





# Just Five Minutes...

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Location: Atavist Planet Keystone-15-4-3 "Thermokepion"  
Objective: Observe natives and determine if they've been illicitly contacted. Mission Time: Planetfall +50 hr.

Kate MacClaine hiked to the crest of the forest ridge, and shifted the sling of her bulky scout rifle to a more comfortable position. Below, the rainforest dropped into a steep, shadowed valley. Across and to the east, a waterfall cascaded hundreds of meters. The rising mists were fringed with rainbows. That reminded her Sky Mirror Falls on Tellumonar, Archie's home planet. She'd write about that in her letter to him.

She wiped sweat-slicked palms on her trousers and raised the monocular. One hour to dusk, and already night was starting to creep across the deepest part of the valley floor. She scanned the atavist village below. No movement. Weird. They should be trickling home.

*Ouch!*

There was a thud and a sharp pain in her thigh. Kate looked down. A projectile shaft protruded from her quadriceps. She focused on the point. It wasn't rock or bone. It was iron. Square-cut. A nail.

So the bastards had been here. These forest people didn't have copper technology, much less iron. A nail would a miracle to them. And there would always be someone who'd sell his brother for a cheap miracle.

Kate dropped below the ridgeline, to a steep ledge perched over a dizzying drop. She tried to land on her good leg, but she winced at the pain in her bad one. If that nail had nicked the artery, she had maybe ninety seconds of consciousness. If not, that spongy shaft of wood was releasing who knows what unknown pathogens into her bloodstream. "Just give me five minutes back on the ship, that's all I ask," she muttered.

Well, if she was going to die right away there was no point in worrying about it. So assume she had an hour or two left before she was incapacitated. Kate peeked over the ridge line, caught a motion in the bush and dropped back immediately. A second arrow whizzed overhead. She watched the valley swallow it up as it arced downward. Bows here weren't very powerful. The bush was dense, hot and damp. A war bow here would be a fragile nuisance, so these guys would be ambush hunters. Pretty damned good at it, to get the drop on her.

She drew her dart pistol. The movement triggered a spasm in her thigh, but she ignored it. The leg of her coveralls was soaked in blood, but clearly the arrow missed the artery or she'd be gone already. With a grunt she rose and twisted, dropping her elbows to the ridgeline to steady her aim.

There he was.

She squeezed the trigger. A moment later he stiffened, and then collapsed. An hour from now he'd wake up, euphoric from the drugs in his system. That was a nice touch, and it made the natives easier to manage when they recovered. Atavists weren't bloodthirsty savages like in the pulps; Kate was young for a scout, so usually one of the men would approach and try to make friends. Sometimes he'd get a little too friendly, then Kate would have to dart him, which

always went over big with his buddies. This was the first time she'd ever been shot without warning. That was a bad sign.

She spotted another rustling and dropped again. A half dozen arrows passed above her. No way she'd dart that many guys. Time for the scout's measure of last resort, the Mark II Surface Sortie Personal Defense System. The scout rifle was the pinnacle of Royal Arms Works design: a weapon so lethally over-engineered that the surest way to kill someone with the thing would be to hand it to them. But say what you would, it had some handy features.

Kate holstered her dart pistol and dialed up a pyrotechnic round on her scout rifle, setting the fuse for extreme short range. Back to the ridge and still under cover, she raised her rifle over her head, pointing it backwards, then with eyes closed she pulled the trigger. Even so, the flash was blinding and when she opened her eyes her vision had a purplish cast. They'd have been looking right at the burst, millions of candela for just a millisecond, designed to blind without injury. Some scouts were cavalier about killing atavist natives, but not Kate. If they didn't want her around, she just moved on. If they didn't want her to move on, she exfiltrated herself with the minimum harm.

Kate checked her watch. She had just bought herself five minutes, ten if she was lucky. Her ship was an hour's hike down a gentle slope in normal conditions, and it started with her passing through these guys while they were still disabled. But first she had to stabilize herself; her coverall leg was soaked with blood, and at this rate in an hour she'd be disabled. That arrow had to come out, but not here; then she'd bleed out in minutes. She took her multitool from her belt and lopped the ends of the arrow off, leaving enough above the skin in front so she could grab it with locking

forceps when it was time to extract. Then she cut a flap in either side of the coverall legs. From one of the small pockets in her coveralls she removed a small bottle of spray bandage with a flip up straw applicator. She extended the applicator and jammed it into the wound, pulling the trigger. Foam mushroomed up around the wound. The analgesic in the foam helped a little. Then she did the wound on the other side by feel. Returning the spray bandage to its pocket, she removed a small roll of self-adhesive wrap bandage from a belt pouch and wrapped it around her thigh several times to hold the hardening spray bandage in place. She checked her watch again. Barely a minute had passed, but she had to get moving.

Kate tried to stand, then sat down. She'd lost enough blood to feel it. Her first aid had bought her some time, although sepsis was coming for her for sure. The immediate problem was the pain. She could force herself to go a few hundred yards this way, but she'd never cover the kilometers to her ship, and she absolutely had to get there, whatever happened to her after. Kate extracted a tiny metal cylinder from a special pocket on her coveralls. She flipped the top open and shook out her don't-ever-take-this-unless-things-get-really-really-bad pill onto her palm. Metakemine offered you a choice of risks. The feeling of invulnerability improved her chances of being able to stay on her feet all the way back to her ship. It also made it much more likely she'd do something really stupid and bleed out long before sepsis was a problem.

Kate opted to split the difference by biting the pill in half. She held one half under her tongue and returned the other half to the bottle, just in case things got really, really bad.

"Just five minutes, that's all I ask."

It'd take a minute for the metakemine to kick in, but the clock was ticking on those guys stalking her. She crawled up onto the ridge and hauled herself up onto her good leg. There was a sapling a few meters away. She hopped over to it. Out came her compact auto-saw, and she lopped the top off and cut the sapling free. Now she had a staff, and she could feel the metakemine kicking in. She hobbled down the slope, pausing to dart one of the natives as he sat, back to a tree, hands covering his eyes.

She continued down slope for another ten minutes. The pill had really kicked in now, and while she couldn't quite put weight on her bad leg, she was feeling pretty invincible. She'd better check herself. A large, punky tree trunk lay athwart her path so she rolled over it, sliding down her back and landing on her good leg. She checked her bandage; it was leaking more than she'd hoped, but it wouldn't stop her from making it back to her ship. She felt great, of course, but with a half a metakemine in her that meant nothing. She took her field thermometer from her belt and jammed it in her mouth. A moment later it beeped, and already it read 38.1. Shit, this was going to be close.

She heard a rustle from up slope. She was hyped up on the combat pill and had been crashing through the brush with one good leg and a staff. A toddler could have followed her trail, and these guys were woodcrafty as hell. She rose, set her scout rifle on the tree trunk and flipped up the display, careful to keep her finger away from the trigger so the pill didn't pull it for her. There were three men, darting from tree to tree, like they knew exactly what she was packing; or rather what a slaver would be packing. Kate had stinger rounds, non-lethal munitions with an area effect. She could shoot past the trees and get them. There were six in her magazine, but her three opponents were spread out; there weren't any to waste. She aimed carefully, using her log for

support and taking her ranges off the display rather than using gut reckoning. She took the first two men out with clean shots directly adjacent to their positions. But she missed the third man three times in a row. What the hell? How was that possible?

Kate prepared to fire her final stinger round, she began to feel uncertain. She couldn't have missed that badly three times. This last guy must have taken at least one stinger round, probably two, but he was still coming at her. This guy was tough. His buddies were good, but this guy was great. Kate decided she'd tell Archie all about him in her letter.

Would another stinger round take this guy down? It would hurt like hell, but if he was still coming at her after the punishment she'd just dished out, another round wouldn't do it. It was pointless to inflict that on him to gain no decisive advantage.

Kate rose, drawing her dart pistol. As if by agreement, her opponent responded by standing and facing her. He was a little on the short side and very powerfully built -- the product of growing up on a world with slightly over one galactic standard gravity.

What was he up to? He'd been crouching in chest high brush, just inside dart range. In his place she'd have snuck in closer for a surprise shot. Kate weighed the odds. The range was a little long for both her darts and his arrows. But she was a good shot, and she had no doubt he'd be one too. They both had cover. She was half shielded by her giant log, and he was shielded by vegetation. Her darts were quicker than his arrows, but much lighter; they couldn't punch through much.

So Kate aimed at his upper torso and squeezed the trigger. It was a clean shot, but he twisted out of the way. Even though the range had been a little long for a dart he couldn't possibly have tracked the dart and dodged it. The next dart hissed into the chamber, so Kate fired another dart and he did it again. It felt almost like he was reading her mind. She frowned, then aimed slightly to one side and fired another dart. The guy didn't move a muscle as the dart pocked through a broad leaf next to him.

She wouldn't have thought it possible, but somehow he was tracking her aim. Then when he saw the recoil he reacted so quickly it created the illusion that he was dodging the dart. Kate was in some seriously deep shit. This guy wasn't just a great warrior. He was a fucking Achilles.

Kate waited for him to advance with her dart gun aimed at him. Now she understood his tactics. Her darts weren't that fast, and at this range his amazing reflexes would make him almost impossible to hit. He was encouraging her to expend her ammunition. When she started husbanding what she had left, he'd close in, confident she'd take slower, more careful shots. Those would only be easier for him to track. If she was dumb enough, she'd run out of ammo.

Kate decided not to play his game. When she didn't shoot, Achilles took a cautious step forward. Then another. Then he quickly drew and fired this bow. Kate could see the arrow coming for her. She was injured, but she also had a half a metakemine in her, and that more than evened the score. She twisted out of the way, then brought her dart gun back up just as he was nocking his next arrow. Now he couldn't aim because she had the drop on him, but it was pointless for her to shoot until he did