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*If you want to read the prologue, it's free at [www.baen.com](http://www.baen.com) through the end of July in html format. You can also buy the whole book in that format, but you'll miss out on a really good looking title and probably rot your eyes out (and I make more money if you read it online!)*

## I: ON FAITH AND MOUNTAINS

Faith moved The Mountain; it had long ago come to Muhammad, and received a chilly reception, but now it was heading for friendlier but less exotic worlds farther in towards the galactic melding.

And, indeed, as always, faith moved The Mountain, faith expressed in the sums large and small that had paid for its construction, its outfitting, and its traveling expenses.

There were a number of such ships, large and small, moving throughout the known galaxy, representing every conceivable faith and some inconceivable ones as well, and while this one was more conventional than not, its faithful aboard were not considered exactly mainstream Christians. Then, again, since the Silence and the centuries that followed it, the same could be said of many faiths on the former colonial worlds.

It had been predicted that when humanity finally went out and colonized the stars that this would collapse the parochial religions of Earth, save, perhaps, for some of the cosmic types like Hinduism and the introspective like classical Buddhism, but it hadn't happened. Indeed, cut off for long periods and by vast distances from the rest of human culture, it was the religions of humanity that kept them together, kept them sane for the most part, and provided the same sort of social framework as the settlers of the American west or the Siberian and Alaskan east had spread with such faithfulness. But such distances did not bring with them a

sufficient number of conventional clergy, nor did the doctrine and study of conventional faiths remain locked in stone. With distance came distortion, and error. And, after the Great Silence severed contact with the mother churches and seminaries, save only the Roman Catholic one, with it came the greatest evangelical boom since the days of Earthbound colonialism, mostly from men and women to whom God spoke after destroying the old civilization that had strayed from the True Path, whatever that Path was, not trained and ordained clerics.

Most were also commercial types, or they hitched a ride on commercial vessels. Spaceships were few and far between and precious. But a few had their own ships, or partially converted freighters to their floating colonies, and the ones without prohibitions against blowing the hell out of pirates, privateers, and outfoxing the occasional military patrol did quite well.

The Mountain was one of the truly grand ones, a tent show with a tent so great that it would have been like some early preacher's visions of Heaven. Nobody knew how anyone save Vaticanus could have afforded to put together such a craft, let alone maintain it. That alone made it a matter of great curiosity, wonder, and awe, and even some suspicion among the planetary governments.

Traveling between the stars and in and out of star gates it didn't look so grand; like most, it was a great power plant scooping up and converting the debris of ancient solar system formation and the cosmic dust of the void into the power to get to the gates and make the jumps. Once inside such a gate the ordinary rules of space-time did not seem to apply; depending on the speed and angle with which your ship entered, you would travel for days or weeks or months or even a year or two, and come out, well, somewhere else, at another gate, impossibly far from where you'd begun yet often, by the strict chronometers of the gates and maintenance stations around them, before you had left where you'd come

from. Nobody had ever met themselves in real space, but there were often temporal surprises for the freighters and military craft that loosely connected the worlds of humanity out there. It was an eerie kind of second hand time travel that committed spacefaring folk to themselves and themselves alone.

That was why The Mountain also had living quarters for almost a thousand men, women, and children. Whole families were there; they met, married, and procreated in the main forward area of the vast two point five kilometer rotating cylinder. That was the Mount Sinai. A smaller ship was actually contained inside the nose, and was launched only when The Mountain was safely docked in stable orbit around an inhabited planet. This was called, when separated, Mount Olivet. Joined, they were always just The Mountain. The pattern and layout was similar enough to that of a freighter that it was clear that the big ship had been adapted from one, but it looked nothing like a standard freighter now.

Mount Olivet was small by comparison to Mount Sinai, it was true, and was designed to land on worlds even if they had no spaceport. In truth, it was an impressive, oblong-shaped craft of creamy white material over a thousand meters long and six hundred meters wide, and it descended on a flat base that was itself a hundred or more meters high. It was powered by a magnetic field drive and was designed for a totally self-contained landing. Indeed, its shape and size made it unwelcome at conventional spaceports, which was just fine with the crew that would take it down to surface after surface. They required a huge flat area not far from some population center yet far enough so that such a landing was practical and the ship, after that, would be accessible.

Finding that type of space, and a crowd that didn't also come well armed and ready to tar and feather at the minimum was a job in and of itself.

As soon as The Mountain cleared the automated wormgate the first order of business was to pull up and scan the entire region. Many of these were in poor shape and the ship's technicians often spent days or even weeks inside the automated station making at least basic repairs and checks to insure that they could comfortably stay a bit yet get out quickly if need be. In-system probes looked for the reason why the gate was there. It always meant a colony, of course, but so many of them were discovered failed and dead, so many had not been viable once the Great Silence had cut them off, or, worse, had become vulnerable to those who roamed the space lanes now with no regard for life but only an appetite for plunder. Others had descended so far into barbarism that they were ignorant of their own origins. Some were hostile, often for good reason, to all outsiders and needed to be coaxed into acceptance of The Mountain and its mission, or, sometimes, written off when no compromise was negotiable.

Nobody knew the reception they would get, but there was no question that the second planet in the eight planet system was Earth Type A, inhabited, and retained at least some technological information.

They were being scanned from monitors mounted on the gate as well as from scanners in fixed orbits farther in system, and those scans were being beamed to the second planet.

This was not necessarily happy news. It implied that high tech defensive systems were probably also deployed and still operable, and that this would take a bit of diplomacy before proceeding.

There was no purpose in delay, though. They were potential targets even where they were, although it was unlikely that there would be any actions that might blow up the gate as well. That was a true last resort and would close the door for good on any hope of friends finding them.

Still, right now the planetary defense system knew more about them than they did

about it or the planet and people it guarded, and that had to be rectified.

“Reconciliation Ship Mountain to unknown planetary civilization,” the captain called via an all-frequency radio link. “We are pleased to have found you, but we have no idea who you are. You are on none of our charts. We come in faith and friendship as an arm of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sophisticated databases and robotic synthesizing and repair systems, and we have agricultural seed, culturable DNA for domestic cloning of farm animals, and much more.” Many places would run from an evangelical group, particularly one with a ship this grand, but it was a lot harder to turn down the more material benefits they also brought and bargained for access to the hearts and minds of people.

There was no immediate reply. The captain waited a minute or two, then repeated his call almost word for word.

Still silence returned.

He shrugged and turned to see the Doctor entering the bridge. Everybody snapped to, even though they were used to the big bear of a man who looked and sounded much like a biblical patriarch but with the patience of a divine right monarch convinced of his infallibility.

Doctor Karl Woodward, Ph.D. was just short of two meters tall, and built so broadly and solidly that he filled a space. He wasn't fat; in fact, he was in excellent shape for a man his age and delighted in challenging younger members of The Mountain's family in all sorts of heavy exercise. He had flowing white hair that tumbled over his shoulders, and a full beard that gave his face a kinder look than perhaps the body's build projected, and his rough, ruddy complexion beneath all the hair was cut only by sharp but very cold deep blue eyes. When he spoke, it was always the voice of the prophet, the voice of command, and in a deep, spellbinding

baritone.

He waved his hand idly at the captain. “Keep going. It may take them a while to decide if they even want to talk to us.”

The captain shrugged and nodded, but noted, “It may be all automated as well, sir. We’ve run into that before, particularly if this is a pirate world or old military or maybe just plain paranoid.”

“They’re all paranoid at this level, Captain,” the Doctor responded. “But most paranoids don’t trust machines to do their vital thinking for them. Haven’t yet seen that, doubt I ever will. We do have live bodies on that world out there?”

“Definitely, sir. Hard to tell the size from this distance, but the best located of the three continental land masses appears to have a significant although not overwhelming population. Good climate, looks like decent rain patterns. The others are a lot more rugged.”

“How many?”

“Computer scan estimates no more than eight to ten thousand, well scattered, no cities, although it looks like everything is centered around a series of tiny towns. Surface roads indicated, mostly unpaved, but development does show a spoke pattern. JoAnn, that’s your department.”

A young woman with flaming red hair in a tight fitting red bridge deck suit looked at her console. “Aye, Captain. Landing site was near a large inland lake, which is fairly common, and somewhat centrally located. It appears they had a basic spaceport, the usual layout, but there’s not much sign it’s been used in recent memory or could be. The scans are definitely being reported to the complex there, but it’s not like it’s the capital city we might expect. In fact, I’d say it has only a few hundred inhabitants, no more than the obviously agricultural support towns in the central plain. There may be an administrator of sorts, but

I would sincerely doubt if there is even as much as a centralized governmental authority with any real clout. No presidents, Maximum Leaders, or whatever. This is a classic frontier pattern.”

“That’s not a lot of people for this length of time,” the Doctor commented. “Any snakes in their Eden we can see?”

“No, sir. Climate’s good and it appears that agriculture is thriving. It may just be that there weren’t very many people to begin with, or that many of them left when the Silence descended and never came back. All that’s guesswork. Anything more would require we go down there and look.”

The Doctor’s massive white eyebrows went up. “What do you think, Captain? Should we send somebody down to look? Can we cover them?”

“I think we could cover them to planetfall, sir” the officer responded, “but once they were on the ground they’d be sitting ducks. I’d recommend a robotic probe. Harder to protect, but it would give us information without risking lives.”

“I know that!,” the Doctor snapped irritably. “Don’t patronize me! Ever! I helped design this thing, remember!”

Everybody on the bridge froze. When the Doctor was in one of his moods, which was more often than not, he couldn’t be pacified, was on a hair trigger, and often in the mood to replace anybody who pissed him off. Everyone there was there by the grace of the Doctor; even the captain could wind up supervising latrines if the Doctor so chose. A combination admiral and Pope, the Doctor was not very democratic. And even those who’d been around him his whole life could never be sure what was real and what was act, but they had known, seen, and sometimes felt the consequences of guessing wrong.

“How many unmanned probes we got left?” the big, bearded man asked, settling

back into his chair.

“Nine, sir. And three of those are mostly being used as spare parts and models for spare parts. That last go-round with the Joy of Islam left us spent. Give me a few days with a competent shipyard or munitions factory and I can replace them all, but not with less.”

The Doctor tugged a bit on his bearded chin, thinking. “All right, we’ll try one. Protect it as best you can and try and recover if at all possible.”

“Cover it, sir? You mean defend it if it’s shot at?” This was quite unusual practice for an unmanned probe, even if they were in such short supply.

The Doctor got up and stretched, then nodded. “That’s right, Captain. Notify me when it’s within data collection range. Notify me even faster if someone or something takes a shot at it. And, if anything does, try and neutralize it.”

“Neutralize...?” The captain knew what the instructions were but he wanted it spelled out for the record.

“Blow it to Hell, damn it!” the Doctor snapped, then exited the com. He paused a moment, then added, “And let’s leave one Q and A channel open, the most likely one to be used, but let’s broadcast on the entire rest of the spectrum. Take a vote, then assemble and transmit at near overload on those channels the worst sounding hymns of all time. If nothing else, that might get some action!”

The captain sighed. “Well, you heard him. Deborah, Rachel, I’ll let you be the music committee. Everybody else on the probe and defensive station. Let’s see who’s down there!”

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It took a couple of hours of diagnostics and programming before the probe was ready to go, and then they knew it would take days to reach the inner planets. The engines on the probes were among the fastest small engines ever devised, but distances were still vast and none of the wormgates was ever placed close enough in to be warped or disrupted by major



planetary gravitational fields or in likely areas of cosmic debris.

The first trick was to launch the probe in such a way as to make it clear to any defender that it was indeed a probe and not a weapon. That was easier said than done, and relied on some experience and tried and true methods, but that didn't stop the entire ship from being put on alert when it was launched, weapons at the ready.

The same defensive system that scanned them when they arrived also locked onto the probe, but, as with them, appeared to make no aggressive moves as a result. As the probe closed in on the largest gas giant and used its great gravitational force to supplement its jump engines more scans snapped on, but, as before, nothing fired at the spherical probe. Either the system wasn't armed for defense, was incapable of it, or was willing to allow the potential aggressor a look at things. There would have been nothing The Mountain's crew could have done to defend the probe had it been shot at; with every passing minute the time delay for a reaction increased. The probe's own computer was pretty much on its own.

A bit more than three days in, and just a hair more than halfway to the inner planet, the defensive system acted. It wasn't a serious defensive blow, more a shot across the bow of the probe, clearly missing deliberately but with the intent of slowing or halting the thing. It came from an undetected free-floating defense platform that was too small and too well shielded to show up on instruments until it revealed itself, but when it did showed, too, that there were no lifeforms aboard. This was automatic.

The probe showed some defensive prowess, whirling and twisting while using some energy for its own shields, but instead of slowing it used every ounce of available power to get the hell out of there while taking a more evasive, zigzag style inward course.

The gun platform suddenly flared into life and began a rapid pursuit. Clearly it would not just be a bow shot if it could close, although it remained to be seen if it was capable of doing that.

“Very weak energy signature,” the gunnery officer noted back on The Mountain. “It’s showing its age and its lack of service. I’d say these folks no longer have space travel in any useful sense. Look—you can see how it’s losing the race. I’d expect— Ah!”

There was a major energy surge from the gun platform, as if it had suddenly shot everything it had at the fleeing probe, but it was certainly not enough. The probe easily swerved even as the beam fired, and didn’t look back.

“Reading only trace energy on the platform,” one of the artillery crew noted. “That platform’s spent.”

“Notify the Doctor and send this to whatever console he’s closest to,” the gunnery officer ordered.

“Done!”

The Doctor was on the intercom within two minutes. “It missed?”

“Yes, sir. No problem. But, of course, if one of them does that this far out, it’s sure as shooting that there’ll be more and meaner ones closer in.”

“Doctor to bridge. Close to the position of the platform. See if you can snag it. I doubt if it’ll be in any shape to resist and our shielding should take whatever it might give. Let’s see who made it, and when.”

“This could be a trap to lure us into just that,” the First Officer commanding the bridge at the time warned him. “Do you really want to risk the ship at this juncture?”

“Faith, Number One! We’re founded on faith! This is God’s chariot! I gave you an order and I expect it to be carried out, not questioned!” he thundered, then paused a moment before adding, in a much more conversational tone, “Besides, if we’re so damned paranoid

we'll run from these antiques then we should get out of this business!"

The First Officer nodded, more to himself than to any other authority, thought a quiet and personal prayer, and then said, "Half ahead. Maintain full alert defensive mode, slowly increase speed to two-thirds pulse if clear."

The ship was basically computer controlled, and was used to interpreting the orders of its long-time bridge officers. In fact, the whole of The Mountain actually required few human crewmembers to run efficiently, although it was hardly a luxury liner type of ship. Much of the routine maintenance, such as collecting soiled clothes, cleaning the vast areas of the ship, changing linen, and so on were done by humans because there were no robots or robotic services of that sort to do them, and, in fact, probably would never be allowed so long as the Doctor was running things. The key systems, though, were automated, even gunnery, although at all such key positions, from the bridge to gunnery to engineering, there were humans present to confirm, block, or manually override as might be needed, and these were also experts at checking out and testing their equipment.

Many of the smaller things aboard might have been automated but deliberately weren't. The Doctor wanted everyone to have a job that meant something to the whole.

By the time The Mountain was in approach range of the one hostile gun platform the probe itself was almost to the warm, blue and white world that was their objective. It had been attacked several times, but always tepidly, and never with great power or with anything other than automated systems behind them, indicating that this whole defense grid was sadly under maintained and out of whack.

This was doubly reinforced when The Mountain reached the platform, placed

an energy plasma shield around it, and hauled it in. The poor platform was almost an object of pity aboard ship; it kept trying to defend itself and shoot up the works, but it just didn't have any juice left. Gunnery experts in repair spacesuits actually approached and boarded it, tracing and dismantling its self destruct mechanism even though instruments said that there was nothing left there to explode.

"Standard Mark XXIX," the chief gunnery officer reported. "It's so pitted that it's clear nobody or nothing's been here to service it for maybe a century or more, and whatever made the big dent shorted out a lot of its power. Logic circuits are still okay, though. Readout says it was placed by Eleventh Mars Corps, UC Navy, one hundred and sixty one years ago." He whistled. "This is an old trooper, then, if it's never been rebuilt or serviced."

"At least it dates the colony, since it's probable that this and the other defensive units were placed here when the colony was established as part of the network," the Doctor commented.

"So they got set up and it wasn't long before the Silence. That could explain why it's so undeveloped down there. They never even got a lot of their initial shipments. Hell, they probably didn't have anything more than the stuff they initially brought with them, and that would have been really the basics. By this point that could be a very primitive agricultural colony down there."

"So you think everything here is automatic, and in as poor shape as that thing?" the Doctor asked.

"Probably, but I wouldn't underestimate one or two of these units or better escaping the ravages and actually functioning. You never can tell."

"Oh, I believe we can tell," the Doctor told him. "And in a matter of hours we'll have a look at just what they've managed to maintain down there. Cheer up! If it's like you say, then we may be able to help them out and lift them up. God brought us here for a reason.

Consider what would have happened if one of the pirates had found this place first.”

He never understood why they didn't think of themselves as the good guys, and it worried him. He was a better teacher than that.

The probe's data confirmed their suspicions of a fairly low level technology even though the colony here had been saved to a large extent by the climate, isolation, and the fact that they'd been set up so close to the Silence that nobody'd heard of them or blundered into them before.

The initial centralized city was stock prefab architecture and was composed of large administrative type buildings and warehouses. There was no indication that it was ever used as a real settlement or capital, only that it was the place where everything was landed. Some cultivated fields surrounding the complex showed that there was continuing activity there, but on a subsistence level.

A technological culture would have had few if any roads; hovercraft and air mags would have made them superfluous. Here there were not only roads, but dirt roads, many deeply rutted, as well as heavily trod paths and trails. The farther from the central core they looked, the less signs of automation or any kind of prefabrication existed.

Development had been more or less radial due to the vast interior plains, the abundant rivers and lakes, and the apparently year-'round mild climate. The fields looked quite snappy close in to the landing site, but became more ragged although not less abundant as the distance from the site increased as well. Houses tended to be the marshmallow-like prefab of the old Combine close in, as did the big buildings at the center, but you didn't have to look far to see little evidence of that sort of technology. By the third "ring" of settlement, most of the houses appeared built of some sort of adobe, quite natural and matching the available materials. There was

evidence of some building in wood and stone, but it appeared that they hadn't quite gotten the full hang of that as yet.

What was most eerie was the total lack of any energy pulses or sites or transmissions along the surface. Not only were there no aircraft, there weren't any powered conveyances of any sort to be seen or detected.

"They're either extremely resourceful or they are members of an old order recidivist cult," the chief anthropologist, whose name was Ruth Morgan, noted when looking at the finely detailed three dimensional pictures coming in from the probe.

"You mean like the Old Order Amish or the like?" the Doctor responded. "We've already seen and traced all the known ones from them and similar groups. That doesn't mean they weren't out for a simpler life, but we've seen too many dead worlds where colonists thought they knew how to do things by hand."

"Still, this group is basically growing grains, fruits, and vegetables the old way," she noted. "Those fields are tilled by animal power. There's no electric grid at all. And yet, I'm not at all sure it was intended that way. You see those herds there? They're crindin, a big, lumbering creature our records indicate is from an old Silenced colony called Mandolan. They were picked to be brought here and probably used in that way, since they're not known to be edible by humans. They make great oxen if you know how to use a yoke and plow, though. Hard to believe many did."

The Doctor frowned and looked at the closeup of the big, lumbering beasts, that in many ways resembled six-legged two-trunked monstrous purple elephants. "Interesting. I'm beginning to grow more and more curious at this colony's past. I think we ought to keep getting data as long as possible but go on in." He punched the intercom. "Captain, high orbit. I don't want us seen from the ground, but I want to be close enough to do our setup work. I don't feel danger here, but I do feel mystery."

The Doctor turned back to the anthropologist. “Any sign of churches or other types of houses of worship?”

She shrugged. “I’m sorry, Doc, but I can’t tell. The buildings are so crude we wouldn’t expect them to risk a steeple, and there’s nothing in the shape of any of the buildings to suggest a cross or similar outfit. No minarets, either, and certainly nothing in the towns to indicate Buddhism or one of its offshoots. My feeling is that it’s either pretty secular, possibly Hindu or an offshoot of it, or another faith with little liking for the trappings of organized religion. They may just worship as they please. Until we’re down there, we can’t know.”

“People?”

“You can see some of them there in those freezes from the survey. Reddish brown skin predominates, but that doesn’t mean much in that climate. Hair seems to be either coal black or pretty white, mostly clean shaven. The dress looks functional, probably handmade, and fairly standard. Women are wearing either a pullover patterned dress or some sort of pants and loose shirt pretty much like the men. Long hair, which indicates few pests, but I don’t see much sign of beards from the admittedly limited sample. The interesting shots are these, taken in one of the warmer regions near a shallow lake. The lake appears thick with rice, and the lands around look to be some variation of cotton plants. Look there—see the movement? Men, women, boys, girls, all out there clearly picking cotton by hand. I bet that in the rice harvest season they do the same thing in the lake. The trail network connects them to basically a quarter of the other farms, suggesting a trading system. Rice and cotton take certain conditions you don’t need for wheat and maize, for example, and I don’t see a lot of indications that these cotton pickers process their crop in bulk. I’d say they trade.”

“Well, it looks promising,” the Doctor noted. “I think we ought to send some folks down there and get a practical lay of the land. Anybody in the mood to go Biblical and take a long, hot walk?”

“We are always ready,” Moran assured him without a second thought, and, while pleased, he accepted that at face value.