

*Determined to protect her friends from the evil that seeks her, explorer Rena Centara embarks on a space odyssey to confront the mind prober who marked her for death. A pirate-wrangling CEO, Callan Feldspar, follows with his band of heroes to keep Rena from facing the threat alone. Awaiting them all — a secret of the universe that will astound and shame humanity.*

## **Earth Aliens: the Miring**

by Sharon S. Anielski

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## **Prologue**

Suspended in space among myriad stars, curious space phenomena and countless other planets, Earth long ago distinguished itself from the pack by cradling the Fertile Crescent, that sliver of land from which a universe of people was born. From tribes to countries, from countries to planets, the peculiarity called man was fruitful and multiplied.

Over time, as the revolving blue planet spun off its progeny to populate distant empty worlds, the universe buzzed with life. Eventually, the displaced people no longer considered Earth their home world. Many among them strained to forget Earth's prominence.

Many among the prominent strained toward domination.

But the spinning continued, while investment into legends and lies grew with clandestine cruelty.

## **Chapter Zero**

Sparone only sensed the others seated around him in the darkness. He heard hardly a rustle of movement, not even the breathing of two hundred fifty soldiers crowded with him in the black, unlit hold of the military space transport. He fought the urge to shift his weight on the bench that ran the length of the hold, unwilling to make a move that might be perceived as nervousness. As a designated squad leader, he was expected to set an example, but battle camp hadn't prepared him for utter darkness.

*Or is this part of the test? Initial battlefield experience in a war-damaged transport.*

While he dreaded the bloody baptism waiting on the planet below, the darkness was his first enemy. He tried to focus his mind elsewhere, but beyond the gloom loomed only the battle ahead. The telltale odor of sweat mixed faintly with urine from soldiers facing first combat drew the walls of the black hold closer. Fearing he'd lose his nerve, he closed his eyes to hide himself in a more familiar darkness.

The transport broke into the atmosphere of Erden with the shudder that announced planetfall rumbling through the ship. The successive atmospheric buffeting finally caused a stirring among the troops, but Sparone kept his eyes shut until he felt the unmistakable working of the retro-thrusters.

The doors parted open and red light from the corridor flooded the hold. Sparone jumped to his feet and shouldered his pack, while shouting an order to his squad. "Disembark! Quicktime!" He tried to rush them past Sergeant Palto and his aides in the corridor, but two soldiers weren't fast enough. Quick jabs from Palto's gunstock hurried them along. Sparone resented the strong-arm tactics but knew better than to object. He grabbed a Tri-10 from one of the aides distributing weapons near the exit ramp at the rear of the ship.

To the sound of firearms snapping smartly into outstretched hands and the noise of combat boots hurrying over metal deck grills, he led his squad onto the desolate landscape of the unfamiliar planet. Rocky crags pinched the horizon in the dry morning light. Nearby, another ship deposited support and observation personnel.

The ships had barely lifted off when a wave of tripodali aliens, grey-skinned and gangly, rose from the rugged outcroppings and boulder-strewn underbrush and swarmed the landing area. Armed only with limbs as dexterous as monkey tails and cavernous mouths full of grossly pointed teeth, they overwhelmed the landing party with sheer numbers. Hard-pressed like the other squad leaders, Sparone ordered immediate defensive maneuvers but casualties mounted quickly.

“Scattershoot a perimeter!” he yelled, stunned that the clumsy-looking creatures had gotten such an advantage over well-armed humans.

Blasters and cannon pulverizing alien flesh nudged back the horde, enough to establish an offensive surge.

Sparone scanned the remnants of his squad. “Tight phalanx!”

With a well-practiced war cry that had seemed foolish during training but now galvanized him, Sparone led his band to pursue the ungainly aliens across the rocky terrain toward the canyons. The blood pounding in his ears almost muffled a comrade’s warning. His world exploded in pain as an injured alien leapt from the ground and wrapped its arms around his head, dislodging his helmet and digging its teeth into his forehead. Sparone fell to his knees. The alien’s body shuddered before it released him and dropped lifeless to the ground.

A cameraman knelt beside Sparone, wrist cam aimed at the dead alien, then at Sparone. “How old are you, son?”

Sparone wiped the blood from his eyes. “Thirteen.”

The remnant of his squad had reached the canyon ahead. He struggled to his feet. Ignoring his vertigo, he hobbled toward the imminent skirmish, unsure if the camera or raw grit was spurring him on.

## Chapter One

Rena Centara sat high in the purple-leaved branches of the ankora tree outside her borrowed hut on the planet Caldera. Shielded from the sun, she enjoyed the everyday sounds of the tribal village below her and the aromas wafting and teasing in the breeze: spicy eintwan and roasted hebera, the sweet mintiness rising from the brewing vat of oha tea. The rippling foliage around her hid the expansive plain nearby from view, although she could hear the gentle ruffling of its grasses. As she placed green-speckled mila bird eggs, her contribution to the afternoon meal, into a grass-lined pouch, she refocused on her upcoming report to the Brimari Exploratory Society.

Her arguments for the Calderan tribes to remain on their land were reasonable. *But are they impactful enough?* The Society's bias against pre-techs could doom her report before she delivered it. And Oringuas and his village would be uprooted, carted off-world. *That cannot happen.* A group of giggling children paraded beneath her like living exclamation points to her resolve as an odd smoky smell jarred her concentration.

*Volcano? No, of course not.* The volcanoes simmered far below the southern horizon, no danger to the village. Shifting to climb down to investigate, she stopped as a tall man in a metallic-threaded vest led a handful of scarlet-clad Universal Union soldiers into the village. Ten creatures Rena could best describe as feral humans—misshapen faces, hunched posture and drooping arms, like caricatures of cavemen—slunk alongside the soldiers. *A rather disturbing lot,* Rena noted. *Can't possibly be indigenous to Caldera.*

*But why is the Union here? The exploratory societies haven't even convened on the primitive deposit issue.* Brimari Exploratory stood poised to recommend relocating the Calderans to sequestered lands near Earth space colonies, but curing an atrocity with an abomination deserved only scorn.

That technologically backward tribes had been forcibly vacated from Earth centuries ago and deposited onto uninhabited worlds to chart their

paths to cultural advancement—*Like cosmic ant farms*—was bad enough. A deserved backlash shut those shenanigans down and primitive seeding was abandoned and forgotten. Only recently had the Universal Union enlisted the exploratory societies to study what, if anything, could or should be done for the descendants of the Earth primitive deposits.

The Calderan tribal communities raised animals, subsistence farmed, generally welcomed visitors. Many were open to trade and new ideas. *Surely, they deserve respect and freedom from even well-intentioned meddling, not further cruel intrusions.*

The smoky smell persisted, more than village cooking fires. Rena shifted again for a better handhold to descend the tree. Below her, villagers who had turned to meet the Union contingent hesitated when the feral humans lurched toward them.

Confused thoughts of horror and disbelief leapfrogged over each other in Rena's head when the ferals attacked. Horror quickly overcame her disbelief as clawed fingers ripped flesh and feral teeth sank into vulnerable jugulars. Wailing bloody villagers fell to the onslaught while the soldiers, guns drawn, did nothing.

Rena pressed against the rough bark of the ankora tree, deep in the leafy camouflage, afraid to draw attention to herself. Afraid even to breathe. She fought panic, watching desperate villagers draw knives and grab spears. *Yes, run!* she silently urged others who tried to rush shrieking children to safety. The smoky odor intensified as the far end of the village burned, a barrier to escaping villagers. A fleeting relief died in Rena when the soldiers finally engaged their weapons, incredibly, to protect the ferals.

Everything inside her screamed *Help them!* But *how* against vicious ferals and phased energy guns?

The feral humans, gaining ugly momentum, turned on the soldiers. Shouts of "Low stun!" sounded and the ferals went down moaning. Rena's mind reeled with incomprehension as the soldiers struggled to manacle their feet. None of it made sense.

None of her Exploratory Society training had prepared her for this. She had some firearms coaching, but no firearm. She knew a few self-defensive

moves, but toe-to-toe confrontation would be a gigantic stretch against beastly ferals and armed soldiers. In her years as an explorer, she'd picked up some fledgling skills in air and space flight but nothing she found useful in this awful moment.

On the ground, soldiers presented injured and captured Calderans to the manacled feral humans whose hands groped the villagers' heads. Squeezing. Probing. Gouging.

More huts caught fire.

The tall man in the vest swept through the madness, grabbing villagers by the face and overpowering them somehow, leaving them convulsing on the ground. Rena couldn't hear his words, but his expression bore a mesmerizing evil. Within earshot, a soldier referred to the tall man as Syderon.

*Syderon?* The urban legend? Myth? Nightmare delusion?

Rena grappled to process impossible information.

Soldiers seized Oringuas, the grizzled old village leader, and brought him before Syderon. Cloth pants dirt-smudged and bloody, Oringuas straightened his thin shoulders, his long grey hair hazy in the smoky air. Rena hardly breathed in the tree as Syderon gripped Oringuas's face.

"*This* is how a mind probe is done," Syderon announced, as though relaying instructions.

In outraged Calderan, Oringuas spat out, "Ultimately...you fail!" A breeze stirred the air enough for the sun to break through to touch Oringuas's face, bathing him for an instant in a defiant glow.

Syderon grumbled something and his hand tightened on Oringuas's jaw. Their eyes locked. Hand to jaw, the two stood in rigid confrontation. Rena, immobilized with fear, watched through angry tears the silent battle between the old man and the malevolent myth.

Oringuas didn't succumb like the other villagers. He didn't convulse. He just fell.

Syderon roared his victory. He kicked the fallen body and glared down at Oringuas. "Enjoy your nightmares, old man." With a final brutal kick, he strode off.

The soldiers followed, forcing the manacled ferals ahead of them. More weapon fire sounded. More fleeing Calderans scattered. When smoke obscured the marauders, Rena climbed down the tree, her entire body trembling. Dropping to her knees beside Oringuas, she worried at his deathly stillness, but his eyes were open.

“Oring—” His name convulsed in her throat. His eyes were open, wide open with a terror that turned her breath to bile. “Oringuas, what did he do to you?” she whispered in Calderan. Her fingers traced the lines of his weathered face. “Oringuas.” But nothing garnered a response. Only the hell in his eyes danced with life.

Oringuas’s grown son, Lare, slipped beside Rena. Smelling of smoke, his arms smeared with bloody gashes and laser burns, he placed a gentle hand on his father’s forehead. Rena read the pain in Lare’s momentary stillness. When he spoke, his voice held both anger and defeat. “Our village cannot fight these men. Can your society help us?”

Rena doubted the Brimari Exploratory outposts could match the weapons Syderon’s soldiers carried. She glanced around helplessly. “We don’t have—” She stopped. Syderon’s shuttles glinted on the plain. Somewhere in orbit a spacecraft awaited their return.

*No time for thinking.*

She pressed Lare’s hand. “Take care of Oringuas. I’ll draw them from the village.”

She jumped to her feet and ran to her hut, where she grabbed her comlink. *Doing something.* Hands shaking, she keyed Pantoli, the Brimari outpost north across the great valley. When the Pantoli staffer answered, Rena spoke as clearly as her tight throat allowed. “We have marauders with weapons in Oringuas’s village. Many casualties. Send help with caution.” She dared not mention Syderon, lest they think the call a joke.

Experience on primitive planets had taught her that survival often depended on resources, so after clicking off, she shoved a few things into her half-unpacked travel bag. Relieved to have overcome her inertia, she ran. She wanted Syderon to believe she was going for help and vacate his minions

before the Society arrived. She *hoped* he'd vacate before the Society arrived. She hated to think she had called coworkers to their slaughter.

*Will Syderon hunt me?* An unnerving thought, especially if whispers were true.

*No time for thinking.*

Plain grasses whipping her ankles, her bag banging her hip, Rena ran for the unguarded shuttles. She expected energy shafts or bullets to try stopping her, but it wasn't until she was airborne in the foremost shuttle that laser bolts sizzled around her. Mainly because she flew in the wrong direction. Banking in a stomach-paralyzing turn, she aimed south for Maconn, the closest Brimari outpost.

*No time for thinking.* But flying wasn't her strong suit. *No time for thinking.* But she'd left the villagers in danger! How could she not think about that?

*Flying! Think about flying!*

Beyond the forest, the shuttle clipped a rise at the top of a valley and tumbled from the sky. Disjointed thoughts ran through Rena's mind: *This is how a crash sounds. They'll identify me from my bag. Did they follow? Syderon is real—warn people!*

The world disappeared with a great noise and a series of terrible jolts. Then silence.

Dazed, with sound returning slowly, Rena staggered from the crashed shuttle. She fell to her knees and dug her fingers into the ground, trying to stop its spinning. Closing her eyes against the reeling landscape, she allowed a few seconds to still her heartbeat. A quick inventory of herself found some sizeable areas that were sure to blossom into bruises, but nothing was broken.

Syderon could easily locate the crash debris, so she needed to run. Still wobbly, she got to her feet and surveyed the remains of the shuttle, giving herself a mental pat on the back. Despite the shuttle's present sad condition and her less than stellar flying skill, she'd survived the crash. Maconn lay just west. *A good head start.*

Around her in the narrow valley, field grasses carpeted the ground right up to the rocks and boulders at the bottom of the valley slope. *Another five hundred meters and I would've been part of that slope.*

Grimacing at the thought and ignoring the hissing of ruptured systems and mangled metals, she crawled into the wreck and recovered her travel bag, grateful it had joined her in surviving the crash relatively unscathed. A singed flap added to its other travel scars.

With or without the bag, though, she had to get to Earth, a decision she'd made when the shuttle hit the ground. With a myth to expose and dead villagers to vindicate, backwater Caldera wouldn't do. Earth held the resources. *The Society will help the village and I'll return as soon as I can.*

Settling the bag's straps around her shoulders, she began the climb up the slope. A descent into the next valley should get her to Maconn in time for the departure of the Exploratory Society's livestock survey ship.

Somehow, she would be on that ship.

## Chapter Two

Rena soon approached Maconn, one of five Brimari Exploratory Society outposts on Caldera. The smattering of rounded, two-story pre-fab buildings from Mynaeda, the Society's home planet, presented oddly on sparsely-populated Caldera where local tribes lived in huts. The livestock survey ship, the *Orton Fawn*, hugged the perimeter of the outpost behind the corrals.

Avoiding the two intersecting streets dotted with a few run-about and small shuttles, Rena circled outside the square of buildings, thankful for the settling evening dusk. No one took notice as she moved among the corrals of livestock, trying to formulate a plan.

Most of the animals were headed for new or struggling space colonies, while representative animals of each herd and flock were bound for Mynaeda. There, at the Brimari Exploratory Society campus, differences between native and deposit animals, those introduced from another planet, would be studied and catalogued, with recommendations made regarding future animal deposits; animal depositing, or *seeding*, however, had become a questionable ecological endeavor, a tightrope of potential missteps still walked by Brimari Exploratory.

Rena stroked the bristly head of a calf near the fence. Mynaeda was too obvious if she was being pursued since she worked for Brimari, but the survey ship had a preliminary stop on Kalinor from which she could find passage to Earth. *First, I have to get on board.*

Grunts and bleats issued from the corrals around her, squeals and chitterings, the sweet cacophony of animal sounds that usually gave her a sense of contentment. Presently, she heard only dissonance. But she sensed no undercurrent of tension as Brimari personnel and Calderan tribesmen worked among the animals. *Evidently, news of the atrocities in the village hasn't reached them.* That ignorance should work to her advantage and

protect the outpost as well. She needed to board the departing ship incognito. That way, Brimari Exploratory could legitimately claim plausible deniability of her presence at Maconn.

Among the animals being herded onto the *Orton Fawn* was a flock of partiks. About a meter high at the shoulder, the sheep-like animals sported especially long, luxuriously soft, thick coats, the type of coat in which a smaller person could get lost.

Or so Rena hoped.

With her Brimari Exploratory Society badge pinned to her jacket for the stock loaders to glimpse, she hied a flock of partiks onto the loading ramp by tapping their backsides with a touchstick lifted from a nearby rail. She hoped no one took a closer look at her badge and questioned why a primitive deposit explorer was loading partiks.

A Union shuttle zoomed in on the opposite side of the corrals near the outpost buildings and disgorged one lone scarlet soldier. Rena caught the flash of metallic threads in Syderon's vest as he retreated from the open doorway of the shuttle. *He won't show himself here*, Rena noted, relieved. *That might mean he won't do anything here either.*

Maybe her impromptu plan was working. Syderon had withdrawn from the village, probably thinking she was raising an alarm in Maconn. She was counting on him leaving Maconn to its business once he discovered she had done no such thing, and the farther Pantoli outpost she'd called for help should be off his radar. Still, he had zeroed in on her too quickly.

She "hied" the partiks a little faster into the ship. Once at the interior corrals, she dawdled until the herders nearby left for more animals. Ignoring the gamey smells of livestock in close quarters, Rena chose a side corral crowded with partiks and climbed over the barrier. Trying not to spook the animals, she pushed her way to the back of the enclosure and buried her bag under the fibrous mat of animal bedding.

Although children rode partiks in mock rodeos, Rena didn't know if partiks would countenance a thirty-year-old woman on their back. She chose a large partik endowed with great billows of hair and straddled it carefully. Bending forward, she plunged into the gloriously soft coat, snuggling close

to the skin, allowing the hair to engulf her. The animal sidestepped a couple of times, but the proximity of the other partiks kept it in place.

Rena felt it sigh in submission.

When the outpost scanned the ship, as the Universals would insist, they'd find no unaccountable bodies, just one heavier partik in a small sea of partiks.

*All I have to do is hold on.*

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On the planet Kalinor, partiks and other animals were loaded and unloaded from the *Orton Fawn* at the landing field outside the Livestock Exchange in Wassa Nole, a quaint community of some 35,000 colonists. Rena had used her time in the partik pen to plot her next move, enabling her to retrieve her bag and slip from the ship with relative ease. Since the *Orton Fawn* would leave without her, she'd be spending some time in Wassa Nole.

The busyness of the corral area allowed her to feel inconspicuous. Farmers, ranchers and auctioneers mixed with merchants as animals were bought and sold under the advocacy of the Exploratory Society. The background jabber of the trade and marketing transactions blended with the animal din, creating an industrious, almost festive buzz around her.

She enjoyed the Kalinoran language, a brand of English with a Gaelic shadow and a heavy dose of dropped word endings. Languages were her forte, a plus for a primitive deposit explorer.

Crushed stone walkways led her to the main promenade of the Livestock Exchange. In a public restroom, Rena ran the water ice cold before cupping it over her face, wishing to wash away the whole nightmarish episode.

*Syderon will know villagers can't fly a shuttle. He'll deduce someone else was in the village and the Exploratory Society will confirm it. He'll have my name.*

*Will he hunt me?*

A feeling like rocks in her stomach made her queasy. In a feeble attempt to change her appearance, she removed her hairclips so her hair settled onto her shoulders. After slapping stray animal bedding from her explorer browns—comfortable cargo pants and tucked-in shirt—she pulled her

hip-length tapered jacket from her bag. She finished with a spritz of an Earth ginger scent she hoped would neutralize the odor of partik.

From the Livestock Exchange, Rena headed to the town proper and located a small café. She ordered, planning to pay with the scripp she carried since she could be traced through her Universal Credit account.

Which stunned her. Worrying about people knowing her location was a new, uncomfortable feeling. She had no idea how far—or even if—Syderon would pursue her, but she'd heard rumors about his “hunts.”

According to urban legend, Syderon had tagged and stalked a handful of hapless victims to their deaths. The most gripping hunts hopscotched among cities and planets like bad dreams for the pursued. Details grew more gruesome with each retelling until reality was thoroughly breached, and the tales became as comfortably unbelievable as campfire ghost stories.

*But what if they're basically true?*

Rena's food arrived and she ate without pleasure.

Mynaeda was the next planetary stop for the *Orton Fawn*. Syderon would have no trouble connecting her to the Brimari Exploratory Society campus and her apartment nearby. The risks were significant to both her and the Society if the village rout on Caldera was any indication. She didn't want to give Syderon the advantage of predictability regarding her whereabouts and endanger her coworkers. Syderon had morphed from the chrysalis of legend into brutal reality, but few knew. The village on Caldera could have been a toe in the water. She didn't want Brimari on Mynaeda to become his full immersion pond.

The only person who could possibly help her was on Earth, an old genetics professor who might not remember her. *A longshot*. While paying her restaurant bill, she inquired about the nearest communication station and headed there.

She had met Professor Mendant at a Citron University symposium on Earth five years before. He'd invited her to the symposium after they'd exchanged professional observations about animal life on different planets. He'd done a paper on the theory that all animals of the known universe were

variations of animals on Earth, a result of the early generation ships with their Earth menageries.

A clamor had rumbled through the scientific community as a coalition of outworld planets contested the theory. Anything suggesting the preeminence of Earth was anathema to them. Rena had shared her observations with the professor, that while many animals on other planets were similar to those on Earth, many were wholly unique.

During her weeks in Las Vegas, she and Professor Mendant had dined together often, their conversations lively and intriguing despite the difference in their ages. She'd understood he had access to an organization working to debunk scientific vagaries and myths, or as she hoped regarding Syderon, to validate them.

The beauty of her relationship with Professor Mendant for her present situation was that they'd had no further contact. No one would trace her to him. Routing her call through the university communication system would continue that anonymity.

In the com station, a worn cubbyhole of a building with a shabby interior, callers filled all the booths and tabletop positions. She paid for an uberlink connection, the communication flow through hyperspace that scientists jokingly called fiber optics in space, and waited. When a tabletop position was vacated, Rena invited the fellow behind her in line to take it while she waited for a booth. Two booths opened up and she hurried to the one farthest in the corner.

She reached Professor Mendant mid-morning at the university, relieved he remembered her. "I'm in trouble," she whispered.

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Professor Mendant needed time to find help and asked her to call him again in four Universal hours—which were actually Earth hours, one of several Predominant Earth Theory sticking points for the outworlds. On that second call, he told her to use the alias, Sara Callaway, to accept a forthcoming call from someone named Balder.

Rena took the call less than an hour later. Balder had a jovial voice, but he wasted no time; as marvelous as uberlinks were, they weren't one hundred percent reliable.

A Pilgrim Foundation transport, the *Remembrance*, would put in at the tiny spaceport on the other side of Wassa Nole the next evening. Travel papers to Las Vegas on Earth in the name of Sara Callaway would be waiting for her on the ship.

Resigned to the wait, Rena sought a place to pass the night. Beyond the Livestock Exchange, where Wassa Nole gave way to fields and farms and small coves of trees, she located a secluded patch of ground shadowed by a circle of rustling trees a short distance from the road. She'd slept in worse places, but without the fear of discovery that now kept her on edge. The *Orton Fawn* had departed, which gave her an uncomfortable sense of abandonment. *I'll be on the Remembrance tomorrow*, she assured herself.

When night swallowed the final haze of light, Rena lowered herself onto her travel towel, her bedding for the night, startling a small animal that scampered into the brush nearby. With her lumpy bag for a pillow, she watched the night sky through the overhead branches and listened to the sounds of Wassa Nole in repose.

Once more, stubbornly hopeful, Rena wondered if she was being paranoid about Syderon hunting her. She *wanted* to believe she was just being paranoid. Professor Mendant, though, had needed little convincing about her predicament and had received her information with no doubting questions. She'd cried as she told him how she left Oringuas and stole the shuttle to bait Syderon into leaving the village.

Professor Mendant had assured her she'd acted wisely, even heroically. In a low voice, as though telling a secret, he'd explained his understanding of Syderon and the brain enhancement surgeries that had produced him, and the Union's unsuccessful attempts to spawn more mind-probing minions.

"How do you know these things?" she'd asked Mendant, aghast at what he was saying.

“I know an organization that seeks such truth,” he had answered. But Mendant hadn’t tried to dissuade her from her paranoia.

She *was* being hunted.

## Chapter Three

“Space pirates.”

Callan Feldspar spoke the words on the cramped bridge of the small space freighter, *Copperhead*, feeling the faintest trace of sudden alertness signaling his body to attention. Despite the low-key reaction, courtesy of seventeen years in space, painful memories and old resentments curdled beneath the surface of his composure. Only a practiced determination fixed his eyes on the viewscreen and his mind on the task at hand.

Still, he despised pirates.

He activated the Universal Union SOS uberlink on behalf of the beleaguered ore ship ahead. The marauders had probably jammed the ship’s communications, so the crew may not have broadcast a distress call.

“They haven’t boarded her,” Nieman said from the copilot’s seat. “But they’re aware of us.”

Aware, but not concerned, Cal suspected. *They crippled an ore ship. They’re not going to worry about a little freighter.* In Neiman’s quick glance Cal read the unasked question and Neiman sucked in his breath in acknowledgment of the unspoken answer.

The tiny *Copperhead* would stop and assist.

Cal’s fingers began the sequence that would take the *Copperhead* to the aid of the besieged vessel, like a space age David attempting to wrest a behemoth from Goliath. “Union Space Patrol is underway from the Rasmuss colony,” Cal said, relaying the message coming in on the return SOS link, which blipped out with a jamming signature. “We’re all incommunicado now,” he said with no surprise.

“Of course, ‘Stop and Assist’ does not necessarily include armed assistance,” Neiman said with unnatural enunciation, reciting from the Universal Union Stop and Assist Protocols, required bridge conversation before any skirmish conducted by civilians. “We’ve notified Patrol. Our role

can end here. Granted, we don't have any passengers this run, but the university might prefer it." He gave a grey-haired toss of his head in the direction of the *Copperhead's* hold.

Cal imagined he heard the same clock ticking in the hold that Neiman heard, marking the decay sequence of university experiments nearing the outer limits of their allowable transit time. Those limits would be tested to the max once the *Copperhead* engaged the pirates. "Are you against assistance?" Civilian captains were compelled by Code to make the inquiry of the first officer when assistance meant confrontation.

"Not at all," Neiman answered. Cal met his eyes for a prolonged instant as the point of no return whizzed by, committing their ship to the fight.

"I wonder what they're after," Cal muttered, as if that were his only concern as he increased the *Copperhead's* speed toward the imminent battle. "They obviously don't want her main cargo or they wouldn't have disabled her." Ore heists always included the ship. "Ten to one she's carrying a passenger they want."

"Could be after secondary cargo." Neiman shifted the bulk of his weight, all muscle, as he informed anyone foolish enough to cast him the smallest hint of condescension. Although many men sought to camouflage an overfondness for food or ale with that sort of boast, Neiman's claim was legit. Next to him Cal felt anorexic, although Neiman, at sixty-five, was almost twice his age.

"You take first seat and I'll man the gun," Cal said, slipping from the pilot's seat. "We don't have to marry the scum, just dance with them till Patrol arrives." He glanced back at Neiman from the doorway with a half-serious grin. "I have it on good authority you're an excellent dancer."

Neiman showed his teeth in a sly smile. "I know a step or two." Like most cargo pilots, he owned a long history of space confrontations, and Cal trusted him in a fight even though this was only the second time they'd flown together.

"Just keep it simple. We only have to distract them enough to keep them from boarding her."

Neiman nodded. "I'll keep them swatting at us."

With a last glance at the viewscreen, Cal noted the pirate frigate still maneuvering to dock with the ore ship. A chewed away section where the ore ship had been attacked bled sparkles of plasma flow into space, a picture that closely approximated how he imagined his mother's ship would've looked when pirates boarded it all those years ago.

A sudden burst emanated from the marauders' ship, a determined streak of light, dazzling and deadly, sizzling past the *Copperhead* and dissipating off its port side. Sensor alarms erupted in a cacophony of outrage as tentacallic radiation flooded space to port of the *Copperhead*. The insidious radiation sought minuscule avenues of entry, threatening to infect the hull like a voracious and instantly lethal cancer.

"Wing?"

"We are shielded," Cal's mechanical assistant answered, voice calm and sounding pleasantly human. "Approaching firing range." A *mechanical*, or *mech* in the vernacular, Wing followed the action within and without the ship. His five feet of robotic and androidic engineering loosely suggested a human model in his outward shell, becoming further removed from it inwardly where some of the most amazing advances of human technology resided.

Cal nodded as he raced from the bridge to the gun turret ladder, too preoccupied to stop and smell the circuits. Marauders weren't unusual in space, but space pirates with tentacallic pulse weapons tipped the scales toward the unexpected. A veiling array would've come in handy. *Like Durham would say, the Copperhead better dance mighty fast. Mighty fast.*

Before the gunnery seat restraints snapped shut around Cal, Neiman had already begun the pirouetting that would prevent their shields from becoming overtaxed and vulnerable to a tenta-pulse. Of course, the targeting computer would choke on the trade-off as the marauders' ship became an erratically moving target, blinking in and out of range with both the ore ship and the *Copperhead* itself blocking the shots.

Cal had heard of ships shooting themselves in the foot this way, so Wing was dubbed fine-tuning liaison between the targeting computer and Neiman's haphazard pirouette pattern. Still, if their shielding failed or if said

foot was shot, Cal's unaided sharpshooting expertise would advance to head of the class. Until then, while they pirouetted, Wing and the targeting computer were the best "men" for the job.

Which was a good thing. Neiman's maneuvers viewed from the bubble of the gun turret, with the *Copperhead* ducking and weaving around the two ships at what seemed like hyperspeed, imparted a touch of space vertigo. Cal found himself closing his eyes to regain his equilibrium more often than he would've liked to admit.

Neiman muttered to himself over the open communication link and Wing gave a monotone evaluation of events as they happened, but Cal didn't add too many of his own woozy comments as he tried to make every computer-assisted shot count. When the Space Patrol ships emerged from their hyperjump, Cal thought them a dizzy illusion until they took out the not-yet-linked docking apparatus on the marauders' ship and its starboard engine thereafter.

The telltale buzz of an incoming transmission sounded over the open comlink as Cal released himself from the targeting chair. A serious voice sounded over the connection.

"*Copperhead*, this is Captain Gates, Union Space Patrol. Prepare for debriefing regarding your SOS transmission and engagement."

"Captain Gates, this is Callan Feldspar on—"

Captain Gates laughed. "I should've known. Cal, why don't you join Space Patrol already? That way you get to wear a nice uniform when you fight the bad guys."

Cal grinned as the patrol Vipers converged on the marauders' ship. "What? And give up the good life?" Sure, there were always forms to fill out, but he hated space pirates. "You'll have my report, Gates. But we're in a bit of a hurry."

"You know the drill, Cal. Send over your report and you can be on your way. And thanks," Gates added after a small hesitation.

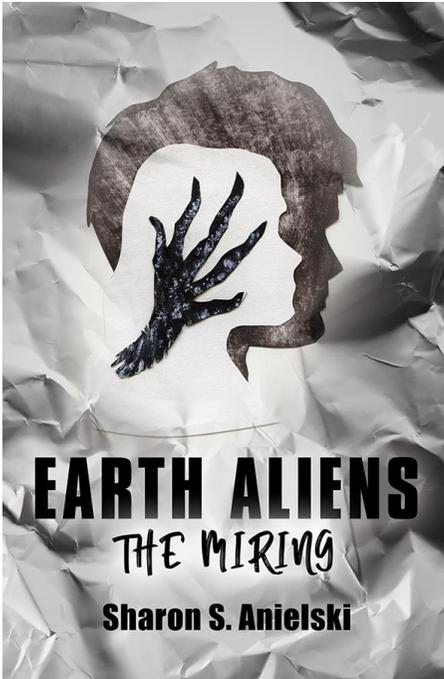
"Get us out of here, Neiman," Cal said, on the bridge again, when he received the sign-off on his Civilian Assist report. "We may still be able to squeak into Vegas in the yellow zone." Once time ran out and the university

experiments graduated to the red zone of allowable transit time, Feldspar Transportation would be in breach of contract.

“Gotta keep the boss happy,” Neiman agreed with an exaggerated wink.

Outside the ship, a star swirl announced their hyperspace jump. Soon, wispy hyperspace ephemerals, the stuff of space legends, snaked their gossamer colorations onto the deepest black of the darkest space.

Cal sat in awe, reminded once more why he continued to fly.



*Determined to protect her friends from the evil that seeks her, explorer Rena Centara embarks on a space odyssey to confront the mind prober who marked her for death. A pirate-wrangling CEO, Callan Feldspar, follows with his band of heroes to keep Rena from facing the threat alone. Awaiting them all — a secret of the universe that will astound and shame humanity.*

## **Earth Aliens: the Miring**

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