

I. DECISIONS



“It must always have been seen, more or less distinctly, by political economists, that the increase in wealth is not boundless: that at the end of what they term the progressive state [economic growth] lies the stationary state.”

—*John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), quoted in Supply Shock: Economic Growth at the Crossroads and the Steady State Solution by Brian Czech. Canada: New Society Publishers, pp. 68–69.*

TWO MESSAGES

Orram—on Varok, 2068 C.E. (Earth date)

Shawne sat on the edge of the algae pool upstairs in the Oran family home, looking beautiful and strong, her golden brown waves framing the delicate sculpture of her human face. She kicked water in the air over Conn's partially submerged sonic melons. I felt a touch of amusement as the elll's amphiboid marble eyes appeared, and his lengthy tongue unrolled to catch a shower of droplets flying past his nasal gills. I moved back a step on the stone deck to stay dry.

"I'm serious, Conn," Shawne said. "I need to go back to Earth. It's too beautiful . . . we can help salvage what's left."

Conn voiced a gill-muffled response in his favorite English slang. "No way. We're doing all we can from here on Varok. You don't need to do anything but finish Integration at the Concentrate."

"Which will be no problem for you." I spoke in Varokian. "You've done very well there, Shawne."

"Thanks, Orram. I appreciate your confidence, but neither of you is hearing me." She switched from English to Varokian to make her point. "Earth is my biological home. I can't just watch humans make the same mistakes—"

Conn's son Stringer interrupted. His rich elllonian tones soared up to the pool from the garden below. "Get down here, Shawne. Our rides are waiting."

"The train for Ahl Vior leaves in the last quarter of this light-period," I said. "You can just make it."

She sprang to her feet. "Goodbye, Daddy-O's. Don't forget to gather the eggs while I'm gone. Make Conn do some of it, Orram. Be sure the *kaehl* have enough *hoat* grain every morning. They also like—"

"I know, Shawne," I said, scanning her thoughts for concerns. "We'll also take good care of the garden. Good luck finishing your Integration Projects. You'll enjoy them."

She smiled. "I love you, *dara vahns*."

Then she disappeared down the stones to the great porch embraced by the giant mineral tree that defined our Oran Locale lodge, my ancestral home. We heard the daramont Pork Belly snuffle as she climbed

aboard the big racer's broad shoulders.

"Goodbye, Shawne Love," Tandra called. "Be good to yourself. Get some sleep."

"Wait a minute, Mom. I forgot to pack my—"

"Let's go!" Stringer hollered.

His daramont, Markup, bellowed and took off, and Pork Belly followed with a loping start.

"Wait!" Shawne protested. "I don't have—"

"Conn finished packing the saddle bags for you," Tandra shouted.

"Oh no-o-o! I won't have anything . . ."

Her voice faded as Stringer whooped a long elllonian ear-splitter, and both daramonts raced across the fields toward the closest train stop. The Ahlkahn was infamous among Varok's ellls for being on time.

I met Tandra in our downstairs office. She stood at the large window, looking out over the lush garden to the web fields beyond. "Have you heard from Bob Carliano yet?" she asked. "Do we have an invitation to go to Earth?"

"Not yet," I said, sensing the dread in her mood.

Tandra had divorced herself and three-year-old Shawne from Earth eighteen Earth-years ago, when we first bonded and became family. She did not want to go back.

I took her hand and led her through the garden, past the egg-layer's pen and into the web fields that stretched toward the valley embracing the foothills of the Vahinorral. Oval berries hung from the web bushes in graceful swirls of light blue.

"They will ripen soon," I said.

"Yes." Tandra looked out toward the valley. We waved at the tall young elll and his human sister, still visible racing across the first meadow. Stringer's green tunic plumes, ruffled by speeding through the moist air, gave his sleek aquatic figure the illusion of deep fur.

"Oh no. Stringer has forgotten to wear his wet-sweater again," Tandra said. "Let's hope Shawne will notice and nag at him."

She stood in the new light, her dark hair glowing with silver lights, its fine strands brushing the soft turn of her cheek. "The mists on the *llaoon* grass—how perfectly beautiful, Orram, how they reflect the colors of the auroral lights."

"Look how the blues frame the yellow, and a hint of green. Jupiter will be rising soon."

"Then it will all turn a golden glow at mid-light. I love it here, Orram, so much. How could we possibly think of leaving, even for a single Earth year?"

She looked at me as if there could be a solution for her dread. "Have I thanked you lately, for our life here, Orram?"

"Tandra, please—"

"We can't leave," she said. "We have a contract for care of the Oran Locale, for eggs for the locale, for this web field and its good forage for the daramonts."

"That will not be a problem, Tan. We have good neighbors who will gladly take a temporary contract."

"Look, Orram. The locale daramont pack is coming in." She laughed. "How can such big fur balls look so awkward with their huge haunches and still run so beautifully?"

Beneath Tandra's foreboding, I read another concern she was suppressing. To accept the invitation we expected from Carliano could mean losing our human daughter to her native planet.

We had stayed in close contact with the former human astronaut since C.E. 2050, when Carliano's spacecraft crashed on Earth's moon. We had used the opportunity to introduce our alien selves to Earth, while his crew recovered at our Eill-Varok Observation Base there.

Now, in 2068 C.E., our Moonbase served as a transmitting station for EV Science. We made regular broadcasts, but other contact was minimal. With Earth's global population thinned disastrously in the 2050's—thanks to climate change disasters, rampant disease, and resource or ideological wars triggered by density stress—human nations and space business ventures no longer afforded the luxury of visiting the moon.

Tandra and I walked slowly back through the web field, and took a moment to check on the bird-like *kaehll* that had been under Shawne's care ever since she was a small child. Under the cover of the mineral tree, we paused on the front porch for another colorful view of the ever-changing sky.

"Bob has sounded more hopeful lately," I said, as we entered the lodge. "The students we hosted here on Varok are now young adults. They're convinced we have workable solutions. They listen to Conn's broadcasts."

"Surely there's no chance—"

"Mom, Orram, pick up." It was Shawne, calling from atop her daramont.

I tapped the office landcom. "Orram here. Go ahead, Shawne."

"Stringer got a call from his Waterfalling lead. He says I've been accepted to be on the team. You've got to come out to Ahl Vior for the games."

"Congratulations," I answered. "You'll be the first human to compete in the ellls' Waterfalling."

"That's silly, since Mom is the only other human on Varok, but thanks anyway, Orram. Please come. Orticon says he can't make it. He's too busy."

"He has his hands full with Earth's satellite data, surveying water resources, but Tandra and I will be there, and I'm sure Conn and Lanoll will come."

Conn had walked down from the family pool, tracking water over the stone steps. "Good work, Shawnoon. Just be careful. Don't underestimate the currents."

Conn is not a schooling elll, not dependent on swimming with a larger group for his social and physiological needs. Though a loner, he provides a sort of fatherly schooling that has made a powerful and sensitive human mermaid of Shawne.

"Good luck, Honey," Tandra added. "We'd better sign off now. There's another call coming in."

Conn took the new transmission, giving Tandra a sympathetic glance. As we listened to the recorded message, his wide elllonian eyes grew wider and blacker. He put a reassuring hand across Tandra's shoulders, and she reached up to stroke the tough web between his fifth and sixth fingers.

"Message received," he said, turning to face us. "We have our invitation, from the United States Southwest Coalition."

Tandra looked disappointed. "I'm surprised it's not from Cascadia," she said.

"They probably encouraged it," I said. "We may attract some attention. Cascadia is hoping to stem the flood of people moving north."

Conn was more cynical. "The southern U.S. has more recovery money right now."

Tandra's face skewed with exasperation. I loved the way her long dark hair swayed when she shook her head, but I didn't enjoy her

gloominess. "There must be other ecological coalitions also behind it. Aliens to the rescue, is it? So they'll have someone to blame?"

"At least, maybe someone will believe us now," Conn said.

Elll-Varok Science had been broadcasting arguments promoting no-growth policies for nearly twenty Earth years, confirming the economic theories developed on Earth in the 1970s by the humans Herman Daly and Donella Meadows. After Carliano's recent tour of Varok to study our recovery from Mahntik's treason, more people began to listen to full-Earth economic ideas from us aliens. On Earth such ideas had been called "ecological economics," "no-growth" or "steady state economics," "complex economics," or "full-circle economics." It came in many varieties—all focused on not depleting critical resources.

Another message came through, this one from from Bob Carliano. "You've got it, Orram, old buddy," he said. "The invitation to come to Earth and teach is wide open. You design the project. They'll go for anything reasonable. Your project name is 'Hope-for-a-Stable-Future.'"

"Thanks, Bob," I said. "You understand that we might not get approval from Global Varok. Travel to Earth is costly."

"I understand all too well."

"We'll inform them about the invitation after we take a short vacation. Shawne is on Stringer's elllonian water-sport team."

"Tell that beautiful daughter of yours, 'best of luck, and don't let their fins get you down.'"

It was good to hear Tandra laugh. "Thanks, Bob."

"Don't kid yourself, my friend," Conn said. "You'd better tell the Southwest Coalition we won't be coming to Earth. Thanks but no thanks."