

PROJECT U.L.F.

BY

Stuart Clark



HOLLISTON, MASSACHUSETTS

CHAPTER

1

The Chaddock was cornered. At least it thought it was. The small, rodent-like creature was native here and had been fleeing from an unknown alien pursuer. Faced now with a wall of thick vegetation, the Chaddock had stopped. Chaddooks were extremely partial to open spaces and unlikely to take refuge in dense foliage, even when faced with imminent danger. For this reason, Chaddooks made excellent prey.

The hunter was closer now, the sounds of moving vegetation and footfalls becoming louder. The Chaddock turned, looked back toward the forest trail that had brought it to this clearing and waited.

The alien appeared, brushing aside forest growth with a limb as it stepped into view. It was unlike anything the Chaddock had encountered before—and it was big.

* * * * *

Wyatt Dorren stepped into the clearing. He was a tall, muscular man with cropped dark hair. On his back he bore a large pack from which nets, smaller canvas bags and other unidentifiable tools of his trade spilled out. Attached to his belt at his left hip was a large sheathed knife, and on his right hip a gun fitted into a holster clipped to the belt and buckled around his leg, just above the knee.

It was not the chase that had caused Wyatt to break out in a sweat, simply the exertion of carrying his heavy load under the heat of the two suns blazing high overhead. The perspiration now covered his body in a sheen and plastered his hair to his head. Beneath his jacket, the sweat had soaked his green T-shirt, and his chest protector was clearly visible as the wet garment clung to it. His loose-fitting pants matched his thick green canvas jacket and the material of both was littered with zips and poppers. Above the left breast pocket in large white letters the jacket sported the word DORREN, and underneath, in smaller red letters, the words *Project U.L.F.*

Wyatt spied the Chaddock on the other side of the clearing and a knowing smile broke out on his tanned face. At the same time he felt a twinge of sadness, for he was about to rob this creature of a fundamental right: freedom. Now, the only life this creature would know would be in captivity. It would become a peculiarity for others' enjoyment. And he would be responsible.

But this was his business, and, as his boss had told him countless times before, those who let their feelings come before their work had no right to be in a job or call

themselves businessmen. Wyatt pictured him, Douglas Mannheim, a stocky man reclining in a leather seat behind his desk, spouting all this bullshit. What the hell did he know? He didn't hear some of these creatures scream as they were trapped or see their eyes, wide and afraid. He had never experienced the sheer terror of knowing that a beast that approached a trap could easily turn and kill you.

The smile had gone from Wyatt's lips. He shook his head to get rid of the image of Mannheim. When he looked up again his eyes met those of the Chaddock. Large. Brown. Doleful. He sighed, "You little guys don't make this any easier."

Instinctively he reached behind him and pulled out a small hand-held gadget. It had a narrow neck that fitted in the palm of his hand and a wider rectangular head adorned with twelve small projections, six at each side. The two sets of projections were off-set from each other at an angle of about thirty degrees, all were set on tiny cogs, some pointing slightly upward, some straight ahead and the remainder pointing toward the ground. Wyatt casually flicked the switch on top of the gadget with his thumb and there was a high-pitched whistle as the unit powered up. He continually kept one eye on the Chaddock. While incapable of doing harm, they had been known to rush attackers when cornered.

He brought his hand up into his line of vision so that when the unit was armed and ready for use he would see the red light on its back illuminate. The Chaddock remained motionless, watching Wyatt just as intensely.

The red light suddenly winked on and Wyatt pointed the head of the unit toward the Chaddock. He pressed the engage button and the twelve spikes on the unit now each emitted two bright red lines of laser light, all slightly displaced from each other vertically. Each small projection on the unit rotated on its cog, moving up and down and causing the beams to cross each other at regular intervals, producing a dynamic net of laser light. The Chaddock was now caught in a corridor of light, the boundaries of which would decrease as Wyatt approached. It was a visual trap, and one that only worked on dumb animals like the Chaddock.

Wyatt stepped further into the clearing, his large booted feet now falling soundlessly. As he left the shade afforded by the thick canopy of foliage, he was struck by the heat of the suns and took a brief look at his surroundings.

The trees towered some two hundred feet high all around him, silent sentinels which guarded the earth where they stood, their sinuous forms snaking ever upward like the fingers of huge outstretched hands, their tops merging to form an almost confluent layer of green and brown broken only by brief glimpses of the sky. Leaves whispered as a cool wind blew through the higher reaches of the forest, causing the trees to sway and caress each other like lovers, their sweet nothings audible for all present to hear. Other sounds could be heard too, the whoops and squawks of countless forest animals, hunting, dying, playing or attracting a mate. Despite the noise, Wyatt thought it was incredibly peaceful.

It seemed odd to him that he stood in an area completely devoid of vegetation, save for the carpet of debris of plants long since dead and the fungi and weeds that thrived among it. It was almost as if a giant foot had fallen here and the owner of the leviathan limb had then moved on leaving the rest of the forest untouched.

He focused his attention once more on the Chaddock. The animal had begun to whimper and its eyes now darted from side to side, watching the lasers as they swept

one way and then the other. “Easy, little fella,” Wyatt said, “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

The plants behind the Chaddock swayed, rustling in objection to the movement, and Wyatt assumed that they had been caught by one of the all too infrequent breezes that gave a brief respite from the pressing heat. The Chaddock turned toward the noise—and froze.

He had never seen this kind of behavior before. Usually Chaddooks watched their attacker the whole time, looking for a flaw in their approach, escape always a possibility. He was even more amazed when the animal began to back towards him; and then the penny dropped. There was a more pressing concern here. Another threat.

Wyatt cursed himself for not sensing the presence earlier but now every nerve in his body told him it was there. His skin prickled, a strange sensation somewhere between fear and anticipation. His nose immediately identified the scent on the air as foreign, the smell of another living thing made uncharacteristically pungent by the humidity. It was as if someone had exhaled directly into his face. It was there and yet he couldn’t see it.

The Chaddock attempted to flee, turning clumsily on its large flat rear feet. Wyatt’s eyes again met with those of the animal and this time he found a new fear there.

It started straight toward him, something he might have expected earlier, but now? Wyatt’s instincts screamed at him that the whole situation was wrong, that the Chaddock’s behavior was driven not by defiance, but by sheer terror. It had covered perhaps two of the ten feet between Wyatt and itself when something smashed into its back.

The creature yelped and squealed, its feet scrambling furiously in a desperate attempt to get some purchase on the forest floor when suddenly it was lifted from the ground. Wyatt could not explain the obscenity occurring in front of him. The Chaddock, now hanging in mid-air, was being violently shaken from side to side, like a glove puppet on a frantically waving hand. Then, just when he thought he could stand no more of the panic-stricken yelping, the Chaddock fell silent and was unceremoniously dumped to the ground.

From where he stood Wyatt could see that a large mass of flesh had been taken from the rear flank and back of the animal. “Jesus,” he said under his breath. It was only when the malefactor materialized before him that he feared for his own safety.

It appeared slowly at first. Just an outline, a bizarre glass ornament beautiful in the sunlight and a stark contrast to the forest backdrop. Then it seemed to swell as color began to fill the form.

Wyatt was stupefied. This *thing* was the most terrifying creature he had ever laid eyes on. There could be no doubt that it was predatory, its whole body structure and posture imparted stealth, cunning and a raw intelligence based solely on survival instincts.

It stood on two hind legs. Huge, powerful legs in which every sinew and tendon could be seen to writhe at the creature’s slightest movement. They ended in large feet from which three claws protruded, hooked and uncharacteristically silver in color, glinting like polished metal. Behind it, a huge tail some seven feet in length waved

restlessly, skimming the higher grasses and leaving a rustle in its wake. The sound was the only other thing Wyatt was aware of over the pounding of blood in his head.

The forelimbs were long and slender, but their narrowness seemed only to exaggerate the size of the muscles that rippled under the skin. Each limb terminated in a crude three fingered hand, each finger playing host to another silver claw slightly longer and more curved than those on the feet. Its belly was a dirty off-yellow color and its back so dark a brown that it could easily have been mistaken for black.

He allowed his eyes to follow the contour of the creature's back from the tip of the tail up to the head. It was still eating part of the Chaddock. Gobs of bloody saliva dripped from its mouth and he could see row upon row of razor-sharp teeth, each row moving independently from its neighbors, set in a different jawbone.

The huge jaws made the base of the head exceptionally broad and as if to compensate for this, two circular horns, brilliant white in color, sprouted from the top of the head and curled down, lying almost flat against the side of the animal's face. The front of the head sloped backward save for a small projection that Wyatt assumed to be the nose.

But where were its eyes? If he had learned one thing in all his years as a trapper, it was to watch an animal's eyes. Eyes imparted so much information about an animal's mood and, more importantly, any change of mood, from frightened to aggressive, passive to calculating. This thing did not have eyes, as such, and Wyatt, already in awe of the animal's physique, now felt himself to be at more of a disadvantage.

Just above the "nose", a strip of red material, almost like fluid trapped behind a membrane of skin—a blister—ran from one side of the head to the other and Wyatt guessed this was its visual sensory organ.

He had not moved since the animal had appeared except for the fact that the hand holding the laser trap had fallen to his side. He was oblivious to the noise it was making.

He exhaled and the sound, like the slow escape of air from a pressurized container, was incredibly loud in his ears. It was as if in his terror, his lungs had ceased to function, and now the body's need for oxygen had forced them against their will to expel the spent air.

He was unsure if the animal was even aware of his presence, but any sound would definitely give him away. His wonder was almost instantly replaced with a desire to be out of the presence of the beast, to escape, to survive.

The red beams of the trap scythed to and fro across the ground. They would attract attention unless he shut it off. He swallowed nervously.

His thumb browsed across the top of the trap searching for the switch that would silence it. He would not look down for fear of signaling his presence. He would not look away out of fear alone. The roles were reversed now and he smiled inwardly as he thought: *watch the aggressor the whole time; escape is always a possibility*. It struck him as rather odd that at his most terrified, his sardonic sense of humor should manifest itself. How bizarre. How human.

For an instant Wyatt had thought he had found the switch and then, perhaps due to his blind fumbling or the clamminess of his hands, the gadget slipped out of his grasp. He looked down then, some insane urge prompting him to follow it, to

attempt to catch it as it tumbled, almost in slow motion toward the earth but still he dare not move.

The trap pitched into the ground with a dull thud and Wyatt winced at the noise. He looked up again at the creature, crouched over the Chaddock, still intent on its meal, and for a moment he thought that it had not heard it. It was a false hope but he clung to it desperately. It was all he had.

The creature turned swiftly, practically pivoting on one leg with surprising speed considering its bulkiness. The tail cut a wide arc behind it. It cocked its head like a bird, a sharp, jerky movement. Wyatt couldn't tell if it was looking at the trap or listening, waiting for another sound that would give away whatever had intruded on its feast. It remained motionless in that position.

The urgency of the situation had numbed all of Wyatt's senses. His world was silent and he felt like he was watching a slow-motion movie through another person's eyes, from another body. The trap whirred continuously from where it had fallen, quiet but certainly audible. He knew he had to move. The realization horrified him, but he had to get away from the trap. Trying to retrieve it would be a dangerous and pointless exercise.

He inhaled deeply in a vain attempt to strengthen his resolve. A bead of sweat rolled off the corner of his eyebrow and ran a frantic, tickling line down his cheek. By some huge act of will he drove the fear out of his body and managed to raise his right foot. The mental toll almost made him cry out, but the breath that would have carried the sound escaped as a quivering stutter. He slowly placed his right foot directly behind his left and then, with his left foot, repeated the whole agonizing procedure. Slowly, noiselessly, Wyatt backed away. The creature remained completely still.

After what seemed hours Wyatt stood about twenty-five feet away from where the trap had fallen. He could still hear it, buzzing like an angry insect in the short grass. He realized then that he had not thought about what he would do when he reached the cover and safety of the trees.

Safety? He had no idea of what this creature was capable of or if, indeed, the forest offered any safety at all.

The creature was moving again. Turning its head slowly from one side to the other, the movement deliberate and disturbing. It was obvious that the animal perceived no danger here. Suddenly it moved to where the trap lay. Covering the distance in two strides with a comical strutting gait. It paused there for a moment, head bowed as if in mourning, scrutinizing the object, the irritation, on the ground.

The trap had fallen head-first into a small depression, the laser beams stretching two to three inches before being abruptly terminated as the earth absorbed them. The creature craned its head forward and watched the flicking rays of light as they danced across the tiny pit. Suddenly, its posture changed and Wyatt could tell that for some reason, it had become afraid. Perhaps nothing so small had ever dared to stand its ground. The trap seemed to move but yet it did not flee, and this unfamiliar scenario demanded caution from the animal. Experience had taught this creature not to attack such simple offerings without proper investigation. A mouthful of acid or a face full of stinging cells was lessons that required teaching only once. Whatever it was, Wyatt surmised that it possessed a reasonable amount of intelligence.

He watched as the creature cautiously lifted one leg and prodded the trap with its foot, trying to get some response from the thing, something that would identify it as prey or otherwise. It nudged the trap lightly at first and then, when no response was forthcoming, more insistently. Finally satisfied that the silver object in the grass posed no threat, it stooped to lift the trap, gripping it clumsily with its three fingers. As it lifted it from the ground the lasers once again darted off on their separate paths. The sudden burst of light alarmed the animal and it dropped the trap, instantly springing back some ten feet in one single fluid movement. Its lips peeled back in a sneer revealing its impressive array of teeth. The creature hissed its displeasure. Then it turned to face Wyatt. The thing had known he was there all along.

In that instant Wyatt felt like a child again, preparing to be reprimanded by his father. Here, once more, he was faced with an authority that he was powerless to challenge, to which he was inferior.

The creature had made an association between the trap and Wyatt, and looked at him as if waiting for some explanation. It sneered and hissed again and then bellowed at him, its neck stretched forward as if to emphasize whom the howl was directed at.

He turned and ran then, the thought to flee being the first one to cross his mind. He could have reached for his gun but he did not trust his shaking hands to operate the weapon as they had been trained to, besides, he had seen the speed with which the animal could move and he doubted whether he could draw and raise the gun before the creature covered the ten or so yards between them.

He plunged through the dense foliage, arms flailing to push away the stray fronds and leaves which occasionally struck him, leaving scratches on his face and tears in his clothing as he frantically fought his way past them. It seemed as if the whole environment had suddenly turned malicious.

He stumbled and fell, his legs not being able to move as fast as his body was willing them. He landed awkwardly but sprang back to his feet with a newfound agility. Over the sound of his ragged, hurried breathing he could hear the pursuit—the rustle of leaves and the crack of wood as the animal stampeded through the forest after him. He thought it sounded like a forest fire, but only the strongest of winds could make fire follow him as swiftly as the thing that mimicked the noise now.

He was running blind, batting aside the forest growth to hasten his passage, turning only twice to be confronted both times with a glimpse of the plant growth swaying back behind him like a gate closing, shutting him in. On the second occasion, his foot struck a large protruding tree root and he was sent sprawling to the ground in a shower of leaves. As he clambered to his hands and knees and spat the earth from his mouth he was struck from behind with such force that he was almost thrown to the ground again. It had caught up with him. It was grasping his backpack, its head level with his. He could feel its hot breath and flecks of spittle on his neck.

Somehow he managed to stagger to his feet and then, like someone resigned to throwing himself off a precipice, he flung his hands behind him. With a wriggle the straps of his pack slipped off his shoulders and the weight of the animal pulled it off his back, both pack and beast falling to the ground.

He was away once more, running with a lightness in his step which was perhaps not only due to the loss of the cumbersome weight he had carried before but also to

the closeness of his brush with death. He had never been that close to actually perishing before, but he had also never felt more alive than he did now.

The combination of the heat and the exertion was making him dizzy and he knew that he would have to pause to catch his breath while he had a lead on the animal, which was probably where he had left it, examining its trophy with the same caution it had shown the trap, thinking maybe that it had claimed a part of him. He stopped and turned to look behind him. There was no sign of the animal and he could hear nothing that would signify its approach. He leaned over, his hands on his knees as his breaths, which came in huge, wheezing pants, gradually lessened in frequency. Thoughts raced through his mind, each being dismissed as quickly as they came. He straightened, still with no real plan as to what he was going to do. He would think as he ran. He was sure the creature would continue to hunt him down as soon as it realized that it would get no meal from the backpack. He turned to run again and was confronted with hundreds of teeth as the thing howled into his face. He screamed.

* * * * *

He was covered in sweat and his voice died in the room. The forest was gone, and where the trees once stood were now dim outlines that slowly resolved as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. It was the dream again.

He wiped his brow with a shaking hand and let it fall down his face, rubbing forefinger and thumb across his eyelids before pinching the bridge of his nose. He struggled to prop himself up on his elbows in the soft bed and exhaled deeply. It was not the first time the nightmare had come and he was annoyed at himself for letting it wake him. He was growing tired of the disruption, almost to the point where he wished that, as he woke, one of the shadows in the room would move and it would be there, somehow managing not only to chase him through the forest but also across the boundaries of imagination and reality. To make the outcome of the pursuit final.

He flipped the bedclothes off and away from him as he swung his legs off the bed and planted his feet on the floor, pausing there to cup his face in his hands and rub away the sleep before standing, collecting his robe and padding quietly out of his bedroom.

The kitchen tiles were cold on the soles of his feet, but it was more of a refreshing sensation than a discomfort. "Lights, surface and ceiling," he said and then, as an afterthought, "Dim."

The strip lights on the ceiling flickered into life and behind each tile that skirted the kitchen work surface a single bulb winked on to produce a solid bar of light which cast a faint blush on anything in the near vicinity. With the light came a faint hum, the sound of electricity, a force that had been stirred from unconsciousness and now dozed peacefully.

He opened the fridge door. It was empty except for a jug of milk and a joint of ham. Removing the jug he shuffled across the kitchen and reached up to the cupboards on the wall. He touched a pressure pad with his forefinger, and the cupboard door slid open to reveal a number of glasses, of which he took one. He poured a glass of the white, cold liquid and gulped it down, gasping in his first breath

when he finished, savoring the taste in his mouth. He didn't begrudge the price he had paid for it, even if it had cost him a fortune on the black market along with the meat. It was so much better than the synth milk from the replicators. Time inside had been useful in at least one respect. He poured himself another glass before replacing the jug and wandering into the living room.

"Screen, channel hop," he said and an area some forty inches square on one of the bare white walls began to illuminate as a picture slowly formed within the undefined region. A computer generated voice stated "Channel one" and Wyatt watched with undisguised apathy as the characters from some dire sitcom he had been unfortunate enough to see once before went through the motions, interrupted only by canned laughter after each delivered punch line. The picture changed and the voice stated, "Channel two" in an identical tone as previously as if it too, shared Wyatt's disinterest in late-night viewing choice.

Three politicians now argued over the city's overcrowding problem and one of them, a rotund man with beady pig eyes, was just about to launch into his proposal for a solution. "I think..." he began.

"Who gives a shit what you think?" Wyatt muttered. He walked to the window and looked down over the city. Even in the dead of night it was a hive of activity. The buildings stood like solid shadows, columns whose forms were darker than the night itself. Within each a multitude of lights blinked and danced like fairy lights on some horrifically charred Christmas tree. The view made him feel like some supreme being, looking out over his minions, but with the same thought came another—that every speck of light he could see was another person going about their business, and the feeling of supremacy was rapidly replaced with one of insignificance.

"Yeah, who does give a shit what you think?" he said again. Every one of those lights was another person and every person had their own problems and their own personal dramas, which to them were far more important than any large-scale social or economic problem.

His thoughts went to Tanya and he turned and looked back toward the bedroom door, hoping somehow that he could spirit her back just by thinking about her. He could see her, standing with her back to the doorframe, one leg bent so her short silk robe climbed revealingly up her thigh. Her long dark hair, ruffled but not untidy, tumbling over her shoulders and down to the middle of her back and her eyes, those lovely dark eyes which could be as soft as velvet or as hard as if they were lumps of coal set in her face. She was a strong woman, every part his equal and every bit a lady and he missed her more than he cared to admit.

Tanya was really the only woman who had ever fully understood his predicament. Registered as a dangerous criminal, Wyatt had been offered a place on the state community service program. In exchange for a reduced sentence, he would do a five-year work placement at a location of the government's choice. The catch was that the jobs that were offered were extremely hazardous and few, very few, ever completed their five years.

The program served three purposes. One, it solved the prison overcrowding problem. Two, it meant there would always be employees for high risk jobs which very few people were willing to do, and thirdly, it dispatched many of society's undesirable elements.

Wyatt had been reasonably lucky. He had found himself posted to the Interplanetary Zoological Park, working as part of a team dedicated to the capture of specimens to be exhibited at the IZP. Many of the people on the specimen capture team were indeed people who had applied for their positions. Some were genuinely interested in the work—biologists, zoologists, botanists—all educated. Others were waifs and strays for whom the excitement or danger was appeal enough, and for the remainder, the prospect of interstellar travel was the attraction, the risks they took from day to day being an unfortunate consequence of their line of work.

It was a large division of people, staffed by maybe two hundred and fifty, and Wyatt was constantly amazed at how well the group worked together considering their diversity of backgrounds. The other thing that struck him as uncanny was the ease with which his newfound colleagues accepted him. They knew his background but he was never quizzed about his circumstances and for that he was grateful.

The reason for the good rapport among the people was made clear to Wyatt when he had commented on the blasé attitude possessed by most people in the division. The man sat opposite him in the refectory had stopped eating, dabbed the corners of his mouth with a napkin before leaning over the table and said, “We work together or we may never work again.” He had then continued his meal as if the conversation had never happened. It was then that Wyatt had realized that these people didn’t just live each day—they survived each day. Every person in a team trusted the next man and, as Wyatt had found out on some of his early expeditions, sometimes that trust extended to putting your life in another person’s hands. The bonds that were forged from such faith transcended the artificial boundaries that most people liked to throw around themselves. Strength of character and integrity were important here.

The uncertainty of what each day might bring also made many people appreciate what they ordinarily took for granted. Wyatt had found that appreciation also brought reflection, and he had spent a number of months examining himself and his situation. He put the past behind him and emerged happier and more extroverted, full of drive and optimism.

He had met Tanya three and a half years into his placement. It had been his day off but he had come in to check up on a marsupial recently acquired from one of the more distant expedition zones that was having trouble acclimating. He had come to respect animals; they gave him the opportunity to care for something—and after being inside he hadn’t cared about anything for a long time.

He had been coaxing the animal to feed when he had seen her through the plexiglass. She was taking a class of children around the zoo and was having trouble with a few disruptive individuals. Wyatt appeared at her shoulder.

“Hey kids, you wanna see some animals up close?” he had said. The children were silenced instantly. They turned, amazed, and Wyatt suddenly felt incredibly self-conscious as sixteen pairs of eyes fell on him. Tanya was looking at him too, half surprised and half amused at his dashing entrance.

He had spent the rest of the day with Tanya and her class, using his security pass to enable them to see more than a day ticket would normally allow. When they had exhausted the exhibits she had thanked him and kissed him lightly on the cheek, much to the amusement of the schoolchildren, before boarding the monorail that would take them back to the main entrance.

Two days later he had received a call at work. It was her. She thanked him for his kindness and inquired as to how his work was going before asking if he would be interested in hosting another school excursion. He agreed. As it transpired, she was the only member of the party.

Their date was a success and the first of many. As he grew to like her he began to trust her. He felt he ought to tell her what had brought him to the zoo, even though he feared the reaction it might provoke. She sat stony-faced as he recounted his story, and when he finished she had clasped his hand in hers, kissed him and told him that none of what had happened mattered to her; it had happened to a Wyatt who existed long before the one she had known. She did not care about his past, so long as he promised to quit his job at the zoo when his contract was over. She worried about him taking the risks he did, and missed him when he was away on expeditions. He had promised.

Within a year of their meeting, Tanya had moved in with him. Wyatt looked forward to leaving his job and starting a new life with her. As a short-termer with only a few months left on his contract he was put on jobs with significantly less risk than he was accustomed to. His final day was both a happy and sad occasion for him.

At first his life with Tanya was more than he had hoped for. She was beautiful, carefree, generous, and for some reason, which he could not figure out, she loved him. He also had his freedom, and the sensation seemed to infuse him with new life. His future had never looked so good. Then, one day, as he watched her playing with some of the children in her care it had dawned on him that besides her, there was no one else in his life. He had immediately felt foolish, selfish. Many others would be happy enough to have Tanya alone in their lives, but the more he thought about it in the following weeks, the more he came to realize that he missed his old life at the zoo. Tanya had talked of marriage and a family, but Wyatt's old colleagues were his family. They had accepted him when no one else would. They had trusted him when no one else would. They believed in him when no one else would. How could he give up something he knew for something he did not yet have?

He had discussed his feelings with her and she had been unhappy but understanding. It was agreed that he would return to the IZP.

His return to the zoo had been greeted with smiles and back claps. Everybody had been pleased to see him. Some thought he was a little crazy, but were pleased to see him nonetheless.

He had been back at his job almost two months when he received a call summoning him to Mannheim's office. Mannheim had beckoned him to sit, offered him a drink, which he politely accepted, and then sat opposite him. "I have a proposal for you..." he had begun.

The proposal involved money. Lots of money. Money Wyatt could look forward to receiving if he agreed to head up a new division called Project U.L.F. The acronym, Wyatt understood, stood for Unidentified Life Form. The group would be a small sub-division of the current specimen acquirement team and would comprise some sixty to seventy people. Their job would be to travel to newly discovered star systems and astral bodies, and capture new life forms for study and eventual exhibition at the zoo. The dangers were great but the salary reflected the hazards.

He had thought about the offer for a long time. He did not tell Tanya but she sensed something was troubling him.

When he did tell her it was after he had signed the contract accepting the position. He would not have believed her reaction, had he not seen it with his own eyes. She went into a rage that he did not know she was capable of, screaming and pacing like some frustrated caged animal. She had thrown herself at him, pounding his chest with her delicate hands clenched into unfamiliar fists. He had grabbed her by the wrists and overpowered her and she had fallen into his arms sobbing. She wondered about their future together and he told her that everything would be all right.

Everything was not all right. On their first expedition Wyatt and his team had found the equipment they were used to using wholly inadequate. Three men were dead and two more seriously injured. With each subsequent expedition, even though the equipment was modified to cater to their needs and new traps were designed, the toll continued to rise. Then, finally, after six months, they recorded their first outing with no casualties.

When he returned home to tell Tanya the good news, he found the letter. She had left him. The letter said that she could not continue their now part-time relationship. She needed someone around her and she missed him when he was away. She lived in constant fear, not knowing whether the next telelink call would be from him or from someone with news of him. It was a situation she could no longer bear. She hoped they would remain friends.

In hindsight, he realized that he had been extremely selfish. They had called each other infrequently, but soon that had petered out to nothing. Months later, fate conspired to deal him a cruel blow. The U.L.F. department expanded and Wyatt's responsibilities and workload increased. Without really seeing it happening, Wyatt had become promoted to I.Z.P. middle management, confined to offices on Earth and on the Moon. Wyatt just didn't go out with the teams any more.

He tried to locate her again but she had moved on without leaving a contact number or forwarding address. He wondered what she was doing now. Who she was with.

He despised himself for not getting over her. That seemed to banish the longing he could feel rising within him as his thoughts dwelt upon her, but the ache of loss, which seemed to infest every part of him would not be dismissed so easily.

He wandered back to the heart of the room before collapsing in his armchair, which seemed to engulf him in its vastness, the leather creaking in complaint of the burden he represented. After selecting a program he could tolerate he sat and watched television, looking but not seeing, his mind elsewhere. His thoughts were haphazard, shooting off at illogical tangents but somehow always coming back to Tanya, like fingers prodding a healing wound, withdrawing with the resurgence of pain that the investigation evoked but always returning even though the action was imprudent.

The last thing he heard before sleep reclaimed him was the glass hitting the floor as it fell from his hand. He dreamt of her and slept fitfully.