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Three hours later, Vasi settled his hip against one walking pole and stared, aghast, at what waited for them.

Field work wasn't tidy or without hazard – that's what he liked about it – but the aircar hadn't left them on a mountain slope. This was the icy tongue of a monster ready to lick them from the face of the planet. The spill of ice, wrinkled and split by black, water-slicked crevasses, groaned and snapped as it moved. Chunks larger than Medya rattled free from its face to join the jumble already damming a glacial lake.

Above? Vasi shrugged his loose hood to his shoulders and tilted his head back. The mountain's peak leered down, baring cloud teeth that ripped through what blue sky remained. It might be calm here, but the wind at those upper elevations would strip flesh from bone.

“Ah, who has the lunch pack? Vasil, do you recall where it's packed?”

“Lunch?” The Tidik couldn't believe his ears or eyes. He must be misreading the Queeb. No rational being could stare at this – this death incarnate -- and ask about food. It must be a valiant effort to shore up their spirits, so close yet so far from possible treasure.

The canid didn't need help with its spirits, busy prancing around their feet. It appeared to disregard anything higher than its eager nose, and began pushing that supposedly tender organ under a loose rock.

“I've got the lunch,” Medya said, shouldering the harness for the larger of the two grav sleds. Ebbet already had the smaller tethered to his back, secured by straps that took advantage of his naturally hunched shoulders.

“Then lead the way, Finder,” the Queeb ordered, pointing at the preoccupied canid. “We've no time to waste with the weather this unsettled. I won't leave a promising site to be buried under the next avalanche without at least an autosampler in place. And our Triad's marker.”

“Very well,” Vasi replied, abandoning hope that the Queeb was playing another trick on him. He summoned the beast with a tap of one hand against his leg, watching as it leaped forward with delight in every body part and surging through the bio'face. It sat before him, waiting for instructions.

Vasi hesitated before giving the 'find' signal with both hand and thought, his uncertainty plain to read in the faint shuddering of his neck flaps, had any of his companions the perception to see it.

Strangely, the beast hesitated as well, its face lifted to one side as though it studied him, ears perked upwards.

“Find,” Vasi said quietly, sure his voice could carry no emotion to confuse the animal.

The canid whirled on its haunches and headed for the glacier, looking back over its shoulder as if to be sure they followed. Vasi grabbed his poles and settled his pack, then started moving. The first part of their climb would be simple enough. As soon as winter had eased, Ebbet had hired a crew of laborers to blast a ramp up one side of the glacier’s face. Gravel and debris, melted clear this spring, formed a roadway from the valley floor to the top of the ice sheet. A good, steady slope. They were all fit and trained for this – the First expected their Triads to be able to cope with fieldwork. Vasi resolutely kept his eyes focused on the happily wagging tail ahead of him, between glances at the instrumentation festooning his left arm and wrist.

He’d grown up on mountainsides and his every instinct told him this was the wrong time to be on this one. The sooner he and the beast found the suspected Hoveny site, Vasi reasoned coldly, the sooner they could start running for their lives.

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Every Hoveny find on Aeande XII had been made in these mountains, old upthrust sea beds now eroded to reveal their former life as city-lined coasts. Their low altitude was a gift. Even the canid panted comfortably and Medya was able to make a running commentary of their trek into her recorder, much of it laden with cheery-sounding phrases in her own tongue, as though she too found Comspeak inadequate. Vasi thought he might ask her, when they were back in camp. If they got back to camp. The wind had tilted over the peak and was spinning columns of loose white snow, catching sparks from the sunshine. A warning.

They were now traveling on the ice sheet itself, lint on the mountain’s blue-white shoulder. There was a path, beaten into the snow and smoothed by the same crew who had provided the ramp. It saved the Triad’s strength for what mattered -- if they found it. The orbital and aerial surveys only located possibilities. It was up to him, Vasi realized as he moved one foot carefully ahead of the other, never trusting a path he hadn’t made himself.

And the canid. The beast wore boots on its feet as well today, a necessity as the sun’s warmth softened the snow into a glue prone to stick and accumulate on any surface. It had only taken one such excursion without the boots to prove their value to both canid and Vasi, who’d had to use his bare hands to melt the hardened ice balls trapped between the beast’s sore and bleeding footpads. The bio’face had shared the discomfort – and the easing of it.

The discomfort hadn’t slowed the beast. When on the hunt, the canid was determined, Vasi had to admit. Its keen senses of smell and hearing were their guide, not as accurate or sensitive as instrumentation, but exquisitely more discerning. Humans had finally convinced the First that their beasts were able to distinguish true Hoveny ruins, with their characteristic construction materials, patterns of decay, and faint sounds of hibernating technology, from those of other civilizations.

He wasn’t convinced the damn dog could find anything but trouble.

Vasi flexed his six-fingered hands around the handles of his walking poles. He should be towing a sled himself, laden with sensors. He’d packed one this morning, but Ebbet had dismissed the need for such equipment, along with three years of Vasi’s

training and skill, with one flick of a gloved tentacle. The scruffy beast, the Queeb asserted, was all they’d need. Since Professor Emeritis Y Ebbet of the 114th Siring by Raken was the being with a reputation to risk, Vasi could hardly protest.

Yet. The beast might work for food pellets and carry itself, Vasi thought bitterly, but if it failed to locate anything worthwhile, he’d protest, in writing, with enough adjectives to make his feelings clear even in Comspeak.

They walked, single-file, the canid leading and Vasi behind, for the better part of another hour. The Tidik divided his attention between the clouds skittering by overhead and the crosshairs on the locator strapped to his right wrist, which would let him know when they were standing on the suspected Hoveny site.

Suddenly, Vasi’s pole went deeper into the snow than he’d expected, and he pulled up short. The beast stopped as well, head cocked towards him. A hand signal and the canid eased down to its belly, chin on its paws. It seemed glad of the rest.

“Are we there?”

“Don’t move,” Vasi snapped, raising his arm to bar both his companions. He took a step back, then another, before probing the path ahead ever-so-gently with his extended pole.

Snow crumpled away, as if he’d touched some area of rot. The resulting hole was small, but intensely dark, promising depth. “Crevasse,” the Tidik said tersely. The path continued beyond, its surface unmarked and innocent.

There wasn’t talk of turning back. Instead, the Triad pulled out safety lines and tied themselves together at intervals long enough to prevent all three from dropping into the same hidden crack. Even the canid was leashed. When ready, Vasi signaled it to move forward and they continued, going around the crevasse, testing every footstep. The Tidik and Queeb planted their walking poles deeply into the snow as emergency supports each time Medya, their heaviest and so most at-risk member, followed them across any chancy area.

Midday, but the air temperature was plummeting. Vasi didn’t need instruments to tell him so – he watched the frosty beard forming along the canid’s jaw and a single icicle grow from the dribbling of its moist nose. When he felt it shiver, he halted their procession to adjust the warming rings strapped around its middle and chest. Its natural covering was useless in this environment, little more than short wiry hair, white with random blotches of black too small to soak up appreciable radiation from the sun. The beast, for all its lack of brain matter, appeared to understand and stood patiently, tail swaying side-to-side.

“We should be almost there,” Medya mumbled around the nutrient tube stuck between her teeth. The cold couldn’t touch the Brill through those layers of blubber and thick outer skin, but she suffered from the demands of steady movement, far preferring quick bursts of activity followed by naps. Ebbet was almost impossible to discern within his bulky thermal suit, with its broad faceplate instead of the goggles worn by his two-footed and two-eyed companions. He bounced impatiently from foot to foot. Protected like this, even an old Queeb like Ebbet could outmarch them all.

“We’d better be,” Vasi said without taking his eyes from the cliff in front of them. They’d turned to parallel the leading edge of the glacier, cutting across what would someday be a valley if the climate of this world continued to warm as predicted. “I don’t want to move any closer to those --” he used his pole to point.

Overhangs of snow draped each dip and ledge along the cliff’s face, beautiful and ominous. The wind played with them, pretending to carve but really building the edges out further and further. Gravity would ultimately win, Vasi knew. Best not be anywhere downslope when that happened.

“Storm, avalanche, or crevasse,” Medya laughed. “You suggesting a bet, Sai Vasilo, or just being your cheery self?”

The Tidik felt the flaps on either side of his neck rising with fury. “You mock me,” he accused, wishing his voice was anything but calm, so the others would for once realize how much he meant what he said. “I know mountains as you do not.” The canid made a strange noise – a growl deep in its throat, as if agreeing with Vasi and sharing his temper. It could, perhaps, through the bio’face. An odd ally.

And, strangely, one the Queeb respected. He bent over to look at the canid, then straightened to direct his faceplate in Vasi’s direction. “My apologies, Finder Vasilo,” Ebbet said. “Yes, I’m aware of your expertise. It was one of the reasons I requested you for my Triad.” Before Vasi could do more than blink, the Queeb continued. “The spring avalanches will bury this potential find, but I’ve no wish to join it. Do you feel we have time to find it and plant our markers, or should we leave – now? You decide.”

Medya made an unhappy sound but said nothing more.

Vasi studied the peak. The wind still whipped the clouds up and away, though he didn’t doubt that could change on an instant. A cautious being wouldn’t be on this glacier today. Cautious beings didn’t make major finds. “Another hour, no more,” he decided, splitting the difference between his common sense and his desire. “After that, this site will have to wait until melt.”

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Vasi knew they were close by the jolt of excitement through the bio’face. He signaled Ebbet and Medya to hold position, giving the canid more leash as it began coursing back and forth over the same area. The tech manual had described this behavior, but he hadn’t seen it before. His own thrill as they closed on their prey would have been just as obvious to another Tidik. Vasi couldn’t control how his frills opened wide, venting pheromones of hunt and happiness. The canid wagged its tail as though sensing his reaction, but didn’t stop its feverish examination of what seemed only a slight bulge in the glacier’s surface.

“Could be a rock outcrop under the ice, something hard enough to force it up like this,” Ebbet said, his voice rising as though urging the Finder to contradict him.

Vasi consulted the one sensor he’d been able to bring, a detector discriminating enough to reveal if a vein of ore or refined metal lay beneath them. “No,” he obliged, unable to make his own Comspeak anything but flat and even. “Whatever’s down there isn’t natural. I’m detecting traces of Barsium III.” He didn’t need to remind his Triad that the substance was rare in this part of space, and favored by the Hoveny in their structures.

The canid didn't need confirmation. Its tail whipped madly back and forth, surely chilling the blood flowing through the appendage, then the beast rolled in the snow as if this could somehow smear the scent it so adored into its fur – a quirk of its nature Vasi was quite familiar with, following those too-ripe fish parts thoughtfully left outside his sleeping quarters.

Still, ridiculous as the beast looked, staggering joyfully to its feet, Vasi longed to express his own satisfaction as clearly. The Queeb and Brill, patting one another wherever they could reach with rather incoherent shouts of joy, both took turns to look at him as though waiting for some sign. Vasi sighed inwardly. If they really looked at him, if they smelled the air as even the beast knew to do, they'd know this was the happiest moment of his life.

He tried. “I am honored to be present at such a discovery, Professor Emeritus. Thank you again for your faith in me,” Vasi paused then added honestly, “and for the opportunity to operate the bio'face.”

If the damn dog had helped find a new Hoveny site, he owed it that.

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“Grasis' Glory.” Medya turned her great head almost completely around on her shoulders to gauge how far they'd already paced away from Ebbet and their sleds, trying to locate the outer boundaries of the site. “This wide? Are you sure, Finder?”

Vasi studied the canid. He'd given it food and water, and as much rest as any of them dared in this place of hazard. It was weary, yet its willingness came through the bio'face, a willingness to strive as long as he, Vasi, the present center of the beast's small universe, asked for the effort. “He's sure,” the Tidik answered, gesturing to how the canid's nose hovered about the snow, nostrils dripping so the hairy lip below remained crusted with ice. Its small body pulled on the leash, as though impatient for them to follow.

Medya followed, step by ponderous step, watching, as he did, for any sign of another crevasse. “You realize if your beast is accurate, Vasi,” she said with a cheery wheeze, “this must be one Grasis-sucking ruin.”

Vasi didn't try to puzzle out her reference. The canid had paused, nose up and working at the air. Then its unreadable face turned to his and he felt a sudden, formless anxiety through their link. “Something's wrong,” he warned without hesitation, his neck and chin flaps snapping closed with dread.

Time seemed to stop and listen to the words, as if as frozen as the wasteland of ice stretching on all sides. It hardly budged as Vasi whirled around, somehow sensing the direction of their danger. It scarcely started again before the cliff shrugged off its winter load of snow and ice, sending the avalanche towards them as a wall of shattered white.

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There was a saying. His father had been a mountaineer and used to drill this saying into a younger Vasi, day after day, trip after trip, upslope or downslope. The present-day version fought to remember it in the darkness, spitting out snow to mouth the words: “Mountains get so big because they eat fools.”

Fool? Maybe. Deaf and blind, but not mountain-food. Not yet. Vasi struggled to focus. First, assess himself. Nothing broken, but he was completely disoriented. Buried, but he'd instinctively curled his arms over his face and ducked away from the onrush of snow. His arms had some room to move. He could breathe.

Joy!!!! The bio'face filled with warmth as his return to full consciousness must have reached the canid. Warmth and pain. Vasi pushed aside snow until his left hand could reach his right wrist, fumble for the leash attached to it. He found it and pulled, dismayed as the tension disappeared. A clamp or the leash itself had given way. Waves of imposed joy and pain and fear alternated in his head, but he didn't have the heart to scold the poor creature. There was comfort for both in knowing they weren't alone.

Comfort, but what he really needed was to know which way was up. His locator couldn't help him. If anything, it added to the confusion as the indicator lights reflected from the snow, overwhelming any dim natural light that might penetrate and give the Tidik a clue where to start digging. He fought away panic, the real enemy. His environment suit would protect him from the cold. There was a distress beacon built into it. He could feel its vibration against his ribs, so it must have been activated by the force of the avalanche. But he couldn't stay buried like this, waiting for some possible rescue. He had to get out, find the others.

Hunt. Find. Not the words, but sensations rippling through the bio'face. Vasi smelled his own fear and tried to control it, concentrating on the link, sending back what he hoped was encouragement. Could the beast be free? Its body was small and light. It might have floated to the top of the torrent of snow.

Top. Vasi's mouth was dry. He bit viciously on his own tongue, tasting the sweet flatness of blood. He kept his lips closed and didn't swallow. After a moment or two, he parted his lips very slightly. The warm liquid flowed out the left side of his mouth and over his cheek, stinging the sensitive tissue lining his neck flaps. So. Vasi reached to his right, and started to dig his way to the surface, refusing to doubt.

Minutes or hours? He couldn't be sure without checking his wrist chrono, but didn't give into that impulse. It would take as long as it took. One gloved hand reached up to carve deeper into what was now a tunnel the width of his shoulders, the other taking the snow and carefully pushing it back and under him, patting it firm. He inched his way further up. Steadily, patiently. He would defeat the mountain.

He didn't battle alone. The bio'face surged with another's determination. Somewhere above him, two small paws were churning through the snow, two more shoving it back and away. Exhaustion, fear, pain. Echoes of his own or the beast's? It no longer mattered; both were sustained by their common need, to reach each other. They were brothers, bound by more than the device in Vasi's head.

The Tidik had almost fallen asleep, though still digging, when a flare of joy roused him. There was a pressure then a sudden chill on his right hand. As he realized what had happened, he cursed happily.

The damn dog had stolen his glove.

[li #]

Finder Sai Vasilo Aris pulled his feet free one at a time, and fell rather than sat down, his lap immediately filled with writhing canid. Fortunately, its paws stayed away from the more sensitive parts of his anatomy. Vasi hugged the creature to his chest to still it, then looked around himself, trying to understand what he saw.

It was as if the glacier had been stirred by Medya’s giant god. The sunlight struck at chunks of blistered ice and shattered rock protruding through the snow, sank into lines and drifts of blood-red dust. Nothing remained of their equipment or the trail. Nothing of Ebbet or Medya.

There was something else. Almost absently, Vasi noted the gleaming bronze of what could be the tip of a pillar or corner of a wall, close enough to touch. The Hoveny site Ebbet had so feared losing beneath the avalanche had, with the perversity of the mountain, been revealed instead.

He paid it no further attention, pushing the weight of the canid from his lap in order to stagger to his feet. A hand signal. “Find them,” Vasi ordered desperately. “Find them.” He did his best to picture the other two members of their Triad for the beast, unsure if that type of information could pass across their link.

The beast stared up at him, head tilted to one side in apparent confusion. It was panting heavily, the warming rings intact, but blood streaked its white flanks. There was more wherever its worn front paws stepped; blood also stained the snow it had dug away to save him. He asked the impossible again, Vasi thought with despair, and didn’t even know how to phrase the question.

His neck flaps opened with stress, pumping useless pheromones of hunt, need, anxiety into the frigid air. “I can’t find them myself,” he pleaded, nonsensically, as if the beast could understand the colorless words.

Its nostrils worked at something. Vasi stared, then relaxed his flaps further, the way he would to communicate his urgency to one of his own. “Find them,” he whispered, repeating the hand signal.

With a hoarse yip, the canid turned and ran, its tail up and wagging, a limping run leaving a trail of dappled red. It couldn’t run quickly – a mercy, since neither could Vasi. Not only was each step a study in either too-soft snow or upturned ice, but every part of his body hurt when he moved. Nothing broken, he told himself bitterly, but several things definitely bent.

The canid stopped by a rock larger than its body and made the same howling sounds it had on the transport. Forewarned by this and the unsettled feel of the bio’face, Vasi expected what he found as he brushed snow from the figure barely visible beneath the boulder. Professor Emeritus Y Ebbet, of the 114th Siring by Raken, would never analyze the secrets of this Hoveny site, or any other.

Vasi hesitated, wanting to pay proper respect, but minutes counted if Medya was injured. “Find her,” he ordered the canid, standing up and giving the signal.

The canid looked from the snow-covered corpse to Vasi, then back again. The Tidik repeated the signal, frantically. He waved in the direction he thought Medya might have been swept.

Abruptly, the beast seemed to understand. It began to push and jump its way through the loose snow in the direction he'd indicated. Vasi followed, worried by feel of exhaustion through the bio'face. He had no idea how to tell it to slow down, to conserve energy. He couldn't stop his own urgency from passing to the beast.

He should have tried harder. He should have reattached the leash. He should have remembered even half of what his father had tried to tell him about mountains and their appetites.

Because the dog ran straight over the crevasse before either of them could suspect this latest treachery, the snow dropping from beneath its wounded feet. There was time for Vasi to throw himself forward and flat, his fingers unable to reach even that stupid rope of a tail; there was time for the creature to yelp in terror, the emotion pouring through the bio'face until Vasi shouted as well.

Then, a searing flash as if a light had lanced through his brain. And, nothing.

Not nothing. A weak, terrified sound echoed upward. “Is – Is someone there?” More strongly. “Watch out! Don't come closer! Who fell?” this in a hoarse whisper, as if the speaker feared having lost her rescuer. “Is anyone there?”

“I'm here, Medya. Vasi.”

“Who fell?” the voice asked, confused and querulous. “Was it – Ebbet?”

“Just the damn dog,” Vasi told her in his calm, emotion-free voice, licking tears from his lips, hands gripping the snow.

[li #]

Waiting rooms seemed unsettled, like weather over a mountain's peak: welcoming, but never comfortable, friendly, but never personal. Vasi didn't care for them, especially when he was surrounded by aliens.

He didn't like the room and the aliens, two male and three female Humans, probably didn't like him. At best, they likely suspected he was spying on them. At worst? Could they tell he was here without permission? Without authorization from the First? Vasi kept his back straight and flaps courteously closed – as if a Human might notice – and tried to remain as inconspicuous as the only non-Human on this world could be.

The door opened. A pair walked out, a Human female and a dog. Vasi was startled to see such a different beast. This one was heavysset, and darkly furred with a coat that rippled like issa-silk. Its head was larger than the entire body of that damn dog at the bottom of the crevasse. But the soft brown eyes surveying him curiously, the wet moving nose, were the same. Vasi opened his mouth, wanting to ask –

“Sai Vasilo Aris, please.”

He closed his lips and answered the summons, stepping past the pair.

The Human behind the desk – there was always a desk after a waiting room – stood when Vasi entered the room. Another Human remained seated, a frown on her face. “Welcome, Finder Aris,” the standing Human said in a pleasant voice. Comspeak, of course. “I'm Samuel Edwards, Assistant Director of the Biointerface Project. This is our

Liaison with the Research Council of the First, Atima Seung. Please. Have a seat. What can we do for you?”

Vasi sat; the Human matched his movement. “I want one of your dogs,” he informed them.

“Our dogs work with Human partners, Finder Aris,” Seung said in a soft voice, with a hint of steel beneath.

“So your species can be of value within a Triad,” Vasi countered. “I am aware of the political rhetoric. It means nothing to me. I want a dog. I’m willing to pay what you require.” The words came out flat. Perhaps they were harsh. He saw their reaction, the tightening of their mouths, the way they looked at each other as if summoning support. But Vasi didn’t know what else to do. His flaps opened despite his best efforts to restrain them, surely another feature of his alienness that would offend these beings.

Edwards tapped a datacube with one blunt-nailed finger. “We’re aware you had a bio’face installed – without our approval -- to allow your Triad to continue working with Finder Durgin’s dog. That wasn’t meant to be a permanent arrangement, Finder Aris. You’ve already had the implant removed. I really don’t see that we can accommodate you. Surely a Finder of your abilities would prefer to use technological means – and you already have a fabulous new site to explore.”

Vasi’s flaps began to tremble, and a tear trickled maddeningly along one lip. “I want another dog,” he said evenly, dreadfully sure they were going to refuse. Why wouldn’t they? They couldn’t understand.

He didn’t.

Seung held up her hand when Edwards would have answered. She leaned forward, her strange pale eyes intent on Vasi. “I feel for your loss, Finder Aris.”

“The Professor Emeritus --”

“Mesky,” she corrected. “Your dog.”

He hadn’t known the damn dog had a name – or that Humans named their animals. “Mesky,” he repeated. “I want another.”

“Why? And don’t tell me it’s because you couldn’t have found the site without him,” the female’s voice was sharper. “I won’t accept that.”

“Because. Because.” Vasi stopped on the word, unable to frame the thought, let alone wrap it in their mutual, pitiful language. Comspeak. Common speak. Useless speak. The way it was on Aeande XII; the way it always was away from his own kind. He gave up, flaps quivering, dumping unshareable scents of misery and loneliness into the room.

A warm hand touched his arm. The Human female had come to crouch beside him, her expression now one he couldn’t read. “I didn’t mean to upset you,” she told him.

“How do you know I’m upset?” he asked. “I haven’t told you so.”

“You are Tidik.” A slight wave to his neck. “I may not be physiologically able to detect your messages through the air, but I do know they are released during stress. I also know you can’t change the inflection of your voice, so I must discount that as a measure of your emotions. But the droplets on your upper lip? I’ve read Tidik literature, Finder

Aris. Those are what we would call tears, are they not? Released, as ours, during sadness or pain. So I know. You cared for Mesky. That’s why you want another dog.”

“He could do that, too,” he confessed, overwhelmed by such unexpected empathy. “Understand what I felt, without this nonsense of speech. We Tidik – it’s not easy for us to work with other species. They call us cold and unfeeling, because we don’t wail and shout as they do. But the dog knew -- ” Vasi stopped, embarrassed, and looked from one Human to the other. “It made me feel less alone,” he admitted to them and to himself. “A silly reason, isn’t it? I’ve wasted your time. I apologize.” He stood to go.

“I can’t promise another dog for you, Finder Aris,” Edwards said with what sounded like honest regret. “The bio’face is the only trump card we have right now, the only way we can gain access to the Hoveny sites for our species. Maybe, one day...”

Vasi nodded. “I knew. I just hoped.” He understood the reluctance of the First. Humans were numerous, but possessed unremarkable technology, biology, and culture. Why admit more of the species to the secrets of the First? But Vasi looked at Seung and suddenly wondered what they didn’t know. He’d never met another alien so perceptive, so willing to work within his own parameters to understand him.

Perhaps the important thing about that damn dog wasn’t about dogs at all, but the kind of beings who valued such partnership enough to bring it with them into space.

“As you know, Liaison Seung, my Triad remains in charge of the most significant Hoveny find ever made on Aeande XII, possibly anywhere,” Sai Vasilos Aris said in his even, unemotional voice. “We lost our Analyst in the tragedy. Do you have a qualified Analyst available for the coming field season? One who can climb?”

After a shocked pause, they both spoke at once: “What – What did you say? Pardon? Are you serious?” Then, Seung, almost angrily: “You want a Human Analyst?”

“A Human.” Vasi didn’t know how to show he shared their astonished pleasure, but opened his flaps a trifle and sent out a scent of pleased anticipation for himself. “I think I’ll enjoy the company.”

[END]