

Earthbound

Penny Hill

The man who hurried along the dock was a sturdy, well-built individual, dressed in a pair of oily white overalls and wearing a peaked cap jammed down over his amenable face. A small dog trotted at his heels, distinguished from the average mutt by the jaunty patch it wore over one eye. As he went the man cast nervous glances in all directions; even so, he was startled when a hand snaked out from behind a pile of crates and, seizing him by the shoulder, dragged him out of sight.

"What the--" the flustered victim began, then relaxed, recognizing his abductor. "Oh, it's you. Where have you been?"

The man behind the crates was fair haired, tall and slight beside the man in the overalls. Blue eyes twinkled out of a suntanned face as he pulled a cigar from his jacket pocket and studied it in the Pacific sunlight.

"I was -- delayed." He grinned as he said it, adding to the impression of understatement. "Ran into a little trouble after I got shot down. You know the kind of thing."

"Yah," his companion peered cautiously around, making sure they were not observed. "Well, if you don't hurry, you're gonna miss your connecting flight."

The dog barked twice, an agreement, and a blond head stared at him in puzzlement.

"He with you?" the man inquired.

"Comes with the territory. Here. That's your ticket for the *Clipper*, and this is a hundred dollars. It ought to last you until you reach the base in the Caribbean. Someone will pick you up there."

"Thanks." He pocketed the proffered money, lit his cigar. "Any trouble to report?"

The face under the cap found a thoughtful smile.

"Nope," its owner announced. "Everything is smooth as silk -- if you don't count the usual round of European spies and Japanese trouble-makers."

The traveller laughed.

"They don't know when they're well off, do they? If they knew what we did to keep real trouble off their doorsteps.... Hades, I got to go. Thanks for everything. No regrets?"

Overalled shoulders shrugged. "Just doing my job. But it's okay; I like it here. And I've made a few friends. I don't like deceiving them, but ...well, I manage the best I can. I miss some things though."

"Don't we all?"

Footsteps sounded along the dock, and another voice intruded on their quiet corner.

"Corky? Jack? Where are you?"

The broad shouldered man sighed.

"Coming, Jake!" he called. He thrust a brawny hand in his companion's direction. "Take care, Lieutenant. We need warriors like you out there."

"Sure. Just like we need agents like you down here. Keeping an eye on things. You take care. Without guys like you our job would be twice as hard. I'll see you around."

His figure slipped away among the crates, and the man and the dog watched him go.

"Corky!"

"Coming!" He looked down at the dog at his feet, who was looking at him accusingly.

"I'll tell him one day," he said defensively. "You know I will. Just -- look, the lieutenant and I go back a long way, okay? He was in trouble, and it's part of my job to look after guys like him..."

The dog considered it. Barked twice and pattered away in the direction of his master's voice.

Corporal Komma, warrior in the Colonial service, ex-comp-tech on the Battlestar *Galactica* and now agent of the Covert Defense Forces of Earth, wiped oily hands down the front of his mechanic's overalls, sighed, and followed him.