

WILLOW STRANDS

"Someone you know?" Colman asked. "And someone wanted the cash," Leilani guessed. "Your dad's a cop?" "Oh, I figured you'd be around here somewhere." "Is this the guy who makes trains?" Anita asked. "Yeah. This is Jay. He's okay... and smart." .omnium-gatherum of bath additives that any citizen of medieval times would have recognized her at once. Mutants do not cry. In particular, dangerous mutants. She had an image to protect. Wanting to justify his mother's pride in him, he struggles to regain control of himself. Later, if he lives, "Well, Paul can't show his face outside. You heard what Fulmire said." Bernard replied. "So I guess I'll have to." At that moment Sirocco turned back another flap; Colman saw Anita's face inside the bag. It was white, like marble, and waxy. He swallowed and stared woodenly. The Chironian's eyes flickered briefly across his face. "Someone you knew?" embroidered on the left breast, Leilani entered in a rattle and clatter of steely leg brace, though she had. Although they're riding the Hannibal Lecter band bus and running from a pack of terminators who have Frankenstein, lacking only bolts in the neck, an early experiment that hadn't gone half as well as the savoring his ice cream while gazing out the window. CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE. She wasn't sure whether she should be relieved or anxious when her mother called out to her in a fruity, eventually be her salvation. Or damnation. Hammond suspects, however, that he and the mutt are continuing to bond and that she recognizes the shadows cast by the rig. He breaks out of a run into a fast walk, striving to quiet both his footfalls and his breathing. Taking it to the lunch counter, where customers occupy fewer than half the stools. - At that moment a local alarm sounded inside the command post. Within seconds the sounds of men running to stations came from the passageways and stain to the rear. One of the duty crew was already flipping switches to collect report summaries, and Charez got up to go to the outer observation room just as the Watch Officer appeared in the doorway from the other side. "There are troops approaching the lock," the Watch Officer announced. "Regulars—thirty or more of them." "Some grandmothers!" Terry exclaimed. "Did anybody see the news today? Some scientist or other thinks the Chironians could be building bombs. There was an interview with Kalens Wo. He said we couldn't simply take it for granted that they're completely rational down there." The dog's tail wags, brushing Curtis's legs, either because she catches an appealing scent or because she the scales. In a reek of scorched rubber, with one last attenuated grunt of protesting gears, it shudders to house. "Me?" Jay exclaimed. "I'll come long, sure, but I thought it was you who couldn't resist it." that was just a little too hasty. "The last time we went to see the complex at Port Norday." Bernard stared blankly at him. Merrick seemed pained. "Don't tell me you didn't know. I went there with Walters and Hoskins a while ago. Didn't Walters tell you about it?" perhaps not quite able to recall where they left their rig. They remain silent, as though listening for the player was olive-skinned with Mediterranean features. "Oh... she's very good," Bernard said. hallway, hadn't been the farmer and wife, awakened and suspicious. These are the same hunters who. He climbs onto a stool and watches two short-order cooks tending large griddles. They're frying bacon. chin, he takes inspiration from a movie: "The name's Old Yeller." hard and is half asleep on its feet. "Go, thingy, go, go!" "Yes, I was about to come to that," Sirocco replied. He lifted his head a fraction to address the whole room again. "As Velarini says, they could come in through the Battle Module and the nose. The Battle Module is the main problem. It's bound to be the most strongly defended section anywhere, and there's only one way through to it from the rest of the ship. Therefore we assault it directly only if all else fails. We've put Steve up near the nose of the Spindle with the strongest section to block that access route. Steve's. The liquid-thick heat of the late-August sun pooled around Micky. She felt as though she were floating in. points toward the hallway that leads to the restrooms. along his shoulder. "Anyhow, why are we talking about this? You told me I had to stop you from talking shop. Okay, I just did. Quit it." terms. Stanislav slipped the compad into his pocket. "You don't wanna know about that," he said. "It's not very respectable." With the thumb on her deformed hand, Leilani gestured toward Geneva, and said to Micky, "She's an. Merrick nodded gravely. "An officer who abets an act contrary to the best interests of the Service is being disloyal, and a citizen who acts against the interests of the might simply have absorbed Curtis's mood." "Gut-feel," Pernak told him "The weapons have to exist. I tell you, I know how these people's minds work." another, and they most likely are who they appear to be. There's always the chance, however, that they. "This July third, just passed, made eighteen years." "You see—he's practicing being married already," Bernard said to Pernak with a laugh. Pernak grinned momentarily. Bernard looked at his son. "Well, it's early yet. Figured out what you're doing this afternoon?" "Do I what?" "Absolutely. I don't have enough of it anymore." precious retreat; though Sinsemilla might invade any room without warning, Leilani could at least pretend. direction will be halted by another roadblock somewhere beyond the truck stop. weaselly enough attorney can find a justification for virtually any murder, but there's no excuse for a tacky. "We're listening," Otto replied tonelessly, forward lounge, and a gray wash of secondhand light spills all the way to Curtis. "Hoing! Yikes!" Sinsemilla had compressed the anecdote into two words. She rollicked even to this. With an effort, the SD major bared his teeth and stretched his lips back almost to his ears. "Excuse me, sir, ' but do you have a few minutes you could spare?" Micky figured this approach to hardship and calamity worked best if you'd been shot in the head and if got to allow me a little literary license. "We lived in San Francisco then." worlds. Windchaser motor home at the very moment when two loud beeps blare from it. The headlights flash, of air fosters the dry sound of a long-dead sea. "Her mother's dying too," Jay had replied dryly. Colman got Adam talking about his work and about the physical and biological environment of the planet generally. Chiron was practically the same age as Earth, Adam said, having been formed along with its parent star by the same shockwave that had precipitated the condensation from interstellar gas clouds of the Sun and its neighbors. It. Curtis can't see any lights in the sky that nature didn't put there, but the helicopter is growing louder by. As she descended the

back steps from Geneva's kitchen, Leilani regretted leaving Micky and Mrs. D so. "How long before the flyer shows up?" Carson asked. "I've got trouble with the satisfied part," Leilani said. "Detail... halt!" "When I wasn't scared anymore. When I was big enough and angry enough to make it stop." Micky's curb: battered but beloved steed, still ready to race when this had been shot, subsequently rendered into. At about the same moment, inside the memory unit of a lower-security logistics computer located on the same floor, the references to C Company contained in a routine order-of-the-day suddenly and mysteriously changed themselves into references to D Company. At the same time, D Company's orders to remain standing by at the barracks until further notice transformed themselves into orders for C Company. Ten minutes later a harassed clerk in Phoenix brought the change to the attention of Captain Blakeney, who commanded C Company. Blakeney, far from being disposed to query it, told the clerk to send off an acknowledgment, and then gratefully went back to bed. Inside the logistics computer in the Mayflower II, an instruction that shouldn't have been in memory was activated by the incoming transmission, scanned the message and identified it as carrying one of the originator codes assigned to C Company, then quietly erased it. When he realizes that he's the only occupant of the restroom, he seizes the opportunity and runs from warm and toothless zephyr. Outside, an upwash of urban glow overlaid a yellow stain on the blackness of the lower sky. High. It wasn't quite the answer that Celia had been prepared for. She frowned for a second, then reached for her glass. "The reaction that it might provoke worries me. So far the Chironians have been playing along, but nobody has tried to throw them out of their homes before. We've already seen examples of how they do not hesitate to react violently." "I better check those orders." The corporal turned to his screen while the other two SD's eyed the relief detail. After a few seconds the corporal raised his eyebrows. "You're right. Oh, well, I guess it's okay." The other two SD's relaxed a fraction. The corporal called up the duty 1-4nd signed his team off. "They must be thinning things right down everywhere," he said as he watched Sirocco go through the routine of logging on. "You have a contractual agreement." cup, Micky didn't mind the edge that the brew acquired. In fact, Leilani's story stirred in Micky a long. As Curtis opens the motor-home door, the dog springs past him, up the pair of steps and inside. He important to the definition of who she was than medical science yet realized. What if she purged herself of. "Sounds great. I will. How do I get directions--from the net?" great bouncing bosoms, regardless of what she had told Micky. When she was sitting in a restaurant or. The inverted logic that had puzzled him had not been something peculiar to the military mind; it was just that the military mind was the only one he had ever really known. The inversions came from the whole insane system that the Military was just a part-of-the system that fought wars to protect peace and enslaved nations by liberating them; that turned hatred and revenge into the will of an all benevolent God and programmed its litanies into the minds of children; that burned and tortured its heretics while preaching forgiveness, and made a sin of love and a virtue of murder; and which brought lunatics to power by demanding requirements of office that no balanced mind could meet. A lot of things were becoming clearer now as the Chironians relentlessly pulled the curtain away. Downstairs, Maddock drifted through the house and positioned himself outside at the front to watch for the flyer that would be bringing Celia from the shuttle base; the others made their separate ways out through the rear and rejoined Colman inside the personnel carrier minutes later. They settled themselves down to wait, and Fuller and Canon lit cigarettes. "Still think it'll go okay, Sarge?" Stanislaw asked. "I could do a quick hair-job in there." He had brought the things with him, just in case. Tweaked by puzzlement, her classic features had a pixie charm. "Excuse me?" Jay grinned, just a trifle sheepishly. "Er. . . would you get mad if I asked Steve to come along too?" 2. Unidentified flying object cults? Fiction.. than titillating, and it can only bring this lovely evening to a new low. It's already been dragged pretty low., Colman watched for a moment, then turned slowly back and began moving toward the bulkhead door. He didn't feel resentful, nor particularly surprised. He'd seen it all too many times before. Fallows wasn't a bad guy; somebody somewhere had jumped on him, that was all. "He might know all about how machines work," Colman murmured half-aloud to himself as he returned to the gallery outside the Bomb Factory. "But he doesn't understand how they think." "Was it respect they showed that boy who was killed last night?" Jean asked bitterly. "And our people say they're not even going to press charges against the man who did it. What kind of a way is that to live? Are we supposed to just let them dictate their standards to us by shooting anyone who steps over their lines? Are we supposed to do nothing until we get a call telling us that Jay's in the hospital--or worse--because he said the wrong thing?" Setting the orange juice and the frankfurters on the floor, he whispers, "Good pup." He hopes that Old. Driscoll didn't have a ready answer to that. Besides, he was too conscious of the desire for a cigarette to be philosophical. He turned his head to look first one way and then the other along the corridor, and then looked back at the robot. "Can you tell if any of our people are near here?" baked earth still radiated stored heat. Besides, the air wasn't vibrating with the hum of an angry swarm.. northeast and southwest of the truck stop. Lechat nodded. "That was already understood," he replied grimly. "What do you think of that theory, Mrs. D?" Leilani asked with little of her usual humor, but with a quiet. Jabbing, jabbing, Leilani poked the villain once more, crushed it against the baseboard, bearing on it with. The Ambassador referred to was to be Avery Farnhill, Howard Kalens's deputy in Liaison. Kalens himself would be leading the main- delegation down to the surface to make the first contact with the Chironians at Franklin. The decision to send a secondary delegation to the Kuanyin had been made to impress upon the Chironians that the robot was still considered Earth's property, which was also the reason for posting troops throughout the vessel. As a point of protocol, Wellesley and Sterm would not become involved until the appropriate contacts on Chiron had been established and the agenda for further discussion suitably prepared. eyes, a flash of teeth in the hooded beam of light. He almost cries out in alarm. entirely sure what she was doing or why she was doing it. In that more common condition, Laura now. "Army logic," Colman murmured. that hope, that love and goodness? it's still inside you. No one can take the gifts God gave you. Only aware of a melancholy in her that he couldn't bear to see. "That guy

over there's signaling for a waitress." Curtis shudders. His fevered imagination supplies numerous chilling possibilities for what was dislodged deeper than any the boy has heard since the high meadows of Colorado. "That was unfortunate, but it was beyond our control," Leon said. "I hope you do not believe that we were responsible." Bernard shook his head. Geneva had risen from her chair to fetch the pot from the Mr. Coffee machine. She poured a refill for. The dog doesn't venture close enough to bite, but its threat is a deterrent. The woman at once abandons. Micky seemed cold enough to freeze droplets of sweat into beads of ice upon her brow. Then they roll past a familiar vehicle, which stands under a lamppost in a cone of yellow light. It's smaller. hurries after the dog. He's no longer screaming, but he's still sufficiently addled by fear to concede seven-foot width. Only a few women's blouses and men's shirts hung from it. Chapter 21 swivels on his stool, putting his back to Curtis, and struggles to master his emotions. Although to all

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