

Perihelion

Online Science Fiction Magazine

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Shuttle 54, Where R U?

By Jack Ryan

"HEY, JODHPUR!" CARL'S VOICE WAS a little loud for the university library. "Y'all goin' collecting?"

Carl Bligh was about six-six, hair black and thick. He had one of those President Nixon five o'clock shadows at any hour of the day or night. And he didn't think it was funny if you called him "Captain" Bligh.

"Sure. Want to come along?" I asked, hoping he'd say no.

"Can't. Got to start a run of CAT scans on my ladies." His undergraduate degree had been in herpetology, so now he was specializing in sea snakes. "Won't end until almost ten. If you could bring back some grass shrimp for my roommate's seahorses, she'd appreciate it. I'll stop by around ten-thirty or eleven tonight, if you'll be home."

"Yeah, but check for lights. I'll be hitting the books all evening so I may make an early night of it."

Carl stared over my shoulder, grinning like a shark. "Yes," he said, and winked. "I understand. Later." As Carl turned and slipped away, I heard familiar footsteps behind me.

"Hi, Hank. What did Captain Bligh want?" Honey oozed from Sara Leone's every word and movement. Black hair curled onto her shoulders and framed her face.

"Nada. Just wants us to bring back some shrimp."

"That's why I've been looking for you. Daddy's holograming me from Buenos Aires this afternoon. So I can't go with you."

"You could take the call as easily in Biscayne Bay as in your apartment."

"I know. But the resolution of my earring's ePhone isn't as good as the HD at my place," she said. "Besides, Daddy wants to upload his photos of a pre-Columbian Charrua pot to my 3D printer."

"So who's going to tug around my collecting chest?"

Sara put her fist against her cocked hip. "Honestly, Hank Jodhpur, sometimes I think the only reason you associate with me is because I'm quicker than you are, smarter than you are ..."

"And definitely stronger than I am. But speaking of smarter, you'll still be over tonight so we can study?"

"Yes, certainly. I'll bring paella."

Spanish food was something we didn't have back in Fort Wayne. If it hadn't been for her "Daddy," it was a taste I could have acquired. I'd only met *Señor Leone* once. He was some sort of diplomat. Friendly, but he left me with the distinct impression that he could be a formidable fellow where his daughter's honor was concerned.

I drove over to Matheson Hammock Park after lunch. Stepping between marinating tourists, I wended my way across the sand to Biscayne Bay. The afternoon was spent sweeping the turtle grass in the shallow water with my aquarium net. My ice chest, for holding grass shrimp and other small critters, drifted along behind me. I had a wide-mouthed plastic jug for anything that might take a notion to crawl up and out of the ice chest.

When I decided to call it a day, I meandered back toward the beach. A few yards in from the turtle grass, on the sandy bottom, I saw the lightning whelk. He'd be a good companion for my rock beauty angelfish.

Whelks aren't aggressive and have no defense other than their hard shells. But as I pulled the big gray snail from the water, my hand prickled as though I'd just banged my funny bone. I dropped him, looked at my hand, flexed my fingers a few times. The whelk had almost disappeared into the turtle grass by the time I saw him again. I netted him, deposited him into the jug, and snapped the cap on.

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ADVENTURE AND MAYHEM!

THE ADVENTURES OF CRAZY LIDDY

CLAYTON J. CALLAHAN

Liddy is a convicted smuggler with one chance at a pardon if she can rescue the governor's son, who is missing in action. Nothing about this mission is easy; at every turn Liddy must push her courage, her resourcefulness, and her trust to the limit just to survive. In the end, there can be only one way to succeed, but it's going to take a starpilot who's truly crazy to pull it off.

At my house, my front door sniffed me, the lock clicked off, and the door slid open. I removed the chunks of souvenir coral from the top of my aquarium, lifted the lid, and dumped the whelk and other critters into the water with Rocky, my rock beauty. Carl's shrimp went into a holding tank on my patio.

By the time I got back inside, the whelk had jammed himself into the lid's feeder opening. I bumped him and he settled to the bottom. He did it again while I showered and dressed. So I bumped him down once more. About that time, Sara arrived with her paella.

After dinner she wandered around the living room while I put the dishes into the ultrasony and waited a few minutes for it to convert uneaten paella bits into dust and suction it away.

"Your *Busycon* is trying to escape," she called.

"Just bump his nose and he'll fall back." I said.

"Maybe he wants to go home."

Sara poked him back down several more times as the evening went on and we got into studying for our Prelims. As I scrolled through the notes on my eSlate's WordPerfect window, I noticed that my cursor was moving across the screen on its own. I jiggled it with my finger. It danced around in response, then continued on to the left.

"Oh, no. Not computer problems."

The cursor finally stopped and we watched as text appeared:

Hello, friend. We must get back to the Bay by tomorrow afternoon. We need your help. Please.

"You've got a virus," Sara said.

I rebooted the slate. The same "Hello, friend" message came up when I restarted WordPerfect.

"Buzz off," I typed in. I thought virus-checkers were supposed to prevent this sort of nonsense.

We heard a buzzing sound and saw Rocky zipping round his tank. As Sara and I rushed over to investigate, the front door's proximity sensor announced, "You have a visitor" and displayed a small hologram of Carl Bligh.

"Come on in," I said, vocally overriding the door's lock.

"What you lookin' at? Oh, you got a new *Busycon*. Nice. A little odd isn't it? Did you get some grass shrimp?"

"Odd?"

"Yeah. Where's his foot?"

Sara and I looked. Where the shell should have curled under, allowing for the foot to come out, was just flat.

"If you think this is odd, look at my slate."

Carl stared at the screen for a moment, then said, "Ya' got a virus, Hank."

"I don't know. Watch."

I picked up the eSlate and began to type:

Who are you? What do you want?

We are the crew of Shuttle 54. We must get back to the Bay by tomorrow afternoon. Help us, please.

Where are you from? What are you doing here?

You are probably not familiar with our star system. We are members of the Stellar Economic Community. We mean you no harm. We are only gathering information about life in your coastal waters.

What is so important about tomorrow?

Our starship will be in this vicinity tomorrow afternoon and we must be there for pickup. Shuttle 54 can fly only about twenty meters through your atmosphere. Please help us get back to the rendezvous zone.

"Damn!" Carl said. "Little green men right here in your tank. I mean, I can hardly believe it, little green men."

Are you little green men?

After I typed it in, I immediately felt a fool.

No. Of course we are much smaller than you but we are not green nor little men. You would probably not find us repugnant.

How many are you?

Counting 3 gerfnids, we are a crew of nine. Please help us.

"Hank, you gotta get hold of NASA right away," Carl said.

"Hank, they need to get back to the Bay so they can go home," Sara objected.

"Not till tomorrow afternoon," Carl said. "First, NASA needs to know. You'll be famous, Hank. Don't you realize what this is? It's a genuine *first contact*. We've been sending people into space for years. But we've never met anyone, saucer-freaks notwithstanding. What time is it in Seattle?"

"Almost 8:05," Sara said. "Why?"

"NASA's exobiology lab should be told," Carl said. "It's too late. They'll be closed. What about Houston or Huntsville? Canaveral's been closed for years. Maybe you should try 9-1-1."

"Hold on, hold on," I said. I thought Carl was about to start foaming at the mouth. "How about Patrick Air Force Base? They're just up the coast."

"You crazy?" Carl said. He gripped my shoulders as if he was going to pick me up. "You want tanks and Humvees and the like all over? Didn't you ever see that old vid, *E.T.*? Some kid found an alien and they encased his house in bubble wrap and took the thing away under armed guard. You call the Air Force and you'll never see Shuttle 54 again." He let go and stepped back. "No. Gotta be NASA. They know how to deal with these things."

"Come on guys," Sara said. "These little folks must be frightened. Wouldn't you be? Take them back to the Bay. They can contact NASA if they want to. Or just go home."

"Maybe Sara's right." I glanced at the clock in the kitchen. "I'll take them back first thing in the morning."

"Look," Carl said, confronting me again. "You're on a NASA Fellowship, the Molecular Evolution Lab is funded mostly with NASA dough. So you're beholden to NASA, right? This'll make you and your ME Lab world famous. What would your Professor Faux have to say 'bout that, boy?"

I wavered. Maybe a building named after me. Job offers that wouldn't quit. "Okay, maybe I owe something to NASA. But I'm not sure that makes it right."

"It certainly doesn't, Hank." Sara's Latina eyes seemed to be scanning my soul. I could tell she didn't much care for what she saw. "Maybe you should talk to Dr. Faux first thing in the morning."

Gears were turning behind Carl's eyes. I wasn't sure what would come out the chute when the grinding stopped.

"Right," Carl said, nodding. "Don't do anything stupid. Talk to Faux. She'll set you straight." He glanced at the kitchen clock. "Gotta go. But I wanta be there when you talk to Faux."

Carl turned and barely gave the door time to slide open. He didn't even scoop up his shrimp.

I turned to face Sara.

"Hank, you can't be serious about turning these people over to NASA?"

"Sara, don't you realize the enormity of this? It's *First Contact*. This day'll go down in history."

"Oh, I'm not stupid. Of course I see the importance. For you, fame and finances. What do you suppose they'll put on your new building? Maybe, *Hank Jodhpur Hall. Dedicated to the memory of the crew of Shuttle 54*. You don't expect those poor folks to survive this ordeal, do you?"

"Survive? Why shouldn't they? Nobody wants to harm them. They'll be like ambassadors. Honored guests around the world."

"No, not ambassadors. Not honored guests. They'll be like those last two coyotes at the National Zoo. Everyone will come to see them, then they'll be gone."

"Don't be silly. They won't be specimens. We want to talk to this Stellar Economic Community they mentioned. Become a part of it."

"Hank, didn't you even see your slate's screen? Those aliens were talking to you in English. They didn't just drop into Biscayne Bay this morning. They know about us, our languages, our cultures. Our wars and our warts. If this Stellar Economic Community wanted us to join them, they wouldn't do it by sending *ambassadors* home with a graduate student out collecting shrimp, would they?"

"Hank, this isn't a *First Contact*. It's one of those alien abductions, but done bass-ackwards!"

I turned and stared at Rocky's tank. Shuttle 54 was motionless at the bottom. I took a deep breath and blew slowly between my lips.

"Okay. You're right. So what should we do?"

"Well, talking to Dr. Faux might actually be a good idea. At least she'd know how to let the right people in NASA know what's happened. But you still need to get these little folks back to the Bay. If you do that, maybe they'll be more inclined to

make contact with us. If not, can you blame them?"

I noticed motion in Rocky's tank. The fish swam from one end of the tank to the other, tilted to the side. Then he turned and swam behind the sea fans and corals and settled down against the bottom. Moments later, he repeated the whole thing. A fish swimming on its side is not a good sign. Maybe Shuttle 54 was giving off something toxic. "He's not looking good," I said.

"Well, first thing, Mr. World Famous Biochemist, Rocky's a *she*, not a *he*." Sara stuck a couple fingers between the buttons at the top of my shirt and ran them up and down a little. "Second, can't you recognize when a lady's telling you it's late enough for you turn out the lights so she can go to bed?"

Sara closed her eyes and tilted her lips up toward me. I could feel my shoulders and neck redden. I stepped away from her and clicked off the light on Rocky's tank.

"You're right. It is getting a little late. Can I give you a lift home?" I was feeling a little flustered and lightheaded.

She shook her head slowly. "I can't believe that you claim to be a farm boy. No, thanks. My car is parked around the corner in front of the lab."

"Sara, I'm not as dumb as you imply. I just don't want your Daddy making a surprise visit to Miami and finding you here."

"You are frightened by my Daddy?"

"Definitely. You say he's some sort of diplomat. I think he's a Nazi hunter and I don't want to make him angry."

"Nazi hunter? Don't be absurd." She kissed her index finger and touched my nose. "*Hasta mañana!*"

As the door closed behind her, I called for the room lights to switch off. In the gloom, I could see Rocky as *she* swam behind the corals and sea fans and settled down for a better night than I was about to have.

The Molecular Evolution Lab was a three-story white structure with insufficient parking. Sara was removing samples from the big oil bath heater when I got in the next morning. Carl wasn't waiting in my office and no one had seen him.

A few minutes later, Sara stuck her head through my door. "Where's Captain Bligh?"

"Maybe he ran over to the library. I know he's around. I just saw the Black Mamba parked up the street as I walked over."

The "Black Mamba" was Carl's Cadillac Espresso. His dad owned a coal mine, actually, several of them, and he provided Carl with anything his little heart desired. So Carl had a Caddy sports car with a MAMBA vanity plate. It was a high-tech car to the nth degree.

"The Mamba was there when I walked past after I left you last night," Sara said, puzzled. "Maybe he spent the night in his lab."

I scanned the security log from my computer. Carl hadn't been back since he left last night.

"I'm getting a bad feeling about this," I said.

"Let's check his car. You don't think he had a heart attack or something?" Her brown eyes were like saucers.

We hurried down the sidewalk, around the corner at the intersection, and up the street. No Carl. No Mamba!

"Come on," I said and grabbed Sara's hand. I almost dragged her toward my house. We ran past the calamondin trees and oleander bushes that masked my place from street sounds and neighborhood eyes.

I saw that I'd have to have to ask my landlord to make me a new front door with his 3D printer.

Inside, I saw that the vid center was still there. So was the furniture. The kitchen looked untouched. But rock and coral samples, a few Floridian souvenirs, some knickknacks, and a handful of video games were gone. So was my bath towel. The cover of Rocky's tank was on the floor. Shuttle 54 was missing. Rocky cowered behind her corals and sea fans. I wasn't sure what to do. Sara called the police.

The officer pulled his goggles down over his eyes from the front of his helmet and scanned the room with IR, UV, and positrons. He didn't sound encouraging as he got ready to leave.

"Sorry, Mr. Jodhpur. Nothing in the scans, and the sniffer was overwhelmed with the scent of paella. Considering what you say is missing, I'd guess this is the work of kids. It's hardly worth reporting to your insurance company and certainly isn't going to equate to the resources that Miami would have to lay out to recover

your treasures. If we could."

"So, you can't offer much hope?"

"Mr. Jodhpur, I'll ask around the neighborhood. Might get lucky. Give my regards to your father, Miss Leone." He touched his finger to the brim of his helmet and ambled out to his bike.

"Why didn't you tell him about Carl? You know he did it!" Sara said.

"What if he didn't?"

"But what if he *did*? With bikes and patrol cars all over the city, they'd probably locate the Black Mamba within fifteen minutes."

"Sure. Then we'd know that Shuttle 54 was in protective custody. Stored away in some evidence room while the prosecutor decides if she should waste the city's funds to put away some guy that's pinched seventy-five bucks worth of junk or just give it back to me."

She sat down on my couch. "We need to get Shuttle 54 back to the Bay."

I plopped down beside her. "We need to find Carl. He wants to take these aliens to NASA. So he might be at the airport booking a flight to Atlanta or Houston, or, if he wants the Young Exobiology Center, then Seattle. Heck, with his money, he could be chartering a flight."

"He'll still have to go through security," Sara said. "What do you think good old Shuttle 54 will do to their scanners?"

"So maybe not the airport. But where?" I said.

Sara touched her right earring to activate her ePhone.

"What are you doing?" I couldn't see the holographic screen but I could see her fingers and eyes moving.

"You can find lots of interesting things on the High Plane Wiki."

"So you're going to Google Carl Bligh *and* Shuttle 54?" I asked, almost believing that she might actually be able to find them that way. All those satellites must see a lot of stuff we'd rather they didn't.

"Give me a couple minutes."

So I unhooked my slate from my belt and reopened the WordPerfect window. I typed in

Shuttle 54. Where R U?

We are here. What are you doing? We must return to where you found us. Can you please go south instead of north?

Shuttle 54, who am I talking to?

This is Communicator Neltonbent.

Neltonbent. This is Hank. I'm still here in my home with my friend, Sara. We do not have the Shuttle in our possession. You have been kidnapped by our friend, Carl.

Kidnapped? Friend? This Carl must be an exceptional friend.

Sara and I are going to try to recover you and return you to the Bay. Can you describe your location?

Shuttle 54 has been wrapped in some fabric. Short range scanners do not detect light outside. We must be in the boot? Trunk? Trunk of Carl's car.

Can you determine your geographic location?

Yes. We can convert our location into your GPS system coordinates. Let me talk to the Navigator. She can ...

I waited. Nothing more.

Neltonbent. Are you there?

Nothing. Out of range! All I knew was that Carl was driving north. But where? To where?

I heard Sara suck in her breath. "Got it! Downloaded and installed! Isn't it amazing what you can find on the High Plane?"

"I was just talking to Shuttle 54 on my slate. Carl's driving north. Then I lost signal. What do you have?"

"An app to read Carl's ePhone log. We can see who he called and what was said. All I need is his ePhone number, which I just happen to have."

"What do you mean, *just happen to have*? And isn't an app like that illegal?"

Sara gave me a "Were you born yesterday?" look, then said, "It's probably illegal, Hank. Do we want to know or not?"

"Of course we do. We need to know who he's going to see."

"Okay, let's do it." Her fingers moved again as she entered data into her ePhone.

"A bunch of calls right after he left here last night—Seattle, Houston, Atlanta. Voice mail only. Nothing until this morning. A little after eight a.m. To Naples."

"Italy?"

"No. Naples, Florida."

"Yes, of course," I said. "NASA has a Marine Biology facility there. Formerly used for zero-g training."

"Well, according to the transcript, Carl introduced himself, told about Shuttle 54. The guy at the other end said something that shouldn't have been archived, and hung up. Carl tried again and was disconnected. He tried again with a special coal company code, threatened to get his Daddy on the guy's back, and got transferred to someone who at least listened. You can't detect tone from the transcript, but I'd guess the guy was humoring Carl or just covering his tail. Carl is supposed to meet him when he gets there."

I brought up the GPS software on my slate to see a map of south Florida and traced the highways on the screen. "If Carl is heading north, he wants to catch I-75 west to Naples. He'll make good time on the interstate, but he has to fight all the morning traffic before he can get to it. If we run west out the Tamiami Trail, then north on the Miccosukee Reservation Cutoff we'll have practically no traffic and we can head him off at the pass."



I rushed Sara out to my Camaro. "Oh, no! I didn't plug in my charger last night. We'll have to use The Red Flash."

"You said you'd never ride in my car again!"

"The Red Flash" was some sort of Spanish sports car called a "Tramontana." Ticket-Me-Red, of course. And fast! Sara had DADDYSGIRL diplomatic plates on it. I'd ridden in it once before. Just once.

"Let's go," I said, grabbing her hand.

After instructions to the car's Take Me, we were whizzed west through the Everglades on the Tamiami Trail. Traffic was light.

The Florida Everglades. Beautiful desolation. Orchids in bloom on trees along the highway. One alligator who had ignored the "Gator Crossing" sign we'd seen a few miles back. Here and there a white egret fishing for breakfast.

"Do you really think we'll head him off?" Sara asked.

"If we continue at this rate we'll get up the Cutoff to the I-75 junction long before Carl. The Red Flash is doing great."

Sara glanced at her rearview scanner and frowned. "Blue Light Special," she said. The Flash began to decelerate, then pulled off the road. I glanced around and saw the highway patrolman getting out of his car. In a moment, he was beside Sara and she lowered her window.

"Good morning, Oscar. Fancy meeting you here," she said sweetly.

"Good morning, Miss Leone. You know the drill. Please step out of the car. You too, sir."

"Beautiful morning isn't it, Oscar?" she said in Spanish as she projected her driver's license with her ePhone. I tapped my watch to bring up my student ID and waited beside her.

He shook his head slowly, then responded, also in Spanish. "Miss Leone, I hope you realize how much this is going to upset your father. This is the third time this month."

"Well, you don't have to tell him do you?" she said.

"What do you think? You know, not everyone out here has a high performance car like this. Certainly not the wildlife. Someone or something could get hurt, especially when you leave the driving to your Take Me. Your ID, sir?"

I held out my wrist.

He looked me up and down. "Señor Jodhpur, please convince Chiquita Banana here to drive more carefully. She's not the only user of this highway." He turned

and walked back to his patrol car.

Sara pulled out onto the road. The patrol car pulled out behind us.

"Do you know every cop in South Florida?" I asked.

"Don't worry," she said as she re-engaged the Take Me. "And don't worry about us hitting someone or something. Red Flash Security will know if there's so much as a palmetto bug crossing the road a mile ahead. Like, we're approaching a disabled car. My friend Oscar will pull over to check them out."

"Good. We still need to get up to the junction before Carl or we'll never catch him."

"How can we stop him? He won't just pull over if he sees us trying to wave him down," Sara said.

"Yeah, and this little thing isn't about to win a round of Bump 'Em Cars."

She gave me a hard stare. "Don't you even think about it!"

I woke up the WordPerfect window. No response from Neltonbent. The Flash turned up the Cutoff toward I-75. I was surfing the High Plane, looking for inspiration, when I felt the car slowing.

I looked up. I could see stationary vehicles ahead. "Fender bender?"

"No." Sara pointed. "More alligators who can't read the crossing signs. Must be enjoying the sun and the sounds of honking horns."

At least two 'gators had both lanes of traffic blocked and weren't about to yield the right of way. Nobody volunteered to goose them.

"The shoulder's too narrow and steep to try to get around. Someone will have called the Park Rangers by now. They'll send somebody down from the Reservation to get them shifted."

"Yes, but when?" Sara said. "We don't exactly have all day. If we miss Carl all we can do is to tail him into NASA Naples."

"You know, snoopers apps aren't the only illegal things you can find on the High Plane Wiki." I opened another browser window.

"What are you looking for?"

"Just keep an eye out to see that none of those 'gators decides to come down here for a nibble on The Red Flash. I've got an idea."

After about ten minutes of searching, I was finished. "As a very brilliant friend of mine once said, *Got it! Downloaded and installed! Isn't it amazing what you can find on the High Plane?*"

"So? Amazing, illegal, or both?"

"Definitely. I've got an eCar app. Entering Carl's tag number, MAMBA, and his VIN number, which I hacked from another site, I can now access his Vehicle Security System."

"So we know he's safe and sound on his way across I-75?"

"Yep." I started typing. "Now I see that he's having some problems. His horn is beeping. His wipers are spraying and wiping. His lights are flashing." I kept typing. "His doors are opening and closing. His stereo system is annoying the red tailed hawks. His brakes are pumping. His engine has just quit and he's coasting onto the shoulder. His System's audio-video contact with Base is down. System GPS says he's westbound on the interstate about eleven miles east of the Cutoff. He'll be there a while. Any sign of the cavalry?"

"Got here a few minutes ago. We're about ready to roll. Looks like the cars ahead are pulling over to watch the Rangers. We're on our way."

The Flash accelerated after we came past the last car. We got to the I-75 junction and turned east toward Carl. Unfortunately, the east and westbound lanes were separated by wide stretches of water. We passed the Black Mamba and a very agitated Carl as we zipped down the eastbound lane looking for a place to turn around. All we saw were for "Official Use Only," blocked by laser gates.

"I've made contact with our little friends. They're trying to roll out of that towel. They'll be ready to trade Carl's trunk for ours when we get there. If we can get there."

"Well, make sure they don't try flying off on their own! Don't want one of those eighteen-wheelers getting Shuttle 54 stuck in its grill," Sara cautioned. "Hang on, we're making a U-turn." She overrode the car's Take Me.

"Wait! Sara! That water's too deep!"

She ignored me. We made a sharp left toward the westbound lane. Water splashed the windshield. We bobbed for a moment.

"Are you out of your mind? Now look what you've done!"

I heard the sound of several robovacs gargling behind us. We surged forward.

"Daddy saw one of those little amphibian cars years ago. Made a big impression. Said propellers might come in handy if I wanted to go driving in the Everglades."

The props cut off as we came out onto land and Sara hung another left.

"Get ready, Neltonbent. We're almost there," I typed.

Sara pulled onto the shoulder behind the misbehaving Black Mamba. "Get Shuttle 54 moving while I distract Carl."

She popped her trunk, then stood up and turned toward Carl. "Hey there, Captain Bligh, need some roadside assistance?"

Carl's face turned a dark purple. He was wearing shorts and one of those skin-tight shirts, so we could see every muscle as they tensed. He could have picked up the Red Flash and tossed us into the swamp behind him, but he just stood there in his apoplectic fit.

I typed in "Go, Neltonbent."

A moment later I received *Gone*. Then, *Secure*. *Thank you, friends Hank and Sara*.

Sara dropped behind the wheel, latched her trunk, and we were off.

"Matheson Hammock, here we come," she said.

West to the Cutoff, then south. Sara raced an airliner headed for Miami International as we sped back across the Tamiami Trail. We waded into the warm waters of Biscayne Bay less than two hours later. Sara held Shuttle 54. I held my slate.

She knelt and set Shuttle 54 gently onto the sandy bottom just outside the turtle grass.

"Have a safe trip home, friends," I typed.

May the Great Sparowatt be with you, Brother and Sister, came the reply.

The sun bobbed on the water, nearly blinding us and leaving dark blue-green spots and trails before our eyes, as we watched Shuttle 54 disappear into the turtle grass.

"Shall we wait and see them get picked up?" Sara asked.

"What? Get ourselves included in that great gaggle of flying saucer nuts?"

As we got back to The Red Flash, Sara answered the twingle of her ePhone.


"Text from Daddy. Something's come up. Yesterday he said he'd be back this week. Now he's staying an extra ten days in Argentina."

I just smiled.

Sara looked at me and said, "We haven't had any lunch."

"Still got some of your paella back at the house. Maybe we could pick up something sweet for dessert."

"Only if you think you really need to," Sara said. She stuck a couple fingers between the buttons at the top of my shirt and ran them up and down a little.

My neck and shoulders didn't redden this time. 

Jack Ryan has a Ph.D. in Biochemistry. Now retired, he writes science fiction. His stories have appeared in "OG's Speculative Fiction," and have received Honorable Mentions in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest for 2010 and 2011.