

Water and Stone

By Clint McInnes

I hate my job.

'Oh?' you say, and 'Really?' you say, and 'That's rich!' you say. And I know you must wonder what's so different about that, and it's not as if I could blame you for thinking that way, since just about everyone who does field work for Survey would like to be somewhere, anywhere else. Or don't you feel that way?

Oh. You *don't* work for Survey? Just passin' through, huh?

Sales? Whatcha sellin'?

Nah. I've already got three implants, and this place ain't got a GPS yet, so the subdermal locator wouldn't do me much good. Looks like you're out of luck.

Oh, they gave you your walkin' papers already? I guess it's started then. But I beat 'em to the punch.

You must not have run into too many Surveyors, then. How long you been on this sales job?

Ha! Okay. You haven't even been through your first regen yet, have you?

Fine. None of my business. I'm just here to get wasted anyway.

Yeah, yeah, I've heard 'em all. *Everybody* has the galaxy's worst bitch of a job. That's a given. But this is a whole new level of hate. Trust me.

No. I hate ... really, really, really, really hate ... my job.

And my boss. I hate her, too. And her boss. And the Regional Coordinator. Him I hate worst of all.

You have to ask? He's the one that picked me for this plum assignment, this cushy little position on this ... *idyllic* planet. Yeah, this is his fault. For the time bein'.

Hey, bud, hang on a sec.

Yo, barkeep! Do it again.

Oh, come off it, you know I'm good for it!

Fine. Here's my chit. Keep it.

Yeah, whatever, just leave the bottle. I ain't going anywhere.

Excuse me? Oh, well, he brought me in from the regional headquarters on Distant where I never actually had to look into the faces of the races we ... um ... deal with.

Of course I'm serious. Oh, yeah, I had it made back at HQ! Nice office all to myself where I wrote my reports and totaled up my statistics and banged my assistant three or four days out of five.

Nah, she wasn't what you'd call 'beauty-queen material', but she wasn't bad. Long hair. Nice rack.

Why? Not a clue. To this day I don't know what I did to get him so totally pissed off, but he really had it in for me. If I could just ...

How's that? Oh, why do I hate the job? Okay. Have you been Outside yet? Well, it's a pretty little ball o' dirt. No dangerous wildlife to speak of; nice, warm oceans; beautiful weather year-round; and more prime, beach-front property than Eden, Earth, and Prosper combined.

Yeah, the lower gravity don't hurt either.

You really interested? I'll dish the lowdown, if ya got a couple hours. I oughta be good for that much longer.

Fine. Here, let me top off your drink. You'll wanna get comfortable ...

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It was maybe two hours after making landfall that I first decided T'knn-t'krri't had retirement-community potential. Y'know, though, somebody's eventually gonna have to do something about that name. It translates as 'High-Mother of the Chosen Folk' or words to that effect. Say what you want to about the univoders, they always lose (or add) some nuance of meaning that you can only get by absorbing the language yourself. Main worry with that is that no human could begin to pronounce it correctly, since the natives' lingo drifts into the ultrasonic about half the time. Angie had suggested I name the planet 'Oemor'. That's her dog's name. It's 'Romeo' spelled backwards. He's a shih-tzu-chihuahua cross-breed. She named him that because he was so scared of a toy poodle bitch he'd run into right after she got him.

Angie? My girlfriend. Survey researcher. Best thing on the whole planet. I'd've slid right off the plate if she hadn't been here.

Nah. I'm not into dogs ... especially those tiny, witless, self-propelled-mop types that yap constantly ... and I could tell the feeling was mutual. Oemor was a particularly loathsome example of the species. I'd go without sex for three months before I named a planet after that fuzz-ball flea-hotel, and I said as much.

Got that right. Given Angie's reaction, I'd say three months was a conservative estimate.

Oh, yeah, picking out a name for the place was part of the job. They called it a perk. Big deal. The rules said I couldn't name it after myself, so what's the point?

But I digress.

Oh! Sorry! Didn't mean to spill it on you, bud. Here, have a wipe.

Okay, you wanted some background, so here it is. We're in Corridor Three, roughly the same distance from the galactic core as Earth. Our star looks like it grew up in the same nursery as Sol, and the planet's year is 1.06 Standard years. The day's twenty-two Standard hours and change, but they divide it into ten sections, just like everywhere else in the Commonwealth. It's a little less dense than Earth, and a good bit bigger as well, so we only have to deal with oh-point-eight-eight gravities.

Yeah, it's a pretty decent benefit. Nice for the joints, if you still have your original equipment, which I do. It's a mostly-water world, even more so than Earth. About five sixths of the surface

is ocean, and the land spreads out over two smallish continents and some fifteen million mostly-tropical islands.

Yep, you heard right. Fifteen million ... plus. And if you don't get more than a couple thousand clicks from the equator, you can swim from one island to the next in a few minutes. Beach-house anyone? You can understand Survey's interest in the place.

Believe it. As long as I was out of sight of the water, it reminded me of Eden. The forests were unbelievable, the trees pushin' up over two hundred meters. Well, technically, they ain't trees, according to the scientific types. More like a reinforced variation of grass, and it grows a couple meters a day in the wet season. But they look a hell of a lot like trees, and I don't worry about details. A guy can get really bogged down in details.

Right. Which brings me to the natives. Now, I'm as open-minded as the next guy. Hell, you've gotta be if you want a career in Survey. And I've met four of the xeno's here and there. Noxians, Brulls, The Ett, Alorr-dorada. You know your xeno's?

Good, then you know not a one of those is remotely humanoid in shape. Hell, they ain't even recognizable as a life-form to most humans. Maybe that's what made it okay, just their sheer alien-ness. The Ett don't need to eat anything, just absorb cosmic rays for life energy, and the Noxians aren't precisely solid, being two-dimensional representations of ... but you already know about that stuff, don't you?

Okay. Your average Kri't is about, oh, two and a half meters ... long? Tall? Depends on how many of its legs it's using. You've seen vids?

You're kidding. Oh, that's right, you've only been here two days! Okay, I can see that. Guess you haven't had much chance to nose around, huh?

Whatever. Couple meters and change, nose to tail. Look like a third-grader's idea of Space Otters, if the third-grader happens to be stoned. They're long and sleek enough, and they've got that rich, brown fur, so if the light's bad and you don't look too close and there's nothing around to give 'em scale, you *might* take one for a mink. But then you notice *all* those *legs*, and the fact that its arms have two elbows and hands on the ends, opposable thumbs and all, and then you realize it's watching you with four eyes, not two, and that its tail is a lot thinner than an otter's, and forked, and prehensile.

Still, they're one of the most nearly-humanoid races we've ever run across. And they're smart, too, in their own way.

Ha! *Their own way.* That turned into my biggest problem. They did things their own way, and no amount of reasoning or persuasion or threat made a dent. But I was too stupid to figure out why.

See, the main reason I'm here is to get the dam project going. I said that, didn't I? No? Oh. Well, it is. 'Cause of the rain. We've got better than four meters ... *meters*, now, not centimeters... of rain coming down on most of the land area every year, and ...

Yeah, that's right. Rains some every day. It's rainin' out there now. Anyway, every piss-ant little island has at least one major river. Fresh, too, spring-fed and everything. See, the ocean is *reeeeal* shallow near the equator, that's some of the reason behind all those islands. It gets way deep at the poles, fifteen, twenty, maybe twenty-five clicks, but around here it's only a hundred meters or so, tops, and usually less than ten. Between the islands and such. Survey saw the

numbers and ... well, okay, I was the one who worked up the numbers. But it wouldn't have mattered who did it, the conclusion was a real no-brainer. Hydroelectricity.

No. See, the natives don't use electrical power.

No kiddin'. Say what you will, but I *know* it's a choice they made. They could produce it if they wanted to. I mean, you've seen examples of their machinery, ain't ya? Seen a mill? A steam engine? A casting house? No, wait, you ain't been Outside. Keep forgettin' that. Anyway, they get an unbelievable amount of energy from the rivers, but it's *all* mechanical! Such gear-trains and drives and transmission systems you never saw! And it ain't like they don't have the raw materials or anything. They use copper and aluminum for all kinds of things, and they get real fancy with some of their alloys, and they've had the local equivalent of thermoset plastics for better'n three hundred years, and hell, *we've* only had that for about four hundred. These buggers are *smart*, I don't care what the psycho wonks say. They've just got this aversion to electric power. Hah! And nobody ever bothered to find out why. Our techies just figured the natives for a bunch of schmucks. I mean, how *wrong* could you get!

But the dams were going in anyway, local wishes or not. One of the more distasteful tasks I get to perform is clearing the locals out where the reservoirs will be. That's what I've been doing for weeks and weeks now. Seems more like years. They don't like it, not even a little. See, they've got this, whaddaya call it, this connection to the land where they were born. You know how salmon always come back to the same spot where they were spawned?

Well, they do. Very same stream. And these guys are just as attached to the old homestead. Some of the Enforcers were thinkin' it's a damn good job they don't have a central government, or we'd've had a real fight on our hands, for sure, no lie.

Uh-uh. They didn't get it either.

I'll get to that. So, what was I sayin'? Oh, yeah. The clans trade some with each other, and they don't have any wars going or anything, but they don't exactly mingle, you know? Hah! And here I am, the freakin' "cultural liaison", and I didn't have a clue about why. What a dope!

Here, lemme top off your glass. Ya look thirsty.

Yo, barkeep! One more just like it.

Yeah, the whole bottle, whadda I look like, a Cub Scout?

You let me worry about that. I need advice, I'll call my mother.

Sorry about that. Where was I? Oh, right. Dams. Yeah, I tell 'em 'bout the dam. They don't care. I tell 'em how they'll be under six meters of water if they stay put. They either don't care or don't believe me. And then if I've gotta get Enforcers involved, things can get pretty tense. Krri't are a good bit stronger than your average human, but the Enforcers, ya might say, ain't average. We never did lose anybody, on either side, but it got close more than once. If I'd just done my homework, instead o' believin' everything the psych techs told me as gospel, we coulda got around that, but noooooo. I had to be Mister Dense. And there was this one clan ...

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Lotta things run across my mind as the boat pulls up to the dock, but the one that kept popping to the surface is, *This is my eighth trip out here*. I thought about that a lot, as I mulled over the fact

that I'd yet to even get a glimpse of the matriarch, much less a meeting. That's what really galled me. There I was, trying to save the lives of these ... well ... these beings. Okay, maybe not save their *lives*, exactly, 'cause they could just swim away, but ... well, help 'em out. You know? Get 'em a little compensation for the hell the Corporation planned to put 'em through. I mean this *is* their world, after all, and we *are* sorta like invaders, if you think about it.

Yeah. Tyrants, in the old sense of absolute rulers. The final arbiters of reality, as Nietzsche would put it. Benevolent tyrants, but tyrants all the same.

Damn. Can't seem to keep my mind from wandering today.

But I'd been out there eight times, and the clan leader wouldn't give me the time of day. And it's not as if I could teleport. Oh, no. Everything at Base is still on darkforce batteries, and they aren't too keen on "wasting" their power on frivolities like, you know, making *my* job something other than grueling. It'll be months before they have a grid set up in the beachhead settlement, and years before anything gets out that far.

Huh-uh. No aircars either, heavens no! Can't be upsettin' the locals with big, white "things" flying around overhead. As if management gives a damn *what* the locals think. They're just being cheap. Standard operating procedure.

Oh, it's never hard to find 'em. The Krri't like to live near the water. That's no trick on this planet, since there's more coastline here than on most of the rest of the worlds in the Commonwealth combined, so the bulk of 'em make their homes on the islands. The ones who choose to live on the continental masses always stay near the local watercourse, and again there are just so many rivers that's not a problem either. They're about as aquatic as a land-creature can get, and are just as much at home in the salt water as the fresh. Not that this humongous ocean is all that salty, especially near the equator. The exogeologists have any number of theories about that, and I didn't think much of a single one of 'em. Knowing what I know now, that goes double. Blind, completely blind, and I'm just as bad.

Nah, hell no, we haven't been here long at all. Not quite a year. And we've only been on decent terms with the natives for the last, oh, seven, maybe eight months. And those knuckleheads think they can scope the whole history of the place in that time! But the jerks missed something ... something *big*. We all did. You'll see what I mean in a minute.

Uh-uh, that's my point. See, T'knn-t'krri't is tectonically active. You seen all the volcanoes? No, wait, you haven't been Outside; damn, why can't I remember that?

Whatever. This place was *very* active in recent times, geogologic ... geliogolo ... dammit ... ge-o-lo-gi-cally speaking. Better slow down. I've wondered more than once how that might've affected the natives' development. I mean, it was barely five thousand years ago that this planet was all but covered with volcanoes. The ... ge-o-lo-gi-cal record ... ya wouldn't think that'd be such a hard word to say ... the geological record shows evidence of a couple hundred-thousand years of incredibly violent earthquakes. I'm talkin' world-shattering stuff. Like the crust just couldn't get comfortable, you know? And they've been here a hell of a lot longer than that, and I'm thinking, how did they survive? *Where* did they survive? The place just wasn't inhabitable.

It bothered me if I thought about it too long, so lately I'd been tryin' not to think about it at all. Hoo-boy, was *that* a mistake!

Ease off, chum, I'll get to that. So, about the visit. The skipper tied up the boat and I jumped up onto the dock. Krri't don't jump. They slide. They flow. They zip. They launch. They're lots

of fun to watch, 'specially if a group of 'em start playing in the water. Reminds me of juvenile otters, the way they go at life with such zest. That's probably another thing that makes 'em not-so-threatening to humans. They always seem to be in a good mood. As long as you don't mess with 'em. That was our mistake.

This stuff ain't bad for rotgut, is it?

Yeah, *course* it's imported. Human's don't mess with the local booze, even if the natives do try to get us to drink with 'em.

And, hey, that's one *more* thing that bothers me about this situation with Ko'oor, the matriarch. She's the first Krri't to give me the cold shoulder (cold neck? cold elbow, maybe? they don't really have shoulders) the whole time I've been here. But that day, I was determined to talk with her. The dam was finished. It was scheduled to start floodin' the valley in two days, or as soon as I could get the last of the locals out, whichever came first.

Yeah. You heard me right. They were gonna flood the valley whether the Krri't moved out or not. Really, I guess it's not quite as bad as if it was humans they did that to. Krri't swim like fish after all. But just taking their land away like that, when they don't want to go? It just seemed ... well, dishonorable. You know ... mean. 'Low-rent', as they used to say back home.

So I figured this was my last chance to get 'em to move. I knew, no matter how greedy and grasping the management was here, they wouldn't, at least, flood the place until I'd left. And I wasn't leaving without this clan.

Theirs was a sizable island, maybe a hundred-fifty meters wide and ten times that long, a big chunk of basalt stickin' up out of the riverbed, covered with thousands of years' worth of deposits and plant growth. It split the river but good, those tree-things growing thick down the middle. Looked kinda like a spine or something. I took one of the paths in toward the longhouse.

There were lots of Krri't zipping around. It was getting into the cane harvest season, and they like to get the early growth for mash. You don't know about their hard liquor, do you?

Yeah, they pull the new canes when they're just starting to turn from green to yellow, mash 'em up, and let the mess ferment for a few weeks. It gets pretty potent even before they distill the stuff. Runs about a hundred-sixty proof after all's said and done, and that by itself would be enough to knock you on your ass, but there's some other ingredients, trace elements and the odd protein, that make it an experience you *don't* want to repeat. Downing a shot of that stuff feels a little like havin' your face pushed out the back of your head by a chunk of dry ice. And the hangover's much, much worse.

Yeah, I did. Just once, and that was twice too many. But the natives drink the stuff like mother's milk.

So. I kept a sharp eye peeled for the matriarch. There's not a whole lot of difference between the sexes, from our standpoint. Hell, most of 'em don't even have a set gender at all, best we can tell. Drones, or some such. But it takes a drone and donor and receptor to do the deed. The matriarch is the oldest donor of the clan.

Yeah, I know, but there's no other reasonable word that makes sense, and I can't pronounce the title they use. She's the clan's big cheese. Deal with it.

And she is big, by the way, relatively speaking. The matriarch is always heftier than the rest of the clan members, and some of the older ones have lighter patches on the throat. I knew Ko'oor was pretty old, maybe pushing three hundred, so she'd likely have the patches. But I walked the length of the island and then back to the center without seein' anything that might be her.

Here, have some more. Your glass looks lonely.

Heh. Killed it, did we?

Yo, barkeep! You know, you gotta say that to get its attention.

Beats me. I guess it's just the way they're programmed.

Huh. Worked before. Yo, barkeep! Hey, can we get some service over here?

No, dammit, I *haven't* had enough. Trust me, you'll be able to tell when I've had enough. Make it Tanqueray this time.

Blasted AI's! Think they know what's best for a human.

Yeah, same to you, bub!

You know damn well I don't have an aircar. And leave the bottle!

Where was I? I asked you that before, didn't I? Right. I stopped by the back door of the longhouse and waited until one of 'em scooted up to go in. I did the whole 'greeting' bit and went through the Ritual of Travelers, and he invited me to their third meal – they've got seven standard periods set aside for eating during the day, something about high metabolisms that I never really studied – so I followed him inside.

No, she wasn't. You might say the next couple of hours gave me a new appreciation for the definition of 'tedious'. I tried to chat 'em up, you know, get one of 'em to tell me where I could find Ko'oor, but they all seemed immune. Oh, they were friendly enough. Shared their water, shared their food, what of it a human could eat. There are some local alkaloids that you *don't* want to get on the outside of, mostly in the starchy foods. One the Krri't eat all the time, grows in the river like a cattail, looks a little like a yam when you dig it up. Works faster than cyanide. The 'One-Bite Potato' we call it.

Yeah, we did lose a couple who didn't feel like following the rules. The sucker smells great when it's cookin'. Management put the lid on any more 'experimentation' after that.

Well, they tried to share their booze, but you might say I wasn't in the mood. I'll never be in the mood for that stuff again, believe you me. But they weren't talking, not about what I wanted to know.

I decided to do one more walkabout before calling in the big guns, and took off for the far end of the island about, oh, forty minutes before sunset. I figured I could take a good look around and still have a little light left for the Enforcers, if it came to that. Turns out it wasn't necessary.

Krri't aren't what you'd call nocturnal, but they do okay in low light. They'll usually go about their business until a human thinks it's pitch dark, but when I stepped outside I couldn't see a soul. Not a one. Pretty weird, but I took off for the head of the rock.

She was waiting for me, right there on the point. Just sittin', smokin' that awful weed they like. I stayed away from her downwind side and sidled up all respectful to get her attention, but she spoke first.

I told ya I didn't like the univoder, didn't I? Yeah, piece o' junk. Don't know who sets the damn things up, but he must speak 'pidgin' as a native language. Anyway, she tells me I'm wasting my time. Right off the bat, no lie! No ritual, no greeting, no nothin'. So I launch in to try to explain about the dam, and she stops me and says it won't make any difference. Says they ain't leaving, and nothing I say can change her mind. I begged, I yelled, I threatened, I promised. No good. She said they didn't need to leave, that the clans along the river had gotten together and they "had it all fixed" and I shouldn't worry. And that's all she'd say. She just sat there, smokin', lookin' at me, all calm and cool. I told her the Enforcers would be there in a few minutes to move 'em all whether they felt like leaving or not, but she just did that two-handed wave thing they do when a human would shrug, and told me they wouldn't *stay* moved, and to do what I felt best.

It was the funniest thing. I had my comm out to call Base, but for some reason I couldn't say anything. It was like ... well, I don't know *what* it was like. It was weird. I figured, in the back of my mind, that she was doin' something to me, but I didn't know what. The tech guys had determined pretty early that Krri't don't have any esper talent. But I stood there with the comm in my hand until the sun had almost disappeared. She just sat and watched me the whole time. I never did call 'em. I finally just stuck it back in my pants and stalked off to the dock.

I was in such a bad mood by the time I got back to the boat that I wasn't worth talkin' to at all. I clumped down onto the deck and stomped over to the chair I'd had bolted to it, and flopped down into the canvas, all the time thinkin' about what idiots they were. Stubborn fools. In two days the rising water level would have crept back to their island. In a week, half of it would be flooded, and in another only the trees would be visible. But they'll stay, oh, yes, heaven forbid they should listen to reason. And heaven forbid management should consider any of the alternatives!

My sour face must have struck the skipper as funny. They think we look pretty comical anyway, you know, lurching around on just two legs the way we do. They have somewhere between six and twelve feet on the ground all the time, and they don't even grasp the *concept* of 'tripping', much less having a word for it in their language. I noticed him makin' that high squeak they make when they get amused.

Hey, you know, that's another thing. See, if you translate their jokes, the punch lines sound funny to us, and vice-versa. I figure any race that shares our sense of humor must be at least a little whacked. So, anyway, I ask him what's up and he don't say anything, just keeps chuckling. But I keep at him, and after a while he just points toward shore. I follow his finger.

There, right there in plain sight, big as life, the group I relocated not four days before is setting up shop ... lock, stock, and kittens. I cussed 'em the rest of the way back to Base.

That evening I dropped into Caitlynn's office – broke in on a meeting she was having with a couple of suppliers – and gave her my report in four sentences, and I didn't spare the language. Then I went to my room and locked the door and drank myself blind. Angie tells me I didn't come up for air for days, but I have no recollection of anything that happened until the beginning of this week. That was three days ago. She took me over to her place to dry out, and I *did* appreciate it. But she could have saved herself the trouble. I dove back in after I found out what was *really* happening.

And that brings us to today. This morning.

I jerked and rolled over when the alarm chimed, and I whacked at it a few times to turn it off. Angie must have set it in case I chickened out. The sun was just starting to peek over the horizon and through the window, but I couldn't work up enough energy to care. Getting out of bed was the very last thing I wanted to do. Someone had decided to use my head to test sonic disruption ordnance, and a flock of incontinent seagulls had obviously roosted in my mouth for at least a week. Besides that, I knew what faced me, knew that I was expected to go out to the site and verify the reservoir depth.

Well, screw it. They could whistle for their damned report.

Sometime later (it was full daylight, but my eyes were still too unfocused to read the clock) the intercom started buzzing at me. In a few seconds Angie's voice came in. "Jon!" she says, "get your lazy ass out of bed and answer the damn door!"

I yelled at her to go away.

Hey, bud, take a note here. Never scream at somebody when suffering the effects of a monumental hangover. I thought my poor head was gonna split open front-to-back.

She says, "The hell! You got work to do sucker."

I answered, *much* more softly, "Screw work."

And she says, "It'll screw you if you don't hop to it. Now buzz me in!"

I knew she'd never leave until I did. She's just as stubborn as I am. I got up, hit the access button, and stumbled off to see if I could find my pants somewhere. I just hoped I had a pair that I hadn't thrown up on yet.

She got me straightened out – as much as I *could* be straightened out in that condition – and we hopped a grounder over to Base HQ. When we got there I dropped by the nurse's station and got a couple of pills for my pounding head, then headed up to my office. I needed a few pieces of equipment to check the reservoir.

We had one of the Enforcers drive us over to the site of the dam. First of many. Dams, that is. The plan is – or that is, the plan *was* – to dam every continental river with a flow of more than four hundred thousand liters a second. And that's most of 'em. So we get to the dam and, sure enough, the water level's up to within less than a meter of the fill line.

It was just a damn cryin' shame, you know? They were real happy before we showed up. So they didn't have electricity, so what's the big deal? They live twice as long as we do, and as far as we can tell they don't have any serious diseases.

Naw, I don't have any hard proof on how they managed that. Got a hunch, though, you might say.

And what are they gonna use it for? Computer games? Like that'll really improve their society. All that stuff was goin' through my head. I really did feel sorry for the buggers.

So, we got a boat and tooled on up the river. Lake, by then. But it was the funniest thing. I coulda sworn the land had been flatter than it looked now. And when I took the time to notice, I saw that the riverside settlements were all still there. Like they'd never left. It was really weird. And not long after that, we came in sight of the island.

No, you heard right. It was still there.

Oh, it beat the total bloody hell outta me. It looked *exactly* the same as it had two weeks before. Same rocks on the shore, same trees on the ridge. Same mill with the same waterwheel. I was Johnny-on-the-spot to take some depth readings, and everything checked out the way it should until we got within thirty meters of the island. Then the river bottom shot up like a skee-ball. Like it had been raised up or ... or grown or somethin'. To keep pace with the water level.

Oh, I couldn't wait to talk to Ko'oor! Found her pretty quick, too. It was almost like she was waiting for me.

"Jon!" she says. "You see worry you not. We fix it too good."

I didn't know what to say to that, but I finally asked her what it was they fixed.

She allowed as how they had a new "agreement". And I wanted to know what the hell she was talkin' about. Who did they have an agreement with?

And she says, "Our mother." Like that explained everything.

Angie grabbed my arm and I had to yell. I mean, she left bruises! She screamed something about the shore, and I looked around, and you know what?

No, see, I didn't understand what I was looking at to begin with. But then I noticed the big group of Krri't standing in a long line against the trees, and I saw the shoreline and it was ... moving. Sort of repositioning itself. Not much, not far, but it definitely moved. Like what had been the shoreline before the water rose had to ... well, had to get comfortable again. And Ko'oor says, "Jon not about worry dam. We fix. All good."

Yeah, I know it's impossible. Why'd you think I was here getting bombed in the first place?

Uh-uh. You want my honest opinion, the psych teams were dead wrong. Krri't are espers, every last one of 'em. They've got some kind of control over the whole damn planet. Turns out some of the Krri't elders started studyin' Survey cosmology a few months ago, and while I was out at the island they were havin' a meetin' with the Representative of the Coordinator and fillin' him in on how things are gonna be from here on out. Found out about it when I got back.

Nah. It ain't a bad deal, all things considered. They don't care if we make electricity, as long as it's just for ourselves, in a few well-defined and fairly small areas. *They* won't use it because they think it'll offend the planet.

Yeah, that's what they said. But as long as we stay in tight little groups, they don't care whether we churn out the stuff or not.

Eh. Planet. Natives. Whatever. Not much difference I can see. The land around that dam moved so smooth an' clean the contractors never even noticed until yesterday, and they were too spooked about it to tell anybody. Can you blame them?

Ah, see, now that's the kicker. We've got sixteen other dams under construction, right?

Well, we do. And one of 'em, about two hundred clicks from here, got taken out last night.

Damn straight, we lost some. Whoever happened to be on the dam at the time. Personnel ain't finished goin' over the records yet, but they figure somewhere between fifteen and eighteen. The guards and the few workers on the ground said there was one almighty big crack, and then everything went quiet. The whole dam just sank into the ground, took all the construction

equipment with it. Didn't even take a minute. No tremors, no dust, and no dam. Go out there now and you can't even tell anybody tried to build one.

That's what I figure. You might look at it as somethin' in the way of a warning. We're welcome, as long as we play by the rules and stick to our own sandbox.

Fine. You believe what you want to. Angie's already got all our essentials packed, and she's gonna have me collected in plenty of time to pour me into a ground car and make our departure flight at noon tomorrow. This time next week I'll be back on Distant, and I promise you I'll never get within thirty parsecs of this world again.

Cheers.

Oh, look at that. The Tanqueray's all gone.

Yo, barkeep!