

The Lunatics

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Foreman Jevik Yuri moved his horse and crew off the dirt road when he heard the hum of jeeps. As the vehicles sped by moments later, he could see the uptight face of base Commander Johnson bringing up the rear. She stomped her jeep to a stop when she saw Jevik.

“A bit late, aren’t you cowboy?” she said when the grey dust had settled. “If we lose a single cow to this storm because of your ambling pace...”

Jevik pulled the dust cloth from his nose, grinning with the cowboy swagger he knew would irritate. “You tried pushing them back with your jeeps again, didn’t you?” he said. “If we lose a cow or two, it’ll be your fault for riling them up before we got there.”

“Just get them back to the barn pods on the double,” Johnson snapped. She gunned the engine and sped away.

“Fool,” grumbled a red-haired cowboy as the crew urged their horses on. “She probably scattered those cows from here to Timbuktu.”

“No worries, Wayne,” Jevik said. “Them scientists are just sore that home base had to ship up a bunch of ‘uneducated’ cowboys to do a job that they in all their cosmic wisdom couldn’t figure.”

Wayne looked over the jittery herd as it came into view. “Book smarts don’t equal cow smarts, that’s for sure,” he said.

The cattle in question cropped colorless grass in the shadow of the *Sirius 7*. The shuttle towered above the plains, an empress anchored to her throne. There was a truce between the starship and her bovine neighbors: If she kept quiet, they kept her lawn trimmed.

The cowboys eased their horses down the sandy slopes. Their movements contained none of the busy bustle that characterized the jeep crew. A few whistles, a few slaps of ropes on chaps, and the cows began bunching neatly. The herd started up out of the valley with plodding resignation recognizing the authority of their quiet horseback shepherds.

Jevik loped his horse up a low dune to watch the herd file past. He scanned for any limping or sickly-looking cows. The impatient scientists had handled them rough and quick for months trying to herd, doctor, and count the cattle from noisy vehicles. The already travel-stressed cows hadn't taken to being hurried and began to lose weight despite near constant grazing. The herd was now thinner than anyone liked, hips and ribs still too visible, but the sharp edges had rounded off some in the weeks since Jevik's crew arrived.

Looking back at the rearing shuttle, Jevik shook his head. The *Sirius 7* was the newest of its kind, capable of speeds previously unimaginable. She sat on a terrain covered in sparse but nutrient-dense grass cultivated by biologists from nothing but bare rock. Around her swirled a breathable atmosphere formed by meteorologists in the space of a few short centuries. All those years of terraforming technology, and a well-mounted cowboy was still the most efficient way to handle finicky cattle.

The rain began, some drops sending up puffs of grey lunar soil when they hit the ground, others dripping off the brim of Jevik's hat like silver meteorites. Below him was a familiar comfort on an alien landscape: A line of flapjack-brown cows shuffling forward in the thickening mud.

Wayne trotted up pulling a slicker from his saddlebags. "Always did like a good rain," he said, shaking the yellow oilskin over his head.

Jevik took a deep breath and nodded. "Smells like Earth."

"Think it'll ever look like Earth?" Wayne asked. Jevik shivered. "Hopefully not."