

As Riverstone high-stepped to the top of the ridge (he was feeling really good now), he was surprised (although once he thought about it, it didn't shock him) to find Harlowe and Leucadia already there ahead of him, sitting cross-legged together on a large rock. The undog was sitting below them, his parabolics searching the area for anything threatening. Behind them was the wheel-less rover they had come in. Ian was one rock over, checking the contents of a blue canvas bag. "Inspiring, isn't it?" Harlowe uttered as he pointed toward the pink and gold sunrise on the eastern horizon.

"Don't try and talk me out of it, Pylott," Riverstone said as he walked on by them.

"It's a good idea, pard," Harlowe replied, his tone unusually calm and relaxed.

Riverstone stopped. "Perfect. Then there will be no discussion about it?"

"We agree with you, Matt," Leucadia added, making eye contact with Harlowe like there was some humongous secret between them.

"You do?" Riverstone took two steps then stopped again. "I know what you're thinking." He came closer, peering into Harlowe's eyes. "You two are up to something."

"Not this time," Harlowe replied, almost too casually.

"Alright," Riverstone conceded, hands on hips, "let's have it. How are you going to try and screw me then?"

For a long moment Harlowe kept his silence, sitting there like some all-knowing guru who had found Nirvana.

"Isn't Millie the most gorgeous lady you ever laid eyes on?" he finally said.

Riverstone reluctantly turned around. "You're changing the sub . . . ject . . .," he growled, but as he did, his face went flush.

He knew it. Harlowe had tricked him . . . again! During the climb away from the ship, he was afraid of looking back for fear of

seeing something that might make him stay. Now, for the first time, he *really* saw Millawanda. All of her! The bright morning sun was reflecting off her clean and smooth golden skin. Every bit of dirt that had shrouded her body for so many thousands of years was gone, scoured away by a three-thousand-knot wind. Millie was breathtakingly glorious.

Riverstone forced himself to breathe again. On a scale of hot babes, she was Mrs. M.

He could see under the ship's hull three massive landing pods fully and gracefully extended to nearly two hundred feet off the ground. To the top of her gentle sloping dome was another two hundred feet at least. From side to side she had to be wider than five football fields, he figured. That kind of distance he was familiar with. She had no hard angles anywhere—no seams, no rivets, no connecting lines, only gentle curves and perfect symmetry.

A thin blue line of light pulsed around her perimeter edge, slowly beating like a heart at rest. He easily recognized the three large curving windows that wrapped halfway around the smooth upper-level dome. The flat, frisbee-like symbol they'd seen everywhere inside the ship was centered just below the forward window.

His knees weakened. "Yeah, Harlowe, she's one sweet doe alright. I had no idea something that size could look so beautiful."

"And to think, she's ours," Harlowe said, gleaming with pride.

Riverstone shuttered, coming out of his stupor. "Forget it, Harlowe, there's no we in this for me. She's all yours, pard."

Harlowe stepped off the rock, pleading, "Hey, once we get the hang of it—"

"I said no *we*, Pylott. I'm hasta-la-bye-bye, brah. You're the worst pilot I've ever seen. I wouldn't get back into that thing if you had a zillion hours logged. We're lucky we didn't crash fifty times getting here. That ridge!" Riverstone threw up his arms. "I'll have night-