

Note: To understand this story, you'll need to read (if you haven't done so already) *Sleeper* first. And this story will be continued in *A New Beginning*, both also available at <http://www.mooncross.com/fiction.plaza/earth2/>

COMING HOME

Prologue

"Forty-seven years, Alonzo," she said, her voice very low, almost a whisper. "Forty-seven years..."

I looked up from the console to see her leaning forward, looking out of the window, her head resting against the reinforced fiberglass. Where her warm breath touched the cold window it fogged slightly. In the distance a blue-green orb basked in the light of the G8 sun. I sighed. She was right. It had been forty-seven years since we last laid eyes on this planet.

I got out of my chair -the ship could fly itself for a few moments more- and moved to stand behind her. I slipped my arms around her waist, encircling her belly. Beneath my hands I felt the tiny movements of the baby - our first child.

It had been dangerous for Julia to go into cold sleep six months pregnant. I was prepared to wait, but not Julia. She assured me the risk was minimal - and she declared she didn't want her baby, our baby, to be born on the stations. She had looked at me with her bright blue eyes, melancholic but resolute, when she said that. And she had a point. The stations were no place to bring a child into the world.

I rested my chin on the top of her head and gazed at the planet. Our home. Despite the dangers and the hardships that we had faced every day, this was where we found each other, found true happiness. I hoped we could find it again.

"Do you think anyone will still be alive?" Her softly spoken question interrupted my thoughts.

"I don't know," I replied. "It has been a long time..." My voice trailed off as I remembered how we had been forced to leave...

Chapter 1

When that sneaky bastard told me that he dumped Julia in the energy current, to send her back to the Council, my heart had refused to beat for a few moments. One look at his

grinning face -once familiar, now the face of a stranger- made up my mind and I threw myself in the next blast - to be spit out straight into a ZED's menacing arms at the other side. Julia's body lay in a careless heap near the exit of the tunnel. She was unconscious, unaware of the danger she was in.

Resistance proved futile and a few minutes later the cyborg strapped us both to cold-sleep bunks in a small, computer-controlled shuttle.

As the cold settled over me, I cast a last, longing glance at Julia in the other bed, her face pale, her eyes closed. My heart went out to her and I hoped that I would be strong enough to support her. She would have to face the Council, who were no doubt waiting for us at the other end of our journey. With her features etched deep in my mind, I drifted off into a deep sleep.

For twenty-two years dreams haunted me. Images of fire and blood raged in my mind, dark dreams of death, betrayal and destruction. My ears rang with the screams of Terrians and humans. Yet among the nightmares drifted Julia's comforting presence. Without her, the dreams would have driven me insane...

We awoke anticipating interrogations and enquiries. But on the stations nobody was waiting for us. Nobody even cared.

We were virtually non-existent, nameless, without an identity and without a single credit to our account. The Council had seized the large fees Devon Adair deposited, payable upon our return, on the day of departure. Eden Project had been reported 'exploded in station subspace' and everyone aboard was declared legally dead.

However, that had been years ago. The stations had changed over the nearly half-century of our absence. Changed a lot. A synthetic cure for The Syndrome had been found. Nobody was interested in events that happened decades ago at the other end of the universe. The Council's power had faded, reduced to a mere token government. Though law and order still ruled the upper levels, where the rich protected their fortunes, among the lower levels survival of the fittest reigned.

We subsisted in the underworld, among society's outcasts. Wheeling and dealing, we took on odd jobs, and I flew the occasional cargo flight. Fortunately, the shuttle that brought us here remained ours; nobody was left alive to claim the ancient ship.

I think Julia secretly feared I might enjoy flying again so much, that I wouldn't want to go back. But the memory of the dreams haunted me. And I never realized how much the events on the planet had changed me until the first freight run I did. The rush seemed the same, yet it was different. All the time I soared through space, my thoughts were

occupied with my return to Julia.

It had taken us three years to scrounge up enough funds for our return to G889, our home. And now, another twenty-two years later, at last, we were about to set foot on the planet again. Would we be ready for what awaited us?

Chapter 2

With a last encouraging squeeze I told Julia to take her seat and strap herself in. The last time that I brought a ship near this planet was still clear in my mind and I didn't want to take any risk with her or the baby. I went back to the console and began the landing procedures. Without anyone to guide me, it was going to take all my skills.

However, the landing went according to plan and I smoothly put the small shuttle down on the beach along the Sea of Antheus. As the engines died and silence descended, Julia's anxious gaze crossed mine. From the day we were forced to leave, we had been living and breathing for this moment. Now it had finally arrived and I think we were both a little scared.

At last I got up out of my seat and helped her to her feet. We held hands as we walked to the door.

"Well, here goes nothing..." I took a deep breath and pulled the lever that opened the hatch. Dazzling sunlight streamed in, bathing the small cockpit in a golden glow. The air smelled fresh and clean, just like we remembered it. After three years of breathing recycled station air the salty tang of the nearby sea tasted like heaven.

We gazed out across the beach. On one side the blue waters of the sea lapped softly at the shore. On the other side rocky hills jutted up into the bright blue sky. It was quiet, very quiet. We heard no sound, aside from the soft splash of the waves on the beach.

With a shrug I jumped down from the craft, helping Julia get out. Her pregnancy made getting through the narrow hatch a little awkward. We clambered up the rocks. There was no way to know if everything had gone according to Devon's plans. If it did, we would find the Colony of New Pacifica right behind the top of these cliffs.

When we finally crossed the ridge we gasped in shocked surprise. Julia stumbled and I caught her arm to steady her. I worried when I saw how pale she had gone, her dismayed eyes standing out darkly. She shook her head as if to deny the view that greeted us.

My hands curled into fists and I tensed. I yearned strongly for the familiar weight of a Mag Pro in my hands - or any kind of weapon for that matter. I stared at the sight before

me.

The Colony was there alright - at least, what was left of it. Burned out Quonset huts gleamed a dull black in the bright light. Charred skeletons of what were once wooden buildings pointed their soot-stained girders accusingly at the sky. A door hung skewed on one hinge, creaking softly in the gentle breeze.

"Oh my God," Julia breathed. "What happened here?"

It was a question I couldn't answer. Although the dreams that had plagued me during the long journey home gave me some idea.

Aghast, we walked among the ruins. On the edge of what must've once been a thriving community I found a half-burned wooden sign, saying 'Welcome to New Pacifica. Population: 874'. It was oddly out of place on a planet just colonized; yet it was exactly the kind of small detail the Advance crew -our friends- would've paid attention to when establishing the colony. Now it only served as a grim reminder of a populace that disappeared.

"Alonzo?" Julia's voice called out. I turned. "Please, take me out of here?" and she sagged against me. Forgetting the surroundings, worry for her and the baby my only concern, I scooped her up in my arms and went back to the ship.

"There's nothing left, Alonzo," she whispered. "It's all gone..." her voice trailed off in a sob and this woman, that had always been so strong, finally broke down. I held her in my arms, stroking her hair, while she wept. I felt like crying myself...

Chapter 3

I imagined I could still taste the smoke of burning wood thick in the air. Yet, on closer inspection, I realized that the tragedy which destroyed New Pacifica, must have happened quite some time ago. The wilderness was creeping back on the human settlement. Moss covered the burned-out houses and clumps of grass grew haphazardly among the ruins. New saplings were shooting up among crumbled walls.

Cautiously I walked among the ruins, scrambling over the debris of collapsed walls and caved-in roofs, hoping to find a clue. Something that would tell us what happened, and where the people had gone. They couldn't all have disappeared, could they?

I found discarded remnants of people's lives. When I discovered a singed photo, a hologram of a happy family, I held it to the light. With a start I recognized Morgan Martin, a slightly balder Morgan than I remembered, and his wife, her once dark hair

streaked with gray. They were smiling at the camera and seated among a cluster of children. The oldest was a teenaged boy, the youngest a mere toddler. Obviously these were happier times. But when I peered closer and tilted the hologram so it caught the light of the sun, I noticed lines of severe worry on Morgan's features, an infinite sadness in Bess' eyes. My heart went out to these people, whose lives so briefly, yet deeply, touched mine, and whose fate I didn't know.

I continued my search among the ruins. I found other things. More holograms of people I didn't recognize. A Terrian-shaped doll, half-burned, with its head missing. A miniature TransRover. A VR module that appeared broken. But I didn't find any answers to my questions. No records, no private journals, nothing. I stood thinking for a moment when I heard Julia call.

"Lonzo?" Her voice held an odd toneless quality that pumped hot adrenaline through my veins. It spoke of danger. I hurried towards the sound of her call and breathed in sharply in surprise.

She stood stock-still in the middle of what was once a street. A few meters in front of her towered a single Terrian. His staff was charged, crackling energy radiated from it. His stance told me he was ready to fire at her, one single move and he would shoot. Julia, smart woman that she is, must have realized this, as she didn't move a muscle.

Cautiously I stepped down from the ruins and approached them. I walked in front of Julia, shielding her, all the while facing the creature. He trilled menacingly when I appeared, but I sensed his fear beneath the threat. I lowered my head, hoping fiercely that forty-four years of cold sleep hadn't diminished my capacities to dream with the Terrians.

I breathed a slow sigh of relief when I entered the Dreamplane immediately. However, my relief melted away quickly when I realized the plane had changed. It wasn't the peaceful, captivating place I remembered. Instead, I was assaulted by swirling emotions. Fear, anger, sadness, hurt. It seemed that whatever hit the colony also marred the plane.

At least the creature was there. He waved his staff at me, trilling dangerously. Beneath all that bluster, he was scared. Alone and afraid. He associated humans with death and destruction, with hurting the earth and murdering the tribes.

I talked to him soothingly, explaining that we were his friends. I showed him images of the times before, of our travels across the planet. He answered with images of his own. Humans blasting a way into the earth, destroying the Terrians' age-old homes. Humans setting Geolocks, freezing the earth and all the creatures within. I blanched at the images he showed me. What the hell had they been doing?

It wasn't until I talked about Uly, the young boy that was meant to be the link between our species and the bridge to a new future, that he lowered his staff, slowly withdrawing the energy until only a small sparkle remained, sizzling on the staff's tip.

With the initial danger warded off, I took myself out of the Dreamplane to see how Julia was doing. She was sitting on the ground behind me and I quickly crouched near her. She looked tired but her eyes were bright as she looked at me.

"What did he say?" she asked. "He is scared, isn't he?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "He is. From what he told me horrible things have been done."

"I know," she said. "I found traces of mining activity at the other side of the settlement." I frowned; I specifically told her to stay near the shuttle, at least until we knew what was out there. She offered me an apologetic half-smile before she continued.

"And scorch marks. They apparently blasted their way into the earth with laser beams." I nodded pensively, my annoyance at her recklessness forgotten. It fit in with what the Terrian said.

"And -- " She halted. I realized there was more, and that she was not sure if she should tell me.

"Yes?" I prompted, dreading her answer but needing to know.

"Terrians," she said quietly, her voice low. " They're dead, most bodies bleached to the bone -- " My eyes widened and I stared at her, not understanding. The earth always took the Terrians back when they died...

"The site is Geolocked," she rushed on and I swallowed. I suddenly felt very sick and my head pounded with anger. The bastards! Not only had they murdered the aliens, they had also denied them their final resting-place. I began to understand the threatening attitude of the lone Terrian. In fact, if I were him, I might've shot first, asked questions later.

"I'm sorry, Lonzo," Julia whispered, as she placed a gentle hand on my arm. "I'm so sorry..."

Chapter 4

We built a small fire on the beach. We didn't need its heat so much as its light, to dispel

the darkness infested with horrid memories. I rested my head in Julia's lap, my cheek pressed against her belly. I felt the baby nudging against my face, a small consolation after the horrors of the day. Julia brushed the hair of my forehead gently and I closed my eyes, relishing the touch of her comforting hand. I was exhausted but doubted I'd get much sleep that night.

I had spent the afternoon transporting the remains of the Terrians from the Geolocked site to a spot where the planet could take them back. The lone Terrian stood a silent vigil on a ridge overlooking the site. He told me he was the last of his tribe, the only one left.

Whenever I looked at the twisted bodies, scores of them, I cringed. I could tell from their positions that their deaths had been violent and painful. I wondered what had possessed the colonists to cause so much pain. My eyes burned with a dry anger for what we, humans, had done to this gentle race.

After I finished with the last body, we quietly stared at the pile of bones. It was all that remained of the aliens, once such a magnificent sight. I felt some kind of ceremony was in order yet couldn't find the appropriate words. So we just took a moment of silence, contemplating. The earth heaved and took them in - and that was all. When I looked up at the ridge, the Terrian was gone, his duty as guardian fulfilled.

A drop of wetness that fell on my cheek startled me and my eyes shot open. Over me, Julia was crying silently, big tears rolling down her face. I sat up, worried, and cupped her cheek in my hand, tilting her head slightly so I could look into her eyes.

"Hey," I said, "what's wrong? It's not your fault."

She backed away from me and averted her gaze. She spoke so softly I had to strain to understand her over the crackling of the flames.

"Yes, it is," she said. "I never told Devon..."

I gasped when the implications of what she just said hit me. "You mean, you never told Devon about him?" I asked incredulously. It came out harsher than I intended. "Julia, that's -- "

She interrupted me. "I know," she cried, "it was the wrong thing to do. But you know how she felt about him... I was afraid she wouldn't believe me. So I wanted to be absolutely sure."

She glanced up at me, a little uncertain. She was afraid of my anger that had flared up briefly. It doused as soon as I saw her anxiety. I crawled over to her and took her in my

arms. She resisted a moment, her body tense, then she leaned against me. "Julia, it's okay. You made a bad call, maybe, but it isn't your fault. You couldn't know he'd find out and trick you."

"Alonzo, the Council prevailed because I didn't tell her..." I silently stroked her hair. Julia's revelation answered at least some of the questions that were whirling in my mind.

Devon Adair would have never let any harm come to the Terrians. Nor would any of the others of our group, I was sure. Unless Danziger continued to work for the Council... Devon depended heavily on that man and unwittingly she would have given him all the ammunition the Council needed to control the settlement.

"Lonzo?" Julia muttered against my neck.

"Hmm?" I glanced down at her to see her bright eyes looking up at me.

"Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive you? Julia, there's nothing to forgive. You did the best you could. You're not responsible for the way it turned out." Her face relaxed slightly at my words but the doubt remained in her eyes.

Chapter 5

I checked the fuel status of our shuttle and muttered in satisfaction. There was plenty left to circle the planet a couple of times so it would certainly be enough to take us to the Biodome. The first winter on the planet we'd known some happy times there and we decided to return to the mountains. It was the only place we could think of, that any survivors might have gone to. And if no one was there, at least it might offer us a place to live.

I was walking around the ship, looking her over. A few days parked in the sand couldn't hurt the shuttle but I wanted to make sure all the same. Suddenly, from the corner of my eye I caught movement on the ridge. I spun around, squinting in the bright sunlight. A dark shadow huddled high above me, at the edge, standing out sharply against the blue sky. My heart began to beat a little quicker.

"Hey," I called and started for the slope. At the sound of my voice, the shape startled and scurried away ungainly. I stopped, disappointed. The tall, slouched shape, the baggy rags. It was only a Grendler. In the back of my mind a small voice whispered there had been something odd about this specific beast. I shrugged it off. Getting to the Biodome was our priority. Chasing Grendlers wasn't.

The journey, that had taken us more than a year of travel the first time, now only took two hours. The sun was still high in the sky when I set down the shuttle on a flat-topped hill nearby. In the distance the rounded roof of the dome gleamed in the light. The slopes were covered in green leafed brush, bright blooms strewn haphazardly between the scrubs. It was very different from the bare, snowcapped hills we remembered.

We stared around, awed. "Wow," I said with a large grin.

"I didn't know it could be so beautiful," Julia smiled back.

"Let's go, see if the dome is still habitable," I said and we began to walk down the slope towards the silver glimmer in the distance. The shadowed woods offered some protection from the sun and it was cool below the dense foliage.

Suddenly, "Stop!" a voice called, startling us. From behind the trees a man appeared. He was an imposing, tall figure and long gray-streaked hair hung in a neat pony-tail. I figured he was in his late fifties, maybe early sixties. The most impressive thing about him though, was the battered Mag Pro he pointed in our direction. The weapon was old but its soft humming unmistakable.

Cautiously he stepped forward to us, peering in the gloom to see better. Suddenly his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. He lowered the Mag Pro.

"Alonzo? Julia?" he asked, disbelieving. "Is that really you?"

Julia and I exchanged a glance. Who was this man that knew our names?

"Eh, yeah," I offered, a little hesitant.

A large grin broke on his face. He took a deep breath and bellowed, "True! Come see who's here!"

True? I thought to myself, remembering Danziger's little girl. That couldn't be, could it?

"Uly? Is it you?" Julia asked. She was always a little quicker to comprehend than I was. Because of the chromosomes, she always excused when I teased her with it.

The man nodded vigorously and I looked a little closer. The eyes, the chin... it could be. I did some quick mental calculations. Ulysses Adair had been ten years old when we were

taken away. That'd make him fifty-seven now. Just about the age I took this man to be. Dumbfounded I stared at him.

Behind the man -Uly, my brain tried to process- a woman ambled up the slope. She was roughly the same age as he was. Could this be True? I eyed her a little warily. True was Danziger's daughter and I didn't think kindly of the man, to say the least. But the woman that stared at me, wide-eyed, astonished, had an open, guileless face. Not a trace of deceit in her eyes.

For long minutes we stood there, sunlight filtering through the foliage and casting dancing shadows among us. In our minds, we were all transported back nearly fifty years, to the last time we had seen each other. What would they think of us? Would they think *we* worked for the Council?

At last True broke the silence. "Come," she said quietly, motioning for us to follow her. "It's good to see you."

"We were so worried about you, about what happened to you," Uly cried and in his excitement I recognized the ten-year-old. Julia glanced at him uncertainly.

His exuberance faded when he caught her glance and softly he said, "Yes, we know. For years we believed him, thinking *you* betrayed us. When we finally found out, it was too late." Then another smile broke on his face. "However, you're alive and well, thank goodness."

Chapter 6

True and Uly filled us in on the years since we left, answering our unasked questions. After Julia and I were gone, Eden Advance trudged on, dismayed and saddened. Danziger's sabotage had delayed them so much that when they finally arrived at New Pacifica, the colony ship had come and gone. The Council was firmly in place, governing the settlement. The Terrians healed only a few of the children. Most of the others died, the lucky ones living long enough for a cure to be found that helped them live a marginal existence.

Devon did her best to keep her promise to the Terrians. She had worked day and night to spare the aliens and their earth, forever running interference between humans and Terrians. It had been a losing battle from the start. The Council wasn't interested in the Terrians. Instead they ravished the planet, mining for Morganite and other precious metals. They used Geolocks, petrifying large parcels of land, and had blasted holes with the Mag Pros at maximum power to get to the minerals.

"When my mother's way didn't work, most of us, of the first," Uly said, referring to the people that survived the crash of the Roanoke, "joined the Terrians in a resistance movement, going underground. A lot of us died fighting the Council. Walman, Denner, Cameron..."

"And Devon?" I prompted, when his voice trailed off.

"She's dead. He killed her," he said, his voice suddenly hard. True took his hand and held it gently, encouragingly.

"She loved him, trusted him!" Uly cried. He got up and started pacing. His face was flushed, his breathing came in short, ragged puffs. He appeared very upset.

"I think Devon really believed she found her soul mate," True added sadly. "When we got to New Pacifica, my father began courting her openly. No doubt on Council orders. Finally, they got married," she whispered. My eyes widened in surprise. Next to me, Julia gasped.

"They lived and worked together for *sixteen* years," Uly continued bitterly. "She involved him in all her plans, all her work. She trusted him, listened to him and valued his opinion. And the Council knew all her thoughts before she even voiced them." He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself enough to continue.

"She was devastated when she finally found out he was a Council agent. That was the final blow, it crushed her spirit. She died six months later, from a broken heart." Uly's voice cracked. Julia's sharp intake of breath told me she was crying. I felt tears welling in my own eyes and blinked to disperse them. All this hurt, all this destruction. And one man, that I once considered my friend, at the heart of it.

"When Devon died, it all fell apart," True's soft voice piped up. "With her gone, the Council had a free hand. The underground resistance became suspicious of everything and everyone, which paralyzed the movement."

"The Terrians struck back in the only way left to them, by shutting down the earth. When the planet began to die," Uly continued, his voice quivering but determined to finish the story, "people got sick. The Terrians protected us but we were forced to leave New Pacifica. This was twenty years ago, give or take. I haven't been back since. And finally, with most of the population dead or dying, the cost became too high and the Council gave up. With a last blast they destroyed New Pacifica and left for space, destination unknown."

A long, oppressive silence descended on us, huddled together under the roof of the Biodome. My head reeled, the story almost too much to take in. Outside darkness fell, quickly, as it always did in the mountains. In the distance a lone cry of some animal echoed through the hills.

"I'm sorry, Uly," Julia said softly. "If only I had told your mother..."

Uly smiled wanly. "You're not to blame," he said. "She wouldn't have believed you. Not then."

Chapter 7

"He's still alive, you know," True suddenly piped up. "I talk to him on Gear sometimes." I glanced at her, raising my eyebrows. Uly abruptly stood and walked out of the dome, the double doors clattering loudly as he pushed through them. True followed him with her eyes, her expression unreadable. I caught Julia's gaze as she eyed True warily.

The woman noticed her glare and shrugged an apology. "He was the only father I've ever known," she said quietly. "Uly pretends to ignore it, refuses to acknowledge it." Again, she glanced at the door.

"He's an old man now," True continued. "The Council left him behind. He outlived his usefulness to them. And I think they blamed it on him when they lost control of the planet. He survived the sickness. He lives there alone, in a cave near the beach."

With a start I recalled the Grendler I had seen that morning, before we left New Pacifica. I had thought something was odd about the creature. Now I realized it wasn't a Grendler...

"I've seen him," I said, "this morning."

Julia's head whipped around and she stared at me. Her eyes were unreadable, yet the expression on her face accused me, 'why didn't you tell me?'

"I thought he was a Grendler," I answered her unvoiced question. I shrugged with a weak smile.

oOo

We stayed with True and Uly. They said that more survivors lived in other parts of the planet. We decided to go looking for them next year. The baby was due soon and winter was approaching fast; we needed to get a winter camp ready.

Julia was withdrawn, pensive. I kept quiet, realizing something was brewing. And I suspected what it was. But I knew my Julia and she would come out with it in her own time. And indeed, after a couple of weeks she walked up to me where I was cutting wood for the winter.

"Lonzo," she said, "I've to go and see him, for it to be really over. Will you take me?"

I nodded. I had been waiting for her to ask.

"The shuttle is ready," I replied. "We can go tomorrow."

She thanked me quietly, gratitude in her eyes when she walked away. No doubt she was reliving events in her mind as she had been doing for the past weeks.

oOo

We landed on the beach, again bathed in bright sunlight. Here in New Pacifica the weather was still hot, summer not easily defeated. We had asked True if she wanted to come along. One glance at Uly, who pretended not listen, made up her mind and she refused. So, it was just Julia and me that walked along the beach, looking for the cave True described.

When we found it, high up in the hillside, we climbed to it. It was hard for Julia, big with child as she was. But the grim determination on her face told me I better not try and tell her not to come.

Finally we reached the opening, panting. A dank, dusty smell wafted from the cave and I wrinkled my nose. Julia hesitated for a moment, then ducked and entered the cave. It was cold inside, and dark. I switched on the Luma light at my belt. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light I noticed a shape crumbled in the far corner. Julia hurried over to it.

"Julia, wait," I called. She didn't hear me and I followed her quickly. She knelt next to the body, a curious expression of revulsion mixed with compassion on her face.

"He's dead," she said calmly. "Has been for a few days." I peered closer and stared at Danziger's face. The face of an old man, wrinkled and dry-skinned. His eyes were glazed over and stared unseeing at the ceiling. His hair, unkempt and gray, was matted with dirt and a nasty smell entered my nose.

Julia stretched out her hand and closed his eyes. I took her shoulder.

"Come," I said, and squeezed gently. "There's nothing more you can do here."

She clambered back to her feet a little clumsily and I supported her until she steadied herself.

"We can't leave him like this," she said quietly and I nodded. I wrapped the body in a blanket and lifted it, amazed at how light it felt.

oOo

That day, we buried Danziger at the foot of the hills, on the beach, where the water never reached. And with him, we buried the past. Together we gazed down at the grave of the man, who left his mark so deeply on the history of this second earth. I didn't feel anger, or hate. Not anymore. All I felt was sadness, and a sense of loss for what could have been.

In the distance, the sun dipped below the sea, the last of the light fading fast. I stared across the waves, at the stars that winked on one by one. Julia moved quietly beside me. For a moment we stood in companionable silence and I wrapped my arms around her. Below my hand the baby suddenly kicked hard and, startled, I drew back. Julia chuckled. In the distance a night owl hooted a welcome to the falling darkness. At last, our journey was over. We were home.

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