

# The Acorna Series

## Volume 1

### ACORNA

Anne McCaffrey

#### Preface

The space/time coordinate system  
they used has no relationship to

Earth, our sun, the Milky Way, or  
any other point of reference we could use to find  
our way around, and in any coordinate system we  
use, they're so far off the edge of the chart that  
nobody has ever contemplated going there, even  
with the proton drive. So let's just say that they  
were somewhere between the far side of nowhere  
and the near side of here when their time and space  
ran out, and what started as a pleasure cruise ship  
turned into a death chamber. They are like us in  
many ways besides appearance. They didn't want  
to die if they could possibly avoid it; if they  
couldn't live, then at least they wanted to die with  
dignity and peace instead of in a Khievii torture  
cell; and they would happily have thrown away life,  
dignity and everything else to save their youngling,  
who didn't even know what was about to happen  
to them.

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And they had time to talk; what amounted to several hours by our reckoning, while the Khievii ship closed in on the little cruiser that had run out

of places to flee to.

"We could offer to surrender if they'd spare

her," she said, looking at the net where their youngling curled asleep. It was a mercy that she slept so well; she talked well enough that they'd have had trouble disguising their meaning from

her if she were awake.

"They make no terms," he said. "They never have."

"Why do they hate us so?"

"I don't know that they do hate," he said.

"Nobody knows what they feel. They are not like us, and we can't ascribe our emotions to them. All

we know? is what they do."

And they both fell silent for a while, unwilling to speak of what the Khievii did to prisoners of other races. No one had ever survived capture by the Khievii, but the images of what happened after capture were broadcast by the Khievii, in full three-D reproduction, with sound and color. Was it a calculated ploy to terrorize, or simply a display of triumph, as members of a more humanoid race might display the enemy's flag or captured ships? No one knew, because the same things had happened to the diplomat-linguists who went under sign of peace to make a treaty

with the Khievii.

"Cruel ..." she breathed after a long while

•watching their sleeping child.

"Their only mercy," he said, "is that they have already let us know to expect no mercy. It won't

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happen to us, because we won't be alive when they reach here."

Since the third broadcast of Khievii prisoner-torture, shortly after the beginning of -what history might know as the Khievii Invasion, no ship of their people had gone anywhere without certain necessary supplies. The only prisoners taken were those caught away from a ship or without time to use those supplies. The others were always far beyond the reach of pain when the Khievii caught up with their bodies.

"But I don't like to go without striking even one blow," he said, "so I have made certain modifications to our engines. There are some privileges to being director of Weapons Development; this system is so recently designed that even the Fleet has not yet been fitted with it."

His hands were not quite as flexible as ours, but the fingers worked well enough to key in the commands that would activate those modifications; commands too dangerous to be activated by the usual voice-control system.

"When anything of a mass equal to or greater than ours approaches within this radius," he told her, pointing at the glowing sphere that now surrounded their ship in the display field, "the dimensional space around us both will warp, change, decompose until all the matter within this sphere is compressed to a single point. They will never know what happened to us or to their own boarding craft." His lips tightened. "We've learned that they don't fear death; perhaps a mystery will

frighten them somewhat more."

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"What happens to the space around us when the compression effect is triggered?"

"No one knows. It's not something you'd want to test planet side or from a close observation point. All we know is that whatever exists within the sphere is destroyed as if it had never been."

She said nothing, but looked at the baby. The pupils of her eyes narrowed to vertical slits.

"It won't hurt her," he said gently, seeing and understanding her grief. "We'll take the abanye now, and give her some in her bottle. I'll have to wake her to feed her, but she'll go to sleep afterwards and so will we. That's all it is, you know:

going to sleep."

"I don't mind for us," she said, •which was a lie, but a loving one. "But she is just beginning to live. Isn't there some way "we could give her a chance? If we cast her out in a survival pod — "

"If we did it now, they'd see and intercept it," he said. "Do you want to think about -what would happen then?"

"Then do it when the ship explodes!" she cried. "Do it when we're all dying! Can't you rig those controls to eject the pod just before they reach the radius, so that they won't have a chance to change course and take her?"

"For what? So that she can spend her last hours alone and scared in a survival pod? Better to let her go to sleep here in your arms and never wake up."

"Give her enough to make her sleep, yes," she said. She could almost feel her wits becoming sharper in these last moments. "Make her sleep for

A coma

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more hours than the pod has air. If only she -were old enough to ... well, she isn't and that's that. If the air runs out, she'll die without waking. But some of our people might find her first. They might have heard our last distress signals. They might be looking. Give her that chance!"

She held the baby and fed her the bitter abaanye mixed with sweetened milk to make it palatable, and rocked her in her arms, and kissed her face and hands and soft tummy and little kicking feet until the kicking slowly stopped, and the baby gurgled once and breathed deeply in and out,

and then lay quite limp and barely breathing in her mother's arms.

"Do you have to put her in the pod now?" she cried when he stooped over them. "Let me hold her a little longer—just a little longer."

"I won't take the abaanye until I see her safely stowed," he said. "I've programmed the ship to launch the pod as close to the time of detonation as I dare." Too close, he thought, really;

the pod -would almost certainly be within the radius when the Khievii approached, to be destroyed with them in the explosive transformation of local space. But there was no need to tell her that. He would let her drink the abaanye and go to sleep believing that their baby had that one chance of living.

She willed her pupils to widen into an expression of calm content while he was closing the pod and arming it to eject on command.

"Is all complete?" she asked when he finished.``````

Yes.

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She managed a smile, and handed him a tube of sparkling red liquid. "I've mixed a very special drink for us," she said. "Most of it is the same vintage as the -wine we drank on our vows-day."

He loved her more in that moment, it seemed to him, than ever he had in the days when they thought they had long years of life together before them.

"Then let us renew our vows," he said.

At first Gill assumed it was just another bit of space debris, winking as it turned around its own axis and sending bright flashes of reflected light down where they were placing the cable around AS—6-4-B1.3. But something about it seemed wrong to him, and he raised the question when they were back inside the Khedive.

"It is too bright to have been in space very long," Rafik pointed out. His slender brown fingers danced over the console before him; he read half a dozen screens at once and translated their glowing, multicolored lines into voice commands to the external sensor system.

"What d'you mean, too bright?" Gill demanded. "Star,) are bright, and most of them have been around a good while."

Rafik's black brows lifted and he nodded at

Calum.

"But the sensors tell us this is metal, and too

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smooth," Calum said. "As usual, you're thinking with the Viking-ancestor part of what we laughingly refer to as your brain, Declan Giloglie the Third. Would it not be pitted from minor collisions if it had been in this asteroid belt more than a matter of hours? And if it has not been in this part of space for more than a few hours, where did it come from?"

"Conundrums, is it? I'll leave the solving of them to you," Gill said with good humor. "I am but a simple metallurgic engineer, a horny-handed son of the soil."

"More like a son of the asteroidal regolith," Rafik suggested. "Not that this particular asteroid offers much; we're going to have to break up the surface with the auger before there's any point in lowering the magnetic rake . . . Ah! Got a fix on it." An oval shape, regularly indented along one edge, appeared on the central screen. "Now what can the sensors tell us about this little mystery? "

"It looks like a pea pod," Gill said.

"It does that," Calum agreed. "The question is, what sort of peas, and do we want to harvest them, or send them gently on their way? There've not been any recent diplomatic disagreements in this sector, have there?"

"None that would inspire the placing of mines," Gill said, "and that's not like any space mine / ever saw. Besides, only an idiot would send a space mine floating into an asteroid belt where there's no telling what might set it off and whose side might be worst injured."

"High intelligence," Rafik murmured, "is not

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inevitably an attribute of those who pursue diplomacy by other means . . . close reading," he commanded the console. "All bandwidths . . . well, well. Interesting."

"What?"

"Unless I'm mistaken . . ." Rafik paused.

"Names of the Three Prophets! I mu^t be mistaken. It's not large enough . . . and there's no scheduled traffic through this sector . . . Calum, what do you make of these sensor readings?"

Calum leaned over the panel. His sandy lashes blinked several times, rapidly, as he absorbed and interpreted the changing colors of the display.

"You're not mistaken," he said.

"Would you two kindly share the great insight?" Gill demanded.

Calum straightened and looked up at Gill.

"Your peas," he said, "are alive. And given the size of the pod—too small for any recycling life-support system—the signal it's broadcasting can only be a distress call, though it's like no code I've ever heard before."

"Can we capture it?"

"We'll have to, shan't we? Let's hope—ah, good. I don't recognize the alloy, but it's definitely ferrous. The magnetic attractors should be able to latch on—easy, now," Rafik admonished the machinery he was setting in action, "we don't want to jostle it, do we? Contents fragile. Handle with care, and all that. . . . Very nice," he murmured as the pod came to rest in an empty cargo bay.



"Complimenting your own delicate hands?"  
Calum asked caustically.

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"The ship, my friend, the Khedive. She's done a fine gentle job of harvesting our pea pod; now to bring it in and open it."

There were no identification markings that any of them could read on the "pea pod," but a series of long scrolling lines might, Calum surmised, have been some sort of alien script.

"Alien, of course," Rafik murmured. "All the generations of the Expansion, all these stars mapped and planets settled, and we're to be the first to discover a sapient alien race ... I <)on't think. It's decoration, or it's a script none of us happens to know, which is just barely possible, I think you'll agree?"

"Barely," Calum agreed, with no echo of Rafik's irony in his voice. "But it's not Cyrillic or Neo-Grek or Romaic or TriLat or anything else I can name ... so what id it?"

"Perhaps," Rafik suggested, "the peas will tell us." He ran delicate fingers over the incised carvings and the scalloped edges of the pod. Hermetically sealed, of a size to hold one adult human body, it might have been a coffin rather than a life-support module . . . but the ship's sensors had picked up that distress signal, and the signs of life within the pod. And the means of opening, when he found it, was as

simple and elegant as the rest of the design; simply a matter of matching the first three fingers of each hand with the pair of triple oval depressions in the center of the pod.

"Hold it," Calum said. "Better suit up and open it in the air lock. We've no idea what sort of atmosphere this thing breathes."

Gill frowned. "We could kill it by opening it. Isn't there some way to test what's in there?"

"Not without opening it," Calum said brightly. "Look, Gill, whatever is in there may not be alive anyway—and if it is, surely it won't last forever in a hermetically sealed environment. It'll have to take its chances."

The men looked at each other, shrugged, and donned their working gear before moving themselves and the pod into the airlock.

"Well, Calum," Rafik said in an oddly strangled voice, seconds after the lid swung open, "you were half right, it seems. Not an adult human, at any rate."

Calum and Gill bent over the pod to inspect the sleeping youngling revealed when it opened.

"What species is it?" Gill asked

"Sweet little thing, isn't she?" Gill said in such a soppy tone that both Rafik and Calum gave him an odd look.

"How'd you arrive at the sex of it?" Rafik wanted to know.

"She looks feminine!"

They all admitted to that impression of the little creature which lay on her side, one hand curled into

a fist and thrust against her mouth in a fairly common gesture of solace. A fluff of silvery hair curled down onto her forehead and coiled down to the shoulder blades, half obscuring the pale, delicate face.

Even as they watched, she stirred, opened her eyes and groggily tried to sit up. "Avvvi," she wailed. "Avwi!"

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"We're scaring the poor little thing," Gill said. "Okay, obviously she's an oxygen breather like us, let's get out of the suits and take her into the ship so she can see we're not metal monsters."

Transferring the pod and its contents back into the ship -was an awkward business. The "poor little thing" wailed piteously each time she was tilted in the pod.

"Poor bairn!" Gill exclaimed when they set her down again. The movement of the pod had dislodged the silvery curls over her forehead, showing a lump over an inch in diameter in the center of her forehead, halfway between the hairline and the silver brows. "How did that happen? This thing's cushioned well enough, and Rafik drew it into the bay as gently as a basket of eggs and not one of them cracked."

"I think it's congenital," Rafik said. "It's not the only deformity. Get a good look at her hands and feet."

Now that he called their attention to them, the

other two saw that the fingers of the hands were stiff, lacking one of the joints that gave their own hands such flexibility. And the little bare feet ended in double toes, larger and thicker than normal toes, and pointed at an odd angle.

"Avvvi, avvvi!" the youngling demanded, louder. Her eyes looked strange—almost changing shape—but she didn't cry.

"Maybe it's not a deformity at all," Calum suggested.

"Still looking for your intelligent aliens?" Rafik teased.

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"Why not? She's physically different from us, we don't recognize the writing on the pod, and can either of you tell me what an 'avwi' is?"

Gill stooped and lifted the youngling out of the life-support pod. She looked like a fragile doll between his big hands, and she shrieked in terror as he swung her up to shoulder height, then grabbed at his curly red beard and clung for dear life.

"Perfectly obvious," he said, rubbing the child's back -with one large hand. "There, there, acushia, you're safe here, I'll not let you go. . . . Whatever the language," he said, "'awi' has to be her word for 'Mama.'" His blue eyes traveled from the pod to Rafik and Calum. "And in the absence of 'awi,' gentlemen," he said, "it seems that we're elected."

Once she had found that Gill's beard was soft and tickled her face and that his big hands were gentle, she calmed down in his arms. Figuring she might be at least thirsty from being in the pod for who knew how long, they experimented by offering her water. She had teeth. The cup would forever bear the mark of them on its rim. She made a grimace, at least that's what Gill said it was, at the first taste of the water, but she was too dehydrated not to accept it. Meat she spat out instantly and she was unenthusiastic about crackers and bread. Alarmed that what was basic to their diet was not acceptable, Calum rushed down into the 'ponies section of the life-support module and gathered up a variety of leafy greens. She grabbed the lettuce and crammed it into her mouth, reaching for the chard, which she nibbled more delicately before

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going on to the carrot and the radish. When she had had enough to eat, she wiggled out of Gill's arms and toddled off—right to the nearest interesting instrument panel and set a danger sensor blaring before Gill swooped her out of harm's way

and Calum corrected her alteration.

She looked frightened, the pupils in her silvery eyes slitted to nothing and her little body rigid. She babbled something incomprehensible to them.

"No, sweetie pie, no," Gill said, holding up a warning Finger to her. "Understand me? Don't touch." And he reached out, almost touching the panel and pulling his hand back, miming hurt and putting his fingers into his mouth, then blowing on them.

The slits in her eyes widened and she said something with a questioning inflection.

"No!" Gill repeated, and she nodded, putting both hands behind her back.

"Ah, it's a grand intelligent wee bairn, so she is," Calum said approvingly, smiling as he stroked her feathery-soft hair.

"Should we show her the head, d'you suppose?" Rafik asked, regarding her nether regions, which were covered with a light fur.

"She doesn't have the equipment to use our head," Gill said, "unless she's a he and he's hiding what he uses." Gill began fingering his beard, "which meant he was thinking. "She eats greens like a grazing animal. ..."

"She's not an animal!" Calum was outraged by the suggestion.

"But she does eat greens. Maybe -we should

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show her the 'ponies section. We've got that bed we use for the radishes ..."

"And you just gave her the last of the radishes...." Rafik's tone was semi-accusatory.

"She's not feline or canine," Gill went on. "In fact, sweet-looking kid as she is there's something almost. . . equine about her."

Rafik and Calum hotly contested that category  
•while she became quite restless, looking all around her.

"Looks to me that she's as close to crossing her legs as a young thing can get," Gill went on. "We gottatry dirt."

They did and she bent forward slightly and relieved herself, neatly shifting loose dirt over the spot with her odd feet. Then she looked around at all the green and growing things.

"Maybe we should have brought the dirt to her," Gill said.

"Let's get her out of here then," Rafik said.  
"We've fed and drained her and maybe she'll go to sleep so we can all get back to the work -we should be doing."

Indeed, she was quite content to be led back to the open pod and crawled up into it, curling herself up and closing her eyes. Her breathing slowed to a sleeping rhythm. And they tiptoed back to their workstations.

The debate about her future disposition, however, went on through an afternoon of sporadic work, intermittently adjusting the great tethering cable

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around the body of the asteroid and placing the augering tool in a new location. AS—6-4-B1.3 might be rich in platinum-group metals, but it was mak-

ing them pay for its riches with a higher crushing coefficient than they'd anticipated. The afternoon was punctuated by one or another miner taking his turn to suit up for EVA in order to search out a slightly better location for the auger, to replace a drill bit, or to clear the dust that clogged even the best-sealed tool from time to time.

"Let's call this asteroid Ass," Calum suggested after one such trip.

"Please, Calum," Gill reproved him. "Not in front of the infant!"

"Very well then, you name it."

They were in the habit of giving temporary names to each asteroid they mined, something a little more personal and memorable than the numbers assigned by Survey—if any such numbers were assigned. Many of their targets were tiny chondrites only a few meters across, too insignificant to have been located and named in any flyby mission, but easy enough for the Khedive to ingest, crush, and process. But AS-64-B1.3 was a large asteroid, almost too large for their longest tether to hold, and in such cases they liked to pick a name that used the initial letters of the Survey designation.

"Hazelnut," Gill threw out. Their unexpected guest was awake again and he was feeding her another leaf of chard with carrots for afters.

"Wrong initial letters."

"We'll be Cockney about it. 'Azelnut. And you can allow me a ze for an ess, can't you?"

"If there were any point to it. Why are you so set on Hazelnut?"

"Because she's a hard nut to crack!" Gill cackled and Calum smiled rather sourly. The smallest



of the three men, he -was the only one who could get inside the workings of the drill while wearing full EVA gear, and the dust of AS-64-B1.3 had sent him outside on this shift rather too often for him to find much amusement in it.

"I like that," Rafik said. "'Azelnut she is. And while you're enjoying your way with words. Gill, what shall we name this little one? We can't just keep calling her 'the child.'"

"Not our problem," Calum said. "We'll be turning her over to Base soon enough, -won't we?"

He looked at the suddenly stony faces of his colleagues. "Well, we can hardly keep her here. What will we do with a kid on a mining ship?"

"Have you considered," Rafik said gently, "the probable cost of abandoning operations on 'Azelnut and returning to Base at high delta-V?"

"At the moment," Calum snapped, "I should be only too happy to leave 'Azelnut for some other fool to crack."

"And to bring back the KheSive with less than half a payload? "

Calum's pale lashes flickered as he calculated what they would make—or lose—on the trip in that event. Then he shrugged in resignation. "All right. We're stuck with her until we make our payload. Just don't assume that because I'm smaller than you, you Viking giant, that I'm naturally suited to play nanny."

"Ah, now," said Gill with great good humor, "the creature's walking and toilet trained already, and she'll soon pick up our language—children learn easily. How much trouble can one toddler be?"

"Add that to your list of famous last words, will ya?" Calum remarked at his most caustic when they found the youngling had uprooted a good half of the 'ponies vegetation, including the all-important squashes and rhubarb, whose large leaves provided much of the air purification.

Rafik ran tests to see how much damage had actually been done to air quality. She'd gone to sleep again and had awakened so quietly that none of them had been aware of her movement until she wandered back in, flourishing cabbage leaves. Calum and Gill replanted, watered, and tied up the pulled plants in an effort to save as many as possible. The infant had evidently sampled everything, pulling up those she particularly liked instead of leaving her mouth-sized bite in leaf or stalk: she had eaten all the half-ripe legume pods, staples of Rafik's preferred diet. These subsequently caused a diarrhea which upset her almost more than it upset them. They spent a good hour arguing over a dose sufficient to bind her back to normal. Body weight was the critical factor and Rafik used the mineral scales to weigh her and then the powder. She spat out the first dose. And the second, all over Gill. The third dose they got down her by covering her rather prominent nostrils so that she had to open her mouth to breathe—and thus swallow the medication. Once again, she didn't cry, but her silverish eyes reproached them far more effectively than tears could.

"We can't have her doing this again," Calum told Gill when they had finished replanting the garden. Then Rafik came over, showing them the readout on the atmosphere gauge.

"It should be down, but it's up," he said, scratching his head and then tapping the gauge to see if the needle moved. "Not so much as a stink of excess CO<sub>2</sub> in our air and we were about due for a good backwash."

"I remember me mum putting a cage around me," Gill said, "when I would get into her garden."

They made one out of netting in a corner of the Khedive's, dayroom, but she was out of that as soon as they turned their backs on her. So they netted the 'ponies instead.

They tried to find toys to amuse her with, but pots and pot lids to bang together and an array of boxes to nest and bright colored cups and bowls did not divert her long. She had to be attached to someone, somehow, which generally made doing their separate tasks difficult, if not impossible.

"Dependence transference," Rafik suggested pompously.

"This is not in my job description," Gill said in a soft voice when she had finally fallen asleep, small arms limp around his neck. Rafik and Calum helped to remove her as gently as possible.

They all held their breaths as they managed to lay her in the open pod, which remained her nocturnal cradle.

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"And that's another thing," Gill said, still whispering, "she's growing by the hour. She's not going to fit in that much longer. What the hell species is she?"

"Born more mature than human babies are," Rafik said. "But I can't find out a damned thing in the Concordance or the Encycio, not even in the alien or the vet entries."

"Look, guys, I know we'll waste time and fuel, and we haven't got enough of a payload to resupply if we go back to Base, but do we have the right to keep her out here with us when someone might be looking for her? And Base might be able to take care other better?"

Rafik sighed and Calum looked away from Gill, everywhere else but at the sleeping youngling.

"First," Rafik said, since he usually did this sort of logical setting out of facts, "if anybody's looking for her, they'd be looking in this sector of space, not at Base. Second, since we've agreed she is of an unknown alien species, what possible expertise can Base supply? There aren't any books on how to look after her, and we're the only ones with hands-on experience. And finally, we Bon't have enough of a payload to refuel. We do have what looks like a real find here, and I'm not about to let any hijackers take it away from us. We did catch that ion trail last week, and it could very well be Amalgamated spies, just checking up on us." Gill growled and Calum sniffed his poor opinion of the competition. "Well, we'll just have to include her in the duty roster. An hour on, two hours off. That gives us two crew working ..."

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"And one going off his nut..." Gill said, and

then volunteered to take the first duty.

"Ahahaha," Rafik waggled a slim finger at his crewmate, "we all work while she sleeps."

Somehow or other the scheme worked a lot better than any of them had any reason to expect. In the first place, she learned to talk, which kept her, and her current minder, occupied. She learned also to respect "no" and brighten at "yes" and, when she was bored with sitting still, would "yes" and "no" every object in the dayroom. She never again touched a "no." The third day, it was Rafik who brought out the markers and "dead" computer printouts. He showed her how to hold the implement and, while she could not manage her digits as he did, she was very shortly drawing lines and squiggles and looking for approval at each new design.

"You know," said Calum, when called upon to admire her handiwork, "looks a lot like the stuff on her egg. How mature was she born, d'you think?"

That sent all three comparing her efforts with the egg inscription, but they finally decided that it was pure chance and how would a youngling know script at such an early age. So they taught her to print in Basic, using the now-standard figures. She outdid them shortly by repeating the computer printout programming language.

"Well, she prints what she sees a lot of."

The big discovery, and the treat could take up to an hour, was bathing her.

"You gotta bathe all kids regularly. Hygiene," Rafik said, pausing to grin at her as she splashed the water in the big galley sink. She still fit in it at that point. "I know that much."

"Yeah? With water on board for three and she makes four and drinks a lot, we'll be in deep kim-chee on water quality soon," Gill said sourly.

"All sink water's recycled," Calum reminded them just as the youngling dipped her face in the bathwater and blew bubbles. And then drank the bubbles. "No, sweetie, don't drink the bathwater. Dirty."

"Actually it isn't," Rafik remarked, looking at the clear liquid in which their charge sat.

"Has to be. I soaped her good." Calum peered in and the metal bottom was clearly visible. "That's impossible. There should be lather and she'd got her kneecaps dirty crawling on the floor and she got her fingers messed up drawing before that. They're all clean now, too."

"Just a jiff," Rafik said, and went off for one of his many diagnostic tools. He inserted it in the bathwater and gawked at the reading. "This stuff is one hundred percent pure unadulterated H<sup>2</sup>O. In fact it's a lot purer than what I used to make coffee this morning."

"But you saw me soap her," Calum said in a defensive tone. "I washed her because she was dirty."

"Which neither she nor the water is now." Rafik immersed the diagnostic tool again. "I dunno."

Calum got a crafty expression on his face.

"Done a reading on our air lately?"

Rafik grimaced. "In fact I did, like I'm supposed to this time of day."

"Well?" Gill's voice rose in a prompt when Rafik delayed an answer -while scratching his head.

"Not a sign of excess carbon dioxide, and with four of us breathing air, there should be some traces of it by now. Especially as we don't have quite as many broad-leafed plants in 'ponies because she," he pointed at her, "likes them better than anything else."

The three men regarded their small charge, who was bubbling her crystal clear bathwater, greatly enjoying this innocent occupation.

"Then there's that sort of horn thing in the middle of her forehead," Gill remarked. "Unicorns were supposed to purify water."

"Water maybe," Calum agreed as he had been brought up with some of the same fairy tales as Gill, "but air?"

"Wa-ter?" the youngling said, dropping her jaw in what they now recognized as her smile. "Air?" she added, though it came out in two syllables, "a-yir."

"That's right, baby, water and air. The two things both our species can't live without," Rafik said, sighing at the puzzle of her.

"Let's call her Una," Gill suggested suddenly into the silence.

"I don't like it," Rafik said, shaking his head. "We're in the As, you know, not the Us."

"Acorna?" Calum. "Sure beats 'baby' and youngling' and 'sweetums.'" He glanced sideways

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at Gill, whom he had overheard addressing his charge with what Calum thought a nauseating euphemism.

"Acorna?" Rafik considered. "Better than Una." He picked up a cup, dipped it in the clear bathwater, and as he made to pour it over her head. Gill grabbed it out of his hand.

"You ain't even Christian," he said—and, pouring the water over her head, "I dub thee Acorna."

"No, no, you twit," Calum said, taking the cup from his hand and dipping it in. "I baptize thee Acorna. I'll stand as godfather."

"You -will not. I will."

"Where does that leave me?" Rafik demanded. Acorna stood up in the sink, and only his quick movement kept her from falling out of the improvised bath.

"Holding the baby," Gill and Calum said in unison. Calum handed him the towel.

They had learned to dry off as much moisture as possible because, once set on her feet again, Acorna tended to shake herself and there was too much equipment about that did not need daily sprinklings.

The Khedive had cracked and digested 'Azelnut and



was on her way to DF—4-H3.1, a small LL-chondrite that should have a high enough concentration of valuable metals to make up the payload for this trip, when the first announcements from Base reached them.

"Summary of proposed adjustments to share-

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holder status ..." Gill scowled at the reader. "Why are they sending us this garbage? We're miners, not pixel-pushers or bean-counters!"

"Let me see that." Rafik snapped his fingers at the console. "Hardcopy, triple!"

"Wasting paper," Calum commented. "Acorna needs more scratch paper to mark on," Gill said.

"And if this is what I think it is," Rafik added, "you two will be wanting to read it for yourselves, not to wait for me."

"Whatever it is," Gill said in disgust after peering at his printout, "it's wrapped up in enough bureaucratic double-talk that we'll have to wait for you to interpret anyway, Rafik."

"Not all of it," Calum said slowly. "This paragraph—" he tapped his own hardcopy—"says that our shares in Mercantile Mining and Exploration are now worth approximately three times what they were when we left Base."

Gill whistled. "For news like that, they can wrap it up any way they please!"

"And thLt paragraph," Calum went on, "says that they have become nonvoting shares."

"Is that legal? Oh, well, for three times the

money, who cares? We didn't have enough shares between us to make a difference anyway."

Calum was blinking furiously as he translated the announcement into numbers without bothering to consult the voice calculator. "The net worth of our shares has increased by a factor of three-point-two-five, actually. But if -we had ever voted our shares in a block, our interest in MME would

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have been sufficient to influence a close-run policy decision."

"I believe," Rafik said in an oddly strangled voice, "that if you two will stop jingling your pocket change and look at the last page, you will observe the important part of this announcement. It seems MME has been acquired. By Amalgamated."

Gill flipped through his hardcopy. "Says here it's a merger, not an acquisition."

Rafik shrugged. "When the tiger executes a merger with the goat, which one walks away?"

"Ah, it's nothing for us to be concerned about," Gill said. "We hadn't enough shares to be worth the voting anyway, Calum, and besides, we were never around for their AGMs when we could vote. And it says right here that nothing is going to change in the way the company is run."

Rafik shrugged again. "They always say that. It's a sure sign that heads are about to roll."

"Back on Base? Sure. But that won't affect us."

"Not immediately, no."

"Oh, quit spouting doom and gloom, Rafik. Since when do you know so much more about the ways of big business than the rest of us? Like I said, we're miners, not pixel-pushers."

"My uncle Hafiz," Rafik said demurely, "is a merchant. He has explained some of these matters to me. The next announcement should follow within twenty-four to thirty-six hours Standard. That will be the company's change of name. The restructuring and the first revised organizational chart will occur somewhat later, but still well

before we reach Base—especially if you still intend mining Daffodil before our return."

"I'm beginning to think we should rename DF-4-H3.1 Daffy, in your honor, Rafik," Gill said. "You can't possibly predict all that."

"Wait and see," Rafik suggested. "Or to make it more amusing, how about a small wager? I'll give you odds of—umm—three to two that you'll not recognize the old MME by the time we bring the Khedive, in again."

Calum grinned. "Not very good odds, Rafik, for someone who claims to be as certain as you are of the outcome!"

Rafik's brown lashes swept down across his face as demurely as any dancing girl in his ancestors' harems could have looked. "My uncle Hafiz," he murmured, "also kept racing horses. He instructed me never to bet on longer odds than I had to."

"And even if they do reorganize," Gill went on, "we're independent contractors, not staff employees. It won't affect us."

"Remembering some of your other famous last words, Gill," Calum said unhappily, "I rather wish you hadn't said that."

The Khedive stayed out much longer than their original prospecting plan filed -with MME. A case of finding Daffodil nearly as lucrative as 'Azelnut and covering a wider area. Since their water remained pure and their air remarkably clear of CO<sub>2</sub>, they really were not at all pushed.

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Acorna also supplied diversion enough to keep all three men from feeling any need to seek fresher companions. Though their arguments about her upbringing slowly verged on the "•what'll we teach her today" rather than physical concerns, the debates usually occurred while she was sleeping. She did require a good deal of sleep, growing out of nap times to at least ten hours in the hammock they devised as her sleeping accommodation. Once asleep, she was impervious to noise — except for the one time a thruster misfired and set off the hooter and she was wide awake in an instant and standing by her assigned escape pod. (Rafik had put her original pod in it, "just in case" he'd said, and the others had concurred. As there were only three pods on the Khedive, and Calum was the smallest of the miners, he would share hers.) So they would discuss her lessons quite freely and sometimes at the top of their

lungs.

Such EVA work as was needed was generally accomplished when she was asleep, or so involved with her "studying" she didn't notice that one of them was gone.

"We're going to have to train her out of such dependence, you know," Rafik said one night. "I mean, when we get back to Base, we'll each have duties that will separate us, and she's got to learn that having just one of us around is okay, too."

"How do we do that?" Calum wanted to know.

"Start doing short EVAs while she's awake, so she sees us going and coming back. I think once she realizes that we f)o come back, she'll settle

down more," Rafik said, shaking his head and casting a sorrowful glance to where she swayed slightly in her hammock. "Poor tyke. Losing her family to who knows what. Small wonder she needs to see all of us all the time."

They'd been giving her lessons in Basic, naming everything in the KheSive for her. At first she had reciprocated—at least they thought that -was what she was doing—with sounds in her own language. But since her words sounded like nothing they'd ever heard before and their efforts to repeat them were dead failures, she soon began accepting and using their vocabulary.

"Just as well," said Gill.

"A pity for her to lose her original language," Calum said, "but she's so young, I doubt she had that much command of it anyway."

"Well, she sure knew how to say ..." and Gill spelled the word out rather than upset Acorna by hearing it spoken.

"Awi?" she said aloud in response. The look of

expectancy in Acorna's eyes as she looked toward the airlock of the KheSive nearly had the tender-hearted Gill in tears.

"She can spell?" Rafik exclaimed, grasping the important facet of that incident. "Hey, there, Acorna baby, what does R-A-F-I-K spell?"

Diverted, she pointed her whole hand, the digits closed as was her habit, at Rafik and said his name.

"And G-I-L-L?"

"Gill." She made the odd noise through her nostrils which the men had identified as her laugh.

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"C-A-L-U-M?" demanded the last of her parent figures.

"Calum!" Now she drummed her closed hands on the table and her feet on the floor, her expression of high happiness.

A good bit of that day's segment went into a spelling lesson. That evening produced the knowledge that she had assimilated the alphabet, and with only a little help from her friends, she began to print what she spelled.

"In a ten-point type, gentlemen, if you will examine the evidence," Calum said, holding up

one of the sheets she had covered with her delicately wrought script.

"What's so amazing about that?" Rafik asked, turning the sheet to the other side where the print-out words were also in ten point type.

"How much has she absorbed?"

"Damn," Acorna said very clearly as the writing implement she was using ran dry.

"I'd say more than enough, mates," Gill said, "and he who uses foul language will pay one half credit to the box for every foul-mouthed syllable uttered from this point onward." He picked up an empty disk box, started to write FOUL MOUTH on it when Acorna, reading it, repeated the legend. He erased it hastily and wrote FINE instead.

"What is 'fine'?" Acorna asked.

That's when they showed her how to access the Khedive's, reference programs. She had a bit of trouble getting her oddly shaped fingers to hit just the keys she wanted until Rafik made up a keyboard with spacings appropriate to her manual dexterity.

If improving this new skill kept her occupied so that they could get on with their professional work and more beneficiated ore was sacked and stored in the drone carrier pods that festooned the exterior of the Khedive, she totally confounded them three days later.

"Cargo pods are nearly two-thirds full. What. . . when they are three-thirds full?"

"Say what?" Rafik asked, blinking at her.

"I think she's trying to ask what we'll do then. We take the three-thirds full pods back to Base, get paid for them, resupply the ship, and come

back for more," Calum replied, trying to speak in a nonchalant tone.

"But Daffodil is more than three-thirds cargo pods."

"Well, you know, we send the iron and nickel back by the mag drive. The ship's own payload is merely the metals too valuable to send that way," Calum explained, as if he really expected Acorna to understand him.

"Platinum is val-uble."

"That's right."

"Then palladium and rhodium and ruthenium is val-uble."

"Are," Calum corrected absently.

Rafik had straightened. "Did you hear that? She knows the platinum-group metals!"

"And why not?" Gill retorted. "Doesn't she hear us talking about them all the time?"

Acorna stamped her foot to get back their attention. "Osmium is val-uble. Iridium is val-uble. Rhenium is not val-uble."

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"Rhenium isn't one of the platinum group," Calum corrected her, "but at the moment, thanks to the boom in proton accelerometers, it is very



valuable indeed."

Acorna frowned. "Not mining rhenium."

"We would if there was any on Daff, I assure you, honey."

"Rhenium is. Deep."

"No, love. Daffodil's regolith is rich in platinum-group metals, but low in iron and the minor metals, including rhenium. We could tell that from spectroscopic analysis and . . . um, other instruments," said Gill, who left the technical task of deciding which asteroids were likely candidates to Calum whenever he could. "That's why we're miners, hon. This is our job. And we are very lucky to have found Daffodil. 'Azelnut was good, but the Daff's been better for us."

"Deep!" Acorna insisted. "Use auger. Drill. Find rhenium, go back soon. Then go somewhere new?"

"To find your folks?"

Acorna's eyes narrowed and she looked down an elegant but definitely equine nose at her closed hands.

"Honey, one of the reasons we've stayed out so long is to make enough money to do a real good galactic search for your folks. Your Awi. Was Awi the only one in your ship?"

"No. Lalli there, too."

"Your mother and father?" Gill asked, hoping that now her comprehension of Basic was so good, she might be able to make the leap to translating her mother tongue.

"No, Awi and Lalli."

"Nice try. Gill," Rafik said, laying a sympathetic hand on his arm.

"By the way, hon, three-thirds full is all full. Three-thirds make one," Calum said, seeking to distract her from her sad contemplation of her hands. "Thirds are fractions."

"Fractions?" Her head came up.

"Parts of a whole. There're all kinds of fractions, halves and quarters and fifths and sixths and lots and lots, and when you have two halves, you have a -whole. When you have four quarters, you have a whole."

"And five fives is a whole, too?" Her eyes were wide again as she grasped the concept. "What is the smallest? One and one?"

"We also got us a mathematical genius," Rafik said, throwing up his slim fingered hands in humorous awe.

One mathematical concept led to another, and it wasn't long before Acorna was accessing algebraic equations. Calum, muttering something about leaving no regolith grain unturned, bullied the others into using the tether and auger to go beneath the fine, friable rubble of Daffodil's outer layers.

"Why not teach her something useful? Like how to watch the catalytic converter gauges and switch over at the right temps?" Rafik asked. "Then I'd get to go out with you guys on EVAs and she'd have less of this dependency thing."

"I think," Calum said in awed tones, "she was born knowing more useful things than we can

imagine." He was inspecting the latest drilling samples by remote control. "Look at this analysis, will you?"

"Rhenium and hafnium," Rafik said slowly, bending over the screens. "High concentrations, too. If the drill keeps bringing up this quality of ore, we can make our payload and be back at Base sooner than if we keep working the surface regolith for platinum. And the load will be richer by~"

"Forty-two point six five percent," Calum said, blinking absently. "She dalS) there was rhenium down deep, you know."

"Daffodil shows as an undifferentiated asteroid. There've been no atmospheric processes to move deposits. Logically, the deep rock should be the same metals, in the same concentration, as the surface regolith . . . just harder to get at."

"Logically," Gill retorted, "looking at this analysis, it isn't. There just may be a few things the cosmologists don't know yet. But I'd give a pretty penny to know how you knew, Acorna acushla. I think we'd better teach her the rest of the metals, gentlemen, so she knows what to tell us about from now on. And as for dependency ..." Gill snorted. "Once you made her her own keyboard, she undepended herself, or hadn't you two

noticed?"

"Some are born to be hackers, and some ain't,"

Rafik said.

"Well, it won't hurt to try, now •will it?" was Gill's retort, but he was as proud of Acorna as they all were. "We're not doing so bad as parents, ?,, are we.

"How mature was she born?" Calum asked, almost plaintively. "She's only been aboard for ..."  
He had to access the log for the date she'd been recovered. "Hey, twelve months and fifteen days!"

"A year?" Rafik repeated astonished.

"A year!" Gill cried. "Hell, we forgot her birthday!"

The other two, tight-lipped with anger, pointed to the FINE jar, which hadn't actually been fed for some time.

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Purely superficial changes," Gill said as the Khedive arrived •within visual range of the old MME Base. "You'll not claim your winnings on the basis of a few cosmetic details, will you now,

Rafik?"

"I should be delighted," Rafik said, "not to claim them at all."

No announcement of any reorganization had reached them, but the MME logo that had once

decorated both sides of each docking gate had been replaced by a much larger sign reading, AMALGAMATED MANUFACTURING. Instead of Johnny Greene's cheerful greeting, they had been read into position by something with a dry mechanical voice that refused to give its name and complained about their failure to introduce themselves with "the Amalgamated protocol," whatever that might be.

The docking bay itself was much the same,

but immediately within the double airlock doors leading to the interior of Base they were met by the owner of the dry voice, still complaining about their failure to use the Amalgamated protocol.

"Look, mate," Gill said, "like the pilot here told you—" he nodded toward Calum "—we're the Khedive, on contract to MME, and we didn't get word of any new approach and docking protocol. If you chaps wanted us to use something new, why didn't you send us the rules?"

"Violation of regulations to send classified company protocols via unsecured space transmissions."

"The ancient Americans had a phrase for it," Rafik said, smiling slightly. "Something about a twenty-two catch, I believe."

"And where's Johnny Greene?"  
"Redundant."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?"  
Gill's voice had grown loud enough to echo down the corridors. A young woman in a pale blue coverall, her fair hair drawn back into a bun, hurried forward with one hand raised.

"Eva Glatt," she introduced herself, holding

out one small hand, "TT&A—that's Testing, Therapy, and Adjustment Department. The consolidation of MME with Amalgamated has resulted in a number of organizational changes for efficiency, Mr.—Giloglie, is it? I've come to take charge of the child."

"She is in our charge," Gill said.

"Oh, but surely you won't want to be bothered

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with her while you're filling out the docking protocol forms and reregistering the KheSive as an Amalgamated ship. I've prepared everything, though your message did not give us much time

to make ready."

Rafk and Calum had convinced Gill that it would be tactful to tell Base something about the enigma they were bringing back from this latest expedition, but they had all waited until they were on the way back from Daffodil, just in case Base had any ideas about issuing an immediate

recall.

"And Dr. Forelle himself wishes to inspect the

pod in 'which she was found and your tapes of the initial contact," Eva went on. "I'll just have that material brought off the ship and taken to him while you're reregistering yourselves, shall I? And you can come with me, you poor baby." She knelt and held out her hand to Acorna, who put

both hands behind her own back and stepped back a pace, narrowing her pupils to vertical slits.

"Not," she said with emphasis.

"Complete sentences, Acorna acushia," Gill said with a sigh.

"Now, dear," Eva Glatt said brightly, "you'll be very bored staying here with your nice uncles while they do all that tedious paperwork. Wouldn't you like to come along to the creche and play some nice games?"

Acorna glanced at Rafik. He gave a small nod and she relaxed her guarded pose slightly. "Will go," she said. "Short!"

"There, you see," Eva Glatt said, straightening, "it's just a matter of elementary psychology. I'm sure she'll be quite docile and trainable."

"That woman," said Gill as Eva led Acorna off, "is an idiot."

"She said something about a creche," said Rafik. "Acorna might enjoy being with some other children for a change. And I do have a presentiment that the next hour or so will be boring in the extreme."

While Gill, Rafik, and Calum worked their way through questionnaires demanding everything from grandmother's middle name to preferences in basic food groups. Dr. Alton Forelle skimmed through the ship's log of Acorna's first utterances half a dozen times.

"Again!" he snapped, and his assistant, Judit Kendoro, obediently replayed the first segments

of that haunting cry.

"Idiots," Forelle said cheerfully. "Why couldn't they have recorded everything she said? Why did they have to interfere by an attempt to overlay Basic Universal speech patterns? There's not nearly enough data here to analyze."

"There's enough to tell that she was just a lost baby crying for somebody she knew," said Judit softly. She thought she might be reduced to-tears herself if she had to listen to that wail of "Awi, awi!" any longer.

Forelle shut off the player. "You're anthropomorphizing, Judit," he said. "How can we presume

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to interpret an alien speech merely from inflection and situation? We shall have to make a thorough syntactic and semantic analysis before any conclusions at all are valid."

"And just how are we going to do that," Judit said, "when she's been with these people for over a year, exposed to Basic Universal and forgetting her own speech patterns?"

"We'll regress her to the time when she was found, of course," Forelle replied, as if that should have been assumed. "The technique is simple enough, and with the right drugs, no one resists a regression. From the number and sequence of sounds she was making when they found her, she must have had some mastery of her native language at that time. The information is still there, simply overlaid by recent experi-



ences. We have only to strip off the overlay."

Judit made a small, involuntary gesture. Even adults who had volunteered for the process found a full regression terrifying. What would it be like for this child? "You'll halt the process, of course, if she appears traumatized?"

"Of course," Forelle assured her. "But you mustn't be so tender. We must have as much evidence as possible to back up this discovery. If she is a sapient alien, speaking a language totally unrelated to any human tongue, whatever we can learn of that language will be of inestimable scientific value. We can't let individual concerns stand in the way of Science."

"And publication," Judit said dryly.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Forelle said. "If

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you help me with the child, I shall certainly list you as one of the coauthors. And you must bear the other possibility in mind, too. If she's just a deformed mutant gabbling some known tongue in a way we didn't recognize from the log, what fools we should look, announcing the discovery of the first true alien language! We can't risk that, can we?" He smiled into space and went on, more to himself than to Judit, "Its high time linguistics came into its own as a scientific discipline. We've been ridiculously hobbled all these years by a squeamish reluctance to experiment on human beings. Why, the entire critical-period theory of language learning could have been settled generations ago if someone had just had the fortitude to isolate a few dozen babies from human speech for ten or twenty years. It would be a beautifully controlled experiment, you see—take a child out every six months and expose it to language, and when they stop responding, you know the critical period has passed. Of

course, one wouldn't want to contaminate the test subjects by returning the exposed children, and one has to allow for sickness, and the need to duplicate results, so rather a large initial test group would be required. I'm sure that's why my request for funding was turned down. Governments are so shortsighted about pure research. But this time I won't need to wait for a grant. I've got the subject right here, at least I <fshall have as soon as that Glatt female is through with her puerile tests, and Amalgamated's psycho-socialization lab is perfectly equipped for the examination."

Judit Kendoro bit her lip and reminded her-

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self that she had been lucky to get out of the factories of Kezdet, lucky to win one of the very few technical school scholarships set aside for indigent students, even luckier to have a good job with Amalgamated that had paid off her sister Mercy's bond and would, given just a few more months, see her little brother Pal through school and into a job of his own. Even forgetting the other considerations that kept her at Amalgamated, no one could possibly expect her to throw away all those years of hard work just because some foundling child might be scared by reliving a traumatic incident of her past. Besides,

what could she do?

"I'll just see how they're getting on with the child at TT&A," she said.

Dr. Forelle smiled. "Good idea. They've had her quite long enough. And you might bring the

test results with you . . . not that I expect much from the clumsy, outmoded instruments that Glatt woman uses."

"We've completed the forms," Gill said, leaning over Eva Glatt's desk, "and we've come for Acorna. If you could just show us the way to the creche?"

Eva looked surprised. "Oh, you can't take her now!"

"Why not? She may be enjoying the chance to play with the other children, but I'm sure she will be wanting to see us by now."

"Playing? Other children? I'm afraid you have misunderstood. We've just begun testing her mental and psychological capacity. She'll be in tests most of this day. Most of the week, probably. You wouldn't be spending any more time with her in any case."

"We would not?" repeated Rafik. "I am sorry, that is not acceptable."

"She is used to us," Calum said hastily, trying to smooth things over, "and . . . we're kinda used to her, too. We figured, unless you located her people, she could just stay on with us. She's already lost her parents. She doesn't need to lose us, too."

Eva Glatt laughed merrily. "How sweet! But you really couldn't expect to retain care of her, could you? Three mining engineers, isolated for years at a time . . . I'm sure you've done your best, but you hardly have the training and expertise to solve her special problems."

"Acorna doesn't have any special problems," Calum said angrily. "She's a perfectly delightful little girl, and we Like taking care of her. Oh, I'm not saying we might not have handed her over to a Company creche if we'd been able to at the beginning. But she's been with us nearly two years now. We're her family. Of course we expect to continue taking care other."

Eva laughed again. "Don't be ridiculous. Even if the situation were not obviously unsuitable, your PPPs would invalidate any application for formal guardianship."

"PPPs?" Rafik repeated.

"Personal Psychological Profiles," Eva

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deigned to elucidate. "I pulled up the Amalgamated psych files on you. All three of you are classified as maladaptive personalities who are drawn to a lonely, high-risk profession such as asteroid prospecting by a combination of self-destructive traits and romantic thrill-seeking — "

"Excuse me," Rafik interrupted, "I do not, myself, recall that this company has administered any psychological tests to me. Calum? Gill?"

The other two men shook their heads.

"You just filled out the personnel forms," Eva said patiently. "The computer analysis was routed to my mailbox immediately, since your personality problems may have a bearing on the child's

psychological problems. The results are much as I expected."

"Psychology! When we contracted with MME," Gill said, "we reported to the Director of Alining Engineering, who was more interested in whether we knew how to handle an ultra-low-temp vacuum blasting unit than in what we saw in the inkblots."

"An outmoded attitude," Eva said. "Amalgamated considers it of vital importance to see that only socially well-adapted personnel are retained in the trying conditions of space."

"And exactly how," Rafik inquired sweetly, "did you come to this . . . conclusion . . . about our personalities?"

"It's self-evident," Eva said. "Why else would you expose yourselves to the risks and loneliness of such a career, when you all score high enough in SGIQ—Stabilized Generalized Intelligence

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Quotient—and have more than enough education to obtain much better-paid administrative positions right here at company headquarters?"

"More money," Calum agreed gravely, "and the benefits of psychologically designed decor. Why indeed?"

Eva looked at him uncertainly. "I . . . I'm glad you agree with me. You understand, then. The child is severely deformed and probably retarded as well — "

A hissing noise distracted her for a moment, until Rafik took Gill by the elbow. "Do not interrupt, my friend," he said. "We are all most interested in the lady doctor's evaluation of Acorna,

are we not?"

"By height and weight charts, she is a reasonably well-nourished six-year-old," Eva said, "but on the SLI—Standardized Language • Interaction—she scored as a low two."

"By my own experience," countered Gill, "she was an infant when we found her, and that was less than two years ago. She can't be more than three or four years old."

"And her understanding of language is excellent," Calum added. "If she's lagging in expressive speech, it is probably because her brain is not wired for human language; she's having to learn it analytically, not naturally as a human infant would."

"I'm glad to see you admit she has brain problems," Eva said quickly.

"Differences," Calum said, "not problems."

Eva fussed with her desk console for a

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moment. "Given the degree of language retardation, -we next administered the Colquhoun Color-Matching Test, which is of course designed for much younger children. She displayed notable clumsiness in operating the cursor—"

"Her fingers are lacking a joint," Rafik pointed out. "Of course she has trouble with equipment designed for human hands. What are you testing for, intelligence or manual dexter-

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ity?

"The two have long been shown to be linked,"

Eva retorted. "Every fool knows that a child is not ready for reading or computation until he can hop a straight line on one foot; it's one of the

standard creche-readiness tests."

"Aye, I'm sure that is one of the things every fool knows," Gill agreed with a heavy irony that escaped Eva. "Du> you test her intelligence at

all?"

"Did you ask her to write a simple program

for carbonyl reduction?"

"Or to calculate the concentration of platinum-group metals in the regolith of an E-type chondrite?"

drite?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Eva snapped. "Even if the child could perform such tasks, she must have learned them by rote. Doing such extremely age-inappropriate things is another sign of the social maladjustment -we will cure after her deformities have been corrected. If she is to develop into an adaptively competent personality, her upbringing must be entrusted to experts who will understand how to help her compensate for her

disabilities without requiring excessive achievement from her."

"And exactly -what did you have in mind?"

Rafik inquired politely.

"Well, I—she must be tested more thoroughly first, of course—but I see no reason why she should not be trainable to hold a minimum-responsibility position in a sheltered workspace."

"Stacking trays in the company cafeteria," Gill said.

"Or folding linen," Calum suggested.

Eva flushed. "I'm not a miracle worker," she snapped. "You've brought me a deformed, retarded child who has already suffered the effects of nearly two years in a socially maladaptive environment."

"I would not, myself, be so quick to be assuming the child is retarded," said Calum. "Once you take your eyes away from the psychological tests long enough to observe that she is not human — which any competent biologist could verify for you—perhaps you will begin to understand that differences are not the same as defects. And yes, she has some problems with language and with manipulating equipment designed for humans. So? In any other field. Dr. Glatt, the expert is the one who knows how to solve problems, not the one who wails that they're unsolvable."

A gleam of triumph appeared in Eva Glatt's eyes. "As a matter of fact," she said sweetly, "I am already preparing to solve some of the child's problems. There's no known surgical correction for the hand problem, but that disfiguring excres-



removed."

"That—you mean you want to cut off her horn?" Gill exploded. "Woman, have you lost your wits? That's not a deformity; it's an integral part of her."

"Amalgamated's on-site med team is quite capable of administering a local anesthetic and tying off any blood vessels that have infiltrated the deformity," Kva said primly.

"I think you do not understand." Rafik leaned over Eva's desk, his dark eyes flashing with intensity. "Acorna is ... not . . . human. Differences are not deformities. And her race Uife^ that horn. We've already learned that she can use it to purify air and water, and we suspect it's integral to her metal-sensing abilities."

Eva sighed. "I think you three have been Isolated too long. You're beginning to hallucinate. What you suggest is not scientifically possible."

"We speak from our own experience," Calum said.

Eva fapped at her desk console. "In my capacity as head of TT&A, I shall recommend extended leave and a course of psychological adjustment for all of you before you are allowed to take out company property such as the KheSlve again. My evaluation shows that you are not only socially maladaptive but seriously delusional."

Gill began to hiss through his clenched teeth again, but Rafik stopped him.

"Never mind the minor insults, Gill. The first priority is to stop this nonsense of surgery on

Acorna. The horn is an integral part of her. Without it she would be crippled ... or worse. We will absolutely not, under any circumstances, give permission for an operation."

"I think you don't understand. Acorna is no longer your problem. After surgery and remedial training, she is to be transferred to an orphanage pending identification of the parents who abandoned her."

"The devil she is!" Gill roared. "We're taking her back. Now. Are you going to send for her, or do we go and get her?"

"She was scheduled to go into surgery at 133C hours," Eva Glatt said. She glanced at her wrist unit. "It's too late for you to make a fuss now."

"Relax, Gill," Calum said after checking his own unit. "It's only 1345 now. They'll still be fiddling around with the anesthesia." He perched on the corner of Eva Glatt's desk, one arm casually draped over her console. "But I do think you had better tell us how to get to Surgery. Now!"

A young woman with a wrist-thick braid of dark hair hanging over one shoulder stepped into the office. "I believe I can help you gentlemen with that," she said. Her chest rose and fell as though she had just been running, but her manner was calm enough. "I'm going that way myself, as it happens."

"That," said Gill, "would be very helpful. We're in rather a hurry, though. ..." He steered the girl out into the hall, blocking her view of Eva Glatt's desk, while Calum slipped behind the desk and stopped Eva from reaching for one of

the recessed buttons in the desk console. "Rafik, go on ahead. I'll bring this one—keep her under my eye so that she doesn't get any ideas about calling Security." He hauled Eva Glatt to her feet and clamped his free hand over her mouth.

"Calum," Rafik interjected, "we do not have time to drag a captive •with us. And we do not wish to alarm our guard." Eva Glatt's eyes rolled up in her head as he approached and she sagged limply against Calum's arm.

"Well, that's solved," said Calum with relief. "She's fainted."

"No," Rafik said, "just weak with fear. I apologize for this," he told Eva, who was now feebly struggling again, "but we do not have access to your more scientific methods of quieting people." His fist tapped her forehead, so quickly she could hardly have seen the blow coming, and this time she fell back in the complete relaxation of true

unconsciousness.

Gill and the girl who'd offered to guide them were some distance ahead when they came out of the office, walking at a pace just short of a jog through the long curving corridor to the left. Rafik and Calum ran and caught up with them at an intersection where they had paused for a moment.

"Running," the girl said severely, "is likely to draw attention. Just -walk as quickly as you can manage. I gather you three are the men who brought the alien foundling in, is that right?"

"At least somebody around here understands she's not of our kind," Rafik said as they race-

walked down the hall. "Yes. Acorna is ours. Or we are hers. Depending on how you look at it. And she must not be put through this surgery."

"Yes. My boss—Dr. Forelle—wants it stopped, too. He was to have called ahead, to make sure they delay until I get there with the orders to release her to our department."

"Just a minute!" Gill grabbed the girl by the upper arm. "She's to be released to UJ, not to another department of this blasted company."

"You," said the girl without slackening pace, "can't get Eva Glatt's orders for immediate surgery rescinded. I can."

"And who might you be?" Rafik asked.

"Judit Kendoro, Psycholinguistics. I work for Dr. Alton Forelle."

"Saints defend us," Gill exclaimed, "is there nobody works for Amalgamated but head-shrinkers?"

"Amalgamated decided to use the old MME base as headquarters for the research and personnel departments," Judit explained. "They're phasing out the independent mining operations;

yours is one of the last contract groups to come in. Deliveries will be handled by drone and routed to other stations from now on." Despite the speed they were making, she wasn't even breathing hard.

"Forelle," Rafik said. "The man who wanted our logs of the first interaction?"

"Yes. He believes—or hopes—she is a sapient alien."

"Then he's on our side?"

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"I wouldn't say that exactly." Judit skidded to a halt just before a three-way intersection with corridors painted in different patterns of yellow and green stripes. "He doesn't want her put through surgery before he has a chance to study her. What do you want with her?"

"To take care other," Gill said.

Judit looked him up and down for a long moment, then turned to Rafik. "I believe you mean that."

"Believe it," said Rafik.

"Then — " She glanced back the way they had come. Calum followed. Judit dropped her voice. "Don't let Dr. Forelle get her. He'll mine her brain for memories of language without caring what he does to the rest of her. It could be worse than the surgery."

"Then what can we do?"

"Is your ship ready to take off?"

"We've just docked, we'd fuel and air to spare, no repairs scheduled ..."

"Then this," Judit said, "is what we do next." She outlined her idea.

"You trust us easily," Rafik commented when she had finished.

"One must trust domebcxhi," Judit said, "and . . . I had been listening for a few minutes outside the door before I interrupted you in Dr. Glatt's office. Incidentally, dare I hope that you gagged her?"

"No time," Calum said, catching up with them. "Knocked her out."

"Good."

"If you were, then you know something of us. But what do we know of you? Why should you take this risk for us?" Gill demanded.

Judit threw him a scornful glance. "Have you ever heard of Kezdet? "

Gill shook his head.

"My Uncle Hafiz," Rafik said, "recommended it as a place to be avoided."

"Your uncle was right. I got myself and my sister out of Kezdet," Judit said, "and pretty soon I'm going to get my kid brother out. Besides . . . but that doesn't concern you. Let's just say I have seen enough children suffering. If I can save this one, maybe . . . maybe it'll make up for what I ignored in order to get myself out."

A few minutes later, Judit Kendoro walked through the swinging doors of Surgery and presented her Amalgamated badge to the desk clerk. "Here to collect Child, Anonymous, recent arrival on the KheVive," she said in a bored monotone. "Dr. Forelle will have transmitted the orders."

The clerk nodded and pressed a button. The

doors behind her slid open and a tall woman in sterile scrubs came out.

"I wuh you people would make up your minds," she said. "We had to give her a global anesthetic, the local didn't work. I could go ahead and get all the restorative work done right now if Forelle would just wait a day."

Judit shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me, I'm just the courier. You want her back when we're done?"

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"If the order for surgery hasn't been canceled by some other department," the woman snapped. "For now, take her with my compliments. I have enough real patients without getting caught in some power struggle between the psych departments."

She nodded toward the room she had come from and a green-gowned aide wheeled out a gurney on which Acorna lay limp and unconscious. The tangle of silvery curls had already been shaved in a wide naked semicircle around her horn.

"I'll take her on the gurney," Judit said in a bored tone, "no need for your people to waste time with the transfer."

As soon as Judit had control of the gurney, Rafik sprang forward and grabbed her from behind. A plasknife slid out of his sleeve and gleamed across Judit's throat.

"Thanks for showing us the way, dummy," he growled in his best threatening tones. "We'll take

the kid back now."

"You can't do this! You tricked me!" Judit was a terrible actress; the words came out as woodenly as someone reading a Basic literacy test.

"Raise the alarm," Rafik threatened the desk clerk and surgeon, "and the girl gets it. Keep quiet, and we'll let her go when we're safely away. Understand?"

Gill reached down to the gurney and swept Acorna up in one arm, and Calum held the doors while he and Rafik and Judit made their exit.

"Is she all right?" As soon as the doors swung shut behind them, Rafik dropped the pretense of holding Judit at knife point. Now he was at Gill's side, feeling for a pulse in Acorna's wrist.

"Breathing," Gill said. "We'll see about the rest when the anesthetic wears off. Judit, is there anything we should know about that?"

She shook her head. "Standard anesthesia. She'll be out an hour, maybe two, depending on how long ago it was administered. Just as well, really. Gives you time to get her back on ship-board without a fuss. ... I'd better go with you, though. Keep the knife out, Rafik, and hold my arm. You may need a hostage again."

"Which way from here to the docking bay?" Gill asked.

"We can take the service tunnels. Less chance of running into people." Judit pressed a panel in the wall and a narrow inner tunnel opened before them, barely wide enough to admit Gill with the burden of a sleeping Acorna.

They reached the docking bay without inci-



dent. The bored, mechanical clerk who'd replaced Johnny Greene hardly lifted his head •when they came to his desk.

"Warn personnel out of the bay and prepare the outer doors for opening," Calum said. "KheDlve departing immediately."

"Not cleared," the clerk mumbled without looking up from his console.

"Please," Judit said in a shaky voice, "do what they say. He—he's got a knife."

This got the clerk's attention. His head

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snapped up, he gave a startled look at the plasknife in Calum's hand, and he dove under his desk. "Do -what you want, just leave me out

of it!"

"Well, well," said Gill softly, "and here I

thought the wee man might make trouble by trying to be a hero. Calum, d'you know the docking system well enough to clear us for departure?"

"If Amalgamated hasn't changed it too much," Calum said. "Here, hold this." He handed the plasknife to Judit, who quickly handed it on to Gill. "I'm a hwtage, you idiots," she hissed.

Gill laughed quietly and accepted the task of holding Judit "hostage." Calum, having swiveled the desk console to face him, was oblivious to the byplay. He brought up a series of screens in quick succession, nodding in satisfaction.

"Hmm," he said at the sight of the fifth screen.

"Hmm . . . Uh-huh. Okay, next, okay, uh-huh."  
He zipped through the rest of the status screens and tapped in a command. "Okay, that clears us. But there are a couple of little problems."

"Anything that would keep us on the base?"

"No, but. . ."

"Right. We'll discuss them later. Come on!  
And Judit, act normal. The bay may be cleared, but unless Amalgamated's remodeled, the loading staff can watch us from the top gallery. We don't want any of the staff to notice you're being a

hostage."

"So I'm not-a-hostage trying to act like a

hostage trying to act not-a-hostage," Judit muttered as they passed through the series of doors

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that protected the interior of Base when the docking bay was open to space. "It's as bad as singing Cherubino, having to be a girl pretending to be a boy pretending to dress up as a girl."

"You like ancient opera?" Gill asked in surprise.

Judit shrugged. "I was in a couple of amateur productions at school. My voice isn't good enough to go professional. But one year we got Kirilatova to coach us in Figure. She did Susanna, of course."

"Kirilatova? But she's got to be about a hundred and ten by now!"

"Not quite. She was seventy then," Judit said, "and when she sang Susanna, if you had your

eyes closed, she was a girl of twenty about to be married to her beloved. It was an incredible performance. I wish I'd been born early enough to hear her at her peak."

"I have cubes," Gill said. "Early performances, originally preserved on DCVCD, then transferred to tri-D when the new format came out."

"Are you going to invite the girl up to listen to your opera cubes. Gill? How about lifting Acorna up first?" There was an edge of sarcasm in Calum's voice. They had crossed the open bay without incident while Gill and Judit talked about dead singers.

"I might at that," Gill said thoughtfully. He took Judit's hand. "You could come with us. You don't belong with the psych-toads at Amalgamated, you know. As the customer said to the

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Vassar girl in the brothel, •what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Judit shook her head. "As the Vassar girl said to the customer, 'Just lucky, I guess.' I know nothing of mining; I'd be useless cargo to you."

Calum, who'd been on the verge of making that point, opened his mouth and shut it again

•with an audible snap.

"You'd better knock me out, too, before you go. The hostage act may not have been totally convincing."

"After all the help you've been? I couldn't

bear to, acushla."

"It -will lend verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative," Judit said.

"Look, I need this job. I can earn enough here to see Pal through technical school. Anyway, I ... I have my reasons for staying with Amalgamated. Now will you get on with it?"

"Can't," Rafik said. "You've no protection. If you're in this docking bay when we open the doors, and not on the ship, you're dead. You "will have to walk back through the inner doors. As soon as you're safe, -we'll take off. They won't have time to cancel the clearing sequence."

Unexpectedly, Judit laughed. "That fat little toad of a receiving clerk is probably still under his desk, and nobody else knows anything's wrong . . . yet. But I look too unharmed to have been the hostage of you brutal roughnecks. Give me the knife. Gill." With rapid efficiency she sliced through her outer coverall at the point

•where Gill had been pretending to hold the knife

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point against her side, then pulled half the hair out of her braid and let it fall in a dark cloud over the side of her face. "Do I look enough of a mess yet?"

"You look most beautiful," Gill said, "and I shall carry your memory with me through the cold of space."

"Get on with it, you two!" Calum snapped.

"We've got Acorna webbed in. The longer you spend chatting the girl up, the more chance of somebody noticing something's wrong."

"That's a brave girl," Gill said as he climbed

on board the Khedive and strapped himself in for takeoff. He watched Judit's halting progress across the floor of the docking bay. "I hope that limp is part of the acting. ..."

"She was moving just fine on the way to Surgery," Calum pointed out. "Rafik! Systems ready? I want us in action the minute she's through the first doors."

"Second doors," Gill said firmly. "She's too valuable to risk."

"And Acorna? Not to mention us? And the KheSive?"

"We'll make it," Gill said -with confidence.

And they did.

"Now what?" Calum said when they were well away from Base.

Gill shrugged. "Long term or short term? Long term, we've still got our skills and our ship, and there are other companies to contract with —

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or -we can go independent. Short term . . . you said something about problems when you -were humming over the console back there. What's our status?"

"Refueling only partially complete, but that's no problem; -we've enough to make it back into the asteroid belt, and once there, we can mine a carbonaceous chondrite to supply hydrogen for the fuel converter."

"A C-type chondrite will replenish our water

and oxygen, too, if necessary," Rafik pointed out. "So what's the problem?"

"Food's low. We're about to be temporary vegetarians."

"At least one of us won't mind that," Gill said with a tender look at the net where Acorna lay, moving just enough in her drugged sleep to reassure them all that she would wake soon enough.

"And we didn't get the replacement auger bits," Calum said. "Azienut cracked most of them and Daffy just about finished the rest of the box off. Our tether cables are worn, too. We were due for a good deal of refitting at Base."

There were more immediate complications than shortage of spare parts, as they learned when they activated the com units.

"Just receiving," Rafik advised them. "Transmitting would give away our position."

"Ah, they're not going to follow us out of sector for one little girl nobody had claimed anyway."

"'Why step on me?' the ant asked the elephant. 'Because I can, and because you have annoyed

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me,'" Rafik answered obliquely. "It is not wise to annoy the elephant."

"I've got the Base frequency," Calum announced. "You two might want to listen in."

They listened in tight-lipped anger to the repeated announcement being broadcast to all Amalgamated bases and ships.

"They're claiming the KheSive is stolen property!" Gill exploded. "They can't do that! She's our ship, free and clear!"

"That ghastly female said something about the Khedive being theirs," Calum said thoughtfully. "Rafik, is there some legal mumbo-jumbo in the reorganization that could possibly make it look like we had been leasing the ship from them?"

"They can claim whatever they want to," Rafik pointed out. "And if they catch up with us, and we have to argue it out in the courts, who'll be taking care of Acorna?" He smiled benignly at his colleagues. "We might be well advised to take on a new identity."

"We can call ourselves whatever we "want," Gill grumbled, "but the ship's registered and known. ..."

Rafik's smile was seraphic. "I might know someone who can take care of that little matter for us. For a fee, of course."

"What have we got to pay your someone with? I have a strong suspicion Amalgamated's accountants are not going to credit us for all the iron and nickel we've been sending back by drone," Calum said dourly. "And the platinum

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and titanium are sitting in the Amalgamated shipping bay—wrapped up in our only container nets!"

"We have," Rafik said gently, "a large block of

extremely valuable, if nonvoting, shares of Amalgamated stock. I think Uncle Hafiz -will be •willing to convert it into local currency for us."

There was a moment's pause, then Gill laughed and slapped his knee. "So Amalgamated pays for the refit, after all! Good enough."

"We'll be broke afterward," Calum grumbled.

"We'll have our ship, our tools, and our skills," Gill said in high good humor. "And Acorna! Never worry, man. There are asteroids out there richer than anything we ever mined on contract. I can feel it in my bones."

"So, onward to Uncle Hafiz?" Rafik asked, settling himself at the navigational board and posing his fingers over the keys.

"Yeah. Where is your famous Uncle Hafiz?"

"The planet is called Laboue; the location is a family secret I'm not allowed to divulge," Rafik said, already plotting in a course. He had completed it and cleared the screen before either Gill or Calum could see what he had entered.

"Naughty, naughty!"

"Nauuughtie?" a feeble little voice queried.

"Acorna, sweetie," and Gill, being nearest, strode to her hammock. "Sorry, hon, sorry. We had no idea at all what those idiots were going to do to our little Acorna."

Her pupils widened and the fear drained from her features, her hands and feet opening in relief

at finding herself back on board the Khedive and with them.

"That stupid woman! Glad I decked her,"



Calum said.

"Very stupid woman," Acorna agreed, nodding her head vigorously and then moaning. "Oh, my head!"

"It'll wear off, acushia," he said, and then added to Gill. "Get webbed. We're about to go into the wild black yonder!"

Acorna was very nervous for the next few days, so they all made a big effort to divert her and promise, on their honors, that she'd never be left alone with stupid strangers again. One of the few-unesential tasks that Calum had had time to do, before they went to collect Acorna, was to pick up some seed from the chandler. He was offered flowers, too.

"There are quite a few decorative broad-leafed types, flowering, too, which do give you some diversity in your 'ponies. Also some botanical oddities that do quite well on nutrient solutions," he'd been told. "Quick growing."

While he had been more interested in vegetables and edible legumes and some of the new bean types, he also picked up alfalfa, timothy, and lucernes seeds, remarking that he would be making a planetfall and was doing a favor for a friend.

Setting out the seeds and using the Galactic Botanical from the ship's library program to figure out how to speed up their growth helped pass the time and increase the variety of their meals. Acorna had read just as much as Calum and Gill had of the GB and she very shortly told them she had the matter well in hand and they were to please do

something else.

"You don't suppose she remembers stuff . . . racial memory?" Calum asked.

Gill shrugged. "Who's to know? I did manage to check that blood sample we took when she scraped her knee. She's not of a known genotype. Shit!" And he obediently put a half credit in the FINE box. It joined its fellows with a clink.

"Hey, man, how much have we got in there?" Calum asked and Gill opened the container, spilling out a good fifty half-credits.

"Won't buy much, but it's a start."

"Uncle Hafiz will set us up, lads," Rafik assured them from the pilots seat. Then he leaned forward. "Gill, d'you remember that dead ship we found rammed halfway through an asteroid?"

"What about it?"

"Wasn't it the same class as this one?"

"Year or two older."

"But same class. Are you getting at what I think you're getting at?" Gill asked, brightening.

"Indeed I am, dear lad," Rafik said, grinning from ear to ear. "And that asteroid belt is also on our present heading . . . well, with a slight detour."

"We change identities with it?" Calum asked.

"Can we So that?"

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"With a little extra help from Uncle Hafiz, that

should be no problemo," Rafik said. "Shall we?"

Gill and Calum made eye contact.

"Well, it's -worth the effort, I think, especially if Uncle Hafiz can fiddle some updates about where that ship has been while she was missing."

"He's a whiz at that sort of thing," Rafik said and began to whistle off-key.

"Sure get Amalgamated off our tail if they should bother to come looking for us," Calum said, looking anxiously in the direction of the 'ponies, where Acorna was working.

"It would at that," Gill said, after finger-combing his beard. He held up a portion of the belt-long hirsute appendage. "Well, I wanted to have a good trim, but I'll bet Amalgamated axed the barber shop, too."

"I'll give you a trim," Calum suggested suavely.

"No way, mate," Gill said, wrapping his beard up and stuffing it down the front of his tunic.

"Uncle Hafiz has an excellent barber," Rafik said soothingly.

"I can't wait to meet this Uncle Hafiz," Gill said.

"He will amaze you," Rafik said with smug pride. He then added, in a much less confident tone, "Only one thing. He isn't to know about Acorna."

"Why not?" Gill and Calum asked in unison.

"He's a collector."

"Of what?"

"Of -whatever's going, and I'm bloody sure he's never seen anything like Acorna."

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"Won't that complicate matters a trifle?" Rafik cocked his head to one side, then the other, and shrugged. "I am not my uncle's nephew for nothing. We will contrive. We can not lose Acorna."

The physical exchange of their beacon with that of the wreck took, in the end, three days of sweaty labor. The first problem was that mining tools were ill adapted to the task of cutting and welding ship parts, and their mechanical repair tools were not designed to function in the vacuum, dust, and temperature extremes of the asteroid surface.

"Without Acorna to purify the air," Calum commented at the end of their first shift, "this cabin would be stinking like the locker rooms at the TriCentennial Games by now."

"Water, too," Gill agreed. With constant recycling, ship's air and water usually developed a stale tang that nothing could get rid of. "Acorna, you're good fortune to us."

Acorna shook her head, sadness filling her dark eyes as the centers narrowed to slits.

"You are that," Calum insisted. "What's the matter?"

"You run away. We hide. I ..." Acorna visibly struggled to put the words together. "If I go back, you do not have to hide. My fault!"

The men's eyes met over her head. "We've been talking too freely," Rafik said softly.

"She speaks so little," Calum agreed, "I forget how much she understands."

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"Never mind that now," Gill said more loudly. "The important thing is to explain that she's got it all wrong, don't you think?" He picked Acorna up and hugged her. "Not your fault, sweetie-pie. Remember the stupid woman Uncle Calum decked? Not your fault she was such a twit, was it now?"

Acorna put the fingers of one hand into her mouth. Her eyes were dark disbelieving pools.

"Listen, Acorna," Rafik said. "We did not like those people at Base. We did not want to work for them. If we had never . . . met . . . you, we would still not work for Amalgamated. Would we, fellows?"

Calum's and Gill's emphatic "No!" seemed to halfway convince Acorna; at least, the silvery pupils of her eyes slowly returned to normal and she consented to munch thoughtfully on the spinach stalks Rafik offered her. By the end of the shift, she was sufficiently recovered to pester them about why they stayed on an asteroid that she could tell held no interesting concentration of metals.

"This is a carbonaceous chondrite, Acorna," Calum explained.

"Simplify it, will you? The kid doesn't know those big words!"

"Just because basic astronomical chemistry is beyond you, Gill," Calum retorted, "don't assume

Acorna is as thick as you are. She knows the words we teach her, and we might as well teach her the right ones for the Job." He went on explaining that the hydrogen and oxygen they

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could extract from this asteroid would provide them with extra air and water, as well as with the fuel they would need to reach their next stop.

"/ clean air," Acorna said, stamping a hooflike foot.

"So you do," Calum agreed easily, "but we don't know your tolerances yet, see, and we don't want to have you doing more than you can handle at this body weight. Besides, we need fuel. . . ." Every few sentences he had to stop and draw diagrams of molecular structures and conversion routines. Acorna was fascinated, and Calum drew the teaching session out until she fell asleep in his

arms.

"Whew!" Calum fastened the sleeping child in her net and stood up, stretching his back. "Okay, fellows, a few ground rules. We'd better discuss certain things only when Acorna is asleep. She's too clever by half; if she knows everything, she'll carry a load of guilt she doesn't need. That goes for the beacon switch, too. If she doesn't know? about it, she won't ask inconvenient questions about it later. As far as she's concerned, we're just here to refuel, right?"

"Just as well we never got around to picking a suit small enough for her out of Stores," Gill commented.

Rafik nodded. "Soon she must be allowed to go outside with us. She can be inestimably useful in locating and assessing mineral deposits, and irre-

spective of the benefit to us, Acorna needs to feel useful. But for now, yes, it is as well to keep her in ignorance of our real reason for stopping here."

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After that it took even longer to exchange the beacons, because they had to do the work only when Acorna was asleep, officially confining their activities when she was awake to the extraction of hydrogen and oxygen. Once the onerous task was completed, Rafik reprogrammed the navigation computer for the destination he still refused to reveal, and all three men slept as much as possible on the way to planetfall.

"Are we to stay on the ship the whole time we're here?" Gill demanded.

"Rafik's probably afraid you'll be able to identify this planet's star if we set foot outside the port area," Calum said. "You can stop worrying, Rafik. There was really no point in those little games you played with the navigational computer. I know exactly where we are."

"How?" Rafik demanded.

"Fuel consumption," Calum said smugly. "Triangulation on known stars. Time. Course corrections. I plotted the course in my head and checked the numbers on my wrist unit. We're on the fourth planet from — "

"Don't say it," Rafik interrupted. "At least let me swear to Uncle Hafiz that the name and location of his hideaway have never been spoken on board this ship."

"Why?" Calum asked. "What's the big deal? Anybody could compute — "

"No, Calum, they couldn't!" Rafik rolled his eyes heavenward. "I could write a book on the hazards of

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shipping with a mathematical genius 'who hasn't an ounce of street sense to balance the other side of his head. There are all sorts and conditions of people here, Calum, and the one thing they all have in common is a strong desire for anonymity. A desire," he added pointedly, "which we share with them, or have you forgotten already? Now, lets keep this simple. You stay right here. / visit Uncle Hafiz and see what sort of a cut he'll want from the profit on our shares in return for converting them to galactic credits and fixing the registration of the new beacon."

"He's not going to do it from family feeling, huh?" Gill asked.

Rafik rolled his eyes again and sighed heavily. "Just . . . stay . . . here. I'll be back as soon as I can, okay?"

"If you people are that big on secrecy, why couldn't we do it all by tight-beam transmission from low orbit? Why make a personal visit?"

Rafik looked shocked. "All this time working together, and you two have yet to learn decent manners. You infidels can cut deals electronically if you wish, but Children of the Three Prophets meet face to face. It's the honorable way to settle an agreement. Besides," he added more prosaically, "no transmission is so tight that it can't be intercepted."

He was back sooner than they expected, tight-lipped and burdened down with a quantity of squashy parcels wrapped in opaque clingfilm.

"You do not look entirely happy. What's the



matter, does Uncle Hafiz want an extortionate cut of the shares?" Calum asked.

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"And how come you stopped off to go shopping?" Gill added.

"Uncle Hafiz," Rafik said, still tight-lipped, "is more traditionally minded than I am. He wishes to meet the other parties to the agreement face to face before we begin serious discussions."

"Not Acorna!"

"Port authorities reported four crew members. He wants to see all four. It'll be all right," Rafik soothed Gill, "he won't actually see Acorna. I've thought of a way around it. It's a good idea, too;

one we might want to use from now on."

"And it involves yards and yards of white polysilk," said Calum, investigating the contents of one of the packages. "Umm, Rafik, don't take offense, but I've had previous experience with some of your 'good ideas.' If this is going to be like the time we tried to slip into Kezdet space to collect that titanium that was just sitting there begging to be mined and refined ..."

"That was a good idea, too!" Rafik said indignantly. "How was I to know that the Kezdet Guardians of the Peace had just hired a new hand who would recognize our beacon from old days at MME?"

"All I'm wondering," Calum murmured, "is what crucial factor don't you know this time?"

"It's nothing like that," Rafik said. "Just a minor costume change. Look, we don't want anybody noticing Acorna, right? So we're going to be

more traditional even than Uncle Hafiz. I told him I'd been studying the Three Books—that made him happy. Then I explained that I had been

inspired by the First Book to study further, and that I had been accepted into the Neo-Hadithians."

"All of which means precisely what?" Gill asked.

"The theological ramifications are probably beyond you," Rafik said. "The important point is that my -wives -wear hijab, which will be the perfect disguise for Acorna." He took a length of white polysilk from Calum and held it up with both hands so that they could see the shape of the garment: a many-layered hood atop a billowing gown of even more layers, each individual layer light and seemingly transparent, but collectively a cloud of iridescent reflective white. "As an enlightened Child of the Three Prophets, naturally I know better than to adhere to the ancient superstitions about the veiling of -women. There is actually nothing in the First Book—what you unbelievers call the Koran—that requires -women to be veiled and secluded. And the Second Prophet absolutely repudiated that and other barbaric practices, such as the prohibition against fermented liquors. But the Neo-Hadithians claim that the Hadith, the traditional tales of the life of the First Prophet, are as sacred as the words of the Books. They want to go back to the worst of the bad old ways. Including the veil. Uncle Hafiz is disgusted -with me, but he says he -will respect my religious prejudices -while •waiting for me to outgrow them. He -will not actually look upon the faces of my wives, but they must be present during the agreement."

"Wives?" Calum repeated.

Rafik's eyes sparkled. "That is the really brilliant part of the idea. I told Uncle Hafiz that I was accompanied by my partner, an unbeliever, and by my two "wives. You see, that neatly accounts for the four people reported on this ship. And anybody looking for three miners and a little girl will probably not think to investigate a neo-Hadithian, his two wives, and his partner."

"Sounds risky to me," said Calum. "You mean one of us stays on the ship and you pick up some local girl to play your second wife? How can you be sure she won't talk?"

"That—er—was not quite what I had in mind," Rafik said. He shook out the second length of white polysilk and held it up against Calum. "Yes. I estimated your height quite well. Now, do remember to take small steps and keep your eyes down like a proper Neo-Hadithian wife, will you?"

"I don't believe it," Dr. Anton Forelle said explosively when he read the reports on the KheSive. "I — don't — believe — it."

"I didn't want to believe it either," said Judit, "but the reports are quite clear." She had been crying. "It's so sad. Those nice men, and the little girl..."

"If it were true," Forelle said, "it would be a tragedy. The end of my chance for the research coup of the decade—of the century! But it's not true. Amalgamated hires fools; I should know, I'm in charge of inventing the language of the lies they

feed their fools, making up nice-sounding words for inhumane policy directives." He shot a shrewd

glance at Judit. "You don't like the sound of that, do you, girl? Don't like me to say straight out what our department's about. But you're not as stupid as the rest of them. You must have noticed. Well, I had my reasons for taking the job—deplorable, the lack of support for pure research these days, and no matter what my ex-colleagues at the university say, I could have completed a respectable thesis if I'd been able to get funding for my research. And I suppose you have your reasons for putting up with Amalgamated, too."

"They pay well," Judit said. "I've a younger brother on Kezdet. He's not quite through school yet."

"And when he is," Forelle said, "no doubt you'll find some other excuse to make to yourself for taking their money. They buy a few good minds and corrupt us, and use us to buy as many fools as they want. Including the idiots who think the Khedive crashed on an asteroid!"

"The beacon signal—" Judit began uncertainly.

"Faked. I don't know how, I'm no engineer, but it was faked."

"Too hard. There'd be registration numbers on the ship body and engines."

"Ha! Nobody went out and actually looked, did they? They just trusted the computer records."

Judit was silent. Forelle's idea was insane . . . but it was true, nobody had physically checked the crash site.

"I'll wager you that ship is not the Khedive. Yes,

that's it. The beacon signal is faked, and they're in some different sector of space by now, laughing at us all. And Amalgamated "will let the matter drop, because they know that no matter what legal juggling they indulged in, no sensible court would uphold their claim to the ship — so rather than pursue it, they'd just as soon write off the ship as a wreck and the dissidents as dead. But I'm not going to let it drop!" Forelle glared at Judit as if she'd dared to think of contradicting him. "That—that unicorn girl is too conspicuous to disappear without a trace. Amalgamated has plants and bases galaxy-wide. I shall put out a standing order for any mention of a child with those particular deformities to be routed to my console with top priority. Sooner or later, they'll slip up. I'll find her, and we'll get our paper, Judit. And then I'll be able to leave these fools and take up the university position I deserve. They'll probably endow a chair for me. Well, get on with it. Compose the order, and I'll edit it so that they know? it's urgent and won't question why, and won't forget it either. Finally applied psycholinguistics will be good for something besides keeping Amalgamated's workforce happy."

Judit thought he was deluding himself, but it was a delusion she would have liked to share. However, if the child had by some miracle lived, she had no desire to see Forelle get hold of her for his experiments. So she put her best psycholinguistic training into composing a memo that would look urgent enough to satisfy Dr. Forelle, while actually encouraging anybody who skimmed it to

mentally dismiss the whole matter as "just another one of Anton's crazy ideas."

The skimmer that Rafik rented to take them from the port area to Uncle Hafiz's residence passed over a trackless expanse of tropical vegetation,

brilliant green sprinkled with blazes of red and yellow flowers. To the east, an indigo-blue sea gave off glints of silver in the sunlight; to the west, they could just see the long blue line of an escarpment that must have discouraged any building of roads into the interior of the continent.

"The Mali Bazaar," Rafik said as they passed over a collection of buildings with flat roofs inlaid in jewel-toned mosaics.

Gill pressed his nose to the window of the skimmer to get a better view of the pictures delineated by thousands of glazed ceramic tiles.

"Anywhere else," he said reverently, "that would be a major tourist attraction. Why do they put it on the roof where nobody can see it? "

"Most travel here is by skimmer," Rafik said, "and it's a kind of advertisement for their services. Everybody knows where the Mali Bazaar is. That's where I bought your hijab, by the way."

"Isn't it a nuisance not having roads to the port?" Gill asked. "How do you transport heavy goods and machinery? "

"By sea, of course," Rafik said. "There are, if you think about it, many advantages in dispensing with a road network. Most of the residents of Laboue have a strong preference for personal privacy;

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traveling by skimmer reduces the chances of meeting other travelers who might be curious about one's errands. It certainly works in our favor, wouldn't you agree? Then, too, roads require a degree of cooperation which is difficult for the strong individualists -who make their homes here. There's no central government, no taxation, no

centrally supported infrastructure."

"Expensive," Gill murmured. "Inefficient."  
Rafik gave him a bright-eyed glance of amusement. "Can any system really compete with the massive inefficiencies of a well-entrenched bureaucracy? As for expense . . . one entrepreneur did attempt a network of toll roads, but he couldn't afford the cost of guarding them."

"You have problems with bandits?"  
"Let's say there are residents who find it difficult to put aside their traditional ways of life," Rafik said, banking the skimmer into a smooth turn that brought them down in a paved square surrounded by high bougainvillea-covered walls. He handed Acorna and Calum out of the skimmer with the care a Neo-Hadithian would be expected to take of his delicate and precious wives.  
"Remember," he whispered to Calum, "Son't talk! As long as you're wearing that veil, convention dictates that you are not really here."

The long, multilayered Neo-Hadithian robes of white polysilk concealed Calum and Acorna marvelously; in the brilliant sunlight they looked like two moving clouds of white iridescence, shapeless and indistinguishable save that one was somewhat taller than the other.

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As Gill made his exit from the skimmer, a section of bougainvillea-covered wall swung away from the rest, revealing a dark man of medium height in whom Rafik's elegant features were sharpened to a look of dangerous wariness.

"You and your family and guests are welcome to this humble abode," he said to Rafik, with a quick gesture of his right hand from forehead to lips to chest.

Rafik repeated the gesture before embracing him. "Uncle Hafiz! You are gracious indeed to receive us. You are well?" he asked as though they had not been conversing only a few hours before.

"I am, thanks be to the Three Prophets. And you, my nephew? You are well?"

"Blessed be the Hadith and the revelations of Moulay Suheil," Rafik said, "I am, and my wives also."

A faint shadow of distaste crossed Uncle Hafiz's features at the mention of the Hadith, but he controlled himself and gave properly courteous answers as Rafik went on to inquire about the health of innumerable cousins, nephews, and distant connections. Finally, the initial greetings finished, Uncle Hafiz stepped back and invited them, with a wave of his hand, to precede him into the garden revealed beyond the walls around the skimmer landing area.

A path of deep blue stepping-stones wound among flowering shrubs. As Gill stepped on the first stone, a clear pure middle C sounded in the air. The next two steps produced an E and a G;

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the sounds lingered on the air and blended in a perfect chord.

"You like my walkway?" Hafiz asked with a satisfied smile. "Perhaps you have not before encountered the singing stones of Skarrness."

"But I thought they were—" Gill choked down the rest of the sentence. The once-famous singing stones of Skarrness were virtually gone now, hav-



ing fallen prey to unscrupulous collectors, who removed so many of the stones that the remaining ones could not maintain their population. But Rafik had said Hafiz was a collector of rarities and had implied that he was not overburdened with scruples. It would probably not be tactful to complete his thought.

"Quite rare, yes," Hafiz said. "It was my great good fortune to obtain a perfectly tuned set in C major, and an even rarer set in the Lydian mode. Very few complete sets, alas, are available now."

Thanki) to jerk^ like you, Gill thought, but he managed to keep his thought to himself and his face composed.

The walk-way led them musically to a high wall of dark stone which Hafiz identified casually as Farinese marble. A double gate of lacy, hand-wrought metal work opened into a second garden, this one surrounded on three sides by a roofed gallery with columns of the same Farinese marble. Through the columns Gill could glimpse openings into a shadowy interior of polished floors, carved wooden screens, and silk hangings.

Hafiz clapped his hands and several robed servants appeared, two carrying cushions of jewel-

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colored silk, another with a tall crystal pitcher, and a fourth behind him -with a crystal bowl and a stack of towels so richly embroidered in gold thread that only a small silken square was visible in the center of each.

"We have, of course, completely modern facilities within," Hafiz said apologetically, "but it delights me to keep to the old customs of offering guests water with my own hands, and food and drink in my own garden, as soon as they have

arrived." He took the pitcher and poured a thin stream of cold water over Rafik's outstretched hands. Gill copied Rafik's motions and took one of the embroidered towels to dry his hands. Hafiz handed the pitcher to Rafik with a bow. "Perhaps you would prefer to offer water to your wives yourself. I should not like to insult your new beliefs."

Rafik bowed acknowledgment and held out the pitcher for Calum and Acorna to wash their hands, casually moving as he did so that his body blocked any view Hafiz might have had of Acorna's oddly shaped digits and Calum's masculine fingers.

Hafiz indicated that they should all seat themselves on the silken cushions, mentioned casually that the pitcher and bowl had each been carved from a single piece of Merastikama crystal, and told the servants to take back the washing implements and bring refreshment for his guests. The placement of brass trays on three-legged wooden stands, the handing round of minute glasses full of fiery liquor and delicate bowls of fruit-flavored sorbet, took what seemed to Gill an inordinately long time

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while Hafiz and Rafik chatted of trivialities. Rafik made a show of refusing the liquor, in keeping with his pretense of conversion to the strict Neo-Hadithian sect, which had revived all the prohibitions of the First Prophet and then some. Gill at first felt glad to be an official unbeliever and free to enjoy the drinks; then, after one burning swallow, he began considering the possibility of announcing an instant conversion to Rafik's tenets. He was relieved to see that Acorna managed to take a dish of sorbet under her veil; he'd been afraid that eating

and drinking would tax her disguise too much. But it seemed the Neo-Hadithians had designed their women's costumes so that the veils need not be removed for anything. Gill wondered sourly whether they removed them in bed.

Finally, as a casual afterthought to a lengthy discussion of the problems of interstellar trade, Rafik mentioned that he and his partner had encountered a small technical difficulty with which Uncle Hafiz might be able to help them out—for a consideration, of course.

"Ah, these minor technicalities." Hafiz sighed sympathetically. "How they plague us, these petty bureaucrats with their accounting details! What seems to be the difficulty, son of my best beloved sister?"

Rafik gave Hafiz a severely edited account of their difficulties with Amalgamated, leaving out any mention of Acorna and stressing the basic illegality of Amalgamated's claim to own the Khedive.

"If their claim is entirely without foundation," Hafiz asked, as though motivated by idle curiosity,

"why do you not take your case to the courts of the Federation?"

"It is written in the Book of the Second Prophet," said Rafik, "'Trust kin before countrymen, countrymen before outlanders, and all before unbelievers.'"

"And yet your partner is an unbeliever," Hafiz pointed out.

"Our partnership is of long standing," Rafik said. "Besides, there is a minor complication in the matter of money advanced by MME—the company with which we had previously contracted—for mining equipment and supplies. The dogs of

unbelievers at Amalgamated claim our ship as security against the advance, though if they had credited us with the metals sent back by drone over the last three years, the debt would have been paid three times over. However, we left the Amalgamated base in some haste and the matter was not resolved."

"It is also written," said Hafiz, "'Be not in such haste to collect the silver that ye let the gold fall by the wayside.'"

"A most excellent precept, O Revered Uncle," said Rafik politely, "but one which I found myself unable to honor under the circumstances." He lowered his voice as if to make sure that the veiled figures on the other side of the brass tray should not hear. "It was a matter of a woman—you understand?"

Hafiz smiled broadly. "I begin to see why you have joined the Neo-Hadithians, my son! It is their revival of polygamy which appeals to you.

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So, two •wives -were not enough. You had to get yourself in trouble with some unbeliever on the Amalgamated base?"

"In confidence," Rafik said, "the taller of my two wives is so ugly one might imagine her a man, and I have no use for her as a woman; while the smaller one is too young yet to be taken to my bed. Both marriages were made to strengthen my claims to kinship -within the Neo-Hadithians and not for carnal desire."

Calum choked under his veil. Gill reached under the table and pinched some part of his anatomy through the billowing white layers of polysilk, hard enough to distract Calum from whatever he might have been tempted to say.

Hafiz laughed merrily at Rafik's account of his marital troubles, and seemed more disposed to help them out if he could get the satisfaction of teasing his nephew for the bad bargain he had made in joining the Neo-Hadithian sect.

Transferring registration of their new beacon into their name, he warned, was a complicated task and would require facilitation payments to a number of individuals, not all of them so liberal in their thinking as he was. He would, however, be happy to arrange the entire matter, if Rafik could see his way to putting sufficient credit at his disposal.

"That brings up another minor point," said Rafik, and showed Hafiz the share certificates from Amalgamated.

"These can, of course, be converted into Federation credits," Hafiz said, thumbing rapidly through the certificates, "although at a substantial discount."

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"The discount on shares from such a galactically recognized company, all but certain to rise in value, should be only nominal," Rafik protested.

Hafiz smiled. "Is it not written in the Book of the Third Prophet, 'Count not the light from a distant star among your assets, for that star may have been long dead by the time its light reaches thine eyes?'" He glanced at Acorna, who had begun wriggling under her veils in a way that was causing Calum and Gill grave anxiety. "But your younger wife is restless. Perhaps your wives would care to retire to the rooms which have been made ready for them while we settle the minor

matter of the discount on these shares and the payments necessary to facilitate reregistration of the new beacon? Or would they like to stroll in the outer garden? I can call one of my women to attend them."

"That will not be necessary," said Gill, rising to his feet. "I should be honored to escort the ladies."

Rafik smiled seraphically. "I repose complete trust in my partner," he assured Hafiz. "As he trusts me to complete the negotiations, so can I trust him with my honor and that of my women."

"Particularly," Hafiz needled him as the others left, "since one is, by your own account, too ugly to bed and the other too young."

"Just so," said Rafik cheerfully. "Now, about this discount. . ."

As soon as they were concealed among the flowering shrubs of the outer garden, Calum shoved back his multilayered veil and took a deep breath. "I am going to kill Rafik," he said.

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Gill snickered. "Remember to take tiny little ladylike steps," he teased. "And better keep the veil down. Even with Rafik's warning that you're as ugly as a man, Hafiz might get suspicious if he saw that you need a shave."

"I just hope they finish dickering so we can get back to the ship," Calum said sourly, but he flipped the veiling back over his face. "I'm tired of fancy dress."

Acorna tugged at Gill's sleeve and pointed at the grass that grew around each of the blue

singing stones. "What? Oh, sure, sweetie, go ahead and nibble if you like. You've been a good girl. Just remember to cover your head if we hear anybody coming. The singing stones ought to give us plenty of warning," Gill said rather defensively to Calum.

"You didn't let me unveil."

"Modesty, modesty." Gill chuckled. "You don't need a snack. Acorna's metabolism needs more than the occasional dish of sorbet, you know. And if Hafiz expects us to stay for a meal, it'll probably be mostly meat dishes and she can't eat those."

Acorna, ignoring the argument, had quietly knelt down within her billowing veils and pushed the face veils back so that she could see to pluck the tender tops of the sweet grasses. "Good girl, good," Gill encouraged her. "Don't make any divots, now."

"Is rude to make holes in grass," Acorna said.

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Is a no.

"A very big no, in somebody else's garden," Gill agreed. "But the stuff has to be mowed, I

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assume, so it'll do no harm if you take an inch or two off the top."

Five notes in a -wailing pentatonic scale sounded in quick succession. Acorna tried to jump up, but the swathes of filmy fabric impeded her movements and she would have fallen if Gill hadn't grabbed her hand and pulled her upright by main force. She was still fumbling for her veil when Hafiz and Rafik came into view.

Hafiz's eyebrows shot up and he came forward rapidly. "By the earlocks of the Third Prophet!" he exclaimed. "A rarity indeed! Rafik, beloved nephew, I do believe we can come to a mutually agreeable arrangement at a considerably less discount than I had anticipated."

"Uncle," Rafik said in reproving tones, "I beg of you, do not insult the modesty of my wives and the honor of my family." But he was too late; Hafiz was already stroking the short horn that protruded from Acorna's forehead. She stood quite still, only the narrowing of her pupils showing her distress and confusion.

"You were complaining that this one was too young to be of any use," Hafiz said without looking away from Acorna. "How fortunate that your new religious friends hold to the old traditions in the matter of divorce as well as of polygamy and hijab. Nothing could be easier than a quiet family divorce, at once freeing you of an undesired entanglement and allowing me the acquisition of a new rarity."

"Unthinkable," Rafik protested. "Her family have entrusted her to me; she is my sacred responsibility. "

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"Then they will no doubt be delighted to hear that she will henceforth grace the home of such a distinguished and benevolent collector as myself," Hafiz said happily. "I am willing to undertake to respect all the religious prohibitions of your sect. She can have the rooms which I had set aside for you and your wives tonight; I will establish them as secluded women's quarters for her and her servants alone, so that the Neo-Hadithian scruples need not be outraged. You will be able to tell her



family that she is kept in every possible luxury."

"I am sorry," Rafik said firmly. "I do not sell my women. Uncle Hafiz, this touches on my honor!"

Hafiz waved the objections away with an airy hand. "Ah, you young people are so impetuous! I would not be doing my duty as your uncle, my boy, if I permitted you to refuse in haste what will upon reflection appear to you as a most advantageous solution to all your difficulties. No, family feeling dictates that I make sure you have time to reflect upon the situation at leisure. You will remain as my guests until you have had sufficient time to perceive the wisdom of this course."

"We cannot impose upon you," Rafik said. "We will return to our ship tonight and there discuss the matter among ourselves."

"No, no, dear boy, I could not hear of it! My household would be dishonored forever should I fail to offer you appropriate hospitality. You will be my guests tonight. I simply insist," Hafiz said, raising his voice slightly.

There was a rustle among the bushes, and

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suddenly two robed and silent servants stood behind each one of them.

"The singing stones, although a great curiosity, are sometimes inconvenient," Hafiz said cheerfully. "There are other ways through the garden for those who serve me."

Rafik caught Gill's eye and gave a slight despairing shrug. "We shall be delighted to accept your hospitality tonight. Uncle. You are too gener-

ous.

Hafiz \*s generosity extended to the provision of separate quarters for them, one set of rooms for Rafik and his "wives," and another room, on the far side of the sprawling mansion, for Gill. "You would naturally wish your women to be housed in seclusion and far from any man's sleeping place," he explained smoothly.

"And that makes it even harder to get away," Calum growled as soon as Hafiz had left them on their own. "How are we going to find Gill and get to our skimmer?"

"Peace," said Rafik absently.

"You're not thinking of giving in to him!"

"I played in this house as a boy," Rafik said. "I know every inch of the grounds, perhaps better than my uncle; it has been some years since he had the figure to wriggle along the low paths under the shrubbery, or to swing from cornice to pipe along the upper stories. But we will temporize for a day or two, Calum."

"Why?"

"We do," said Rafik sweetly, "want to give Uncle Hafiz time to fix the registration of our new

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ship's beacon, don't we? Let him think -we're cooperating until that is done; then it will be time enough to get away."

"And how do you think you're going to get him to switch the registration and launder our shares

without handing over Acorna?"

"Don't worry about a thing," Rafik said. "I'm a master negotiator. I learned from an expert."

"I know," said Calum. "We're negotiating with the expert in question, remember?"

comawoke to the dawn-chirping of birds in the sweet-scented flowering vines outside the window. The night had been still and hot and she had pushed all the covers off her bed; now it was cool, almost chilly. She wrapped the clinging layers of white polysilk around herself. The robes were enough to keep her warm, but she was unable to recreate the drapery of hood and robe and face veils that Rafik had arranged about her the previous day. She looked doubtfully at the sleeping Rafik and Calum. Would it be a big "no" to leave the room like this, -without the veils over her head? She hated the veils anyway; they clung to her mouth and nose and chafed her forehead -where the growing horn was still tender. It -would probably be an even bigger "no" to wake Calum and Rafik and ask them to dress her, -wouldn't it?

The pressure in her bladder settled the question. Tiptoeing so as not to -wake the miners,

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Acorna quietly slid the carved •wooden door open just enough to let her squeeze out. She remembered the -washing-place they had been shown last night, a -wonderland of blue tiles and jets of hot and cold -water and minty steam rising up through

•wooden slats. But this morning there -was no one to make the hot water come out for her, and after relieving herself she abandoned the washing-place and tiptoed down two flights of stairs to -where she could see the garden through an open archway.

The blue stones sang when she stepped on them, just as they had last night. Entranced by the sweet pure tones, Acorna dropped her clinging draperies and danced back and forth, improvising a tune by leaping from one stone to another and accompanying the music of the stones -with her own singing. She did not realize how loud she

•was getting until a discordant note interrupted her melody. She -whirled and saw Uncle Hafiz standing at the beginning of the blue stone path.

Acorna's song broke off and the sudden stillness of the garden shocked her into realizing how boisterous she had been.

"Too loud?" she asked, penitent. "If I make too much noise, that is a big no?"

"Not in the least, my dear child," Uncle Hafiz said. "Your singing was a delightful interruption to a boring task. No, no—" he forestalled her as she belatedly tried to -wind the robes around herself again, "there's no need to trouble yourself with those things, not among family."

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"I must be covered. Rafik said."

"On the streets, perhaps," Uncle Hafiz agreed, "but among your own relatives it is different."

Acorna thought this over. "You are rel-tive?"

"And I hope soon to be a very close relation indeed."

"You are rel-tive to me?"

"Yes."

"And I am rel-tive to Rafik and Gill and Calum. So you are rel-tive to Gill?"

Uncle Hafiz was so dismayed at the thought of claiming kinship with the red-bearded unbeliever that he didn't even think of asking who Calum might be. "Ah—it doesn't -work quite like that," he said hastily.

"How many percent rel-tive to Gill are you?"

"Zero percent," Hafiz said, then blinked.

"Aren't you a little young to be learning fractions and percentages? "

"I know fraction, percent, decimal, octal, hexadecimal, and modulo," Acorna said cheerfully. "I like numbers. You like numbers?"

"Only," said Hafiz, "when the odds are in my favor."

Acorna frowned. "Odd is not-even. Even is not-odd. Odds is not-evens?"

"No, no, sweetheart," Hafiz said. "The boys have neglected an important part of your education. Come along inside. I can't explain without drawing pictures."

When Rafik came pounding down the stairs an hour later, sure that Acorna had been kidnapped while he and Calum slept, the first thing he heard

from Hafiz's study was a familiar piping voice asking a question.

"That's right!" Uncle Hafiz sounded more relaxed than Rafik had ever heard him, almost jovial. "Now, suppose you're making book on a race where the favorite is running at three to two, so you offer slightly better odds—like, say, six to five — "

"Six to five is much better," Rafik heard Acorna object. "Should not give more than seven to four."

"Look, it's just an example, okay? Suppose you offer seven to four, then. What happens?"

"Many people place bets with you."

"And what do you do to make sure you don't lose your money?"

"Lay off the bets with another bookmaker?"

"Or," Uncle Hafiz said cheerfully, "make very, very sure the favorite doesn't win."

That was the point at which Rafik interrupted them and brought Acorna back to their rooms for the excellent breakfast Hafiz had ordered sent up to them. He and Calum wrangled over the sliced mangoes and pointed skewers full of grilled lamb like weapons at one another while Acorna quietly worked her way through the bowl of leafy greens Hafiz had ordered especially for her.

"How could you be so careless and irresponsible?" Calum demanded.

"You were sleeping in this room, too," Rafik

pointed out acidly. "I happen to know that you slept very well last night. You snore!"

"You should have told her not to go out without one of us!"

"Look," Rafik said, "no harm's been done, okay? He didn't hurt her."

"From your own account," Calum retorted, "he was teaching her to gamble! That's not the sort of education I want for my ward."

"She's mine, too," Rafik said, "and there is nothing inherently criminal about the profession of being a turf accountant."

Acorna chose that moment, having finished all the sweet greens and the sliced carrots, to speak up. "Nobble the favorite," she said clearly, and smiled with pleasure at her new word.

"I rest my case," said Calum, arms folded. "And what's more, you are not getting me back into those ridiculous garments. If Acorna can run around unveiled, so can I."

"You will not," Rafik said with quiet intensity, "do anything to destroy my cover as a Neo-Hadithian. And that includes raising your voice. We're just lucky that Uncle Hafiz respects my religious beliefs enough to order the servants to keep away from these rooms, or we'd be blown already."

"I think we are blown," Calum said. "Blown clear out of the water. Now that he's seen Acorna, what's the point of wrapping ourselves up like white tents?"

"My conversion to Neo-Hadithian tenets," Rafik said, "is an essential part of my negotiating strategy. And it's not such a bad thing that Acorna has charmed Uncle Hafiz, either. He'll be all the more inclined to complete the transaction and

speed us on our way."

Calum stared. "You sound as if you actually mean to give him Acorna!"

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Acorna's eyes narrowed until the silver pupils were all but obliterated. She leaned across the table to grab Calum by one hand and Rafik by the other.

"It's okay, sweetie," Calum soothed her, "we're not going anywhere without you. Are we, Rafik?"

"Want Gill," Acorna said firmly. "All together."

"We will be together, darling, in just a little while," Rafik promised.

"Want Gill here now!" Acorna's voice rose.

Calum's and Rafik's eyes met over her head. "I thought you said she was over the dependency," Rafik mouthed.

"Being auctioned off as a curiosity makes a girl insecure," Calum whispered back.

"Gill!" Acorna wailed on an even higher note.

"Just so you understand," Calum said some time later, "I'm only doing this for Acorna."

"Darling, I would never ask you to put on hijab for my sake," Rafik said sweetly. "White isn't your color."



They were strolling in the garden, Calum and Acorna decently veiled so that Gill could join them without outraging Rafik's supposed Neo-Hadithian sense of propriety.

"Explain to me again," Calum said while Acorna skipped ahead, holding Gill's hand, "exactly how wrapping me up in a bolt of polysilk is an integral part of your negotiating strategy. Am) Son't giggle!" he added sharply, almost tripping over some of the lower layers of robes.

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"Don't hike your skirt up, it's not decent," Rafik said. "If you'd take small steps, like a lady, you wouldn't trip all the time. Ah, Uncle Hafiz! The benevolence of your smile lights the garden more brightly than the summer sun."

"What joy can be sweeter than the company of beloved relatives," Hafiz replied, "beloved relatives and, er, um ..." He looked at Gill's flaming red beard and freckled skin. "... relatives and friend," he finished with an audible gulp. "I trust you have had time and privacy sufficient to confer with your family and your partner, dear nephew?"

"We accept your offer," Rafik said. "Transfer the registration of the ship's beacon and sell the shares for us, and ..." He nodded at Acorna, who was happily chattering to Gill about the new kinds of fractions she had learned, such as three-to-two and six-to-four.

"Excellent!" Now Uncle Hafiz was truly beaming. "I knew you'd be reasonable, dear boy. We're two of a kind, you and I. If only your cousin Tapha could do as well!"

Rafik looked slightly queasy at being compared to his cousin, his uncle's heir. "Where is Tapha, by the way?"

Hafiz's smile vanished. "I sent him to take over the southern half of the continent. Yukata Batsu has been running it long enough."

"And?"

"I don't know where the rest of him is," Hafiz said. "All Yukata Batsu sent back were his ears." He sighed. "Tapha never had what it takes. I should have known when I abducted his mother that she

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didn't have the brains to give me a •worthy successor. Yammer, yammer, yammer, all the time complaining at me that she could have had a career dancing topless at the Orbital Grill and Rendezvous Parlor. Her and her perky breasts. Yasmin, I told her, all the girls have perky breasts in zero-g, you were nothing special, you're lucky a good man took you away from all that. But would that woman listen?" Hafiz sighed and brightened up. "However, I'm not too old to try again. Now that I've found a woman with intelligence to match my own..." His eyes strayed to Acorna. "Don't you mind her holding hands with that dog of an unbeliever?"

"She's only a little girl," Rafik said stiffly.

"Not for much longer," Hafiz said. "They grow up faster than you think."

A sputtering sound escaped from behind Calum's layers of white veiling. Hafiz looked startled. "Your senior wife? She is unwell?"

"She suffers from nervous fits," Rafik said, grasping Calum's wrist and hauling him away

from Hafiz.

"A sad affliction," Hafiz said. "Meet me within the house when you have calmed your women, Rafik, and we will pledge faith to our agreement over the Three Books." He turned away, muttering, "Ugly, prone to fits, big feet, and what a hairy wrist! No wonder he is reluctant to give up the other one . . . but with his ship and his credits, he can easily buy another wife."

"And just what were you snickering about?" Rafik demanded in a whisper when Hafiz had passed back into the house.

"They grow up faster than you think," Calum quoted. "If he only knew how fast! Would he believe Acorna was a toddler when we found her less than two years ago?"

"Let's don't tell him," Rafik suggested. "This whole deal depends on mutual trust, and he'd be sure I was a thumping liar if I tried to tell him how fast Acorna grows. Besides, she's not going to be here long enough for him to find out."

"But its the truth!" Calum said.

"Truth," Rafik said, "has very little to do with verisimilitude."

Gill kept Acorna amused in the garden while Rafik and Calum went into the study to meet Hafiz. He was seated behind a gleaming, crescent-shaped desk with the usual consoles and controls, plus a few that Calum did not recognize, inlaid flush with the surface so as not to spoil the smooth lines of the desk. Incongruously stacked atop the modern equipment were two antique books, the kind with hard covers enclosing a stack of paper sheets, and an old-fashioned databox with only six sides.

"You admire my desk?" Uncle Hafiz said pleasantly to Calum. "Carved from a single piece of purpleheart . . . one of the last of the great stand of purpleheart trees on Tanqqe III."

"My wife prefers not to talk to other men," Rafik said sharply.

He'd rumbled lu, Calum thought in despair. He know,) I'm not a woman. Rafik and hid damn <math>\diamond</math>dly gam&f!

"Dear boy," Hafiz said, "surely within a family

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as close as ours, and soon to be united even more closely by the exchange of wives, even you Neo-Hadithians can drop some of these ridiculous . . . oh, all right, all right, I didn't mean to insult your . . . religion." He pronounced the last word with the faint distaste of someone directing the servants to remove whatever it was the cat had dragged in and failed to finish eating.

Rafik bridled, scowled, and gave what Calum thought an excellent imitation of a man on the verge of taking mortal insult.

"Your ship," Uncle Hafiz said, "is now registered as the Uhuru, originally of Kezdet."

"Why Kezdet?"

"That -was the original registration of the beacon you appropriated. It would have been extremely expensive to delete all traces of the beacon's history. I think it suffices that We can now

show an electronic trail of three transfers of ownership. Appropriate insignia have been applied to the body of the ship, along with some . . . ah . . . cosmetic changes."

Calum choked.

"Every rascal in the galaxy registers under Kezdet," Rafik protested. "They're a known cover for all sorts of thieves, desperadoes, con men, and cheats."

Uncle Hafiz's brows rose. "Dear boy! My own modest personal fleet has Kezdet registration."

"Exactly," muttered Calum, too low for Hafiz to hear him. He jabbed Rafik in the side with one veiled elbow, hoping to remind him of the other problem with using Kezdet as their port of registration.

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"And," Rafik said, "as it happens, I have had an ... unfortunate encounter with Kezdet patrols. One of those pesky matters of trespassing that can occur with the best of •will on both sides, but I am afraid they took it in a poor spirit." There was no way of knowing for sure, but it seemed a safe bet that the Guardians of the Peace were still unhappy about the patrol cruiser he, Calum, and Gill had crippled and marooned before taking off with that load of titanium.

"Then," Uncle Hafiz said smoothly, "you will have an excellent excuse for not returning to your port of registration, will you not? Now, your shares have been converted to ..." He named a sum in Federation credits that made Calum gasp through his veils.

Rafik actually managed to look disappointed. "Ah, well," he said sadly, "that would be after your discount, of course?"

"By no means," said Uncle Hafiz, "but I propose to take no more than twenty percent of the gross, which I assure you will barely cover my expenses in arranging . . . facilitation payments . . . to all the bureaucracies concerned."

"It was seventeen percent yesterday."

"Delay," said Uncle Hafiz, "increases the expense. How fortunate that you have come to a wise decision! It only remains to complete the transaction. If you will swear on the Three Books to honor our agreement, then call Acorna in and divorce her, I shall marry her immediately and you will be free to depart."

Rafik looked mournful. "If only it were that

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easy!" he said. "But I must warn you that the Hadith require a -waiting period of at least one sunset and dawn between a woman's divorce and remarriage."

"That is not in my understanding of the Hadith," Uncle Hafiz said sharply.

"It is a new revelation of Moulay Suheil," Rafik countered. "He had a dream in which the First Prophet, blessed be His Name, appeared and expressed his concern lest women, being weak in understanding and easily led, might be drawn into error by too much haste in the matter of divorces and remarrying. A divorced woman must spend one night in prayer, seeking the will of the First Prophet, before she may enter into any new alliance."

"Hmmpf," muttered Uncle Hafiz. "I would

scarcely describe the young rarity out there as being weak in understanding. I've never seen anyone catch on so fast to the idea of keeping a double set of accounts, one for the Federation and one for private purposes."

Calum choked and Rafik trod on his foot. This was no time to resume the argument about whether Hafiz was teaching Acorna suitable things!

"However," Rafik said, "to allay your anxieties, I will do better than swearing on the Three Books. I will swear on this copy of the Holy Hadith themselves, authenticated by Moulay Suheil, and most sacred to me and to all true believers." He drew a datahedron from his pocket and kissed it reverently before extending it in his cupped hands. Uncle Hafiz recoiled as if from a snake.

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"You swear on your Hadith," he said, "and I will make my oath on the Books of the Three Prophets. Thus each of us will be bound by that which one holds most sacred."

"An excellent idea," said Rafik.

Calum's attention wavered during the lengthy oath-taking which followed, most of -which was not performed in Basic Interlingua but in the language of Hafiz and Rafik's culture of origin. It sounded to him like a group of birds choking on something unpleasant, but it seemed to make sense. At one point they called for Acorna to be brought into the room; she stood quite still under her veils while more of the unfamiliar language spouted over her head. At the end Hafiz kissed the topmost of his Three Books, and Rafik pressed his lips to the datahedron again, and both men smiled as if in the satisfaction of a bargain concluded.

"With your permission. Uncle, I will now escort my former wife to the place set apart for her, that she may begin her vigil of prayer. I know you will not wish to delay the final ceremony," Rafik said.

"Since I myself am not a Neo-Hadithian," Hafiz said, "I see no need at all for this delay."

"I must report to her family that all has been handled decently and in good order," said Rafik. "It is a matter touching my honor. Uncle."

Hafiz muttered and grumbled but finally let them go, after receiving Rafik's assurances that Acorna's prescribed time of prayer need not interfere with her attending the wedding feast that

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night. "Only family," he promised. "Only ourselves and your partner."

Rafik looked surprised. "You will break bread with an unbeliever?"

"You consider him as family and entrust him with your honor in the persons of your wives," said Hafiz, looking as though he had just swallowed something very unpleasant. "In loving respect to you, my dear nephew, I can do no less."

"What," Calum demanded as soon as they were safely in the secluded rooms upstairs, "was all that about?"

"Well, you didn't want me to hand Acorna over to him then and there, did you? I had to come up with some reason to delay. Now that the credits and registration are in order and he's told me the passwords to access them, we can sneak out



tonight. Have to wait until after this blasted feast, though." Rafik frowned. "I wish I knew why he insists on having Gill there. He obviously didn't like the idea above half."

"Makes it convenient for us," Calum pointed out.

"That," said Rafik, "is what worries me."

Out of consideration for Rafik's supposedly strict religious views on the seclusion of women, Hafiz arranged that no servants should be present at the celebration feast that night.

"You see, dear boy," he said, gesturing at the spacious dining hall with its carved lattice-work screens and colorful silk-covered divans, "all is

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prepared. The table is, after all, adequately furnished with heating and chilling chambers to keep food at the proper temperature. What could be pleasanter than a simple dinner en famille? The employment of dozens of servants to carry trays and pour drinks is merely an outmoded tradition of conspicuous consumption, something which the Third Prophet enjoined us to abjure at all times. Do you not agree?"

Gill was glad that he, as an unbeliever, and Calum, as Rafik's senior wife, were not expected to reply to this statement. All he had to do was keep a straight face as Rafik praised the modesty and simplicity of Hafiz's arrangements . . . and try to keep his eyes from wandering over the incredibly lavish display before them.

A long, low table stretched between two rows of divans covered in emerald and crimson silk. Dishes covered the table from one end to the other: bowls of pilau, silver trays of sizzling-hot

pastries, sliced fruits arranged as an elaborate still life on a specially inset chilling tray, skewers of grilled lamb, dishes of yogurt with chopped mint, Kilumbemba shellfish fried in batter, crystallized rose petals and sugared goldenhearts. . . . Between the dishes stood tall tumblers frosted with ice, and a pitcher of some sparkling fruit drink rested in another cooling tray beside Hafiz's divan at the head of the table. The far wall of the dining hall appeared to be a cliff of moss-covered rock with a veil of water running down its surface and splashing into a recirculating stream at the bottom of the miniature cliff. From behind the carved lattices, a

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recording of Kitheran harp music provided a softly tinkling counterpoint to the sound of the falling -water.

"We shall even pour our own drinks," Hafiz said, gesturing toward the pitcher. "I have seen that as a good Neo-Hadithian you follow the First Prophet's words and abjure wine, rather than accepting the dispensations of the Second and Third Prophets. I myself usually enjoy a Kilumbemba beer with my dinner, but for tonight I -will share the iced madigadi juice prepared for my guests."

Rafik nodded, rather sadly. Actually, as both Calum and Gill well knew, he would have liked a mug of cold Kilumbemba beer, the other specialty of that planet, to wash down the fried shellfish.

"Don't even think about it," Calum muttered in his ear. "If I can wrap myself up like a white balloon to substantiate your conversion, you can drink fruit juice for one evening and like it."

"Your senior write is disturbed?" Hafiz

inquired. "Not another fit, I trust? "

Rafik tried to step on Calum's foot, but only succeeded in trampling the hem of his robe. "She is in excellent health, thank you, Uncle," he replied, "only inclined to chatter about trifles after the manner of women."

"Women who are not kept veiled and secluded," Hafiz pointed out rather acidly, "have more of a chance to develop Interesting topics of conversation—oh, all right, all right! I won't say another word against the revelations of Moulay Suheil."

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"We are returning to the pure traditions of our original faith," Rafik said stiffly.

"Then let us enjoy another tradition tonight," Hafiz said, "and drink from the same pitcher in token of perfect trust within the family." He made a show of pouring the iced madigadi juice into each of their cups, finishing with his own and taking a deep draught from it as proof of the drink's harmlessness. Rafik raised his own cup, but a sudden commotion outside the room surprised him into setting it down again. There was a babble of excited voices, then the high-pitched wail of a woman: an old, quavering voice.

"Aminah!" Hafiz sighed and stood up. "Tapha's old nurse. She treats each bit of news from the south as another installment in a vid-drama. I had best calm her. Forgive the interruption. Please, go on with your meal; I may be some time." He strode out of the room quickly, a frown between his brows.

Gill took a handful of the batter-fried shellfish and crunched them with enjoyment.

"Well, he did say to go on," he said when Rafik raised an eyebrow, "and even if the table does keep these things hot, it can't keep them crisp indefinitely." He took a deep breath and reached for his own cup. "Must say, I've never had them served quite so hot and spicy before."

"Any decent food tastes overspiced to you barbarians," Rafik said. "Acorna, what are you doing?" She kept pushing and pawing at her veils until they were a tangled mess around her face.

"Here, honey, let me fix that for you," Gill said.

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"Any reason why she shouldn't put her veils back for dinner, Rafik? It's not as if Hafiz is gonna see anything he hasn't seen before."

"Only that he may wonder why I do not permit my other wife to unveil," Rafik said with resignation. "I suppose I shall have to explain that she is so ugly, I fear the sight would put him off his food."

Calum kicked him under the table.

"That's odd," Gill said, feeling Acorna's forehead.

"Do you think she has a fever?"

"Her skin is cool enough. But look at her horn!"

Great drops of clear liquid were forming on the fluted sides of Acorna's horn. She mopped at them ineffectually with the end of her veil.

"Have a cool drink, sweetie, it'll make you feel

better," Gill suggested, holding her cup for her.

Acorna stared at it blankly for a moment, then took the cup from Gill and, instead of putting it to her mouth, dipped her horn into it.

"What the deuce?"

"She does that with the dirty bathwater, too. Acorna, sweetie-pie, do you think the juice is dirty? It's okay, that stuff floating in it is just madigadi pulp."

"Is not dirty," Acorna said firmly.

"Well, that's good—"

"Is baS." She dipped her head again, this time plunging her horn into Gill's cup. "Now is one hundred percent good," she informed him.

The three men looked at one another. "He

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made a great show of pouring all our drinks out of the same pitcher," Gill said.

"Why would he want to poison us? He thinks—I mean," Calum said, choosing his words carefully in case of unseen listeners, "we have agreed to all his wishes."

"Oh, it's just a foolish fancy of the kid's," Rafik said easily, but he rose to his feet as he did so and offered Acorna his cup and Calum's. "Nothing to worry about. Let's go on with the meal!" At the same time a subtle head shake warned both the other men not to take his words literally.

Acorna's horn broke out in drops of sweat again as she brought her face close to Rafik's cup. She dipped her horn into the juice for a moment,

then smiled in satisfaction.

"Ah—just a minute," Rafik said as she moved to repeat the treatment on Calum's cup. He put that one back on the table and offered Acorna the cup Hafiz had been drinking out of. Her horn showed no reaction.

"How did he do it?" Gill mouthed soundlessly.

"The drug must have been in the cups, not in the pitcher," Rafik replied in the merest thread of a whisper. Quickly he exchanged Calum's cup with Hafiz's, then sat and served himself a plate of rice and pilau. "Come on, wives," he said loudly and heartily, "let us feast and rejoice!" He piled Acorna's plate high with fruit and greens just as Hafiz rejoined them.

"I trust the news from the south is not bad, Uncle?" Rafik inquired.

Hafiz's thin lips twisted in an unpleasant gri-

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mace. "It could be worse," he said. "It could be better. Yukata Batsu has sent back the rest of Tapha. Alive," he added, almost as an after-thought. "Aminah cannot decide whether to bewail the loss of his ears or celebrate the return of her nursling."

"Felicitations on your son's safe return," said Gill. "And—er—I'm sorry about his ears."

Hafiz shrugged. "My surgeon can replace the ears. No great loss; the original ones stuck out too far anyway. As for Tapha himself..." Hafiz sighed. "No surgeon can fix what should have been between the ears. He, too, expected me to congratulate him

on his return, as if he did not realize that Batsu freed him as a gesture of contempt, to show how little he fears Tapha's attempts against him. He is as foolish as his mother was." He twirled a ball of sticky rice on two fingers, dipped it into the pilau, and downed the combination in a single gulp. "Eat, eat, my friends. I apologize for allowing this minor contretemps to interrupt our pleasant family dinner. Do try the madigadi juice before it loses its chill; as it warms, the subtleties of the flavor are lost to the air." He took another lengthy pull from the cup beside him.

"Indeed," said Rafik, following his uncle's example, "this particular juice has some subtle, lingering aftertaste that is unfamiliar to me."

"Almost bitter," Gill commented. "Good, though," he added, quickly taking a deep drink before Hafiz could become too alarmed.

Since none of them had any idea what drug Hafiz had put in the cups or how quickly it was

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supposed to act, they watched him for cues. Within fifteen minutes Hafiz had all but stopped eating, as if he had forgotten the food on his plate. His speech wandered and he began forgetting what he had said and repeating himself.

"Ever hear th' one about th' two racehorses, the Sufi dervish and the jinn?" He launched into a long complicated story which Gill suspected would have been extremely obscene if Hafiz had not kept losing the thread of his own narrative.

Rafik and Gill ignored their own food, leaned forward over the table and laughed as loudly as Hafiz did. Calum leaned back against the wall, an anonymous white bundle of veiling, and

produced a rattling snore. Acorna's eyes went from one man to the next, the pupils narrowing to slits until Gill surreptitiously squeezed her hand.

"Don't worry, sweets," he whispered under cover of Hafiz's raucous laughter, "it's just a game."

Finally Hafiz abandoned the Sufi dervish in midsentence and slumped forward into his rice. The other three waited tensely until his snores convinced them that he had lost consciousness.

"Okay, let's get out of here," Gill whispered, standing and swinging Acorna to his shoulder. Calum followed suit, but Rafik bent over his uncle's form for a moment, fumbling in his stained silk robes.

"Come on, Rafik!"

Finally Rafik, too, stood, showing them a

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holographic card that flashed a complex three-dimensional image of interlaced knots.

"Uncle's skimmer key and port pass," he said happily. "Or -were you planning to walk to the port?"

Hey, Smirnoff?" Ed Minkus called to his office mate in the Kezdet Security office.

"What?" Des Smirnoff replied without real interest, for he was scrolling through some routine ID checks as fast as he could and had to keep his eye on the screen, just



in case something interesting turned up in the latest haul of dockside indigents.

"Gotta match on an oooooold friend."

"Who?" Smirnoff was still not dividing his attention.

"Sauvignon," and he immediately had Smirnoff's complete attention.

"I told you then," and Smirnoff savagely stabbed the hold key, "that perp wasn't dead. He may have had to lie low a while. . . . Send the item over here." He drummed his fingers for the few seconds it took for Ed to transfer the file to his screen. "Registered as the Uhuru now? Couldn't

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change the origin, could he? So the ship's still Kezdetian."

"I can't imagine a clever perp like Sauvignon ever returning ..."

"Voluntarily, at least," Ed interjected with a sly grin.

". . . into our own dear jurisdiction. But you ..."

"Never know, do you?" Ed had a habit of finishing Smirnoff's sentences for him.

"I can," and Smirnoff's thick fingers stabbed each key as he typed in a command, "make sure that we, and our dearest nearest neighbors in space, are aware that the Uhuru is of great interest

to us here in Kezdet."

He gave the final number of the code sequence such an extra pound that Ed flinched. Keyboards suffered frequent malfunctions at Smirnoff's station, to the point where both Supply and Accounting now required explanations. They always got the same one: "Get a new supplier, these boards are made of inferior materials or they'd stand up under normal usage."

Since most of such equipment was made in the sweat-levels (and quite possibly out of inferior grade plastics), the ones who suffered were the unfortunates who eked out a bare living anyhow. Who cared how many got fired and replaced? There were always enough eager youngsters with nimble fingers to take over.

Having instituted a program that would apprise the office of Lieutenant Des Smirnoff the instant the beacon was scanned in any of the nearby systems which cooperated, however

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unwillingly, with Kezdet Guardians of the Peace (a piece of this and a piece of that was what the neighbors said), the proximity of the Uhuru would now send off bells, whistles, and sirens.

"So the report of Sauvignon's death is greatly exaggerated," Des said, grinning with evil anticipation of future revenge. "How delightful."

"Sauvignon may be dead," Ed suggested. "The new reg lists three names, and none of them are Sauvignon's."

"Whose are they?"

"Rafik Nadezda, Declan Giloglie, and Calum Baird," Ed replied.

"What?" Smirnoff erupted from his chair like a cork from a bottle of fizzy. "Say again?"

Ed obeyed, and suddenly the names rang the same bell in his head. "Them?"

Smirnoff punched one big fist into the palm of his other hand, jumping about the office in what had to be some sort of a victory gig, waving his arms and hollering in pure, undiluted, spiteful joy.

"Is everything all right?" and their junior assistant, a female they had to employ to keep the Sexist Faction satisfied, though Mercy Kendoro's role in their table of organization began and ended with taking their messages and supplying them with quik-sober. On seeing Smirnoff's unusual antics she had hoped that one, he'd been poisoned, or two, was having a fatal heart attack or convulsion. Sometimes, not even getting out of the barrios of Kezdet made up for the humiliation she suffered at their hands.

"I got 'em. I got all of 'em," Smirnoff was

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chanting as he bounced from one large boot to the other. "Clo^e the Soar!" he roared when he saw Mercy's head peering in at them. Her reflexes were excellent and he missed her when his big boot slammed the door shut.

"Weren't Nadezda, Giloglie, and Baird those miners who marooned us on an asteroid before they made off with a fortune in titanium?"

"They were, they are, and they will be ours,"

Des Smirnoff said, rubbing his hands together. The expression of great gleeful anticipation intensified on his face. His thick upper lip curled: a sight that made many timorous souls tremble in fear. He was not a man to cross and he had sworn vengeance on these three by all that he held sacred. Instead of prayers, Smirnoff had a nightly litany of those who had crossed his path and on whom he was sworn to take revenge. This not only kept the names alive, but topped up his capacity for vengeance, certain in his own little mind that he would one day cross paths with every one of those in his bad books. This mining crew would pay dearly for the indignity and suffering he had endured at their hands. He was still paying off his share of the repairs to the patrol cruiser. Kezdet Guardians of the Peace were not a forgiving authority and you ponied up out of your own credits for any damage above normal wear and tear. And for rescue and salvage.

In point of fact, he hadn't actually paid out of his own private account, but out of the public one into which he had dribbled the credits required for

the monthly payments from his little side business of protection monies. But he had other plans for that credit and meant to take it out of the miners' hides if he ever had the chance.

"So Sauvignons off the hook?"

"Nonsense." Des Smirnoff swiped the racks of data cubes off their rack. "They've got the ship, they've got the fines accrued against it." The thought had him settling at his keyboard again while he accessed those fines and chuckled at the amount of interest that had accrued since Sauvignon's disappearance.

"You'll own the ship, too, at that rate," Ed said, sniffing enviously. He tried not to show it, but he

did really, honestly, deeply, sincerely feel that Des kept more than his fair share of the covert rewards of their partnership. He was waiting for the day when he found some little inconsistency in Smirnoff's duties that he could use as a handle to bargain for a larger percentage.

"What'd I do with a crappy old tub like Sauvignon cruised? It was all but falling apart as it was. Amazing he survived. I was sure we'd penetrated the life-support system with that last bolt we fired at him."

"Yeah," and Ed scratched his head, "sure looked like a direct hit, if I remember correctly."

"You better remember my aim is always accurate."

"Odd though that the ship survived, isn't it?"

Des Smirnoff held up one hand, his big, blood-shot brown eyes -widening.

"Wait a nano ..."

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"It didn't survive," Ed said. "Those miners have switched beacons."

"Do we have their IDs?" But he didn't wait for an answer, his big fingers slamming down the keys as he completed his own search. Then he flipped the offending keyboard up, pulling it out of the desk socket and spinning it across the room,

where it crashed and split against the far wall.  
"We don't. We should. They were MME, weren't they?"

"MME's been absorbed by Amalgamated, I heard," Ed replied, disguising his sigh as he opened the corn unit to Mercy Kendoro. "Bring in a replacement keyboard. Now."

When Mercy entered, she handed the keyboard to Ed rather than approach Smirnoff, who had his hands tucked up under his arms and was clearly seething over whatever had caused him to break the latest keyboard.

"Rack up those cubes, too, while you're in here. This office must be kept neat and up to standard at all times," Des said and smiled anew as he saw the trembling assistant bend to her task.

Later that day, Mercy Kendoro took her midday meal break at a workers' canteen near the docks, where the balding owner teased her affectionately about moving into the tech classes and forgetting her origins.

"That's right, Ghopal," Mercy replied as always, "if I'd remembered how terrible your stew is, there's no way I'd be eating here! What did you

put in it this morning, dead rats? At least three of them, I'd guess; I've never seen this much meat in it before."

Ghopal took the teasing in good part and personally cleared away Mercy's bowl when she had finished eating. Later, when the midday rush had petered out, he put in a call to Aaaxterminators, Inc. "We've found three dead rats in various spots too near the kitchens for my liking. If you'll send out a man I'll give him a list of the specific locations so he can find where the vermin are hiding and clear them out. And—as usual, no need to

trouble the Public Health office with the matter. Eh? After all, I'm dealing with it promptly, like a good citizen."

Ed Minkus came across that transcript when reviewing the day's tapes of private calls from citizens in whom Security took an interest.

"Hey, Des," he called, "Time to pay a little semi-official visit to Ghopal. He's having problems with vermin again, and he'd probably be grateful not to have the matter called to the attention of Public Health. About fifteen percent grateful, I estimate."

"Small-time," Des grunted. "If I catch those miners—and I will—we won't need to bother shaking down dockside bistros any more."

But by then the representative of Aaxterminators, Inc. had called at the back door of Ghopal's kitchen and had gone away with the note Ghopal handed him, promising to take care of the rat problem.

On his way back to the office, the Aaxterminators

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man stopped at a kiosk and bought a cluster of happy-sticks, paying in real paper credits from an impressive wad he kept in his inner coverall pocket. He flirted outrageously with the girl who sold him the happy-sticks, which might have explained why she seemed a bit flustered and took longer than usual to give him his change.

That evening, as always, Delszaki Li's personal assistant went out to the same kiosk to buy a flimsy of the racing form sheets for the next day. He and the kiosk girl laughed over the old man's refusal to subscribe to the racing news via personal data terminal and agreed, as they always did, that if a nice old man was embarrassed by his fascination with this form of gambling and thought that buying flimsies with hard credits would preserve his anonymity, there was no need to disturb his illusions. The folded flimsy sheet Pal Kendoro took back to the Li mansion was thicker than usual. After he had unfolded it and read the contents of the inner page, he dissolved that page in water, poured the water down the drain, and requested an immediate interview with his employer.

"Sauvignons ship has been reported in transit, sir," he said, standing as straight as a military attache before the old man in the specially equipped hover-chair. A wasting neuromuscular disease had rendered Delszaki Li's legs and right arm all but useless, but the intelligence in those piercing black eyes was as keen as ever, and with one hand and voice commands he had remained in charge of the Li financial empire for fifteen years

sir,

after enemies had predicted his speedy demise. Pal Kendoro was proud to serve as Li's arms, legs, and eyes outside the mansion.

"And Sauvignon?"

"I don't know. There is still a party of three aboard the ship, but the names are not those of our people. It is now registered to Baird, Giloglie, and Nadezda," Pal recited from memory.

"Would have been most unwise for Sauvignon



and party to retain same names," Li pointed out.  
"Do you think they attempt to make contact with us again?"

"Unlikely. This information came from a Guardians' office."

Delszaki Li's black eyes snapped fire. "Then is most urgent to find them before Guardians do. Must be you who goes. Pal. Wish I could keep you here, but who else would be believed as doing errand for me and at same time reestablish contact with Sauvignon?"

Pal nodded agreement. Most of the members of the league were from the underclass, with no visible means of going off-planet, no obvious reason to go, and no off-planet passes. The few, such as Pal, who had risen through the tech schools, were the only ones who could travel freely without inconvenient questions being asked. But he didn't like leaving Delszaki Li with only his regular servants, at least half of whom were secretly in the pay of Kezdet Guardians of the Peace—and secure in the belief that their second source of income was a secret.

"If I might make a suggestion, sir, you will

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need a personal assistant while I'm gone. My sister might be able to oblige."

"Mercy?"

"No! She's too useful where she is. My older sister, Judit; I don't think you've ever met her.

She's brilliant. Finished Kezdet tech schools at sixteen and scored highly enough on the final exams to win a scholarship to study off-planet. She's working in the psych section at Amalgamated's space base."

"Would be willing to leave this fine job?"

"Like a shot, sir. She hates the place, was only working there for the money to put Mercy and me through school so we, too, could escape the barrios. It should be safe enough for her to return to Kezdet. Due to leaving so early, she's never been . . . active," Pal said delicately.

"And therefore is unknown to the Guardians' offices, except as sister to girl who works as their assistant." Li nodded his satisfaction. "Could hardly have a better guarantor." Li chuckled quietly. "Is good, Kendoro. Send word to sister, but do not wait for her arrival. I shall manage well enough for few days, and Sauvignon may need help."

"If it is Sauvignon," Pal said under his breath, but the old man heard.

"And if is not Sauvignon, then maybe ship in hands of those who kill our friends. In which case ..."

"Terrorism is against the principles of the league, sir. Despite -what they say about us in the newscasts."

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"Is extermination of rats," Li snapped. "Is not terrorism."

So the chain of information from the Guardians' office to the Li mansion ended as it had begun, with a discussion of dead rats.

"I want that boy," Hafiz told his trusted lieutenant, Samaddin.

"With respect, patron, I thought it was a girl."

"What? Oh—the curiosity. Yes, well, of course I want her, too. But I want young Rafik more. The son of a camel and a whore outsmarted me!"

"With all respect, patron!" Samaddin bowed even lower. "Forgive me, but the patron would not wish, later, to recall that he had spoken of his sister in such terms."

"Family!" Hafiz said in disgust. "When they double-cross you, you can't even curse them properly. Get me that sheep-buggering boy, Samaddin."

"Consider it done," Samaddin promised. "Er—you want him with his balls or without them?"

"You idiot! You misbegotten son of a jinn's meeting with a jackass, may the grave of your maternal grandmother be defiled by the dung of ten thousand syphilitic she-camels!" Hafiz indulged the bad temper resulting from a major drug hangover and the loss of his prized unicorn by abusing Samaddin for several minutes, while his lieutenant's expressionless face grew steadily closer to purple than its normal creamy tan. Finally Hafiz calmed down enough to explain that

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he wanted Rafik back alive and unharmed, and especially with his generative capacities intact.

"He'll pay for what he did to me, never fear. But after he works off his debt, I've got plans for

the boy. Do you know how long it's been since anybody double-crossed me, rather than the other way round, Samaddin? He's got the brains and the guts to take over after me, and I want him to have the balls to sire more sons, too. I'm going to adopt him and name him my heir. Well? What are you staring at? Perfectly normal practice—good families, no son to carry on, bring in a young relative."

"The patron has a son," Samaddin murmured.

"Not," said Hafiz grimly, "for long. Not after the way he screwed up the southern operation. Soon as his new ears are fixed, I'm sending him back to do the job right this time."

"Patron! This time Yukata Batsu will kill him!"

"Sink or swim," Hafiz said with a benign smile, "sink or swim." He considered for a moment. "Better not send him until you've got Rafik safely back here, though. The family is short of young males at the moment. Tapha is, I suppose, better than nothing."

"Waste not, want not," Samaddin said helpfully.

In the curtained room where Tapha lay with his head wrapped in bandages, old Aminah whispered with the servant girl she'd sent to dust the lattice-work outside Hafiz's office. She raised her hands

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and eyes to heaven in horror when she heard Hafiz's plans for his own son.

"What shall we do?" she wailed. "If he goes back to the south, that fiend Yukata Batsu will surely kill him. And if he stays here, that other fiend, his father, will kill him. We must smuggle

him away as soon as he has healed from surgery. There must be some place where he can hide."

Aminah's wailing awakened Tapha, and he struggled to sit up in his bed. "No, Aminah. I will not hide."

"Tapha, nursling! You heard me?" Aminah fluttered to his side.

"Yukata Batsu took my outer ears, not the brain which hears and understands," Tapha said sourly, "and a deaf beggar would have been awakened by thy wailing, old woman. Now tell me all that you know?."

When Aminah had poured out her story, Tapha lay back on his pillows and considered. His face was somewhat paler than it had been, but that might have been from the exhaustion of sitting up.

"I will not hide," he declared again. "It is unbefitting a man of my lineage. Besides, there is no place where my beloved father, may dogs defile his name and grave, could not find me if he wished. There is only one thing to do." He smiled sweetly at Aminah. "You will tell my beloved father that I am not recovering from the restorative surgery, that it is feared I will lose my life to an infectious fever brought back from the southern marshes."

"But, my little love, you grow stronger with

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every hour! You have no fever; I, -who have always nursed you, should know."

"Try not to be more stupid than you were made, Ammah," Tapha said. "Since when is it nec-

essary to declare to my father the exact truth of what passes in these rooms? Or will you no longer protect me as you did when I was your nursling in truth, and you lied to deflect the wrath of my father over minor escapades?"

Aminah sighed. She had lied for Tapha too many times to stop now.

"But the deception must soon be discovered, my darling," she pointed out. "You cannot pretend to lie abed with the marsh fever forever."

"No. But while my father is staying well away from these rooms for fear of the infection, I can get off-planet. I do not think he will kill you when he discovers the deception," Tapha added after a moment's thought. "He may not even beat you very badly, for you are old and weak, and it is shame to harm one's servants."

"Dear Tapha," Aminah said, "don't worry about me. My life is as nothing compared to a single hair of your head."

Tapha had no quarrel with this assessment.

"And so you will hide after all?"

"By no means." Tapha smiled. "By no means. Running away and hiding offers only a temporary safety. There is only one way to make sure that my position as my father's heir remains unchallenged, and that he treasures my life as a loving father ought. I shall simply have to find my cousin Rafik," he said, "before Samaddin does."

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The Uhuru was unloading a collection of miscellaneous minerals on Theloi when Calum was approached by a courteous stranger.

"I could not help overhearing your discussions with Kyrie Pasantonopolous," he said. "Allow me to introduce myself— Ioannis Georghios, local representative for ... a number of businesses. I had the impression that your dealings with the Pasantonopolous family had been less than satisfactory? Perhaps you would allow me to inspect your cargo. I might be able to make you a better offer."

"I doubt it," Calum said sourly. "It's the mineral resources around Theloi that were unsatisfactory. We had to go all the way out to the fourth asteroid belt to find anything worth mining, and then all we recovered from the ferrous regolith was gold and platinum. Hardly worth the cost of the journey—"

He stopped abruptly as Rafik stepped on his foot and interrupted him. "But, of course, the value of anything depends on how much the buyer desires it and how little the seller cares for it," he continued smoothly. "Perhaps one of the businesses you represent, Kyrie Georghios, would find some slight use for our trivial and insignificant cargo. Don't run down our payload in front of a purchaser," he added to Calum out of the corner of his mouth as Georghios followed Gill to inspect the samples they had shown the Pasantonopolous concern.

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"And just "what -were you doing?" Calum demanded indignantly.

"Being polite," Rafik said. "It's a different thing altogether. I think your bargaining instincts have

been dulled by too many safe years under contract to MME. You'd better let me do the talking from now on."

"He wants to take samples for his own office to test, and we're invited to dine with him tonight to discuss an asteroid he wants us to explore," Gill said, joining them. "He hinted it might be a good source of rhenium. I suppose you think my bargaining instincts are atrophied, too, Rafik? "

"My dear Gill," Rafik said amiably, "you never had any talent for bargaining in the first place. We would do better to hand over the dealing to Acorna, who, at least, has a flair for numbers."

"Better if she's not seen too much," Calum said. "She'll have to stay on board the Uhuru tonight."

The other two agreed. Acorna had grown so fast that she could now pass for a short man, and in miners' coveralls and with a bulky cap concealing her silver hair and nascent horn, she could just get away with passing through the bazaars of Theloi •without attracting too much attention. But they doubted her ability to pass for human through a prolonged evening of bargaining and formal dining.

"Better," Rafik said, "if all three of you stay on board. Then you can't put your foot in your mouth again, Calum."

"Calum stays with Acorna, I go with you," Gill decided after a moment's consideration. "We don't

know this Georghios, and I don't think any of us should be going off alone with strangers at present. We've annoyed too many people recently."

"He may not be willing to tell a loudmouth like you about the rhenium asteroid," Rafik warned.



"No," said Gill cheerfully, "but he won't bop me over the head in a dark alley, either."

"You're paranoid," said Rafik, but in the end it was he who recognized the trap Georghios had laid for them.

"He wants all four of us to dine with him," he reported after a telecom conversation with Georghios. "Says he prefers to know that all partners are in agreement before committing to a possibly hazardous venture like this ... it seems the rhenium asteroid is closer to Theloi's sun than we usually work, and we'll need extra radiation shielding as well as protection from solar flares."

"Partners? Well, that lets Acorna out, anyway."

"He specifically requested all of us," Rafik said, frowning. "Hinted that if we didn't all show up, there'd be no deal. Now who does that remind you of?"

"Sounds like Hafiz," Gill said, nodding. "In which case we'd better take Acorna along to check for poison."

"No," Rafik said slowly, "in which case we'd better leave now. I'll accept his invitation—that will give us the afternoon to unload our payload, get what we can out of the Pasantonopolous family, and take off for Kezdet."

"We don't dare go to Kezdet," Calum pointed out.

Rafik smiled. "All your survival instincts have atrophied. I knew it. Kezdet makes as good an official flight plan as any, don't you think? We haven't decided where to go next, and I wouldn't want to accidentally file a plan for someplace near where we're actually going."

What they were able to get from the Pasantonopolous concern for their gold and platinum barely paid their expenses. They had to stop at the first system with any mineral resources at all. That was Greifen, where the planetary government was building a series of orbiting space stations for zero-g manufacturing and could use all the pure iron the Uhuru could refine and send back into low planetary orbit by drone. The profit per load was not much, since Greifen was only willing to buy space-mined iron as long as the cost was less than that of lifting their own planetary iron into orbit. But it was steady work, and while the mag drive shipped buckets of iron back, they slowly accumulated a payload of more valuable metals. They were almost ready to look for a buyer on Greifen when Calum, who had been amusing himself during long refining processes by breaking the security codes on bureaucratic messages from Greifen, raised the alarm.

"I don't think we'd better try to sell this stuff on Greifen," he told Rafik when the other two miners checked the status of the latest processes. "In fact, I think we'd better leave—now—and sell it someplace far, far away."

"Why? Getting bored? Another hundred tons of

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iron and we should have accumulated enough rhodium and titanium to make the trip seriously profitable."

"Listen to this." Calum flicked a switch and the corn unit replayed the results of his last few hours'

eavesdropping on official Greifen business.

"Somebody has landed with a claim against the Uhuru for debts and damages incurred on Theloi."

"We didn't ()o any damage on Theloi," Gill said indignantly. "We didn't have time!"

"Would you like to explain that to a court that's been thoroughly bribed by Rafik's Uncle Hafiz?" Calum asked. "He must be really mad at us. I didn't think he'd follow us out of Theloi."

"He didn't," said Rafik, examining the flimsy of the transmissions Calum had decoded. "At least . . . this does not have the flavor of my uncle's work. He prefers to avoid the courts. And look at the name of the supposed creditor. That's not a Theloian name."

"Farkas Hamisen," Gill read over Rafik's shoulder.

"Farkas," Rafik said, "means 'wolf in the Kezdet dialect. ... I think maybe it was not such a bright idea after all, to file a flight plan for Kezdet. That must be how they caught on to us."

"They'd have no reason to go after this ship," Gill protested. "Officially we're not the Khedive anymore. We're the Uhuru. We've even got the beacon to prove it."

Rafik shrugged. "Do you really want to stick around and find out what they've got against us?"

"No way," Calum and Gill said in unison.

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They agreed to forget about their credits from Greifen for the last drone loads of iron. As for the

payload, as Rafik pointed out, any number of systems would be happy to get supplies of titanium. Nered, for instance, was a high-tech and highly militarized planet suffering from a severe shortage of mineral resources. . . .

"The trouble with selling to Nered," Gill pointed out gloomily after they had reached that planet and concluded their transaction, "is that there's nothing in this system for us to mine. We've got an empty ship ..."

"And a great many Federation credits," Rafik said. "They really wanted that titanium."

"Yeah, but these people are military mad. I bet there's nothing to buy here except paramilitary gear and espionage gadgets."

"We'll spend it elsewhere," Rafik said. "Most of it. Tonight, let's celebrate solvency by taking Acorna out to dinner in the best restaurant on Nered."

"Oh, boy," Calum said, "I can hardly wait to check out Nered haute cuisine. What's the main course, bandoleers in hot pepper sauce? With gingered grenades for afters?"

"She can't go dressed like that," Gill announced, gesturing in her direction.

Over the course of the past year, Acorna had shot up in height until even Gill's coveralls were short on her. Inside the ship she preferred to relax •without the binding, too-small clothing. Calum and Rafik turned and stared now at Acorna,

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where she rested in a net, happily perusing a vid on carbonyl reduction techniques for nonferrous metals. Her silvery curls had grown into a long mane that tumbled fetchingly over her forehead

and tapered down her spine. Her lower parts -were covered in fine white fur. She was taller than Gill and as flat-chested as a child, with nothing of an incipient mammary development visible.

"I wonder how old she is?" Calum speculated in a low voice, so as not to attract Acorna's attention.

"Chronologically," Rafik said, "probably about three. It's been two years since we found her. Physiologically, I'd guess around sixteen. Evidently her species matures quickly, but I don't think she's come to her full growth yet; look at the size of her wrist and ankle bones relative to her height."

"Six feet six and counting," Calum muttered.

And that would shortly pose a serious problem. The Khedive had been designed for three small-to-average-size miners. Gill's broad shoulders and excess height had put a strain on the system; sharing the quarters with a fourth passenger had necessitated some fancy reshuffling of the interior arrangements; fitting a seven-foot-tall unicorn into the small confines of the mining ship was virtually impossible.

Acorna looked up from her vid. "Calum," she said, "could you explain, please, how this sodium hydroxide reduction process forms liquid  $TiCl^+$ ?"

"Umm, that's a late stage," Calum said. He bent to draw a quick diagram on the vid screen next to

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the explanatory text and pictures. "See, you have to pump dilute  $HCl$  into the electrolysis cell ..."

"They should have said so explicitly," Acorna complained. Her language use had asymptotically approached standard Basic in the last year; only a slight formality in her speech, and a faintly nasal inflection, gave any suggestion that she -was not a native speaker of the galactic interlingua.

"And developmentally," Rafik murmured, watching Calum and Acorna threshing out the details of electrolytic metals separation, "she's four going on twenty-four."

"Yeah," Gill agreed. "She knows almost as much as we do about mining, metallurgy, and navigation of small spacecraft, but she doesn't know anything about, well, you know ..."

"No, I don't know," Rafik said, watching Gill's face turn as red as his beard.

"You know. Girl stuff."

"You think it's time for one of us to sit her down and have a little talk about the human reproductive system? Frankly, I don't see the point," said Rafik, fighting his own embarrassment at the idea. "For all we know, her race may reproduce by—by pollinating flowers with their horns."

"That fur doesn't cover everything," Gill said, "and anyway, I bathed her as often as you did last year. Anatomically, she's feminine." He looked doubtfully at Acorna's long, slender body. "A flat-chested female, but female," he amended. "And she can't go on lounging around in nothing but her long hair and white fur."

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"Why not? Maybe her race doesn't have a nudity taboo."

"Well, mine does," Gill shouted, "and I'm not having a half-naked teenage girl parading around this ship!"

Acorna looked up. "Where?"

She never found out why all three men exploded in laughter.

They still had the yards of white polysilk that Rafik had bought at the Mali Bazaar to clothe his "wives" in approved Neo-Hadithian style. Gill hacked off a length of fabric, Calum came up with some clip fasteners, and together they wrapped the material around Acorna's waist and threw a fold of it over her shoulders. A second length of fabric provided a loosely wrapped turban which disguised her horn, . . . well, sort of.

"This is not comfortable," she complained.

"Honey, we're not dressmakers. You can't go out to a nice restaurant in my old coveralls. You'd better buy her some clothes while we're here," Gill said to Rafik.

"You buy the clothes, you're the one who cares," Rafik retorted, "and you'll be lucky to find anything but army fatigues on this planet."

Rafik had maligned the shopping resources of Nered unfairly. Both men and women at the Evening Star restaurant were dressed like peacocks: the men elegant in formal gray-and-silver evening wear, the -women a colorful garden of fashions and styles from across the galaxy, all

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interpreted in brilliant jewel-toned silks and stiff rustling retro-satins. In such a gaudy gathering

the miners hoped that they would escape notice. Their own formal wear was respectable, but not comparable to the silver-flashed suits currently in vogue on Nered, and Acorna, with neither jewels nor colorful silks to adorn her, should have looked quite dowdy next to the fashionable upper class of Nered. Instead her appearance had quite the opposite effect. Her height and slenderness, the tumble of silvery curls falling down from her improvised turban, and the simplicity of her white polysilk sari made her stand out in the crowd like a lily in a bed of peonies. Heads turned as they were shown to their table, and Rafik could tell from the swift calculation in the mai'tre d'hotel's eyes that they were being given a far more prominent table than the one originally intended for four working miners from off-planet. Bad luck, that, but there was no sense in making a fuss over it now; that would only draw more attention their way. They would simply have to make it through dinner as best they could, and he would watch like a hawk to make sure Acorna's turban didn't fall off. He also looked around to see if any one else was wearing a turban, or was as slender as Acorna. You never knew in an interstellar area what sort of oddities you'd encounter. Returning Acorna to her own people would solve a great many problems!

He was so intent on shielding Acorna from notice that the real danger, when it did come, took him completely by surprise. A tense young man in

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dark brown military fatigues thrust his way into the restaurant, knocked down a waiter carrying a tray of soup bowls, and took advantage of the confusion to level three bursts of laser fire at Rafik before making his escape.

Gill knocked over his own chair in his haste to get to Rafik, but Acorna was faster, kneeling over



an ominously still figure. The shock of the attack sent isolated nightmare images flitting through Gill's brain. Rafik wasn't moving; he should have been screaming in pain—half his face was burned. Acorna fumbled at her turban. Shouldn't let her do that. She had to stay covered. Doctor! They needed a doctor! Some idiot was babbling about catching the assassin. Who cared about that? Rafik was all that mattered.

Acorna bent over Rafik, her horn exposed now, her eyes dark pools -with the pupils narrowed to virtually invisible silver slits. She—nuzzled—at him with her horn. It was heart-breaking to watch; a child mourning a parent. Gill thought numbly that he should take her away. Let her grieve in private. Hide her before too many people noticed the horn. But moving to Rafik's side felt like swimming through heavy water, as though time itself had slowed around them, and when he reached Acorna and Rafik, Calum gripped his shoulder and held him back.

"Wait," he said. "She can purify -water and air, and detect poison. Maybe she can heal laser wounds."

Even as they watched, the charred flesh on Rafik's face was replaced by smooth new skin

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wherever Acorna's horn brushed it. She lingered for a moment -with her horn just over his heart, as though urging his shocked system to continue breathing and circulating. Then he stirred and opened his eyes and said irritably:

"What in the name of ten thousand syphilitic she-devils happened?"

Calum and Gill tried to tell him at once. Then those at the tables nearest them came over, now

that it seemed safe to approach, to add their impression of the assassination attack. Those further away, of course, were demanding to know what had happened. When they saw no visible damage but overturned chairs and food spilled on the floor, they turned back to their own tables to resume their interrupted meal. Calum managed to put the turban on the back of Acorna's head, and Rafik pulled it over her horn. Then both he and Gill had to explain to those nearest that no, Rafik had not been hit. No, the laser hadn't even touched him.

Eventually all agreed that an assassin had fired at Rafik and that the young lady had fortunately reacted quickly enough to save him by knocking him out of his chair, so that he was not even singed by a near miss. A small vociferous group wanted to discuss their idea that the would-be assassin had looked remarkably like Rafik. Gill and Calum let the story of the miraculous near miss stand and discouraged plans to hunt down Rafik's attacker who had eluded his pursuer; all they wanted was to get back to the Uhuru at once. They had attracted far too much attention this evening!

] elszaki Li and Judit Kendoro were finishing their evening meal when the dining room corn unit beeped in the rising arpeggio that meant a scrambled message had been received.

"That will be Pal," Li said. He depressed a button on the left arm of his hover-chair and the sequence of jagged, screeching noises that constituted the scrambled message became audible. After a moment of silence, the corn unit's decoding module whirred busily and the original message was heard, Pal's voice somewhat distorted and metallic due to the limitations of the coding process.

"There are four crew, not three, presently

using the Uhuru. None of them is Sauvignon. They have enemies; one of the crew was the target of an assassination attempt this evening in a fashionable restaurant. The consensus of opinion is that the assassin missed his target, but I was

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sitting close by in an attempt to listen in on their conversation and I believe what actually happened was quite different—and very interesting. The miner Rafik was actually struck by three bolts of laser fire; I saw the burns myself. I also saw them healed with astonishing speed by the fourth crew member. This person appears to be a very tall young woman with slightly deformed fingers and a small ..." Pal's voice paused for a moment and only the faint background noise introduced by scrambling and decoding was audible. "Sir, you're not going to believe this, but she seems to have a small horn in the middle of her forehead. And when she nuzzled the man Rafik with this horn, his burns healed and he was conscious within seconds. Sir, I saw this with my own eyes; I'm not making it up or repeating gossip." There was another pause. "These people have no discernible connection with our friends. But they are very interesting. I have decided to maintain contact with them until you send further instructions."

"A ki-lin!" Delszaki exclaimed as the message ended. He turned exultantly to Judit, who had been sitting as still as stone ever since Pal had mentioned the horn. "My dear, we have been granted a portent of inestimable value. This strange girl may be solution to Kezdets tragedy ... or she may only portend coming of solution. We must bring her here!"

"Acorna," Judit said. "They called her

Acorna. ... I thought they had all died; their ship's beacon was found transmitting from a crash site. I

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cried for them then, those three nice men and the little girl. Acorna." There were tears standing in her eyes now.

"You knew of a ki-lin and did not tell me?"

"Mr. Li, I don't even know what a ki-lin is! And I thought she was dead. And it was my fault, because I helped them get away. . . . They wanted to cut off her horn, you see ..."

"You must tell me all this story," Delszaki Li said. "But first, you must understand the importance of the ki-lin and why I need her here."

"Ki-lin ... is that Chinese for 'unicorn'?"

Li nodded. "But our beliefs are somewhat different from your Western tales about the unicorn. Your people have stories of trapping and killing unicorns. No Chinese -would ever kill a ki-lin, or even hunt one. The ki-lin belongs to Buddha; she eats no animal flesh and will not even tread upon an insect. We would not dream of trapping the ki-lin as a gift to a ruler; rather, the wise and beneficent ruler hopes that his rule may be blessed by the arrival of a ki-lin, who, if she comes to his court, is received as one sovereign visiting another. The appearance of a ki-lin among humans is an omen of a great change for the better or of the birth of a great ruler."

"And you yourself believe this?"

Delszaki Li cackled at the expression on Judit's face. "Let us say I do not ^ubelieve it. How could I? I am scientist first, man of business only from necessity. No ki-lin has ever appeared in

recorded history, so there is no evidence to prove or disprove the legends. But I am also man, not

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only scientist, and so I hope. I hope that this ki-iin will presage the change which Kezdet—and Kezdet's children—so desperately need. And so I shall instruct Pal to make these miners an offer they cannot refuse. They will, in fact, be quite useful for one of my other projects. And while we wait for their arrival, you shall tell me what you know of this Acorna and her friends, and we shall search the Net for more information about them. Never go into a bargaining session unprepared, Judit—even if you are bargaining -with a ki-Un!"

It was Acorna -who suggested they measure her to know how long the legs of pants and sleeves of shirts should be, though why she needed to cover herself, when her fur kept her quite comfortable, she couldn't understand.

"Didn't you like what the women were wearing in the restaurant last night?" Rafik asked. "I saw you looking around like your eyes would pop."

"Her eyes don't pop," Gill said loyally, and then added, "but your pupils were out to the edges of your eyeballs."

A sort of dreamy expression crossed Acorna's face briefly and she gave a resigned sigh. "None of those things would last a minute crawling down a conduit or in an EVA suit."

"That's another thing we have to get for you," Calum said, for he had -worried about that lack. She could do with some hands-on mining experience to round out her education in asteroid extraction techniques.

"You would need to measure me for that," she said.

From somewhere they unearthed a flexible tape in an old mechanic's kit. They made most measurements using the instrumentation on board because most of what they needed to measure was out in space and their EVA suits were equipped with gauges. So they dutifully took down what they felt they needed to buy in appropriate sizes.

Then they argued over who was to go: Gill would definitely be useless in a dress shop, or even a straight women's-apparel outfitter. Calum's taste, according to Rafik, reposed only in his mouth. Rafik would have to go.

"Not when there's an assassin out there somewhere waiting to snuff you out and this time we can't take Acorna with us for emergency first aid."

"You all go," Acorna said reasonably and before the decision-making turned into one of the interminable arguments the men all seemed to enjoy so much. "I am safe in here and will not answer any summonses."

That was debated, too, but it was finally decided that with Gill bulking along behind Rafik and Calum at his side, he would be less of a target and he would at least not be able to complain when either of the others came back with what he felt to be unsuitable raiment.

They got the EVA suit first, since those could be custom-made and produced within an hour. They'd collect it on their way back.

Despite Gill's snide comments about the mili-

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taristic bias of Nered, it was still a •wealthy planet •with the usual supply of flea markets, bazaars, and good used-apparel shops. With proper measurements, they could also find the right sizes of work clothing for their growing charge. Rafik even found attractive upper-body wraps, made of an elasticized material that was guaranteed "to fit any female form comfortably."

"She'll like that," Rafik announced, and got three plain colored ones in blue, green, and a deep purple that he felt would look -well with her silvery hair, and two figured ones: one with flowers that might never have bloomed on any planet in the galaxy, and another with daisies. At least that's what he told the other two they were.

After looking in several used-apparel shops, he also found some skirts with elasticized waistbands, also guaranteed to fit any form comfortably.

"It doesn't say 'female'," Gill said, about to discard a splendidly patterned one.

"Mostly females wear skirts," Rafik said, and took the skirt from his hand. He found another that was filmy but opaque, in a misty blue that he thought Acorna would like for the flow of it—a saleslady modeled the item—the texture of the material, and the color.

It was the saleslady, having discerned that the three attractive miners -were buying for a female they all knew, decided to inveigle them to buy accessories, such as "lingerie."

"You men are all alike. Concentrate on the outer wear," she said teasingly because the big,

bearded redhead blushed to the color of his hair at

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the first mention of underclothes, "and forget there has to be something underneath."

Rafik beamed at her. "My niece has just reached puberty, and I don't know what girls do wear underneath ..." and he wiggled his fingers in helpless innocence. "Her parents were killed in an accident and I'm her only living relative, so we've sort of inherited her."

"Very good to do so, too, if I may say so, Captain," Salitana said with more than usual fervor, losing her suave salesperson persona. "When you think of the traffic in orphaned children in this curve of the Milky Way, it's nice to know some will take on responsibility for blood relations instead of selling them out of hand to who-knows-what miserable existence."

"Like Kezdet?" Gill asked, having glanced around first to be sure they were not overheard.

"Out-system visitors call us paranoid," Salitana said, "but if your planet were this close to Kezdet, you'd have a major defense budget, too."

The two locked eyes, but Salitana immediately smiled her salesperson smile and turned to her keyboard, accessing the stock for the sizes the niece needed: she had the measurements before her. Rather than embarrass the men any further, she ordered up what she felt would appeal to a young girl—what would have appealed to her had she had any options in what she could wear in puberty. While those were on their way to her station, she frowned down at the chest measurement. Poor child was absolutely flat-chested. Well, maybe a training or an exercise bra would suffice. She



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ordered several of those and the merchandise arrived, already wrapped.

"You'll find these suitable, I assure you," she said, handing them over.

The redhead looked most grateful as the covered items slipped into the carisak he held open.

"You have been shopping. What about shoes, now? I can show you — "

"No, that's fine. We got footwear in the bazaar," Rafik said, and hastily proffered the plastic card used on Nered for purchases. He didn't like using a card because it could lead back to the Uhuru more quickly than credits would, but credits caused delays, since the shop had to check that these credits were legal and backed by a

respectable credit authority.

"We should get her some shoes somewhere," Gill said when they were out on the mall walkway again.

"The skirts measured long enough to cover her feet, and you know how she hates constriction," Rafik said. He was tired—probably a remnant of having been dead yesterday for a few minutes—and he was eager to show her what they'd managed to find for her pleasure and adornment. "Let's get a hovercraft back to the dock."

"I thought you looked tired," Gill said solicitously, and waved his long arm to attract a hire

vehicle from the rank at the end of the mall.

One zoomed in to the head of the rank and blinked its HIRED sign to show it would take them, but they had to wait until it could get in the traffic pattern above the busy area. It was just turning at

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the far end when the saleswoman rushed out to them.

"Don't take that one," she cried, and frantically pulled them back into the store. "You've been followed. Your charges were monitored. Come with me."

The urgency with which she spoke and Rafik's so recent problem -with an assassin impelled them to obey without question. Within the store again, she led them through the crowd of shoppers in a circuitous route to the rear, down two flights of steps, which had Rafik panting from exertion, and into a clearly marked STORE PERSONNEL ONLY room, which she had keyed to open.

"I'm sorry to act so presumptuously," she said, her face pale and eyes dark with worry, "but for the Sake of your niece, I had to intervene. Anything to save her if she has been orphaned in this quadrant of space. I don't know? who's tracing you, but I do know it isn't Neredian-generated, so it has to be illegal and you are in danger." She held up both hands defensively. "Don't tell me anything, but if you'll trust me just a little longer, I contacted a friend — "

"From Kezdet?" Gill asked gently.

"How did you know?" she said in a soundless gasp, one hand to her throat, her eyes wider than Acorna's last night.

"Let's just say, we know a bit about what happens on Kezdet from . . . other friends ..." Rafik said, "and we appreciate your help very much. Someone is after me and I do not know why. Is there another way out of here?"

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"There will be shortly," she said, glancing at the chrono on the wall. "I cannot linger, or my absence will be noted. The . . . party . . . will tap like this." She demonstrated with a long index finger nail on the door. "The . . . party . . . knows the access code," and she gave a helpless little shrug. "You need it to get in or out. But the party is absolutely trustworthy."

"A child labor graduate?" Calum asked.

She nodded. "I must go. Your niece is so lucky to have you! She has the right to have you in good health and one piece."

She was out the door again so fast they hadn't time to see what digits she had pressed.

"So, who's after us? Or you, in particular?" Calum asked Rafik, leaning back against a table.

"She was a nice woman," Gill remarked, regarding the closed door with a bemused expression on his face. "Not as nice as Judit..."

"Judit?" Rafik and Calum said in unison, staring at him.

"She came from Kezdet."

"And has a brother still stuck there . . . but one begins to wonder about the main occupation of those lucky enough to leave it," Rafik said,

then shook his head. "Nah, it's more likely to be Hafiz who's after me . . . but Uncle's style would be more along the lines of kidnapping me to take the place of that idiot son who lost his

ears.

"So long as the idiot son didn't lose what's between them," and Calum inadvertently paraphrased the subject of his sentence, "maybe it's

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him who found out and is going to put an end to Uncle's future plans for you."

"Or it could be our erstwhile friends from Amalgamated. They're still after us for our ship," Gill said.

"Or maybe it's that spurious claim of the Theloi?" Rafik said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"So who's this Farkas Hamisen who hates your guts and registered the claim?" Gill asked.

"Possibly my earless cousin," Rafik said, nodding his head, as that fit the parameters of such a relative.

"Or it could be the Greifen, after the ore ..."  
Calum suggested.

"Well, the ore's gone." Rafik dismissed that option. "Could it have anything to do with our new beacon? And here Uncle Hafiz was so certain he was doing us a real favor. ... I -wonder. ..."

"What?" Calum and Gill said in chorus.

"Who died in the wreck?"

Gill's eyes popped and his mouth dropped.

"You mean," and Calum recovered more quickly, "we got people we haven't even annoyed after us, too?"

The tap startled them in the silence that followed this observation.

The door opened and a slender youth, with dark eyes that were wiser than his countenance, gestured imperiously for them to follow him. Though they did, Rafik hissed a bombardment of questions at the boy's back as they had to jog to keep up with him.

"Shush," he said, holding up one hand, which

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Gill then noticed pointed at a spy-eye in the corner of the corridor.

They shushed and he hunched over the pad of a heavily plated metal door at the end of the corridor. It opened slowly, because it was ten centimeters thick at least, Rafik estimated as he slipped through when the space was wide enough. They had to wait a few seconds longer for Gill to squeeze through. Their guide had judged it finely enough—he'd already tapped in the close sequence, hauling Gill's leg out of the way. The door closed a lot faster than it opened. The youth then gestured to a goods van, thumbed open its back doors, and pushed the three inside.

They could feel it rising on its vertical pads and then it moved forward. Very shortly they were all aware that they were in a traffic pattern of some kind, for the van was not soundproof. What it had originally carried was moot since there was nothing in it but three sweating miners. Rafik slid down one

wall and onto his rump and mopped his forehead.

"Dying takes more out of you than I ever realized," he said. "I'm bushed."

"Are we a/w-bushed, I want to know?" Calum asked, hunkering down on his heels. Gill sat, too, as his head was brushing the ceiling of the van.

"No, you would have been," a new tenor voice said softly. "Salitana said you have taken a niece from Kezdet..."

"No, that's not correct," Rafik said. "She has been our charge for nearly four years. She needs new clothes."

"Ah! But you know of Kezdet?"

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"Yes," Gill answered, "we met someone who got out of there. Still trying to get her brother off that damned planet, too."

"Really?" Surprise more than a prompting to continue colored that one word. "Now, we are out of the mall. Where do I take you that you may safely descend?"

"The docks," Rafik said.

"We should pick up Acorna's EVA suit first," Gill said, and cowered at the dirty looks the other two gave him for mentioning her name.

"At which chandlers?" the youth asked in such a natural tone of voice that some of their fury at his indiscretion was dispelled.

"The one on Pier 48B," Rafik answered, still

glaring at Gill.

"Can do." And they all felt the van make a left-hand turn.

That was right, Rafik thought and sneezed. Gill and Calum did, too. In fact they all were in such a paroxysm of sneezing that they inhaled a more than sufficient quantity of the sleep gas that circulated through the rear of the van.

Some very astringent substance was being held under his nose and Rafik roused to avoid it. To his utter surprise, a slim hand was held out to him.

"I am Pal Kendoro and it is my sister Judit who was working at Amalgamated who had paid for an education that would lift me out of the barrios of Kezdet. Are my bona fides sufficient to restore me to your good graces?"

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Rafik glanced over at the still unconscious forms of his two friends.

"All of you -would overpower me. One I can handle," Pal Kendoro said, tilting his head—evidently a family trait; Rafik saw the resemblance to his sister in that pose. "I apologize for ..." and he waved his hand toward the front of the cab, ". . . the necessity, but I was seeking another whom I thought might be you."

Rafik straightened up. He'd a crick in his neck from lying in an uncomfortable position, but the back door of the van was open and, while the air it let in smelt of fish and oil and other unpleasant odors, the last of the gas was dissipating.

"And -who might that be?" Rafik asked in a

droll tone. "There's a waiting list."

Pal grinned. "So I have discovered."

"How long were -we out?" and Rafik rubbed at his neck. "Oh migod ..."

"She will not worry," Pal said, reaching out a hand to steady Rafik when he tried to leap to his feet. "I sent a message to your ship. . . . She believes you have stopped to eat."

"How the devil did you access our security codes . . . ? Oh." He groaned. "I think I know. You're looking for the legal owners of the beacon •we borrowed. Believe me, the ship was split like a nut when we found it wedged in an asteroid. Nothing could have lived."

"Would you at least remember where you found the derelict?" Pal asked, his dark eyes intent.

"Sure can, but I don't know what good that'll do."

"We ... I ... would be obliged."

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"We ... I ... owe you one," and Rafik left off rubbing his neck.

Pal Kendoro got off his haunches now and went to wave his restorative under Calum's nose before he handed the bottle to Rafik to tend to Gill. Rafik chuckled at Kendoro's innate caution. Gill did indeed come out of his inadvertent nap ready to do mischief to whoever did that to him. A few brief explanations and harmony was restored, thanks for their escape offered and dismissed.

"Can we get back to — "



"Our ship," Rafik hurriedly interjected.

"Yes, and with one stop at the chandlers on Pier •48 B," Pal said, exiting the van and adding as he closed the sides, "this time I let you see where I am driving you."

He was as good as his word, for the opaque panel between the goods section and the driver's turned transparent.

"I have had fresh words with Salitana," he told them as he eased the van out of the side road and into a busy traffic pattern, "and there was considerable interest in you which she was unable, of course, to answer, since you were strangers buying clothing for female friends and she, naturally, wanted no part of the offers you made her."

"She wouldn't have imparted to you a description of the interested parties, -would she?" Rafik asked -with a -weary smile.

Pal Kendoro slid three quik-prints through a small slot in the panel.

"She is efficient."

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"Hey, that looks like ..." and Gill closed his mouth on "the assassin."

"No, but there's a resemblance to the uncle," Calum said, "and if I'm not mistaken this shot shows quite new ears on him."

Rafik had also noticed that.

"He is registered at the port as Farkas Hamisen," Pal Kendoro said over his shoulder.

"She's not the only efficient one," Calum murmured.

"Okay, why have you involved yourself with the cause of utter strangers, and don't tell me because we have succored a minor female?" Rafik said. He was getting very tired of being chased and helped and then chased again.

"I have also had a word with my sister, Judit, who is currently assisting my employer during my absence on the mission to discover who caused the death of our friends who owned the ship whose beacon you have appropriated for use in yours."

Rafik was not the only listener who blinked at the long and involved and grammatically correct sentence.

"And ..." Rafik prompted when Pal seemed to take a long time to make up his next sentence.

"Would your niece be a young female of unknown origin with a curious protuberance on her forehead?"

Rafik exchanged glances with his mates. Gill nodded solemn approval, but Calum looked wary.

"I think this lad is in an ... efficient . . . position to help us on a number of vexing matters," Rafik murmured. "Yes, that is our niece, and Judit

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has already helped us save her. She isn't still with Amalgamated, is she?"

"No, and one of the reasons is your ward."

Rafik raised his eyebrow over that term, but it was more accurate than "niece" had ever been,

technically speaking.

"Here's the EVA shop," Gill said, pointing to the right.

"So it is," Rafik said and started to move.

"Oh, no you don't," Calum said, pushing him back down. "I'll get it. No one's been killing me."

"You are both wrong," Pal said, twisting around. "You will undoubtedly have a chit that indicates the merchandise has been paid for." He paused to don a cap that said clearly NERED MESSENGERS GMBH, INC & LTD on the peak. He held his hand at the slot and Rafik slid the receipt through.

Pal got out whistling and entered the shop while the three miners watched . . . and watched all corners for anyone watching Pal's activities. But by then he was out of the shop, still whistling, the EVA suit in its protective covering thrown over his shoulder in a careless fashion. He threw it through a barely adequate opening at the back of the van, winking as he did so, and slammed the door shut before resuming his position as driver. His forward motion could scarcely be called either furtive or fast. Clearly he was a messenger determined to increase the time of his errand for a larger fee.

Clearly he -was also very adept at inconspicuous trips because, although the three miners

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observed the twists and turns he made, they almost did not recognize the Uhuru -when the van stopped at its closed hatch.

Then a lot of things happened all at once: Pal Kendoro grabbed the EVA suit, jerked them out of the van -when they didn't appear to move quickly enough to suit him, and said that -whoever had the command to open the Uhuru's, hatch had better activate it right now because "they" -were here and •waiting for them.

Rafik activated it and the hatch opened just enough for them all to get inside, even Pal, though he had to be pulled through with the suit encumbering him.

Acorna was at the pilot's controls. "We have cleared for take-off, just as you asked. Uncle Rafik," she said as he slid into the second seat.

"I did?"

"You did!" At the sound of his own voice so cleverly imitated, Rafik turned around to see Pal behind him. "And I advise the most speedy departure this ship can make and an even quicker jump to these coordinates." He laid a flimsy beside Acorna.

"Well, go ahead, Acorna," Rafik said, waving his hand in submission.

"Where?"

"To a place of absolute safety," Pal said, trying very hard not to stare at the slender figure with the mane of silver hair who was in control of the ship.

"I trust him," Rafik said, uttering what would soon be added to the list Calum kept of his

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Famous Last Words. "He's Judit Kendoro's brother."

Acorna had no more than finished keying in the course than Rafik began to sneeze again. So did Calum, Gill—who tried to reach out to Pal, who held a mask over his face—and Acorna.

Seven

In the end, it was Judit who conveyed Delszaki Li's invitation to the Uhuru -when the ship reached Kezdet "Pal can negotiate with the miners," she'd pointed out, "but if you want Acorna to come and stay with you — "

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"She must," Li insisted. "I may not know? how or why yet, but this I do believe: the ki-Un is vital to our goals!"

"I have met these men," Judit said. "They have been betrayed before; they will not entrust Acorna to strangers again. To me, perhaps, but not—forgive me—to an unknown businessman on a planet that has not treated them well."

"Name of Li is scarcely unknown in "world of business and finance," her employer remarked dryly.

"They would probably trust your financial expertise," Judit agreed, "but will they trust you to care for a young girl?"

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She was not entirely sure, herself, that she trusted Delszaki Li to recognize that Acorna was a little girl as well as a kl-lin. Pal had described her as a young woman . . . but that was ridiculous;

after all, Judit had seen the child herself, only a

year ago.

And, with the image of that drugged child in her mind, she was taken aback at first by the tall, slender young woman in a sophisticated deep purple body wrap and misty blue flowing skirt who greeted her when at last she received permission to board the Uhuru. For a moment she wondered wildly if there could be two Acornas, if this could be the mother or older sister of the child she remembered.

On her part, Acorna stared at Judit as soon as she spoke, and her silvery pupils narrowed to vertical slits.

"I think ... I know you," she said in confusion. "But how?"

"She saved you from surgery at Amalgamated's space base," Gill said. His big hand briefly enveloped Judit's; she felt a wave of warmth and security emanating from his touch. "But you were unconscious at the time, drugged for the operation. You can't remember."

"I remember the voice," Acorna said. She looked thoughtfully at Judit. "You were very much afraid . . . and very sad. You are not so sad now, I think."

"Then it is you!" Judit exclaimed. "But you were so tiny..."

"It seems my people mature more rapidly than

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do yours," Acorna said. "Not, of course, that we know anything about my people. . . ." Her pupils narrowed to slits again, then widened as she

turned her silvery gaze on Judit and dismissed that subject. "So you are Judit. Gill and Rafik and Calum have told me often of your heroism."

"Then they have exaggerated wildly," Judit said. "I didn't do anything, really."

"You will allow us to differ about that," Gill put in, still holding Judit's hand clasped inside his.

"And you were not harmed afterwards?"

Judit smiled. "Oh, no. They bought the hostage story ... I think Dr. Forelle had some doubts, but nobody else could quite believe that a barrio girl, even one who'd made it through university, would have the brains or independence to go against so many rules. And to keep them from thinking it, I made sure to act very stupid for some time thereafter. I think they were glad to get rid of me when Mr. Li offered me a position as his assistant."

"Ah, yes," Rafik said. "Your famous Mr. Li. Pal has been telling us all about him, and his fortune, and his great plans — "

Judit felt the blood draining from her face.

"Pal, how could you?"

How could Pal have trusted these men with such dangerous secrets! Oh, Gill, she would trust, but these other two ... no doubt they were good men, but Pal didn't have the right to risk the lives of children on his intuitive judgment of them.

"—plans to establish lunar mining bases on Kezdet's moons," Rafik went on, and Judit breathed

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again. "He seems very eager to give us a contract to

oversee the establishment and development of the work ... a remarkably lucrative contract to offer three independent asteroid miners."

"As I've explained to you," Pal cut in, "Kezdet is a technologically underdeveloped planet. We have planetside mines, of course, but they are of the crudest sort, dependent on manual labor for nearly everything. And there is no local expertise in low-g mining. Kezdet's moons are far richer in valuable metals than the planet itself, but up to now we have lacked the capital and the technology to exploit the mines. Mr. Li proposes to provide the capital, but he needs men like you to consult on all the problems of mining in space—protection from solar flares, high-friction coefficients, lack of the usual reagents for extraction, and so forth."

"You seem tolerably well informed on the problems, anyway," Calum remarked.

Pal flushed. "I've studied a few vid-cubes. That doesn't make me a space mining expert. That's where you come in."

"I should perhaps point out," Rafik said softly, "that hijacking our ship and taking us, unconscious, to a planet we have every reason to avoid is not the most persuasive of bargaining maneuvers."

"Pal," Judit said sorrowfully, "you could have tried explaining to them!"

Pals flush deepened and he rounded on his sister, palms out. "A minute ago you thought I had explained to them, and I was in deep kimchee for that, too. Can't I do anything right? "

"Not with a big sister, kid." Gill chuckled.



"Rafik, Pal, both of you calm down. Whatever the rights and wrongs of it, we're here now, and it won't hurt us to listen to Mr. Li's offer . . . and personally, I'm dying to hear the explanations."

"I think Mr. Li would prefer to present his case to you personally," Pal said, "and he very seldom leaves his mansion. Will you trust me so far as to accompany me there, where we can discuss the matter in greater comfort?"

Gill glanced at the others, smiled wryly and shrugged. "What the heck . . . we're already on Kezdet, how much worse can it get? Just lay off the sleep gas this time."

"Kezdet," Pal said somberly, "can get much, much worse than any of you can imagine."

Just before dawn there was a subtle change in the quality of the darkness of the sleep shed. Unrelieved blackness faded slightly, revealing the slumped outlines of what looked like piles of rags on the earthen floor. After three years •working Below, Jana could sleep through the twenty-four-hour rumble and thump of the slagger, but the faint light in the shed woke her, most mornings, before the call. That was the good thing about being on day shift. Night shift, you didn't have that bit of warning. It worked today; she was on her feet, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, when Siri Teku came through the shed with his bucket of icy water, splashing it on the heaps of rags until the children underneath stirred. He grinned at Jana and aimed the last of the bucketful

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at her, but she dodged so that he only got her bare feet.

"Thanks," she said, "I was meanin' to wash my

feet today anyway."

She dived into the corner and caught little Chiura by the arm, hauling her upright and clapping one hand across her mouth before the kid could wail and earn a slash from the long, flexible rod Siri Teku held in his other hand. The other kids knew better than to cry about a little thing like cold water, or to take too long scrambling to their feet, but Chiura was new, the only new one their gang had got from last week's intake. The others had grumbled when Siri Teku shoved her into their shed.

"How we gone keep up our allotment with babies on the soojin' gang?" Khetala demanded.

Khetala, two years older than Jana, broad-shouldered and black-browed, was the unofficial leader of their gang. She kept the rest of the kids in line with pinches, slaps, and threats to tell Siri Teku on them. But she also kept their ore carts full and the draggers moving so that they weighed in with a full allotment most shifts. That meant supper. Gangs that didn't earn supper didn't last long;

the kids got tired too easily, then they couldn't keep up their allotment, they started getting sick, pretty soon the sick ones disappeared and the ones that were just puny got sold off to other gangs. Or worse, Kheti said darkly, but Jana wasn't sure what could be worse than being a dragger on a

gang.

"She's too little to go Below," Jana said.

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Chiura's bare legs -were dimpled 'with baby fat; her round, full face was tilted upward to Jana and Khetala as if she expected them to pick her up or something. She'd learn soon enough that there

wasn't any time at Anyag for playing with babies.

"No backtalk!" Siri Teku's rod whistled against the backs of Jana's legs. She didn't jump, so he lashed her a couple more times until tears stood in her eyes. "She's not going Below. Not yet, anyway. She can help Ganga and Laxmi sort."

Jana and Khetala looked at each other. They needed another sorter. Siri Teku had taken Najeem away right after wake-up a couple of days ago, when he noticed Najeem's morning cough. But how were they going to teach a baby who couldn't be more than four, maybe only three, to sort ore?

"She wants to eat, she'll learn," Siri Teku said. "You'll teach her." He left the shed to fetch their scanty morning meal.

Now Jana knelt beside Chiura, dipped a corner of her own kameez in the water bucket and wiped the kid's face clean. She'd been crying again in the night, there -were dried tears and snot caked around her upper lip. A bruise was starting to show on her cheek.

"Who hit you, Chiura? "

Chiura didn't answer, but she glanced toward Laxmi and back, a quick, darting, furtive glance that she'd learned in this first week at Anyag. Jana glowered at Laxmi.

"The brat kept me awake with her snuffling," Laxmi said.

"We all cried at first," Jana said. "You hit her again, Laxmi, and I'll break your arm. See how long Siri Teku keeps you on the gang when you can't work!" She wiped Chiura's face as gently as she could and ran her fingers through the curly dark hair, trying to work a few tangles out of the

matted ringlets.

"You're wasting your time," Laxmi said. "She'll hafta get clipped like the rest of us, or she'll get lice. I donno why Siri Teku hasn't done it yet."

"You mean there's something you don't know?" Jana jeered. "An' here I thought you -was the Divine Fountain of Wisdom come down to Anyag to instruct and save us all."

Sin Teku kicked the door open and set down a round platter of bean paste )ust inside the shed. Beside it he dropped a stack of patts, letting them fall on the dirt so the bottom ones would be all gritty. He said it trained the kids to grab their food fast and not waste time, but Jana figured it was just meanness. She'd never seen anybody who wasn't hungry enough to bolt their patts and bean paste so fast they hardly chewed.

The first day, Chiura had wrinkled up her face and spat out the gritty patt and bean paste Jana rolled for her. She was hungrier now; she would've dived right under the trampling feet of the older kids if Jana hadn't held her back.

"It's okay," she told Chiura. "Kheti sees to it, there's fair shares for everyone."

"More," Chiura wailed when the rush had slowed and they got their patts and beans, one apiece.

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"Fair shares," Jana said firmly, but she tore her rolled patt in half and slipped it to Chiura when nobody -was looking. And while the rest of the

gang shuffled off to the shaft, she lingered to ask Laxmi how the baby was doing.

"Plays too much, less'n I clout her," Laxmi said. "Doesn't know good rock from bad. She's bringin\* down our count."

"Don't hit her," Jana said. "She won't learn if she's scared. Let her watch what you're doing. She'll learn." She knelt by Chiura and hugged her. "You'll watch Laxmi, won't you, sweetcake? Watch and learn how to tell good ore from rocks. Watch for Mama Jana."

"Sweetcake?" Chiura repeated. "Mama?"

"Aah, she's too dumb to know what you're saying," Laxmi whined. "Only way to teach her . . ." She doubled over in a silent cough. Her thin face turned dark with the effort to hush the convulsions that shook her body.

"You don't hit her," Jana said, "and I don't tell Siri Teku you got Najeem's cough. Deal?"

Laxmi nodded in between convulsions, and Siri Teku's rod came down across the backs of Jana's legs. This time Jana yelled good and loud, to give Laxmi a chance to let some of the coughing out. And Siri Teku was so busy telling her off for lingering behind the rest of the gang, he didn't even notice the way Laxmi wheezed for breath. She hoped.

Going Below was the part Jana hated worst, the sickening drop in the cage full of scared kids. It was usually all right, if the minder was awake and paying attention to his engine. If he let it run a few seconds too long, the cage would slam into the pit floor like a dropped basket of eggs. Coming back up was just as dangerous; an inattentive minder could drag the cage and all into the engine to be chewed up like a lump of ore in the slagger, but you didn't

think about that so much—by the end of shift, all you could think of was getting Above again. Above belonged to light and flowers and Sita Ram, whom Jana imagined like a mother who smiled and hugged you close and wanted to keep you forever. Below belonged to Old Black and the Piper, and if you prayed to Sita Ram or even thought about Her, they'd maybe get angry and send one of Their messengers for you: a rock falling from the tunnel roof, a flood of water when the hewers broke through into old workings, or the stinking air that made your chest forget how to breathe.

The cage rattled to a stop, thudding on the pit floor but not falling, and the gang moved off to their places under Siri Teku's direction.

"Buddhe, Faiz, you boys are dragging for Face Three today. Watch how Gulab Rao handles the compressor, Buddhe. You're getting too big for a dragger and I just might put you to work on the face pretty soon if you show me you can get a load of ore without spraying the gallery with rock splinters. Israr, you trap for Face Three. You girls go to Five. Khetala and Jana drag, Lata trap."

Buddhe and Faiz set off at a run down the opening that slanted down to the tunnel to Three, but Kheti called them back and made them strap on their knee and arm pads.

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"Girl stuff," Buddhe said scornfully, flexing his skinny ten-year-old arm •while Kheti tried to tie on the pads she'd made out of old rags. "When I'm a hewer, I -won't fool with stupid girl stuff like padding myself."

"Wear the pads, maybe you don't get so many

cuts, maybe you live long enough to make hewer," Khetala snapped.

Jana didn't argue about putting her own pads on. They were another of Kheti's good ideas. Other gangs, when they got new kameezes, sold the ragged bits of their old ones to a picker for a cornet of curried peas or some other luxury. Kheti made them save the old cloths to make these pads that protected their knees and elbows from the sharp rock floors of the tunnels. While the pads lasted, their gang didn't come down with half as many scrapes and cuts and infections as the other gangs. The only trouble was, they never could get enough cloth. Kheti said she was going to talk to Siri Teku some day when he wasn't drunk or angry and point out how much the pads saved them, try and talk him into giving them some extra cloth. But it could be a long time waiting until Siri Teku was in a mood to be approached.

The hewers had been working at Five since well before first light; they went on shift and off shift earlier than the draggers, so that the kids could find full corves of ore -waiting -when they started work and could finish off the hewers' last production of the day before they went off shift. This morning there were three full corves -waiting for them. You couldn't hear anything over the

•whine of the compressors, but one of the hewers — Ram Dal, it was—wasn't -wearing his face mask, and Jana could guess from his scowl what he -was saying to them. If the draggers got behind, then he wouldn't have an empty corf to pile his ore into, his production -would go down and the gang wouldn't meet their allotment. It -wasn't her and Khetala's fault that Face Five had turned into an easy vein that the hewers could strip faster than Siri Teku had expected, but they'd be the ones to get the stick if Ram Dal told Siri Teku that they were holding up the line. Jana buckled the belt about her -waist, straddled the chain attached to

the first corf, and set off back up the long slope of the tunnel without a word or a nod to Khetala. Halfway up the tunnel, Lata pulled the ventilation fan back so that they could drag the corves through.

"Come back soon," she begged. "It's dark here. I'm scared the Piper will get me."

"Don't worry about the Piper," Jana said as she passed. "I left an offering for Him at the face. And we'll be back in a minute."

It was always dark in the tunnel, and they always came back as fast as they could. Lata really

- was simple; you could see it in her face, the funny tilted eyes and the moon-round cheeks. She could never remember anything from one trip to the next. But being so simple, she didn't get bored and fall asleep, either. Jana liked having Lata as trapper and didn't mind saying, every trip, that she

- would come back in a minute.

"Liar," Kheti whispered when they were past

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Lata and the hum of the fan blocked out their words. "You never. Piper's gonna get you."

"Huh. Piper won't want me, I'm too skinny. Piper's gonna take you, Kheti—your chest getting big now."

The first trip wasn't so bad, except for being in a hurry because the hewers were getting ahead this morning. Jana figured about the third trip was the worst; by that time everything was bugging you. Your thighs ached from the pull of the



loaded corf, you had scrapes on the places your pads didn't protect, the chain between your legs chafed and sweat dropped down into the chafed places and made them sting worse than ever. In some ways Jana reckoned it was better later on in the shift, when you were too tired to care, almost too tired to remember that there'd ever been anything but pulling loaded corves, tipping them into the cage basket, and drawing the empty boxes back. Finally the hewers quit for the day, and then they knew end of shift was almost there and all they had to do was clear the last loaded corves.

Then there was the creaking cage again, this time taking up draggers and trappers instead of baskets of ore, and cool clean air and the first stars of evening, and shivering because your kameez was soaked with sweat and you weren't used to the coolness. Jana helped Khetala to herd the other kids of their gang over to the pump that spewed out water from the lowest mine workings, nagged them all to pull off their kameezes and wash. The littlest ones, Lata and Israr, were so tired they were about to fall asleep, even though

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they had been sitting still all day instead of hauling corves. They gasped and crowed indignantly at the shock of the tepid water. That helped; Buddhe and Faiz wanted to show they "were tougher than the little kids, so they splashed rowdily under the pipe. Jana and Khetala took the last wash. Faiz tried to pinch Khetala's chest and she splashed water into his eyes and everybody had a good laugh.

"I wish we had spare kameezes, and spare pads, too," Kheti said as they trudged back to the shed. "Then we could wash our clothes and pads and leave them to dry next day."

"Yeah? Long as you're wishing, why don't you

wish for the moon to hang in our shed and a cloud to fly through the tunnels on?"

"The better we keep clean," Kheti said firmly, "the less we fall sick."

Jana didn't see the connection herself. Everybody knew that sickness was caused by annoying Old Black and the Piper so that they laid a cough in your chest. She'd been at the mines five years now, since she was only a little bigger than Chiura. Kheti was all the time setting herself up as some kind of know-it-all because she'd only come to the mines two years ago, when she was eleven already, and she claimed to know all sorts of things about the -world away from the mines. But she did know a lot of good stories to tell at night, and it was true that since she'd joined them they had only lost two kids from the gang to illness. Besides, if you argued, she hit and slapped, and Jana had taken enough blows that day from

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Siri Teku and Ram Dal—she didn't need a fight

•with Kheti to finish the day off.

The sorters had come in when it got dark. They -were supposed to light a fire and heat

-water to cook the evening beans and meal porridge, but half the time the sleep shed was dark and cold when the rest of the gang got there. This evening -was one of those times. Laxmi and Ganga were bickering about -whose turn it was to fetch sticks for kindling. Khetala waded in and sorted the argument with a couple of brisk slaps, sending Laxmi for kindling and Ganga to fill the bucket.

"What about her?" Laxmi jerked her head at the pallet where Chiura lay, chubby arms and legs

flung out in exhausted sleep. "She don't sort her share, she don't help fix the fire ..."

"She's little," Jana said. "She'll learn. Give her a chance."

"I say, if she doesn't work, she doesn't eat!"

"That's dumb," Jana said. "If she doesn't eat, she'll just get sick. I'll help you get the dinner ready if you'll give her a share."

Her legs ached all over from hauling corves of ore all day, but walking and carrying kindling was a different kind of work anyway. It probably did her some good to stand upright for a while. Some of the older hewers hobbled around half bent, unable to straighten up after years of lying on their sides in wet tunnels to hack out the last ore in a narrow vein.

When they got the fire going and the water began to bubble, Khetala made Laxmi stir, even

though Buddhe and Faiz complained that she would cough all over their food.

"Never mind them," Kheti told Laxmi.

"Steam's good for the breath-sickness. You stir every night for a while, and lean over the bucket while you stir, hear? Breathe in that steam."

"Why?" Laxmi whined.

"Easy," Jana said before Khetala could lose her temper and slap Laxmi, which was how she usually settled disagreements. "Steam goes up, right? Sita Ram is Above, Old Black and the Piper are Below. Chest cough comes from Old Black and the Piper. Steam carries it up to Sita Ram."

Khetala rolled her eyes but didn't argue. "Just do it, Laxmi. Breathe the steam, and hope Siri

Teku keeps you on sorting for a while and doesn't make you drag a corf."

"Right," Jana agreed. "She goes Below, it'll just give Old Black and the Piper another chance to lay a curse on her."

Jana took Chiura to sleep beside her that night. She wouldn't mind if Chiura cried, and she wouldn't hit the kid the way Laxmi did. Anyway Chiura didn't cry much; she snuggled in between Jana's arm and body and burrowed her head into Jana's armpit like a kitten butting its mother for milk. There'd been a litter of kittens once, all soft and fuzzy . . . but that was before the mines. . . . Jana blinked away tears. It didn't do no good to think about before. That was the first lesson anybody learned. You were bonded to your gang-master, Siri Teku or whoever, and he took the cost of food and clothes out of your wages and kept the

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rest to pay off the advance your family had gotten for bonding you, and "when you were paid off, you could go home or you could stay at "work and send the money back to your family. It took a long time to get paid off, though. But it must happen for some kids. Sometimes kids just disappeared, and they weren't sickly or anything, and you never saw them around the mine again, not working the other shift or working in another gang or whatever. Like Surya. She'd been a year older than Khetala, but she wasn't on the gang anymore. So she must have earned out her bond and been sent home. Jana wasn't sure what she would do when she earned out. She didn't know how to find her family. She'd been too little when they bonded her—she only knew it was a long way off. They maybe wouldn't want her back anyway; there were too many kids and not enough to eat. Maybe she'd go to the city

and find some easier work. Anything had to be easier than dragging corves. . . . She fell into an uneasy dream of dragging bigger and bigger corves up a worse slope than any in the mine, with the Piper behind her dark and faceless and threatening, and her legs jerked and twitched all night as the overstrained muscles tried to remember how to rest. But whenever she woke up there was Chiura's little body warm against her, and that was some comfort;

almost as good as having a kitten of her very own.

The miners were tense as they followed Pal into the Li mansion, unsure what to expect. The house was darkened against the heat of the Kezdet sun,

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•with cool, scented currents of air fanning though high-ceilinged rooms. They were still blinking with the sudden change from brilliance to shadows when the soft whir of a hover-chair heralded Delszaki Li's arrival.

While Pal and Judit made introductions, Calum hung back, studying the man whose power and influence had brought them here. A wasted body was largely concealed under stiff, brocaded robes; all that he could see was the man's wrinkled face, with sharp, intelligent eyes. Those eyes lit up when Acorna was introduced, and Calum tensed.

She u what he want^, he thought. The r&ft itjiut an excuse.

But his suspicions were lulled by the long, intense discussion that followed the introductions and ritual offering of food and drink. Li had evidently studied and anticipated all their tastes; there was Kilumbemba beer for Gill, chilled fruit juice for Acorna, and a variety of cold and refreshing drinks for Calum and Rafik.

But the man was obviously eager to be done with social niceties and get on with his business;

the clawlike fingers of one hand trembled over the hover-chair buttons while they made polite conversation. He seemed relieved when Gill downed his beer and said bluntly, "Now, Mr. Li, we have been promised some explanations. Exactly what made you so eager to bring us here, and -why are you so sure we will accept your offer?"

"Require your assistance," Li said, "to destroy

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illegal but well defended system of child slavery on this planet."

"There are unpleasant rumors about the fate of unprotected children on Kezdet," Rafik agreed.

"The reality," Judit said, "is worse than the rumors."

Gill put one arm around her shoulders.

"And exactly how will the establishment of lunar mining bases help to eradicate the current system?" Calum demanded. "And why UJ?"

"Second question is more easily answered than first," Li replied. "I have chosen you because of personal reports from Judit Kendoro, also substantiated by reading of classified files of Amalgamated. Men who will break contract and incur wrath of intergalactic company to defend one child might be willing to take some further risks to save many children."

Calum had the feeling that Li was not revealing

all his thoughts, but then, the head of a multi-billion-credit financial and industrial empire seldom did reveal everything he was thinking.

"For answer to first question," Li went on, "small introduction to current system is necessary." He paused for a moment, his bright black eyes darting around the table until he was sure that he had everyone's attention. "Kezdet, like Saturn, eats its children. Small population of highly paid technical workers, bureaucrats, and merchants rests at top of a pyramid of underpaid and exploited human labor. And at bottom of pyramid are children—those of Kezdet, and the unwanted children of many other planets. Kezdet

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labor contractors visit an overpopulated, impoverished world where planetary government is already struggling to provide basic social services. They make promises of employment and education for homeless children, training in basic job skills, and the chance for a better life. Reality is sadly different. Training? Yes—employers claim child is 'in training' for long years during which no wages at all are paid. Employment? Yes—as much as twenty hours a day in some cases. And education?" Li smiled sadly. "All most of these children learn is that if they do not work, they will not eat. And they learn that lesson very well. Illiterate, half-starved, separated from their families if they ever had any, they are utterly dependent on their employer's good will. Enslaved children are backbone of Kezdet economy."

"Child labor and slavery are both violations of Federation law," Rafik said. "Surely the law applies on Kezdet as elsewhere?"

Li's smile was infinitely sad. "Inspections are always announced in advance, to give factory owners time to hide children or pretend they are

only working in allowed roles such as carrying water and snacks to adult workers. Kezdet Guardians of the Peace are paid, what you say, under the console?"

"Under the table," Rafik supplied.

"Sometimes Child Labor League makes public some company's violation of law. But judges are also paid off. Small fine, company continues business as usual."

"It doesn't make sense," Calum protested.

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"Adult workers are stronger and do more. I'm sure conditions are terrible for the few children who have to work, but you make it sound as though they are the entire workforce."

"Kezdet has specialized in industries where children are especially useful," said Li. "In primitive mines, their small size is convenient. In glass factories, they can run faster than adults and calculate a path more intelligently than 'bots, bringing molten glass to blowers. Small nimble fingers are useful in match factories, where sulfur poisons them, and in carpet factories where children are crippled from hours of sitting in a cramped position and half-blinded from working in the dark. Adults," Li said dryly, "might protest such conditions. Children provide cheap, uncomplaining labor. And Kezdet industrialists too tight-fisted and short-sighted for kind of capital investment it would take to modernize industries and improve appalling conditions. Children do here what machines do in more civilized places—and is always cheaper to buy another batch of children from a labor contractor than would be to automate a factory. System perpetuates itself. And children



themselves are kept in perpetual slavery by system of financial juggling. Most bonded child laborers incapable of calculating 'debt' they owe for transportation to Kezdet and fee of contractor who brought them here. As legal fiction," he explained, "debt is owed by adult head of child's family, if such exists. Everyone knows debt is to be paid only by child—but cannot prosecute on basis of what 'everyone knows,' especially on Kezdet,

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where entire legal and peace-keeping system is corruptly in pay of factory owners. Meanwhile, employers cheat children in every possible way, charging food and clothing at ridiculous sums against their wages, docking for breakages, keeping high rate of interest on original debt. All bonded laborers hope someday will work off bond. Very few ever achieve that."

"I was lucky," said Pal. "I had a sister who won her freedom with a scholarship, then spent years working hardship posts on space stations and sending back every penny of her salary until Mercy and I were bought free as well."

"Success of Judit required brilliance, tenacity, and luck," Delszaki Li said. "First element of luck was that she was not sent to Kezdet until she was fourteen, when she and Pal and Mercy were orphaned by a war that left their home planet burdened with thousands of displaced children. She fell into barrios of Kezdet later than most, with good health, a basic scientific education, and—most important of all—knowledge that a better way of life was possible. But none of that would have saved her if she had not been an exceptionally brave and intelligent young woman."

"You don't need to tell me that," Gill rumbled. "Remind me to tell you sometime about the first time I met this girl."

"But for every Judit who escapes the Kezdet system are hundreds of children who do not escape. Too poor, too weak, too ignorant to fight..."

"But what happens when they grow up?" Rafik demanded.

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"Mostly," Pal said, "we don't. Grow up. What do you expect, with poor food, hellish conditions, no medical care? The healthiest and best-looking children are regularly bought from the labor contractors for city brothels, and even they don't last long there. The rest work until they get sick, and then they die. And the few who survive to adulthood are too weak to do much besides breed more children whom they can sell to the labor contractors for a pittance."

Calum looked about him at the luxurious furnishings of the room where they sat: windows of high-tech Kyllian solar glass, walls draped in sound-absorbing Theloi silk, an entire wall covered with shelves of expensive antique flatbooks. Delszaki Li intercepted and interpreted his glance.

"No, this is not paid for by labor of children," he said, "although you would be hard put to find another such house in all of Kezdet." He sighed. "This humble person was young and idealistic when inherited family holdings on Kezdet. Swore never to employ child labor or any bonded laborers. Have devoted a lifetime to demonstrating that is possible for businesses to flourish—even on Kezdet—without exploiting children. Experiment has gained me many enemies, but has had no other effect. In recent years have turned to more direct action. Child Labor League achieved some successes at first, but now has been made illegal by

order of Kezdet government, which has accused members of terrorist action." Li smiled. "This means, among other things, that contributions to the league not tax deductible."

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"It also means that his house is watched, his assistants questioned, and his projects ruined wherever the corrupt Guardians of the Peace can find out what he is doing," Pal put in.

"If this room is bugged," Rafik pointed out, "this entire conversation is extremely indiscreet."

"Is indiscreet anyway," Li said calmly, "but I have made decision to trust you. As for other listeners, I believe my off-planet technology is still better than their off-planet technology. Guardians of the Peace are just as cheap as any other group on Kezdet; they buy second-rate espionage equipment and have it copied in barrio factories where workers do not know what they are supposed to be doing and hence make many mistakes. . . . Actually, it is remarkable how many mistakes they make on contracts for Guardians of the Peace;

suspicious man might think someone were alerting them and suggesting subtle ways to sabotage equipment."

"I like the way this man thinks," Rafik announced.

"You would," Calum said, "he's almost as twisty as your Uncle Hafiz." He glanced at Li. "No offense intended, sir."

"If you are referring to Hafiz Harakamian," Li said, "no offense taken. He is brilliant man with admirably subtle mind. Your people sometimes find subtlety morally suspicious; mine do not."

"About the mines?" Gill prompted.

"Peaceful demonstration has failed," Li said.  
"Education efforts on Kezdet have been hampered by Guardians of the Peace, who destroy

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Acorna

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corn systems belonging to Child Labor League and break up schools established to teach bonded children how to read and calculate, so that they may know how much their employers are cheating them. Now I try third approach: direct action. Remove children from Kezdet. Only two problems: how to find children who have been well trained to hide from strangers, and what to do with them when found."

"Just two little problems, huh?" Rafik drawled.  
"You will solve second problem. Li consortium owns mineral rights to all three of Kezdet's moons, sold to me personally by stupid government officials who thought moons too expensive to mine. Not willing to make capital investment, train modern workers. Li consortium has plenty of capital. You three men have expertise. You will establish first lunar base city on primary satellite, Maganos. You three will train freed children to operate equipment. Judit will be head of school system and medical services. Children will work, but will also learn."

Gill blinked at the scale of the project presented in these few clipped words. "Mr. Li, I think you don't realize how many trained personnel it takes to run an efficient lunar mining base. We're contract miners, independents. We know how to

strip an asteroid and ship the separated metals where we'll get the most money for them. What you're proposing is a much bigger operation."

"I know that," Li replied. "You do not realize how many children are enslaved on Kezdet. I will supply personnel. You will train them."

"It's going to be extremely expensive," Calum warned. "Setting up shielded living quarters, importing equipment from other systems ... it could be years before you see any return on your investment."

Li waved his one working hand disdainfully. "Li consortium has capital. Initial return on investment will be lives saved. In fifty, maybe hundred years, will be fully working concern. Li descendants will be rich and happy. I will be dead, but will be one happy ancestor."

Rafik asked Li for the chance to sleep on the proposition and Li smiled, murmuring something erudite about prudent men. Pal was designated as guide for the men while Judit took charge of Acorna.

As the three miners watched their ward make her graceful way up the anachronistic flight of stairs to the second level of this amazing house, they each experienced a sense of moment.

"She's grown up ... all of a sudden," Calum said plaintively.

"She belongs in a place like this," Rafik remarked, beaming with pride at the look of her, courteously inclining her body to the shorter Judit and smiling at something said.

"She's grown out of us, that's for sure," Gill said with a sad sigh, and then focused his attention on Judit.

She ^o criei) when dhe thought we were ail oea0 ana gone. WhoVve thought it? They'd met so very briefly.

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He hoped Rafik and Calum would be willing to go along with Li's scheme. He'd have a lot more chance to be with Judit and he found he wanted that, suddenly, at his time of life. Well, he wasn't that old, after all was said and done. Time he gave a thought to settling down. Mining was a grand life when you were young, but it was isolating and he'd had enough of the females available for short-term liaisons. Would Judit mind that he'd played around a lot? He'd been careful: always insisted on seeing an up-to-date cert before he did anything.

"You're right on that count," Rafik said with a wistful expression on his face. Ah, well, they were due for a change.

Calum had entirely different thoughts, though they were centered on Acorna. They had managed to bring her to her species' maturity, or close to it. But they hadn't done -what they ought to have done a long time ago: found out who and •where her people were. Caring for her was one thing. He couldn't fault any of them on that, but they really should now, especially with the resources available to them if they picked up on what Li was suggesting, be able to employ the experts they needed—discreetly, of course—to find her home system. They owed her family that.

They owed her that. She was female and shouldn't be deprived of a mate because a proper member of her own species wasn't immediately available.

Pal showed them into a suite of rooms, three bedchambers off a spacious, beautifully furnished lounge, and each bedroom had its own bath facility.

"Boy! Have we come up in the world!" Calum said, pivoting on one heel with his arms wide open, taking in the luxurious appointments.

Pal smiled at such an ingenuous remark. "You are very welcome guests. I do hope that you can find it in your hearts and minds to forgive my actions, but perhaps you see why such cautions had to be taken."

"If Li's up against an entire planet, I suppose he's got to be doubly, triply careful," Rafik said as he settled himself into a wide chair that immediately conformed itself to him. "Hey, I can get to like this!"

Pal stepped to the nearest wall, pressed an ornate button, and a panel slid back to reveal not only a well-stocked bar but other supplies.

"In case you require sustenance or refreshment before the morning. In the meantime, I will wish you a comfortable night's rest. And if you have any requirements, speak into this grill and the house of Li will supply whatever you lack."

"I believe it could," Rafik said with a grin.

Pal left and closed the door quietly behind him.

"I think -we ought to ..."

"This is the chance of a lifetime ..."

"Be our own bosses ..."

They had spoken all at once and broke off, laughing. Gill and Calum found chairs, which they pulled closer to Rafik's semithrone so they could have a good natter about their amazing new-prospects.

"First," Rafik said, taking charge and ticking off the points he wanted to make, "I think we'd be

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stupid not to take Li up on the offer because we're not getting any younger and mining asteroids for huge corporations like Amalgamated is no longer the -wide-open, friendly game it used to be." The others nodded. "Exploiting the riches of a moon . . . and nonexploiting our employees at the same time . . . much less not having to -worry about what'll happen at our next port of call ... I wonder ..." Rafik paused, "... if Li can find out who else is after us and why."

"Whaddaya wanna bet that's already being handled?" Calum said. "But, look, fellas—"

"Look, there must be hundreds of techies and experienced men who're as cheesed off with Amalgamated as we are. We take our pick of good men to start this project up: builders, engineers, environmentalists, medics ..." Gill's eyes gleamed with such rosy prospects. "We could hold out for the best there is."

"Not to mention the fair Judit." Rafik shot a sideways look at Gill, -who blushed to the beard and beneath.

"Now..."



"Ease off. Gill," Calum said, holding up his hands between them. "Before we get our heads all warped with plans, there's one other thing we have to do."

"What?" They both turned on him in surprise.

"Find out where Acorna comes from. We ought to have done something about that a long time ago."

"Yeah, when we've had so much free time," Rafik began, and then stopped. "That kind of search could take a lifetime."

"Not if Li will let us hire a metallurgic specialist and get us the spectroanalyses of primaries."

"All of them?" Even Rafik goggled at that.

"Naw, we can narrow it down," Calum said. "She hadn't been in that pod very long—the oxygen supply wasn't down by as much as half—"

"But she could have kept it clean," Gill put in.

"It took a few weeks to do ours, remember," Calum said. "Any way, we go back to the old 'Azelnut group and use the evaluation of primaries in that area, -widening the search. She can't have been from that far away. Besides -which, I'll bet anything that some of her people visited Earth, or that sort of a legend wouldn't have grown."

Gill frowned at him and -waved his hand in dismissal of the idea.

"Now, -wait a minute, Gill," Rafik said, holding up one finger. "A lot of those old legends did have bases in fact -when modern science took a look at them. There's no reason Acorna's people didn't start that one. Just remember how beautifully that escape pod ... a mere escape pod . . . was

designed. They've been in space a lot longer than we have."

Gill stroked his beard. "Yeah, I guess it's possible."

"That would be a real coup," Rafik said.

"Furthermore," and he settled back into his chair, locking his hands behind his head as he stretched out, "I think Li -would really go for the research."

"At least he's respectful of Acorna," Gill said. "Not like others I could name," and he shot a glance at Rafik.

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"Or that awful surgeon -who was going to remove the 'disfigurement,'" said Calum, who had never forgotten his outrage over that and by what a slim margin they had saved her. If they'd been just a fraction of a moment later ... he shook himself.

"So we broach that tomorrow, too?" Rafik asked.

"Look, let's get an idea of what we're going to need)," Gill said, "draw up a plan of attack—"

"A visit to the moon?" Rafik put in, grinning.

"Among other things." Gill was opening cupboards to find out where the computer terminal was hidden.

Rafik removed one hand from behind his head and laid it on the edge of the table beside him. It lifted and exposed a state-of-the-art system that made him sit up and whistle. He rolled the chair around the corner of the table, toggled it on, and

raised his hands over the keypads.

"Okay, what's first?"

When they had revised their order of the priorities half a dozen times and finally reached one they could all agree (mostly) on, which did include a visit to the moons, which headhunter to contact for the most essential personnel, and what Calum would require for his search, they did "sleep" on it.

Wake up, Jana!" Somebody  
was shaking her, dragging  
Jana out of the lovely second

sleep she'd fallen into after she woke at dawn and Siri Teku didn't come. The sleep shed door was locked and nobody brought them food, so Jana went back to sleep so she wouldn't think about how hungry she •was.

Kheti's face was gray with fear. Jana'd never seen her like that, not even that real bad time when Siri Teku got so drunk he was seeing demons here Above and started whipping all the kids, screaming that he would drive Old Black and the Piper out of them. Kheti'd kept her head then, helping the little kids to scramble into hiding places, making Buddhe and Faiz throw rocks to distract Siri Teku until they all got out of reach, keeping them safe until the gangmaster threw up and fell down on the ground to sleep it off. She'd taken a lash across the face that would mark her

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for life, but she hadn't been frozen by fear the -way she was now.

"I got to get out of sight," she whispered. "I'm too big now, she'll take me for sure." She tugged her ragged kameez up, trying to bunch it up over her chest where she was bumpy now, but there wasn't enough fabric to cover her top and bottom, too. Buddha snickered and pinched her on the butt, and Faiz yelled that he could see some hair that wasn't on her head.

"Who'll take you?" Jana demanded.

"Didn't you hear the whispers? Didi Badini's coming."

DQi meant big sister. "Your family?" But why wouldn't Khetala want to go with her sister? Nobody's family ever came for a kid. Only the real little ones, like Chiura, even thought it would happen.

Khetala tried to laugh. It came out like a grinding fall of rocks.

"Oh, Didi Badini's everybody's big sister, didn't you know? Piper sends her at night to take the pretty little kids, boys and girls both, and the girls that're getting too big to be draggers, like Surya . . . didn't you ever wonder what happened to Surya?"

"She worked out her bond," Jana said slowly. "She went home. Didn't she?"

Khetala laughed again. "Don't you know anything? Nobody ever works out their bond. Does Siri Teku ever show you how much you owe, how much you're earning, how much he takes out for your keep?"

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Jana hung her head. "I don't know my num-

bers so good."

"Well, I do," Khetala said, "and the first time I asked to see my records, he knocked me across the shed." The color was coming back to her face now, her eyes were sparkling; she loved to instruct people. "The second time, he said I'd have to come to his room, he kept the datacubes there. Huh! He didn't even have a reader. Had somethm' else he wanted to show me, though. So I know all about what Didi Badini's coming for."

"You said she comes at night. It's not night."

"I can't help that. Dunno why she's coming in the daytime this time, but I heard the whispers. Besides, why else would Siri Teku keep us locked in here? Missing a half day's shift "work, we are."

Khetala's fear was infecting Jana, but she didn't want to show it. She yawned and turned over on her side.

"So what? Me, I get a chance to sleep, I'll take it. ... Besides, whatever Didi Badini wants kids for, can't be worse than this place."

"Can't it? She works for the Piper, dummy."

"Piper's a story to scare kids down Below." Or maybe not. But they were Above now, even if they had been locked in the sleep shed since before dawn. They were in Sita Ram's realm of sky and sun. Piper couldn't have power here.

"Piper's real, and he takes kids to the bonk-shops in the city. You catch worse things than chest-cough that way, too. You get the burnies, and the scale, and if they don't kill you by doing it to you too much, then your nose falls off and your

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crotch rots and they throw you out on the street to beg."

"How do you know all that? "

"I know what Siri Teku did to me in his room," Khetala said, "and I got away from Ram Dal a couple of times when he wanted to do the same. And I been in the city, too, before my mum died and her boyfriend sold me here. You can see the beggars all over the place . . . and pictures of kids outside the bonk-shops. Why do you think she takes the prettiest kids? And Siri Teku and the other gangmasters, when a girl gets too tall to drag, they practic'ly give her to Didi Badini . . . and I'm going to be tall. You'll be okay for a while, Jana, you've been living on parts and bean paste since you were a baby, you'll always be a little shrimp. Me, I had eleven years of good food and standing up straight before I came here. I've got big bones. I won't be able to drag much longer. You know that."

Jana nodded slowly. Sometimes Kheti got stuck in the narrowest tunnels, the ones leading to Face Three. That was one reason she usually worked Five now. And if she grew much more, she -wouldn't be able to get through the low pitch on the tunnel from Five.

"You're not pretty, though," she said slowly.  
"Not since ..."

Kheti rubbed the pink weal that crossed her right cheek.

"I know. But I'm big. That's bad enough. If I thought gettin' my face messed up would keep Didi Badini from takin' me, I'd go stand by the compres-

sor and let the flying chips cut me to pieces. But that won't make me small again."

A new fear struck Jana. "Chiura!" Her face was burning up, but her hands felt icy cold. "She wouldn't take ..."

"I reckon that's why Siri Teku didn't clip her curls," Khetala said. "He never figured to train her for a sorter. She's a little sweetcake of a kid, specially the way you been keeping her washed and her hair combed so good. He figured it was worth feeding her for a few weeks, then sell her to Didi Badini. He'll make lots of creds off that one. He won't get much for me though. Maybe if I can keep out of sight..."

Jana didn't hear the rest. She darted to where Chiura was playing with a pile of cast-off rocks and snatched her up, ignoring the baby's wails of protest.

"Come on, sweetcake. We got to get you fixed up good for the visitors. Faiz, give me your knife."

Faiz rolled his eyes. "Who me? Got no knife, got nothing."

"I seen you stroppin' that bit of steel," Jana said. "Give it here. You can have it back when I'm through."

"You going crazy," Faiz said. "Old Black eating your brain."

But he fumbled in his pallet and came up with a thin band of metal, gleaming sharp along one edge and rusty dull on the other.

Chiura cried when Jana pulled her hair to hack off the curls, and she'd only got one side of the kid's head when they heard steps outside.

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"Sita Ram, help me!"

Jana rubbed her hands in the dirt and smeared it over Chiura's face. The tears and snot mixed with the dirt until Chiura's round little face looked truly revolting. Jana rubbed some more dirt into the long ringlets she hadn't had time to cut, spat on the dusty hair and patted it into muddy strings that hung down over the side of Chiura's face. That was good—she looked almost ugly now, probably worse than if Jana'd had time to finish cutting her hair. She tossed the knife back toward Faiz and pushed Chiura into a corner.

"You sit there and don 't make a noiie!" she hissed at Chiura.

The little girl pulled her knees up and sat rocking back and forth, eyes wide- She was probably scared to death that "Mama Jana" had been so rough with her. All the better, if it would keep her quiet.

"I'll give you a honey sweet when they're gone," Jana whispered, though she had no idea where she'd get one. "Just keep quiet now, Chiura, sweetcake, you don't want them to notice you." She squatted in front of Chiura, shielding her with her body.

There was a clanking noise —that would be Siri Teku unlocking the door. Then light flooded in. It was full day. Jana felt a cold sweat of fear over her body. She didn't want to believe in Kheti's panic, but Siri Teku had to have some good reason for wasting all this work time. Time was credits, he always said, and here he'd lost a lot of time



keeping them in the shed—how much she hadn't realized until the door opened and she saw all that

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light. The golden rectangle of the open doorway hurt her eyes; she had been working day shift so long she couldn't remember when she'd last seen so much sunlight. It had to be something big to make it worth his losing all those hours at work. Just for a moment she believed all Kheti's horror tales about Didi Badini, and more, too.

The man and woman who followed Siri Teku into the shed didn't look evil, though. The man was a pinch-faced little gray fellow, no fangs or nothing, so Jana reckoned he couldn't be the Piper. And she didn't have much attention to spare for him after she caught sight of the woman. She was the most beautiful thing Jana had seen since she'd been brought to Anyag as a bondchild. To begin with she was clean, with no dust dulling the sheen of her smooth brown skin. And instead of being skinny and bony, she was plump and solid. And her clothes! The kameez was all pink and gold, and it was made of something so light and gauzy that it seemed to float over her body and caress her full curves like a cloud of butterflies;

below the gold-embroidered hem of the kameez Jana could see the cuffs of deep pink shalwar, half hidden under gold anklets. Without meaning to, Jana made a small sound of longing and reached out, then snatched her hand back. She wanted to feel the fine stuff of the kameez, but she'd get it dirty. She was just a dirty little girl of the mines and Siri Teku would beat her if she messed up this fine lady. Maybe d he'll take me, Jana thought, anS I'll wear ^ilk. shalwar unSer my kameez an.3 eat every i)ay am)...

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Didi Badin's eyes met Jana's for a moment.  
The eyes were not beautiful like the rest of her;

they -were cold and dark and hard, as if Old Black had sneaked up Above to look through the beautiful lady's face. And when she saw the eyes, Jana remembered seeing Didi Badini before. Only she'd thought it -was a dream. She'd come at night last time, inspecting the children by lamplight. Jana had rolled over and buried her head in her pallet, too tired to care about the dream-people talking and moving the lamp; in the morning

Surya had been gone.

"Too skinny, too plain," Didi Badini said now to Siri Teku. "If that's your best, you're wasting my time."

"I've a big girl here, getting too big to drag the tunnels. Where's Khetala?" Siri Teku demanded of the children.

Jana hadn't noticed where Khetala had gone, she'd been too busy with Chiura. But Israr's eyes flicked toward the corner farthest from the door, where several pallets of rags seemed to have been heaped up together, and simple Lata said, "She's playing hidey, but I saw her."

Siri Teku kicked the pallets with all his force. Something gasped. He reached into the heap of rags, fumbled for a moment, and pulled out

Khetala by one arm.

"She won't want me," Khetala sobbed. "I'm too

ugly. Look!" She stood in the sun and turned her face up so that the pink weal crossing one cheek showed.

"Mmm," said Didi Badini. "Stand still, girl."

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She ran one hand over Khetala's chest, felt her buttocks, and reached in between her legs. "Marked and used," she said "And no more use here, as you said yourself. I'll take her as a favor."

"She still owes on her bond," Siri Teku said.

Didi Badini looked amused. "Don't they all?"

She and Siri Teku haggled for a moment and agreed on a sum in credits that left Jana gasping.

"No! I won't go!"

Siri Teku had let go of Khetala to wave both his hands during the bargaining; now she ducked between the adults and made for the door. Didi Badini's fat brown arm flashed out, quick as a snake, and caught the fat braid of dark hair that hung down Kheti's back. Kheti hit the floor on her knees, only the hand on her braid holding her upright.

"Please," she sobbed. "I'm ugly, see, you don't want me."

Didi Badini's smile was full of Old Black. "Some of my clients like them that way," she told Kheti. "You'll have more marks soon enough." She nodded at Siri Teku. "Put the fight out of her. I'm not wrestling a screaming cat all the way back to Celtalan."

Siri Teku casually punched Kheti on the side of the head. Her head bobbed limply from the braid that Didi Badini still held. He hit her again and her whole body hung limp. Didi Badini let go the braid and Kheti fell onto the mud floor. Siri Teku slung her over his shoulder and carried her out the door.

"That is not what I came here to see," the gray

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man said in a voice like dry leaves blowing in the  
•winter -wind.

"Your mister told me there was something worth coming here for," Oidi Badini said to the rest of the children. "Where is it? A pretty child, he said, something really special, and too young to be worth training for -work."

Jana looked at the floor. Maybe if she didn't look up, if she didn't see Old Black peeping out of Didi Badini's eyes, maybe the woman wouldn't see her and -wouldn't question the way she was crouched awkwardly in front of the corner where Chiura sat.

"Was it you he meant?" Didi Badini tipped up Faiz's head with one finger under his chin. "Sweet brown eyes, but the teeth are hopeless and you look old enough to be a good worker. Not you." She moved on to Lata, who looked up with a vacant smile and tried to focus her one good eye on Didi Badini. "If he meant this one, he's wasting my time." Her chubby brown feet moved on with a tinkling of the little gold bells that were attached to her golden sandal straps, until she stood in front of Jana. "Look at me, child 1"

The sweet cloud of perfume that wafted from the folds of Didi Badini's kameez almost choked Jana, it was too much, too sweet.

"Nice," said a little voice behind her. "Pretty."

"Ahhh," Didi Badini breathed on a long satisfied sigh. She bent and took Jana by the nape of the neck. Her fingers were surprisingly hard and strong; she threw Jana onto her side without even breathing hard. "So this is the prize."

"Pretty lady," Chiura said, looking up. She grasped Didi Badini's kameez with muddy fingers.

"A lovely child, indeed, if she were clean."

"No," Jana gasped, coming up to her knees and pushing Chiura back. "No, lady, you don't want her, she's simple, and sick already, she's got a bad sickness, she'll make you sick, too." If only Kheti were there, Kheti who knew so many words and knew all about the city! She'd be able to think of a good story. But Kheti was gone, head lolling against Siri Teku's back, sold to the pretty lady with Old Black in her eyes and her smile.

"Don't talk nonsense, girl." Didi Badini slapped Jana aside with a backhanded blow. Her hands were covered with rings; the ornate settings cut Jana's cheek. "I suppose you're the one who tried to make her ugly? A right mess you've made of her, too, half cutting her hair and all that mud. But I can still tell she'll clean up fine. You come with Didi Badini, little one," she crooned to Chiura. "Come and live in the city, sleep on silk and have sorbet to drink every day."

Chiura lifted her muddy arms to Didi Badini, then looked over her shoulder. "Mama Jana? "

"Your mister will take care of Mama Jana,"

Didi Badini said. "She's not coming with us. Not this time." The cold black eyes flicked a scornful glance over Jana, sitting on the mud with blood running down her grimy face. "Maybe the mister will give her away when she gets too big for a dragger."

"No. Don't take her. Please," Jana begged. Siri Teku had come back in; she clasped his knees.

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"I'm teaching her to sort, she'll be a good worker, I'll take care of her, she won't be any trouble."

Siri Teku kicked Jana away. His boot landed in her stomach and knocked the air out of her. She lay on the floor and listened to her own breath whistling like something far away and unimportant, while Chiura babbled in Didi Badini's arms and somebody counted out credits. Then Didi Badini and the silent gray man were gone with Chiura. And Siri Teku had raised his cane.

"I'll teach you to try and hide my stock," he said before the first blow landed, burning across Jana's chest.

There was something about waking up on a planet that always excited Acorna. Maybe it was the flavor of the air: not dead-pure as on the ship, but mixed with an infinite variety of scents and the tantalizing hint of exotic goodies to eat—tender new leaves, sweet crunchy roots, hectares of grass blowing in the wind instead of the carefully tended blades grown for her in the ship's 'ponies system.

This morning she woke with her head filled with vague dream-images of a sunny garden full of flowering shrubs and the music of trickling streams . . . and another music, too, from little animals that danced in the treetops and sang in sweet harmony. Was that a real place, or something she had concocted in her dream? The images were so strong, she could almost imagine they were a true memory of something she had seen when she -was a child. A long, long time ago, because she'd been

quite small in the dream/memory . . . before Nered, before Greifen, before Theloi, even before Laboue . . . hadn't there been a garden where the grass was soft and blue-green, and a pair of arms that held her up to see the singing-fuzzies? But when she tried to chase down the elusive memory, it vanished like a bubble on the water, leaving her with only the feeling that nice things happened on planets if you went for a walk in the early morning.

There was some vague discomfort and guilt associated with the clearer memory of the gardens on Laboue with their singing stones, though. Hadn't Rafik and Calum and Gill been angry with her for going out? Oh, yes—she had forgotten to wear those robes that were supposed to cover up her horn. Well, she'd been a silly baby then. She was grown up now. They'd said so last night. And she certainly knew better than to make that mistake again!

Feeling quite proud of her forethought, Acorna donned not only the clinging body wrap and long skirt Gill now insisted she wear, but also a scarf of filmy green to match the skirt which could be draped casually across her head so that instead of a horn, she seemed only to have a bouffant hair style from which a few silver curls escaped. Thus fully prepared, she slipped out of the mansion where they'd been brought by skimmer and prepared to explore Kezdet's capital city of Celtalan

in her own way, by walking.

The restricted life of a mining ship left Acorna with few chances to stretch her long legs. She

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•worked out daily in the ship's exercise room—exercise closet was more like it, she thought, admiring the broad open spaces before her—but it wasn't the same as having a good run on nice hard-packed dirt.

Not that the immediate prospect from Delszaki Li's house offered any good opportunities for a run. Already, early though it -was, the open space between rows of town houses was filled with people in skimmers darting back and forth on urgent errands. They flew low, obviously not expecting to have to dodge pedestrians, and Acorna prudently kept to the narrow stone-covered strip just alongside the houses. She congratulated herself on her intelligence and forethought in keeping away from the skimmers. Gill and the others were all wrong when they said she didn't know how to take care of herself dirtside. True, she'd never been alone on a planet before. She'd gone out only on those carefully chaperoned shopping trips where they stopped to sell their payloads. But how dangerous could it be? This wasn't like EVA from the Uhuru, where a slight mistake could leave you without air to breathe or send you spinning dizzily away from the ship into space. Planets were e<uy; they had gravity and atmosphere. What more did she need?

But this part of this planet was boring—row



after row of faceless walled houses with metallic grills across their windows, and the only people awake -were locked away in their skimmers and darted past her with no chance for interesting conversations. Acorna raised her head, looking to the horizon for something more amusing, and her

sensitive nostrils caught a -whiff of something green and growing not too far away. She followed the scent along stone pedestrian strips, her feet clacking on the smooth-worked stone, until she reached its source.

Though Acorna did not know it, the Riverwalk was Celtalan's glory of city planning—at its western end—and its shame at the eastern end, where the river that gave the park its name had long been allowed to degenerate into a polluted, half-choked stream. She entered by the arches cut through hedgerows on the -western side of Celtalan, where everything -was neatly manicured and controlled to a fare-thee-well. The view through the first arch gave the illusion of spacious countryside with rolling hills; it was only after Acorna had walked through the entrance-way that she realized how clever landscaping and tricks of perspective had made this park surrounded by city buildings seem so much larger than it really was. Little streams (carefully purified before they -were guided into their pre-formed channels) trickled over miniature waterfalls of moss-covered boulders; half-size gazebos and follies, perched atop grassy mounds, gave the illusion that one was looking down vistas of limitless space laid out by a landscape architect of infinite means. Acorna beguiled half an hour in a flowering maze before the sweet smell of the fresh green buds next to the flowers became unbearably tempting. Rafik and Gill had impressed upon her strongly that it -was considered a social faux pas to eat other people's gar-

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dens. If she went back to the big house, that nice Mr. Li would probably find her something she could eat. But she wasn't tired yet, and at the far side of the maze she could see that the careful landscaping of the Riverwalk began to degenerate into something wilder and less carefully manicured. Instead of the gravel path that hurt her feet, there was a path of hard-packed earth, a perfect surface for running on. . . . Acorna glanced around, saw no other early risers who might be surprised or offended by her actions, and carefully kilted up her long flowing skirts to above her knees. After all, she assuaged her conscience, she had only promised Gill that she would wear the skirt; she was still doing that,

wasn't she?

Two Kezdet Guardians of the Peace, observing

the park from overhead scanners, saw the tall girl take off at a galloping run down the dirt path that led to the river on the eastern edge of the Riverwalk Park. They shrugged and continued sipping their morning kava. Most members of the wealthy technoclass -who inhabited the west-side mansions knew better than to go anywhere east of the river without an armored skimmer and armed bodyguards. Doubtless this girl would turn back before she reached the river bridge. And if she didn't—well, there might be a reward in it for them if they got her out of trouble and saw her safely home. Before she got into trouble, there was no reason to bestir themselves.

Pounding down the dirt path, her horn-covered feet landing solidly on the earth, Acorna

felt more alive than she could ever remember. Some atavistic instinct deep inside her told her that thm was what she was born for—not the sterile confines of a ship, but long glorious runs up grassy slopes and down the other side, effortless leaps over the ragged brambles that impeded her way after she left the path, the morning breeze blowing through her tangled curls. The blood throbbed in her veins and she increased her speed until she felt as though she were flying over the grass and bushes, flying down a long weed-infested downhill slope. . . .

The same instincts that had urged her into a run saved her from a fall into the stinking river at the bottom of the slope. Without consciously thinking about the obstacle, she shortened stride, collected her balance, and launched herself from the bank in a long, glorious arc that carried her safely over the ten-foot expanse of stinking, gray-green water.

On the far bank the park ended abruptly and the expanses of pavement resumed, but with a difference. Instead of long regular rows of tall, faceless houses there were clusters of humbler dwellings, with dirt paths winding off between the buildings. Instead of businessmen in skimmers, the main road was full of people: stalls and carts selling bangles and snacks and fruit and vegetables, a knife grinder squatting in the corner made by two mud walls, a huddle of street urchins playing some game that involved mad rushes in pursuit of something Acorna couldn't quite see. She grinned happily. This was interesting. She would explore a

little, get an apple or some other snack from one of these stalls, and be back at the house before anybody else woke up.

Overhead, in the scanner tower, one of the Guardians of the Peace nudged the other one.  
"D'you see that?"

"See what?"

"That girl. She jumped the river!"

"You've been burning too many happy-sticks," grunted his partner. "River may be down to a miserable trickle, but it's still too wide to jump. Besides, why would anybody take the risk of falling in there when there's a perfectly good bridge upstream?"

"Maybe she didn't want to detour. Maybe she didn't want to explain her business to the bridge guards. This could be interesting. Let's take out a skimmer and follow her."

The fried meat pies being hawked from the first rolling stall didn't appeal to Acorna, but the second wagon held a tempting display of fruits and vegetables . . . rather more tempting from a distance, she realized with regret, than on closer inspection. The apples were soft and wrinkled, the madi-fruits covered with brownish spots.

"Do you not have anything fresh?" she demanded of the owner.

"All fresh, gracious lady, picked just this morning from my cousin's farm."

"Huh!" the meat pie seller grunted, just audibly,

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"just fell off the back of your cousin's skimmer, more likely."

Acorna did not wish to get embroiled in the men's bickering. She pointed at random to a cluster of ruta roots. They looked slightly limp, but ruta aged well, and they'd be something to nibble on while she walked back through the park. She tasted one -while the stall-keeper wrapped the others in a scrap of plastifilm for her; the insides, at least, were still sweet and crunchy.

"That'll be five credits," the stall-keeper said, holding out the package.

From the way his neighbor's eyebrows shot up, Acorna guessed that she -was being charged at least double the going rate for a bundle of slightly overage rutas. But that wasn't important. What WOJ important was that this blasted skirt had no pockets, and she hadn't been thinking of money when she left the house that morning.

"Charge it to the account of my guardian, Delszaki Li," she said.

The stall-keeper's face turned ugly. "Look, techie, we don't run charge accounts this side of the river. Credits in hand is my rule."

"Then keep the rutas," Acorna said, "they weren't that fresh anyway."

"You'll pay me for the one you've eaten! I

been robbed already once this morning by one of them thieving street brats, I'm not having some techie come along and make a free meal off my stall on pretense of sampling the goods!"

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"Hey, Punja, we got the little thief for you!" called one of the street urchins whose game Acorna had noticed just before she inspected the stall.

Now, with a sinking heart, she realized that the quarry in their "game" was not a youngling from their group, but a much smaller child, bruised and bleeding from a cut lip, who struggled madly as the larger boys hauled her bodily toward the stall.

"And a lot of help that is," Punja snarled, "you can tell by looking that she hasn't a clipped credit to pay me back."

"What did the child take?" Acorna interrupted.

"Three of me best madi-fruits. Gobbled them down on the run, she did. I suppose you'll be wanting that placed to the account of your guardian, too, will you?" the man asked Acorna with heavy sarcasm.

"You could give us a reward for catchin' her," one of the boys holding the child grumbled.

"What good's it to me that you caught the brat? You can give her a good beatin' if you like, teach her not to steal from respectable merchants," Punja suggested. "That should be

enough reward for you. Have a little fun before you turn her loose."

The boy's heavy-browed face lit up with an expression of sickening glee, and he slammed a fist into the child's stomach before Punja had finished speaking.

"That's just for starters," he told the gasping, white-faced child. "Now you can come along wif

me and me mates and see if you haven't got something to pay us back for our effort."

"Scrawnier'n a bondworker," one of his pals demurred.

"But free," the first boy pointed out, "or did you suddenly get rich enough to patronize a bonk-shop, huh? Now me, I'm ..."

He never got a chance to finish articulating his philosophy of life. All that had delayed Acorna's intervention was the need to tuck her flowing skirt farther out of the way. Now she executed another leap from her perfectly balanced standing position, came down with one foot on the first boy's stomach and swung the other to crunch into his mate's nose. Rather pleased with the results of her self-defense classes with Calum, she recovered her balance and pulled the starving child up by one wrist while the rest of the gang of boys, seeing what had happened to their biggest and strongest members, melted away into the network of dirt paths behind the main thoroughfare.

"You," she told the child, "had much better come with me. No one shall beat you again."

The child struggled feebly and tried to pull away from Acorna's hand.

A skimmer settled in the dusty roadway, and two uniformed Guardians emerged.

"What's all this?" the first one out demanded.

A chorus of voices informed him, variously, that the girl was a techie out to make trouble on the wrong side of the river; that the child was a thief and ought to be bonded to honest labor; that

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the girl -was a foreigner who had viciously attacked two innocent boys who just happened to be standing by the stall.

"And who's to pay for the damage to my stock?" wailed the stall-keeper, virtuously holding up a handful of bruised fruit which he reckoned he could blame on Acorna's part in the brief fra-

cas.

"My guardian, Delszaki Li, will cover all charges," Acorna said.

"Aye, she keeps naming Li, as if she thought the sound of his name would carry all before!" said the stall-keeper virtuously. "Y'ask me, she ought to be confronted -with Li himself. If, as is no more than I suspect, she's lying, he'll know how to deal with impostors. Why don't you make her go there now?"

"I should like nothing better," declared Acorna, "but this little girl comes with me!"



"You'd best be telling the truth," one of the Guardians warned her, "Kezdet doesn't treat impostors and thieves lightly. Maybe you'd rather step off with me and we'll . . . ahh . . . see if we can't work something out, hmm?" He eyed the long shapely legs, which were by now almost fully exposed by the way Acorna had tucked up her skirts for battle. Strange kind of furry stockings the girl wore under her skirts . . . some new techie fashion, no doubt. Never mind, he'd soon have those off her.

"Not without me, you don't go nowhere!" the stall-keeper interrupted. "I got a right to me damages."

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Acorna's prompt willingness to call on Delszaki Li had given him second thoughts. If the girl w(U telling the truth, he should be able to get more "damages" out of Li than his entire stall -was worth; Li was far beyond the need to count credits when appeasing a poor man.

No one had yet missed Acorna when the two Guardians of the Peace brought her back to the Li mansion, one holding Acorna's left elbow firmly in his right hand, while she supported the waif against her "with her right arm, Punja dancing behind this quartet. None of the street children had been able to keep up with the skimmer as it set about on its lawful errand, but they followed as far as they could: right up to the rancid water.

"Jeesh, how'd she get across this?" the leader of the group wanted to know. "She dint come by the bridge, like."

One of Delszaki's many discreet servants peered through the spy hole before exclaiming and calling for the nearest girl to summon the master.

Trouble was on the doorstep. Then he flung the door open, kowtowing before Acorna until his nose nearly touched his knees.

"Missy, missy, why are you here? You have not

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arisen from your bed as yet," he said, bobbing in his consternation.

"Will you please inform Mr. Li that I am here and not in my bed and need him. If he is in his bed, I am truly sorry to disturb him ..."

Pal and Judit came down the massive stairway as if it had turned into a slide.

"Acorna!" cried Judit, and then exclaimed more loudly when she saw the bedraggled girl Acorna was protecting.

"Mr. Li is on his way this very moment, Guardians," Pal said, gesturing for them to enter. "If you will be so good as to step inside. ..." and, with a very deft push of his rear against the front door. Pal closed it right in the stall-keeper's face.

Oblivious to the howls outside and imprecations which could be heard, if muted, through the thick panels of the door. Pal courteously guided the Guardians of the Peace, who were exchanging bemused and gratified glances, while Acorna was trying to get the child's arms from around her neck so that Judit could take charge. The child was moaning and weeping in the desperate way of her age: all the more effective since such "lost" noises demonstrated that she had been bereft of comfort for long enough not to expect any to come her way.

"You know this . . . this . . . person," the first Guardian said, for by now the kerchief on

Acorna's head had been pulled off and the distinctive horn was visible.

"Of course we know her," Pal said so stoutly that both raised hands in defense of their query.

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"She is the Lady Acorna, beloved ward of Mr. Delszaki Li, who is surely known to the Bureau of Guardians ..."

"Indeed he is, and very generous he is to our retirement and the vacation funds," the second man said, bobbing not unlike the doorman but not as deeply, as much because he couldn't have folded his paunch as because Guardians are not supposed to show respect to any but their superi-

ors.

"Are you all right, Acorna?" Pal asked, taking her by the arm and leading her to the nearest chair. She looked very shaky indeed to him. "Where did you go? Why have they brought you back?" he whispered.

"I wanted to run on the grass," she said in a very tiny voice.

Just then Rafik, Calum, and Gill entered the room, having obviously thrown on the nearest clothes to hand.

"Now, Guardians, just what is the problem?"  
"Well, the . . . the . . . female there . . . said she •was Mr. Li's ward and she got into a bit of a spot,

so -we thought we'd better check it out."

"You mean, you did not believe the word of a gently bred girl who is obviously well dressed and clearly not the sort of person who gets into spots?" Rafik said, but the look he shot Acorna indicated to her, at least, that he 'was going to have a few

choice words with her.

She got very interested in brushing the dirt off her hands and then her arms. She could do little about the stains on her lovely skirt right now, but

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she did straighten her head covering. Not that it mattered.

Delszaki Li appeared in his hover-chair, and so the reception room became quite cramped.

"Now, Acorna, my dear, why did you go out without someone to escort you wherever you wished to go?" He turned to the Guardians. "Cordonmaster Flik and Constable Grez, what seems to be the trouble?"

In the background, someone "was kicking the door steadily. To the rhythm of the blows, Cordonmaster Flik, who was extremely gratified to realize that Mr. Li knew both his name and that of his partner, explained the circumstances. Since the cameras on the exterior of the house had taken pics of the two Guardians and their identities had been verified by Central Guard Headquarters, the knowledge surprised only the two Guardians.

The matter was shortly resolved and Punja paid exactly what his merchandise was worth—and the look given him by Pal as he handed over the half credits made Punja very certain that this

was not the person to haggle with—and sent his way. A junior servant very quickly appeared to remove the scuff marks of Punja's plastic shoes on the fine wood of the door so that when the Guardians, invited to have some refreshment, left, there was no mark remaining of the morning's fuss. They also left with sufficient credits, yet not too many, to ensure that the incident would be "suitably" reported in their log as a "lost child returned to her home."

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"Whatever possessed you, Acorna?" Rafik demanded •when the Guardians had been sent on their •way, well, but not overly, paid for their rescue •work.

"I -wanted to run on the beautiful grass," she said, gulping back a sob.

"Now, now." Judit was back and slid into the seat beside her. "It's all right, dear. No one is mad at you. Just terribly upset that you had such a fright."

"I -wasn't exactly frightened," Acorna said, raising her delicate chin, her eyes slits of remorse, "I •was furious to see a little child beaten like that for taking damaged fruit." She had clenched her fists and brought them down so hard on her knees that Calum •winced. "Where is she? She was so terribly frightened and hurt and hungry."

"She's fine, dear," Judit said. "She's being fed, carefully, because she hasn't had any food in quite a few days and to eat too much would be unwise. Then we shall bathe her and make sure she sleeps. Although," and Judit's delightful laugh eased the tension in the room, "I have a suspicion that once her tummy is full, she •will fall asleep before we

can clean her up."

"So why did you go out? Why so early? Didn't you know how dangerous it is out there?" Calum demanded. He turned to the rest of them. "She's not JtupQ; I've never seen anybody pick up the basic concept of Fourier transforms so fast. I can't understand why she would do such a stupid thing."

"How would she know Kezdet could be danger-

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ous?" Gill leapt to her defense. "She's never been planetside for more than a day or two, and always •with one of us."

"The park was beautiful," Acorna said. "It was like the one in my dreams. ..." She realized that was a lame excuse. But maybe no one would realize that the park was so far from the house that she couldn't have known about it when she ventured out.

"Your dreams?" asked Mr. Li in a coaxing voice and waved Rafik and the others away. "You men, stop harassing the child. Will make her more afraid of you than of Kezdet!" While Calum and the other men took the seats he indicated at a good distance from Acorna, he turned his attention back to her. "Tell me about these dreams . . . while Judit fixes you a refreshing drink. I think you may need one."

Acorna sipped something cool and green and tangy and then told him about the dream, and how the park had seemed so like it.

"At least the first part of the park -where it was truly lovely," she said, ending lamely.

"No, -we will not try regression, Mr. Li," Judit said suddenly. "The method produces enough problems -with cortices we are beginning to understand."

"It was but a thought."

"I think her . . . adventure, though, has proven a thing or two to the others," Judit said, smiling at her employer.

"Has it. Well, that is advantage then," and he leaned over to pat Acorna's arm, below the mud.

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"No action -without some profit, if the eye can see it. You rest now, later we talk again."

Acorna stood. "I am very sorry for any trouble

I caused."

"Must make errors in order to learn," Mr. Li said understandingly and pulled his hover-chair

aside so she could leave the room.

"Do you need any assistance, Acorna?" Judit

asked gently.

She shook her head. Distress still narrowed her

pupils to vertical slits. "I must think. It is sad ... I have never seen such terribly poor people."

The two watched her make her way in slow

repentant steps up the stairs and to her quarters.

"Reality has touched Acorna," Delszaki said with a heavy sigh of regret.

"Kl-liiu must know of reality, sir," Judit said as gently as she had spoken to Acorna.

"A rude awakening," and he sighed again.

"She had healed the child," Judit added. "I hope that the Guardians of the Peace did not notice."

"They have been taken care of," Delszaki said.

"Their interest has been redirected into useful paths."

"So what is next to be done?"

"Meet with the miners and discuss the Moon Project and this dream world of Acorna's."

It was Delszaki who noticed that Rafik and Gill did most of the talking, while Calum seemed more intent on covering the notepad in front of him with

light-pen doodles: most of which were primaries with satellites whirling around them in impossible astronomical patterns.

"What is it that you see in those patterns, Calum Baird?" Delszaki asked, pausing the conversation on double domes versus linked units.

Calum sat straight up and pretended he had been listening to every word said. Rafik glared at him, but Gill looked surprised at his inattention. Last night he'd been full of good suggestions.



"I think we have got to find Acorna's home world first," he said, letting the sentence out in a rush, then he colored as redly as Gill could.

"How can we possibly find what the child only remembers as a dream?" Delszaki asked.

"But she does remember something. I was just thinking ..." and he ran dots on the primaries, "that every star has its own spectroanalysis. And every star throws out satellites, if they do generate planets, that are made up of their constituents. Maybe a bit more metal on that one, maybe just gases on another, but if you knew what metals a primary had to disperse, you could find the right one," he waved a hand heavenward, "and find Acorna's."

Rafik shook his head. "There's not enough difference in constituents. Stars are all basically made of the same stuff—at least, all the ones that generate Earth-type planets are going to look pretty much alike to spectroanalysis. Certainly they'll all have the conventional metals."

"The pod Acorna came in," Calum said stubbornly, "is not composed of conventional metals."

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Not entirely, anyway. We never did figure out exactly what-all was in the alloy, but it's not like anything we—humans—use for space and industrial construction. Lighter. Stronger." He waved his hands. "I'm a mathematician, not a physicist. It's worth studying, don't you think?"

"You have original spacegong container?" The fingers of Li's left hand tensed over the corn pad on his chair. "And have not mentioned the artifact

before?"

"Well, it scarcely came up in conversation,

after all," Calum said apologetically. "We always meant to study it one day."

"Ah, well, it takes but a little arrangement..." and, even as Delszaki turned to Pal, the young man -was tapping out an access code, "... to make appointment to discover what -we may from it."

Actually, it took considerably longer because Rafk, Gill, Calum, and Pal had to bring a collapsible crate to the Uhuru so that anyone watching would not see what they were unloading. Of course the vehicle Mr. Li could put at their disposal for the transfer was state of the art and undoubtedly left a number of watchers gawking at its speed and maneuverability so that the precious pod was at its destination before they had managed to achieve altitude in the traffic pattern.

Delivered to the impressive cube of one of Mr. Li's business acquaintances, it was taken by grav-lift down to the bowels of the cube, through several

alert and noncurious security checks and into the appropriate room for its closer examination.

"You can call me Zip," said the white-coated older man who greeted them there. He had an oriental cast to his features and olive skin, but he spoke in an accent that suggested he had learned many other languages before the Basic he now used. He was also minus the first joint of both small fingers and the tip of one ring finger. "Mr.

Li says you have a puzzle for me. Pal. I love puzzles."

The three miners decided they liked his style and, with Pal, quickly uncrated the pod for him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, raising both hands in awe, and his eyebrows and letting his mouth hang open. Then, he prowled around it, kneeling down to see the underside of the ovoid and standing on tiptoe to look over it. "Ah!" he said again, seeing the inscriptions and delicately tracing them with an index finger as lovingly as a mother would trace the features of a child. "And you've done nothing to discover if this language is known?"

Rafik looked at Gill and Cal and they all shrugged. "We're miners, not linguists."

"What about the occupant? Well, there was one, -wasn't there?" Zip said testily. "Or so I -was given to understand. I do have Mr. Li's complete confidence, you know. But I need some clues."

"I thought . . . well . . . maybe," Calum stut-tered, no longer so sure of his premise.

"That if we had some idea of what metals comprise this alloy, we might use the spectroanalysis of stars to find out which ones are more likely to

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have produced satellites •with similar material," Pal said with a polite nod to the tongue-tied Calum.

"Not very likely," Zip said briskly. He repeated Rafik's argument.

"Then there's nothing we can do?" Calum looked cast down.

"How come you believe him and not me?" Rafik muttered.

"I did not say there was nothing to be done." Zip looked at them severely. "You must listen more carefully if you wish to be true scientists. The avenue of approach you suggested is not likely to succeed . . . but there are some other things we can play with. Cosmology has advanced slightly since the days of planetbound observatories," he said with a slight sneer. "Have you ever heard of epsilon-V testing? Planetary emissions separation? Mass diffusion imaging? Do not tell me how to do my job." He tapped the pod and ran his hands across the top, around the sides. "Come, come, gentlemen, it is enough of a puzzle by itself •without me having to waste time discovering the opening mechanism."

"We wouldn't," Calum said sweetly, "want to interfere -with the expert."

"But we wouD want to cooperate. Wouldn't we, Calum?" Rafik reached over and showed how the pieces slipped into each other, then the lid slowly opened upward.

"Ah!" Once again Zip threw up both hands in delight at the furnishings "within. He was feeling over every inch of it while the four watched and, bored by his diligence, began to shift their weight

from one foot to another. Rafik finally gave a little cough •which interrupted the tactile examination. "Ah, yes. This is not something that can be solved in a trice. Or even a nonce. Go," and he flicked one hand at them in dismissal while, -with his

other, he reverently felt the lining in •which the baby Acorna had once lain. "I will report when I have discovered anything of interest. My respectful greetings to Mr. Li," he said to Pal, and turned back.

They were passed through the various checkpoints and back to the roof where their vehicle awaited them.

"Say, I thought the ID was 87-99-20-DS?" Calum said, pointing to the craft. "And I'd've sworn blind it was blue."

"I smell fresh lacquer," Gill said as they closed the gap to the machine.

"It's the same type," Rafik said, because he hadn't noticed the ID nor the color.

"A little precaution that might, or might not, be necessary," Pal said as he opened the door. "The color is dry."

Calum entered, perplexed. Gill was frowning, but Rafik began to like Delszaki even more. A cautious as well as a prudent man.

As Judit had predicted, the child Acorna had rescued fell asleep before she had finished eating, clutching a piece of bread so tightly that it could not be removed from her chubby fist without reducing it to crumbs.

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"Maybe we can just sponge her off while she snoozes," Judit suggested, but Acorna resisted the

suggestion fiercely. "Let her sleep! She must be exhausted, poor little thing. I'll bathe her when she wakes up."

Acorna sat over the sleeping child for the rest of the morning, watching the gentle rise and fall of her chest under the light blanket Judit had thrown over her. She was filthy, but that could be remedied; too thin, too, but regular good food would take care of that. The bruises and scratches she had borne after the scuffle in the street were slowly fading, encouraged by an occasional gentle nuzzle from Acorna's horn to heal into clean new-flesh.

"She's only a baby!" Acorna thought indignantly. "Why isn't somebody taking care of her?"

She did not realize she had spoken her thought aloud until Pal Kendoro answered her.

"Someone is, now," he said. "You are."

He had been silently watching for some time, entranced by Acorna's rapt attention to the sleeping child and the tender look on her face as she nuzzled the baby's scratches with her horn. Some people, he realized, might have found the scene outlandish or alien. To him it was simply the most perfect expression of motherly love he had ever seen. It didn't matter that Acorna was of a different species, that she might never have children if they couldn't locate her home, or that those children would be physically very different from the starving beggar she had snatched up out of the streets of East Celtalan. The bond of love was there.

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"But how could she have been simply abandoned to starve?" Acorna smoothed the ragged curls away from the right side of the child's face. On the left side of her head the hair had been

crudely hacked short. "She must belong to ^ome-  
bo<hf."

"I don't think she was abandoned," Pal said.  
"She's a beautiful child. The way her hair was  
hacked off, it looks as if somebody was trying to  
make her look ugly. Probably the same person  
helped her to run away."

"What is wrong with beauty? And what would  
she be running away from?" Pal sighed and pre-  
pared to recapitulate Delszaki Li's lecture on  
Kezdet's system of child labor, bondage, "recruit-  
ing," and outright kidnapping. What Li had told  
Acorna and the miners had probably been too  
much for Acorna to take in all at one time. Calum  
went into rhapsodies about the speed with which  
Acorna absorbed mathematical and astronomical  
theories, but learning emotional facts was some-  
thing else again.

"There are many children on Kezdet with no  
one to look after them," he said. "Some are  
orphans, some are unwanted children from other  
planets -who have been brought here to work in  
mines and factories, some are bought from their  
parents to do the same work. If they don't work,  
their only alternative is to starve in the street." He  
frowned. "She doesn't look young to have run  
away, though. Mostly it's the older children who  
have the gumption to escape and the wit to make  
some sort of plan. Perhaps when she wakes we

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can find out more about her, at least get some idea  
what -workplace she was bonded to."

"Not to send her back!" Acorna said, flinging a  
protective arm over the little girl.

"No. We won't send her back. And if. . ." Pal had been about to say that if the child's bond-owners traced her, Delszaki Li would surely buy her freedom. But he decided not even to mention that possibility in the face of Acorna's fierce protective instincts.

"If what?"

"If we can find out her name," Pal improvised, "she might have parents who are looking for her." Personally he doubted it; most children who ended up in Kezdet's labor system did so precisely because they had parents so desperately poor they had no option but to sell their children. But he found himself wanting to put the best possible face on the child's situation for Acorna's sake.

Acorna's eyes narrowed to slits, then she took a deep breath and deliberately widened them again.

"Yes," she said sadly, "all lost children like to think that their parents are searching for them. If this one has not traveled too far, perhaps her people may be found."

Pal could have kicked himself for his clumsy words. How could he have forgotten, even for an instant, that Acorna too had been a foundling, and one who did not know even where her race was to be found, let alone her own parents? No wonder she identified so instantly and protectively with this little waif. He stammered, trying to find some words of apology that would not deepen Acorna's

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pain, and was saved by the abrupt awakening of the waif.

"Mama!" she wailed, and pushed Acorna away when she would have cradled her in her arms.

"Mama Jana. Chiura wants Mama Jana."



"There, you see," said Pal, deftly catching up the flailing child and carrying her toward the bathroom before Acorna could realize how thoroughly she had been rejected, "she knows her own name and that of her mother. We're making progress already."

Most of the progress they made in the next half-hour consisted of transferring large quantities of warm water from the tub and onto the carpets, draperies, and themselves. Finally Chiura calmed down, exhausted by her hysterical sobbing, and sat quietly patting the remaining few inches of water in her tub and watching the soap bubbles that formed and popped under her hands. Pal took advantage of the peaceful moment to question Chiura gently. Did she know how she came to the city? In a skimmer? Who piloted the skimmer? How did she come to be alone? Where was she before she came to the city?

Chiura babbled and wandered from topic to topic while Pal tried to make sense of her words and kept her going with questions, always sheering away when Chiura's eyes crinkled up and she started to look upset again. Acorna wrapped Chiura in a towel, took her on her lap, and tried to comb out the long ringlets that had been caked in mud before the bath and the first three rinses. Chiura babbled that "a bad man" had piloted the

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skimmer and they had come from "the bad place" . . . and Acorna "was pulling her hair, and she "wanted Mama Jana now!

"It's no use," Acorna said despairingly.  
"Oh, I •wouldn't say that," Pal said. "You don't know enough about Kezdet to -work out the clues, but I'm getting a pretty fair idea where she -was

before she was brought to the city . . . and why she was wandering the streets alone." It was as he had suspected when Acorna cleaned her up and he saw how lovely the child was.

"Kheti ,faQ," Chiura piped up. "Said when she made Didi Badini busy, run, run away, hide. There was a little fire." She thought it over. "Maybe big fire. Didi Badini was mad, but Chiura hid quiet-quiet under the stinky sacks." Her eyes crinkled and a tear plopped down her cheek. "Didi Badini hit Kheti, but Kheti didn't tell. Then Kheti jumped on Didi Badini and they roll around and get all muddy and Chiura ran, long way, got lost.

Chiura bad?"

"No, darling," Acorna said, hugging her and

kissing her tangled curls. "Whoever this Didi Badini was, she does not sound like a nice person at all and I am sure Kheti would not have wanted

you to go back to her."

"You see," said Pal, "we're getting somewhere. It's not as hopeless as it seems. And I'd like to meet this Kheti," he added. "Anybody who'd set a bonk-shop on fire to give a kid a chance to get away ..."

"Hopeless? Oh—I meant her hair," Acorna explained, ruefully lifting a rat's nest of tangles in one hand. "It will all have to be cut."

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"Would have had to be anyway," Pal pointed out, "to match the other side. Or did you want her to go around looking lopsided?"

Acorna managed a smile at that. Chiura bounced up and down on Acorna's knee and cried, "Lop-side! Lop-side!" until both adults were

laughing helplessly. And Pal managed to put off explaining what he had deduced of Chiura's fate until after she had demolished a bowl of sweet patts and beans and had fallen asleep again.

"The name of Didi Badini is a dead give-away," he explained then. "Didi" literally means "older sister" in the original language, but in Kezdet children's slang it means a woman who procures young girls for . . . um . . ." He blushed under the unblinking gaze of Acorna's wide silver eyes. "For immoral purposes," he finished in a rush.

"You mean, so that men can have sexual intercourse with them?" Acorna translated calmly. Then, at Pal's look of surprise, "Calum and Rafik and Gill have an extensive library of vid-cubes on the ship, and I have watched many of them—and not only the interactive training cubes on mining techniques! I do not think I was supposed to know about the others, but sometimes it was very boring when they were all working outside and there was not yet any crushed ore for me to run through the refining processes. Those vid-cubes that Calum kept behind his bunk were boring, too," she added reflectively. "I do not understand why anybody would want to do such uncomfortable and undignified things—and over and over, too!"

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Except that I gather from the EncycL) that it is necessary to make babies. Still, some of the actors in the vid-cubes seemed excessively enthusiastic

about their •work."

"The enthusiasm is something that . . . um . . .

develops as one matures," said Pal, making a mental note to tell the miners that their charge had a rather more extensive education than they realized. Then he had to explain to Acorna that, yes, some men were so enthusiastic they paid females to partner them in this undignified activity—and some were so perverted that they preferred the use of very young females.

"But Chiura is only a baby," Acorna protested.  
"It would hurt her!"

"The men who buy the use of children," Pal said grimly, "don't care if it hurts them. Mercy—"

He stopped. Mercy had made him promise never to tell Judit what had happened to her after Judit won the scholarship to get off-planet. Neither Pal nor Mercy wished to burden her with unnecessary guilt about things she couldn't have stopped anyway. "Well, this little one seems to have been lucky. Apparently this Kheti went to a lot of trouble to give her a chance to run away. It probably wasn't as easy as Chiura makes it sound, either."

"Lucky? To beg and starve on the street!"  
"Better," Pal said. "Believe me . . . better."  
"Then we have to find this other girl, this Kheti, and get her free, too."

"And what," Pal inquired, "do you plan to do about the hundreds of others in like situations?"

"Saving one is better than saving none," Acorna said firmly.

Pal could hardly disagree -with this statement, but neither could he believe that Acorna would accomplish much by starting a crusade against the Didis of East Celtalan and that mysterious powerful figure, the Piper, who was said to support the brothel industry and to be supported in wealth by

its proceeds.

Delszaki Li had been trying for years to identify the Piper, and when Pal joined him he had brought the Child Labor League's network of gossip and spies to bear on the problem. But not one of their covert sympathizers had turned up a whisper of the man's identity. Even Mercy, ideally situated as she was in a Guardians of the Peace office, had been unable to give them a clue; even the Guardians, it seemed, did not know who the Piper really was. All they knew was that he was wealthy, powerful, and absolutely ruthless in crushing any opposition. There were rumors that he reserved some of the children bought by the Didis for his personal use, and that these children were the ones found strangled and floating in the river from time to time . . . unable to bear witness against him. Pal imagined Acorna's long silvery body mangled and tossed into the polluted water, and felt physically sick.

All things considered, it was almost a relief when Chiura woke up crying for "Mama Jana" again and Acorna was distracted into trying to identify Chiura's mother. To take her mind off the plight of the children in the brothels. Pal enthusi-

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astically tackled the task of decoding the clues they could extract from Chiura's baby recollections ... a little too enthusiastically, he realized, as they neared success.

"This Jana can't be her real mother," he said after another lengthy questioning session, interspersed with games of stacking vid-cubes, rolling a wheel that had fallen off a household trolley, and other improvised amusements. "Look at what she played with the vid-cubes." Chiura had built a completely enclosed space, then went around the room putting all the small objects she could find inside the space and naming each one. "Lata. Faiz. Buddhe. Laxmi. Jana. Chiura. Khetala."

"She was telling us that all these people were on the same level, all trapped."

Chiura had reacted vigorously when Acorna tried to lift the little bronze box representing Jana out of the enclosure.

"No, no, no!" she shrieked. "NO, run away!"

Siri Teku beat!"

Then, in an abrupt change of mood, she had swiped at the stacked vid-cubes, scattering the "walls" she'd built all across the room, and moved every one of the figures out onto the open floor.

"She was confined with a group of other children, probably all bonded laborers," Pal interpreted. "Jana must have been one of the older ones, like Khetala, who tried to take care other."

He tried to get some idea of where Chiura had been kept, but she had only the vaguest notions of place. There had been a big hill -with no trees, only rocks. The sun went down behind the hill. Chiura

had not been sent to work with the other children and had no idea what they did, only that they came back dirty and tired. What had Chiura herself done?

"Stupid Chiura," she said, her face puckering

up. "Laxmi hit Chiura."

That night Pal consulted Delszaki Li's extensive atlas of Kezdet.

"I think it must be someplace relatively close to Celtalan," he explained his reasoning to Acorna, "because Chiura says they were not very long in the skimmer—and anything over an hour's flight would be 'long' to a child that young."

He drew a line out from the depiction of Celtalan on the screen, representing the distance a skimmer could fly in an hour, and requested detailed overlays of the region. Then he narrowed the search by looking for treeless mountains "with factories situated on the eastern side of the mountain. There was only one. "It has to be the Tondubh Glassworks," he concluded, "Unless . . . no. That's the only mountain that fits her description. "

"Then we will go there tomorrow?," Acorna said, "and find Jana."

"I don't think that's such a great idea," Pal demurred. "Mr. Li is working on his own plans for freeing the bonded children. We could mess things up for him by going out and making a fuss at the glassworks."

Acorna gave him a disgusted look. "Naturally we will tell Mr. Li. But he will not stop us. That child has already lost her home, her parents, and

her trust in the rest of humanity. Now you want to deprive her of the only person who cared for her and completely destroy her? I know -what it feels

like to be separated from the people who take care of you," she said, remembering the terror of the barren, chemical-scented corridors of Amalgamated space base and the mean lady who would not take her back to Gill and Calum and Rafik. But they had come for her. Who would come for Chiura? They had to find this Jana.

After the beating Siri Teku gave her for trying to hide Chiura, Jana lost her position as dragger on Face Five. Her partner Khetala was gone, and anyway she couldn't drag. That last kick Siri Teku gave her had crunched something in her right knee; she could no longer put any weight on that leg at all, and she certainly couldn't crawl up the narrow shafts dragging a full corf of ore behind her. Buddhe and Faiz took over the lucrative Face Five work. By way of apology for taking her place, Faiz appropriated a slat from the roof -which he whittled into the shape of a rough crutch, so that at least Jana could drag herself outside to the sorting slopes and the latrine trench. She supposed it was kind of him, but she didn't much care any longer. She hurt all the time since Siri Teku's beating, and the weals were hot and swollen and not healing properly. Kheti would have fussed about bad food and dirt, would have made her wash the wounds and choke down nauseating stews of the weeds growing on Anyag's mountain-

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ous slag heap to supplement the unvarying diet of patts and bean paste. Without Khetala to nag her into it, though, Jana just couldn't bring herself to take the trouble. She was tired and achy and there didn't seem to be much point in making herself even more miserable with cold water and weed stew.

Siri Teku had cursed when he saw that she was temporarily crippled, but her unfeigned wince •when he drew back his foot to kick her bad knee



again restored his good humor.

"Knew I'd break that cheeky spirit of hers someday," he exulted, not even troubling to address her directly. "She can take Chiura's place sorting ore until she can walk again."

Laxmi grumbled that Jana -wasn't much more use sorting ore than "that baby" had been, and it was true. She -wasted long hours just sitting on the ore heap, watching clouds drift across the sky, watching the evening shadows lengthening in front of the slag heap that blocked off half the sky, desultorily turning over bits of broken rock in her fingers from time to time. Laxmi made a point of separating her work from Jana's so that Siri Teku would be in no doubt about who had done what at the end of the day.

"You can be lazy and starve if you -want to," she warned Jana, "I'm not -working double for both of us. Hafta move fast if you -want to earn your dinner."

"Who cares?" said Jana.

Choking down the gritty patts was just another pointless thing that seemed more trouble than it

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was -worth. She had to concentrate harder than she liked to make the connection between missed dinners and the constant, gnawing knot of pain in

her middle. It wasn't the worst pain anyway, nothing near as bad as the throbbing of the infected whip marks on her skin, or the sharp pain whenever she dragged her bad knee somewhere. She knew, somewhere in the back of her fever-ridden mind, that if she didn't eat she would get even weaker and die soon, but that didn't seem to matter anymore, either. Without Kheti to bully them all into taking care of themselves, the whole gang wouldn't last long; already Faiz had a festering sore on one hand, and Laxmi's cough was worse than ever. Anyway, what was the point of working so hard just to keep alive? Nobody cared whether Jana lived or died, and since they took Chiura away there was no little soft warm kitten-girl to cuddle and love. If Jana had been given to putting her thoughts into words, she might have told Laxmi that without someone to love, there was no reason to live. But talking was too much trouble. She listlessly pitched another ore-bearing rock into her sorting box, to shut Laxmi up, and went back to her dreamy contemplation of the clouds.

Pal had half hoped that Delszaki Li would flatly refuse Acorna's request to visit the Tondubh Glassworks in search of Chiura's "Mama Jana," or at least would insist that she go surrounded by a small army of House Li servants and bodyguards. Acorna had in mind to go unannounced and

unescorted, except by Pal, and pointed out that bringing a large group would almost certainly cause the supervisor of the glassworks to treat their visit like an official inspection, hiding all the children.

"I think he will do so anyway," Delszaki Li said, his eyes twinkling at Acorna, "but if you wish, shall go with only Pal and one other." He tapped one of the buttons on the corn pad of his hover-chair.

"One?" Pal began in outrage. "But that's totally

inadequate to protect—" He stopped and took a deep breath at the sight of the woman who had answered Li's button.

"I think you will find Nadhari adequate to any emergency," Li said dryly.

Pal nodded, dumbstruck. Nadhari Kando was an all but legendary figure in the Li household. Rumors said that before coming to work for House Li, she had been one of the infamous Red Bracelets of Kilumbemba, or possibly a commander of one of Nered's elite shock troops, or maybe she had personally created and led the Army of Liberation that freed Anrath from its despotic rulers. Logic said a woman who looked no more than thirty could not possibly have done all those things, but when Pal looked at Nadhari, he could never decide which stories to discount; she appeared capable of having done all three before breakfast. Whatever she had once been, though, it had ended in an episode whose truth was unknown to anybody in House Li. She had been dismissed in disgrace for a savage combat action,

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or she had been sent to assassinate Delszaki Li and instead had fallen under the spell of his uniquely personal charm, or Li had saved her from summary execution at the hands of the Kezdet Guardians. Again, all three stories seemed

perfectly possible.

Five feet six inches tall in her bare feet, lean

and as tough as a length of braided leather, Nadhari Kando was expert in three forms of knife fighting and six forms of unarmed combat— none

of 'which she had many chances now to use in the line of duty, since she went everywhere armed with an arsenal of miniaturized state-of-the-art weapons that could appear in seconds from her tight black braids, her gleaming skin-tight red boots, or ... Pal gulped and tried not to think about the other places where she probably concealed weapons. Rumor also said that Nadhari could read minds and that was -why she always appeared somewhere where her opponent was not expecting her, just outside of his blows or behind his laser fire. But of course, nobody could read minds. That was just a superstitious story.

He hoped.

"I shall be honored to accept Nadhari Kando's escort," Pal said through lips suddenly gone dry. "If . . . that is ... if you are sure you can spare her?" Nadhari's primary duty was to accompany Delszaki Li on all public appearances.

Li waved his good hand. "Nadhari is bored. Do not go out often enough or encounter enough assassins to amuse her."

The silent, black-braided woman in the door-

way nodded once in confirmation of this statement.

"Mission?" she queried tersely.

"Ah . . . the Tondubh Glassworks," Pal said. "Acorna will tell you all about it as we are going along."

Acorna's sunny mood gradually dimmed as they moved into the gray, dry industrial district east of Celtalan proper, and by the time they reached Knobkerrie Mountain she was hardly talking at all.

The desolate landscape, spoiled by decades of dumping industrial waste and punctuated by walled compounds enclosing factories and housing, seemed uglier and more barren to her than any airless asteroid.

"Does it have to be like this?" she -whispered as the skimmer banked and hovered over the compound bearing the Tondubh Glassworks logo.

"Kezdet," said Pal, "is ruled by the bottom line and the quarterly balance sheet. In any given quarter there is more profit in spoiling the land than in preserving it, just as there is more profit in buying new bond laborers than in keeping those you already have happy and healthy. If you don't care whether your workers live or die, and if they are too ignorant and frightened to complain, then why bother to give them decent lodgings or attractive surroundings?"

The skimmer settled gently into the space set aside for official visitors to the Tondubh facility, and Pal jumped out, ready with the story he had prepared to cover their interest in the facility. He spun the security guards a story about an off-

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planet vid-artist who wanted to feature Tondubh as one of Kezdet's success stories, a concern that had contributed to giving this resource-poor planet one of the higher gross planetary products in the sector.

"No vid equipment allowed in the plant," the

guard said.

Pal gave in on this point after minimal arguing, since he had no idea what he would have done if they hadn't insisted on this restriction; there hadn't been time to procure the kind of recording equipment an intergalactically known vid-artist would expect to use. The guard reciprocated by unbending slightly and allowing as how they could arrange a brief guided tour for the lady, if she and her companions would just wait an hour or so.

"No time," Pal said, "her time on Kezdet is measured in hours. Of course, if it's not convenient for us to see this facility, I'm sure the Gheredi Glassworks would do just as well. If you'd just give me a note of your name and number, so that I can explain to InterVid exactly why Tondubh proved unsuitable . . ."

The mention of Tondubh's biggest competitor on Kezdet, plus Pal's veiled threat that he would see the guard took blame for letting this publicity opportunity go to the competition, got them inside the glassworks without more ado. As they passed the second security wall, Pal caught sight of a pair of slender, scarred bare legs winking out of sight

around the corner.

"Damn kids," the guard said genially, "they're all over the place, bringing messages to the workers,

begging a bite of the hot meals Tondubh provides to the hands, generally getting in the "way." The roar of the furnaces within the main manufacturing facility almost drowned out his words. They picked their way over a floor covered with shards of broken glass. The heat from the open furnaces was like a blow? in the face; all the signs pointed to a factory in full production, yet the immense room was curiously empty. Only a handful of emaciated

adults squatted in front of the furnaces.

"Do you not employ children, then?" Acorna asked.

The guard looked shocked. "'Deed, no. Why, that would be in violation of the Federation Child Welfare Statutes! Mind you, I'm not saying an occasional one as is underage may not sneak onto the payroll; these people breed like flies and don't keep no records. But Tondubh has always done its best to abide by Federation standards, madam. Get out of the way, there," he roared at a boy who trotted into view with an iron rod taller than himself, the end covered with a blob of molten glass.

"P-please, sir, I was just bringing the glass to my gang leader," the boy stammered, the end of his sentence all but drowned out by another outraged roar from the guard. "Don't you know you kids aren't allowed to do anything but carry water? Now put that glass down! You could get hurt, messing with hot glass!"

The little boy dropped his rod with a clang. Molten glass splattered into the air; Pal and Acorna had to jump back to save themselves.

"Sorry about that, madam. You see why it

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-would be better for you to -wait and take a proper tour," the guard said. "It's hard enough to enforce proper safety regulations here at the best of times, and with these brats infesting the place for what

they can pick up, well, it's no place for a lady like yourself, and that's a fact. I'll just escort you back to the skimmer now."

Nadhari glanced at Pal and raised one brow inquiringly while she shifted her weight in a manner he found ominous.

"No," Pal said under his breath. "We will go as requested."

Looking disappointed, Nadhari relaxed slightly.

The guard watched while Pal took off and cleared the factory airspace.

"That," Pal said grimly, "is just one of the problems we have to solve. Not employ children, indeed! That factory is ninety percent child-operated, and everybody knows it. But they have guards and gates and delaying tactics, and the children are trained to hide when any strangers come. I had hoped that a party of three would not be enough to alarm them. I was wrong."

"I could have alarmed them," Nadhari said in her gravelly voice, with a smile that sent a cold breeze along the back of Pal's neck.

"I am sure you could take on the entire security force of Tondubh Glassworks," said Pal tactfully.

"Piece of cake," Nadhari confirmed. "Soft slugs. Poor defensive position."

"But I think Mr. Li might be annoyed if we started a private war."



Nadhari nodded sadly.

"I do not understand why the children hide," Acorna said. "Don't they want to come out and ask for help?"

"They do not have much experience with strangers who make their lives better," Pal said. "Usually its the other way."

"That poor little boy. The guard was lying about his not working there. Did you see his feet? They were covered with burns and scars. If he hadn't run away, I could have healed them." Acorna sighed. "I suppose, if they do not admit to hiring children at all, it is useless to ask if they have a bonded child laborer named Jana?"

Pal agreed. He could have predicted this outcome to the trip, but it had appeared the only way to convince Acorna of the enormity of the task was to let her see for herself the kind of obstacles they faced. Now, however, he felt her disappointment as keenly as if it were his own.

"There is one other place we might try," he said. "I've been thinking . . . it's true that Knobkerrie is the only treeless mountain this near Celtalan that has a factory beside it. But to a little girl like Chiura, who's to say what counts as a mountain?"

"There isn't much else that could be considered a mountain," Acorna said, looking down at the featureless landscape below the skimmer.

"Some of the pit mines have pretty high slag heaps near the sorting bins," Pal said, banking the skimmer slightly. "And one of the oldest mines—with one of the biggest slag heaps—is not too far

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from here. It wouldn't hurt to pay a visit to Anyag. This time, though, -we're going to think up a better story."

"We are?" Acorna had been tremendously impressed by the speed and fluency with which Pal had spun his tale at the Tondubh Glassworks.

"We'll have to," Pal said. "The children at Tondubh had plenty of time to hide while I was convincing the guard that they couldn't afford to alienate a galactic vid-artist. This time we're going to use a story that will make them want to keep the children for us to inspect." He glanced at Acorna. "Good thing you dressed up this morning. But you need to be a little gaudier." He guided the skimmer down toward a walled compound of courtyards and gardens, brilliant in the surrounding near-desert as an emerald in the sand. "Wait in the skimmer," he said over his shoulder as they

landed.

A slim, pretty girl with long black hair ran out of the nearest arcaded passageway, calling excited greetings to Pal. He met her too far from the skimmer for Acorna to hear what they said, but there was no need; his exuberant kiss of greeting and the way he picked the girl up and spun her around in his arms told her all she needed to know about their relationship. They disappeared together into the maze of buildings and Acorna slumped in her seat, feeling remarkably foolish. Of course Pal had a girlfriend. She'd seen enough story-cubes to

understand that this was the normal arrangement of human society. They spent twenty years or so growing, and then they were ready to mate. Gill

was showing every sign of preparing to mate with Judit, and that didn't bother her; why should she feel so depressed at seeing that Pal was in the same situation? Probably because there was nobody for her to mate with. Not that she had the least interest in the kind of sexual acrobatics displayed in Calum's secret vid-cube collection, but it would have been nice to have somebody to share secrets and jokes with, somebody who came running out with a joyful face when you came to their house, somebody who would hug you and spin you around like that.

Ridiculous to feel sorry for herself, just because she was the only one of her kind, when so many people had worse problems. Acorna glanced at Nadhari, who was sitting upright and watchful in the backseat. Nadhari was alone, too, and it didn't seem to bother her. She didn't even need to talk to people except about her work.

Acorna shivered. She didn't -want to be quite that self-sufficient. How lucky she had been to be found by Gill and Rafik and Calum, instead of by somebody who would have sold her to a labor factory on Kezdet! Acorna sat up very straight and concentrated on remembering how lucky she was and what a good life she had. She managed to such good effect that when Pal reappeared and climbed into the skimmer, the first thing he said was, "What's the matter?"

"Not a thing," Acorna said. "Not a thing. I don't need to know what your plans are. I just do what I'm told."

Pal tightened his lips to conceal a smile. So

Acorna could take a huff, just like any other young girl, -when she felt left out and ignored! She might look different, but she -was completely and gloriously female. And that thought pleased him inordinately. He couldn't quite figure out why he should be so pleased to see her displaying signs of jealousy, but . . . well, it was nice to know that at least emotionally she was very human, indeed.

"Irodalmi Javak's family is very wealthy," he said, "and her father would not approve if he knew that she was a secret sympathizer with the Child Labor League. He doesn't approve of me either, but pretending to be a penniless and unacceptable suitor for her gives us an excellent cover for an occasional secret meeting—even if anybody found out, they'd just think I was sneaking into the compound to steal a few kisses."

"Oh." Acorna digested this. "Then it's just . . . pretense? You two certainly looked happy enough to meet!"

"I am very fond of Irodalmi," Pal said truthfully. "She is a good, brave girl and she risks a lot for the movement. But she has no use for boyfriends; she wants to get off-planet and study to become a starship navigator."

"That must be very sad for you."

"Nothing to do with me," Pal said so cheerfully that Acorna began to feel much happier. "She's got her life planned out, and I am developing plans of my own. Our 'courtship' is a convenient cover, that's all. I didn't want her to see you because the

less she knows, the safer for all of us. But she lent me enough of her jewelry to deck you out in the

necessary style." Both his hands were fully occupied now with lifting the skimmer and piloting it back toward Anyag. He nodded at the dark green case he had brought out of Irodalmi's house.

"Open that, will you, and put the stuff on."

Acorna was dazzled by the sight that met her eyes when she lifted the lid of the case. A profusion of rings, bracelets, chains, and stick pins glittered in the sunlight that filtered through the skimmer windows. Most of the jewelry was in a heavy, ornate style of gold work that would suit neither the slender Irodalmi nor Acorna with her silvery coloring, but there -was one ring of blue starstones set in platinum, and a matching chain with a very large starstone pendant. She put these on and longed for a mirror in which to check the effect.

"How do I look?" she demanded of Pal.

He glanced sideways and grunted. "I said, put it on. All of it."

"I do not know much of fashionable dress," Acorna said, "but I think that to wear all this gold at once would constitute a vulgar display of wealth, as well as being mwt unattractive."

"Yep," Pal agreed, "that's Javak Seniors style, all right. Irodalmi doesn't care for the stuff herself. Says that if she -wore her father's gifts, she'd look like the senior Didi in a high-class bonkmg-shop. Which is what made me think of her. That's precisely the effect we're after. Now put the Jewelry on. Please."

Acorna did her best to follow his instructions, but most of the rings designed for human fingers would not fit on her less-supple digits, and she ran out of room for bangles on her arms.

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"The larger bangles are for your ankles," Pal instructed without taking his eyes from the skimmer's instrument panel, "and can't you thread some of the rings through that turban kind of thing you wear on your head?"

"Try not to crash this thing in a lake," Acorna said after following his instructions. "I'd sink like a stone. I'm not even sure I'll be able to walk with this much jewelry hanging off my body."

"Excellent," Pal said. "We want you to look extremely rich and extremely vulgar. Too bad you don't wear scent. A heavy dose of musk and jasmine essence -would finish off the picture nicely."

"What picture?" Acorna demanded.

"Just came to me," Pal said, "in a sudden flash of inspiration. We geniuses often work that way. If Did! Badini is welcome at Anyag to inspect the children, why not Didi Acorna? Explains Nadhari, too," he added. "Any Didi as rich as you're pretending to be would naturally travel with a bodyguard."

"You want me to pretend to be a Didi!" Acorna exclaimed. "That's a truly revolting idea."

"It's a truly brilliant one," Pal said. "Just leave the talking to me, and nothing can go wrong this time."

Acorna regarded him with some suspicion.  
"Sometimes," she said, "you remind me very

much of Ratik."

"Act arrogant," Pal warned her just before they reached Anyag, "and leave the talking to me."

Acorna had no trouble following either of these instructions. Shock at the sheer unrelieved ugliness of Anyag, the gigantic slag heap and the piles of separated ore and the endless roar of crushers, kept her silent. The stench of the latrine trench behind the sleeping sheds kept her nose up in the air, and the unaccustomed weight of jewelry on her body forced her to move slowly. The effect was all Pal could have wished: she appeared to be an incredibly -wealthy young -woman -with vulgar taste, slow dignified movements, and too much pride to speak a civil -word to the mine superintendent. It was easy for him to believe that she -was a new and unprecedentedly successful Didi looking for fresh young stock to build up her expanding network of houses. He all but fell over himself apologizing for the poor condition of most of the children in the mine and issued no orders at all to hide them.

Pal demanded curtly to be shown to where Siri Teku's gang slept, and the superintendent showed some relief. He had heard that Siri Teku had scored a coup from a labor contractor just last month, picking up a curly-headed, fair-skinned girl child -who looked like just the sort of fresh young thing a Didi -would buy off him at twice or three times what he'd paid for her. He started to apologize that Siri Teku's crew was on day shift and would be unavailable right now, then stumbled to a halt as he decided that Siri Teku wouldn't have been fool enough to send a pretty piece like that baby girl Below. He'd have her working Above on some easy task like sorting ore or sweeping tailings to not spoil her looks. . . .

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Pal interrupted him. "Just point out the sleep shed. We won't need your company."

The superintendent was disappointed; he'd expected a cut of the profits from any sale made on his shift. A discreet transfer of credits salvaged his disappointment and bought Pal and Acorna privacy while they picked their way through the debris of the mine to the area where Siri Teku's gang sorted the ore they had dragged to the surface.

There were only two children on the sorting bench. One of them was working so fast her fingers seemed to fly as she picked through the broken rocks and assessed them with an expert eye. The other stared through them with blank, empty eyes that made Acorna's own eyes narrow in anguished sympathy.

"Jana?" she asked, expecting the active child to answer.

"I'm Laxmi," said the girl who was working so hard. "She's Jana." She jerked her chin toward the other child. "She don't talk much, not since ..." A rattling cough interrupted her words.

"Get her some water. Pal!" Acorna said.

"S okay. S nothing," Laxmi croaked, wiping her chin. "Don't tell 'm . . . I'm not sick!" There was desperation in her cry. "Not!"



"Of course you are not sick," Acorna agreed soothingly. "You are a fine, strong worker."

Laxmi edged suspiciously away from her as Acorna came closer, until she was on the far side of the bench with a pile of broken rocks between her and the visitors. Acorna sat down beside Jana

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and put an arm around her. Jana winced away •with a gasp of pain.

"Best not touch 'er," Laxmi warned from a safe distance. "She ain't healed from that beatin' Sin Teku give 'er."

Jana's ragged gray kameez was stuck to her back and sides in several places. When Pal came back with a bucket of scummy water, Acorna looked at it in despair, then deftly stripped off the scarves that swathed her head. Laxmi gasped and fell into another coughing fit at sight of the small white horn in the middle of Acorna's forehead.

Acorna dipped her horn into the water for a moment, then used her silk scarf to dab the now-clean water onto the worst of Jana's marks. When she was finally able to lift the kameez without pulling at the broken skin underneath, she laid her forehead against each swollen, infected -weal. Laxmi edged closer and closer, eyes round as she saw clean new skin replacing the raw stripes on Jana's back and sides.

"Please, lady," she whispered, "I dunno what you're doing . . . but could you do her knee, too? That's what hurts her the worst. Can't walk •with-out a stick. ..."

Acorna bent her head to the swollen knee for a long moment. Jana sat unmoving and unresponsive, but the swelling visibly -went down.

"Come to me," she said, and Laxmi, a look of surprise on her face, slowly moved toward Acorna.

"If you c'n fix me, too," she said hoarsely,  
"reckon I'll go with you. Kheti allus said gom'

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•with a Did! was worst thing as could happen to a girl . . . but Kheti dint see you.."

Acorna laid her face against Laxmi's throat and slowly moved the horn down along her chest. Laxmi drew in a deep breath and hardly coughed at all; she took another breath and another, and color crept into her face.

"What you think you're doing, bint?"

The angry roar came from the mouth of the shaft behind them. A moment later a tall, lean man in brown robe and turban leapt out of the cage-lift, brandishing a long, flexible rod in one hand.

Quickly swathing her horn, Acorna lifted her head.

"I have a use for these children," she said. "You will be compensated for them."

Siri Teku's eyes narrowed in crafty speculation. It must be Laxmi the Didi wanted; Jana wasn't much use to anybody now. She was trying to confuse him by pretending an interest in both children.

"I might consider letting you have that one," he said, nodding at Jana. "'T'other's too valuable to me. Last trained sorter I got, see."

"I need them both," Acorna replied firmly.

Siri Teku mentally evaluated the worth of this new Didi's gold jewelry and decided to take a gamble. It was true that he needed Laxmi's services. He wouldn't have pretended not to notice her cough for so long if he'd had anybody else half so good at sorting ore. But a month would give him time to buy some new children and have Laxmi train them. And if this Didi was really so interested in Laxmi, Old Black knew why, she'd

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come back at the end of that month . . . by which time he should be able to trade, steal, and buy enough really handsome children to make her a constant customer of his.

Besides, he thought he recognized the silent bodyguard who stood behind the Didi. Was House Li getting into the bonk-shop business? And if so, did old Li himself know, or was the old man so senile that his employees were able to take off on their own? He needed time to check the rumors so that he could figure out how to turn the maximum profit from this situation.

"This un's not for sale yet," he repeated, grabbing Laxmi's arm and jerking her away from Acorna and Pal. "Come back next month, after I've had time to train some new sorters. And for the other, it'll be fifty credits."

"Who're you kidding?" Pal demanded, using a rough accent Acorna had not heard from him before. "We'd be doing you a favor to take her off your hands. Ten credits, no more."

"You wish to rob an honest working man of his livelihood? Besides, I will have to give a percentage to the mine superintendent. Thirty-five."

"Fifteen," Acorna said.

Siri Teku hesitated, and Acorna turned on her heel.

"Come," she snapped to Pal. "My time is too valuable to spend haggling over one child."

"Seventeen and a half!" Siri Teku cried.

"Very well," Acorna said, "seventeen it is." She dropped a bundle of credits in the dirt and turned toward the skimmer.

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"And a half?"

Acorna laughed and kept walking.

"Remember," Siri Teku called after them as Pal carried Jana toward the skimmer, "come back next month! I'll make it worth your while!"

Laxmi's eyes followed the skimmer as it rose over the mountainous slag heap of Anyag and banked west, into the afternoon sun, toward Celtalan.

Pal tarried long enough at Irodalmi's house to return the jewelry, which Acorna was only too happy to remove, despite the surprise that it caused Jana.

"I am no Didi, little one," Acorna told Jana, stroking her no longer sore back. "I am taking you

to Chiura, who has been crying for her Mama

Jana."

"Chiura?" Jana exclaimed. Miracle upon miracle this day had for her. Not only had her pains been soothed and she had been taken from bondage with Siri Teku, but Chiura was at her destination. Furthermore, her well-honed instincts told her that this marvelous lady with the funny horn in the middle of her forehead was good, and Jana had had so little of "good" in her life, she wondered that she could believe in any. Yet why heal her when she wasn't pretty like Chiura or useful like Khetala? That name sprang from her lips. "Khetala? You will find and free her from

Didi Badini?"

The man who drove the skimmer groaned.

"One rescue a day is all I can cope with right now, and there'll be a lot of explaining to be done for this day's work—that I can assure you."

"But surely. Pal, we must save these children. The other one who coughed ..."

"Laxmi?" Jana asked hopefully.

"Mr. Li has a large house, but there are limits to what hospitality he can extend. That is why we must make the moon colony. Then -we will have a safe place for all the abused and misused children in those mines. First things must come first, Acorna." He spoke as severely as he could, and yet the melting look in Acorna's eyes over Jana's head was almost more than he could bear. What amazing powers this most unusual female had!

In December 1936, the English king, Edward VIII, abdicated his throne to marry an American divorcee, Wallis Simpson. Before Christmas of

that year, schoolchildren from Land's End to John o'Groats were chanting, "Hark, the herald angels sing, Mrs. Simpson's pinched our king." No one ever figured out how the song spread so quickly; it certainly hadn't been part of a BBC broadcast.

The tale of a silver goddess with a horn in the middle of her forehead, come to Kezdet especially to heal and help children, spread with similar rapidity. As with the song about Mrs. Simpson, the only certainty is that it wasn't disseminated by anyone in authority.

When the rest of Siri Teku's gang came up from their twelve-hour shift Below, Laxmi told them

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that Sita Ram, Lady of the Sky and Above, had visited Anyag disguised as a Didi, had healed her, and had taken Jana to live with her in the sky. The other children might have scoffed, but it was a fact that Laxmi's racking cough was gone; she breathed as easily and deeply as any of the newest arrivals. A child sold from the mines to Czerebogar took the story and the hope of that healing with him.

In the carpet works at Czerebogar, where the children squatted on hanging benches and tied knots in the famous Kezdet carpets until their fingers bled, Laxmi's Sita Ram was transmuted into Lukia of the Lights, and they whispered that the unicorn's white horn shed a magical healing light that restored the sight of squinting, half-blind carpet weavers. An itinerant teacher from the Child Labor League, entering Czerebogar in disguise, found her way made easier by this legend and suggested to her colleagues that they spread it as a

way of overcoming the children's ingrained fear and distrust of all strangers.

"Should -we try to overcome it?" one of the other part-time teachers asked. "Most of the time they're right to fear strangers."

"Not us," said the young woman who'd slipped in and out of Czerebogar, bringing counting games and stories and taking away the legend of Lukia. "If they fear us, we can't help them."

In the Tondubh Glassworks, the story became part of the legend of Epona, the horse-goddess who bore tired glass-runners on her back and galloped from furnace to blower with the molten glass to spare the children's weary legs.

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Everywhere on Kezdet, where there was a mine or factory keeping children at work in cramped, poisoned, miserable conditions, there was also some legend of a rescuing goddess, spun out of the older children's hazy memories of a mother's arms and given strength by the younger children's need for hope. But never before had one of the legendary goddesses taken mortal form and given solid, practical healing to a sick child. All the legends suddenly took on new life; hope flourished like an underground stream of pure water running through all the dark factories; overseers -wondered why the children had begun to sing and laugh, and worried about the change.

The repercussions from Acorna's adventure were less than Pal had feared. Judit was frankly relieved to have Jana take over the care of Chiura, who had never ceased wailing for the older child whom she evidently regarded as a mother.

Delszaki Li and the miners were somewhat more vocal. "You did what?" Rafik bellowed when

Acorna proudly reported the results of her trip to him.

"I told you that I was going to look for Chiura's 'Mama Jana,'" Acorna said.

"Yes," said Calum unguardedly, "but we didn't think you'd succeed, or we wouldn't have let you go off with just Pal and one bodyguard."

Nadhari Kando shifted her weight slightly, from one foot to a balanced pose on the balls of both feet. The slight movement should have gone unnoticed,

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but instead it drew everyone's attention. She looked straight at Calum until his eyes dropped.

"That is ..." he mumbled, "of course you were perfectly safe with Nadhari. After all, if Mr. Li entrusts his own life to her. ..."

"Quite correct," Nadhari said. Her low, grating voice was almost without expression.

"Don't you want Jana?" Acorna put her arm around the bewildered child.

"Sure we do," Gill said heartily. He dropped to one knee before Jana, who shrank back involuntarily at the approach of this red-bearded giant. "We need you here, Jana. Chiura needs you. We all do. Plenty of room in this house for another little girl." He glanced at Delszaki Li and received an approving nod. "We were just . . . surprised that Acorna found you so quickly."

"We underestimated her," Rafik said gloomily.

"Probably not for last time," Delszaki Li



chirped. His dark eyes were bright with amusement.

Pal's private nightmare, that the Guardians of the Peace would somehow trace him and "Didi Acorna" back from Anyag to the Li mansion and accuse him of procuring children for immoral purposes, never came true. He was not sure whether that was because they had not been traced, or because the Guardians were too bright to try to shake down so powerful a figure as Delszaki Li, or because they simply accepted as a matter of course that any man who was so inclined might buy himself a few girl children for private use whenever he felt the urge. He suspected the last.

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Even Acorna, after a few wistful comments about the amount of room there was in those upper stories and how many beds they could fit into the long parlor, seemed to accept Pal's strict injunction against collecting any more children before Delszaki Li had started the safe haven of the lunar colony. She didn't even promise Jana to go out and look for Khetala— thank goodness! Pal sweated when he remembered the risks he had already allowed Acorna to run in their mad escapade. The last thing he needed was to have her opening those wide silvery eyes at him and politely requesting a tour of the East Celtalan brothels. Especially since he had a terrible suspicion he would give in. The urge to give Acorna everything she wanted was only growing stronger the more time he spent in her company.

All things considered, he should have felt relieved when, after a few days spent quietly with Chiura and Jana, her only request was to go shopping with Judit.

"I am sure you must have many more important things to do," she apologized to Judit, "but

you see, I have promised Mr. Li not to go out alone again. There are a few things I need from the stores, and somehow I do not think that Nadhari..."

"Of course," Judit said. "You're quite right. I'm pretty sure Nadhari doesn't have a black belt in shopping. And I have been quietly going mad with inactivity while I wait for Delszaki and your friends to come up with something for me to do. Really, if he's going to spend all his time locked in

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Dr. Zip's lab or cruising the Lattice on his corn unit, Delszaki hardly needs one personal assistant,

let alone two!"

"I'll go with you," Pal volunteered, and felt unreasonably annoyed when Acorna stammeringly refused his help.

"Don't be silly. Pal," Judit said in her best bossy elder-sister tones. "One of us must stay here in case Delszaki comes out of his brown study and -wants something." Adding, after she sent Acorna off to get a heavier wrap on the pretext that there were cold winds coming in from the north, "I expect the child wants to buy feminine fripperies, Pal. She'd only be embarrassed to have you tagging along. Nadhari will come, and she'll be quite protection enough."

Nadhari cleared her throat, and Pal hastily agreed that no one could want more protection than she could supply.

Relief though it must be to have Acorna safely-occupied, Judit could not repress a slight scorn when she saw the girl counting the credits in her purse before they set out. Was all the -work of the Child Labor League to be set aside for Acorna's convenience? Here was Delszaki Li off on a wild-goose chase to find Acorna's home planet, instead of completing the plans for his lunar colony;

Acorna herself, it seemed, was perfectly happy to go shopping for the latest fashions. It was true that Delszaki had advanced the credits to her himself, saying that he wished his "ward" to be dressed as befitted the House of Li, rather than continually washing and -wearing the same three outfits the

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miners had casually picked out for her. And it was true that the plans of the Child Labor League were in much more danger from hasty enterprises such as Acorna's rescue of Jana than from a few days of neglect. Still, Judit could not keep from fretting over all the problems remaining: the lunar colony yet to be designed, let alone set up; how the children -were to be gathered together -when every factory owner had trained them to hide whenever strangers approached; "worst of all, how to neutralize the shadowy, malevolent figure known only as the Piper, whose fortune derived entirely from the worst forms of child labor and who was supposed to be behind most of the official and unofficial bedevilment the league members had suffered. The Piper would surely find some -way to stop Li's latest and boldest plan if he got word of it, as he •was sure to do sooner or later in Kezdet's spy-riddled society.

She was further surprised when Acorna first proposed that they should walk, then stopped not five minutes from the house and hired a skimmer, directing the pilot to take them to the Gorazde Bazaar.

"Acorna, are you sure that is where you wish to go?" Judit remonstrated as the skimmer rose and hovered over the heart of Celtalans wealthiest district. "The Gorazde is not at all fashionable. Respectable, yes, but it is the sort of place where Delszaki's servants buy their daywear. It is not equipped to cater to a young lady of fashion."

"I am not a young lady of fashion," Acorna said calmly, "and I inquired of the house staff before

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making my decision. I am confident that I shall find exactly -what I need at the Gorazde."

"And -why rent a skimmer?" Judit -went on.  
"We could have used one of the House Li skimmers."

Acorna hung her head. "I -wanted to do this myself," she said, "with my own credits from the work I have done for Calum and Rafik and Gill."

"Do "what, for heavens sake?"

"That little boy at Tondubh," Acorna said, "his feet were all burned and cut from running over hot and broken glass. I thought ... he could use a

pair of sandals."

"What a nice thought!" Judit approved.  
"And all the other children there," Acorna said.  
"That is why I thought of the Gorazde, you see. They say it is a good place to find cheap but

durable clothes."

She proceeded to occupy the few minutes required for the skimmer to cross the city by asking Judit about her brother. Judit played down the misery of the first years on Kezdet, when she and Pal and Mercy had been bond-laborers with no hope of freedom, by saying truthfully that they had all three been sent to different places and she really knew very little of Pal's life during those years. Instead she concentrated on tales of Pal's progress through technical school and the stories he had told her about his work with Delszaki Li. It was a pleasure to talk at length about her beloved little brother to such an attentive audience, and Judit was almost sorry when they reached the Gorazde. She had been meaning to

ask Acorna a few things about Gill . . . subtly, of course, so as not to betray how much more interested she was in him than in the other two miners who composed Acorna's foster family.

Once the skimmer pilot had set them down and had been requested to wait, Acorna changed from passive audience to taking charge of the expedition once again.

"I think this is exactly the place I have been looking for," she said, walking past a handful of clothing stalls to enter Sopel's Sandalarium -with its flashing lighted sign proclaiming, WHOLESale, DISCOUNT SALE, AND GOING-OUT-OF-BUSINESS SALE EVERY DAY.

A clerk hurried forward to serve them, every line of his demeanor announcing that he had never hoped to see two well-dressed young ladies from West Celtalan in Sopel's Sandalarium. When he offered to measure their feet, Acorna informed him that this would not be necessary, as she knew what sizes she wanted. Judit gave a small internal sigh of relief; they really did not need the kind of

attention that a close inspection of Acorna's unusually shaped feet would draw. Acorna specified a range of sandal sizes that would fit anything from a toddler to a child of ten and selected a cheap and long-wearing style in recycled synthofoam. When the clerk mentioned a price that Judit thought far too high, Acorna glanced at her and immediately counter-offered for little more than the wholesale cost of the sandals. She pointed out the advantages of good relations with someone who was prepared to buy in bulk, gave the impression

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that she might be a buyer for some large consortium -who could be enticed back by a very low price on this first order, and eventually acquired the Sandalarium's entire stock in the requested sizes at less than half the price originally mentioned.

"You see," Acorna said -when a slightly dazed

clerk left to order porters to carry their purchases to the waiting skimmer, "I told you I would require some help with my parcels."

Almost as dazed as the clerk, Judit said the first thing that came into her head. "Where did you learn to bargain like that? "

Acorna gave her an impish smile. "I have spent two years listening to Calum selling payloads of ore and drone buckets of iron all over this quadrant. The basic principles are not dissimilar—and I have always liked working with

numbers."

"Working with numbers is hardly an adequate

description," Judit said with feeling. "Anybody who can juggle all those prices and quantities in her head ought to be looking at a career in gambling."

"Seven to four," Acorna murmured, smiling at a

private memory, "'Nobble' the favorite ... I think we had better watch the sandals being loaded, don't you? Mr. Sopol is not making as much of a profit as usual on this transaction; he may try to redress the balance by making a few slight mistakes during

loading."

In fact, Acorna discovered no fewer than three "minor discrepancies" between her receipt and the

goods being loaded on the skimmer in the first few minutes. With the discovery of the third shortage, she instructed the porter to inform Mr. Sopol that any more discrepancies would cause her to lose faith in his ability to conduct a business and would force her to take her credits elsewhere. Thereafter all proceeded smoothly.

When the skimmer was fully loaded, Acorna directed the pilot to take them to the Tondubh Glassworks, with a sidelong glance to see if Judit would countermand her orders.

"You promised Delszaki not to collect any more children," Judit murmured with a warning shake of her head.

Acorna lifted her long chin slightly. "I did not promise not to help them. Surely no one can object if I give a few things to make their lives easier?"

And in fact, when Acorna swept into the Tondubh compound with the imperious air she had been practicing, she met with almost no opposition from the startled overseers. Judit was rather surprised to find that the Tondubh staff suffered from the illusion that Acorna was a galactically famous vid-star come to film a complimentary documentary on Kezdet's "economic miracle," but she said nothing to dispel the idea.

"We do not film today," Acorna said loftily, "so I amuse myself by bringing a few gifts for the children I saw here the other day."

The manager started his practiced spiel claiming that no children worked in the glass factory, but Acorna cut him off.

"Of course, I understand perfectly, they do not

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work here," she agreed -with a complicitous smile and wink at the manager.

"Exactly," said the manager, returning the wink. "They are only hanging about here to run errands and beg meals from the generosity of the management. As long as that is understood, there can be no objection to the lady's kind gifts."

"They will perhaps 'run errands' more swiftly if their feet are protected from the hot glass and broken shards in the factory," Acorna said. "Let them come to me here and select sandals to fit each one."



The manager frowned. "I think they will not come. They are shy of strangers, gracious lady. It would be best if you left the sandals here for me to distribute."

Already he was calculating how much he could get from Sopal's Sandalarium if he returned the merchandise still in its original wrapping — not full price, of course, but even a percentage of the discounted cost would make a nice little addition to his salary.

But, although the child workers in the factory had scattered as usual when Acorna's skimmer arrived, they were not that far away. A few of the braver and more curious ones had lingered to learn what they could of the new arrival, and they spread the word to the others that the whispered rumors were true: the Lady Epona had come to Tondubh! Who else would care to bring sandals to protect their burned and blistered feet?

At first slowly, by ones and twos, the children crept out of concealment to receive their gifts from

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the Lady Epona. At the sight of the first boys' burned feet, Acorna's eyes narrowed to silver slits.

"Distract that man," she murmured at Judit, nodding at the greedy manager.

Judit smiled sweetly at the manager, flirted shamelessly, and persuaded him to take her inside for a restorative cup of kava. The other overseers, not to be left out, crowded after her, and Acorna was left alone with the children for a few precious moments.

As soon as the adults were gone, Acorna pulled off the scarf wound about her head. At the sight of the white horn rising from the tumble of silvery curls on her forehead, the children murmured in awe. A few of them dropped to their knees, all doubt removed; the younger ones clung to her skirts and begged her to take them away.

"I cannot take you now," Acorna said, her eyeslits narrowing until they were almost invisible. "I have promised . . . and I have no place for you yet. But I will come back. And when I come, you will not hide? You will come to me?"

The children were awed into silence as Acorna knelt before the first boy to claim his sandals and touched her horn to his scarred feet. When they saw the blisters and infected cuts disappearing under the touch of the horn, they were momentarily frightened. But little Donkin jumped and shouted in happiness.

"They doesn't hurt! They doesn't hurt anymore ! Come on, noodle-tops, get yours!"

"Shh, shh," Acorna cautioned Donkin, and the children quieted immediately.

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They were so pale, so quiet, so obedient! There was hardly any pushing and shoving as they lined up to receive their sandals and, an even greater gift, the healing touch of the Lady Epona's white horn.

By the time the last child had been cared for, Acorna was exhausted and shaking. She was relieved by Judit's prompt reappearance from the manager's quarters and hardly noticed Judit's

disheveled, flushed look.

"Take me home," Acorna whispered to Judit, "I am so tired."

"With the greatest of pleasure," Judit said between her teeth. She gave Acorna a hand into the skimmer and leapt in after her, accidentally stepping on the manager's hand as he reached in to wish them farewell. "West Celtalan Riverwalk," she told the skimmer pilot. That would put them within an easy walk of the Li mansion—or a hundred other wealthy homes, so anybody questioning the skimmer pilot later would not be sure just where they had gone.

But Acorna fell into an exhausted slumber on the flight back, and with resignation Judit altered her orders and told the pilot to take them to Delszaki Li's private landing pad.

"With pleasure," said the pilot, "and -won't nobody find out from me where you went, neither! I thought as it must be somebody from the CLL."

"Delszaki Li has no connection with the Child Labor League," Judit said.

"Righty-ho," the pilot said with a cheerful

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wink, "and I'm the president of Kezdet. Don't you worry none, little lady. Truth to tell, I was just fixin' to go in and get you, claiming some kinda emergency, when you come on out of the offices. Nice girl like you hadn't ought to be alone with the kind of scum they use to run those factories."

"You're telling ine," Judit said with feeling. She straightened her tunic and twisted her hair back into its usual severe knot.

"Pulled you about some, didn't they? Like me to go back and beat 'em up?"

Judit chuckled. "If you want to be helpful, my friend," she said, "let's not start by getting you thrown into a Peacetower. An anonymous skimmer could be useful from time to time."

"Here's my call sign," the pilot said. "Any time you want me, just take the nearest public corn unit and put out this sign. Double the last two digits and I'll know it's you, see; then I'll be there soon's I can. If it's an emergency, triple the last two digits and I'll ditch my passengers and be there sooner."

The children were not the only ones to hear about Sita Ram, Lukia of the Light, and Epona: Didi Badini did, too, and she was livid. She asked a few questions of various informed sources and learned, to her astonishment, that no, there was no new bonk-shop opened with a Didi named Acorna. She was even more annoyed to learn that' In fact, she became obsessed with this Didi Acorna personage and traveled all the way to Anyag to question Siri

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Teku at length. He knew only that she had come in a rented skimmer —

"To keep us from knowing her location, no doubt!" Didi Badini said, tapping her elegant foot and forgetting that the mud -would get between her painted toes, done only that morning in silver:

a color she intended to take off the moment she got back. Silver was definitely "out."

"Quite possibly, Didi Badini," Siri Teku said, bobbing continuously in his desire not to alienate one of his better customers—although in the back of his mind -was the thought that if the mysterious new young Didi could, indeed, heal his sickly children, it would be worth more to cultivate her patronage than placate this old fiend.

More aggravated than ever, Didi Badini paced her apartment, ignoring the cool drinks and tasty tidbits offered to her. Only the news that a new patron awaited her inspection diverted her from her annoyance.

The customer introduced himself as Farkas Hamisen, an off-planet merchant who had, he said, been told that Didi Badini's house would show? him the best Kezdet had to offer.

He was a handsome young man, if one overlooked the ears that sat rather oddly on his head and did not seem to quite match the cafe-au-lait tone of his face. Didi Badini was far more interested in Hamisen's expensive clothes and the jeweled ring that twinkled on his hand; she had no problem at all ignoring the ears, especially when

he initiated the conversation by flattering her shamelessly. He could well believe that an establishment with such a lovely proprietor was the finest on Kezdet, he said, but it was hard to believe the owner did not outshine her merchandise. Perhaps she would do him the honor of an evening's conversation, just to get acquainted, before they discussed business?

Didi Badini smilingly agreed. Surely she could serve him better, she agreed, if she knew his tastes and personality.

A few more fulsome compliments gained him entree into her private rooms, where poufs of silk-

covered cushions invited visitors to relax at their ease. Hamisen praised the room as well and said that surely no establishment on Kezdet could boast such a lovely lady and such luxurious settings. He almost dared to confess the secret fantasy that had never yet been satisfied.

"On Kezdet," Didi Badini said, smiling, "anything is possible . . . for a price."

Hesitantly, almost shamefacedly, she thought, Farkas Hamisen confessed to a fascination with unusual girls. After some beating about the bush Didi Badini established that "unusual" meant deformed rather than very young.

"You have come to the right planet, my friend," she said, searching her memory for the children she'd recently rejected as too odd to appeal to her customers. There was that one-eyed child at Anyag...

Still acting shy, Hamisen said that there was a particular deformity that had always excited him

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beyond measure, although he had only seen it in a dream. A Didi in the next street had attempted to satisfy him by offering a girl with an obviously false horn pasted onto her forehead, but of course he had been revolted by the trickery.

"You -want her?" Didi Badini gasped unguardedly. "I don't believe it!"

"You know of such a girl?" Farkas murmured. "Truly I was well guided by those who recom-

mended your establishment." In fact he had been touring the bonk-shops of Kezdet in no particular order, amusing himself with a girl at each one -while at the same time he pursued this inquiry for Acorna, who -would lead him to Rafik. "Do tell me about her."

"There are rumors of such a one," Didi Badini said, thinking quickly. If she told Hamisen that the horned freak was setting up as a Didi on her own account, he would go straight to Didi Acorna and she herself -would lose the lovely profits promised by his clothes and ring ... as well as the pleasurable caresses -with -which he -was entertaining her -while they talked. She never "went" with clients anymore, but that didn't mean she -was averse to affectionate fondling of the kind that knowledgeable men and women exchanged. Just now he was stroking her hair, which she felt was her best feature: soft, silky, curly, and without a single -white hair. He knew just how to do it, too, -without catching his fingers or his nails, -which she had noticed he kept properly manicured.

"Only rumors?" he repeated, withdrawing the caressing hand.

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Then again, Didi Badini thought, if she professed too much ignorance he might leave and pursue his interests elsewhere. That must not be allowed to happen! Not only would she lose the money and the pleasure he promised, but the half-formed plan which was floating in her mind would never come to fruition.

"Only rumors to most people," she said, "but / have seen her, and I ... might be able to find her again." The thought ,of delivering her impudent new rival to Farkas Hamisen, drugged into a state

of compliance, gave her far more pleasure than anything Farkas Hamisen could do with those elegant, long, brown hands.

"Really? You must let me know if you learn anything else," Hamisen said in a bored tone. The underlying message -was clear: she would have to do better if she -wanted to retain his interest. Didi Badini searched her memory for some scrap of information that -would intrigue Hamisen and keep him close to her, -without giving him enough of a clue to actually locate this girl.

"Her bodyguard used to -work for the Li consortium," she said reluctantly. "There may be some connection there . . . but you -would be well advised not to pursue it, my dear. Delszaki Li is powerful, corrupt, and utterly ruthless. It -would be too dangerous for someone who does not know the -ways of Kezdet to inquire into House Li affairs."

"A man does not shelter behind a -woman's skirts," Hamisen said firmly. "How are you going to find out about the girl?"

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Didi Badini smiled and stroked his arm -with one long, elegantly oval fingernail. "I have my friends . . . here and there. Amuse yourself -with some ordinary girls tonight, Farkas—on the house, of course," she added hastily, "and come back to me in a few days for more information." She treated him to the sleepy smile that had beguiled the elder Tondubh into parting with more jewels than the glassworks could afford, back in the days when she still did her own work. "You will come back . . . won't you?"

He answered her question with one of his own.



"You will find the unicorn girl for me . . . won't

It was Gill who brought home news of the legends that permeated Kezdet through kava shop to bazaar and even to the sacred rooms of the Miners' Guild. He had all he could do to keep from pounding a few faces in for the smutty suggestions about horn-nuzzling that went on. What had Acorna done to generate such speculation? Well, it would have to stop right now! Mr. Li's house was impregnable, but Acorna had lately been given to such bizarre . . . escapades . . . even when she was supposedly being guarded and/or chaperoned by Pal and Judit.

Then it occurred to him that maybe he had best join any more outings, to guard Judit as well as

Acorna.

The high-pitched laughter of happy children greeted him as he palmed his entrance to Mr.

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Li's mansion. He stood for a moment, listening to the enchanting mirth. Laughter was a lovely sound and suddenly he realized that he could not make Acorna suspend her lifesaving activities. But the sooner they initiated the Moon project, the better . . . the safer.

Rafik was busier than he had ever been in his life in the spacious office which Mr. Li had given over to him, and the use of state-of-the-art communications devices that allowed him to speed messages to an incredible number of destinations. He was not a member of his particular family without having an innate natural instinct for trading. He often wondered why he hadn't gone into that respectable profession as his mother had wanted. Not that he felt himself at any loss in the bargaining and badgering that were part and parcel of

making successful deals. In the odd moments he had, he decided that as a callow youth he had only been kicking over the traces to go a-mining. And yet, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to do this now if he hadn't done that. Kismet!

He had managed to make contact, again through Mr. Li's amazing network of contacts, with a lunar engineer: an elderly man, one Martin Dehoney, now retired, who had been responsible for the ingenious structures that were almost compulsory on moon mining installations for their high safety factors and low budget requirement. He was also said to be a treasure chest of innovative ideas which conservative agencies, such as

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large corporations and governments, -would not consider. So, when Rafik contacted him, at first the Architect Dehoney had demurred by virtue of his age and debility, but Rafik's gentle persuasion—and the explanation that the plan would ruin the system of Kezdet's child-bondage system—won him over. He allowed that he had quite a few novel ideas for moon installations which he felt might be eminently suitable, and which someone of Rafik's breadth of understanding might appreciate more than bureaucracies. To know that some of his best work would see the light of a sun would be very nice indeed before he slept. It took a moment for Rafik to realize he meant the "long sleep" of death.

To his and Mr. Li's intense gratification, a veritable harvest of plans, complete with specifications (although some of these were improvements and annexes to some of Dehoney's existing lunar facilities—fascinating in themselves) arrived by special courier three weeks later.

"It's not just the innovative design for integrating living facilities and life-support hydroponics," Calum marveled. "The man has an incredible instinct for mining engineering problems! Look at this bootstrap proposal. It's so elegant it's beautiful!" He was looking at Dehoney's projected Phase II of the lunar base. In Phase I the lunar regolith would be raked for metal grains, which would then be reduced to their component elements by the gaseous carbonyl process. At the same time, a related chemical vapor deposition process "would be used to fabricate large-sized, ultra-lightweight

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mirrors from the carbonyls of iron and nickel. In Phase II, when the regolith had been raked down to the underlying rock, these mirrors could be used to concentrate solar heat and break up the rock without the use of explosives, which would have to be imported, or mechanical drills, which as Calum knew all too well were subject to frequent dust clogging and friction wear in near-vacuum conditions.

"And he uses by-products of the regolith beneficiation to provide shielding from solar flares in the first habitats," Gill pointed out, "then, in Phase II, we can construct extensive living quarters in the rocky areas we excavate. So there's very little added cost for habitat construction and radiation shielding." They were poring over the doubled-domed, lock-connected habitat and hydroponics design when Judit interrupted them to turn on Universal News and the report of Dehoney's demise: in his sleep.

"He must have just sent the plans off to us," Rafik said, awed and chagrined. Had his urgency contributed to a fatal fatigue?

"I wouldn't have thought you could care about such things," Judit said, giving him an odd look.

"You malign me," Rafik said, though he knew that she had overheard him dealing rather ruthlessly with some suppliers. He laid one hand on his heart, allowing his hurt to show. "I would be callous indeed to work an old man to death. Even if children are being done so daily here, until -we can get this underway."

Mr. Li regarded Judit over his nose as he had a

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habit of doing when he wished her to do something that she did not wish to do.

"My apologies, Rafik."

"We will name the main dome 'Dehoney' after his inestimable contribution to the project," Rafik announced, though he looked at Mr. Li for confirmation of this sudden whimsy. Then, with a deep sigh, which could be interpreted in any way she chose, he unrolled the rest of the plans and studied them.

With such detailed plans, even to the environmental shifts as the population increased, Rafik was able to send out tenders to the construction firms which Gill had been checking out for integrity and the reputation of finishing jobs on time and within budgetary parameters. They sent the tenders out -with a return address of the Uhuru, so that Mr. Li's privacy -would not be invaded by the importunate. When word of the size of this job got out, they would be besieged by every penurious subcontractor looking to make more than his work was worth. Better that the office of record be a space ship so that dock security could be

tipped to see that the worst did not gain entrance.

That meant that Rafik and Gill would have to have a discreet and secure modem link to Mr. Li so he could supervise affairs.

"Rafik has the energy this project has needed," Mr. Li said, smiling beneficently at Judit and patting her hand, "-while I can still supply the wisdom of experience -which his young head has not yet had time to accumulate."

Judit had just discovered the packet of disks,

part of the consignment, and, exclaiming with delight, loaded them into the computer. Almost instantly, the sketches became three-dimension drawings, moving as the strained voice of Marty Dehoney added explanation to his vision of a lunar mining station that could also vie for use as a holiday resort, so complete were the amenities.

"And look at this!" Gill exclaimed as Dehoney went into his expansion plans. "To cut down the hazard of fire, he suggests we capture small carbonaceous asteroids and release their nitrogen."

"Not to mention we can get sulfates and phosphates from the same source, if needed, to supplement the lunar minerals," Calum pointed out. "If you hadn't been so single-minded about collecting valuable metal payloads, you'd have thought of that yourself. We passed up plenty of carbonaceous chondrites in between E-types."

"I didn't notice you coming up with the suggestion, either."

"Didn't need it to support a crew of four," Calum said smugly. "If we'd been trying to stabilize life-support and atmospheric systems for an entire colony, naturally I would have mentioned it."

"Oh, naturally," Gill drawled with heavy irony.

They were still viewing the comprehensive disks when Pal came to announce that dinner was ready. On noticing their intent faces, he very quickly called down to ask the butler to hold the meal for at least half an hour.

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Tapha's tongue stuck out between his pinched lips as he -worked his -way through the cipher program built into his personal corn. His father was so stupidly old-fashioned, requiring all his operatives to use a cipher that depended on recalling large chunks of the Books of the Three Prophets from memory. He'd probably have a fit if he knew that Tapha had reprogrammed his personal corn to generate enciphered messages automatically, always using the First Verse of the First Book as the key . . . and even so, there was more hands-on labor involved than Tapha cared for. When he took over the organization, one of the first changes he'd make would be to modernize the communications system, using an automatic encryptor instead of this cumbersome system. Hafiz was overly concerned about security, anyway. Why, Tapha had been using the same encryption key for every message he sent from Kezdet, and there was no sign that any of them had been broken.

Nor was there any sign that any of them had been received, though he knew they must have been. Hafiz was just being mean and petty, refusing to advance the credits necessary for Tapha to live in the style befitting the heir to the Hafiz Harakamian empire, forcing him to sell off one by one the jewels

he'd collected when he fled. Well, all that would change now. With satisfaction Tapha completed the encrypted message telling his father that he had located his prized unicorn girl and would return her . . . for a price. He could not resist adding the cryptic comment that he had also found the way to solve another family problem here on Kezdet.

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Without help! Well, without very much help, anyway. Didi Badim's mention of House Li had been enough of a clue for Tapha to locate Acorna and Rafik on his own. He wouldn't need to go back to her for information . . . though he might go back for his own amusement.

After handing in his message at one of the public comsutes on the main streets of Celtalan, Tapha went on his way to arrange the solution of that nagging family problem. How proud his father would be when he learned that Tapha had not only recaptured the unicorn girl but had also revenged the trickery practiced on their house by Cousin Rafik! More to the point, with Rafik safely out of the way, there would be no more plots to do Tapha out of his rightful position as his father's heir apparent. This time Tapha did not intend to make any stupid, impulsive moves, such as the attack at the restaurant . . . although that dhouQ have worked; he still couldn't figure out how Rafik could have moved fast enough to avoid taking even one blast of laser fire. No matter. This time his disguise would allow him to get close enough to make absolutely sure that Rafik was quite thoroughly dead.

And once that little matter had been cleared up, he had only to wait until his father's emissaries arrived with enough credits to make it worth his while to tell them where the unicorn girl was. No need to put himself to the effort of capturing her;

that was work for subordinates. He, Tapha, was the mastermind behind the plan, and that was quite enough. No, he would simply relax at Didi Badini's

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until Hafiz responded to this latest news. The old bat would give him anything for a few kisses and sweet words . . . and when he was ready for something fresher, he would offer to help train this new acquisition, the scarred girl from the mines. An enjoyable way to wile away the days of waiting, and one advantage accrued to this child, since she was already marked, was that presumably the Didi •wouldn't care if she acquired a few more scars during "training." There'd be no need to be careful as he had been ever since that unfortunate accident with' the joy-toy girl on Theloi.

As was routine on Kezdet, Tapha's latest message and all other messages with off-planet tags were routed through a Guardians of the Peace office on their way to their final destination. Ed Minkus browsed through the day's mail list with a casual eye out for any interesting anomalies or potential profits, stopping at the obviously encrypted message purporting to concern differing religious interpretations of the First Verse of the First

Prophet.

"Hey, Des," he called to his partner, "here's some more crap from that Tapha guy. You know? The one with the funny-looking ears who keeps writing home for money and uses the same encryption key every time."

"So?" Des grunted. "Unless he actually geU some money, he's no use to us."



"This one is something different." Ed activated the decryption program and scanned the cleartext

as it appeared on the screen. "He's found something valuable . . . might be worth a cut of the action . . . oh, and it looks as if he's planning to assassinate some guy named Nadezda."

"Nadezda?" Des rolled out of his chair and into a standing position over Ed in one savage movement. "Nadezda! He can't do that! That triple-timing, two-tailed miner is mine! Nobody kills Nadezda before I get mine back on him!"

Delszaki Li's payment of the "fines" owed by Calum, Gill, and Rafik to Kezdet had left Des "without official excuse to persecute the miners, but with none of his original lust for vengeance diminished in the slightest.

"Well, then," Ed replied mildly, "we'll just have to stop this Tapha before he gets there, won't we?"

The vid-screen in a corner of Didi Badini's luxuriously furnished sitting room transmitted only a jagged pattern of neon flashes that made the Didi's head hurt.

"Drop the bloody scramble, can't you? It hurts my eyes—and it's not as if I'd never seen you before." Immediately she made that last comment, the Didi regretted it. It was not wise to remind the Piper that you were one of the few people on Kezdet who had seen his face . . . even if you had no idea where in the ranks of Kezdet's techno-aristocracy he led his "real" life.

"I have already been careless enough," a dry voice whispered from the speaker grill surrounding the screen, "accompanying you to that mine. And for

what? First sight of a pretty girl-child whom you managed to lose before she was back in your house!"

Didi Badini cringed at the anger in the whispering voice and forbore to remind the Piper that he, too, had been in the skimmer when that little beast Khetala distracted them and gave Chiura her chance to run away. Never mind. She dared not express her anger at the Piper, but she could take it out on Khetala later. The brat had been locked below long enough to take the fight out of her; now she would turn her over to Tapha to break her.

"A thousand apologies, master," she said, swallowing her rage at this unfair criticism. "How may

I serve you now?"

"There are rumors—" the voice whispered,

while neon-green and bile-yellow stripes crawled and writhed across the vid-screen, "rumors that the goddess of some children's cult walks the soil of Kezdet. She has a thousand names but only one face, long and narrow, with a horn like a unicorn's sprouting from her forehead."

"Didi Acorna!" Did! Badini sat upright on her pile of cushions. "I knew she was no true Didi, for none of the sisterhood knew of her!"

"Didi, goddess, what does it matter?" the Piper interrupted her. "The tales they are spreading of her healing powers are gross exaggeration, but that does not matter, either. What matters is that the children believe. The Child Labor League and that malcontent Li are stirring up enough trouble now;

•we do not need some goddess cult serving as the focal point for more resistance. This horned freak must disappear. And I must not be seen to be

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involved in it. I will not have my official position compromised."

Didi Badini's plump, powdered face creased in an unpleasant smile. "Nothing," she assured the Piper, "would give me more pleasure. And there need be no hint of politics about the removal, either. For impersonating a sister without paying dues to our guild, she has already earned punishment. And there are those who would pay well for that horn of hers; powdered unicorn's horn is an aphrodisiac of unparalleled power."

"But will removal of the horn kill her?" asked the voice, like dry leaves rustling.

"I think we can be sure of that little point," said Didi Badini, smiling as the vid-screen display abruptly went gray.

Then her face sagged with relief. She might not be able to see the Piper, but she knew he could watch and interpret every change of expression on her face. A little longer, and she might have been rash enough to let him find out exactly how she proposed to locate this Didi Acorna. She saw no need to tell him that she counted on young Tapha to lead her to the girl. The Piper might think that he could more profitably deal with Tapha directly . . . and Didi Badini had not been lying when she mentioned the resale value of a unicorn's horn. She had customers whose natural powers were failing, to be revived only by some special treat such as a very young virgin or the whipping of a recalcitrant girl; they would pay handsomely for this by-product of Acorna's death.

Tapha gave his borrowed dock workers coveralls a last nervous hitch and strode through the workers' gate to the spaceport, giving the security guard a jaunty wave as he passed. He could scarcely conceal his jubilation. The disguise had worked! The coveralls were a gift from Didi Badini, who had bought them from a lower-class Didi whose establishment of aging ladies was patronized by the poorer dock mechanics and by transients who knew no better. It had been a simple matter for Didi Hamida to slip a trunk into one of her clients' drinks, remove his uniform while he slept, and subsequently remove his unclothed body to a gutter some distance from her establishment.

Women helped him, Tapha thought as he paced down the cavernous hangar where ships in for repairs were being disassembled and worked on. He definitely had a way with women . . . and

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once this little job was taken care of, he looked forward to returning to Didi Badini's establishment to have his way with the new girl. Experienced women were all very well, but there was nothing quite like the young and untouched . . . and if they were frightened as well, that added spice to the encounter.

"Hey, you!" a real mechanic bawled at him.  
"Get me a hydraulic splitter! Not that way, you idiot," he went on as Tapha sauntered on his way.  
"Stores are the other side of the hangar!"

Tapha waved and mouthed something intended to be totally unintelligible. The mechanic shrugged in disgust, said something to his mates about

fardling idiot foreigners who didn't even speak Basic properly and what was the Guild coming to, and went to get his own hydraulic splitter—whatever that might be. Tapha neither knew nor cared, but he quickened his pace so as to reach the Uhlirus, docking space outside the hangar before anybody else could delay him. It would be a real pity if the fiendish cunning of his new disguise and improved weaponry were spoiled by encountering somebody who expected him to actually know about mechanicals. Tapha patted the sagging pocket of his coveralls and grinned. This time there would be no possibility of a miss.

From a borrowed office high on the hangar wall, Des Smirnoff and Ed Minkus watched Tapha's sauntering progress. "Idiot thinks he got through the security check by dressing up like a mech," Ed commented. "He doesn't even guess that we had the weaponry and retinal scanners

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turned off and told the guard not to check IDs when the little guy with the funny ears showed up. Why 3Q we let him through the check, anyway? Would've been easier to've picked him up there. Or did you change your mind about letting him off Nadezda for you ? "

"Hell, no," Des replied, "but he hasn't done anything illegal yet. He hasn't even cheated the scanners, since they were turned off. It would be exceeding our charter as Guardians of the Peace to stop a man who, for all we know, is paying an innocent family visit."

"And very nice that'll sound if there's an inquiry," Ed applauded. "Now what's the real rea-

son?"

Des gave a wolfish grin. "It won't hurt to put a bit of a scare into Nadezda before we take this one out. Besides, if we stop a suspicious-looking character at the gate and find unlawful arms on him, we're just doing our duty. If we shoot him down just in time to prevent an assassination attempt, we're Heroes of the Republic."

Ed sighed. "You already got your money back. Now you want revenge on Nadezda and a Hero of the Republic medal? Ever hear the story of the fisherman's wife who wished to be pope?"

"Pope who?"

"Never mind. He's coming into range now; let's see if the scanners can pick up just what he's carrying in that bulging left pocket." Ed activated the beams, focused them, and gave a long, low whistle. "Holy Kezdet . . . we shouldn't have disabled the weapons scanners at the main gate."

"We didn't want him stopped for carrying a pocket laser or something like that," Des reminded him.

"Pocket laser! Ha! The idiot's got a tungsten bomb in there!"

"You're kidding!"

"Wish I were. Here—take a look at the reading."

Des glanced at the scanner screens and blanched. "He didn't mention this was a suicide mission. If that thing goes off, he won't only get Nadezda. He'll blow up the bloody ship!"

"He'll blow up the whole bloody hangar," Ed corrected him.

"Maybe the whole spaceport."

"A chunk of West Celtalan."

"Hero of the Republic," Ed said, "is not what they're going to hang around your neck for letting this one through, boyo."

"If we don't stop him," Des said tersely, "I won't have a neck left for them to hang me by. And if he sees us, he might panic and set the thing off prematurely. . . . Hell, he's so dumb he might set it off by accident anyway!"

Both men were jogging down the internal security hall by the middle of this conversation, so well attuned to each others' thoughts and reactions that they didn't even need to discuss what to do next. If they could round two sides of the hangar and cut off Tapha before he reached the Uhuru, if one of them could get a clear shot at him, they just might be able to save themselves and a largish chunk of West Celtalan from molecular disintegration.

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"Alarm?" puffed Ed as they passed a security station.

"Nope. Don't want to startle him." Des was in no better shape than his colleague, but his adrenaline high was enough to keep him from feeling out of breath yet.

They made it to their target corner with seconds to spare, Ed leading. He drew his stunner, peered around the wall, and swore. "Too many fardling workers in the way. I can't get a clear

shot."

"Screw? the workers," Des said. "They'd rather

be shot in passing than disintegrated by a tungsten bomb, wouldn't they?" He leaned over Ed's crouching form, utilizing every advantage of his superior height and reach, and squeezed off a series of narrow-band stunner shots without even seeming to pause to take aim.

"Got him," he said with satisfaction, and sprinted for Tapha's fallen form to defuse the bomb, Ed close behind. "Let's hope it's a standard arming device," he said, reaching into the baggy pocket they had spotted as containing the •weapon. "Be a damn shame to lose the hands that have such perfect aim to a misfired tungsten bomb."

"This thing goes off," Ed said sourly, "you'll never have time to miss your hands." He knelt over Tapha and watched, breath held, as Des twirled the combination detonator on the tungsten bomb without a trace of nervousness. Three clicks, an agonizing pause, and then the bones of Ed's skull registered the cessation of the almost subliminal buzzing that had signaled an armed tungsten

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bomb ready to detonate on signal. Now for the first time he noticed the people around them; the crowd of mechs shouting misinformation at one another, and two of the miners pushing their way through the crowd. Rafik Nadezda was the first to reach them.

"Hey," Rafik said, looking down, "that's—"

"A tungsten bomb," Des Smirnoff said, rising to his feet with the dismantled halves of the bomb, one in each hand. "Whoever this was really didn't



like you, Nadezda—even more than I don't like you. You owe me one. Another one," he said •with heavy meaning.

"I was about to say," said Rafik with dignity, "that's my cousin, Tapha."

"You got the tense -wrong," Des said with a tight-lipped smile. "That w< your cousin Tapha. I set my stunner on max when I got a maniac with an armed tungsten bomb wandering around the port, Nadezda, and he took half a dozen shots to the head. Fried his brains." He thought that over. "His hypothetical brains."

"How did he get past security?" somebody wondered aloud.

"These terrorists are fiendishly cunning," Des said, raising his voice to roar over the noise of the crowd.

"Terrorists?" Gill repeated. "I thought it was a personal — "

"The Guardians of the Peace have been watching this man for some time," Des said loudly. "We have reason to believe he is closely associated with the Child Labor League, those notorious terrorists

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who are doing their best to •wreck the economy of our happy, peaceful, and productive planet."

Gill's face turned as red as his beard. Rafik

stepped backward and landed heavily on his toe.

"A happy end to an unfortunate situation," he said over Gill's rumblings of anger. "Allow me to congratulate you on your prompt handling of the crisis. Guardian Smirnoff. And—er—that little episode on the asteroid was a mistake. We had no idea you would be marooned there for any length of time. I owe you an apology for that incident."

Smirnoff's face darkened. "You owe me more than an apology," he said under his breath, "and I still intend to collect, Nadezda. Later!"

"How about a formal report and recommendation that you be nominated as a Hero of the Republic?" Rafik suggested in equally low tones.

"You've definitely earned it today."

Smirnoff paused, visibly undecided.

"And no inquiry as to how this . . . terrorist . . . made it through security," Rafik added.

"You can pull that off?"

"An off-planet miner may not have that much influence," said Rafik, "but the heir to the Harakamian Empire has."

"You?"

Rafik stood looking down at Tapha's body, his face expressionless. "I am now. You'll permit me to collect his personal effects?" he added after a moment's silence. "I should have something to send to his father."

"Go right ahead," Des offered. "And—"  
Rafik's lips curved slightly. "I won't forget the

report, no. Congratulations—Hero of the Republic!"

Calum missed the excitement of Tapha's second assassination attempt, as he had missed most of what was going on around him since Dr. Zip pro-

duced the results of his study. Zip had concentrated on the sector of space nearest where Acorna was found and had been downcast to report that the epsilon-V studies of stars in that sector showed a very low chance of any primary producing planets rich in the precise mix of metals used in the pod, a report that was borne out by the mass diffusion imaging of the nearest JM-type stars and their planets.

But Calum rather thought Zip, in his pride at being able to report the constituents of distant planets through new technology, had overlooked a few things. The one sure thing they knew about Acorna's people was that they had a sophisticated space-faring system. If he and Gill and Calum could take rhenium from the asteroid Daffodil to make solar thermal-thrust chambers on Theloi, why couldn't Acorna's people also have mined a number of systems to collect the metals for this alloy?

That concept turned the problem of locating Acorna's home world from a straightforward task of astrophysical analysis to a complex optimization program requiring sophisticated operations research techniques.

"You see," Calum had explained to Gill when

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he started working on the program, "we are also going to assume, going from what we know of Acorna, that her people are not stupid or wasteful. They wouldn't go farther than necessary to get their metals. So first I have to use Zip's data to design a program to find all the subsets of stars

within a given volume of space that would, collectively, provide the necessary substances, then, for each such subset, find the M-type planet that most nearly approaches an optimal location for all the required mining missions."

"Hey," Rafik said, "if Zip can come up with planetary emissions studies for all these systems, why don't we use him to locate good mining areas for us?"

"Costs too much," Calum said. "You wouldn't believe what Li has spent on this problem already."

He quoted figures until even Rafik reluctantly agreed that it wouldn't be cost-effective to retain Zip's services as a prospector.

"But," he said, brightening, "he has already produced all this data in search of Acorna, has he not? Surely there would be no objection to our using it for other purposes?"

"Probably not," Calum agreed. He was rather annoyed at the way his friends kept missing the point. Who cared about mining? He wanted them to appreciate his elegant approach to the problem of identifying Acorna's home. "I'm treating the entire collection of stars as overlapping subsets, each containing one or more M-types. By the Axiom of Choice, there must be — "

Rafik had left abruptly then, muttering some-

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thing about mad dogs and mathematicians. Calum was a bit surprised that Rafik didn't share his joy in the beauties of applied linear programming, but then it took all sorts, didn't it? Whistling under his breath, he commandeered one of the parallel-processing units used by the

banking branch of the Li consortium, raided another branch for statistical analysis software that could be perverted to serve his ends, and proceeded to put together his very own astronomical and mining optimization program. For the past weeks his conversation at mealtimes had been limited to cryptic statements such as, "I'd have it done if I didn't have to put the data structures from all these different bloody star charts into canonical form first," or, "No, the fact that it's in an infinite loop doesn't mean the program doesn't work; it just entered a state with which I was previously unfamiliar." And whenever Judit would let him get away with it, he skipped meals altogether in favor of a quick snack that he could eat one-handed while gliding through visual displays of his program in the windowless room dedicated to the project.

Now, at last, he was getting results. Inconclusive, maybe, but results. He barely heard Gill's excited account of the assassination attempt and its aftermath. "Tapha's dead? Good, that's one less person after us."

"And I think Rafik's squared Des Smirnoff. So the Guardians of the Peace won't be bothering us, either. Calum, you should have seen Smirnoff defusing that tungsten bomb! The man may be a

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corrupt cop, but he can take a place on my bomb squad any day. Talk about nerves of steel!"

"Mmm. Good job he defused it," Calum said, nodding over the latest printout. "A bomb like that could've caused a power outage as far as here, couldn't it? I could've lost a lot of data."

Gill suggested that Calum take his data and do

something anatomically improbable -with it, then stomped off to find a more appreciative audience. Calum barely registered his disappearance; he was thinking about ways to narrow down the long list of possible planets to check out. The trouble with his brainstorm was that they'd gone from zero possibles to over a hundred, none of them conveniently close. Of course, they wouldn't be clwe. He snorted at his own na'i'vete. If they were nearby weVve met Awrna J people by now. And he might not be able to rule out any of this long list of possibles, but he could rank them for the search by running a second optimization, this time minimizing the total travel time and distance required. It would be a simple variant of the classic traveling-salesman problem.

The only trouble was, then what? Calum longed to test his results, and the only way he could see to do that was to go and look for himself. Delszaki Li would probably be willing to retrofit the Uhuru with superdrives that would minimize the travel time. But it would still be a five-year project just to check out the nearest group of possible planets. How could he abandon his buddies and take their ship for five years? Rafik and Gill nee3e3 him; neither of them was

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enough of a mathematician to manage subspace navigation on his own.

Calum came out of his particular haze when he realized he had not seen Rafik and, at breakfast, asked if Rafik was living aboard the Uhuru.

Acorna giggled. "I told you that eventually he would notice," she said to Mr. Li, who was smiling benignly on her.

"Well? Is he?" He addressed this query to Gill.

"In a manner of speaking, he is," Gill replied around a mess of kippered herrings which Mr. Li had imported especially for him. Though Calum was as British in origin as himself, the mathematician did not like kippered herrings.

Waiting for Gill to continue, he even wrinkled his nose as the reek of the delicacy wafted in his direction.

"He's on a sorrowful mission," Acorna said, giggling again.

Calum wished she wouldn't giggle. It wasn't like his Acorna. She had never been silly, but maybe it was part of the girlish things that Judit was teaching her. Although he couldn't remember Judit giggling.

"What?" and Calum addressed this inquiry to Mr. Li as the only sensible member at the dining table.

"His cousin, Tapha," Mr. Li supplied.

"Can no one give me a straight answer?" Calum complained.

"Considering that all we've had out of you

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recently has been either statistical probabilities or astronomical variables," Judit said, a touch peevishly, "a straight answer is improbable, isn't it?" Then she relented as Calum did indeed look hurt and had been trying so hard to locate Acorna's home world. "He decided he'd better take Tapha's ashes back to Uncle Hafiz and explain how he met

his death."

"Oh!" Calum digested this along with several mouthfuls of a delightful breakfast omelet before he let his fork fall from his hand. "But he's now his uncle's heir."

"We know," Judit replied.

"Will he come back at all? Gill said something about Rafik Rnally finding his element in all the trading he's had to do for the Moon Mines."

Gill glowered at him. "He won't leave us until he's finished that, because that will prove to Hafiz that he's really sown his wild oats and is ready to settle down and represent House Hara-

kamian."

"Oh!" Calum said, digesting that before he picked up his fork. "Yes, it would rather, wouldn't it? But Rafik wouldn't do that, would he? Not yet, when we haven't finished the moon base or found Acorna's planet."

"I don't think he would," Gill said, half his mind on getting the last flake of kippered herring onto his fork and into his mouth.

Pal entered, looking concerned. "I just heard that Hafiz Harakamian's fastest ship docked here this morning, in fact, in the berth the Uhuru •was, using."

Acorna

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"Uh-oh," Gill said, looking at Acorna. "That idiot son of his must have told him you're here."

"How could he know?" Acorna was dismayed.

"How could he know?" And Gill went falsetto



in mimicry. "Because you've been doing your Lady of the Lights and the healed -wounds and purified water act all over Celtalan is how he knows. How many unicorn horns are there on Kezdet?" He stood, throwing down his napkin, the bristles of his beard trembling with sincerity. "And I'm going to stick as close to you as your shadow."

"Oh, good, when Calum goes back to his computers, we can go out. I have just a little errand to do. I would have asked Pal, but he's doing something for Mr. Li, and I have a call in to Pedir," she spared a glance at the elegant antique carriage clock on the mantelpiece, "and he will be here shortly. Do say you'll come?"

"You better go," Calum said, "because I haven't spent hours, days ..."

"Weeks?" Judit put in, grinning from him to Gill.

". . . trying to locate where you came from, to let Uncle Hafiz get you first."

"So Pedir found out where she is?" Judit asked.

Acorna nodded. "He's been so helpful."

Judit looked as if she were about to add something, then saw the belligerent look on Gill's face. "I can't come this morning." She turned to Mr. Li. "We have that appointment with the head of the Public Works about proving the moon base design meets code."

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"That sounds like an engineering problem," Gill objected.

"It's politics," Judit said. "He knows the base design is safe, and he knows -we know it. At this stage, Delszaki doesn't need an engineer to reiterate the facts and get red in the face. He needs a psycholinguist to maneuver the talks the right way."

"You mean, Kezdet's objecting?" Gill asked, for he'd heard rumors which Rafik had discounted.

"Nothing that can't be discreetly settled, my boy," Mr. Li said, and moved his hover-chair back from the table. "Come along, Judit. Gill, I'd rather you accompanied Acorna and Nadhari since Judit cannot."

"As you wish, Mr. Li," Gill said, but he wasn't looking forward to it. Nadhari Kando wasn't his idea of a pleasant female companion for an excursion. "You'll be safe with me." Actually, he didn't think they needed Nadhari at all, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

He could add that to Calum's list of famous last words. Climbing into Pedir's skimmer—he'd met the man previously, since his vehicle seemed to be constantly in use by Judit and Acorna for their "shopping trips"—he had no idea where they were going. Pedir started right in telling Acorna about some very useful items he heard were going for nothing in the market which he thought she should check out. That ought to have warned Gill, but he was thinking about Tapha and Rafik and

worrying that Rafik's wily uncle might somehow hold him on Laboue, and the Li Moon Mining Company Ltd. might grind to a halt. Rafik had so much in his head and not on paper that it would take Gill months to catch up if Rafik didn't return

in a timely fashion.

He was roused out of his contemplation when Pedir landed the skimmer, and Gill was astonished to find themselves in the very -worst possible neighborhood.

"You will wait in the skimmer," Nadhari told Acorna. "I will fetch the girl."

"She won't come to you," Acorna said. Nadhari bared her teeth. "She will if I tell her to." She slipped out of the skimmer, which barely fit in the narrow courtyard where they had landed, and trod through puddles of slime to where a short flight of stairs led to a basement door in the wall. She tapped a special sequence; the door opened a crack, then swung shut again.

"Wait, wait!" Acorna cried, scrambling after Nadhari. "They don't know you! She's afraid! You'll have to go back to the skimmer!"

"Delszaki Li ordered me to protect you." Nadhari planted her booted heels firmly in the mud and glared at Acorna. "You go, I go." "Nobody's going in," Acorna said patiently. Gill thought it was time he joined the discussion. "Acorna, acushia, this is not exactly a shopping trip, is it? Want to tell me what's going on?" Acorna looked at her feet. "Not really." "Not good enough," Gill said sternly. Acorna drew a deep breath. "Well..."

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The door creaked on its hinges. "You talk too long!" whispered a woman. She put her face to the open crack, where the daylight cruelly illuminated the shiny red burn scars that disfigured the right side of her face from cheekbone to chin. "Someone will come! The lady must come in and pay the price. No one else."

There was a moment of tense bargaining, as both Gill and Nadhari initially refused to allow Acorna to go into the dark rooms at all, and the person on the other side of the door wanted them to go back to the skimmer, and Nadhari clearly wanted to blast her way into the rooms and take whatever it was Acorna had come for with no more talking. Finally a compromise was reached:

Nadhari and Acorna were allowed in while Gill waited outside.

"We are only women here," the veiled figure had said. "Only women come in."

"And if they think that makes them safe," Gill muttered, pacing the short length of the courtyard and back again, three strides each way, "they obviously don't recognize dear Nadhari."

There was a cry from inside, then the door bolt snicked, the door was flung back, and Acorna's arm pushed a very young girl out of the entry. Her arm did not follow? as he hoped, but was yanked back inside.

"They'll kill her," the child squeaked, and managed to jam her foot in the door. She cried out with pain as the closing door compressed her foot, but only for a heartbeat; then Gill had his shoulder to the door, forcing it open again.

The sudden change from light to darkness startled him. He had a confused impression of figures struggling in the confined space. Was that

Acorna? He was afraid to move for fear of hurting her or Nadhari.

An elbow jammed into his solar plexus and Gill backed up two steps, banging into the door. "Be some use, can't you!" Nadhari's low rough voice excoriated him. "Open the fardling door!"

Gill pulled the door open, and the daylight showed him that at least two of the figures he'd seen were going to give nobody any trouble. Two men lay on the floor, one with a trickle of blood coming from his open mouth, the other staring wide-eyed and blank at the ceiling. Acorna was breathing hard. Nadhari was not. In the light from the open door, her right hand flicked and sent a knife into the shoulder of the young woman who'd insisted that Acorna come inside.

"Don't hurt her!" Acorna cried.

"It was a trap," Nadhari's toneless voice grated. "You have paid the price. Now come, before there is more trouble."

Gill could see that the woman's face, though contorted with pain, was now smooth with new clean skin where the burns had disfigured her before. "I didn't mean for you to be trapped," she cried to Acorna. "They must have followed me."

Nadhari made a sound of disgust and took Acorna's arm, pushing her out of the door.

The child in the courtyard had been trying to get back in to help, but now she was hindering their escape by blocking the door. Gill

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swooped her up in one arm, pushed Acorna toward the stairs with the other, and was up the stairs, down the alley, and into the skimmer in seconds.

They were actually in and Pedir was making a hasty lift out of the courtyard when more figures erupted out of the basement. The child started shrieking, clinging to Acorna.

"They'll get me. They'll get me," she cried.

"Who?" Then Gill did a double-take on one of the male figures who had joined in the futile attempt to catch the rising skimmer. "By all the saints, that's Uncle Hafiz!"

"Uncle Hafiz?" Acorna swiveled round, but the courtyard and its occupants were now out of sight and Pedir had pushed the speed bar as far forward as it would go, kicking the skimmer into full power.

"So, after all, Tapha told him you were here? And there's Rafik trying to make a good impression on Uncle!" Gill gave a snort of exasperation. "Where was that? And who's this?" He decided these were safer topics than speculating about Rafik's annoyance when he discovered that Hafiz was here and might even know that his son had been trying to kill his nephew. Or maybe that wouldn't surprise him.

"This—" Acorna smiled proudly down at the young girl who -was hugging her rescuer's waist in a stranglehold, still chanting her litany, "she'll get me/he'll get me" "—this is Khetala, who saved Jana and so many of the children and guarded them as best she could until Didi Badini took her

away. And we've taken her away from Didi

Badini!"

"That won't help now," Khetala blurted. "He's

after you and the Piper always kills those he's after."

"The Piper?" Pedir said, noticeably blanching.

"The Piper?" Acorna's tone held contempt and

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scorn.

"The Piper?" Gill asked, wanting to understand the diverse reactions.

"He's the one who's supposed to be behind the child bondage schemes here on Kezdet . . ." Acorna began.

"He is," Pedir said in an awed tone, jiggling the controls to get more speed out of the skimmer as he aimed it toward the nearest congregation of vehicles exactly like his.

"But we have Khetala now and she's safe with me," Acorna said.

"I'm not sure I am," Gill said, and sucked his bloody knuckles.

"Did you have a chance ... I mean ..." Pedir floundered and craned his head around to look at Acorna.

"Of course, I did. That was the bargain, wasn't it?" Acorna said stoutly.

Gill decided that since Pedir seemed to care what happened to the scarred girl, it might not be tactful to mention that they had left her with a

knife through her shoulder and suspected her of setting them up. Nadhari and Acorna seemed to be working through the same thought processes, for they were both silent on the trip back. For Acorna, at least, that was unusual.

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They reached Delszaki Li's home to discover that the population had been augmented by one that very morning, and a three-way fight was raging in the entrance hall.

"Now what?" Pal demanded, taking in their disheveled condition and the girl clutching Acorna like a life-preserver. "Oh, never mind, don't tell me. I've got enough trouble this morning already, what with Mercy running out on her job."

"I'm Mrry, Pal," said the slender young woman facing him. Her delicate yet firm features and the thick braid of dark hair that hung down her back reminded Gill of Judit, though this girl wasn't half as pretty. Her dark eyes didn't flash like Judit's, and she didn't have Judit's way of tilting her chin up just before charging into battle. "I know you—we—need the information I was getting from the Guardians' office. But there wasn't going to be much more information that way. Not through me. Even Des Smirnoff noticed eventually that there were too many people named Kendoro around him. You and Judit haven't exactly been keeping a low profile, you know. Smirnoff and Minkus started being careful what they said around me last week. Today I came in to find they'd changed the passwords on all their files . . . and then I saw one of those windowless skimmers from Interrogation



on the landing pad. I had to get out. I'm not brave like you and Judit, you know that. If they took me to Interrogation, I don't know what I might have told them."

Surrounded by unknown people, Khetala clung with bruising fingers to Acorna. She quietly led the child away to the kitchen, hoping that the probably unusual experience of having all she wanted to eat would soothe and reassure her.

"Stop apologizing!" Calum snorted. He put one arm round Mercy's shoulders, as if to hold her upright. "I've heard about some of the methods Interrogation uses. One jab of the needle and you spill all, no matter how you try to keep from talking. I doubt I could stand up against them myself. You did exactly the right thing—not just for yourself, but for all of us—by getting out before they could take you." He glared at Pal. "What were you thinking of, to let the kid stay there at all after they started suspecting her?"

"I had no reason to think she was under suspicion," Pal said stiffly, "and the inside information she has provided on Guardians of the Peace activities has been invaluable. She's warned three of our field agents to get out before the Guardians could break up the hedgerow schools they were running for factory children and arrest our people."

"With that kind of record, even the Guardians would have had to figure out there was a fly on the office wall somewhere," Calum exclaimed. "What was your plan: save the field agents and sacrifice the local one?"

"There was no need for any suspicion to have fallen on Mercy if she had been discreet," Pal said.

"Discreet? Didn't you listen to the girl? It was her name, not her actions, that got her in trouble," Calum said, blithely reversing his previous

argument. "If you two hadn't been taking Acorna all over Kezdet to stir up trouble, maybe it wouldn't be so dangerous for her to be a Kendoro." "Were you followed here. Mercy?" Pal asked,

ignoring Calum.

The girl shivered. "I don't know. I don't think so. ... I used the old route, through East Celtalan, and then the tunnels under the Riverwalk Park."

"Let's hope you haven't compromised it, then."

Calum snorted. "Pal, if the Guardians are watching out for people named Kendoro, you can be sure they've got a watch on this house. What difference does it make whether Mercy was followed? The house is already under surveillance. But they're hardly likely to break into Delszaki Li's private residence to get a girl who's committed no crimes . . . are they?"

At this point Judit returned from her appointment with the head of Public Works and entered the fray.

"Pal, leave Mercy alone!" Judit commanded. "She's had the hardest job of any of us, and if she says it was time for her to clear out, the least you can do is trust her judgment."

Pal threw up his hands. "I give up! Two big sisters in one household is more than any man should be expected to take."

"Fine," Judit retorted, "next time you can go and talk to the Public Works Department. Tumlm Viggers is refusing to certify our base on Maganos for colonization. He says it's an untried technology and the architect needs to come to Kezdet to explain his plans in person."

Acorna

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"The architect happens to be dead!" Gill exclaimed.

"Precisely. It's a stalling maneuver." Judit frowned. "Usually that means they want more bribes. But Viggers didn't hear any of Delszaki's hints in that direction. Maybe he really doesn't understand the base design. It is a radical departure from standard practice in some ways . . . and Kezdets Public Works Department doesn't even have any experience with standard space environment designs."

Delszaki Li had steered his hover-chair in behind Judit and had been watching the argument with quiet amusement.

"Perhaps would be wise for some people to go to Maganos," he suggested. "Report, please, on how lunar base construction progresses; demonstrate success of habitat and ecological system."

"I'll go," Gill said. "Rafik may not be back for a while, and heaven forbid we should tear Calum away from his astronomical optimization programs." He looked at Acorna. "And ... I didn't have a chance to tell you yet, but we spotted Hafiz this morning. Three guesses what he's doing here! I think Acorna had better come with me. That'll keep her out of his way." Am) out of trouble, he added silently to himself.

"I'll go with her," Pal said immediately. He shot a dirty look at Mercy, who didn't notice. Her attention was all on Calum, who was talking quietly with her in a corner. "This house is entirely too full of sisters."

"Judit," Delszaki Li said while Pal and Gill

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started discussing how they would produce a convincing report for Public Works, "I wish you would accompany them."

"Why me? Not that I mind," Judit said hastily, "but you need an assistant." She glanced at Gill. For some reason the idea of studying a half-completed lunar colony with Gill sounded as attractive as a month-long holiday on the rainbow beaches of Erev Ba.

"Also need someone with sense to keep these children out of trouble," Li said, which made Judit feel like the aging spinster governess in a Victorian household. Or the maiden aunt. "As for assistant. Mercy can take over in your absence. Continue tradition of a Kendoro as my personal assistant." He cackled under his breath. "You and Pal need to get busy, produce next generation of Kendoros before this old man -wears out all three of this generation." His glance at Gill was full of meaning.

Judit blushed and tried to think of some way to disguise her eagerness to go.

"Seems hard on Pal," she murmured. "He's going to Maganos to get away from his big sisters, and now you're sending one of us along to keep tabs on him."

Li cackled again. "I think maybe Pal has other reason for wishing to go to Maganos." He looked meaningfully at Pal, who was staring at Acorna with an expression his loving older sister could only categorize as goopy in the extreme. "Just when I have an assistant who understands my mind," he sighed with pretended disappointment,

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"his gets bent in another direction. You will go to Maganos, Judit," he said firmly, a little too soon for Judit to be sure that his previous complaint had been meant to apply only to Pal. "Mercy will stay and take care of poor old man in his declining years."

"If you're sure she can do it. . ." Judit began doubtfully.

"You people don't appreciate Mercy!" Calum reentered the conversation with a bang, still clasping Mercy's shoulders. "For years she's had the hardest job of any of you, working undercover for the Guardians of the Peace. Wasting her intelligence on pretending to be a secretary and carrying trays of kava! It's criminal. Do you realize this girl has an advanced degree in linear systems optimization theory? She's coming down to the basement now with me to see the programs I've developed to search for Acorna's home world."

Li sighed as they left, but his dark eyes were twinkling.

"At least is not etchings," he murmured, "but is getting harder and harder to keep good help these days!"

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Brantley Geram, the subcontractor in charge of building the living quarters and life-support systems for Maganos Moon Base, was only too happy to have representatives of Delszaki Li coming to look at the work in progress. He was in general a happy man, working on Maganos in almost complete autonomy, developing the last designs of the legendary Martin Dehoney, and with the financial backing of the Li consortium allowing him to make sure that for once everything was done exactly as it should be, no corners cut in construction processes and no inferior materials used.

This did not, he hastened to assure Pal and Acorna, imply any extravagance. Quite the reverse. Mr. Dehoney's plans were far-reaching, ambitious, futuristic, perhaps, but not impractical or extravagant.

"As you see, we started with minimal living quarters, due to the expense of lifting shielding

materials into orbit. But as soon as the beneficiation and reduction processors for the regolith were in place, we -were able to expand significantly, using the dust and by-products of reduction as our radiation shield."

Acorna looked over the one large room he was showing them.

"Is this all?" she asked.

"We will, of course, be able to expand the living quarters even more as the processing of regolith continues," Geram said, "but there's no need for that at present. We have ample space for the contractors and work crews here."

"You'll need more space," Acorna said. "How-fast can you expand the quarters? We'll need dor-

mitories, schoolrooms — "

"Schoolrooms ? "

"Children may take up less space than adults," Acorna said, "but they must be educated. Or did you think Delszaki Li had gone into the business of exploiting child laborers like the rest of Kezdet?"

Brantley Geram sputtered unintelligibly and finally managed to convey that nobody had told him anything about children.

"That's why Mr. Li wants all the machinery designed for easy maintenance and operation by people with little upper-body strength," Pal told him. "But I suppose you weren't involved with the mining machinery contract."

"No," Brantley said, with a regretful glance down the tunnel leading to the processing section of the base.

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Gill had disappeared almost immediately upon arrival to Inspect the technical -workings, taking Mr. Li's other assistant—strange how all of Li's assistants seemed to be named Kendoro—along with him and reducing Brantley's audience to two. The funny-looking girl didn't even seem to be interested in the technical obstacles they had overcome to get this much of the lunar base operational in such a short time. Women! Let them into a place and they were mentally hanging curtains and planting flowers

before you even had a decent oxygen-nitrogen balance established.

"And don't start turning the "whole space into communal living quarters," young Kendoro added to the girl. "Remember, we'll have adults here, too, and they'll want some privacy. Make sure there are some shielded bedrooms for staff."

Young men, Brantley thought, were even worse than women. All they thought about was bedrooms. Too bad that middle-aged miner, Gill something, hadn't stayed to inspect the base living quarters. He had looked like a sensible man.

"Privacy is necessarily a low priority in this phase of the project," he said. "Later on, when the miners start excavating below the regolith, the tunnels should provide enough living space to satisfy everyone's needs. In fact, it will be quite luxurious. With solar power from the hyper-mirrors that we're now constructing, we will have abundant energy. And by incorporating Mr. Nadezda's suggestion of capturing a cometary asteroid for its ice core, we will be able to maintain a large base of water which can be passed through a swimming

pool, a series of decorative ponds, and the hydroponics facility before it is purified for reuse."

"Excellent," Acorna said. "You're quite right, privacy isn't important now. We need to provide a safe habitat for as many children as possible. We can wait as long as necessary for the luxuries."

Pal sighed. "I'm -willing to -wait as long as I have to," he said.

Acorna, of course, didn't notice his double meaning. At the moment, she was so entranced with the vision of refuge for Kezdet's children that he wasn't sure she had even noticed his presence. Well, he could only keep trying . . . and waiting.



"Perhaps you'd like to view the hydroponics section," Brantley suggested, trying to regain the attention of his wandering audience. "Maintaining an even ecological balance is, of course, the other limiting factor in our expansion, as well as the need for shielded quarters. We could import food, but in the long run it's better to grow it here; if enough plants are grown to provide food, they will automatically meet the oxygen demands of the people. That means approximately three hundred square meters of growing area per person, and a photosynthesis energy requirement of thirty kilowatts per person. If we increase the demand for oxygen faster than we build up the 'ponies, the whole ecosystem will go out of balance and we'll have serious problems. Same thing if we expand the growing area significantly beyond the needs of present personnel. Balance is the key to success in any closed ecological system," he said earnestly.

"Mmm," said Acorna as they ducked through the

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low tunnel to reach the hydroponics area. No space wasted here! She and Pal had to crouch to make it through; it was a relief to stand up in the spacious dome allocated to hydroponics, with its moist atmosphere and reflected solar light. She sniffed the air. "You have a little problem with excess nitrogen."

"Why, yes," Brantley said, surprised. How had the girl managed to read the gauges from all the way across the dome? "We're increasing the number of soybean tanks; they're our principal nitrogen-fixing legumes. Later we'll add peanuts, too, for a more varied diet."

"Good. That should take care of it. It's a little much for me to manage on my own," Acorna said.

Brantley shook his head. "On her own"?  
Something about this conversation . . . These people seemed to be speaking Basic, but some of the things they said made no sense at all.

While he was trying to regain his momentum, Acorna plucked a leaf of chard from the nearest tank and chewed it daintily, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Needs potassium," she said. "Better check your mix."

"I'd do it if I were you," Pal said cheerfully at the blank look on Brantley's face. "She has great intuition about these particular things ... no intuition whatever about some others, though, so it balances out."

"What do you mean, no intuition?" Acorna

demanded

Great. She might be annoyed with him, but at

least it was attention. Pal grinned.

Acorna

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"Don't you ever think about the future?"

Brantley Geram sidled off to activate the water testers. It would take a few minutes to verify that the girl had been talking off the top of her head when she claimed the 'ponies tanks were low on potassium-, but the satisfaction would be worth it. He knew this system; he'd built it, he maintained

it. No pretty girl could do a better job than his AI-driven automatic ingredient-balancing system!

"Of course I think about the future," Acorna snapped at Pal. "That's practically all I think about—how many children can we house up here, and how soon we can start bringing them up."

"I meant your personal future," Pal said patiently.

"Calum is "working on that."

"Finding your home? Yes, but that's not all there is."

Acorna's pupils narrowed to vertical slits. "Without other people like me," she said, "I have no personal future."

"That," said Pal, "is what I mean about your impaired intuition, Acorna. There are other people like you right here and you never even noticed. Don't we want the same things? Don't we care about the same things? Do I have to grow white fur on my legs before you'll notice me? Or is all your love reserved for small, helpless people? Maybe I should break my leg. Would you notice me, then?"

"I would not recommend that," Acorna said. "I do not know if I can heal broken bones." They had already discovered some limitations to her healing

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power, Delszaki Li's nerve paralysis "was too far

advanced for her to do more than relieve some of his minor symptoms.

Pal threw up his hands. "You're impossible! You're deliberately missing the point!"

Acorna took his hand. "Had it occurred to you," she said softly, "that maybe this particular point had better be missed? "

"No, it hadn't, and I don't see why," Pal said.

Acorna took a deep breath.

"Pal. We don't know anything at all about my genus. Your people take twenty years to reach physical maturity; I've done it in four. For all we know, I could be old in another four years."

"I don't care," Pal interrupted her. "And even if it were so, is that any reason for not living now?"

"We don't even know if our species are inter-fertile."

"I'd be willing to run some tests. We wouldn't even need a laboratory—" Pal smiled "—and I'd be happy to repeat the experiment over and over."

"Don't you want children?"

"Dear lady of my heart," Pal said, "we're going to have children. Several hundred of them, for starters!"

As he checked the results of the water test with unbelieving eyes, Brantley Geram heard them laughing and thought they must have been running their own tests on the tank mix. Okay, so the girl had been right: potassium levels -were down. A lucky guess, that was all. A lucky guess.

Ed Minkus took the call which came into the Guardians of the Peace offices. When he realized the origin of the call, he covered the mouthpiece and hissed across the room at Des Smirnoff.

"We've got the inspector on our neck. Over that dock shooting. The grieving parent is on his way here and we have to prove it wasn't our negligence that caused his death."

"Negligence? Negligence?" Des said, blustering because any call from the inspector was startling—and dangerous. One day the man was going to figure out just how little he knew about this department. When he started taking an interest in things, there would be an awful lot of "things" that would need to be rapidly "lost."

"Yes, sir, we certainly will, sir. All the files ready and the tri-d documentation of the ... ah ... regrettable incident," Des was saying, almost falling into the phone to project earnest, and innocent, sincerity. "Yes, yes. I got the name: Hafiz Harakamian." He put the unit down as if it carried skin-eating plague.

"Harakamian the father is coming here?" From his surfing of the trade nets the name was instantly familiar to Smirnoff, and suddenly he realized who the man known as "Farkas Hamisen," with his connection to Rafik Nadezda, must really have been. The planet seemed to grow aliases the way some people grew . . . ears. "Did we save the files? I thought we gave the stuff to Nadezda?"

"He got copies, but our files sure show the tungsten bomb, and that'll save our liver and lights."

Smirnoff glowered at his subordinate. "You  
hope!"

Then the door to their office swung open and  
in came their new clerk, Cowdy, a very shapely  
young woman, herded inside, back first, by the  
prodding finger of the man who -was barging in  
without proper introduction.

"How many times must I tell—" Smirnoff  
switched gears the moment he saw their visitor, who  
was unctuously backing Cowdy into the room. "Oh,  
sir, we didn't expect you so quickly," and he rose, as  
gracious as if he had never started to ream his  
underling out of her tights. "May I, and my partner,  
express our deep sympathy and regret for the unfor-  
tunate way in which your son met his end?"

"I want to <ee the records," Hafiz Harakamian  
said in an absolutely expressionless voice, taking a  
seat at the vid-screen and looking from it to

Smirnoff expectantly.

Minkus nearly fell over his own feet and  
Smirnoff's to key up the necessary file. And there  
it was: the perp's unswerving progress toward a  
certain ship, the scanners' discovery of the tung-  
sten bomb, their race to intercept him, and then  
their neat skewering of him with stunner shots.  
Then the all-important close-up of Des defusing  
the tungsten bomb.

"He couldn't have been that stupid," Hafiz was  
heard to mutter, at which point both Minkus and

Smirnoff began to relax.

"You see, Honorable Harakamian, how little option there was! For that device to have been planted . . ." Smirnoff shrugged eloquently.

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"Yes, I see." He rose from the desk and turned with a very cold and distant expression to face them. "I have come to collect his remains."

"There were none. He was cremated," Ed blurted out.

"Cremated? You donkey! You horse's ass, you camel's slime spit..."

"Rafik said that was the way — "

"Rafik?" Hafiz lowered the arm with which he was dramatically gesturing. "Rafik here?" Relief flooded his features. "Then it was done as the Prophets have ordained?"

"Of course. How could you doubt our efficiency in such a detail?" Smirnoff said. "And, of course, we had Nadezda to direct the ceremonies. But, he is on his way to you. He felt it only necessary."

Hafiz's expression altered and he regarded Smirnoff as one would camel's green cud on formal attire. "So the bomb was meant for my nephew!"

"It was?" Ed Minkus looked innocently at the Honorable Harakamian.

"There was bad blood between them, that is true," Harakamian said, dropping his head as if in deep sorrow. Then, tilting his head a trifle, he asked, "I don't suppose you would know where

the ward of my nephew would be? On the ship with him, returning my son's ceremonially blessed ashes?"

"No, he went by himself. The others are still at Mr. Li's," Ed replied, and managed a sickly grin as Smirnoff's expression told him he should probably have reserved that information for a price.

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"Not Mr. Delszaki Li?" Hafiz exclaimed.

"The very man," Smirnoff replied.

"Thank you. And good day," Hafiz said, and made as speedy a departure as his arrival.

"You stupid twit! You ninny-hammered log-head! You anvil-pated numskull. Have you any idea how much that information would have meant in good House Harakamian credits? And you gave it to him?"

Ed Minkus drooped. It would take him a long time to get over that.

It did not, however, take Hafiz Harakamian very long to reach the house of Mr. Delszaki Li. And there he sat, observing who came and went. When the skimmer pilot seemed restless, Hafiz reminded him that he had agreed to the hire of his vehicle and if he, Hafiz, wished to spend all day across from the house of Mr. Li, the meter was ticking and what difference did it make to what the vehicle did with its time?



"Who was you looking to find?" the driver asked. "Lotsa people go in and out of that house."

"Well, why not?" Hafiz said to himself. "Would you have noticed a female with silver hair and ..."

The driver swung to face his client, his eyes wide with surprise. "How wouldja know anything about the Lady of the Lights? I only picked you up at the spaceport."

"Lady of the Lights? My sweet little Acorna has achieved the distinction of a title?" Hafiz said.

"You better believe it. Cured my sister of a

birthmark which uglified her to the point no decent man would look at one so cursed. And, without the stain, she's not that bad lookin'." The transformation seemed to have surprised the driver.

Hafiz sighed. He had thought it might be easy to smuggle her back to his ship and away. But if she had achieved this sort of adoring notoriety, the odds had turned astronomical. The Didi had suggested that the girl had acquired unusual protectors.

"Anyway," the driver went on, all affability now, "she ain't here. She and the big red-beard and the littler guy went off to Maganos two days ago. To see the moon installation. But they're goin' to have trouble with that," he added, frowning.

"Oh?" Hafiz said encouragingly.

"Yeah, only they haven't figgered it out yet. If I'd of been the one to take them to the spaceport, instead of a House Li pilot, I'd of told them a thing or two." He laid an oily, broken-nailed finger along the side of his nose and winked at Hafiz.

"You wanna know anything around here, you ask drivers. They hear a lot even if they do sit up front, pretending they're deaf."

"Do tell," Hafiz said, making a paper plane out of a large denomination credit note which, with a practiced flick of his wrist, lofted over the partition, where it flew straight into the driver's quick hand.

"That I can, because we're all wantin' the Lady Epona to get the better of the Child Bonders and clean up Kezdet's reputation. Why, just the other

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day, there was some kinda fanatic trying to blow up the docks with a bomb!"

"Really! Is there some place nearby •where a man like yourself and I might have a quiet meal and discreet conversation?"

The driver revved the engine of the skimmer in answer. "Know the very place!"

Judit listened politely. Gill with growing enthusiasm, to the mining subcontractor's description of the simple three-drum drag scraper which was already in operation as they tested feasibility of Dehoney's first-stage designs.

"This is one of DPWs stated objections to the Maganos proposal," Judit told Gill and the subcontractor. "They say the drag scraper is an outdated twentieth-century technology."

Provola Quero, the subcontractor, sneered. "They should talk! Kezdet's mines aren't just outdated, they're medieval! Besides, haven't they ever heard of the saying, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'?" She jammed both hands deep into the pockets of her coveralls and paced to the next viewing window, talking nonstop. "The scraper is outdated for planetary use; it's inefficient and inflexible. And it's not worth setting up for quick in-and-out asteroid jobs. But as a starter system for Maganos, it is ideal. It's simple, rugged, and required very low mass to be lifted up here. When we scale up, of course, we'll replace this with more efficient, high-volume methods . . . using equipment fabricated right here on Maganos, in the pressurized repair

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shop we have already set up to deal with scraper repairs and working with the high-purity structural metals we reduce from the first batches of lunar regolith. Dehoney planned this operation to bootstrap itself from the git-go. He always said that the whole point of lunar industrialization was to do what you couldn't do dirtside, not to throw away credits lifting machinery designed for gravity and atmosphere into orbit and then fixing the inevitable problems."

Gill's eyes lit up. "You knew Dehoney personally?"

"Studied with him for five years," Provola said, running a hand through her yellow crewcut. "Helped assemble the designs for his prize-winning solar greenhouse habitat." She tapped the stud in her nose, which Gill now recognized as a miniature version of the space-station icon that was the famed Andromeda Prize, worked in black enamel and diamonds. "I plan to be the next Andromeda prizewinner," she added, "and Maganos is going to do it. Just tell me what you need to make DPW happy, and I'll bury them in

documentation proving the worth of Dehoney's plans . . . and my implementation."

She and Gill moved happily into a discussion of duty cycles, component replacement, and modular design, -while Judit stared out the viewport at the monotonous drag, scrape, lift of the cable-driven machinery. She didn't need to follow? the engineering discussion in detail to be reassured that both Gill and Provola knew what they were talking about; years of working with Amalgamated

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had given her a sixth sense for which engineers knew their field and -which ones were shooting out clouds of technical terminology to disguise their incompetence and laziness. Gill and Provola Quero were both in the first class. If they were satisfied that this three-drum whatsit was the best way to initiate lunar mining on Maganos, she had

no doubt they were right.

What she did doubt—very seriously—was the usefulness of any engineering argument to convince Tumim Viggers of the Public Works Department. Accustomed to reading nuances of speech and slight gestures of body language in order to survive with Amalgamated, Judit had picked up far more from that brief, inconclusive meeting than diggers had actually dau). The man •wasn't really concerned about the technical specifications for Maganos; he'd thrown out those objections almost casually, as if he were only playing for time. More disturbing, he had evinced no

interest in Delszaki Li's hinted bribes either. When a Kezdet bureaucrat didn't take a bribe, you knew you were in real trouble.

She tried listening more carefully to the technical argument, to take her mind off what she suspected were their more dangerous political problems. Gill was querying the need for the large-scale pressurized repair shop. It had been relatively low on Dehoney's original list of priorities; why had Provola chosen to make it the first major construction?

"Because -we need it now, and we're going to need it more every day!" Provola tugged at the

one long braid dangling at the side of her short, bristly haircut. "Sure, some of this work can be done suited and on the surface, but why should we? Give me one good reason for rewinding an electric motor in a vacuum! You've worked asteroids; you should know that dust is the worst problem of low-g, low-atmosphere environments." Even you, her contemptuous tone implied.

"We managed our repairs on the ship," Gill said.

"You," Provola flashed back, "had to be portable. We don't. We're going to need an industrial-sized shop soon enough to fabricate the next generation of mining machinery, so why not build it now and save the cost of expanding later? "

Gill put up his hands to register capitulation. "All right, all right," he said pacifically. "You're right; I'm used to small, quick operations, not to permanent base construction. I wouldn't mind learning, though."

Provola gave him a sudden, flashing smile. "And

/" she admitted, "have more theoretical than practical experience. Are you going to hire on to the Maganos project? We'd make a good team . . . unless you have problems with a woman supervi-

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"I like women," Gill said.

"That doesn't answer the question. I wasn't asking what you like to do with your hands when you're off duty."

Gill reached out for Judit and pulled her close to him. "My hands, and my off duty, are already committed, lady," he said, "and I wouldn't object to

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working for any student of Martin Dehoney's ... if that answers your question. Unfortunately, I'm not

free to stay on Maganos."

"Why not?" Judit cried. She had just begun spinning a picture of how pleasant their life here could be. Delszaki Li had already shown her plans of the private living quarters he intended to allocate to the woman in charge of welfare and education for the rescued children and had hinted strongly that he would like her to be that woman. If Gill took a job on the mining side of the project,

he could share those quarters . . . and he loved children. There couldn't be a better man to restore the children's faith after the horrendous experiences some of them had been through.

But, of course, he hadn't actually (and) he wanted to stay -with her. He had only been putting an arm round her at every opportunity, and wanting her to go with him wherever he went, and . . . Judit swallowed her disappointment.

"Can't ditch my buddies," Gill said. "We've always been a team, the three of us. Calum and Rafik need somebody with some muscle to do the heavy jobs, and somebody with some common sense to get them out of the crazy complications they're always getting into. I'd be a real jerk if I asked them to buy out my third of the Uhuru just because I'm a little older than they are and feel like settling down in a cushy construction job." The words were directed at Provola Quero, but his blue eyes -were on Judit, begging her to understand.

She swallowed again and nodded slowly. Of course he wouldn't break up the partnership. She

should have understood that was why he never said anything about the future, even when he was most enthusiastically demonstrating his desire for her company in the present. "I wouldn't want a real jerk to ... work on the project," she said in a small voice. "But perhaps you'll visit occasionally."

"As often as I can arrange it," Gill said, a wistful look on his broad face. "Oftener."

It was cold comfort, but it was better than nothing, Judit told herself. Anyway, what did she have to complain about? She had been incredibly lucky in her life so far. And now, at only twenty-eight, she was being offered the chance to do what she loved most: working with children, designing their education, overseeing their welfare, and healing the invis-

ible wounds that she herself knew all too well. It would be asking too much for the fates to throw in a fortyish, broad-shouldered, red-bearded Viking throwback as a life's companion in that work.

Hafiz Harakamian found the skimmer driver an invaluable source of information. Not only did he know the day on which Acorna was due to return from Maganos, he claimed to know the very hour of her return. But he also warned Hafiz that waiting for her at the shuttle port would not be a good idea.

"Too many folks wants to see our little Lady of the Lights, now that word's getting out about her," he warned. "Goin' to be a crowd at the port. If she comes out in it, you'll never get to her; if she's smart and gets Security to let her take a back exit, you'll miss her like the rest of 'em."

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He suggested that he bring Hafiz back to the Li residence at the exact time -when Acorna was scheduled to return.

"I have always preferred to be in place well before anybody else is expected," Hafiz said with the firmness of a man who had survived the thirty-year Harakamian—Batsu feud and had negotiated a partitioning of the planetary business without, like the two elder Harakamians, losing his head . . . literally. "We will take our position outside the Li mansion two standard hours before the



arrival."

At the time, this had seemed like an excellent idea. Before the two-hour safety margin was even one-third past, though, Hafiz Harakamian recognized that his tactical instincts had been impaired by too many years in the tropical clime of his home planet. Nobody had mentioned to him that Kezdet's rainy season was about to begin. Or that the rainy season was accompanied by a biting cold wind from the northern mountains. And, since it had been warm and sunny until this morning, he hadn't noticed that this particular skimmer had a leak in the roof and allowed an irritating draft to whistle through from one ill-fitting window to the next. He shifted his position so that the worst of the drip would fall on the driver and told himself philosophically that it was always a mistake to rely on hired equipment and staff, he should have brought his own people and transportation. But after the way young Rafik had cheated him over the unicorn girl, he had rather wanted to pull off this coup single-handed—the way he'd done in the old days, before

he became head of House Harakamian. Just to let Rafik see that the old man wasn't past it yet.

The iron-studded front doors of the Li residence swung open, revealing the fantasy of thin-sliced, colorful Illic self-lighting crystals that illuminated the inner doors. Hafiz admired the play of lights and colors while at the same time registering that no other skimmer had pulled up; somebody was coming out, not going in. No need to do anything except slump down in his seat and be inconspicuous. . . .

A light tapping on the window beside him was the end of that notion. When he pushed a button to make the glass sound-permeable, it stuck. Cheap, rented equipment! He had to physically open the window. A fine cold rain slanted in, accompanied by a yellow hand holding a holo-card.

"Mr. Li sends his compliments," said the servant, who, Hafiz noted irritably, was protected by a rainshield extending at least a foot around his body, "and suggests that the head of House Harakamian might be more comfortable keeping him under surveillance from iuu'u)e the house."

At least Delszaki Li knew how things should be done between equals. It would probably be insulting to hint that the sudden disappearance of Hafiz Harakamian would cause untoward repercussions upon several branches of the Li consortium. Hafiz insulted the servant anyway, and received a graceful reassurance that this was merely a social invitation, nothing more. Of course, the man would have said that anyway. . . . Hafiz grunted agreement and climbed stiffly out of the rented skimmer.

"Wait here," he told the driver.

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He could perfectly well have called up another and better-quality skimmer when he was ready to leave, but after the miserable hour he'd just spent, it suited him to think of the skimmer driver sitting and shivering in his drafty vehicle. Besides, in delicate business negotiations, there was always the possibility that one might have to depart in haste, omitting the usual polite formalities of leave-taking.

The servant extended his personal shield to cover Hafiz on the short walk across the street. Once inside the double doors of iron and crystal, he

was invited to hand over his lightly sprinkled turban and outer robe for drying while he took kava with Delszaki Li.

The head of the Li consortium was older than Hafiz had expected, considering the energy with which he directed the galaxy-wide network of the varied Li manufacturing and financial interests. He looked -with interest at the shriveled, yellow-faced man in a hover-chair, a blanket covering the wasted body whose absolute immobility betrayed his growing paralysis, only the snapping black eyes still showing the life that burned brightly inside. The man was older than Hafiz by a generation or more, older than any living member of House Harakamian. Hafiz's sense of danger went up a notch. Unlike some people, followers of the Three Prophets knew better than to underestimate the aged. In his long and successful life, Delszaki Li had undoubtedly used, analyzed, and countered every trick Hafiz knew, and then some.

While they sipped the first small cups of hot, fragrant kava and murmured conversational nothings

at one another, Hafiz felt his brain working furiously. There was no point in clinging to his first plan of snatching Acorna, claiming she was his wife by the Books of the Prophets, and removing her from Kezdet while the Guardians of the Peace were still asking the religious courts for a ruling. Not only had he lost the advantage of surprise, but he doubted his ability to fool Delszaki Li as easily as one could fool or bribe the Guardians. A straightforward, honest approach was more likely to be successful . . . that is, a reasonably straightforward and honest approach. His ancestors would reconstitute their corporeal substances if he let down House Harakamian by laying all his cards on the table at once.

After the necessary exchange of condolences from Li on the loss of Tapha and apologies from

Hafiz for the boy's idiotic behavior, he made his first oblique approach.

"Regrettable though the death of my son may be," said Hafiz, reflecting on the matter with little internal regret whatsoever, "it is -written in the Book of the Second Prophet, 'When you embrace your wife or child, be aware that it is a human being you are embracing; then should they die, you will not be unreasonably grieved.' As is enjoined upon me by my faith, therefore, I have put aside care for the dead and am now concerned for the living. Before his death, Tapha informed me that my nephew, Rafik, had brought to this planet my young ward, Acorna, a child whom he kidnapped from my home last year. These rash young men!" Hafiz sighed with a conspiratorial smile at Li.

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"They will be the death of us with their escapades and exploits,-will they not?"

"On contrary," said Li, his black eyes twinkling, "I find escapades of young people most rejuvenating force in this ancient life. But Rafik has brought no child named Acorna here."

"Perhaps he changed her name," Hafiz suggested. "She is unmistakable—a rarity, deformed, some would say, but in a most attractive way. Tall and slender, with silver hair and a small horn in the middle of her forehead."

Li's face creased into a smile and Hafiz let out the breath he had not been aware of holding. Thank the Prophet, the old man was going to admit Acorna's presence!

"Ah, you are speaking of the one our people of Kezdet call the Lady of Lights. But she is not a child. She is a mature woman and no man's ward."

"That's impossible!" Hafiz protested. "I tell you, I saw the child less than two standard years ago. She seemed to be about six, then — I mean, she w(U six," he corrected himself firmly, remembering that she was supposed to be his ward and that he would be expected to know her exact age. "Even on Kezdet, are children of seven considered adults?"

"Ah. There is concept of chronological age, and there is concept of developmental age," Li said serenely. "The one whom I know as Acorna is most assuredly a grown woman. Allow me to show you."

For a wild moment Hafiz thought that Acorna had been smuggled into the house by a back way and that Li was actually going to have her brought in;

then the holo-paintings on the far wall dimmed, to be

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replaced by obviously home-made vids. The image of a graceful, six-foot-tall Acorna moved, life-sized, across the wall, plucking flowers in a walled garden, playing with a toddler, gracefully lifting a long, full skirt to run up a flight of golden limestone stairs.

"Perhaps," Li suggested, eyes twinkling at the astounded expression on Haftz's face, "is not the one you know as Acorna? Perhaps is coincidence of name and appearance?"

"Impossible," Hafiz said. "There can't be two like that."

Nor could she possibly have grown so fast. The

vids must be some trickery. He decided to forget the argument about Acorna's age and press on to his second point. He had the skimmer driver to thank for the gossip that gave him this additional argument.

"It was most irresponsible of my nephew to bring her to this superstition-riddled place," he said, "and I shall speak severely to Rafik when I see him. She is in danger from hired assassins, some possibly actually in government pay. It is my duty to take her back to a place where she will be

kept safe, loved, and cherished as the unique being she is."

"Perhaps is not wishing to be 'safe, loved, and cherished' in museum of rarities." Li smiled.

"Perhaps prefers danger and important -work which only she can do."

Hafiz took a deep breath and counted to thirteen slowly. It would be most impolitic to accuse his host of talking nonsense. But what important -work could a child like that be doing? This was just another lie to delay him, like those faked vids.

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He had only reached ten when the door burst open and a short, fair-haired young man burst in.

"Delszaki, I think we've got it!" he exclaimed.

"Probabilities on this latest run show a ninety percent chance that it's somewhere in the Coma Berenices area—" He halted and stared at Hafiz with an expression of horror-struck recognition.

"Ah, that is, never mind, I'll come back later. ..."

"Please." Li stopped him with a single word.

"Do be seated. I feel sure that Mr. Harakamian will be as interested as I in the results of your research."

The young man bowed and tried to surreptitiously brush the crumbs off his wrinkled coveralls. His eyes were red-rimmed, as though he'd been working "without sleep for several nights.

"Delszaki," he said, "I don't think you understand. This guy tried to kidnap Acorna once already."

"Excuse me," Hafiz said, "I do not believe I have the honor of your acquaintance."

"Calum Baird," the young man said. He wasn't so young, now that Hafiz looked at him closely: late thirties, perhaps. It was the awkwardness and the exuberance that had misled Hafiz. "And -we have met... at your home on Laboue . . . although you may not recognize me. I was Rafik's senior 'wife,'" he said with a demure smile. "The ugly one."

Hafiz burst into uninhibited laughter. "That rascal, how he has tricked me again and again! Truly a worthy successor to House Harakamian! How did he persuade you to put on a hijab? You do not look like the sort of man who takes a secret delight in putting on women's clothing . . . although appear-

ances can be deceiving. / certainly was deceived."

"Rafik talked me into it," Calum said. "Rafik, as you may have noticed, can talk anyone into almost anything."

"Of course he can," Hafiz nodded. "He is my nephew, after all. The Harakamian strain runs true in him, at least." Tapha, on the other hand . . . Oh, well, Tapha was no longer a factor. "But I interrupt.

You wished to tell Mr. Li something?"

An almost imperceptible nod from Delszaki Li reassured Calum that it was indeed all right to go ahead.

"I think we've pinpointed Acorna's home world, sir. Once I normalized the astronomical data bases ..."

"Home world?" Hafiz interrupted in spite of himself.

"Yes. Where her people come from. Of course, she wants to get back to her own race," Calum said.

"Her own race? But I thought..."

"That she was human?" Calum shook his head.  
"No way. We don't know much about her background, but the pod she was found in shows that she comes from an advanced space-faring race with technology far beyond our own in some ways."

"The pod she was found in," Hafiz repeated. He seemed to be reduced to repeating phrases all the time. He didn't like the feeling that everything was shifting and changing under his feet. "You mean there are others like her?"

"I doubt," Calum said, "that it would be possible to sustain a high-tech, space-faring civilization with a population of less than, say, several million at the

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absolute lowest estimate. The need for specialization alone would preclude any smaller grouping."

"Several million." By the Three Prophets, he was repeating himself! Hafiz pulled himself together. "You could have told me this before," he said severely. "It might have saved us all a lot of trouble."

"I didn't know where her planet was until this morning," Calum protested. "Where it probably is, I mean. There's only one way to be sure. Someone will have to go and see. ..."

The look of naked longing on his face surprised Hafiz, but he did not have time to consider what it might mean. Another person had entered, as unceremoniously as Calum.

"I might have known you'd be here," Rafik snarled at his uncle as he barged into the room. "I turned around as soon as I heard a Harakamian ship had applied for clearance into Kezdet space. It didn't take you long to track down where Acorna was staying, did it? Well, it won't work! She's not here, and you're not getting her back to add to your museum!"

"I am delighted to see you, too, my beloved nephew," Hafiz said urbanely. "As for the matter of Acorna . . . perhaps -we can come to some arrangement that will be satisfactory to both of us."

"Tapha's ashes?"  
"Better a live nephew than a dead son," said

Hafiz with his benign smile.

Rafik's whole body tensed slightly. "Well, then. I was going to give them back to you anyway, you know. And the cremation was performed according

to the orthodox rituals."

"I know that," Hafiz said "Just as I know that you have not really let that Neo-Hadithian nonsense rot your brain and supplant your decent religious upbringing."

"How ..." Rafik croaked.

Hafiz smiled and gestured at Calum.

"Well, now, boy. You would hardly be letting your senior 'wife' run around without a hijab if you were truly a Neo-Hadithian, would you? I must admit, you completely took me in at the time," he went on. He felt he could afford a little generosity, since Rafik was so completely off balance. It would soften the boy up for the final agreement. "But I hold no grudge. You have shown me that you have the true Harakamian mentality."

As Rafik only goggled at him, Hafiz continued, looking away from the boy so that his words would not seem too pointed.

"Having lost my only son, I am in need of an heir. A worthy heir," he emphasized, "one of my own blood, one almost as clever as I am myself. Such a one would, of course, have to be trained in the complex affairs of the House. Training him would be very nearly a full-time occupation for me. I suspect I would have very little time left to pursue my hobby of collecting . . . rarities."

Rafik gulped audibly. "I am committed to finishing the Maganos Moon Base project," he said at last.

"House Harakamian honors its commitments," Hafiz said.

"My partnership with Calum and Gill— "

"Is it a lifetime contract?"

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"It's not a formal contract at all," Rafik said. "It just, well, things just worked out well for the three of us together."

"Perhaps," Hafiz suggested, placing each word as delicately as a surgeon cutting out overgrown flesh, "it is now time for the three of you to work apart."

Rafik glanced at his partner. "Calum?"

"Actually," Calum said, "I would rather like to go check out my findings on Acorna's home planet myself."

"Gill. . ."

"If Gill can be compensated for loss of partnership," Delszaki Li said, "is offer of Mr. Harakamian acceptable to you?"

Rafik looked sternly at his uncle. "You'll leave

Acorna alone?"

"I will swear on the Three Books," Hafiz said. "Well, then." All the tension seemed to drain out of Rafik's slender body. "If it suits you ... I, too, will swear on the Three Books to return to Laboue for training in the ways of House Harakamian—as soon as I have completed Maganos Moon Base ... if you will compensate my partners appropriately."

After some formal haggling, they agreed that

Hafiz Harakamian would buy out Rafik's and Calum's shares in the Uhuru from Gill and would provide Calum -with a subspace-equipped scout ship from the Harakamian fleet for his search. Rafik and Calum left, limp with exhaustion from the bargaining session, to revive their energies with something stronger than kava, while Hafiz and Delszaki relaxed with the satisfaction of old men who have seen matters properly arranged.

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As soon as they were well out of earshot, Rafik began chuckling to himself.

"Uncle Hafiz drives a hard bargain ... he thinks! But if you're really okay with breaking up the partnership, Calum ..."

"I've been dying to get out to the Comes Berenices and check my results in person," Calum said, "but I didn't like to say anything to you and Gill. Anyway, we're getting a bit old for this asteroid-hopping life. Gill, too. I think he's about ready to retire into a planetside Job . . . especially if it's a planet Judit Kendoro is on!"

"And I," Rafik said with satisfaction, "have discovered considerable talent for trading during the process of setting up Maganos on a commercial basis. I had already been thinking what fun it would be to have the Harakamian assets to play with. We'll go on letting Uncle Hafiz think he's driven a sharp bargain, though. It makes the old man happy."

Meanwhile, Delszaki Li and Hafiz Harakamian were enjoying their own interpretation of the bargain over their third cups of kava.

"My nephew is sharp," Hafiz chuckled, "sharp

enough to cut himself. If he had not been in such a hurry to extract a promise from me, he would have seen what I think you had already noticed."

Li's face crinkled. "That you had no more interest in Acorna, now that she is believed not to be unique after all?"

Hafiz nodded. "When this Calum finds her home—and he strikes me as the sort of obsessed fanatic who will not rest until he has solved the

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problem—unicorn people will be as common as Neo-Hadithians. What a fool I should have looked, collecting and announcing one as a rarity, when shortly thereafter they would be walking the streets everywhere. But it is well as it ends. I have an heir of the blood to carry on the affairs of my house, and young Rafik has a settled position in life. I keep thinking of him as a boy, but he's not getting any younger, you know."

"None of us are," Li said calmly.

"Yes, but you and I have done our work. Rafik needs a wife—a real wife," Hafiz smiled, "to give us another generation of traders for House Harakamian. I will settle the matter as soon as he comes home."

"I have no doubt you will," murmured Li, "but might be wise not to announce plans to Rafik just yet. Leave him illusion of choosing his own woman."

The team of four returned from Maganos early that afternoon, with vids, datacubes, construction records, air and water quality analyses, and

every other bit of evidence they could think of to support their contention that Maganos Moon Base was not just potentially habitable but already habitable.

"Why must we wait for Phase II?" Acorna demanded of Oelszaki Li before she was well in the door. "The base is in use now. The construction crews are living there; how can this Tumim Viggers say it is not safe? And there is much space available within the pressurized sectors. Provola Quero has caused to be built the very large repair and manufacturing facility which will be wanted later, only she does not need it at ail yet—well, only a tiny bit of it," she said with a reproachful glance at Gill's choked-off expostulation. "We could wall off a small section for repair work and

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put children's bunks in the rest—use it for a dormitory until the proper living quarters are completed. Why should they live so miserably any longer than is absolutely necessary? Further, Brantley Geram now understands how he can expand the 'ponies system rapidly enough to cope with a sudden increase in population."

"Acorna is responsible for that," Pal put in. "While we were there, she found a nitrogen imbalance in the air, identified a potassium deficiency in the water, and showed Geram how to triple 'ponies production practically overnight without destroying the atmospheric balance."

"The first two things were data that could have been read from instruments, and I am sure Mr. Geram would have thought of the ecobalancing system on his own if he had had time," Acorna murmured. "All that is not important, Pal—please do not interrupt!" She turned back to Delszaki Li,

her pale face glowing with the cool silvery light that showed when she was excited, her eyes opened so wide that they were silver orbs in her face. "Truly, Mr. Li, there is no technical problem with beginning to use the base immediately—not one!"

"Unfortunately," Delszaki Li said, "technical problems are not the only ones. The Kezdet Authority has forbidden us to go forward with Maganos Moon Base, or to add any more personnel, until is completely satisfied by report of independent commission that all construction meets Kezdet building codes."

Pal snorted. "If the match factory where I used

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to work meets the building codes, Maganos is so far beyond that it's not even applicable!"

"Match factory has probably never been inspected by building commission," Li said gravely.

"Who's on this independent commission?" Gill demanded. "We can meet with them right now, show them the data. I'll convince them Maganos meets code, if I have to ram the cubes down their throats!"

"Members of commission have not yet been appointed," Li said. "Informed sources within Department of Public Works say selection and appointment of commission may take several years." He regarded the four young people—from his perspective they were all children—benignly. "Is not technical problem. Is political. Someone does not intend plan to succeed."

"Who?"

Li's left hand lifted slightly, his approximation of a shrug.

"Many people profit greatly from exploitation of children on Kezdet. Could be any of them. Or all of them. But at this time, is still mystery. We know, for instance, that owner of Tondubh Glassworks has bought two judges and a subinspector of Guardians. Very well. I pay them better bribe than Tondubh, now I have them. Child Labor League has list of other corrupt government officials, paid by this factory or that to ignore abuses of Federation law. But even if we buy off all minor officials, is still blocked from top. Someone with much power and position in

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government is stopping plan. Someone so respectable, and so -well concealed, that even Child Labor League does not know true identity of man called the Piper."

Gill's shoulders sagged. "Then what can we do?"

"Dp not despair," Li said. "You have on your side Delszaki Li, veteran of many years political and financial double- and triple-crossing. Also have now secured independent services of consultant -with even more experience than Li in handling corrupt governments, because has run seriously corrupt organization himself. Hafiz Harakamian."

Gill turned white. "Get Acorna out of here!"

"Harakamian no longer wishes to acquire Acorna," Li said. "Talk to Calum and Rafik. They



have much news for you."

But the talk had to wait, because Chiura got wind of Gill's return. At this point she came flying down the lift-chute, squealing happily, "Monster Man! Monster Man!"

"He's big and ugly, all right," said Calum, who had entered the hall just in time to catch Chiura executing a flying leap far too soon to reach her objective, "but don't you think it's a bit over the top to call him a nwiuter?"

Gill's face was almost as red as his beard.

"It's ... uh ... a game we play," he explained. By now Jana had arrived after Chiura and the girls were tugging Gill by both hands toward the lift-chute. "Umm . . . maybe we can talk upstairs?"

The talk was again delayed until Gill had been exhausted by chasing Chiura and Jana around the suite on his hands and knees, roaring like a bull and occasionally reaching out one large hand to snatch at flying hair or the hem of a kameez, while they squealed in pretended terror. Even Khetala, who at thirteen considered herself too old for such games, got caught up in the excitement and laughed and giggled like the other two.

"He is giving them back their childhood," Judit murmured under cover of the noisy game. There were tears in her eyes. "I don't know how to do that."

"You never had a childhood." Pal put an arm around his sister's shoulders and hugged her. "You had to grow up too fast, to save Mercy and me."

She looked up at the "little brother," who had shot up so fast in the last years that now he stood half a head taller than her.

"Oh, Pal, we need) Gill at Maganos. The children need him. Can't -we persuade Calum and Rafik-"

"That," said Rafik, grinning, "was what we wanted to talk to you about."

"You want to talk business while Chiura's crawling all over him and climbing his beard?" Calum muttered under his breath.

"Safest time," Rafik replied out of the side of his mouth. "He won't turn violent while he's festooned with kids."

They explained their arrangement with Hafiz Harakamian, somewhat apprehensively, and were relieved when Gill's broad face broke into a beaming smile.

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"That," he said cheerfully, "simplifies everything."

"We were, um, hoping you'd see it that way," Rafik said.

Gill looked at Judit.

"That's a nice living suite Delszaki Li has put into the Maganos design for you. Plenty of space for two people, wouldn't you say? Think Li -would hire a couple to work -with the children, instead of leaving it all on you ? "

"The proposition would have to be put to him," Judit said, lowering her eyes.

"Well, then!" Gill made to get up, but he was too weighted down with children to make it on the first try.

"And first," Judit said, very demurely, "the proposition would have to be put to me. I'm old-fashioned about these things."

Gill looked at her.

"Me, too," he said, "and I draw the line at proposing to you in front of two miners and a gaggle of giggling kids."

"Then we'll have to do it for you," said Calum and Rafik in unison.

Calum went down on one knee in front of Judit. Rafik laid his hand on his heart. Gill started turning red.

"Dear Judit," Calum said, "would you do us the immense favor — "

"—and Gill the great honor," Rafik put in.

"Of providing a home and family for this poor, old, arthritic—"

"I am not arthritic!" Gill bellowed. "That trouble with my right knee is an old sports injury."

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"—broken-down, lonely, unloved—" Rafik continued over Gill's protests.

"Oh, stop it, you two!" Judit interrupted them. "He is by no means unloved." She looked meltingly at Gill, -who was now more purple than red. "But I think he might have a stroke if you don't knock it off."

"Then you'd better accept him," Calum said promptly. "You wouldn't want to be responsible for the poor old fellow's demise from apoplexy, would you? A kind-hearted girl like you?"

"We'll ask Li to name that suite at Maganos after you," Rafik suggested. "The Judit Kendoro Home For Stray Miners."

"Get out of here," Gill roared, having finally divested himself of children, "and let me propose to my girl in my own way and my own time!" He shooed Calum, Rafik, and all three children out of the room. "And no eavesdropping!"

That the two former partners did not, spoke volumes for their self-discipline and the fact that they had both decided Gill and Judit were exactly suited to each other.

Each went down the lift-chute with a much lighter heart to see what they could do to solve the major problem now facing the Maganos Moon Base scheme.

"Bribery will only get you so far," Rafik said. "I suspect there is more at stake than money or prestige or mere power."

"There's nothing 'mere' about power, Rafik,"

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Calum said in a sudden fit of depression, brought on as much by the happy scene being enacted in the children's quarters as anticipation of facing an unknown quantity of opponents.

It couldn't just be this mysterious Piper person, not when Mr. Li -was confounded by the machinations behind the scenes.

"Well, what Mr. Li can't find out. Uncle Hafiz can.

"Don't you mean Papa Hafiz?" he said almost snidely.

"Uncle, smunckle, papa doppa," Rafik said, shrugging indifferently, "we are both Harakamians and nothing will daunt us!" He raised a fist in respect of his determination as they reached the door leading to Mr. Li's domain. The fist altered and its knuckles rapped most circumspectly for admission.

During their absence in the children's suite, Uncle Hafiz had joined Mr. Li, and so had the scruffy man they identified as Pedir, the auxiliary skimmer driver who had attached himself, limpetlike, to Acorna and Judit for their excursions.

sions.

"Ah, is good you have returned," Mr. Li said. "You know Pedir?"

After Rafik and Calum had exchanged greetings and seated themselves, Mr. Li continued. "Is source of much local knowledge and gossip."

"Knows where a lot of bodies have been buried, you might even say," Uncle Hafiz added, stroking the chin beard he was cultivating.

"We," and Mr. Li's delicate hand gestured to

Uncle Hafiz, "who feel is time to introduce Lady Acorna to society — "

"—such as it is," Hafiz put in.

"—are inviting," and he gestured now to Mercy who was seated at the console and furiously typing away, "every person of wealth and standing in city to splendid gala banquet and dancing the night away."

"Anyone who is anyone in Kezdet will come," Hafiz said, "because it will borne in on them that not to be invited would indicate social or industrial inferiority to those also on the guest list."

"But Acorna," Rafik and Calum were instantly on the qui vive, "would be in jeopardy."

Hafiz flapped his hand dismissively, grimacing away their caution.

"Not from this house," Mr. Li said. "Not with so many watching her all night long with eyes of hawk and claws of tiger."

Hafiz leaned back in the conformable chair, at almost a dangerous tilt, steeping his fingers and staring up at the ceiling, a slow smile creasing his face.

"She will be clad in raiment fit for a princess, a queen, an empress ..." he extended one hand ceilingward, opening his fingers at the apex, indicating magnificence beyond imagining, "... bejeweled ... and also," he pulled his eyes down to his nephew, "warded from every possible danger by the built-in systems hidden in the jewelry."

"Ah, ingenious!" and Rafik relaxed into a chair, stretching out his legs, hooking his thumbs in his belt and preparing himself for whatever pearls of

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wisdom and crafty conniving were sure to be revealed.

Calum, with a droll smile, wandered over to Mercy's desk position and perched on a stool.

"There will be music ..." Uncle Hafiz went on.

"Several groups," Pedir said, "for I am promised to promote three groups and undoubtedly, once this is noised about, I will have to help others. All worthy and all good musicians ..."

"Only good musicians," Mr. Li said, raising a slim finger.

"Only the very best," Pedir nodded, "for there ain't no bad guys around here as play well. Get you good extra boys, girls for serving, too."

"I'm doing that, Pedir," Mercy said, looking up from her screen.

"No problemo," Pedir said, wriggling both hands to assure her he would not interfere. "What about a skimmer strike? Would that be any help?"

Mr. Li shook his head with more vigor than he usually displayed for poor ideas.

"Strike is ours to do," he said. "A different strike. All will see." Now he raised his frail arm, closing the fingers to a point, retracting his arm, then darting it forward in an unmistakably reptilian strike.

Uncle Hafiz pretended to recoil in terror, his eyes sparkling with amusement. But no more was said. In fact, Pedir was excused, and so were Calum and Rafik, though they were enjoined to have the skimmer driver transport them to the most prestigious tailor in Kezdet, to be measured for masculine finery.

'To talk of the sumptuousness of the coming evening of Mr. Delszaki Li's prestigious house," Uncle Hafiz said. He buffed his nails on his lapel. "I have already commissioned elegant evening attire. Unless you wish me to deprive you of acceptable female companionship for the entire evening, you had best look less like camel drivers than you do now."

Rafik snorted. He had hurried without changing from his usual shipboard gear to Mr. Li's, and Calum had come dressed as he was because he was uncomfortable in anything but the casual clothing he was now wearing.

"Come, Calum," said Rafik, rising, "let us do as we are bid, for if my dearly beloved uncle has commanded us to appear in sartorial elegance, he will certainly be willing to pay for the best there is to be had."

While Hafiz was sputtering about impudent, improvident imps, the two made their escape, pushing the laughing Pedir ahead of them as Mr. Li cackled in appreciation of the taunt.

"I have finished the list, Mr. Li," Mercy said, instantly diverting them to the more important task of contriving a most exhaustive guest list.

Mr. Li's house was more than adequate for such a social evening, but rooms long unused for entertainment had to be turned out, refurbished in the newest fads, decorated in the latest color schemes, and exotic viands ordered from all over the galaxy.



"Is going to be a legend in this time, this

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evening," Mr. Li often said while Uncle Hafiz fervently seconded him, but had to be discreetly restrained from providing a few bizarre entertainments. "Is not to distract guests from main purpose of all this, good friend Hafiz."

"True, true." Though Hafiz sighed, remembering the most amazing contortionist act he had happened to catch at one of the more elegant of the casinos on Kezdet, stimulating jaded tastes and appetites.

The invitations, miracles of calligraphy and illustration in their own right, were dispatched to the recipients, and shortly it became difficult to manage necessary calls from Mr. Li's house to suppliers, merchants, and even acquaintances.

Acorna, accompanied by a glowing Judit and a more sedately excited Mercy, made many trips to the couturier -who had been chosen, of the many available, to supply their gowns. Excitement was high in that establishment, which had made certain that every other couturier in Kezdet realized how much they had lost by not securing these commissions. Acorna was often so besieged by those wishing her miracles that Rafik and Calum joined them at the dressmaker's.

Rafik was actually helpful, for he had inher-

ited, among other things, Calum said sourly, the Harakamian dress sense and was able to comment knowledgeably about fit, line, and color.

The jewels were, however, left to Uncle Hafiz, who had sent for skilled craftsmen as well as the raw materials of precious metals and uncut gems, and supervised the styles and elegance of what

each girl would wear. That special adornments were also being made for Mr. Li's evening banquet •was discreetly mentioned and several invitees finally decided to attend upon hearing that news.

Calum and Gill had been busy, too, with electronic and engineering effects which would guard the already well-guarded Li household. They even did their best to protect against such ingenuities as contact poisons, sleepy powders, and other deadly elements. Special beams could render the most popular of these substances neutral. Not that Acorna could not neutralize venom but they wished to avoid such problems in the first place.

And so the great day arrived, and the coiffeurs came with their preparations and oohed and aahed over Acorna's magnificent mane. Her gown had been cut to free her hirsute splendor and a tiara had been designed to crown that silvery glory. (One of the many jealous females was later heard to swear that Mr. Li's ward had had to be glued into her costume, for how else could it have stayed anchored so firmly when she gyrated on the dance floor.) The dark hairs of both Judit and Mercy were also teased into fetching styles, but nothing outre, since quiet elegance suited them better, and as a foil for Acorna's unusual appearance.

Khetala, Chiura, and Jana watched, almost as glued to their vantage seats in the "tiring room," speechless with the beauty they were seeing, and the subtle ways which natural loveliness could be enhanced. They had received permission to watch

the guests arrive and were to receive the same foods that would be served for dinner.

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"So you can feast even as we do," Judit explained. "There will be so many people, small persons like yourselves would get lost and that

might be scary."

Khetala had agreed. She still liked lots of space around her and felt safe around strangers only if

her "uncles" were nearby.

Chiura had put behind her all the terrible memories which still woke Jana, sweaty and trembling in the night. She was forever leaving her little bed and creeping in with Kheti for comfort. But she was truly excited about the party and knew exactly where she could crouch, unseen, on the first landing of the great stairs and see everyone arriving.

Finally the ninth hour came, an hour which the fine clocks in their niches, corners, and surfaces celebrated with melodious, arrogant, or demure chimings. At precisely the third stroking of the hour, the front door -was opened to receive the first guest, a very minor official and his wife, splendidly garbed for the occasion. Jana didn't think much of her dress: the color was garish and the flickering light display adorning the neckline made her look like a washed-out sketch. On the stroke of the ninth, another minor official, his wife, oldest son

and daughter, were admitted. Jana liked -what the daughter -was wearing—the very prettiest shade of pale blue—though it didn't really suit the girl. Her shoes, with their very high heels, studded -with sparkling jewels, and straps that started at her toes and -went up to her knee, were nice.

The trickle of guests became a rivulet and then

a river, with no time to close the door between their comings. Kheti and Chiura got bored with looking at what people were wearing, but Jana feasted her eyes on the colors, the patterns, the combinations, the swags and the trimmings, the feathers and the furs. She could not quite believe there could be so many variations of dress and suit: she, who had lived much of her life in darkness, in a black to gray environment, lapped up all the colors as a desert dweller would drink from an oasis.

Then, he stood in the doorway. Jana was frozen with fear. Kheti and Chiura had left their positions -when the undermaid had called them to eat their share of the banquet. Not that Jana could have uttered a word. She could only stare at him, seen in the bright lights, in a deep blue suit which gave off subtle glitters, with a white-white shirt collar barely showing at the neck of it. But it -was he, and he was here where she thought she could be safe.

Rigid with terror she watched as Mr. Li greeted him and introduced him to Uncle Hafiz, who introduced Acorna, who smiled and made Judit and Mercy and Pal known to him in this silly ritual they had been performing for every guest that entered the house. Nearly fainting, she saw Gill and Judit usher him into the main salon, where he passed from her sight. Then she collapsed in a little heap.

That is how the undermaid found her when she

went to collect the third of her charges for the evening.

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"He's coming for us," was all Jana could say when she first recovered from her faint. "We've got to hide Chiura."

"Who?"

"He's here. I saw him. They invited him."

There could be only one "him" who would elicit that terrified note from Jana. Kheti's face went gray. "The Piper?"

Jana nodded. She snatched up Chiura, eliciting a wail of protest as the little one was seriously involved with the tray of sweets, and wrapped both arms around her as though to shield her with her own body.

"We have to get away," she whispered. "The lift-chute's too dangerous, it lets out in the front hall. The windows — "

"Wait!" Khetala sank down on the floor, not quite as gracefully as she had been trained to do by Didi Badini; her knees were trembling too hard for that. "Let me think."

Jana crammed sweets into Chiura's mouth randomly, to keep her happy while Kheti thought. She was shocked, though, when Khetala reached for a jellabie and bit into the sweet, crystallized-honey crust.

"Is this a time to be stuffing your face?"

"Sugar helps when you got the shakes," Khetala said. "You eat something, too. Even if we do run — "

"We have to. Now!" Jana interrupted.

"Even if we do, you won't run far on an empty belly. You eat. I'll think."

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Khetala washed down the jellabie with a long drink of iced madigadi juice while Jana obediently picked at a witifowl pastry. Each crumb seemed as if it would choke her.

"Now then," Khetala said at last. "I been thinking. The Lady Acorna is gooS. She wouldn't invite the Piper here."

"I tell you, I ^aw him! The gray man who came to the mine with Didi Badini. Ain't he the Piper?"

Kheti nodded and folded her hands to conceal the shaking of her fingers.

"Oh, yes. I heard him talking to Didi Badini, many and many a time, when she had me locked in that closet where they keep — Well, never mind that," she interrupted herself hastily. Jana didn't need to know about Didi Badini's dark closets and the means she employed to make sure new girls would be docile when she finally let them out. "I got to hear him talk again to make sure, though. If it Li him ..." she shivered "... it's bad. Very bad. See, I don't think they know who the Piper really is. He's got himself another name for this side of Celtalan. I heard them talking about it the other day. It's a big secret, the Piper's real name. Maybe the biggest secret in Celtalan. If he finds out we've seen him here—" She mimed slitting her throat. "Best we could hope for is he kills us quick. He

ain't taking us back to the mines, Jana. He ain't taking us anywhere. Did he see you?"

Jana shook her head. " He went straight into that big room with all the lights and pretty ladies." "Did the Lady Acorna go with him?" Jana shook her head again.

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"Good," Kheti murmured. "She should be all right here, anyway. He wouldn't do anything to her here, where he's passin' under his real name."

"What would he do to her?"

Khetala looked at Jana pityingly.

"He wants her killed, too. He told Didi Badini she's making too much trouble here on Kezdet, getting the bond kids and the Child Labor League all stirred up."

Jana stiffened and squeezed Chiura so hard that the sleepy child cried in protest. "You didn't tell me that before!"

"Told Delszaki Li," Khetala said. "He knows. He's been seeing that the Lady's safe. Why do you think he sent her off to Maganos? I heard them talking about that, too. I hear a lot."

Jana went unerringly to the weak point in Khetala's argument.

"But he doesn't know the Piper is that dressed-up man I saw downstairs. Nobody knows. You

said that yourself. So he doesn't know the Piper is here, in this house. How can he keep the Lady safe if he doesn't know?" She felt more frightened than she ever had in her life, more than when Siri Teku came at her with the whip that last time. She'd thought she might as well die then, she was hurt so bad and Chiura was gone. But the Lady Acorna had made her live again and had brought her back to Chiura. Debts had to be paid. Jana forced the next words out. "We got to warn her."

"We'll find Air. Li. Or somebody -we can trust," Kheti said sharply to force down her fear at the idea of going among all those strangers. "But I still

think he won't move against her now, in this house, -where everybody knows him by his real name!"

"He could put poison in her food or something." As none of the children had experience with Acorna's ability to detect poisons, this seemed all too probable to Khetala as well as to Jana. "Or maybe he's going to lure her out into the garden and there'll be a bomb. Or ..." Jana's invention failed. What did it matter? She only knew that the Lady Acorna, her lady, was in terrible danger and she had to do something about it. Even if she was so scared all she wanted to do was hide and cry. "Come on. We got to warn her!"

She stood up with some difficulty, because Chiura had become frightened by the older girls' evident tension and was refusing to let go of her "Mama Jana."

"He sees us," Khetala said, "we're dead. You know that?"

"I know that," Jana said, wishing her voice wouldn't wobble so much. "But I got to go. She took me out of Anyag." She gave Khetala a scornful look. "You want to, you can stay here. Maybe



the Lady didn't take you out of Didi Badini's bonk-shop. Or maybe you forgot already? "

But Kheti was on her feet now.

"You're an idiot, Jana," she said, sighing, "but I can't let you go and be an idiot all by yourself. Got in the habit of taking care of you little kids too long ago, I guess. Come on. Let's go and get ourselves killed, if that's what you gotta do. Only let's leave Chiura here. He don't need to know about her."

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But Chiura -wound her arms tighter about Jana's neck -when Jana tried to set her down, and screwed up her pretty face in the grimace that they knew was preparatory to one of her ear-piercing screams.

"All right, all right," Jana hushed her, "you can stay with me. But you got to be real quiet, you understand? Quiet like a ghurri-ghurri, like a shadow, like you're not even there. Or Piper'11 get you."

To Chiura, the Piper was just a name used to frighten her into acquiescence, like Old Black, who lived down in the bottom of the mines and ate little girls for breakfast. So she was scared enough by the threat to hush up, but not scared into screaming hysteria.

Acorna was in fact in the garden, where (under the watchful eye of Hafiz Harakamian) she had

retreated from the noise and social chitchat of the party to talk with some of Delszaki Li's distinguished guests about matters of more importance to her.

"Is not only social occasion," Li had instructed all his people. "Is testing of the waters. Must talk little, listen much, try to find source of high-government secret opposition. Perhaps head of Public Works says, 'Is not my doing, gracious lady, is warning from Orator of the council that would be unwise for political appointee such as myself to further projects undesirable to certain of his constituency.' Perhaps orator of the council says,

'Having duty to protect interests of glass-working and related industries.' Then perhaps we say, 'Aha! Is looking closer at Tondubh Glassworks.' Only example, you understand," Li had said, almost purring. "Personally, do not expect to find source of opposition in Tondubh. Have already bought most of judges and public servants bribed by Dorkamadian Tondubh. He is cheap man, does not pay workers, does not even make good bribes. But perhaps you find some other thread. Listen! Listen! And if must talk, then be obnoxious."

"Why?" Pal had queried.

"How?" That was Calum, who looked more interested than alarmed at this suggestion.

"Accuse justicers of taking bribes, claim that politicians are put in office by industrial interests, hint that civil servants are in second service of the Piper. See who looks nervous and changes subject. All people here are wishing to be seen as respectable, good people, personally obeying Federation law? as well as Kezdet local law. Someone is not. Be offensive, my children." He smiled seraphically. "Someone already hates us. Be charitable. Give him good reason to hate and fear us."

Acorna did not feel that she had any real talent for offending people, so she had been dutifully following Li's first directive and listening. But she doubted she would learn anything from this particular conversation except that Dork Tondubh lived up to his nickname and that Tumim Viggers, head of Public Works, and the politician Vidra Shamali were equally smug, self-satisfied, and

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impervious to suggestion. All three of these social and political leaders of Kezdet society -were more than happy to stroll in Li's exotic gardens -with a lovely young lady, even if she did have an odd protuberance in the middle of her forehead. Acorna had followed Li's suggestion and, instead of trying to disguise her physical differences for this party, had accentuated them. Her tight sheath of Illuc spidersilk showed off the lean, flat planes of her body; a spiral of jeweled ribbons accentuated her white horn. The result had been exactly as Li had predicted: after a few surprised looks, the haute monde of Celtalan had decided that anything so flamboyantly displayed must be an asset, not a deformity. ("It's a feature, not a bug," Calum had said sardonically, and when questioned, added, "Old Earth saying. I'm not sure exactly what it means.")

Unfortunately, the avuncular tone adopted by Dork and Tumim was not likely to give Acorna any results except extreme boredom and a growing desire to turn around and kick them where it would do the most good with her sharp, hard feet.

As for Vidra, at least she wasn't accompanying her lecture with the sleazy looks and surreptitious touches Dork added to his talk, but the bossiness of her manner more than made up for that.

At present all three were happily "explaining" to Acorna exactly why it was impossible to eradicate Kezdets practice of child labor and why employers should be considered charitable guardians rather than slave owners.

"Of course there are children around the glass-works," Dork said. "It's hot work, there among the furnaces. The workers need water; the children bring it to them."

"I saw a little boy running among the furnaces with a seven-foot iron rod loaded with molten glass," Acorna said.

Dork made a mental note to ream out the security guards at Tondubh for ever letting this pretty thing inside the compound. She hadn't just been giving away shoes; she'd been noticing things. He shifted to his second line of defense.

"Alas, yes, there have been some lapses. You must understand, my dear, Kezdet is an under-capitalized economy. Our people must work to eat. What can we do when parents bring their children to the factory and beg for work? Should we let them starve?"

"Don't wrap it up in pretty ribbons. Dork," said Vidra in her harsh voice. "The glass industry on Kezdet requires children. Adults can't run so fast with the molten glass. If Dork and others like him didn't hire children, not only would those poor families starve, but production would go down."

"That's true," Dork said with more animation.

"Profits might drop by as much as thirty percent. I have a duty to my shareholders, you know."

"Yes, it is expensive having workers whom you have to pay and provide medical care for." Acorna smiled in agreement. "Still, most industrial planets manage it." She thought she could get to enjoy Li's instructions on being offensive, after all. "What's wrong with Kezdet, that you people can't figure out how to run a factory without slave labor?"

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"Now, now, dear, do not upset yourself," Tumim Viggers counseled her. "You are young and a stranger to our ways, and perhaps those terrorist zealots of the Child Labor League have been telling you misleading stories. The fact is that the few children working on Kezdet are very well treated. They are fed and lodged at their employer's expense, have years of free training in their chosen career, and enjoy the knowledge that their earnings are sent home to help support their beloved families. Why, if you sent a team of Federation inspectors to any of our mines or factories, I do believe the children would run away and hide rather than be taken away! They love their work, you see, and the overseers are like parents to them."

"Possibly," Acorna agreed. "I understand that some parents also beat their children."

Tumim Viggers sighed. "There may have been excesses. It is no easy matter to train and disci-

pline young children, but I assure you, they are learning lessons which "will be invaluable when they grow up."

"How many of them c>o grow up?" Acorna asked in a tone of bright interest.

Tumim Viggers chose to ignore that question. "Child labor is one of the harsh realities of life on an overpopulated, underdeveloped planet. Extremist groups like the CLL only make matters worse. Why, if we were to eradicate all child labor on Kezdet tomorrow?, what do you think would happen?"

"I don't know," said Acorna brightly. "Why not try it and find out? "

She rose, then. "I must really circulate, but it has been so nice to get to know you better. Do enjoy the garden. The night-blooming scented plants are in that corner."

"Do show us exactly where?" Tumim said and reached for her arm, a maneuver she evaded by swaying away from him and out of reach.

As she walked back toward the house, she happened to glance up at the windows and saw three figures hurrying down the staircase: three figures that ought to have been fast asleep in their beds, stuffed with all the food and sweets she had asked to be sent to them. Where -was the undermaid who was supposed to watch out for them? If they should be seen . . .

She hurried inside and spotted Calum, who had a desperate look on his face: the anorexic daughter of the shipping magnate she had met in

the receiving line was clinging to his arm with a death grip. Acorna gave him the old EVA danger sign. He peeled the girl off him and, muttering some sort of an apology, he made his way quickly to Acorna.

"The children are up. They must not be seen," she said in an urgent undertone. "On the stairs. If I go up . . ."

"Leave it to me."

The skeleton had clattered after Calum, but Acorna intercepted her, taking her by the arm.

"I do hope you are enjoying yourself this evening, Kisia," she said, fortunately recalling her name and steered her toward the refreshment table, where a new display of subtleties and

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delights had just been arranged. "With your father so prominent in the shipping industry, do you get a chance to travel to far-off planets and places? Or are you forced to remain here in a dull school?"

Kisia stiffened and almost sneered up at Acorna. "Fraggit, but you know nothing, do you? School? I've been a qualified navigator for three years. The only reason I'm at this party at all is because the whole family got invited. And then you have the nerve to skive off with the only interesting chap here."

"An errand only he could do for me," Acorna said, "and see, here he is back."

However, Calum grabbed Acorna by the hand and pulled her so close to him that Kisia swore, more as a deckhand than a navigator might, and flounced off to find another target for her attentions.

"They're terrified. They've seen the Piper here."

"They have? They could identify him?" Acorna looked around the room for Mr. Li's hover-chair or Uncle Hafiz, trying to hide the terror she felt. Calum peeled her hands off his arm.

"Khetala and Jana are both certain, but they're terrified for your sake. They're afraid he's here to kill you."

"Here? In front of everyone?" Acorna ridiculed the notion. "Not likely."

"You'd still be dead, sweetie pie," Calum said soberly. "Besides which, very few people here are enchanted with your interference with their profitable operations employing child labor."

"Then why did they come?" she asked, annoyed as well as frightened. Dreadful people. Smile at your face and pull a stunner once your back -was turned. Although, where many of those present could hide anything in the sleek, tight-fitting garb that was currently fashionable, she did not know. Very little was left to the imagination, and one could count spine ridges and ... all sorts of things. She could have appeared at this dinner clad in only her own skin and given away nothing of her gender, but these people covered it all up and then flaunted what they covered.



"They came for the food and to say they had been here tonight. Mr. Li is excessively pleased with the turnout, but I must go tell him that the children can identify the Piper. That will be one more obstacle out of our way, so we can find out where you really belong." Calum grinned up at her and then squeezed her hands. "I'll go tell them. You circulate."

He gave her a little push toward the nearest clutch of chattering men and women. Kisia intercepted her.

"My father wishes to speak with you, Acorna. He says you've been avoiding him all evening."

There was a remarkable strength in her skeletal arms as she towed the taller girl past the nearest group and toward a quartet, which mercifully included Uncle Hafiz. Acorna stopped resisting.

Hafiz rose and kissed her cheek. "You are more beautiful every time I see you, Acorna. Here is Baron Commodore Manj'ari and his wife, Ilsa, wanting to meet you. The baron claims he ships

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anything and everything, anywhere in the known galaxy. And, as I'm sure you realize, Acorna, the baroness's family, the Acultanias, were one of the first to settle Kezdet and recognize its importance in this sector."

The baroness smiled a social smile, while stuffing her face with the dainty petit fours on the table beside her. Baron Manjari rose courteously to his feet and, removing his hand from his pocket, patted his lips before he reached for Acorna's proffered hand. He didn't look very impressive, Acorna thought: medium height, spare build, which might account for his daughter's anorexic-looking body. He had very piercing eyes and a gaze that wished to penetrate her skull. She managed to suppress a shudder as he brought her hand to his mouth. Instead of miming a kiss above the skin, he planted a very moist one on the back of her hand.

"Charmed," he said, drawling in an oddly dry voice, almost a whisper, as if he had some impediment in his throat. "I have been waiting all evening to have a few words with you."

As he released her hand, she began to feel unwell and, with the pretext of mending her coiffeur, brushed her hand to her horn. She could feel it tingle through her forehead and the poisonous kiss, for that was what it had been, -was neutralized. Baron Manjari might have ships that traversed the known galaxy and be able to find contact poisons undetectable by Li's guard beams, but he had never encountered one of her species. Her problem now was how to react to having just been given an undoubtedly "lethal" dose of poison.

She noticed that he now brought out a handkerchief to blot his treacherous lips, and then a small pill box, explaining as he withdrew a tiny white oval, that it was time for his medication.

"I did not mean a discourtesy," Acorna began with social civility, nodding to the baroness, who was having a hard time deciding which small delicacy to try next. "The littlest ones are filled with raspberry liqueur," she said, and got a blank look from the woman and almost a sneer from the baron. "I think I should sit for a few moments,"

Acorna said abruptly to Uncle Hafiz, who immediately handed her into the chair he had just vacated.

She began to rub her hand, as if unconscious of what she was doing. She caught the avid expression in the baron's eyes and the tension in his wife's bare shoulders. "Uncle, a glass of something cool, please?" she said making her voice rise with urgency.

"Of course."

Acorna used the ornate fan that dangled from her left wrist. "I don't know what's come over me."

"Why," Ilsfa leaned toward her, one hand outstretched to touch her knee, but Acorna managed to avoid the contact, "I expect it's no more than any young girl experiences during her introduction to society. Why, my Kisia was a nervous wreck until

the evening had started, and then she danced all night."

"Really?" Acorna managed politely in a soft voice. Should she be feeling weak so soon?

"Here you are, m'dear," Hafiz said, offering her

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a glass of the madigadi juice he knew she liked, so cold the glass was beaded with moisture.

She drank it all down, hoping thirst was one of

the symptoms of the poison -working. The baron looked so satisfied that she was sure it must be.

"Just what I needed," she said gaily, and rose.  
"So nice to have had a chat with you but, before I find I have inadvertently ignored some one else, I really must circulate. Come, Uncle Hafiz, there is someone I want you to introduce me to ..." and she pulled him away despite an initial protest.

"That man just tried to poison me," she muttered in Hafiz's ear. "Keep walking. Do I fall down in a faint, or just collapse somewhere? A contact poison. He had a very slimy kiss."

"By the beards of the Prophets!" Hafiz began, and tried to pull loose from her to deal suitably with Baron Commodore Manjari.  
"No, he may be the Piper."  
"Oh!"

"Where is Mr. Li? We must inform him."  
"Who identified him? There are many people here who might wish to poison you."

"Khetala and Jana. They watched the guests entering and saw the Piper among them. They've been quaking with terror ever since, but they overcame their fears to warn me. Well, actually, they found Calum and he told me. Who else would want to poison me?" Acorna demanded.

"Just about every man and a good many of the women here tonight," Uncle Hafiz said, and signaled the butler.

Acorna wondered if the man had been cloned, or was one of triplets, for he had been so assiduous in his duties.

"Hassim, no one is to leave yet," Uncle Hafiz said in an undertone. "And where is Mr. Li at this

moment?"

The butler indicated the card room with a discreet gesture and glided toward the front door, deftly opening the panel and tripping a switch that would close every exterior door and the garden exits.

Mr. Li's hover-chair was surrounded by some of the loveliest women at the party and not a single man. He was obviously enjoying himself, and the women were laughing at some joke when Hafiz, smiling to see the quality of the company he was about to join, approached.

"Ah, but ladies, your glasses are empty. Come to the table and I will pour for you all."

That left Acorna free to inform Mr. Li of her suspicions as well as the children's ability to identify the dread Piper.

"Take them to my study. Tell Hassim to secure the house. Immediate confrontation now. Who?" And Mr. Li stared at her as he suddenly assimilated the information he had just been given. "Not . . . how extraordinary! Is most remarkable. Is last man this person would suspect."

"That's often how it is, isn't it? But how do we entice him to the study? I am supposed to be dying of his poison. Will he not suspect?"

"Is my job. Get children. Get to study. Hafiz?" and he drifted his chair. "You forgive?" He

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beamed back at the ladies even as he was moving out of the room, -with Hafiz almost running after him. "I give beep call and assemble cavalry."

Acorna had already disappeared up the staircase, Calum taking the steps two at a time -with Rafik trying to keep up.

Judit intercepted them at the stairs. "What is the matter?"

"Oh, is nothing. Keep guests happy," Mr. Li said. "Is that not Baron Manjari I see? No chance yet to show him my new acquisitions. Is now the time."

Judit -was too well trained to ask what new acquisitions, and obediently followed the hover-chair to where the baron commodore, wife, and daughter, were now standing, his expression slightly smug, theirs rebellious.

"Ah, dear Mr. Li," the baron said as suave as ever. "We were about to take our leave of you. Your lovely Acorna has only just left us to our own devices."

"She asks me to show? you mine, is all," Mr. Li said and, laying one finger along his nose, winked at his guests. "Have only just acquired." His finger now bridged his lips to indicate secrecy. "You travel much and can advise me on how to keep all safe."

"Surely, Mr. Li, you have no need of my advice?" the baron commodore said.

"Ah, but is to see my treasure first and then advise. We go now. Ah . . . some devices not suitable for ladies, you understand?" Li added in an undertone. "My Judit will entertain lovely wife

and daughter while you come with me."

There was something in the tone of the old gentleman that made it impossible for Baron Commodore Manjari to refuse. With an apologetic shrug toward his womenfolk, he followed Li's hover-chair to the study, at the far end of the house from the glittering party. Hafiz unobtrusively followed to make sure the baron was cut off

from any possible allies who might notice their exit.

The children were gathered in the study, Chiura half asleep in Acorna's lap and the other two holding tightly to her dress. When the baron entered after Li, Khetala gasped and backed behind Acorna, but Jana jumped in front of her protectively. "Don't hurt her!"

"My dear little girl," the baron said in his slightly hoarse tone, "why would I wish to harm this lovely young lady?"

At the sound of the dry, husky voice, Khetala gripped Acorna's shoulder.

"It's him," she said, her own voice no more than a thread. "He always whispered before. But I know him. I do!"

"So do I," said Jana.

Chiura woke up, looked at the baron's face, and wailed in fright.

"Piper!" she shrieked, trying to burrow into Acorna's lap.

"The Piper," Jana said. "You came -with Didi Badini and took my Chiura away—but we got her back!"

"The Piper," Khetala confirmed. "You came with Didi Badini and took me to her bonk-shop."

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The baron sputtered, gobbled, and turned red. "Nonsense!" he finally managed to rasp. He turned to Li. "You'd take the -word of these ragamuffins from the mines against a man of good family? I've never seen these children before."

"You spoke -with Didi Badini many times," Khetala said firmly. "I remembered your voice. There -was not much to think about in the closet •where she kept me. I remember all the words you have said, from the day when Siri Teku sold me to you until the day the lady rescued me. Do you want me to repeat all I heard you say? "

"Ridiculous!" Baron Manjari said. "This is a tissue of fabrications, and I can prove it! The child at Anyag had a whip scar on one cheek ..."

His voice rustled to silence, like a pile of dry leaves when the wind ceases to stir them. Delszaki Li and Hafiz Harakamian, one on each side of

him, let the silence draw out.

"Interesting," Li said finally, "that you know these children came from Anyag."

The baron made a gesture of denial. "I must have seen them ... a business trip . . . arranging shipping discounts. . . ."

"A clerk's task, one would think," Li said. "The Lady Acorna healed my scar," Khetala



said. "But she cannot heal you."

Chiura twisted round to face the man who had haunted her baby nightmares, the man who had played with her and tormented her in the skimmer that took her away from Mama Jana. She kept one hand firmly twined in the silvery curls of the Lady Acorna, who had brought Mama Jana back

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to her. All three children stared unblinking at the Piper, their eyes a silent accusation.

Finally, Baron Manjari looked away. "No one will believe this story!"

"You wish to make experiment? " Li asked.

"Be seated, Baron," Hafiz invited. "We have some serious discussion to do." He nodded at the children. "Should not these little ones be in their beds, Delszaki? It offends me that they should continue to breathe the same air as this camel-sucking filth."

None of the children felt safe away from Acorna, so she too left, taking them upstairs, where she and Gill told stories and sang songs and promised a thousand times over that the Piper would never come near them again.

"Why didn't you tell us at first you had seen the Piper at the mine?" Gill asked at one point. "You could have identified him from a vid without ever coming near him."

"Wasn't sure until I saw him and heard the voice," Khetala said.

"What's a vid?" Jana asked.

"Poor little mite." Gill stroked her forehead. "I keep forgetting, there's so much you've never seen. We'll get a vid player up here for you. You'll love Jill and the Space Pirated. I've got all the episodes. Acorna loved it when she was a little girl." Jlut two year<> ago, he thought sadly. Well, those days were gone forever. How could Acorna's people stand seeing their children mature so quickly? You scarcely had time to love them before they had become tall, independent strangers.

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When all three girls -were finally asleep, the lower floors of the house were dark, the lights in the hall and gardens dimmed. Acorna rose stiffly.

"I wonder what's happening? We shouldn't have left. What if he poisoned them?"

"Calum and Rafik were with them," Gill pointed out. "I don't think the Piper was prepared for violence ... at least I hope not. I'll be very annoyed if Calum and Rafik got a chance to beat the living daylights out of him and I didn't get my share." He gently disentangled Jana from his coat and beard and laid her down in her cot, brushing a gentle kiss against her forehead.

"Has been no violence," said Delszaki Li, appearing at the entrance to the suite in his hover-chair. "Has been some serious negotiation, but all is resolved peacefully."

Hafiz, behind him, was wearing the beatific smile of a man who has just sold thirteen blind and

lame camels for a bale of Illic silk.

"If I could ever feel sorry for that bastard," Calum said, "I would now. Anybody caught between Hafiz and Delszaki. . ." He whistled. "I just hope you two gentlemen don't team up and form the Harakamian-Li consortium. You'd be ruling the galaxy in no time."

Hafiz and Delszaki glanced at one another. "Interesting idea," they said simultaneously.

"Uh-oh," Gill murmured to Acorna, "I think •we've created a monster. Come on. Let's leave the kids to get their sleep and find out what kind of deal these two cut with the blessed baron."

Once more in Mr. Li's study, Acorna listened

intently, but the results of the negotiations were not entirely satisfactory to her. The price of Baron Manjari's cooperation was their silence. If he was allowed to retain his social position, if no whispers of his peculiar habits and his extra sources of income got out, then they would find that all official constraints on Maganos Moon Base would be quickly removed. Furthermore, Manjari Shipping would subsidize the lunar colony by providing free transport for all materials brought to the moon and all minerals mined there in the next five years.

"Must give to get," Li said patiently to Acorna. "If we destroy Manjari, have no hold over him. If we keep silence, can ensure success of lunar colony, make safe place for children."

"It's logical," Calum said.

"But not satisfactory," said Gill.

Rafik grinned. "Well, think about this. The baron just lost three-fourths of his income—or will, when we take all the bonded children away—

and his shipping company is going to be in the red for five years, if Maganos is as productive as I expect it to be. And he won't be able to tell the baroness and that ratty daughter why they're suddenly broke. Does that help?"

"It's a start," Gill allowed.

"We will finish," Li said softly, "when children are all safe. Old family motto: 'The best revenge is revenge.'"

"I have some ideas," Acorna said.

"You," Hafiz informed her sternly, "will stay out of sight until we have the necessary permits. Remember, you've been poisoned. You're

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extremely ill and your life is despaired of. You may even have to die for a -while." Acorna looked shocked and then smiled. "That's right. We don't want Manjan tempted to have another try at you."

Baron Manjari -was hardly able to conceal his rage and fury after leaving Delszaki Li's party. Indeed, he hardly bothered to conceal it. His wife and daughter had learned from long and painful experience how to survive his dark moods. The baroness thought he was angry because she had eaten too many sweets again, the girl because she had been chasing after that blond miner instead of making a push to attach somebody who could be a

useful business connection for Manjari Shipping. The baroness babbled nervously. Kisia sulked, but stayed well out of range of her father's hand; she had had to explain away too many bruises as "accidental falls" already. That, she considered, was the price she paid for the money that had put her through nav training and now paid for the collection of top-of-the-line fliers and small spacecraft she enjoyed for her private use. She couldn't actually work as a space navigator; that would be beneath her family's status. So she accepted the baron's heavy moods, occasional casual blows, and tight hold over her allowance as the inevitable inconveniences of life. And she controlled -what she could control: the flight patterns of her ships, and -what she put into her body, and how much fear she displayed when her father went into one of his black spells. She despised her mother, who

stuffed herself with sweets and then apologized that she "couldn't help it," almost as much as she despised the baron himself. At least if he had some discipline, Kisia thought.

The baron, brooding over the insults he had just suffered, was all but unaware of his women-folks' feelings. They were afraid of him; good, they would not question him. Not now, anyway. Even if he had to retrench and retire to the country for a few seasons, his wife would be afraid to ask what had happened to their lavish income. Kisia, though—Kisia would raise hell when she found out that he could no longer support a hangar full of private small craft for her personal amusement. He would have to find some way to shut her up. ... If it came to that!

But then, Manjari thought, what were the odds that Li's insane plan would succeed? He -would have to ensure that official blocks to the development of Maganos Moon Base were removed, but that did not mean the project would be a success. If Li never managed to get the lunar mining facil-

ity in operation, his own expenses in providing free shipping would be minimal. And Li would never make a go of the moon base, because he meant to staff it with the bonded children of Kezdet. Children who had been well trained to hide themselves whenever anybody unknown to their supervisors came to a compound.

Let him collect a few <>tray^, Manjari thought. Much gooc) it will f)o him I

The system on Kezdet was too well entrenched, the children too well trained in fearful, unquestioning

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obedience, for any one man to overthrow it. That pathetic Child Labor League had not even managed to keep schools going near the factories to teach the children their letters and numbers. Literate, numerate -workers could read their contracts and calculate their indebtedness and their -wages. Couldn't have that sort of nonsense. Manjari hadn't even had to quash the schools himself; a -word here and there in the ears of the factory owners most directly affected, and buildings were torched, teaching-vid machines •wrecked, maybe a young idealist beaten up or "accidentally" killed from time to time to warn anybody else who might have such ideas.

So Li would make his gesture and collect a few stray children, and he would think himself triumphant for a little while . . . and finally he would understand that his plan would not work, could not work. The children would never trust a stranger.

As for that deformed girl who was getting some sort of reputation as a miracle worker, who might have been a figurehead for organized resistance—<<he would be dead by morning. By this time the slow-acting contact poison would make her feel headachy and sleepy. She would go to her bed and fall into a sleep from which she never woke, and by the time her body was discovered, the traces of poison would have dissipated.

Man^an was almost relaxed by the time his personal skimmer reached the heavily guarded compound where his family and servants lived in walled luxury. He need not worry overly much. All he had to do was wait . . . oh, and dispose of

those three children. Without his witnesses, Li could prove nothing. And children were fragile;

they died every day in the mines and factories of Kezdet. It should be easy enough to get rid of those three. Better to wait a little while, though, until Li thought himself quite safe.

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As good as his word," Judit said the very next afternoon, as the sheets of permits from every reluctant inspector streamed from the printer.

"Is not good his -word," Mr. Li said. "Is good as his fear of disclosure. That works well for men such as this baron commodore. Is there all that are necessary?"

"I think so," Judit said, scanning the first sheets. "Pal's doing something on the other unit, though. Nothing from the baron; just a routine legal search, he said."

Rafik reached for the last one to emerge from the printer and worked backward, moving toward her as he glanced at the official permits, mumbling about which department and what sector and which quadrant. Then he gave a burst of laughter as he cavorted about, wrapping himself in the sheets and tearing some of the peripheries with his antics.

"Stop it, Rafik, oh stop it. You'll ruin them and we've waited for long to get them," Judit exclaimed.

"They came?" Gill burst through the study door, Acorna behind him and the three girls following her like the train of a bridal gown.

"We got 'em!" Rafik held the sheets up over Judit's head, wheeling around. "We got 'em! For once, the baron commodore is as good as his word."

"His word is not good," Mr. Li repeated, but he was beaming. "His fear is."

Judit slapped at Rafik, trying to get him to surrender the rest of the permits. Gill reached up and deftly nipped them from Rafik's hand. He delivered the slightly creased sheets, pressing the wrinkles out, into Judit's eager grasp, and she went back to the console.

"I'll enter them into our records, and send timed and dated confirmations to the respective departments," she said.

"My, there were a lot needed," Acorna said, moving with her three shadows to observe Judit as she dealt with the necessary procedures. "How



much longer must I stay dead?"

"But you aren't dead. Lady Acorna," Khetala said, confused.

"I am as far as the Piper is concerned, sweetie pie," Acorna said, hugging Khetala to her side. Chiura crept in under her arm, as well, while Jana was content to stand within arm's reach. "Did you not help Hassim hang the mourning banners?"

"Is not to let the little ones out of the house!" Mr. Li exclaimed, anxious.

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"Hafiz, Gill, and Calum were with them all the time, and they were crying most piteously."

"Kheti pinched me," Chiura said, rubbing her bottom.

"All I had to do -was think of Siri Teku's whip and I could cry for weeks," Jana said, rather proud of her performance.

"But won't I have to be buried?" Acorna asked.

Hafiz shook his head. "Cremated as befits the first wife of the scion of House Harakamian," he said, grinning. "I shall carry the urn with me to repose next to that of my son on my ship when Rafik and I return to Maganos tomorrow. And you, little ones," and he patted the heads of the three little girls, "will be among my baggage: the very first to enjoy the hospitality and safety of the Li Moon Mining Company."

Khetala clung more closely to Acorna, and Chiura sniffled.

"But I shall be carrying you," Gill said, wagging a finger at them, "and I want not a whimper, a tear, or a gasp from you when you are supposed to be miners' clothing in my sacks."

Jana giggled at playing at being "clothing" and even Kheti smiled, for all three girls loved Uncle GUI.

"But you can't tell stories to clothing?" Chiura asked, her eyes wide with regret.

"Who says I can't?" Gill responded, scowling fiercely, and she giggled as he swooped down and tickled her neck with his red beard.

"I've work to do and must concentrate," Judit said.

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"Is, after all, office-study," Mr. Li said, trying to look severe. "Rafik must now call suppliers A to M to be sure they have received permit. Judit do M to Z." He clapped his hands together to suggest urgency.

"Come, girls," Acorna said. "We must pack the clothing just so in the sacks."

Li's assistants quickly learned that there was no hope of keeping Acorna safely in the house while they completed the long task of collecting bonded child laborers from Kezdet's factories, mines, and brothels. Without Acorna, they could not even begin; the children had been too well trained to hide when strangers approached the compound, and what with the recent rumors of a horned goddess coming to liberate the children, most overseers were more stringent.

After the first frustrating day, Judit and Pal conferred with Delszaki Li. As Calum, Rafik, and Gill all reported the same inability to get children to come out of hiding, Li reluctantly agreed that Acorna might go with them the next day.

"But she is not to waste energy with too much healing," he instructed. "Is already long task, one person to visit all places. If she exhausts herself with healing every child, will never complete the work. I send medical team with you."

"I'm not worried about Acorna burning herself out," Gill said, "as much as I am about the baron. If she starts collecting children from the factories, you know, he's bound to notice she's not dead."

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"And we went to so much trouble with the funeral banners!" Judit sighed.

"Will speak personally to Baron Manjari," Li said. "No trouble there. But you watch Acorna!"

And, with those somewhat contradictory reassurances, they all went together on the second day. Acorna was eager to go to Anyag first, but Calum had overnight produced a revised skimmer schedule showing the optimal path to allow them to clear mines and factories sequentially while making the best use of their skimmers. Anyag was far from first on the list.

They began at the Czerebogar carpet-weaving

factory, where on the previous day Pal had found only empty sheds, quiescent looms, and vague talk from the supervisor of some kind of holiday for the workers—all adults, of course!

Today, as soon as Acorna stepped out of the skimmer, pale children began collecting silently in the central compound. They seemed to come out of nowhere, from cracks in the walls, from shadows. The supervisor cursed them and told them to get away, that they had no business in his factory. The children seemed not even to hear him. They moved slowly forward until they encircled Acorna. The nearest ones reached timidly to touch her with cut and bleeding fingers.

"It is Lukia of the Lights," one whispered.

Others repeated, "Lukia! Lukia!" on rising tones until the word became a song of praise circling the courtyard.

"My brother," a ragged girl said. She pushed a taller boy forward, guiding him with both hands.

"Can you give back his sight, Lukia of the Lights? He had an infection of the eyes and we had only water to wash them, but it was not enough."

Acorna caught her breath on a sob, but before she could reach out to the boy, Rafik had gestured for a med-tech to see to the lad.

"The infection is reversible, with proper treatment," the tech said. She straightened and glared at the overseer. "You would have let the boy go blind for want of a five-credit jar of antibiotic ointment! I am ashamed to be of Kezdet. But I did not know," she said to Acorna, "one hears whispers, always whispers, but I did not know ... I did not want to know."

By the time the flight of hired skimmers, led by

Pedir, had collected the last of the children from the Czerebogar Carpet Factory, the medical technicians hired by Delszaki Li had all volunteered their services, )ust as the skimmer pilots had done after a little encouragement from Pedir.

At Tondubh Glassworks, the news of Acorna's visit to the Czerebogar factory had preceded them. They were met by a furious Dorkamadian Tondubh, threatening to obtain an injunction from Judge Buskomor against any attempt to remove workers who were legally bonded to work for the glass factory in payment of their debts.

"I wouldn't even try," Pal said pleasantly. He ruffled through the papers he had been printing out from the corn unit two nights earlier. "I recently performed a routine legal search. We

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have here . . . no, that's the Vonzodik statement. . . ah, here we are. This is your sworn statement, attested by palm-print before Judge Buskomor himself, that no children under the age of eighteen are employed by any Tondubh concern. Clearly," he said, looking at the children who had come out, as at Czerebogar, when the word of Acorna's visit spread, "these children, being well under eighteen, do not work here and hence cannot possibly be bonded to you."

Acorna looked at him with delight. So this was what Pal had been quietly working on! How clever he was! But she didn't have a chance to tell him so just then; children in filthy rags and clean, nearly

new, cheap sandals were pressing all around her.

"You came back. Lady Epona," one of them breathed.

"Epona, Epona," the others repeated in a low rhythmic chant that filled the compound and echoed from wall to wall until Dork Tondubh covered his ears and made no more protest against their removing the children.

The skimmer pilots were busy through the day, flying loads of thin, pallid children from east of Celtalan to the spaceport, where Judit and Gill awaited them. When the first children were brought in, Judit gave a triumphant glance at Baron Commodore Manjari's portside manager.

"Now do you believe that there are passengers to transport to Maganos?" she demanded.

"Where's the transport the baron promised?"

"I see you want transport," the manager said, "but the baron didn't tell me nothing about laying it on. 'Sides, our ships are all busy with real cargo."

"Call him," Judit said.

The manager grinned and spat to one side.

"Told you, lady. I didn't have no orders, and I don't have no ships."

Gill took the man's arm.

"I strongly advise that you accede to the lady's request," he said. The tone was mild enough, but there was something in the look of his blue eyes—not to mention the size of the hand grasping the manager's arm—that suddenly made using the portable corn unit to page Baron Manjari seem like a very, very good idea.

When Manjari answered, Judit took the corn

unit.

"You were told that ships would be required today to shuttle passengers to Maganos. Will you honor your undertaking, or ... shall Mr. Li honor his promise to you?"

The Baron Commodore refused to believe that Judit and Gill really had passengers for Maganos until the manager confirmed their statement. Very shortly thereafter his personal skimmer touched down at the Manjari private pad.

His face first turned gray when he saw the crowd of waiting children, then slowly suffused with color as he grasped the meaning of their chatter about the lady whom some called Lukia and others Epona.

"She's dead," he insisted, his voice a gravelly protest "Everybody saw the funeral banners ..."

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Gill raised his eyebrows. "The funeral banners? Those were a sign of respect from House Li to House Harakamian in their mourning for the heir."

"Whatever could have made you think they were for Acorna?" Judit added with a slight smile.

"Acorna is alive and -well," Gill emphasized. "And Mr. Li suggests that it would be best for everybody if she stayed that way." He lowered his voice. "The children you met the other night are

already in a safe place. You cannot get at them, but they can be brought back to tell all Kezdet who you really are . . . and if Acorna is harmed in any -way you can be very sure we will bring them back."

The baron's face sagged, as if the muscles had been suddenly cut, leaving only unsupported, aging flesh.

"The Manjari ships are employed elsewhere," he said. The dry voice was once again level and betrayed no emotion. "I will make . . . alternative arrangements."

He spoke into his com unit at some length. Shortly thereafter several things happened. First, obsequious men in Manjari uniforms arrived to invite Gill, Judit, and the children to Baron Commodore Manjari's personal storage hangar. Next, a second Manjari skimmer discharged two women: one short and plump, the other gaunt to the point of emaciation. The older woman wore a bejeweled robe and had a look of pleased expectancy on her round face. The younger one was dressed in unrelieved black and began shrieking before she even got out of the skimmer.

"Father, how dare you commandeer my personal ships! They're mine, you said so! To make up for not letting me have a real job as a navigator, because it was supposed to be an unsuitable occupation for the Manjari heiress. Anything I wanted, you said, and when I said I wanted my own collection of private spacecraft, you said yes. You can't go back on that bargain now!"

She stared, suddenly speechless in horror, at the dirty, ragged children being led into her personal skiff with its luxurious interior fittings.

"Hush, Kisia," Manjari snapped. "I am only borrowing your ships. I would not do so if it were not absolutely necessary, I assure you!"



"They're mine," Kisia repeated.

"Then, Kisia, if you want to keep them, you will allow your father the use of them for as many days as this takes," Manjari said so firmly that Kisia's narrow mouth closed on her next complaint. "You have no conception of the difficulties I face."

"How should I? You never tell me anything!"

"Well, I'm telling you now. We face ruin, girl. The House of Manjari is going to lose three-quarters of its income for years to come. Maybe forever."

"Manjari, what is it?" The baroness touched his sleeve. "What is the trouble?"

"Oh, don't bother me. You've never been any use—one child, and that one a scrawny girl—and you certainly can't help now. Go watch one of your romance vids and eat a box of sweets and stay out of our way!" Manjari turned back to

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Kisia. "You will help me out in this crisis. And -we will rebuild the fortunes of House Manjari. You and I, together, as many years as it takes."

"By letting these stinking beggars on my ships?" Kisia's thin face twisted in disgust. "Forget

it! You go too far. Father. They'll get bugs on the upholstery."

"Quite likely."

"They'll get space-sick."

"Almost certainly."

"They're dirty, and they stink, and some of them are bleeding. They are absolutely disgusting, and I'm not having any more of them anywhere near my ships. Stop them, do you hear me? Stop them boarding! Now!"

The baron cocked his right hand back over his left shoulder, but the baroness was beside him before he could strike his daughter.

"Wait a moment, Manjari," she said calmly.

"While I do believe that this once I sympathize with your desire to beat Kislá, there is something she must know first—and you, too." She looked at the gaunt young woman with something approaching pity. "Kislá, you would have been one of those children."

"I?" Kislá gasped. "You're crazy! I'm your daughter! No child of House Manjari was ever even close to one of those filthy beggar brats!"

"No child of House Manjari, true," the Baroness Ilsfa agreed, "but you see, Kislá, I learned of some of Manjari's more disgusting habits very shortly after our marriage. There was a little maidservant . . . well, never mind. I vowed

then that I, an Acultánias, descended from the First Families of Kezdet, would never bear a child to him. But he would not leave me alone until I

produced an heir, so ..." She shrugged her plump, white shoulders. "While he was away on one of his half-year business trips, I made a small payment to a Didi in East Celtalan for a relatively new baby. The ... ah ... donations to the Celtalan Medical Center to certify that you had been born to me and that I would never be able to have another child were considerably more expensive. I had to sell a lot of my dowry jewels—gaudy things; I never liked them anyway, and Manjari certainly never noticed they were gone. So you see, Kislá, it becomes you ill to sneer at children whose fate—or worse—you might well have shared."

Baron Manjari and Kislá stared at the baroness in shocked silence.

"Which Didi?" Manjari finally asked.

"One of those you hired to procure children for your filthy habits, Manjari dear," the baroness said sweetly. "How else would I have known where to find a Didi? So you see, there is even a possibility that Kislá is your own daughter. Although it seems unlikely to me, since you always preferred children too young to become pregnant—"

Baron Commodore Manjari had lowered his hand during her disclosure and, with an insouciance that was almost laudable under the circumstances, had slipped it into his pocket. Now he withdrew that hand. There was a glint of metal;

Gill sprang forward with a warning cry, but he was too late. The plasknife had neatly sliced through

the baroness's neck. Blood spurted over Manjari's hands.

"No, Father! Don't kill me, too!" Kisia shrank away from him.

"I had to stop her talking. Surely you see that," Manjari said in a conversational tone, his dark eyes glittering and staring. "If people found out that you -were a brothel foundling, it -would ruin our position in society."

He looked around him at the horrified faces of Judit, Gill, and half a dozen Manjari Shipping employees. "Stop talking . . . stop them all talking. . . . It's too late for that, isn't it?" he asked Gill, like a child. "Isn't it too late?"

Gill nodded heavily.

"I was afraid of that," Manjari said heavily, and turned the plasknife upon himself.

They had tried to keep the children from seeing the removal of the bodies, but Kisia's piercing screams attracted all eyes until she, too, was removed, under restraints and shot full of trunks.

"The Piper's dead," one child reported to those already on the shuttle.

"The Lady Lukia killed him for us."

"How could she? She ain't here!"

"She can do anything. Prolly she put malojo on him to make him kill hisself."

Gill shook his head as the children calmly took their places on the shuttle.

"I thought they'd be upset," he muttered.

"They have always known death," Delszaki Li

said. He had come upon them silently, in his hover-chair, and Gill jumped half a meter at the unexpected sound of the old man's voice. "Death is no stranger. Now it is for you and Judit to teach them about life." He looked down, where the Manjaris blood stained the floor of the port, and sighed. "But it is great pity about the baron commodore."

"I don't see why," said Judit. She was somewhat pale, but she was no longer leaning against a wall and fighting nausea. "He was an evil man. He deserved to die."

"Judit, Judit." Li sighed. "Have I taught you nothing of business? Now? will have to pay own shipping costs instead of extorting from Manjari. Is great pity," he repeated.

Acorna, still east of Celtalan, heard nothing of the happenings at the spaceport. The enormity of the task was exhausting her—so many places to visit, so many children hidden away and -working as slaves! But it grew easier as the day -went on. The same secret, subterranean channels of communication that had once spread tales of Epona, of Lukia, of Sita Ram, now carried the -word that the promised day of freedom had arrived. Those who hid would not be taken away into the sky; they would have to remain as slaves. And so the children began coming out even before they saw Acorna.

"Tomorrow you won't have to do it all," Pal said cheerfully. "Anywhere they see a Li consor-

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tium skimmer, they'll come to us. You should go home and rest now."

"The skimmer pilots have been flying all day," Acorna said. "If they can keep on, so can I." She beckoned to Pedir. "Can you and your friends manage one more flight today, Pedir? Good. There is one place more that I must visit now. For Jana and Khetala."

At Anyag, the news of some crazy woman who was taking away perfectly good bond-laborers had reached the overseers as well as the servants. Some locked their gangs in the sleep sheds. Since Siri Teku's gang was just coming off shift at the end of the day, he simply told them to stay Below. There would be no off-shift until this Acorna person had come and gone. She wouldn't find Anyag as easy to ruin as those city-type factories with their soft managers !

But the news had not mentioned a small army of skimmer pilots, medical technicians, and House Li guards coming along with Acorna. While Delszaki Li's people swarmed over the Anyag workings, breaking open sleep sheds and escorting the dazed, blinking children to skimmers, Acorna looked and looked for the faces she remembered.

"You won't find 'em," Siri Teku taunted her, grinning. "They belong to me and Old Black."

Mention of the underground demon whose name was used to terrorize the children was all the clue Acorna needed. She stopped briefly at each open shaft, delicately testing the air with her horn

until she came to the one where the air -was heavy  
with the breathing of many small people left all  
alone in the darkness of Below.

The engines that moved a cage up and down  
the shaft were stilled, but there were emergency  
ladders at the side.

"Laxmi," Acorna called down into the dark-  
ness. "Faiz. Buddhe. Lata."

There was a shuffling sound deep in the shaft  
and a scuffling noise behind Acorna, as Siri Teku  
moved toward her and three pilots joyfully sat on  
his chest. Acorna took no notice; all her attention  
was concentrated on the slender thread of her own  
voice, drawing the children toward her. "Ganga,  
Villum, Parvi," she called.

As she named the children, they slowly, fear-  
fully, climbed the long ladders to the top of the  
shaft. Laxmi was first.

"Sita Ram." She sighed. "You did come back!"  
She fell to her knees and kissed Acorna's skirts.

Acorna gently lifted her. "I will need your help  
with the younger ones, Laxmi," she said. "Lata,  
Ganga, Parvi?" she coaxed again.

"These are the last ones at Anyag," Pal said  
tensely beside her. "Now will you come home and  
rest? If only so you can come with us tomorrow??"

"Yes," Acorna said. "Come, Faiz, Villum,  
Buddhe," she called. "We are going home. We are  
all going home."

That the home she would eventually go to—if  
Calum's researches were true—would be many  
light-years, and possibly many subjective years, of  
travel from Kezdet was not important now. And

certainly not to be mentioned to these children

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until she saw them happy on Maganos under the care of Judit and Gill. Perhaps she and Calum would wander the stars without success, but, in helping these children, was she not earning the right to find her own people? Had she not made good her vow to the destitute and abandoned of Kezdet?

Smiling, she swung Lata up into her arms and walked toward Pedir's skimmer, trailed by children, whose grimy hands clutched her skirts and her long silver hair.

No one at Anyag dared to stop them.



# Acorna's Quest

By Anne McCaffrey and Margaret Ball

*A short recounting of events that took place prior to the opening of this book, events that are fully detailed in the novel Acorna, also by Anne McCaffrey and Margaret Ball:*

*Three asteroid miners Calum Baird, Declan "Gill" and Ratif Nadezda were at the beginning of one of their long collecting journeys when they discovered, floating in space near the asteroid where they were working, a life-support escape pod of unknown origin and its single, sleeping occupant. The occupant was clearly humanoid yet not quite human; this was not as much of a problem for the miners as the fact that they had suddenly been saddled with the care of an infant-and a female one at that! Yet, having no desire to stop working a profitable asteroid belt to bring the child back to their base, they had no choice but to keep and care for her as best they could. In a few days, they loved her as they would a child of their own. Then the child's unusual qualities became obvious-she could purify water and air, she learned with astonishing speed, and she matured even faster. Within the single year of their voyage she grew as tall and mature as an adolescent human girl.*

*When they did finally have a large and valuable enough load to return to their base, they found that MME had been taken over by a larger company, Amalgamated Mining. This change in ownership, as well as Amalgamated's desire to assume all control over the waif whom they had named Acorna, proved unacceptable to the three miners. When they and their "ward" fled, officials at Amalgamated pursued them with claims to ownership of the ship, which was the miners' only means of livelihood-untrue claims which could nevertheless keep Gill, Rank, and Calum tied up in Federation courts while their resources were drained by legal expenses. In desperation the miners turned to Rank's remarkable*

*Uncle Hafiz, the wealthy and more than slightly shady owner of an interstellar financial empire.*

*Hafiz arranged to swap the identifying beacon of their ship for one belonging to a wrecked vessel with Kezdet registration. Although the miners were uneasy about adopting the registration of a planetary system with which they had had some difficulty in the past-a small matter of disputed mining claims-they had no option but to accept the offer and pay part of the price Hafiz demanded-a substantial percentage of their profits from the last mining journey. The rest of his price, though, was unacceptable to them. A dedicated collector of rarities and one-of-a-kind treasures, Hafiz was fascinated by Acorna's short horn and delighted by her*

*precocious ability to understand the numbers he loved most-gambling odds. He demanded that the miners leave Acorna with him and clearly planned to keep them prisoner until they complied. Rafik outwitted his uncle in a series of clever maneuvers which freed them but left them on the run from even more enemies than they had had before: not only the minions of Amalgamated Mining, but also the Kezdet magnates who had caused the wreck of the ship whose identity they had "borrowed." In addition, they had a third enemy they did not even know about. Hafiz Harakamian was so impressed by the way in which Rafik had outwitted him that he decided this nephew was quite clever and crooked enough to be a worthy heir to the Harakamian financial empire -in contrast to his worthless, bungling son, Tapha. Hearing about his father's plans to disinherit him in favor of Rafik, Tapha decided that the only way to keep his inheritance was to find his cousin and kill him.*

*After a precarious time spent moving from system to system, trying to sell off their payload without being caught by any of their numerous pursuers, the miners were finally captured by Pal Kendoro, a young man working for Delszaki Li. Li had been a friend of the real owner of the ship whose identity they had borrowed, and when his agents discovered the ship's beacon again in use they assumed the miners had killed the owner and hijacked the ship.*

*Although based on Kezdet, Delszaki Li was no friend of the Kezdet government and their quasi-military police, the so-called Guardians of the Peace. In fact, he had quietly funded an organization which worked to subvert the ruling class of Kezdet. The wealth of Kezdet's few was based on the sufferings of the many; its low-tech mines and factories were served by unwanted children brought from nearby systems and kept in bondage by a semilegal system which treated them as debtors who must work off their debts. The factory owners saw to it that the children's nominal wages were so low and the charges against them for food and shelter so high that they never "worked off any debt, but remained in perpetual bondage. Few survived to adulthood, and those who did were so debilitated by years of poor food and crippling work that they had no energy to challenge the system that had enslaved them.*

*Heir to a financial empire that rivaled that of Hafiz Harakamian, Delszaki Li had first freed his own interests of any connection -with the Kezdet child-labor system, then had begun working secretly to help the enslaved children in any way he could. Although physically disabled by a wasting neurological disease which had almost totally paralyzed him, he -was still brilliant and wealthy and was able to recruit others to his cause-among them Pal Kendoro and his two sisters, Mercy and Judit. The Kendoro siblings had been among the orphans brought to Kezdet for slave labor, but Judit had escaped by winning one of the scholarships established by Delszaki Li to encourage education among the bonded children, and by hard work she had soon earned enough to buy her young brother and sister free. Now grown, all three were determined to take whatever risks were necessary to free the children who remained in bondage.*

*Their attempts to effect peaceful change by educating the enslaved children and helping them to demand better conditions were continually frustrated by the wealthy class that controlled Kezdet's government, and by the time he encountered Acorna, Delszaki Li was on the verge of despair. It seemed as though nothing short of a revolution would free the children-and it would take a miracle to overthrow the solidly entrenched government of Kezdet.*

*In Acorna, Delszaki Li thought that he recognized that miracle. Half-Chinese, he saw in her a ki-lin-the legendary unicorn of China, whose appearance is an omen of great and beneficent change. The fact that she came accompanied by three asteroid miners only increased his belief that she was sent by the heavens to bring good fortune to his enterprise, for it happened that he was in particular need of such expertise as they might supply. Before he met Acorna, Mr. Li had subtly acquired the mineral and mining rights to Kezdet's three moons-Maganos, Saganos, and Tianos- seeing in them a possible place for the children he wished to rescue from Kezdet's factories and mines. None of the planetary mining companies wanted to bother with the problems of building moon bases when it was so cheap to use child labor on ... or rather below ... the surface of the planet. But Li's plan was ambitious as well as altruistic. He meant to use his great fortune to create mining bases on the three moons, where the children he freed could work part-time and be schooled part-time. With love and care and decent nourishment, upon reaching adulthood they should be ready to take over the mining bases and make them truly self-sufficient. But until he met the three asteroid miners and their "ward," the mysterious unicorn girl, Acorna, Mr. Li's plans had moved so slowly that he despaired of their coming to fruition in his lifetime. There were too many problems for one man to overcome: the entrenched opposition of the wealthy families of Kezdet, the bureaucratic obstacles which the Kezdet government threw in his path, and, most of all, the fears of the children who had been taught from arrival on Kezdet to flee strangers-even benevolent ones. When the factory owners would not admit to employing children, and the children themselves had been trained to hide, how could they be found and freed?*

*Once it was clear that Calum, Gill, and Rank had not caused harm to his friend, but had merely exchanged identities with the wrecked and derelict spacecraft in an effort to evade their own pursuers, Li recruited them as his allies and offered to adopt Acorna as his own ward. Recognizing that the child they had raised was now maturing to the point where she needed a permanent home and an education in the ways of "normal"-i.e., planetside-civilization, the miners agreed to help Mr. Li with his project. But when Acorna learned of the plight of Kezdet's enslaved children, she precipitated a crisis that affected all of Delszaki Li's slow and careful plans. Unable to wait and do nothing where she saw obvious cases of need, she became entangled in any number of projects that aroused the wrathful attention of Kezdet's ruling class-rescuing one child from a brothel, another from begging on the streets, giving shoes to the barefoot slaves of a*

*glass factory and using her horn to heal their wounds. The furor aroused by her actions forced the Child Liberation League to forgo their years of patience and incremental improvements in favor of a bold stroke for freedom.*

*While the miners worked desperately to get the first of the planned moon bases in condition to receive children, and Delszaki Li fought Kezdet's bureaucracy to get permission to open the base, Acorna solved the problem of finding and freeing the children. They might have been taught to flee strangers, but the mystical rumors which identified Acorna with the protective saints and goddesses of the children's manifold belief systems ensured that she alone, of all the beings on Kezdet, was accepted by all of them. Believing that the silver-haired girl with the horn on her forehead was an earthly manifestation of Lukia of the Lights, or Epona, or Sita Ram, at her call they came willingly from mines and factories and followed her without fear. With the help of Calum, Rafik, and Gill to implement plans for a working mining base on Maganos Moon, and the sometimes overenthusiastic help of Acorna to reach out to the neglected children of Kezdet, Delszaki Li had the immense gratification of seeing his plan become a reality. He also saw that he had made many implacable enemies among those formerly wealthy who were now, as a result of his machinations, merely well-to-do. But it did not appear that this fact disturbed him particularly.*

*By the time that Maganos Moon Base became a reality, the miners' lives as well as Delszaki Li's had been changed-as much by Pal Kendoro's two sisters, Judit and Mercy, as by the implementation of the moon-base plan. Gill and Judit Kendoro had agreed to act as foster parents to the children brought to Maganos. Rafik's cousin Tapha had died in an attempt to assassinate him, and Rafik felt it was his responsibility to work with his uncle Hafiz and learn the ins and outs of the Harakamian family businesses that he was now slated to inherit. As for Calum, he was as taken with the shy, quiet Mercy as Gill was with her more outgoing sister, but he felt that with the defection of his comrades it was even more his responsibility to help Acorna in the search for her home, especially as it was his mathematical analysis of the partial results given them by Dr. Zip that had narrowed down the possible location of her home planet to a searchable sector of space.*

*Even Acorna was not romantically untouched; Pal Kendoro had fallen in love with her, and she was, like any young girl, flattered though distressed by his devotion . . . but unlike most young girls, she had to wonder whether their two species were even compatible ! In any case she felt that she could not commit herself and her life to this young human while she still did not know where, or even if, others like her might exist.*

*Where did she truly belong? And how much time did she have to find a suitable mate? In the three years that had elapsed since the establishment of Maganos Moon Base, she had matured from an adolescent into what appeared to be a*

*fully adult female other kind. Knowing nothing of her origins, she had no way to guess whether*

*her body would stabilize or whether she would age and die as rapidly as she had matured.*

*Although the search for her home world was of prime importance to Acorna and almost as much to Calum, Acorna's other friends and guardians were reluctant to see them start out on such a long and potentially perilous journey. They had become used to protecting Acorna-not only from the enemies she and Delszaki Li had made on Kezdet, but from the genuinely ill who wanted access to her healing powers and the charlatans who thought to grow wealthy by exploiting her unusual capabilities.*

*To protect her from wearing herself out in an attempt to heal everyone who might approach her, they had grown into the habit of shielding her from the world, screening her mail, and otherwise treating her as someone to be sheltered and hidden. Sometimes it seemed that it would take another revolution to free Acorna from her well-meaning friends, and as, Accrual Qiwf begins, just such a revolution is about to take place. . . .*

Maganos, Unified Federation. Date 33. 05.11

Acorna's office in the Dehoney facility Maganos Moon Base was far too full for her ' comfort, and the meeting had been going on so long that she was developing an alluring fantasy about escaping the comfort of the base for the freedom of a good planetside gallop-any planet, anywhere, just so it offered her clean firm earth to run on and a horizon very far away. The need for earth and sky and open space was becoming almost an obsession for her as the meeting dragged on -just as dreaming up all these new ways to stop her and Calum from starting on their mission to find her species' home world had become an obsession for Pal

She tried to compose herself, remembering that it was probably even worse for Calum. He considered finding her home world his first duty to her, even before his love for Mercy. The sooner Acorna could release Calum from that self-imposed quest, the sooner he and Mercy could marry. Acorna understood why some other friends were reluctant to see the Acad&cki depart. Gill and Judit were happily settled now, overseeing the care and education of the bondchildren still arriving to study and work at Maganos; and Rafik was presumably satisfied with his new career as assistant and heir apparent to his uncle Hafiz, the head of House Harakamian. But couldn't they see that Calum needed to complete his quest for her home planet-and that she needed to find her own people before she could be content anywhere?

Pal continued inexorably to read on from the notepad in his hand. "Supplies and munitions are still not completed. But right now"-and he looked directly at Acorna and then Calum, shaking his head sadly-"the worst problem is that of reinstalling and testing the AcaSecki's defense system. My people estimate it will take at least four weeks to be certain that the new defenses are accurately installed this time."

"Wait a bleeding minute!" Calum jumped to his feet. He and Acorna exchanged a glance that told her he felt sure this was yet another one of the many phony little delaying tactics thought up by Pal in collaboration with his sister Judit and Gill. Possibly even Delszaki Li had had a hand in this one; although the AcaSecki had been supplied by Hafiz Harakamian, Mr. Li had offered to finance its refitting to make it the perfect vessel for this long-distance quest. Had that generous offer really been a sneaky way of seeing that Delszaki Li retained control over the ship and could drag out the refitting until they gave up the search?

Calufti shot a second, almost accusing glance at Mr. Li, who was floating quietly in the chair which allowed him such mobility as his increasing paralysis permitted. Some people had made the mistake-sometimes a fatal mistake-of underestimating Delszaki Li because of his great age and the debilitating neurological disease which had all but paralyzed him. Not Calum! He was all too aware of the clear, penetrating mind encased in that ancient body. Delszaki Li was a force to be reckoned with- benevolent, powerful, astute, and, Calum thought wryly, about as straightforward as a spiral staircase in an Escher print.

Calum knew that Mr. Li found it hard-deep in the heart which Acorna's beauty, charm, bravery, and intelligence had thawed-to let her start out upon her search. He did make every appearance of helping to secure her ambition of finding her folk; but he was easily tempted into thinking up new ways to delay her actual departure. And Pal Kendoro, his personal assistant, was not limited by even the pretense of wanting to help Acorna on her quest! He considered himself in love with Acorna, could not or would not see why she couldn't settle down happily with him while remaining in ignorance about her own race, and absolutely did not want her going off alone for months, possibly years, with Calum. Neither of Pal's sisters could convince him that Calum Baird had absolutely no interest in Acorna, apart from completing his self-imposed task of finding her species.

Cal might seem totally immersed in technologies, improvements, designs, star systems and analyses thereof, but he wasn't oblivious to Pal's obvious jealousy, and he did his best to defuse situations which fed that unreasonable attitude. Sometimes he wondered if it wouldn't be better to openly declare his love for Pal's youngest sister Mercy and his desire to marry her as soon as he had completed this mission-though that would not be fair to Mercy; she should not be tied down while he went away on a quest of unknown duration. But right now, all Calum's good intentions of calm, rational behavior had gone out the nearest air vent as, once again, Pal seemed to be sabotaging the start of their voyage.

"If you think," Calum went on, his anger apparent in his acid tone of voice, "that a lousy defence system is going to stall us another few months, you're crazy. Crazy!" And he scissored his hands to emphasize his denial.

"Why we should require a defence system," Acorna jumped in to support him, "so far beyond what was originally designed for that class of ship, I do not know."

"Is not sensible to send you so far without every possible consideration taken for your safe return," Mr. Li said,

"We have communications devices that can reach a habitable system soon enough to summon help if the long-range missiles, the mines, the warheads, and the laser cannon do not dissuade a pirate," Calum went on. He was seething with resentment.

"First"-and Acorna held up one of her blunt, two-jointed digits - "what could a ship the size of our scout possibly have that anyone would want?"

"You," Pal said in an unequivocal tone.

"Second," Acorna said, ignoring that, "the built-in weaponry already installed allows us to defend ourselves against ships with three times our capability. ..."

"Not to mention our built-in speed," Calum interjected. "Why, that drive could outstrip the fastest drone ever manufactured. And that's saying something." He gave an extra nod in emphasis.

"Third, Uncle Hafiz has supplied us," Acorna continued, "with so many identities and drive-variation signatures that anyone looking for us from one port of call would never recognize our ship in the next one. And he has already taken long enough to supply such multitudinous identities!"

"You, Acorna, are valuable for so many reasons and to so many people," Pal said, his tone almost as angry as Calum's had been, "that of course House Harakamian desired to support you with alternate documentation and drive-emission camouflages."

"Nineteen of them? Requiring six months to develop? To be any safer, I would have to be dead already!" Acorna said, unusually sarcastic for her characteristically gentle self. "You can stay

here, safely, and let Calum find your folk," Pal said, desperation creeping into his tone.

Acorna straightened her narrow shoulders, tossing the magnificent mane of silvery hair behind her. "These are my people we are trying to find. How will they know that Cal is on a genuine search unless I am with him to represent myself? We know so little about my circumstances." She shook her head sadly. Her brilliant silvery eyes filmed over, ever so slightly, with the melancholy that was deepening within her daily, almost drowning her with an urgent need to be resolved. Sometimes, at night,

she was nearly overwhelmed by the intensity other need to find her own kind.

"Why was my life pod evacuated from the ship in the first place? Who did it? Enemy or friend? Why was it done? To save me or to destroy me without trace? Why have no vestiges of my kind been discovered with all the explorations that are being undertaken in every direction of this galaxy? "

"That's another point," Gill said, speaking for the first time and squeezing Judit's hand in his big one. "You may not even come from this galaxy. The search could take decades."

"Decades it could be," Delszaki Li said, sadly nodding.

"Oh, Mr. Li." Acorna leapt from the chair she was seated in and lowered his float so she could take his almost useless right hand in hers and stroke it lovingly. "I will not tarry a moment longer than necessary to hurry back to Kezdet and you. You will receive a message the moment we have found my home world."

"I know this, Acorna," Mr. Li said in a gentle, understanding voice. He nodded as if he were patting her hand, an action he could no longer perform.

Acorna bent her head, touching his hand with her horn, wishing she had the power to eradicate completely the wasting disease which slowly consumed him. She could, and did, ease his discomfort. But she need not stay for that; there were medicines which did as much as she could to alleviate his pain. And she was more and more "urged" to begin the search. Before it was too late? The phrase sprang into her mind. Startled, she looked up at Mr. Li's black eyes, wondering if he had a vestige of telepathy. But she saw nothing other than his real love and concern for her.

"Acorna, my love," thundered Declan Giloglie, "you're not going without the best defenses we can fit you out with, and that's me final word on the subject!"

Calum heaved a dramatic sigh. "I see there's no changing your minds."

Acorna glanced at Calum, aghast at this apparent collapse of resistance. The side of his face that was turned toward her, away from the rest of the group, flickered in what might have been a brief wink.



"I suppose you are right," she said, bowing gracefully toward Mr. Li. "Please forgive me for causing you anxiety. It was indeed extremely selfish of me to wish to find my own people before I die of advanced old age." She could not restrain that comment, even though she recognized as she made it that her words might destroy Calum's pretense at acquiescence ... if it was indeed pretense?

"Women!" Calum said in a disgusted tone. "All sentiment, no logic. But I do see the force of your arguments, and I'll explain it all to our pretty one here until she understands."

"Oh, no, you won't," Pal said. "That's my job."

"Convince me later, Pal," Acorna said sweetly. "Right now- since we are all agreed on the necessity for installing the revised defense systems-I wish to go over some matters of the ship's living space with Calum. I am afraid we may need to completely remodel a portion of the interior."

"By all means," said Delszaki Li, beaming in a way that reinforced Acorna's belief that this talk of the new defense system

was just another taradiddle designed to delay her departure yet again.

"Make whatever changes you wish. My architect will accommodate." Li bowed to Acorna.

Once they were alone on the Aca()eck, Calum looked at Acorna.

"You didn't really -want to redesign the living space again, I trust?"

"You don't really want to wait six more weeks, which •will

probably turn into six months if Mr. Li and Pal can arrange it, before we take off, do you?"

"No I" they both said in chorus.

"We're well enough supplied for the initial voyage right now," Calum said thoughtfully.

"If something happened to distract the others for just a little while ..." Acorna murmured.

On their return to the base, it seemed that distraction might just be at hand. Pal and Gill were fuming out loud at one of the

corn techs, who had innocently sent the requested acknowledgment for delivery of a message to Acorna.

"What is the problem with this?" Acorna asked. "It seems perfectly standard behavior to me."

Gill gave her a disgusted glance. "For people who aren't celebrities, maybe. For you-the acknowledgment tells whoeverthis-is that they have found your Lattice node. Now you'll be inundated with junk mail and worse. Damn it, people send these test messages out like confetti, hitting every node where they think they might find their target, and I thought we had trained all the corn techs never to acknowledge anonymous messages!"

Acorna put her hand on the techs shoulder. He was young enough to have been trained at Maganos in the past two years, thin enough to have come from one of Kezdet's factories before that, and he was shaking under her hand. She sent soothing, calming impulses to the boy until she could feel that he was steadier.

"If you upset the people who work here for no reason at all, Gill," she said, "how can you expect them to remember your wishes? Do not worry," she said to the tech, "it is a small matter, soon forgotten."

"That's what you think!" said Pal darkly.

Acorna shrugged. "I've never had an anonymous message before, so there is no reason to suppose this one is the beginning of a flood."

"Never-had-" Gill plunged both hands into his curly red beard and tugged as if he were trying to root it out. "Why, we must have bounced half a hundred of these confetti jobs back in the last week alone!" He glared at the younger man. "Didn't you tell her, Pal?"

"I didn't think," Pal said unhappily, "it would be a good idea to mention that we were screening her mail. ..."

"You were WHAT?" Acorna demanded in outraged tones. "Gill, whatever gave you the colossal gall to intercept my personal messages? And Pal, did you think that because I hadn't absolutely rejected your declarations, you owned me and my communications ? "

"See here, Acorna acushia," put in Gill, "you can't be talking to me that way, me that bathed you when you were a baby and that's not so very long ago neither!"

In a few short, scathing sentences Acorna demonstrated that she could and would talk to Gill that way and worse. By the time she stalked away, Gill's face

was as red as his beard, and Pal later swore that he had seen small puffs of steam coming out of the miner's ears.

"I knew it wasn't a good idea to tell her," Pal said.

Gill glared at him. "You could have explained why we had to do it!"

"Did you hear her give me a chance to get a word in edgewise?" he replied. "Besides, you could have explained, too, and I didn't hear you saying anything!"

Gill's deep laugh rumbled through the coin center, and he wiped his sweating forehead. "You've a point there, young Pal. Tell you what, let's get a printout of all the messages we've deleted in the past ten days or so. That'll explain it to her without us having to get that word in past the young lady's offended fury." ,

"Where'11 we send it? The mood she's in- "

"No matter what kind of a mood she's in," Gill said, "you can't stalk off very far on a lunar mining base. And you should be able to guess as well as I where she'll go to let off steam. Why don't you give your sister a call, let her know what to expect?"

He leaned over the desk and began explaining to the corn tech exactly what arcane procedures he'd have to follow in order to retrieve the massive amounts of "junk mail" that he and Pal had deleted from Acorna's files before she ever saw them.

"They treat me like an infant," Acorna declared, stalking around the circular floor of the main dome in the living space Judit Kendoro shared with Gill. "I am not to search for my own people ... I am not to read my own mail ... I will not have it!" Her head came up, her nostrils flared, and the silvery mane that cascaded down her back quivered with the force of her indignation.

"Of course you will not," Judit agreed, taking Acorna by the hand and leading her to a comfortable couch designed with her equine proportions in mind, "but perhaps you will have a cooling drink before you quite explode with indignation? Iced kava, perhaps, or madigadijuice?"

"If you are trying to make me forget about it," Acorna said, seating herself, "I should tell you that it will not work! I am no longer to be treated as an ignorant child!"

"Of course you are not," said Judit Kendoro understandingly. "You have grown up quite amazingly in the last two years. You never lose yourself galloping in the park anymore, or get into fights with street vendors, or ..."

Laughing, Acorna stopped her. "Enough, please! I do not deny that I did some very foolish things when I first came to live with Mr. Li-but remember that nearly two years aboard a mining ship is not much preparation for social life on a planet! And I was much younger then."

"That's true," said Judit, "and Gill and Pal now realize that they were wrong to screen your mail for you."

Acorna looked at her suspiciously, "Then why did they not say so? And how do you know?"

"Did you give them a chance to apologize?" Judit asked. "Or did you just stalk off in high dudgeon, O mature and sober woman of the world? Pal guessed where you would go and called to tell me that he and Gill would be sending your intercepted mail from the last ten days over as soon as it could be retrieved and printed-and here it is now," she said as the delivery bell chimed to signal arrival of a parcel.

And chimed.

And chimed.

And chimed. . . .

"Two dozen boxes!" Acorna exclaimed when the last of the boxes of printouts had been dumped on Judit's floor. "Impossible! I do not know two dozen people apart from the children, and most of those people I know are right here on Maganos and would have no need to send me any mail. Gill is making a joke."

"Well, this one seems to be addressed to you," Judit said, picking a flimsy at random from one of the boxes. "Don't you want to read it?"

"Let Karina, Psychic Healer, make your fortune?" Acorna read aloud. "What is this about? I do not know any Karina, and if I did, why would I wish to join in partnership with her to sell my healing abilities at so much for each millisecond of time expended? It sounds like a most immoral notion to me!"

"It may not be the most immoral notion you come across today," Judit said softly. "Read some more."

By the time Acorna had worked her way through half a box full of requests for money, suggestions for a line of gilt plastiflex visors called "Acornas," offers of partnership, and demands that she submit herself to some research institute or other for immediate examination, she began to understand why Gill and Pal had been so protective.

Judit, for her part, silently blessed the men for leaving all the heartrending pleas for help and healing at the bottom of the heaviest box, where with any luck Acorna would never see them. She would never be able to resist those cries for help . . . yet to heal even one percent of those who needed her would sap her energy that she would be unable to do anything else. We must find a better solution for her, thought Judit. We cannot go on leaving her from the world—the war is catching up with her, and it will destroy her.

But, of course, Judit realized, with a catch in her breath and a queer ache in her heart, the solution was there—had been there all along. If they hadn't been interfering with Acorna's desire to go and find her people, she would long since have left Maganos Moon Base to explore distant regions where even junk mail had not yet penetrated. And now that one of these messages had been acknowledged, whoever had sent it was sure to be on his or her way to Maganos . . . to be followed by newscasters, charlatans, and the terminally ill. The fiction that Acorna's healing abilities had faded as she matured would be exploded the first time Acorna's soft heart was touched and she touched her horn to an ill or injured person.

The only solution, after all, was for Acorna to leave Maganos before she was tracked down here. And even if she never came back . . . she would come back. Judit blinked away incipient tears and set about the task of persuading the lost youngling of an alien species, whom she had come to love like a younger sister, to leave immediately.

It was not, after all, much of a task. So, feeling as if she was doing something heinous, she contacted Pal's missile-defense supplier and told him that Mr. Li wished that the installation would take longer.

Mendaciously, she also told Pal that she had received a call to that effect: there was some difficulty in supply. She told Calum, who exploded, and Acorna, who gratified her by assuming the most rebellious expression ever seen on that lovely, tranquil face. Judit decided that frustration would have the desired result.

It did. Calum and Acorna made discreet plans, stowed the few items they wished to take with them on this history-making voyage, and took off without waiting for permission. The AcaSecki had been "ready" for all practical purposes for weeks. The hydroponics tanks had even been replanted since the original plants had gotten out of control in size or disuse, and some of Acorna's favorites had gone to seed. The alfalfa had had to be harvested three times already and was back to lawn height.

Since the Acaoecki had long been in one of the Dehoney takeoff bays, it had been no trouble at all to board her. Nor had the Tower seen anything odd in a request for her launch, since the Acaoecki was constantly being taken out for trial runs on this, that, or the other new ramification to its engines, corn units,

whatever. Calum and Acorna were up, up, and away and into the star-studded sky while those nearest and dearest to them slept.

Calum had spent the entire first few hours whistling happily or chortling at having escaped so deviously. It eased Acorna's nagging conscience that he evidently suffered from no guilt about their precipitous departure. She herself still felt pangs of grief and guilt about sneaking away without a proper farewell to Gill and Pal and Mr. Li-not to mention Rafik, who had been away, as usual, on business for his uncle Hafiz. But she could not have said good-bye without warning them . . . and it had seemed essential to take advantage of Judit's offer to keep all three men busy and out of communication until the AcaPecki was well clear of Maganos.

"Are you sure even Rafik won't be able to deduce our course, Calum?" Acorna had asked when they were outside the heliopause of the Kezdetian primary.

"Not even Rafik, Acorna. He may be subtle in dealing with people, but I'm the engineer and navigator," Calum said proudly.

"But they all know our destination: the Coma Berenices quadrant."

"Ah,"-Calum's smile was devious as he held up one finger-"there are nine and sixty ways of getting there, and we're taking almost, but not quite, the most illogical. I don't trust Rafik not to think of the most illogical, so I plotted in the course he is least likely to suspect. Therefore, there is no logical or illogical way for him to figure out what way we did go. See-here's the space we're navigating in." He put his hands in a position to encircle a globe, then drew out the left side.

"Milky Way," he explained, "then we are going down ..." He let his right hand describe a direct downward line. "That is NOT the shortest distance to where we want to be." And his right hand made his planned deviation. "Except that, actually and spatially, it will be. But I don't have to make a course correction for a few days."

"Well, in that case ..." Acorna allowed herself to be reassured, at least that they could not be followed and talked out of their project by Rafik's eloquence. "I am surprised, now that we've been gone nine hours, that they haven't discovered we've gone."

The corn unit bleeped. "You spoke too soon," Calum said. "Urgent you return to Dehoney immediately. Ace-" Calum's hand disconnected the corn unit. "Well, I'm surprised it took them so long."

"Ace?" Acorna asked, blinking a little anxiously. "Maybe we should at least listen to the message? It sounded like Provola."

"So? They all know we respect Provola and might listen to her, where we've given UP listening to them!" His tone was caustic.

"But she's never been an alarmist," Acorna responded, weighed down once again -with guilt about their stealthy action.

Calum shrugged. Provola Quero was now in charge of the Saganos operation; she couldn't have anything that urgent to say to them; she was probably just relaying the expectable protests from Acorna's other "guardians."

"We can't swerve from this departure, Acorna, love, or they'll just find another way of stopping us."

It was not until the third day out that their euphoria at escaping so neatly received a slight check. Acorna had by then used up the greens and vegetables that she had brought on board. She also needed to replenish Calum's supplies from the storage area. She came rushing back into the main cabin.

"It's not there anymore," she cried, her silvery eyes wide with distress. "What could have happened to it?"

Calum rose from the pilot's chair and took her by her slender arms, which were far stronger than they looked. "Easy, girl, what's not where?" "My escape pod."

"What? But it was there when I inspected the ship five days ago.

She followed him as he ran to where he knew, damned well certain he knew, that the escape pod in which they had found her five years ago had been carefully netted in. The net was still there, but the escape pod was not.

"Blast Pal and his retrofitting nonsense. It was there." He picked up a piece of the netting as if by shaking it he could restore the missing escape pod. "They must have removed it for safety before they started their damned defense installations. The tubes would have had to be settled against the inner hull. Damn!" And he forcefully threw the netting down again.

"Oh, well, it is not all that essential," she said, now taking the role of comforter. "After all, there is no counterfeiting me," she said, giggling as she swept her hand down her obviously alien length.

"Yes, but the glyphs . . . they might establish your lineage or rank or something."

"We have holos of them in the files. For that matter, I can draw them quite well, you know."

"Yes, petal, I know you can." Calum absently patted her arm. But he, too, was shaken by the disappearance of the pod-not crucial in itself, but what else might they have overlooked in their eagerness to get away?

The second shock to their seemingly smooth escape was the failure of the legume crops to sprout any pods as they should have done by this point in their growth, followed the next day by a decided yellowing in the stalks of alfalfa. Acorna spent a good deal of time on the agri channel and the microscope, trying to determine why that crop was failing.

"Somehow, the valve to the nutrient reservoir has been tampered with. Damn it."

Her mild cussword surprised Calum enough, but the fact that she had not spotted the problem earlier was even more unnerving to him. Acorna was usually instantly aware of the slightest change in atmosphere or water.

"It's just fed the entire stock of trace elements into the water supply at once-zinc sulfate, copper sulfate ... no wonder the chard looks so sick!" Acorna sighed deeply.

"Something the matter with your famous nose?" Calum asked, since Acorna could often just smell an imbalance.

"The ship has many new smells, most of them chemical. I guess I thought it was just normal." She paused, thinking. "Maybe we should listen to Provola's entire message. 'Ace\* . . . where you shut her off, could have been the beginning of 'accident' as well as the start of my name."

"So we will now dutifully listen." Calum keyed in the interrupted message.

Urgent you return to Dehoney. Supervisors report lists a broken valve in the hydroponics' unit, which was to have been repaired first thing this morning. Only you left before they couQ repair It. There was a hint of humor in that final sentence, and Acorna winced. Advise immediate return to effect such minor repairs which cou0 totally Damage entire hydroponics ano grazings if not maae. It won't take long.

The plea was unmistakable even in Provola's unmistakably prosaic tone.

"Now, now, petal," Calum reassured her. "At least it was a mistake."

"Like unloading my pod?" Acorna asked, then thinned her lips over her front teeth.

"How bad is it?" Calum asked anxiously.



"Well, the chard could be toxic. The old, tough spinach leaves"-Acorna wrinkled her nose-"should be okay since they were fully grown when we left, and one vat of timothy was well grown before the trace-element dump, but the rest I'm not sure about. I'll have to purify the rest of the 'ponies . . . and the alfalfa will have to go; if it's picked up even a small percentage of that zinc, I'll come out in spots."

"Now just a moment," Cal said soothingly, and twirled his chair around to the astrogation-control panel. A flash of knowing fingers across the touch pads, and he beamed. "We're not that far, spatially speaking, from Rushima. We can stop there . . . two, three days. Basic agri world, colonized by the Shenjemi Federation. It'll have everything we could possibly need."

"Well, I suppose I can exist on what's available," Acorna said with a sigh. She swallowed hard and scratched a bit, thinking about how near she'd been to chewing her way through her original notion of lunch-a long swath down the alfalfa bed.

SI ~~ he unused 'ponies tank was cold and hard. The lightweight protective mat that covered it and hid Markel also blocked the warmth of the sunlamps that fed the plants in the working tanks with a steady diet of golden, artificially balanced light. He had padded his sleeping place as best he could with fragments of worn-out mats, but it was still so cold that he was unable to take advantage of the space he'd exulted in when he found this hideout. He slept, when he slept at all, curled around himself like a sprout coiled within its pod, trying to hold on to the warmth of his own body. It was so dark and cold under the mats . . . almost as cold as the empty space that surrounded the Haven. . . . He was not, he told himself firmly, going to think about that. He curled up, arms wrapped around his knees, and drifted off into an uneasy doze. The hard white surface of the tank was soft, he was floating, spinning, and the stars floated around his head. . . . No, they didn't. If you were spaced without protective suiting, your eyes and everything else exploded, and you couldn't see anything!

Markel jerked awake, shivering. He wasn't going to think about his father, Illart, floating forever in absolute cold and darkness, empty eyes gazing unseeingly on the stars that he had loved. He wasn't going to think about anything except the immediate practical problems of surviving another day on the Haven without getting caught.

Huddled in another cramped position, he worried at the problem with his conscious mind. A person could get warm enough in the heating vents that led to the food center. He would try that in a little while, but he didn't dare now; he was so tired, he might fall asleep in the vent and be scalded to death when the steam blasted through to clean and sterilize it. He would have to wait, and if he timed it right, he might be able to nip out of the vents and steal some scraps of food from the recycling bins. His body needed protein to supplement the fresh greens he stole from the working 'ponies tanks in tiny nips and pinches.

And he needed to steal a blanket from somewhere. Due to recent events, there should be enough to spare now . . . enough blankets and warm clothes for anybody. He wondered if one of Nueva's lieutenants had moved into his family's old quarters, or if he dared try and make it back there to get some of his clothes. . . . No, not his clothes, that might make them suspicious. Illart's. They knew his father was dead-everybody knew, had seen. . . .

Markel struggled soundlessly against the dream of space, the cold and the brightness of distant suns and the pressure of his own blood exploding outward; he snapped out of the nightmare once more and felt his heart thumping in his chest. It had all happened so fast, almost as quickly as the dreams that trapped him whenever he tried to sleep.

Only three, no, five shifts ago he had been safe in his own quarters, and the only thing that worried him about the quarrel between Illart and Sengrat was that Ximena would take her father's side. She'll never look at me now, he had thought-as though she had ever noticed him before! But he'd been a child then. Five shifts ago. Or was it six? It seemed terribly important to remember.

Somebody had to remember. Somebody had to tell the truth, counteract the lies they meant to spread about. . . about the ones who could not speak for themselves anymore. The ones who would never be warm again.

The quarters Markel had shared with his father were spacious by Haven standards, as befitted Illart's rank as one of the three Speakers of the Council. Naturally there were separate sleep bunks for the two of them, with their own carefully engineered storage areas for personal belongings; any citizen among the Starfarers was entitled to that much space, and any working citizen, or parent raising small children, was also allotted a private sitting space and a desk console.

But nobody else Markel knew, even Third Speaker Andrezhuria, had a space so large that all three Speakers could sit down at one time without even feeling crowded. Where else, except in a public hall, could a person enjoy such luxury? Market could never understand his father's wry comments about how his rank in Council as First Speaker bought him almost enough room to swing a cat. But then, Markel's only knowledge of cats came from the vids he called up on his personal console, and he never had figured out why anybody would want to swing one.

The Old-timer generation was full of quaint sayings like that, like their insistence on calling a period of two and a half shifts a "day." Ximena said it was better just to humor the old folks and not to demand explanations for all their quaint old folk sayings.

Anyway, it wasn't the presence of the other two Speakers that had made the sitting area so crowded that Markel had retreated to his sleep tube with his personal console; it was Sengrat. Really, Markel thought, it was Sengrats overinflated ego that seemed to fill up all the space and use up all the oxygen. The man had a voice like a file going through sheet metal; once you started letting it get to you, it could saw through earplugs and ruin your enjoyment of a good classic music vid. Markel blinked twice to stop the vid. No sense in letting his pleasure in the ancient music be ruined by irritation at Sengrat. He would just wait until the visitors left.

Sengrat was always going on about something; it seemed he never agreed with any of the Council decisions. And Illart said he wouldn't speak up during open Council; he just sat there and simmered and waited to buttonhole one of the Speakers in private, later, and tell them how wrong they were. Right now he was disputing the decision to leave their present orbit as soon as the nav officer on duty identified a good pattern for quadrant departure.

"We've done -what we came to Khang Kieaan for, Sengrat," Andrezhuria said wearily. "We've presented our case, we have the promise of their support in the next Federation meeting. ..."

Sengrat snorted. "Presented our case," he mimicked Andrezhuna's precise, cold tones. "Zhuria, wake up and smell the kava! We've been presenting our case for ten years now. All the moral support in the world won't make Amalgamated Mining cede Esperantza back to us-and if they did, they couldn't repair the damage they've already done to the planet. Its time to move on, make a new life for ourselves."

"Are you saying we should have accepted Amalgamated's joke of a resettlement offer?" Gerezan, Second Speaker, inquired. "A bit late to be arguing that, don't you think?"

Markel could tell without looking that Sengrat would have flushed a deep purple. His anger came out in the plummy resonance of his next words. "Don't twist my words, Second! I'm not the one who's living in the past-you three, and the Council members who follow you around like dullbots, are the ones who do that. You're still talking as if we could get Esperantza back and settle to dirt farming. I don't want to do that. I'm not even interested in that. Our 'case' against Amalgamated was settled in Federation court - "

"Unfairly," Andrezhuria cut in. "If we can get evidence of the bribes Amalgamated paid out and the records they had doctored, we'll have grounds to reopen it. And we will get it; the kids in my data study group are sharper than any dirtside hackers, and they're getting through Amalgamated's data firewalls one at a time. Until then, our mission is to keep the story of Esperantza alive. Not to let anybody forget what an injustice was done, not to let Amalgamated get away with it!"

"You're dead wrong, my dear 'Zhuria," Sengrat drawled. "Our mission is to survive. Anything else comes second. And in the interests of survival, as Chief Maintenance Officer, it is my duty to point out that the Haven is long overdue for retrofit and replacement."

"Well, I hardly think we should request permission to dock on Khang Kieaan for maintenance work," Illart said, chuckling. "Even if we could afford it, some of the folks down there may just not feel too friendly toward us after the way we took over their planetary communications system to state our case. Sure, we got a lot of popular sympathy, but I bet the government's going to be nervouser and nervouser the longer we hang around here. All three governments," he corrected himself after a moment's mental review of Khang Kieaan's troubled political situation.

"We don't need to request anything of Khang Kieaan," Sengrat snapped. "We had their communications system under total control. That should have paid for all the maintenance we need."

"Exactly how do you figure that?" Gerezan asked. "They weren't going to pay us to run their planetary communications when they had a perfectly good working system of their own."

"But they didn't, 'Zan," Sengrat purred. The rasping tone was gone from his voice now, and Markel pulled the vid plugs out of his ears to hear better. When Sengrat's voice softened, he was happy; when Sengrat was happy, there was trouble coming.

Sengrat'd sounded just that way, smooth and velvety and jovial, when he told Markel that Ximena was too old for him, and he didn't want any good-for-nothing teenage kids hanging around his daughter.

"They didn't have a working system of their own," Sengrat went on, "not while we'd intercepted all communications to make our own 'cast. With a little diplomacy, we could have gotten a contract from the Night Sky Lightning party granting them exclusive use of planetside communications . . . through us."

"You're talking about making them pay us to stop disrupting communications? We're not racketeers," Illart said sharply.

"And just what do you think the Sun Behind Clouds and the Spring Rains parties would have done about that deal?" Gerezan demanded.

"Nothing," Sengrat said simply. "I checked. Night Sky Lightning is the only group with the technology to attack us in orbit; the other two parties are exhausted from

three generations of constant fighting. The NSL is the clear technological leader; with a little help from us, they could control Khang Kieaan now.

We'd be doing a public service, really. End the fighting now, instead of two or three generations down the line. And ensure Haven's survival." He sounded as though he was beaming, turning his face this way and that so that all three Speakers could get the benefit of his confident looks.

"We don't interfere in other planets' internal affairs," Illart said. "In case you've forgotten, that is part of the original charter agreed upon when we decided to refuse Amalgamated's resettlement offer and live on our colony ship until we got justice. We offer to all other peoples the respect and noninterference we desired for ourselves. That is the way of the Starfarers."

"Your way, you mean," snapped Sengrat.

"The Council's way," Illart corrected him. "You wish to discuss changes in the charter, Sengrat? If so, you should have convened a full Council meeting instead of buttonholing the three of us privately. Nothing less can change the original charter."

"Nothing is less likely to change it," Sengrat riposted. "I already know it's no use going through the Council; they'll do whatever you three want. And you're living in the past. I should warn you that not all the original Starfarers see things your way. And the political refugees we've taken in from other places- why should they care about a dead planet they've never seen? People like Nueva Fallona aren't interested in being permanent refugees crowded into a ship that's turning into a slum, Illart."

"If we hadn't taken in Nueva and the other refugees from Palomella, the ship wouldn't be so crowded," Andrezhuria pointed out. "If it weren't for our charter and our commitment to aid other victims of political injustice, she wouldn't be here. Perhaps she should bear that in mind before agitating to change the charter."

"She said you'd do that." The metallic rasp was back in Sengrat's voice. "That's why I was chosen to present the opposition point of view to you. The Palomellese and other newcomers are underrepresented in Council - "

"That will change with time," Gerezan put in quietly. "They have the same voting rights as any other Starfarers."

"Some of us," Sengrat said, "don't think we should wait any longer. Some people don't see any point in trying to work through the Council; whoever's elected, it's you three Speakers who run it, and Nueva was right-your minds are stuck in the past. I'm looking toward a future in which the Starfarers are truly free, not

begging for favors from the Federation, but expanding in space and answerable to no planetary bureaucrats. If you're wise, you three, you'll join me. It's past time for some real changes around here."

"Always so pleasant chatting with you and hearing your views, Sengrat," Illart said. "Are you sure you can't stay for kava? It's a new strain, compliments of the genetic researchers from Sun Behind Clouds. They think we might actually be able to get enough yields from this strain to justify raising our own kava onboard. Of course they don't understand dark-roasting, so I'm afraid it's not as strong as you like it, but there's a nutty flavor reminiscent of hazelnuts that I personally find quite enticing.

Sengrat's rejoinder about frivolities and frippery was drowned out by the crackle of the shipboard corn system. Sengrat wasn't all wrong, Markel reflected as he stretched out in his tube and reached for the earplugs. Like far too many systems on the Haven, the corn speakers desperately needed upgrading and refurbishment. The Starfarers might have the scientific and technical know-how to take over entire planetary systems and hack into intergalactic corporate data bases, but their own equipment was held together by duct tape and prayers. The speaker in Illart's quarters was so bad that whole words and phrases were drowned out by static. All Markel could make out was, "Kava shipment. . . message. . . . Xong . . . join. . . .

Oh, great, he thought. Another political refugee, sneaking a cry for help out in the kava be-aiu. Ju^t what they neeoS, one, more person on the overcrowded Haven. Or maybe fourteen or fifteen more people, he reflected gloomily. These Kieaanese ran to large families.

He had just inserted one earplug when his father's yell of excitement all but pierced the other ear. "Xong who?"

"Not Hoo," the voice on the speaker crackled, "Hoa. Ngaen Xong Hoa."

Gerezan and Andrezhuria burst into excited babbling until Illart hushed them. Whoever this Ngaen Xong Hoa might be, they seemed to think he would be worth his space on the Haven. Markel put the vid system aside again and wriggled out of his tube. Might as well find out what all the fuss was about. He would take his vid off into one of the service tunnels later and enjoy it in peace and quiet. The desire for privacy had long ago inspired Market to explore all the nooks and crannies of the Haven -where a slender boy could fit unobserved. He knew every supposedly unusable space where outmoded equipment had been yanked out and sold for scrap, as well as the whole system of the narrow air vents and the crawl spaces designed for access to the ship's electrical system.

The three Speakers were grinning and hugging one another when Market entered the sitting area.

"Such a pity Sengrat didn't stay a little longer," Andrezhuria said happily. "Then he could have heard the news ahead of everybody else!" She looked almost as young as Ximena, flushed with excitement, curly tendrils of her blond hair escaping from their severe braids to frame her face in light.

"Just as well," said Gerezan. "Why give him extra time to think about some way to put Ngaen Xong Hoa's research to unethical uses?"

"Oh, come off it, Gerezan. Even Sengrat couldn't think of a way to misuse a weather-prediction system!"

Illart cleared his throat. "I'm not so sure about that." He tapped the data screen set into the wall behind Gerezan. "Here's the complete text of his message."

Although still slender enough to fit into the air vents, Markel was already a good head taller than Andrezhuria. He had no trouble seeing the screen over her head. Ngaen Xong Hoa-and Markel still didn't know who he was-requested political asylum on the Haven because he feared that one of the three governments of Khang Kieaan would misuse the results of his latest research.

"Oh, he's just saying that to make sure we'll have him," Andrezhuria said blithely. "And of course we will. If he's finished the model he was discussing at the Chaos and Control Seminar, we should be able to sell it to agri planets for enough to take care of all the Haven's maintenance problems forever!"

"Not sell," Gerezan said. "Rent. We keep control of the model."

"Are we counting our chickens before they're hatched?" Illart inquired dryly. "We don't even know he's still working on the same thing. He may have given up on the chaos-theory problem and turned to some other line of research entirely."

In the brief silence that greeted this suggestion, Market finally got a word in edgewise. "Who is this Ngaen Xong Hoa, anyway?"

Illart reached out to put an arm round his son's shoulders. "It's kind of hard to explain if you don't remember living planetside," he said, "but... I guess you'd call him a weatherman."

"And that's all he would say about it," Markel complained later to Johnny Greene. Even if Johnny was of the same generation as his father, he wasn't as stodgy as the original settlers. He'd only joined the Haven a few years earlier, after a nearcalamitous escape from MME when Amalgamated had taken over the large mining company and caused huge redundancies among the specialists. In some ways Market found Johnny could bridge the gap between his father's generation, who could remember digging and growing things in dirt, and the young people of

his own generation, who had been raised in space. "What's a weatherman, anyway? I looked it up on the ship's net, and all I could find was some junk about solar winds. I don't see how that's going to make us rich!"

"Oh, that's space weather," Johnny Greene said. "Ngaen Xong Hoa's work is on planetary weather systems, and he's the prime researcher in the field. Although last I heard, even he hadn't solved the chaos aspects."

"Who cares about planetary weather?" Markel demanded. "If dirtside folks didn't like being rained on, why didn't they live in space like all sensible folk?"

"Markel," Johnny said sharply, "stop pouting and use your brains! I know you've got some, heard 'em rattling round in there just the other day. Turn on a couple of processing bits, will you? Okay, so space colony ships like Haven don't care about dirtside weather, neither do lunar colonies or high-tech cities in domes. But there are still plenty of people out there who live by growing food or raising animals on planetary surfaces, who have to guess right about the upcoming weather if they and their children are going to eat next year. Ninety percent of Khang Khieaan's habitable surface is good agricultural land; naturally they care about knowing whether it's going to rain enough to raise their crops ... or enough to drown them."

"Sounds like a simple enough question to me," said Markel. "Just model the atmosphere and the ground surface and plug in your numbers. Nothing like as complicated as plotting a course through four-space to shortcut from one quadrant to another without meeting a neutron star."

"You think so, do you?" said Johnny. "Well, here. I'll give you references to the latest weather-modeling theories, and you can download a complete data set on Khang Kieaan's current weather. We'll likely be here another two-three shifts to collect Hoa, so you'll have plenty of time to predict . . . oh, the rainfall over the Green Sea, and the expected high temperature in the central plains area, that'll do for starters. Just take a look at the models, decide which one works best, and . . . what was it you said? . . . plug in the numbers. Then we'll see how close you came."

Markel hadn't come to Johnny for extra homework, but he'd learned that if he did what Johnny Greene suggested, it usually worked out to his benefit in the long run. Besides which, once Johnny had given him a learning assignment like that he wouldn't talk to Markel at all, not even to tell tales of mining adventure among the asteroids, until Markel could show that he'd done the work. So he copied the references over to his private storage files, set the system to download Khang Kieaan's current weather data, and skimmed papers on weather modeling while he waited for the data to come in.



He was waiting when Johnny came off duty two shifts later. "This stuff is crazy," he complained. "Look, I programmed three different models-well, okay, I didn't have to do them from scratch, most of the code was in files attached to the papers -and fed in the same numbers, and look at the results! This one says the Green Sea is going to get two inches of rain between dawn and noon tomorrow, this one says thirty percent chance of typhoons and doesn't tell me anything about rain, and this one"-he waved the printout for emphasis-"this one only says, 'If a butterfly flutters its wings in the rain forest, what is the probability of snow in Alaska?'"

Johnny laughed. "Okay. Welcome to chaos theory. That last one is telling you it doesn't have enough data."

"I gave it the same data set the others had."

"It's more persnickety. The other two models are designed to give you their best guesses regardless of how close on they are - sort of the way traditional weathermen operate. This third one"-Johnny tapped the printout-"won't give a prediction that can't be relied upon. And it just happens that planetary weather is what we call a chaotic system-meaning that its adjacent solutions diverge exponentially in time. Such a system is very sensitive to the initial conditions, which means that a very slight change in the starting point-like the fluttering of a butterfly's wing-can lead to enormously different outcomes."

"Then this last model is a joke," Markel muttered.

"Nope. It's making a point: that none of the existing models is accurate. Did you look at the author's name?"

"Ngaen Xong Hoa. That's the guy who's supposed to be delivered with the last load of supplies from dirtside," Markel said before realizing that he probably wasn't supposed to have read the memo detailing exactly how the Haven planned to collect their scientist . . . even if there was nothing particularly new about the plan. "So?" Markel went on hastily to distract Johnny from the fact he'd been hacking into Council memoranda again. "They're all excited about getting somebody who tells you Zen proverbs about the sound of one butterfly wing clapping?"

"I think," Johnny said cheerfully, "they're excited about the chance that he's solved the problem by now. And even if he hasn't. .. take another look at that model. I bet you incorporated the code without reading it thoroughly. Want to bring it up on the screen in my quarters, take a second look?"

A few minutes later Markel was following lines of code as they scrawled across Johnny's screen in the highly abbreviated format of upper-level languages. "I don't see the point in untangling this code," he grumbled under his breath, "it's

just what he says in the paper. Put the data into canonical form, apply a series of nonlinear equations, and . . . oh." "Now you see it?"

Markel nodded. "If you don't stop with the initial data set, but keep entering small changes as they're monitored . . . but then you have too many variables. In fact, you could have an infinite series of variables. So you can't define your nonlinear system until you know how many variables you're dealing with, but you can't tell how many variables you need until you've defined your nonlinear system, but . . . my head hurts," he groaned. "But, okay, okay, I see what you mean. If you follow this path through the program, you don't get a Zen proverb, anyway."

"Good. What do you get?"

"Probably a system crash," Markel said absently, studying the complex system of data structures and temporary processors that would have to be created, and then, "Johnny! You told me to implement a model that would've brought the Haven's computer system down?"

"Actually," Johnny confessed, "I didn't think you'd get that far. I thought you'd get bored by the time you'd implemented even one model, and then you'd bring the results back, and then we could have looked at the discrepancies between the prediction and what was actually happening dirtside, and that -would be enough to convince you it wasn't so simple."

"And then," Markel said, "you'd have implied that I screwed up by not following through all three models in rigorous detail, and I'd have been embarrassed and quit bugging you about this stuff. John Greene," he said slowly, "you are one twisty, devious s.o.b."

Johnny beamed. "Thank you, son. Does my heart good to have somebody recognize my true talents. And by the way . . . that last model wouldn't have brought the whole system down. We do have fail-safes against infinitely expanding neural networks. Can't ever tell what some kid might code in to run his sim games, you know," he chuckled, referring to the time Markel had used up sixty percent of the system's resources to simulate a series of space battles in real time for one of his war games.

Markel flushed. "That was a long time ago," he muttered. "I was just a kid then . . . fifteen. ..."

"Last year," Johnny grinned. "Sixteen is, of course, ever so much older and wiser than fifteen."

There was a tap on the door.

"Johnny?" called a soft voice that sent Markel's heart rate into fifth gear.

Ximena Sengrat opened the door a crack. "I am sorry to disturb you," she said, "but the com unit to your quarters is malfunctioning again."

Johnny snapped his fingers. "Damn wiring!" he said. "I really gotta get in there with some duct tape."

As Markel, Ximena, and everybody else knew, Johnny had the highly unauthorized habit of disabling the com system in his personal quarters whenever he got tired of the continuous flow of scratchy, squeaky announcements from Central; so they gave this "explanation" all the attention it deserved.

"My father thought you would wish to know," Ximena went on, "that Dr. Hoa is now on board, and he has brought with him the code for his new weather-modeling system. The Council feels it might be tactless to try to sell the results to Khang Kieaan." She smiled and brushed her dark hair back, revealing more of the perfect oval of her face. One curling lock clung to her neck;

Markel could have leaned forward and moved it with one finger. Instead he hunched over the data console and piled his printouts on his lap. "It has been suggested we should visit Rushima instead. As a primarily agricultural colony, they should be in desperate need of our services, and certainly the Shenjemi Federation can afford to pay for them."

If he didn't know Ximena was only four years older than he was, Markel thought, he would've taken her for a Council member herself instead of just somebody's kid running an errand. She sounded as if she'd been in on the discussions. Sengrat was probably right . . . she was too old for him. She'd never look at a sixteen-year-old kid.

"They want all our best mathematicians and computechs to familiarize themselves with Dr. Hoa's model en route," Ximena went on. "So I'm afraid you two will have to give up your sim game, or whatever you were playing at."

Markel wanted to protest that he had not been playing sim games, he "was way too old for that kid stuff, but realized saving so would only make him sound younger.

"You're supposed to study the math, Johnny," Ximena said, "and Markel, you're assigned to the team to analyze the code."

"Me?" Markel's voice broke on the word in a humiliating croak, the sort of thing that hadn't happened to him since he was thirteen . . . except around Ximena.

"But of course," Ximena said, dark eyes wide as if she couldn't imagine why he was surprised. "We couldn't do without you on this, Markel Illart. Everybody knows you're the fastest computech on the ship."

A part of Markel's mind noticed the way Ximena said "we," as if she identified herself with the Council, but most of his mind was floating off into hyperspace. She knew? who he was-not just his name, but what he was good at-and she respected it!

"Even if you are the youngest," Ximena added, and Markel came back into ordinary flat three-space with a dull thud.

For the three shifts it took them to reach Rushima and attain a stable orbit, Market was lost in the efficient beauty of Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa's approach to modeling atmospheric processes in terms of their electronic-potential differences. The paper which had been issued to him, modestly entitled, "On Certain Aspects of Chaotic Systems and Operations Theory," outlined a global-weather model that was both more general and much more elegant than the one Johnny Greene had had Markel working from. And yet. . . ?

Markel frowned at the screen. Once you cut through the code to the underlying structure and mathematics of the model, this seemed essentially the same as the one in the earlier paper. True, Hoa had replaced his flip comment about the butterfly with weather predictions graded by reliability, but it was still true that until you got into the infinite loop of adding variables and revising the nonlinear-equations system, there were no predictions Hoa graded as reliable enough by his standards. He still had not solved the problem of the unpredictably large results owing to small variations that, according to Johnny, plagued all attempts to model complex chaotic systems.

Markel had just reached that point in his reasoning when Illart announced that it was time for their sleep shift. Under the circumstances, the only thing he could possibly do was wait until his father started snoring and then sneak a portable console into his sleep tube to try out the new model for himself. Despite Johnny Greene's certainty that the built-in checks in the system would prevent his inadvertently crashing the ship's computers, he decided that it would not be prudent to test the new model directly. Besides, it would take half the shift to download the amount of weather data he'd need. Instead, he wrote a quick and dirty driver program that would simulate the running and systems requirements of both Dr. Hoa's models, given unlimited data.

The results were almost identical. The new version could handle more nonlinear equations than the old one before it crashed, but it still didn't get anywhere near the predictions stage of the program. Markel switched off the portable console and lay with his arms behind his head, thinking. If Dr. Hoa's work was this far from completion, why had he found it necessary to flee Khang Kieaan?

Next shift, the Haven was settling into orbit around Rushima, and Illart was too busy preparing to negotiate for the Council with Rushima to answer Markel's questions. Markel wound up, as usual, perched on Johnny Greene's cluttered worktable in the CaN, or Computation and Navigation.

"Hoa hasn't actually been working much on the prediction model since that paper you first saw," Johnny said, supporting Markel's deductions of the shift before. "He's a meteorologist by trade, not a mathematician, and he says what that model needs is some new mathematical insights-and he sure hasn't got them."

"Then why did he really want to leave Khang Kieaan? The original work has been out for over a year. Isn't it a little late for him to worry about somebody misusing his research? Besides," Markel added, as snidely as befitted somebody who'd been up for most of his sleep shift comparing a cleverly disguised "new model" with its virtually identical predecessor, "you can't even use this one, let alone misuse it."

"Oh, don't underrate Hoa's work," Johnny said, "it's the best weather-prediction model going, and even if it's not long-range or perfect, it ought to be a considerable improvement on whatever the Rushimese are currently using."

"I still don't get why he had to be smuggled out in a sack of kava beans."

Johnny sighed and touched his console with one finger to halt the program he was running. "And you're not going to stop asking why until you get some answers, are you? Pestilential brat," he added, but his voice was warm. "What you need is a walk in the Garden. Get some exercise. You've been staring at your data console all night again, haven't you? You'll addle your brains that way."

"I'm not-" Markel began. Johnny hushed him with a hand signal that dated back to the time of his first arrival on the Haven, when he'd spent hours playing Miners and Martians with a lonely kid whose father was wrapped up in Council business and in grieving for a mother Markel could barely remember. That waggle of the fingers, Markel remembered, meant, "Hush, we are observed." And the slight crook in the thumb meant "Follow me silently."

The "Garden" was actually the part of the Havens hydroponics unit that was open to general view: a network of narrow trails on the spongy damp flooring of the unit, past flowers and fruits and greens that had been carefully trained to drape over the edges of their ugly tubs. Markel had never seen the point of it, but the Starfarers of his father's generation, who had actually wanted-wanted! he thought in amazement-to become dirt farmers, who remembered living dirtside in the inefficient alternation of light and darkness that didn't fit human biorhythms, insisted they needed this gardenlike section to remind them of their past lives.

Today, though, there were no visitors other than Johnny and him. Probably everybody was too busy 'preparing for the Rushima negotiations, or too anxious to hear the results, to take time for smelling the flowers.

"You're not cleared for this information," Johnny began abruptly once he had ascertained that there were no other visitors to the Garden. "I'm only telling you because I know how hard it is to stop you when you've got your teeth in a problem, so I know you'll be worse trouble and probably uncover more stuff if I don't give you a little now. But I'd hate to have to explain to the Council that I couldn't head off a sixteen-year-old's 'satiabile curiosity,' so just keep it to yourself, will you. Elephant's Child?"

The nickname came from an old story Johnny had once told Markel, about a baby elephant who got into terrible trouble and had its nose pulled until it became a trunk, all because it refused to stop asking annoying questions.

"You haven't actually told me anything yet," Markel pointed out, "except that there's something to tell. Now that I know that, of course I'm going to be curious." He grinned at Johnny.

"All right. I told you Hoa hasn't been working on the weather-prediction model for over a year, and that's true. This paper we've been given to read is just a rehash and slight improvement of his earlier stuff, put out to convince the heads of his research lab on Khang Kieaan that his more recent work has not been productive and that he is going back to the prediction model. The fact is that his experiments have been quite successful. Terribly successful," Johnny added in somber tones. "He didn't want them to fall into the hands of any of the three Khang Kieaan parties for fear that whichever party had it would use his work to destroy the other governments, and probably destroy the planet in the process. And there were too many people involved in the work to keep it secret indefinitely; even though he was the only one who knew all the parts of the project and could put it together, he was afraid some lab assistant or graduate student would let out enough to get the head of the lab interested. He had already converted his notes to a single datacube and erased all his working files, and he was prepared to blow up the datacube and himself if they came for him before he found a way off-planet. You can imagine that he was very glad to learn of the Haven's visit."

"Okay, okay." Markel was practically dancing with impatience. "But what is this 'terribly successful' work, and when do I get to see it?"

"You're not having these papers," Johnny told him. "Nobody but Council heads and a few selected experts have been invited "Like who?"

"Well . . . yours truly, for one, which is how come I know enough to know that you shouldn't be asking questions right now. Sengrat, because if we can find a useful

application for the work, he'll be in charge of building the equipment needed. J don't know who else. Not many."

Markel could tell when he was beaten. "You could at least tell me what its about."

"I could at least get my head ripped off by your father for breaching security to the extent I already have," Johnny muttered. "Look, kid. If I tell you the general area Hoa's been working on, do I have your word of honor that you'll stop asking questions, and you won't hack into the ship's system to get any more information on it, until it's released for public consumption? He's taking a big step here. He doesn't trust his own people to use this work wisely, but he does trust the Starfarers. Do you have any idea what that says about the reputation men like your father have built up in a decade of fighting for justice? And do you see what a betrayal of Hoa's trust it would be if we let word of the results spread as soon as we knew what he'd been working on?"

Dry-mouthed, Markel nodded. "Okay," he said. "You have my word I won't ask any more." The next thing cost him an effort to say, but he managed it anyway. "You don't even have to tell me what it's about, if you don't want to. Besides," he couldn't resist adding, "I bet I can guess."

"Anything but that," Johnny exclaimed in mock horror. "Better you should know than we should be subjected to the guesses you'll dream up. . . . He's moved from studying weather prediction to studying weather manipulation. Everybody knows that if you zap a planet's ionosphere with enough energy you can disrupt communications and cause unusual\* weather patterns;

well, Hoa's been refining on that, getting more accuracy, working -with a series of targeted laser beams and precise timing sequences. From what I've seen of the preliminary results, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he can call down lightning out of the heavens."

True to his word, Markel did no more investigating of Dr. Hoa's recent research. Instead, he put in a casual quarter of an hour answering the questions the electronic math tutor had Allocated for that week, then decided to revert to last year's childish pursuits and play a few rounds of SimArmageddon. But the console beeped a warning at him instead of bringing up the sim game, and neon green capital letters flashed a message on the screen.

YOUR ACCESS TO GAMES HAS BEEN RESTRICTED UNTIL YOU WRITE THAT TERM PAPER FOR THE LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION TUTOR. LOVE, ILLART.

Markel hated actually composing papers-language was so clumsy compared to the pure, sparse beauty and rigorous meanings of mathematics and computer languages. He felt sure that he could easily enough hack his way around

whatever restrictions Illart had imposed. No First-Gen Starfarer could know his way around the Haven's computers the way the children of the Starfarers did. But Illart would probably consider that dishonorable.

With a sigh Markel settled down to think over the assignment. Research and write the biography of an adult with whom you are personally acquainted. Verify all statements with documentation and interviews. Where there is a conflict between documentation and the personal account, resolve the conflict without either falsifying the documented facts or offending the interviewee. Oh, great. Not only was he going to have to write complete sentences and paragraphs and do footnotes, he was going to have to practice Tact and Diplomacy 101.

Well, let's see. Doing Ximena would give him an excuse to "interview" her . . . but he felt sure the tutor would not count a Starfarer of his generation as an "adult," even if she was four years older than him and inclined to identify herself with the older generation. Johnny Greene wouldn't take offense at anything Markel wrote, but he was a slippery customer; Markel had already discovered that Johnny was vague about certain episodes in his past and that a lot of his life had somehow slipped through the bureaucratic meshes of the galactic Lattice.

Everybody else would be doing some First-Gen Starfarers; Markel cringed at the thought of hearing all those histories of the Theft of Esperanza from various points of view. He would have to do something different . . . there was that woman Sengrat had mentioned, Nueva Fallona of Palomella. She must be quite old, at least thirty, but Markel wouldn't mind interviewing her one bit. He thought about glimpses of a curtain of straight, iridescent, reddish bronze hair, a firm chin, eyes that always seemed to be looking into some distance only she could see. And she was intriguing, with that slight limp and the elegant cane she used, made of a reddish bronze to match her hair, turning her disability into an affectation. Probably she'd been tortured by the Palomellese government and was too proud to talk about her past sufferings. Yes, she'd definitely be an interesting subject. Besides, Markel would bet nobody else in his age class would think of doing a Palomellese; it wouldn't have occurred to them that they could access Palomella's databases via the Lattice. True, there'd be just a little hacking involved . . . but it was research for an assigned paper, Markel told himself virtuously.

And the Haven's computer-tutor seemed to agree, or else Illart hadn't thought of restricting Markel's access to anything other than games, for it let him access a gateway to the Lattice with no trouble at all. He didn't really have to start working until he reached Palomella's first level of security. When Illart returned upset from a two-shift-long Council meeting, Markel's mood was somber enough to match his.



"How did it go?" Market asked from the tube, where he'd been lounging and watching old music vids. "You missed our mess time. Want me to go to the kitchens and get a bowl of hotchpotch for you?"

"No, thanks," Illart said. "They sent in food between shifts, so we wouldn't have to break for mess."

"How come?" Market thought he knew the answer, but he wanted the satisfaction of hearing it from his father. "You always said it was a good idea to break up long meetings, give everybody a chance to simmer down."

Illart rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, and Market knew from the gesture that his father was suffering one of the agonizing tension headaches that had plagued him ever since he took over from Andrezhuria as First Speaker. Perhaps it was time he handed over to Gerezan. Market slipped out of his tube and squatted behind Illart to rub the tense cords of muscle in his neck.

Illart sighed with relief. "That's better. You've your mother's touch. When I came in hot and sweaty and aching from the fields, Aiora used to rub the ache out of my muscles as lightly as a butterfly's wing."

Market could almost remember the scene -or was it just that Illart had reminisced about it so many times? All that Market could truly remember of their life on Esperantza was the communal creche where Illart had left him for the long hours of daylight after his mother died. He couldn't even remember what his father had been like in those days; he was usually asleep by the time Illart came in from the fields to collect him. He'd been looking forward to turning five, when he would be old enough to follow Illart into the fields and collect stones, or help with some other farming task, instead of staying in the creche with the babies. Life on the Haven had been a joyous adventure of freedom and exploration compared to that, an unexpected boon from the heavens. . . .

Market abruptly switched his thoughts back to the present, as he always did when his reminiscences reached that point. It seemed disloyal to Illart and the others who had given more than ten years of their lives seeking justice, to admit that he for one didn't really want to go back to Esperantza or any other dirtside life. Crowded and dilapidated the Haven might be, but it was far more home to Market than any vague memories of dirtside life.

And he mustn't let Illart guess that, ever. It would hurt him too much.

"So tell me about the meeting," he said instead. "How come you didn't break for mess, and didn't 'cast any of the discussion?" Usually, although not always, the Council meetings were broadcast on a separate channel for any interested citizen to view through the data console.

"We were discussing . . . classified matters," Illart said. "Why would the negotiations with Rushima be classified?"

-Market asked in his most innocent voice. "After all, everybody knows that's what we're here for."

"They're not going well," Illart said.

"I'm not surprised. After I looked at Dr. Hoa's weatherprediction model, I can see why they might not want to pay for it. Its not that much of an improvement on current systems.'

"Yes, but they don't know that yet," Illart said. "They haven't seen the code . . . they just said no thank you, they've had three years of bad harvests planetwide and they owe so many back taxes to the Shenjemi Federation that they can't even imagine throwing away their credits on high-tech frills. The wording," he added dryly, "is Rushimese, not ours."

"So it took two full shifts for them to turn us down?" "Oh, no. That happened about ten minutes after we opened negotiations. The rest of the meeting," Illart said wearily, "concerned what we do next."

"Try somewhere else ? " Markel hazarded. "That seems to me our only option. But Nueva Fallona had another idea. You see, Hoa brought with him the results of some other research he's been doing recently... I can't tell you exactly what, you're not cleared, but it has to do with actually modifying weather patterns rather than just predicting them. Nueva and some of the other Council members thought we might be able to use that research to convince the Rushimese that they needed our services." Illart sighed again. "If Hoa's work were accurate enough for us to guarantee a season's worth of good growing weather, and if we could afford to wait around during that growing season, it might not be such a bad idea. But he doesn't have that kind of control yet, as Nueva ought to know; she's seen the abstracts Johnny Greene put together for all the Council members. I pointed out that we couldn't predict what would happen if we started discharging pulsed energy into Rushimas ionosphere-we could cause terrible catastrophes on the surface- and do you know what that woman said?" Illart's voice rose in indignation. "That it didn't matter what happened; if we could make their weather interesting enough, they'd be very happy to pay for our services. As if we'd stoop to running a 'protection' racket-pay us or we'll destroy your climate! None of the original Starfarers would stoop to such a thing. Naturally, Andrezhuria and I quashed that idea. But it took forever. Some of the Council actually couldn't see that Nueva was proposing to threaten Rushima until I spelled it out for them in plain language, over and over. The funny thing is," Illart said, yawning hugely, "Nueva herself didn't seem to be that unhappy when I made it clear that we'd never consider such an unethical procedure. The other

Palomellese on the Council were griping and muttering, but Nueva actually seemed pleased that I wouldn't even consider her proposal."

In view of what Markel had learned about Nueva during his afternoon of hacking into Palomella's secure data bases, this surprised him even more than it did Illart; but his father fell asleep before he had a chance to tell him what the Palomellese aboard ship had been tactfully not mentioning.

Later he thought that he might never forgive himself for that omission.

A dream of flashing lights, laser pulses calling lightning from the clouds, cities going up in silent waves of flame, resolved into the steady three-pulsed flash of the cabin lights that signaled an emergency alert. Markel half fell out of his sleep tube, rubbing his eyes, and turned to Illart for an explanation of this emergency.

Only Illart wasn't there. He must already have gone to deal with the problem . . . but what sort of emergency could call the First Speaker out in the middle of his sleep shift? For engineering problems, Sengrat would have been called; for computer systems, Johnny Greene or one of the other hotshots who carried the CaN. Much as Markel respected his father, he knew that Illart's high position on the Haven was due not to technical expertise but to his reputation for probity and plain speaking. Illart wasn't even that much of a diplomat; when they needed somebody to weasel-word around some system's regulations, Gerezan was the Speaker they called upon to phrase the careful sentences.

Well, it was dumb to stand there trying to guess what had happened instead of using the ship's information channels. Markel turned toward the main data console built into the wall of the sitting area, but before he touched it, the screen came to life of its own, casting an eerie pale glow over the darkened chamber. "FREE CITIZENS OF THE HAVEN!" blared the speakers. For once, the sounds came through clear as a bell, with no ominous cracklings in the background. "Please assemble before your screens for an important announcement!" The emergency lights flashed three more times, a siren went off, and the lights pulsed again before the gray background of the screen dissolved to show . . . not the Council chambers, as Markel had expected, but one of the cargo bays where technical equipment and supplies were stowed. Confused-looking people, disheveled from sleep, stood to one side of the bay; among them Markel saw his father and Andrezhuria, the Second Speaker. On the other side of the bay stood those who must have been on shift when the emergency, whatever it was, had occurred; their faces were bright and alert, and they were wearing crisply pressed black fatigues. The majority of them seemed to be Palomellese, although Markel recognized Gerezan, Third Speaker, and Sengrat standing with them. With mounting disbelief Markel saw that two of the Palomellese had drawn phasers and were aiming them at the other side of the bay. He had no time to see more before Nueva Fallona's sharply chiseled features filled the screen.

"Free citizens of the Haven," she began crisply, "you have been betrayed, not once, but over and over again through the years, by those who pretended to care for your welfare above their own. This ship, our only home, is in grave disrepair, and the Haven has no funds for refitting and repair. Yet the Speakers of Council who are supposed to guard your fate have paid no attention to your desperate situation; they care more about acting the part of noble and disinterested statesmen than they do about protecting those who depend on them! Furthermore, though they pretend to have a system of democratic elections, the fact is that the power of Council is controlled by the three Speakers, and they have not changed since the first charter of the Starfarers."

Markel frowned. That was true, now he came to think of it. Andrezhuria, Gerezan, and his father had shifted the burden of being First Speaker from one to another over the years, but he could not remember any other Speakers ever being elected. In fact, nobody ever ran for the office; it was the lesser Council posts that were disputed in the lengthy political debates the older people loved so well. But Nueva didn't understand. Who'd -want to be a Speaker? It was a heavy responsibility, one that had lined Illart's face before his time, one that had broken up Andrezhuria's marriage to Ezkerra when he complained that she cared more about the Starfarers en masse than about her husband.

"As a loyal Starfarer, I can no longer stand aside and see this travesty of a government go on until our tanks are empty of -water and our atmosphere is poisoned by failing recyclers," Nueva went on. An abstract part of Markel's mind was impressed by the way she harped on the issues that would immediately excite any space-faring group, while the rest of him was beginning to panic. Something terrible was going to happen. He knew about Nueva and the rest of the Palomellese now; he had to tell Illart immediately, before whatever this was went any further.

The cabin door would not move under his hand. He tugged at the latch to no avail; it wasn't stuck, it was electronically locked. Probably by a command from Central Systems.

"At the eleventh hour we have found a way to salvage ourselves through the work of a new Starfarer, Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa," Nueva said from the screen. "Proper application of his . research can give us the power to control the weather and communications of any planet we visit. Rushima and many others will pay well for the use of this technology, but the fainthearts who control the Council will not permit it. They would rather see you suffocate in a dying ship than take the risk of using new technology!"

Illart started forward. "No!" he shouted. "That's a lie, Nueva, and you know it! Tell them what Hoa's system will actually do to a planet! Tell them that you don't know the effects of using it, that nobody can predict-"

A Palomellese swung his phaser up into Illart's face. "No interrup' La Fallona!"

Markel held his breath until Illart subsided. For a moment he'd thought he was about to see his father murdered before his eyes.

"We, the loyal Starfarers, have been forced to take over from the Council in this emergency," said Nueva. "Those who are with us stand here. Those who are not with us may now leave the Haven."

Markel exhaled a long sigh of relief. The Palomellese might be criminals, but they weren't homicidal maniacs. They meant to exile the Speakers to Rushima. It was a crazy plan, but it wouldn't-it couldn't-last long. The Starfarers would never stand for this . . . would they? For the first time he felt uneasy about the sight of Gerezan and Sengrat, fully dressed and alert, standing comfortably among all these armed Palomellese.

Andrezhuria spoke into the silence left by Nueva's last words. "I will happily take a lifeboat to any system you name," she announced, "rather than lend my countenance to your extortion schemes. But we'll be back when the Starfarers realize what you're up to!"

Nueva's smile did not reach her eyes. "Back? Oh, no, I don't think so," she said softly. "Whatever gave you the idea we meant to waste precious resources like lifeboats and oxygen tanks on the fools who have already wasted so much of the Haven's substance? If you won't earn the air you breathe, then you can find your own-out there." She gestured with her phaser toward the door to air locks at the end of the cargo bay.

"Now, just a minute, Nueva," Gerezan protested uneasily. "I never meant - "

"No? Then you, too, are a fool," Nueva said. "Perhaps in sentimental vids people leave their enemies alive, to recover and strike at them again. On Palomellawe learned better." She nodded at one of the other armed Palomellese. "Esposito, the prisoners here are those who cannot be rehabilitated. You may escort them to the air locks." She turned back to the screen. "Citizens, you have been confined to quarters for your own security during this changeover. As soon as the prisoners have been disposed of, members of the new Council will come among you to release you from your quarters and take your oaths of loyalty."

Markel stood like an idiot, staring at the screen as he saw the men and women in their sleeping clothes shuffle forward under the phasers of the Palomellese guards. He recognized nearly all the faces in the group: Council members, First-Generation Starfarers from Esperantza, the sort of people who would have agreed with Illart that it was unthinkable to use Hoa's weather control as a weapon against peaceful planets. How much of this had been planned? An extended Council meeting, to make sure that all the dissenting members would

be sleeping on the next shift; easy then to surprise the CaN and Engineering departments, and to round up unsuspecting, sleeping people for. . . .

"NO!" Markel hammered at the door, weeping tears of rage and fury. On the screen, the image of his father said, "Esposito, quit waving that thing around, somebody's going to get hurt. If you're going to run this ship, you'd better learn to think ahead."

Illart sounded so calm that Markel thought for a minute he had secret control of the situation, that in a moment he would snap his fingers and the Palomellese would discover themselves outmanned by a large force of armed Starfarers.

But instead, Illart strolled toward the air lock as casually as if he were going for a walk in the Garden. "Aiora, my love," he said to the slowly opening door, "it has been too long." He looked directly toward the screen for just a moment. "And we leave those behind who will remember and avenge this treachery."

That was his farewell to Markel. Later Markel realized that Illart had not mentioned his name because he did not wish to remind Nueva Fallona that he left a son who would never forgive his execution. At the time he only watched, eyes blinded by tears, as his father passed beyond the inner doors of the air lock and out of his life forever.

Behind Illart, Andrezhuria shook off the Palomellese who had a hand on her arm. "I go with the First Speaker," she said coldly. Her eyes glanced at the group of Palomellese. "Gerezan, your honor goes with us. Will you not accompany it?"

"I did try to get you to see reason, 'Zhuria," Gerezan mumbled.

Andrezhuria lifted her chin and tossed the tumble of blond ringlets back over her shoulders. Without another word she stepped forward through the inner doors of the air lock, hand in hand with her former husband Ezkerra. The other prisoners followed her, one by one, some protesting, others accepting their fate in benumbed silence.

When the inner doors closed behind them. Market went temporarily mad, beating on the unyielding door and twisting at the walls until his hands were raw and bruised. This could not be happening-it was some sort of nightmare!

"No nightmare," said a raw voice he hardly recognized as his own. "You knew - what Nueva Fallona was. You knew, and you did not tell Illart." He had a debt to pay for that failure, a task Illart had laid on him in those last words: to remember and avenge.

And he could accomplish nothing by crying like a baby or wrestling with the doors as if they could hear his desperation. Markel put his grief aside, and with it the

last of his childhood, because he did not have very long to decide -what to do before the new guards came for him. They must know that he -would never swear loyalty to the regime that had killed his father. Even if they were blind enough to believe in any oath he took, wouldn't the words choke him?

There was only one alternative: he must not be there when they came. It was a good thing he knew the secret insides of the Haven so well. In the icy calm that he had imposed on himself, Markel mentally went over at least three separate ways to exit the cabin without using the locked doors, any one of which would leave no trace. But just to confuse the issue, he would hack into the central computer and see what trouble he could make before leaving. No telling when he'd next get a chance at a data console.

Three

Labour, Unified\ Federation Date334.05.12

House Harakamian received an emergency call from the senior members of the secluded and elusive planet of Laboue, where Hafiz Harakamian made his home when he was not scouring the galaxy in search of rarities for his collection and profits for his businesses.

"Surprised by your call? Why, no, my dear Quiabriel," Hafiz said urbanely. "I assume you wish to enlist my help in communicating with the strange ship that has been in orbit about our world for the past six hours."

An irritated crackle came from the speaker, ending on a note of inquiry.

"But of course I am aware of it. House Harakamian's defenses are, as I am sure you are aware, planetwide; and information, my dear Quiabriel, is the first requisite for proper selfdefense."

But Hafiz had not been aware of the reason why Quiabriel was enlisting his aid. When he learned of it, his eyebrows rose in surprise-not so much at the news that beings similar to the horned girl Hafiz had once sheltered were apparent in vids transmitted from the strange ship, as at the discovery that Quiabriel knew all about his unicorn visitor of four years previously. Something was very wrong with the Harakamian security arrangements, to allow Quiabriel access to such information!

But concerns about his private security system vanished when the broadcasts coming from the ship were transmitted forward to the Harakamian house screens.

What it was broadcasting was not a known language but files of the most awful atrocities he'd ever seen committed, inflicted by vicious-looking members of an alien race on what Hafiz instantly identified as members of Acorna's species. Some, and these must be the males writhing within their torture structures, had larger horns, were obviously taller than Acorna, but helpless. Then the awful visions altered to a spatial map, showing the planet Laboue where House Harakamian was sited. Clearly displayed were the bridge of a ship occupied by members of Acorna's species, and then a second view of the galactic area in which this solar system was located as well as a five-ship vanguard of what had to be the vicious torturers aiming straight at this retreat. Then images of the unicorn people, this time standing upright and free, appeared, their arms outspread in what appeared to be a gesture of greeting-or a cry for help.

"So?" asked Misra Affrendi, a trusted family retainer who had recently celebrated his 11 Oth year of life, "what do we do?"

Misra didn't sound desperate, but there was an edge to his voice.

"Is there a channel from our satellite open to the horned ones' ship?"

"Of course, and everyone with any linguistic ability is trying to analyze their language."

Hafiz grimaced. He did have a cube of Acorna opening the Maganos Mining, but he didn't have Rafik, who might or might not remember the few words Acorna had initially used before she had sopped up Basic Universal Interlingua like a sponge. And, as far as Hafiz knew, the escape pod was at Maganos Moon Base, too, and he'd no cube of THAT to display.

Quiabriel had wondered if the vids were some form of threat, but to Hafiz it was obvious that the horned folk felt some warning was required to another sapient race standing in the path of such a viciously predatory race as those videoed. Hafiz shuddered at the thought of Acorna's lovely slender body encased in any of the instruments of torture displayed. And then at the thought of his own in a similar condition.

"What else is being done?" Hafiz huffed. "As the Third Prophet said, 'Before thine own life and thine own honor, redeem and protect the house from whence thou earnest.' First we must protect House Harakamian-then we can analyze this message at length and attempt to establish communication."

"That has already been taken care of. We've activated the Shield, of course," Misra said, his elderly voice croaking with impatience.

"Have we warned all our shipping and affiliates?"



"Those in immediate peril, yes."

"But once the Shield goes up, no one can get in or out."

"Exactly," Misra said with great satisfaction.

"I must contact my heir immediately. ..."

"You have six minutes before the Shield goes up."

For the first time in his life, Hafiz wondered if the Shield, which had cost so much and had been kept so secret, would prove sufficient to the need. As soon as he sent a message to Rafik, he would initiate his own special invasion procedures. They would have been sufficient against any known hazard, but he didn't like the look of these new predators. Especially if the little Horn ship had felt obliged to warn any other sapient species it encountered.

Why could he not remember the few words that Acorna had said to him in her own language?

"Ah!" Now they came floating back to him. "Awi," she had cried in her sleep once. "Awi, Lalli..."

"Misra, I must speak to these Horned Ones!"

"Why? Have you suddenly a method of learning their language unknown to us?"

"For once, Methusalitic relic of a thousand of an era no longer even understood, stop asking questions! PATCH ME THROUGH!"

If the beauty of the four obviously mature specimens of Acorna's species startled Hafiz, they were dumbfounded to hear him use the two words of their language that he knew.

"Aavi," one of them repeated, giving the word a slightly different emphasis that made her sound exactly like Acorna. "Laali?" Then, blast it, she started chattering their gibberish at high speed.

"What is she saying, what is she saying?" demanded Misra.

"I have no idea," said Hafiz, although in fact he was pretty sure she was saying the Horned Ones' equivalent of "Praise to Allah, at last someone who speaks a civilized language!"

That attempt at communication had backfired, but at least he had a vid of Acorna to show, taken secretly two years ago -when she had visited him, and kept by

Hafiz for his private enjoyment. When he displayed the pictures of young Acorna romping on the grass and dancing to her own music on the Singing Stones of Skarness, he saw the amazement of the envoys increase. They fell silent, but their moving eyes and animated gestures indicated that a lively discussion was going on. Why could he not hear it? Oh, well, what difference would it make if he could? He wouldn't have understood what they were saying anyway.

When he also produced the graphic of the inscription on her escape pod, they became so agitated that he wondered if he had turned the information about Acorna over to the wrong sort of Horned Ones.

Hafiz had never been good with charades as a method of communication, but he had the sense to record the movements: the blunt two-jointed hands mimicked a small member of their species, then outspread and uplifted arms and a universally understood expression of query.

In response he nodded, smiled, and gestured to the latest height of Acorna to indicate her maturity.

Then they obviously were trying to extract from him her current location, showing him star maps and pointing urgently at them. They spoke all the time in their own liquid language, slightly nasal, as Acorna's Basic was, but he was totally out of his depth. He'd always left navigation to his highly trained space crew and wished desperately that he had Rafik to hand just then.

A chance look at the timepiece showed him he had little time to fool with gestures and expressions. He compressed their interview into a message cube, slotted it in with the Uhuru's code, and sent it off. No sooner had he done that than a great shadow seemed to float through the window and over his house. The Shield had been put in place.

Lost was any contact with the courier ship, and he could not be certain that the message had made it through that device and on to Rafik.

"Well," Misra's acid voice now violated his ears, "did you find out anything?"

"If I did, that damned Shield, ten thousand djinnis fly away with it and drop it into the hell of molten rock, may have prevented it getting through to where this information will be most valuable. Rafik HAS to have that information."

"They call themselves Linyaari," Misra said with that odiously superior tone he so often adopted. "We know their planet of origin, but it has been totally destroyed by these invaders whom they call the Khieevi. They have reestablished a home world only to be forced to run again from these . . . these things. They thought to warn us, and they have other couriers doing the same task in the hope of finding some group strong enough, or militaristically advanced enough, to overcome the

threat the Khieevi so obviously are. Let me remind you that all communications would now cease even if the Shield were not in place, in case these . . . predators . . . have equipment able to detect even planetary-based signals."

"That," Hafiz said, "could prove as expensive as not having the Shield at all." No communications meant no trade, and how long could Rafik carry all the burdens of House Harakamian's multitudinous business schemes by himself? Not only that, but he would be absolutely unable to complete some agreements without Hafiz's personal authorization, and there were others he had not been told of. ... Well, the boy had already proved his worth as heir to House Harakamian; he wouldn't be a worthy heir if he didn't have, somewhere, a source of information about ALL the House's business plans, as well as a code key that would allow him to forge his uncle's authorization. In that sense at least, one could always trust one's family. . . . But to do exactly what? Rafik couldn't protect Acorna and manage Hafiz's business simultaneously. Hafiz paced his study and could not decide which choice would cause him most distress.

Rafik was somewhat surprised to receive a message from his uncle, who should know that the Uhuru was already orbiting Laboue and that Rafik would be reporting in person shortly. The message had obviously suffered some damage in transit, and the only word that came through unmutilated was "Acorna's ..."

Rafik fired off a request for a repetition of the message while he waited for confirmation of his first message, requesting permission to land.

The com board gave a warning beep; Rafik glanced over to see that his second message had been returned as undeliverable. There was still no response to the first one ... and a new series of beeps alerted him to the possibility that there would be none. Laboues main communications satellite had stopped transmitting. "Check alternates, display visuals, trace," Rafik snapped, and the visual-display screen came up showing a sphere of cloudy gray, to all appearances completely enclosing the green planet where he had just been preparing to land. The test of alternate communications routes returned a null; apparently none of the backup satellites was transmitting or receiving messages either. The red tracer line that showed the futile progress of his communications burst from one possible node to another also showed a strange ship, one whose beacon signal, if any, was unknown to the Uhuru's computer . . . and Rafik would have sworn that his uncle Hafiz had access to every ship-recognition code, registered or unregistered, in known space.

What sort of threat had that little ship posed, to make Hafiz take the unprecedented step of shutting Laboue off from the rest of the universe with the Shield? Should he stay and try to help from here? After a moments agonizing debate, Rafik decided against it. He had every confidence in Uncle Hafiz s ability to take care of himself. Besides, if this confidence should prove to be misplaced for once, Hafiz would surely not be pleased to see his heir run into the same

noose that had captured him. And that garbled message had said something about Acorna... perhaps to warn of some danger threatening her? Clearly his duty was to return to Maganos Moon Base at once, to check up on Acorna, and once there perhaps to enlist Delszaki Li's aid in finding out what disaster had cut off his uncle's communications.

On board the Balakiire, joy and confusion almost overwhelmed the Linyaari envoys at this evidence that one had survived who had long been considered dead to them. They were not, however, so overset that Mehreenya, the communications specialist, failed to copy and trace the single message that emerged before a shield impenetrable even to their sophisticated equipment blanked out transmissions from the planet below.

Among themselves they did not bother to speak aloud; after so many months of travel, the small crew were all perfectly attuned to one another's thought-patterns, so that the rudimentary short-distance telepathic communication of their kind was even less effort than speaking.

(That pod was marked with the names of Feriila and Vaanye.) That was Neeva, Feriila's sister, one of the two senior members of the envoy team. The hope that some member of her family might have survived had overpowered her emotions; her golden eyes were narrowed to vertical slits, and the gilt tendrils other mane quivered in the still air of the ship.

(But we know they destroyed their ship rather than be captured by the Khieevi. How could one of the survival pods have come so far, to be in the possession of these barbarians?) Thariinye, young and beautiful and arrogantly male, prided himself on his unemotional analytical reasoning.

The thought-streams of the whole crew blended, coalescing and separating like partial conversations at a very crowded party.

(We don't know they are barbarians. They may be perfectly civilized people.) The thought-shape that accompanied this concept was of a group of hornless unicorns with flimsy, soft hands and feet. If Khaari had been speaking, the words that went with this thought-shape would have been "people like us." (Then why won't they treat with us? Anyway, they look like carnivores to me. Did you see those pointy side teeth?)

(We still don't know all the properties of the device Vaanye used to destroy the ship; his research notes went with him. But we can postulate it was developed as an offshoot of his research into space topology and transportation.)

(Who cares about the research! I want to find Feriila's child!)

(Neeva, calm yourself. That they have a vid does not prove that they have the child, only that there has been some previous contact with our kind. The vid was of a young girl; its been three ghaanyi since the explosion; if Feriila's youngling had lived, she would be fully grown by now.)

(My point about the research was, Vaanye said the new weapon worked by folding space to make two distant points contiguous, but there were still a few minor problems to be solved.)

(So?)

(So maybe what he meant by "a few minor problems" was that objects close to the fold might be unpredictably transported to an unknown distant point. Physicists think like that, you know. And when he used his experimental weapon to blow up his ship and the Khieevi attackers, maybe as a side effect, the youngling's escape pod was transported into this sector.)

(A lot of "maybes" there.)

(Okay, you explain how they got hold of a pod from a ship that was supposed to have been destroyed down to the molecular level three ghaanyi ago.)

(I'm sure she survived. I'm sure of it. The barbarian was holding his hand up to show us how much she'd grown. And that word he kept saying-"Acorna"-that must be what they called her.)

("Acorna"? That word was in the transmission that was sent just before the Shield closed down. It was the only signal I picked up clearly. But it was enough to send that neighboring ship out of orbit.)

(Can we follow it?)

(Of course we can, if Melireenya will give me details of the ship's signal. I didn't get this for nothing.) Khaari tapped the crescent-shaped silver medal that proclaimed her a senior tutor in the Navigators' Guild.

(Might as well do so, then. It certainly doesn't look as if we're going to get any more out of this lot of barbarians. Why did you have to scare them with those vids of Khieevi tortures, Melireenya?)

(Me? I like that! It was your idea to start with vids instead of first collecting enough samples of the language to run the LAANYE, Thariinye!)

(Well, they're scared now, no matter whose idea it was,) Neeva interposed pacifically. (We'd better cloak the ship; if this one notices us following, he might think we have hostile intentions toward him.)

(Why don't we just capture him for our language sample?)

(Thariinye. I. Want. To. See. Where. He. Goes. All right?)

Thariinye's handsome young face flushed dark, and his silvery pupils narrowed to slits at Neeva's scolding tone, but he realized the justice in it. His attempt at first contact with the barbarians had failed miserably. In the democratic fashion of the Linyaari, it was now Neeva's turn to take the lead, and he was obliged to support whatever decisions she made in her own attempt to initiate contact—even if those decisions did seem to him, as now, to be excessively guided by personal concerns.

To be even more than fair, Thariinye reminded himself that a possible missing one of the Linyaari should be of the greatest importance to them all. It was just coincidence that this particular one, if she lived, might turn out to be Neeva's sister-child.

All the same, he felt embarrassed both at his failure and at this public reprimand, and was eager to distinguish himself before the older envoys; a desire which was to cause far more trouble than this brief squabble on board the ship.

Cloaked and shielded, the Balakiire followed Rafik's Uhara at a discreet distance, a momentary darkness in space that hovered always in the other ship's blind spot. For fear of alerting their quarry, the Linyaari shut down transmissions with their home base, difficult in any case at this great distance from the civilized world; but within the ship, they discussed their next step endlessly until everybody's thought-patterns converged by minute increments onto the same plan. They had been mistaken to try and skip the language-acquisition phase of initiating contact with a new people; this would, therefore, have to be their first priority after they discovered the other ship's destination.

For many generations the Linyaari had relied more and more upon their late-evolving telepathic abilities and less and less upon spoken language, except as a way of communicating with younglings whose brains were not yet mature enough for thought-speech. Only when they first came into contact with other races did they discover the problem presented by their total inability to make thought-contact with Others who showed signs of being as "linaryii," in their own way, as the Linyaari themselves. With highly advanced technology but no experience in learning second languages, they had taken the obvious step of devising a learning device that, given a sample of an alien language, could be used in a few overnight sleep-training sessions to connect the forms of that language with the thought-forms of basic Linyaari communication. The device did have the one minor drawback—that it was necessary to establish some rudimentary dialogue with one of the aliens first, as a basis for further learning; and they had learned through experience that it could be extremely difficult to get cooperation before

proper communication was established. The nesters of Khorma V had been sedentary creatures, the adults bonded to their nests by a complex set of chemical interactions. That first translation task had been easy enough; the Linyaari envoys needed only to camp beside a large nest and wait until the inhabitants grew curious enough to begin interaction. But the scurrying little dharmakoi of Galleni had been shy, easily frightened little creatures with a unique ability to disappear into shadows. The Linyaari had slowly established trust over a long period of cautious contacts, until the dharmakoi learned that not all Others were predators and came trustingly to converse with the large horned ones ... a lesson the Linyaari now regretted teaching them, since the dharmakoi had greeted the first Khieevi with the same trust and hence were now extinct.

Memories of the time it had taken to gain the trust of the dharmakoi had inspired Thariinye's suggestion that they initiate contact with vids from Khieevi torture ships, showing these barbarians what a mutual enemy they and the Linyaari had. At the time it had seemed like an excellent idea. Now they had returned to their basic contact methods, with a slight difference that was argued out while they followed the other ship.

(We don't have time to spend months taming a barbarian. Besides, they are many, and we are only four-in this sector. What if they decide -we're dangerous and try to kill us? We have to establish communications right away,) Tharunye argued.

(I'm not even going to mention where I've heard that idea before, or what just happened when we tried it.) Neeva's thought-images were accompanied by an emotion, or rather, by the haughty repression of all emotion; they seemed to float in a cold empty space.

(It wasn't a total failure,) Melireenya pointed out. (We did learn that your sister-child may be alive and in this sector, Neeva.)

(I'm just saying that next time I'd like to have a little more meaningful dialogue and a little less hand waving, all right? It's clear we can't do anything until we have their language.)

(I didn't say we don't need the language, I said we don't have time to sit outside their burrows and win their trust little by little, like the Second Envoys did with the dharmakoi.)

(So what do you suggest, Thariinye-always-in-a-hurry?)

(Isn't it obvious? We'll have to catch one. The one -we're following is handy.)

(That's unethical! We can't deprive a sapient being of liberty without its understanding and consent!)

(So we'll calm it down until it consents.)

(Wait a minute, Neeva. Thariinye has a valid point. It could take a long time to win these barbarians' trust. . . and they seem to have formidable weapons systems. If they are more khievii than linyarii [more like vermin than like us, the People] then they might -well exterminate us before we can even begin negotiations.)

(If they are so khievii that they kill strangers who come to them peacefully, there's no point in negotiating. Those are not the kind of allies we need.) (Agreed, Neeva, but if you don't terribly mind, I would prefer not to die finding this out!) Khaari thought with a wry twist other mind that set all four Linyaari laughing in agreement.

(Perhaps if we could win the barbarian s consent after we have captured and tamed it. . . ?) Melireenya suggested.

(Bending our laws instead of breaking them, Melireenya?)

(Any good system must be flexible,) Melireenya stood up for herself.

(Hmm. Well. . . )

(We might want to use the barbarian as an envoy, too, rather than speaking with them directly. Just at first, while we're finding out what happened to your sister-child. It might be better if they think it's one of their own people inquiring, then they won't get scared and hide her.)

(You're assuming a lot of cooperation from this captive barbarian whom we don't even have yet.)

(If this people are at all linyarii, then surely every one of them will be happy to reunite a youngling with her family.)

(And if they aren't?)

(Then it's best we find that out first-even if it does mean bending the Linyaari code of ethics slightly. After all, our forebears who devised the code governing first contacts never envisioned encountering something like the Khieevi.)

(I should hope not! Who could imagine anything like that?)

(But now that -we know such beings exist, it is only rational to amend our code accordingly. Ethical interspecies contact should not require that -we put ourselves into avoidable danger.)



(Ah, but which is more important-our danger, or the fear and anguish we shall inflict on this hypothetical captive barbarian who will have no idea what is going on?)

(We can dampen the fear and anguish.)

(Even if it were ethical to mess with its^ mind, we don't know the effects we might have on its memory. This one may know something about our little lost one; we daren't use it for a teaching tool.)

Eventually a compromise was reached. They would not attempt long-distance contact at first, but neither would they kidnap any members of this species. Nor would they approach whatever sentient beings were on the ship they were following, for fear that the necessary clouding of their minds would also cloud their memories of the desired information. Rather, they would ascertain the ships destination, then intercept and board some other ship headed for the same destination, relying on signs and whatever telepathic abilities this species might have to make it clear that they came in peace and meant to harm no one. If one of the barbarians on the ship would come with them willingly, they would use it for a language sample and maybe later employ its services as an envoy. If not, they would let the ship go on its way and try to think of some other stratagem. In either case, since they would be physically present on the vessel, they would have the power to heal any fear experienced by the barbarians during this brief captivity, as well as to blur their memories of the experience so that they would be hesitant to speak of it to others.

(What if we find we cannot heal this species?) Neeva fretted. (And even if we can, isn't it just as unethical to fool with their memories as it is to take one of them captive?)

(Bend, not break, Neeva,) Khaari said firmly.

The shuttle for Maganos was delayed on the launching pad, giving Karina ample time to suffer from the tasteless decor of deep red and orange that clashed horribly with her personal colors of lavender and creamy white. And the shuttle was fully booked, every seat filled, and in some cases overfilled; the old woman next to her filled up her own space and overflowed into Kanna's. And somebody quite nearby had been eating Thai food: the whiff of garlic and cilantro quite overpowered the usual shuttle smell of carpet cleaner and recycled air. Karina whiled away the long wait for takeoff by explaining to the old woman next to her, who was going up to try to identify a long-lost great-nephew or something of the sort, how extremely trying she found experiences like this, with the crowd of humanity pressing so close against her.

"I know just what you mean, dearie," the old bat said comfortably. She shifted position and propped her legs up on Karma's cariyall. "They don't make these shuttle seats near big enough for full-figured women like us, do they?"

Karma glanced at the old broad's shapeless bulk, bulging out of a shiny stretch dress two sizes too small and thirty years too young for her, then smoothed a reassuring hand down the flowing curves of lavender silk that she herself wore. Surely there could be no comparison . . . could there?

"Oh, it's not physical crowding that troubles me," she said with a little laugh that someone, a long time ago, had mistakenly likened to the gay tinkle of water falling onto smooth stones. Karina had been tinkling gaily ever since. "It is the presence of so many souls, each with its own weight of misery and secret fears and bodily pains. I am a Sensitive, you see: I can feel these things." She pressed a hand to her heart.

"Me too," her seatmate agreed amiably. "I feel it most particular after I eat fried foods. Looks like that's where it's getting you now. A burning pain, like, right under the breastbone?"

"Not in the slightest," Karina snapped. "Besides, I never eat animal fats or take alcohol."

"Can't be too careful when you get to our age, can you?" The old woman chuckled comfortably and reached into a capacious silver-mounted traveling bag. It looked as if she were bringing out her portable photo album . . . and it was huge.

Karina decided it would be hopeless to try and explain to the old bat that the pain she referred to was one of empathy, sharing the sorrows of humanity and knowing that her own poor talents would never suffice to heal the griefs of all those she encountered. In sheer self-preservation she was obliged to limit her healing work to those with whom she felt a certain spiritual oneness. At first she'd thought her seatmate might turn out to be one of those—the gaudy display of rainbow-flashing rings and bracelets on her fat white wrists and fingers suggested someone who could pay adequately for healing whatever pained her. Now Karina began to think it would be wiser to pass the rest of the flight in contemplative silence.

She announced that it was time for her personal meditation, leaned back, and closed her eyes, trying to ignore both the plump thigh pressing against hers and her seatmate's agreement that a little nap after lunch was a good thing at their age. Irritation would interfere with the alpha waves, and she wanted to arrive on Maganos projecting a serene calmness that would reassure this Acorna. Poor child, she had had no guidance in how to handle her psychic powers; no wonder she had fled to a remote lunar base! Indeed, a time of withdrawal from the world

might have been most healing for her. But now it was time for her to come back to the world; Acorna herself must have sensed it, which was why she had acknowledged Karina's fifty-seventh message. Now she would take the unicorn girl under her wing, teach her how to use her powers for the good of all without exhausting herself and, above all, without simply giving it away as she'd done during her weeks on Kezdet two years ago. The very thought made Karina feel slightly ill. Never mind; once she and Acorna were partners the girl would learn better.

Karina fingered her pendant of opalescent moonstone set in silver and visualized a pink light of love all around herself, reaching out to envelop Acorna in its roseate glow. She felt an answering pulse, alien and surprisingly strong, and definitely welcoming. Wonderful! The shuttle couldn't be more than halfway to Maganos, and already she could feel Acorna's presence ... it had to be the unicorn girl, didn't it? Karina willed herself to sink deeper into trance. It was awfully hard to concentrate with that silly speaker squawking at them about minor course corrections and telling her not to panic. Of course she wasn't going to panic . . . strange! The seat felt as if it were dropping away from her. She must be achieving a really good trance, almost levitational. And there was definitely a sense of an alien presence, very close now and quite different from the babbling, grumbling minds all around her.

A firm tap on her shoulder and a warm, mint-flavored gust of breath broke the trance.

"Have one of these, dearie," her seatmate said, holding out a mint that had suffered from being clutched too long in a hot, sweaty palm. "Wonderful for the motion sickness, they say."

Before Karina could explain that she never permitted her mind to experience such illusions as motion sickness, the shuttle gave a sickening swoop and a sideways lurch that took her breath away, then steadied. Someone across the aisle made retching sounds. Karina had to close her eyes and remind herself firmly that she -was thinking of Higher Things and that motion sickness was a false messenger. Someone farther up the cabin gave a faint shriek that -was echoed from various seats around the body of the shuttle. Karina concentrated fiercely on her mental image of Acorna, tall and silver-maned and welcoming her partnerto-be, before she allowed herself to open her eyes and see what the screaming was about.

Which was -why she, alone of all the shuttle passengers, was neither frightened nor amazed to see a tall, silver-maned being with a golden horn stepping lightly through a door that should have been closed and double-locked until the shuttle entered the artificial atmosphere of Maganos. Outside the open door could be seen a stable, sourceless, golden glow where there should have been empty space, blackness, and immediate death for all the shuttle passengers.

"Don't scream, you idiot, it's only Lady Lukia!" one of the passengers admonished another, using one of the names by which Acorna had been known during her brief stay on Kezdet.

"She's comin' to take me, and I don't want to be took!" cried the girl who'd first screamed, burying her head in her trembling arms.

The unicorn-person said something in a liquid, slightly nasal language, and touched the girl's head. She looked up, trembling, and met those golden eyes. Immediately her body relaxed, and she sat back in her seat, limp and smiling slightly.

Whatever had been done to the girl appeared to be contagious, for within seconds, the people sitting on either side of her were similarly relaxed and vacant-eyed.

The old lady beside Karina was clutching the arms of her seat, white-knuckled, and saying prayers under her breath. Karina realized that the other shuttle passengers had no idea what was really going on.

"Excuse me," she said tightly, pushing herself out of the seat and starting for the aisle. "Excuse me, please, thank you, if you could move your knees a little, sir, thank you. Sorry about that, there's nothing to worry about, it's me they've come for. ..."

Finally, disheveled and breathless, she reached the aisle amid disgruntled murmurs about people who didn't have the consideration to go before they got seated and people who ought to pay for two shuttle seats if they were going to take up all that space.

foiots, Karina thought. We've been lifted into Another Dimension a.n2 Acorna has come personally for me, an<) all they can think of if their paltry human bodies. Throwing up, screaming, anD kvetching about having their toes stepped on - what must she think of us? It's up to me to show that some of us are Above All That.

Smiling resolutely, and ignoring the tiny part of her that squeaked that it, personally, was worried about its paltry human body and didn't want to go away with aliens no matter how benevolent, Karina walked down the aisle and held out one hand gracefully to the unicorn-person.

"It's all right," she said. "I know you've come for me. Don't worry about these others; they're not used to psychic manifestations on this plane of being."

Acorna-for surely it must be she: there was no other like her-tilted a long, shapely face and said something like, "Llirivhanyithalli? "

"Charmed, I'm sure," Karina replied. Why hadn't anyone mentioned that Acorna didn't speak Basic Interlingua? Oh, well, they could communicate on a psychic level. She beamed and projected, as strongly as she could, the image of herself and Acorna together and surrounded by the rosy pink light of perfect love and accord. When Acorna still looked puzzled, she put one hand to her moonstone pendant and asked it to lend her its energies for the projection.

Acorna turned away from her!

(See, Neeva? This one wants to come with us! Can't you sense it?)

(It feels confused to me. If it can thought-talk at all, it's doing so very weakly. Are you sure about what it wants?)

(Thariinye, I'm not so sure either,) put in Melireenya. (From your thought-images, it seems to be baring its teeth. In carnivores, isn't that usually a threat?)

(Not in these carnivores.) Thariinye had watched randomly captured vids from intercepted satellite transmissions while they had followed the other ship across space to the lunar base where it had landed. (They bare their teeth to indicate sociability and greeting.)

(Oh, all right, if you say so. Anyway, I suppose we can reassure it later.)

Karina let out a sigh of relief as Acorna turned those large golden eyes back upon her and extended a ... hand? Whatever- the digits were thick and clumsy compared to human fingers, but soft like a hand. Karina grasped the offered hand and felt a twinge of unease. Was she picking up some trouble from Acorna's mind? Or was it the fact that Acorna's eyes were golden, not silver as in the stories? Or was it the fact that she seemed taller and more muscular than Karina had pictured her? Almost masculine in her aura. Perhaps it was the effect of the loose navy blue tunic she wore; it was so severe-looking, not the way you'd expect a young innocent girl to dress-unicorn or no. Well, perhaps Karina had been Sent to teach Acorna how to dress . . . among other things.

"Just a minute," she said firmly when Acorna beckoned her toward the open door. "I need to get my bag."

That occasioned another interlude of panting, wriggling, and apologizing as Karina fished her carryall out from among other passengers' feet. She emerged from the struggle flushed and anxious that Acorna would have become impatient, so she did not demur when Acorna gestured that she was to go first up the aisle and through the door. The golden glow outside the door blinded her, and she

thought about Higher Powers and stepped into it with complete -well, nearly complete - Love and Trust anyway.

Only when the other ship appeared in the glowing light, when she saw even more unicorn-people excitedly awaiting her appearance, did Karina realize that she was just as badly off as the other passengers on the shuttle.

She didn't have a clue what was really going on.

four

Rudhima, Unified Federation Date 334.05.17

While the Starfarer vessel was orbiting Rushima, it was not at the moment in a position to see the arrival of the Aca^ecki. Nor did Calum bother to check on any orbiting spacecraft since the Galacticapedia resume on Rushima indicated the planet was in the early stages of its agricultural development and had only a message beacon. As he and Acorna saw no need to leave a message that would undoubtedly not be retrieved until whenever the colony remembered to look for messages, they thought they would simply identify a decent-sized settlement and land there. Rushima, being new with only one generation born on-planet, would not be startled or surprised by a single ship arriving. They could pay for anything they needed by transferring credits from the Li Alining Company to whatever credit institution the Rushimese nominated.

But as the Aca^ecki made its approach, Acorna frowned. "This is the sickest-looking agricultural planet I have ever seen. Whatever can they be growing? It looks all brown, and yet this is the summer for this hemisphere. Something should look green. Even the forests look sick."

"You're right. Maybe we should try the northern hemisphere. This planet, it says right here"-Calum pointed to the entry from Galactic which was displayed on another screen- "has little axial tilt, so it stays more or less the same temperate climate year-round. Hmm."

As they got closer, into the atmosphere, they spotted larger lake areas than were apparent in the official entry orbital scans. "What could have happened?" Acorna said. "Floods?" "Sure looks like 'em," Calum had to agree. "But planetwide?"

That just doesn't figure into"-he tapped out some directions to the screen showing the Galactic - "the sort of weather they're supposed to have."

Then they overflew a vast wasteland with withered trees which had given up the struggle to survive without the rain they required. "If they don't do something quickly, erosion will ruin this land forever," Acorna said, for she had studied ecology along with many other subjects during her years aboard the mining ship.

They continued on, over a low range of mountains, covered with sun-seared vegetation.

"Noah, you been at it again?" Calum said facetiously, to cover his shock at the devastation: one area of land drowning next to one that had been sun-baked to extinction.

"There's a sizable settlement over there, to the right, Calum. And what looks like an airfield."

As they closed the distance, Calum snorted. "A very wet airfield, but safe enough for us to land on. The settlement s not far away.

"Not far for aquatic animals," he amended later, when they opened the outer hatch and surveyed the lake which was the field: a rather muddy lake since their landing had stirred up the drowned soil.

"Phew!" Calum said, turning his head away from the smell that now rose to their nostrils. Acorna s nose twitched, but her main concern was food, not water.

"What's happened?" she asked. "Think the soaking's reached the sewage-disposal units?"

He pinched his nostrils. "I'll just get me a set of plugs." He paused as he passed Acorna: there were no plugs for her wider nostrils. But then she wasn't as particular about smells, bad or good, as he was. She seemed to like them all-the more intense, the better.

"There's no one around, either," Acorna said, shielding her eyes to peer around and adjusting to the odor. "I don't understand this."

Her digestive juices gurgled in complaint. She hadn't seen a need to ration what remained edible on board and had really been looking forward to a decent graze on Rushima. As far as her far-seeing eyes could perceive, there wasn't that much to tempt her. But she needed to eat something.

"Trees, over there, Acorna," Calum said, pointing beyond and behind the ship toward a distant hillock. "Look! You go see if there's anything edible there. I'll"-he looked down at the water surrounding them-"wade over to the buildings and see what I can see. Maybe even ground transport . . . delete that:

what we'd require is aquatic transport." He looked at the landing ramp. "Doesn't look all that deep." The ramp's edge was only centimeters into the flood.

Blithely he stepped off, into water up to his ankles. The next step had him in water up to his knees. And he grinned sheepishly back at Acorna.

"Must've been a rut or something," he said.

"Well, I can at least help us see where we're going," she said, and, kneeling on the ramp, bent over so that her horn touched the water. A few swirling motions and the silty, smelly floodplain cleared magically. She dropped her nose into the clear water and drank. "Hmm, rather nice without the effluvium. There were fertilizers dissolved in the water, too."

"Really? They must be in bad shape here. One-half the planet burned to a crisp and the rest of the real estate underwater. Something's peculiar. That's unnatural."

Acorna stepped off the ramp. "It feels cool around my hooves." She grinned with childlike pleasure. She rarely used footwear on the ship. "I shan't be long. Now that I can see -where I'm going, it's all about fetlock height across to the hill."

With that, she started off, splashing through the water at a dead run, occasionally leaping a few strides, her delighted laughter trickling back to him. Now that he could see through the water, Calum stepped over the minor ruts that had nearly sunk him before Acorna purified things. The grooves in the dirt had probably been made by vehicle wheels on the soft ground of the landing area. Odd that they wouldn't have paved this area over with something solid. Still, this was a new colony, and most likely it didn't have time or money for refinements.

Time or money for much at all, he decided when he saw the condition of the airfield buildings. They had an uninhabited and disused look to them, with dead vines clinging to the walls. The plants were little more than mushy stalks that hadn't yet fallen to join the rest of the plant in the mud. The building was on slightly higher ground, so the water had not yet quite reached it ... although it looked to have been flooded quite recently, perhaps during whatever disaster dumped all this water on what was supposed to have been growing here. A badly warped and distorted sign over the door, half-covered with mold, read,

LOADING CENTER WEST-AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

When he touched the door panel, it was slimy. Wiping his hand, he pressed harder for admittance, and, creaking badly, the door gradually opened. Obviously no one had been here for yonks. It must have been in use once, for there were benches, tables, openings in the sidewall which had led to a ticket counter, and to a weighing office. The size of the platform suggested heavy cargoes had been shifted through here.

Only one door was locked, and that gave -with just a little push, as the damp-soaked locking apparatus fell from the softened wood. Calum had hit pay dirt-



he'd found the main office, to judge by all the files. Someone had spent time and energy to pile the plastic cabinets on footings to keep them above water level.

The room had several communication devices, good ones, but Calum had to wonder if they were still serviceable under all the mold. He brushed as much gunk as he could away and depressed the com toggle. It clicked uselessly several times before he decided that there was nothing powering it.

Frowning, he went back outside to see solar panels on the roof. Not much would rot or otherwise damage the materials from which such panels were usually manufactured, but they did have to have at least four hours of sun to operate. Clouds were already gathering to the west. Rather fast, he thought, remembering they'd landed in clear skies and hadn't even seen a weather front moving in on their approach from the west. Odd that! And there wasn't so much as a breeze to ruffle the flooded field.

He caught sight of Acorna in her grazing posture and was delighted that she, at least, had had some luck. He hoped he'd have his share as well. There had to be something wrong for the solar panels to fail. Possibly the cable connecting the panels to the reservoir had perished. Then he spotted the ladder attached to the gable end of the roof, which would give him access to the panels. He'd just check. Sure enough, the cable connections had fallen away from the rain-soft wood, and the cable itself lay half in a puddle, the insulation rotting away from it. Well, he had plenty of cable that size back at the ship, so he climbed down and splashed to the AcaSecki, got a belt of the tools he'd need, and waded back to the building.

It didn't take him long to splice the cable and, since he rather thought there'd been some sunlight, maybe he could just rouse someone on this planet on the com unit. He headed into the rundown building. Power he had, and he sent a brief message, asking to be met by someone in authority at the field so he could transact business in acquiring new seeds for a hydroponics tank system. Then he trudged back to the AccSecki to get himself a bit of lunch and await the arrival of anyone who'd heard the call.

That was why he didn't see Acorna waving frantically in his direction, or hear her distant voice trying to warn him of the flotilla of assorted water vessels heading in his direction, bristling with all sorts of makeshift weapons. The first he knew of danger was an unfriendly challenge from the leading boat:

Hold it right there, y'damned pirate!"

Whoops, Calum thought, suspecting that Kezdet's new improved interstellar reputation might not have spread as far as Rushima. For the first time he felt fervently grateful for the hasty departure that had precluded his suggesting that Mercy might accompany them on the journey-ostensibly to provide Acorna with

feminine company, that would have been his excuse. His sweet, gentle Mercy had already been exposed to too many dangers in her time -as a spy for the Child Liberation League within the offices of the corrupt Kezdet police. She didn't need to deal with floods, famine, riots, and whatever else was now coming their way, clearly spoiling for a fight.

He girded himself quickly with an arms belt, snapped on the field that would keep them outside and him safely within the ship, and just made it to the hatch before the first of the paddled boats arrived with its cargo of many men and women. Most of them were carrying sharp-edged or heavy tools; all of them looked distinctly unfriendly. What had ticked them off so quickly? Were they that serious about that AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY, sign on the derelict loading shed?

"Hold it there yourselves," he called, raising both arms to show that he was not holding a weapon. Those at his belt could be clearly seen, and he wanted to keep folks far enough away from the ramp so that he could grab a stunner if he needed to.

"I'm Calum Baird ottheAcaSecki. We've had a 'ponies failure and need to buy plants and seeds from you."

"Plants and seeds, he wants," a bearded man cried, laughing almost hysterically. That was the general mood of those who poled or paddled their craft to surround the AcaDecki. They kept repeating his words with variations of derision and angry frustration.

"This is Rushima, isn't it?" Calum asked, perplexed. "What you bastards have left of Rushima, you mean," the spokesman said, and the muttered growls of his companions did nothing to reassure him as to the general hostile mood.

"We're from Maganos Moon Base at Kezdet on our way to Coma Berenices on a private mission," Calum went on, making his voice sound as reasonable as he could even though he was scared stiff. Why hadn't he listened to Pal about defense systems? Not that anything a spaceship carried would have been useful in his present circumstances.

"Pull the other one, it's got bells on," growled the spokesman.

"Hey, now, he could be telling the truth," a tenor voice suggested. A young man in a raft with ten-centimeter sides glided to the side of the Aca()eckt, and read out their current alpha-numeric identification code. "That's not a Starfarer ID. Could be from Kezdet."

"So could half the pirates in the galaxy," said the leader, who evidently was all too aware of Kezdet's lax registration laws, which attracted all sorts of illicit business, "and if those Starfarers are as far-flung as they keep telling us they are, could be one of theirs anyhow. But it's shortly going to be ours. ..." There was movement as some of the bigger men slipped into the water and started for the ramp.

"Hey, the water out here's clear," a woman said, astonishment and delight in her voice. She scooped up a handful, tasted it cautiously, and let out a whoop. "How'd you do this, mister?"

Immediately others were sampling the water. And then almost everyone, at the risk of tipping over their basically fragile craft, buried their faces to drink so thirstily that the sight transfixed Calum.

Water, water, everywhere nor any Drop to Drink-the phrase popped in from some distant corner of his brain.

"I did it." Acorna stepped gracefully around the after section of the ship. She also held her hands up, not that she could have hidden anything in the short, skintight tunic she was wearing.

"Purifying water is one of our skills."

Calum closed his eyes in what could have been prayerful exhortation. Acorna had learned a great deal about humans during her experiences 'with Kisia Manjari and Didi Badini's attempts to kill her, but she was still far too trusting. These people might have softened a little during their brief talk, but they had started out as a mob out for vengeance. And, if purifying water just happened to be a must for this section of a waterlogged planet, Acorna might find herself an unwilling resident of Rushima.

At least she had said "our," instead of "my" skills, so they might not be aware that she had the power to cleanse the water all by herself.

He eased himself slightly to the right side, where the controls were. If she could just get close enough to dive through the hatch, he could have the field off and on before anyone else could capture her. He gave her the slightest signal -with the fingers of one hand, trying to convey the necessity of boarding the ship as quickly as possible. Even the few who were out of their boats wouldn't be able to move as quickly through the water as Acorna could.

"Can you tell us what has happened to your planet? For something most disastrous has," she said in her sweet and calming voice. Kven Calum began to feel more serene, less anxious. He blinked. With water still dribbling down the

corners of his mouth, the spokesman regarded her with considerably less animosity than he had accorded Calum.

"Them Starfarers"-he ^erked a finger heavenward- "they're running a bloody bandulu bidness." "Huh?"

"Protection racket," the young man who'd read iA\le AcaSecki's registration translated. "They offered to give us weather-prediction services for a fee, and when we said we didn't need 'em as our climate is so even- "

"That baggy on the com - "

"Woman," the younger man interpreted. "Give a nasty snigger, she did, and said we might be getting some climate changes. We've had nothing but rain since then . . . drowned all our winter crops before we could harvest anything, and there's no point in trying to raise anything in this." He pointed to the floodland. "And if we tried rice, they'd fry us."

"WHO?" Calum and Acorna said with such incredulity and outrage that their chorus provided more evidence of their innocence than any eloquence.

"Starfarers," was the universal reply. "They've been making a mess of the weather."

"Starfarers? I thought they -were just a political protest group," Calum said.

"They've been 'making it rain'?" Acorna was still dumbfounded and glanced at Calum, but she was also surreptitiously moving nearer the ramp.

"Can you manipulate weather like that?" she asked Calum with such incredulity that it provoked sour laughter from several sources.

"Not with any accuracy," Calum said, "and you have to work off existing weather conditions."

The spokesman gave a hollow laugh. "Well, then, they got 'em some kin' obeah beyond any you know. They got half our fields soaked and t'other half dried up like a desert, and it ain't gonna get better till we pays up."

"That's extortion," Acorna said indignantly. She had learned a good deal about extortion, blackmail, and such terrorizing activities on Kezdet, but those had been industrial or economic, not ecological. There was humorless laughter from the crowd, but Calum was relieved that the belligerence apparent at their arrival seemed to have eased.

"And how'd you fix the com unit? " the spokesman said.

"A new length of cable was all it needed, and the sun we had this morning."

"First sun we've seen in yonks." Then the man gestured to the flooded land. "Not that it'll do much good. We're promised"-and his expression was sour-. . . another six inches of rain if we fail to accept their 'protection.'"

"You say this has been going on since the Starfarers arrived?" Calum asked. "By the way, I'm Calum Baird, Li Moon Alining Enterprises, and this lovely lady is Acorna DelszakiHarakamian."

"Know those names," the younger man said. "You're connected with the House Harakamian?" he asked Acorna, and didn't seem to realize that she had edged closer to the side of the ship, nearer the ramp.

"Mr. Delszaki Li and the House Harakamian are my guardians," she said proudly. "If you know them, then you realize that we have nothing whatever to do with . . . this!"

"I'm Joshua Flouse, mayor of this." He gestured contemptuously at the lake. "Is that purifier device of yours on the market? "

"Why, yes, it is," Acorna said with a bright smile, taking one step closer to the ramp. "I'll just get you one, shall I?"

Calum's left hand depressed the field-generator switch, and he gave her a nod. With a nimble and unexpected leap, she was on the ramp and moving inside while Calum reinstated the protective field just in time to slow the startled Flouse, who had lunged forward after Acorna only to find his arms slowed as if swimming through cold molasses.

"That is," Calum said crisply, feeling more able to take a firm line now that Acorna was safe, "we'll trade our water-purification services for seeds-legumes and broad-leafed greens for choice. Oh, and zinc and copper sulfates to replace the trace elements our system accidentally dumped. We'd only need small quantities."

Flouse's expression showed his disappointment at Acorna's escape. But she was smiling at him so charmingly that he shook his head, abashed, and shrugged.

"Whaddawe got left?" he asked, turning to those in the boats around him.

"Just about everything we've been able to keep dry enough to plant if we ever get the chance," a woman said. "But right now I'd settle for clean water. Josh."

"We'll also undertake to inform the authorities of these Starfarers who are blackmailing you," Calum said. "Unauthorized interference with a developing planet is a serious offense."

"Tell them!" half a dozen voices chorused as even more fingers pointed skyward.

Joshua pointed to the group in one of the motorized boats. "Jason?" he called, and the man at the tiller answered with a loud "Yo!"

"You got the security code. Get us some chicka-chicka peas and greens seeds. And bring a few seedling chard and rhubarbs. And a canister of Solution B." He turned back to Calum and Acoma, showing his eagerness to complete the deal. "Anything else?"

"You wouldn't happen to have alfalfa seeds, would you?" Acoma asked wistfully.

"A sack of alfalfa it is, ma'am. Now, lemme see this purifier of yours"

"I'll just get one," she said, and before Calum could ask her what the hell she had in mind, she was down the companionway, moving in the direction of the storage compartment.

When Calum turned back to the flotilla, he saw that some children were splashing about in clear water up to their knees, laughing as they whooshed water at each other.

"It's been lack of clean water that's been the worst part to bear," Flouse said, shaking his head. "Boiled water isn't the same, and we couldn't even bathe or wash clothes without the smell staying in. Flooded out our sewage system by the third week, and we hadn't a chance of stopping it. Some folks"-Flouse jerked his head in a northerly direction-"have tried sending tankers just to get our water to keep crops going, but the convoys keep getting blown up by lightning. Midday, at that, and not a blink of warning. Just zap!" - he brought both hands together in a resounding slap that momentarily stopped the kids playing - "whole damned convoy's crisped."

"How do they expect you to pay them if they've ruined your economy? "

"They'll lift the weather controls if we agree to supply them with all their food and the other agricultural stuff we were producing to pay off our colonial debts."

Calum nodded, understanding the basic crunch of producing sufficient to feed themselves with an excess to export to acquit the indebtedness of the initial expense of colonial expansion.

"Only they're going to send . . . administrators to see that each town and county supplies the quotas they're setting."

From the dolorous expression on the faces of Flouse and the others, Calum quickly saw that the Rushimese would be left with barely enough to feed their own families. "Any idea where they came from?" "Dunno. They're mighty short on explanations." They both could hear metallic whangs and bangs echoing down the companionway, and Calum had to pretend he knew exactly what Acorna was doing . . . when he was dying of suspense and anxiety.

But while she was contrapting whatever she was making, he found out all he could extract from Flouse and the others. The return of the launch coincided with Acorna's reappearance at the hatch, carrying a length of ordinary three-centimeter pipe, with valves on each end which were obviously meant to be attached to an intake point of the main town water supply. "Now, this purifier has interstellar patents from here to the last century," Acorna said, pointing to the center piece. "I wouldn't try to investigate, as the purifier is also delicate-useless once it has been unsealed. But I can guarantee that any water running through the purifier will come out one hundred percent pure."

The launch slowed beside the ramp and willing hands transferred the seeds, seedlings, and nutrient canister to Calum just as Acorna placed the "purifier" in Flouse's eager hands. That was when he noticed the small slice that she had taken from her horn. Was she going to be read a riot act when they were safely away from here!!! Calum did not forget to switch back on the field that separated them from the crowd. But they had what they needed, and so did the Aca(jeck).l.

"I promise you, we'll send out word of this to the authorities as soon as we're clear of planetary interference," Calum said. "Now, if you'll just step back, we'd best be off."

Acorna had disappeared the instant she had the 'ponies' replacements, so it was up to him to get them safely away.

Calum carefully lifted the AcaSecki in low-energy mode before touching the thrusters lightly enough to move far enough away from the flooded land to start an ascent. He wasn't sure who he was maddest at: Acorna for using a piece of her own self to provide the purification for those poor farmers, or the frigging bastards holding an entire world to ransom with weather tricks. And where had they gotten such tricks FROM in the first place?

He was far too busy laying in a course to access the Galacticapedia, but he would as soon as he had a finger free. As far as he knew, there was no process that could deliver rain to one area of a planet, lightning on command to another, and relentless sun to bake a third. That was undoubtedly why he didn't check the screen until he felt the unmistakable yank of a tractor beam ... a very powerful

tractor beam . . . snatching the AcaSeckl right off her ascent and inexorably into the maw of a massive spaceship, no doubt owned and manned by the Starfarers.

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Haven, Unified Federation Date 334.05.17

Calum tried desperately to send a Mayday to Maganos, but they'd been ahead of him all along, and his signal bounced harmlessly back.

Calum was damning himself left, right, and center before Acorna came running to the bridge.

"What are you doing, Calum? I nearly lost the can ..." Her complaint trailed off as the lights from their captor nearly blinded her.

"The Starfarers?"

"Sorry about this, Acorna," he said, mortified. "Rafik and Gill would never have been so stupid as not to check the trajectory, much less the proximity screens."

"Well, I've a few choice words for such scummy piratical opportunists. ..."

She was so angry her horn glowed, and Calum buried his head in his arms. He'd done it now. Truly he'd done it. How was he going to save Acorna from this? He only hoped the Starfarers had been so busy with their felonious extortion that no hint of a strange species with a horn had reached their com unit.

"Acorna," and his voice cracked in his anxiety, "could you pretend to be a pet?"

"A pet?"

"It's the only thing I can think of."

Acorna stood very still, her tall form dwarfing him in the pilot's chair. She gave a little sniff, her wide silvery eyes regarding him. "I don't think they'd buy that."

i

"Then let's play it as cool as possible."

"That makes sense."

"And this time you've never heard of Delszaki Li and House Harakamian. When I can think what they'd hold Hafiz up for, much less Mr. Li, my heart fails me."

"You've made a very good point."



The AcaSeckl shivered, if a metal ship can be said to do such a thing, as she was locked into place aboard their captor.

"While I can't be a pet, Calum, I can be a Didi," she said, and was off down the corridor, shouting over one shoulder, "You be the pet, this time, Calum. Just bright enough to speak when spoken to."

He reviewed that in his mind as he felt other things happening to ??????????????, like the clang of metal against the main hatch. They were unlikely to be able to break through, but what if they decided to blow or shoot the hatch off? Better to surrender and maintain the ship intact. He quickly keyed in a code and turned off the system with the special switch he himself had installed. Let 'em try to break that, he thought with some satisfaction.

Then he switched on the exterior speakers. "Wait a damned minute, willya?" He flipped off the security lock on the hatch. Anyone could open it now from outside. "I'm coming. I'm coming. Doan like no one messing up the ship. My Didi'll get back at me if'n you do."

He was at the hatch when the first of the Starfarers showed up, and he did not like the look on this surly bunch of musclebounds at all.

"Hey, boys, take it easy. The Didi's coming." He waved them on in as if he weren't the least bit impressed by their menacing appearance.

The leader backhanded him with such efficiency that he careened from side to side of the narrow passageway before falling in an embarrassing heap to the deck.

"Really!" came the sultry remonstrance from an Acorna Calum didn't recognize. He blinked, as much to clear the shock of that backhanded blow as to make sure his eyes still functioned. "Was that necessary? Poor Calum doesn't have many brains anyway, and the ones he's got don't need to be rattled. He'll do whatever you tell him anyway. He's been trained to."

The attention of the heavies was immediately focused on the vision in black. Calum vaguely remembered Judit, Mercy, and Acorna giggling over some of the outfits that had been concocted to either emphasize or hide her horn. This outfit was not only skintight, but the high collar disguised the long fall of Acorna's silvery mane. It was cleverly attached to the ravishing black hat which sat at a jaunty angle on Acorna's head. The peaked front completely hid the horn and almost covered her right eye.

"Let me introduce myself: Badini, the Didi of Kezdets best..." she paused, her voice heavy with significance, ". . . establishment. You wouldn't happen to have

any children you consider excess baggage, would you? They certainly didn't down there." She pointed a contemptuous gloved hand down, indicating Rushima, which they had so obviously just left. Acorna's gloves effectively disguised the differences in her hands, and her cloven hooves were hidden within the apparently stack-soled boots just visible under her long pantaloons.

"What's a Didi?"

A disembodied voice echoed outside. "Bring them aboard. I want to question them if they've been on Rushima," said a woman's voice.

"Anything you say," drawled Acorna's imitation Didi Badini in what Calum decided was an excellent imitation of the real bonk-shop owner's voice.

With an elegant swaying step, Acorna the "Didi" made her way past the first of the guards, deliberately brushing against him in such an enticing fashion that Calum hoped she wasn't overdoing her role.

"I suppose you'd better come, too," she said, deigning to notice Calum just before she went through the hatch. She put just the right inflection in her voice to suggest to anyone listening that Calum was of no importance whatever.

Of such little importance, in fact, that when he had been given the most cursory glance by the hard-faced woman standing slightly ahead of two obvious henchmen, he was immediately hauled away, probably by the man who had backhanded him. As his collar was tightly held by whoever kept pushing him forward, he couldn't be sure. But he was pushed down a few miles of antigrav tubes to the bowels of the enormous spaceship and shoved into a bare cell. It was equipped with two slabs of some plastic, strapped up against opposing walls, a sanitary appliance, and that was all. Not even a water supply.

"Nor any Drop to Drink," he murmured, then reminded himself that this cell was likely bugged. So he released the fastening on one slab and sat down on it. And began to worry about Acorna. Could she pull off her fancy-dress persona? And what good would it do? These people were the type who'd think nothing of spacing superfluous bodies. He was suddenly not so happy to have been cast in the role of "expendably unimportant."

"WHERE did you say you came from?" asked one of the three facing her.

"Kezdet," Acorna promptly replied. "I'm looking for . . . replacements."

"Replacements for what?" the woman asked, but the first man laughed.

"Dirtsiders need certain types of entertainment I'm sure this woman provides, Nueva."

"Oh. And you had no luck on Rushima?" This seemed to amuse the woman.

Acorna snorted contemptuously. "If it isn't flooded out, its desert or burned out. Not what I was toFd to expect," Acorna said indignantly. "No one would even come out to speak to us, no matter where we landed. Ruined one outfit in the wet, and another has sand just driven into the seams." She let her voice flatten with annoyance. "Wasted time and fuel. As I said, I'm Didi Badini. ..." She cocked her head, as if she expected to be informed of her interrogator's name.

"Welcome to the Haven, Didi Badini. I am Captain Nueva of the Starfarers."

"You wouldn't happen to have a few excess . . . children, or females ... or even that sort of male type ... I could relieve you of?" Acorna said.

"We've . . . sort of ... relieved ourselves of the excess."

That was when Acorna realized she and Calum were in big trouble. Maybe she should have remained Acorna DelszakiHarakamian, and worth a sizable ransom.

"Really," she replied as if amused at such a mutual circumstance, "then, if you'll just return my . . . my little friend, we'll be on our way. I really do need to find a few replacements, you know. Tastes get jaded so quickly."

Nueva made a motion, and two of the guards behind her grabbed Acorna by the arms. She could have thrown them off easily enough, being far stronger than she looked, but unless she also had Calum, displaying any of her discreetly concealed abilities was futile and possibly dangerous to them both. As she was turned and taken off in the direction Calum had been hauled, she saw that the AcaDeckI was tightly held by deck clamps fore and aft.

"Let's see how quickly your tastes jade," Nueva said, with an unpleasant laugh.

Over her shoulder, Acorna saw Nueva signal a waiting group of men and women, carrying various kinds of testing equipment and tools, to board the ship.

Acorna didn't think that Calum would have forgotten to disable the AcaSecki before he'd opened the hatch. Of course, a personality like Nueva-and she made Kisia Manjari seem angelic in comparison -would have ways of extracting the information she -wanted.

Nor was she, as she had half hoped, flung into the same cell as her guardian. Five of the doors on the narrow aisle she was pushed to were blue with force-field lights. So another timeconsuming puzzle would keep her from being totally jaded. Insane, maybe, but not jaded. Did they fill the cells in order? Or had

Calum "een pushed into the first empty one . . . since this Nueva person had boasted of relieving herself of excess personnel? After using the sanitary appliance, -with a deft but concealing shift of her pantaloons, Acorna unfastened one of the two slabs and lay down on it. She also decided to keep in character. She didn't doubt for a moment that anything she said would be monitored. So why had they separated her from Calum? Two people in the same fix would certainly exchange information. Oh, dear, perhaps she had laid it on a bit thick that Calum was useless. At that moment she would have given anything to be comforted by her "uncle."

She was roused from a restless sleep by a hissing noise and, as she lay prone on the comfortless slab, her face was turned to the metal ceiling . . . and the open vent. A thin, mournful face •was framed within the vent. A grubby thin finger was placed across the lips of a tear-stained and very dirty face. But Acorna was not in a mood to quibble; she welcomed any friendly contact right then.

The child slowly let a rope down through the opening. She stood on the slab, thinking to assist by being closer to the vent. But instead the kid made violent gestures for her to refasten the slab to the wall.

As if she'd never been there. Good thinking. There seemed to be just enough rope to reach her outstretched hands.

If this if all the've got, we'll never reach Calum even with the slab down, she thought.

She heard a soft, interrogative "Mmm?" from above, as if her rescuer was afraid to say out loud, "Come on, what are you waiting for?" Somewhat dubiously, Acorna gave a tentative pull on the rope. The thin youngster who was her unexpected savior couldn't have enough muscle to pull her up, light as she was. But he had tied the rope to something reassuringly secure. Hand over hand, she pulled herself up, grasping his hand as she reached the frame and angled her shoulders to the diagonal of the vent. Despite that, she scraped her arms badly getting through.

There was only the light from the narrow vent to see with. It reflected off a tube wall that wasn't very big, so she had to sort of slither the rest of her body out of the cell. Her rescuer quietly replaced the vent grill, screwed the fasteners back in, and began to re-coil his rope. Once more he put his finger to his lips, then began to wriggle along the tube, looking back once to indicate she was to follow.

Fortunately, Acorna's gown was made of a fabric much more durable than it looked, but the fashionable boots that hid her oddly shaped feet were very clumsy and might make enough noise to be heard. How she finally got them off she never knew because it involved contortions of her lithe body she'd never had to make before, even in her self-defense exercises. Lying on her back, she sort

of inched her feet up to where she could grab the boots and untie the laces. She would have loved to abandon them right there, but it seemed unwise to leave this proof of her escape route. Turning back on her stomach, she managed to tie the boots around her waist to keep them from hitting the tube walls. "Good idea," her rescuer approved in a bare thread of a whisper. After that they made better, and much quieter, progress along the tube. She wondered once or twice if her blood pounded more loudly than her body slithered, but no alarm was sounded.

She did sneak a peek through the other vents, but Calum was not in any of the three cells she could see into. The apathy of the detainees did nothing to reassure her about his safety.

They came to an intersecting tube, and the boy swung his body expertly to the left and wriggled down it. How long she followed him in this snakelike fashion Acorna had no idea, but suddenly they were in a much wider place-wider by comparison, at least-and she could sit without hitting her head on the ceiling. She was breathless and dry-mouthed from all her exertion.

"It's safe enough here. We can talk now," her savior said, but his voice was only a faintly raised whisper, warning her that their "safety" was only relative.

"What about Calum?" she whispered back.

"Who?"

"My . . . pilot."

The boy shook his head. "Must have been held in another area. I didn't see anybody but you and some of our own people." Acorna's heart sank at this information, but she tried to put a brave face on it. "We must search for him," she said. "But first, I should thank you for rescuing me. I am Acorna. ..." She let her voice trail off as she could not decide how else to identify herself. Was it safe to tell this unknown rescuer of her connection with the houses of Harakamian and Li? It might be better to find out a little more about him first.

"I'm Market Illart. My father . . ." He gulped. "They ... the ones who caught you . . . they're not Starfarers, not really. They were refugees we were helping out, and then that Nueva had a coup and spaced practic'ly all of the First Gen. I couldn't do anything, they'd locked the cabins. I couldn't do anything," he repeated, his voice rising dangerously.

"No, of course you could not," Acorna said at once, though she was not at all clear on the situation-except that her rescuer, having shed his self-confident air, was clearly only a boy, a lost youngling in need of comfort. Despite, or perhaps because of, her sympathetic reassurance, Markel suddenly crumpled into sobs, even though he tried very hard to suppress them.

Immediately Acorna transferred herself to his side of their refuge and pulled him into her arms. Despite the hat, which had somehow remained in place through all her recent gyrations, she could touch his head with her concealed horn, to help relieve his anguish. The hands that he held to his face to muffle his sobs were bruised and bloodied as well as filthy. She could, and did, heal them. If he was to be of any further assistance to her, he needed to be whole. She left the dirt, having no water anyhow to clean him up. That reminded her of her own thirst.

"I'm terribly sorry, my dear," she said, hoping that he could feel the sympathy and reassurance she longed to give him. "How long ago did this happen?"

"Days, weeks, months it could be. It ... it isn't easy to keep track of time up here." His voice wobbled dangerously.

"No, it certainly wouldn't be," Acorna agreed at once, "and I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for rescuing me."

"I had to, if I could. I'll do anything I can to get back at them for my father." He pressed his lips together as if holding back another outburst of unmanly sobs. "And they're going to make you tell them how they can get control of that ship of yours. It's a beauty."

"How would you know that? "

Markel's eyes lit up, and for a moment he seemed to have put aside his grief and his too-adult mannerisms, to be a normal cocky teenager enjoying a chance to boast of his expertise. "Oh, I know every tube and conduit in this ship. I can go anywhere, and I can even listen in on their corns. They think they're so smart. Well, they're not all THAT smart. I even know where they came from. They got on board the Haven by pretending to be Palomellese political refugees, but what really happened was Palomella decided to dump its worst criminals and scammed us into taking them on. That Nueva was running an extortion racket on Palomella, and now she's trying the same thing on the Haven. If only I'd warned Dad before-" He broke off and swallowed hard.

Acorna realized he was fighting back a sob, but the gesture still made her thirsty. She tried to moisten her mouth by running her tongue over the tissue, but she really needed some water. She thought rather wistfully of all the water they had so casually left behind.

"You wouldn't possibly have access to some water, would you?"

"Ha! I have access to anything I want," Markel said. "For all the good it does ..."

Acorna sensed that he needed bolstering up, needed to think more about what he could do and less about the past that he could not change.

"I'm very thirsty," she said wistfully. "And, when I think of the floods there were down on Rushima. ..."

He reached behind his back and pulled out a water bottle, complete with nipple, the kind used for free-fall supplies.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Acorna said, and there was no need to feign pleasure for Markel's sake. She enjoyed a long, luxurious drink of the water; it tasted stale and metallic, and she would have liked to purify it before drinking, but she didn't want to insult the boy. "Go ahead," Markel urged when she paused after that first restorative drink. You can have all of it," he added with a casual flick of his fingers. "I've got more whenever you need it. Are you hungry?"

"Why, I am. Don't tell me you can find food, too! Is there anything you don't know about this ship?" She exaggerated her admiring tone slightly and saw the praise work on Markel as the water had done on her, restoring the parched tissues of his soul. "Only ..." she thought to warn him before he made promises he wouldn't be able to keep, "... I cannot eat meat; only grains and vegetables."

Markel looked slightly relieved at this statement. "That's as well because it's much easier to snatch plants than anything else, like cooked food. Finish your drink. We're not far from the 'ponies."

Acorna's stomach made a joyful noise she was certain would echo down the tubes, but Markel had already turned to lead her to food. She slipped the bottle into one of her boots-as long as she had to drag these things along, at least they could be useful as carriers. The laces were long . . . maybe if she could add them to Markel's rope, they'd be long enough to reach Calum.

Over the other reeks of the ship, Acorna smelled vegetation: lots and lots of different kinds of vegetation, and the slightly chemical smell that her sensitive nostrils could identify as 'ponic nutrients. She wondered wistfully if the seedling chard she had planted on the Aca^ecki would ever leaf for her.

"Be very quiet now," Markel said, once again more mouthing words than actually speaking, as he deftly inserted a tool and withdrew the fasteners of a much larger grill.

The smells were almost unbearably enticing to Acorna, but she waited on his signal to enter after he had done a preliminary prowling round on hands and knees. The scent of chard drew her like a magnet, and it was fortunate indeed that it was nearer to her than the root vegetables he was deftly, and cleverly, harvesting. She noticed that he was careful to take only the small ones that were

likely to be culled anyway. He took carrots and turnips and potatoes and several other brightly colored things that she did not recognize. Hybrids, probably. She carefully augmented his selection with chard leaves, then some lettuces, and one head of cabbage, stuffing what she could into her other boot. She was glad she hadn't been wearing the boots for very long before using them as food and water carriers.

The surreptitious harvest didn't take long. Both Markel and Acorna had nimble hands and were agile on their hands and knees. They gathered up their booty and retreated to the tube, and Markel refastened the grill behind them. He beckoned for her to follow him some distance away from the 'ponies unit before he signaled her to stop and start eating. Which was perfectly understandable, for carrot chomping could be heard if one was listening for it. Even, perhaps, if one was not, because she was chewing as fast as she could. She took chard next, then experimented with the dark red thing he handed her, and that was good, too. Well, almost anything would have tasted good to her at that point.

After those sorely needed restorative mouthfuls Acorna thought again of Calum. He, too, would be hungry and thirsty. If only she knew where he was being held!

She tapped Markel's shoulder as he was chewing away at a raw potato and indicated she wanted to speak. He nodded but cautioned her -with a finger across his lips to speak quietly.

"My friend will have no food or water. If only you could figure out where he is being kept, could we get to him with something to eat and drink?"

Markel considered and finally gave a sharp nod. "He'll be in the secure area," he whispered, "where they keep the important prisoners."

Acorna's heart sank. "I tried to make them believe he knew nothing."

"Didn't work," Market told her, "or they'd've tossed him in the holding cells like they did you. It'll be a lot harder to sneak into the secure cells-but you're right, we gotta try. Even if we can't break him out-and I ain't promising, those cells are a lot tougher-we can prob'ly slip him a water bottle and some greens. He'll need it, too! Sometimes they 'forget' to feed the folks in detention. I hate it," he whispered. "I keep thinking, what if somebody dies, and I could have saved him . . . but some of the ones they throw in the cells are Palomellese. If they found out I was free, they might sell me out to gain favor with Nueva."

Acorna's heart ached at the decisions that had been forced on the boy, decisions that would have been heartbreaking for a mature adult. "Well, I can assure you that neither Calum nor I will sell you out - no matter what happens!"

Balaklire, Unified Federation Date 33.05.17



Once she got over her shock at being surrounded By unicorn-people instead of facing just one, Karina realized that she might really be onto something here. The entire rest of the populated galaxy thought that Acorna was the only one of her kind. But here were four more of the unicorn-people-and she was the one who had been Chosen to act as their guide and interpreter! Once it had been established, with a great deal of pointing and head tossing and shrugging and mane twitching, that none of the four around her was Acorna, Karina was able to guess that they were looking for Acorna. It was strange, the way their meaning seemed to come into her mind if she just let them say their strange nasal words and didn't try to understand. The trick seemed to be not to think about it, to convince the busy part of your head that you were actually thinking about something else and Just sort of accidentally overhearing their conversation.

In the first minutes on the unicorn-people's spacecraft, Karina found that trick quite easy to pull off. Everything was so different, so ... magical? Or just alien? She couldn't decide. The soft, flowing draperies they wore, the glowing translucent horns on their foreheads, the couches where they reclined so gracefully, even the gentle radiance that lit the interior of the spacecraft all spoke to her of a Higher World guided by thought and love, the Upper Realm she had so long been seeking to contact. But when one of them went through a slitted opening into another part of the spacecraft, she saw a board covered with twinkling dials and long projecting levers that had not been made for any human fingers to manipulate. That made her nervous, so she decided not to think about it but to concentrate on boosting her psychic awareness so that she could communicate better on a pure and spiritual level.

But every time she achieved the kind of calm that was supposed to bring connection with one's spirit totem and access to higher levels, she lost that sense of almost understanding what the unicorn-people were saying. It was most irritating and not at all what she would have expected.

(Do you have enough data from its thought-images to use the LAANYE yet, Melireenya?)

(Not quite, though I have learned that it is a she-creature.) (Had to be, with those engorged mammarys. Don't they hurt?) (Well, those could be the result of some kind of illness. They certainly don't look natural, do they? But her images are distinctly feminine . . . what I can read of them. You've noticed how weak her transmissions are? And every time I think we're communicating, something breaks it off and all I get is this image of a long, pointy crystal-see?)

(Maybe she's trying to tell us that they use something like that to amplify their naturally weak thoughts.)

(Good idea! I hadn't thought of that. Shall we make one?) (Might as well try it. If we have to build the data for the LAANYE by pointing our horns at things and listening to her grunt their names, it'll take forever.)

Something heavy and sharp-edged dropped into her lap and interrupted Karina's meditations and earnest efforts to establish communion on the spiritual plane. "Hey!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes. "Be careful what you're tossing around, will you - Ohhh. ..." Her indignant comment died away into a long gasp of awe and wonder as she lifted the ten-inch, doubly terminated quartz crystal. "Now where did you get that, I wonder?"

(Well, that came through loud and clear. She doesn't like us dropping rocks in her lap.)

(She likes the rock, though. Look how she's holding it!) (Great, we can generate as many of those as we need from the spare-parts assembler. Maybe we can use them as trade items. Go on, now, get some more complete utterances from her. The LAANYE needs syntactic data as well as semantics, you know!)

(Barbarian! Can you say . . . shit, I've lost her again.)

Holding the quartz crystal, Karinawas deep in meditation, imagining the flow of energies that moved in a stream of golden light through the crystal, into her hands, through her body, and out to embrace the Guides around her. She imagined so effectively that she was completely unaware of the thought-images directed at her by Melireenya.

(We got a burst of transmission when we gave her that crystal. Maybe she wants another one.)

(Maybe we should just drop something heavy on her foot and see what she says.)

(Thariinye, when are you going to grow up?) After a bit of tinkering, the spare-parts assembler was able to produce not only quartz crystals but also a number of other crystalline mineral specimens. They started with the varieties of quartz, showering Karina (gently) with rose quartz, amethyst, and citrine; then, for variety, Thariinye adjusted the assembler to produce other silicates such as tourmaline and iolite, orthoclase and microcline. He was particularly proud of a large, tabular orthoclase with a bluish white sheen in two directions. Their biped seemed impressed by it as well.

(She likes the feldspar group. I got a lot of good data from what she said that time.)

(Of course! Look, she's wearing a feldspar; maybe that's her totem.)

So moonstone, labradorite, anorthite, and other feldspars dropped into Karina's open hands until she was all but buried in their silvery shimmer, and Melireenya turned the LAANYE settings from collection mode to analysis mode with a sigh of relief.

(That was a job and a half! These beings can't concentrate at all!)

(Oh, well, it's done now. Let's eat while it's analyzing, then we can put the LAANYE in sleep-teaching mode and in a half turn we should be able to talk to it, I mean her, with mouthnoises.)

(What do you suppose she eats?)

(I hope she likes sprouts.)

Karma wasn't the least bit unhappy to be offered a vegetarian meal. Although her hosts worried back and forth at each other about the poor variety of foodstuffs and the drab flavor of shipgrown fruits and greens, Karina found the meal, at least, to be everything she would have imagined spiritually advanced beings to ingest. She had been a little worried that the unicornpeople would be too spiritually advanced to require any nourishment beyond a little water. The salad they offered her, full of crisp greens, its flavor set off by a tangy dressing of ground seeds that tasted a little like mustard and more like dill, reassured her on those grounds. She wouldn't have minded a tofu brownie or some sprouted-grains cake for dessert, but the bowl of fruits and berries was a reasonable alternative. The little brown berries proved surprisingly sweet and embarrassingly juicy-the first one she bit into felt like an explosion of sweetness in her mouth and startled her into a minor coughing fit. After that she took the berries with respect, to offset the tart flavor of the yellow thing that wasn't exactly an apricot, and found that the combination made a reasonably satisfying dessert.

After the meal they showed her a tiny cubicle, high enough to accommodate the unicorn-people but barely wide enough for Karina, and after some puzzlement she worked out what the facilities were for and how she could use them. That solved another problem she'd been trying not to worry about and left her feeling quite confident that she would be able to handle anything else that came up. And after all the excitement and that really very filling meal of salad and strange fruits, she was quite tired and more than willing to lie down on a couch in the main cabin when they dimmed the lights in there.

(I'll keep watch this shift,) Khaari volunteered. (She can sleep on my couch, and you three can use the LAANYE. I don't really want to hurt my head learning another barbarian language anyway.)

(Khaari! We must all be able to negotiate with these people!)

(Why? Somebody's got to stay with the ship, and I nominate me because I'm the only one who can navigate you out of here.)

(Self-thinking is un-linyarii.)

(Huh! I'm Liinyar, and I'm doing the thinking, so by definition it's linyaru.)

(This younger generation,) Neeva sighed toward Melireenya. (We would never have talked like that. There's no telling what Thariinye and Khaari will do next.)

(So maybe it's a good idea Khaari doesn't learn their language. In fact, we might be better off if Thariinye didn't either.)

This last comment inspired Khaari to take her turn with the LAANYE after all, sleeping on a reclining chair in the control cabin since the barbarian female was snoozing on her usual couch. As for Thariinye, he was already stretched out on his couch, wearing the headset that connected him with the LAANYE. He hadn't even waited to make sure the barbarian was comfortable . . . but the light snores issuing from Khaan's couch reassured Neeva and Melireenya on that score. With a mutual glance that spoke more eloquently than their thought-images on the subject of this impulsive younger generation, they, too, donned their headsets and settled for a strenuous night of sleep-learning.

By the beginning of the next shift, when Khaari brought up the lights in the main cabin, they could talk to Karma in her own tongue.

Which was very nearly the same as knowing the Basic Interlingua used for trade, diplomacy, and war in all the worlds inhabited by Karina's people.

It was easy enough to explain, now, that they were relatives of Acorna's who had been searching for her.

(This is not the entire truth,) Neeva fretted. (It is even an untruth, if we allow her to believe-as she surely will-that we came to this portion of the galaxy in search of our lost little one. Should we not tell her of the Khieevi, and that we came to warn her people and seek alliance with them?)

(All things in their proper time,) Melireenya replied. (Remember how the people of that first world were so frightened that they closed themselves within an impenetrable shield? If those harboring 'Khornya (for so Linyaari tongues had rendered her name, turning it into something pronounceable in their language) should do the same, we might NEVER get her back!)

(First we must find our 'Khornya,) Thariinye agreed. (Think, Neeva: she will surely tell us all we must know of these barbarians, so that we can judge whether

they are khievii or linyarii, whether we wish to make alliance with them or to disappear before they can attack our worlds.)

The unspoken interchange went so swiftly that Karina was not even aware of any pause in the conversation; she was still exclaiming in delight over how quickly they had picked up her language.

The Linyaari envoys were equally delighted when Karina confirmed their hope that Acorna was to be found here, on the lunar base to which the shuttle had been bound.

"I had a Lattice note from her, out of this node, just a few days ago," she told them. "Oh, then you are acquaintances-You know our little 'Khornya?'" Neeva asked eagerly. "How does she? Has she been well treated here?"

Karina looked down. Much as she longed to claim acquaintance with Acorna, was there any point in doing so, when a few hours would prove the claim false? "We have not met in person," she evaded, "only in correspondence. But our auras are attuned." Surely a Lattice note from one person and an acknowledgment from the receiver constituted a correspondence?

"Then she . . ." Neeva fumbled among unfamiliar words. Their shapes in her thoughts were blurry and poorly defined;

could the LAANYE be malfunctioning? "Your karma is joined with hers . . . she is expecting you?"

Karina gazed soulfully at the heap of moonstones in her cupped hands. She had been fondling them and playing with them ever since she awoke.

"Will she be concerned . . . worried," Thariinye substituted the easier-to-pronounce word, "that you were not on the shuttle?"

"Oh, no," Karina said unguardedly, then tried to retrieve matters. "That is," she said with her tinkling laugh, "we didn't have a definite arrangement. We just left it that if I did not hear from her that this was not a good time, I would be coming to Maganos within the next few days. Synchronicity, you know"- she waved her plump little hands vaguely-"all will manifest for the good of all; we need only maintain the appropriate space in our hearts. But I am quite sure," she said earnestly, "that she is looking forward to finally meeting me on this plane."

"Plane flies through atmosphere," Thariinye said, puzzled. "Atmosphere is not on this moon."

Karina laughed again. "I meant, on the physical plane. We have long been close on the spiritual plane," she said.

(What is she talking about? Do these beings move through different dimensions?)

(They appear to exist in three dimensions and move along a fourth at a fixed rate, just as do we and all other entities,) Khaari told him. (You must have been confused by some idiom of their language. What is the Linyaari for what she said?)

(I don't think you can say it in Linyaari.) "I hear you," Thariinye said aloud to Karma, having picked this up from the LAANYE as an all-purpose phrase meaning, "I don't know exactly what you mean, but let's not argue about it."

Rafik's worries about Acorna grew to monumental proportions when he reached direct-communications range of Maganos Moon Base and got no satisfactory answers to his queries. All he wanted to know was that Acorna was still there and unharmed. All he got from the com techs working the boards at Maganos was static, missed connections, and finally a bland statement that questions about Acorna were to be passed directly to Delszaki Li.

"Fine," Rafik said, "patch me through to Mr. Li's suite."

But Delszaki Li was napping ... or in a private meeting . . . or investigating some new workings out of reach of the base-to-ship communications system ... or simply not to be found at the moment, depending on when Rafik tried to contact him and which technician was asked to forward the message.

"I don't believe it," Rafik said flatly when for the second time he was told that Delszaki Li was visiting the new mine workings on the far side of Maganos. "The man's old and paralyzed and confined to a hover-chair, he's not going to be hopping around Maganos like a performing flea!"

"Mr. Li has a very good hover-chair," said the com tech. "State-of-the-art. And, uh, the light gravity here means that he has more energy, of course. Less, umm, strain on the muscles, you know?"

"Ten thousand bazaar dogs and Shaitans take the hoverchair!" Rafik shouted into the mike. "He doesn't USE those muscles, what difference does gravity make?"

"Transmission unintelligible, please moderate volume," the tech said. "Signal fading ..." Her voice slowly dissolved into a crackle of static. Fuming, Rafik decided that he would just have to wait until he landed on Maganos. Then he would See For Himself.

Even landing took longer than usual; a vessel of unfamiliar design, whose pilot seemed completely unfamiliar with standard docking facilities and commands, was just before him in the queue and held up docking for everybody else.

"Sorry about that, Uhurii," said the breezy voice of the secondshift guidance-control officer. "These idiots just ahead of you in the queue come from some backstars subspace where apparently nobody flies by the regs; according to the pilot they just make it up as they go along. She's having a hell of a time following my instructions-keeps saying, 'I hear you,' and then doing something completely different."

Rafik had a moment's regretful thought for the ancient days of the First Prophet, when in some parts of Earth the Book of the Prophet was interpreted to mean, among other things, that women were not allowed to drive.

When he finally docked, he was in a tearing hurry to reach Delszaki Li's private quarters and much too worried to care about the very odd design of the ship that had held up the queue for so long, or the plump little woman in fluttery lavender draperies who was clambering down an exit stair much too steep for her short legs. He waved at the lunar-base guards and was passed through on sight, without the formalities of identification and checks for contraband that held up strangers arriving at Maganos Base. An old friend of his from the days at MME was now overseeing the Beneficiation and Extraction Department and let him take a slightly illicit shortcut and hitch a ride on a conveyor belt that was supposed to be carrying pulverized material to the oxygen-extraction plant, allowing Rafik to arrive at Delszaki Li's quarters shortly after docking and a good ten minutes before he was expected there.

"Where IS she? Is she all right?" he demanded as he pushed through the iris door, too impatient to wait for it to retract its flexible membranes fully.

Gill and Judit were sitting in the anteroom, holding hands. Judit looked as if she had been crying; Gill turned red at the question.

"There is no reason to suppose Acorna is in any difficulty," Judit said.

Gill swallowed. "Of course not. Acorna can handle anything that comes up, and Calum . . . well, Calum is very smart, you know, Rafik." "Calum," Rafik said, "doesn't have the common sense the Prophets would give to a canary, and if we're relying on him to keep Acorna out of trouble, no wonder Uncle Hafiz was worried about her! WHERE IS SHE?"

"Hafiz?" Judit exclaimed. "How did he find out?"

"Find out what?"

"Well..." Judit gestured helplessly. "What was he worried about?"

"Don't know, can't find out now." Rafik explained about the garbled message he had received just before a planetary shield closed down all travel to and communication -with Laboue.

"And you think there may be some danger to Acorna? "

"Whatever it means," Rafik said, "it can't be anything good. Communication and trade are the basis of House Harakamians wealth. With Laboue closed off like this, Uncle Hafiz can't check the odds on any of his, umm, interplanetary operations, or keep tabs on the competition, or do any of his other, umm, normal financial and commercial procedures. He wouldn't have done this unless something out there had really scared him." He thought this statement over for a moment. "In fact, I wouldn't have said there was anything that could make Uncle Hafiz nervous enough to forgo a quarter percent profit on the Skarness Relay . . . which he will have lost through not being there to authorize a credit exchange before the news of the Relay s failure came through the regular communications channels."

"Hafiz has advance information on the Skarness Relay?" Gill asked, impressed. "How does he work that?"

Rafik grinned. "You know the Singing Stones of Skarness, in his garden? They're not just a curiosity-they're a communications system. Hafiz broke the code. Those rocks know what's happening on Skarness, no matter where in the galaxy they happen to be."

"How?"

"How does a clam in an aquarium in the desert know when it would be high tide if the desert were underwater?" Rafik shrugged. "They know, that's all. At first the Stones weren't all that useful, because they aren't interested in human affairs-they think we move too fast and die too soon to be studied-but Uncle Hafiz got one of them to make a small side bet on the Relay with him, and now they're all following it. He'd sent to tell me to lay off all our bets just before that last message and the Shield closing down . . . but without his authorization, I couldn't do it."

"Delightful as it is to learn these details of sporting events," Judit said, "I for one should like to find out a little more about what has brought you here in such haste. You don't know what the threat was?"

Rafik shook his head. "Not precisely. But it must have come from space, not from one of his competitors on Laboue, or there'd be no advantage in invoking the Shield. So we don't need to worry about Yukata Batsu or any of that southern



continent lot. Uncle Hafiz has effectively divided the universe into two separate boxes," he said somberly. "One box contains Laboue, the other holds the rest of the universe . . . including whatever threat motivated him to take this step. And whatever it is must concern Acorna."

Judit drew a deep breath. "Then . . . perhaps it's for the best that things have turned out as they have. Don't you think. Gill?"

"Could be," Gill agreed. "After all, if even we can't find her, what chance is there that these mysterious enemies will do so?"

"CAN'T FIND HER?" Rafik echoed in shock and outrage. "What-how-Shaitan-begotten spawn of a cretin, you can't have lost the girl on a lunar base this size!"

"Rafik, you really must make an effort not to pick up your uncles habits of speech," Judit reprimanded him.

At the same time Gill said heavily, "Not on the lunar base. Off it. She and Calum have done a bunk. With a little help from certain other people," he added, giving Judit a dirty look. She flushed but made no attempt to defend herself.

And in chorus, the two of them explained to Rafik how a series of delays in the preparation of the AccSecki had so frustrated Calum and Acorna that they not only took off before the ship was ready but failed to follow the navigation plan Calum had filed, so that by the time their getaway was discovered, it was impossible to follow them.

"Impossible?" Rafik repeated, raising his straight dark brows a fraction of an inch.

Gill gestured helplessly. "You know Calum. He's not only a brilliant mathematician, but a devious s.o.b. There are innumerable ways to navigate space from here to the Coma Berenices quadrant, and trust Calum not to take the most logical-the one in his filed nav plan-nor yet the least logical, because/ we checked that already. There's absolutely no way to predict -what path he will have taken."

Rafik would have disputed that, and had already asked for star maps on several scales to be displayed, but his study of the possible routes to Coma Berenices was interrupted by the announcement of a visitor for Acorna.

Not being privy to the shortcuts Rafik had used, nor anywhere near as quick on her feet as he was, Karina had taken quite a while longer than Rafik to reach Delszaki Li's headquarters. That she was there at all was tribute not so much to her increasingly confident statement that Acorna had invited her as to the Linyaari ability to soothe and calm the minds of those physically close to them. Neeva and Melireenya had risked showing themselves to the guards on duty at

the docking station just long enough to project calming thoughts of "I haven't seen anything unusual" and "This is a friend of Acorna's."

Once she entered the interstices of the lunar base, though, Karina had to make her own way without the help of the Linyaari projections. She had done remarkably well already, ascertaining from "casual" conversations with the people she encountered that either Acorna was to be found with Delszaki Li, or that gentleman would be able to tell her where she was. No one saw any reason to question Karina's statement that she was a friend of Acorna's and an expected guest; if she had not been able to show some valid reason for visiting Maganos, she would not have been allowed past the docking facility, would she? And her statement that she had impulsively come by private transport rather than by the regularly scheduled shuttle both explained why she hadn't been met and gave her an aura of wealth and luxury that helped to smother any doubts. But here, in the anterooms to Delszaki Li's private quarters, she met her match.

The secretary-receptionist who guarded Mr. Li's privacy knew Rafik by sight and had passed him through without question. But Karina he did NOT know-and he was as disinclined to admit somebody who was not on the list of accepted visitors as Karina was to give up so close to her goal. The resulting altercation drew first Judit's attention, then Rafik's, and finally Gill's. They opened the iris door in time to hear Karina "explaining" with some heat that she and Acorna had been in correspondence for some time, that they were closely linked on the spiritual plane, and that it was now their destiny and the will of the stars that they should also be together on the physical plane.

"Stars didn't send me a directive," the secretary said, deadpan.

"Oh, Lor'," Gill groaned, "it was bound to happen sooner or later, but why now, on top of everything else?"

"What was bound to happen?" Rafik asked plaintively. Since reaching Maganos he had continually found himself two steps behind the latest events-only to be expected -when he had been absent so long on House Harakamian business, but nonetheless a galling situation to a man used to making his fortune by the timely use of information.

"Nutcases," Gill answered, retreating back into the room behind the secretary's station to make his explanation. "People heard about the healings Acorna did on Kezdet, you know. Can't keep something like that secret. We've put it about that her healing abilities have faded as she matured, but that's not enough to deter the really determined nuts. We've also spread rumors that she's at half a dozen different houses Mr. Li owns in different systems. I think I know how this one got onto her, though-tell you later," he muttered in an undertone as Judit opened the iris again and went through to the secretary's station.

"I am so sorry to disappoint you," Judit said sweetly, "but Just now Acorna is ..."

The pause was fatal to her good intentions.

"She's not seeing visitors," Rafik said firmly.

At the same moment Gill said, "Not on the base. She's gone to visit old friends."

And, just too late to stop herself, Judit said, "... terribly busy." They're all lying! Something is terribly wrong! Karina's shock and outrage, undiminished by any conscious attempts to focus or channel her psychic abilities, came through to the anxiously waiting Linyaari as clearly as a minor explosion. (Oh, my head! Tell that female to damp her modulations, will you?) Thariinye complained.

(I can't tell her anything,) Melireenya thought, rather acidly. (She thinks you're in charge, remember?)

(She recognizes natural brilliance when she sees it.) (Hmph. She probably comes from some culture that has a peculiar caste-ranking system. Maybe they're graded by physical height.)

(In that case, she must be pretty low-caste. I've been looking through the screens at the others other race who come in and out here. And have you noticed-)

(Not now, you two!) Neeva put in. (Melireenya, you're supposed to be monitoring the female . . . Khariinya. What's happening now? Who are "they," and what are they lying about?)

(I don't know. That was the first I heard from her since she passed those guards at the exit from this docking area. I'm trying to get back in touch now. . . .)

Karina had meant to demand to see Acorna, but some impulse she did not recognize made her ask first, "Who are you people, anyway?" She followed that - with her own questions. "Why won't you let me see Acorna-and why are you lying about it?"

"None of your business," Gill said firmly. "Only people on the list of approved guests are admitted to this suite, young lady. You're not on the list-so I strongly suggest you leave now, before we call Security to have you put out."

Karina felt the secretary's mocking eye upon her. She was sure she was turning red with embarrassment, but she stood her ground a moment longer.

"I must see Acorna. Truly . . . you don't understand . . . and I can't tell anyone but her . . . but it is not just for my own sake. There is something she must know. Oh,

please!" She was almost in tears. "Please, you don't understand, it's terribly important. If she knew, she'd want to see me, I just know she would."

"Darlin'," Gill said more gently, "I'm sure it's important to you, but there's just no way you can see Acorna. I'll tell you the absolute truth: she's not on this base, and we don't know when she'll be back." He took Karina's hands in his. "Word of honor," he said, looking into her face with those piercing blue eyes that must have persuaded ever so many silly girls to believe whatever he said.

And he radiated truth and sincerity this time, whatever she had felt from him before.

The silver-set moonstone at her throat was cold and dull. And try as she might, Karina could not persuade herself that she "felt" Acorna's presence anywhere near them.

"I... I see," she said dully.

Declan Giloglie's blue eyes blazed with a triumphant light that renewed all her suspicions. Karina consciously breathed deeply and thought of Peace and Love. "Well, in that case," she said, "I suppose I may as well go on. I certainly don't want to waste my time looking for somebody who's not even here!" The tinkling laugh was a little flat, and her voice trembled slightly, but that might be put down to disappointment rather than to the sheer fury that possessed her.

(She's absolutely furious now, but I can't tell what about. The silly twit doesn't think, she just stirs the brain-bits around like a nut-and-root stew, you never know what's going to bob up next.)

(Is she in trouble? Where is she?)

(How should I know? She doesn't look, either. You can't transmit images of your surroundings if you never look at them properly. All I can see in her mind right now is blue.)

Karina widened her own eyes and looked straight into Gill's until he released her hands and stepped back. "Well . . . that's that then," he said. "Sorry for your disappointment."

Karina visualized herself floating in a cool blue cloud that absorbed and masked her utter fury.

(Shit! Now I've lost her completely!)

As the door to Delszaki Li's private suite closed behind him, the secretary looked at Karina with a touch of pity.

"You're not the only one with a sob story, you know," he advised her, not unkindly. "Take more than that to get in to see Acorna . . . that is, it would if she were here," he added, remembering Gill's story. Not being privy to Acorna's unheralded departure, he took it for granted Gill was lying to protect her privacy. "You've struck out-better go home. They'll call Security if you hang out here, you know."

"I haven't the -" Karina stopped herself before she could disclose her dilemma. The fact was that she didn't have her fare back to Kezdet, much less to her home planet. Everything she owned and as much as she could borrow had been barely sufficient to pay her way this far.

But she did, she reflected, have private transport ... of a sort. And she did owe it to the Linyaari to go back and tell them . . . well, perhaps not exactly what had happened . . . they wouldn't understand the nuances; she would be false to the underlying spiritual truth if she told them the bald literal truth, wouldn't she?

"You are quite right," she said instead. "I shall return to my personal ship at once."

On the way back, she concentrated on her breathing until she had attained a state of spiritual tranquillity in which she was no longer deceived by the superficial appearance of events and felt quite able to convey the basic truths of the situation to her Linyaari friends.

She'd thought of exactly how to phrase it, too. "She's being kept prisoner!" Karina announced on her return to the ship. She was breathless not only from the climb but from the irritation occasioned by having to push her way through a growing crowd of curious onlookers who were fascinated by the gilt scrollwork and trompe l'oeil scarlet-and-emerald ribbons painted as if they -were flowing across the body of the ship.

"Have you seen our 'Khornya?'" Neeva asked, pronouncing the newly learned words slowly and carefully.

"Acorna, not Kornya." Karina sank back onto one of the couches in the main cabin. "No, I told you, they're keeping her prisoner. There's an absolute brute of a man guarding the rooms, he won't let anybody in, and a red-bearded Viking giant who tells the most terrible lies you ever heard. Would you believe it, he actually tried to convince me that Acorna wasn't there at all! And the other two gave quite contradictory stories."

Neeva frowned in concentration as she tried to follow this burst of speech. "But you said she was expecting you . . . had invited you to visit her. Why would she go away? "

"That's just it." Karina sat up. "I don't for a minute believe she has gone away. One of the others said she was sick, and another said she was busy. Obviously they are all lying. I don't know why, but they are determined to prevent Acorna from speaking with anybody outside their little group. Why, for all I know"-she cried, too indignant for caution-"she may never even have seen my first fifty-six messages!"

"Your what?" asked Neeva, now thoroughly confused.

Karina remembered that she was supposed to be a close friend of Acorna's. Well, she was. On a spiritual level. "Never mind, that's not important. The important thing is," she said, enunciating clearly, "there is something very sinister going on, and I intend to find Acorna and rescue her from these people!"

All four of the Linyaari looked at one another for a long time. Karina had the oddest feeling that a very intense argument was going on, though none of them actually said anything. She half closed her eyes and tried to sense their auras. Breathe slowly, she reminded herself. Often to your breathing, fill the mind, expand your awareness.

It had been a very trying morning. Perhaps she would be able to still her mind and expand her awareness more effectively lying down. . . .

Karina fell peacefully asleep while the Linyaari debated their next step.

(It is brave and generous of this Khariinya to offer her services further, but we must not accept.) Neeva was firm on this. (Bad enough that we have fooled with the minds of those people on the shuttle, making them forget that their flight was interrupted. We must not go on to put this one at risk from her own kind.)

(Besides, she hasn't accomplished much so far.) (She has found where 'Khornya is being held, and has ascertained that she is a prisoner. That is enough to go on. One of us will have to free her.)

(Oh, dear, oh, dear. I see more fooling with their minds coming up.)

(We are going to have to do that in any case. Have you looked at the screens showing us the docking area recently?)

(Of course not, I've been trying to understand what Khariinya was saying.)

(The other barbarians are behaving oddly.)

(So? It's not as if we knew what was normal behavior for them.)

(I think they are curious about our ship.) (Why? It's a nice unobtrusive vessel, nothing gaudy.) (Not by their standards. Look at the other ships docked in this facility.)

Neeva studied the views in the screens and had to concede that Thariinye had a point. Although the Linyaari vessel was not dissimilar in shape to the barbarian ships, the other ships were so ... well, so dreary! Naked metal and blind ports; nothing to disguise the ungraceful lines of thrusters or to decorate the long plain sweep of the main body; and above all, no color, not even a discreet touch of gilding or a splash of crimson to delight the eye.

And by now, quite a number of the short, hornless bipeds were gathered so near to the Linyaari ship that the screens offered only a foreshortened view of them, pointing and talking excitedly among themselves. (Perhaps they are admiring our tasteful decor,) she suggested without conviction.

(I'm afraid it is more than that,) Melireenya agreed reluctantly with Thariinye. (Nobody would choose to make ships look so dull and plain, so it must be that they do not know how to protect painted surfaces against atmospheric abrasion or meteorite damage. This ship must be quite an oddity to them.)

(How could a race be so sophisticated as to travel in space, colonize many systems, even build bases on airless asteroids such as this, and still remain ignorant of the first principles of surface shielding?) Khaari demanded crossly. (It is not logical!)

(Whether it's principle or taste,) Neeva told her, (we are obviously too conspicuous. I am afraid our attempt to make unobtrusive contact has not been successful.)

(We had better not allow them to board ... or even to pay any more attention to us.)

(I am afraid you are right.) Neeva suppressed a sigh of disquiet. Start bending the ethics of the Linyaari, it seemed, and there was no limit to how far they might get bent. The other three envoys had assured her that the only questionable action they would have to take was to make the crew and the other passengers on the space shuttle a little bit unclear about what had happened mid-flight. But just by being here, they had already exposed the hornless bipeds to a superior technology. Now one of them would have to leave the ship in order to exert a calming presence on the people who were obviously so curious about it. And who knew what that might lead to?

(Don't worry, Neeva. I'll take care of everything,) Thariinye thought blithely.

The base of Neeva's horn ached. Thariinye would not have been her first choice to take on the task of calming the hornless ones . . . but it was a small task; what difference did it make who did it? Still, her forehead ached as though the horns were warning her of calamities ahead.

And it might have been right, for Thariinye did not stop at showing himself long enough to establish his influence over the bipeds near the ship. Cloaked in his projected cloud of (You haven't seen anything unusual) and (Everything's all right), he went down all the way to the ground level and casually strolled among the bipeds there. The little group gathered near the ship was breaking up now, the members of the group moving away briskly in different directions as if they had suddenly remembered something they were supposed to be doing and couldn't imagine why they were wasting time staring at what was, after all, just another spaceship of the hundreds that docked at Maganos.

Melireenya chuckled at the sight. (Thariinye must have added a bit of "Urgent business" to his projections, to clear them out so fast!)

(I wish he wouldn't. We shouldn't fool with their minds any more than we have to. And-Thariinye! Where do you think you're going?) The young fool was following several of the bipeds toward the guarded exit from the docking facility.

(Quit worrying, Neeva!) Thariinye's images, slightly weakened by distance from the ship, were nonetheless sharp enough to convey a sense of slight irritation. (We agreed that one of us must find 'Khornya, did we not? And since I have already expended the effort to cloud these bipeds' minds into believing that I am one of them, why should I not go on into the base and seek out 'Khornya right now, before her captors have time to hide her elsewhere?)

(He may be right, Neeva. Khariinya's visit may have alerted them.)

(But you do not know where she is! The base is large. . . .)

(Not large enough to hide another Linyaari. I shall simply wander until I sense her presence; then I shall ask her how she is held and what would be the best way to free her. I am not entirely stupid, Neeva.)

And since she could not think of any better plan, Neeva let him go without further protest.

During his first minutes inside the base proper, Thariinye kept letting his calming projections slip as he was distracted by the oddities of this alien construction, then hurriedly projecting extra soothing feelings to relax and distract surprised onlookers. AS he cataloged the alien peculiarities, he left behind him a trail of slightly perturbed base workers who had the vague feeling that they'd just forgotten something very important, or that something wonderful had almost



happened and if only they'd been looking carefully enough they might have seen it.

The corridors connecting the docking facility to Maganos Central, and that central complex to other parts of the shielded base, were so dark and low that Thariinye felt almost as if he were exploring a mine. After cracking his head on a projecting air vent and catching his hom a really painful blow at a slit-opening door of unfamiliar design, he learned to stoop slightly, walk slowly, and watch the way ahead very carefully for obstructions.

The high dome of Maganos Central, with its seemingly extravagant aerie of scaffolding in a spiderweb design spirahng to the top, was as much a physical relief to Thariinye as a shot of oxygen would have been. But the design itself distracted him for dangerous moments. The spirahng web of scaffolding was hung with green plants that dangled invitingly downward, and in the light gravity of this moon he could easily have jumped high enough to browse at will. What was this place-some sort of cafeteria?

A gasp from a passerby reminded him to maintain his cloaking shields. (You haven't seen anything unusual) he projected, with a hint of (urgent business somewhere else) to hurry her on her way.

The female trotted off and later told her partner in Shipping and Receiving that she'd seen the most amazingly handsome young man just coming into Central, she'd have stopped and tried to chat him up if they hadn't been so behindhand with the monthly report; whereupon her partner gave her a very odd look and said that the monthly report wouldn't be due for another six shifts, and did she think she might be coming down with something?

Retreating to lean against a gently curved wall, Thariinye maintained his shielding and watched the barbarians hurrying back and forth until he concluded, with some reluctance, that the greenery must be merely an atmospheric purifier and not a buffet. At least, nobody else was nibbling on those tempting new leaves.

(Thariinye, you greedy pig! You're supposed to be looking for our 'Khornya, not thinking about brunch!)

(Yeah, yeah, but Neeva, you should just see these plants!) But, reminded of his duty, Thariinye tore his gaze from the succulent new shoots and leaves just above eye level and mentally felt around the central complex for some sense of another Linyaari.

He could sense nothing but the tangled, muddy undertow of a thousand alien minds muttering away, each in its separate little shell, and most too weak and

garbled to be intelligible, with here and there a feeling highlighted by surprise or strong emotion:

Oh, Jussi, why did you leave me? . . . grubble grubble grubble . . . payday's next shift, then I can get OUT of here . . . grubble grubble grubble . . . Lukia, Lady of Light, help me now!

Startled, Thariinye swiveled to look at the source of that last thought, a grubby kid weaving between the adults so rapidly that Thariinye would have lost him but for the strength of his projections. The words meant nothing to Thariinye, but the image of a radiant Liinyar girl in white-silk robes that accompanied them riveted him.

A sudden thought of "Saints preserve us, what's THAT!!!" accompanied by an image of himself enlarged to ten feet tall and glowing with a strange radiance, reminded Thariinye to maintain his calming projections while he edged through the crowd after the urchin who had so obviously been thinking about a Liinyar girl. He still could not sense any trace of another of his kind in this crowded, smelly base, but that child must have seen 'Khornya at some time, to have formed the image so clearly.

The miner who'd called on the saints stared after Thariinye but could see nothing unusual among the swirling streams of passersby. Ramon Trinidad mopped his forehead and decided not to mention to his mates that he'd had a vision of Acorna. They already teased him enough because he had a small icon of the Virgin of Guadeloupe superglued to the dashboard of his operator cab at the loading station; if he told them he'd been seeing visions, he'd never live it down. All the same, it must mean something that the Lady had appeared to him like that, all in a blinding flash it was, and then vanished. She must be warning him that he'd been marked out for something special.

Ramon Trinidad marched down the corridor to Mining Ops HID more jauntily than he'd moved since coming to Maganos. At first he'd thought this job, training kids from the gutters of Kezdet to operate lunar mining equipment, was high pay for light work; then he'd considered resigning and telling Personnel that he was a miner, not a kindergarten teacher; then he'd actually begun to like some of the kids. Besides, they didn't laugh at him for invoking the protection of the Virgin and the saints each time he took a group of them out into the long, lightly shielded corridors of the active workings. The kids had their own saints ~ Lukia of the Lights, Epona, Sita Ram.

The urchin whom Thariinye was following was also headed for Mining Ops HID, and praying desperately that he'd get there well ahead of Ramon Trinidad; so the image of Lukia of the Lights kept lighting up in his thought-patterns, guiding Thariinye like a flashing beacon.

Bored by Rafik's intense study of the star maps which were projected all over the walls of Delszaki Li's office, Gill stood up to stretch his legs and wandered over to the one wall not devoted to mapping the outer reaches of the explored and unexplored parts of the galaxy. Rafik had been unable to commandeer this wall because it was filled with vid-screens on which, at any moment, random scenes of the moon base were displayed. Although no one's private quarters were invaded, Delszaki Li took great pleasure in observing all other parts of the base in operation, from the children's school to the outermost mine workings. Before the progress of his disease had robbed him of the ability to control a touch pad with his right hand, the display had been designed for him to call up whatever views he desired. When touching the pad became too difficult for him, the engineers had offered to make the display voice-controlled like his new hover-chair, but he had refused, indicating that it was too tiring for him to issue unnecessary commands and that he would prefer a random display which he did not have to control. Now the images on the more than twenty screens changed constantly, on a randomly activated timer, giving a constantly varying panorama of Maganos Moon Base activities.

Gill stared unseeingly at an image of the glittering dome over Maganos Central, with its overarching glass panels and its garlands of greenery, until it shifted to a view of the bakery attached to the cafeteria, where a cook was setting out trays of fresh pastries in preparation for the shift change, then to an overhead shot of the four major mine workings viewed from a camera atop the central dome. The random changes depressed him, reminding him of the inexorable progress of Delszaki Li's nervous paralysis, and he wondered whether Acorna would return in time to see her benefactor once again. Her image was so clear in his heart that he thought for a moment he was imagining her on one of the screens before him; then his shout surprised Rafik into dropping the laser pointer with which he had been tracing one of the AcaSeckl's possible routes on the larger star map for Pal and Delszaki Li.

"What in the name of the Djinni Djiboutis -" Rafik began before remembering Judit's request that he not swear like the descendant of twenty generations of Arab-Armenian rug merchants.

"What are you playing at, Gill? We're trying to get some work done over here, if you don't mind!"

"Acorna," Gill croaked. "I saw her ... on one of these screens. She's not gone, Rafik; she's right here on Maganos!"

"She can't be . . ." Pal said, and then, ". . . can she?" Here on Maganos, and concealing herself from him? The thought was almost too painful to bear.

"I saw her, I tell you," Gill insisted. "She was right..." He dropped his hand; the screen he pointed at was now showing a row of children chanting the Basic

alphabet with hand signs for each letter. "Here," he said, "only it wasn't the school, it was some damn corridor, and the bloody automatic timer had to shift scenes before I could identify it."

"There she is!" Judit cried, pointing at a screen in the far upper right section of the wall.

"That's one of the new workings," Gill said, "somewhere in III."

At the same moment Pal said, "But that's not Acorna." The picture switched to an image of the docking facility. "Damn that bloody automatic timer, can't we turn it off?" Gill demanded. "And are you out of your mind. Pal? Just how many six-foot people with golden horns do you think we've got around here?"

"More than one, evidently." Pal folded his arms with the gesture of a man who is not to be shaken from his opinion, no matter how impossible and illogical it may seem to the rest of the world. "I would know Acorna among a thousand of her kind. ..."

Gill snorted. "How do you know? You've never seen a thousand other kind."

"I would know her," Pal insisted quietly, "and that is not my lady."

Judit had turned away from the screens to look through Delszaki Li's desk. "Judit!" Gill bellowed. "What are you playing at? Get over here and watch the screens. I need some backup in case she appears again! No, first tell somebody to hustle down to III... no, I don't know which subsection, there aren't but six open, surely we've got enough security people to cover all of them? Why are you fooling around looking for office supplies, girl? We've got an emergency here!"

"Is searching for manual controller," Delszaki Li put in, his dry and slightly amused whisper cutting through the fog of Gill's emotional bellowing. "My suggestion. You countermand?"

Gill stared. "It still works?"

"Override," Li whispered. "Useful if I wish to see something longer than five seconds . . . but someone else must push pad, now."

Judit scrambled through a clutter of carved jade tokens, laser pads, used betting slips, fact-flimsies with access codes scrawled on the back, and unlabeled datacubes, and finally held up the control pad with a cry of triumph.

"Try all the workings off III," Gill directed her. "You'll just have to flip through them until we come. ..."

"Silly," Judit said, "we've got a lot more than six screens to choose from, let's look at them all."

With shaking hands, she tapped out the code for the cameras in IIIA, B, C, D . . .

"THERE SHE IS!" cried Gill and Rafik.

"No, she isn't," Pal insisted.

Mr. Li whispered a command, and his hover-chair carried him across the room to float before the screen showing Mine Working HID.

"There he is!" the other kids who were in the training session squealed when Hajnal darted into the open area around Ramon's sledger and slid the last twenty feet, triumphant, stopping himself just inches short of the piles of rough lunar rock that marked the end of the workings. "Didja get it? Didja get it?"

"Hajnal, Master Thief of Kezdet, strikes again!" Hajnal boasted, pulling open his jacket to reveal an extremely nervous, long-eared, white-fronted marchare. The marchare squeaked and leapt out of its hiding place with a powerful thrust of its long rear legs. The other children scrambled to catch it.

"Ow! It scratched me!"

"At's nothing. Look 'ow it got me on the way here, but I didn't drop it." Hajnal pulled up his shirt and proudly showed the long bloody scratches on his chest and stomach. "Now 'urry up, you lot, and get it into the toolbox in the back of Ramon's operator cab. I seen Ramon coming this way. Ain't gonna believe the workings is 'aunted if 'e sees the blasted hanimal, is 'e now?"

"Poor little marchare," crooned a girl who cradled the nervous animal in her arms for a moment, petting it until its eyes stopped rolling and the long nervous ears stopped twitching. "Didn't mean to scratch anybody, did you. poor little frightened thing? Hajnal, I don't think we oughter put him in the toolbox, he'll get scared."

"If you don't stop petting him, Eva, he'll go to sleep on us, and we'll lose our chance."

The little fiends of Kezdets first graduating class had been working on Ramon Trinidad for weeks, trying to convince him the combination power unit and loading station he operated was haunted by the ghost of a mining engineer who'd been killed in an accident so grisly nobody who knew the story was ever willing to use that station again. They gauged their success by the number of holy medals and icons Ramon hung on the device, blamed the miners of the next shift for "losing" most of the icons, and competed to see who could drop the most hairraising hints about what had "really" happened to the mythical dead engineer.

But Ramon was beginning to doubt their unsupported stories. It was time for some hard evidence. They were counting on the scrabbling and squeaks of the third-shift pastry cook's pet marchare, concealed in a compartment in the back of the sledge, to provide that evidence. Hajnal, proud of his past as a free thief on Kezdet and no factory slave, had boastfully volunteered to "borrow" the marchare without the cook's knowledge.

"It's mean, putting him in that dark little place," another girl piped up. "Let's not. He's so cute!"

"Cute," Hajnal said darkly. "Lemme tell you, you wouldn't think 'e was so bleedin' cute if you'd had to carry him through Central under your shirt, and 'im gougin' tracks in your belly every time he startled!"

"Sita Ram wouldn't like it," Eva said.

"Huh! Lukia don't mind. She 'elped me get away," Hajnal boasted.

Eva's eyes widened. All the children seemed suddenly to be looking up, over Hajnal's head. Slowly he turned, certain that Ramon had spoiled his plot by reaching the workings before he could conceal the marchare.

But it wasn't Ramon who stood behind him, but a being taller and far brighter than the little miner; a being who seemed clothed in light from Her golden horn to the silvery wisps of hair around Her hooves.

"Epona," "Sita Ram," "Lukia," whispered the children, and when they were all over the bright being.

"I knew you were here, Acorna, I knew? you wouldn't just leave us without saying good-bye," squealed Khetala, who had known Acorna as a person rather than a vision of goodness. She threw herself on the tall, silver-haired being in an unrehearsed\_ and decidedly unwelcome-embrace.

"Get off me!" Thariinye sputtered in his own tongue. In the panic of the moment he could not remember the words the LAANYE had implanted in his cortex a few hours previously.

There was a smaller girl clutching his tunic, now, marring the elegant drape of the fabric, and a boy jumped up and down and swung from his arm as if he were some kind of climbing toy. Why hadn't that plump little woman warned him that the moon base was full of children? Pre-pubes, their psychic abilities still latent, were not susceptible to the mental projections that could be used to calm adults . . . and apparently that particular developmental factor was true across species, or at least it was as true of these beings as it was of his own race. But he had no

other projection, nothing else to try! Frantically he projected (You don't see anything unusual) (Nothing is happening) (Need to get back to work).

"But I do see you. Lady Epona, I do! I do!" squealed the smallest girl.

Khetala, the oldest of the group, loosened her embrace and backed off a step, puzzled. Why had she thought this was Acorna? It was obviously only a tall miner . . . she squinted . . . with silver hair . . . and a horn. . . .

"Don't you remember me. Lady Acorna?" she asked, hurt and puzzled.

Hajnal was too high on success and escape even to be touched by the projections. "Whaddaya screechin' about now? I know my Lady Lukia of the Lights!"

Thariinye gritted his teeth and redoubled the force of his projections, but the children were jumping up and down, shrieking with excitement, and far too hyper to receive the calming influence he was trying to put forth, even if they had been old enough to pick up his mental images. Not only that, but they seemed to be insane. They expected him to cuddle them. They thought he was. . . .

Under sufficient stress, Thariinye stopped trying to remember the words of the alien language and just used them without thinking.

"Lookh, yuuu hiteli twerpis," he hissed in rage, "I-aam- naat-a-ghiril! See?"

And, just as the security guard requested by Gill arrived at the workings, Thariinye yanked open his blue tunic to display irrefutable evidence that he could not be the "lady" these brats were greeting so ecstatically.

The guard, unlike the children, was affected by Thariinye's projections; so he saw nothing unusual in the sight of a sevenfoot horned male with a cascade of silver hair falling down his neck. What that male was doing, however, was both unusual and strictly forbidden on Maganos Moon Base.

"You'd better come along with me, mister," he said.

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That's Hoa," Markel mouthed in Acorna's ear' as ?????? down the vent at the first of the innermost security cells, much smaller and more closely guarded than the row where Acorna had been kept.

"Who?"

"Ho-A," Markel separated the syllables. "He's the guy the Palomellese spaced my"-he had to swallow-"my father for- to get control of his work. If he hadn't come aboard the Haven, everything would be all right. He's how Rushima's being flooded, burned, blasted, or stormed until they pay Nueva Fallona's gang protection money."

"He?" And Acorna looked down again at the dejected, darkhaired man sitting with his head in his hands. What she could see of his skin had a faintly yellow cast that reminded her of Delszaki Li and made her instinctively wish to trust him. "Then why's he here"-she pointed one hand down-"and not up there with them?"

"Because he trusted our Speakers-my father and Andrezhuna and that Gerezan." The last name was expelled like a Gurse, and, in the light from the cell below, Acorna could see the tears begin to form in Markel's eyes. He brushed them aside with impatient fingers, taking a deep breath. "He didn't know about what they"-Markel jerked a contemptuous finger upwardplanned. He was scared stiff that the governments of Khang Kieaan, where he used to live, would've figured out that he couldn't just predict weather, he could manipulate it."

"Ooooh." Acorna's mind made leaps of conjecture on how that could be used. "So that's what happened to Rushima?" Markel nodded.

"But how could Hoa give that sort of power to renegades like them?" Now she, too, pointed upward.

"He didn't. He thought he'd be safe on Haven . . . and he would've been, only Nueva and those traitors Gerezan and Sengrat planned a coup and got rid of all the rest of the First Generation. ..." Markel gulped.

"Like your father." Acorna laid a sympathetic arm about the thin shoulders, thinking proudly of his loyalty and resourcefulness. "Did you escape before they could . . . you know ..."

He nodded. "They don't know the half of what I know about the Haven. I could do anything to this ship . . . sometimes I think I ought to be making more trouble for them, only I don't want to wreck it and kill a lot of innocent people. The other SecondGeneration kids may be pretending to go along, but they shouldn't die for it. I could do anything," he repeated, "if only I knew what to do. ..."

In that pause, Acorna softly asked, "Like being able to release the clamps on my ship so we can all get away?"

Markel considered, eyeing her, then the lighted vent and the rounded walls of the tube. She didn't think she'd called a bluff:



rather she felt, through her arm still about his shoulders, that he was figuring out how to accomplish this.

"I'd be glad if you could alert Shenjemi Federation that one of their colonies is being blackmailed. And my planet that I'm being held hostage."

Markel gave a little snort, muffled by his fingers. "You're not a hostage, you're a prisoner. They got better things to do than collect ransom for hostages. They can hold up -whole planets for Acorna gulped, happier than ever that she was no longer trapped in that cell, vulnerable. But Calum was still a prisoner. And, if they had no need to take hostages, Calum was in greater peril than she'd originally thought. They'd have to work fast. She was considering priorities when suddenly she saw that Hoa's face was turned up to the vent. She gave Markel a discreet nudge.

"Oh, oh," he mouthed back at her, and would have led her away, but she stopped him.

"He didn't intend this to happen . . . and he looks ill. I think they've hurt him. Let's free him, too. Maybe he'd know how to stop what they've started. Can we do that? Please?" Market didn't really have any defense against Acorna in pleading mode-especially with her arm around him and the comforting warmth of her soft feminine body giving him the nurturing love he had needed so desperately for so long.

"He'll have to be quiet," he said.

"I doubt that will be a problem," she replied, and helped Markel unscrew the vent.

Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa's slender frame made it through the narrow vent with no difficulty, but he was so weak they had to help him far more than Acorna had expected; he did almost none of the work of climbing. When he was finally in the tunnel, she realized why he had been so helpless. Even in the bad light, Acorna could see what had been done to the man's hands and arms. Pretending to bend lower to reset the screws on the vent, Acorna made sure her horn touched-through the fine fabric of her hat-both mangled hands.

Urgently now, Markel directed them away from the empty cell and around a bend in the tubes and over to the other side of the prison block. At the intersection, he firmly placed Dr. Hoa against the curving side and, finger on lips, indicated that he was to stay put. Dr. Hoa nodded, only too happy to comply. Then Markel beckoned Acorna to slither past the scientist. He put his hps to her ears and spoke low? but distinctly.

"We got to get your buddy right away now? because as soon as they see Dr. Hoa's gone, there'll be nine kinds of alarms and searches and stuff. Might not get another chance. Any way you Gan help me locate him?"

Acorna closed her eyes. If only her horn had the power of locating people as well as healing them! Maybe it dou, she thought. . . I've never known another of my kirn). How do I know what I can do?

She composed her thoughts and tried to visualize Calum's features, but all she could sense was the aura of misery that filled the whole area around the cells . . . and something about . maps? She shook her head, trying to clear it. How could she concentrate on finding Calum when she kept getting this feeling that somebody was lecturing her on how to color a map? It felt as if there was a whole geography class going on somewhere under her right hand ... no, not geography. Strange, half-familiar words floated into her head.

"Conjecture . . . lemma . . . simple closed curve. . . ."

Weil, how about that!

"I think," she said slowly, "he might be in the cell on the far right."

Calum was so absorbed in the diagrams he was tracing on his cell wall that she had to hiss several times before he finally noticed-and even then he did not look up.

"Just a minute, I'm thinking," he said-and then did a comical double take, looking up so fast that he nearly lost his balance. "Acorna? What the-"

"We're rescuing you," Acorna explained patiently.

"Who's wel And do you have anything I can copy this down on? I don't want to lose it, and the trouble with drawing diagrams in the condensation on the wall here is ..."

"Ten thousand devils fly away with your diagrams and drop them in the dung of the camel pits of Sheol!" Acorna ripped out a variation on one of Rafik's favorite curses. "Do you want to wait around until they come to torture you into releasing the hold on ^as. AcaSeckit Or do you think you could drop your mathematical conjectures long enough to climb up this rope?"

Calum gave a dubious glance at the slender rope and the narrow space of the air vent through which Acorna was whispering to him, then looked back once regretfully at the drawings he had traced on the wall of his cell.

"Oh, well, I can probably reconstruct it later," he muttered. The vent opening was a tighter squeeze for Calum than it had been for Dr. Hoa or Acorna, but when he seemed to be stuck fast Markel inspired him by mentioning a few of Nueva Fallona's favorite Palomellese tortures, then commented that if Calum's shoulders were really wedged firmly into the vent his feet would doubtless be at a convenient height for Nueva's attentions.

"She likes playing with matches," he said.

Calum made one last convulsive effort, freed his broad shoulders, and wriggled upward into the tunnel, clutching the rope.

"Oh, well," he said, as Acorna exclaimed over his scrapes, "it's only skin, plenty more where that came from."

They replaced the vent, went back around the curve, and collected Dr. Hoa, who was trembling violently in reaction to his salvation.

"I am not a man of violence," he whispered in apology. "I am a scientist. .. and I was trying to get away from people like these. Now we are all trapped. ..."

Acorna touched his cheek with her horn and the spasms stopped. Toward the end of their passage, they had to tie the rope around his shoulders, and Acorna pulled him behind her, with Markel helping the scientist over the joins and aprons that connected the clicks of interior tubes and conduits. As soon as they reached Markel's nest, the boy picked up his listener, a device that sat comfortably in his ear, and indicated that Acorna should make Dr. Hoa comfortable on the pile of miscellaneous clothing and thermal sheeting behind them.

Acorna was glad to oblige. While she was at it, she also assessed the scientist's other injuries and healed them. He had been badly knocked about before the Palomellese even began their systematic destruction of his fingers and hands; she could not blame him for having given them enough information to use his research, nor for the fear and despair that had all but overwhelmed him in the tunnels. But as she soothed his bodily aches, he seemed calmer and more in control of himself. When she was finished, he caught her by the arm, his eyes once more alive with intelligent curiosity.

"Ki-lin?" he asked in a bare whisper that would not reach Markel, occupied with eavesdropping.

She smiled and put her finger across her lips as their young guide so often had.

He closed his eyes once, indicating he understood, but he also put one frail, healed finger to his lips and then pressed it against hers.

She turned to take a water bottle from the rack above her head and handed it to him. Though he clutched the bottle as possessively as any thirsty man would, Acorna did not have to warn him to take small, slow sips and accustom his body to water again.

Markel was grinning with delight at whatever he was hearing on his earphone. He kept listening, but occasionally would whisper at what was going on.

"They found Hoa missing first, then checked the rest of the cells. They haven't a clue how he and Calum got away, and they got into an argument about it and haven't yet checked to find out that you're gone, too, Acorna. That's as well. Gives us more time to figure. ..." The boy paused, pushed the device more securely into his ear, his eyes blinking angrily. Then he relaxed and smiled again.

"I got to meet someone. And fast," he said, taking out the listener and carefully restoring it to its pouch on tube wall. "You stay put and stay quiet," he murmured to Acorna and Calum. He glanced over at Dr. Hoa, shrugged his shoulders, and crawled away with the speed of a spider after an intruder in its web.

Acorna saw that Dr. Hoa was asleep, the water bottle securely clutched against his chest with both hands. Briefly she remembered the swollen, distorted knuckles and torn, burned skin she had seen before her healing touch had soothed them. She shivered and tried not to imagine what deliberate cruelty had inflicted those injuries.

"I don't much like this," Calum muttered. "How do you know we can trust the kid?"

Acorna gave him a chilly look. "For starters, he just saved us both from imprisonment and you, at least, from torture. Then there's the fact that his father was killed resisting the coup that put these people in power-

"So he says. How do you know he's telling the truth?"

"Well, we're free, aren't we?"

"Are we?" Calum stretched until one elbow banged into either side of the tunnel where they crouched.

"Damn!" Acorna exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of asking Markel to send a message to either Shenjemi or Maganos-or better, both?"

Whatever could Market have heard that had produced first fury and then humor? Acorna pondered that for a moment. No way to tell now. While waiting, she might as well restore her strength. She took a careful mouthful of water and munched on another carrot as quietly as one can munch a carrot. But they were not

vegetables that dissolved even when mixed with her saliva. She swallowed hard, forcing down the half-masticated bits of carrot, so that she could listen once again.

After an interminable wait she heard slight noises coming toward them-but they sounded like the movements of a large man, not like Markel's quick, delicate crawl. She threw a blanket over Dr. Hoa in the faint hope of concealing him from whoever had discovered their hiding place, and looked at Calum with wide, frightened eyes. He squeezed her hand reassuringly-at least, she assumed he meant it to be reassuring.

With her acute hearing, she registered before Calum did that there were two people approaching them, the smaller one in front.

"It's all right," she whispered to Calum, "Markel's bringing someone."

"That," Calum whispered, "is exactly what I was afraid of."

"Acorna?"

She lifted her head, identifying Markel's whisper. The much larger person behind him looked vaguely familiar, yet the feel of him was completely strange . . . she felt sure she had never been in his presence before, yet his face raised some chord of recognition in her.

He caught sight of her, goggled and gulped and pointed. Markel looked around, then at Acorna, and he, too, goggled.

"Damn," Acorna said out loud. In her hasty attempt to conceal Dr. Hoa, her hat had come off. And her horn was visible.

Calum began chuckling. What was so funny about the situation? A moment ago he'd been sure Markel had betrayed them, now he thought it was funny that her horn was in plain sight?

"It's all right, Acorna," Calum said, "and so is Markel, if he's hanging out with this worthless space drifter."

The man with Markel chuckled in his turn. "Might have known if there was trouble, you'd be mixed up in it somehow, Calum. But what were you thinking of to get young Acorna into it?"

Acorna gasped in surprise, and the man turned to her. "No, you don't know me, but I've heard plenty about you."

"Oh?"

"Gill used to send me holo's of you, before we lost touch. Even the Brain, here"- he jerked his head toward Calum-"occasionally mentioned you. When he bothered to write, that is!"

"You can't be ..."

"Johnny Greene, very much at your service, ma'am."

Acorna took a deep breath of relief. "Of course! Gill has a holo of you in his office, but..."

The man in the holo looked much younger, his head thrown back in carefree laughter. This man's features were the same, but now they were drawn in the lines of strain and watchfulness that seemed to mark everybody who had survived Nueva Fallona's coup on the Haven.

"You could have told me," she scolded Calum.

"Didn't have time," Calum defended himself. "Look, I didn't know he was going to show up here."

Markel looked about anxiously. "Where'd you stash Dr. Hoa?"

Acorna reached over and gently raised a corner of the cover to show the exhausted doctor sleeping, the tiniest of smiles in the corners of his mouth.

"Is that a relief!" Johnny exclaimed, when he saw the scientist. "I don't know how you did it, Markel. . ."

"Very carefully," the boy said, sitting with his arms resting casually on his knees, totally relaxed and very, very pleased with himself. "I got them out through the air vents. They fit diagonally through the openings once I took the grates out. Only this one"-he jerked his chin toward Calum--"needed a little encouragement." He frowned as he took a closer look at Calum. "Say, how'd you stop the bleeding? I could've sworn you lost some skin back there!"

"Oh, it was A- " Calum began, then stopped as Acorna gave him a warning shake of the head. It wasn't that she didn't trust Markel, but he was being asked to assimilate a lot at one time. And if something went wrong . . . she refused even to consider that. There would be time enough to explain her unique healing capabilities when they got out of here-and they would! "~a fuss about nothing, as it turned out," Calum substituted for what he'd been going to say. "I sure thought I was going to get scraped raw on the way out, though!"

"Markel," Acorna said urgently, "can you get messages out as well as eavesdrop on their communications? We ought to alert the Shenjemi Federation about what's happening to Rushima- and send to Maganos for help, too."

"Might could," Markel allowed. "Have to tap the main power lines to boost a message, though, and they just might notice the surge. Lemme check on who's on shift now. . . ." He tapped his earphone back in place and listened for a moment. His eyes lit up like those of a much younger child planning some mischief.

"Ooooh, is Nueva furious!" he said. "She's giving all of them what-for and threatening to space the next incompetent who manages to lose a prisoner. 'They'"-Market thumbed his chest bone-"have got to be found. Oho!" And he sat bolt upright a moment, then relaxed again. But the sparkle was gone from his eyes. "Sengrat's just pointed out that I was never accounted for in the original coup . . . and Ximena reminded him that I used to know ways about the ship in the tubes and stuff." The way he emphasized her name warned Acorna that Ximena was, or had been, someone special to Markel. "They really are on Nueva's side; they're not just going along to save their own skins," he said. "Even Ximena ... I used to like her. I don't understand people like that."

"Neither do I," Acorna told him.

"You're a couple of charming innocents," Johnny told them, 'but I for one would like to know what they plan to do with this information and how Markel thinks he's going to stall them- because I know what that look in your eyes means, kid," he said, ruffling the top of Markel's head.

"Nueva was just going to send someone through that bis tube, which would have been a fine game of hide-and-seek in this maze. We could've run the searchers ragged," Markel reported. "Then Sengrat suggested they should use gas. He's still underestimating me." Even as he spoke, he was rooting through yet another hiding place and came out with one hand clasping breathing masks and the other emergency oxygen bottles.

Acorna smiled. "We won't need those."

Johnny shot Acorna a wondering look.

"She is Ki-lin," murmured Dr. Hoa, who had awakened during Markel's excited report. "Her horn purifies water and air and heals. Does it not, most gracious lady Ki-lin?"

"I am not Ki-lin, Dr. Hoa, but the rest of it is accurate," she said.

"See? She has healed my hands and arms from what they did to me." The scientist shoved one sleeve up to show a slightly wrinkled but healthy forearm with a few patches of paler skin replacing the deep burns. "And the rest of me, too," he said with some surprise as he realized he could sit up and move without pain.

"And my knuckles," Markel said, eyes wide as he finally noticed. "My knees don't hurt either, nor my back." He looked at Calum accusingly. "Hey-you did get scraped bad, getting through that vent hole, didn't you? And tried to persuade me I'd been imagining it, when the truth is Acorna healed you?"

"We thought it might be hard for you to accept," Calum said. "Some people don't believe. ..."

Markel looked reverently at Acorna. "Even with a demonstration? What an asset for our side! They're never going to get their hands on you, lady. Not while I can still breathe."

"I'll see that's a long, long time," Acorna said.

Then Market pressed the earpiece and held up a hand to stop any further talk. "Yes, that's what they're going to do. Ximena is small enough to make a search once the air has cleared up." His face clouded over. "She doesn't want to ... I thought maybe she wasn't as bad as the rest of them . . . but she doesn't care about what happens to us, she's just afraid I'll survive the gas somehow and go after her in the tunnels. I couldn't hurt her," he said sadly, "not Ximena, no matter what she's done. I thought she would know that much, at least."

"Well, let's not wait to meet her," Johnny said, changing the subject briskly before Markel's emotions could overpower him. "Markel, can you get us from here to the hangar deck?" He a-lanced at Calum. "I'm thinking that your ship would make a better command center than this tunnel . . . we could send our messages for sure, and maybe even get clean away if Markel can disable the Haven's grapples."

"No problem! Can't you see, we're already at Red 32 x Blue 16, all we have to do is take a side route through Blue 16-24 and cut across at the intersection of Green 48 ... well, never mind," Market slowed down as he sensed the bafflement of his companions.

"I'm just a simple techno-nerd," Johnny said. "I don't happen to keep a 3-D color map of the ship's maintenance tunnels in my memory."

"It's real easy," Markel said. "I'll tell you all about it when we have time."

"That," Johnny said hollowly, "is exactly what I'm afraid of."



"Huh?"

"Never mind!" Johnny gave Markel a friendly push. "Get going, O friendly native guide. Lets hit the road ... or rather," as Johnny caught Markel's startled look of warning, "let us make noiseless progress away. Do we need anything you have stashed here, Markel?"

"Water?" Markel took down the fabric that had held the water bottles to the wall and it folded out into a sleeveless tunic, the water supplies on the back of it. "Ration bars. My headset. These ... no, too heavy... but I gotta have these," he mused over a collection of tools, rapidly making his selection. He stuffed the necessary items into another backpack, draping thermal covers over everyone's shoulders, even Dr. Hoa's, and then, lifting up a corner of the tube wall, shoved whatever remained into the opening. It took a few hard pushes to get the opening to resume its normal shape. The area was back to normal. Markel had left no signs of his presence.

"This way, now," he said, pointing before he took Dr. Hoas hand.

Later Acorna would wonder how they had managed that exodus. The healing properties of her horn were prodigious, as well as its air-purifying abilities; but the constant effort of making the air around them breathable eventually exhausted even her. And there were other problems. They did not have the luxury of sticking to the "safe" routes Markel had mapped out for himself;

now they had to follow the passageways that held least risk of detection or offered the shortest path to the hangar. Some of the walls they crept through felt cold, others almost unbearably hot and, over one section-the coil to main drive-Acorna went from one member of their group to another, to heal blistered knees, hands, and other portions of their anatomies they could not keep from touching the hot metal.

"Lousy insulation," Johnny muttered, as Acorna laid her horn up and down his thigh where the material of his pant leg had been seared away.

They rested every time they reached a double tube crossing because there Acorna and Johnny could stand upright and ease their backs.

"You do know where you're taking us, young'un?" Johnny asked.

"I told you, Johnny Greene, I know this ship like no one else, First or Second Generation. What's the matter, can't you take the heat?" Markel asked so fiercely that Johnny held up his hands in mock self-defense.

"Lay on, Macduff," the spacer said with a smothered laugh, "and damned be he who first cries Hold, Enough! That is," he added, "if you and Dr. Hoa can manage, Acorna? "

Acorna wanted nothing more than to be through with this claustrophobic journey. She fervently assured Johnny and Markel that there was no need to slow down on her behalf.

Markel had indeed known exactly where he was taking them, a storage room for tools on the hangar deck itself. Through the grill on the narrow window, they could even see the AcaSecki, clamped tight to the deck but still in front of the other smaller vessels that were part of the Haven's force.

"And that is their first mistake," Markel said with great satisfaction.

As if he hadn't been crawling for days through narrow tubes and inspection conduits, Markel made space on the worktable and started plugging his equipment into some of the power-tool sockets. Everyone else flopped down, exhausted, on the metal floor. Acorna was certain she would retain the honeycomb pattern of the room's floor on the tender parts other anatomy, but it was worth it to stretch out at last. The cramped journey through the tunnels had tried her sorely; for once she envied Calum his lack of inches.

"Ha! They haven't found anything, and it's going to take them days to inspect the entire network," Markel said. He rubbed his hands together and glanced in the direction of the AcaSecki. He tried to peer in other directions, but his view was restricted. "Oops." He pulled back as if someone could have seen his face in the window. "Guards." He peeked out again. "No more than three that I can see. There're usually ten or twelve on hangar duty." Gleefully he washed his hands. "We really have them running up their own . . . sorry." Markel caught himself at Johnny's sharp nudge and shot a quick apology in Acorna's direction. "But that doesn't get us out of here."

"If we could get to the AcaSecki and power up," Calum asked Markel, "could you patch into the Havens command centers from there and disable their communications and other systems?"

"Nothing to it," Markel nodded, preening a little.

Calum stood, shakily, and pointed at the window. "Lemme have a look?" Markel moved aside. Calum grunted. "You're sure there're only three here now?" Markel nodded. "What we need is a diversion . . . that is, if you can get us out of this storage room."

"No problemo," Markel said, and, taking an odd-shaped bit of plastic from a thigh pocket, inserted it into the door. They could all hear the light "snick" as the lock

was opened. "Only now what? Soon as I open the door, we're in clear sight of at least two of the guards."

"And each of them would like to take credit for the recapture of Dr. Hoa," Johnny said, with a gleam of malice in his eyes. "If you don't mind acting as bait. Doctor?"

"I owe the universe whatever action will repair my disastrous misjudgment," Dr. Hoa said with a slight bow, "even should it require the sacrifice of my life."

"Oh, I don't think it will come to that," Calum said cheerfully, hefting a length of thick steel bar which he had quietly "acquired" during their passage through the tunnels. Acorna looked around the supply room and found a heavy mallet, which she swung about to test its balance.

"That looks good," Johnny said, reaching for the mallet, but Acorna shook her head.

"Find your own weapons," she told him. "I like the heft of this."

Johnny's eyebrows shot up, but he made no further protest.

"I did mention, didn't I, that she's very independent?" Calum asked drily.

"You didn't tell me the half of it," Johnny muttered, rummaging around the cluttered room for something he could use as a weapon. He settled on a length of thin cable that he carefully knotted around a pair of screwdrivers.

"I've got a better idea than using the good doctor as bait," Calum said. "Markel, you said you could hack into hangar security and disable the grapples on the AcaSeckil. If you did it now, that'd distract them for a moment right when we make our break and give us a head start on getting out of here."

"Start opening the door and get ready," Markel said, pressing more key pads. "I got the hangar security on line and . . ."

The sound of the grapples retracting echoed throughout the large hangar. The guards went running toward the ship, and Markel and his followers were out of the storage room before the guards spotted them.

One of the two guards on the catwalk pounded on a device on the wall before he followed his companion down to the hangar floor. The three guards made straight for the AcaSeckil and the attackers made straight for them.

Acorna let her hammer fly at the nearest guard as he lifted his stunner. Her weapon shattered his hand and sent his stunner skittering across the metal floor, right to Markel's feet. Markel picked it up and downed the top one on the ladder, while Johnny, coming out from behind the bulk of a small shuttlecraft, tackled the third guard before he could raise his weapon. Calum looked around, puzzled that there was no one for him to attack.

"That was too easy," he said.

Markel was taking the stairs to the catwalk two at a time, and running along it, checking the unlocked hatches leading into the interior of the ship.

"We're secure in here now," he called, and sauntered to the farthest ladder, sliding down it without using the actual steps. The boy had had a lot of practice in such acrobatics. The others followed him in more conventional fashion but with scarcely less haste. Even though until Calum powered up they could not lock the hatches, Acorna felt more secure once she and all her friends were inside the AcaSecki.

"Well done, Markel," Johnny said, throwing an arm about the boys shoulders. "But what do we do now? Once they see us leave, they merely latch the tractor beam on us and haul us back aboard. Unless you can disable that. ..."

"Yes, that much I can still do," Markel said, "but..."

"The AcaSecki's fast," Calum said, "but, even with the tractor beam useless, I'd be surprised if the Haven doesn't have laser cannon and missiles." Markel nodded, looking mournful. "Both- and there's no way I can get into those controls."

"You mean there's some security on this ship you haven't worked around?" Johnny pretended amazement, but Markel looked so hangdog that he patted the boy on the back and told him it didn't matter; there was more than one way to skin a cat.

"We may not be able to get clean away," Calum said cheerfully, "but we can activate the ship long enough to send out a spurt for help in all possible directions, then lock down again and ... well. . ."

They all looked at one another for a long moment, acknowledging that they might have come to the end of this particular road. Their takeover of the AcaSecki was not likely to go unnoticed for long, no matter how cleverly Markel disguised his jamming of the communications between the harbor and the main deck; and they could hardly hold the little ship like a besieged fortress. "Well, we'll jump through that spacewarp when we come to it," Johnny said with a shrug, accepting the

inevitable. "Better get on with it-no telling exactly how much time Markel can buy us with his system manipulations."

Calum started the reactivation sequence while Acorna was busy framing a spurt code message, which she thought should go to Maganos, Kezdet (in case Mr. Li was at home), and Laboue.

"I'm thinking of Rafiks Uharu, too," Calum said. "Won't take more than three seconds a spurt, and it'll quadruple the chances of one message getting through."

"First of all we send one in clear to Shenjemi Federation," Acorna said, and when Calum opened his mouth to protest, she added firmly: "We promised." Calum sighed. "So we did." And looked up the direction code for the Federation. The other destinations he had already long memorized. A low whistle startled them both as Markel, with Johnny Greene assisting Dr. Hoa, came into the main compartment.

"This is some ship," Markel said, awed.

"You can say that again," Johnny added, equally impressed as he helped Dr. Hoa into one of the comfortable chairs. "You got a galley on board?" he asked.

Acorna pointed.

"Is there a shield over the hangar entry, Markel?" Calum asked. "Our messages could bounce right back at us if there is."

"I took that off when I disabled the grapples," the boy said absently, far more intent on prowling around the room, running his hands over the soft fabrics and looking into compartments in the furnishings. "There's so much space for everything," he said, standing in the middle of the room, arms outspread and turning slowly around.

Johnny came back with a tray full of steaming cups which he offered first to Dr. Hoa and then to the others. "A pick-you-up," he explained. "This ship isn't just a pretty space, it's well appointed."

"Got your earphone in, Markel? I'm about to spurt, and I want to know if they catch it," Calum said.

"Gotta be outside for that," Markel said, and headed off to the hatch. "If they do hear us, get back inside in one helluva hurry, lad, because I'll take off and risk their firing at us; we'll just have to hope that everyone's too busy looking for us to see us," Calum warned.

"Gotcha," was Markel's insouciant response.

"On my mark," Calum said, raising his arm, "NOW!" He reactivated the ship and waited tensely through the seconds before the corn unit would be ready to function. "Anything on your end, Markel?" After a moments silence, he toggled down the spurt relay.

"Wait!" Market cried from outside the ship. "What? You don't-" The boy's cry was too loud to miss, and filled with an unidentifiable emotion.

Calum hit the toggle for the spurt relay and punched in the shutdown sequence for the ship in three quick, deft motions.

"I'm sorry," he said to Acorna. "The Shenjemi message got through, I don't know about the coded spurt to our friends; it was processing the multiple address list when I shut down. With luck, some of the addresses will have been cleared. Where's Market? What was he yelling about?"

As if on cue, the boy wandered in, a dazed and incredulous look on his face. "I think it's all over."

"What's all over?" Johnny demanded.

"I think . . ." and Markel hesitated, "... I think there's been another coup. Nueva and the others were so busy chasing us, they weren't paying attention to the other passengers. Nueva and her gang've been taken prisoner. I think the Starfarers--at least what are left of them--are back in charge again."

"I think we stay right where we are until we know that's what's happened," Johnny said, and gestured for Calum to close the hatch manually. "And let's not reactivate the AcaSecki just yet. If everything's okay, we have plenty of time to let our friends at home know--and if it isn't, we don't really need to alert anybody who didn't notice that one spurt. We'll just listen in for a bit. You can patch in to the bridge using Havens systems, can't you, Markel?"

"I think so."

With shaking hands, the boy began to do just that.

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hariinye was too stunned to resist the security guard's firm hold on his arm. First the children, then the man seemed to have resisted his projections. Was there some force field in this part of the base that annulled telepathic projections? He sought contact with the Linyaari on board the ship to reassure himself.

(Names of the Four First Mares, what have you gotten yourself into now, Thariinye?)

(Is this what you consider "having an inconspicuous look round"?)

(I told you he was too immature to be trusted with this responsibility.)

Wincing, Thariinye closed his mind to further contact. All right, his mental powers were as acute as ever . . . but what he heard from the three enraged ladies on board the ship was not in the least reassuring! He would just as soon take his chances with the barbarians. After all, they were a puny lot; he could crush this man's skull with one kick from his powerful hooves, if he chose to.

(Thariinye! You'll do no such thing!) ,

(I am shamed that any blood kin of mine should even contemplate such a khievii action.)

(Much too immature. I told you so.)

"Oh, do stop nattering at me!" Thariinye snapped aloud, but in Linyaari.

"Don't know what kind of foreign gabble that is, mister," the stolid security guard said, "but iggerance of the law ain't no excuse. Ifnyou don't speak Basic, you'll get a interpreter."

"You can't take the Lady away!" one of the pestiferous brats around them cried out.

"Kid, this guy ain't no lady," the guard said. "Now git on back toyer mining class. I'm takin' him straight to Mr. Li."

The tallest girl nodded slowly. "I see . . . this is not Acorna." She glared down the protests of the other children. "I know the Lady, and she is like this one, but. . . different. Mr. Li will know what to do."

The guard hurried Thariinye away before the children could start any more fuss.

"What. . . law . . . of yours ... do I break ... by existing . . . in this form?" Thariinye had to concentrate to get the words out;

it was a harsh, tongue-mangling language, this "Basik."

The guard looked Thariinye straight in the chest . . . about where his eyes would have been if he'd been the same height as this puny biped. So that much of the

projection was still working! The man certainly behaved as if he saw nothing unusual in Thariinye's appearance ... so what was it that had alerted him?

"I ain't interested in your beautiful form and figure, mister, and neither are them kids back there. But since you DO speak Basic, you oughta know better than to go flashin' in a public place. Specially kids," he added. "Right down on molesting kids, Mr. Li is, and who'd blame him, seein' what them kids already been through? If'n it was up to me, I'd have you deported without a space suit."

The guard's anger lifted his thought-stream momentarily out of the dull "grubble, grubble, grubble" of normal thoughts and gave Thariinye a devastatingly clear image of a tall, handsome, silver-haired biped making sexual overtures to a group of shrieking children, followed by associated images so disgusting he hastily closed his mind against them. He was so shocked that he did not even try to persuade the guard to forget his memories and let him go.

(You idiot, Thariinye! They must have a nudity taboo.) (Nobody TOLD me!) (I knew we should have taken longer to study the culture.)

"Lucky for you Mr. Giloglie ordered you brought directly to Delszaki Li's private rooms," the guard said, steering them through a side corridor that opened onto an antechamber lined in crimson silk, -with yellow patterns on the hangings. "There's some as would have you lynched for even thinkin' about what you just done."

He nodded at a young man sitting to one side behind a carved wooden console, and an oval opening in front of Thariinye widened like the pupil of a Linyaari eye to admit them.

"Very good, Barnes. You may return to your regular duties now," said a slender, dark-topped biped standing in a tense attitude of expectation just inside the next room, a spacious chamber furnished with soft couches and small tables.

Thariinye ducked to get through the oval opening and redoubled the force of his projections.

(You aren't seeing anything unusual. I'm really very boring. You want me to go away.) The dark-topped biped swayed and put one hand to its forehead. The gesture tightened the fabric across its chest so that Thariinye was able to see its enlarged mammarys, large enough to indicate it was of the same gender as Khariinya but nothing to compare with hers. Perhaps it was an immature member of the species ... a nymphet?

"I don't know what's coming over me," she said weakly. "I thought. . . but I did see ..."



She gazed vaguely in Thariinye's direction with eyes that clearly did not really see him, but only something she would take as "not unusual" in this place. "Excuse me ... do I know you?"

"Judith, what's the matter with you?" A large, red-topped biped with an amazing display of facial hair burst through an inner door. "Acorna, where the devil have you ..."

This one slowed, and the same confusion crossed his features. "Wait a minute. I thought..."

He backed up through the doorway by which he'd entered, glanced up at something, and looked back at Thariinye. "I don't get it," he said, and rubbed his eyes. "On the vid . . . but you're not. . ."

The hiss of machinery behind him became louder; the red one stepped aside, out of sight, and a very aged biped mounted on a floating box maneuvered through the doorway. Thariinye had an instant impression of fragile, paper-dry, wrinkled skin around a withered frame, bright dark eyes, and a piercing intelligence.

(I deduce some kind of telepathic damper,) the new biped thought.

Thariinye sighed in relief. (Then your people can hear with the heart as well as the ears?)

(It is not a well-understood talent among those of my race, but the possibility has long been discussed. A sage of this man's people once said that when the impossible has been discarded, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth.)

Thariinye tossed his forelock out of his weary eyes. If this was the aged being's first experience of mind-speech, why was he taking it so calmly? And how had he figured it out so fast?

(You young people are so easily excited.)

Thariinye felt the dry amusement in the old being's thoughts.

(Confirmation of a long-discussed hypothesis is gratifying, not frightening! As for deductions, I could conceive of no other hypothesis which would account for the fact that your image appears as one like Acorna on the vid-screens, yet all who see you in person take you for a man like us.)

(Except those blasted kids!)

(My species often claims that children's sight is purer and more truthful than that of adults. Is this then true?)

(They're too immature for thought-speech. I suppose you could call that pure-I call it damned inconvenient!)

(Ahh. Will be most interesting to learn details of what you call thought-speech. But first things must come first. Let us take tea together, and perhaps you will tell me what you know of our Acorna.)

(OUR 'Khornya,) Thariinye corrected firmly, (and it is for your people to tell us what you have done with her.)

(There are more of you?)

(Introduce us AT ONCE, Thariinye. How could you be so rude? This is clearly not a barbarian but a truly hnyarii being.) (You are so inconsiderate, Thariinye!)

The aged biped's dark eyes widened, and he let out a hiss of comprehension.

"This is wonderful," he whispered aloud. "Judit, you will please make ready tea for . . . how many?"

(There are four of us.) There didn't seem to be much point in concealing their number when this being had so rapidly deduced so much about them.

"I don't see what is so wonderful!" said the female addressed as "Judit"-terrible, tongue-mangling name; how would he ever manage to say it?

"We speak in mind," the old one said in his husky whisper. "I hnd is much less tiring than manipulating vocal apparatus. You will please learn art of mind-speak as soon as possible, my Judit. Perhaps these new ki-iin will be so kind as to teach you." To Thariinye he suggested, (It might reduce confusion if you were to allow my companions to see yourself in your true aspect.)

(How rude, Thariinye! One does not project illusions onto the minds of linyarii beings to whom one has been properly introduced.)

(SHUT UP! Oh, sorry,) Thariinye sent to the old one, (not you, my aunt Melireenya. She is the most terrible nagging- well, you'll see.)

(I look forward to meeting your companions.)

There was a gasp of amazement from the younger bipeds gathered around the old one as Thariinye dropped his cloaking projections and stood before them as

himself: a seven-foot-tall Liinyar male in the pride of health and youth, as good a specimen of the race, in his own humble opinion, as they could hope to find.

The momentary silence was broken by a slender, darktopped biped -with a facial structure resembling that of the female, but -without the enlarged glands on its chest.

"I told you that was not Acorna," it said smugly.

(WHERE IS SHE? Oh, sorry. I did not mean to shout at you . . . but we are most concerned for the fate of our 'Khornya.)

(Is long story. You wall please to take tea first, then when all are calm we will discuss what is to be done.)

Thariinye was chagrined to find that this frail, ancient biped, who claimed to have just now exercised telepathic communication for the first time, was able to shut his mind completely to further queries. The portion of his mind that Thariinye could reach now resembled a wall of polished green stone, so smooth that nothing could adhere to it, so hard that nothing could penetrate it.

Once admitted to the innermost chamber, Thariinye understood how these beings had so easily seen through his calming projections. The vid-screens transmitted the input of mechanical image-sensing devices which, having no thoughts, fears, or emotions, could not be confused by the Linyaari art of projecting illusory feelings.

(Really, Thariinye. You should have realized that beings capable of some limited form of space travel would have other mechanical devices.)

(Huh! I don't recall YOU mentioning the possibility. Aunt Melireenya.)

(The boy is right, Melireenya. We are all culpable of underrating these beings and their intelligence. Already we have discovered that their technology, though crude, is effective and that at least one of them is capable of clear mind-speech. They may well have other surprises in store for us.)

(Let's hope they have something in store that'll surprise the Khieevi. Latest communications from Home say the invasion fleet is definitely targeting this sector.)

(First we get 'Khornya back,) Neeva put in firmly. (THEN we will tell them about the Khieevi. We do not wish to frighten them as we did the first ones we contacted. Thariinye, you are not to discuss the Khieevi until we are with you, do you understand?)

(No fear, Neeva. Now that the old one has closed his mind to me, I am having enough trouble saying ANYTHING in this horrible language of theirs. It hurts my mouth to pronounce the words, and they are so dim they never understand anything until I say it three times.)

Actually, Judit was pleased that her facility -with languages extended to being able to decipher Thariinye's accent. He had wakened sooner and spent less total time with the LAANYE than the older Linyaari had, and it showed in his difficulty with Basic Interlingua phonemics. Her name was rendered as Yuudhithe" and as for his apology for violating their culture's nudity taboo, well, it was a good thing she'd had some idea what he was talking about, or she never would have figured it out.

Once they understood that Thariinye knew no more than they about Acorna's whereabouts. Gill and Rafik were perfectly content to let Judit do the hard work of making conversation with Thariinye and translating his remarks into proper Basic for their benefit, while Mr. Li took one of his quick naps in the hover-chair and conserved his energy for the upcoming meeting.

There were fine beads of sweat along Judit's hairline, and she could feel a tension headache gripping the back of her neck before Pal brought the other three Linyaari to Mr. Li's inner room.

(At least you haven't gotten into any more trouble while w6 were on our way.)

(You can relax now, Thari. We'll take care of everything.)

"Missiter Li," Thariinye said, "allow me to initraduuse mi khomipaanians." He would have gritted his teeth if it had been possible to do so while working his mouth around the harsh syllables of the alien language. Wasn't it just like Melireenya to come swanning in and take over after he had taken the risks and done all the really hard work? "Neeva of the Renyilaaghe, visedhaanye ferilii. Melireenya of the Balaave, gheraalye ve-khanyii. Khaari of the Giryeeni, gheraalye malivii." At least the Linyaari names flowed easily off his tongue, and he did not put himself to the trouble of translating their titles.

"Inn your speech," Neeva said easily, "I believe I would be knownn as Enyvoy Extraordinyari. My companyaan Melireenya is our Senior Communycations Officer, and Khaari is our Navigation Officer."

Gill nodded stiffly; Rafik bowed; Pal took the envoy's hand and bowed over it, touching his lips to the back of the blunt fingers so like his Acorna's. The pupils of Neeva's eyes narrowed briefly to silver slits, then widened again. The fleeting expression was so like Acorna's that Judit felt tears spring to her eyes.

"We are honored to make your acquaintance," she murmured for Mr. Li, unaware that he was already speaking to the newcomers in their own private manner.

(Is indeed great honor to be the first of our race to greet others of Acorna's kind.)

(Not exactly the first. But that first lot wouldn't even-)

(Thariinye!)

Delszaki Li glanced at Judit, and she moved closer to him, the better to hear his labored whisper. "Can they understand languages other than Basic?" he whispered in his mother's native tongue, which was a first language for more than half the people of Kezdet.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance," Judit said promptly in the same language. Neeva's eyes narrowed to silver slits again.

(Honored Li, I apologize. We thought we had learned your tongue already, but I cannot follow what this person is saying.)

(Not to be concerned. Takes some time to understand obscure idioms of Basic,) Li responded. He quickly called up the image of the Jade Palace to shield his mind once again, lest the Linyaari pick up some hint of his innermost thoughts. "Judit, be polite to our guests," he reprimanded her, "speak Basic, and slowly."

Judit blushed and apologized for her carelessness and gave no sign that she had acted under Mr. Li's orders to begin with.

Delszaki Li was severely embarrassed to confess to the Linyaari that he had lost track of Acorna only shortly before her own people came for her, and he made no effort to conceal his feelings from them. (My house is shamed. I will tell you that we took all possible care for Acorna from day of her finding, but how will you believe this when now she is lost? Descendants of Li will be mourning this day through centuries to come.)

When this was said aloud, Rafik interpolated, "Excuse me, Mr. Li, but let us not say yet that Acorna is lost. We know her intended destination - "

"But not the route," Gill put in.

Rafik's lips twitched. "More than you might think can be deduced from intelligent study of the star maps, Declan Giloglie. Given what we know of the accident to the hydroponics section of the Aca<sup>^</sup>ecki- "

"On't-day ee-bay inay uch-say ay uny-hay oo-tay ell-tay em-thay allay ou-yay ow-knay," Gill interrupted. Lacking the multilingual background shared by Li and the

Kendoros, he had independently come to his own conclusion about how best to converse privately in front of beings who could learn Basic overnight.

"Why not?" Rafik demanded.

Gill glanced at the envoys. "Ee-way on't-day ow-knay oowhay ey-thay eally-ray are-ay," he said. "Ey-thay ight-may eebay ee-thay eople-pay oo-whay arooned-may Corna-Ay."

Rafik put his hand on Gill's arm and drew the larger man into the antechamber.

"Stop making a bloody fool of yourself with that pig Latin," he whispered. "We've got no reason to mistrust them."

"We've got no reason to trust them, either," Gill returned in a furious whisper. "SOMEBODY set Acorna adrift to die in space; until we find out who and why, we're not turning her over to the first funny-looking strangers to waltz in and demand her!"

Rafik's lips twitched. "At the moment," he murmured, "we can't turn her over, can we? So while I'm studying the star maps, why don't you sit down with the Linyaari and find out what they have to say about Acorna? "

By that time the tea Mr. Li had requested was ready, and the small social ceremony helped to alleviate the strain all parties were feeling. Knowing Acorna's tastes, he had ordered a blend of herbal tea with alfalfa for the envoys, served in the handleless cups favored by Acorna, while the humans, with their more slender and more flexible digits, drank smoky Kilumbemba Oolong from cups with delicate porcelain handles. Melireenya took pains to tell Judit aloud that she had noticed and did very much appreciate this evidence of attention to their tastes.

"Is no trouble," Mr. Li whispered, so that humans as well as Linyaari could understand them. "We have learned much from our beloved Acorna. Now we hope to learn more from you. Origin of Acorna is still mystery. Gill, you will tell of finding her?"

Gill cleared his throat and briefly recounted their discovery of Acorna, asleep in what they had later deduced was an escape pod, drifting close to an asteroid he and Calum and Rafik had been mining. He downplayed the work the three of them had put into raising the foundling, not to mention the fact that they had lost their jobs and almost lost their ship, to protect her from becoming the ward of Amalgamated Mining and subject to whatever experiments their Linguistics and Psych department could dream up, but his affection for Acorna came through underlying every word and moved the Linyaari envoys deeply. He skipped the tangled tale of her adventures on Kezdet and ended by explaining that Calum

had come up with an ingenious theory for locating Acorna's home world and that he and Acorna had just taken off in search of it-unfortunately without filing a navigation plan.

(One chance in mitanyaakhi!) Neeva silently exclaimed. (Vaanye could not possibly have foreseen that the explosion would not only transport Acorna out of danger but would bring her to another populated sector of the galaxy . . . and into the hands of these good Linyaari who raised her as one of their own.)

(Calm down, Neeva. Good they may be, perhaps even linyarii to a degree, but they are not Linyaari, and I for one am not sure how far we may trust them.)

(You are too cynical! Can't you feel the truth and love in this large red one's mind?)

(I agree with Neeva. This one at least is linyarii, if not technically Linyaari. We should tell them the truth of our mission.)

(We don't know that all of them are good people. From this man Ghil's story alone it is clear that some, at least, of this race think nothing of experimenting on other sapient beings. Such behavior strikes me as more khievii than linyarii. Let us go slowly here.)

"So," Gill finished, "that's what we know about Acorna. And what we're all curious to find out is, exactly how did one of your younglings come to be floating in our sector, in a pod that couldn't have kept her alive many more hours, with no signal to alert anyone to her existence? You folks seem mighty concerned for her now; strikes me you've come a long way to retrieve somebody who seems to've been thrown out with the trash in the first place." He rested his big, heavy-knuckled hands on his knees and looked from one of the envoys to another, his bright blue eyes challenging them to account for the plight in which they had found Acorna.

(Neeva?)

(What do you think, Neeva? Shall we tell them?)

(You are the envoy, Neeva, and 'Khornya is your sister-child. The decision is yours.)

"Well?" Gill challenged as the silence after his speech stretched on and on. Most of the humans in the room waited eagerly for the Linyaari complement to Gill's story; only Rafk, once more absorbed in his star maps and calculations, -was oblivious to the mounting tension as the Linyaari looked at one another but did not speak.

(We love Acorna as our own child,) Delszaki Li told them. (We 'will not give her over to those who may have sought to destroy her in the first place.) He repeated his words aloud so that the other humans could understand the statement. Judit nodded firmly, Pal folded his arms, and Gill merely shifted his weight a little forward, like a man in a bar anticipating that fists might soon start swinging.

(The red one does not look so linyarii now, Neeva. He looks quite capable of violence. Do you really want to trust this race on so little evidence?)

(I would not give up my worst enemy to the Khieevi,) Neeva replied violently. (We are ethically obliged to tell them.)

(What if they throw us out and shut down like that first bunch?)

(We will have to take that risk. Anyway, I think they are telling the truth when they say that they do not know where Acorna is now. We have as good a chance of finding her as they do; in fact, if this Khaalum's deductions are correct, she may reach Home before we do!)

Thariinye snorted aloud. (They may be very nice bipeds, but their technology has some major gaps, and most of them can't even mind-speak. I shouldn't be surprised to learn that this Khaalum has gone haring off in absolutely the wrong direction. At least find out where they think he might have gone before you tell them.)

While this silent colloquy went on, Delszaki Li murmured with Pal and Judit in rapid Old Magyar. "They are concealing something from us; I can sense the shields in their minds. Also there is fear and guilt."

"They'll have to tell us more before we give away anything about Acorna. You've said too much already," Pal said, then bit his lip. He had never before ventured to criticize his employer and benefactor.

"Fear you may be right," Mr. Li whispered.

Gill glowered at being shut out of this exchange, even though he understood the necessity for using some language other than Basic Interlingua. Feeling useless among all these polyglots and telepaths, he rose and went over to look at the lines of light Rafik's calculations had produced on the projected star maps.

Thariinye felt much the same. All three of the senior Linyaari were looking at him with deep disapproval, as though taking reasonable precautions against an unknown race were a khievii act on an ethical par with eating one's young. He could not remove himself from the mental discussion, but he could-and did- leave the tea table to stroll across to the wall of projected star maps, where he leaned over Gill's shoulder and studied the display with growing interest. It was difficult



to read, and showed the heavens at entirely the wrong angle, but as he began to understand the alien notation he was able to mentally map these images onto the three-dimensional picture of the stars in space that he carried in his head.

As anybody who has proved even the simplest geometric theorem knows, there is a mental language of geometry that exists independently of any spoken language. First comes a kinesthetic sense of the "meaning" of the theorem—a sort of "Aha! If this moves over there then that has to swing round this point about so far, so it will always be the same length as that-over-there." Afterward comes the laborious process of translating the intuition into Line AB and Point C and so forth and so on.

Thariinye, looking on as Rafik muttered calculations and traced lines of light on the projection, was able to follow the logic of Rafik's thinking in these intuitive terms. And when he touched Rafik's arm, waggled his eyebrows, and suggested that an arc be minutely widened to cover a slightly greater subsection of space, Rafik frowned, nodded, and changed the light-diagram without the necessity of a word being said. But at the next suggested course correction, Rafik shook his head violently. "You don't understand," he said. "We know there is a fault in the hydropon<sup>s</sup> unit." He had to repeat that very slowly before Thariinye waggled his eyebrows to show comprehension. "They must stop before they leave our explored space. The question is, where would they be most likely to stop for supplies? If Calum took this route, he could pick from a salad bar of ag planets in these two star systems; if he took this one, there's nothing, he'd have to backtrack. But I'm betting he would pick neither the quickest route nor the worst one. Something shaped like a corkscrew •would appeal to the shifty bastard. And that would bring him out somewhere near here." Rafik tapped a point representing a distant sun to bring up a closer view of the system. One panel darkened, then displayed a glowing white outline within which was shown a reddish sun with only three planets orbiting it, two far too close to support the temperate-region greens Acorna favored.

Thariinye reached out and touched the image of the third planet. It looked right to him: a little larger than Home, far enough from the sun to be in the right temperature range, slightly tilted in its elliptical orbit. Two moons, one large enough to cause tides, the other a mere speck, orbited the planet.

The panel beeped, the color of its glowing outline changed to green, and a close-up view of the selected world appeared. Thariinye studied the arrangement of continents and seas approvingly. Yes, this world might well have an ideal climate for farmers. He extended one finger to touch a pattern of light blue triangles and diamonds that looked like a string of beads scattered across the largest continent, and waggled his eyebrows at Rafik rather than hurt his mouth framing a question in this awkward language.

"Ag settlements," Rafik said, "and one spaceport." He indicated the six-armed star set toward the bottom of the chain of blue marks.

(Neeva. They are heading in the right direction.)

(Wonderful!)

(No. Not wonderful. Come and look!)

Thariinye extended his hand with an imperious gesture. Rafik raised his own brows, but after a moment looking in the young Liinyar's eyes, he gave him the laser drawing tool.

"Res-taare fiirist diispla?"

After a moments pause, Rafik said, "Oh-restore first display? Sure." He snapped his fingers twice. The panel showing a close-up view of Rushima faded back into the general picture. With swift, sure gestures Thariinye sketched many parallel lines of light, originating at the far upper right of the screen and approaching the human-settled portion of the galaxy at an oblique angle that would shortly cut right across the bottom of the screen, passing directly through the solar system that hosted Rushima.

(Look, Melireenya, Neeva, Khaari. Our 'Khornya is going here, and so) -Thariinye tapped the parallel bands of light-(are the Khieevi. There is probability eighty-nine percent that the first world they destroy will be the one for which 'Khornya is bound. We have no more time to debate -we must trust these barbar . . . ) He jammed the brakes on that thought. ( ... these linyarii beings.) They had better be truly linyarii, for all their sakes!

Neeva's pupils narrowed to threadlike lines of silver as she took in the devastating message of the star map. She could not make the mental translation to their notation and angle of view as rapidly as Thariinye had done.

(Navigation Officer! Do you concur with Tharis conclusion?)

Khaari rose and joined Thariinye close to the display. After a moment her own pupils narrowed like Melireenya s. (About the Khieevi he is correct. Envoy. As for the route supposedly taken by 'Khornya, I cannot say. It is certainly a possible way to approach our sector . . . but it seems unnecessarily roundabout.)

(This dark one has explained it to me,) Thariinye broke in. ('Khornya left without the permission of these beings. They believe she has taken an unusual route in order to avoid messages ordering her to return.)

All four of the Linyaari turned to stare at the humans sitting round the table.

"Something's wrong," Judit murmured to the others. "Look at their eyes." Acorna's slit-pupiled look of grief or emotional tension was repeated four times over in the long, elegant faces confronting them.

"Delszaki Li." Neeva spoke aloud, carefully, and with only a slight lingering trace of accent in certain syllables. "We . . . haave not been . . . entirely open with you. We haad anyother purpose in comiin to your people."

"Is obvious," Li whispered. "Was wondering how long it would take you to admit it. Now we speak freely?"

"Yes, fireeli," Neeva said. "Iss little time." (Calculate expected time of arrival of Khieevi fleet. Navigation Officer! You will aid. Computation Specialist Thariinye! I want an estimate before they ask for one! It is time to take action!)

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Neeva began to tell the story of the Khieevi invasion of the First Home, haltingly in the beginning, then with more assurance as her tongue became accustomed to the awkward syllables of the speech called "Basik."

"Vhiliinyar we called it: 'Home of the People.' What need for another name? And our star was called 'Light of the People.' Other stars, other lands, we named as we first ventured into space: named for their position, for their discoverers, for the color of their light or the quality of their resources. We took what we needed from other systems, and groups of the People dwelt away from Vhiliinyar for a time to explore and use these other lands, but there was only one Home, and now it is no more."

"Vhiliinyar thiinyethilelen, fiinyefalaran Vhiliinyar," murmured the other three Linyaari in their own tongue, a soft ritual plaint of mourning that needed no translation. "We see that your race has seeded itself over many star systems," Neeva continued. Have you, then, experience of the Khieevi already, that you protect yourselves by this diversity? "

"Population pressure," Gill said. He gave a quick estimate of we rate at -which human populations tended to expand, given sufficient food, and Neeva's pupils slitted to silvery lines. "I see! We do not reproduce so quickly," she said with regret. "Many generations will pass before the People recover from the devastation created by the Khieevi. Your race may yet be more fortunate. Even though they destroy one or many worlds, yet will others of you survive and replace those who are lost."

"I think," Pal prompted gently, "you had best tell us exactly what you know of these 'Khieevi.' Where do they come from, what are their customs, and what is the reason for the war between your races? Are they humanoid or completely other? What have they said to you?"

Neeva shook her head. "If I knew these things, I would surely tell you. They. . . they do not Communicate. They destroy;

and before they destroy, they torture. Of their tongue we have too few samples for the LAANYE to analyze; of their physical structure we know only what is shown on the broadcasts they have sent to cow us into submission. When their first ships appeared in our space, we sent envoys to them, as we have come to you, in peace and friendship. Those envoys never returned, but we know their fate from the images sent back to us. I think I will not show you those vids; there is no need to harrow your hearts with the images engraved on ours. Our envoys, and all of the People who have subsequently fallen into Khieevi hands, have been tortured to death as slowly as Khieevi arts permitted. Fortunately for us," she added drily, "they were initially unaware of how fragile our bodies must be compared to theirs; the first captives died quickly. Since then they have learned more of our physiology."

She explained that at the time of the first Khieevi attacks, the Linyaari had been a space-faring race but not a warlike one; it was all but impossible to make war on or harm beings whose grief and pain you could feel, through telepathic contact, as clearly as your own. Gentleness and empathy had been bred into Linyaari culture until any other way of being was all but unthinkable. And although they had, in their explorations of space, encountered other sapient aliens, none of those races had been so well developed or so powerful as to force the Linyaari to learn the arts of war-or even of elementary self-defense. The only real change caused by their encounters with other races had been the development of the LAANYE, the linguistic analyzer which allowed them to acquire a basic understanding of alien languages from a relatively small speech sample.

"Strange that they would develop such a device when they had no prior experience of language translation," Rafik commented sotto voce.

"Is logical development," Mr. Li contradicted him in a whisper. "No different languages among their own people, hence no false generalizations as to 'true nature of language' such as human linguists produce. Also no development of natural ability to learn other languages, perhaps no brain structures adapted to such task. Is only logical these most intelligent beings would turn to technology for solution."

Rafik shrugged. Having been brought up trilingual, in the Arabic and Armenian of his family house and the Basic of interstellar commerce, he could not even

imagine a world in which all intelligent beings spoke but one language and regarded other tongues as codes to be broken by communications software.

"From the Khieevi," Neeva said, "we learned the arts of war . . . but not quickly enough. First we fled them, abandoned Vhiliinyar rather than commit violence against other sapient beings . . . but not all. Too many of the People refused to believe the evidence of the Khieevi 'casts; it was beyond their comprehension that any beings could attack others in this fashion. They learned . . . too late . . . and the Khieevi showed us what happened to them. Even if the Khieevi were to abandon Vhiliinyar now, the People who remain could not return. The land would be alive with the memory of pain and betrayal; the water would be tainted with the blood of innocents."

"Vhiliinyar thiinyethilelen, fiinyefalaran Vhiliinyar," repeated the other Linyaari.

Neeva went to the star map and asked Thariinye to make it display the Coma Berenices quadrant. With Rafik's help, the projection was changed, and using the laser pointer, Neeva traced lines of light showing the Linyaari dispersion to planets in other systems, far enough away, they hoped, to evade Khieevi notice. This flight had bought them enough time to adapt their technology to space war and defense systems, and also time enough to establish certain stringent rules for all their people. "No more Linyaari shall die under Khieevi torture," Neeva told them. "We have all taken a vow to die at our own hands before falling into the claws of the Khieevi. For some years this was not necessary. Having conquered Vhiliinyar, and our neighboring world of Galleni, the Khieevi did not move again for a time. But we did not cease our studies and explorations. We have had two objects; to find a way of traveling much farther and faster than any known spacecraft, so that we might escape the Khieevi for good; and to develop defense systems that might annihilate the Khieevi, both in our own defense and so that other races might not be totally exterminated like the dharmakoi of Galleni."

"Galleni thiinyethilelen, fiinyefalaran dharmakoi," murmured the other Linyaari.

"One of our foremost scientists, Vaanye of the Renyilaaghe, had adapted his researches into the topology of space to weapons research shortly before his death," Neeva told them. "He had discovered a way of temporarily collapsing the dimensional fabric of space at a selected point, which created an inordinately large and destructive explosion at the point of origin. Vaanye had told us only that there were a few minor side effects to use of the weapon, such as the fact that it destroyed whoever employed it as well as the intended target, when he and his life-mate made the mistake of taking a short cruise in order to show their first youngling to . . . me." Neevas pupils narrowed into vertical silver lines of distress. "My sister Feriilawas Vaanye's . . . wife," she explained, "and I had been on duty at an outlying planet in the same system, attempting to establish diplomatic relations with a race of large quadrupeds which at first contact had

appeared to be sapient. This was later proved to be an error; they had neither language nor social organization nor any long-term memory. It was an error which cost Feriila her life, for Vaanye's cruise coincided with the Khieevi discovery of this star system. Our new planetary defenses thwarted their first attack-but Vaanye, in space, had no such defenses. For three ghaanyi we have believed that Vaanye destroyed Feriila, their youngling, and the ship rather than allow them to be captured by the Khieevi. We were astonished to discover that an escape pod from Vaanye's ship had survived the explosion only to be transported to this remote sector of space . . . and even more surprised to find that my sisterchild had been raised to maturity among you."

"Ha!" Pal exploded. "So you didn't come for Acorna."

Neeva inclined her head with a graceful gesture that indirectly reproved Pal.

"No. Since our present planetary defense systems have at least temporarily repelled the Khieevi attack, we have observed that the number of their ships near the systems we inhabit is greatly diminished. Some of our people conjecture that their fleet has gone in search of other, easier worlds to conquer. With the smaller number of Khieevi ships patrolling our space, it was possible to send out parties of envoys with some hope of escaping Khieevi detection. We felt it our duty to discover if any other sapient races might exist in the path of the Khieevi fleet, and to warn them if such existed."

"Did you know they were coming this way, then?" Gill asked.

"There were several paths they might logically have taken. We sent groups out in all such directions." Neeva paused, her pupils narrowing again. "Not all ships made a successful escape from the remaining Khieevi . . . but ours did, and we were instructed to continue on our way. Recent transmissions from narhii-Vhiliinyar-you would say. New Home-have emphasized the urgency of our task, as it is now known that a large Khieevi fleet is indeed making a sweep toward this sector of space. We hope to make alliance with you, to share our technology and what we have learned of the Khieevi with whatever resources your race can muster, that they may not fall upon you unwarned as they did us. And now, as well, we hope to find my sister-child and bring her back to the People ... if she can be saved from the Khieevi into whose path she is heading."

Gill had been moving restlessly in his seat, bursting with questions. How and when had the Linyaari seen Acorna's escape pod and learned of her existence? Who had told them to look for her here on Maganos Moon Base? And why had they been so secretive and indirect in their first approaches on Maganos? But Neeva's last statement thrust all his previous questions into the background.

"Great Gods, woman," he roared, "do you mean to tell us these beasts are headed for Rushima? Why the devil did you draw it out so long? Rafik, send a coded spurt to Rushima immediately! There's no time to waste!"

"Gently, Gill," whispered Mr. Li. "Is important to know all salient facts. Right action can arise only from right understanding."

"I should think the action needed is obvious enough!"

"Declan Giloglie," said Judit firmly, "chill."

Gill subsided into his chair, muttering into his quivering red beard, and Rafik looked at Judit with new respect.

"How did you do that?" he murmured in her ear.

"Practice," Judit replied, equally quietly. "My first employer on Kezdet had a hunting dog which it was my responsibility to train. Behavioral training principles turn out to be applicable across species."

"When we have a moment," Rafik responded, "I want to see if you can get him to heel."

Judit's lips twitched. "No, but given the right motivation he •will sit up and beg."

Rafik intercepted a meaningful glance from Mr. Li and, abandoning this badinage, he slipped out of the room to consult with Li's secretary about the fastest route by which to send a coded spurt-message to Rushima for immediate transmission to the Acadecki. The message would have to have a header that would persuade Calum and Acorna not to reject it unheard, yet it must not contain anything that would start a general panic on Rushima. Hmm . . . Wasn't Rushima an outlying colony of the Shenjemi Federation? Best apprise the Federation, too, of the situation ... or as much as could be encapsulated in the very condensed but fast-traveling spurt. Let the Shenjemi decide whether to defend or evacuate Rushima; Rafik's first responsibility was to get Acorna and Calum out of there at once. Then perhaps the Linyaari envoys could set up a communication link with the Shenjemi to discuss their next step.

The messages sent, Rafik returned to the deliberations in Mr. Li's innermost office. All the interior walls except the one devoted to vid-screens now glowed with star maps; arcs of light radiated from one system to another, and geometric shapes denoting star fleets moved with agonizingly deliberate velocity to converge on the Rushimese system as various parties put forward their suggestions for mobilizing a defense against the Khieevi attack. Gill pointed out that Kezdet's own Guardians of the Peace had a large space fleet at their

command, testimony to Kezdet's acquisitive ways and tendency to demand "taxes" or "reparations" from neighbors on the slightest excuse.

At his command, the star-map projector displayed a fleet of golden rhomboids moving from Kezdet toward Rushima, but taking a far more direct route than that presumably chosen by Calum. "They could be there within five days."

"You can't be serious!" Judit flared up at him. "Shake hands with Kezdet, count your fingers," she quoted a proverb popular in this and neighboring star systems. Pal nodded his agreement. Having escaped the infamous system of child bondage on which Kezdet's old industrial empire had been built, a system protected by the Guardians of the Peace, neither of the Kendoros was inclined to trust a Kezdet Guardian in the slightest.

"Oh, they're not all that bad," Rafik said. "Smirnoff and Mmkus, for instance - "

"Smirnoff's a psychopath!" Gill interjected. "And out for your blood, in case you've forgotten."

"True," Rafik nodded, "but he did save my life by disarming the bomb Tapha meant to kill me with. Whatever else you may say against Des Smirnoff, he's no coward."

Gill snorted. "Maybe not, but he's still an idiot. Remember who let Tapha get past security with that bomb in the first place? No, thank you. We don't need clowns like Smirnoff and Minkus in this operation. They're liable to get your whole hand blown off instead of just taking a couple of fingers!"

"This insignificant old person has dealt with Kezdet for many years and still has all fingers intact, though unfortunately not functioning," Mr. Li pointed out. "But Kezdet fleet is designed for small-time piracy and aggression on weaker neighbors. Gill, not for defense against armada. Send Guardians to Rushima is to sign their death sentence."

"Well, now," said Pal and Judit simultaneously, their brows clearing, "if you put it that way ..."

"Besides," Li added, "Kezdet is not known for altruism. Will hardly strip their system of defenses in order to protect agricultural colony belonging to Shenjemi Federation."

"Rafik, has Shenjemi responded to the spurt yet?"

Rafik glanced at the small portable com unit which he had set to display all incoming messages from Shenjemi-or Rushima.



"More or less."

A voluminous spurt from Shenjemi was still being expanded and decoded; the words scrolled across Rafik's screen as he watched.

"First, they request proof that this so-called attack on Rushima is not a hoax, and they want to know what connection this message has with the spurt they recently received from Rushima claiming the planet was under attack by space pirates."

"The Khieevi-already?" Judit paled.

"I don't think so," Rafik replied. "The Rushimese seem to think they're being attacked by some group called the Starfarers. . . . Now, where have I heard that name before? Oh, yes. . . . Uncle Hafiz mentioned them once; they used to be the Free Nation of Esperantza. Amalgamated diddled them out of the planet they'd just settled and stripped it for mineral assets, but they refused to take the resettlement offer-claimed they'd been cheated and would settle for nothing less than having Esperantza restored and returned to them. They turned their space station into a mobile colony and have been wandering around for yonks, staging protests and doing odd jobs in space to finance themselves.' He frowned. "But they were always very ethical.. . obnoxiously ethical. I can't see them turning to piracy, no matter how hard up they were. This must be some other group with the same name."

"Besides," Gill said, "Rushima s not exactly the ideal target for pirates, is it? What sort of loot could they take off an ag planet? Loads of grain? Some nicely rotting silage?"

"To get back to the Shenjemi Federation," Rafik said, "they have sent a spurt direct to Rushima requesting confirmation and have as yet received no reply; third, Rushima's ROI-return on investment," he translated for the Linyaari, "is too low to justify the expense of a full-scale defense. They are considering sending a small fleet to evacuate the planet and relocate the colonists, should there be any basis for our 'hysterical' message." He shrugged slightly and touched the display of red stars for Shenjemi ships to stop the forward movement of the simulation. "Let's hope they make up their minds in time. How much time do we have?"

(Khaari?)

(I'm working on it!)

(Between one and two enye-ghanyii,) Thariinye announced.

Khaari sighed and rolled her eyes. (I hate to admit it, Neeva, but the brat's probably right. I'm trying to get you a closer estimate.)

(Brat! I like that! You're only one age group ahead of me, Khaari!)

(Children, quit squabbling! I can't hear myself think!)

After a few minutes' consultation with Judit and Gill, Neeva said, "If the Khieevi observe Rushima and choose to take it, they will probably begin operations in ... I think eight to"-she counted on her digits for a minute, murmuring-"I do wish somebody would add arithmetic capabilities to the LAANYE; I cannot add in base tenn." She muttered to herself in Linyaari for a moment, then lifted her head. "Yes. Two-tenn to six-tenn of your days."

"Twenty to sixty?" Gill asked hopefully. "Or twelve to sixteen?"

The number words were within the LAANYE's capacity, if the arithmetic was not.

"Twelfto six-teen," Neeva said firmly.

Gill whistled. "You didn't give yourselves much lead time, did you?"

"Be reasonable. Gill," Judit said. "They risked their lives to get away from narhii-Vhiliinyar at all. Are you going to criticize them because they reached us just ahead of the Khieevi?"

"It's a whole lot better than getting here just after the invasion," Pal pointed out.

"Let's just hope the Shenjemi Federation get their collective finger out in time." Gill said. "And in the meantime, let's have Acorna out of there. Rafik, what word from Rushima? They must have received our spurt by now."

Rafik shook his head. "It didn't get through." "WHAT? ? ? " Gill lunged half out of his chair. "What did You do wrong"

"Chill," Rafik said firmly. He was disappointed to see that the word was not effective when it wasn't delivered in Judit's calm voice. "Look, Gill, nothing is getting through to Rushima right now. The Shenjemi couldn't raise a reply either. And the AcaSecki isn't receiving OR transmitting."

"If these Khieevi have already got there-"

"Imm-possible," Thariinye said in an atrocious accent, but with great authority.

"More likely it's space weather," Rafik pointed out. "A bad disturbance in the ionosphere could bring satellite communications down for several hours, even days."

Judit touched Delszaki Li's desk-console screen with one finger, murmured a few words, then tapped the screen again. "Unlikely. The Galacticaedia says Rushima is noted for its temperate and even climate. Atmospheric and ionospheric storms are virtually unknown."

"In any case," Mr. Li put in, "dare not wait days, or even hours. Someone must go to warn Rushima, and to bring Acorna and Calum back. Here, we continue to resend spurt message, make plans for defense, encourage Shenjemi to evacuate Rushima."

"And what happens if the Khieevi bypass Rushima?" Rafik asked.

"They find richer pickings closer in," Gill said grimly. "Depending on their tastes. . . Neeva, what do these Khieevi want?"

Neeva shook her head. "You know the fate of our envoys. We have never established communication; whatever they want, it is not that. I know only what they do. They destroy."

"Do they colonize the planets they take? Are they looking for living space?"

Neeva thought that over. "They . . . yes, they now inhabit Vhiliinyar; but our scouts report that we would not know our home again. They . . . they ..." She choked, could not find words in Basic to describe the devastation, but Delszaki Li's eyes widened as he took in the images of desolation that filled her mind and the thoughts of the other Linyaari.

"Valleys and green hills become plains," he said, straining his voice to communicate what he perceived to the others. "Orchards and cities are leveled. All native life is destroyed, down to the insects in the air and the bacteria in the earth. A river becomes a foul marsh breeding clutches of small Khieevi in the thousands. Dry land is an ocean of grass in which the mature Khieevi fly. And the bones of the Linyaari are piled in monuments."

"The Mongols meant to do the same to Western Europe, once," Rafik said. "It would have been in the"~he paused and flicked fingers swiftly over the string of amber beads knotted in his belt-"in the thirteenth century, Old Reckoning. Chroniclers of the time say they advanced like locusts, devouring and destroying all before them, and attacking so swiftly that the mounted knights of the West had no time to assemble a defense. Impregnable walled cities went down before them, whole lands were depopulated, and they boasted that they would make of the entire world nothing but a vast steppe over which they might ride wherever they would. Fortunately," he said, "this was before our people had space travel, so it did not occur to them to extend the devastation to other planets."

Neeva drew in her breath in shock at this revelation.

(Did you hear that? Their own histories recount such behavior!)

(Have we made a mistake in seeking alliance with them? Perhaps they are more khievii than linyarii after all.)

(What choice did we have?)

(I think we are safe enough. They, too, have no choice. How could they ally with the Khieevi, who destroy anyone who lingers long enough to communicate with them? They must help us to turn back the Khieevi, else their own worlds will suffer as did our Home.)

Gill thought the Linyaari simply had nothing much to say.

"Very interesting, Rafik," he said. "But the Mongols did not succeed. I've seen Earth; its not a featureless steppe, and Europe has cities and monuments dating from long before the time you mention. So what turned them back?"

Pal and Judit turned to Rafik, hopeful.                      • Rafik shook his head slightly. "Their leader at home died," he said, "and they thought it was more important to go home and vote than to continue the conquest; they could always destroy Europe some other time. Fortunately, they never got back to it."

"Oh," Gill said, disappointed. "I don't suppose we can count on that happening again. You'll just have to think up some ruse, Rafik."

"Me?"

"You and Delszaki Li are the brains of this outfit," Gill told him blandly. "Me, I'm just a simple, horny-handed son of the lunar regolith. You two work out how humanity is going to exterminate this swarm of killer bees, and I'll just pop off to Rushima and fetch our Acorna home again. Mr. Li, what's the fastest ship Maganos has available right now?"

"Wait just a minute," Rafik protested. "You'll go for Acorna? Excuse me, but I believe I have some interest in this matter as •well."

"And I," said Pal.

"You're not going anywhere without me," Judit said.

"You two can't go," Gill protested, "Mr. Li needs you. And Rafik has to stay here and think."

"I could think just as well on board a ship as anywhere else, Rafik said, "and anyway, I'm not nearly twisty enough to solve this problem. What we need is somebody who can persuade all the major planetary federations to disburse large sums of cash and most of their defense systems, up front, to guard against an alien threat that they've never heard of and that is being described only by some other aliens."

He paused, appalled at the magnitude of the task, so described.

"What we need, in fact," he said finally, "is Uncle Hafiz." He pounded one fist into his palm in frustration. "And he is walled up behind the Shield, where no one can communicate with him ... or the rest of Laboue ... at all."

(Walled up behind the 'Shield'? Khaari, I have a bad feeling about this. Do you suppose that first planet we approached . . . )

(Oh, no!)

(Oh, yes.)

Aloud, Neeva said, "Where is it, this Laboue?"

"Not on the maps," Rafik said. "My uncle and the others who make it their headquarters prefer their privacy. And I am sworn to House Harakamian now; on the lives of my unborn sons, I may not tell you its location."

Neeva nodded. "Tell us nothinn, then," she acquiesced, "but I am not forbiddenn to tell you that before we approached you onn Maganyos . . . Maganos," she corrected herself, "we had made contact by vid with residents of another planet on the fringes of your settled area, the first one we identified. Since at that time we did not have the LAANYE programmed to teach us your language, we attempted to communicate by vid; we showed them some of the scenes broadcast from Khieevi torture ships, to make them aware of the danger. We received a brief vidcast from the planet.. . there was a biped .. . human .. . dark as you, Rafik, who showed us pictures of Acorna and a drawing of her escape pod. That was how we learned of her existence. But before we could question this human further, the entire planet was shut down under an impenetrable shield that blocked all communication, even visual transmission. Our only clue was a message sent from the location we had been communicating with, indecipherable but for the one word 'Acorna.' That message went to a ship which then departed hastily in this direction; we followed the ship to Maganos in the hope that its owner might lead us to Acorna."

She inclined her head gracefully toward Rafik. (Khaari, point out the location of that first planet on these maps.)

Khaari took a light-wand and illuminated a star some distance from Maganos and lying well away from the more populous parts of this sector.

"I very much fear," Neeva went on, "that it is we who were responsible for your . . . your mother- sib's retreat behind the shield."

Rafik looked at the illuminated area, lips set in a grim line. "Without breaking my oath to House Harakamian," he said, "I think I can say that you are very probably correct. And you know," he went on in a slightly more hopeful tone, "perhaps it's not Uncle Hafiz's brains we need so much just now . . . perhaps what we need is the Shield. If such a device could be installed on every inhabited planet, beginning -with those in the direct line of the Khieevi fleet. . ."

"But the secret of the Shield," Pal pointed out, "is presently behind the Shield, together with your uncle's invaluablely twisty mind. So perhaps our first priority ought to be finding some way to crack the Shield. Surely Hafiz has told you something about how it functions?"

"Nothing," Rafik admitted. "I am not sure he even understands it himself. The genius of our House is in finance, not technology. But we always hire the best technicians."

"Then the engineer who designed and installed the Shield ..." Pal began.

"Martin Dehoney," Rafik said. There was a moment of silence.

"Well," Gill said slowly, "he was the best, no question about it!"

He was also dead; the design of Maganos Moon Base had been Dehoney's last creation.

"Provola Quero worked with Dehoney," Judit said. "Perhaps she might have some ideas. Why don't you two get together and discuss the matter with Mr. Li while we ..."

"Oh, no," Rafik said. "I'm going, too."

"And we," said Neeva. "Acorna is my sister-child; it is my responsibility to see to her safety. Besides, our ship is faster than any your people could design."

Rafik's teeth flashed white under the thin dark line of his mustache. "We'll just see about that!"

"As for planetary defense," Mr. Li put in, "House of Li has excellent liquidity, as does House Harakamian. Why not hire mercenaries from Kilumbemba Empire?" Gill whistled through his teeth. "The Red Bracelets? If anybody can take out the

Khieevi, they should be able to." Delszaki Li's personal bodyguard was rumored to have served -with the Red Bracelets at one time, and he had never met any human being tougher or more frightening than Nadhari Kando.

"Say," Rafik put in, evidently thinking along the same lines, "Is it true that Nadhari used to--"

"She prefers not to discuss her past." "Oh. Well. . . but, Delszaki, it would cost a fortune." "House Harakamian and House Li command two fortunes," Li said calmly. "Also, Kilumbemba mercenaries will work on commission. Percentage of profits in captured alien ships, alien technology could be powerful lure."

"And," Gill said slowly, "they're probably bored right now. The Kilumbemba Empire hasn't expanded in several years. The Red Bracelets are expensive to maintain and dangerous when bored, but Kilumbemba aren't release them from their contract for fear of a revolt in one of the new, um, 'acquisitions.' It just might work. Rafik, you and Delszaki are the best negotiators;

before "we go anywhere, why don't you see if we can subcontract from Kilumbemba for the best part of their mercenary space fleet?"

"And pledge Uncle Hafiz's credit to support them, I suppose," Rafik said with resignation. "Not that I don't think it's money well spent," he hastened to explain, "but Uncle Hafiz is going to kill me when he comes out from behind the Shield."

"He wouldn't grudge the credits to save Acorna," Gill pointed out.

"No -but what do you bet he'd find a -way to make somebody else pay them?" Rafik grinned and sat down at a corn unit. "After this little maneuver, I had better make tracks for Rushima . . . and I m not sure it would be wise to come back! I don't want Yukata Batsu wearing my ears on his trophy belt!"

"Shhh," Gill said in a rumbling attempt at an undertone, "I think that kind of talk upsets our guests." He felt it would definitely be unwise to tell the Linyaari about Yukata Batsu, Hafiz's chief competitor on Laboue, and his unpleasant habit of keeping trophies from his defeated enemies . . . including the ears of Hafiz s own son, Tapha. Hafiz himself had been more upset about Tapha's stupidity in letting himself be captured than about the mutilation, but somehow Gill felt the Linyaari were not used to taking such matters in their stride. They are still not sure we're civiliw) enough to 2eal with, he thought. Maybe we '3 better not let/hem Listen in on the negotiations with the Kilumbemba mercenaries, either. And on the excuse that Rafik and Delszaki Li needed absolute privacy for this ticklish task, he offered to escort the Linyaari on a brief tour of Maganos Moon Base while the necessary wheeling and dealing took place.

"That is-if you can be sure nobody will notice your . . . um ... unusual appearance ? " One thing they did not need to deal with was the effect on Maganos of seeing four "Acornas" suddenly appearing in their midst.

"We attracted no attention on our way here," Melireenya pointed out. "As long as Thariinye does not lose his temper again, we should have no trouble."

"Just keep us away from those blasted kids," Thariinye said.

Since the *raison d'etre* of Maganos was the education and training of the bondchildren liberated from Kezdet, Gill found this directive rather difficult to follow, but with Judit's help he managed to keep the Linyaari occupied for some time in childfree areas of the base. Indeed, Provola Quero alone would have been able to lecture them indefinitely on the design of the base living quarters, mining facilities, and engineering shop; but even the Linyaari thirst for knowledge was eventually satiated by the seemingly endless string of facts and sketches at Provola's disposal, and at last Gill could think of nothing but to bring them back to Delszaki Li's rooms before they became too tired to maintain their shielding projections.

He was relieved to deduce that the negotiations had gone well; Delszaki Li was napping in his hever-chair, and Rafik was sprawled on cushions with a look of satisfaction on his thin, dark face and a glass of something that would probably have been forbidden by the First Prophet in his right hand. "All done?" Gill asked cautiously. "All fixed." Rafik tipped the glass to his mouth and took a sip of the amber-colored liquid. "He"-he jerked his head toward the sleeping Delszaki-"is a genius at this. I think he might even be able to teach Uncle Hafiz a thing or two," he said with surprising generosity. "Would you believe he's got Kilumbemba underwriting half the costs of the expedition, because they feel it's to their benefit to keep the mercenaries busy and in training rather than having them at loose ends where they might stir up trouble? Although I'm not sure they realize it yet," he added thoughtfully. "The way Delszaki put it was that we would save Kilumbemba a lot of money by paying half the retaining salaries of the mercenaries for the duration of this expedition. Which means that effectively they are still paying half the costs . . . and then House Li is covering seventy percent of the remainder. I only had to sign over the profits on a couple of planetary systems in Uncle Hafiz's name, he might not even kill me when he finds out what he's paying for, but I don't plan to stick around and check it out. Very generous of Delszaki."

Mr. Li's eyelids flickered. Gill suspected the old man was not really asleep, and he wondered just how "generous" Delszaki Li's offer had really been. He would have a controlling interest in the expedition now, and if he was right about the profits to be made from exploiting Khieevi technology, the lion's share of those profits would go to House Li rather than House Harakamian. Insensibly Gill began to feel more confident about the whole project. The Linyaari were so



convinced that no one could withstand a Khieevi attack, they'd infected him with their pessimism-but Delszaki Li was no man's fool, and if he was already maneuvering to control profits, he must be counting the war as good as won.

"The only problem is," Rafik went on, "I did have to throw in a little extra inducement to Admiral Ikwaskwan."

"Admiral?" Gill said sharply. He had heard the notorious leader of the Kilumbemba mercenary forces called many things, but never anything so flattering as that.

Rafik waved a languid hand. "It's not exactly a formal military structure. If the man wants to be an Admiral, or a Brigadier, or High Potentate, let him take the title. Thing is, he wanted a share in Rosewater's Revelation."

You sold your uncle's best racehorse to Ikwaskwan?"

"Only a part share, and it is in a good cause. You think he'll mind?"

"I think you'd better head for Rushima and not come back, like you were saying at first," Gill told him. "What have you been drinking to make you think Hafiz is going to be happy about teaming up with a-a-" It wasn't so much that words failed him, as that Judit's presence inhibited him from using any of the words he felt to be appropriate. "With Ikwaskwan," he finished weakly as a familiar smoky scent, wafting through the air, distracted his attention. He took another deep sniff and recognized it. "MY BEST SCOTCH, THAT'S WHAT YOU'VE BEEN INTO!"

"I earned it, weasel-wording and sweet-talking Ikwaskwan and half the Kilumbembese Cabinet -while you were playing tour guide," Rafik said without bothering to move out of the way of Gill's furiously working hands. "Judit, call off your husband before he damages these precious vocal cords. Oh, and by the way, we had a spurt-message from the AcaSeckl."

"You did?" Gill's hands dropped to his sides. "Oh, all right, I won't kill you until you tell me what was in it."

Rafik grinned up at him. "That's not very good motivation."

"Very well, then, I'll let you live. This time."

"It was a little confusing," Rafik confessed. "Basically it said, 'Disregard previous message, everything all right here, stopping for R&R on Rushima.' I doubt that means they've defeated the entire Khieevi fleet single-handedly; it probably just means they've outwitted those space pirates Rushima was complaining to the Shenjemi Federation about. That should be well within Calum's and Acorna's abilities," Rafik said with sublime confidence.

"Did you tell her to get out of there?"

"Couldn't. The AcaSecki's not answering; they must all be on Rushima, and Rushima isn't transmitting. I expect the space pirates knocked out their satellite communications. I did send a long spurt telling Acorna about her people showing up here, and that we'd be with her in five days. If anybody picks up on the AcaSeckl, they should get that much."

"You didn't tell her about the Khieevi?"

"That sort of message is not something you want to leave lying about a ship's com system until somebody is inspired to pick up," Rafik pointed out. "What if the Rushimese hear it? There could be panic, rioting-and Acorna's somewhere on the surface, we don't know where. I thought it better to wait until we can patch through some sort of direct contact."

Gill had to admit the logic of this, but knowing for sure that Acorna was on Rushima-and unwarned about the deadly danger approaching-made him more impatient than ever to take off. The hours they would have to wait for the Kilumbemba forces to mobilize dragged like lead.

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"What do we do now?" Calum asked. "Wait until the dust settles and there's someone we can talk to about leaving?"

"I think we better be sure they know it's us who are leaving and not some of the enemies escaping," Acorna said. "I'm going to check on my 'ponies."

Calum watched her go. He hoped there was enough there for her to eat. He also hoped that she was going to change out of those rags and into some outfit suitable to the real Acorna.

"Anyone else for a bite to eat while we talk this over?"

He looked first at Dr. Hoa, who hadn't moved since sinking into a seat. The man's color was better and his expression more alert. "Are you feeling well enough for a meal?"

"There's nothing wrong with me a good cup of tea won't set right in next to no time," the scientist said with a little smile. That is, if you should happen to have tea."

"In fact, I do," Calum said, making his way to the galley. "Tea for all?"

"What's 'tea'?" Markel asked.

"You can find out after you've cleaned up a bit," Johnny Greene said.

"Why should I do that when I might just have to do a flit again?"

Johnny closed off his nostrils and raised his eyebrows. "In this fresher air, ol' buddy, you stink. So do I, I'm sure, but not quite as badly."

Calum, whose back was to Markel, grinned. He hadn't wanted to mention the fact.

"If you happened to have any clean clothes, Calum," Johnny went on, "I could sure stand a change myself. Any old ship suit'll do."

"Second cabinet in the first cabin on the right. And there's a sanitary unit directly opposite the bunk."

Dr. Hoa was on his second cup of tea and looking far more alert when Acorna came back, wearing more normal attire. Then both Johnny and a far cleaner Markel showed up, although the boy looked a trifle surly.

Markel took the cup of tea and some finger foods that Calum had defrosted, and went to the place where he had deposited his equipment. He put in the earphone, and in a few seconds was smiling with great satisfaction, but then he glowered again.

"If I hadn't been stuck with you, I'd've been in it, too," he said.

"If you hadn't been able to save Acorna, Calum, and Dr. Hoa first, young 'un," Johnny Greene said in firm contradiction, "there wouldn't have been a coup at all. I gather someone had the sense to gas the searchers in the tubes?"

For a moment, Markel stared in astonishment at his friend. Then his expression was both smug that he had actually been a crucial element in the rebellion and surprised. "How'd you know how they got them?"

Johnny shrugged. "That's what I would have done. Nueva, Dom, Sengrat, and the others would have<sup>^</sup> been so intent on wanting to get at least Dr. Hoa back into their hands, they'd've depleted their guard points." He waved to indicate the guards they had overcome. "We'd've been up the crick without a paddle if the full complement of guards had been here in the hangar. Then he grinned at Markel. "Whaddaya bet that Kerratz, Andreziana, and Zanegar led the revolution?"

Markel's eyes went wide. "How'dyou know?"

He ruffled Market's hair. "You were doing all you could in your fashion, Markie, lad, and your father was one of those spaced. It's only logical that the ones who hurt worst would try hardest to get back at the murderers of their parents. Now, find out if they need to know where Dr. Hoa is hiding. I'd ask for Kerratz. Always thought he was the smartest of 'Zhuria and Ezkerra's brood."

"No, Andreziana's the one we want," Market said in his blunt fashion as he found the mouthpiece in his backpack and attached the speaker J-bar. "I need to speak to Andreziana. This is Markel."

Johnny Greene and Calum both gestured for Market to patch in the Acadecki's system so they could hear, too. Market shook his head emphatically, but Johnny caught him by one ear and gave him such a malevolent glare that Markel capitulated just in time for them all to hear the contralto voice of Andreziana.

"Where the hell have you been, Markel? "

"Clearing the decks so you could act, of course," the boy replied, laughing. "Caught 'em all napping, didja?"

"No, we caught them hunting in the tubes for you. So we closed 'em off and gave them a dose of their own," the girl replied.

"S-spaced?" Markel looked slightly green.

"We didn't have a lot of choice," Andreziana said. "They refused to surrender. I wasn't going to lose more of our own people going after them in the tunnels, not to mention risking that they'd win a tunnel fight."

"No," Markel said. "No, you couldn't do that. It's Just..."

"I'll say this for those Palomellese," Andreziana interrupted like someone eager to change the subject, "most of them were right with us. Seems that Nueva Fallona and her group weren't that popular with their own people after all."

"So, what did you promise the Palomellese to get their coopfiration?" Markel asked, accepting the change of subject.

"They'll take a landfall on Rushima and help undo the damage done for the chance to stay on."

"Won't we have to go through the Shenjemi Federation for permission for that? At the very least, they'll want to sue the Haven for the havoc caused," Markel said, dubious.

With an arm around Markel's shoulders, Johnny positioned himself to speak through the J-bar. "John Greene here, 'Ziana, and congratulations on handling the retaking. That'll all be on log, and I think we can reason with the Shenjemi. We've sent a message about the condition of Rushima, by the way. ..."

"You did WHAT?"

Her protest even shook Dr. Hoa, making him spill a bit of the tea he had been so happily imbibing. He held up a finger.

"We've been down on the surface," Calum said, speaking directly into the com unit of the Aca^ecki, "and promised the survivors that we would get a message to their sponsors. This is Calum Baird, pilot. By the way, do you have wounded?"

"Sure we do." The girls voice softened. "Did you think we could manage a bloodless revolution? Why? We've some medics...."

"But you do not have a ki-Un," said Acorna, elbowing her way beside Calum.

"What the shards is a ki-lin}"

At that point. Dr. Hoa angled his way between Acorna and Calum. "Very good, very unusual, useful, miraculous person. Saved me. Saved Markel, saved Calum. Save you pain and healing time."

"Who's that?"

"Dr. Hoa-and this is the ki-LIn."

Acorna took a deep breath. "For what now appear to be very sensible precautions," Acorna said, her voice rippling with amusement, "I disguised myself as a procuress when my ship was captured by Nueva and her gang. I am, however, Acorna Delszaki-Harakamian."

If Johnny and Markel were jumping up and down in dismay at Dr. Hoa's revelation, Calum was tearing at his hair over Acorna's admission.

"Harakamian?" There was a certain awed tone in 'Ziana s voice. "Of House Harakamian?"

"Delszaki?" added a baritone. "Not THE Delszaki Li?"

"Yes, to both questions. How may I help you now?"

There was a babble in the background, then a new person was speaking.

"Look, I'm medical, but we've got some really badly off wounded on the infirmary deck and some people who'll die if we can't clear that gas out of their lungs," the man said.

"I'm on my way," Acorna said, and gave a decisive nod at Calum, who was staring hopelessly at her.

"C'mon, we'll all go. Lock down your ship, Cal, will you?" Johnny Greene added. "Just in case there are some survivors creeping down to the hangar."

With some regret, Calum did as Johnny suggested. He had been thinking of trying to raise regular contact with Delszaki Li's headquarters on Kezdet . . . just to allay any fears Mercy might have for his safety if the original spurt had gotten through . . . but Johnny was right. It was too soon to cry safe and far too soon to omit any possible precaution.

Before they reached the end of the hangar deck, there was banging on the hatches that had been locked against Nueva's group.

"We're coming, we're coming," Johnny Greene roared, deftly assisting Dr. Hoa up the steep risers.

"I am better, much better," Dr. Hoa kept protesting. "And what has been done can often be undone. With my process," he added with a little smile, "we can set much right in little time."

"That'll go down well with the Rushimese and the Shenjemi," Johnny said with a wry grin.

As soon as Dr. Hoa reached the bridge, 'Ziana, the late Andrezhuria's daughter, greeted him with considerably more warmth than she accorded those accompanying him. One eyebrow went up at the sight of Acorna, but she politely did not comment on Acorna's unusual appearance. Her face composed, Ziana was sitting in the bridge command chair, which dwarfed her slight figure. Her bandaged hands dangled from the armrests, but not far from the festoon of weapons hanging to her lap from the belt she wore. Not much taller than Calum, slender, with fair hair braided tightly in many small strands and tied together at the base other neck, she looked her age, not the pnnGipal in a major coup. She certainly didn't look as if she could have been capable of the deeds she and the other teenagers lounging around the bridge had recently planned and executed.

"Dr. Hoa, is there anything you can do to help Rushima?" she asked. Her slightly accented Basic was delivered in the tone of a much older, self-possessed woman.

"I do believe I can, Andreziana," he said, as courteous as ever as, with a querying lift of his brows, he nodded toward one of the empty chairs on the port side of the bridge.

"Go to it, Doctor," she said, gesturing with one graceful, if bandaged hand. Blood had leaked down her forearm and clotted.

Acorna sucked in her breath and looked at Johnny, who gave his head the slightest of negative movements.

"Who're the strangers. Market?" 'Ziana went on, steepling her bandaged hands in front of her. It was a gesture, Acorna instinctively felt, that had been one other mother's.

"Acorna." Markel might have been introducing a reigning planetary leader for the pride in his voice. One of the teenage boys lounging around the bridge snickered. Markel bristled, relaxing when Acorna touched his shoulder. "You only show how little you know," Markel said.

"She's the one can heal?" the lad said snidely. "What does she use? That horn on her head?" His hair had been cut into bristle which was dyed in uncomplimentary colors. 'Ziana's gesture silenced him, and he seemed to cave in over his diaphragm at her displeasure. He wore a sloppy bandage on one shoulder: the sear mark of the stun bolt was partly visible.

So swiftly that no one could have stopped her, Acorna was beside him, her derided horn performing its miracle.

"Hey, whaddya go and do that for?" The boy raised his unharmed arm to push her away, but she had already retreated.

"Hey." His tone was completely different. He peeked first at the now healed flesh, then pulled off the rest of the bandage and saw clean, pink skin. "Hey, how'dyou do that?"

"However she does it, I'll have some of the same, if you wouldn't mind, Acorna?" 'Ziana said, holding out her bandaged hands. "Can't really use the fingerpads with all this on me."

Although Acorna was as delicate as possible in peeling back the wadded fabric, little flickers in 'Ziana's eyes showed how painful the process was. Her hands were so badly burned they were weeping blood and serum. Acorna lowered the horn to each palm, then the girl's torn wrists. Flesh seemed to flower instantly across the wounds.

"Let me tell you, that is a relief," 'Ziana said, briefly sounding her chronological age. "There're injured down below who need a lot more help than I do ... did. Thank you. And, you, Brazie, I didn't hear your thank-you."

Brazie of the multicolored hair stammered out his gratitude, still fingering the now smooth ex-wound.

"You're both welcome. Anyone else?" Acorna asked, looking around at those who occupied the bridge.

"Aw, it ain't much," one of those beside Brazie said, but his companions pushed him toward Acorna. Another pulled up the rags left of the back of his shirt and revealed encrusted welts. Acorna had never seen anyone whipped and beaten, but, when she maneuvered the boy into the light to assess his injury, she knew that that was what had been done to him. Calum uttered a low whistle.

'Ziana now turned to Johnny Greene and Markel. "I need to talk to you two," she said, once again in that firm, uncontradictable voice. "You were within an ace of getting spaced, Johnny. Did you know? How'dyou know to hide? And where did you hide?"

Johnny settled himself in the chair just below her level, and Markel took a seat next to him. "Well, I figured I was running out of Nuevas good graces. She was never sure where I stood with the First-Gen group, since they sort of picked me up because they were short a docking expert. Esposito and I had had a couple of run-ins. . . ."

'Ziana chuckled. "So you had. Dom never liked you either."

"True, though I had no intention of cutting him out with Nueva. She wasn't my type. But that's all history, 'Ziana. Let's talk about now. You've control of the Haven, but are there enough competent people left after two sets of wholesale slaughter to staff and crew a ship of this complexity?"

"My mother didn't raise me stupid, Johnny. Any more than Illart did Markie-boy here." 'Ziana was slightly contemptuous. "Then you do have someone who can dampen the electromagnetic resonances in the navigation controls," Calum said, pointing to some orange flashing lights on one drive control board.

'Ziana swore and swung down off the command chair to take a closer look.

"If I could make a recommendation," Calum said at his most tactful, "I think the problem is more drift than immediate danger, and I can do some calculations to see how much thrust you'll need to apply, but this is one panel that should be manned at all times. And the life-support system seems to have been damaged



from the look of the signals its giving." He pointed to a board several positions down.

"You a pilot or something?"

"I've belted around the system for most of my life and never lost a ship," Calum said. "All modern ships use about the same basic controls . . . just some are bigger'n others, like this one."

"He's an expert and very experienced pilot," Acorna said. "Approved and recommended by both Delszaki and House Harakamian."

"Who's them?" Brazie asked, frowning in suspicion.

"Only two of the biggest interstellar firms," another lad said, and came up to Calum, extending one hand in greeting. "I'm Kerratz. My father was ..." and Calum surmised that the father had been one of those spaced, ". . . teaching me his specialty. I've had a little time on the board, so I could take it over-if you'd do the calculations. I wouldn't want to do them, and be wrong."

A girl, heavy-boned and wearing flashily dyed blue-and-orange hair, pointed to the life-support board. "'Ponies system suffered a lot of damage when we were trying to weld the access panels shut so they'd all die in the tubes." Those deaths didn't seem to bother her as much as the harm to the plants. "Want I should get a gang together and see what damage is done?"

Calum turned politely toward 'Ziana.

"Go to it, Negara," 'Ziana said, waving her off. "You help her, Brazie, Dajar, Foli. You've had a long enough rest now. And Rezar," she added, pivoting on one heel to address a tall, well-built boy cultivating a fine mustache on his handsome face, "you take the com board. This bridge needs to be properly controlled."

Then she turned to Johnny with a "how'm I doing?" glance that was challenging.

"What's happening on the decks below?" he asked. "There may be some good 'uns among the Palomellese who can spell your folk."

'Ziana didn't much like that suggestion from the expression on her face.

"Well, you'll be standing long watches, then," Johnny said with an indolent shrug.

"You go find some loyal enough to help," 'Ziana said. "I'm not leaving the bridge."

"I agree. You shouldn't," Johnny said, "but, if Acorna's finished here and Calum can hang about with the technical advice, I'll leave our ki-lin at the infirmary on my way down the levels."

'Ziana nodded agreement, but, as Acorna walked away toward the door, her eyes spoke volumes of gratitude to the spacer that 'Ziana's pride would never allow her to utter.

"You've done well, 'Ziana," Johnny said, then chuckled. "Nueva's mistake was in not spacing the whole kit and kaboodle:

First AND Second Generation."

"You're damned right there," 'Ziana said as she resettled herself in her command chair, "but she considered us 'kids!'" She snorted as she steepled her fingers.

"A mistake for several reasons," Johnny said suavely. "How about communications below? Are they in working order?"

"Most of 'em," said Rezar, surveying his board. "Some holes, but call here to the bridge anywhere you can. I'll patch you through." He began running a diagnostic on the system.

You okay where you are, Dr. Hoa?" Johnny asked before Joining Acorna by the lift shaft.

Oh, go on, go on, I've so much to set right I won't miss you at all," Dr. Hoa said, absently waving a hand over his head in the direction of the speaker, but focusing all his attention on the graphics in front of him. He was tsk-tsking over something as Johnny and Acorna left the bridge.

"Surely those children cannot run a ship this size?" Acorna said.

"Oh, I dunno about that, Acorna," Johnny said with a grin. "Seems to me I heard that Cal, Gill, and Rafik had you managing a lot of basic controls before you were three years old."

"My species evidently matures more quickly than yours," she said.

"And those kids who put down Nueva's coup were apprenticed, as a matter of course, to specialists once they turned fourteen."

"They can't be much older now," Acorna protested.

"On the contrary," Johnny said in a very droll tone, "they are much, much older ... now." With a hand under her elbow, he signaled her to jump to the level they

were nearing on the shaft. "If they're beginning to find out how complicated it is to do it all themselves, it'll make my job easier."

"Finding someone a little more senior with enough experience to direct them?"

"Precisely." He pointed to starboard. "Infirmary's that way."

Since she could hear the moans and sobbing, his direction was unnecessary.

"I'll come back this way and see how you're doing. Even medics were not safe from Nueva's •wholesale spacing orgy."

"Calum?" Rezar asked. "Could you come look at this? I don't know this kind of code."

Calum had been overseeing several panels for the appointed novice crew as well as giving Dr. Hoa a hand with the math. ["Never my strong suit, Mr. Baird." "Well, it is mine, and you've merely inverted the matrix that defines nonlinear diffractionprocess interaction too soon-or tried"to; the matrix can't be inverted, so you have to transform it to this form first. See? Now you get the right answer."]

"That's beamed at Rushima, which no longer has any corn units. Broadcast on a wide beam so we're catching the edges of it. Use the finer tuner and put it up on screen. No, this toggle.

The message immediately began blaring from the bridge speakers until Rezar figured out how to modulate its volume.

"This is Blidkoff of Shenjemi Federation calling." Even the tone sounded bored with the words. "Rushima, reply. Urgent. You must respond if you expect any aid."

"He sounds real interested," Rezar said sarcastically.

Calum glanced up at 'Ziana. "I'd say Rushima needs help from whatever source it can get it."

'Ziana regarded him steadily. "But this ship caused the damage.

"Ah"-Calum held up one finger-'yes, my initial message to them said Rushima was under attack by the Starfarers."

"The real Starfarers"-Ziana indicated herself-"are once again in control ofHaven. Our ..." she had to swallow before she could continue, "... mothers and fathers believed that peaceful protest "would allow us to use some uninhabited world as a new home, since Esperantza was destroyed."

"You have been traveling a long time," Calum said kindly.

"The Shenjemi could demand reparations from us. . . ." she said.

"Not you . . . and you've logs to prove it," he said, pointing to a ceiling device that was the visual log of all proceedings on the bridge. "I can answer as myself. Shall I? And we can sort the Haven's part out later. We have to give some answer. The Rushimese are in a bad way down there."

"We've been in a bad way up here, too, Baird."

"Ah, but I can restore much of the normal climatic pattern in just a few days," Dr. Hoa said, "after first inducing some more . . . extraordinary. .. weather to quickly counteract the worst effects of what has been done."

"Can you?" 'Ziana looked around at the frail man, who nodded vigorously.

"This is Blidkoff, Second Undersecretary of RUI Affairs, calling Rushima. Can you respond, Rushima? Are you under attack?"

Calum moved to the com unit. "Blidkoff, this is Calum Baird of the AcaSecki, a private vessel. I sent the message you received. The planet has been under attack, and the first thing to go were the satellite communications."

"Baird? Calum Baird? No such name exists on the planetary roster." Blidkoff was plainly skeptical.

"Because I'm not Rushimese," Calum said. "I'll repeat. I am Pilot Calum Baird of the AcaSecki, a private vessel. We had a 'ponies problem and thought Rushima could help us with it. Instead, we had to help them by informing you of the attack. The whole planet's in a bad way. They're going to need a lot of help to get sorted out down there."

"View please," Blidkoff answered, his skepticism coming through loud and clear.

'Ziana was wagging her arms in protest, but a grinning Rezar made a frame around Calum's face, indicating that he'd broadcast just the face. Calum looked over his shoulder for 'Ziana's permission, and, after a moment with her eyes closed, she nodded.

"Oh, sorry, didn't realize the view was off on my end," Calum said. He beamed at the screen for Blidkoff's benefit.

"And what exactly did you perceive was a problem with Rushima? Apart from their failure to communicate through normal channels?"

Pompous brain^ regoUthic Q'wt, Calum thought to himself, keeping his smile intact. "Storms, floods, and drought."

"They must be inventing disaster to get off paying their taxes. That planet was selected for its incredibly boring and stable climate."

"It's a large planet, Blidkoff," Calum said, no longer willing to be the victim of the man's incredulity. "And as your first spurt informed you, these disasters were artificially created by their attackers . . . who have now been disposed of, but the settlers are in dire need of basic supplies to help them start over. You do what you want. I promised Joshua Flouse I'd send you a Mayday. I have. Good day to-"

"Now, let's not get in a huff, Pilot Baird. Joshua Flouse . . . • eff-eel-o-"

"U ess ee," Calum finished.

"Well, he's a reliable community leader."

"I suspect he is. Decent chap, gave us seed and enough vegetation to keep us going, even though they'll be in need themselves. So why don't you go on and keep him going?"

"I fear that's beyond my area of command," Blidkoff began. "Rushima's return on investment is insufficient to justify the expense of further Federation assistance."

"That's your problem, Blidkoff, and I'm sorry for the Rushimese, but at least I've kept my promise." And Calum himself cut the connection.

A buzz interrupted the silence on the bridge.

"He wants to talk to you again," Rezar said, looking hopefully up at Calum.

Calum looked around at 'Ziana, who seemed in an equal quandary.

"You kids got rid of the nasties, but now what?"

He could see 'Ziana swallow.

"Now we have to carry the can for those Palomellese bastards' mistakes," Rezar said.

"That's what being adult is," Calum said gently, feeling sorry for so much shit dumping on these teenagers who, only a few weeks ago, probably had been nice normal kids, fussing because no one would take them seriously.

"We should have a meeting about this," Kerratz said.

"Yeah, a meeting," Brazie agreed hastily, nodding nervously.

"Mother said that, too, that adults ..." and Ziana paused a moment before she rushed, "... are not afraid to accept responsibility. I took that one to heart when we gassed the tubes and spaced the murderers of our parents. I guess it applies here. We'll stay, and we'll make good as much as we can . . . -with Dr. Hoa's help."

And then I am taking myself and my weather program out of reach of anyone else," Dr. Hoa said.

"I think I may be able to help you there, Dr. Hoa," Calum said. "How much longer do you need?"

"Oh, I'm just starting, Mr. Baird. What was done to Rushima cannot be undone as quickly, but we're making progress. Yes, indeed, we are making progress. Now, would you check my Equations again? I shouldn't like a simple error on my part to undo what I've been able to accomplish so far."

"But this is your program, isn't it?" Calum said as he went to the doctor's position.

"Oh, it is, but I always had a mathematician assisting me. Meteorology is science, my boy, but mathematics is a black art."

"Did you want me to help with the damage reports, 'Ziana?" Johnny, returned from escort duty to Acorna, said so suavely that none of the people on the bridge could take offense. It was obvious none of them had thought of that.

With great dignity, 'Ziana nodded in his direction. "Please, would you, Johnny? You've had a lot more experience in that area than we have."

"You're learning," he said with his engaging grin.

Johnny concentrated on checking out the essential functions of the Haven, and apart from some damage by weapons fire -fortunately only stunners had been used rather than missile handguns ^-the hull had taken no integral damage. The conduits would need further flushing and venting to remove the traces of the gases used . . . and any remaining bodies had to be found and removed. Not the most agreeable of duties, but it needed to be done. When Johnny looked around to see whom Markel could suggest for the task, the lad was gone.

Markel, in fact, had gone back to the quarters he had shared with his father to see if any of his things were still there. The rooms had been trashed. He took one

look and pressed the lock. He'd find himself somewhere else to stay. He'd also find himself some clean clothes. He'd had enough of these.

The main clothing storage was locked, of course, but his little strip of plastic did its trick, and he was in. The place still had a faint trace of the gases that had been used to trap Nueva and her gang, probably the stuff was still trickling from any vents that hadn't been closed. Something would clearly have to be done about it soon. So he made a quick selection of clothing and new ship shoes- Acorna had healed all the cuts and bruises he'd acquired in his adventures, but ship shoes would add to his new dignity. He also picked up a tool belt and a notepad, since his was still on the AcaSecki, with the few personal items he had managed to save when he decided he'd better not be found by Nueva or any of her conspirators.

He did wonder that there were so few people in the corridors and halls. Maybe 'Ziana should make a shipwide announcement that Second Gen had complete control of the Haven.

Then he shafted over to 'ponies, which was looking very sad indeed, though Neggara and her group were already planting some vats.

"I need some stuff for Acorna. She'll be using up a lot of energy healing, you know," he said.

Neggara craned her neck around at him. Then she grinned. "Since it's you, and for her, you're welcome to anything that's edible. Though that ain't much."

"You've got the big leaves still." Markel pointed to the basic pumpkin, rhubarb, and legume leaves that would indeed be essential to air refreshing. He said nothing at all about Acorna's ability to clean air. But he was pretty sure that was what this ship was operating on right now.

Neggara was shaking her head. "Don't understand it. According to the manuals, they aren't enough to do what they have to be doing in terms of restoring clean air to the entire ship."

"We got lucky, I guess," Markel said, and picked what he thought would be a useful bouquet of greens and some early legume pods for Acorna.

What Neggara didn't know wouldn't hurt her-or Acorna- but, as he left the 'ponies section, he did worry that the Lady would not have enough strength both to heal the wounded AND purify the ship's air. However, he had managed not to smirk with his covert knowledge of who was really responsible for the fact that they weren't all gasping for breath on the Haven.

Acorna was just bending over an unconscious Palomellese with serious stun bruising all down his left side when Markel arrived at the sick bay. As Markel approached, he heard her sigh, and knew he'd been right to rustle up some food for her. She seemed to be working her way into the infirmary, for there were already many empty bunks at the front of the room. Medics were buzzing in small groups, watching her surreptitiously.

Markel waited just out of Acorna's range until she had finished the current patient.

"Gotcha something to help you," Markel said, holding out his bouquet to her just as one of the senior medics started to protest his interference.

Acorna held up one hand, then smiled with weary gratitude for his thoughtfulness. She couldn't know it, nor did Markel realize the significance of his altruism, but seeing that Acorna was fed was probably one of the first unselfish things he had ever done. Even in rescuing her, he had been acting out of selfinterest.

"And I think you'd better be down when you've eaten ... you look absolutely transparent," Markel said, giving a level and accusing glance at the medic. "I don't see anyone bleeding to death," he added, having made a quick assessment of those still abed. "I'll never hear the end of it from Calum and 'Ziana if you pass out on us, you know."

The way Acorna wobbled as she rose was sufficient evidence to the medical staff that this intruder's assessment of her condition was undeniably accurate. The head medic almost leapt forward to assist her, but Markel was closer and took her arm as if by right.

"You haven't used up all the private compartments, have you?" Markel asked.

This way." The medic ushered her into one of the cubicles. "We're very grateful, lady, and didn't realize that you..." Markel firmly closed the panel on the apologies.

"There's not much selection in 'ponies, right now," he said, placing his gleanings on her lap.

"Doesn't matter," she said, stuffing chard into her face and chewing with weary efficiency. "Anything green'll do fine. There are so many more - "

"Who can probably recover just fine in the usual way, Markel cut in firmly. "We need you more to keep the air fresh in this ship with the 'ponies in the condition it's in."



Acorna gave a weary sigh, munching on the legumes and the stalks, too.

"You can't do everything yourself, you know," he said. "Isn't there anything else you can eat that we'd have on board? Somehow just those ..." His fingers dismissed the limp chard leaves as insignificant. "Any vegetable ration bars? I cannot live on them for any long stretch of time, but they will keep me from starving through the immediate future."

"Thousands," Market said, immensely relieved. "That's what we've had to feed the Palomellese with. I'll be back in a flash."

As soon as he exited the compartment, the head medic caught him.

"Is she all right? We didn't. ..."

"Well, it takes a lot of energy to do what she does, you know," Markel said, trying to make out Acorna was worse off than she was to be sure they wouldn't interrupt her until she'd had some rest. "You don't happen to have any vegetable ration bars up here, do you?"

They did and loaded Markel down with as many as he could carry. He took them in to her. She had finished all the fresh greens-if that was what you could call the limp leaves-and gratefully shed the packaging film protecting the first bar. She ate nine before suddenly she seemed to collapse inward and sprawl across the bunk.

"Acorna?" Markel reached for her delicate arm, even if he hadn't a clue where he'd find a pulse on it.

She clasped his arm, -weakly, but turned her head and smiled at him.

"I'll be fine. You stand guard, will you. Market? I'll just need a bit of sleep while I digest that fine meal."

Markel could not agree with her notion of a "fine meal" as he spread the light thermal over her and tiptoed out of the compartment.

"She's sleeping," he told the head medic, then snagged a fourlegged stool, which he put against the door. He sat, crossed his arms over her chest, and assumed his role as guardian.

He was also asleep, head drooping over one shoulder but supported by the door he guarded, when Calum and Johnny came down to find Acorna.

"You know," Johnny said thoughtfully, hands on his belt and elbows cocked to the side, as he looked down at his protege, Markel might turn out to be a fine man after all. Though"-he wagged a finger at Calum-"never tell him I said so."

1 8 8 ANNE McCAFFREY AND MARGARET BALL

"Last thing on my mind," Calum said, making a cross over his heart.

So they waited until Acorna emerged from the room, and just managed to catch her guard before he fell into the compartment. His reflexes had him on his feet and in a defensive position against the -wall before he was awake enough to see who was there.

"Well, you look a lot better," he said to Acorna in the tone of a worried parent, straightening his tunic and brushing back his hair. "Sleep did you good, didn't it?"

If Calum had to turn away and Johnny had to cough to disguise his chuckle, Acorna affectionately smoothed Market's hair.

"Yes, it did." She looked past Johnny to see the head medic eagerly approach her. "There's an urgency-"

"Well, it will have to wait," Johnny said firmly, taking Acorna by the arm. "The bridge has need of Acorna right now!"

In point of fact, it was the 'ponies system which needed Acorna, and she did what she could to clean the air.

"How much of that gas was used?" she asked, sneezing.

"The kids wanted to be sure," Johnny said at his driest.

"We could rig blowers," Calum said, remembering how they had managed to clear air in the early days of Maganos Moon Base. "What sort of equipment is available, Markel?"

"Well, we can find out easy enough," Markel said, and turned toward the nearest shaft. "But it'll have to be from the bridge computer."

"I'll go back to the infirmary then," Acorna said, starting in that direction, but it was Calum this time who grabbed her.

"No. You are going back to sleep," he said firmly. "Your horn is practically transparent, and the rest of you doesn't look much better."

"There are still people in need-"

"Nothing our own medics can't handle," said Andreziana, who had been calling up reports from the infirmary while they talked. She backed Calum up. "You have done too much, Acorna . . . and we have other problems to solve now that you cannot help with."

"What?" "First, we must repair the damage to the Haven. Then, Dr. Hoa has promised to work on his weather program, to see if there is some way he can control it so as to correct the damage done by our ship and his science to Rushima ... if they will accept the offer." Andreziana's emotional and physical exhaustion made her look, briefly, much older than her chronological age. "Whether by use of Dr. Hoa's technical expertise, or by the work of our own hands, we must make what reparations we can to the settlers of Rushima. That is our problem, not yours."

"The Shenjemi Federation . . ."

"Have realized that the situation is critical, yes," Johnny Greene said, "and help is on its way. But 'Ziana is right. The First-Gen Starfarers were men and -women of honor who would have done everything possible to repair the damage caused by use of their ship. I'm proud to see these kids following in the tradition."

With this assurance, Acorna felt justified in taking a few extra hours for rest. Hours turned into several days, as she fell into a deep healing sleep from which she awakened at intervals only long enough to consume immense quantities of the most mineral-rich greens the Haven could provide. "I wish I could get her dirtside," Calum fretted. "Rushima's a mess, but she needs to run, and breathe air that hasn't been recycled, and eat something that didn't grow in a vat."

"I think that can be arranged," Markel told him. Calum had been watching over Acorna too obsessively to pay much attention to the repair work on the Haven or the ongoing discussions with the Rushimese. "Hoa's ready to work his weather magic now, but we're going to need to temporarily resettle the Rushimese from the worst flooded area while he arranges a few minor cataclysms to fix things up."

"Good idea," Calum approved absently. "Now, Acorna-"

"Is going to have to be with our resettlement party," Markel said. "Otherwise, they won't go anywhere with us. Acorna's the only one they trust. In fact, we were hoping that you and she would be willing to use the Aca<)eck to ferry settlers- because they have a pronounced, if justifiable, aversion to any of our landing craft."

"Sounds good to me," Calum said. "Soon as she's really awake, we'll get started."

Acorna was clearly healing herself in these periods of deep sleep, restoring the energies depleted by her efforts on behalf of the Starfarers and their wounded ship, and he had no intention of interrupting that process. He returned to watching over her obsessively, feeling more relieved than anything else that their friends on Maganos did not know to transmit queries to the Haven. After sending a "Disregard previous message, everything's all right," from the AcaSecki immediately after they were sure the counter-coup had succeeded, he'd shut down the AcaSecki and joined in the work of rebuilding the Haven. He did not particularly want to communicate with Maganos again until he could assure them Acorna was perfectly well. Call him a coward, but there were some things he'd rather not tell Gill and Rafik, much less Delszaki Li and Uncle Hafiz. This-an Acorna too worn-out to stay awake-was definitely one of those things.

Laboue, Unified Federation Date 53<sup>^</sup>. 05.22

afiz had never been so long out of communication with his various colleagues and interstellar financiers. No amount of pacing up and down his underground refuge would ease his churning mind.

"There is really NO point at all in such ferretlike isolation. There hasn't been a single explosion registered on the equipment. There haven't been any landings anywhere. Am I a slave, to live in prison, or a woman, to dwell in purdah?"

His pacing had brought him back once again to that portion of the garden where the Skarness Stones were located. Although his establishment was completely underground, and shielded by formidable appliances, he could actually stand just beneath the position of the Stones.

He clapped his hands to summon a human servant. "Bring me a thin rod, of metal, not silver nor gold, but base metal, of two arm-spans' length. No, misbegotten -whelp of a djinni's basest lusts, how should I know where such a thing is to be found? Inquire of the steward, and do not trouble me with such matters." Once the rod had been located, he demanded a ladder. Now position it... no, never mind. Guard the door to this corridor, and let no one enter until I give permission. I shall be ... at my devotions." No need for any to observe the procedure which he had invented for communicating with the Stones from this underground refuge; and if they wondered what sort of devotions required this equipment, why, let them wonder!

The manual labor of placing a stepladder was beneath his dignity, but by great good fortune he hit the D Stone with his first try. Then, placing his forehead and both hands on the rod, he tapped out his urgent query.

"Has Laboue been invaded?"

There was no immediate answer. He hadn't expected a prompt reply-but he expected some reaction. Besides, it was undignified for a man of his eminence and prestige to remain in this semisubservient posture, even if he had taken care not to be observed. Also, the metal rod was beginning to wear a groove into his forehead. He daren't relax either his grip or the contact with the rod because he had to catch the rhythm of whatever message the Skarness Stones had for him.

"Clear sky."

Hafiz thanked them and stood upright, dropping the rod with a clang as he alternately rubbed the ridges on his hands and forehead. Then he wondered just what that cryptic message did mean. "Clear skies" because the weather was fair; "clear skies" because these monsters had landed; or "clear skies" because whatever had been headed toward Laboue had gone around the planet?

He convinced himself the last interpretation was the most likely, since no detection equipment known to mankind could have pierced the shell currently protecting the inmates-and there was no truer definition of those who resided on, or under, Laboue right now. So it had to be safe. The Stones would not have lied to him. They didn't know how.

Hafiz did get in touch with Quiabriel as protocol required.

"I'm going above, Quiabriel. I must be in touch with my people, to reassure them. I will report on the condition of the surface once I have ascertained if any damage has been done. But I must surface."

"If you must, you must," Quiabriel replied in a grudging tone. "However, do not respond if there is any change in the surface at all. And a thorough scan, please."

"Has not the Second Prophet admonished us, 'Do what thou shalt do, but do all in order and as fitting My children'?" Hafiz replied genially, while vowing that some day Quiabriel would pay for the tone of voice he had just used to the Head of House Harakamian.

The process of unshielding and rising took time. Hafiz had the ladder placed in one of the upper rooms, at the tallest window near the ceiling so that he could countermand the action if he found reason to do so.

He saw no danger, as his dwelling made a stately ascent into the fresh, clear air of Laboue. All around, of course, -where other gardens should be, and other dwellings hidden within them, there was blank and featureless space. For the Shielding provided Laboue with a sterile desert surface in some places or rampant, impenetrable jungle vistas which clearly said to any observer that this planet wasn't worth further inspection.

Clambering down the ladder while his extensive household was still climbing up out of its basement retreat, Hafiz made his way to his office and reactivated his contact with the receivers implanted in one of Laboue's little moons.

Messages came flooding in to his receiver. Those from Rafik went from queries to near-hysterical demands for reply. Some of the later ones from his associates also ranged from moderate concern to the hysteria that characterized Rafik's.

"It's nice to know that I've been missed," Hafiz said, until he realized that he had also missed out on a fine coup and a large profit. He got more and more upset as he began to tote up just how much money the isolation had cost him in terms of deals unanswered and missed opportunities. When he got his hands around the necks of those . . . those . . . what had they called themselves? . . . Linyaari, he would show them not to deceive the Head of House Harakamian with such dramatic hoaxes.

Yelling for his servants to ready his spacecraft and telling his chief steward to report to Quiabriel, Hafiz almost ran to the hangar in his anxiety to be airborne and back in the midst of the world from which he had temporarily excluded himself. He must show himself in person at the trading centers of his personal empire, and at once. Who knew how long it would take him to repair the damage done? Who knew what negotiating it would take to prove that the Head of House Harakamian was not a coward, diving underground at the first sign of danger? What had made him panic so badly at those obviously manufactured scenes shown by the Linyaari?

He was already demanding a nav plan for Twi Osiam when he calmed down enough to wonder, again, whether the scenes broadcast to Laboue might not have been real and not a hoax. After all, the people who had broadcast their warning were Acorna's folk. He'd never known her to lie ... but of course, his beloved nephew had raised the girl so she would value truth. A pity, that. . . with better training, she might have been most useful to him in the business dealings of House Harakamian. But she was so incurably candid that he suspected her species could not be other than straightforward. And why would they have shown their own species being tortured if there were not some substance to their outrageous claim that this part of the galaxy was in danger? That those . . . those . . . barbaric savages were on the loose in the immediate vicinity?

He sent a lucid message to Rafik on the Uhuru, mentioning that he was again in circulation and asking what Rafik had been able to save of their current deals without his authorization, which, in some cases, Rafik still must present to seal a contract.

He got back the signal, which meant the Uhuru was recording the message. Now where was Rafik? If not on board his ship, he had better be doing business for

House Harakamian. He received back the somewhat reassuring report that the Uhuru was currently docked at Maganos.

What but a threat to Acorna could have taken Rafik from his assigned business deals to Maganos? And should she not be apprised of the arrival of others like her? Worry and concern and a kindly desire to give Acorna this news in person inspired Hafiz to do something he had not considered in all his adult life: he put aside his business plans for a purely personal trip to Maganos Moon Base.

"At least the time of travel need not be a total loss," Hafiz told himself. Some at least of his complex business dealings could be rescued by long-distance communication, and he spent the time of the journey doing just that. He was requesting landing permission from Maganos Moon Base when a final message in the long line he had been receiving was from Rafik.

"Uncle, having no way of communicating with you, I have asked Delsaki Li to make arrangements on Acorna's behalf. I trust they will meet with your approval. I will report as soon as we reach Rushima."

"Rushima? Grushima?" Hafiz was totally outraged. He'd never heard of the place and tapped in a request for information, trying to control his temper. After all, he had authorized Rafik to operate on his own, finely tuned instincts. . . . "An agri planet?" he bellowed when the information came up. "Sponsored by the Shenjemi?"

Hafiz's dealings with the Shenjemi Federation had not been all that remunerative, and Hafiz made his value judgments on profits made. He'd had few enough from the Federation.

"Why has Rafik gone off to Rushima anyway? It almost sounds as if he is following Acorna. What possessed the girl to take off just when her people appear in our space? Provola had better know exactly what's happening, or I may have to wait until Rafik's firstborn son shows what promise he might have," Hafiz said to the ship in general and no one, certainly not his crew, in particular.

When his ship docked at Maganos Moon Base Hafiz went straight to Delszaki Li's private offices, only to find them deserted. Not even the secretary who usually guarded the inner sanctum was at his post. As a consequence, Hafiz had no way of finding out that Mr. Li had briefly collapsed after the strain of the past few days and had been ordered to bed in Maganos's small hospital facility. The secretary who should have been receiving visitors and directing inquiries was instead hovering outside the closed doors of the hospital unit, waiting to hear of the recovery of an old man he had come to love like . . . well, not a father . . . more like a great-grandfather.

To be fair, Li had no reason to expect any need for his services; since the triumph of the Child Liberation League had obviated the need for secrecy, Mr. Li had more and more left the day-to-day management of his financial and business affairs in the hands of trusted subordinates. Furthermore, when he visited Maganos he considered himself "on holiday" and expected- and received-no visitors except those in his immediate circle of beloved friends-the three miners, the Kendoro siblings, and, of course, Acorna-all of whom were gone now. Not expecting Hafiz to lower the shield, let alone journey to Maganos, none of them had thought to leave him any explanations for their sudden departure. And the secretary, who, like most of the rest of Maganos, was not privy to the tale brought by the Linyaari envoys, had little to offer when Hafiz finally located him.

"Acorna and Calum left first, in the AcaSeckl- " Hafiz began. "You know about that?" The secretary was stunned. "I should," Hafiz said, "she's my ship. Continue, please." "Well. Everybody was worried about that. The ship wasn't fitted up properly, you see. ..." The secretary started off in some detail about the remodeling and improved defense plans for the Acadecki, which he did know something about, until Hafiz interrupted and very politely suggested that the man go on with his story about what had happened to cause a mass desertion of Maganos and Delszaki Li's collapse.

"Well, um, they arrested this . . . person," the secretary went on doubtfully, and wondered why his own tongue seemed to be fighting him. Of course it had been a person, a young man, he'd seen him, what else would you call him? But something else was diverting his attention from the story. . . .

"It's hard to talk with my collar twisted so tightly," the secretary said, "if you could ..."

"A thousand apologies." Hafiz released his grip on the man's tunic, but not the steely-eyed glare that somehow brought to mind much worse things than simple assault... archaic words like *bastinado* and *strappado* floated through the secretary's jangling brain. Once released, he told Hafiz everything he could; unfortunately, that wasn't enough to allow any reconstruction of what had been going on in Li's private rooms. Other ... "people" ... had come... • For some reason, he had a hard time describing them or even remembering their appearance; all he knew for sure was that they were good people who meant no harm, and there was nothing unusual about them.

"And how," Hafiz inquired silkily, "do you 'know' all that?"

The secretary shook his head. "I just know. ..."

Judit, Gill, and Pal had all gathered with Mr. Li to speak with them, and so had Rafik when he arrived. They kept the door closed, and the secretary couldn't hear



anything except when somebody went in or out. Once he heard the new visitors speaking in a language that he couldn't identify.

"I didn't get it," the man said. "They had their own ship; they looked rich; doesn't everybody speak Galactic by now? I can't imagine where they could have come from."

"Who cares?" Hafiz snapped. "Go on."

There wasn't much left to tell. The strangers had left in their splendid ship; Judit, Gill, Pal, and Rafik had all left in the Uhuru;

Delszaki Li had been so fatigued that despite frequent short naps while the talking went on, he had collapsed immediately after their departure and had been resting in the high-security medical unit ever since.

"They won't let anyone in to see him," the secretary said. "They just keep saying he's resting comfortably and doing as well as can be expected and all the usual blather." He looked at Hafiz with some hope. "The doctor might let you in."

But the Harakamian will met its match in a youngish, tired doctor whose first medical experience had been as a volunteer to patch up bruised and broken children on the day of the Liberation, and who revered Delszaki Li as a near saint.

"He's been heavily medicated and will remain so until I am satisfied that his physical condition has stabilized," the doctor snapped, "and until then, nobody disturbs him!"

"If you've got him doped to the eyeballs," Hafiz tactlessly translated the medicalese, "I don't suppose it would do me much good to look at his sleeping body."

Consumed with curiosity, he decided to pass the time until Li awoke or a message came from the Uhuru by finding out what had been done since his last visit to complete the mining facilities. A sudden thought struck him as he turned to make his way to the engineering offices. "Ah ~ Provola didn't take off for the back end of beyond also, did she?"

Reassured that Provola Quero was in her office as usual Hafiz made his way there after leaving instructions that any news was to be forwarded at once to Provola's office, the suite which was kept for him in Maganos's living quarters, and any other place he might conceivably be found.

The door to Provola's office was open, and from some distance Hafiz could hear a tearful voice pleading with Provola Quero and that woman's calm, cool,

responses, obviously unmoved by the petition. As he entered, his eyes were taken by the unexpected sight of a generous womanly figure in lavender, nicely set off by white trim, and enhanced by a number of glittering crystals of various colors which quivered enticingly from the fine silver chains which draped the woman's voluptuous body. She would have made two of wiry little Provola Quero, with her ascetically cropped head and single tight braid-and in Hafiz's estimation, a true woman like this was worth ten of an engineerfemale like Provola.

"My dear Mr. Harakamian," Provola said with more warmth than Hafiz had ever heard in the woman's voice before. She was not his type, and not even feminine in her appearance, but she was an excellent manager. She turned to the female. "I must ask you to leave now."

"But where can I leave TO?" was the tearful reply, plump white hands with beringed fingers wide open in appeal. "I only had enough credit to get here to help darling Acorna. ..."

"And why, my dear ..." Hafiz paused to allow for an introduction.

"Karma ..." both women said at once.

Hafiz could not resist seizing the delightfully plump white hand now extended in supplication to him. And he kissed and stroked it while with his other hand he gestured to Provola that he would handle this.

As he guided Karina out of Provola's inner office, he could hear her sigh of relief.

"My dear Karina, why did you think that Acorna needed help?" Hafiz said, gesturing around at the well-appointed waiting room and the busy corridor outside.

"But she does," Karina insisted, and then his name dropped into the proper slot in her retentive memory, "dear Mr. Harakamian."

"Let us discuss this matter in the privacy of my quarters," Hafiz said at his most persuasive and in his silkiest tone. He hadn't seen a woman of these delicious proportions in so long. Nowadays the emphasis was on trim, slim, svelte, bony feminine figures, and he'd about given up the hope of finding one that would be so enticing to him. It was an added attraction that she seemed to know something about Acorna's present situation.

Karina's eyes widened. "You have rooms here . . . on Manganos'

"I have many personal and business connections with the House of Li," Hafiz explained, leading her toward Living Quarters A. "A suite of rooms is kept constantly maintained and at my disposal... or is supposed to be." He finished

with a scowl as he placed his palm on the reader beside the door to his suite and the door slowly irised open to reveal rooms that had clearly quite recently suffered from the recent invasion of a careless bachelor. Datacubes and vids littered the floor, never having been put back in their individual cases; a natty suit in lime green and fuchsia lay crumpled at the entrance to the shower cube; and a half-empty glass making rings on the polished Tanque purpleheart wood of the nearest table testified by its smell that the recent occupant of these rooms had taken to heart the Second Prophet's relaxation of the restrictions on spirituous liquors.

"My heir," Hafiz growled. "Soon to be my ex-heir if he does not mend his ways'." He activated the wall console and requested a thorough cleaning for the suite, then suggested to Karma that they should repair to one of the small dining rooms off the main cafeteria instead. "And when Rafik comes back," he said, "if he comes back, I shall enroll him in the Personal Hygiene and Cleanliness classes taught to the children of Maganos, for clearly he is in sore need of basic instruction!" The thought of tall, dignified Rafik cramped into a child's desk and lectured on the need to clean his teeth properly tickled Hafiz's fancy and dispelled most of his anger.

Karina dispelled the rest of it by asking how he could possibly be annoyed with such a fine, brave, handsome man as Rafik and vowing that she had recognized him instantly from his resemblance to Rafik. If she had in fact done so, it would have been a remarkable feat of imagination, since Hafiz was six inches shorter and thirty pounds heavier than Rafik, and his creased face, now consciously amiable, bore a strong resemblance to that of a crocodile hoping that some day another fat, brown child would tumble down the bank. However, to Karina, hungry and stranded for days on a strange planet without credit, Hafiz looked truly beautiful as he led her to a small dining room where he requested a tray of cream pastries and his special blend of kava.

"Now, dear Karina, do tell me how it happens that a friend of Acorna's should have been left in this sad plight," Hafiz invited her, "and what you would like me to do to the villains who abandoned you so."

"Oh," Karina said, "they are not villains, they are Enlightened Beings, and I am almost sure they did not mean to leave me in desperate straits, only they were in a hurry, and, of course, I had not told them I had no credits left. How could I? You do see, don't you?"

"Of course," Hafiz agreed urbanely, although totally confused.

"They have beautiful auras, you know," Karina rambled on, "as of course you'd expect of Acorna's race -"

"The Linyaari are here?" Hafiz interrupted her. Although he had put aside both his current business dealings and the tempting thought of making an exclusive trade agreement with the first sapient aliens to contact human civilization in order to look after Acorna, now that he was actually at Maganos and nobody seemed to be panicking on Acorna's behalf, he could not help thinking how lucrative such an arrangement might be ... and that he, as one of Acorna's two guardians, should by rights have first pickings. He had not reckoned on her other guardian somehow magicking the Linyaari to his residence first.

"Well, not anymore. They went after- "

"Ten thousand Shaitans! I should have known that crafty old dog of an unbeliever would get ahead of me!" Hafiz drummed his fingers on the tabletop, temporarily oblivious to Karina. "But perhaps Rafik has protected my interests. Yes, that must be what he meant by 'arrangements.'" The downward creases on his face lifted slightly. "In that case, I may well forgive the boy after all. Karina, my dear lady, I must speak with Delszaki Li's secretary again at once; can you ever forgive me?"

Karina's eyes darkened with a sorrow that was not entirely due to the fact that she had not quite finished the last of the pastries. "But we've only just met!"

"And I look forward to many delightful hours improving our acquaintance," Hafiz assured her. "And although my business is pressing, I refuse to leave unless you promise me that you will take proper care of yourself and eventually retire to my suite to rest. You must eat to keep up your strength and to maintain your exquisite beauty." He called for a portable console and left orders for Karina to be able to request anything she desired at the charge of House Harakamian.

That should be safe enough, he thought cynically; there was nothing to buy on Maganos Moon Base except food and the simplest of basic necessities. Later he would give himself the pleasure of ordering new garments from Kezdet for this generously endowed beauty, a project that would absolutely require him to acquaint himself with her exact dimensions, and later . . . who knew what might not follow? Best not to alarm her; he would not want such a treasure of voluptuous womanhood to take flight while he was occupied in business talks.

His first order of business was to extract from the secretary the terms of any trade agreements that had already been filed. With any luck there had not been time to put anything on disk. Opportunity abounded when a man was prepared to take advantage of it. Then, if Li was still not available, he could while away the hours of waiting by courting his lovely Karina. It seemed his trip to Maganos would be profitable in more ways than he could have ever predicted.

Haven, Unified Federation Date 534.05.25

It was nearly six days before Acorna started staying awake for more than a few minutes at a time, but then she returned to normal within a few hours of her last awakening.

"You mean those poor people have been waiting all this time only for me?" she exclaimed, horrified. "Calum, why did you not go on without me?"

"I," Calum said, "do not possess a sweet voice, a pretty face, or a magical horn. The mere fact that I was around and helped to repair their corn system doesn't seem to be enough to make me Trustworthy. It's you or nobody."

"Then you should have wakened me sooner!"

Markel and Calum looked at each other and tried not to laugh.

"We should've taken vids," Markel said. "Acorna, you have been awake, off and on-vertical, anyway. Just long enough to use the facilities and devastate our chard and spinach beds. Then you'd stagger off without saying a word and go back to sleep."

Acorna shook her head. "I cannot believe it."

"Next time we will take vids!"

"There won't be a next time," Calum said. "I'm not letting Acorna wear herself out to that extent ever again."

The Rushimese required that the AcaSeckl land first with only Acorna and Calum on board; they did not trust vids of Acorna speaking to them from the Haven.

"I just hope that you'll be able to convince them that the kids really want to make reparations for the devastation caused during Nueva's coup," Calum said wearily as they landed. "If they won't let us use the Haven's shuttlecraft as well as the Acai)eckl to ferry settlers from the flooded area to high ground, we'll be here for weeks before Dr. Hoa can start work on drying out this settlement."

"I will try to persuade them," Acorna said, "but it may take time. ..."

Calum chuckled weakly. "And to think we thought we were saving time by skipping out of Maganos before the repairs were complete! If we'd waited until the 'ponies were fixed, we wouldn't have been caught up in this mess, we might have been well on our way to searching the Coma Berenices quadrant by now. . . . Well, my mother always told me, 'Haste makes waste,' but I was always in too much of a hurry to listen to her."

"It is not a waste if we are able to help people desperately in need," Acorna said, but her lovely eyes clouded over at this reminder of how much time the stopover at Rushima had cost them. "Someday we will find my people . . . and you know, Calum, if we had waited for Pal and Mr. Li to agree that the AcaSecki was ready, we would still be on Maganos!"

Calum had to agree with that. Still, he hoped that the Rushimese got over their suspicions of the Haven quickly. The longer he was away from Mercy, the more he missed her . . . and since he had promised himself to see Acorna safely with her own people before he was free to be with Mercy, it was a kind of torture to be delayed and delayed here, where they had barely begun their quest.

"The settlers are arriving," Acorna said. "Let me see what I can do to get them organized, and you can try to raise Maganos. She gave him an understanding smile. "Mercy, I mean, all our friends, will want to know what we are doing."

Calum found that he did not particularly like being "understood." One of the many things he liked about Mercy was that even if she could guess what he was thinking, she never told him so!

Oh, well, soon enough they would be on their way out to the Coma Berenices quadrant, and he could apply himself to nice straightforward problems of astrogation instead of the most chaotic, unpredictable problems of all. . . people.

Still, this might well be his last chance to communicate with Mercy in private; it was thoughtful of Acorna to give him the opportunity. For the first time in days, Calum activated the Aca(Secki's com unit.

Before Calum could enter his request, though, the com unit gave forth the nerve-racking squeal that signaled an incoming spurt-message. He sighed and waited the interminable seconds while the spurt codes chattered across the screen, then watched a blurry image gradually become clearer and clearer as the AcaSecki's computer expanded the compressed message. As the face on the screen became recognizable, Calum sat upright and tensed.

What was Rafik doing in this sector, close enough to send compressed visuals? Had their first message from the Haven gotten through after all, sending Rafik on a wild-goose chase to rescue them? He'd never live that down. . . .

Rafik's first intelligible words, once the entire spurt was expanded, proved this was not the case; the call for help had not in fact been received, but the "all clear" message had. And Rafik was coming on a completely different errand. Calum listened with growing surprise, replayed the message not once but twice to make sure he had understood it correctly, then set the com receivers on "automatic." He had to find Acorna at once!

They had set the AcaSecki down in the muddy lake where they'd first landed, thinking that a logical place to start the restoration of Rushima would be with Joshua Flouse and the settlers who already knew Calum and Acorna. Once these waterlogged hectares had been dried out and restored to productivity, the Rushimese would be more likely to trust the good intentions of the Second-Generation kids who now controlled the Haven. But Dr. Hoa had warned that the process of draining and drying the area through weather modification was likely to be brutal; even with Calum's mathematical help, they could neither predict nor control effects with the accuracy desirable when working over populated communities.

Calum was rather disconcerted when he came out to find the landing area deserted, while Acorna stood fetlock-deep in the clarified water, absentmindedly picking up and tasting small floating strands of filamentous algae. "Hey, where'd everybody go?"

"They are building rafts," Acorna informed him, "to ferry their possessions across the pond. There was some discussion of asking us to set down in a drier spot, but they could not agree on one; every little hill that is not actually underwater is too full of livestock and refugees."

"Oh. Well, their choice, I guess," Calum said, "as long as they don't take too long about it. ..." With Rafik's amazing news to impart, he couldn't really get too interested in the settlers' logistical problems. "Anyway, I've got something to tell you. Acorna, we don't need to go on in the AcaSecki. There'll be no need to test my program to find your home."

The jubilant note in Calum's voice startled Acorna. "What are you talking about?" She had never seen Calum like this before. His eyes blazed, and his fair hair stuck up in an untidy quiff along the top of his head.

"I've heard from the Uhuru. Rafik is coming here." "Rafik?" She felt slow and stupid, unable to think clearly. Something very important was about to happen, or had happened; she couldn't tell which. It wasn't about Rafik, though; so she focused on the details to slow down the important thing, which she was not ready to hear. "But he was not on Maganos or Laboue. How did he know we were here?"

"He was on Maganos -when our message got through. And you'll never guess why!"

Acorna thought she did not want to guess. "Does he know everything is all right now?" she asked. Calum had sent another message as soon as they knew the situation on board the Haven, but perhaps Rafik had taken off for Rushima before that spurt came through. Why else would he be coming?

"I guess so." Calum scrubbed one hand over his head; the short yellow hair flattened like hay under a great wind, then sprang up again, quivering with excitement. "I mean, he must; I gather only the second message got through. The first one must have been killed when I shut down so fast. But there's other news. Acorna, he's not coming alone. Like I just said, we don't need to go on with the search for your home."

It had been the first thing he'd said, and she had known at once what it must mean. She had been holding the meaning away from her, bracing herself against it, trying to keep him from saying it with all her questions about Rafik. But it could be delayed no longer.

"They have found us," she said, slowly, and regretted it the next instant. Half the bright exultation drained from Calum's face.

"Yes-I wanted to tell you. How did you know?" "I guessed. Why else would he stop here?" Acorna felt as if she were feeling her way with bare hooves across a shaking quagmire, treacherous ground that might dissolve under her at any moment. "So . . . they are coming for me?" Calum confirmed her guess. "With Rafik?" "They have their own ship, of course. They think it is faster;

Rafik is not so sure, but he wanted to be sure you had the news before they reached Rushima. He thought it might be too great a shock if you saw them without warning."

"That was . . . considerate of him." Shock? What was that? This numbness through which she moved, half-disembodied, half-sinking under feelings she did not recognize-was that shock? She felt as if she had been poisoned; her limbs tingled, and her eyes could not take in the light that had been there a moment ago. If she had really been poisoned, though, she would be able to heal herself. And this moving darkness was not something she could heal with a touch other horn.

"Acorna?" Calum sounded far away. "Acorna! Are you all right? I thought you'd be happy!" "Of course I'm happy," she said with an effort. She forced a smile to her lips. "My people. My dream come true. How could I be anything else but happy, dear Calum?"

"Well, that's what I thought," he said, still sounding doubtful, "but for a moment you looked almost ill. Are you coming down with something, do you think? But you shouldn't . . . you don't get sick."

"No more I do," she agreed, with another smile. "I think I was a little dizzy for a moment. It was quite a shock, you know." She thought of the disappointment that Calum must have been loyally concealing. Such a good friend ... he and Gill and



Rafik had always been so good to her, the only family she had ever known. He had wanted to discover her home himself, not have the location handed to him. The least she could do now was play up to him.

"And, Calum, now we will not have to wait months to find out whether your deductions were correct. My . . . people will surely be able to tell us the exact location from which they came. Won't it be interesting to find out whether it matches the destination we chose on the basis of your program?" He could still have the satisfaction of being proved accurate ... if he had been correct.

Calum grinned. "You're right! We don't need a construction proof; we'll have an existence one! And another thing-

"Calum, you know I don't speak mathematics," Acorna said in warning.

"Not about my program. About your people! Rafik says they are telepathic, isn't that wonderful? And they have a very high code of ethics; it took them quite a time to decide whether we were worthy to know them." Calum blithely condensed what Rafik had already abbreviated, the Linyaari discussion over whether humans were linyarii or khievii. "Oh, by the way, they call themselves Linyaari, although I expect it just means something like 'People' in their language. Their technology is way beyond ours in some respects-apparently they've got some kind of automatic language-learning system. The ones who are coming already speak Basic, so you'll be able to talk to them right away, isn't that great? And best of all, Acorna, one of them is your aunt!" Calum beamed as if he were giving her a wonderful present.

"Talk to them?" Acorna said faintly.

"Yes, right away. Although now I think of it, you probably won't need to use Basic. If they're telepathic, you must be, too. You'll just be able to merge minds with them."

"That's . . . wonderful."

Calum looked suddenly uncertain. "Your own people, a family of your own . . . Acorna, don't quite forget us, will you? Gill and Rafik and me?"

Acorna stood up, pleased to find that her legs would, after all, support her. Standing, she was now taller than this one of her three foster parents.

"Calum, I will never forget you. You three are my family, and nothing can change that," she said firmly. "But I ... I need to think. Do you mind if I go out for a run now? I can think better in the fresh air."

"All right, but be careful, won't you? All that heavy weather's done some funny things to the terrain. You don't want to go spraining an ankle or getting your mane snagged in a wire fence," Calum warned, exactly like any overanxious parent who can't quite grasp that his or her child is grown-up.

The fetlock-deep water slowed Acorna and forced her to lift her feet high as she set off at a steady pace for the distant horizon. She had to stay constantly aware of minor changes in the underlying ground which she could not see through the mud her running stirred up. She was grateful for the difficulties of running; they were a welcome distraction from her thoughts.

All too soon, however, she reached the edge of the lake bed and was running upward over a gentle slope covered with soggy wet grass that squelched underfoot but required no particular attention from a runner. The oversweet smell of rotting vegetation came up to her nostrils with each breath; the land was waterlogged, water-poisoned. But under the cover of soggy, rotten dead grass there might be living roots and the promise of new life in a gentler season. Was there a similar promise for her, of life ^ an environment that was truly hers? Or was she a misfit, neither of the Linyaari nor of the race that had fostered her? As Acorna's pace evened out she found unwelcome thoughts and fears once again plaguing her. Her people . . . did that mean Calum and Rafik and Gill were no longer hers? Calum had asked her not to forget them, but was the truth not more likely to be that they would soon forget her?

What had she ever been to them but a burden and a complication? They'd lost mining time to raise her from infancy, lost their jobs to protect her from Amalgamated's unethical scientists, and then had been thoroughly entangled in her crusade to rid Kezdet of child labor ... a cause they might sympathize with, but would surely never have undertaken but for her. Even now their lives were being distorted around hers. Did Gill really want to be a foster parent to the children relocated on Maganos, or did he secretly long for the freedom of asteroid mining? Did Rafik resent being called away from House Harakamian business? Was he only coming to Rushima because his sense of duty required him to be present when Acorna met her own people? And as for Calum-would he ever have undertaken the long and risky voyage they'd planned if he had not felt it his own duty to restore Acorna to her home? Certainly he had not seemed all that disappointed to learn the voyage and search were no longer necessary.

As she breasted the hill and began loping down into the long valley before her, Acorna decided that the three ex-miners would probably be only too happy to hand her over to "her people" and know their responsibility to her -was ended.

And what other? She was supposed to be ecstatically happy at being reunited - with her own race. Wasn't that -what this whole voyage had been about? Now Acorna faced the fact that she had never really imagined an end to the voyage. The planet Calum had targeted as her probable home lay so far away that the

prospect of reaching it had never been quite real to her. Now, without the expected months of waiting and preparation, suddenly she was supposed to rejoice at being thrown into the arms of these strangers. They might look like her, but what else would there be to link them? "Linyaari," she whispered to the wind, trying out the unfamiliar word. "Linyarri? Liinyar?"

The word evoked no recognition in her, any more than the syllables of her native language that Gill and Rafik insisted she had pronounced when they first met her. "Awi," she'd said aloud then. "Lalli." They were nonsense syllables to her now, nothing more.

Calum was occupied with figuring the rate of thrust required to take off the mass soon to be inserted into the spaceship when Acorna got back to the AcaSeckl, tired and sweaty from her long run. She used most of their fresh water in frantic showering, afraid the approaching Linyaari would be disgusted by the sight of a hot, sweaty, barbarian relative, then purified the water and let it trickle back into the tank. Wrapped in a dark green towel, nervous over the coming meeting and what it might mean to her, she considered the meager wardrobe choices available to her. She hadn't been thinking of clothes when they made their getaway from Maganos. The only important thing then had been to begin the search and escape from well-meaning attempts to delay. Now, as she surveyed the available choices with mounting dismay, perhaps sublimating her fear over what the next few hours might hold, clothing assumed an importance it had never before had for her.

All she had brought were plain ship's coveralls and an assortment of gaudy disguises such as the one she had donned while pretending to be a Didi. All the disguises were frothy and elaborate, to match the large, lavishly decorated hats she used to cover her horn; they were not to Acorna's taste at all. She would not meet her newfound relatives in something she considered vulgar and garish-but would they be insulted if she wore only her everyday ship's coveralls? What would such highly civilized beings wear? Did they dress for dinner, like the characters in historical vids? Maybe they were clothed in shimmering force fields of light and would think anything she donned quaint and provincial. . . .

Calum was aroused from his brown study by a tall, slender, agitated female wearing nothing but yards of green towel, a silver mane, and a sprinkling of water droplets. "Calum, this is impossible!" she declared. "I don't even know when they will be here or what they wear! What if they don't like me? What if they think I look barbarian and provincial? What if ... and I can't even talk to them," she exclaimed, flinging up her arms. "I don't remember-" The towel slipped, and she made a hasty grab for the top edge just in time to avert disaster. "I don't remember any words of their language. My language. They're telepathic. I'm not, so -what if I'm some kind of a mental defective by their standards? You said they had trouble deciding whether human beings were worthy of an alliance with their race, and look what they had to study-Gill, Judit, Rafik, Mr. Li ... if they aren't

good enough for the Linyaari, how will I ever measure up?" Her eyes were silver lines in dark pools of distress, and she was beginning to make the whinnying sound that was as close as she ever came to sobbing aloud.

"Hold on a minute, girl," Calum said, "you're not being rational here."

"Oh, yes, I am!" Acorna contradicted him. "I am being quite rational; I have thought this whole thing out very carefully, and Calum, this-is-not-going-to-work! I cannot meet them, don't you see?" She whirled away from him, silver hair flying through the air, and he thought that not all the moisture on her face had come from her recent shower. He wished to God Judit were here, she'd know how to calm Acorna down. Or Gill. Or even Rafik! Why did it have to be him who was stuck with the task? A man didn't specialize in mathematics because he had a rare talent for human relationships. All Calum had was reason and logic, and he made one more attempt to apply it.

"Acorna, how do you know you're not telepathic? If it only works between members of your race, and you've never been around any others - "

"I just know," she interrupted him. She had thrown a second towel over her head and shoulders and was rubbing vigorously as if to dry off her hair; her voice was muffled by layers of fuzzy fabric. "I'd have felt something before now if I were a telepath. I shouldn't be surprised if they exposed me at birth. You know the ancient Greeks used to do that with defective offspring, or even superfluous girls- I am certainly superfluous to them, don't you think? What would they want with some barbarian who can't even speak their language? Only, being such a high-tech race, naturally they wouldn't just leave me on a mountaintop. A space capsule must be a much better means of disposal, don't you see? After all, the mountain thing wasn't totally reliable-look at Oedipus."

"Who's he?" Calum was completely out of his depth now.

"Really, Calum," Acorna said in tones of freezing superiority from the depths of her covering towels, "don't you read anything? He was exposed because of a prophecy that he would murder his father, only a shepherd took him in and raised him, and then one day he met his real father at a crossroads and they got in a fight and of course Oedipus didn't know who he was, so he killed him, and then . . . well, after then he behaved most improperly, all through not knowing anything about his origins, and I think eventually he blinded himself. So you see why I can't meet them."

"I see you're talking a lot of nonsense," Calum said. "I never met this Oedipus chap, and what's more I don't want to, because he sounds quite loopy to me. You're not loopy, and you're not going to kill anybody, and the Linyaari want you. They've come one hell of a long way for you, so I most seriously doubt that they

sent you off in an escape pod to begin with. It'll have been some kind of accident, that's all, and no doubt they'll explain it all when they get to Rushima."

Acorna had dropped the towel that covered her head and was nodding silently. Under the illusion that he had calmed her fears, Calum made the mistake of adding, "Now why don't you just get dressed; pick out some pretty thing; you want to look nice when your people get here."

"You don't understaaaand," Acorna wailed, and was off again, hiccuping and whinnying. Calum patted her shoulder and prayed to the Gods of Balanced Equations that Gill, Judit, Rafik, somebody who understood females would reach them before the Linyaari showed up and wanted to know why he'd been upsetting their foundling. But to his great relief, she calmed herself quickly enough and was once again—at least on the surface—the quiet, sweet-tempered girl he had raised. It was the arrival of Joshua Flouse with the first rafts that restored her to normal. On hearing the splashing approach of the settlers, Acorna quickly dashed cold water over her face and slipped into her coveralls. "I am sorry," she said. "I have been foolish, and -we have work to do. Calum, do you not need to go to the Haven and collect that working party? "

"Might as well take the first load of settlers to high ground, then go on to the Haven from there," Calum decided. "But they'll have to leave their goods here for now, except for what each one can carry; when I get the kids dirtside, they can do the heavy lifting.

That decision, announced by Calum, caused a furor, which only Acorna could calm. As she waded through the lake, speaking quietly to each group of settlers with their raftload of treasured personal possessions, the cries of outrage died down and the Rushimese farmers grudgingly poled their rafts back to the soggy "shore." Once there, Joshua Flouse displayed the talent for leadership that had made him spokesman for this settlement, quickly separating each pile of personal goods into those that were too fragile to be left and those that might reasonably survive Hoa's weather modifications if carefully stored in an outbuilding.

Even with this division, and with Calum's requirement that each refugee carry his own possessions, he and Acorna wound up doing far more than their share of physical labor. Children and old people and invalids had to be helped into the Aca()eckl., and the helpers could not carry anything else. Calum personally stowed a tea set brought at great expense from the Shenjemi home, piece by fragile piece, and then cursed himself for wasting time with such trinkets when he saw Acorna wading through muddy water with twin infants clinging to her neck and caressing her horn. By the time the Acadeckl was filled with refugees, Calum and Acorna and the able-bodied men and women of the settlement, who'd chosen to see their weakest members to safety first, were all exhausted and dripping with mud and sweat. But the labor seemed to have been good for

Acorna; or perhaps it was the twitters and coos of the babies who were entranced by her horn and silvery mane that had restored the shine to her eyes. The settlers' hard-won calm almost disintegrated, though, when Calum told Acorna to board the Accuiecki, that they could take no more passengers on this trip.

"How do we know you'll be back?" cried a burly man who'd all but exhausted himself helping weaker settlers board the ship.

"You're not going with my babies, and me not with them!" a young mother exclaimed fiercely.

The imminent danger of a riot was averted when Acorna stepped out of the ship before Calum could stop her.

"I will stay with you," she said in her clear, sweet voice, and the uneasy group subsided at once.

"Well, if she stays...."

"You're a damned fool, Kass," somebody said to the burly man who'd begun the protest. "Oughta know there's no funny business when the likes other is involved."

"Ow'd I s'posed to know that?" the unlucky Kass protested. "Never seen nothm' like her before, did I?"

"Just gotta look at her . . . besides, she cleared the water for us, didn't she?"

Acorna gently urged the people away from the base of the ship and waved at Calum. "Go on," she urged him. "Everything will be all right."

Not without misgivings, Calum lifted off once the settlers on the ground were well clear of the area. What would Rafik and Gill say to him if they knew he'd left Acorna alone, even briefly, in such circumstances? But there seemed little choice . . . and with any luck, they never -would know.

Acorna was not the least bit concerned for herself as Calum lifted off; she didn't have time for that. There were too many wet, muddy, disgruntled people to be helped into some semblance of organization, too many piles of hastily abandoned household goods which the owners had left with anxiety and a great many last-minute messages: "Mind and keep all my things together and don't let that Auntie Nagah be poking around in them. ... Be ^re they stow those datacubes of mine somewhere safe and dry, that's the only library on all Rushima. . . . Now be sure and keep that table upside down, see, one of the legs falls off if you pick it up the other way, but 'er's a good table and solid."

Solid "er" certainly was; Acorna had to enlist the help of Flouse and Kass to get it carried as far as the soggy bank. "Leave it there," Flouse said. "I'll ask one of the dryland settlements to send a motodray—all ours are fair ruined with this wet, see?" He wiped his sweating forehead. "Blest if I know how old Labrish ever got it that far, and him half-crippled with the rheumatics."

Acorna rubbed the small of her back in rueful agreement. Although strong, she was already tired from carrying most of the children to the ship. But they seemed calmer in her arms than in anybody else's, even their parents'.

One of the parents was sitting, at the water's edge, uncaring of the mud that smeared the cuffs other coveralls, crying quietly. The woman's tears ran in an unending stream down her face to join the silty water of the acres-wide shallow "lake."

Acorna recognized the young mother who'd protested against her children being taken off without her.

"They will be all right," she said quietly, sitting down beside the grief-stricken woman without regard for her own clothes. "I promise you that. And very soon Calum will come back for more people, and you will be with them again, in a nice dry place where you can get them clean and they can sleep dry and warm; won't that be better?"

"They'll be frightened without me!"

"But you'll be with them very soon," Acorna repeated, "and in the meantime . . . they do have your own elders from this settlement to watch them, and Calum himself is very good with children."

The young woman sniffled. "Doesn't look like a man who'd have much patience with their little ways."

"Looks are deceiving," Acorna said with a smile. "Calum raised me from infancy, and he is much more patient than he seems."

"You? Garn!" The woman looked up and down Acorna's tall body. "He ain't hardly old enough!"

"Looks," Acorna repeated, "are deceiving." She did not add that it was her appearance, not Calum's, which was deceptive; the settlers had accepted her strange looks with surprising equanimity. She did not wish to remind them of her alien nature by explaining that she came of a race which could apparently grow to physical maturity in just four years.

By personally promising to see that the young woman was taken on the very next shipload, and talking in a low, soothing voice, Acorna got her somewhat calmed down; and that calm seemed magically to spread through the crowd. This was shattered as the roar of a ship's engines filled the air and all but drowned out the voices of those on the ground.

"Oh, good," Acorna said cheerfully, "see, here's the Accu)eck back already. ..."  
But it didn't sound like her own dear ship; in fact, it didn't sound quite right for any ship she had ever heard. It came down much too quickly, and the roar stopped too abruptly, and she had barely glimpsed a flash of gold and scarlet before it landed with a hiss of escaping heat that turned the shallow lake bed to a wall of steam clouds.

As the clouds cleared, Acorna saw a craft not dissimilar in shape to the U-class starships of Delszaki Li's fleet, but ornamented with gaudy scrollwork of scarlet-and-gilt ribbon shapes that curved about the hull. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. How did they do that? No decorative paint could survive repeated searing journeys through a planet's atmosphere ... no paint known to humanity, she thought with a flash of panic, and suddenly the ship seemed utterly and completely alien.

Around her there were sudden cries of fear, and the young mother beside her leapt to her feet with the evident intention of running away. Acorna jumped up, too, if only to keep the girl with her; if these people ran in panic, this frail young woman and many others might slip and be trampled . . . who were these new arrivals? They could only be the Linyaan . . . her people.

My peoples-alien, alien, alien-no, my own people. Her heart thudded irregularly, and the young mother pulled away from her with the strength of sudden, desperate panic. Acorna realized suddenly that she herself was contributing to the fear of the crowd. Perhaps if she could calm down and set an example . . .

"There is nothing to be afraid of," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. She raised it slightly. "You don't know who is in that ship, but I know. These are more of my kind. You aren't afraid of me, are you? Well, then! They've come to help, not to hurt you."

As her commonsense words percolated through the crowd, the momentary danger of a panic-stricken flight passed. The settlers were still nervous, Acorna could feel that in the tense movements of their bodies and the way they stood poised on both feet as if ready to fight or flee; but they were listening to reason again.

If indeed it was reason ... she could not be sure that this alien ship held her own people, could she? And yet, beyond all reason, Acorna was sure of it, even before a hatchway too far up the side of the ship opened and let down a ladder



whose treads were too steeply set for human legs, even before the eerie sensation of looking in a distant mirror came over her at the sight of tall, slender, silver-haired people slowly descending the ladder with their hands open in a sign of peace and the golden horns on their heads glittering in the Rushimese sunshine.

Ruthima - Unified Federation Date 334.05.25

There she is ... my 'Khornya . . . our 'Khornya!

(We must tell her . . . them . . . now. It would be wrong to keep them in ignorance, Neeva, and there are surely enough of us here to prevent any panic.)

(Let me greet my 'Khornya first. Can we not have this one moment in peace without being reminded of. . . )

Acorna had a confused image of something alien and terrifying, something like a metallic ant heap writhing with hatred and destruction.

(As you will. But she must be told soon.)

They were within speaking distance now, lifting their long, elegant legs clear of the muddy water with each delicate step. Behind them, Acorna recognized Nadhari Kando, Delszaki Li's personal bodyguard. She had no energy left to try and figure out what Nadhari was doing here; all her attention was on the beings so like and yet unlike herself, who were so rudely discussing her to her face. Acorna couldn't figure out how she had heard them so clearly even when they were still quite some distance away, but it didn't really matter now.

"What is it you need to tell me?" she asked.

The tall woman in the lead blinked and said something in a rush of liquid, nasalized sounds that meant nothing to Acorna. She shook her head, feeling dull and stupid, and suddenly all too aware of the sweat that soaked her coveralls and the mud that ornamented them in soggy brown blotches.

(I thought you said she was old enough to speak "when Vaanye and Feriila took her on that trip, Neeva! What's the matter with her? Is she retarded, do you think?)

(Probably neglected. They -wouldn't know how to care for one of us.)

Well! In all her childish fantasies about finally meeting her own people, she'd never imagined anything like this! Acorna blew out an indignant "Whuff!" through her nostrils and lifted her head proudly, forgetting the mud on her coveralls and all her doubts about being acceptable to these Linyaari.

"There is nothing the matter with me," she said slowly and clearly, "except that I am afflicted with inconsiderate relatives. I used to imagine all sorts of things about the people of my race, but one thing I never thought of was that they would be rude. I am not retarded, and Calum and Gill and Rafik took better care of me than you can conceive, and I am proud to have been raised by them!"

Beside her, the young mother she'd befriended stirred uneasily.

"Whatcha talkin' about?" she demanded. "They ain't said nothing yet, 'cept that foreign gibble-gabble, and I don't think you understood that any more than I did!"

Acorna frowned, puzzled. It was true - she had not understood the only thing that had been spoken; and yet they had said those other things . . . hadn't they?

(Oh, my dear 'Khornya! Have you never heard mind-speech before?)

(Of course she hasn't, Neeva. Remember, barbarians raised her.)

(Don't pay any attention to Thariinye, my dear. He is incurably rude . . . hardly linyarii!)

The untranslatable word carried, in mind-speech, all its connotations of "real-people-like-us," "civilized," "sapient," and "ethical."

Acorna started to speak, then deliberately closed her lips and thought at the others.

(Perhaps ... I am not. ... linyarii... either. It is true ... I was raised by these people ... you call "barbarians"... AND I LOVE THEM!) she finished in a desperate unmodulated rush.

A woman standing behind the leader winced. (Do try and teach her not to SHOUT, Neeva.)

Then Neeva's arms were about Acorna, and she touched horn to horn, and with that contact came a flood of emotion not translatable into any words: joy, and mourning for the parents Acorna could not remember, and absolute, unconditional welcome.

(You are both linyarii and Liinyar, and you are ours,) Neeva thought with absolute conviction. (I am Neeva of the Renyilaaghe, visedhaanye ferilii of this expedition,

and you are 'Khornya of the Renyilaaghe, my sister-child. Your parents were Feriila and Vaanye of the Renyilaaghe; you have Feriila's eyes.) And Neeva's clan memories surged into Acorna: a blue-green grassy world of rolling hills and bright streams. A tall man with eyes the deep silver of the shadowed grass, who smiled and tossed a laughing baby up in his arms; a sweet-faced woman whose silver eyes were the mirror of Acorna's own; feast days of flowers and singing, little furry animals that chattered in the trees. . . .)

"My dream!" exclaimed Acorna aloud.

Neeva drew back slightly, but still keeping both hands on Acorna's shoulders. "Your ... dream?" she asked in slightly nasal Basic.

It had been a treasured dream that sometimes came to Acorna in the drowsy moments between sleeping and waking, sometimes not for months at a time, sometimes two or three times in a single week. It was among her earliest memories, and it had been in her mind even before that, for Gill and Rafik had told her that as soon as she learned a few words of Basic she had occasionally wakened speaking of strangely colored skies and demanding angrily to know the name of an animal they had never heard of.

Haltingly, Acorna told Neeva of the fragments she retained from a dream that had always left her feeling safe and loved. "There was a garden where the grass was soft and almost blue, and someone held me up to see the singing-fuzzies in the trees. ..."

"No dream," said Neeva, and the silver pupils of her eyes narrowed to vertical lines. "That was a garden in the clan-house of the Renyilaaghe. Your father Vaanye used to take you to see the thiliiri in the trees there; he said you sang like a thiliir instead of crying like an ordinary youngling. And Feriila and I would chat while Vaanye played with you . . . don't you remember?"

Acorna shook her head, feeling her own pupils contract like Neeva's.

"No matter, no matter." Neeva rested her horn against Acorna's for a brief moment of infinitely reassuring contact. "You are ours, our memories are your memories, you will share them all as we do." Underneath the spoken words Acorna could hear a cry of grief and pity. (How could you survive so, all alone?)

(I was NOT alone,) she thought, and her own memories of Gill and Rafik and Calum flooded into Neeva's mind.

(I see,) said Neeva in a much-altered tone. (We had not expected there could be a bonding. . . .)

"Not a bonding, not like that," Acorna said, since Neeva's sense of bonding meant a physical, sensual tie. (They nurtured me, taking turns. . . .) She touched horns again with her aunt and let loose a myriad of scenes from being bathed as a small child in a small sink to her sampling all the plants in the 'ponies, to understanding "no," and then learning how to read and write, and how to do more important things like find rhenium where they didn't know it would be, and understanding equations and how to place bets to win. And, most of all, protecting her from those who thought her deformed. . . .

(Deformed?) And the others echoed the word, shocked. Especially the tallest, who stood slightly apart from the other two women. From that one, Acorna sensed masculinity and pride and something else. If that was what a grown Liinyar male looked like . . . well . . . Acorna forced her thoughts away from that area.

(Yes, deformed. They nearly took it off.)

(They nearly what?) All four Linyaari cringed, and the male actually put a quick hand up to his horn, as if protecting it from the very thought of such an action.

(So you see, I owe much to Gill, Rafik, and Calum. They never, ever left me alone.)

(Yes, my dear child, we will express our gratitude for their care of you in a substantial manner.) Neeva drew Acorna a little farther away from the clutch of settlers who were distinctly interested in what was going on.

"I ain't heard 'im say much at all," the young woman complained. "Just touchin' them horns together like stags back on Shenjemi. And they ain't neither of them stags."

Neeva beckoned to Khaari to join them in a three-point touching so that Khaari's personality could reduce the shock of what they had to impart to Acorna.

So it was that Acorna learned about the Khieevi and why her parents had needed to send her from their ship to prevent her capture. Both Linyaari cushioned her against the horrible scenes of torture that the Khieevi perpetrated on helpless Linyaari Acorna pitied the poor victims and understood why her parents had wanted to spare her from it and give her that one slim chance to live.

(We are also here to warn this quadrant of the galaxy that the Khieevi are on their way here,) Khaari said, nuzzling Acorna with her horn to reduce the shock that did, indeed, shudder its way through Acorna.

She broke their hold, looking about in shock at the poor bedraggled settlers.

(Be easy, Acorna) Khaari said sharply. (You are broadcasting fear, and they will sense it. Melireenya, help us dampen this. Thaari, you, too. As I said, help is on its way. This Rafik has called upon an army. . . .)

"Is that why Nadhari's here?" Acorna managed to peek over at the short woman who was standing in a parade-rest position, not seeming to look at anything, but, if Acorna knew the woman, and she did, seeing everything. Only what could Nadhan do, trained and intrepid as she was, against people who frightened the tall, elegant Linyaari? (Several come. These people will be safe. But you must be in the safest place,) Neeva said, sliding one hand around Acorna's slim shoulders. (For -we must not lose you again. Come, into our ship.)

"No. I promised that I would stay here until the Aca^ecki comes to take another load away from here. And these are not the only ones that must be protected," Acorna said, backing away from her own people. "I can go nowhere until the entire planet is evacuated if the Khieevi things are coming this way."

"We can take zum in our ship," Neeva said, glancing over and doing a mental count of the heads she could see. "But not all."

"All, or I don't leave this planet."

(It is obvious she is linyarii,) Thariinye said in a bored tone. (Only females will support a lost cause.)

(Be still with such foolish talk, Thaari. We must get her to safety. And I do not think we will have much time.)

(The armies are coming. We know that.)

(But when? And soon enough?)

"I don't go without these people and as many others as we can find," Acorna said, and suddenly Nadhari Kando was beside her.

"That's telling them, Lady Lukia," said the bodyguard in her gravelly voice.

Meanwhile, Rafik had reached the Haven, fully expecting to see Acorna awaiting him. The first ship he spotted in the huge hangar bay of the Starfarer ship was the AcaSecki. He did not see the Linyaari ship. But his instrumentation had shown that the Linyaari ship had been far enough ahead of even his superfast Uhuru to have landed, collected Acorna, and been back before he could arrive. Calum was there, and Rafik charged angrily toward the one familiar face, only to stop and stand stock-still when he realized that the man next to Calum was familiar, too.

"Johnny Greene, what in the name of misbegotten imps, djinni, and Shaitans are you doing here?" But he thumped Johnny on the back with more enthusiasm, Calum thought, than he had ever displayed on being reunited with his old mining partners. "Is Acorna on the bridge? Where's that fancy ship of the Linyaari? I know they made it to Rushima ahead of me."

"We expect them at any moment, Rafik," Calum said absently. He was absorbed in counting the other old friends who were even now disembarking from the Uhuru. Judit, Pal, Gill. . .

"Mercy? " he inquired hopefully.

"She felt it was her duty to stay •with Mr. Li. He wasn't looking so good-oh, nothing to worry about," Rafik said. "We've been in touch with Maganos; he was in bed for a few days but he's okay now, and anyway Uncle Hafiz is with him. Apparently he decided to raise the shield and"-he gestured helplessly-"it's rather a lot to explain. Now where's Acorna? "

"On Rushima."

"You left her alone? On Rushima?" Rafik's coffee brown face faded to a dingy gray.

Calum gave Rafik a dirty look. "I'm sure you would have arranged everything much better if you'd been the one to get kidnapped by Palomellese space pirates. Forgive me, all I managed to do was rescue us"-actually Markel should have gotten the credit for that, but Calum was past being reasonable-"help recapture the Haven, and work out the mathematics needed for Dr. Hoa to reverse the weather devastation on Rushima. She's needed there now to help with relocating the settlers to high ground, and so am I. I just stopped to get a working party of kids off this ship."

He had the slight satisfaction of seeing Rafik's eyes widen.

"Like you said," Calum added in an offhand tone, "it's rather a lot to explain. Now, if you don't mind, I need to get on with the relocation. We have to have all these people on high ground or off the planet before Dr. Hoa can start. ..."

"Forget the high ground," Rafik said in a strangled voice. "A different planet is exactly what we need for them. Maybe a whole different system."

It was Calum's turn to goggle. Quickly Rafik filled him in on the threatened invasion which had brought both the Uharu and the Linyaari to Rushima.

The com unit on Johnny Greene's belt squawked suddenly.

"Armed force approaching. ..."

"That'll be the Red Bracelets," Rafik said, and added, "I hope. . . ."

On their way to the bridge he sketched the situation for Calum and Johnny, who relayed the information to the Haven's young crew so that no further explanations were needed when they reached that area. Full-screen displays gave a view of nine approaching ships: a dreadnought, flanked by two battle cruisers and six destroyers, all of whom were capable of carrying light fighters within as the fleet now angled down to the same plane as the Haven's position.

Rafik gave a sigh of relief. "Yes, they're our people ... so to speak. We've bought them for this engagement-that is, Delszaki and Uncle Hafiz together have."

Calum's eyes widened. "The entire Red Bracelet fleet? How are you-we-going to pay for that?"

"That's all of your friend's fleet?" the kid in charge of the displays snapped over his shoulder. "Then who're these guys?"

The scene altered, and, although the screen's magnification had not been changed, it was obvious that another triangle of nine ships-of-a-kind Rafik had never seen before-was also closing fast on this same position.

"The Khieevi?" Calum asked.

"Must be," Rafik said. "I got a-well, a picture in my head from Neeva, she's Acorna's mother's sister. ..."

Her aunt...

"I think they've got a different kinship structure. She calls herself mother-sib to Acorna, and the feeling I get is that it's more like a second mother than an aunt."

"What the hell difference does that make with the design of the Khieevi ships?"

"None, but that's them," Rafik said, pointing. "And they're still far away, because close-up, Melireenya says the smallest of them is twice the size of the Haven."

Calum swore with great verve and imagination, impressing Markel.

"And Acorna's on Rushima "with those things coming after her? Why didn't it occur to any of you great thinkers to mention this little invasion when you were sending that joyous let'sreunite-the-family spurt-message? "

Calum's scathing glance swept over Rafik and his companions. Gill turned red, Pal stared straight ahead, and Judit dropped her eyes.

"Rafik thought we shouldn't risk starting a panic among the Rushimese," Gill mumbled.

"It was your idea, actually," Rafik said.

"Whatever! Anyway, we all know now; and what are we going to do to protect those people from what's coming at them?"

"First step," said Calum, "is to get Acorna and the Linyaari up here, find out what exactly they know about these Khieevi. These mind-pictures you're talking about can't be any substitute for a good discussion of strategy and tactics. And as soon as the Red Bracelets are within range, we need to get their head honcho in on the talks. You stay here and work on opening communications with the Kilumbembese, Johnny; I've got to collect Acorna."

"I'm coming with you," said Pal in a tone that brooked no argument.

When the Aca<sup>e</sup>cki returned to settle in the extensive but shallow mud puddle that the Haven had created from a hectare of lowlying fields. Pal was first out of the hatch. He stopped in midstride, shocked by the appearance of the gaudy scarlet-and-gold ship that sat a short distance away, and even more shocked by the sight of the Linyaari envoys scattered through the crowd of Rushimese settlers. Actually it wasn't that so much that bothered him; it was the fact that Acorna was neither with the four envoys nor alone. The tall, overbearing young male who'd been arrested by a security guard on Maganos was by her side, bending over her with an attentive expression that made Pal want to deck him. Behind them stood Nadhari Kando, apparently relaxed . . . until one noticed that she was lightly balanced on the balls of her feet, hands free, eyes constantly scanning the space around Acorna for possible threats.

"Look at that oversize . . . stallion," Pal muttered to Calum in tones of disgust, as the other man joined him. "Making time with my girl while we've got an emergency on our hands!"

"I don't think she's your girl now. Pal," Calum said sadly. "I don't think she's any of ours, now."

"Yeah, but-"

"Save it for later," Calum advised him. "For now, help me figure out how we're going to get Acorna and the others up to the Haven without being mobbed by the Rushimese."



Pal hadn't served as Oelszaki Li's personal assistant for years without learning how to keep a poker face and, more important, how to spin a convincing lie on the spur of the moment. As he moved through the crowd, grinning and repeating his tale about a purely temporary glitch in the resettlement and the need to get help from these aliens in preparing adequate facilities for all the waiting settlers, Calum could almost believe it himself. Certainly none of the Rushimese questioned Pal's story, though Calum thought he saw a quizzical look on the face of Joshua Flouse—a man who, as settlement leader, had undoubtedly had his own experience with making up plausible tales.

Even Pal, though, could not keep the whole group of settlers calm without the help of the Linyaari. That became evident as he began, like a good sheep dog, cutting out the aliens and neatly herding them out of the crowd and back to the AcaSecki. He had to get them one at a time, and as each one left, ripples of unease stirred through the crowd, only settling when the remaining Linyaari spaced themselves out more evenly in the mass of humans.

Acorna was reluctant to come with Pal, but he explained that they needed information from the Linyaari, and that she, as the only person who could communicate with them telepathically and who was also familiar with Basic Interlingua, might be needed to make sure that they understood the Linyaari information about the Khieevi correctly. She and Thariinye were the last but one of the Linyaari to come aboard, followed by Nadhari Kando, who was taking quite seriously her orders to guard Acorna at all times; only Neeva remained with the Rushimese.

"She's not coming," Pal reported.

"Oh, yes, she is!" Calum started down the steps, prepared to bring the Linyaari Envoy Extraordinary to safety by force if necessary, but Acorna caught his arm. "Calum, one of us must remain here," she said in an urgent undertone. "If I am truly needed to interpret—"

"You are," Pal said in a firm tone that brooked no argument.

"Then one of the envoys must stay." Her pupils narrowed. "I wish it were not Neeva . . . but we Linyaari cannot all leave."

"I don't see why!" How quickly she had identified herself with them: "we Linyaari" indeed!

"Yuu would not," drawled Thariinye. "We haff skills yuu know nothinn of... anny one of us cann keep these beings calm in ways yuu do not unnerstan. Eeven little 'Khornya could do it!" He put his arm around Acorna's shoulders and patted her arm patronizingly.

"It is true, Calum," Acorna said. "They . . . we . . . can put forth an aura of peace and calm that will keep the settlers from panicking. But if we all go, and the AccSecki as well, they will surely think we are abandoning them."

Calum thought grimly that this might well be true, unless the Linyaari and the humans on board the Haven could come up with some way to protect an entire continent full of far-flung, scattered settlements from imminent invasion. Right now, he'd kill for the secret to Uncle Hafiz's planetary shield. But with the only man capable of installing it and making it work buried six feet under on some distant planet, the Rushimese -and anybody else on the surface of Rushima- were dangerously, potentially fatally, exposed.

But he did not wish to say this to Acorna, nor to confess that his own immediate objective was to get her to the relative safety of the Haven. Rushima was virtually without defenses, and the AcaSecki didn't have top-flight weaponry and defenses owing to his and Acorna's eagerness in leaving before the retrofit of the weapon systems was complete.

He began to forgive Rafik for his reticence about the Khieevi invasion. It was not the sort of news one wished to broadcast to an already unhappy crowd.

Nor did he care much, himself, for the idea of abandoning the Rushimese to their fate. He would bring Acorna and the Linyaari back to the Haven, but after that he would be free to use the AcaSecki up to the last minute in ferrying the Rushimese . . . where? The Haven could hardly provide space, let alone life support, for all the farmers in this and other settlements. Perhaps there were caves where the people could hide.

He would worry about it later, Calum decided, as he broke all records and several safety regs in his eagerness to blast away from Rushima and get Acorna to safety. . . and, as a minor objective, to get her out from between Pal and Thariinye, who had strapped in on opposite sides of her with the evident intention of glaring at one another and exchanging barely veiled insults all the way back.

Fortunately, it took only a matter of minutes to reach the Haven and dock, and once on board, Calum discovered that a solution to the problem of the Rushimese settlers had already been found . . . if the Red Bracelets would go along with it. Already a harsh Kilumbembese voice crackled from the spurt decoder.

"Admiral Ikwaskwan to Haven, regarding your request Denied. My men came to fight the enemy, not to baby-sit civilians. It is not in our contract to perform transport services for these . . . farmers!"

Rafik spoke into the recorder. "With respect, Admiral, we believe you will find that Section 19, Subsection iii, Paragraph (b) of your contract requires you to operate

under my direct command in all matters not specifically military. I do hope we can resolve this matter amicably; penalties for forfeiture are explicit and ... ah ... rather steep. I fear my uncle is not at all of a forgiving nature in such matters." He hit the code and transmit buttons and sat back with a sigh as the response was compressed for spurt to the lead ship of the Red Bracelets.

Seconds later, another transmission was received, this time accompanied by vid. Ikwaskwan's harsh, high-boned face stared out from a gray background slashed by a single curving red line. "We shall reach Rushima orbiting range within the hour, at which time we will discuss this in person," he snapped. The screen went blank with no parting formalities from Ikwaskwan.

"Dear, dear," Gill said, "seems the -wee mannie is just a tad annoyed with us, Rafik. You had better take me along for this personal discussion he wants."

"And me," said Nadhari Kando in her low, gravelly voice.

"You're going nowhere," Rafik said briefly, "and neither am I. Really, Gill, one would think you had learned nothing of the art of negotiating from all those years of watching me in action! Uncle Hafiz would not have chosen an heir so stupid as to conduct difficult bargaining sessions on the opponent's home turf." He thought that over briefly. "Well, Tapha probably would've," he conceded, "but Uncle didn't exactly choose Tapha." Hafiz had expressed no particular grief when his dim-witted, conceited son had died in an attempt to assassinate Rafik before he could be disinherited in Rafik's favor, and none of his friends believed this was because of his iron control of his feelings. . . . He had, in fact, been heard to comment that Tapha's untimely death saved him a fortune in legal fees.

"Nothing difficult about it," Gill said. "It's in the contract, isn't it? He has to do whatever you say, apart from direct battlefield decisions."

Rafik regarded his erstwhile partner with amusement. "And just who," he inquired lightly, "is going to enforce said contract at this distance when they're heavily armed and outnumber us by a factor of thousands? As for later . . . Ikwaskwan is, I'm sure, quite as well aware as I am that time, distance, dead witnesses, and lies can blur the definition of just what was or was not a direct battlefield decision. No, we will have to find other methods of persuading him."

"To do what?" Calum, a latecomer to this discussion, demanded.

Rafik briefly explained to him that on the nearest star system to Rushima, but well out of the current sweep of the Khieevi fleet, they had identified a planet with acceptable gravity, atmosphere, and water where the Rushimese could take refuge until the battle was over ... if the Kilumbembese mercenary fleet could be pressed into service to transport them there.

"Will we have time?"

"That," said Rafik, "depends to some extent on exactly how long it takes to persuade Ikwaskwan to accept our views."

Although he was present for the subsequent discussion, opened as soon as the Red Bracelet flagship Ta'anbl was within hailing range, Calum was never quite clear on just how Rafik managed to persuade "Admiral" Ikwaskwan to come aboard the Haven rather than the other way round. All he could say was that there had been an exchange of compliments in which Rafik so carefully veiled whatever threats or bribes he was offering that it would take the twisty mind of a Harakamian ... or a Kilumbembese mercenary ... to figure out what was going on. All he knew was that Rafik sighed when the exchange was over and commented that this could be expensive, and he hoped Uncle Hafiz and Delszaki Li were prepared to pay for cost overruns beyond the scope of the original contract.

"You're bribing him to move the Rushimese?"

"I am hinting that cooperation will not go unrewarded," Rafik corrected Calum's surmise. He sighed again. "We'll doubtless have to commit ourselves to explicit promises and named sums before he agrees; I just hope I can keep his demands down within reason."

Nadhari Kando broke her customary silence. "I may be able to help persuade him."

"Any help you can give would be most appreciated," Rafik said with a courtly bow. He started to ask whether it was true, then, that Nadhari had once served with the Red Bracelets; but something in her cold, expressionless stare put him off. He had heard that Li's bodyguard did not discuss her past; it would be impolite to bring it up now. Risky, too. Decidedly risky.

Acorna turned and looked up at Thariinye. "Cannot we help, too? If it is a matter of persuading . . . you were so good at calming the Rushimese!"

"Calum tells me you did pretty well at that yourself!" Pal exclaimed.

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Thariinye smiled and patted Acorna's shoulder. "Little 'Khornya will learn, but she is unpracticed. Best to leave this to those with the experience to be tactful and diplomatic."

(Well, that leaves you out, Thariinye! I'd sooner have 'Khornya handle it; at least she knows how to be nice to people!)

(Will you just get off my case, Khaari?)

Acorna's pupils narrowed to slits, and she looked back and forth between the Linyaari while the others wondered just what was going on.

(Please, Khaari, don't be angry on my account. What Thariinye says is true, you know; I have not practiced your . . . our . . . arts and I would likely be only a hindrance to you.)

(Never a hindrance, dear child, but we do not wish you to exhaust yourself. Thariinye, Khaari, save your energies for this visitor; do not waste yourselves in quarreling.) Melireenya's firm intervention quashed the momentary altercation and brought the four Linyaari together in at least superficial unity-for Acorna unconsciously moved to stand with her kinsfolk as they drew closer together.

When "Admiral" Ikwaskwan boarded the Haven, Calum understood why he had not been afraid to negotiate on Rafik's turf. He was accompanied by a squad of mercenaries in dark gray uniforms, each man visibly armed and alert. Calum noticed that some of them wore one red bangle on the left wrist, others two or even three, while Ikwaskwan himself was bare-armed. Some kind of rank symbol? Nadhari would know; he wished he had asked her before the Red Bracelets came aboard. Perhaps Rafik already knew.

Nor was the bodyguard Ikwaskwan's only protection; his first words-he dispensed with the time-wasting formalities of greetings and introductions-made it clear that his flagship had weapons trained on the Haven and that at least one member of his bodyguard carried a fully armed tungsten bomb.

Rafik smoothly agreed that it was desirable to take all possible precautions when visiting, mentioned with a deprecating smile that the Haven was itself not without weaponry both offensive and defensive, and said that he personally would deeply deplore any dissension which should cause injury to their honored ally.

(Meli, are you sure these "humans" are on our side?)

(No . . . but at least they are not Khieevi.)

(That is beginning to seem less and less of a recommendation. Like us in form, perhaps, but hardly in ethics.)

(That may not be entirely a bad thing. If they meet their friends with weapons in both hands, what do you suppose they do to their enemies?)

(Thaninye, you have abominable taste. Besides, if they are so suspicious, they will likely destroy one another before the Khieevi even arrive.)

The Linyaari continued their internal debate. Acorna listened, wanting to cry out in defense of her friends, but also concerned that her newfound kinfolk would think her, too, a warlike barbarian. If only Neeva were there! Acorna longed for her aunt's wisdom and acceptance.

Once the opening dance of establishing ascendancy was over, with neither side a clear winner, Ikwaskwan demanded to know exactly what additional compensation would be granted his troops for the service of ferrying dirt farmers from one planet to another.

Rafik cleared his throat and prepared to equivocate to the best of his not inconsiderable ability; but before he could speak, Nadhan Kando sauntered out from her semiconcealed position behind the group of tall Linyaari.

"Hi, there, Ikki," she said, her usual gravelly drawl muted to an almost husky tone, "it's been a long time."

Not long enough! was written on Ikwaskwan's bony face at sight of Nadhari, but he had too much self-control to voice the feelings. "Nadhari Kando. I had heard you were dead."

"The rumors were gravely exaggerated," replied Nadhari without cracking a smile. "But since we appear to be on the same side again, Ikki, I hope you are a little better at carrying through your plans now than you were then."

"I could hardly be worse," Ikwaskwan muttered, as if to himself. "How did you . . . never mind. So you're doing securityguard work now, Nadhi?" His scornful tone made it clear he thought she had come down in the world.

"I am under contract to the House of-Li," Nadhari said without blinking, "as are you and your troops, Ikki. Tell me, did M'on Na'ntaw ever hear what became of that credit exchange from Theloi?"

Ikwaskwan licked suddenly dry lips. Nadhari waited patiently, thumbs hooked into her belt, one knee slightly bent toward the man she called "Ikki."

"Or did the data get lost when his second-in-command was assassinated?" Nadhari prodded. "Remember? Everybody thought it was counterrevolutionaries, but no one could explain how they'd gotten hold of the plans for our camp. Very clever of them to go straight to Skomitin's tent and back out again without getting caught, wasn't it?"

"So delightful to talk over old times," Ikwaskwan said with a tight-lipped smile that did not reach his eyes. "We must have another little chat some time, Nadhi dear, but just now I am needed at my own bridge. Rafik Nadezda has indicated that

there is some urgency about this little population transfer, and you know my feelings on honoring the wishes of the client."

"I certainly do," Nadhari agreed. Her own smile was echoed in her wickedly glinting dark eyes. "So does E'kosi Tahka'yaw . . . oh, no, I should say, he did know, did he not?"

"Later, later," Ikwaskwan mumbled. "Must return to the Ta 'ani)ji now. Nadezda, have the goodness to transmit orders and location of the targeted system, also a map of the settlements to be evacuated here on Rushima."

Rafik nodded, stern and unsmiling. "All necessary data shall be at your disposal. . . Admiral."

Not until the closing of the outer ports indicated that Ikwaskwan and his bodyguard were physically off the Haven and on their way by shuttle back to the flagship did he allow himself a long sigh of relief.

"Nadhari-" he began, but the quiet woman had vanished.

"Who were those people she was talking about?" Gill asked.

Calum shook his head. "Never heard of 'em. Meant something to Ikwaskwan, though. Ikki?"

"I don't," Rafik said gravely, "believe I want to ask. We owe her, though . . . and I'd better get busy transmitting those orders!"

(See, Khaari? These humans aren't so bad after all. They settled everything quite amicably.)

(It must be that a pretense offeree is part of their greeting ritual,) Thariinye suggested. (You know, like a singing-fuzzy erecting his tail spines when he's courting.)

(Isn't it nice that the Admiral met an old friend on board this ship?)

(But who'd have guessed it? Nadhari is such a sweet, gentle girl, how do you suppose she got to be friends with a professional fighter?)

Acorna listened to this exchange and once again decided not to say anything, either out loud or mentally. Her kinfolk seemed to have totally missed the point of that tense, threatening conversation; but why disturb them, if they were happy with their own interpretation?

fourteen

Riuhlma, Unified Federation Date JJ^ 05.26

If some of the Red Bracelets were offended at being ?????????? I assigned to evacuate settlers rather than to strictly military tasks, two of the newest officers were complacent at the prospect. Ed Minkus and Des Smirnoff joined in the grumbles of their unit but then Smirnoff, in a surprising volte-face, volunteered himself and Minkus to pilot one of the shuttles that was to be sent to outlying areas. Although most of the small settlements on Rushima consisted of clusters of homes and storage sheds along the single primitive road that snaked through the eastern part of the main continent, there were always those individualists who desired privacy, unspoiled territory, or simply the chance to acquire a larger grant of land in compensation for developing areas far from existing transport. Some of these settlers might not be able to get to the collection points currently being specified by continentwide emergency broadcasts on the hastily replaced com-sat equipment. Others might not even hear the 'casts since their equipment might be down or damaged. Some individualists were prone to turning off their com systems for weeks at a time. Ikwaskwan reluctantly agreed to send a few low-flying shuttles to seek out stragglers, although he was adamant that all his people should be back at their stations well before the ETA of the Khieevi force.

"You crazy, Des?" Ed Minkus grumbled as they prepared to board the shuttle assigned them. "Never volunteer for anything, that's what you told me was the first principle of surviving in this outfit."

Des Smirnoff laid one finger to the side of his bulbous nose and winked, while saying in a loud voice that echoed through the hangar, "Why, Ed, didn't we swear an oath of loyalty to the Red Bracelets? And doesn't a loyal comrade enthusiastically support whatever his superiors order? Duty and honor, Ed!"

Captain Ce'skwa, their Unit Leader, heard the speech and gave Des a long, disbelieving look. "Suck-up," murmured one of the Red Bracelets working on the next shuttle.

Des gave the man a wide, brilliant smile and a thumbs-up sign before clambering into the pilot's seat of his own shuttle.

Ed started to ask what all that nonsense had been about, but Des silenced him with a sign. The chatter of takeoff instructions filled the cabin; Des went through his checklist and said nothing that was not strictly business until their craft was well on its way to a landing on Rushima. Then he slapped the com unit off, turned to Ed, and grinned.

"You always were thick between the ears, Minkus."



"Not thick enough to put myself out for work I don't have to do," Minkus grumbled. "Ikwaskwan's not fool enough to send all of us on transport duty. Some lucky sods will get to stay behind, manning the battle stations and polishing command chairs with their rears, and we could've been among them."

Des snorted. "Not bloody likely, with us so new there as to've accumulated no seniority and no friends with strings to pull! We were for this duty, my friend."

"So you thought volunteering would make you look good?"

Des winked again. "I thought, Ed me boy, him as volunteers first gets the pick of the assignments. Now which would you rather be doing for the next six hours - commanding a troop or slogs to feny the dirt farmers back and forth, with some twobracelet type watching your every move, or taking your pick of what the evacuees left behind in their hurry?"

"But we're supposed to ... oh," Ed said as understanding belatedly dawned. "You aren't going to look for settlers at all, are you? You're going to look for places they've already left!" He guffawed. "Neat trick, Des. Okay, we'll take it easy and say too bad, couldn't find no stragglers, Captain Ce'skwa, ma'am!"

"We will not take it easy," Des contradicted him. "We've got just six hours Standard and who knows what goodies to collect and stash in that time."

At the rendezvous landing they were met by a sweating dirt farmer who offered them their choice of datacubes or a handdrawn map showing where he thought most of the outlying settlements -were. Des was about to spurn the paper map when Ed discovered that the datacubes were in a format incompatible with the shuttle's computer. "Okay, okay, we'll take the map," he said, grabbing it before some of his colleagues could make the same discovery.

Captain Ce'skwa glanced at the map and quickly assigned each of the four shuttles on outlier duty to a different quadrant. Des grinned in satisfaction as he saw the generous sprinkle of X's marking probable settler huts all over his quadrant.

"Eager for work, Smirnoff?" Ce'skwa said drily. "You surprise me."

"Hope to continue doing so, ma'am!"

As she turned to the next pair of pilots, he continued under his breath to list the ways he'd like to surprise the uppity, interfering bitch, then snarled at Ed. "Well, what are you waiting for? Get going! We've only five and three-quarter hours Standard left to collect ... all these poor, unfortunate souls," he finished with a sanctimonious smirk.

The first two places they flew over looked not only deserted but too poor to be worth looting: ramshackle huts whose roof timbers had been lifted off by some freak wind, the interiors soaked by torrential rains. "Nobody's lived here for some time," Des grunted, "if you could call that living ... and if there was any good stuff, it's long gone or buried in mud. Whoever built here was an idiot anyway; obviously the area is subject to flooding- he shouldn't have settled on low ground."

The third place looked more promising. A long, low stone building tucked into the shelter of a cleft in a rocky hillside, it had been high enough to escape the floods, and the cliff must have sheltered it from the worst of the storms that had devastated the forest at the top of the hill. Des's eyes sparkled, and he guided the shuttle to a landing place on a barren outcrop of rock above the building. "Now this looks more like it!"

The scramble down to the building was rougher than it had looked from the air; the thin layer of topsoil over the rocks had been washed away by pounding rains, leaving a barren, slippery surface with precious little to hold on to and not even any good footholds. Ed wished that Des had landed in one of the waterlogged fields below the house instead, but he knew that saying anything would only ignite Smirnoff's temper and would not spare him the slippery descent. He took his time, though, testing what miserable footholds he could find and tugging firmly on roots before trusting his weight to them. Des slid recklessly down, bouncing and bruising his anatomy on various outcropping ledges of rock, got to his feet at the base of the cleft, and lumbered toward the house, blaster in hand, before Ed had even finished praying to all the gods he could bring to mind that he wouldn't break his neck on the last fifteen feet of the descent.

He was dangling by one hand, eyes closed, feeling for the ledge that had bruised Des on his descent and praying that the burly man hadn't broken the rock off entirely, when a bellow of delight from within the house startled him into letting go and dropping the last few feet.

"Minkus! Get your worthless butt in here and help me shift this stuff!"

"Shit," Ed said, not exactly in reply, "I think I broke something."

"You better not have, ol' buddy," was the response. "If I have to choose between carrying you back to the shuttle or carrying this load of furs, well, the furs have some market value. ..."

With this encouragement, Ed limped as far as the outer door of the house-more of an elongated cabin, really-and decided that his right ankle was not really broken after all. Sprained, maybe. A bad sprain. He ought to be lying down with his foot up and an ice pack on the sprain, not hobbling around pretending to

rescue settlers. Whose idea had it been to join the Red Bracelets anyway? Probably Smirnoff's, but he couldn't remember for sure. They had both engaged in some heavy drinking after being thrown out of the Kezdet Guardians for embezzlement, peculation, and abuse of suspects to a degree that revolted even the other Guardians.

It had been after one of those drinking parties and the subsequent blackout that Ed had wakened to find himself dressed in a gray uniform and being addressed as "Scumsucker," by the broad he had quickly learned to call "Captain Ce'skwa, ma'am!" What followed had been the most strenuous and miserable weeks of his life; Captain Ce'skwa had a talent for convincing them that they would really rather attempt whatever bonecrunching, muscle-tearing "exercise" she assigned than explain their failure to her.

And that had been the officers' training; his and Smirnoff's experience in the Kezdet Guardians had at least bought them a single red bracelet apiece on entry. He didn't even want to think about what the rank and file of the mercenaries went through as basic training.

Now he turned a jaundiced eye toward the stack of halfcured furs Smirnoff was fondling and inquired where exactly Smirnoff planned to stash those things that they wouldn't be noticed by Captain Ce'skwa. "They stink, too," he pointed out. "Whoever had this place wasn't through tanning them when he lit out. Even if you could hide them, she'd be bound to notice the smell. I'm sorry, Des. We need to look for smaller stuff."

Des scowled. "Do you know how much furs of this quality would fetch in the Zaspala Imperium? And I've got a perfect fence . . . uh, buyer; my cousin Vlad has a furrier's and tailor's emporium, caters to the Zaspala aristos. Shit!"

And he signaled his acceptance of Ed's strictures by whirling the bundle of furs around at arm's length, then tossing it at the open cabin door. Ed dodged. The bundle landed with a thud, the bindings split, and furs spilled out into the thick black mud left by the rains that seemed to have assaulted this whole area.

Des dropped his blaster and went through the cabin with the recklessness of rage, spilling out food stores in case they contained jewels or antique money, smashing crude pottery cups and dishes that all too obviously had no resale value even on Rushima, let alone anywhere civilized. While he smashed and destroyed he cursed monotonously, taking out his disappointment over the furs on the inanimate objects in his path.

"Why couldn't the jerk have been a prospector instead of a fur trapper?" he demanded of the ceiling.

"He is," cackled a dry, crackling voice behind them. "OneOne Otimie, explorer, trapper, prospector, and misanthrope extraordinary, at your service, gentlemen! Don't do anything reckless, now; I ain't real familiar with this here de-vice, wouldn't want to set it off accidental like."

Both men turned slowly to see a dried-up little stick of a man in the doorway, holding Des's blaster with two dismayingly shaky hands.

"Broadcast said as the enemy was comin', and we was to clear out," One-One said "with a cackle, "but I don't reckon on leavin' my place to no in-vaders, nosirree! You fellas was tumble careless and noisy. Give me plenty of time to hide out up yander." He jerked his head toward the cliff they'd descended with such pains.

Des glanced at Ed and moved his head slightly to the left. Ed knew what he was thinking: if they got far enough apart, the old geezer wouldn't be able to keep the blaster trained on them both, and while he shot at one the other would be able to tackle him. But what, Ed thought, if he was the one who got blasted? Damn it! He'd known the Red Bracelets was no outfit for him.

"No TACTICS?" Rafik raised both arms in total incredulity and flopped back into his chair. "You've been captured, tortured, pursued for generations. You've had your home world disintegrated, and you have still developed NO TACTICS to fight these Khieevi?"

Gill, Calum, and Ikwaskwan looked equally confounded by Melireenya's remonstrative expression.

"Linyaari do not kill."

"That's fine and dandy if someone isn't trying to kill you," Johnny Greene said.

"You mean all you've been doing since those . . . those devils started extinguishing your race was run and tell everyone the wolves are coming?" Rafik asked, still staring with disbelief at the calm Linyaari.

"No, we have . . . designed defensive weaponry," Thariinye said, not at all liking Rafik's reaction. "We have designed ships-

"Which can outrun them," Rafik finished for him, as Thariinye drew himself up to his not inconsiderable height with indignation. "Fine, fine. Do you know what sort of firepower they have? What sort of weaponry they can bring to bear on us?" Rafik had risen, come out from behind the table, and was advancing on the tall Linyaari in as belligerent a pose as anyone had ever seen him use on another sentient being. "Because we sure as hell are NOT running away. Nor are you in that fancy fast ship of yours. The chips are down, the game is up, and it's here or

never." Rafik finger-combed his hair back into order because he had been emphasizing his words so vehemently, his longish hair half covered his face.

"We, too, are armed and ready," Khaari said firmly. "They" - she pointed to the phalanx of Khieevi ships-"have missiles of great strength, capable of destroying all but your largest ships ..." Khaari found herself unable to get out the syllables of the mercenary leader's name. ". . . Add-mee-ral," she got out. "They attack and attack until the ship is so ... made holes in ... that it can no longer return fire."

"That's not tactics," Rafik muttered, "that's suicide. At least"-he glanced thankfully at Ikwaskwan - "we've the proper attitude and experience to hand right now." He went to the screen. "Have your ships power enough to flank them, Ikwaskwan?"

"Of course we do, and considerably more firepower than they are likely to have if all their kills have been as easy as these horned types say. I mean, no contest. Go for the drive, the bridge, a few shots midships, and you've disabled it."

"Now that the settlers are safe," Melireenya said, "would it not be wiser to depart this system before the Khieevi arrive? Thus no one will be harmed."

"This time," Rafik said. "Your own experience has shown that running away won't work forever. And we barbarian bipeds have a strange reluctance to hand over real estate we've worked hard to claim."

Acorna felt enclosed in an isolation cell from all that was said around and about her. Somehow, in those few moments she'd allowed herself to envision her "own kind," she thought they'd be ... well, wiser. More aloof, more self-contained: not that Melireenya wasn't, but Thariinye stood there with this supercilious expression on his face, which didn't become him at all, and he obviously loathed Rafik for making all Linyaari seem craven. But, if you weren't raised to kill, or hate, or scabble for a living as her Kezdetian children had, why would you need to know tactics?

(One uses tactics in maintaining peace and accord, 'Khornya,) said the soft voice of Melireenya. (But, at first all we could do was run, or be certain none of us were captured alive. The vid we showed you is from our earliest contact with the Khieevi. And it was your father who invented the most devastating weapon we have. We dare not use it against the Khieevi because it destroys the destroyer as well. So we do not mention it until there is no other recourse. Do not fault us that we have been tardy in learning the skills of aggression and the weapons of defense. Had we not come to warn you, you would not have known the threat approaching you now.)

Though Melireenya stood on the opposite side of the conference room, Acorna was abruptly "in" the room again and not isolated from her kind or her defenders.

"So, let's get this tub"-Rafik paused to bow a smiling apology to Andreziana-  
"behind the moon, where it is not immediately apparent to the enemy converging  
not so slowly but very surely upon us. You don't want to have a few of Admiral's  
Ikwaskwan's gunnery officers stay aboard the Haven, do you?"

"I'm gunnery officer," Johnny Greene said, appointing himself into that position on  
the spot.

The flush of indignation faded from 'Ziana's cheeks. "We've all had battery  
practice. Admiral. We'll pick off anything that eludes your attack."

"Well, now, willya, li'l lady?" Ikwaskwan's eyes glittered.

"Leave it, Ikki," Nadhari murmured, and the light in the Kilumbembese  
mercenary's eyes dimmed to their normal shrewd gleam.

And, suddenly everyone was leaving to whatever posts they had been assigned,  
and Acorna was alone.

(Khornya,)-Thariinye leaned into the room again, smiling an invitation at her-  
(you're with us.)

Calum pushed past Thariinye and got her by the arm. "You'll be on the AcaSecki.  
Rafik thinks we can move nonessentials about and make room for more  
ammunition. Even if we didn't fit in the extra banks Pal wanted, if we have  
enough ammunition, we'll achieve the same effect. More or less. If we get the  
chance."

Acorna accompanied Calum, but she bestowed an apologetic smile on Thariinye  
and a soft (good luck) as she passed by him. He was still watching her when she  
and Calum took the grav shaft down to the hangar level.

What Rafik thought of as nonessential was not so regarded by either Calum or  
Acorna, but in the end they acceded to his demands, and racks of additional  
missiles were stacked wherever there was room for them, up to and including  
Acoma's cabin, the space where her escape pod had been strapped, against the  
walls of the main lounge, Calum's bunk, and the spare cabins. The bunks  
happened to be exactly the same length as the missiles, and eight were strapped  
on top of the mattresses.

This was done with great effort and much sweating and swearing, finished just in  
time to hear the Klaxon that warned of an important message about to be given.

"Captain Andreziana here. Ikwaskwan reports that Rushima can be considered  
cleared of settlers. There is one shuttle still missing, but it is expected to report  
shortly.

"We will now proceed to our assigned position. All escort ships please prepare to disembark. And good luck, AccSecki, Balakure."

"Good luck to you, Haven," Rafik said, reaching across the control panel to open the comlink. He settled himself in the pilot's chair, and, turning his head, said, "Prepare to leave the hangar."

"Hey, I pilot the Aca^ecki," Calum said, pushing at Rafik to leave the chair.

"I'm the tactician, remember," Rafik said as his slim brown fingers flew across the control panel. "You're the mathematician. And whichever you are, strap in."

Calum was still mumbling under his breath when he complied. Acorna muffled a giggle, and Gill turned his head away. To herself she thought how much like Thariinye and Khaari Calum and Rafik sounded.

(Not a bit like that undersized egotistical by-blow of a twilit and a barsipan,) said Thariinye's voice in her head.

(Do be quiet,) Melireenya said at her firmest.

Despite the speed at which Rafik prepared the AcaSecki for takeoff, the Linyaari ship had already slipped out of its hangar position and was speeding to take its position in the battle line. fifteen

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The Kilumbembese mercenaries got back in the nick of time from ferrying as many of the Rushimese to safety as possible. As the combined space force of the Kilumbembese, the gaudy Linyaari courier ship, the three armed pinnaces of the Haven, the Uham under Nadhari's command, and the AcaSecki-with Rafik in the pilot's seat-ranged themselves in their assigned battle positions, a certain steely calm descended in the main cabin of the AcaSecki. The pinnaces were a last-minute addition, but they upped the odds against the Khieevi squadron.

Ikwaskwan had decided on a frontal approach. If things went as planned, as soon as the ships came into firing range, the coalition defending Rushima should divide their forces into two, confining the Khieevi within their pincers. This meant that each of the larger ships could bring its port or starboard missiles into action, swing around, and come back to deliver a second blow to the attacking ships. If any of the Khieevi ships should break off for a direct attack on the helpless planet, the smaller ships should attempt to slow their progress and/or their landing.

"Naval maneuvers need not be complicated, especially when we have never fought with you before," Ikwaskwan said. Rank would have preferred a more sophisticated or subtle attack, but he had none to offer. These weren't asteroids he was attempting to make surrender their valuables, but sapient-although that was not a certainty-aggressors who had managed to terrorize the more sophisticated Linyaari. At least more sophisticated in some areas of technology.

The Khieevi liked to fight, so a fight they would get. Only this time the buggers wouldn't win so easily. The heir to House Harakamian was no lifesaving altruist: he was the descendant of red-blooded warriors who had for millennia taken by force what they desired, and held on to it. Since bargains were impossible with the Khieevi and force the only thing they understood, he would fight them as they had never seen fighting before.

Nevertheless, when the first, seemingly endless missiles spurted out of the Khieevi vanguard, Rafik prayed to those warrior ancestors with a fervor he had never before used. It was Gill who triggered the AcaSecki's missile ranks. He heard Acorna applauding, then Calum raging at Markel . . . who shouldn't be on board this ship . . . and then Gill tapped him on the shoulder.

"We're reloaded. Your turn."

This time, Rafik snarled as he sent more missiles after the first lot and recoiled at the bursts of flame and spewed fragments as the AcaSecki's missiles contacted and exploded the oncoming Khieevi warheads.

"Sheer off, we're going right into the mess," Gill cried, and Rafik hit the thrusters in a two-second blast that took the ship safely away, and their proximity sensors indicated they had missed being blown up by the skin of their collective teeth. Suddenly it was Gill in the pilot seat, though how he had relocated Rafik in the second chair, the heir did not know. But Gill's lips exposed his bared teeth in a snarl, and the intense expression on the big man's face suggested that his ancient Viking ancestors were a lot more accessible than Rafik's warriors.

"Oh, just look," Acorna cried, pointing at one of the auxiliary screens, aimed at where they had just been. "The lead Khieevi ships are breaking up."

"NO!" Calum's negative shout had more than a tinge of fear in it. "They're breaking OFF."

As Gill turned back to where the mercenaries were pounding the V formation of the Khieevi, it seemed that the three lead ships were disassembling themselves into smaller separate units. Far too many smaller units.

They watched, horrified, as the little pinnaces, like minnows against sharks, followed, their forward lasers punching at the shark tails ... in three cases making



direct hits. But only three instances . . . and luck had to have been on their side because there were far too many of the smaller Khieevi ships heading directly toward Rushima.

One of Ikwaskwan's dreadnoughts engulfed a Khieevi ship in such a holocaust that there were only a few units left to peel off the mother ship, like dry seeds falling out of a pod. But they made no attempt to correct their downward direction.

"Dead!"

The battle cruisers took out three more Khieevi mother ships, and sent their fighters after the few that escaped the devastating firepower of the cruisers. The destroyers worked at the lowest level of the V of Khieevi, but the instant the mother ships were attacked, the smaller units detached.

"There're thousands of them," Acorna cried. "Oh, how will we ever destroy them all?"

"We'll give it a mighty big try, Acorna acushia," Gill said. "What's the state of our weapon supply, Cal?"

"We'd do better to try launching singly, bringing down a small ship with each missile, than any more broadsides," Cal said.

"I think ..." Acorna added her opinion, "... that we ought to go for the mother ships. I know they're now a much smaller target, but if we kill all of them, the Khieevi will be forced to land on Rushima, and they'll be sitting targets."

"Good thinking, Acorna," Gill said, giving her a grin over his shoulder as he maneuvered the AcaSeckl to bracket one of the now-spindly-looking mother ships in his launch sights.

They were so oddly shaped they didn't even appear to be dangerous, though the ovoid upper structure was clearly armed, to judge by the laser beams and lance missiles it was throwing at any target in range. From the upper ovoid a long stem depended, the stem on which the smaller units had been attached, making the Khieevi ships seem so much bigger than they actually were.

The dreadnought immolated one of the rear Khieevi in a ball of fire and slowly began to swing round to target a second. One of the battle cruisers took a bad hit and swerved out of range, while its fighter ships returned to defend it.

"That's two of the nine gone," crowed Rafik, waving his fists about.

"No, three," Gill corrected him, pointing to one that was no longer firing.

"Yes, but how many dozens of the smaller ones have gotten completely away? " Acorna asked.

"Let's hurry a few to their deaths," Gill said, and altered course once more, bearing down on a covey of them.

"We're down to laser fire," Cal said.

"Misbegotten son of a syphilitic camel driver," Rafik said, and swore on. "If you'd listened to Pal in the first place, we'd've been able to go for one of the mother ships instead of having to go after the small fry."

"Let's fight them," Gill said, "not each other. Ah, got one."

Which he did, but the small ships seem to explode into even smaller divisions.

"How long can they keep separating?" Gill complained in exasperation.

Fighters from the battle cruisers and the pinnaces, which had survived against incredible odds, began shooting the new lots like so many swallows in a seasonal pilgrimage. However, the swallows had barbs in their tails, and one after another the three pinnaces following their primary targets were hit.

"Sowing space mines?" Gill asked rhetorically. Some pods had escaped each of the pinnaces. "We better get as many survivors as we can."

The brilliantly colored Linyaari ship and the Uhura had had much the same idea and collected the pods, which attached themselves to their rescuers' hulls with tractor beams. But that meant the loss of any high-speed maneuvering capabilities for the rescuers.

"Let's get this lot back to the Haven," Gill said, pointing to the bulk of the Starfarer ship just visible at the edge of Rushima's primary moon. The small one that rushed around in orbit beyond the bigger one wouldn't have hidden a Khieevi parasite.

By the time the AcaSeckl, the Uhuru, and the Linyaari had brought the pods safely back to the Haven, Captain Andreziana had received orders from Ikwaskwan to come out of hiding and get the last three ovoid mother ships. The other six had been accounted for and were destroyed.

"All Khieevi are now on the planet, or about to land. We can move in now -with kinetic energy weapons and smash them," Ikwaskwan said, his voice vibrant with triumph. "Pick on our clients, will you, you parasitical, piratical, putrefied parcels

of puking pus-filled perverts. You won't be back in this part of space again, I can tell you! We'll pick you off like nits from a nanny."

Rafik listened to Ikwaskwan's harangue with the air of one master of the art of invective listening to another.

"But there are now so many of them down there," Acorna said.

"Thousands." Ikwaskwan grinned. "It could be expensive . . . lucky our clients are rich."

The Haven, with them on the hangar deck, moved out from behind the moon and, one by one, turned her big lasers on the ovoid stems that were attempting to find refuge behind the moon from the dreadnoughts and battle cruisers chasing them.

Amid the cheers as the last mother ship blew up, Markel said with great satisfaction and in anticipation of what was to come next-

"Well, it's up to Dr. Hoa now, isn't it?"

He became the center of everyone's attention.

"Well, isn't it?" he asked in a slightly speculative tone.

"Look," Ed Minkus said patiently for perhaps the twentieth time, "we aren't the invaders you were warned about. There are aliens-real aliens-heading for Rushima. And they're nasty bastards. They'll torture and kill every last one of you and turn this planet into a wasteland. We were sent to get you off-planet before the fighting starts. We're the good guys, damn it! "Sure," One-One said. "Sure you are. That's why you was wreckin' my cabin. You all seen the damage they done, didn't you, fellers?"

There was a general murmur of agreement, broken only by one dissenting voice that said he personally had seen One-One do worse than that to the bar at Grip's Crossing more than once.

One-One frowned the dissenter down. "Caught 'em in the act, din't I? And you ain't never seen me toss me own good stock of furs in the mud, have you, Quashie?"

Over the hours while Des and Ed had been held prisoner, there had been a steady trickle of other settlers who'd remained behind, coming in twos and threes in response to a message put out by One-One on some incredibly primitive homemade broadcasting device that seemed to operate on quartz crystals, wire coils, and curses. The gist of his message seemed to be that the bastards who'd

messed over Rushima's weather had finally made the mistake of coming down to mess them all over in person; he'd caught two that they could use for hostages or execute depending on how things went, and everybody within range should come to his cabin as soon as they could get there, and bring their weapons.

The motley crowd that now filled the cabin inspired Ed with no very sanguine hopes as to his and Des's future. There were too many of them, and the cabin's tiny windows let in too little light, for him to see them all clearly, but he was not as glad of that. The faint light from the windows showed lean, weary-looking men and a few women, dressed in limp rags or stiff, awkwardly tanned leather. Their skin and clothes were crusted with engrained grime, their eyes glittered with the dangerous light of people who'd been pushed too far and isolated too long, and, collectively, they stank of old sweat and stale liquor. And the weapons they had collected inspired him with no more confidence. There were a few fairly up-to-date laser pulsers and blasters, but more common were edged weapons that looked to have been improvised out of farming equipment and whatever could be found for handles-sharp blades, things with rows of pointed hooks, a kitchen cleaver. There were even a few ancient projectile -weapons that looked as if they belonged in a museum.

"Individualists" was in Ed's private opinion an overly polite name for the Rushimese who'd chosen to settle the backcountry and stay there in the threat of an invasion by overwhelming forces. Several more appropriate terms came to his mind, including, "nuts," "wackos," and "psychotic bastards." But he was careful, considering his company, to keep those opinions strictly private. One of the first arrivals had been carrying a long rope with which he bound Des and Ed together, seated back-to-back on the floor. He'd cut off the unused length of rope and coiled it again. Whenever the settlers discussed what to do with their prisoners, this man's lean, grimy fingers began stroking the coil of rope, and Ed watched it with horrified fascination.

From One-One's broadcast and subsequent conversations, Ed and Des had learned how the land and huts they'd overflowed had come to be in such poor condition and why the settlers were so hostile to strangers now. They'd likely have been received with suspicion even if they hadn't been caught wrecking the cabin in search of valuables to loot. Ed had to admit that little fact did rob their story of some credibility ... but damn it, he was actually telling the truth, and it was in these people's interest to listen to him; they'd all be in deep kimchee if they didn't untie him and Des and let them take them off-planet.

Ed kept trying to convince them of that, though with less and less hope of doing it as the hours wore on. The changing quality of the dim light warned him that much precious time had already passed . . . how much he didn't know; One-One had relieved him and Des of their chronometers and other equipment as soon as someone showed up to hold the blaster on them -while he patted them down for weapons.

Des was unable to join in the argument for their lives, having exploded in such bursts of fury and blasphemy when first tied up that One-One had told the man with the rope to gag him. All Des could do now was rock back and forth and breathe stertorously through his nose to express his fury and indignation. Ed decided to make one more try at convincing -with the colonists.

"Look," he said reasonably, "I can understand why you wouldn't trust us on our unsupported word; you have suffered terribly from strangers. But if you'd just let me use our ship's corn system, I could bring other people who'd tell you the same thing."

One-One cackled. "Right, sonny, you could bring some more of your thieving buddies down on us, couldn't you! Don't waste your breath; I sent somebody to shut down the corn units hours ago. And there's three guys guardin' the ship, so don't get no ideas about that bein' your ticket home, neither! Reckon we c'n use it to ambush yer buddies when they do show up."

"Hours. . . What time is it?" Ed demanded. "For God's sake, just tell me how long we've been here already?"

One-One squinted at Des's shiny chronometer, which hung awkwardly off his skinny wrist.

"Cain't read these little bitty numbers so good as I used to, sonny. What you reckon it says, Quashie?"

Quashie scowled. "Funny numbers," he said finally. "Don't look like no clock I ever seen. Change too fast, too. What's that one mean, the one keeps getting bigger? Look, it was ten awhile ago, now it's up to twenty-five . . . twenty-six. ..."

Sweat beaded on Ed's forehead and rolled down his face in an agonizingly tortuous, ticklish path. He tasted the salt on his dry lips.

"Is that number in a little blue square at the bottom right hand of the chronometer face?"

"Was blue," Quashie said. "Now it's red."

Ed sagged against the ropes that held him more or less upright and closed his eyes.

"I'm tired of hearing all your arguing," One-One told him. "You shut your trap now, or we'll shut it for you like we done the other 'un."

"It's okay," Ed said tiredly. "There's no hurry now. We're all dead, we just don't know it yet."

The chronometer had been set to display the time left before Admiral Ikwaskwan's deadline for clearing the planet. The changeover from blue to red meant the time had elapsed and the

chronometer was now measuring the time since the deadline had passed.

Ed didn't know what Ikwaskwan expected to happen now, but he was fairly sure that the Admiral wouldn't change or delay his plans for the sake of two new recruits and one shuttle -and it must have been something fairly disastrous he had in mind; otherwise, their employers wouldn't have been so insistent about the necessity to evacuate all Rushimese from the planet before the deadline.

As if to corroborate his statement, a distant blast rumbled through the sky. Several of the Rushimese startled nervously;

two of them blocked the tiny window, trying to peer out of it.

"More of their dirty tricks," one of them said. "Thunderstorm, I reckon. That could of been a lightning strike on Grip's Crossing. Any more rain, and that cliff's gonna come down on this-here cabin, One-One."

"Held up all right so far, din't it?" One-One retorted, but his eyes slid uneasily upward.

"Naah, that ain't lightning," the man called Quashie argued. "More like the dam upcreek of Grip's busting. I heerd the big one down to the reservoir go. Sounded just like that there."

Three more booms and a series of sharp cracks canceled the argument. The last noise was so close to the cabin that Ed shut his eyes and tried to contract his body, as if that would protect him from aerial attack.

"Hellfire," somebody at the window shouted, "they done got the shuttle!"

"Get my Pyaka outa there!" screamed a gray-faced woman.

"Winjy," said Quashie, putting an arm around her shoulders, "ain't nothing left to get nobody out of. I'm dreadful sorry, but we be mournin' Pyaka and them other two fellas. They gone, Winjy."

Now we are really 3ea9, Ed thought, and if he thought he'd known despair before, he knew the difference now. There'd been no reasonable hope that these maniacs would untie him and Des and give them a chance to reach the shuttle . .

. but as long as it existed, the hope of escape had been there, the chance in a million that they would somehow be able to get out of this crazy place and back to the narrow berth on a Red Bracelet ship which now, in retrospect, seemed a haven of comfort and safety.

So deep was his despair, he paid no attention to the lowvoiced conversation going on between One-One, Quashie, and one or two other settlers who seemed to be leaders of the group. Their words were almost drowned out anyway by the woman Wmjy's hopeless sobbing and by the blasts and roars of distant battle . . . not all of them all that distant, either!

Ed leaned against the cabin wall, eyes closed in despair, and ignored his surroundings until something hard poked him in the ribs, and One-One gruffly demanded to know what he thought.

"About •what?" He didn't even bother to open his eyes.

"About settin' you loose, peanut-head, what you think we been talkin' about here?" A second, harder dig inspired Ed to look at the old guy. "Reckon if these here invaders wanted to blow up your shuttle, them and you might not be on the same side after all. And they's ship looks different from yours, too. Different from anything I ever seen before, truth."

"Christ on a crutch!" somebody yelled. "They Lf aliens! Some kinder giant bugs!"

Des grunted and thumped from side to side, shaking Ed with each excited movement. "Mmmp? Mmmb nnn mmmph!" he grunted emphatically.

"Course, you're still damned looters, and we'll probably still hang you after we done fought off these here fellas, but if'n you'11 give your parole while the fight lasts, well . . . reckon we c'n use ever able-bodied person we got here."

Ed couldn't swear loyalty fast enough.

"Your buddy, too?" One-One regarded Des critically.

"Mmmm-mmmp," Des told him.

"Good enough . . . you ain't got nowhere to run to, anyways. Might wanta keep that in mind." One-One sliced through Des's gag with a casual swipe of his sharp tanning knife, then cut the ropes binding both men with two more slashes.

"Hey," the man with the rope protested, "that's me good rope youwastin'!"

"Ain't got time to fool with knots," One-One said. "Cover the back winder, willya?"

He handed a blaster to Des and pointed out that he still had the other blaster, and that there'd be someone watching their backs, in case they had any cute ideas. Des shook off the ropes and gag like feathers and charged for the back end of the cabin as if he'd been doing sitting-up exercises instead of sitting tied up in a corner for hours. Ed moved more slowly, feeling the pins and needles of returning circulation in his extremities and the cramping sensation of muscles protesting their long confinement.

"Pick it up, Ed me boy!" Des shouted. Somebody handed him a wicked-looking iron pole with a row of sharp points roughly welded to its far end.

"A lot of good that does," Ed protested. "Where's our other blaster?"

One-One grinned and shook his head. 'Ain't got enough distance weapons to waste two on one winder, me boy. Your buddy'11 try an' hold 'em off. Any of 'em gets in close, you use this best way you can, got it?"

When Ed reached Des, his partner was wearing a maniacal grin intensified by the foam that had flecked his lips while he was gagged and the blood where One-One's pointed knife had cut his cheek as well as the gag. His chin was blue -with an incipient beard and, all in all, he looked as desperate and uncivilized as the worst of the settlers in the cabin.

"Luck of the Smirnoffs, Ed old buddy!" he greeted Ed.

"Luck?" Automatically, Ed took position beside Des, his iron pole at an angle where he could jab it out the window at anything approaching. "Our ship's been destroyed, we're trapped on this planet between crazy settlers and invading space bugs, Ikwaskwan's gonna pound the bugs and doesn't care what he does to us in the process, and you say we're lucky?"

"If the bugs hadn't moved in," Des said cheerfully, "these maniacs would've likely hung us. And as for the ship, there's a simple solution now, isn't there? We'll just have to take theirs!"

"Simple." Ed almost choked.

"No alternative, buddy. Oh-oh, here comes a bug. Let's see if their armor holds up to a. ..." Des squeezed off a shot. A cloud of steam went up from the advancing alien's hard brown carapace, and one of its many legs disappeared, but the other limbs kept inexorably moving. Some of the legs fired green energy bolts at the cabin.

Des ducked, looked at the weapon in his hand, and swore. "Damn fools gave me your blaster!"



"What's wrong with that?"

"Got mine fitted with a PowrChargr last station," Des said, naming one of the many enhancements that was considered illegal and immoral in the civilized world. This particular one was supposed to allow an ordinary hand blaster to spread its stun range over half a klick, or alternatively to narrow and concentrate its power in one needle-sharp pulse that would vaporize the object it hit.

"Shit!" Des squeezed off half a dozen more shots as the alien advanced, coolly picking off the jointed legs along one side of its flat body until they were all gone. The alien toppled to one side and lay wriggling its other legs helplessly.

"Give me the pole." Des squeezed his bulk through the open window with a few rips, scratches, and curses, dropped with a thump onto the muddy ground, and charged without stopping to catch his breath. The hooked pole went into a bulbous, gleaming structure on the alien's head and sank deep within, splashing Des with the black fluid that spurted from the sphere. Ed clenched his teeth against the wave of nausea rising from his guts.

A moment later Des was back at the window, saying, "Come on, get 'em all out this way. We can't stay in the house, it's an obvious target."

"What's the point of leaving it?"

"Easy," Des said. His teeth gleamed white among the blood, foam, and black droplets that decorated his face. "We'll lure the bugs into the house, then fire off a couple of blaster shots and bring that cliff down on 'em . . . it's not all that stable now, didn't you notice that when we were coming down the track?"

Ed certainly had. And though he had little or no faith in Smirnoff's plan, he couldn't think of anything better-so he begged, bullied, or persuaded the remaining settlers to crawl through the back window and follow Des along the narrow track he had temporarily cleared.

For one dark moment he wondered exactly how Des planned to "lure" the Khieevi into the cabin and who was going to play "bait," but One-One Otimie solved that question once he understood the plan. From an overlooked cupboard above the food stores he produced battered musicubes and a solar-powered player.

"Kirilatova," he said, jamming a cube into the player -with ruthless disrespect for the delicate workings of the machinery. "Figaro. Remastered from the originals." He cackled at the look of surprise on Ed's face. "Thought we was all uncultured backcountry folks, din't you, sonny? Hee-hee-hee. I like opera just fine; its people I wanted to get away from."

As they scrambled through the back window, the last two humans to clear the cabin, the seductive strains of Susannah's aria, "Deh vieni, non tadar," floated through the air. Ed only hoped the song would be as enticing to the Khieevi as it had been meant to sound in the opera.

He was almost disgusted at how well Des's crude plan worked. The cockroachlike Khieevi approached the cabin, cautiously at first, then more openly as no one fired on them. They made sharp crackling noises among themselves as they drew closer, firing occasional bolts into the cabin; Ed could almost have sworn the two in the lead were laughing and rubbing their forelegs together in anticipation of a jolly time. He remembered the vids Ikwaskwan had copied from the Linyaari and used as training films, and felt sick all over at the memory of what the Khieevi considered light entertainment. He had a terrible moment as he worried that everybody was out of the cabin. He couldn't have left a dog to the mercies of those-those things. . . .

Every muscle of his body screamed to run, run now before they noticed their quarry had escaped, but Des coolly waited through agonizing seconds until all but one of the advancing aliens was out of sight inside the cabin. Then he and One-One fired blasters at the designated weak spots, dissolving a long line of muddy earth and stone into a bubbling liquid that let the front face of the cliff slide downward with a long, final sigh. Slabs of stone tilted slowly forward and smashed the cabin roof flat; one of them fell half across the one Khieev who remained outside, turning his body into a mangled mess that leaked black fluid and curls of steam. The stone slabs were followed by a slow but inexorable tide of wet dirt and the molten lava created by the blasters, which buried the cabin and its occupants under a newly created hill.

"Come on," Des hissed before the wave of mud and lava had settled, "gotta take their ship before they catch on to what just happened!"

"Before who catch on?" gasped Ed, at his side. "We just killed-oh." More cockroaches were pouring out of the squat, alien-looking ship that stood in the clearing.

"You are so damn dumb, Minkus. Would you leave a ship totally unguarded while everybody chased the natives?" Des gave him a look of disgust. "Yeah, you probably would. Give me that pole, you don't know what to do -with it." And he plunged in among the Khieevi with a battle yell of pure, savage joy, stabbing the pole down with unerring aim into the enemies' soft spots.

Someone thrust a cleaver into Ed's hand, and the wave of yelling settlers carried him on until he found himself in the thick of the fight, chopping off legs with his cleaver, dodging the energy bolts, frantically waving his free arm to defend himself from the gouts of black acid the aliens spat . . . and then, before he knew

it, they were through and on the farside of the aliens, and Des was shouting at them to follow him into the ship itself. Ed stepped over blobs of black guck, already crusting over, and kicked a dying Khieev off the ladder with one booted foot.

There were no more Khieev inside ... no more living, that is ... though the stench of their dying and the acid whiff of their black . . . blood? . . . whatever . . . infested the entire ship. The settlers crowding after Ed forced him forward and into the tiny section covered with unreadable instrumentation that Des already occupied. He was squatting on the low, narrow bench that the Khieevi must have used instead of chairs.

After a moment's uncomfortable experimentation, Ed decided that Smirnoff had found the only possible adaptation of the human anatomy to these furnishings. Wide metal columns behind them, their outer walls curved in a concave form that must have been designed to fit a Khieev carapace, promised support and protection during takeoff, and the straps that dangled from the columns could, with some ingenuity, be arranged to hold a human body. Ed hoped the settlers had made their own accommodations to the Khieev interior; Des was already punching buttons with mad abandon in search of the one that would fire up the ship's engines.

"You think you can fly one of these things?" he asked doubtfully.

"Can't be all that different from ours," Des said. "Same problems, same type solutions. They gotta get free of gravity, navigate, correct position, and tilt. . . Yeehaw!" he screamed in triumph as one of the buttons he'd punched resulted in a wild blast of flame that lifted the ship from its landing place with a sickening double punch and sway. "Ikwaskwan, here we come! See if you can find a portable corn system among all that crud the settlers dragged on, Ed. It might be polite to announce we're on our way!"

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With the Khieevi mother ships disabled and their pods pinned down on Rushima by the orbiting ships of the Red Bracelets, there was time to discuss Markel's suggestion of using weathermodification technology to destroy the Khieevi rather than the expensive, and destructive, kinetic energy weapons favored by Ikwaskwan.

"I had intended this system for peace, not war," said Ngaen Xong Hoa sadly. "But it seems that technology of this sort must be used always for destruction-if not by the warring parties of my homeland, then by whoever controls it." He gave Markel a long, steady look. "I trusted your father's honor. He died rather than permit

Nueva Fallona and her cronies to make war on Rushima with my weather-modification system. Now you ask me to do the same thing."

"Not on Rushima, on the Khieevi - " began Gill. "Wait!" Markel swallowed hard after interrupting Gill, but his face showed a maturity and resolution that had not been there short weeks earlier. "Yes, Dr. Hoa. We wish to use your scientific knowledge to kill... those who would otherwise ... exterminate us. So we would be using it in self-defense, which is not the same thing as using it for making war on the helpless... . You know what the Linyaari have told us about these invaders. If they had come in peace, we would have greeted them in peace . . . but they come to destroy us. And, yes, I will use any means at my disposal to defend my people and myself. I believe Illart would have done the same thing."

"We do not know they have come to make war," Hoa said. "Actions speak louder than words," Rafik pointed out. "Ah. But words have not spoken yet." Hoa clasped his hands together in front of him. "Before I give consent to this further misuse of my research, I must insist that we make every effort to communicate with our alien visitors."

"Markel? Is this necessary?" Andreziana glanced at Markel and raised one eyebrow.

"Yes," Markel said in the most decisive tone. He paused and gave an indolent shrug more like his usual mannerisms. "Anyway, I could probably deploy the weather-intervention technology without Dr. Hoa's consent. Just as Nueva Fallona did! By analyzing the programs Nueva's people implemented we could deduce those things that were left out of the research notes." He paused, and all his aggression seemed to dissipate suddenly. He swallowed again. "But... I believe . . . Illart would also have said we must first attempt peaceful negotiation."

"Ridiculous!" Andreziana was on her feet. "Market, as captain of the Haven, I could order you to implement the technology now.

"But you will not," said Pal Kendoro sharply. Pal was so quiet that all were startled at this interruption and watched as he came forward to grip Andreziana's arms at the elbows, forcing her to look up at him. "'Ziana, don't you know better than to give orders that Market will feel honor-bound to disobey? You and the other kids did a grand job of recapturing the Haven. You're a bunch of infant experts at everything from astrogation to life-support systems, but you've still got a few things to learn about people . . . and the art of command."

"I know what we need to do in order to deal with the Khieevi," Andreziana snapped, freeing herself from Pals grip with a quick, vicious twist of her body. "Unlike some around here, I'm not afraid to take responsibility for it-any more than I was afraid to space the murderers who killed my mother and father!"

"And you're still feeling bad about that, aren't you?" Pal said in a low, gentle voice. "They were murderers, and you had no other option, but you see their faces in your nightmares . . . and so to prove you made the right choice then, you have to keep choosing the toughest path, "whether or not it's necessary."

Tears sparkled in Andreziana's eyes, and she stared up at him wordlessly.

"You don't have to do that now, 'Ziana," Pal said. "This responsibility belongs to all of us; you don't have to carry it alone. Whatever we do, we'll all discuss it, and we'll all share in the decision. You and the other kids did a fine job when you were left on your own, but the point is, that you're no longer alone anymore. We're in this battle, fighting right beside you."

Andreziana's lips trembled, and Pal put his arm about her, shielding her face from the view of the others for a long, tense moment. When Andreziana finally turned away from him, she looked composed, more at peace than she had since the Palomellese coup on the Haven.

"I'm sony, Markel," she said. "Understand," she warned him, "I'm still captain of the Haven . . . but this can't be just the captain's decision. This decision belongs to all of humanity ... all who are here to speak, at least . . . and to the Linyaari, too," she said. "Shouldn't they be here? And the Red Bracelets - "

"Let's not overdo it," Johnny murmured. "I think we know how the Red Bracelets would vote. Besides, they're needed where they are ... in low geosynchronous orbit, making sure the Khieevi don't go anywhere."

"And we cannot afford to keep them there indefinitely," Gill pointed out.

After more discussion, it was agreed that the Haven and the AcaSeckl would attempt for a period of two Standard hours to establish some communication with the Khieevi on Rushima, using the universal codes that had long been agreed on for first contact with any sapient alien race, should one ever be found. Therefore, mathematical formulae and physical constants were broadcast in steady sequence, using different base systems and with regular pauses to invite reply.

"No response," Calum said wearily after more than an hour had gone by. "Perhaps we should try something else."

"We could shoot at them," Gill muttered. "That sure got a response!"

"No, not-waitammute, wait a minute!" Calum punched at the control panel to bring up an enlarged view on one screen. "Something's leaving the planet-and heading straight for us. Corns, tell Ikwaskwan not to shoot it down!"

"Trojan horse," Gill suggested, while Acorna efficiently raised Ikwaskwan's flagship and requested the lone vessel be allowed to exit Rushima unhindered.

"He's not heading straight for anywhere," Calum exclaimed. "Look at that-yawing all over the place . . . don't these people know how to stabilize their ships?"

"They did just fine in the battle," Gill pointed out. "Maybe this one is damaged." His fingers twitched, indicating his complete willingness to do more damage.

"Acorna, are you open on all frequencies?"

"Of course, Calum," Acorna said. "Intruder is not transmitting."

"If they don't correct their course and identify themselves somehow in the next sixty seconds," Calum said tensely, "rescind the hold-fire request and give Ikwaskwan permission to destroy them. They're now, more or less, on a collision course with US. I'm sorry about Dr. Hoa's sensibilities, but not sorry enough to die while waiting for the other fellows to parley. The Linyaari said they don't parley, and it looks like ..."

Fortunately for two newly hired mercenaries and a group of weary Rushimese settlers, at that moment Ed Minkus found a portable corn system.

"Don't fire! Don't fire!" he squawked first, and then, regaining a little control, "All Red Bracelet ships and allies: this is Ed Minkus for the ship ... uh ... what is it called, Des?"

A rumbling growl seemed to be telling the speaker not to waste time on nonessentials. "Call it Jurden, it smells like one!"

"Right! Uh . . . this is the ship Jurden, a prize of war captured from the Khieevi, requesting permission to rejoin . . . and, uh, could somebody tow us in with a tractor beam? We're having a little trouble figuring out the controls on this thing."

"Jurden, this is the Haven," came a crisp young voice on the frequency Ed had found. "We have a fix on you now. Can you verify this is not a Khieevi trap?"

"Dammit, we just got away from the Khieevi . . . wait a minute!" There were scuffling sounds and Ed's voice muffled by distance, protesting; then a crackly old voice came on.

"Girlie, this here's One-One Otimie, free settler of Rushima, and you bring us on board right fast, you hear me? Got things to tell you about them big ol' bugs like you wouldn't believe! And I ain't goin' back there, no how, no way, so if you think us is bugs, you just go right ahead and blow us out of the sky, you hear? Rather than goin' back, right, folks?"

"Jurden, prepare to be towed," Andreziana's voice responded.

The exchange was shut off as Haven's tractor beam attached itself to the Khieevi ship. Gill and Calum leaned back, laughing weakly, while the others exchanged puzzled glances.

"What's so funny?" Acorna finally asked.

"Smirnoff. The bastard can't be all bad," Gill said. "He must have some Celtic ancestors somewhere."

"I fail to see that as a guarantee of respectability-look at you two giggling idiots!" Rafik said, crisply critical.

"Jurden," Calum calmed himself long enough to explain, "is an old Scots word for a chamber pot. So I guess we know Smirnoff's opinion of the Khieevi!"

And once Smirnoff and Minkus and One-One had described how the Khieevi came in firing and attacked immediately, even Hoa regretfully agreed that the Linyaari account of their enemies seemed to be completely accurate.

"Talk is better," Hoa said ruefully, "but some warlords do not talk, only kill. Markel, you will assist, please?"

The weather-intervention process fascinated Calum, who was watching every detail of Hoa's work. There was plenty of time for all interested observers to assemble because Hoa insisted that the Red Bracelet ships must clear out of their low orbit. "Ionospheric intervention of this magnitude can affect orbiting ships' communications and electrical systems," Hoa explained. "Haven must maintain a certain distance in order to fire laser beams, but all others should retreat as far as possible."

While the Kilumbembese ships -were moving to a safe distance, Hoa studied real-time displays of Rushima's atmosphere and terrain and hummed softly to himself.

"Mmm, mmm, good unstable cloud masses here, yes, much instability in the troposphere, electrical potential building up ... a little nudge here. . . . We begin with lightning," he said, "using ship's amplifiers to simulate action of hybrid Oscillator/ Regenerative Amplifier -which I used in scientific studies. Spaceships, being tall and metal, should attract lightning before any other objects on ground. Communications and electrical systems -will be destroyed."

"Get on with it, can't you?" Calum murmured under his breath. "Pulling back the Red Bracelets may have been necessary for their safety, but it's got to look to the

Khieevi like we're retreating. They'll see if they can escape. They know they're trapped on the surface."

Hoa's fingers played over the console pad before him, and he snapped requests to Market for confirmation of the numbers he produced.

"Hurry!" Andreziana said from her own seat. "I'm seeing hot spots, probably ships igniting their engines. ..."

"Now," Hoa said, and the screen in front of Andreziana went wild with a display of crackling lights.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"Series of short pulses cause electron migration, propagation, collisions, avalanche ionization," Hoa said. "Conduction path will be formed wherever possible. Lasers would provide more focused strikes, but in absence of information about location of ships, general ionization is best bet."

Three Khieevi ships had launched off-planet during the lightning storm, but two of them behaved so erratically as to make Des Smirnoff's approach in the Jurden appear a marvel of accurate navigation. After a series of staggering loops, one failed to escape Rushima's gravity and fell back toward the planet; the other one transmuted into a searing burst of light that left only fragments. The third ship darted through a space just recently vacated by the Red Bracelet fleet and escaped Rushima, but not to attack, only to flee. One of Ikwaskwan's warships swung out of line and followed.

"How did you make that second one explode?" Calum demanded, awed.

Dr. Hoa shrugged slightly. "Impossible to predict what goes first when electrical systems are destroyed. Steering, power . . . in this one, I think fuel controls. It is not at all an accurate action," he said with disapproval. "Is not science; science deals with predictable results. Now you will see! Markel, bring up titanium-sapphire lasers, please."

"Aren't -we too far away for laser warfare?" Calum asked. "The beam will spread until it's so weak ..."

"Sufficiently intense light pulses are trapped in three dimensions," Hoa replied without looking up. "Self-compensating nonlinear effects. End result, dispersion, diffraction, and scattering are balanced by self-stabilizing processes. I cannot prove how it happens," he said, "only demonstrate results of focused high-intensity laser strikes on appropriate cloud material. Laser forms a tunnel of ions, which attracts lightning. . . . My intent," he said sadly, "was to use such tunnels to draw lightning away from structures, which needed protection. Instead ..." He



twiddled with controls and adjusted the focus of the laser with infinite precision. "Instead," he repeated, as lightning arced through Rushima's atmosphere, "I now direct it at structures. ..."

"Which need destroying," Calum reminded him gently.

Ikwaskwan's corn technician reported that the Khieevi ship had escaped; having so little mass, it had been able to reach lightspeed long before the heavier battleship, and they had been unable to catch it within the limits Ikwaskwan had set for his fleet's range.

"Quite right, too," Calum agreed. "They'd do themselves and us no good by following one Khieevi ship until their fuel was exhausted. Still, I'd like to know where they come from. ..."

"Several ships have been captured," Market reminded him, "and we have the virtually intact pod that Smirnoff and Minkus escaped in. We can study their computers and charts. ..."

"And maybe Dr. Zip can help analyze the metals," Calum said, remembering how that eccentric astrophysicist had applied the latest epsilon-V imaging techniques to provide Calum with a basis for working out where Acorna's home world probably lay. That world was long since laid waste by the Khieevi, and the Linyaari envoys could provide them with the location of the new home, narhii-Vhiliinyar; but there still might be a use for his computational and astroplotting program, to help locate the home base of the Khieevi. That possibility cheered him immeasurably, and while Dr. Hoa pounded Rushima with storms and floods to destroy any remaining Khieevi, he began jotting notes for an amended version of the program.

When Dr. Hoa patently began to tire Calum and Markel both vied to take over from him. Calum was chosen but, when Dr. Hoa saw Markel's sullen expression, he put his hand under the boy's chin and forced him to meet his gaze.

"There will be time for you, too. Watch and be ready to take your turn. You are well able when all is said and done."

Johnny Greene leaped forward to help the exhausted man who, at first, waved off the need for assistance until he stumbled at the steps leading up to the main level of the bridge.

"Come." Andreziana was beside the doctor, firmly taking his hand. "You may rest in the captain's ready room," she said, indicating the door that gave onto the bridge.

"Your ready room, my dear, your ready room," Dr. Hoa said, smiling as he patted her arm but quite willing to let her escort him. That accomplished, Andreziana returned to her command chair with just the slightest of smirks at having been more effective than Johnny Greene. And Pal moved just that much closer to her chair, subtly informing the older man that his efforts were redundant.

Johnny turned away, with a broad grin that Acorna and Rafik noticed: Acorna with considerably more sympathy and relief than Rafik.

That would certainly solve a problem for her. The way Pal had all but challenged Thariinye disturbed her even if she did see it as only the usual posturing of males for a desired female. The incident had also taken away from Acorna's eyes the scales of infatuation over her first encounter with a male of her own species.

However, she too was tired and wanted to retire as discreetly as she could to the AcaSecki., now once again on the Haven's hangar deck.

So, too, was the Linyaari ship, and, as she passed it, Neeva called out to her.

"Join us, my sister-child," and then added as Acorna switched her direction, (You cannot know how rewarding it is to see the Khieevi overwhelmed as they have overwhelmed us for centuries. To know that we, we four, have been witness to their rout.)

(I don't feel much like cheering, I'm afraid) Acorna said truthfully.

Neeva pressed her horn against Acorna's. The scene of Acorna's dream reappeared. (This is what they destroyed for you. But it is good to see that you are more linyani than khieevi in the matter of dealing death. This is indeed a novel way of defeating one's enemy.)

(If you can get them to land on a planet) Acorna said.

Neeva nuzzled Acorna. (You are heartsick, my sister-child, and it is because we are not what you thought we should be. Is that not correct?)

Acorna gasped. She hadn't realized just how deeply Neeva could delve. (I mean no offense, truly. It's just that you . . . )

(Are what our world and genetics have made us, just as these humans are the product of their worlds and genes.) It was Melireenya whose deep voice chimed into their conversation. She appeared in the open hatch of the brilliantly decorated ship. (You wish to know HOW do we manage to keep the paint so bright? Ah, that is one of our secrets. Come. Come. Let us relieve your anxieties and confusions, dear 'Khornya.)

Acorna was mind-weary enough to wish surcease and entered the Linyaari vessel. Thariinye was not in evidence.

(You must have just passed him on the way to the Haven's bridge,) Neeva said. (He wishes to know more about this most unusual and spectacular method of dealing with the Khieevi.)

(Huh,) Khaan said 'with a nasal snort of disagreement, (he enjoys seeing the ships blown up and was counting them. "That is for the Selinaaryi." "The next kill will be for the Juveniiryi.")

(Who?) asked Acorna, confused, though she did realize that these were family names.

(Ancestors and friends who were lost to the Khieevi over the centuries,) Khaari answered.

(Will there be ships enough to satisfy that lust in Thariinye?) Neeva asked ruefully.

She led Acorna to a pile of cushions and settled her in their comfort. Then she began to knead the muscles of Acorna's neck, and "work her fingers up and down the length of the mane, into the vertebrae themselves. More often than not, Acorna winced at the pain as Neeva touched places which Acorna hadn't even known were sore.

(When we bring you home) and there was a subtle triumph in Neeva's use of the word, (we shall introduce you to the ways whereby we dissipate tension and fatigue. This ship was not large enough to contain the unit, which is why we do not appear at our best to you. We, too, have suffered from the stress of reaching your quadrant of space soon enough to give you warning.)

(We are not always as contentious as we have been these past few weeks,) Melireenya said sorrowfully. Then her silvery eyes brightened. (What glad tidings we bring, along with one we thought lost and gone to us.)

(Do I have many relations?) Acorna asked, though she already knew that she had been the only youngling born to her parents.

Neeva's silvery neigh filled the room. (Hundreds! But we shall not require you to meet them all at once.)

(I will want you to meet a few) - Khaari smiled, her eyes sparkling-(a chosen few of mine.)

Melireenya gave Khaari an affectionate shove. (I am the elder. I shall have the first chance.)

(Chance for what?) The inferences were beyond Acorna, though she sensed them in the subtle nuances of the interchange.

(Why, to introduce you to a suitable mate, of course) Neeva said, as if that should have been obvious. (You are well old enough to need a mate. In fact, I marvel that you have been able to contain yourself.)

(She has had no one to stimulate that part of her nature yet) Melireenya said. (Or have you experienced . . . well, unusual sensations at all?) She turned to the other two females. (It can happen, you know, for someone isolated as she has been.)

(I ... well)-Acorna bowed her head in confusion-(there have been moments . . . )

(Not for much longer, sister-child,) Neeva assured her, and continued to massage her neck.

(It will have to be for a while longer,) Acorna said regretfully.

(WHY?) all three Linyaari demanded, shocked.

"Well, there are things I must attend to at Maganos. ..."

(Nothing that Rafik fellow cannot handle) remarked Melireenya firmly. (We are YOUR people. You must first come with us. Then, if there are any problems that you must indeed deal with yourself, we can return with you.)

Khaari's neigh was closer to a snicker. (And with your life partner.)

(WILL one find me suitable? I've lived so long. . . .) Acorna stopped because even Melireenya was convulsed in Linyaarish laughter.

(Wait and see, 'Khornya. Wait and see.) Then the other two made excuses of tasks to be done and Neeva altered the rhythm of her gentle kneading, and, before Acorna could help herself, she was dozing off.

It was dawn on the Haven before anyone came looking for her. Calum had finally deferred to Markel and gone back to the Aca<)eck, falling asleep the moment he lay down. He never thought that Acorna would be anywhere but in her own quarters. So, when Gill and Rafik came looking for her, and him, to announce the arrival of Uncle Hafiz, with his voluptuous and veil-swathed Karina, they were startled and dismayed to find her missing.

"She is here, close by," Karina said through her veil. It wasn't a very thick gauze, Calum noticed: much more transparent than the silks he'd once been dressed in for Uncle Hafiz's benefit. It allowed someone to get a glimpse of a rather attractive face, if much too plump for Cal's taste.

Now Karina gracefully placed her much beringed hand on her forehead.

"Very close." She slowly turned and looked at the Linyaari vessel. "There in fact. And oh, they're all there. And fast asleep."

"Uncle," Rank said in an undertone, "since when have you followed the outmoded and barbarous custom of veiling your women?" Only a few years earlier Hafiz had been shocked and dismayed to find Rafik apparently converted to the Neo-Hadithians and reverting to the strictures practiced by those who denied the Second and Third Prophets, keeping women veiled and refusing spirituous liquors. He had professed great relief to discover that Rank's apparent conversion to a fundamentalist sect had been only a clever business trick—even if he had been its victim.

"Since I acquired this pearl without price, my lovely Karina," Hafiz replied in the same discreet undertone.

"Acquired? Uncle, the last time I looked, slavery was forbidden by the laws of all known states and federations. Even on Laboue, I do not think you can legally own a concubine!"

Hafiz put on a disapproving expression. "Nephew, I might take offense did I not love you so dearly. Karina is my beloved and dearly cherished wife in the sight of the Three Prophets. We have sworn our vows upon the Three Books."

Rafik's mouth dropped open. "You've married that . . . that pseudopsychic charlatan?"

"Dear boy," his uncle said in a warning tone that held more than a hint of steel, "you are speaking of your new aunt. It is a shame to all discerning men that such a flower of beauty should have been forced to work for a living instead of reclining upon silken cushions and being fed on marzipan and cream cakes. Her previous lifestyle," he said grandiloquently, "is unimportant to me; the cherished gazelle of Hafiz Harakamian need never lift a finger again."

Rafik reflected that if his uncle really intended to feed his new acquisition upon marzipan and cream cakes, she might well be incapable of lifting a finger in a few years. Even now, "gazelle" was hardly the word that came to mind when describing her.

"Is she not voluptuously beautiful beyond your wildest dreams?" his uncle sighed rapturously. "Even my Yasmin could hardly have compared with Karina."

Mention of Hafiz's first wife, the long-dead Yasmin, reminded Rafik that his uncle had already shown a definite predilection for women whose most prominent attributes lay somewhere south of their brains. Yasmin had been a dancer in a zero-G topless bar when Hafiz abducted her.

"Karina, my little lily," Hafiz said to his new wife, "pray do not exhaust yourself in using your powers to contact the Linyaari. They will awaken soon enough of their own accord, and I would not see your lovely face lined -with fatigue. Sit here and rest yourself, and I will see to it that some light refreshment is brought to restore your psychic energies."

Karina smiled up into his face with a look of such radiant love and trust that Rank's last objections to the marriage melted like snow on Laboue, and he was devoutly thankful that the words "gold digger" had not passed his lips. No one looking at the pair could doubt that they were truly infatuated with one another. Still, when he remembered his uncle's cynical strictures on the subject of women and marriage, he could not but be amused to see Hafiz, of all people, swept away on a tide of sugary-sweet romance.

"What are you laughing about?" Calum inquired out of the side of his mouth after Rafik had greeted Karina with all the respect due to his uncle's wife and retired to the farside of the Haven's main cabin to release his amusement.

"Hafiz," Rafik said. "To see him billing and cooing with that. . . I mean, with my beloved aunt. . . and if you had ever heard the Old Earth poets he used to quote on women and marriage! He used to compare marrying to buying a horse." And he recited four lines of Hafiz's favorite poet's from memory:

If it be pleasant to look at,  
In the packed ^erai, Doe  
not the young man  
try tld temper anS pace ere he bay?  
If She be pleasant to look on, what ^oe^ the  
young man .say? 'Lol She if pleasant to look on. Give her to me tooay!

"And if she produces a son to cut you out of your inheritance?" "Is it not written in the Book of the Third Prophet, 'Count not the light from a distant star among your assets, for that star may have been long dead by the time its light reaches thine eyes'? I have not been such a fool as to count on stepping into the shoes of a healthy man with many years to live, Calum. While trading for Uncle Hafiz I have built up quite a respectable line of credit on my own account. . . which, come to think of it, he may need to borrow against." Rafik raised his voice. "Tell me. Uncle, how stands the credit of House Harakamian after these disasters?"

Hafiz interrupted a low-voiced colloquy of his own with Admiral Ikwaskwan and Johnny Greene. "What disasters, my beloved nephew?"

"Well . . . the interruption to your trade . . . and, ah, paying the . . ." Rafik stammered. He had been so flabbergasted by the introduction of Karma as his uncle's wife that he had not even noticed Admiral Ikwaskwan's arrival, and now he had to hastily suppress the comments that had risen to his lips about rapacious mercenaries.

Hafiz gave the broad, closed-lip smile that many competitors had learned to dread. It usually meant he had just swallowed their pet canary.

"I confess there were some minor difficulties initially," he said pleasantly. "In fact, Delszaki Li and I were forced to combine our businesses in order to command enough liquid credits for the initial great expenses. But -with the advantage of House Li's trading contacts and capital added to my own superior communications system, I am happy to say that House HarakamianLi now commands an even greater share of the galactic market than before . . . and from what Mr. Greene here tells me of the technology to be discovered in the captured Khieevi ships, we expect to recoup our initial losses quite quickly. There is also," he said thoughtfully, "the small matter of trade agreements with the Linyaari. Now that Delszaki and I are no longer in competition, that should also be resolved quite profitably."

"House Harakamian-Li?" Calum repeated, stunned.

"What's the matter -with that?" Gill demanded. "Sounds like a good idea to me." Calum groaned. "Gill, you have no business sense whatever. With those two . . . rapacious old pirates . . . working together . . . and about to reap obscene profits off their contacts with the first two space-faring alien races we've ever encountered ... well, let's just say they make the Khieevi look like a minor threat to civilization!"

Admiral Ikwaskwan cleared his throat. "As to the matter of profits," he reminded them, "a half share in the Khieevi captures belongs to the Red Bracelets."

"One-third," Hafiz said quickly.

Ikwaskwan hooked his thumbs in his belt and rocked back and forth slightly on the balls of his feet. "The agreement was that all parties to the contract should share equally in the spoils of war. Since Harakamian and Li are now one House, clearly they constitute only one contracting party and should share half and half with the other party - me."

"One-third," Nadhari Kando said from behind Hafiz and Greene. "You were content with that originally. Play fair, Ikki!"

Ikwaskwan's bony face looked even sharper and more angular at sight of Nadhari. "But..."

"E'kosi Tahka'yaw," Nadhari said, sounding relaxed, as if she were saying a private mantra to the ceiling. "M'on Na'ntaw. And, of course, Skomitin. You haven't forgotten Skomitin, have you, Ikki?"

"Skomitin's dead," Ikwaskwan said quickly.

Nadhari gave him a sweet smile. "But I'm not . . . am I, Ikki?" Her light rocking movement mirrored Ikwaskwan's own, but she seemed considerably more relaxed; one hand was on the back of her head, the other in a pocket of her dark, close-fitting coveralls. Calum remembered that Nadhari was said to keep poison darts in those tight black braids that coiled around her head.

Ikwaskwan moistened his lips. "You seem in the best of health ... as I am. I trust we all expect to stay that way! Onethird, then," he said more loudly, turning back to Hafiz, "as was agreed in the original contract. God forbid I should seek to defraud my honored clients! The Red Bracelets' reputation for probity and fair dealing is known throughout the galaxy. "He didn't say what it was known as," Calum muttered in Rafik's ear.

"Can't use the appropriate language in front of the ladies," Rafik responded, equally sotto voce.

What exactly constituted a fair one-third share of the captured ships required quite a lot more haggling, as neither Ikwaskwan nor Hafiz wished to allow the other party to conduct a detailed survey of exactly what had been captured before the spoils were divided. By the time they had agreed on how to share out the loot, another complication had arisen. Des Smirnoff and Ed Minkus, rested and recovered from their ordeal on Rushima, put in their own claim for credit to the salvaged pod known as the Jurden.

Ikwaskwan listened to their claim without speaking, while his dark eyes slowly looked over the two very junior Red Bracelets from head to foot and back again. "What recruiting officer took these in?" he demanded eventually. "If I had known any of my officers thought us so desperate for warm bodies ..."

"Hey," Des interrupted, "you're looking at experienced men. Trained with Kezdet Guardians of the Peace, y'know." He puffed his chest out and threw his shoulders back, looking as tough and military as he could manage.

"Tchah! Howotiwak, thsi6w6tiya"the!" Ikwaskwan dismissed the claim with a phrase in his own language that made Nadhan laugh aloud. "Bumbling incompetents who allowed themselves to be captured by the dirt farmers - I have heard all I need of these. It's not the looting I object to, you understand," he



explained to Hafiz, "it's the incompetence. My Red Bracelets would be the laughingstock of the galaxy were it known that I had taken in such gutter-sweepings as these. I dare not even dismiss them." He sighed. "I cannot afford to let them loose with the claim that they were once, however briefly, officers of my force. There is only one solution." A hand twitching toward the blaster on his hip made it quite clear what he thought that solution was.

"Quite so," Hafiz agreed. "Clearly they must be properly trained up to the standard of your forces. You do have something corresponding to the regular army's basic training, do you not?"

Ikwaskwan's lips twitched as he took in the proposition. "On Kilumbemba . . . we have, indeed. It is, of course, mostly geared to the young and exceedingly fit; admission tests for the lower ranks are stringent. But I think these two should be able to survive it," he said in a casual tone that revealed his disinterest in the outcome. "Smirnoff! Minkus! Give me your bracelets; you are reduced to the ranks and ordered to Kilumbemba for training."

Ed stripped off the single red bangle that was his badge of rank without a word, but Des was foolish enough to push his luck. "And the credit for our capture?"

"Ahhh," Ikwaskwan breathed. His head moved like that of a serpent about to strike. "As it was told to me, the Jurden was helplessly out of control when Haven took her under tow. By the laws of space salvage, she is Haven's prize, no? Now, you two- to the shuttle, march! You will consider yourselves under arrest until you can be delivered to the brig aboard one of the battle cruisers." He lifted his wrist and delivered a series of short, sharp instructions in his native tongue which presumably alerted the shuttle crew to the imminent arrival of two disgraced exofficers.

Once Smirnoff and Minkus had shambled off, Ikwaskwan turned to Nadhari. "Nadhi. It has been, as you say, a long time. I believe some of our new armaments may be of interest to you."

"I have a duty here," Nadhari said. She sounded almost regretful.

"Go, go," Hafiz said with a beneficent smile on his face. "Acorna is in the care of her people now. You have earned some time off." Especially considering that she had just increased the profits of House Harakamian-Li by one-sixth.

Nadhari looked thoughtfully at Ikwaskwan. "You do understand that should I fail to return within . . . let us say two hours Standard . . . your shuttle would not be permitted to depart?"

"And you," Ikwaskwan returned, "understand that the security precautions put in place by my predecessor for safeguarding the person of the Admiral have been

not only retained but improved? My staff officers would die to avenge any harm to me."

Nadhari shrugged. "With the primitive tactics you employ, Ikki, they will likely die soon enough anyway." But she put one hand on his arm and sauntered off toward the docking bay-where the shuttle rested.

"Well," breathed Calum, staring at the two retreating short, slight figures with their air of coiled menace, "seems like romance is bustin' out all over!"

Rafik glanced at the corner where Pal was holding Andreziana's hands and talking earnestly. "It does indeed."

"Come up and see my battle lasers some time," Gill said, in a voice trembling with suppressed laughter. "I don't know, I've never tried that line. ..."

"And you never will," said Judit firmly, tucking her arm through his. "Didn't you have a proposition to put to Johnny, Gill?"

Johnny Greene was tempted by Gill's suggestion that he return to Maganos to help with the development of the mining base's third stage, but shook his head regretfully. "I can't leave these kids to run the Haven all by themselves."

"Looks to me as if they won't be completely on their own." Rafik jerked his head toward Pal and Andreziana.

"Still . . . it's bad enough they've lost their parents and their home. ..." Johnny said, incautiously loud.

Markel, never far from Johnnys elbow, overheard this. "What do you mean, we've lost our home? Haven's in perfectly good shape ... at least she will be, once we make the repairs which we should be well able to pay for, now that Dr. Hoa has agreed to stay on with us. We should be able to earn more than enough to maintain the ship by selling his weather-modification services to ag planets ... honestly," he added, "not as a protection racket!"

Johnny raised his eyebrows. "You can keep the Haven, yes. But Esperantza..."

"Was dear to our fathers," Markel \*said, "and we weren't about to hurt their feelings by telling them it was a dream we didn't share. Hey, 'Ziana," he yelled, breaking into her tete-a-tete with Pal, "you want to live dirtside?"

"No way!" Andreziana shook her head so vigorously that golden ringlets bounced around her face like scraps of a broken halo. "Give up being captain of the Haven just to get worn-out fighting atmospheric weather and planetside gravity? You gotta be kidding!"

"You can take a poll if you like, Johnny," Markel offered, "but I think you'll find the rest of us feel the same way."

"And between Dr. Hoa and Pal," Rafik pointed out, "they will hardly be without adult guidance. Trust the kids, Johnny. They know what they want, and they can be fairly ruthless about getting it."

He withdrew to a reasonably private corner with Gill, Judit, and Calum. "Looks like everything is getting settled," he said glumly.

"Yeah," Gill said with equal lack of enthusiasm.

"There's really no excuse ..." Calum began.

". . . to keep Acorna here with us," Judit finished, tears sparkling in her eyes. "She needs her own people."

"Do not grieve," Karina advised them, a lofty smile on her round face. "She will not leave you . . . not for long. I can sense her presence with us now."

"Of course you can!" Gill snorted rudely, "you know damn well she's on the Baiakare, sleeping."

"Not anymore," Karina said smugly, and on her last word, the Linyaari delegation came in, Acorna glowing -with light and happiness.

"I must say farewell to Mr. Li before we leave for narhiiVhiliinyar," she -was telling Melireenya, quite firmly. "Even if the return to Maganos does delay you . . .us."

"Then you have decided to leave us," Gill said heavily. "Well, it's the right thing for you, Acorna acushia, and we all wish you ..." His voice trembled with suppressed sobs, and he could not go on to save his life.

"I must go back with Neeva and Khaari, yes," Acorna said, "to be educated in the Linyaari ways, and to find . . . She blushed. "Well, to complete my education."

(Yes, you're going to have all sorts of educational experiences,) Khaari teased, and Acorna's blush deepened.

"But after that. . ." Gill, Rafik, and Calum all waited with bated breath.

"We must maintain diplomatic contact with your race," Neeva said, "and as our only expert in human ways, Acorna will be too valuable an envoy to be wasted in any other position. Melireenya will be staying with you for the time being, to be joined by her life-mate; but as soon as our 'Khornya has found her own life-mate,

I expect that she will be permanently assigned to this sector as special attache to the Linyaari embassy."

Karina was the only one who could speak after this announcement. "Told you so!" she grinned.

Meanwhile, far away from the human-settled sector of space, a damaged ship fled homeward with its traumatized crew. Their speech could not be transcribed in the letters of any human language, consisting as it did of a series of rapid clicks whose changing rhythms carried their meaning; but the meaning itself would have been perfectly clear to any of the iniquitous, warlike race from whom they fled.

"We must warn our masters to have nothing more to do with this race," Senior Click-Off Longlegs announced to clicks of agreement. "They are barbaric and vicious beyond belief: when attacked, they actually fight back!"

As for whether the human race would remain equally content to have nothing to do with the Khieevi . . . this they did not consider.

End Acorna's Quest

# The Acorna Series

## Volume 3

### ACORNA'S PEOPLE

Anne McCaffrey

One

On the planet of Laboue, within the opulent chief residence of Hafiz Harakamian, in one of the hundreds of finely crafted, hand-joined cabinets of rare and lustrous woods in which he kept his smallest and often most precious collectibles, Acorna had once seen a display of brilliantly bejeweled and decorated eggs. Created hundreds of years ago by a man named Carl Faberge for the collection of a Russian czar not nearly so wealthy as their present owner, the eggs had dazzled the eyes of the young girl with their richly colored enamels, their gold loops and whorls, their swags and bows of diamonds and glittering gemstones, and their tiny movable parts-the delicately wrought scenes that unfolded from within their interiors.

Now, a fathomless distance from Uncle Hafiz's home and many years later, it seemed to Acorna as if the eggs had magically grown to giant size and lofted themselves into space, where their colors shone even more brilliantly in the blackness of infinity than they had in the memories of her childhood. They formed a festive flotilla visible from the viewport of the Balakiire.

The flotilla had been growing in size since the Balakiire exited the wormhole that deposited them just beyond the atmosphere of narhii-Vhiliinyar, the second Linyaari home world.

The imagery was further borne out by the seemingly endless number of Linyaari space-farers, the denizens of those bright ships, who paraded across the comscreen to welcome the Baiakiire delegation home.

Melireenya introduced Acorna to each of the officers as they appeared on the screen, so that Acorna felt that she was already at one of the receptions or parties her aunt and -Melireenya were threatening to give in order to introduce her to Linyaari society and, most especially, to prospective lifemates. Acorna was so excited by the sight of the egg-like ships and the spectacle of her people's home rotating almost imperceptibly beyond them that she could hardly pay attention to the images on the comscreen.

The Linyaari welcoming her to this world all looked so much like her that they could have been mistaken for her by her human friends. The figures on the comscreen were pale skinned and had golden opalescent spiraling horns growing from their foreheads, topped by manes of silvery hair which continued to grow down their spines. Like her, they had feathery tufts of fine curly white

hair adorning their legs from knee to ankle, to just above their two-toed feet. Their hands, like hers, bore only three fingers, each with one joint in the middle and one where the finger met the palm.

After the life she'd led, it was a little overwhelming to be among so many others of her kind. All of the equipment and utensils she could see and touch were designed for people like her. Nothing had to be specially adapted to her anatomical peculiarities. Nothing about her appearance was unusual to the Linyaari.

However, as like her as these people were, they were all, even her mother's sister and those aboard the Balakiire, still strangers-strangers who took a proprietary interest in her without actually knowing her very well. Although she had ceased to be regarded as a child by the humans she had grown up among, she seemed to be regarded by her Linyaari shipmates as little more than a youngling.

This was a new sensation for her. Acorna had been jettisoned in a life pod from her parents' ship as an infant to save her from the fatal explosion that claimed the lives of her parents and the attacking Khieevi. She'd been rescued soon after and had grown up among humans. Specifically, she had been raised by her three adoptive uncles—Calum Baird, Declan "Gill" Giloglie, and Rafik Nadezda. Back when they'd found her they had been miners working in the far reaches of the human galaxies. These days they'd gone on to other things. Rafik, for example, was now the head of the House of Harakamian, the empire founded by his uncle Hafiz Harakamian, an uncommonly wily merchant and wealthy collector.

When Acorna had first met Hafiz, he'd wished to add her to his many treasures, to be displayed along with the beautiful Faberge eggs and the incredibly rare Singing Stones of Skarness guarding his courtyard. However, her value to Hafiz as a collectible had sharply decreased when Hafiz learned she was not a solitary oddity but merely a member of a populous alien race.

Acorna's relationship with Hafiz, and the one between Hafiz and Rafik, had improved after that to the point that Acorna now used the name Harakamian, along with that of her good and gentle mentor Mr. Li, as a surname. Dear Mr. Li had passed on a few months ago, but the more durable Uncle Hafiz had recently married his second wife and was now enjoying his retirement in her company.

Acorna, along with her uncles and Mr. Li, had succeeded in rescuing the children imprisoned in the camps on Kezdet, a planet whose economy had once depended on the exploitation of child labor. They had been ably assisted in this task by the intelligent and resourceful siblings of the Kendoro family, Pal, Judit, and Mercy, themselves former victims of the camps. Together, Acorna and her friends had been instrumental in changing the planet's laws and ridding it of the Piper, the ringleader responsible for the most heinous of the abuses. They had gone on to establish a mining and teaching facility on one of Kezdet's moons, Maganos, to nurture and educate the children they had rescued from the horrors of the labor camps.

Later, Acorna and her uncle Calum, while trying to locate her home world, had helped quell a mutiny among the Starfarers, human voyagers on a large colony ship. After being forced to watch their parents' murders during the rebellion, and the subsequent bloodshed, murder, and exploitation that the ship's new masters were intent upon, the children of the ship were able, with Acorna's help, to wrest control from the mutineers and destroy them. In the process, they rescued the famed meteorologist Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa, and his weather control system. The people who had seized the ship had used Dr. Hoa's new system to destroy the economy and ecology of the newly colonized

planet Rushima. The mutineers were spaced by the triumphant youngsters, just as the mutineers had spaced their victims, when the children regained control of the ship.

While returning with Dr. Hoa to repair the damage to Rushima, Acorna, her adoptive family, and the children fell under attack by the Khieevi, a vicious bug-like race responsible for the death of Acorna's parents. Fortunately, Acorna's aunt Neeva and the delegation from narhii-Vhiliinyar had arrived in time to warn everyone of the impending invasion. With Acorna's help, the resources of Kezdet and the Houses of Harakamian and Li had been mobilized to rout the Khieevi.

In the course of all this, Acorna had become something of a mistress of disguise, and had used her horn to purify an entire ship's poisoned air and the waters of Rushima as well as to heal the wounded in all of the hostile encounters with which she'd been involved.

This was all quite aside from her abilities to divine by seemingly magical means the mineral content of each individual asteroid her uncles wished to mine, an ability which had earned her their respect while she was still quite young. So Acorna had actually packed a great deal of activity into a relatively short life. Consequently she did not feel particularly childlike most of the time.

Nevertheless, she was a child to her mother's sister Neeva, a Linyaari Envoy Extraordinaire, or vw^haanye ferllii She was considered a youngling by all the other Linyaari aboard the Balakiire as well: Khaari, the navigation officer or gheraaiye mallvii in the Linyaari tongue; Melireenya, the senior communications officer or gheraaiye ve-khanyli; and Thariinye, the young male whose function was still not exactly clear to Acorna, even after their travels together, but who seemed to think that without him, the mission could not have succeeded. What had been taken by Acorna's human friends for talent was apparently standard issue for her race. And many of the talents the other Linyaari possessed seemed to have been carefully developed. For instance, none of them needed words to communicate with each other and all of them could read the thoughts of the others on the ship-including hers, a fact which she found rather unnerving at times. She had so very much to learn. Fortunately, if her shipmates were typical examples, her people were kind and forbearing.

"Khornya, this is my counterpart in the Gamma Sector, Vt^e^haanye FeriUi Taankaril," Aunt Neeva told Acorna. Khornya was the Linyaari version of Acorna, the name given her by her human "uncles." The introduction pulled her attention once more from the spectacle of the ships outside the viewport. Acorna dipped her horn, as did the vLfe()haanye ferllii, a woman who, like Aunt Neeva, Khaari and Melireenya, was of an indistinguishable age, at least indistinguishable to Acorna.

"Khornya," Aunt Neeva said, nodding to the woman on the comscreen and relaying her thoughts to Acorna, "the vife^haanye ferlili is the mother of two handsome sons who have not yet found their lifemates. She regrets that she is about to embark upon a mission, but hopes you will feel free to call upon them for any assistance you need in adjusting to your new home."

Acorna smiled and nodded at the woman again. No actual words had been exchanged between her aunt and the dignitary. Even across the vastness of space, it seemed that the senior space-faring Linyaari could read thoughts. Acorna occasionally felt she was catching on to how it was done, but found the process frustrating even with people standing in front of her. Particularly when they responded to thoughts she would not have voiced, given a choice. But her grasp of the Linyaari tongue was not yet complete and the crew of the Balakiire found the need to communicate with her in spoken words tedious. Neeva assured her she'd get the hang of things soon enough. But Acorna still worried.

And so went her homecoming, with the space around her new home planet dancing with egg-ships full of Acorna-like beings, all of whom seemed curious about the formerly presumed dead daughter of the illustrious Feriila and the valiant Vaanye, all politely inquiring as to where she'd been all this time and what she'd been doing, all seemingly with unmated sons or nephews or widowed fathers and uncles, all shepherding the Balakiire into port and docking alongside her.

Acorna emerged from the Balakare behind her Aunt Neeva and just ahead of Thariinye to find the docking bay crowded with Linyaari, some even holding a banner aloft. Behind the uniformed Acorna-like space travelers streaming from their ships to add to the party, a mass of multicolored creatures similar in form to the space-farers crowded onto the docking level, strumming, blowing into, pounding upon, brushing, and stamping a variety of musical instruments. The docking bay was filled with strange but wonderfully harmonious and joyous music.

Even before Aunt Neeva could explain, Acorna was overwhelmed with happiness. This was the welcoming committee. They didn't even know her, and they'd brought the brass band and the welcome mat. Aunt Neeva gave her a hug.

"We are all so glad to have you back, Khornya," she said, waving her hand to indicate the smiling Linyaari. Tears came to Acorna's eyes as she nodded an acknowledgment to all those who'd turned out to meet her.

At last she would truly belong. At last she would no longer be an oddity. What a relief that would be. "And I am so glad to be here. Aunt Neeva," she said. "I can't tell you how glad."

Aunt Neeva looked a little puzzled, an expression that seemed common whenever she was dealing with her niece. "But you just did, child," she said. "You just did."

Condor lurched and shuddered and flung its captain and the human part of the crew—both parts consisting of one Jonas Becker, CEO of Becker Interplanetary Recycling and Salvage Enterprises Ltd. against the bulkhead. As quickly as Becker fell, he was released, and rose to the ceiling like a ballet dancer in slow motion, while the rest of the crew, twenty pounds of grizzled black and gray Makahomian Temple Cat, drifted past him, the cat's extended claws grazing what remained of Becker's right ear.

"Dammit, RK, have you been pissing on the GSS panel again?" Becker groaned. RK, whose full name was Roadkill, growled back in his version of a friendly purr. His claws were flashing in and out, blissfully kneading the air, and beads of happy cat drool floated up from between his formidable fangs. His good eye was closed in an excess of feline ecstasy. Becker had never seen a cat who loved zero G the way RK did—but then he had never seen a cat anything like RK before either. The cat's stub of broken tail moved back and forth like a rudder as it floated by.

Becker gave the Gravitation Stabilization System panel a boot as he passed it. The force of his kick sent him soaring upward to bang against the console of a fighter ship strapped to the ceiling above the control panel of the Condor. There wasn't a whole lot of room in his vessel to store cargo, and Becker utilized every cubic centimeter of extra space. This left him no soft place to land when, after a couple more shudders, the ship's gravity stabilized and Becker and RK tumbled back to the deck.



Becker massaged his hip. He'd banged it against one of the packing crates of cat food he had unloaded from RK's original home ship. The cat, always interested in those particular crates, rubbed himself between it and Becker. As usual, Becker was surprised at how soft the cat's coat was in comparison to his personality. Becker had lost the little finger of his right hand while trying to salvage Roadkill. The cat had then been nameless, of course, the spitting, hissing, clawing sole survivor left aboard a derelict Makahomian spacecraft along with the corpses of his former shipmates.

Becker didn't like to talk about the loss of his second finger, but it had to do with what he referred to as "RK's adjustment period," the time when the cat had recovered enough from his injuries to start feeling at home. When Becker went to sell a couple of choice bits from the inventory soon after he'd acquired Roadkill, he'd found them slick with yellowish liquid and stinking worse than a musk otter in heat. The cause was obvious-and so was the need for a solution.

Becker consulted the library he had rescued from a landfill on Clackamass 2. He was a sucker for information in any form: hard copy, chip, what have you. It came in handy when he wanted to identify or figure out how to operate some of the inventory.

He dug through quite a few moldy, torn books before he found the copy of How to Care for Your Kith/cat he'd stashed in the stall of the spare head. The book advised that when a male cat began "marking his territory" by spraying it, the only way to stop the behavior was to have the cat neutered. Beckers business kept him a long way from a veterinarian, but back when he was a kid on the labor farm on Kezdet, he'd helped with the calves and goats. He'd figured a cat couldn't be that much different, so he attempted a little home surgery on RK. Turned out he'd figured wrong. The attempt ended with them both having surgeries of a sort RK was now one nut short and Becker had another stump in place of his right ring finger next to the stump of the little finger the cat had shredded during the original rescue. You had to love an animal like that.

"That's okay, man," he told the cat, scratching it behind the right ear, which, like his own, was only partially there. The cat's purr increased in volume until it sounded like a whole pride of lions right there in the cabin. "Those gravity systems are worthless anyway."

He knew he had a replacement system someplace among his cargo, probably a better one than the one he'd installed six months ago. Only problem was he couldn't do these particular repairs in space. To the best of his recollection, the piece that he needed was buried so deep he'd have to unload the cargo hold to find it. As usual, the ship was packed too tightly to have any room inside to conveniently shift the cargo while he looked. He could maneuver around and manage it in a pinch, of course, but why bother?

"So, cat, looks like it's dirtside for us again. I was going to pass up this next trashed-out planet and head back for civilization, but it looks like we need another pit stop first. The way I figure it, with this one, we've pretty much replaced the whole ship since we last headed back to Kezdet-we'll basically have a brand new Condor by the time we dock there again."

This wasn't unusual. On the average, he replaced most of the Condor about three times a year. This was an occupational hazard, or maybe a hazard of the kind of personality that occupied Backer's occupation. He hated to pay full price for anything when there was so much good stuff, only a little used, laying around for the taking. He was an expert at improvisation, refitting, retooling, and emergency landings on remote hunks of rock in the middle of space. He could do mid-space repairs, too, but it was so much easier to land somewhere with a bit of gravity where he could suit

up, toss stuff he didn't need out the hatch while uncovering what he did need, close the hatch, pressurize the ship, make his repair, then retrieve and reload his previously discarded cargo.

He ended up making some pretty rough landings occasionally, but he wasn't much worried about scratching his paint job, and the Condor wasn't so big that he needed a lot of level area for a landing pad. He headed for the planet he'd selected for this minor emergency. If the rock had an oxygen atmosphere, he'd even be able to empty the cat box and let RK out to do a little business.

Sometimes they found some of their best cargo on these pit stops. Lately he'd run across a whole string of planets, all pretty well stripped of resources on the one hand, but chock full of possibly profitable debris on the other hand. Becker lived for debris. His big regret was that he had not yet devised a way to strap extra cargo to the outside of the Condor, but so far he hadn't found a way to do so that would allow him to enter and exit atmospheres without burning up the merchandise.

The Condor landed on what seemed the only level bit of ground for miles around. Soil and vegetation had pretty much been stripped from the rock around this little basin in the wreckage, but here bluish grass-like plants still grew-until the Condor's descent singed them, anyway. It was a rough landing. The atmosphere was tumultuous-roiling clouds of various red and yellow gases filled the sky. That was okay. According to his instruments'-if they were working properly, and they seemed to be -it was still breathable out there. Even if it wasn't, he had a good protective suit if he needed it. It was the one item he bought not only firsthand but also top of the line. He never knew what the conditions would be like out here in the boonies. While he could use the robotlift for most reloading, loading, and hauling jobs, some of them he needed to do by hand. It took him a day and a half to repair his system. The first full day, with RK's enthusiastic participation, he devoted to rooting around among the derelict shuttles, escape pods, and command capsules in his inventory, looking for an outfit in better shape than the one he was using. As usual, much of what was on top of what he wanted landed on the ground outside the vessel until he found what he was looking for.

He eventually rounded up a replacement system and patched it in. RK "helped" again, trying to stand between him and what he was doing. Every time Becker reached past the critter, RK's low snarl warned him off. When the cat tired of that game, he sat beside Becker and periodically reached up to sink a single claw into the man's thigh. Finally, Becker opened the hatch again and the cat leaped out without a backward look. The work went amazingly swiftly after that.

Prior to reloading his cargo, Becker suited up. He was a little more cautious of his own hide than the cat was. Taking a work light, a collection sack, a tin of cat food to lure his roaming partner back aboard again, and the remote to the hatch and the robotlift, he popped the hatch and disembarked. All he had to do now was throw his stuff back aboard and find Roadkill. While he was looking, he might as well take a stroll and scope out the local real estate.

The grass around the Condor was singed for about thirty feet from where the vessel sat, and Becker thought it was a real shame about that. All around the basin, bedrock lay tumbled as if something had reached in, pulled it up, and stirred it around. What a dump. Only this one little patch showed any real signs of life. Of course, it could be the planet was just in the process of giving birth to life, or it could be a failed terraforming job, but his guess was that this planet had at one time been alive. The little patch on which he stood was probably one of the last, if not the last, vestiges of that life. Damn shame, of course, but without ruins like this, he'd be out of business. Only problem was, the devastation here was so complete, there wasn't much left, even for him. The other planets they'd come across lately had been much the same. Each of them had a few useless remnants that gave him the creepy feeling that a perfectly good civilization had been destroyed fairly recently.

It was Roadkill who pulled him from his contemplation of mortality.

In fact, it looked as if the cat had dug up something, and was smacking it around. Space mouse? Not very likely, with no signs of plant or animal life around, excluding themselves and the puny patch of grass they occupied.

Whatever it was, RK was in love with it. Becker couldn't hear anything, but he could see that the cat's sides were pumping up and down with the force of his purring.

A few feet further on, something gleamed in the beam of the work light, and Becker bent to examine it. Like the object RK was mauling, the thing was long and thin, maybe had been pointed on the end at one time, but the tip was broken off. There were definite spiral markings on it, he saw as he brushed away the soil. It glistened in the light, refracting rich shades of blue and green and deep red from its white surface. It looked like a big, carved opal. Pretty thing. He tucked it in the sack and swung his beam around. It flashed on several other pieces like the one he had, all broken and sticking up through the soil. He took a couple of other specimens, and made a note of the precise coordinates of this location so he could land here again, in case this stuff was valuable. Then he grabbed RK and headed back to the ship.

He finished reloading his cargo. As usual, he left a few of the more expendable pieces behind to lighten his load. He had inventory scattered all over the galaxy now. Well, most of the sites where he'd stashed the stuff were uninhabited, so it would keep. He could reclaim it if he found a market later. Finally, after he got the cargo stowed aboard once more, Becker lugged RK, the new treasure firmly clamped in his fangs, back onto the ship.

First things first, he decided. He set their course back to Kezdet and lifted off. It wasn't like he wanted to go to Kezdet.

He hated the damned place, but it was-unfortunately-the Condor's home port. The ship had originally been registered to Becker's foster father, Theophilus Becker, who bought Jonas from a labor farm to help with the business when the boy was twelve. The old man had died ten years later, leaving the ship, the business, and his private maps of all manner of otherwise uncharted byways and shortcuts through various star systems and galaxies for his adopted son. Becker had spent every possible minute in space in the years since.

Once the ship was out of the planet's gravity well and the course was set, Becker turned the helm of the ship over to the computer. Too exhausted to fix himself anything else to eat, he opened another can of RK's cat food and ate that before settling down for some sleep. The cat, who had of course been fed as soon as the two returned to the ship-otherwise nothing else could have been accomplished-was already sacked out on top of the specimen bag containing the strange rocks they'd salvaged from the planet.

Becker pushed the recline button on his seat at the console and slept at the helm. His bunk was full of cargo. Besides, he couldn't get to it for the stacks of feed sacks full of seeds he'd picked up several weeks before.

He woke up finally when a paw on his cheek told him he'd better do so if he didn't want another pat, this time with the claws bared. He looked up into RK's big green eyes. Something was different

about that cat, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He fed both of them again, checked his course, and emptied the collection sack onto the console. Time to get a better look at what he'd acquired.

He didn't figure he needed to use gloves with these specimens, since the cat had been carrying one around in its mouth with no ill effects since they'd found them, so he dug a couple of the spiral rocks out and ran a scanner over them. No radiation, nothing to poison, burn, freeze, or sting him. He knew that, having just picked them out of the sack with his bare hands.

RK crowded in close as Becker examined the objects, stroking them, turning them, trying to chip a piece off one with a rock hammer. The stones had a strange feeling to them—a sort of hum, as if they were alive. Maybe they were. Damn, if these were sentient life forms, he'd have to take them back. He was going to have to check this out with an expert. He dumped the rocks back into the collection bag.

There wasn't much else to do, so he slept again. When he awoke, it was to find RK standing on his chest. Becker thought the cat must have been sleeping on his arm, because his right hand tingled as if it had been numbed from the cat's weight. His right ear felt funny, too.

That was when he realized what was different about the cat. Two green eyes blinked back at him, the good one and the one RK had lost in the crash. The cat's right ear was also whole and perfect. At that point the cat stood up, stretched itself halfway down Becker's leg, and stuck its tail in his face. Becker was stunned to see that the tail had straightened out, lengthened to a luxuriant and elegant appendage, and now waved quite handsomely. Below the tail, well, yeah, that missing part had returned there, too.

Becker lifted his own right hand and saw that the stubs of his fingers had regrown. His hands looked just as they had before he'd come into contact with RK—maybe minus the odd scar. He touched his ear. That felt whole again as well. What in the name of the three moons of Kezdet was going on here? How could this have happened—not that he was complaining. The only thing he could think was they'd run into some kind of healing force on that derelict planet. If the planet was capable of this kind of miracle, it was no wonder somebody had wrecked the place looking for the secret. As soon as he sold some of this cargo and reprovisioned—he was getting tired of cat food—he was going right back there to see what he could find.

"Mercy, Roadkill, when we get to Kezdet we're both gonna be so damned good lookin' we'll have to watch out they don't snag us for the pleasure houses." Not that he didn't intend to go there straightaway himself. And he'd take Roadkill with him.

Hell, they didn't call those places cathouses for nothing. Must be a lady cat or two around there would appreciate the attentions of a handsome space traveler like his buddy.

The trip back was real pleasant. For one thing, the cabin and hold didn't stink. Not even a little bit. Becker had to keep looking around to make sure Roadkill was still aboard because the whole ship had stopped smelling like cat piss. It was a smell you got used to, but it was nice to get used to not smelling it. For another thing, they were making really good time, even though they had been traveling vast uncharted distances from their well, Becker's-home world.

Theophilus Becker had been much more than just a junk dealer-er-salvage broker. He was a salvage broker, a recycling engineer, and an astrophysicist. Jonas's new master, who liked to be called Dad, was also just a tad on the reckless side. The man liked nothing better than riding the wild

wormhole, finding the quirks in quarks. He'd known how to detect those places where time and space pleated up, accordion-style, to be shot through for a shortcut by a space-farer with the guts to use them. Jonas had learned a great deal from Theophilus.

So it was a matter of only a month or so before Becker, with RK trotting along beside him like a dog, showed up in front of his favorite bawdyhouse. A girl he didn't recognize came to the door. She was fully dressed in a long-sleeved coverall fastened clear to her neck, not the attire he was accustomed to in this place.

"Oh, Lord, not another one," she said.

"You don't sound glad to see me," he replied, smiling. It had never been customary to bring flowers or any other greenery here-just a few hundred credits and the courtship was complete.

"When will you men get the word that this is an honest establishment for making safety belts for flitters now? The Didis are history."

"History?" Jonas felt stupid. "I like history. What do you mean, history? Where's Didi Yasmin?"

"In jail, where she belongs. Where have you been? Outer space?"

"As a matter of fact, yeah," he said. "Why is she in jail?"

"I haven't got time enough to tell you," the girl said. "But you might try asking some of the kids on Maganos-little girls she forced into prostitution." She glared at him.

"Hey, not with me! No, don't look at me that way. I like big girls-grown up girls, women, actually. I never-aw ..."

His hostess's attention was diverted by Roadkill, who was rubbing against her ankles. She reached down and petted him, then picked him up. "What a pretty kitty," she said.

"Lady, I wouldn't do that," Becker said. "He'll take your arm off."

But RK, the traitor, lay happily purring in her arms, butting up against her chin with the top of his head, shamelessly cadging caresses. Becker wished he could do the same thing.

"What's his name?" the girl asked.

"RK," Becker hedged.

"What does that stand for?" Now she was tickling the traitor's tummy. It was white. Becker had had no idea that the cat's belly was white. RK never wanted him to do any tickling. Quite the contrary.

"Refugee Kitty," Becker lied, knowing that the truth would not go down well with her. "I found him on a derelict ship-his people had been killed in a freak accident and he was in a bad way."

He hoped this would elevate him in her estimation from a simple child molester to a child molester who was at least apparently kind to animals. "And my name is Jonas. Jonas Becker. What's yours?"

"Khetala," she said.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

"I can't say the same to you, Mr. Becker. You'll find Kezdet has changed quite a bit since the Didis and the Piper got what was coming to them. Maybe you considered the houses harmless fun, but I was forced to work in one before the Lady Epona liberated us. I don't share your attitude."

"Hey, I understand. I was slave farm labor myself but I got adopted out. I " She was staring at him stonily. Even he knew it wasn't the same. His voice drifted off into confusion and he reached for RK, who took a slice at him. Becker ignored the cat's reluctance to be dislodged and firmly, if painfully, extricated him from Khetala's arms. "We-uh-nice meeting youwe'll just be going now."

She turned on her heel and went back inside. One good thing about meeting her. He wasn't in the mood any more for what he had always let pass for love. So it was time to get back to work instead. He'd always found making money a fairly acceptable substitute for most pleasurable pursuits.

Before he went to the trouble of renting a container cruiser and offloading his cargo, he made a few inquiries about the state of the market. He was gratified to find that the Lady Epona who had so thoroughly cleansed the planet of evil hadn't minded junk, presumably as long as its purveyors weren't hterbugs.

The nano-bug market was still flourishing. He took a look around before settling in for the day. It was getting harder to find a real good deal any more. The original Mars probe, still in prime condition (because it hadn't worked in the first place), had been recovered by a guy who used to work for Red Planet Reclamation-the outfit that was supposed to return planets to their pristine condition after the minerals were stripped. The guy wanted enough of it to build a whole new planet from scratch. Becker shook his head and moved on. He also found a great booth for rockhounds. He was particularly attracted to four new gemstones he hadn't seen before-bairdite, giloglite, nadezdite, and acornite. Bairdite was a multicolored opaque stone with a pebbly crystalline surface striped both ways with red and yellow-probably iron and sulfur deposits. Giloglite was the color of serpentine, only translucent and cloudy. Nadezdite was a transparent purple with gold flecks, and the acornite was a blue-green stone that cleared in the middle to the most gorgeous deep teal transparency he had ever seen in any rock, real or manufactured. The sequence of names sounded familiar to him, but he couldn't quite think why.

He and RK checked out the food booths. There was a meat chili advertised as the specialty of Ma'aowri 3. It smelled really good to him, but RK took one sniff and backed off. When Becker tried to get closer, RK gave him a look that was hard to fathom, but left him thinking that maybe the meat in the dish was a little too close to home for comfort-whether to him or RK he wasn't sure. He passed up oddly shaped fruits, cheap fructose candy and waxy chocolate, various roast beasts, some fairly bizarre vegetation, and assorted other delicacies too alien to identify. He finally settled on a good old-fashioned gyro and a cup of cat, then returned to the stall he'd rented and began to unload his container into it.

After Becker had displayed his wares as temptingly as possible, he sat in the throne-like command seat he'd taken from an otherwise totaled Percenezatorian battle wagon. RK lay on the collection bag from the last trip. It had become his bed of choice. He had been willing to part with only the smallest and most broken piece of that funny opal-looking mineral. Becker kept that piece in his

pocket as a deal-sweetener. It was eye-catching enough that maybe somebody would decide that his wife couldn't live without it.

As far as sales went, the day was pretty slow going-the usual looky-loos, a couple of rich teenage boys looking for ways to jazz up their cheap transportation. Becker figured he would offload what he could here and then move along to Twi Osiam to do some major trading and restocking. About then, she came along, her entourage trailing behind her.

She wasn't really his type-too young, for one thing. She had a figure like a twelve-year-old boy who had been dead of starvation for a year or two. Her hair was long and curly in the back and short and spiky in the front. But she was fashionably and expensively dressed in the furs and skins of several now extinct species. Amazing that clothes that cost so much could cover so little of what was, to his eye, fairly pointless to reveal.

Her entourage consisted of four men a little older than she was, all of whom ranged restlessly behind her. "Stay," she told them, in a tone Becker would have been a fool to try to use on RK. "Helloo," she cooed to him. Well, he had been right. He'd returned to his natural drop-dead handsomeness and now women found him so irresistible he'd get tired of it. Except, oddly enough, for Khetala. Later.

"Helloo, yourself," he said. "What can I do for you, princess?" he asked, judging correctly which endearment she would prefer. RK, on the other hand, was clearly not about to try and flatter this customer. His back -was up; his tail, in its fully recovered state, would have made an excellent bottlebrush, his eyes were slits, his ears were flat, and he was hissing like a tubful of vipers. Becker stepped in front of him, to block his cat's view of this doubtlessly well-heeled customer as well as to block the customer's view of him.

"I was hoping you could advise me," she said. "I was told you know just everything there is to know about slightly used equipment."

"Not everything, but more than most," he agreed.

"I'm starting a small business and it would be a big help if I had just a teensy little fleet of ships all to myself. I can get some very good bargain spacecraft, but they all need parts here and there and I was just wondering-hoping actually-that you would have a few things."

"Like what? "

She snapped her fingers and one of the men appeared and recited by rote a string of instruments, equipment, systems, and parts. Becker suspected the man wasn't actually a flesh and blood type, but an android. For one thing, he didn't pause for breath during the whole fifteen minutes it took to recite the lady's shopping list. For another thing, while he was talking, RK peed on his foot and shredded his lower leg and the guy didn't seem to notice.

"Yeah, I got all that," Becker said at the end of the recitation, looking closer at the guy. Yep. Android. Its foot and lower leg were smoking slightly. Cheap model. Bad wiring job. "You want takeout or shall I deliver the stuff to the hangar of your choice? Part of it is still aboard the ship." The lady would be cleaning him out, actually, a fact that made him a little nervous. He'd have to make enough money from this sale to cover his expenses while he collected more inventory. Luckily, he was already planning to go back to all of those desolate planets and pick up the bits and

pieces he'd left behind. And while he was at it, he'd check out what had done the healing job on him and RK.

"Oh," the lady said in an arch voice, "how much?" Becker named his price. About a half dozen times more than the stuff was worth. She smiled and methodically cut it down to a pittance. He named a price more than four times what the merchandise should bring, and the bargaining began in earnest. The problem was, he was nearly selling out here. It would put him out of business until he collected more salvage. He wanted enough profit to float him and RK for a good long time, with enough left over to at least maybe take a little vacation, preferably somewhere there were still Didis or pleasure houses in operation.

"Look, I'll tell you what," he said. "I wasn't going to show you this, but you're a pretty lady and I can tell you have exquisite taste. You give me my original asking price and I'll throw this in for free." He reached into his pocket and drew forth the bit of spiral stone that RK had let him keep. "Give it to your jeweller, he can cut and shape it into a fabulous suite of jewelry for..."

The "woman's eyes widened when she saw it, and she snatched it from his hand. She began to laugh. Not a pretty laugh either. "Where did you get this?"

"Found it," he said, with a shrug.

"Found it?" She laughed again. "On whom? I mean, where?"

"Now that would be telling," he said. "Just be glad you've got it and nobody else does. A rare find, princess." Part of him thought that if she liked it so much, he should show her the rest of the stones, but that would mean trying to get RK off the specimen bag. Frankly, he liked the cat a lot better than he liked this woman. He already deeply regretted letting her have this sample for nothing-well, nothing except making her pay a lot more than she'd wanted to for the items she needed.

"Yes, indeed," she said. "What a pity you can't get more. I have an excellent market in mind." She thrust her skinny chest toward him. "We might even go into partnership."

"Gee, just my bad luck. But you know how it is," he said with a shrug. "Sometimes you just happen onto a good thing and you may never find it again." He wouldn't part with any more of the spiral stones until he knew what she knew about them that made her so interested in the one he let her have. The things were probably worth a lot more to someone else than what she was offering him.

"Pity," she said, her eyes as hard and narrowed as RK's. For some reason she seemed to doubt his veracity. Good. That made them even.

She handed him a big wad of credits. They were issued in the name of Lady Kisia Manjari. He counted and pocketed them.

"Great. It's a deal then."

"If you'll step aside, I'll have my crew reload your container and use it to transport my merchandise," she said.

"Fair enough. Come on, RK," he said to the cat, and grabbed the specimen bag RK was sitting on. The cat spat at the woman again.



Oh, no, you don't," she said. "I just bought everything here, including that mangy creature. I know a laboratory that would love to get such a specimen."

Sorry, lady," he said. "You bought everything on the list that your singing android friend there read. And the cat's not on that list. I can't sell him under any circumstances. Federation law prohibits it. RK here isn't a creature. He's my partner. A sentient being. The brains in the outfit really."

"I want it," she said and beckoned to her men. RK left bloody skid marks on Decker's arm as the cat leaped over him and raced off, to be lost among the stalls. Becker grabbed his arm and dropped the collection bag on his foot, but recovered quickly, fumbling to close the mouth of the bag before Kisia could see what he had. He didn't dare look around too much, so he didn't see that one of the artifacts had slid out of the bag and rolled under an oxygen recycling unit.

"Told you he was sentient," Becker said, grinning up at her to make sure she was meeting his gaze and not looking too closely at anything else. "Sorry about that. I'd help you load your stuff but I have to find my partner now."

He nonchalantly tucked the collection bag into his belt and tried not to clank as he walked away.

Acorna wanted a graze and a good long gallop more than she wanted anything else in this world at the moment, but before she could say so, her thought was taken up by all of the others.

"A meal? What a good idea," exclaimed a nearby dignitary, as if she had spoken her wish aloud. She had been introduced to this person onscreen but she couldn't recall who he was exactly. Someone very important.

"Yes, something to eat, and a good run. What a splendid idea!" Thariinye agreed, and others concurred with nods and other gestures of affirmation. The young male had also spoken aloud.

Neither of them had apparently read the part of her thought in which the galloping and grazing was being done by herself, alone, with the wind blowing through her hair, down in that field below. She put the thought away as antisocial, something she didn't wish to appear to be, especially now, when she really wanted to make a good impression on her native people.

So she smiled and nodded and avoided being trampled while the assembled masses poured out of the spaceport and onto the broad plain separating the port from the town. The plain was lush with lovely grasses, foreign to her but tasting deliriously of lemon and pepper, with a hint of cinnamon.

The people who had joined the Balakure's crew to celebrate their homecoming happily pulled up and munched the grasses, while wandering from one area to another chatting, laughing, and calling to each other. Acorna slid a sidelong glance at one of the nearby Linyaari. He was not white like her fellow space travelers, but a deep red color with a rich black mane. Others in the crowd were black, brown, golden with white hair, or gray with hair that was lightly dappled with a darker tint.

Neeva smiled at her, catching her thought. "You didn't know we came in colors?"

Several grazers glanced at them in a startled sort of way, then looked politely away.

"We should either speak aloud now or you must keep a tight focus upon me, my dear," Neeva told Acorna. "You send quite well, you know, and will have half the planet privy to your inner thoughts if you're not careful."

"Sorry. It's going to take some getting used to, guarding my thoughts so that everyone can't hear. I'm still not quite sure what, or even when, I'm transmitting."

"You're very strong, dear, if somewhat new to this. You tend to-well, sometimes you shout a bit. Most people won't deliberately intrude upon your thoughts, but you have to try to control your broadcasts. It's not like it is on shipboard where we're in sync with each other, thanks to long-term close association. People here on narhii-Vhiliinyar tend to use thought-speak mostly only among their own kinship groups or close friends. They tend to vocalize at events like this, both to maintain their own privacy, and to avoid intruding on the thoughts of others. Most would no more try to listen in on your private thoughts than they would try to eavesdrop upon your private audible comments."

"I'll try to be more careful," Acorna promised quietly, watching both white and multicolored Linyaari sitting crosslegged in the field or simply lying down, rolling over to get a new nibble when they'd worn out the old spot. No one seemed to mind about their clothing getting mussed. Acorna decided it was time for a change of subject. "No one mentioned to me that Linyaari came in varied colorations. I was a bit surprised, that's all. You and the other Linyaari I've met until this moment are white like me, so I thought we all would have the same coloring."

Neeva made a wry face. "The color of our coat, or lack of it, among those of us who travel in space has until recently been a matter of pride to us. It shows our people who we are, and where we have been. The white coloration is known as becoming star-clad, -wearing the white and silver of the distant stars. A space traveler proudly sheds his or her color the way a child sheds his or her toys. We're not sure why, but a Linyaari's natural coat color bleaches to white during his or her first space voyage."

"It's not genetic then, as coloring is among humans?" Acorna asked.

"Not the white coloring, no." She said, "Since the evacuation, when many people who would have preferred to retain their original pigmentation lost it, being star-clad has come to be considered, at least among some circles, as an abnormality that should be addressed. Our researchers are being asked to study it as a 'condition.' The last I heard, they had postulated that the change is caused by a combination of factors: the deprivation of natural light during a typical space voyage, which results in the destruction of certain photosensitive pigmentproducing elements in our skin; and the lack of certain nutrients in our diet which are only found in plants native to Vhiliinyar, and which will not grow successfully in hydroponics gardens. We can store the plants in seed form for transport to suitable new environments, of course, but during the space voyage, we simply have to do without them, with the resulting effects on pigmentation. Between the two processes, Linyaari space-farers lose all coloration in their skin during the course of a typical space voyage."

Acorna looked down at her own arms and hands, trying to imagine them red or black or any of the other colors she saw around her. "Will I change colors now that I'll be in the sun and eating the right nutrients, then?"

Acorna imagined, in rapid succession, herself in each of the colors she saw on people around her, then herself with bright purple skin and a violet mane. Everyone nearby was clearly listening in, in

spite of what Neeva said was polite. There was a scattering of laughter around her, and a few frowns. She deliberately broadcast an image of herself rainbow-colored. Conversations all over the meadow stopped and the laughter turned to embarrassed coughing. Even the frowns looked puzzled, and more people stared at her with politely quizzical expressions. Hmm.

Neeva laughed. "You can see, Khornya, that you'll need to learn to refine your range when you send thought-images. Some of our people have no sense of humor, and they will now think that you are not one of us at all, but some strange second cousin to the Linyaari who started life as a-what is the little lizard from those vids? The one who changed colors?"

"A chameleon," Acorna said, blushing. "Can I send an apology?"

"Perhaps it would be better to leave well enough alone for now," Neeva replied, still amused. "Otherwise, they will see your blush and think you are trying to tell them you were originally pink. But in answer to your question, sister-daughter, once starclad, always star-clad. The varicolored Linyaari you see here are younger than you are, born on narhii-Vhiliinyar since the evacuation." She sighed and stood up. "You know, I haven't spent a great deal of time on-planet since shortly after your parents disappeared, so perhaps the experts who see being star-clad as a disease are now close to finding a 'solution.' Perhaps I could return to being gray with spots if I wished. As it happens, I most emphatically do not wish to. I like what I am."

Acorna chewed thoughtfully on one last mouthful of the cinnamon-flavored grass. She caught several frankly annoyed stares and thought less strenuously. She was getting the distinct impression that it was rude to chew and broadcast at the same time. Oh dear, she hadn't been here long at all and already she was afraid she'd get a reputation for unfortunate behavior. It was hard fitting in when she didn't know the rules. . . .

She lowered her voice and moved closer to her aunt, and tried not to think too loudly. She was beginning to feel rather overwhelmed. For one thing, while no one was deliberately sending to her, under the vocalized chatter and laughter she was aware of a constant buzz of random thoughts. For another thing, even though her aunt had told her that the evacuation had happened after her parents and she, as an infant, had left Vhiliinyar for their pleasure cruise, somehow she'd thought narhii-Vhiliinyar would more closely resemble the place she saw in her dreams-that wonderful land with rolling fields leading to snow-capped mountains, with crystal clear rivers and streams cascading into waterfalls and pooling into emerald lakes and ponds when they weren't winding through green fields and wildflower-filled meadows. Nice, cuddly, furry animals drank from the waterways and birds darted everywhere.

Here the hills rolled slightly, the mountains were conspicuously absent, and the plains stretched off to the far horizon. She saw only the Linyaari people; no other large life forms at all. It was a pretty enough place, but lacked the gorgeous scenery and amazing biodiversity other dreams. Of course, she hadn't seen the entire planet yet. It was unlikely the whole place was like this. Possibly there were many more interesting places on it.

An older white Linyaari male joined Acorna and Neeva.

" VLfei)haanye Neeva," he said, inclining his head.

"Aagroni lirtye, what an honor it is to see you again, sir."

"The honor is mine, Vi^e^kaanye."

"Allow me to present my sisters daughter, Khornya. Khornya, Aagrani lirtye is one of the founders of narhiiVhiliinyar. His team located this world. He headed the terraformmg committee, determining what would be needed by our people to sustain life here, and he customized and implemented the programs and processes necessary to create a new habitat for us." "An awesome responsibility, sir," Acorna said. "I'm glad you realize that, young lady," lirtye said. "I could not help but overhear how disappointed you were at the lack of certain topographical and biological amenities we enjoyed on the old home world."

"Oh, dear. I am trying very hard to learn not to think so loudly, sir, but I can't seem to find the volume control on my mind." She smiled self-deprecatingly, hoping he would have a sense of humor.

It appeared that he didn't. "I see no reason that you should be less than honest," he said with a frown. "But you must understand how little time there was to prepare. Some of the features of the old home world were not only unnecessary, but were at times dangerous. A flat and fairly uniform planetary surface was most efficient for terraforming under the circumstances. This planet had such a surface. As for the other fauna, while we introduced all the essential species-single-celled life forms, invertebrates, and some of the smaller vertebrates like birds and reptiles-during the course of the terraforming process, we were still in the process of gathering breeding populations of the larger vertebrates to transplant when we were notified that the evacuation of our people was to take place immediately. The Khieevi invasion had overtaken Caabye "

"That was the third planet from our sun back on Vhiliinyar, Khornya," Neeva interjected.

"We had no time to waste. Getting our people off the planet and on the way to safety took priority. We had to mobilize our entire fleet-those ships that were not already away from the planet, that is."

Acorna did not need to invade his thoughts to realize that he was making a posthumous reprimand aimed at her parents because they had taken a spacecraft-and the director of weapons development, which was her father's title and position -away from Vhiliinyar at such a critical time. Though how her parents could have predicted the moment was at hand so quickly when the speed of the final Khieevi invasion took everybody by surprise, Acorna couldn't imagine. Nor could she imagine that her parents would have left the planet if they'd had even an inkling of the fate that awaited them. But she wasn't about to point either of those observations out-if she could help it-to this man.

"In anticipation of the Khieevi invasion, we had furnished this new world with sufficient dwellings, equipment, and provisions to sustain us for the first year. We crowded our people into the colony ships in a mad rush to escape the invaders. We loaded whatever animals we could as well, but the populations were small, and have not flourished here, probably due to a lack of genetic diversity. We have teams searching other worlds now to find similar life forms to supplement and replace the native creatures we lost to the Khieevi."

"I meant no criticism, sir," Acorna replied softly. "You were responsible for saving our people and making this new world. No one, least of all me, could possibly find fault with that. I was only thinking of the world I saw in my dreams."

"Yes, I saw," he said, and turned on his heel and walked away.

Neeva and Acorna exchanged looks.

(I thought being psychic meant that everyone would understand everyone else,) Acorna whispered to her aunt.

Neeva patted her shoulder and "whispered-vocally-in response, "Some people can hear nothing but their own inner voices shouting at them so loudly that they come to believe the shouting is coming from others. The aagrone was a zoologist before he was assigned to the terraforming project. The loss of so many of the native animals was shattering for him."

Acorna gazed after the man who had disappeared into the throng.

"Never mind him, Khornya," said Neeva. "The man is a relentless perfectionist. Despite his efforts, like all worlds, this world is less than perfect. Of course, Vhiliinyar was less than perfect, too, but no one remembers that now. So the aagrone does not count the lives he saved or lives of all the children born on this new world when he measures his accomplishments. He is acutely aware, however, of every single complaint about the weather, the lack of animals, the monotonous scenery, the bugs, and natural upheavals that are all too common on a recently terraformed planet."

Just as Neeva finished speaking a breathless young person skidded up to them, almost falling in her haste to reach them.

"Your pardon, Vue(jhaanye Neeva," the young person said. Her skin was a soft mocha brown and her hair a darker brown adorned with large white splotches. She was almost stammering in her haste to convey her message. "The Vilzaar Liriili wishes to see you immediately on a matter of some urgency."

"The Vu-zaar Liriili?" Neeva asked. "When did Liriili become viizaar!"

"A ghaanye ago, Vw^haanye Neeva," the girl said. "When Viizaar Tiilye stepped down to pursue Haarha Liirni. "

Acorna consulted the vocabulary she'd learned from the LAANYE, a translation device usually used by Linyaari emissaries to sleep-learn the languages of other species. In her case, a LAANYE had been recalibrated so that she could more rapidly learn Linyaari. A viizaar was some kind of high political office. The other term the girl used seemed to mean "higher learning." And Acorna knew a ghaanye was roughly a year and a half in Galactic Standard time.

"We were just coming to report in," Neeva said with extra warmth in her voice to reassure the girl, warmth that was quite at odds with the dismay Acorna felt emanating emotionally from her aunt. "I know Liriili will be so pleased to meet Khornya."

The messenger girl looked Acorna up and down quickly, even a bit skittishly. "So you're the one who was captured by the Khieevi," she said. "How did you get away before getting tortured and killed?"

"Captured by the Khieevi? But I wasn't captured by the Khieevi," Acorna said, confused. The two of them fell in behind Neeva and Melireenya as they made their way to the road to the city. Khaari had found old friends among the greeting committee and was, judging from the exchange of lively

facial expressions, deep in animated conversation with them. Thariinye, flanked by two younger female Linyaari, followed Acorna and the messenger.

Acorna became aware of a mental exchange between her aunt and Thariinye.

(Thariinye, where do you suppose this child would get the idea that Khornya was captured by Khieevi?) Neeva asked.

(Not from me. I only said that the beings who intercepted Khornya's pod after her parents' death were barbaric and in some ways Khieevi-like. I never said she was captured,) the young male replied.

Acorna and the messenger girl looked at each other. Acorna was all too aware of the psychic communication that took place between the mature adults. But according to what Acorna had learned, psychic ability only began manifesting itself in the Linyaari youngsters at puberty. This girl was definitely prepubescent.

"I wasn't kidnapped by the Khieevi," Acorna told the young Linyaari. "I was brought up among an alien species called humans. My adopted uncles were very kind, as were many other humans I encountered. I'm sure you would have found Mr. Li in particular most. . . Linyaan-like. Am I using that correctly? There were other humans who were pretty barbaric, it's true, but my contact with the harsher aspects of humanity has been limited."

The girl looked extremely disappointed, and for a moment Acorna thought it might be the sort of bloodthirstiness she knew from the children on Kezdet.

"I'm sorry to have got it wrong," the girl said. "I didn't mean to upset you. I was hoping that you had been captured. I mean, not that I wish you ill, but especially when I saw that you looked so unharmed, I was hoping you had been through the torture and survived it because. . . . Oh well, it's not important right now. You didn't endure it, and I'm glad you're all right. My name is Maati, by the way. I know that you're Khornya."

"In your-our language-yes. At home I was called Acorna," Acorna said, allowing the subject to change since the girl was evidently too flustered by her mistake to make a great deal of sense. Acorna did not find the child easy to read and wondered if this was because Linyaari children lacked psychic ability. It was clear from this youngling that the lack meant that the children not only lacked the ability to receive thoughts but also to transmit them nonverbally, consciously or unconsciously.

"Acorna? That's an odd name," Maati said. "So is Khornya, for that matter. I mean, the word means 'one horn.' All of us have one horn and nobody has more than one, so what's the big deal?"

"No one else where I was living had a horn," Acorna told her.

"They didn't? How did they heal things when they got hurt or sick? And what if the water was muddy in the stream where they were, or there was a fire and the air was smoky? How did they fix it? "

"Sometimes they didn't. If they were hurt or sick, and I wasn't handy, they went to medics who fixed them with all sorts of tools and tonics and pills. As best they could, anyway. And if the water

was muddy, they drank muddy water or went thirsty. If the air was smoky, they breathed it or moved to where there was cleaner air. Again, unless I was handy."

"I'm surprised they let you come home if they're that backward and you were that useful to them," Maati said stoutly.

Acorna sighed and refrained from trying to explain any more about human society.

They were walking across the edge of the field now. The sky was a clear cloudless turquoise. Acorna saw the road from the city to the spaceport just ahead of them. Standing on the road were several men in elaborately decorated uniforms, each uniform a different color. Standing beside them, decked out in beribboned and bejeweled blankets that matched their attendants' uniforms, were animals that looked something like horses-except that they had horns, just like the Linyaari.

"Madam," one of the men said, though he said it in Linyaari, of course, "our Ancestors will now convey you to the home of the vazaar."

"Ride? TheArts&^to/v?" Neeva sounded shocked. "When did we start using the Ancestors as transportation?"

"Ancestors?" Acorna asked, intrigued. She reached out her hand and touched the velvet nose of one of the gorgeously blanketed creatures. Up close, though they mostly looked like Uncle Hafiz's horses, they also looked a tiny bit like goats, with little beards on their chins. They were somewhat more slightly built than the horses she'd seen in Hafiz's stables. But they were entirely identifiable as something else she'd been associated with by her human companions all her life. "These are Mr. Li's ki-Lin!" she said. She looked at Neeva. "You didn't tell me about them."

"Well, no," Neeva said. "One doesn't speak of the Ancestors off the home world, not even among one's closest companions. They do not care for offworlders, no matter how Linyaari, knowing about them. In the past, they have had great reason to be frightened of other species. Not of Linyaari, of course. The Linyaari have, since the Ancestor's great tragedy and rescue by the Ancestral Hosts, evolved from them, but their kind are long-lived and adaptable. These are descendents from the original species. Most are far older than any of us. Their species, all of the Ancestors, remain as they always were, unchanged since those long-distant days before our kind had yet to be born."

To the man in the fuchsia uniform standing beside the fuchsia-blanketed unicorn Neeva now repeated her question. "Ride the Ancestors ? "

Acorna's normally serene aunt was clearly so taken aback she'd shouted without meaning to.

The fuchsia-clad man rubbed his temples and grimaced in pain. Very slowly, as if he was unaccustomed to speaking aloud, the man said, "Yes, Vme()haanye Neeva. It is the wish of the Ancestors that you and your crew ride upon the backs of these Ancestors to Kubiilikhan. It is traditional."

"Traditional? Since when? I am not aware that we ever rode upon their backs since-well, since the Linyaari race began."

The man rubbed the area around his horn, as if continuing to block pain, and said, "It has become traditional over the past ghaanye and a half, VLie()haanye. Since the Ancestors noticed that in the continued absence of flitters, our space-farers have been walking into Kubiilikhan from the spaceport. The Ancestors feel that this lacks dignity. They feel that a lot of two legged creatures simply walking down the road to the capital provides no sense of circumstance or occasion befitting the importance of our space-farers."

"Now that is odd," Melireenya said. "Back on the home world, the Ancestors never quite approved of space-farers. Such dreadful things had happened to them in space, you know."

"During the evacuation, madam, the Ancestors became aware of the important functions those who brave the perils of space fulfill these days on behalf of our people."

"I don't understand," Acorna said, feeling a little like the girl who had fallen down a rabbit hole in a rather odd old story she had once read while aboard her uncles' mining ship. "The ki-lin here are our Ancestors, and they want us to ride them because there are no flitters? Why aren't there any flitters? Isn't it awfully hard to get around on the planet just walking or maybe riding on-on the Ancestors?"

Aagrom lirtye, who was in the group of people rounded up by messengers to go to the viizaar's house, spoke up. He demanded of her as if she were stupid, "How much room do you think a space fleet has when it has one chance only to evacuate an entire planet full of people and the essentials for helping them survive? Flitters are large. They take up vital room that is better used by other cargo. They are easily replaceable. Organic creatures are not."

Acorna couldn't help herself. She had to reply to that. "Of course the living must come first, sir. But wasn't it difficult to settle the planet without some sort of small scale ground transport?"

"We had steps, ramps, and ladders . . . and we had feet, young lady!" the scientist said. "And each transport ship had a shuttle fleet which was perfectly adequate for transporting people and supplies to various locations around the planet as necessary. Our current dwellings and devices are quite sensibly easily portable, and as a people we've always kept the complex machinery we require in our home environment to a minimum. Flitters were, during the chaos of the evacuation, simply a convenience that took up room we needed to transport the Ancestors to our new home. The Ancestors, after all, are sentient beings. They could hardly be left to the nonexistent mercies of the Khieevi."

He shook his head at the general stupidity of his fellow beings and allowed an attendant to lead him to his designated Ancestor.

"And afterwards," someone said in a small voice, "even though the council did get around to ordering flitters eventually, they've been on back-order for almost an entire ghaanye."

"I don't quite understand," Acorna said. "You mean it's been three years and you haven't even started replacing them?"

"It's all right, dear," Neeva told her. "You need not understand everything right away. There will be plenty of time to explain later."



"I'm just surprised that. . . never mind. Since the Ancestors wish to make such a sacrifice, please tell them I am deeply appreciative," Acorna said, dipping her own horn toward the unicorn. She turned back to Neeva and whispered to her in a quiet aside, "It was just a surprise that the Linyaari have no more mundane form of ground transport when they have such a glorious space fleet." She indicated the ships neatly docked nearby, so many fanciful eggs in a crate.

"The ships were necessarily brought along during the evacuation. We used everything flyable in our haste to leave our old home before the Khieevi came. The flitters were expendable, though, as were many of the technological devices we'd commonly used back on the old planet. We concentrated on saving the biological wealth of the home world. As is always the case in any forced migration, there were things we lost along the way," Neeva said.

"We have all we need to sustain us," the attendant replied, overhearing the quiet conversation. "The Ancestors in their wisdom indicate the path of truth, as usual. By their example, they show us how to use what is important to substitute for that which is less so."

"It takes time and credits to resupply a transplanted world," Melireenya said, as, after a deep bow to the unicorn blanketed in blue, she was helped by the creature's attendant to mount. "Fortunately, our space fleet was equal to the demands that we made of it, both during the evacuation and now. Good engineering and buying quality paid off when we were in dire circumstances."

"The ships weren't manufactured on your old home world?" Acorna asked, surprised.

"Only partially. They were assembled off-planet by manufacturers who cater to our trade and then brought to us to be customized to our specific needs and tastes by Linyaari technoartisans."

"I see. But why off-planet? I thought, with the LAANYE and the other devices I've seen, that you-we-were a highly advanced technological society with the infrastructure to support a great deal of industry."

"Having the capability isn't the point, child," said another of the Linyaari greeting committee.

The attendant of Acorna's Ancestor cleared his throat and said, "The Grandmother says that in the day of her own grandmother, the Ancestral Hosts did a great deal of manufacturing. It was very messy. It took up valuable grazing area and required either living workers who would much rather be elsewhere or else mechanical workers who themselves had to be manufactured."

Another attendant chimed in, as if reciting a litany. "It was a pernicious system, which devoured increasingly more grazing area as time passed. Fortunately, the Ancestral Hosts took advantage of space travel and relocated much of our manufacturing to other worlds where the beings didn't mind living without adequate grazing area. These days, even though we have a large community of techno-artisans who are superb designers and engineers, the vast majority of our manufacturing is done under Linyaari supervision on other worlds."

"Which is a very good thing," Melireenya said, "because we're always in need of grazing land."

A Linyaari woman wearing a long multicolored robe said, "The example of the Ancestral Hosts has served us throughout our history. Most of our people feel that living a life centered in plants and creatures is much more Linyaari than dealing with metals and tools."

"But our people don't mind if others spend their lives working with metals and tools," Neeva said wryly. "And some of the Linyaari find their calling in doing just that. Just as some of us live our lives in space or on other planets. Our people trade with other worlds for the items, materials, parts, or processes we need to have manufactured."

"What do we trade if we manufacture nothing ourselves?" Acorna wanted to know.

"Think about it, Khornya," Thariinye said. "What problems do industrial societies have that we can cure?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "Pollution, of course! Their manufacturing processes create toxins we can neutralize."

"But mindful of the example of the Ancestors," the attendant intoned, "our envoys, emissaries, and tradesmen do not disclose the true source of our power."

"Of course not," said another of the white-skinned Linyaari greeting committee. "Our trading partners do not realize the purification power lies in our horns. They think it is a mechanical process-centered in these little devices we take with us which they believe effectively dispel pollution and contamination on their worlds. Though they've also figured out the devices only work in the hands of Linyaari technicians."

"Thus, profiting from the examples of the Ancestors and the Ancestral Hosts, the vast majority of our people can live a pastoral lifestyle uncontaminated by the processes which would compromise those things we value," a golden-colored Linyaari concluded.

Neeva interjected, with a mixture of amusement and annoyance, "Fortunately for those who embrace only the agrarian lifestyle, our people are not of a hive mentality. While we sometimes communicate telepathically, that by no means indicates that we all agree, or think alike. There are many of us who find endless pastoralism stupifying, boring and tedious. Some Linyaari prefer to study science and physics, to enjoy the challenge and adventure of space travel and other more technological pursuits. We have many among our kind who are inventors, who design the devices, techniques, and programs we need, and adapt alien technologies to our purposes. We space-farers serve our people as envoys and traders to supply new markets for Linyaari skills and goods, and to bring back those things our people prefer not to manufacture for ourselves."

"And we are content that you do so, Vue()haanye, and even grateful for the many conveniences, improvements, and innovations you bring us, so long as you do not undertake to do your work here, or make us join you out there," said another white-skinned Linyaari with a slight shudder. "One journey in the blackness of space will serve most of us for a lifetime. And how you can live out most of your life inside a large machine, however beautifully decorated, is beyond me."

"I must admit," Khaari said, "after ghaanyi in a space ship, I do love coming home-to the agrarian life where one grazes, not from a hydroponics tank, but in a real garden or field with bugs and birds and unexpected treats among the wildflowers and weeds."

"There are not many birds here, honored lady, the pendot•n-een-uniformed attendant of the peridot-blanketed Ancestor Khaari rode said sadly "Great grandfather here sadly misses their singing."

"As do I," said the aagronei sadly. "As do I."

( Kisia Manjari's pout at losing the junk man and his wild cat as victims rapidly disappeared when her sandaled foot encountered a hard object on the ground. "Ouch!" she said, and bent down to pick up what she had thought was an offending rock, in order to fling it after Becker. Then she saw what it was.

"Two unicorn horns? That girl only had one. Daddy," she said to her father, a figure she alone could see. She saw him as she always saw him now, dressed in his finest ceremonial clothes with the blood just beginning to flow from the wound in his neck, the way it had flowed the day he died. "Where did the other one come from? The junk man said he gave me the only one. He said he had no more. He was lying, the low-born space scum."

"You must never let people get away with lying to us, Kisia. You should punish him," her father told her.

"Oh, yes. I will. Daddy, of course I will. I'll make him tell. But if these horns are real, which one is hers, do you think?"

"Kisia, I think this is a grave matter upon which you should consult your Uncle Edacki. He will be able to advise and help you."

"Yes, Daddy, I'll do just that," she said. She turned to her staff. The androids were quite accustomed to Kisia's seemingly solo conversations and paid no attention to them. "I want you to finish loading the container and then stop at the registration office and find out the junk man's name and where his ship is docked. We'll be wanting to pay him a call later. Right now I am going to visit my guardian. In the meantime, take these things to my personal hangar and have the workmen begin integrating the useful parts into my vessels. Await my instructions there."

"As you wish. Lady Kisia," said the latest model among them. Since most of Uncle Edacki's human servants were too slow and stupid to suit her, he had instead given her four of his androids for her staff. They were obedient, and were not always crying or bleeding like the human servants.

Count Edacki Ganoosh gave his ward a slow, appreciative smile as he handled the unicorn horns she had brought him. Kisia ManJan was psychotic, of course, but she was not as stupid as many people assumed. And perhaps the craziness would lessen, over time. After all, it was bound to be a shock to a young girl to see her father kill her mother and then himself after being denounced as an arch-criminal in front of the most respected citizens of Kezdet. He'd been there that night, and it had certainly shocked him. Since Kisia was a very self-centered girl, one might have assumed that discovering that she was adopted, and had been born the illegitimate daughter of a prostitute, would have been the main shock of that night to her, but once it turned out that her parents had died before the state could officially confiscate all their holdings, and that she, Kisia, was their only heir, that part of the horror seemed to have slipped her mind. The government had still confiscated most of the Manjari empire, but Count Edacki, as the girl's appointed guardian, had pleaded that the girl was not a criminal and should be left with certain holdings among the Baron's legitimate enterprises, enough to constitute a solid trust fund for her upkeep, education, and a hefty income for the remainder of her life. Count Edacki secretly suspected the girl also knew of certain secret holdings the government had not yet located. Large holdings, he believed. It was such a difficult job to gain the trust of an orphaned child. The count was thus pleased for more reasons than one that she had decided to show him the unicorn horns.

"Excellent, my dear Kisia. You've done well," he said, stroking the horns and wondering if it was true what the legends said of such horns having aphrodisiac properties.

"I don't need you to tell me that. Uncle," Kisia seethed. "I need you to help me find out why there are two and which one belongs to that girl who is responsible for the deaths of my parents and the theft of my property."

"You are impetuous, little one," he said, laying the horns aside in order to rise from the soothing bath of rose-colored gelatinous mud from the fragrant swamps of the Haidian rain forests. Having dismissed his valet at Kisia's insistence, the count was forced to wrap himself in his massage robe of the deepest purple plush. He then made himself comfortable on the bed-like couch that bracketed the gel pool. "While it is certainly possible that one of these may belong to Acoma, I believe word of her death would have reached us, and it has not. However, these horns might well belong to one of the others other kind."

"What others?" Kisia demanded.

"Why, the other unicorn people who came to fetch the girl a few months ago."

"I knew nothing of this," Kisia said.

"My dear, you were still distracted with grief. That and the legal affairs your late lamented father left concerning your legacy. I did not feel it was a proper time to trouble you with the news then. Oh, yes. Four others, I believe. It seems Acoma was not a goddess, as the little child laborers believed, but simply an alien creature who, being as highly evolved as they are all generally supposed to be, took it upon herself to correct what she considered our less fortunate social behaviors and economic practices."

"These horns could belong to them then, to those other unicorn aliens who came to get her?" Kisia asked. She could see a plan dawning in Uncle Edacki's eyes.

"Oh, yes. Or any others of her race, though they were unknown to our species before your little friend arrived."

"She's no friend of mine." Kisia spat.

"No, of course not. I was being facetious. The junk man will have to be questioned, of course. If there are two of these, there may be more, and he must tell us where he obtained them."

"I'll take care of him," Kisia said.

"Yes, my dear. But be careful. We don't want him to die before we've learned all that we need to. In the meantime, I think we really must sacrifice one of these to determine its properties and composition. I have heard miraculous things about Acoma. That her horn could heal and purify and even no, now I'm confusing rumor with ancient legend."

Kisia had seated herself on the edge of the couch beside his head and now she leaned over him and spoke into his ear. "Don't misunderstand us, Uncle. If there is a profit to be made from these, we want it, Daddy and me. But most of all we want that girl, and all of her family, and all of her friends dead, the same way she killed my family and chased away all of my friends."

The count smiled up at his ward. The truth was, Kisia had never had any friends at all, but it would do no good to mention that. Nor to point out that she had, in the same breath, referred to the late Baron Manjari, her adopted father, as if he was still alive, and yet also admitted that her whole family was dead.

Count Edacki patted Kisia's hand. "Have no fear, child. I think that if these horns prove as useful as they are said to be, Acorna and her kind will soon become hunted throughout the galaxy as any other creature with a built-in treasure would be hunted. There are already those who seek them. But with these"-he tapped one of the horns-"and the use of a bit of research and a few contacts used wisely, I believe we may contrive to be the first to find them."

Once the skinny girl disappeared, and her henchmen had loaded Becker's container with the goods she'd bought and left, RK crept out from under the table where he'd hidden, jumped up on its surface, and scattered the stones there as he made himself comfortable among them.

And that was where Becker found the cat later, entertaining the strokes and pats of the children of the stone vendor and idly batting one of the smaller and more precious stones back and forth between his paws. The rock glinted blue, green, aqua, then back to blue again as the cat rolled it from paw to paw. "Nice cat, mister," a boy of about five said. "What'll ya take for him?"

Becker cocked an eyebrow at him. "That's the second offer I've had today."

"Don't be dumb, Deeter," a girl of about seven -with the same red hair and freckles said. "You don't buy and sell cats like this. Can't you see he's a Makahomian Temple Cat? They're sacred, you know. Probably part of this man's religion. I bet he's a priest or something."

"Pope at least," Becker agreed. "Him, I mean. I just work for him."

The vendor himself was rooting around in a box and when he stood up this time, Becker finally remembered his name.

"Reamer! You're Rocky Reamer!" he said.

"You got it, buddy," the man said. It was clear he was the daddy of these kids. He had the same red hair and freckles. "And say, I thought I recognized you, too, but if you're the guy I'm thinking of, you look a little different. It's Joe Becker, isn't it?"

"Joe, Jonas, whatever," he said. "Yeah, that's me, Becker. You know what? I just remembered why those stones I was looking at earlier sounded so familiar. What were the names again? Giloglite, bairdite, and nadezdite?"

"That's it," Reamer said. "They're from new deposits the kids on Maganos found and named for the Lady's uncles. See, that one with the red and yellow in it that has a kinda plaid look to it? That's for Calum Baird, who's a Caledonian Celt like me. We had a geology class together once. The serpentine looking one is for that Irish partner of his, Declan Giloglie, and the flashy one for his nouveau richenw himself, the heir and current manager of the House of Harakamian, Rafik Nadezda."

Becker grinned. "That's what I thought. So Rafik's uncle made him heir, huh? I never could tell if he hated the old man or admired him."

"A little of both, I guess. You know those guys, then?"

"Yeah, we been chasing each other around the same big rocks for years. They were looking for the unoccupied ones and I was looking for the occupied or formerly occupied ones, so we didn't get in each other's way much."

RK had knocked the stone he was playing with off the table and was allowing himself to be distracted by a string dangled by Deeter.

Becker picked the stone up from the ground. "And what did you call this one?"

"That's acornite."

"Where's it from? A planet where all the plant life is also mineral? You maybe grow already petrified oak trees from it?"

Reamer's face was blank for a second, and then he grinned and chuckled.

"No, silly," the little girl said. "Don't you know anything? It's named for the Lady, of course!"

"I thought her name was Epona ..." Becker said. "If it's the same one, I mean. I was told that was who was on Maganos, anyway, and you said that's where Gil and Calum and Rafik are these days."

The little girl looked unsure of her information at this point and turned to her dad, who said, "Nah, that's one of what you might call her titles. See, she and old man Li-he died this year, did you know? "

"Delszaki Li died? Shards, I thought he was immortal in spite of the wheelchair."

"Nope, he finally died. Turned out he was head of the Liberation Movement that saved Kezdet. Li had already done some of the groundwork for the revolution, but nothing really got moving until Gil and his buddies brought the Lady down here. She didn't know much about politics, but she knew for sure she didn't like to see kids being sold into slavery. Took her about a year to bring down the houses and the Piper and start up the education and mining center on Maganos. Of course, it helped that she also forged an alliance between the houses of Harakamian and Li so she had almost unlimited money behind her. Anyway, the kids got real superstitious about her and some of them thought she was some kind of goddess, depending on the religions they'd had where they'd come from. So they call her Epona, Lady Lucia, or the Lady of the Light, but her name's really Lady Acorna Harakamian-Li."

"Maybe I'll go look up my old buddies then," Becker said. "I'd like to meet this lady. I was a slave when I was a kid. If it hadn't been for my adopted dad, I'd probably be dead now."

Reamer rubbed the red heads of his offspring. "I'll tell you what, buddy, it sure makes me feel better knowing those places have been shut down. In case anything happens to me, I don't have to worry about my kids getting sent to the mines or some godawful thing."

Becker thought for a minute, then pulled out the collection bag, carefully extracted one of the opalescent objects, and kept it concealed in the palm of his hand except to open the hand a little to let Reamer have a look. "While I'm at it, I think I just made a big mistake letting some of this go to a customer. It didn't come from Maganos, but I've never seen anything like it anywhere. Do you know what it might be?"

"Ho-oh-oly hematite!" Reamer said, touching the thing as if afraid it would burn him. "Where did you get that, Becker?" His voice was not very friendly this time, and his blue eyes had gone ice cold. "Kids, I want you to leave the cat alone and go get yourselves some candy," he said, dropping a credit in each hand.

"But, Dad ..."

"Scat!"

They ran off and RK emitted a mournful and, for him, curiously resigned mew, watching his new friends disappear into the crowd.

"That's why you look different. You were missing an ear the last time I saw you!" Rocky said. It was an accusation.

"What about it?"

"People say the Lady's horn can heal. Then you turn up with one like it and your ear fixed, so what am I supposed to think?"

"Keep it down, will you? Jeez! I found it, I tell you. Does this lady of yours control everything? Wipes out child labor, closes the pleasure houses, and now you're about to kill me because she has a horn like mine? So what? Maybe she found hers the same place I did."

"I don't think so," Reamer said coldly.

"No? Why not? She might have."

"No way. Hers is growing from the middle of her forehead. At least it was, the last time anybody I know saw her."

The crew of the Baiakiire and the dignitaries among the greeting committee rode the Ancestors into Kubiilikhan with as much pomp and circumstance as the Ancestors could give them. Acorna feared that if dignity was what the Ancestors wished to impart by having others ride them, in her case it was rather a lost cause. Her long legs dangled below the belly of the Ancestor she rode, so that her feet were almost as low as the unicorn's cloven hooves.

Riding the Ancestors certainly didn't make the trip quicker, either. It took almost an hour to ride the two or three miles between the spaceport and the town, which at first seemed to be a tent city of massive gem-hued, gold-trimmed, tasseled pavilions the size of the circus tents Acorna had seen pictured on vids and in the books at Uncle Hafiz's. Walking would have been much quicker. The ki-lin of legend were supposed to be fleet of foot. If so, you couldn't tell it by the Ancestors, who kept their pace to a slow, deliberate strut.

Maybe it's because they are so ancient, Acorna thought, and immediately felt an impression of reprimand at the notion.

(We're as spry as we ever were, impudent youngling, and can beat you in a race any time, any place, just try us.)

Oops. She was sure the thought hadn't been loud or deliberately sent, and no one else seemed to have picked up on it, but the Ancestor she was riding rolled a rather challenging eye back in her direction, and snorted.

The Ancestor's attendant noticed the eye rolling. He stepped away from his charge for a pace, stroked the Ancestor's nose, and cast a reproachful glance at Acorna.

By that time their party arrived at the first structures in the Linyaari settlement. She supposed, since the spaceport was nearby and they were being taken to see the vlizaar, this place must be the main city on the planet, but it was not of any great size.

The circus-tent-like buildings of the city were clustered around an even larger central circus tent, where each section sprouted another tent-like tower from its center. Actually, these dwellings were not so much like tents as like the pavilions she had seen depicted in films of ancient Earth medieval encampments. Each was, like the attendants' and Ancestors' costumes, decorated in a different gaudy hue, and liberally trimmed with loops, swirls, swags, fringe, and tassels of contrasting metal or fabric or rope.

These pavilions had no windows of the sort Acorna was used to, but each section of each tent had a large arched doorway open to the outdoors and several had whole wall sections removed.

"Behold Kubiilikhan, our principal city, honored lady," the attendant said.

"It's very colorful," Acorna said politely. And tried to think the same thing, though the attendant frowned a bit so some of her concerns were clearly leaking through her guard. "But you must suffer greatly from the dampness during the rains."

Maati, who had fallen back from her trot at the head of the procession, laughed. "No, wait till you dismount. Excuse me, Great-grandmother, but she's got to see this!" the girl said with an affectionate but not particularly reverent pat on the nose to the unicorn. The Ancestor snorted, but rather fondly, Acorna thought, very much in the same way a tolerant grandparent might act toward a well-loved but rambunctious child.

Acorna dismounted with a horn dip to the unicorn, who ignored her. She followed Maati, who was now stroking the silken-appearing wall of the large purple pavilion. "Feel!" Maati commanded.

Acorna reached out and touched the fabric. Surprisingly, she found it hard and unyielding. Rapping on it with the backs of her fingers, she heard a metallic ting. "It's solid?" she asked.

"Yes, and you can open the pores so the air comes through nicely-but not the wet."

"And you don't get chilly during the cold season -you do have a cold season?"



"Oh, sure, outdoors when we're grazing. But then we can just go inside, close the flaps, and adjust the pores so that they heat the air as it comes inside. Very scientific," she said, as if she hoped that it being scientific would please Acorna.

"It certainly is," Acorna agreed.

Neeva beckoned her into the tent. "Come along, Khornya. Liriili is not a particularly patient person."

Acorna followed her, with Melireenya and Khaari close behind. Maati scrambled to get ahead of Neeva and while Acorna's eyes were still adjusting to the dimmer light inside, she heard Maati say, "Grand Viizaar Liriili, presenting Vi^e()haanye Feriili Neeva, the crew of the spacecraft Balaklire, and Khornya, sister-child to VifeDhaanye Neeva and daughter to the late Vaanye and Feriila of honored memory."

Viizaar Liriili was, Acorna saw, seated at a desk. Like the other space-farers, she was pale skinned and silver maned, and her eyes, when they met Acorna's, were deep pewter-gray. Her golden horn was twined with glittering silver thread and she wore a gown cut to compliment her rather sturdy figure in a fabric that matched the thread. Her mane was cropped short around her face and neck and her face was a bit longer than that of any of the other Linyaari. In fact, she rather resembled the Ancestors.

Thariinye's unguarded thought came to Acorna, (What a beauty!)

The Viizaar's eyes twinkled as they rested upon the handsome young male for a moment, and then she turned her attention to business. "Vi^e()haanye Neeva, dear Melireenya, Khaari, my child, Thariinye, we are all so delighted at your return especially in view of the terrible dangers you faced to warn others. And most of all, Khornya, we are thrilled that you have finally rejoined us."

"I am thrilled to be here," Acorna assured her. "You will of course be joining us at the reception this evening, Viizaar Liriili?" Neeva inquired.

Liriili smiled, "I will be there, certainly, Vife^haanye Neeva. You will be happy to know your instructions were all implemented and everything is in readiness. Unfortunately, neither you nor your core crew members with the exception of Thariinye will be there, I'm afraid. As you were disembarking, I received an urgent message from one of our trading missions. I must discuss this with you privately and then you must leave again, as soon as you have had time to refuel."

"But my lifemate is expecting me!" Khaari cried. "He is on that trading mission, Khaari," Liriili told her.

"That is one reason I wish the Baiakiire to undertake this particular task."

"But what about Khornya?" Neeva asked.

"Why, she will stay here, of course, and learn to know her people and attend the fete as you have planned. While she will sorely miss your guidance, we will try in your absence to make sure that she is not lonely and learns what is needful for her to know."

"Excuse me, Vii-zaar Liriili-" Acorna interrupted as politely as possible. She did not much care for being discussed as if she was not there.

"Yes, Khornya?"

"It's just that-well, even though I was very much looking forward to doing these social events with my aunt and friends, I really would rather not attend them by myself. Is it possible to postpone the reception so that I could accompany them on their mission?"

Liriili laughed. "My dear Khornya, you will hardly be by yourself! I shall be there, and Thariinye, and most of the cream of Kubiilikhan society including many young males most eager to make your acquaintance!"

"Yes, ma'am, but I'd rather be with my aunt. Perhaps I can be useful on the mission."

"You're very young and have a great deal to learn," Liriili said as if that settled the matter.

"Khornya is a very capable young lady, Liriili," Neeva told the viihaar, and projected images of some of Acorna's adventures.

"I'm sure she is, VLte<)haanye Neeva," Liriili said, then turning to Acorna, repeated, "I'm sure you are, my dear, but you are not yet versed in our ways sufficiently to undertake a mission of the delicacy this one requires. And there will probably not be enough room for you on the return trip. Or for Thariinye, which is why we are not sending him. So you young ones may as well remain here and enjoy yourselves. The reception can hardly be postponed. Everyone has been working ever so hard preparing it and many, many people will be most disappointed if you are not there. Run along with Maati now. There's a good girl."

"Excuse my persistence, Vihaar, but what is this mission?" Acorna pressed her case. "Maybe I could help. I have good friends in many high places."

The vihaar gave her an exaggeratedly patient look. "That may be so, Khornya. But whoever you know and whatever you have done before is irrelevant to this mission, which I cannot discuss with you because you are not fully conversant with thought transference, and I am reliably informed that during unguarded moments your every fleeting notion is broadcast to the whole of the planet; information could be disclosed that I have no wish to disseminate at this time. In your aunt's absence, Thariinye can continue your tutoring in our communication forms and customs. Now go please go with Maati and freshen up. There is not much time before your shipmates must leave, and I must brief them. In private."

"Yes, ma'am," Acorna said, feeling more like a schoolgirl than she ever had done when she was of the age to have been one.

"Excuse me, Liriili," Neeva said, dropping the title in her annoyance. "I would like to take leave of my niece before we are sent back into space, if you can wait a few more moments before briefing us. I had to wait three and a half gkaanyi to find her and who knows how long it will be before I see her again?"

"Very well, but be brief, please. We have much to discuss," Liriili said, and turned her attention to the others.

Leading Acorna outside the pavilion, Neeva touched horns with her and Acorna, impulsively, hugged her aunt as if she never wished to let her go, which indeed she did not.

Neeva's eyes were full of tears when they stood at arm's length again. "Oh, that insufferable woman!" she said. "This had better be a truly urgent mission or I am going to have her before the Council!"

"You think she'd send you out again without a good reason?" Acorna asked. "When you've been away so long?" She frowned. "I thought if everyone could read each other's thoughts and feelings, they would be kinder."

"We are, but there are still jealousies and insecurities and all of the other baggage that goes with being sentient. And Liriili has more than her share of those emotions. She isn't really a bad person, and she can only do just so much without the sayso of the Council, but she has no love for our family. While I doubt she'd try to actively harm you, don't count on her for help either. Just stay out other way until we return, if you can."

"I'll do my best, Neeva. But return soon, please?" Neeva ran her fingers down her niece's face and smiled. "We'll do our best, youngling. You know we will. Now you go with Maati to my pavilion and get ready for the party tonight. I've ordered some things sent over for you to try on. I wish I could be there to see the faces of the young males when they set eyes on you!"

"Farewell, mother's-sister, safe journey and quick return."

"Farewell, sister-child, till we meet again."

"Let's go through the courtyard," Maati said, taking Acorna's hand and pulling her away from the pavilion. "I always go that way when I can."

"Why-oh, I see," Acorna said, as the child stepped onto the path paved with several sets of the Singing Stones of Skarness, similar to the ones Uncle Hafiz had at his compound on Laboue.

"Yeah, look," Maati commanded her, and proceeded to play hopscotch-and a little tune-across the courtyard.

Acorna smiled, applauded, and followed suit with one of the tunes she used to hopscotch on Uncle Hafiz's stones. She found it as hard now as she had then to stay unhappy when the stones sang.

Maati led the way to a pavilion at the far side of the town. "This is the wife()haanye's home. Ooooooh, look at the dresses!"

Walking into the pavilion was like walking into a particularly well stocked closet. Gowns of every color, cut, and description lay and hung on every possible surface and protuberance. Also in abundance were gleaming gemstones and little pointy objects, like hats, the size and shape of her horn. These were decorated variously with gems, with flowers, with pompoms, with ribbons, and gilt threads.

"Pom-poms?" Acorna asked.

Maati giggled. "They're all the rage at the moment especially among the girls of color who are entering society." She stuck one on her own slightly smaller horn. The effect, with her dark skin and mottled hair, of the yellow and pink pom-poms, was certainly festive and not quite as clown-like as Acorna had supposed.

"Why do people decorate their horns?"

"Well, it's not just decoration. The covers also mute telepathy to some extent," Maati said. "It's for flirting, too. I mean, this way if a girl likes a boy, she doesn't have to show it right away and neither does he. Before anybody can read anybody else's mind, they can kind of see how the person they like is acting first, or if there's anybody else interesting."

"I see," Acorna said. "When is the party?"

Maati shrugged. "It starts at moonrise, in about three hours."

"I'd better get busy then," Acorna said. All of the gowns were far too elaborately decorated for her taste, with layers and layers of different colored skirts, and frills, lace, ruffles, bows, and flowers completely covering whole bodices or skirts. Fortunately, life in a society where women were normally much shorter than she, and the occasional necessity of disguising her horn with an elaborate costume, had taught Acorna to be an excellent seamstress herself. She narrowed her eyes to blur the bewildering details of the gowns so that she could get some idea of their background color. Turning slowly, she spotted a lovely soft mauve-rose brocade fabric and reached for it. It was the undergown of a dress with a rainbow assortment of skirts that stuck out like tutus from the hipline to the ankle.

Without the tutus the rosy underdress was slightly too sheer so she looked around again until she saw that one of the flowing veil-like overskirts of another gown was a beautiful lilac color that complemented both her own complexion and the color of the undergown. That would do.

When she had bathed and dried her hair, she slipped into the rose-mauve dress and pulled the length of lilac fabric under one arm and joined it at the opposite shoulder, pinning it, after some deliberation, with a stunning brooch of pale amethysts and rhodolite garnets set in silver. The brooch had earrings that matched.

She was able to locate lilac slippers in the mass of shoes that was spread everywhere dresses and jewels were not.

"Horn?" Maati reminded her.

"Oh, yes," Acorna said, picking up the lilac horn cover that matched the outer skirt. "This means no one else can read my thoughts, then?"

"Well, not clearly anyway. You know, so if you think something-well, about reproduction, you know, the other person" Acorna giggled at the younger girl's attempt to sound adult while discussing the mating rituals of which she was not yet a part. "I think I get the idea. I will try not to broadcast so loudly I overpower the muting effect of the horn cover." She looked at the cover again. "But this spiral of wisteria has to go."

"Maybe just a few at the base of your horn?" Maati suggested, looking dismayed to see the pom-poms and wads of the purple flower Acorna called wisteria falling to the floor.

"Yes, that's nice. Thanks."

"The decorations are so pretty," she said, sadly, picking up the culled flowers.

Acorna was firm. "Less is more," she said.

Maati looked baffled by the idea.

No sooner had Acorna dressed than a great herd of seamstresses, jewelers, and cobblers descended upon the pavilion to carry the excess merchandise away.

"We'll deliver daytime ensembles for your approval tomorrow morning, Khornya."

"Oh, please don't bother," she said. "If Maati will show me where your workplaces are, I would love to see where you make these pretty things."

She had the horn cover firmly in place then and could afford a diplomatic fib. The creators of the two dresses she had altered to make her gown tried to hide their frowns but a couple of the others were eyeing her with a speculative expression.

As the last of the clothiers departed with their wares, uncovering Neeva's furnishings and returning the pavilion to some semblance of a dwelling, Thariinye arrived.

"I'm sorry, Khornya," he apologized-with some effort-aloud. "I thought you would be dressed by now."

"Oh, but I am dressed!" she said, twirling. "Like it?" He didn't say anything for a moment, then realized, with an expression of relief, that she was wearing her horn-hat, as she thought of the ornamental shields. He gave her a huge false grin and nodded so hard she thought he'd shake his own horn off. He was a budding diplomat, after all. In the mainstream of Linyaari culture there would be little opportunity to lie and he was unaccustomed to the practice. She supposed she should give him credit for knowing when a fib was called for.

He quickly donned a horn-hat that coordinated with his own ensemble. It had a three-dimensional stylized red fabric bird perched on the tip to match the birds quilted, stuffed and embroidered on his flowing waistcoat, the cummerbund at his waist, and perched on each shoulder like epaulets, and delicately poised upon an oversize codpiece.

Acorna politely broke into a fit of coughing to disguise the portion of her reaction not softened by the horn-hat. Linyaari fashion was going to take some getting used to. Strange that in her travels around the galaxy she had never for a moment entertained an ethnocentric attitude, had never even considered that the clothing or customs of others might be ridiculous. She supposed she felt more strongly about the Linyaari customs because they were, after all, her customs and she was supposed to adhere to them. One of her disguises as a Didi would have fit right in but her own natural style definitely did not.

"I saw the crew off on the new mission," Thariinye said. Acorna was glad his tone was grave. It helped her keep a straight face. She heard just a hint of censure in his tone, as if she should have been there to say goodbye, too. But surely he had heard her being ordered by the vi'maar to ready herself for this occasion?

They did not speak as they crossed the Singing Stones again, enjoying the music instead, as it blended harmoniously with the Linyaari music emanating from a pavilion even larger than the one the vlizcmr occupied. This one had bundles of flowers decorating it on the outside, and streamers of ribbon added to the gold tassels. People were flocking into it-or perhaps a better expression was that bouquets of people were gathering themselves into the pavilion and onto the dance floor spreading all around it like a carousel containing only unicorn people.

Ridiculous as the dresses and men's clothing looked individually, collectively they were rather breathtaking, like a field of multihued blossoms, studded with brilliant stones and even ribbon that looked amazingly like flowing water.

Several of the men wore bird costumes such as Thariinye's, while others wore designs depicting other animals, or elements such as fire and water. One or two had embroidery resembling the fleet of starships. A few had celestial themes to their clothing. The total effect was far more attractive than Acorna would have imagined.

To her surprise, the huge tent was used not for dancing, but for the reception line and dining. Her gaze of the afternoon had worn off, and terraces and tiers of all sorts of vegetation growing right from the soil inside the pavilion looked delectable. The pavilion had a large central panel which opened to capture sunlight. It was now raised, to admit the fresh breezes and an excellent view of the heavens that so recently had been Acorna's home.

"Ah, Khornya, Thariinye," the viihaar said. "Please stand next to me to greet your guests. My aide will introduce you to each."

Thariinye saved them both by saying, "Certainly, Vuhaar Liriili, but if we may have a moment to dine beforehand? I haven't-that is, neither Khornya nor I have eaten since landing and the journey was quite long."

The viihaar beamed up at him again. "Of course, dear boy. But I'm afraid the line to meet Khornya is already quite long. Why don't you harvest some of the most succulent foods and bring them to her to sample?"

Thariinye demurred charmingly. "I'd be happy to, ma'am, except that Khornya's peculiar upbringing makes it impossible for me to guess what her tastes might be."

The viihaar glanced pointedly at Acorna's gown. "I do see what you mean. Very well then, but return to us quickly. The line is getting longer."

Following the viihaar's hand, which waved at a line that stretched out beyond the pavilion and across the dance floor, Acorna saw that the viihaar was not overstating her case.

"Just a little snack then," Acorna said placatingly. But the viihaar didn't acknowledge her remark.

The pavilion was arranged more beautifully than one of Hafiz's gardens, she saw as she followed Thariinye through the crowd, which was partaking only lightly of the gorgeous flowers and leafy greenery sprouting and blooming from floor to ceiling on cleverly designed terraced platforms, with little walkways between levels like paths up a hillside. A fountain in the center of the structure splashed and sparkled and watered some particularly succulent-looking reeds and grasses. Thariinye need not have worried about Acorna's tastes. She loved everything. Her native food at least was very much to her liking.

After sampling a few of the plants on the lower level, however, and gathering a few to munch on while greeting the long line, she said to Thariinye, "I suppose we'd better return now, then."

"No hurry," he said casually. "Its just a formality anyway. The viizaar realizes that you and I are meant to be lifemates and the others are only here to make the process appear to be fair."

Acorna looked up at him, blinked several times, and said the first thing that came to mind, the sort of thing Delszaki Li used to say when faced with something preposterous. "Really? How very interesting." Suddenly, returning to the line seemed very attractive indeed.

"The other guests . . . ?" she said, with a lifted eyebrow, and a wave back to the reception line. "We wouldn't want them to think us inconsiderate."

"Yes, of course-oh, wait! Is that rampion? I wonder -where they got that! I don't think it was native to the old planet. Want to try something really wonderful?"

"Perhaps later," she said, moving toward the line. "Suit yourself," he said. "You go on ahead. Everyone knows me already. It's you they want to meet."

Acorna was amused and annoyed at the same time. How quickly the young male's priorities could change! She slipped back into the receiving line, between the viizaar, who was reluctantly deep in conversation with the oldest Linyaari Acorna had seen so far. The woman's face was actually lined and her neck and jowls sagged slightly. Acorna found that sign of mortality oddly comforting among so many smooth and flawless faces. The aide-a white and silver veteran of space like herself, the viizaar, and Grandam-acknowledged her return her with relief.

"Grandam Naadiina has been holding up the line while you were gone. The rest of the people are starving," the aide whispered. The male before her was as young or younger than she was, she could see, as his skin was golden and his hair a pale cream. "Now then, Khornya, this is the scion of Clan Rortuffle," he said, from memory, not from reading a list. "Hiirye, meet Khornya."

Acorna tried her best to be gracious to Hiirye and gave him a big smile. He stepped back, flustered, and did not accept her hand. Instead, he pulled the aide aside and whispered urgently to him, then retreated. Several other males dropped from the line as well, following him.

Acorna wished again she could read minds better. "What was the matter with him?" she asked the aide, but the aide had turned to the viizaar and begun a frantic whispered consultation with her. Meanwhile, the Grandam Naadiina turned back to till the place in line vacated by young Hiirye. Acorna saw the youth, rather than continuing on to eat, had been going down the line, talking excitedly to other people. Each person he spoke to abruptly left the party.

"Really, child," Grandam said. "These affairs Liriili insists upon foisting on us are tiresome, but did you really need to become so hostile?"

"Hostile?" Acorna asked.

"You bared your teeth at that boy in an extremely aggressive fashion. I'm sure he mistook you for one of those ..." Grandam looked around to make sure no one else was eavesdropping, then put her lips close to Acorna's ear and said, "Khieevi. You scared the living daylights out of the lad."

"Oh, dear!" Acorna remembered now the thought patterns she had heard from her aunt and shipmates about the peculiar custom humans had of baring their teeth. They understood, because of their contact with her people, that an open smile was a gesture of good will. But this was not yet known to the rest of the Linyaari. If only Thariinye's appetite had not gotten the best of him, he could have explained. His smile and social lie earlier about her dress showed, or so she had thought at the time, his willingness to try to adapt customs familiar to her in order to put her at ease. Now she wondered. Perhaps he had been actually baring his teeth in the Linyaari sense of the gesture after all?

Whatever could she do to correct the appalling impression she seemed to be making?

"Calm yourself, girl, you look as if you're about to fly apart," the grandam advised.

"But what will they think of me?"

Grandam snorted. "No less than you should think of them, particularly Liriili, dragging you out to this thing before you've had time to rest from your journey and have a bite to eat. And before you've been properly introduced to your new home and had a chance to meet people in the normal way. It was unforgivable, her sending Neeva and the others away and leaving you alone among strangers except for that uppity young stud, Thariinye." She snorted. "These young ones are making such a fuss over culture, but culture begins with kindness. I was just saying so to Liriili when you bared your teeth at that young ass. Not his fault, of course, but I daresay in your position I would have done the same."

"Oh, but you see, I wasn't trying to bare my teeth at all-I mean, I did bare my teeth, but where I come from, among the people I grew up with, one shows one's teeth to be friendly, happy-it's an expression of greeting and cordiality, not at all one of hostility. I have been told, actually, that it isn't viewed the same way among your-our-people, but I got a bit flustered and ..."

"There, there, child. You needn't explain to me."

She firmly took Acorna by the elbow and led her to the highest of the tiers where the delicious foods grew. In a long and rather shrill Linyaari utterance that sounded eerily like "Hiiire me!" Grandam Naadiina stopped the music, the dancers, the talking, and drew all stares to herself and Acorna.

Acorna noticed, meanwhile, that both viizaar and her aide had left the pavilion hurriedly, looking worried. She suddenly had the feeling that the crowd's reaction had more to do with Liriili's exit than her social grace.



"My children, you have all gathered here to meet our long lost kinswoman, Khornya, daughter of the late lamented Feriila, and Vaanye. She only just this afternoon, as many of you know because you were there, arrived on the planet from a journey of many months. Her closest relative and only acquaintances among us had to ship out immediately on another mission, leaving the child here among us. Yes, her accent is strange and her dress is a bit of the old fashion instead of the new, and because she was not properly instructed, she greeted a prospective lifemate with an expression interpreted differently by the culture from which she comes than it is in our own, but she is a good girl, I can tell, a nice girl, and she'll be glad to meet any of you later on when she's had a proper chance to rest, collect her thoughts, find her way around, and get a decent meal or two under her belt."

As Grandam spoke those words, many people stopped dancing. Rather than paying attention to their elder, they were looking toward the flap of the pavilion where Liriili had exited as if they were waiting for something to happen. Something far more important to them than Grandam's slap on their collective wrists. They were waiting, Acorna thought, for Liriili to return and explain what business had compelled her to leave.

Kisia, precious, you look fatigued," Uncle Edacki said.

"I confess that horrible junk man and his nasty beast upset me, Uncle. He cheated me-told me he was selling everything but kept the cat and more of the horns he lied about having. You just can't trust anyone these days."

"No, indeed, pet. It's a hard cruel world and it distresses me that you've had to learn that so young in life. But fortunately, I am here to protect you and see to it that you don't wear yourself out. Now then, if you want the junk man, it's a simple matter of sending your droids over to collect him and the cat and checking his computer banks for information about how he acquired the horns. No need for you to go yourself."

"I can be there when he's questioned though, can't I, Uncle? And have the nasty cat to play with?"

Whatever you wish, dearest. But you'll want to be at your best so run along now and let Uncle Edacki handle it." I'm sure you know best. "I'll need the horns, dear one."

She got that sly, calculating look that reminded him so other, unlamented father. "I can let you have one, I suppose. I'll keep the other." She handed him the more broken of the two.

"Here, you take this one. I think this one I have is probably hers."

He sighed and smiled as if it didn't matter that he indulged her this time. "One will do nicely, thank you, Kisia. Now off you go. Leave it to me."

When she had gone he sprang into action, after his own fashion. The first thing he did was call her droids away from the hangar where they had been unloading her cargo.

"KEN637, your mistress tells me you were instructed to check on the whereabouts of a craft belonging to a certain dealer in salvaged goods?"

"It is docked at outer bay four niner eight, sir," the droid replied.

"Very well. I would like for you and your friends to call upon the gentleman at his ship and invite him to my warehouse, the one on Todo Street, number nineteen?"

"I know the one, sir."

"Yes, and the animal, too. But first, have him show you around his computer banks. And if he is not there when you arrive, access them yourself. Your mistress wishes to know where he obtained the horn he gave her."

"Certainly, sir. Suggested force level, sir?" Unlike the androids in early science fiction epics, those employed by Edacki Ganoosh's various corporate enterprises had no programming prohibiting them from harming human beings.

"Maximum without damaging any of the components."

"Yes, sir."

With the tip of his finger, Ganoosh then accessed the considerable data banks on the unicorn girl and her associates.

Many of these files had been compiled by Kisia's late father, the baron.

He found a number of useful connections. The first name he noticed was that of General Ikwaskwan, the leader of the Kilumbemba mercenaries, a group he himself had employed from time to time. The reason that name particularly caught his attention was that he had been intending to contact the general for some time on another matter.

It would be late in the day in the Kilumbemba Empire, but the general was a man of business and if he was presently unemployed, the man would no doubt be thrilled to hear from Ganoosh. The comscreen showed nothing but static for a few moments and then, in a very distracted tone, from off screen, Ganoosh heard Ikwaskwan's voice saying, "Nadhari, by the Gods, woman, this is business. Untie me before you accept incoming calls."

"Certainly, Ikky," a woman's deep and sultry voice purred. "And if I do, I assume I have your promise?"

"Yes, mistress. Never again shall I sleep when you have rubbed my back with oils before I do likewise unto you."

"Very good then." There was the sound of a kiss. "I know it's difficult, Ikky, after all these years of rape and pillage, for you to remember that we women have our needs, too, and in an alliance such as ours, it is imperative that you meet them graciously. There, now, I return your dignity."

"Yes, my ferocious flower." The sound of another, more prolonged kiss. Very prolonged. Ganoosh cleared his throat.

"Ah! Nadhari, it is Count Edacki Ganoosh. Count, you have met my second in command. Colonel Nadhari Kando?"

"I have," Ganoosh said. "Though we were not formally introduced." The woman had been glowering menacingly by the side of Delszaki Li when they had met, looking as if she would cheerfully bite off the head of anyone who so much as frowned pensively in the direction of her employer. Now, she stood naked, obviously female but extremely well muscled, behind Ikwaskwan. Ganoosh was as unmoved sexually by the sight of her as he would have been looking at any other dangerous predator. She regarded him with a long stare that made him feel as if he were the one who was undressed, or perhaps dressed in the hunting or culinary sense, then slowly she shrugged her lithe muscles into a dressing gown patterned with glittering fireworks.

"Hmm," she said, in his direction, then muttered to Ikwaskwan, "The officers will be waiting for their briefing" and turned and left.

Ikwaskwan gave Ganoosh a rather silly grin and winked and shrugged as if to say, "Women."

Ganoosh chuckled far more indulgently than he felt. Even hardened mercenary killers weren't of the same caliber these days.

"General, I'll come right to the point. As you know, our government here on Maganos has undergone a great purge of corruption and through the good works of Delszaki Li and his ward, we are finally free of the tragedy of child slavery."

"I've been meaning to send my congratulations for some time, Count," the general said dryly, "but I haven't found just the right card to express my joy."

"Now, now, no need to be bitter just because your people are now deprived of the income they received for delivering war orphans to our facilities from time to time. You surely must realize that while this dreadful injustice has cleansed us of moral turpitude, it has also created a great hole in the labor force of the planet's economy."

"I had understood you were going to mechanize?"

"Hideously expensive, as you know. It occurred to some of us-me, for instance-that rather than giving machines skilled jobs that can be done less expensively by human beings, we should perhaps find another labor pool. Now, you have occasion from time to time to fight in wars where one side or the other is totally devastated."

"When my troops are involved, that is inevitably the case, the general said.

"Rather than execute the wounded or allow the survivors, if any, to either be butchered or starved, why not bring them to us? We could reeducate them into useful professions. We'd be saving lives, really, and making the universe a better place. NO one could object to that."

"Humph," the general said, stroking his whiskers with the big knuckles. "The only problem with that is it would • ^ certain amount of restraint and gentleness on behalf req troops. Usually by the time we finish with the losing side, We not in any shape to work for themselves or anyone I "

"This brings me to another issue. A question really. I have heard rumors-perhaps myths-of the healing power demonstrated by the unicorn girl who was the ward of the late Mr. Li."

"She was also the ward, remember, of Hafiz Harakamian," the general said. "The Lady Acorna is not a being to be trifled with, as I know from recent experience."

"Realty? Tell me about it, do."

"She is not just any girl, for one thing. She's a member of a race of unicorn people. A very sophisticated people no one on this side of the universe had heard of before, but who apparently have been making contact with other worlds for some time. My troops formed an alliance with Li and Harakamian against an old enemy of these Linyaari, as they were called, and liberated a planet called Rushima. Afterward-I could hardly believe it myself-Lady Acorna and the others of her species healed all of the wounds as if they had never occurred. I heard that a time or two she has revived the dead, though I didn't personally witness those events. Not only that, but some young renegades aboard a Starfarer's ship were heard to say that she had purified poisoned air aboard their ship, and the people of Rushima claim she gave them a magical device to purify tainted water that had covered their world. Purified the whole world's water supply. I hear it's the horn that does it."

Ganoosh was fairly purring to himself. "How wonderful! How marvelous! Why, just think, if you had a Linyaari medic among you, or someone who possessed the power of their horns, you could instantly heal your wounded and send the same People back into battle after battle. Your troops would be Poetically immortal."

Hmrrmm, yes . . . and so would these poor souls you would bring to me for reeducation. Frankly, some of the jobs that used to employ children will be a bit riskier for adults. There could be increased on-the-job injuries. How wonderful again, if we were to have such healing power to keep our workers whole and productive."

"As far as I know, Lady Acorna's people don't hire out for such things though, Count. I think you're barking up the wrong tree there."

"Perhaps no one has made them the right offer?" "They're," the general spat, "pacifists. Wouldn't even fight to save their own planet from these big bug things we destroyed to liberate Rushima. They're plenty scared of them though."

"Hmmm-do these bug creatures have any allies, I wonder?"

"I'm told the only use they have for allies is at meal times." "And perhaps it wouldn't be necessary to have an actual member of this alien race to which the girl belongs to work the wonders. If the power is all in the horn, all one would need is the horn."

"Yeah, but where would you get one of those?" Ganoosh smiled. "I'm a resourceful man. And I do appreciate our little chat, General. Think about what I've said. See if you can come up with a proposal, a bid, for a solution to these little problems. And I will continue to research this matter."

"I'll do that, Count. But-uh-please, if you don't mind, utilize the code we set up for the last job I did for you after this. Nadhari is rather softhearted and sentimental about her former alliances. I wouldn't want to upset her "

"I understand perfectly. General. Good day, and er, victory and glory to your armies."

"The same to you. Count."

Hafiz Harakamian, eh? There was an interesting footnote or two on his dealings in Manjari's files. For instance, there was the first wife, whose death Manjari had helped fake when the lady, unfulfilled by her marriage to her inattentive and unappreciative spouse, had wished to return to the spotlight she had only begun to occupy in the recreational sex industry that was one of the pillars of Manjari's empire. That wife, as her beauty waned, had retired into a profitable position as Didi of a house of pleasure. She was a particular favorite of Manjari as she had also divulged a great deal of information about her former spouse and his enterprises, associates, and most helpfully, the layout and security system of his compound on Laboue.

The poor girl had been languishing in prison with the other Didis at the behest of her former husband's ward. Ganoosh clicked his tongue. How sad. How very sad. Fortunately, he, Count Edacki Ganoosh, would be able to effect a happy ending. He lay back on his couch, his hands steepled over his abdomen and his face wearing a smile of satisfaction. Family reunions were so touching. He must arrange for one between this poor, ill-rewarded servant and her bereaved husband, who, unfortunately for the lady, had recently remarried.

The information she had provided Manjari over the years would prove useful in effecting the reunion as the proper surprise that made such occasions so memorable.

And of course, she should have a wedding present. Ganoosh picked up the piece of horn and fondled it, imagining he could feel its much-vaunted healing and purifying energy coursing through his being. Couldn't have that now, could he? Being purified was the last thing he wanted. Picking up a heavy crystal ornament, he smashed the horn to powder. There now. That was a start. He kept a bit for himself-the aphrodisiac powers might work as well powdered as whole, and were far easier to slip into some victim's beverage that way. He himself, of course, needed no such stimulant. Bringing out the baser emotional and physical responses in others served him very well in that regard.

With a bit of a chemical additive from one of his other business ventures and a bit of a lure of the sort Harakamian was well known to covet, this was the perfect bait. If anyone knew where the unicorn girl and her kin were going, or how to find the planet where all of those magical horns on the hoof lived, it would be Harakamian.

With the right messenger, the right bait, and-ah, the properly dramatically delivered tale surrounding the gift-not too much, of course, just enough to lead the rival in the right direction Harakamian was quite likely to be concerned enough for the welfare of his ward to wish to personally check on her welfare. And where Harakamian could go, so could Ganoosh. Or Kisia. Dear little Kisia, who soooo needed to be healed from the death of her beloved parents and who would not hesitate to murder each and every unicorn person while they slept.

Nadhari Kando showered and dressed in fatigues prior to reviewing her troops. As the sonic waves cleansed her skin of sweat and sex she felt the need to be cleansed of something else as well. Edacki Ganoosh, hmm? Now, what would he be calling Ikky for?

Ganoosh was not in the same league with the Piper-at least, not while Manjari had been alive-and the investigation into the child labor and sex industry businesses hadn't turned up anything conclusive linking Ganoosh's businesses to Manjaris. But he was the appointed guardian of Manjari's adopted daughter, twisted little piece that she was. He also controlled the few legitimate

enterprises the council had allowed Kisia Manjari to retain for her maintenance, as they had been very meticulous about not punishing the child for the sins of her adopted parents.

And now he was calling Ikky on private business. This didn't sound good for the hopes she had had for the general. She shook her head at her own foolishness. He was a good looking man, fit and steely like herself and well able for the games she enjoyed. Bedding down with him, to use the term loosely, was a bit like a good day in battle, kept the body honed and the wits sharp. But she had felt, as she twisted his arm to join the forces of Li and Harakamian in battling the Khieevi, that he had taken some pleasure in helping the comparatively defenseless settlers of Rushima. Of being a good guy for a change, or at least of working for the good guys who were for once the highest bidders. It was that, more than the blackmail or his attractiveness, which had made their fling turn into more of an alliance.

She'd known he was getting restless, though, and from the men she had heard some things she didn't particularly like. She had been, in fact, thinking for the last couple of days of bailing out.

She bloused her trousers in her boots and took the back way down to the quadrangle where her men would be waiting. The com suite was on the way. She thought it might be wise to leave a message with the kids on Maganos and maybe Harakamian's security forces as well, asking them to check for new activity on Ganoosh's part.

But as she drew level with the door to the communications suite, she heard Ikky's voice. One thing about being a CO. Your voice did tend to carry after all those years of barking orders.

"What I want you to do," Ikky was saying, "is go back into our banks. Find the signals we received from that Linyaari ship when we were all on Rushima, up against the bugs. Isolate their signal, analyze it, and send word to our allies to do the same thing, and so forth, until they find it again."

"And once they find it, sir?"

"Jam it from going any further then track it to its source. Keep me posted and when we have contact, I'll issue further orders."

"Very good, sir."

Nadhari managed to be well down the long corridor before Ikky entered the hallway himself, but she felt his eyes between her shoulder blades and she knew he would know that she had heard. Normal people, maybe, wouldn't jump to such conclusions. But she and Ikky were trained by the same people and they thought very much alike. He knew. She had to make an effort not to stiffen, waiting for him to call after her, or even shoot her, perhaps, though that was less likely. But what he did was reenter the com shed.

When she finished reviewing her troops and returned to "write her letter home," Sergeant Erikson told her the computers were down, even though she could see very clearly that they were up and running. He kept his hand near his side arm as he said it and she knew that this was the sergeant's rather respectful way of telling her Ikky had made the com suite off limits to her.

The androids, KEN model numbers 637-640, stood at docking bay 498 staring at the Condor. It did not compute.

"I have tried the proper codes," said KEN637, "and the hatch will not open."

"I have attempted a manual override of all known computer codes for opening hatches with the result that we now have access to every other ship, flitter, chopper, and pizza delivery fly-by on the planet, and still the hatch will not open," said KEN638.

"I have tried hammering on the hull with all of my nonorganic attachments," said KEN639, "and still the hatch will not open."

"Perhaps a can opener would be of benefit," suggested KEN640, the one with the wet and smoking shredded pant leg. Fortunately for the other KEN models, they did not have olfactory sensors as part of the standard equipment.

"What is a can opener?" asked KEN637.

"An antique device for accessing the hatch of food containers and opening them," KEN640 said.

"Where may we obtain one?" asked KEN639.

KEN640 opened a panel in his forearm and his own array of nonorganic tools swung into view: a hacksaw, chisel, fingernail file, scissors, screw driver, two different knife blades, and a rotary tool with several different burrs attached. And a corkscrew. And finally, a flat piece of metal with a knobby bit and a cutout crescent shape. "Here!" KEN640 announced.

"Oh, is that what that is?" KEN637 said, opening his own arm. "I was wondering. I had noticed it in your assembly before and wondered what it was and why we earlier model numbers didn't have one."

"I believe I was designed as a special commission. My original employer had some rather old-fashioned tastes."

KEN637 said, "Perhaps you should try it on the hatch then. From my observations, I would say that Jonas Becker, CEO of Becker Salvage and Recycling Enterprises, Limited, also has antiquated tastes."

KEN640 obligingly mounted the movable scaffolding that the androids had brought from the central facility of the loading docks. Modern vessels all had a fairly standard hatch location but the older ones were often made by a variety of manufacturers with a variety of specifications.

KEN640 was still replacing his auxiliary components into his forearm while he mounted the scaffolding. Suddenly, his foot, which had developed a short and, consequently, and involuntary twitch from the attentions of RK, slipped off the top rung. He threw himself against the scaffolding to catch his fall and escape damage. The scaffolding banged hard against the hatch, which flew open, showering several tons of spare computer components, ancient nose cones, small flitters, and one long stretch of metal grating down onto the other KEN models, who had been standing directly beneath him, looking up to see what the ruckus was about.

KEN640 lost his grip and made one last leap to try to regain purchase on something to stop his fall and found it. His fingers closed on the edge of the hatch. He tightened his grip and swung himself

aloft and into the hatch. As he slid away from the opening, the hatch closed behind him. He banged on it. Nothing. He pushed with all his might. It remained sealed shut.

"Assistance!" He projected his vocalization so that it would carry to the units below. "Assistance is required. My sensors do not detect any accessible openings into the ship from here, and no means to operate the opening to the outside. Please assist me at once."

When time passed and he received no assistance, nor could further searches discover a mechanism to either allow him inside the ship or out of it entirely, he shut himself off to conserve power. Kisia Manjari did not appreciate it when her units wasted power.

Just before his visual sensors shut down, however, they replayed a fleeting image he'd seen-of the debris from the hatch superimposed on the prone forms of the other KEN units, who presented during this flash an uncharacteristically two-dimensional appearance, as if they were mere splashes of plastiskin, machined parts, and various lubricants smashed onto the pavement beneath rather than their usual selves.

Back at the nano-bug market, Becker was recounting his life story to Reamer and his family in an attempt to persuade Reamer that he was not the kind of guy to go bumping off idealistic young unicorn ladies to get at their horns. After all, he hadn't even known what they were till he showed them to Reamer, had he?

The redheaded rock hound was just starting to relax his suspicions again when the remote alarm went off. Since it sounded like the Klaxon horn on an old bicycle playing the first bar of "Dixie," everyone heard it. RK growled.

"That would be the skinny little princess and her heavy metal boys trying to board the Condor," he told Reamer. "I hate it when people do that. Maybe I forgot to leave off the NO TRESPASSING sign. Or maybe she came before I got back to pick up the rest other purchases."

"Kisia Manjari is nobody to mess with," Reamer advised. "I'd stay away if I were you until she has what she wants, then go back and pick up the pieces of your vessel."

"Good advice, huh, RK?" Becker said, thinking it over. Then he said, "Naaah, a man's vessel is his castle. Besides, she won't be able to get in without this." He tapped the remote, which was also the source of the alarm. "C'mon, RK." The cat hopped up on Becker's shoulder and the man began jogging back toward the flitcycle he had brought along for personal ground transport.

"Wait a minute," Reamer told him. "Manjari and her droids could trace your movements through the market to us. I don't want to wake up in the middle of the night to find that particular woman anywhere near my bed or my kids insisting I answer a lot of questions about you when I don't know anything to tell her."

"So better you should come along and find out all my secrets so you'll have some juicy stuff to save your collective asses with, right?" Becker said. "Come on, then."

Reamer called to the woman in the Ogonquonian Ornamentation booth, "Watch the kids for me, okay, LaVoya?" and sprinted after Becker.



Becker had purposely docked as far out in the boonies as the docking bay went because he didn't like a bunch of officious inspectors messing with his vessel. The problem was, security wasn't very good out here either. A lot of semiderelicts were warehoused in this part of the bay until they could be refurbished or junked, and it was very tricky trying to tell if the Condor was one of them or not. However, if anyone had been passing by, they'd have noted that the Condor was evidently crewed by untidy personnel, as a large pile of miscellaneous technogarbage was heaped on the pavement to one side of the ship.

"Looks like the princess came by, okay," Becker said, scratching his chin. "Guess she went back for more help. Whatever she wanted seems to have been too heavy for these guys."

"Are you kidding?" Reamer asked, most sincerely, because it was hard to tell with Becker sometimes. "She sent her goons to break into your ship! I bet she was after the horns"

"Shhh, not so loud," Becker said with a finger to his lips. "Now that I know what they are, I wish I hadn't mentioned it. In fact, I need to pull a disappearing act real quick now, before her highness returns with more goons. Look, tell you what hang onto this." He gave him a piece of the horn. "I swear to you I didn't get it off of anybody alive and didn't even see any bodies. RK and I found these things lying around on a trashed out planet. You decide what to do with it. I'm outta here."

He thumbed the remote, which played another tune Reamer didn't recognize, and what appeared to be an exhaust chute for a Mythenan toxic waste transport extruded a broad platform that Becker and RK stepped onto.

"Don't you get beamed up?" Reamer asked, as Becker and RK ascended into the chute.

"Nah, that stuff makes the cat nervous," Becker said. "Say bye to the kids for us."

"You got it," Reamer called back, waving. Becker had forgotten the flitcycle so Reamer climbed back on it and proceeded to put as much distance as possible between himself and the pile of junk with the squashed androids at the bottom.

Reamer was thinking hard as he bombed through the back streets, trying not to make a clear path to the nano-market and his kids. Despite his customarily mellow attitude, education from the school of hard knocks had taught him a healthy amount of street-smart paranoia. Damn the red hair anyway. Between that and his height, he sort of stood out, and anyone who had seen him riding with Becker was likely to identify him to Kisia Manjari. Neither he nor his kids would be safe now. Even if nobody had spotted him on the way to Becker's ship, the nano-market was a hive of gossip and it wouldn't lighten Kisia Manjari's purse by much to find out that Becker had spent quite a bit of time at Reamer's booth. The nice, anonymous life he had built for himself and the kids, not attracting attention, not violating laws but at the same time not possessing anything anyone else would want enough to hassle them for it, was now totally blown. Well, these things happened. It was time, maybe. The important thing was to get the kids to safety and also to let Baird, Giloglie, and Nadezda know about the horns.

Reamer's heart settled back down in his chest when he saw his children working the crowd as usual, sizing up prospects for the Ogonquonian Ornaments with the same expertise they used to determine who could be tempted by the rocks and minerals in their own booth.

"Come on, Deeter, Turi, we have to pack up and get out."

"But, Daddy, -we've paid in advance for our space for the season," Turi, his little business manager, objected.

"Baby, haven't I told you there's things more important in life than money? Now hop to it!"

He was thinking fast about where they would go from here. The authorities were only nominally clean, even in these reform days. Kisia Manjari's guardian, the count, was a man of vast influence and many of the security patrolmen were in his pocket. They were far more apt to frame Reamer on some charge and detain him at Kisia's convenience than they were to be helpful. It was all fine when the Lady and her uncles and Delszaki Li had lived here but without their physical presence . . .

Reamer suddenly remembered the little story Becker had told of going to the pleasure house and running into Khetala. Reamer had had a similar encounter with her himself, for similar reasons. But she was one of the Lady's people, one of the children Acorna had saved from the mines. Khetala would know what to do about the horn. She could help him and the kids escape Kezdet, too. She would help them. She had to.

The eyes of every person in the pavilion were focused on the opening. The flap spread wide. Dancing stopped although the band played on. Then, abruptly, the band stopped, too, and Liriili, horn uncovered, strode through the crowd gathered outside, then the crowd inside, and stepped up onto the bandstand, where she appropriated the tiny amplifier. "I am calling an emergency council session in the fli-zaar's pavilion immediately. Meanwhile, all prep crews of all space vessels are to report to their ships and prepare for takeoff, and all other crew members are on standby. Commanders of the ships and all emissaries, envoys, and ambassadors will please attend the council meeting now."

Then she strode off, a great number of the white-skinned Linyaari following her, or leaving the party behind her.

Grandam, apparently undeterred by affairs of state from reminding people of their social graces, led Acorna down from the heights of the grazing platforms and she herself went to the bandstand and picked up the amplifier. "My children, those of you whose presence is not required elsewhere, please remain and dance with your loved ones as long as you may. There is still much good food on the platforms and many of you have not yet met Khornya."

Acorna protested. "This seems to be an emergency. Whether people meet me or not is hardly important right now."

But from several directions she could hear low mutterings to the effect of, "She seems to have brought trouble with her."

"Good manners are always important," Grandam told her crisply. "Besides, you'll give people something to take their minds off of more worrisome matters. I must attend the council meeting, child," Grandam told her. "Young Maati can show you the way to my quarters when you're ready."

"I want to come, too," Acorna said. "If something has happened to the Balakiire, to Neeva and the others, I want to know."

"I doubt you'll be permitted to attend, child. But if the emergency concerns the Balakiire, be sure that I will let you know when I return, and also, I will see to it that you are given a berth on one of the outgoing ships. If you'll excuse me?" Acorna had no choice but to agree.

The revels had been most effectively stopped by Liriili's announcement but still everyone stood around waiting for further developments. At last Liriili and the council members, including Grandam, returned to the reception and the viizaar addressed the grim-faced, ridiculously dressed crowd.

"My people, I'm sorry if I have caused you undue alarm. The council, however, agrees that although there is no major emergency that we are aware of, nothing really to become overly concerned about, prompt action may forestall future emergencies. The Balakiire ~" Acorna held her breath.

"The Baiakiire, which was just dispatched to investigate a disturbing report from one of our trade missions, sent us a message that they were unable to receive transmissions from either the trade mission in question or any of our other ships or missions abroad in space or on other worlds. It is the belief of the communications officer that some sort of universal equipment failure is responsible for this silence. For that reason, in order to reestablish communication as soon as possible as well as to ensure the safety of our people in space and on other worlds and, if they are in any danger, to evacuate them as soon as possible, we are deploying the remainder of our fleet to simultaneously travel to all of the known destinations of our other ships. They will in all likelihood simply assist with the repairs of our transmitters, but if their assistance is needed in other ways, they will be there to provide it. For this reason, for all of our space fleet personnel, shore leave is cancelled and you should report to your duty stations by mid-sun tomorrow."

Acorna and Thariinye both rushed forward to volunteer to go back into space but the viizaar only smiled at Thariinye and said, "You're needed here." Then, ignoring Acorna, Liriili turned to go. Acorna, with two quick steps, placed herself in front of the viizaar. "If my aunt is in danger, I want to help. I need to be on one of those ships."

Liriili regarded her very coolly. Acorna saw that the viizaar once more had her horn-hat firmly in place and besides, the vuzaar seemed to be even more adept than most at concealing her thoughts. "If it becomes necessary for our ships to evacuate our people from space or other planets, excess personnel may cost lives. I cannot possibly take the responsibility for that risk simply to allow you to indulge your curiosity, Khornya. I hope as you spend more time among us, that you'll become less selfcentered and willful. Perhaps among the barbarians, your Linyaari intelligence made you best qualified to make decisions and lead expeditions, but here you are a mere child among those older and wiser than yourself. Your aunt left you among us to learn our ways, so I suggest you apply yourself to that goal and leave the crisis to those of us trained to deal with it."

Fortunately, at that moment Grandam rejoined Acorna, hearing only Liriili's last stinging words.

"Come along, Khornya. I tried to convince the council that you should be sent out on one of the ships being dispatched, but I was overruled. Certain know-it-all youngsters agreed with Liriili that you hadn't had a chance to evolve enough to be useful on a mission yet. Humph. Well, we older ones are considered by some of our so-called respectful descendants to be relics of a less-evolved time, you know." Her expression was wry. "That's why I thought perhaps as long as you are stuck here, you might be more comfortable staying with me. We less evolved types should stick together, don't you think?"

Acorna gratefully agreed.

"At least we know, since word of the malfunction or whatever it is that is occurring that's keeping our people from being able to contact us-came from the Baiakiire, that Neeva and the crew are safe. As a precaution, the ships going up now are having their com units equipped with special filters and boosters as well as the repair equipment for existing transmitters. New communications programs are being installed tonight as -well by the prep crews, with extras being sent along for the ships already abroad and of course, the main receivers, transmitters, and computers are being checked for some sort of fault in their space relay systems as well."

"What do you suppose could be causing the problem?" Acorna asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps a meteor storm between us and the closest transmitters in the relay system? Maybe some kind of mechanical difficulty in the transmitters themselves or even a programming flaw? A sun going nova? Liriili is right about one thing-I'm sure the problem, whatever it is, is one our crews are well equipped to sort out by themselves."

"You don't sound as if anyone believes there really would be a need to evacuate our people elsewhere, more as if the silence is a technical problem. In which case, why'not just send out crews to the most likely areas of interference? If there is a larger problem, all of your-our-ships could be cut off from communication with the planet, maybe even each other, and we would have no idea what was occurring. Wouldn't it be wiser to risk fewer personnel?"

The animation left Grandam's face and her mouth settled into a grim line. "We are hoping that this is a technical problem. If so, the council's reasoning is that the more ships we deploy to the most places, the sooner the problem will be mended. The communications channels are a lifeline to our ships, and through them to our allies, as well as a lifeline for us. It would be impossible to devote too many resources to their preservation. And in case there is a more ominous threat"-Acorna heard with her mind rather than her ears that the council was most deeply afraid of a new, heretofore unheralded attack by the Khieevi "we need to cover all options as quickly as possible so we can learn of the danger, assist if possible those affected by the threat, evacuate those it does not yet affect, and have our ships return home." She paused and said, "We would not need them for evacuation from narhii-Vhiliinyar. We do not, at this time, have an alternative home ready so evacuating this planet is not an option."

"But-if nothing else, people could go to Kezdet, Maganos moon, Rushima. All of the human worlds are compatible with our species."

Grandam took a deep breath, let it out, and said, "Of course. There are other worlds as well. But until we know there is a threat and if so, where it comes from, we would hardly know where to run, would we? The personnel in space could well be safer than those of us here on narhii-Vhiliinyar. One option seems about as good as another. If this place is not safe, Khornya, is any place?"

She shuddered and Acorna realized that the elder was not only deeply worried but also deeply frightened. Since there seemed to be little either of them could do about the situation, Acorna deliberately changed her focus.

This was not hard to do once they arrived at the Grandam's pavilion. It shimmered with a ribbon of silver streaming around teal green under the light of the two moons, one blue and one golden, and

although there was nothing about it that seemed lamiharly cozy it nonetheless exuded a charming warmth and hominess.

Grandam Naadiina waved her hand and soft light emerged from beautifully patterned glass pillars that upheld the center and corners of her pavilion. The flaps farthest from them were open so that once more the moons were visible, and all the stars. Naadiina beckoned Acorna to follow her toward the flap, where three soft beds were arranged. On one of these lay Maati, sound asleep.

"I like to sleep with my face to the stars, and my memories of my lifemate on the old world," Grandam said, peeling off her gown and sliding beneath the top blanket of the bed. Acorna did the same, grateful to be rid of the makeshift finery.

"Maati lives here, too?" Acorna asked.

"Yes," Grandam said. "I think her parents felt that I could use the assistance and would be grateful for a strong young person to run my errands. Since it has become clear that they were not coming back, and Maati was orphaned, she has remained with me. She hardly remembers them and is useful as a page for Liriili and other government officials."

"I'm so sorry," Acorna said. "What became other parents?"

"They could not adjust to the loss of their two sons, Aan and Laarye. They tried to-they were here almost two ghaanyi and had time to conceive and give birth to Maati. But her mother went into a deep sadness and at last the two of them announced that the only way to solve this sadness was for them to return to the old home and try to learn what had become of their sons. They have not been heard of since. This may be a good thing. The Khieevi have not sought to entertain us with films of either them or their sons being tortured to death, so perhaps they met with a diversion along the way or perhaps their boys were rescued in some other way and they are pursuing them still."

"But-I thought everyone escaped when you left the old world. Neeva gave me that impression anyway. You mean you left children behind?"

"What could we do? The need to evacuate happened quite suddenly. And they were young men, not children. We had learned of the Khieevi before, of course, and we had already located this planet as our refuge and had our plan in readiness. But not everyone could be gathered in time for the evacuation. A few-very few, I'm happy to say-were left behind to save the majority. Maati's parents could not accept that their sons could not be found. They would have stayed behind to search but we could not allow that, much as we hated to leave anything behind for those monsters. It was agony to leave at all. I myself could scarcely bear to leave the grave of my lifemate on the same planet with the Khieevi."

"Will you tell me about your lifemate, and what it was like on the old world?" Acorna asked.

"Oh, yes. But aren't you tired after your journey and the so-called reception?" Acorna did not have to be very psychic to feel the scorn in the old lady's tone.

"Not really," she replied. "But I was overwhelmed. I don't think vlizaar likes me."

"The vilzaar was already prejudiced against you long before you arrived, my dear," she replied. "Your mother was chosen by the lifemate Liriili had already decided was her own. Unfortunately, Vaanye didn't agree."

"Oh, that must be it then. Neeva mentioned some bad feeling toward my family. But it doesn't seem sensible to take it out on me."

"Prejudice and jealousy are seldom sensible. Liriili's is not a flexible or forgiving nature."

"I thought that people who could read minds would be incapable of that kind of pettiness."

The old lady grunted. "Except when they are healing, and really concentrating on extending empathy, or dealing with some crisis among their nearest and dearest, most people have psychic communication down to a very superficial art. One's thoughts and feelings have many layers, contradictory layers at that. And even in thought, some people are more reserved than others-or repressed, perhaps. Liriili is used to filling her mind with the details of administration and can use those to mask her feelings even from herself, as no doubt she is doing in your case."

"Oh. Speaking of feelings, is it true that it's already decided that Thariinye and I will be lifemates?"

Grandam hooted and in the dark her eyes twinkled like the stars as she rolled on her side and grinned at Acorna, only baring her teeth just a little. "Who told you that? Thariinye? I can see that he did! Of course no one has decided such a thing! Except maybe him! You've nothing to worry about there." "I'm glad," Acorna said. "I want it to feel-right." "You're a very clever girl. Are you very sleepy?" "No, not really. I feel rather restless, to tell you the truth." "That makes two of us. Would you indulge an old lady and tell me of your life? Neeva indicated in her reports that you had had some adventures. I should very much like to hear of them. Since coming here, our people have been a rather dull lot, and I do like a good story."

"Very well," Acorna said, and began with her earliest memories of her uncles and the mining ship.

She had not quite finished when both of them fell asleep. The next morning, Acorna awoke to the sound of birds singing and a stream burbling very nearby. She sat up.

The stream was running right behind her head, as a matter of fact, down one glass column, across the floor of the pavilion, where it was joined by the waterfall flowing down the glass column on the opposite side of the floor. Acorna cupped her hand to dip out a drink, and found that the water was actually covered by glass. So were the singing birds that flew from another column, across the top of the pavilion, to disappear into the column opposite the one where the flight had begun. Within the bird's path, clouds drifted with seeming air currents and, at the base of the pillars, the branches of bushes seemed to bob in a breeze.

Acorna yawned and stretched. The pallet beside hers was empty. Then she noticed that beyond the bird column, the flap was closed and voices were coming from the other side.

She rose and pulled on the undergown from the previous night, wishing she still had her flight suit instead.

The front flap opened, and Grandam Naadiina entered the pavilion. Her arms were full of various items, bouquets of wild flowers, notes, and sheaves of edible grasses and big leafed vegetables.

"Here, let me help you," Acorna said, rushing forward to relieve her hostess of some of the burden.

"You may as well take them all. Young males haven't left such tributes to me in a long time."

"You mean these are for me? But-why?"

"Your welcome home reception was interrupted and your guests did not get properly introduced. I suppose these are by way of being an apology, if not an invitation, on behalf of some of your guests. Perhaps some of them were fellows who are going off planet now and will have no chance to meet you until they return." She paused. "Besides, the Ancestors seem to approve of you, whether or not Liriili does. The opinions of the Ancestors carry a great deal of weight with our people."

Acorna shook her head, disbelieving, as she deposited some of the edibles-the wildflowers were edible, too-on one of the low tables near the eastern wall of the pavilion. There was no kitchen facility, or rest room either. Like Acorna, the Linyaari of course tended to graze, eating only fresh vegetables and grasses, so a food preparation area was unnecessary. They buried their waste in the ground, too-or in an area of the hydroponics gardens, as Acorna and her shipmates had done aboard ship. There was no taboo about this. Linyaari recycled food with a clean efficiency that made the waste excellent fertilizer, Neeva had told her. Acorna's human upbringing made her wonder at the lack of squeamishness about this function, but then, humans often used recycled urine for water while on long voyages, too, and the connection was at least one step more remote in this case.

"I'm glad they approve," Acorna said. "It was rather difficult to tell."

"It always is, for anyone other than an attendant. Your brow is wrinkled. Why is that? What's bothering you?"

"Just that I made a fool of myself last night, and then there was the emergency and here I am being given gifts, when everyone is so very worried. I don't want people to give me things because they feel guilty or intimidated. I want to make friends, to learn to know and understand our people."

"You are a very sensitive girl and your attitude does you proud. However, many of the people last night, including our leader, were most ungracious to you and the gifts show that they realize that. The emergency no doubt kept some of them from making complete asses out of themselves. These gifts are actually quite a healthy sign-that in spite of the crisis, some of them cared enough about your feelings to apologize. Once this would not have been at all unusual but our people have changed, since the evacuation." Her voice drifted off, sadly. When she spoke again, it was to change the subject. "Now then. Tell me more about your adventures."

Acorna was surprised. She was not used to talking as much as she had talked the night before. It was easy to talk to Grandam though. The funny thing was, sometimes Acorna knew that Grandam didn't merely hear her words-that she saw Acorna's own memories as well, felt what Acorna was feeling as she remembered, felt as she had felt while experiencing the events the memories recorded. But with Grandam Naadiina, Acorna didn't worry about what was thought-talk and what was verbal. She knew without needing to question that Grandam understood what she was trying to communicate, however she communicated it. And that, Grandam's willingness and ability to really know her, was what had drawn her out. It had been that way somewhat with Neeva and the others,

but there had always been their own thoughts, their considerations of what was and was not Linyaari, that got in the way.

Grandam smiled at Acorna in the brief pause the girl took before speaking and nodded. "I see that you have shared enough with me already. It has been my pleasure hearing your tales. They are so different from anything else one hears on this planet, among our people. Never fear, granddaughter, that you are unworthy. Our people don't yet know you or understand you but they will."

Acorna took a deep breath and straightened her spine. "Not if I don't make the attempt to get to know them, Grandam. Apparently I cannot help out with the crisis in space, but perhaps I can at least offer comfort to those left behind here on the planet. The gifts have given me an opening. First, I must try to learn who sent each bundle and thank them, and visit with them, and not bare my teeth." Her mouth curled in a smile but she determinedly kept her lips closed. "I must also speak with the people who designed the dresses they so kindly sent-and pay for the two I altered to suit myself."

"That is not necessary, you know. It's all been put on Neeva's account at her instruction."

"Nevertheless, I fear I insulted them and after I saw how everyone was dressed last night, I better understood the intent of the designers. I would like to tell them so."

"That would be most gracious, my dear. They are very silly though, these fashions."

Acorna could not truthfully debate that point, but continued. "Be that as it may, I was told that there was a possibility that some day I would return to Kezdet and Maganos and my human friends as an ambassador of the Linyaari. I don't seem to be making a good start of it yet. So perhaps, since I don't yet know exactly what it is to be a Linyaari, I should begin to explore that and in the process, practice ambassadorship by trying to represent the culture from which I've come in a more positive manner than I seem to have done so far."

"Bravo!" said Grandam Naadiina. "You have a splendid attitude with which to begin your work, I must say. And perhaps with your broad experience of other worlds, you will be able to ease some of the fears people have for their loved ones in space."

Acorna's mind was already so busy planning her day she simply nodded to acknowledge Grandam's approval. "And also, I would like to meet some of these techno-artisans Maati was telling me about, the ones who design, alter, and adapt the technological trade items to Linyaari tastes."

"They have their own community, actually, but it's not too far from here to walk, though the path is a bit overgrazed. And you must realize that many of them spend considerable time on other host planets, learning the basics and keeping up with the new developments. A few of them will be on the crews shipping out but by no means all."

"So they spend a lot of time in space?" Acorna asked. "That's very interesting. No one in any place I have ever been has ever seen a being like me before the Balaklire came looking for me."

"Is that so? In some parts of the universe we're quite a routine sight, you know. But those are peaceful parts, and if they cease to be peaceful, we cease to be seen there." Her tone had a wry twist to it that made Acorna realize with some surprise that the words had been thought and not spoken,



for she saw an image of Linyaari techno-artisans in training hastily vacating a planet where hostilities were erupting.

"Is this all right to wear to go calling?" Acorna asked, indicating the gown she had worn the night before.

"My dear, it wouldn't bother a soul if you went out unclothed altogether. We aren't fussy about those things around here, not for modesty's sake, anyway. But the weather does turn suddenly. Allow me to loan you something. You'll be pleased to know extreme fashion is only utilized in formal clothing. For daytime wear we are rather more practical."

Grandam raised the lid of one of the low tables, and inside were folded a variety of garments. From among these, she selected a simple knee-length tunic with long full sleeves and a neckline cut low in back to accommodate the hair that grew down Acorna's spine and that of every other Linyaari. Acorna slipped it over her head.

"Very comfortable," she said.

"Yes, but it does need a touch. It's a bit too floppy on you. Here, this will do nicely." Grandam handed her the most gorgeous belt Acorna had ever seen. The edges were intricately braided and interwoven of some strong but supple material, while the body of the belt was patterned with faceted gemstone beads woven into the design of birds and water, flowers and distant mountains with a stream flowing the length of the belt. Acorna had to stroke and admire it a moment before buckling it around her waist. The buckle continued the pattern of the belt in a slightly wider motif of a very tall mountain with one sun setting and another rising on the other side of it.

Grandam smiled. "It suits you. Niciuye made it for me to wear for our ceremony of union when we were still courting. Unfortunately, it lacks a few Diich'<fe' of meeting around my waist these days. The scenes, as you may have guessed, are from our original home world. It was the only home Niciirye knew."

"What became of him?" Acorna asked. "If it isn't too painful for you to tell me?"

"Not at all. He was even older than I and died peacefully in his sleep. He was well enough, and an excellent healer, but his parts were simply worn out. I begin to understand that problem myself. I do miss him though-his foolishness as much as his guidance. Ah well. I hope you can find someone you care for and who cares for you as much."

Acorna sighed. "Right now I'll settle for not making an outcast of myself."

"I'm sure when people get to know you, they'll be sincerely glad you've come. I think you will have much better luck talking to one or two people at a time. You are not a shallow person, and small talk is essentially a shallow form of communication. It will not be necessary when you are alone with other individuals. Just be yourself and be willing to take each person as you find him or her and you'll do well."

"I'm sure you're right," Acorna said. "Now, how do I find these places?"

"I'll send for Maati." Grandam poked her head out of the tent, ready to call.

"Oh, no, surely with the crisis, the vilzaar will need her more than ever today. Really, if you'll just tell me, I'll find my own way. I don't want Liriili to have another excuse to resent me."

It was Grandam Naadiina's turn to sigh. She moved back into the tent. "I suppose you're right. Very well then, I'll draw you a map. When you're ready to visit the techno-artisans, come back here and I'll take you myself. I've left a heating unit with Kaakiri for repair and it should be ready by now."

Hafiz Harakamian regarded his second wife, his most lusciously beautiful bride, with alarm bordering on panic. "Karina, my little pomegranate, you grow thin and pale!"

Indeed, half of her second chin had disappeared, and the lovely little roll of belly below her amethyst-encrusted lavender bra and bolero and above the amethyst-studded band of the diaphanous lilac harem pants she wore was eclipsed from its usual full moon to little more than a quarter.

"Tell me, oh my garden of delights, why do you wither away to nothing? Is there some wish I have not fulfilled? Some food you crave I have not had fetched from the corners of the universe to delight your delicate palate? Some garment you would desire to swathe your so lovely figure"-and he almost drooled as he said it, for his new bride was all that he had hoped she would be "that I have not had made for you from the finest materials by the most talented and skillful seamstresses available? Some redecorating, maybe, you'd like to do to our homes?" he asked in desperation, as the first two questions were meeting with no response but a slight trembling of her lower lip and flutter other eyelashes.

"Oh, Haffy, my darling figgy pudding hubby," Karina said, for she was not to be outdone in hyperbolic compliments to her wealthy husband who, if he was not exactly handsome, still had a wonderfully compelling personality, tremendous vitality, enormous charisma, quite startling capabilities in the bedroom, and marvelous taste in women-not to mention oodles and oodles of lovely money, "you have done everything to satisfy my body but my spirit remains unfulfilled."

"Why is that, o beloved whose face is like unto a blossoming white rose, whose eyes are brighter than the twinkling stars, whose ..."

She cut off the flow by burying her face in her heavily be-ringed hands. "I fear I allowed myself to be distracted from my own spiritual journey by the suddenness of our passion. So overcome was I with the newness of our love that I grew complacent about what I knew was my true calling, my greatest spiritual quest-to aid Acorna and her people and teach them to channel their energies and use their gifts in a proper"-and profitable, for Karina thought wealth was very proper-"manner."

"But, my little oasis of carnal conviviality, Acorna went with her people to learn their ways and will soon return to us. Surely you need not pine?"

She sighed deeply. They were sitting beside the fountain in the courtyard, where they had just partaken of a fabulous meal. She had only picked at the third course and had barely touched her sherbet. She popped another of those little chocolate egg truffles into her mouth though. Hafiz was right. She had to keep her strength up. "Oh, Hafiz, my wise and wily warrior in the world of wealth, you are such a debonair fellow, so learned in the ways of commerce and the battle of the

marketplace, that in your munificence of spirit you no doubt saw the beautiful Linyaari beings as like yourself, as sophisticated as they were soignee.

"But I, who communed with them on both a deeper level and a higher plane than any among our own kind, recall their childlike innocence, their need to be nurtured and tutored along the great spiritual pathway that it has been my privilege to travel to these many years. Their incredible healing and purifying powers which really need sharp management so they don't go exhausting themselves by giving all that valuable stuff away.

"I was to have been Acorna's mentor in just such a way, but now our lovely Lady of the Light has gone with them to this secluded home world of theirs, a place where no one can find them, a place where our beloved Acorna and all other potential are lost-not to mention the potential of a whole planetful just like her! -to me and all who love her."

Hafiz scratched his bearded chin, pondering the words of his wife, words which he had come to learn had many levels of wisdom.

Then he shrugged as if it were all a small matter. "Acorna said she would return, and her people were of the opinion that she would be given honors and rank among them and sent to us as an envoy. I'm sure she and they will be with us again soon, O my heart of butter. And this home where they live is only in space, beloved, not in that land where our esteemed friend and colleague Li now resides. And if these people can locate it in space, so can the finest engineers and navigators in my employ-that is to say, the finest engineers and navigators available. And this planet, if need be, could be visited. Especially by a friend."

"Friend? Why, you are practically the only family she has! Apart from your nephew and his friends, she had only Mr. Li. And while I am in constant contact with him, his guidance is lost to her. In fact," she added shrewdly, "it is his guidance in this matter, his insistence that Acorna and her people should still have access to our advice and assistance, that has caused me to dwell on this matter while neglecting my diet."

Hafiz was momentarily incensed. "You have been having clandestine visits with Delszaki Li, my old rival, and neglecting to feed the body upon which I have lavished so much love?"

"He is dead, Haffy," she said reasonably.

"But you entertain his counsel!"

"My darling, it is my calling to succor such spirits, to keep open the channels of communication between the planes. I cannot reject the spirits any more than you can reject a profit!"

"But Li himself organized her departure, outfitted her ship ..."

"Yes, but he says he always intended that one or more other guardians should go with her. Had she not left prematurely, I would have intercepted her and been aboard the vessel that carried her away the first time. Of course, it didn't occur to her aunt to invite me along. What with us being newlyweds and all." She blushed, a blush that cast a roseate dawn upon the exposed globes above her overflowing bodice.

Hafiz, never one to be outdone at the bargaining table, even of love, reached for her. "Perhaps I am at this moment too distracted with concern for your health to consider these matters, my little couscous. Come, I cannot speak of this further until I have once more personally inspected the possible damage your dietary deprivation has wreaked upon your beauteous body."

Karina, who was not yet over the novelty of having a man so besotted with her that, while he insisted she wear her flowing robes in public, it was only so that she could wear, if anything, skimpy little outfits like this one for him and him alone to drool over in private. His hands were very skillful and the look in his eyes made her feel, as always, quite faint with desire. Besides, he was always more reasonable afterward. As for Hafiz, he was even more aroused than usual, recalling the words of his voluptuous vixen, the ones where she pointed out that there was a profit to be made in the talents of Acorna and her kind. His Karina was not only lusciously lovely but also had a head for business—a true helpmeet at last!

Before he had time to explore this side of her along with the others, a discreet cough from behind him made him turn toward the lacy latticework of the door leading into the garden. "Your pardon, Lord and Master and gracious lady, but a matter of great urgency has arisen that requires your presence, Master, something you and you alone must attend to."

"And so I will when it pleases me," Hafiz said with a glower at the servant, who had been in his employ since boyhood and certainly knew better than to interrupt him when he was engaged in the pursuit of marital bliss. "It should be obvious to you that it does not please me now."

"Yes, Great Lord. But I swear to you upon the Three Books and by the Three Prophets that though you reward my impertinence with a thousand lashes for this interruption, you would redouble that punishment if I neglected my duty in informing you of this matter."

"This is so?" Hafiz asked. He had not risen to his present position by ignoring urgent business when it was brought to his attention, even when it was so wretchedly inconvenient as it was now.

"Even so, Great Lord and Master," the servant said with a bow.

"Ah, very well then." He kissed Karina tenderly on the cheek for he dared not kiss her lips or he would never leave, gave her belly a longing stroke, shoved the gold enameled dish wrought with nightingales and piled with chocolate truffle eggs into her hands and said, "Eat, my dainty doe of deliciousness. You will need all of your strength when I return."

"As will you, my love," she said in a sultry voice that all but drove him mad.

Didi Yasmin, currently unemployed since the combined forces of Delszaki Li and the peculiar horned girl had put all of the pleasure houses of Kezdet out of business, was still in mourning. This fact distressed her, as black was not one other better colors. But a son was a son and hers was dead and her husband and supposed widower no doubt had something to do with it. Therefore, he should pay. Would pay.

He would never miss it, she thought, looking around at the thick red-patterned carpets, the crimson and emerald silk-covered cushions of the divan, the endless cabinets of lustrous and exotic woods filled with equally lustrous and exotic treasures, the masses of fresh blooms plucked from his gardens, which were cooled by no fewer than a thousand flowing fountains.

And he owed her. She had given him the son and heir he demanded of a wife and he had wasted the boy and given away his empire to that asteroid-hopping nephew of his. But the worst of all was that he had had the gall to remarry without even bothering to make absolutely certain she, his real wife, was dead.

True, she had gone to elaborate lengths to fake her death so that she might return to her own profitable career in the sex industry, but it had always galled her how easily and with what apparent relief he accepted the exaggerated reports of her demise. He had been glad, back then, to have the boy to himself. She had been glad to leave her son as well, then. She had found motherhood extremely taxing, despite a whole platoon of nannies, and even then had hated to have anyone thinking she was old enough to be someone's mother!

But it had suited her purposes and those of her employers that she keep track of both her husband and her son. Her son had frequented the houses other colleagues and even, on a couple of occasions, had graced her own establishment, though of course he didn't recognize her.

A fine boy, a strapping boy. Too bad he had caused such damage to the women he had used that they had to be replaced, at great expense, of course. After that, she reluctantly banned him. As for her dear husband, she was kept well informed of his movements and interests through those enemies she had happily supplied with detailed maps of his compound, an inventory of his most treasured possessions, the names of all of his personal guards she could recall, and other readily marketed information.

It was these people who finally secured her release from prison and these people, also, who engineered her arrival at this same compound where once she had been mistress, who got her past the guards, and who supplied her with one other little thing.

Hafiz delighted her by gaping at her as if she were indeed the ghost he supposed her to be.

"Yasmin!" he gasped, as his well-fed and gorgeously robed form appeared from among the glittering beads of the curtained doorway.

"Greetings, husband," she said sweetly. "I was told you have recently remarried. I am assuming from this that you have recently embraced at least Reform Neo-Hadathian customs and have become polygamous, since we two are still legally twined in wedded bliss." His face was turning the exact shade of scarlet she had hoped to see. She smiled sweetly. "No, no, my darling husband, do not imagine that I object. A senior wife can always use a young one to relieve her of some of her more distasteful duties. But I am surprised she is not here to greet me as well. Is this new girl perhaps indisposed? I had so hoped to meet her and see if she can live up to my standards'-and of course, to instruct her in her duties to me, as your first wife and khaSliu."

Hafiz stared at Yasmin, with whom he had once briefly been so infatuated and whom he had long believed to be dead. He had never mourned her properly, it was true, for despite her beauty as a young woman, and her apparent ardor, she had not been a very good wife. She was vicious, vain, and somewhat stupid, so much so in fact that like many petty criminals her own emotional shortcomings even got in the way of fulfilling her greed at times. And Yasmin had been a very greedy woman.

Unfortunately, it seemed she was also alive, because she did appear to be breathing even though she very much looked the part of a ghost. Her once-charming face had been resculpted, had had its

wrinkles repeatedly removed by poison and knife blade so often that her skin looked as if it had been stretched over her skull bones like the skin of a goat on a drum. It was shiny, not from youthful moistness and freshness, but rather, it appeared, from some sort of pickling process that made it look thick and coarse. Little veins had broken in her cheeks.

Her mouth was puffy with the injections she used to keep it from falling back into its former thinness-but back then, though thin, that mouth had been ready for bawdy laughter, and that was part of what had attracted him to her. Now it looked as if it pained her to speak. Her eyes had had the lids lifted and brows tattooed above them.

Thick eyelashes had been implanted to augment her own. But none of this disguised the dull, stony glare of her eyes. Beneath black veils trimmed in a tasteless manner in black spangles, her hair was stiff with gilt metallic dye.

"Yasmin, you are dead by law if not in fact, and even if you remain my wife, it is only in name, and that will not be for much longer, now that I know it is a problem. Had I realized that you still lived, I would not have divorced you before, for the sake of our son, but now that he is gone "

"Murdered," Yasmin whispered, her eyes narrowed to slits. "Fouly murdered and yet I understand that you, his father, did nothing to avenge him! Have in fact, it is said, with unseemly haste replaced him with that asteroid-hopping nephew of yours as your heir."

"Tapha had it coming. He was our son, it is true, but it is also true that he was a vicious and ignorant pig." "He didn't get that from my side of the family." Hafiz waved his hand in dismissal. "No matter. There is no longer any your side of the family. Your side of the family, apparently through your own contrivance, is extinct. And you have not been a member of my family in many years. It grieves me to tell you, oh dear departed mother of our late unlamented son, that I would have disinherited Tapha even if he lived. The boy managed, despite his legitimate birth during our marriage, to be a bastard of the worst kind."

"You have no sense of family! It is a good thing that I have returned, as your khaSine, to instruct my junior wife."

Hafiz looked as if he were about to explode, and said in a slow, dangerous voice, "You will not speak to her, you will not so much as lay eyes upon her. You are not khaSine. You are no longer even my wife."

He took a deep breath and began chanting the expeditious ancient Hadathian method of ridding oneself of unwanted marital attachments, "I divorce you, I divorce you, I-"

Before he could say it the third and decisive time, she interrupted in a shrill, high whine that would not allow him to ignore it.

"You think you can cast me out, just like that, kill my son, marry another, and dismiss me as if I were someone of no consequence?"

"I am certainly about to," Hafiz told her.

"There's no need to get so unpleasant. As you recall, it was I who left you. I was only testing you," she said with a poisonously sweet smile. She pulled a beautifully jeweled box from her robes and

offered it to him. "I confess, I was afraid you might react this way, that the shock of my resurrection would prove too much for you and that the years we have spent apart would have put too great a strain on your affection. Still, although I do not care for the way you've treated me, I am a broad-minded woman. And to show there are no hard feelings, I have brought you a wedding present. One I know will be of great interest to you."

"I have no wish for your gifts-but, ah-h-is that a rare Terran early nineteenth century inlaid vermilion and jade snuffbox similar to the one from the court of the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte?" He must at least inspect such a treasure. His fingers itched to do so, as they did with any fine and rare collectible object. Perhaps he was only imagining the sneer that crossed Yasmin's red swollen mouth?

"The very one. The emperor himself gorged his very nostrils from this same box, oh avaricious husband. And now it holds a new rarity, a treasure of particular meaning for you. Go ahead, take it."

He started to accept it from her hand and then thought better of it. "No, you open it. Show me. It would be like you to have had it fitted with some poisoned clasp ..."

"You wrong me, beloved," she said, and wondered how the man who sold her this box had known that Hafiz would say this. She touched the catch and the lid popped open. "You see? Nothing in it but fine sparkling powder, like ground moonstones or opals."

"I do not traffic in drugs, Yasmin," Hafiz said huffily. He didn't either. Not any more. Not for many years. Well, not on a regular basis. It wasn't really profitable any more.

"Ah, but, husband, this is no drug of the sort to which you refer. This is a very special powder indeed. It will heal any wound, neutralize poisons, and will act as an amazing aphrodisiac to any man or woman who takes only a few grains in a drink or food."

"This is so?" Hafiz asked. "That is a wondrous thing indeed, mother of my deservedly-deceased son. And something I will happily accept if only you will tell me, why is it that you, who have never, so far as I could discern, borne love for any part of me but my wealth, bestow this upon me? As a gift," he reminded her hastily. A gift was, after all, a gift, though for a remedy with such powers as this powder was said to have, he might well have paid a great deal.

"Because, dear husband, it is said to come from the horn of a humanoid being who has but a single horn in the center of her forehead. Since you once showed favor to such a being ..." She laughed, and taking a deep breath, blew the powder from the open box into his face, and into his eyes, blinding him with a starry swirl that also, somehow, silenced him and made him swoon so that when he regained his senses he was lying upon the central pattern of the Garden of Paradise carpet, and the living ghost of his late wife had vanished.

He was one with his home world, gray-brown and broken, and to an onlooker would have been almost indistinguishable from the rubble. He no longer knew which was rock and soil and which part of his own body, except for the pain. He had had no fear, when the ship landed, that either the small furry animal or the cumbersome monster who kept flinging things in and out of the vessel would notice him.

But he watched when they landed once more with far greater trepidation, and with relief that he had already removed from its resting place the sacred trust that undoubtedly drew the outsiders.

The House of Harakamian chemists reported ????? that the powder -was a mixture of the ground pollens of the rare Wahanamoian Blossom of Sleep and another substance difficult to analyze, but appearing to be calcified tissue of the horn variety, about which they could say nothing further except that one of the men who had cut himself accidentally a little earlier spontaneously healed upon coming in contact with the powder.

Hafiz mentioned nothing of this to Karina. Until he could finalize his divorce to a supposedly dead woman, he did not wish to jeopardize his marriage by mentioning the inconvenient vitality of his late spouse to his present one.

But he was very troubled indeed. Surely, Yasmin had obtained the powder through her underworld contacts, which he was certain she had, as who else would have financed her all these years while she plied the trade that she seemed to feel made her a star? But if these people had somehow contrived to murder Acorna and the delegation from her home planet, Hafiz felt sure they would have said so more directly-he himself would have done that, though he was often the most indirect of men. Therefore, this powder was a warning. And yet-where could the horn material have come from?

A sickening thought occurred to him. Before he had met the Linyaari, they had broadcast as a warning vids of the Khieevi torturing Linyaari prisoners. Was there some faction of the sort of worm with whom Yasmin consorted so low as to actually have contacts among the Khieevi who would sell them Linyaari horn?

If so, this was a very grave matter. Acorna and her people should know of it at once. Hafiz wished to contact his nephew and heir about the matter but decided on balance it was best to do so in person rather than trusting the com units. Hafiz was far too practical to be overly brave, and Yasmin's ability to come and go without his knowledge had shaken him profoundly.

He forbade his house staff to say anything of the surprise visit to Karina until he could decide how to tell her himself and ordered the entire compound searched for the presence of his late wife. As he suspected, she had disappeared utterly and completely while he lay drugged on the floor of his own home.

At last, only three hours' time from when he had last been at Karina's side, Hafiz appeared in the marital bedchamber, where his bride lounged upon their connubial couch. She had been sleeping, he thought, but had awakened at his step.

"Karina," he said, "You have convinced me. Our ship is being prepared and we shall soon depart for the Linyaari home world to visit Acorna and the others."

Karina would have known at once that something was amiss even if she had not already encountered a deeply troubled and no doubt deluded woman claiming to be Hafiz's true wife. She naturally assumed that the woman was a ghost, since Hafiz's first wife was dead. Of course, she could have been one of the holograms Hafiz was always constructing to surprise a person in odd nooks and crannies, but why would he make an ugly hologram that claimed to be his wife? Had to be a ghost. Karina attempted to soothe and comfort her, to tell her to go back into the light, but the specter had merely looked annoyed. Presumably she had then gone on to haunt Hafiz, or had just



come from haunting him, as the very next time Karina saw him he was behaving in a very peculiar fashion, as those who had received visitations from the other side sometimes did.

For one thing, Hafiz addressed Karina by name instead of calling her by one of his lengthy endearments. For another thing, he gave up without even a token tussle, totally unlike him, and let her have her way about seeking out Acorna's people. And for a third thing, he hardly ever did anything in haste, but always with slow and deliberate preparation.

His sudden acquiescence so alarmed Karina that she backtracked slightly.

"My darling, perhaps we should wait a little after all," she said, easing him down beside her with a light tug on his hand. "You look unwell. You perspire and your color is not at all good. I think you need a course of some of my special herbal teas and perhaps we should burn a cinnamon candle tonight to ease your-"

"Pack it, beloved!" he said. "Pack all of the tea and candles you wish. Pack your gowns and jewels, pack your cards and stones and your crystal ball. But we cannot deprive Acorna and her people of our guidance for another day."

Nor could they wait a moment longer, he thought privately, for Yasmin to return and spoil the honeymoon any more than she had already done. Hafiz worried his first wife's troublemaking would be even more distressing next time-and more obvious to Karina. He wouldn't allow that. Women were extremely difficult to understand, even for a man of his considerable amatory experience. But what worried him more than Yasmin's tricks was that the security of his stronghold had been breached. If he was to go, it had best be in all haste, before Yasmin's unsavory associates followed her here.

In the meantime he had ordered a complete restructuring of his security strategies, changes in locks, codes, and passwords, and that the compound be totally remodeled and its defenses reinforced. In his early days of affection-very well, lust-for Yasmin, he had shown her everything -everything.

He deeply regretted that now, for even though he had added and altered several systems since the time of his first wife, still she knew too much. He and Karma would not truly be safe here, in his own home, until the presence of Yasmin was purged.

His personal vessel was kept in readiness at all times and well equipped for his comfort on journeys around most of his customary haunts. He commanded that it be readied for an extended cruise and had retrieved the data plotted by Calum Baird and Acorna for their originally planned journey to the Linyaari home world.

They would travel with the bare minimum crew-pilot, navigator, physician, and communications officer, plus one trusted personal attendant for each of them, including the ship's officers, who must be relaxed and at peace to do their jobs well.

Hafiz himself was a competent pilot but for such a long journey, and one that had not actually been previously successfully completed by anyone of his acquaintance, he preferred to employ a specialist.

He would have preferred to take along his personal chef, the hairdresser and dressmaker, manicurist, massage therapist, valet, lady's maid, and other servants they were accustomed to, but

most of these functions could either be performed by the personal attendants or were well within the ship's ability to provide electronically. For entertainment, they would have his holograms to amuse them and add a bit of spice and variety to the atmosphere. He had been constructing and collecting holograms most of his adult life, first as a business and now as one of his little hobbies. They were lightweight, took up no actual room, and could be surprisingly useful.

In the interests of maintaining security-both his own and that of the Linyaari, he decided that perhaps they had best rough it on this journey. His skeleton crew was handpicked and had been raised and educated within the House of Harakamian. They were loyal and trustworthy.

Then there was the additional problem that, in the interests of establishing rapport with Acorna's people, he felt he could not carry the usual arsenal on board, or any obvious security guards. Although the crew and attendants were well trained in security functions, that was not their primary job. Perhaps braving the unknown without sufficient weaponry or an army at his back was foolish, but there were always the ship's builtin defenses that could be deployed if necessary. He doubted even the Linyaari would suspect they were there. Given his mission, it was either go this way, or not at all.

In the unlikely event that Acorna's people did spot his ship's defenses, the Linyaari would simply have to understand. He was sincerely attempting to come in peace-very possibly at the expense of his people's safety, as well as his own. He could only hope their departure would be rapid enough that Yasmin and whoever it was she worked for would be unable to launch a pursuit.

Karina was rather distracted on the journey from Laboue to Maganos.

"What troubles you, my love?"

"My spirit guides keep looking over their ectoplasmic shoulders, darling. I'm just sure they're trying to tell me I've left something important behind or perhaps we forgot to turn off some major appliance-"

"You are having a flashback to your days of penury and poverty, flower of my soul. You have servants to see to those things now, remember? "

She gave him a wan little smile. "So we do, O beloved. Still, I wish the communication was clearer. It's very disorienting to spirit guides moving from planet to planet, you know. They get very attached to the places from whence they entered the other side."

"Indeed? You are a fountain of information, best beloved among women. I had no idea."

Oh, yes!

"Tell me, love of my life, is Delszaki Li still among your otherworldly friends?"

Uh, my, yes.

"Then tell him your husband said that he's to explain himself at once and stop worrying you, precious pearl of psychic perception."

Karina giggled. "Oh, Hafiz, you are so cute when you're indignant. I couldn't say that to Mr. Li. But I will mention that you are concerned, too, and see if he can offer enlightenment. I must meditate in solitude to concentrate my energies. Now, where is that twenty-carat amethyst crystal you gave me?"

"I believe you loaned it to the physician to try to communicate with his bacterial specimens, my love."

"So I did. Well, I'll simply have to borrow it back. I must have the proper tools of my profession, after all. Can you manage without me for a while, beloved?"

"Each moment will be as a dagger in my heart, sweet and succulent spouse, but I will valiantly endure."

They kissed and she departed.

To the communications officer, Hafiz said, "Please alert Maganos Base to have my nephew standing by when we arrive."

A moment later the Maganos communications officer said in the high and low cracking voice of a boy going through puberty, which he no doubt was since the moon was now a training facility for youngsters and the trainees provided the personnel for almost every phase of the operation, "Shahrazad, this is Maganos Base. We weren't expecting Mr. Harakamian!"

"We're aware of that, Maganos Base. That's why Mr. Harakamian wishes to speak to his nephew. Can you contact him please and put him on screen?"

"I'll try, Shahrazad. Just a tic."

But the face that appeared on the comscreen was not Rafik's but Calum Baird's. Hafiz placed himself in front of the communications officer so that his own face and voice would appear on Baird's screen.

"Ah, senior and ugliest wife of my nephew, how goes it?" Hafiz asked, delighting to see the color rise above Baird's red beard at the mention of their first meeting, when Baird, as well as Acorna, had worn veils and a long gown to promote the idea that Rafik had become one of the fundamentalist polygamist Neo-Hadathians.

"Not so bad, oh robber baron who makes All Baba's forty thieves look like rank amateurs," Baird responded. "But I regret to tell you that Rafik had to go to Rushima. Dr. Hoa had a spot of trouble he had to discuss with him."

"In that case, don't wait up for us, my friend. We will go to Rushima instead for I must speak with my nephew personally. Ah-Baird?"

"Yes?"

"How is my nephew's junior wife? Has anyone heard from her or the other members of the harem?"

At first Baird looked puzzled and then he said, carefully, "We last heard from them as they were leaving this quadrant, about twenty days ago. They were all well and uh-looking forward to being united with their families."

"I see. And Baird?"

"Yes?"

"Your last cruise with the junior wife-would your plans have brought you to the destination you wished? Did the other harem members give you a clue?"

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact, they did. We would have come within-uh-the anteroom of the seraglio, so to speak. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. Just curious. A small wager I had with my own navigator. Nothing of any importance."

"Right," Baird said, in a tone that clearly meant "pull the other one."

"Shahrazad out," Hafiz said cheerfully.

"Have a nice voyage," Baird replied sweetly and with an exaggeratedly effeminate wiggle of his fingers. His bushy eyebrows were twisted with concern, however, and Hafiz knew that the Caledonian understood something of the nature of the business the Shahrazad had with Rafik.

The Condor contained certain modifications that were not purely born of mechanical necessity. A bank of multifrequency scanners was arrayed directly in front on the control console. Next to the cargo, these scanners were the most important item contained on the ship, aside from the captain and first mate.

Becker was constantly keeping a weather eye and ear open for distress signals, blips where there shouldn't be blips, homing beacons, any sort of indication that some vessel, station, planetoid, or whatever might now be or have been in trouble in the recent past. Of course, Becker had a first aid kit and was perfectly willing to assist survivors if necessary, but his interest was not solely humanitarian -or alienatarian, as the case might be. He simply wanted to know where trouble had been, where vessels or settlements might be abandoned, leaving behind equipment and other good stuff for an enterprising scavenger. His scanning devices were aided by other sensors that detected the physical presence of largish items in the Condor's vicinity and, just as usefully, detected the absence of the usual detritus, an indication that one of the useful holes or folds in space might be at hand. While some of these things could be plotted, others sometimes occurred where they never had before. "Space moths," Becker Senior had postulated. "Damn space moths been chewin' in this sector again. Shall we see where this one goes, boy?"

It wasn't that it hadn't ever occurred to Theophilus Becker that he might guide the Condor into one of these little byways in space that made life jolly for astrophysicists and never find his way out. It was that neither he nor Jonas usually had an actual schedule or anything so he felt free to poke around. While it was certainly possible they could become lost in infinity, as the old vids were always postulating, the senior Becker held the opinion that there was a pattern and a predictability to these wrinkles in the space/time continuum within a given area. It was an opinion he hadn't

shared with much of anyone but Jonas, who figured what was good enough for Dad was good enough for him and took the same cavalier attitude toward wormholes and such, new or used.

Normally he didn't go out of his way to pay these instruments undue attention as long as they were working. If he didn't notice, RK often did and would sit staring pointedly at one screen or another until Becker did likewise.

But he was a little nervous about being followed by Kisia Manjari and company and also was on the lookout to restock the inventory as soon as possible.

As soon as he had cleared Kezdet and her moons, he turned his attention to the scanners. He hadn't expected to be sought real soon, actually, but one of the short-range scanners was keeping up a continuous, pulsing bleep. It had to be close, but he couldn't see its source on any of the screens.

"Well, doggone it anyway," he said, "Where are you, little bleep?"

It beeped again. Still nothing on the screen though he looked fast, as if he was expecting the visual manifestation of the sound to be playing peekaboo with him.

By the time the Condor had cleared Kezdet's solar system and warped through a couple of wormholes, Becker was getting pretty tired of the beep. He also noticed that RK wasn't hanging out on deck much any more. When they were back to cruising through what was usually calm empty space, Becker went below decks with a can of fish he'd picked up on Kezdet before hitting the pleasure house, intending that RK should be able to take it as an offering to his temporary mate. There was quite a bit of time before the Condor hit the next "black water," as Theophilus Becker liked to refer to the pleated, holey portions of space -where he found his best shortcuts. "RK? Hey, cat! Where the hell are you?"

He finally found the cat by the smell and the noise. Since acquiring the sack of horns, Becker hadn't smelted RK's particular perfume but right now C-deck reeked of it. Which reminded him that RK was once more a fully functional male cat with the begetting capabilities and prerogatives thereof, supposing there had been a lady cat who was interested.

Which fortunately there wasn't. Becker didn't even want to think of a ship with a whole bunch of little Roadkill clones playing hide and seek through the cargo.

Mean-while, if the cat was going to stink stuff up, Becker would just have to wear nose plugs or carry a hanky with something pleasanter to counter the stench-garlic maybe. If it worked with vampires, maybe it would work with cats.

It better, because Roadkill was damn sure going to stay fully equipped. No way was Becker going to go through that again. It made his two formerly missing and now mostly restored fingers ache just thinking about it.

Finally, the stink led him to the cat, claws scrabbling at the side of the cargo hold that opened to the outside. This hold had been the airlock of the hatch of an ancient model of Antirean space craft, and it fit well into a hole Becker had to fill during one of his impromptu redesigning sessions of the Condor.

"Mrrrow!" RK said, looking up at Becker as if to say, "It's about time you got here, you damn fool. Help me out with this, huh?"

Becker had rigged a bin-style entry door to the hold that opened outward. The door was totally slimed with RK's personal signature testosterone blend.

"Okay, cat, why didn't you say so before?" Becker asked, but realized he had been busy at the controls when he wasn't sleeping. Besides which, RK was used to keeping his own counsel. He knew how to get Becker's attention when he wanted it. He had obviously just preferred to work on his own so far. Becker had to admit that he couldn't have improved on the job RK had done on the cargo hold door. It was well and truly slimed—a piece of feline artwork in its own way. Becker had to find a piece of cloth to wipe off the mess before he could punch the button that opened the hold.

The hold door fell open, rather than sliding. And lying on the inside of it was what looked like a dead man.

A familiar-looking dead man—and not just familiar looking. Becker knew who the fellow was from the torn and stinky pant leg.

"No wonder you were carrying on," Becker said aloud to Roadkill. "It's your old scratching post, hitching an unauthorized ride."

He put his hands under the android's armpits and started hauling him out of the cargo hold. There was a pulse. Funny. These older models didn't have a true circulatory system. There was something strangely familiar about that pulse though, and as soon as Becker hauled the guy back to the command deck and heard the little steady bleep again, he knew what it was.

"Well, RK, here's our little homing pigeon, giving away our position with every beat of his heavy metal heart. Shee-it. I wonder if you can hear this thing through wormholes?"

Kisia Manjari pitched a fit when she saw what had become of her mechanoid henchmen. "He killed them!" she told her uncle. "Smashed them with his junk then took off with one of them stole it. Stole my KEN unit! He can't get away with that—oh, no."

"Certainly not, my dear," Uncle Edacki said smoothly. He could see the scene in question on her portable comscreen.

"Most unwise of him indeed."

"I wonder why KEN640 doesn't answer when I try to reach him," Kisia said. "He is still operational, according to his sonid button. He should answer and obey my command to kill the junk man and bring his ship back here."

"Hmmm, perhaps," Uncle Edacki said. "But, Kisia darling, are you sure that would be the best use of this fortuitous situation?"

"What do you mean fortuitous? They were my units! Now who will help me assemble my fleet?"

"I'll get you some others. But for the time being, you say you are still receiving the signal from 640's sonid, and 640 is presumed to be with Becker in his craft going-where? To their next destination. Which will be-where do you suppose?"

"Back to where he found the horns?" she asked, the light dawning finally.

"And the sonid signal, with its tiny trail of electrons" "Will let me track him and everything!" Kisia said, very excited. "Oh, Uncle, may I?"

"Yes, sweetie. You are doing so well today-first finding the horns, then cleverly arranging for your unit to be captured so we can track Becker by the signal. Just for that you may handpick a crew and take command of the MQcu) in order to follow Becker's trail."

"Oh, Uncle, you are the best!" "Nonsense, my dear, you've earned the privilege." Edacki Ganoosh signed off with a feeling of satisfaction at a job well done. He would have his horns one way or the other now, both with Kisia tracking her android to find Becker's source, and then there was the little matter of sending the Pandora to follow a similar sonid implanted in certain key employees-such as Yasmin, who was even now emitting her signal from her hiding place aboard the Shahrazad.

Honestly, the things a girl had to do to get out of jail. Confronting her almost-ex-husband wasn't so bad-there had always been a better-than-average chance he might try to buy her off, if she had been able to act sad enough about poor dead Tapha. Well, she hadn't. Tapha was no great loss to anyone. And really, she would have almost paid for the opportunity to see Hafiz's face when he realized what the powdered horn was. That made up for all the cracks about her acting and dancing ability when they were married.

Actually, what with being supplied all the security codes she didn't already know, it had been no trouble to smuggle herself aboard the Shahrazad, like her bosses told her. It wasn't that Yasmin wasn't perfectly comfortable either, even though she felt that as Hafiz's senior wife she should have been occupying the master suite instead of the quarters generally assigned to the pedicunst. She chose those herself because, as the pedicurist was one of the lesser servants, her quarters were farthest away from those of the family and other crew members. Here Yasmin could be as inconspicuous as a little mousie while all the time the transmitters she would sprinkle about the Shahrazad could send signals back to her bosses so they could monitor its movement.

But what got to Yasmin was that it was just too, too cruel of the bosses to make her go along on a "honeymoon trip" with Hafiz and that big cow he had married, thinking to replace her.

Never mind. She'd fix the wedded bliss stuff. It had never been all that blissful for her. All those cracks Hafiz had made about which end she thought with, all that worry about trying to keep her looks so her rich husband wouldn't get ideas. Keep her looks, hah! To think of all the dieting she had done to keep her shape and here he was with that-that-rhino-whale in purple robes!

So even though she was supposed to keep a low profile and let the Shahrazad lead her bosses to the unicorn people planet, where the bosses would then put her in charge of punishing Hafiz and his new playmate, Yasmin couldn't resist playing a few little tricks. Well, if a girl couldn't turn a few tricks, the least she could do was play some, huh?

She had, of course, bugged the boudoir. She really couldn't imagine failing to do so. It was a standard security measure in the brothels. Kept the girls from cheating by keeping tips for themselves, or the customers from becoming enamored with a particular girl and trying to run off with her.

She was delighted, on hearing the pillow talk between her husband and his new "wife," that neither of them had told the other about their encounters with her. These little deceptions on their part opened many exciting possibilities for troublemaking on hers.

Her familiarity with Hafiz's tastes and habits helped, as well as Karma's penchant for "meditation" and believing her superstitious nonsense about dreams and communication from the dead, that sort of thing.

Yasmin might not be a brain but she was a very practical woman, in her own way, with no sentiment in her makeup. She believed in the physical, and in what she could buy and sell. If anybody thought she was jealous of Hafiz's new bride, or even of the lap of luxury Karina had fallen into, they should just think again. After all, she, Yasmin, had abandoned all of that to follow her personal star.

But she thought it was really insulting that Hafiz had been able to forget her, to replace her with someone he actually claimed to like better! She, Yasmin, was the unforgettable beauty, the succubus who haunted men's dreams. How dare another woman think she could fill Yasmin's place in Hafiz's bed!

Of course, despite her considerable premarital experience, Yasmin had been little more than a gifted amateur when she married Hafiz compared to what she knew now, but she couldn't imagine how, after tasting her own charms, Hafiz could so much as bear to look at that fat, ugly, insipid cow who was not fit to fill Yasmin's douche bag!

When Karina returned to her "meditation chamber" to consult her spirit guides, as she had done before, Yasmin hovered on the floor above, listening through the replicator that was connected in the same spot on the wall through both levels. She'd discovered how easy it was to hear Karina's spiritual rantings quite by accident while planting one of the transmitters in the replicator shortly after the journey began.

Karina tended to "meditate" out loud when nobody was around.

"Yoo hoo, Mr. Li! It is I, Karina, your dear friend and faithful follower. I ask you to manifest answers for me. Hafiz that's my husband, you know him, Hafiz Harakamian, you did business together in life? He wishes to know what you would have us do. You see, Mr. Li, I keep getting this image of you looking back over your shoulder. Are you disturbed, gentle spirit? Are you disoriented by this departure from your home planet? Or-" The fat woman paused and her voice quavered as she asked, "Are you trying to warn us somehow?"

Yasmin couldn't think of any reply to that so she waited. And waited.

So did Karina until she said finally, "Mr. Li, you know you can tell me. Come on, what is it that's troubling you? Funny, but I can't even get an image. It's as if there is some sort of interference in the ether. Oh well, perhaps you're not feeling very sociable today. Hmm. Are there any other spirit guides who wish to make contact? I am here to help you."



Yasmin's lips curled back in a snarl that would have earned her a severe scolding from her cosmetic surgeon for making unsightly creases in his work. While it was true that while in a vertical position, Yasmin was not an imaginative woman, she was after all an entertainer of sorts and as such had a highly developed flair for the dramatic. She wasn't about to pass up an opening like this one.

Wishing she had the gauzy veils she had danced with and discarded in one other old numbers, the better to haunt Karina with, she settled for letting her low voice rumble through the replicator. "Beeewaarre ..." she said, trying to sound all dead and ghostly.

"Well, yes," Karina said. "I do realize that I should beware of a great many things. I'm afraid you'll have to be a more specific er-entity. Can you tell me who you are? I've never encountered a haunted replicator before."

Yasmin was far too clever to give her own name, of course, especially since she had, very much in the flesh, confronted Karina, who nevertheless had failed thus far to mention the visitation to Hafiz. From that omission, Yasmin gathered that she must have been mistaken for one of Karina's less corporeal acquaintances. The fat idiot thought she was a ghost.

Yasmin quickly stripped her right ring finger of the four rings she had piled on top of the dinky gold wedding band in the shape of a snake Hafiz had bought for her and sent the wedding band down the replicator chute. On the inside of the ring was her name entwined with Hafiz's, and their wedding date. Yasmin hated to let go of even that insignificant amount of gold, but it would almost be worth Karina's weight in gold to see the stupid sows complacency shaken up.

Yasmin saw Karina's plump fingers with the medium amethyst ring surrounded by moonstones scrabble in the replicator bale and remove the ring. "Uh, thanks," she said. "A serpent-how, uh, emblematic of mother goddess, in a creepy crawly sort of way. But I am puzzled, oh spirit. I don't see what it has to do with anything."

Yasmin was trying to form a suitably cryptic clue, something to imply that Hafiz had murdered her and maybe a whole harem of other girls and kept their bodies locked in a subcellar someplace. Something like that to really put a scare into the smug little wifey. But before she could let out with so much as another ghostly moan, somebody knocked at the door. "Madame Harakamian, please join the master on the bridge and secure yourself for landing."

"Hearing and obeying," Karina declared.

Yasmin made haste to secure herself for landing as well. It would be very helpful if the lot of them left the ship so that she could have an opportunity to plant additional monitors throughout. She was having a certain amount of remorse about the ring now-gold was gold after all-but the stupid slut would probably lay it down somewhere soon and Yasmin would be able to retrieve it.

The Rushiman administrator, who was deep in negotiations with Rafik Harakamian, insisted on throwing a banquet for Rafik's uncle and his new bride. Hafiz had been instrumental in gathering the forces which helped Rushima repel the invasion of the Khieevi and it had been his ward, Rafik's "niece," who had purified the putrid waters of the planet and ultimately arranged for Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa, the meteorologist turned weather manipulation wizard, to help heal the planet's climate.

That same climate had been damaged by Dr. Hoa's techniques, while the man was being coerced by another group foiled by Harakamian's niece. So it was for his connections, as well as his wealth and power, that Hafiz was made welcome on Rushima, and Hafiz, with his typical perspicacity, understood this distinction. He was uncharacteristically grateful, particularly in view of the possible threat to his ward, of whom he was as fond as he was capable of being.

His business with Rafik was of the first priority, however, and since he did not wish to discuss it in front of Karina, he had, with the complicity of the captain and his Rushiman relatives, made certain arrangements to keep his beloved busy while he was otherwise engaged.

Therefore, when they disembarked, Hafiz gave the captain a wink and the captain addressed Karina. "Wise and enlightened mistress, during your meditations I was in contact with my sister, who has settled here on this isolated world. The people here are in much need of spiritual guidance and insight. My sister, on behalf of a delegation of the particularly troubled, hoped perhaps that you would be so beneficent as to share your gifts with those most in need."

"Certainly, Captain, I would be happy to," Karina replied with a gracious nod of her head and a queenly wave at the ragtag populace assembled to greet them. "And since this is the request of a family member of yours, I will happily provide my services at a very great discount."

"Barter is the usual method of exchange here, madam," the captain said.

"Hmmm," Karina said. In the old days, when she travelled to fairs and festivals throughout her home world, she had acquired many small bits of jewelry and stained glass doodads, hand-carved salad forks and once, a Mytherian fang-cleaning device, in exchange for readings. Now that she was a person of considerable means, these things would be more of a liability than an asset to her well-ordered home.

"Very well, then. Captain, I'll tell you what. Suppose you arrange the means of payment. What I cannot use, because we are traveling and our space is somewhat limited at the moment, perhaps we can take credit for on future exchanges with these people. I have been given to understand that due to the turmoil caused by the recent wars, the crops have not been particularly plentiful. I would not wish to take food from someone's children at this time." And of course, at a later time, the pickings would no doubt be better.

"My lady is gracious, as always," the captain said. "I shall be happy to perform this task for my lady and for my sister's adopted people."

First, however, Rafik, quick and graceful as ever, sprang forward to plant a kiss on each of Karina's cheeks and each of his uncle's. Mercy Kendoro was beside him and she greeted Hafiz and Karina a bit more sedately. She was not as yet one of the family but Hafiz thought she would make a fine addition. Broad hips, good for making children. And rather lovely, in an otherwise delicate sort of way, and very clever, too. Rafik was choosing his wife far more intelligently than Hafiz himself had the first time, at least. Hafiz noted this with relief as it was another sign of the boy's suitability for the responsibility of leading the House of Harakamian.

Karina and the captain separated from the group to greet the captain's sister, who had been briefed ahead of time, and her fellow seekers of enlightenment. The remainder of the crew was invited to the community hall at Rushima's chief settlement and Hafiz gestured that they should accept. After all, this trip was from all indications to be a fairly long one and who knew when another

opportunity for shore leave might arise? They were to return in time for refueling and taking aboard a few more provisions to top off the ample quantities loaded aboard at Laboue.

When he could be sure they were alone, Hafiz filled Rafik in on the visit from Yasmin.

He did not, of course, come straight to the point, but told the story in proper narrative fashion, building suspense so that when he spread his hands in alarm to show his reaction to the powder Yasmin had blown in his face and how he had lost consciousness, Rafik, used to drama as he was, widened his eyes with alarm.

"I presume there is some point to this. Uncle, to drive you from your home and honeymoon and into space other than a visit by your former wife who wished you to sleep?" Rafik asked.

"Nephew, has the responsibility I have laid upon your shoulders caused you to become impatient and rude? I am coming to it, I am coming to it, and all shall be made clear. You see, I had the powder analyzed. In addition to the sleeping powder there was powdered horn-and the powder, as it touched an injury on one of the technicians analyzing it, healed that injury." Hafiz let the sentence hang in the air, where it would soak into his nephew's brain like rain into thirsty soil. "Linyaari horn? But how did they get it?" "Alas, Yasmin was not disposed to disclose such information, though had she not disappeared by the time I awakened, I assure you I could have persuaded her otherwise."

Rafik went quite pale for someone whose usual skin color was the same golden tan as Hafiz's. "Acorna?"

Hafiz shook his head, a small, careful gesture. He could see the horror and fury building in his nephew's eyes. "We do not know that, Rafik. The universe is wide-it could have come from anyplace. But just in case, Karina and I are making a social call upon Acorna's newfound kinsmen. We will use the charts prepared by Calum Baird and Acorna for their journey. Once we are sure all is well, we shall return."

"And if all is not well? " Rafik asked. "I should go with you."

Hafiz shook his head and waved both hands in negation. "No, no, no, no, my nephew who is like a son to me, you are my heir, the new head of my household. Think of the many enterprises that would fail, the people who would lose their employment, the joy of our enemies, if both of us should perish. You are needed here. If there is a need, we will signal you."

"How? No one here has ever received a transmission from Acorna's home world. It is quite probable that our transmitters and other devices cannot penetrate the depths of space within which the Lmyaari planet is located."

Hafiz shrugged. "True, it is possible. But trust me, I will think of something. I was sailing among the stars long before your birth, puppy. I am a resourceful man."

"Also true," Rafik said. "But-"

"My son, is it not written in the Three Books that however small and randomly picked the pebble, if the aim is true and the intention firm, it may yet strike its mark?"

"Still, Uncle, I would feel better if you took an army of other pebbles with you."

"And if all is well with Acorna and the Linyaari? Do you think these people who so prize their privacy would welcome an army? Perhaps one old man and his nubile bride, perhaps even the crew of their ship, but an army? Do I remember incorrectly that these are people so peaceful they would not even fight the horrible Khieevi?"

Rafik smiled and laid his hand on his uncles shoulder. "Maybe I am wrong when I remember that an elder relative of mine was so frightened by clips of these same Khieevi that he would not leave his compound, much less go face them without an army behind him. Are you mellowing as you age. Uncle Hafiz?"

Hafiz shrugged and scratched his chin. "Perhaps. Or it could be that I do not think these Khieevi, horrors that they are, would have given Yasmin the horn powder without taking parts of Yasmin in return. Therefore I do not feel it is Khieevi with whom we are dealing.

"And I am also of the opinion that anyone less savage than the Khieevi can be bought off. And as my dear Karina does not seem to sense the possible harm to Acorna, I see this journey as both a way to reassure myself and her other adopted relatives of our girl's safety and as a splendid opportunity for commerce. One which I would not have sullied by the presence of an army, for who knows to whom each individual soldier owes loyalty? No, my son, this pebble must fly alone-in a manner of speaking. But my aim is as true as the charts drawn up by Acorna and your ugly senior wife, and my intentions, though more diversified than those of which the Three Books speak, are nonetheless pure. I remain convinced this is the best course of action. Karina and I and our handpicked staff will go alone. We will go cloaked and shielded, of course, and if we find danger, we will return for assistance."

Rafik continued to frown and Hafiz saw with amazement that it was not only Acorna he worried about but his wily Uncle Hafiz, who had chosen his nephew over his son not only because the son had stupidly gotten himself killed but because the nephew was the only family member who could outsmart him.

It brought a brief sentimental tear to Hafiz's eye, which he quickly blinked away as an unproductive waste of moisture. Perhaps he was mellowing. Ah well, that was what a new marriage and retirement were for. But now was not the time to relax his vigilance or dull his wit. He clapped Rafik on the back. "Come, my son, let us see how your new aunt fares at reading the fortunes of these farmers."

Karina had done readings on credit for four mangy chickens, a basket of half-spoiled assorted fruit, a primitive handmade wooden musical instrument whose tone much resembled that of a squealing pig, the squealing pig that resembled the musical instrument, and a set of tea towels embroidered with the patches of the various branches of the Federation service that formed the career path of the embroiderer, who was a burly bearded six-foot-two tractor mechanic with hair the color of butter and eyes like razors.

"Please," Karina said wearily to the captain. "I grow fatigued with the power of my visions. No more, please, no more."

"Just one, Madame Harakamian, oh please, just one," begged a young boy leading what appeared to be a very elderly and crippled individual who looked as if what was left of her hair had never made

the acquaintance of shampoo. "My granny sorely needs to see you, ma'am. She's been waitin' on you for weeks and weeks. I'm sorry if we're late, but she has a mighty hard time gettin' around."

"Oh, come now!" Karina said, snapping just a teensy bit. She had been enjoying getting used to leisure and luxury, and these locals had put her through a very grueling day for a few pounds of garbage she would have had to have been very hungry to eat even at her poorest. "How could she have been expecting me for weeks and weeks? My husband and I decided on our journey quite suddenly, made first contact with anyone outside of our own staff only a few days ago, and have not actually been traveling for weeks and weeks."

"Nonetheless, ma'am, she was expectin' you. Granny has her ways, she has. Now then. Granny, sit a spell and visit with the purty lady."

Karina paused. He did seem a very bright boy, after all, and with excellent taste and eyesight, so she gestured to the chair vacated by the last seeker of enlightenment and the boy helped the crone be seated.

"Now then, Madame," Karina began, shrewdly guessing that the old lady probably didn't want to know when she was going to find her true love, "can I put you in touch with some departed soul of whose happiness you wish to be assured?"

The old woman fixed her with one clouded eye and one quite bright green one and said in an insultingly mocking voice, "No, Missus, you cain't put me in touch with some dead person. I can do that for my own self if I've a mind to."

Where do these people come up with their atrocious accents? Most of them had been required to have quite good educations before being allowed to settle here not so very long ago. And how did this woman get so old. Surely the original settlers would have had better genetic material than that!

The old woman, as if reading her mind, cackled at her. "No genes gonna keep me from lookin' old when I'm a hunnert and three years old, Missus. Kept me from bein' fat earlier on though. Looks good on you though, if I do say so, and pleases that husband of yours. Oh, good, here he is now. He can hear what I have to say to you, too."

Karina was glad for Hafiz's presence as he came to stand behind her, taking one other hands in his.

"If you don't wish me to contact the departed for you, then what is it you wish?" Karina asked very sweetly, considering.

"I wish you'd quit jawin' and let me tell you what I come to say. I want to put you in touch with the living, girly-girl. I reckon as how you and your man are off to help that horny headed gal come to save us from them buggers awhile back. It's your man been in touch with his dead, only she weren't dead, and she's been in touch with you, too."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"You got yourself a new golden ring in the shape of a pie'^on'iu serpent, ain't you?"

Karina dug in her pocket and pulled out the ring.

"Look inside of it, you darn fool."

Hafiz groaned and tried to snatch the ring away but, failing, covered the lower half of his face with one hand.

"Hafiz and Yasmin Forever Entwined," was inscribed on the inside of the band.

"A wedding ring?" Karina asked.

Hafiz groaned again. "Yes, beloved. I can explain, my heart."

Karina turned back to the place where the old woman and her grandson had been. The chair was empty, the table vacant. She looked at Hafiz, then, truly baffled.

"But-how did you-where did she go?" Karina asked Hafiz and the captain.

"Where did who go, madam?" the captain asked. "The golden-aged woman who was just here? She and her grandson?"

"I saw no one like that, Madame Harakamian," the captain said.

His sister replied, "Machinist Johansson was your last reading, Madame. There's been no one here until Mr. Harakamian arrived."

Karina looked from one of them to the other. "You're wrong. There was a young boy and a very old woman just here. She said she was one hundred and three years old."

The sister exchanged looks with a couple of the other people who had already had readings. "It couldn't be."

"Couldn't be who?" Karina demanded. "Who was she? How did she know about the ring? Where did she go?"

It didn't occur to her that, as the psychic reader in the room, perhaps she should not have had to ask.

The captain's sister looked abashed. "I can't say for sure, Madame, but the only person ever did live here by that description was old Alison Ward as used to run the herb farm."

"Well, yes, Naima, but her grandson died in that avalanche years and years before old Alison passed on."

"Passed on?" Karina asked. "I'm sorry, but she was right here, sitting in this chair."

"Oh, old Alison will do that from time to time if she reckons there's something you need to know. Don't let it upset you none, ma'am," a rawboned farmer said gently. "It's just her way."

While the locals were all saying things like "you can't keep a good woman down," and "Alison always did have to get her two cents' worth in," they all nevertheless continued steadfastly to deny having seen the crone or her grandson. Karina, who found she was far more disturbed than she

expected to be at having once more encountered what was apparently a quite genuine apparition, turned to Hafiz.

"But you saw her, didn't you, darling?"

Hafiz shook his head slowly, and pointed to the ring. "I do, however, behold that band, the very one I gave to my first wife, who up until recently I fondly believed to be dead. Tell me, Karina, where did you get it, and when, and why did you not mention it to me?"

There ensued a heated discussion-their first argument! as to why neither of them had told the other about Yasmin. Fortunately, Hafiz was not so distraught by his current wife's omission to mention encountering his first wife that he neglected to order the ship searched from stem to stern.

Yasmin, hardly the sort to trouble herself to escape through any possible handy ventilation systems, emerged, roughly escorted by three crew members and four or five enthusiastic locals. She smoothed her skirts against her thighs and glared at them defiantly.

"Get your hands off my husband, you fat bitch," she said to Karina.

Hafiz thundered, "All bear witness! Yasmin, I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you! There! Now, what were you doing aboard the Shahrazal and where did you get that powder you blew into my face?"

"Yeah, honey, what's the matter?" Karina asked in a voice she hadn't used since middle school. "Didn't you have the price of a flitter ticket? Is that why you stowed away?"

"I regret only that we did not discover your presence aboard before we landed," Hafiz said. "The customary punishment for stowaways is spacing. I would have greatly enjoyed pushing you through the lock with my own two hands."

"Bully!" Yasmin said. "You'll get yours when my friends catch up with you."

"Where did you get the powdered horn you blew in my face, daughter of evil but idiotic ifrits?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," Yasmin said.

Hafiz turned politely to the planet's administrator and asked, "Have you a very dull axe, like the one you use to butcher wood for your fires, perhaps?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Harakamian."

While the administrator was sending for the required implement, Hafiz whispered to Rafik, "Already I regret the necessity for us to arrive unarmed among Acorna's people, to demonstrate respect for their customs and possibly their religious beliefs, you understand."

"Under these circumstances, I can understand that regret, Uncle," Rafik said.

"Alas, I was unaware of Yasmin's presence and her onboard activities. There are other ways to defend oneself than conventional weapons, of course. As you'll see when they bring me that axe. Nonetheless, I shall have to reevaluate our internal defenses in light of this breach of security."

When the axe arrived, it was handed to Hafiz, who bowed graciously to acknowledge the generosity of the person or persons who lent it to him. To the administrator he said, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, "I hope you have no quaint native customs forbidding the execution of criminals? I assure you, my former wife has been convicted on many counts of many heinous crimes."

"No, sir. Out this far from civilization, we don't have the luxury of bein' overly forgiving. You just go right ahead, sir."

Karina saw her husband accept the axe. He nodded to the captain and Johansson, who grabbed Yasmin's arms and maneuvered her into position, her neck exposed and pressed against a handy tree trunk.

Karina held her breath. She could not believe he would do this without recourse to judge and jury.

The crew and the settlers looked extremely calm about the matter, however.

Hafiz took in a deep breath and swung the axe back over his head.

Yasmin, who had known him in his younger and more impetuous years, did not take the situation at all calmly. "Wait! Stop! You can't do this!"

Hafiz lowered the axe and smiled. "Rest assured, seed of a syphilitic she-camel, that I can, and I shall unless you answer my questions."

"I don't know where the powder came from," she lied. "The lawyer who had me released from prison gave it to me. He told me to give it to you and then follow you."

"Follow me?"

"Well, hide myself on your ship." She reached into her décolletage and pulled forth what looked like a tiny jewel. "I've been wearing this, you see. So they could follow you."

"Follow me why?"

"I don't know-robbery, I guess." Hafiz raised the axe again and Yasmin squealed. "Aiyee! I-I don't think they know where the horn powder came from either. They wanted you to lead the way to the unicorn girl."

"Aha!" This made sense to him. They were business rivals, these patrons of his former wife, and wanted to make contact with the Linyaan for nefarious reasons. They hoped Hafiz would lead them to Acorna's people. That made very good sense.

"Administrator, perhaps you need a spare field hand," he said. "If you keep this one in chains, she may be useful to you. But keep her among women only. If she is left alone with men she will be on her back in the twinkling of an eye."



Yasmin spat at him but was led off to the detention cell, to be fitted for chain jewelry. Karina called after her, "Just think of how much karmic clearing you'll be doing, dear! It will stand you in such good stead in your next incarnation!"

"May it come quickly," Hafiz growled. He ordered the ship swept for further transmitters and four more were discovered.

Then the Harakamians and their crew turned their attention to the celebration being held in their honor. Karina wore something even more floaty and lavender and silver than usual and Hafiz thought he had never seen her looking more radiant. "You are a precious pearl among women, my love," he told her. "Lesser females would have upbraided me for concealing a not quite-former marriage."

She dimpled at him. "Hafiz, you are so cute sometimes. Obviously you meant to divorce her-and you did, once you knew she wasn't dead. I am attuned to the secrets of the universe, you know," she said. Besides, the servants gossiped, comparing the current Mrs. Harakamian to the last one favorably, she was happy to hear. "I do know you'd been married before. I am only a little regretful for your sake that you chose someone with quite as many Pluto problems as that woman undoubtedly has. But then, we all have our lessons to learn, don't we?"

"Yes, my beloved."

Karina sighed and looked deeply into his eyes. "However, oh mountain of manhood, while you are not now a widower, or a bigamist, but instead have become a properly divorced man, you have nonetheless had your wicked way with me under the guise of a false marriage. I was never a legal wife and so now am only your concubine, your plaything, your-"

He looked back into her eyes, but his hands itched to make the contact more than visual. "A grave matter indeed, my sumptuous slave of scintillating salaciousness. One we should discuss immediately, perhaps, in our bower aboard the Shahrazadi"

"And shame me further before all of these good people?" she breathed, but took a step backward. "Oh, master, you are too cruel."

He snapped his fingers and the planet's administrator, Rafik, and the ship's captain all came running. "I wish to remarry my wife at once. Captain? Administrator? You will say the words."

"We're not on board at the moment, sir," the captain said. The administrator quickly stepped forward and said, "here is a ring"

Karina slipped off her amythest wedding ring and gave it to the man, who said, "By the power vested in me, I pronounce you man and wife."

"So it has been said, so it will be written, so let it be done," Hafiz said. "You are satisfied, my flower of feminine virtue?" "Not yet," she breathed and gave him a wink worthy of Yasmin during their heated youth. "But I expect I will be when we return to the ship."

Hafiz responded by kissing her hand repeatedly, his kisses going higher and higher, up her sleeve and onto her shoulders, portaging the wisp of fabric that covered the shoulder until he ended at her neck, at which time they were called to dinner.

The community hall was not quite large enough for all of the settlers who came from miles around to enjoy the party, so tables were set up outdoors. The weather was ideal for such alfresco dining, thanks to the manipulations of Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa.

"Useful, this weather wizardry," Hafiz said, scratching his beard.

After a bit of preliminary table hopping, Hafiz, Karina, Mercy, and Rafik took one table, and were soon joined by Dr. Hoa and the planet's administrator. However, some matter or other required the administrator's attention and he was called away.

Dr. Hoa leaned in and spoke confidentially to the three members of the House of Harakamian. "I wish to go with you, Mr. and Mrs. Harakamian. My work is done here and indeed, I have repaired all of the damage I was forced to do while I was a prisoner aboard the Haven. My only wish now is to retire to a place where I will not be asked to exploit my discovery any further."

Before Hafiz could speak, Rafik raised his hand, palm out, to stop him, and said, "Uncle, I have known for some time of Dr. Hoa's wish to leave here for a place where he and his discovery will be safe. He wishes to go-where you are going, and regretted that he was not able to accompany our mutual friend there when the first opportunity arose." Rafik, of course, was deliberately employing vagueness and circumlocution in the event that the conversation was overheard. "Therefore, I took it upon myself to inform him of your destination."

"So long as he is the only one, nephew," Hafiz said with a nod to Dr. Hoa. A long journey with the man might provide Hafiz with the opportunity of convincing the doctor to allow the House of Harakamian to market some small portion of his enviable discovery. "Dr. Hoa is of course always welcome in my home, whether it be on land or in the cosmos." "You are too kind, sir."

"In fact, I have been pondering a certain dilemma that has occurred due to the tender sensitivities of my wife and me for the beliefs of our dear little Acorna and her people. Perhaps you will be able to advise me."

Dr. Hoa nodded, though he looked a little wary. Hafiz, however, felt certain that the simple homely solutions he was beginning to envision to his security problem would not be offensive to Dr. Hoa's beliefs, any more than they would be to those of Acorna's people.

As soon as the banquet was finished, they made their apologies and took off again. Dr. Hoa smuggling himself aboard with the crew to avoid embarrassing confrontations-or good-byes.

None of them were aware that the detectors used to find homing transmitters were unable to separate the signals given from the transmitter from those emitted by another similar device-such as a replicator.

Rocky Reamer and his children, shepherded by Khetala, arrived on Manganos moon base. Khetala had been concerned when she saw the children that they were leaving their home she was very big on children having a home, since she hadn't had one.

But Turi and Deeter fielded her careful questions about what they were leaving behind with questions about what lay ahead. They were tired of the nano-bug market, and had knocked around

the planet with Rocky since they were babies, living in a motley collection of used recreational vehicles tastefully outfitted as combination bedrooms and merchandise warehouses for the jewelry and rocks. They each brought with them their few changes of clothes, a couple of their favorite stones, and, for Rocky, his tool kit, and left the rest for the other traders to scavenge.

Rocky didn't care. Possessions came and went. His family was with him and they were going to be safe, and that was what mattered. Not only that, but he had been able to help Becker and was helping the Lady Acorna and her extended family, and he was sure that was the right thing. To be able to be safe and do the right thing was a terrific combination, as far as he was concerned. He breathed a lot easier once Kheti's little craft left the planet, and he and the kids got a big kick out of taking the trip off-planet, the first they could remember, together.

Jana, Chiura, and the other children Kheti had protected while in the mines had heard from the communications officer of the day that their friend was returning to the base. They rushed forward to meet her. Reamer's kids jumped up and down in excitement to see so many other children jumping up and down, even though they weren't quite sure what all the fuss was about.

Close on the heels of the former child slaves were Acorna's "uncles," Calum Baird and Declan Giloglie, accompanied by Judit Kendoro.

Giloglie and Reamer exchanged cautious nods, acknowledging their long-ago acquaintance in a geology class, and Khetala made introductions and explained the situation, then asked Reamer to produce the horn.

Reamer hesitated for a moment. "Do you really think-in front of all these kids-I mean, it's pretty serious and from what I've heard they look at Lady Acorna as some sort of goddess."

Kheti's hard brown face turned up at him and she said, "These kids, as you call them, have already lost most of their illusions. If Acorna is truly in danger, they will want to know and they will want to help in any way they can. If this horn belongs to her or any of the other Linyaari, someone is going to find that we're plenty adult enough to make them pay dearly for harming our friends."

So Reamer showed the horn and everyone looked. Some wanted to touch it and some put their hands behind their backs and looked frightened. One girl, Jana, began to cry softly.

"I remember when I'd been beaten in the mines so badly I could hardly move and Acorna touched my wounds with her horn and healed me -it was the first comfort I had had in years and years. This just can't be hers, Kheti. It just can't."

Calum Baird regarded Reamer suspiciously. "Did you bring this straight to Khetala for her to bring it here?"

"Yes, sir, I did. Becker was having trouble with a lady who seemed to want to rob him or kill him, so he and the cat took off."

"I guess that would explain why he didn't come to us himself. That and the fact that if he thought the horns were valuable he'd want to secure his source," Baird said. "Who was the lady? Did your friend say anything about going to see Hafiz Harakamian by any chance?"

"No, sir. The lady, and I use the term loosely-I'm sorry to be so judgmental but it's true-is about three nuggets shy of a payload. Her name is Kisia Manjari. Her father used to be a big shot."

"We know all about her and her father," Baird said shortly.

"Oh." Reamer blinked. "Oh, of course you do. You guys and Lady Acorna helped bring him down, didn't you? Well, anyway, Becker and the cat figured they should make themselves scarce but he didn't say anything about visiting Mr. Harakamian. He said he knew you guys, though, so maybe he met him through your partner, Rafik."

"It's possible," Baird said thoughtfully. "Laxmi, can you secure a channel for us to talk to Rafik? Uncle Hafiz was headed for Rushima. Let's see if he got there."

They were told that the Shahrazad had just left, but that a spy had been discovered onboard. When Rafik told them who it was, Gill let out a low whistle. About the time his cousin Tapha had been killed, Rafik had regaled his partners with a few stories about Tapha's dear departed mother, Uncle Hafiz's first wife.

"So she's still alive, huh? That whole family is amazingly hard to kill," Gill asked. "Well, Yasmin's interference probably explains the unexpected journey Hafiz and Karina are taking in the middle of their honeymoon."

"Oh yes," Rafik said. "My honored aunt blew some powder in Uncle's face that turned out to have ground Linyaari horn as part of its chemical composition. You can well imagine where he's going now."

"Yes, but do you think it's wise for the Shahrazad to go alone?" Calum asked.

Rafik repeated the conversation he had had with Hafiz, adding that Dr. Hoa had gone with the Harakamians.

When the transmission ended, Judit was shaking her head. "I don't like it. I just don't like it at all. Maybe an army isn't a good idea, but Hafiz and Dr. Hoa going together-it just sweetens the pot for unscrupulous people like the Pipers daughter." She gave Kisia Manjari's father the nickname the enslaved children had called him when he was still an unknown evil controlling their destinies on Kezdet.

A moment later, the communication with Rushima was reestablished and Mercy Kendoros face appeared on the screen. "Judit? I think it's about time we got in touch with our brother and the Starfarers, don't you think? If the Pipers daughter and some of his old network are able to penetrate even House Harakamian's defenses, we need to be thinking about security. Has anybody heard from Nadhari Kando?"

They continued talking about a lot of people, most of whom Reamer had only heard of, if that, in grave tones that suggested danger. It was way too heavy for Reamer. He'd done his job and brought the trouble to the attention of the people who should be able to fix it, and had managed to take himself and his kids out of harm's way. He didn't want to hear any more. He didn't want to know any more. He was a peaceful sort of guy who mostly minded his own business and let other people mind theirs.

All he wanted was a place to make his living and raise his kids without somebody trying to kill or imprison them. Security arrangements were best left to people who enjoyed being on red alert all the time. He personally was not one of them.

He drifted to the back of the throng of adults and children crowded around the comscreen. A boy too small to see over the heads of the others admired Reamer's belt buckle, which he was at eye level with.

"That's beautiful, mister. What's the stone?"

"Turquoise. Pretty rare now."

"I like the frame you put it in. Is that metal silver?"

"Yeah. I made it myself."

"Wow! I wish I could do that."

Reamer shrugged. "It's not that hard. I brought my tools and a few supplies with me. Want me to teach you how? "

"Boy, do I! I'd love to make something like that with an acornite in the middle. It would make me feel somehow-you know, closer to her."

And so Reamer and his kids stayed on Manganos moon. Reamer began teaching the other kids more about looking for gemstones and how to set them in precious metals. Baird and Giloglie looked in once in a while and expressed the wish that they had time to learn.

Khetala stayed, too, at the insistence of the Kendoro sisters, who felt the younger woman would be in danger from Kisia Manjari's contacts if she returned to Kezdet right away.

And then one day, while Reamer was teaching laser torch work to the little boy who had first expressed an urge to learn metalwork, a new ship called for landing clearance on Manganos. The duty officer, Jana that day, called out to the rest of the people in the com center, community hall, school, and administration building rolled into one, that it was the Haven and someone had better fetch Mercy-Rafik and Mercy had returned from Rushima by that time-and Judit. Their brother was aboard.

Reamer went over to the com station to see what all the fuss was about as the Haven docked, the hatch opened, and out poured dozens of children of all ages, plus one guy a little younger than he was and another guy a whole lot older, and very familiar.

"Johnny Greene!" Reamer cried when he saw his old friend.

"Well, I'll be, if it isn't Rocky Reamer!" Greene responded, pumping his hand and clapping him on the back. "Who set off enough blasting powder to get you into space after all these years? I thought your feet were rooted dirtside." Reamer explained.

He had first met Greene through some rock hound friends, years ago, and Greene had had him make a piece for some lady he was interested in back then. They'd hit it off and since then had run

into each other off and on over the years when Greene was dirtside, where he liked to cruise the nano-bug markets, or needed another piece of jewelry, or had found some interesting mineral specimens he wanted to unload. Though up until now Reamer had been a wayfarer and Greene had been a spacefarer, their paths crossed often enough for them to know they liked each other. When you had similar interests and some of the same friends, it could be a pretty small universe.

"I didn't know you had any kids," Johnny said, when introduced to Turi and Deeter. "When did you get married?"

"Right after you were on Kezdet last," Reamer said, pretending to look only at the tops of his children's heads to hide the fast blinking he had to do when he talked about Almah. "We had a good life for a while there." He tried a grin and managed it. "Now Turi has to look after us."

"They're a handful, too," Turi said in a dry way that made Johnny laugh.

"But look who's talking," Reamer said, indicating the scores of young people and children that now swarmed into the building. "These all yours?"

"Not by a long shot," he said. "The Haven is a Starfarers ship. These kids are the survivors of the original crew. The ship took aboard some banditos pretending to be refugees, and they overpowered the adults in charge of the ship and spaced them. Fortunately, Calum there"-Johnny lifted his arm to wave at Baird who was crossing to meet him "and Acorna were able to help my buddy Markel liberate Dr. Hoa, who was being held by the bandits, and provide sufficient diversion that the kids of the original Starfarers' Council were able to regain control of the ship and do unto the bandits as they had done unto the Council. I was already aboard as tech crew and the bandits didn't bother me, so I was able to help Markel and the others when the opportunity came. Pal Kendoro also came aboard later to help out. He got a hail from his sisters and the whole ship felt like it was time for shore leave. So here we are."

Reamer shook his head, laughing. "Never a dull moment, eh, Johnny?"

"Not if I can help it. Though there were times when I wished life was a little less exciting, to tell you the truth," Greene admitted.

Later, in the dining hall, when the moon base community was taking its evening meal, the Starfarers Joined them. Adreziana, Pal Kendoro, Johnny Greene, his friend Markel, and other members of the Starfarers' Council sat at a table with Baird, Giloglie, Nadezda, and the Kendoro sisters. Normally the adult administrators spread themselves throughout the dining hall, making themselves available to hear any problems or complaints from the student/residents. But the kids were all aware by now of the Linyaari horns that had been found and everyone was anxious to make sure Acorna and her people were well and that no harm had come to them.

Reamer Joined the table at Baird and Gill's invitation. Khetala was there, too. He smiled at her as he sat down, but Kheti never seemed to smile. He thought that what had happened to her in the slave labor camps-and after-when she had been taken by the Didis must have been pretty horrible for her to be so grim.

The other kids from her camp had told him how she had protected them and taken heatings herself to save the younger, weaker ones. And then when she grew too big to work the mines, she'd been sold to the Didis. After Acorna freed her, she had gone right back to the house where she had been

brutalized and raped, to help the other girls there learn skills that would let them earn their livings without having to sell their bodies.

Reamer felt ashamed that he had never actually considered that the girls he had occasionally enjoyed in the past might not be enjoying themselves at all, or what might have been done to them to make them flexible and willing parties to any whim he happened to have. His face flushed to match his hair every time he saw Kheti now, or found her looking at him.

Turi and Deeter were at another table that had been joined by some of the younger Starfarers. His kids were listening wide-eyed to the adventures the travelers were telling about their most recent journeys. Poor kids. He had never had the wherewithal to take them off Kezdet. He had been so terrified, after Almah's death, of ending up unable to support them and having them taken from him and sent to the camps.

"Rocky, would you tell 'Ziana and Pal what you told us about the horn?" Judit Kendoro asked. The horn Reamer had brought with him was making the rounds of the table.

He repeated his story. The frowns of the Starfarer captain, her advisors, and the council members deepened as they listened.

"You say your uncle has gone to find Acorna alone?" 'Ziana asked Rafik. She was a bright young lady and not hard to look at. Reamer thought. He could see Pal Kendoro shared his opinion.

Rafik nodded. "It's a big ship but he took no extra weaponry with him, for fear of alienating the Linyaari. Of course, his people are all well trained at hand-to-hand combat, and the ship is equipped with certain long range weapons that would be almost impossible to disable. Still, for threats like the one posed by Yasmin or her employers, he doesn't have much protection. I could see that it worried him, but he told me he would deal with it." Rafik shrugged. "If anyone can take care of himself in a wide variety of circumstances, it's Hafiz."

"Still," 'Ziana said, "they should have some backup. Not to invade narhii-Vhiliinyar, of course, but just to make sure they don't come under attack."

"I wish Mr. Li's forces were still available to us," Pal said. "House of Harakamian has that kind of resource," Rafik said. "But I don't think Uncle would appreciate it if I undermined his decision by sending an armed escort after the Shahrazad."

"No," Mercy said. "It would be hard for Acorna's people to understand that an unarmed Harakamian arriving on their world followed by an armed House of Harakamian escort is not the same thing as an armed Harakamian. Besides which, the course mapped out by Calum and Acorna to narhii-Vhiliinyar is not common knowledge. It shouldn't be."

"We could go," 'Ziana said. "We're known to Acorna and the people who were with her. Even though we're armed, we've a shipload of children. We won't be suspected of trying to incite a war or coerce anyone, but we could still guard Rafik's uncle."

"We owe Acorna and all of you big time," Markel said. "Not only for helping us free ourselves from our parents' murderers, but for healing our wounded and helping us restore the good name of the Starfarers by taking Dr. Hoa to repair the damage his weather-control device had done while we were controlled by Nueva Fallona and her Palomellese gang."

Pal interjected, "That's true enough, Markel, but even though the current crew of the Haven has won a couple of battles and has some weapons, you're not an army or a police force. And as you yourself said, you are, when all is said and done, a ship whose crew is mostly comprised of children."

"That's to our advantage though," Ziana pointed out. "We're Starfarers. We go everywhere and everyone knows it. No one will suspect we're deliberately guarding the Shahrazad. They'll believe us if we say it was a chance encounter."

"I see that," Pal said, "But we're still not soldiers or police. Many of our number are still under twelve."

"Some of the fiercest fighters in history have been kids," Markel said.

Kheti had been very silent, but now she said, "It's good to know how to fight to protect yourself and others but Pal is right. We are none of us professional fighters and if Kisia Manjari and her uncle are using some of the same network her father once employed, they are very professional indeed."

"Training is all we need," Ziana said. "That and maybe a little advice. And the coordinates where you believe the Linyaari home world to be, Mr. Baird. We won't need your course." She glanced at Johnny Greene. "We Starfarers have our own methods of navigating."

The Council members were all nodding. Reamer could see Pal and the others were outnumbered. Pal sighed and said, "Okay, but if/w adviser could give one more piece of advice the one member of Mr. Li's staff who is still available, as far as I know, is Nadhari Kando. If you have to have one trainer and adviser, she's the one."

"The last I heard, she was staying in General Ikwaskwans compound, helping train his troops," Mercy said.

"Now, that's handy," Pal said. "If we need extra fire power it's right there. We could apprise the general of the situation, too. With your authorization, Rafik, we could retain the Red Bracelets on a standby basis in case your uncle runs into further problems."

"That's a good idea. Pal," Rafik said. "Meanwhile, I can speak with Federation officials about possible sentient rights violations. Trafficking in the horns of non-Federation peoples known to be sentient surely must break some kind of law."

"And I can get the authorities on Kezdet off their duffs and launch an investigation into Ganoosh's illegal activities," Gill said.

"I think someone could just try using the secure channels on the com lines instead of everyone going rushing off into space," Judit suggested.

Calum shook his head. "I wondered why Hafiz didn't do that instead of seeking out Rafik in person. Even when he spoke to me, he used a kind of personal code. I realized that he suspected his own security had been breached. As a precaution, I took a look at our equipment and programs. They're all manufactured by Kezdet-Kom, which is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Interlay Enterprises,



which is owned by a company owned by Ganoosh. Our security programs are manufactured by another of his puppets."

"Just can't get good help these days," Gill growled.

"We'll go find her," Ziana rejoined

Kheti said, "I'm going with you. Pal has been out of the camps too long. I can identify quite a few of Manjari's perverts for Nadhari and the general if they need me to. If the Piper's cronies are causing trouble again, I want to personally make sure they're stopped. None of us will be safe until that whole machine is destroyed, once and for all."

"I think that's a little beyond the scope of our mission, Khetala, but you're very welcome," Markel said. The other council members nodded assent.

"Daddy, we should go, too," Turi said. Reamer had been so engrossed in watching the proceedings that he hadn't noticed his kids had wandered over to stand behind him, where they had apparently been taking in every word. "The horn is ours. Mr. Becker gave it to us to help the Lady and her people. We should be the ones to take it to them."

Reamer didn't much like conflict of any kind and the idea of kids doing battle with people like Edacki Ganoosh scared the living daylights out of him. But so did the idea of his kids being plucked up like ripe fruit for Kisia Manjari and her uncle to use as they wished.

If there were going to be lessons for youngsters on how to take care of themselves from a former captain of the notorious Red Bracelets like Nadhari Kando, Turi and Deeter should be in on them. Him, too. Not that he'd be much good at combat. But maybe he could repair weapons or something. Bound to be able to make himself useful one way or the other. And it sounded like a wild adventure.

Johnny Greene clinched it by growling into his ear, "If the manure hits the ventilator in Kezdet, you and the kids will be well out of harm's way coming with us to see Nadhari and the general. You don't think the Kendoros and Acorna's uncles would agree to the Starfarers taking on the recruiting mission unless they thought that was the best way of keeping the Starfarers out of harm's way, do you?"

"Yeah," Reamer said, hoping he wouldn't be sorry. "Count us in, too."

The entire city-or village, as it seemed more to Acorna-was filled with the sound of people bidding farewell, the sight of people touching horns, and a long hue trudging up to the spaceport, duly accompanied by the Ancestors at their deliberate pace which would make any space traveler itch for warp speed. In a matter of an hour or two, the Faberge egg crate spaceport was emptied of ships.

Grandam Naadiina, who had been so reassuring the night before, looked suddenly much older as she gazed skyward watching the eggs bounce into the air and disappear beyond the clouds. Then she became very busy about her quarters for quite a while. Maati's lower lip trembled. "What if they don't come back?" she asked aloud.

"The whole fleet? Not come back? Don't talk foolishness, child," Grandam said briskly, but Acorna knew the old lady was as upset as the child.

Thariinye appeared at the open flap. "Just thought I'd check up on you ladies. Liriili felt it was important that at least one responsible, well-traveled male remain dirtside to look after the women and children and show a bit of leadership for the other males."

Grandam's mouth quirked with annoyance.

Thariinye continued. "Of course, I could have had my pick of berths, but I wished to honor Liriili's wishes. The poor lady is overwhelmed right now with so much happening."

"She's hardly the only one," Grandam said sharply. "Khomya was going to go visiting this morning but I hardly think people will be in the mood for guests. Perhaps this would be a better time for her to see the compound of the techno-artisans. Thariinye, perhaps you could demonstrate a bit of that sterling leadership capability of yours by showing Khomya the way?"

"Certainly, Grandam," he said with an eagerness that indicated spending time with Khornya was exactly what he wished to do.

The walk was not long but it was very dull. Thariinye went on at great length about his importance in different organizations and families. Acorna saw some long blue grasses she would have liked to ask about, but he was in the middle of a story of how he came to be elected the garage of the Order of the Irriinje, which he did bother to explain was the name for a noble bird which, on the home world, had lent its name to the similarly noble members of the organization. His babble was annoying, but she knew him well enough to realize it was partly because while the emergency had galvanized him to action, there was no action required of him. His nervous energy had nowhere to go. Had she not had so much else to worry about herself, she might have reacted the same way.

Once they reached the techno-artisans' compound, however, the trip became very interesting indeed. The pavilions were as large as landing bays and had a great deal of shiny machinery and many comscreens, plus huge bins of various metals, rocks, and gemstones. Acorna was enthralled by the central area of the huge main pavilion, where a large eggshaped spacecraft in the process of having its outer decoration applied brooded over the bustling techno-artisans. It rather looked as if the egg was presiding over the chicken yard, instead of the other way around.

"The hull was shaped two pavilions over," the artisan in charge told her. He was a fraternity brother of Thariinye's and had been introduced to her as Naarye.

Beyond the ship under construction, in the background, sat two gigantic hulls, their hatches gaping and cavernous. Hulking as they were, they had escaped her notice at first, as other work proceeded in front of them and regardless of them, as if they weren't there. Unlike the ship in the middle, which looked like a flitter by comparison, the leviathans had plain dark paint jobs with no decorations.

"I've never seen such large ships used by the Linyaari," Acorna said. "What are those for? Are they here for repair? Is that why they aren't up at the port?"

Naarye shook his head. "Now those are a piece of Linyaari history, Lady. It just happens that right now they're a piece nobody wants to look at. They're the two big evacuation transports that brought

the people of our fair city from Vhiliinyar to Kubnhkhan. The port was built after we arrived, and they're too big to fit up there; besides, nobody much wants to look at them. It takes a crew of at least twenty people fully trained and checked out on that particular model to fly them and far more fuel than we could scrape together at a moment's notice."

Acorna could only imagine that the monster ships would need to escape the planet's gravity well.

"We could have them operational again if we absolutely had to, but it would take time and plenty of muscle to tune up the drives, fuel the vessels, and get them out of here, especially if we hope to leave both them and the pavilion intact. We keep them here because it gives our people a little sense of security knowing they're available, but at the same time, the people don't want to be reminded they might need them again."

Naarye was being more than polite to her but he, too, was clearly affected by giving the transport ships too much attention, so Acorna returned his courtesy by changing the subject.

"I'm fascinated by the decorations on the ship you're working on and the others I've seen. The BaLikilre's pattern, for instance, was quite different. Do you determine the designs personally?" she asked. The craft in front of them was being adorned with multicolored panels forming a sort of flame pattern, outlined in what appeared to be gilt.

Naarye beamed and waved his hand in a lordly way toward the spacecraft. "Handsome, isn't it? It is the pennant pattern of Clan Haarilnyah, the oldest clan extant among us. In answer to your question, we"-and here he said a word in Linyaari which was unpronounceable to Acorna, even though she was becoming more facile with Linyaari every day. She understood it to mean outer hull embellishment specialists "adapt the designs for the hulls from the pennants of a clan or an individual distinguished enough to have a personal banner. We are doing it in rotation according to both their geographical and astrological position on Vhiliinyar in relation to the moons and also according to historical date, in inverse order. We keep very strict records. No one must be offended."

"Of course not," she said. "I'm afraid I don't yet have enough of a grasp on how your-our-society works to understand the importance of the order you mention, but I'm sure it's very fair."

"Actually," Naarye said with a twinkle, "it's entirely arbitrary and meant to sound as complicated as possible so that if anyone takes offense because their pennant has not yet been represented, we can make a baffling enough excuse that they will get off our backs, grateful not to have to hear the explanation of how a geographical and astrological position can be plotted according to moons we can no longer observe and translated to some sort of time order sequence. This lets us do whichever design strikes us as prettiest and most appropriate for the ship at hand."

She chuckled.

Naarye, pleased at the reaction to his wit, gave Acorna a frankly curious glance. "So you are still learning our ways, then, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"I saw you at the reception last night but didn't get a chance to say hello," he told her. "Before the evacuation I worked with your father on the development of some defensive weapons against the

Khieevi. Unfortunately, your family disappeared and the invasion struck before we could test them. He and your mother were fine people, though."

"Thank you," Acorna said.

"Did you know that your great-grandmother was responsible for the design of our ships?"

"She was?" Acorna asked, and found she was eager for more information about her family. "What was her name? Did she travel off-planet to study, too? Did she have many children? And what would her pennant have been like?"

The artisan smiled. Like her, and the majority of people in this pavilion, he was white-skinned and silver-maned. His features were not quite so regular as Thaarinye's, however, and the skin of his face had a rather rough, dry appearance, with ridges where his goggles lay against his cheeks and brow, just beneath the horn. His hands were blackened, too, and his clothing speckled with pigment-purple and fuschia on the top layer, along with bits of glittery stuff.

He answered, "Her name was Niikaavri of Clan Geeyiinah. She didn't find a lifemate till late in life, I understand, after she had been traveling in space, learning of alien technology and studying for many ghaanyi. She designed the first egg ship with the outer hull in the pennant of her lifemate, as a bonding gift. Her own pennant-ta da! -you see before you."

"Odd that it wouldn't have been one of the first," Acorna said.

He wagged a finger at her. "Don't you start on me, too. The truth is, she never knew what it looked like. Distinguished historical persons are often awarded a special pennant posthumously. This one is a fairly recent design actually not conceived until we left Vhiliinyar and came to this world. You do understand, don't you, that besides beautification, outer hull embellishment has a very serious function as heat and friction shielding material?"

"No, I didn't know that."

That information and other new ideas she gathered as she talked to the techno-artisans intrigued Acorna throughout her tour of the fascinating if baffling processes and techniques performed by the artisans. The most entertaining artisans were those who stamped the large casings and decorative moldings-they performed this function with both hands, equipped with a special glove that joined the fingers in a single block on the end, and feet, and their work resembled a kind of wild stomp dance that they did with great concentration and precision, but also with a touch of amusement at their own antics. Acorna clapped appreciatively and they bowed toward her before returning to their work.

In the next building, the artisans were busy designing flitters. "Oh, so you are going to get them?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," the designer told her. "We have the prototype nearly complete. It's non-polluting, and very beautiful to behold. Once its finished and we have customized the model, we will return it to Kaalin where it will be manufactured, then shipped back to us fully assembled."

Acorna admired the design, which made a Linyaari riding in one of the airborne vehicles look as if he were a winged creature, the wings spreading out just behind the rider's shoulders, at the joining

of the clear overhead canopy with the body of the flitter. The wings were purely decorative of course, but decoration was no small part of technology to the Linyaari, Acorna was learning. Everything the Linyaari artisans made was stunningly beautiful.

Speaking of beauty, Thariinye was quite a favorite with the younger females who worked in the compound. Acorna almost feared she and Thariinye would be asked to leave because of the disruption he caused among them. But the techno-artisans seemed glad of the distraction. She spoke with many of them about their relatives or friends who were studying or trading on other planets, and their worries were almost palpable.

When at last she returned to Grandam's, leaving Thariinye to stroll away with a pretty techno-artisan on each arm, it was dark already.

Grandam was not inside and Maati was already asleep. It took Acorna a long time to settle into sleep, and during that time Grandam returned and touched horns with her, acknowledging Acorna's concern. "I was called out to another general council meeting, pet," she said wearily. "We're still receiving signals from the ships dispatched this morning, but so far none have identified the reason why we are not receiving the more distant signals."

The following morning Acorna tried to visit the homes of the people who had left their gifts at Grandam's door the previous day.

She carefully gathered the nicest grasses she could find as a peace offering, then set out for the home of the young male she had grinned at. At the flap of his pavilion, she inquired if she might come to visit.

After a few moments the flap was opened by an older female, who announced that her son had gone off visiting his former schoolmate. She projected a picture of a lovely black haired, black skinned Linyaari with a white blaze from her horn down the center other mane/hair to the middle other back. Also in the thought was that the girl's full coloring, her long face, very down-turned, slightly flared nose, and curveless arms and legs were far more beautiful than Acorna's pallid coloring and somewhat shorter jaw line and nose.

"I'm happy to hear that, ma'am," Acorna replied. "I simply wanted to apologize for my social error at the reception. Where I was raised, baring one's teeth is often a sign of friendliness and welcome rather than hostility, as it is here."

"You must have been raised by rather strange people," the woman said with a lift of her brow.

"Very good people, actually but, well, I'm glad your son is enjoying time with his friend and not--"

"Not in space?" she asked dryly. "He serves a vital plantside function as a communications officer. Our people do not do space given a choice. It is good of you to apologize, but quite unnecessary. We were all very fond of your parents, of course, and Neeva is a fine lady, so when we heard you were returning, we were anxious that our son meet a girl from such distinguished stock. We hoped he would find in you some of those qualities that make the rest of your family so admirable. But with your, shall we say, unusual, background, I fear you just aren't really suitable for our son. So you needn't bother to call again. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have much to do. Good day." Acorna was glad tent flaps could not be slammed.

Other than that, no one was actually rude to her but, as the pavilions all had both a front and back flap, and the people Acorna was going to visit could undoubtedly hear her coming long before she arrived, it simply appeared that everyone she wanted to see was extremely busy that day, each going about his or her typical Linyaari day, whatever that was like. From what Acorna could tell, it seemed to consist of grazing. Far away. She sighed and nibbled on the handful of grasses she had. Making friends was going to take a while.

Somehow, she decided, as irrational as it was, because her arrival coincided with the crisis, she was being held responsible for it.

Grandam Naadiina was busy with the council and often came home late. She briefed Acorna on what developments there were, but actually, there weren't that many. The main thing that took time was the Linyaari desire to reach consensus in decisions, which required a great many discussions and much trying out (at least hypothetically) of different tacks until one they all agreed on worked. Of course/in this case, without more input from the persons off planet, not much could be decided. Grandam Naadiina was a bit disgusted. "It's a wonder we ever got off planet before the Khieevi arrived," she said. "I'll bet it took them less time to invade our world and turn it to rubble than it did for the council to decide what we would call this world."

Maati was exhausted when she came home at night, after running errands and carrying messages all day long.

Acorna spent much of her time visiting with the technoartisans, who didn't seem to mind if she watched them work or asked questions. Daytimes not spent with them were difficult for Acorna, who nevertheless tried very hard to learn all she could of the rest other people.

Linyaari always seemed to be walking in pairs or larger social groups, and when she approached, they were always heavily engaged in intense conversations about matters she had too little knowledge of to even ask an intelligent question. On the rare, desperate occasions when she tried to interrupt, people would politely but pointedly excuse themselves and turn their backs to continue their conversations. Even the business establishments seemed to be closing just as she approached.

"Is there no school I could attend, no class to take, no tutor on Linyaari culture to teach me what I need to know?" Acorna asked Grandam Naadiina.

The old lady looked rueful. "We learn our own culture from our parents, from growing up in it. There has never before been an outsider-so there has never been any need to teach how to be Linyaari to one of our own. And truthfully, you seem fine to me. Except for that smile at the reception, I cannot tell you any particular thing you are doing wrong. If you had grown up among us, no one would criticize or complain of any of your words or actions. But you did not grow up here, you see, so even though you are Linyaari the others still see you, if not as a barbarian, at least as someone not Linyaari. And neither I nor the Ancestors can tell them differently. Ours are a very stubborn people about some things."

"I see," Acorna said. She did, too, and she didn't like it. As different as she had been among the people who raised her, still, many had been willing to give her a chance, to at least find out who she was. They had not just fed and clothed and educated her, they had loved her, even when they must have found her appearance and her behavior extremely strange. They had simply worked around her differences and helped her adapt to their world. Here, where she looked so much the same, she

felt different as she had never before felt in her life. Remembering Gill, Calum, Rafik, kind Mr. Li, the clever Kendoros, and wily Uncle Hafiz, she could have wept with longing for them.

She shook her head slowly. She would never have imagined that her own people, the people Neeva and the others had said could read feelings and heal wounds, as she could, would be so hard for her to reach. "It is almost as if they are afraid of me," she told Grandam.

"Perhaps they are," Grandam Naadiina said. "Your arrival has shown me that our people have become very skittish since our exodus from Vhiliinyar. I don't really know what to tell you, dear, except to be patient with them."

Acorna nodded and did her best.

When she returned for the fifth time to try to pay the dressmakers, they were closed, as they had been every time she approached. She noticed that the pavilion beside theirs was quite busy, however. Two lines of Linyaari went in and out.

One line consisted of pale-skinned, silver-maned Linyaari such as herself. They were going in.

The other line was comprised of the more colorful, and presumably younger Linyaari, spotted, brown, black, red, gray, golden, so many different colors of hair and skin colors.

Acorna decided that since she had nothing better to do and these people did not appear to be engaged in private conversation, she would, very quietly and trying hard not to think any alien thoughts, join the line.

She told herself simply to be receptive, to learn what the line was about. What she heard were remarks such as, (Brilliant! I don't know why no one has thought of this before!) (It's the very latest. Everyone is doing it. Except those who you know-go oat there all the time.) (And to think, remember when we were children, and everyone wanted to look like that? All colorless and bleached out? This look is so much healthier!) (I think it's only because it is so much younger looking-perhaps because we've become conditioned to think of Linyaari of color as the young ones who did not endure the journey and who do not remember the home world.)

When she reached the pavilion, she began to notice that some of the multicolored Linyaari emerging were wearing the same clothing as the strictly white Linyaari who went in. So. Acorna couldn't help smiling. Gill might say they were now horned horse people of a different color. When her turn came, she was offered a smock by an attendant wearing a horn-hat. This was interesting. Acorna had thought the horn-hats were only for formal wear but perhaps those working with the public sometimes wore them to partially shield themselves from the multitude of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes coming at them from several directions at once.

"Please enter the minipavilion, remove your clothing, don the smock if you wish, and ring for your personal colorist," the attendant told her. Acorna was moving away as she heard the attendant repeat herself four different times. That would be a good job for a robot instead of a sentient being! Or a shelf full of smocks and a recording!

But Acorna went inside, took off the dress and the beautiful belt, put on the smock, and rang for her "personal colorist."

The colorist was of a reddish brown color, with her mane golden streaked with white. "What do you recall as being the skin of your birthright?" the colorist asked.

From the friendly way she spoke, the colorist no doubt had failed to recognize Acorna as the pariah of the planet. Acorna said, "I was born in space and so I have always been this color."

"A shipborn and you want to try color? "

"Yes. Is-is that forbidden or somehow against custom?" she asked, fearing she was making another social faux pas.

"Oh, no, my dear. Simply very daring. The star-clad and the space-going caste have always been, shall we say-vain-of their lack of coloring up until the great transference. Now, with most of us having been bleached out by the journey-" The colorist's golden eyes were rueful as she spread her arms and shrugged.

"You, too-you used to be the same color as me?" "Still am, darling, under the cosmetics and dye. Tomorrow I could be black if I liked, or roan. But today, this is the real me. Now then, what, do you suppose, is the real you?" "I hardly know. Are there-rules about color?" "Not really. Of course, your paints tend to breed paints and that sort of thing, but we Linyaari have been very open about that for generations. You can be anything you like at all. I myself am not exactly au naturel." She tossed her head so that the fringe above her golden horn flipped in a saucy way. "I call this look aural sorrel. None of us were ever born this way but so what? It is my art to improve upon nature. So, sweetie, how about you? What'll it be?"

Acorna was tired of trying to blend. "Stripes," she said. "Zebra stripes."

"Zebra?"

Acorna projected a mind picture of the beast she had viewed vids of while still a child aboard the mining ship. The colorist giggled and began working on her.

"You'll stand out for sure in these," she said. "I must say, it's rather an attractive look."

"I seem to stand out whether or not I wish to," Acorna said. She had made herself conspicuous, to some extent out of rebellion against being isolated from her fellows, but her unusual appearance had the opposite effect, at least on some of the younger Linyaari. They commented favorably on the stripes and asked about them, then invited her to a ring-toss tournament.

Watching the boys and girls catching circlets of flowers on their horns and tossing them back and forth, keeping them away from the opposite teams, made her feel unusually young and giddy again, a feeling that continued until a loud crack of thunder heralded sheets and spears of red and green lightning splitting the sky as an earthquake might split the ground, and torrents of rain poured down on everyone, washing all of the colorful paint jobs down into the grass, beating the flowers into the mud and making footing so slippery that many people stumbled and fell running for shelter.

A great wind came up, so forceful that Acorna fully expected to see the pavilions tumbling along the ground like wheels, but of course, the structures only gave the appearance of being fabric and poles. They were actually quite sturdy. In fact, the storm gave her an opportunity to observe another feature of the buildings. As the ground flooded, the floors of the pavilions rose, extruding



ramps leading up from the ground to the raised floor. The central poles pulled in, too, so as not to attract the lightning. In fact, other poles suddenly appeared on the outskirts of the compound, specifically raised to attract the lightning.

"Power collectors," a very wet Grandam Naadiina told her.

She came in shortly after Acorna and laughed to see the running black dye on her skin and hair. Grandam herself was thoroughly drenched but after a brisk toweling for all three of them-Maati had been closest to the pavilion when the storm broke and hot herbal teas all around, Acorna was back to her original color of hair and skin and all of them were a great deal drier.

It was a very noisy night, but the miraculous pores of the pavilion fabric kept out the damp and most of the wind, leaving only a heady feeling due to the ions charging the air.

"Tell us a story, Grandam," Maati begged. "Tell the one about how the Ancestors left their old home to come to Vhiliinyar."

"Very well," Grandam said. "Long ago, very long ago, before the first Linyaari was born, the Ancestors lived among other species on a distant planet. As they do even now, and as they have passed down to the Linyaari as their legacy to us, the Ancestors possessed horns with the power to heal and to purify air and water.

"They were, as we are, peaceful creatures, who desired nothing more than harmony among themselves and with all the other animals. They were shy and fled at the first sign of trouble, and would stand and fight only to defend themselves or one another, or occasionally some weaker animal preyed upon by a stronger one. They lived high on the mountains and deep within the forests and their powers were valued by all so that they had no natural enemies.

"And then one day to the forests and the mountains came a new species that walked on hind legs, as we do, and carried tools and weapons with its forelegs. These creatures were not overly bright, they were not kind, and they were very, very arrogant. They cut down forests and diverted streams and rivers. They dug up plants and laid bare the ground to plant crops of their own choice. Some of these crops the other creatures, including our Ancestors, found quite tasty, but the newcomers were selfish and did not wish to share and slew any animal they could find who wished to sup upon their crops.

"The Ancestors thought that some misunderstanding was occurring. They believed all creatures to be reasonable, as they were, and except for food and mating needs, to be peaceful, as they were. But it was quite evident these new creatures-men, as they were called - were not understanding their place in the scheme of things.

"The Ancestors decided to attempt to communicate with them but they feared the males, and so they would attempt to find one of the younger females when she was alone and converse with her, show her how the air and water could be pure, show her how wounds could be healed. This was a grievous mistake, for the most part.

"The young females told the males, who felt that the horn's power was inconveniently attached to large, swift, shy creatures who knew where and when they wished to deploy the power. The men began systematically to hunt our Ancestors until many many of them were dead or captured.

"Of the captured Ancestors, some were slain but some also escaped, after observing the ways of the men in their dwellings. They felt that some of the things the men could do were very great powers as well. "But overall, it was a tragic situation for our Ancestors, and they used the power they had always had to communicate with other species and each other to cry for help. As they were hunted and harried, the cry became louder and more desperate until at last it was heard.

"Off-world spacecraft arrived and offered refuge to the Ancestors, taking them aboard but at the same time, causing an atmospheric disturbance that produced a great flood that covered all of that planet. The Ancestors grieved to see many of their fellow creatures destroyed, but they found it hard to grieve for men.

"The beings who had found them were the Ancestral Hosts. They, too, communicated by thought, but unlike the Ancestors, they stood on their hind legs like men. They took the Ancestors to Vhiliinyar. Over the years, the Ancestral Hosts, because of the love between the two species, began to genetically blend with them. Eventually, a race arose made of the best of both the Ancestral Hosts and the Ancestors-the Linyaari. Gradually the space-faring race blended with our own, and then left, or perhaps just died away, for they were shorter-lived than the Ancestors.

"But the Linyaari remained, and many of our Ancestors remained, and we all remembered, to remind us of the dangers the Ancestors had once faced on that other world, and to teach us that while we must sometimes share our gifts with others, we must also beware and keep our home hidden from them, lest our enemies find us once more."

"We are the ki-lin" Acorna said excitedly. "Or rather, the Ancestors are! My guardian, Delszaki Li, told me of the Ancestors from mankind's viewpoint. He came from a very old people whose memory predated the great flood of which you speak. They revered the Ancestors almost as much as the Linyaari."

Grandam yawned. The herbal tea was taking effect. "I'm glad our story pleases you, Khornya. I haven't seen you look so animated since you arrived."

"I think I'm finally starting to adjust," Acorna admitted, sleepily.

But the next morning, as she was leaving for the technoartisan compound, Acorna was intercepted by a breathless Maati, whose eyes were round, wide, and wet. "Khornya, Khornya, I came right away to tell you. We're not getting the routine signals from the Balakiire anymore."

"Since when?" Acorna asked.

"Earlier this morning, about three kii ago." A kii was roughly fifty-seven minutes of Galactic Standard Time, Acorna had learned. "Everyone else is finding out now but I wanted to come to tell you myself," Maati said. "Khornya, I'm sorry." The young girl began to cry, which helped Acorna to control her own fears enough to put her arms around the child, hug her, and rock her.

"There, there, Maati. They've probably just been affected by that same problem that's blocked communications from the other missions-the one all the ships went to try to fix. Grandam says most likely it's some sort of equipment failure and as soon as one of the crews identifies it, it will be fixed and we'll be hearing from everyone again."

"Do you think?" Maati asked.

Acorna was glad that Lmyaari children weren't psychic, so that Maati couldn't tell how frightened for Neeva and the others she really was. "No doubt. If the Balakiire has lost contact, that means they're also closer to the source of the problem. The others won't be far behind on their way to their own destinations, so probably one of them will have an answer for us soon.

But the answer, as the days progressed, was that with one ship after another, contact was lost. Relatives and friends were informed of each successive failure to receive a ship's signal. In the interests of security, signals would not be sent from the planet to a ship which could no longer be heard from. Everyone knew that the Khieevi could be listening, and find narhiiVhiliinyar by tracing the signals. That was not a thing that could be risked. All over Kubiilkhan, all over narhii-Vhiliinyar, eyes turned heavenward as the planetbound searched skies which were silent except for the sound of thunder and the clatter of rain and hail.

It seemed as if the storms brought with them such an unescapable wash of anxiety, regret, fear, and grief that Acorna paced with restlessness.

"Grandam, I feel so useless. I need to be active, to be of service. You and Maati come home exhausted every night. Can I not relieve some of your burdens somehow? If not yours, then perhaps Maati's? Surely if a child can do her job, I could, too."

"Hmmm," Grandam sighed wearily, sinking onto her pallet, which was still dry thanks to the raised floor. The inside of the pavilion was dark now and confining rather than cozy with the flaps closed against the rain. "A very good suggestion, Khornya. Our people need more than ever to stay in touch with what's happening, with the crisis, with what the government is doing about it, and with each other. I, for one, would welcome your help."

While heading toward Nirii, the crew of the Balakiire distracted themselves from worrying about what might await them by imagining the parties they were missing.

(I just hope we'll make it back in time for Acorna's bonding ceremony,) Khaari joked.

(I think you're being a little premature,) Neeva responded. (I'm afraid if the new viizaar has her way, my niece will be put to work picking seeds from the grass and replanting them by hand or some such chore. Liriili is unbonded herself.)

(I get the feeling she prefers it that way,) Khaari said. (I think you are being too hard on her.)

(Not intentionally,) Neeva said. (But Liriili is a very complex person, I fear all of her thoughts and motivations are not known even to herself-possibly that is what makes her such a good administrator. She would convince herself that whatever she was doing or not doing was for Khornya's good or the good of the planet.)

(If you mean sending us to Nirii, at least we've learned we have lots of company. Other ships were dispatched not long after we left,) Melireenya put in.

(I wonder that they didn't leave more of the fleet on narhiiVhiliinyar,) Neeva said. (What if the Khieevi should attack while we're gone?)

They all shuddered and tried to suppress images of all the people planetside biting down on suicide capsules.

(That's not going to happen,) Neeva said firmly. (The Khieevi got a taste of their own medicine at Rushima and will not think we're such easy targets again.)

(At least not any time soon,) Melireenya said. (But after this current crisis is dealt with, our government needs to put a bit more thought into defensive strategies and weapons again.)

(And we must find another world to evacuate to. It's not enough to keep ships and personnel on hand at all times should evacuation be necessary. We need a place to go,) Khaari said.

(No,) Neeva countered. (Wishful thinking is no substitute for the kind of defense we saw at Rushima. We simply cannot just keep running from world to world and letting the Khieevi destroy everything we leave behind. When we return home, I believe we should approach the Council about getting our trade allies to join something like the Federation Khornya's people belong to. I believe the time has come to take a stand.)

As they approached Nirii, it was decided among them that Neeva, as the ambassador, would take the shuttle to the surface, landing in the Linyaari-occupied district of Nirii's principal continent's principal city. The rest of the crew would remain aboard the Balakiire in orbit around Nirii.

Because the crew of the Balakiire did not know what to expect, the ship had not made her usual contact with the com base in this sector of the planet. When someone of Neeva's stature paid a visit, it was customary to do so. But under these circumstances, the notice was waived as an unnecessary risk. Neeva stepped out of the shuttle and onto the empty docking bay. Normally between five and ten shuttles stood here at any given time. As she gazed around the cavernous space, Neeva knew that something very wrong had occurred here.

She had made her landing cloaked and under cover of darkness, a moonless night with a light snow falling from a dark pewter sky emptied of light. The rest of the city was full of lights, all white, all small, and seemingly strung along orderly grids. This time of night the streets and skies were empty. Though there was no curfew and little superstition on Nirii, the people were nonetheless extremely conservative and self-contained. They conducted their business during the day and their home life at night, period. Like the Linyaari, they were inclined to use thought-talk, but they did so only privately, among friends and family, after heavy mental shielding was released. There had been no crime here for a number of years, nor had there been any war, making the people of this planet ideal trading partners for the Linyaari, particularly since they were a highly scientific and technologically inclined people.

The Linyaari district was not required to follow Niriiian customs but usually did, in Neeva's experience. But she saw no signs of life, no footprints of people or animals or any other species as she walked down the street between two of the four large dwellings that faced each other across a square. Centering the square was a park where athletic events, lectures, entertainments, and meetings were held. The building appeared, at least from the outside, to be totally deserted. She entered the door to the building on her left. It was unlocked, and irised open at her touch. This wasn't too surprising. The residents of Nirii did not lock their doors as a rule.

The building felt sterile, devoid of life or any evidence of it.

The doors to the cubicles had been removed, and gaped at her as she walked past them, peering into empty apartments containing no furnishings, mementos, or equipment. Each building had contained eight apartments, and all of these were empty, in each and every building. Neeva could catch not a whisper of thought, not a spark of raw emotion.

She returned to the outside, her skin crawling with the unnatural silence and emptiness of the places where some of the best and brightest of her people had lived while learning, teaching, trading.

As she stepped out onto the park, her feet disturbed the layer of snow on the ground. She noticed that the native grasses her people had planted here were untended, dead. Nor had there been anything remaining to eat in the indoor gardens that each apartment customarily boasted. There had, in fact, been no way to tell which room served which function, so completely empty had the former dwelling places been.

But beneath her feet the soil, snow-covered as it was, was beginning to tell her something at last. Anger and fear, confusion, interrupted sleep, interrupted mating, longing for loved ones who were not there, the cries of frightened children and some, not much, but enough to scare any resisters, actual pain.

She was so busy absorbing these impressions that she failed to hear the snow-muffled footsteps of the party approaching her until it was too late to run back to her shuttle.

Leading the party was the large, double-horned, heavily built form of her old friend and primary negotiating contact, Runae Thirgaare, along with some other Nirriians unknown to her. And behind them, four uniformed people who looked very like those who had sheltered Khornya.

"Vue(haanye ferilli Neeva," the Runae said to her with less warmth than usual in her greeting. "I am afraid we can no longer welcome you and your kind among us."

"Why not?" Neeva asked. "Where are the others?"

One of the uniformed strangers stepped out from behind the Runae. "We will take you to them, VLfe<)haanye feriiu Neeva," a hornless woman almost as large as the Runae said. "We are Federation forces and have detained your people to assist us with our inquiries into certain criminal irregularities we are investigating at this time."

(Runae, please, speak to me yourself. What is happening here? You know I have only just come from my own world. What crimes could my people have committed? You know us as well as your own!)

(Not quite as well, VU^haanye. Your people are inclined to some wildness and peculiar practices. They are unpredictable. Ours is a well-regulated world. We have no idea what trespasses you may have committed elsewhere. It's to be expected, of course, of those who are deprived of the stabilizing influence of a second horn. I'm sure there is nothing to worry about. These people are from the regulatory body for a large federation of allied worlds far beyond us. We are, at their behest, considering membership at this time. So you see that of course we must respect their request for extradition.)

"For what criminal irregularities are we being charged?"

Neeva demanded of the hornless beings.

"We'll explain it all along the way," the woman said. She looked very familiar to Neeva. Her uniform particularly looked familiar. Wasn't it very much the same one as was worn on Rushima by the troops that had assisted in the repulsion of the Khieevi attack?

Neeva pondered this as she was hustled past her own shuttle, which was being transported to the same place she was, a larger vessel with some official-looking markings on it. It wasn't until the uniformed woman began to push her into the hatch, pushing down her head so that her horn did not catch on its upper flange, that Neeva recalled that the troops who had assisted on Rushima were not allied with any Federation. They were a private army of mercenaries under the command of one General Ikwaskwan.

Grandam "was as good as her word. Acorna joined -ssfc ^ ^ .-Maati and several other couriers in carrying ^ ^ f messages back and forth from the governmental compound to the citizens at large. Despite grave concerns about the situation in space, Acorna felt better than she had done since her arrival now that she was able to be useful and somewhat a part of things. Being a government messenger also gave her a much better idea of the communities in the area and the scope of settlement on narhii-Vhiliinyar than trying to make contact on her own had done.

Besides the central compound, mostly composed of government officials and workers and their families, many of which included one or more members who were now on active duty as emissaries in space, and the large techno-artisan compound, there were many other petals to the flower that formed the populated area of narhii-Vhiliinyar.

Naturally, Acorna had realized there had to be more people than she had met thus far. From the air she had seen what looked like a large flower garden spreading out over the continent upon which the Balaklire landed.

Now she realized that this flower garden was but a single bloom-the center was the government compound, and extending from it, connected by road and common grazing fields and plains, were the technoartisan compound, an educational compound (mostly for those who wished to study offplanet cultures-it was assumed that Linyaari would need no studies in how to be Linyaari, unfortunately for Acorna), an agricultural experimental farm where new food stuffs were developed and tried, and other functions.

One compound was mainly devoted to very senior elders who did nothing but contemplate higher philosophies and mathematics. The remainder of their compound was staffed by junior people who studied with the elders and supplied their practical needs. Grandam Naadiina said she had gone through that phase fifty ghannye ago and found it far more entertaining to be with the younger folk in the central compound. They were much more amusing, and laughing, she said, helped her stay youthful.

Narhii-Vhiliinyar had no mining and very little manufacturing, despite the bins of raw materials in the techno-artisan compound. Those were all imported.

Surrounding these compounds were the communities whose labor and expertise staffed the various enterprises, while beyond them, in semicircular clusters, were smaller units of the same sort, independently producing other products and supplying other services to their communities. Beyond

the plains were low mountains and there, she was told, was where the Ancestors dwelled when not performing the ceremonial functions they had taken it upon themselves to offer.

Acorna could well understand why Maati was so tired at the end of every day. She could also understand why the young girl did not need to be in school. Walking and even running to the various homes, businesses, agencies, and other message stations within the central compounds was quite educational in and of itself.

Thariinye complained that Acorna had so little time to walk out with him and accept his "tutelage" and indeed, when she was not on duty, she was far too glad to be off her feet to wish to walk anywhere with anyone. So she was quite surprised when carrying a message to the agro-farm one day to sense great hostility from a young woman, with ruddy skin and black hair who was sorting seeds into packets for distribution throughout the planet.

"Have I done something to offend you?" Acorna finally asked, though she couldn't imagine what it might be, aside from the usual prejudice she had felt when she first arrived.

That had diminished somewhat now that she was frequently seen to be serving an important function among her people. She supposed it was also that she was harder to avoid and too busy to notice, most of the time, any lack of friendliness.

The woman's anger and dislike were evident not just in unvoiced thoughts, however, but in the stiff way she held herself, the angry way she wrestled the seeds into their packets and sealed the packets as if imprisoning the guilty seeds for life. It was evident in the flashing of her big green eyes as she darted glances at Acorna while she was delivering her verbal message from Liriili, and in the snappishness of her voice when she finally attempted to dismiss Acorna.

"Isn't it obvious? First you bring trouble to us so that my father is sent off-planet to solve it-"

"Wait, wait. What trouble? Who is your father?"

"Aagrioni lirtye. He criticized you and you used your influence to have him sent away."

"My Influenced" Acorna said. "Feel free to read my thoughts. I have no influence here. If anything, I have the opposite of influence. And I have nothing to do with the problems that sent your father off-planet."

If the woman took her up on her offer, she did it very quickly, and she looked away for a moment, confused, and then back up. "And then-and then there's Thariinye. Why won't you release him?" the woman demanded.

"Release him?" Acorna asked, quite baffled.

"You don't care for him, you don't even like him, I can see that, so why are you taking him as a lifemate? He means nothing to you and he m-means everything to m-m-m-me!"

"You're telling the wrong person this!" Acorna said. "You should tell him if you feel that way! I have no claim on him whatsoever. He was the first Linyaari male I met and is an old shipmate with whom I've shared certain adventures, but it's his idea entirely that we should be lifemates, not mine!"

The girl looked puzzled, and wiped at the tears of anger and frustration that flowed down her cheeks. "I can tell you're speaking truly, but I thought..."

"What I think," Acorna said with sudden insight, "is that Thariinye is no more interested in me than you seem to think he is in you. I believe he likes all of the attention from all of the eligible females and doesn't wish to settle yet with one-by seeming to choose me, when he must know I don't feel that way about him-I suppose he feels free to take his time making another, more suitable choice. He's not unkind and I doubt it occurs to him that he is causing you pain."

"It's true he-he doesn't know how I feel. I knew he was promised to you and so I concealed my thoughts, thought pointedly of plowing furrows and planting when he was around and"-she blushed-"I suppose he took my metaphor literally." She sighed. "He is such a lusty fellow, it was very hard, I mean difficult, I mean ..."

Now Acorna was amused. "I definitely think Thariinye is the one you should talk to. Good luck."

Her amusement faded as she went about her other errands. It was true that Thariinye was not her choice for a lifemate, but on a whole planet of beings similar to herself, with many eligible males, she had not thus far met anyone who was.

In fact, Pal Kendoro, who was not even the same species as she was, inspired more warm feelings in her than almost anyone she had met here so far except Grandam and Maati.

So if finding her a mate was part of the reason for her being here, it wasn't working out. And she would much rather be taking her chances with her aunt and the rest of the Balakiire's crew, or any crew, than stuck down here with no real purpose and no ability to influence events or people.

What if the Khieevi had returned, what if the radio silence was because the ships, the crews, the other planets even, had all been destroyed, invaded?

Acorna firmly shook her head and put that out of her mind. It did no good to worry about such things. For the first time in her short life, it did no good to do much of anything but wait and watch and hope for the best. She did not think she was going to be very good at it.

"What do you mean 'detained,'" Melireenya asked the official on the comscreen. She had a hard time believing she was having this conversation. The Niirians were the last people she would have expected to behave even rudely to the Linyaari ambassadors or tradespeople. Niirians were courteous and ethical, like the Linyaari themselves, punctilious and moral almost to a fault.

"We do apologize, madam, but the circumstances were totally beyond our control, as we explained to Vue^haanye Neeva. Probably your ship will only be impounded for the time it takes to retrieve your original representatives and return them to you, but in the meantime, our orders are very clear."

"Not to me," Melireenya said. "And I'm good at reading minds. So please enlighten me. What is it that your orders say?"



"All Linyaari coming within our spheres of influence are to be detained for diplomatic reasons. I'm afraid I'm not privy to the reasoning behind this. I am so sorry to be the bearer of such distressing tidings, madam. You have been a good friend for many years."

Melireenya softened. The young official's voice held genuine consternation and his horns seemed to droop with shame. "As you have been to me, Snoraa. I suppose there is no alternative but to trust our old friends one more time?"

"None, I fear. But I will take it as a personal matter of honor that no harm befalls you or your crew."

"I appreciate that assurance, Snoraa. Did you issue the same courtesy to my lifemate?"

From his silence, Melireenya guessed that Snoraa had-or at least had concerned himself with the fate of Hrronye and his students.

"May I speak with the wifeDhaanye, please?" she asked politely. Neeva had taken the shuttle to the planet's surface, feeling it a wise precaution until she knew what had become of the missing Linyaari and why they had sent a distress signal home.

"The vmeShaanye has been detained as well and is presently incommunicado, madam. Please dock your ship in bay one one four and present yourself and your crew to the guardians who will greet you there. I will do what I can to assist but my job, you understand, is to insist upon your compliance with my orders at this time."

Melireenya had attempted to send another message back to Vhiliinyar. Like her previous attempts since coming within the planet's orbit, her transmission met with no response.

Unable to contact base for further orders and worried about what was happening to Neeva, she saw no viable alternative but to comply. From the transmissions they had been receiving from the other Linyaari spacecraft, she and Khaan had determined that most of the fleet, if not all of it, was now deployed. Unlike the Balakiire, the rest of the ships were not investigating a distress call, but rather a widespread radio silence on behalf of the diplomatic, trade, and educational missions stationed on various planets. She opened all channels in an attempt to reach the other ships, to apprise them of Nirii's odd behavior, but was met with the same silence that greeted her calls to home base. Something was very wrong.

She sent out a general Mayday, with no response whatever. Her only consolation was that none of this seemed even remotely like a Khieevi attack or invasion.

But as she prepared to land, she felt a deep sense of panic like none she had ever experienced. She thought that the elders must have felt this way in the old stories when, attempting to make contact with a hostile species by communicating with its least dangerous members, the young females, they found themselves instead surrounded by armed males and were taken into captivity, the purpose of which they did not truly understand to this day.

Her fears were well founded. No sooner had she landed than a team of uniformed people, not Niirians but very much like the people among whom Khornya had been dwelling when the Balakiire located her, boarded the ship. Two of them forcibly removed her from the command seat

while two others removed Khaari from hers and still others swiftly took over the controls at both of their stations and demanded the access code to the ship's computer.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What gives you the right to tamper with a sovereign Linyaari vessel? I demand to see Runae Thiirgaare at once."

"Take it easy," a burly young man who seemed to have no hair at all told her. "You are under arrest by the Federation Forces and your ship is being impounded."

(Don't worry, Melireenya,) Khaari's thought came to her. (They will have difficulty impounding us unless we cooperate.)

(Then why do I feel us lifting up again?) Melireenya returned.

(Oh, dear. This must be one of those tractor beams we've been hearing about that allows us to be towed by another ship. I didn't see one, though, did you?)

(No. But they may have been cloaked.)

Over the com system, Snoraa's voice could be heard demanding that the vessel ask for clearance but the uniformed people paid him no heed.

"What are the charges?" Melireenya asked. "And for that matter, what are the mysterious crimes that our people are supposed to have committed?"

She was picking up a welter of feelings and confused thoughts, most of them violent, angry, or lustful toward her or her fellow crewmen, or disrespectful of the bovine-like Niirians. They were lying, that much she knew. All of them were lying. But they were following orders, which was how they earned their living.

"Well, let's see, ma'am, what were those charges again? Resisting arrest, fleeing custody, failure to render assistance in a medical crisis, nondisclosure of residence, crimes of omission against the various environments under Federation protection. That's for a start. When we think of others, we'll let you know."

"That's nonsense!" she said. "Narhii-VhiImiyar is not part of your Federation!"

(And to think, we were just discussing whether or not it should be,) came Khaari's thought.

"Oh, yeah, that's the other charges," said the uniformed ruffian. "Criminal trespass, entering Federation galaxies without a license, abduction of a Federation citizen."

"Abduction? The only person who accompanied us was the niece of Vi<fe()haanye ferilii Neeva and she came willingly and eagerly to her home world."

"We'd just like a chance to check that out, ma'am," he said. "Suppose you set this egg back on course for your home world and we'll ask the citizen in question ourselves."

"We can't do that," Khaari said.

She had been watching the woman who took her seat trying to access the navigation system.

(Create a diversion, Melireenya,) Khaari said. Melireenya screamed and lunged forward, pointing and screeching out the words to a Linyaari poem she remembered from her youth.

Khaari took advantage of the distraction to slip in closer to the woman sitting in her seat, who had swiveled around to see what the commotion was. Khaari was able to make two swift keystrokes before the woman turned back.

(There!) she said. (Thanks.)

(Were you able to delete the course information?)

(Naturally. Had we been able to complete our sequence before they boarded us, it would have done so of its own accord. It's a good thing we Linyaari have good memories for navigation.)

The woman in the navigator's chair swore something ugly and violent.

"What's the matter. Brill?" the man with no hair asked.

"It's gone!" she said. "I had almost accessed the route when-you erased it!" she said to Khaari.

"It's self-deleting," Khaari said, which was true enough. "After all, we know where we've been already."

"Yeah, but how do you know how to get back there?" the man asked.

"That is a matter of planetary security," Melireenya said. (If they can talk like petty bureaucrats, so can we.) "Now then, speaking of abductions, if you are the people who have abducted our ambassador and other members of our diplomatic community, we must insist you release them and us immediately."

"Yeah, 'well, tell us who is going to make us and how we can get to talk to them and maybe we will," the man said.

Khaari was staring at them. (Those aren't the uniforms of Federation Forces, Melireenya.)

(I noticed that. These are the same uniforms worn by the troops on Rushima. Mercenaries. Now, what do you suppose they are up to?)

(I have the unhappy feeling we're about to find out.)

There was no doubt in Becker's mind whatsoever that he should space the android. The damned things had homing beacons that left indelible electron trails for the owners to follow in case of loss, theft, or, on very rare occasions, defection. Furthermore, there was no way to remove the damned beacons that Becker had ever heard of. Even if he inactivated or destroyed the android completely, the beacon would take the lickin' and keep on tickin.'

Of course, if he spaced the android, the homing device would go into space, too, and kinky Kisia could follow it into infinity for all he cared.

The thing was, Becker just could not quite bring himself to throw out something so useful, so potentially salvageable. So ultimately valuable. He hadn't actually tried to deactivate the homing beacon on an android before. People abandoned androids very rarely and if an android happened to be the sole survivor of an unfortunate space accident, it was unlikely there'd be anybody left to follow the beacon, even if whoever found the droid could not legally claim salvage rights. Surely if he tried, he could do it. But Kisia wasn't a problem to be sneezed at.

RK jumped on the droid's chest and kneaded big rents in its tunic. This was accompanied by a lot of drooling and the cat rubbing the top of his head under the android's chin, then rubbing the sides of his mouth against the droid, cat lip curled upward as if smelling something nasty.

"You don't think you marked this thing enough already, huh?" Becker asked. "Come on, cat, we have to space this dude."

But when Becker started to lift the android a second time to haul him to an airlock, RK took a swing at him that would have ripped his hand open if it had connected. The cat's back was up and his tail bristled.

"Hey, look, I know he followed us home but you can't keep him, dammit, and neither can I. He's bugged."

For a cat in the business RK was in, the feline member of the crew did not seem to take technical difficulties as sufficient reason for infringing on his territory. He snarled menacingly, ears flat, eyes narrowed, back feet clawing on the androids chest much in the way bulls were known to paw the ground before charging.

Becker swore and sat back on his haunches, hearing the cat on the one hand and the steady bleep on the other. "I've got half a mind to leave you both off on some rock and let him take care of you if you're so crazy about him," Becker said. The cat remained unimpressed. They both knew that Becker would not do this, however unreasonable RK was, as the android would sooner or later attract Kisia Manjari and he would not wish her attentions on his worst enemy, much less his usually more or less convivial shipmate.

"Okay, okay. Will you let me haul him up to the bridge then so I can watch where we're going and probably, who's coming with us, while I try to disable the beacon?"

The cat marked the android again, then lightly jumped to Becker's shoulder and wound purring around his neck, claws close to his jugular, just in case he tried something funny. Becker hauled his and everyone else's asses up to the bridge just in time to spot one of those rare wormholes, uncharted by anyone but Theophilus Becker.

"You're beautiful, baby!" he said, blowing a kiss as the Condor dove into the hole.

He wasn't sure how effective those electron trails were through wormholes but with any luck at all, maybe he could buy a little time this way.

The hole spit them out in the same chewed up galaxy where he had discovered the trashed planet with the horned cat toys.

Becker returned his attention to the android. Now he really had to get that transmitter disabled. He dug in to the task at hand. The cat looked on as anxiously as an expectant father.

Becker kept hoping that if he fooled around long enough, the cat would do what he usually did and get bored and wander off someplace to sleep, but of course, that was what Becker wanted so no way was RK going to do that.

Becker was concentrating so hard he was sweating, and meanwhile that annoyingly regular little bleep continued. After a while, RK's possessiveness subsided enough for the cat to start noticing the bleep, too, and taking an interest in it. An intense interest. The cat stalked up and down the recumbent length of the robot, across the open control panel, waving his newly fluffy tail under Becker's nose as he walked between Becker and what he was trying to work on.

"Look, cat. A little cooperation would be appreciated."

RK, much to Becker's surprise, backed off a little, looking offended, sat down and began washing his right front paw. Both ears, now that he had two again, were cocked forward at an extreme angle. Becker stopped working for a moment to watch the control panel again.

When he glanced back at RK, he saw that the cat's ears twitched very slightly with each bleep, and the critter was hunkered low, into stalking posture, his hind end wiggling with suppressed excitement as if he was about to spring.

"Don't look now, cat, but unless the digital navigation system is on the blink again, we're homing in on the planet where we found the horns. What do you think? Should we give it a fly-by? I think we've probably got enough time to disable the transmitter. We've been weaving through wormholes like a demented spider. It's gonna take Kisia and company awhile to get here. I vote we land and get this over with, then split."

RK did not vote out loud, but instead sprang for the android's neck, where the cat began biting and digging at the plastiskin with his claws.

"Oh, is that where the homing beacon is coming from?" Becker asked. "Okay, if you'll move your furry carcass I'll see if I can disable it and reprogram this dude."

With a little physical persuasion, and the inducement that the man was actually doing what the cat wanted him to anyway, RK eventually subsided and Becker was able to concentrate totally on the android-so totally, in fact, that he lost track of time and place. He felt peckish and grabbed a handful of cat food but, after having to fish some of the food pellets out of the android's inner workings, he gave up on snacking.

He had set the Condor on voice control for most functions. The voice control had the voice of Buck Rogers. For a while, Becker had used the usual ploy of having the computer sound like a husky-voiced woman, but he'd found he wasn't getting much work done. He was always heading back to port to find a pleasure house. Now he used the voice of a heroic space voyager. He figured that would help him be proud and happy to be voyaging among the stars.

So, with Buck's backup, and having committed himself to the task of debugging and rehabilitating the android, Becker gave it his full attention. Locating the main axis of the homing beacon wasn't

the only problem. The damned thing was thoroughly integrated with both the central nervous system and the circulatory system of the android. The wiring had to be

removed completely and redone with minimal harm to the KEN unit.

Becker was very good at this kind of thing, when he wanted to be. It was one of his talents, prolonged intense focus on a single complex problem. Unfortunately, although the ship was still under his command, the part of his brain not devoted to working on the android was occupied fully with the problem at hand. The ship told him about wormholes and black water, space pleats and folds, and he took physical control long enough to negotiate through or around these, but all the best part of his brain function was devoted to the problem lying on his ship's deck. He really didn't register how long his work was taking until the Condor came within the orbit of the planet where they'd found the horns.

As he was just then managing to extract the last of the homing beacon, the Condor's computer had to clue him in. "Captain Becker, do you wish to land? Or would you prefer to crash in a dramatic, explosive ball onto the surface when at last we have orbited until we run out of fuel?"

Becker looked up from his task. The extraction of the homing beacon had been successful. The bleep was gone, though it was almost as if he could hear the echo of it in his head, he'd been listening to it for so long. RK had finally gone to sleep and had opened one eye when the computer spoke.

"What? Oh, guess we should crash. No, just kidding, Buck."

"Not funny, Becker. You programmed me with a sense of humor, but I did not find that amusing. I was already implementing the orbit by the time you said no."

"Of course I programmed you with a sense of humor-otherwise I'd have taken a crowbar to you years ago. The cat isn't much for laughing at my jokes."

"I'm waiting, Captain Becker. This planet, however, is not. It continues to exert its gravitational force upon me."

"Oh, yeah, okay. Let's set down in that green patch where we found the horns the last time-you have the coordinates, right?"

"Accessing . . . can't seem to find them, Captain Becker. Will that open volcano crater do just as nicely?"

"What? Huh? Are you crazy? Of course not!"

"Just kidding. I accessed those files nanoseconds and nanoseconds ago!"

"Now I know why usually I run the ship myself and talk to the cat!" Becker grumbled.

He figured he would have plenty of time to put the android back together after they landed. He'd have to wait to dispose of the deactivated beacon in space again. He certainly didn't want it to lead Kisia Manjari to this planet. He finally returned his attention to the landing procedure.

"How's it going. Buck?" he asked the computer. "A-okay, captain. There is just one little thing I thought you might wish to be aware of, however." "What's that?"

"The tail of a space liner seems to be extruding from the outer atmosphere. It looks as if it means to set down beside us." "I don't suppose we could take evasive action?" "You're kidding again, right? Where would we take it? Between the last few centimeters of atmosphere left-well, not any more - between ourselves and the ground? Sorry, Captain, we've landed. The other craft must have been cloaked." "I don't suppose we have that capability, do we?" "Afraid not. Besides, they know where we are," the ship said.

"Well, just a minute then." He spoke to the comscreen. "Hey, you, with your tail hanging out, identify yourself! This is Captain Jonas Becker of the Condor, flagship of Becker Interplanetary Recycling and Salvage Enterprises, Limited. My company has already got dibs-staked salvage rights, I mean, on this planet. Uh . . ." he continued, as there was no answer, "... I don't suppose you're a derelict in distress looking for a-tow, are you?"

Kisia Manjari's face appeared, grinning, on the comscreen.

"Nope, I didn't think so," Becker said, disgusted. "What's the matter, princess? Forget your receipt?"

"Oh, no. Captain Becker. It's just that you go such interesting places and find such interesting things, I wanted to come along. I sent my droids to find out where you were going next, but you killed them. Well-all but the one whose track we've been following."

"There now, RK, what'd I tell you?" Becker said to the cat. "Another fine mess you've gotten us into!"

"Oh, is the nice kitty there? I still really really want to play with it," Kisia said. "I've heard so very often that there's more than one way to skin a cat and I really want to find out."

By now, Becker had a visual on  $\mu$ (U, totally uncloaked and a largish dot in the multihued twilight sky.

"You're a sick cookie, you know that, don't you?" Becker asked.

"Why, thank you."

Meanwhile, he opened the emergency cat flap in the hatch. Normally, from the hatch's opening to the ground on a given planet was a bit of a leap for RK, and the cat used the robotlift for an elevator in the same way that Becker did. But Becker had rigged the flap up for just such occasions as this-not that there'd been many occasions such as this, but Becker had a healthy imagination and a goodly amount of paranoia. He turned off the comscreen, grabbed RK before the cat had a chance to protest, and shoved him down the chute that led to the cat flap. He then opened the cat flap with the remote. He got a visual of RK sitting among the grass on the ground, licking himself vigorously, and then, as the other ship landed, bolting for the rough ruin of the landscape beyond the grass. RK would have sense enough to steer clear of Manjari, as long as he was free to do so, Becker knew. Becker was pretty sure he himself could outmaneuver her, but RK shouldn't be trapped in the ship. In fact, if he left the ship himself, he might succeed in escaping her and it might not occur to her to attack the Condor. After all, the only thing he could think of that she wanted

from him was the horns and this was where they'd come from. She had what she wanted. If she couldn't find him, she'd more than likely take her booty and run off to do whatever it was she meant to do with it. Finance a fleet made from a higher caliber of cast-off parts, maybe.

He didn't suit up this time. It would just slow him down and he already knew he didn't need to for this atmosphere. He did slip on antigrav boots, however, the ones he wore on planets with gravity far heavier than that of Kezdet. He didn't want to take the time to lower the robolift. Instead, he opened the hatch and jumped out. The boots bounced him back up a couple of meters, and he sprang for the hinterlands, as if he was Jack wearing the seven league boots from one of the old fairy tales Dad had encouraged him to read in between physics texts in an attempt to give him back a little of the childhood that had been stolen from him on the labor farm.

He should be able to get away before Kisia emerged from her ship, he thought, feeling very cocky as he left the grass for the rocks. It wasn't until the bolt from a stun gun mounted in the ship's side sliced through him that it occurred to him, in one last flash of thought, that Kisia probably had no need to leave the ship to bring him down.

None of the people who invaded the holy place were able to see him, so well did he blend with his surroundings. But he saw them. Saw the first spacecraft land and the small furry animal, the same one who had come before, first fall from the craft's belly, only to twist in midair and land on all four paws. It momentarily licked itself, then came running-straight toward him. None of the people had seen him, but the small furry creature headed his way immediately, past the sacred place and into the rocks where he lay concealed.

The other ship descended and as it did, a man bounced out of the same ship as the one that had carried the animal. The second ship landed, and a bolt of light shot from it. The man was on his third bounce, almost safe behind one of the hillocks of rubble created by the Khieevi when they destroyed this world. The man was the same one who had come before with the animal. He had the same smooth face and forehead. He did not look like a Khieevi and he did not act like a Khieevi. The Khieevi did not run in fear. They caused others to fear.

The animal had reached the hidden one, had greeted him with soft twinings and loud rumblings, seeking sanctuary. It had watched, wide-eyed, as the man fell. It had changed its body so that it grew to twice its size and the pointed ears lay flat on the head. The rumbling had given way to the sound air makes when escaping the lungs of someone punched in the stomach.

The second craft landed. Four people came out of it. There was a small one with a loud voice, and three larger ones. The small one moved with certainty, the others had less.

The small one walked right to the man, pointed to him, and indicated that the others should carry him. They did so, carrying him back to the grass between the two ships. The small one began to kick the body all over.

That was when the little animal burst from the rocky cover and leaped across the grass, into the midst of these intruders who, although they looked like the first man, appeared from their actions, from their-energy-to be Khieevi after all.

The hidden one shook and felt sick. He could not bear the Khieevi again, he was sure he could not. They had hurt him beyond repair before. He could not face them again, not even to save their new victim, for he knew he could not save him.



The little animal had less experience, though. It dove straight into the middle of them in a howling, angry whirlwind of fury, blood, snarling, and screaming. The blood appeared to be mostly from the small biped in the center. The noise seemed to be coming from all of them.

And then, all at once, another light bolt and the furry creature fell to the ground. A silence fell upon the group.

The people still standing looked much different now. Their clothing was torn, one of them covered an eye with his hand, and their faces were a network of scratches. The small biped had her-for the voice sounded female to the hidden one-hand to her throat and red blood streamed from between her fingers.

She sent a vicious kick into the body of the little beast and it flew to the edge of the grass.

Then she began once more to beat the unconscious man, until one of the other men stopped her.

The hidden one rocked and cried and grieved and wondered if perhaps-perhaps the little animal could be saved without the Khieevi noticing. There was enough power nearby to heal it, if the wounds were not already fatal.

On his belly, the hidden one slithered toward the edge of the grass where the small body lay.

Becker had definitely had better days. The pain in his leg was intense. Kisia's kicking reminded him of the time he had dropped one of those Myrathenian morning stars on himself while trying to store the damned thing. Lots of little sharp pains. Speaking of which, it looked like Kisia and her gang had lots of little sharp pains themselves. RK had apparently come back; their faces definitely bore his signature. But where was the little demon anyway? Becker raised his head to look around. The eye that wasn't busy swelling shut saw the small furry body by the edge of the-moving -rock.

Kisia's boot aimed at his jaw. Becker caught her leg in one hand and jerked. She fell on her butt. Somewhat to his surprise, though her crew showed him their weapons, they did not intervene. Come to think of it, he wasn't all that surprised that they didn't. These were humans, not androids. Working for Kisia probably had a few uncomfortable side effects.

"Shoot him!" Kisia screamed.

"Calm down, princess. What did I ever do to you?" he asked. His voice was a little slurred. Apparently one or more kicks had done more damage than he thought.

"You cheated me is what! You destroyed my droids--" "You poet, you," he said.

"And you lied about the horns! You said there was only the one! You lied! I found another horn. Where are the others?"

He sighed painfully. He really had to get rid of her and go see about the cat. "They're right here-all around. I just took a sample or two."

"He's lying," one of the crewmen said. "There's nothing here. I've been looking."

Kisia kicked herself free of him and stood up, but she stood back. "Okay, time to make him tell! Let's take him back to the ship."

"Before we go through all that, why don't I check his computer banks and see where he found the horns, and if this is the place? Meanwhile, you can keep him on ice while we make a more thorough search for the horns." This was proposed by a sane-sounding man, a high-ranking member of Kisia's new crew, judging by the decorations on his uniform.

"I give the orders here," Kisia said.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm just trying to suggest a fast way to check on what the man's told us."

Kisia liked to give orders but she wasn't stupid. The guy was making sense. She hesitated.

"With your permission then," the man said, not making it a question, and turned to go.

Becker sat up again, unhooking the remote from his belt. "Here, buddy, you'll need this. Red green blue red." He could cooperate with sane people. It wouldn't do to get Kisia excited again.

It was a good move. The other two crewmen tied Becker up-well, taped him up, having apparently brought along a roll of silver tape just for the occasion. They only let Kisia get in two more kicks before they distracted her by rooting around, looking for horns. During the time they were doing this, Becker noticed that RK was no longer lying where he had been. That was interesting. Could the little guy fake being hurt? Nah, surely not!

After a while-Becker didn't know how long as his consciousness seemed to fade in and out, along with Kisia's dainty little foot-the crewman who had gone up into the ConSor returned. He was carrying the sack that contained the horns. Becker groaned. He'd gotten used to a sweet-smelling spaceship and had been sort of hoping Kisia wouldn't find the horns so he could heal himself. "Well?" she demanded.

"This is the place all right. Not on any of our maps but the coordinates are the same ones he marked before. Here are the horns. This all there were, buddy?"

"I didn't think so," Becker said truthfully. "That's why I came back. But the light's not that good. Maybe we took them all the first time." He tried to shrug but his shoulder had stiffened up too badly.

"Your droid is a mess," the crewman continued his report to Kisia. He brought out the mess of wires and syn-tissue that Becker had extracted from the droid. "Here's the homing beacon. You know, your uncle-I mean you-figured Becker here would make a beeline back for where he found the horns. This very likely is the place."

"Maybe," she said. She had the sack now and was pawing through it. "Where did you find these, junk man?"

"Lying around on the ground here. Don't ask me why. I didn't get it off any living girl, if that's what you're thinking."

"That's too bad, but it can be remedied later," Kisia said.

And just then a series of explosions shook the ground, shooting blossoms of dirt and fire in a more or less straight line toward the Mu)u.

"What the hell is that?" one of the crewmen asked.

"Asteroid shower?"

"This planet has obviously undergone some kind of destabilization recently," the fellow who had boarded the Condor said. "I don't think we'd better hang around very long. Want to take Becker here along with us, ma'am?"

Kisia grinned through her sharp little teeth as another explosion rocked both the MQu and the Condor. "No." She snatched the remote from the crewman's hand, threw the unit to the ground and stomped on it, grinding it under her heel. "We'll leave him. No food or water here except on his ship, which he can no longer board. He'll have to eat the cat-hey, where did the cat go?"

Another explosion erupted beside her before she could answer. She kept her mouth shut as the crewmen herded her aboard the MQu, which prepped for takeoff in record time. The ship rocketed back into space like a scalded cat.

Speaking of cats . . .

Becker passed out, only to awaken when something wet hit his face. Cat drool. RK, looking no worse for wear, stood on his chest, kneading sharp claws into it. He no longer lay beside the Condor. It was dark, and he didn't hurt anymore. Not anywhere.

If someone had offered to make Edacki Ganoosh king or emperor of the universe, he would have turned them down. He did not wish to have ultimate power or ultimate responsibility or ultimate visibility. He far preferred the joy of playing puppet master and pulling the strings that manipulated people and events for his amusement. Presently, he was both very happy and highly amused.

His network's tentacles had extended far beyond his customary haunts, into new galaxies where his allies had allies who had allies and those allies had allies who were quite accustomed to dealing with people who fit the description of the Linyaari. Also, like the Linyaari, these particular people were said to be quite advanced and peaceable and law-abiding by nature. Ganoosh, though he was not fond of abiding by rules himself, was very fond of such people. They were so much easier to control. Sometimes he wished his ward were more law-abiding but then, if she were, she probably still wouldn't be alive now. She would have been much less trouble, but also much less useful.

He was, in fact, quite anxious to hear from the dear girl. The Mu)(U had not communicated for a very long time. The willful child was probably just trying to keep her dear guardian in the dark. He was greatly pleased at how quickly Ikwaskwan had taken control of the situation, his mercenaries now patriotically serving as Federation peacekeepers, traveling to the farflung, non-Federation worlds that had been harboring the Linyaari renegades. These staunch uniformed troops let the non-Federation worlds know that continuing to aid and abet the Linyaari would sadly lead to a show of force on behalf of the Federation, which could not allow such people to just go running out of its jurisdiction after committing the interesting array of offenses Ikwaskwan and the others had dreamed up. As Ganoosh had suspected, the worlds frequented by Linyaari were as staid and peaceful and law-abiding as the unicorn girl's visitors had claimed their own world was.

Ganoosh considered it a great pity that the Khieevi Ikwaskwan's men had helped defeat had no known allies or common language or communication with any other race. He felt that such ferocity as they were known to exhibit could be of value to his enterprises.

The com unit sent forth a blast of the static that it was patented not to emit and then Kisia's voice preceded her indistinct image on the comscreen. "Oh, Uncle Edacki, we have failed! Daddy is furious with me, I'm afraid, and says I am not fit to command a starship. Please please please don't be mad at me! It was the crew's fault really. They were such sissies when I wanted to torture Becker. They didn't even want me to kick him around or kill the nasty cat."

"Calm down, sweetheart, and tell Uncle Edacki all about it now. You must remember the crew are corporate employees, not information-gathering specialists. I should have thought to send one along but I was trusting to your natural talent. I can scarcely believe you got your hands on the man and did not find the place from which the horns came or secure any more of them."

"Oh, I found it, all right. At least, I found the place he got the first ones from. But there weren't any more and there are only a dozen or so in his sack."

"I have a hunch he is holding out on you, darling girl. Do ask him again nicely."

"I ca-a-a-n't," she wailed miserably. "He got away? "

"No I sort of, you know ..." She made an approximation of the sound of a laser burning through flesh. She did it very well, and it was a difficult and unpleasant noise to reproduce.

"Did you let your enthusiasm get away with you before you investigated thoroughly, Kisia Manjari?" Ganoosh asked her sternly.

"Nooo! Really, Uncle! We checked his computers and according to them it was the right place. But after I zapped him, these little explosions started going off everywhere and the MQcD was about to be hit so we took off and left him. We can always go back if you want us to, and take his ship and check the computers again."

"No, no, my dear, that would most likely be unproductive. I should have known persons such as the late Mr. Becker would have no truly valuable finds to share with us, no matter how prettily you asked."

"You're not cross, are you. Uncle? Perhaps you could send me to the school, you know, where your information extraction specialists learn their trade. I know I can very helpful in this work if you'll just give me another chance."

"Oh, precious, don't fret your little head about it. Of course I'm not cross with you. You did get more horns. All the horns Mr. Becker had. And I have no doubt but what, if a school for information extraction specialists existed, you would, except for that little tendency toward impatience of yours, be at the head of the class in no time. In fact, with your natural talent, I'm sure you could be an instructor."

He saw her well enough now to discern that she was blushing with pleasure. Positive reinforcement worked well with this girl.

"I have so much faith in you, in fact, that I want you and the Muja^ to undertake a new mission."

"Oh, goody! What is it? Do I get to extract information?"

"Certainly, my darling girl, and from a wealthy and pampered pair of newlyweds, one of whom is a very close personal friend of your own close personal enemy . . ."

"Which one?" she asked eagerly and he could see her taking inventory of people she knew of who filled his description. "Oh, Uncle, you don't mean that wily old sheik, do you?"

"Now who is wily? You figured that out immediately. Bright girl. Good girl. Yes, I'm afraid the stupid Yasmin allowed herself to be found. To buy her own head she betrayed the tail I had on her. I expected no better, to tell you the truth. However, Harakamian's ship the Shahrazad has just left the Rushiman orbit. Fortunately, Yasmin apparently did not feel it necessary to tell her captors about the secondary monitoring devices she placed aboard the ship. We are still able to get a fix on the Shahrazad without difficulty."

"Can I kill Yasmin for you when we get back?" Kisia asked. "She shouldn't have tattled on our surveillance ship."

"I'll think about it. Patience, remember, darling. Yasmin has her limitations but she may still prove useful if I can retrieve her from the settlers-preferably after she's done a bit of hard penal labor to remind her who her friends are. No, I want you to follow, properly cloaked and shielded, until such time as you can board the Shahrazad and take the Harakamians prisoner. At that time you may use any methods you wish to determine the course Hafiz is employing to reach the unicorn girl's home world."

Kisia was beaming. "Uncle Edacki, you are the but. I'll find out for you at once!"

"Make it so, sweetie. And Kisia? Lovie?"

"Yes, Uncle?" Her impatience was now again evident, along with a certain defensiveness, like a dog who was afraid its treat would be snatched back.

"You're not to go there once you find out. Just relay the information and detain the Harakamians until I give you further orders."

"Awww, Uncle!" "Kisia!" he said warningly.

"Oh, all right. May I hurt them while I detain them? Even if I can get the information some other way?"

"There will be sufficient opportunity for that, dear heart, once we have the information you are after. Hafiz Harakamian has many secrets and I'm sure you will enjoy cajoling him to confide in you once I tell you what it is I wish to know. But that can wait. Now, scoot! You've a job to do. Commander Kisia!"

"Yes, Sir," she said, blew him a kiss, and the screen went dark.

Some aspects of Ganoosh's plans were going even better than he could have hoped.

His teams had found an entire chain of planets destroyed by the Khieevi. While the planets themselves were depressingly without commercial value, one of them had a serviceable moon. With the help of biosphere-type prefab experimental stations, it was soon able to support sufficient personnel for his purposes. Ganoosh installed his teams of scientists and security forces. The former were told what to look for and the latter were told where to find subjects. Nothing could be simpler.

General Ikwaskwan reported back to him via remote relay, and the reports were enormously satisfying to both Ganoosh and the general.

One by one, the Linyaari trade partners were being identified -occasionally by the Linyaari taken into custody, and more often by the trading partners themselves. A few of the trading partners had proved awkward, but forceful persuasion generally was all it took to sway them into surrendering their Linyaari guests, and the location of any trading partners they knew about. Two large, secure wards were currently filled with the white, single-horned humanoids. If things went well, there would soon be more. More horns and more likelihood of breaking one of the Linyaari and finding the location of their home world.

When the most recent arrivals were herded into the biosphere, General Ikwaskwan was in residence, listening to the complaints of the scientists. These unimaginative men claimed that they had all of these subjects, but unless the subjects could be observed doing whatever it was they supposedly did, the scientists would be unable to proceed. Linyaari were extremely stubborn, for a peaceful people. They seemed to be able to communicate without words, leaving the scientists continually feeling as if they were being discussed, even though the Linyaari never spoke in their presence, not even to complain, once they realized what the scientists wanted.

"Sedate them," Ikwaskwan said. "Put them in cold sleep until you need them. I don't care."

"I thought so!" a loud, nasal, feminine Linyaari voice rang through the sphere. "General Ikwaskwan! Are these your people? There has been some mistake. You know who I am. Please tell them to release me and my crew and our people at once."

Ikwaskwan didn't know the lady in question at first. For a heart-stopping moment, he thought he had actually captured Harakamian's niece, Acorna. But no, there was something older, about this woman. "Madam, you have the advantage of me," he said, with a mocking, courtly bow.

"I'll refresh your memory then," she said, dragging her captors nearer to him. He signaled for them to let her go. "I am VL)e()haanye ferliiii Neeva of the Linyaari people of narhiiVhiliinyar. I demand to know the meaning of this outrageous imprisonment of myself and my people. The trumped-up charges your people used to abduct us are so patently ridiculous, I'm amazed you were able to take us without a formal protest from our hosts."

"Your hosts stood to gain a great deal by the transaction, madam, if you know what I mean," Ikwaskwan said. "Besides, we were able to convince them that while you may be wellbehaved in your own sector, you were definitely a criminally disruptive influence in ours. You are to be congratulated on finding so many supremely stodgy allies."

"Neeva, save your breath," said another of the newcomers just as loudly, as if she thought they were all deaf. "There's been no mistake. Obviously he is no longer an ally."

"Very astute, dear lady. I put my superb mercenary forces at the service of the highest bidder. As you see, the highest bidder has changed since our last meeting."

(Neeva! Is it really you? Oh, beloved lifemate, how I have longed to see you, but not here and now.)

Ikwaskwan was rather amused to see the fight go out of Neeva as her attention was drawn to the others of her kind in the biosphere. He hoped what was said but so far unproven about this race was accurate. Otherwise they were a waste of good air and food, as far as he was concerned.

He shrugged and left them to the scientists. He was ready to return to his own compound for a time and reunite with Nadhari. He had some rather splendid plans that would make good use of her. He planned to put her at the service of Ganoosh, whether or not she was willing.

The titillating but distracting struggle for power between them would be over for the moment, if he did so, but it would be delicious to break her time and time again. Of course, the real point was to see how thoroughly these supposedly miracleworking Linyaari could put her back together again. She would never forgive him, of course, but that was part of the fun of it. The joy in conquering a woman was in playing the last trick and this, surely, would be the best trick anyone had ever played on Nadhari. Just to be sure he would be the one doing the taking, not the other way around, he brought along a company of the best troops he had who had not been trained by her.

When the remaining communications officer buzzed the comlink in her room to tell Nadhari she was being hailed, she asked, "The general, I presume?"

"As a matter of fact, ma'am, no," the officer said. "This is another party. They've been cleared to speak to you, with your permission."

"You have it," she said abruptly. She hadn't spoken to anyone outside the station since the day Ganoosh called Ikky. Ikky had pretended nothing was happening, and Nadhari, aware of her precarious position, had gone along with the pretense, while keeping her senses tuned for an opportunity to turn the tables, escape, or at least get a message through to let the Kendoros know of the alliance.

Fortunately, she hadn't needed to maintain appearances for long before Ikky and most of his troops departed.

She switched on the comlink. "Colonel Kando?" The halting question came from a young Starfarer girl she recognized from the Khieevi invasion of Rushima.

"Yes?"

"We would like to retain your services as a combat instructor, please," the girl said.

Nadhari watched a figure move into the comscreen. When the face appeared, she saw with relief that it belonged to Pal Kendoro.

She knew she was being monitored and tried to figure out what she could say to tip them off to her situation.

"Hello, Pal, long time no see. Are you running a day care facility these days?" she asked.

"You know better than that, Nadhari," Pal said. "Look, we've come to try to recruit your help, and the general's if he's available. We would like to dock and speak with you face to face, if possible."

"I don't think that's a good idea. Pal. I'm not at liberty to receive guests right now and the general isn't here."

"Be that as it may, we've come all this way to talk to you. We request permission to dock. We have reason to believe there's a threat to Acorna and her people. House Harakamian has authorized us to retain your services and the gen "

"This isn't a good time to talk about it, Pal," Nadhari said. "The general already knows "

Her transmission was suddenly interrupted by the smooth and friendly voice of Sergeant Erikson. "Permission to land granted. Haven. Just come on in and set 'er down. We have a lot of vacancies right now."

Damn! How could she warn them off now?

She was both pleased and surprised to find that her door irised open to her touch as usual, so she had not been confined to quarters. There was a trap in this situation somewhere. She knew it, and if she could keep the Haven from falling into it, she had to try. She sprinted for the docking bay.

The canopy was open and the Haven was already landing before she could pull on her pressure suit and gravity boots. She waved at them to go back as she stood in the transparent viewport between the air lock and the open landing bay, but of course they didn't understand. They thought she was greeting them. Damn. If she'd had a rock she'd have thrown it. The Haven set down as trustingly as a child settling onto its mother's lap.

Immediately afterward, as if by magic, Ikwaskwan's flagship suddenly appeared above the bay. It had been cloaked, she realized. Lurking. It probably picked up the Haven's signal from some distance away. Ikky apparently felt he had some business with the Haven, because Erikson would never have welcomed them without orders to do so.

What was the general playing at now?

The docking bay boasted a huge comscreen with loudspeakers and Ikky's face appeared before them. Nadhari pulled on her helmet and stepped out into the bay. Despite the bulkiness of her suit, she felt naked without a side arm.

The big face on the comscreen looked down at her as if she were a bacteria under a microscope. "Nadhari, you didn't tell me you were expecting visitors or we'd have tried to make it home sooner. This is my lucky day! I get to see you again and also those plucky Starfarer kids."

Plucky? Oh, God, if he was being that phony the kids were done for, too. But if he was keeping up pretenses, she had one other own to try. The mike in her helmet worked. "It was unexpected. They



came on behalf of House Harakamian to retain our services. They've brought us. General, a substantial offer," she said, almost hopeful that it would work. Money was Ikky's native language. Maybe House Harakamian could buy him off?

But as the flagship came to rest beside the Haven and the dome of the docking bay closed over them, a weapon she had not been aware of was deployed by Ikky from the safety of his ship. The air in the bay turned oddly greenish and a strong noxious-smelling mist soon filled the interior of the docking facility.

She was staring at it in horrified fascination when Erikson and five other mercenaries entered the lock. She was suited up, and clumsy. They wore simple gas masks and were armed. She tore the mask off one of them and broke Erikson's leg, but they didn't fire on her. Instead, three of them subdued her while the others snatched her helmet off before raising their weapons. When the stun bolts hit her, the last thing she saw before the world faded to black was Erikson's satisfied smile.

She was not conscious when the Haven was boarded, after the hatch had been forced open by masked troops to allow the ship to fill with gas. One by one the Starfarers were carried out of their own ship and aboard the general's, while Nadhari herself was tenderly scooped up by Ikwaskwan and later just as tenderly chained to his berth aboard the flagship. She did not feel this either. The flagship, full of this unexpected human bounty, began the voyage back to the experimental station, leaving the Haven, standing alone in the docking bay, forlorn and seemingly empty.

Roadkill!" Becker cried, and the cat jumped back as if scalded. But there was nothing wrong with the critter. Not a thing. "Hey, buddy, I got hit and from what I could see, you got hit. Why don't we hurt? If we already died and went to heaven, it's a lot darker than advertised up here."

"Riidkiii?" a voice asked. It was not the cat's voice. The cat was washing vigorously, taking inventory of all of his parts. A gray, shambling, lumpish form appeared, hovering over Becker. The face was long and the forehead had a caved-in look to it. Matted, filthy hair surrounded it. The figure was pointing to the cat.

"No, man. Roadkill. Road. Kill. It's a joke."

"Riid. Kiiyi." The figure tried hard, but his tongue couldn't seem to cut through.

"Yeah, see, the joke is from back before flitters, when we all traveled in wheeled conveyances which rolled on the ground along paved stretches on planetary surfaces called roads. Critters like RK here-okay, Riid Kiiyi, if you insist-critters like him would wander out on the road and get squashed. Like he almost did."

The figure stroked RKs back and the cat rose up to meet the clubbed-looking hand. Becker had thought something was wrong with the hand before, and now he saw that each finger lacked a knuckle, and the hand didn't have enough fingers. The guy's feet were screwed up, too. They looked more like a goat's feet-cloven hooves-than like a person's feet.

"Riid Kiiyi Khieevi?" inquired the figure-a male, Becker decided, from the overall stance and bearing of the creature.

"No, Riid-Roadkill isn't whatever you said. Roadkill is a cat. A Makahomian Temple Cat, to be precise. -Makahomian Temple Cats are bred from ancient Makahomian Cat God stock to be defenders of the temples of-ah-Makahoma. They are very fierce fighters. I guess RK kinda thinks of the Condor as his temple now and me-I must be the pope at least! That's how come the little guy waded into Kisla's gang, even when he could have got away. Nice kitty," he said, and petted RK, who growled a little.

That was when Becker noticed that the funny looking guy had a little boxy device he had positioned between himself and Becker. Becker touched it. "What's this?"

The other guy pointed to Beckers mouth and made a shadow duck quacking in the flickering light cast on the wall by the fire burning in the-cave? It had to be a cave they were in. When had the fire been lit? Becker didn't remember a fire. Maybe he wasn't yet one hundred percent recovered. Must be still lapsing in and out of consciousness.

So-Beckers mouth, quacking-speaking maybe-then the man made a sweeping motion with both hands that clearly meant exchange-and pointed to his own mouth. "Linyaari."

"That your name? Linyaari? I'm Becker. Me. Becker," he said, feeling like the lead character in one of those ancient icons of classic film, Tarzan. He pointed to himself. "Becker." To the cat, who rose up again, to allow himself to be stroked, "Roadkill." Back to himself: "Becker." He pointed to the man again and asked, "Linyaari?"

The man made a sweeping motion with both hands and arms to indicate either the whole cave or possibly the whole planet. "Linyaari." Then pointed to himself. "Aari."

"Art? You're Art! Hi, Art. Jonas Becker. Much obliged for the rescue."

"Muk oblii!" Aari responded. "Hit, Biickir." The filth on his face ran with wet streaks, glistening in the firelight. "Hit, Riid. Kiiyi." The cat climbed onto Aari's folded legs and began to purr.

Over time, Becker wasn't sure how much time exactly, Aari's grasp of Standard improved. Aari encouraged Becker to talk and used different words as Becker brought them up. The little translator didn't give Becker much of a grasp of Linyaari, which was clearly the language and race that Aari belonged to, and the race that had once occupied this planet.

The coin dropped after Becker had more sleep under his belt. This planet was the one with the horns. The horns that had been mistaken for a very personal horn belonging to the Lady Acorna, the unicorn girl. That must be her race. Linyaari. The same as this guy.

Except this guy didn't have a unicorn horn. Maybe only the girls did? Nah-quite unwillingly, Becker looked more closely at the injury to Aari's forehead. Then he threw up what was left of the last handful of cat food. Oh, great, pretty soon he'd be hacking up hairballs, too.

But what he had seen, when he looked, was that there was a place where Aari probably had had a horn. Now it was a deep, partially scarred-over crater that gave the guy the appearance of having a crushed forehead.

Aari saw him looking and pulled the matted hair down over the wound as far as he could, shaking his head and weeping again.

"Aari, buddy, what happened here? What happened to you?"

"Khieevi," he said, and then made motions where his horn should have been that made Becker want to vomit again, only there was nothing there to vomit, just as there was nothing more on Aari's forehead for anyone to torture him with.

"How in the hell did you get away? How did you survive?" Becker asked.

"Vhiliinyar," was the only Linyaari word Becker heard and then, the funny thing was, he sort of understood the rest of what had happened without actually being aware of anything Aari was saying. At first he thought that the universal translator gadget was actually working both ways, and then something made him realize that he and Aari were reading each other's minds-and a third mind as well.

RK very carefully sunk a single claw into Becker's leg and Becker knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that RK could hear and understand the thoughts of both of them and could have transmitted thoughts, too, if he'd wanted to. The cat just preferred body language. As far as he could see, RK wanted Becker to try to learn Cat. It was beneath a cat's dignity to speak human Standard, Becker figured. Then it hit him.

"Hey, you're telepathic! And so are we, when we're with you!"

Aari shook his head and picked up one of the horns, then made a sweeping motion with his hands, and an exchanging motion between his head, Becker's and RK's. Then he pointed to his own forehead, made a negative swipe with his hand, and hung his head.

"So we understand each other telepathically because of the horns, huh?" Becker asked.

Aari sighed deeply, shook his head to indicate that wasn't the case, shrugged, and looked perplexed. RK sunk his claw into Becker's leg again and fixed him with another stare, which to Becker's somewhat rattled brain seemed to say that RK had been reading his mind all along; he just didn't much care what Becker thought. Becker guessed he was reading the cat because-well, he had always read the cat, really, but now he had nothing better to do so he noticed.

Aari smiled a little, and Becker could tell the Linyaari was reading him. Aari projected a few careful images that showed him with his horn, communing wordlessly with other people that looked just like him. So, he had been telepathic when he had his own horn. Fair enough.

Becker didn't ask again what had happened to the guy's horn but Aari grimly showed them how it had been when the Khieevi were about to finish him off and, having broken his body, excised his horn in a particularly slow and painful way. He backtracked to show them how he had been captured. Aari had stayed behind during the Khieevi invasion to help his brother, who had been stuck in this cave, badly injured, too far away from the spaceport for them to get help from the

ships departing with all of their people during the great evacuation. Aari had been unable to reach him in time to heal him.

The Khieevi had captured Aari when he was out gathering rope for the rescue, and had begun long, long tortures of their captive, all the time probing, probing, as if trying to feast on his grief. They had captured some of the translator boxes from previous diplomatic missions-LAANYE, Aari called them-and used them to communicate with him, to interrogate him, though they surely learned little that could be of help to them. What he knew that they might have wished to know, he never told.

Aari did not speak of his brother, or of the new planet his people had found. The foremost thoughts in his mind were grief. His brother would be dead from his wounds by now, so he grieved, and grieved more as the Khieevi destroyed him, along with his planet. He grieved for the loss of his people, for the simultaneous destruction of his own body and the body of his home world, grieved at the pain, and the memories of better times. And all the time the Khieevi stood by jeering and gloating over their methodical ravaging of the beauty and life force of a planet and one of its children, the only one within their grasp.

"Did they kill all those other people, too?" Becker wanted to know. "I found all those horns."

"No," Aari said, and Becker felt triumph in the thought as Aari carried a light to the back of the cave. It was filled with horns and bones, carefully arranged into individual skeletons whenever possible. "These are the bones of my Ancestors. When you landed the first time, you discovered our graveyard. The residual power of the horns kept that area living when the rest of the world was destroyed. The Khieevi never knew of this sacred place, and I did not tell them. They found me some distance from it.

"When the instability they caused in Vhiliinyar by their destruction caused the planet to drive them from its face, leaving me behind for dead, I dragged myself back here, and slept among the horns. Most of my wounds were healed-you cannot imagine the shape I was in before then. I did not resemble anything Linyaari. But the Khieevi had done something to me that prevented the horns from truly healing me, though nothing could block the process completely.

"And so-" His eyes rolled slightly up, to where his horn had been. "And so even the healing power of the horns did not make me truly whole again, for among the Linyaari healing rests not only in the horn but in the guiding intelligence and empathy of the healer. After the Khieevi tortured me, I was incapable of participating in my healing. The horn merely knit together that which was broken. Except for my own horn. All of the horns of our dead could not give me back my own horn.

"Still, the healing was enough that I could gather a few of the horns that lay on top of the ground and return to the cave. But the Khieevi had held me a long time and my brother had lain injured for a long time, waiting for my return to rescue and heal him. He was with the Ancestors, beyond the power of the horns to heal."

"But even without your horn, you can still read minds and everything, right? 'Cause you were telepathic before and-"

"The horns are like-um-things on the heads of insects?" Aari put his hands up to make antennae and Becker supplied the word. "They transmit our thoughts but the ability is in the Linyaari. Without

my own horn, I cannot make myself heard. I do not know how. But surrounded by so many, many horns, I have many antennae. You have antennae, too, and Riid Kiiyi."

"I get it. I think," Becker said. "So, tell me, why didn't you let me know you were here when I came the first time?" Becker said. "I would have helped you. I could have taken you to your people at their new place."

"You were robbing graves," Aari said with a little shrug. "I thought you might be Khieevi of another sort. Besides, I feel shame-at my own appearance. I do not wish to see my people again-well, more precisely, I do not wish for them to see me as I am now. They will shudder to look upon me. But I could not let the bones of our Ancestors be defiled any more. So when you left, I disinterred the Ancestors, and brought them here to a new place."

"That's why there weren't any horns there. Well, look, Aari, it's a good thing you did that because that gal you saw kicking the shit out of me? She has some use for the horns, and I can almost guarantee you it isn't a happy one. Good thing your home world here decided to pop off a few explosions "

Aari pointed to himself again.

"You did that?" Becker asked. "How?"

Aari walked to the back of the cave and picked up something that was obviously a very nasty weapon. He pointed to it, said, "Khieevi," and made a booming sound, then set it back down.

"Is there anything to eat around here, by the way?"

"Oh, of course. Excuse my rudeness." Aari bent down, there was a tearing sound, and he returned with a big handful of grass.

RK put it better than Becker could have. He looked at the grass and meowed piteously.

Aari looked crestfallen and again Becker caught an impression of overwhelming shame.

"You will starve because I cannot feed you that which you need to sustain life. Riid Kiiyi will starve also," Aari said.

"Not if we can help it. We just have to find a way to get back into the Condor. Kisla-baby tap-danced on my remote."

The three of them returned to the former graveyard. The grass was dying already, turning brown and brittle without the power of the horns. Becker found the pieces of his remote where Kisia had left it. It was smashed so badly even he couldn't fix it.

They tried a couple of horns but the horns didn't seem to work on electronics. However, Becker did have some emergency backups. Not easy ones, not convenient ones, but he had them.

By standing on Aari's shoulders, he was able to grasp a tail fin and haul himself to within reaching distance of a particular area near the hatch. Touching that, he whistled the bar of "Dixie" that was the opening code. An encoder implanted inside the hull translated his whistle into electronic code.

Then all he had to do was slide back down the tail fin and drop to the ground before the robotlift descended on his head.

He and RK climbed aboard and chowed down. He grabbed the spare remote he had stashed in the ventilation duct, and then he and RK returned to the surface with a bag of freeze-dried veggies for Aari.

The Linyaari was busy hauling loads of bones to the Condor.

"I must set aside my shame now and ask you to take me to narhii-Vhiliinyar, the new home of my people. I must take the remains of our forebears with me. This world has become unsafe even for the dead."

For Markel, the Haven's ventilation system was home sweet home. He had hidden in it and made his way around the ship after the Palomellese bandits had killed his father.

Trained in warfare or not, the Starfarers did have one advantage over the Red Bracelets, and that was that they knew their ship. When it became clear they were caught in a trap, Markel had naturally suggested the ventilation system as a hiding place for the younger ones and the ship's "guests." He, Johnny Greene, and Khetala, along with the Reamer family and Starfarers under the age of five, would hide in the ducts from Decks A to D, which could be blocked off from the rest of the ship and supplied with their own oxygen.

Of them all, only Markel realized that this section was also where many of the bandits had been gassed to death while trying to pursue him, Acorna, Calum Baird, and Dr. Hoa after Markel had rescued Acorna. As he lay flat in the duct, not speaking, hardly breathing, with perhaps a hundred other bodies lying in the same fashion down the length of the ducts, he thought he could still smell the lingering pong of the poison gas they had used. But, of course, that was ridiculous. It had been many months since the Palomellese had been overwhelmed, gassed, or spaced.

He waited for the cries of his shipmates below-for 'Ziana and Pal to shout orders, a surrender, anything. Their faces had appeared on the comscreen and so his friends could not be hidden from any possible attackers, lest their enemies realize they were not dealing with all of the Starfarers. But he heard very little from below-no screams, no shouts, just sighs and slight shuffling sounds, before the boots of the enemy tramped across the Haven's decks and retreated again, even more heavily.

The bay vibrated with the noise of other ships taking off. And still no noise from below.

Markel had positioned himself strategically above the supply lockers, a bit separated from the others so that if he was discovered, it might be presumed he was alone. Or if the others were discovered, he might not be, and would be able to help them escape.

Johnny Greene was above his duty station, the computation and navigation room. Khetala, Reamer, and some of the more mature children were placed among the younger children, to keep them quiet. Not that there were many among the very young who couldn't fight and think extremely well under pressure. But the little kids were also the smallest and the most easily captured.

Markel took a deep breath and lifted the seal that was also the entrance to the room below. The acrid stench of some kind of gas caused his eyes to water and made him feel sleepy. He managed to wrestle the seal closed, and let his drowsiness pass while he thought about what to do next.

He didn't know what kind of gas it was, though judging from his own reaction, it was supposed to knock people out, if not kill them. There were gas masks in the lockers. If he could hold his breath until he could access one of the masks and put it on, then he could get masks for the others. He could also check out the status of their shipmates and see what damage was done to the ship.

He would have liked to have communicated this plan to Johnny but the distance was great and time was short. Before they'd hidden, they had all agreed they would wait until they heard from him, or at least send someone to check on his position before anyone else acted. He was the acknowledged expert vent rat of the crew. Admiral of the vent rats, even.

The vent rat admiral held his breath and opened the seal again. Quickly, he dropped down, letting the seal close behind him as he slipped out so it would not allow much of the gas into the system where his shipmates hid.

The maneuver was tricky and cost him precious seconds. The greenish gas draped the room heavily but Markel held his breath and lay on his stomach, crawling for one of the lower lockers. The air was always better close to the floor, in case he had to breathe before he got to the lockers. He figured he was going to have to. He couldn't see the lockers from here. The vent opened into the middle of the room and the lockers were along the sides.

Then his hand, outstretched to help him swim-crawl through the miasma, touched something soft and fleshy-warm. He heaved himself up so his eyes were level with his hand. Annella! Annella Carter lay there, knocked out by the gas but still breathing, though very shallowly. And as he drew closer, wondering how on earth he would manage to hold his breath one more second, he saw that she held a gas mask in her outstretched hand. Her other hand, holding two more masks, lay near an open locker door. He knew at once that she had grabbed the masks to get them to him and the others in the ventilation system, but had already breathed too much gas. It had knocked her out before she could get her own mask on.

He fitted a mask over his face, then put one on her. After he got masks to Johnny and some of the others, they could clear the ship of this gas and work to wake her up, if the mask didn't do the trick. But right now he had to try to save the others. Carrying as many masks as he could hold, he ducked out into the passage and down the next one which led to the computation/navigation center.

He saw no more bodies, living or dead. The door to the locker area was concealed behind some pipes, so the enemy had missed it-and Annella-when they boarded. He wished he knew what had gone on while they were in hiding. Really, he'd have to talk to Johnny about rigging the vents with visual surveillance equipment in the future. Maybe bunks and hot and cold running water and battery powered lights, too. He grinned at his own wild ideas.

Tapping on the vent, he waited until it was pulled open and shoved a mask up at Johnny, who took it, then reached back for the other masks. The vent closed again-Markel assumed everybody was masking up. Johnny and other masked shipmates finally began dropping through the ceiling. Markel directed them to the lockers, to gather more masks for their remaining shipmates in the vents.

All of this was done in eerie green silence. The only sounds on the ship were clanking chain sounds of opening and closing locks, seals, and hatches, and the soft sound of Markel's shipmates' phantomlike movements-or maybe elflike movements, in the case of some of the smaller kids.

Markel himself made for the main hatch, warily, laser cannon in hand, alert for any intruders who had remained behind. But none had. Nor had they left behind any of his other friends. The gas was even thicker outside the ship than it was inside. He closed the hatch behind him and went to search for the ventilation control of the docking bay. He didn't locate it, but he did find the pressurized transparent control shed. This was not full of the gas. Once inside, he was able to remove his mask as he studied the controls, finding by trial and error the panel that opened the overhead portal that allowed ships to take off and to dock.

This he opened. The green gas was sucked into the vacuum of space. When all tinge of green was gone, he closed the portal once more and adjusted the oxygen, pressurization, and ventilation fans. The air in the bay was soon breathable. He returned to the ship, opened the hatch, and allowed the bays vented fans to pull the gas from the interior of the Haven. Johnny Greene called softly from the open hatch. "Rocky used the healing horn to help Annella. She'll be grand now."

"Fine. Nobody's tried to kill me for at least ten minutes. I don't think much of anybody's left here."

"Good. Then maybe we should take advantage of that hospitality the general offered."

With Johnny's help, Markel raided the airlock adjoining the bay, and two of the adjacent, unattended rooms. With the general and his troops gone, the place was virtually deserted. Johnny found station security headquarters, and took out the guard. There was only one. He had been watching reruns of the Haven's, capture. For a few mesmerizing moments, Johnny and Markel stood over the body of their unconscious captive and watched first Nadhari Kando, then their shipmates, being gassed and dragged or carried aboard the general's flagship, now painted to look like a Federation Forces vessel. So that's what those footsteps had meant. Thoroughly angry now, Markel and company had disabled the monitors and raided the unattended areas of the base. They took all the weapons and food they could find, and-as an afterthought on Johnny's part-any uniforms they found lying around. They also removed all of the pressure suits from the lock. Johnny downloaded a copy of the flagship's course from the computer in the security room. The security room guard was still unconscious, so they tied him up and took him along.

It had taken them three trips back and forth to the Haven and about forty-five minutes to accomplish all this, before Markel, loaded with the last of the booty, returned to the Haven. Johnny, wearing one of the purloined pressure suits, opened the canopy and boarded the Haven through the air lock. Once they were well away from the general's compound, Johnny adjusted their course to follow that of the general's flagship.

Becker had never felt awe for anyone except his dad in his whole life until he met Aari, but his respect for the maimed Linyaari grew on the journey from the old Linyaari home to the new one. Aari knew exactly how to get there. In spite of having endured tortures that would drive anyone else insane, he had kept the memory of the Linyaari escape route, drummed into him since boyhood, not only intact, but also secret from the Khieevi. He tidied up the Condor, which was, thanks to Kisia Manjari, almost vacant. Becker still had the money she'd paid him back on Kezdet, money that had nearly emptied his ship. Come to think of it, Becker was almost willing to bet Kisia's credits were somehow fraudulent. He didn't trust anything about that venomous little psycho.

After cleaning the holds, Aari had reverently placed each Linyaari skeleton, from the most recent one of his brother, to the most ancient fragments, side by side throughout the ship. Becker helped



him until Aari saw the android. Both men realized just how useful that android could be in the current situation. The horn would not work on its electronics, which Becker had already mostly repaired, but did a great job on shredded plastiskin. Soon the reprogrammed, aesthetically pleasing, and now very helpful KEN640 was back in business as official assistant keeper of the Condor's charnel holds. With KEN640's help, every skeleton was loaded aboard the Condor's holds. Aari slept there every night among the bones of his ancestors.

Away from those holds, Aari had a tougher time talking to Becker. He was trying hard to pick up Standard and Becker was trying hard to pick up Linyaari, and Roadkill wasn't interested in speaking anything except Cat. Which meant that Aari and Becker indulged in a lot of communication through body language and charades. But that was more of an exchange than Becker usually had with the cat. Becker was enjoying the trip and the company.

RK apparently felt the same way. He showed Aari the sort of kitty cat affection he had not thus far deemed appropriate to bestow upon Becker. He sat on Aari's lap and took to sleeping beside him in the Linyaari graveyard. The KEN unit came in handy for changing the litter box. He was not the brainiest droid in the universe, but he was rehabilitated, thanks to Becker's new programs, and no longer said things like, "Do you wish me to tear his arm from his socket now, or would you prefer I punch out one eye in a painful and maiming, yet not lifethreatening, manner, Lady Kisia?" It had taken Aari and Becker both a lot more work to get KEN640 over some of these socially unacceptable utterances. These guys might be computers on feet and have opposable thumbs, but the computer was only there to operate the feet and thumbs in a useful way. KEN'S processor was an idiot compared to, say, the ship's computer.

KEN was also somebody who could play gin rummy with Becker when Aari was feeling antisocial, which happened fairly often. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why a guy who'd been left behind by his people, who felt he'd failed to take care of his brother who died while the guy himself was being slowly tortured to death by alien invaders who were also destroying his home world-why a guy like that might need a little down time once in a while. And Becker was a rocket scientist, albeit an idiosyncratically privately tutored and self-taught one.

Aari didn't spend all of his unsocial time in pity-party mode, however. His Standard improved by leaps and bounds as he watched the store of ancient films and clips stored in the ship's computer, as well as read the hard copy books.

"Did you see this one, Joh?" he asked, pronouncing Becker's first name with a sort of a whuff through his nostrils. Aari was brandishing the How to Care for Your Kittycat book. Becker noticed that RK for once was not clinging to the Linyaari like a fuzzy leech.

"Yeah. Skip the part on interfering in a feline's sex life. I tried it and RK was not amused. That cat on a bad fur day could give those Khieevi bugs a run for their money."

Aari looked puzzled and retreated to the now-cleared-of debris berth in the newly organized crew's quarters to pursue the cat care trends of several hundred years ago.

Becker hardly recognized the Condor. The KEN unit had tidied up the ship so that things were stored and catalogued and there was actually room to move around. Becker wasn't at all sure he liked it. The other way had been sort of cozy.

After a while he found that having two other-well, one and a half other-people on board was distracting, so he had the KEN unit turn itself off between bouts of housekeeping. And Aari was busy studying or brooding (or both) a lot of the time, so that wasn't too much of a problem. Becker's real adjustment was that RK was spending most of his time with Aari and Becker missed the onery feline.

He was thinking that he had been a real sucker to think that because the cat tried to rescue him from Kisia and her men that it meant the animal harbored any affection for him. Why, he showed his fuzzy puny side more to Khetala on first acquaintance, or to this Aari guy, than he ever did to Becker. As Becker was thinking this, he felt a familiar pain in his thigh and looked down to see RK sitting there, switching his tail back and forth, and looking expectantly up at Becker.

As soon as Becker paid attention, the cat sprang up to his shoulder, lay against his neck and purred with a noise that rivaled that of the rustiest rattletrap engine of an outmoded junker ship. "Aw, RK. I didn't know you cared."

RK backed down and proceeded to rub his face all over Becker's, marking him in one of the less objectionable ways the cat had of performing that task. And it occurred to Becker that he really hadn't previously actually solicited the cat's actual affection-theirs had been a more rough and ready relationship. Man-to-man or cat-to-cat as it were, depending on the viewpoint. Of course Roadkill loved him. Otherwise the cat would have found himself new quarters the first time the Condor docked.

Becker suddenly realized he was also thinking a lot like a cat and he looked at RK suspiciously. The cat, whose fur was lightly coated with white dust from the Linyaari boneyard, blinked back at him three times and intensified the purr.

Thereafter on the journey, the cat spent a little more time on the bridge and after a while so did Aari, asking Becker questions about the things he was learning and trying out words on him, getting his accent corrected. Becker, in return, tried to learn Linyaari words and phrases. The little box, a LAANYE in Linyaari, took only a bit of tampering with on Becker's part, with the technical assistance of Aari, to translate in both directions.

Meanwhile, they came within shouting distance of narhiiVhiliinyar. "Shall I hail them or will they be less freaked out if you do it?" Becker asked Aari. "My accent isn't as good as it should be yet."

"I will speak if only you will not turn on the visual projector," Aari said. He had stayed with the bones for days on end the first time he got a look at himself in Becker's shaving mirror. "I do not wish to frighten my people."

He did anyway.

Becker got his first visual of a Linyaari female when the communications officer, a white-skinned, white-haired girl with a pretty shiny spiraled horn growing out of her forehead, said, "Please adjust your visual transmission. Condor. We are not receiving you."

"This is Aari of Clan Nyaarya, narhii-Vhiliinyar port," Aari repeated. "Our visual projector is temporarily out of service. Request permission to land."

There was silence, while the communications officer presumably conferred with someone else, and then her skeptical voice said, "Aari of Clan Nyaarya was lost to us during the evacuation of Vhiliinyar prior to the Khieevi attack. Please adjust your transmission and properly identify yourself."

Aari's voice was tight as he said, "I have been imprisoned on Vhiliinyar by the Khieevi but escaped them, and have been rescued by the captain and crew of the Condor. I have recovered the bones of our forebears from the sacred cemetery, to save them from plundering and bring them back to their children for reinterment. Now please give us permission to land so that I may rejoin my family."

"Really?" The communications officer forgot to use the official language and lapsed into vernacular Linyaari. "You actually escaped the Khieevi after they captured you? I'll have to apply for official permission but-oh, welcome home, Aari! Everyone 'will be so happy to see you!"

By the time she came back on screen, the Condor's fuel supply was running dangerously low.

The communications officer's face was closed again as she said, "Aari, the ship may land long enough for you to meet a greeting committee who validate your identity, but all nonLinyaari personnel aboard the vessel must remain aboard and the vessel itself must depart immediately after you have been identified."

"Tell her we're out of fuel," Becker said.

"The Condor will need to refuel," Aari said.

"Permission denied," the communications officer said.

"Gimme that thing," Becker said, and took the portable transmitter from Aari. "Look, lady, I know your people have been through a lot," he said in the best Linyaari he could muster. "Aari explained all that to me. But he's been through whatever you people use for hell himself, and my crew and I went through a lot to get him here. The least you could do is have the common courtesy not to make us take off again without enough fuel to get to the next stop."

Another long silence before she returned to say, "Permission to land granted. Prepare to be boarded upon docking."

The Condor was forced to land in a field outside the regular port, as all of the docking bays were hollowed into deep ovals, the wrong shape for the ship's alien tail. Becker sent down the robolift. He was busy talking to Aari and didn't notice RK scooting out down the emergency cat flap chute. The cat depressed the exit mechanism himself and landed neatly on the deck of the lift, thereby forming his own greeting committee.

Aboard the Condor, Aari was letting Becker know that he was just as glad the inspection committee was going to come aboard instead of the other way around. He was seemingly as afraid to meet his people again as he had ever been of the Khieevi.

Becker turned on the outside visual and saw Roadkill being lowered with the robolift. Four of the white unicorn people, three females and one male, and two brown male ones plus one small female spotty one, stood below watching as the cat joined them. The little spotted one clapped her hands but was held by one of the white females, while another gently reached onto the lift to receive RK,

who jumped up to meet her. While the women were occupied, the white male and the two brown ones climbed onto the lift. They did not look happy about it.

In the middle of the night, Thariinye appeared in the flap of Grandam's pavilion, insisting that Grandam, Acorna, and Maati all rise, dress for a long walk, and hurry with him to viizaar's pavilion immediately.

When they got there, VHzaar Liriili's eyes showed white all around the pupils, and Acorna could smell her fear, strong and goatishly acrid.

Grandam asked, "What in the name of the Ancestors is wrong?" None of them asked why the problem couldn't wait until morning.

"An alien ship is entering our atmosphere," Liriili told them. "It refuses to transmit visuals, but the person who initially contacted us claims to be Maati's brother Aari, who was missing at the time of the evacuation along with Maati's other brother, Laarye. You know as well as I do, Grandam, that it's absolutely inconceivable that anyone escaped the Khieevi or the destruction of the planet."

Acorna cleared her throat. "I escaped."

"What?" Liriili asked and Acorna read her clearly to mean, "How dare you interrupt?"

"Everyone presumed all were lost when my parents' ship exploded, but I escaped. Perhaps Maati's brother did, too."

Maati, who had never known her brother, glanced agitatedly from one of the adults to the other, her sleepiness completely overcome by the excitement.

"I believe it is a trick," Liriili said.

"How can that be?" Grandam asked. "No one knows of Aari and Laarye except a few of us."

Liriili shook her head violently. "Everyone we have sent into space has disappeared without so much as a hailing," she said. "I can't help but believe they have come to harm. If they haven't actually fallen into the hands of the Khieevi, then they've run afoul of some other race, one that seeks to know us. Our people may have been interrogated for anything that would get the captors past our defenses."

"Yes," said Grandam. "That may be true. But it may also be true that somehow Aari has found his way home. Though I can't think how."

"In an alien vessel with a very bad-tempered alien with an atrocious Linyaari accent, according to Saari, the duty officer at the space port. Here is a tape of the transmission."

She played it for them.

"That's a human!" Acorna said.

Liriili glowered at her. "I thought that might be so. One of your people. Who is it?"

"How should I know?" Acorna asked. "It doesn't sound like any of my friends."

"It doesn't?" Liriili was surprised. Acorna was a little amused in spite of herself. The viizaar sounded like the old joke that -went, "Hi, I'm Mirajik. I'm from Mars." "Hi, I'm Sarah from Earth Prime." "Earth Prime? Oh, say, I have a friend from there. Do you know John Smith?" The vllzaar seemed incredulous that since Acorna knew some humans they would not be the same ones currently on the "doorstep" of narhiiVhiliinyar.

"No," Acorna said, trying to keep both the amusement and her own excitement out of her voice. It would be good to hear Standard spoken again. "But if you need an interpreter, I'll be glad to help in any way I can."

"Very good of you, Khornya," Grandam said. "I'm sure that's why the viixaar included you in this group. And I am here as the elder and Maati because if this is indeed Aari in our midst, she should be there to greet her brother. And Thariinye?" The last was a question aimed at Liriili.

"Thariinye also speaks the tongue of Khornyas adopted people and can serve as a second interpreter."

Acorna made a noise of protest. What Liriili meant was that Thariinye was supposed to report if she was translating truthfully or not.

"I am keeping this party small," the viizaar continued. "A couple of the other young men will accompany us but there is no need for everyone to know about this until we have determined the nature of the intrusion. I have asked my vice-vit.zaar to be prepared to evacuate the city in the event that we are being invaded again, however. I can only hope we can prepare for our escape in time."

"How about the ships Khornya and I saw the other day, Liriili?" Thariinye asked. "I am a qualified pilot. I could certainly fly any of them. And I can organize a crew among the elders who have retired from active duty."

"I hope you will not be called upon to try, but it is a noble thought," Liriili said.

"Before we go running off in all directions, I think we'd better see what's coming our 'way," Grandam said sensibly. "There's no need to alarm the Ancestors yet. Besides, even in an emergency, the Ancestors move at a stately pace."

"Yes," Thariinye agreed. "So stately a pace that a full invasion could wipe everyone out before we arrived at the spaceport."

Liriili, with a slight nod to acknowledge the jest-and that only because it came from Thariinye, Acorna thought inclined her head in agreement and they set out, the vllzaar, Grandam, Thariinye, Maati, and two young males, presumably as a security presence.

Watching the ship land, Acorna relaxed. The tail looked Federation, but that was a Mythenan toxic waste chute if she ever saw one sticking out the bottom, and the hull itself was composed of a strange patchwork of metals, not to mention the somewhat eccentric structural design of the nose. Where the hatch should have been was what looked like a pocket of some sort. As the ship landed, it caused the ground to quake. The engine sounded as if it was about to fall to pieces. (That is no battleship, Liriili,) she said with a smile, in thought-talk. She was getting much better at it,

fortunately, since verbalizations would have been drowned out in the roar of the landing. (It is not any one sort of ship at all. It looks like a junker to me.)

(The alien aboard claims that it is out of fuel,) Liriili replied. (He demands that we refuel it.)

(I'd believe him,) Acorna said. (That vessel looks like it H needs all the help it can get.)

(It could be a trick,) Thariinye said. (To lull us into complacency.)

(It's working for me,) Grandam said. (And-does no one else feel it? I have a definite impression of a Linyaari aboard.)

(I felt that, too,) Liriili said. (But there is something wrong about it. Something terribly wrong.)

The noise stopped and another series of sounds began, with first a thunk, then a whoosh, and then, slowly, the hydraulic hum of a platform being lowered out of the Mytherian toxic waste chute.

Suddenly, Maati clapped her hands and pointed. "Oh, look!" she cried aloud. "Look at the furry little alien! He must have come so far in that big old ship! I'll bet he's hungry, as well as needing fuel." She ran over to a patch of fairly healthy looking grass and pulled it up, along with some purple flowers Acorna had learned were very tasty.

Tears formed in Grandam's eyes and her voice choked a little as she said, "The little alien reminds me of a pahaantiyir." Acorna caught a thought-picture of a furry cat-like being.

"It does, doesn't it?" Liriili asked, sounding teary herself. "I had the dearest little pahaantiyir when I was at home, but it ran away just before the evacuation and I couldn't find it in time."

Maati was reaching forward, coaxing the "alien" with her bundle of succulent grasses and flowers. "You'll find these delicious, alien entity," she said politely.

"I doubt it," Acorna said. "That looks to me very much like a Makahomian Temple Cat. They are carnivores, I believe."

The cat gave her an indignant look and daintily stepped forward to sniff the flowers, then began to eat one. Just one. All of the Linyaari watched it with awe. It sat back on its haunches, surveyed its audience complacently, and began to wash.

Acorna reached over and lifted the cat into her arms, then handed him over to Maati. The youngling squealed with delight as the creature snuggled against her neck and then settled into purring.

"The alien likes me!" Maati said

"I wouldn't be too impressed," Acorna replied with a smile. "This fellow is probably not the captain. Nor does it appear to be Linyaari, so it can hardly be your brother."

Thariinye and the other young males stroked the animal, too, as did Liriili.

"It's so soft," Maati said blissfully. "Since they sent the lift down, perhaps they mean for us to board," Acorna said.

"It could be a trap," Thariinye said.

"I've only heard of cats practicing mind control when they are looking for homes or a meal," Acorna said. "I very much doubt this one is a spy. I would like to see who inside the ship. Perhaps they have news of my friends."

"You're not going up there without me," Thariinye said. "Unless-uh-unless you think it best."

"I think it best," Liriili said. Firmly putting her hands behind her to stop petting the cat. "It is why you were sent for. And you two-go with them."

"Yes, Viizaar," the two young males said in tandem. "I want to go see if there are more of these-kaaats?" Maati said.

"Mrow? " the creature said. "You must stay here until we know if it is safe," Liriili said.

"But you said my brother ..." "Someone who claims to be, yes. It is best that Khornya and Thariinye handle first contact."

Acorna stepped onto the platform and was followed by the males. The cat leaped from Maati's arms and sat on the platform with them.

The platform rose through the tube until it was level with one of the decks. A stocky, barrel-cheated, curly-haired man with a bristling mustache watched their arrival, then reached forward to help Acorna off the platform. "Hi, there, ma'am, boys," he greeted them in a deep and slightly gravelly voice. "I don't know which line to use-'We've come in peace' or 'Take me to your leader.' Aari tells me you folks aren't used to visitors."

The cat jumped from the platform and onto the man's shoulder, to curl around his neck. "I see you've already met our leader, or the self-appointed glad-handing committee anyway."

The funny thing was that he was using all of these Standard idiomatic expressions, but in the Linyaari tongue. Acorna understood him but she could also understand the puzzled expressions on the faces of the other three Linyaari.

"My name's Jonas Becker," the man continued, as the males joined them on deck. "I am captain of the Condor here, and Chief Executive Officer, Chairman of the Board, and-until recently Chief Cook and Bottle Washer of Decker Interplanetary Salvage and Recycling Enterprises, Limited. It was going to be Becker and Sons but my dad didn't get around to changing the sign before he died so there's still only one Becker. And you folks are?"

Acorna was grinning again, enjoying the fact that Becker, whom she liked at once and from whom she was sensing very positive energy, would know that she was being friendly while the other three Linyaari would probably be under the impression she was fearlessly baring her teeth at the "alien." This man reminded her a great deal of her beloved uncles. The same brand of individualistic and independent intelligence, curiosity, and kindness radiated from him. "I was named Acorna by my foster parents," she told him. "In Linyaari-our language-1 am known as Khornya."

"Bingo!" he said. "I mean, no kidding? I've been hearing about you all over the place, Lady Acorna, nothing but good things, and here you're the first person I meet when I get here. Pleased to meet you, ma'am, and I mean that sincerely. I used to be a farm slave on Kezdet when I was a kid and what you did for those children was wonderful, from what I hear. I know your daddies, too. Good men."

Thariinye cleared his throat in a gruff, manly sort of way. "We are told you were permitted to land because you claim to have a Linyaari aboard?"

Becker's demeanor altered subtly to be as gruff as Thaarinyes and twice as threatening. "I didn't claim it, no, sir. Aari himself did."

Acorna touched Becker's arm lightly. "My people are unused to visitors. They have had some bad experiences, especially recently. Please do not take offense. May I present Ambassador Thariinye, who was among the party that came to Manganos to bring me back to narhii-Vhiliinyar, and these fellows are"-she caught their thoughts-"liryn and Yiirl."

Becker nodded, a short and wary and not nearly so friendly gesture. "Boys," he said in acknowledgement. "Well, Aari got a little shy all of a sudden when he saw you coming and he's back in the holds sorting out the graveyard. I guess if we each take a few loads of bones down we'll have it dirtside soon enough."

Thariinye and the other two males looked, if anything, whiter at the mention of bones. Becker examined their faces for a moment, and then seemed to be looking them over in general, and Acorna as well, then he said, "Make yourselves at home. I'm going to go check on KEN and see what's keeping Aari. He's probably working so hard back there he didn't hear you board."

(That is very strange behavior for one gone so long from us,) liryn said.

(Well, he is very old, from back before the evacuation,)

Yiirl replied. (Perhaps he grows forgetful.)

(You were certainly friendly to that Becker person,)

Thariinye said.

(He's a good man,) Acorna replied. (Could you not feel it?) (Hmph, No. He didn't have the same energy -with me that he did with you. He is very hostile and suspicious and, I would say, can be violent.)

(We shouldn't judge him without knowing him,) Acorna said.

(Not much chance of that, fortunately) Thariinye said.

(You realize, of course, he and this ship must leave immediately after refueling. Their presence contaminates and endangers all of us.)



(I hardly see how,) Acorna was thinking when Becker, looking extremely troubled, reappeared and crooked his finger at her. Thariinye started forward and Becker said, "Hold it, sport. Just the Lady Acorna for now, please." He started up the ladder connecting the decks.

"Very well," Thariinye said. "But do not try any unacceptable behaviors with her or I will cause you to be remorseful that you did."

(Why, Thariinye,) Acorna shot at him in passing, (that sounded hostile and aggressive and maybe even violent.)

She climbed to the upper deck where Becker waited for her.

"Aari's in a bad way, to tell you the truth. Lady Acorna," Becker said. "I met him when I was hurt worse than he is, and I hadn't met any regular people like you then-but looking at you-well, let me prepare you. Those Khieevis messed him up pretty bad. He's missing his horn, that's the most obvious thing, but from the looks of you people, there's other stuff that hasn't healed right either. The way he explained it to me was that he was all busted up when he collapsed in the cemetery and the power in all those old horns healed him, except the Khieevi had done to him something that kept the healing from proceeding normally. Without someone who knew what they were doing to guide the healing, his bones just knit together wherever one end touched the other. I guess now that he's almost safe back home again and doesn't have to be on alert all the time, the impact of everything he's been through is starting to hit him. I found him curled up in a corner sobbing his eyes out. I thought maybe if you came back alone with me and talked to him, told him it would be okay, that his folks are looking forward to having him back, it would be better."

"I'll do what I can," Acorna said, grateful to the man for his thoughtfulness on behalf of the former captive.

They clanked across open metal grating on their way back to some of what would have been cargo holds and crew's quarters on a standard vessel. Following Becker into one of the holds, Acorna heard the clatter of bone on bone. Then a monster arose before them.

Even as hunched up and crooked as he was, Aari towered over Becker and was taller than Acorna. But his joints did not articulate properly and there was a huge hump on his back. His legs bent incorrectly and his head was at an odd angle-and then there was the stomach-churning sight of that sunken-in forehead.

She tried to take this all in only on a physical, visual level and not think about it, not react to it at all. The expression in his deeply haunted eyes showed that he could read her before she sent or he received a thought.

She extended her hand to him-horn touching would be inappropriate in this instance with no other horn to meet it. "I am called Khornya. I was born in space after the evacuation and have only just arrived here myself. But welcome home."

He dipped his head, and though he was trying to sound composed, his voice trembled as he replied, "I was Aari. I thank you."

And then, from behind her, she heard the clatter of hard soled feet on metal grating. The three males entered the hold behind them, and made gasping noises.

(What is it?)

(I think I'm going to be sick!)

(They really made a mess out of you, didn't they?) from Thariinye.

Acorna closed the distance between them before Aari could retreat farther back into the hold. She took his hand with hers and this time did lean her horn against his cheek, for healing, for calming. (They are young and stupid and know nothing of anything outside this world,) she told him. (I'm sure the physicians here can put you right in no time.)

Thariinye, who was thoughtless but not intentionally unkind, realized his error at once and crossed to them as well, also, with only slight reluctance, laying his horn against the newcomer. (Khornya is right. I was rude and cruel. The physicians will be sent for at once.)

"Maybe before we unload the Ancestors' bones, you people would want to take Aari to some kind of hospital or clinic with you?" Becker asked, and Acorna realized that he, too, had a definite, if somewhat limited, ability to read thoughts.

"I will go below and discuss the matter with the viizaar. But, my brother," Thariinye said to Aari, "would you not be happier if we brought physicians to you before you meet your little sister and old friends again?"

Aari gave him a glance full of bitterness. "You mean so that I don't frighten them? You are very thoughtful, my brother."

"Okay, that's it," Becker said. "I think we'll just stow the moving of the bones until your docs see what they can do for Aari, here or there, I don't care. Just get off my ship for now, all you guys. Lady Acorna is welcome any time she wants to come, but the rest of you do me a favor and wait for an engraved invitation, huh? Tell your leader lady that I still need fuel and I hope they got a long hose on the gas pump at the spaceport to bring the fuel to me since I can't get to it."

(Very hostile and aggressive,) Thariinye told Acorna in passing.

"I heard that!" Becker said.

"I think I should go, too," Acorna said. "You will need someone to speak for you. Not that my opinion is much valued by the vuzaar, but if Grandam Naadiina, the elder, backs me, they will have to listen."

Aari almost smiled at her. "Is Grandam still with us, then?" "Very much so," Acorna said.

"I would like to see her. She will not be frightened of me, though she may be sad. Grandam was always kind to Laarye and me when we were small."

"She has taken care of your little sister since your parents" Pain spasmed over his face and she realized that if his parents had been lost before they reached Vhiliinyar, he would not have known he wouldn't be reunited with them here. "Oh, I'm sorry. You shouldn't have found out that way," she said.

His broken hand rested on her shoulder, comfortingly. "I knew they could no longer be alive or they would have been here to meet me. It was my choice to remain behind, not theirs to abandon me. You only confirmed what I knew already."

Acorna hurried to catch up with the others and Becker lowered the robotlift once more. This time the cat stayed firmly onboard, sitting protectively between Aari's feet.

"I'm happy to report. Count Edacki, that the experimental station is now fully operational and the testing has begun." General Ikwaskwan gave the news to his employer on his private and secure channel. "Our technicians are going over the computers of the captured Linyaari ships, trying to find a way to open the navigation programs and decode the course to the home world. It seems there is an autodestruct device on such programs, but we are unsure as to how it can be reconstructed when the creatures-wish to return to their home world."

"Perhaps you can cajole our guests into providing you with the information verbally," Ganoosh suggested.

"Well, there's a little problem with that, sir. Except for three of the captives, the ones who came for the Acorna girl a few months ago, none of these creatures speak anything resembling Standard. We tried forcing the ones who do understand to translate, but they refuse and there is no budging them. Torture doesn't work. They don't say anything, even though they feel it. They pretty well heal immediately. Or die. We've almost lost the ambassador-whatsername-the one who is Acorna's aunt. At least that's who she said she was. It's hard to tell. They all look alike. It's hard to tell the men from the women even.

"Hmmm-are they being recalcitrant about using their other powers?"

"Oh, no siree. We've got that under control. Put one or two of them in a gas chamber and the air is sweet as springtime when you let them out. Poison one of them with drain cleaner and it's crystal clear water before you know it. That's well documented. You can feel free to dump toxic waste, pollute anything you want, and what we have here is a cure-all. Of course, I'm not sure how well they'll perform outside a controlled environment."

"It's not like you to mince words. General." Ganoosh smiled. "You mean outside of captivity. Well, there are some other little tests I want you to run. I have had my ward divert her course, but soon she will be arriving with a very important guest, I hope, and possibly some information regarding the location of the central nesting place of our fine horned friends.

She will also have with her some horns which have been removed from their original owners. I would like you to do some testing to determine the qualitative difference in the performance of the horn on a live animal, as opposed to one that's detached. If it is not great, well, then "

"I understand perfectly, Count Edacki. I wish also to report, by the way, that I have myself devised an interesting and entertaining way of testing the horns' healing powers."

"How is that?" Ganoosh asked.

"By reviving the idea of the Roman amphitheater and gladiator contests. You'll recall my associate, Nadhari Kando?" the general asked.

"You haven't made her privy to our little secret, have you? The woman was in league with that bleeding-heart Delszaki Li," the count said with some disgust.

"We seem to have solved the problem of Nadhari's tender heart with liberal infusions of drugs that produce hostility and aggression. They seem to overcome her natural inhibitions to violence, which were never all that strong anyway." Ikwaskwan's smile was feral.

"I recall that from another conversation we had," Ganoosh said.

"We lucked upon a ship full of children, enemies of your late associate, the Piper, I might add. They had hoped, I understand, to enlist Nadhari to teach them the art of war. So I am accommodating them. Have a peek," he said.

The general switched the view on the comscreen so that Ganoosh saw an amphitheater constructed by building bleachers up the sides of a biosphere bubble. The soldiers in the bleachers were protected from the combatants by walls of reinforced plascrete. In the center of the ring, tethered by the neck and foot to a pillar, was Nadhari Kando, the lithe and dangerous-looking female Ganoosh had seen previously in Ikwaskwan's company. She was armed with daggers and whips. And a tall, rather lovely teenaged girl, dressed in what was apparently Ikwaskwan's scanty idealized version of a Roman toga, was forced into her path by soldiers carrying laser prods. The girl had only a dagger and a net.

An anguished cry rose from somewhere in the background.

"Ziana! No!"

"Is that her name?" Ganoosh asked.

"Yes, sir. She is Adreziana Starborne, the captain of the Starfarer children I spoke of. How touching. She is trying to talk to Nadhari through the drugs, you see? But Nadhari is no more likely to listen to her than the lions once did the Christians,"

"And the male voice I heard just now crying her name in such a tender fashion?"

"That would be Pal Kendoro, Count Edacki. Like Nadhari herself, a former lackey of Delszaki Li. A friend of Nadhari's, actually. The old Nadhari, that is, not this new, improved model."

"It is unfair and unchivalrous of you to send that sweet child out there to face the madwoman on her own, General. May I suggest a refinement?" "Yes, sir, of course."

"Bind the lovers together. Two love birds with one stoned warrior woman." He began to giggle. "Oh, that tickles my fancy! Yes it does! I shall have to come out there immediately to view it in person. Save that spectacle for me, will you?"

"No need. Count. No matter how badly Nadhari hurts them or, if they are lucky, one of them hurts her, the Linyaari will certainly cooperate to heal such innocent hides. We can recycle both Nadhari and the children indefinitely, if the healing powers work as well as we've been led to believe." if.:  
"Splendid, General, splendid! How I have missed these little entertainments-the sort the Didis used

to dream up to interest me back in the old days before the unicorn girl showed up. How very fitting that her own species should make such pleasures feasible and cost effective again."

^vL /fasLti "wanted to know where her brother was ^ / \1 anc^ ^^y ^e ^^ not come out with the others.

"He was hurt, Maati," Liriili told her when the child refused to leave. "The aliens we fled when your parents came here hurt him very badly. He does not want you to see him until we can heal him."

All of the adults were now trying to project calm and patience like crazy but Maati had learned a thing or two as a government page.

"You didn't want him to come!" she said. "You were scared of him. But he wouldn't hurt me. He's the only family I have and I'm the only family he has. I want to see him."

Acorna said, "You will, Maati. You will. But he was hurt by the way people look at him and he doesn't want to be pitied. He wants you to look up to him, not feel sorry for him. So we have to go get the physicians now and bring them right back here to heal him."

"I want to be there," Maati said firmly. "We are family and I want to help him. If I was hurt and he knew it, I bet he would be there. My parents would have been, wouldn't they, Grandam?"

"Yes, Maati. And I see no reason why you shouldn't come, . if too. Thariinye sent the adults in the group a somewhat distorted mental picture, in Acorna's opinion, of Aari and Becker. Grandam gasped and Acorna, who had been trying hard not to project, snapped at him.

(Well, Grandam said she didn't see why,) Thariinye declared in his own defense.

The other two males had scurried off immediately, looking distinctly unwell.

"Thariinye," Liriili said. "Please ask the communications duty officer to contact the physicians' college and have Baaksi Bidiila and Baaksi M'kaarin come here at once with their staff and any necessary equipment."

"Yes, Viizaar Liriili," Thariinye said, relieved to be away from there for even a moment. "At once."

When he had gone, Liriili confronted Acorna and Grandam. "It is not helpful that you two judge him or me or the others for reacting in this way to One who has been so badly maimed," she said. "The Khieevi sent the vids of our people under torture to us in order to deliberately terrorize us. As you can see, it works. Our people are not cowards, but we are peaceful. We're healers. We would never do anything so dreadful to other living creatures. It is horrifying to us in the extreme. To see what can be done to us while we still live and breathe and walk-well, that would be far too upsetting for most of our people to be able to continue functioning. Such a sight would upset the balance and harmony we have achieved since coming here. Besides, it is in the best interests of Aari himself that he be healed before he rejoins us."

"How bad is it?" Maati wanted to know. "I'm his sister. You shouldn't all try to keep this from me."

Before Liriili could tell her what she'd seen in Thariinye's image, Acorna described Aari's wounds herself, focusing on the pain in his eyes. Maati started to cry, big grieving tears rolling down her cheeks. "Nooo! Why did they do such a thing? Poor Aari! I want to help him."

Grandam patted her shoulder. "You shall, child, you shall. Liriili, I feel it would be a good idea if Acorna, Maati, and I went to the communications shed and asked to be allowed to speak with Aari."

"I really discourage any further communication with those aliens until we can bring Aari back among us," Liriili said.

"Child, I do understand your objections and your responsibility to the rest of our people, but in this case, our responsibility to Maati must come first-if she feels she can handle this, then we must not stand in her way. Aari is her family, almost all the family she has left. Hasn't she lost enough? Hasn't her brother? We left him behind once for the sake of us all; isn't it his turn to come first, now that he's back among us?"

"I will bow to your wisdom, Grandam. But I still feel that the sight of Aari would be unnecessarily frightening to the public. The images projected by lilyn and Yiirl alone will be giving many of our people nightmares."

"In that case, Viizaar," Grandam said, "perhaps if you feel so strongly about that, it must be your immediate priority to return to the city and give our people the correct and actually and we seem to have overlooked this-quite joyous news that one we all believed was lost has not only returned, but is the first person to have survived capture and torture by the Khieevi; that he is in the process of having his wounds healed, and should soon be among his friends and loved ones once more. Meanwhile, since according to Thariinye, Acorna is the only one of us capable of reasoning with the belligerent Captain Becker, she, Maati as next of kin, and I as a friend and elder from the boy's youth, should remain to help the physicians with their work and provide moral support." Grandam's words were clearly an order to the flustered viizaar.

"As you wish, Grandam." Liriili withdrew and headed back to the city. The rest of them walked to the communications shed.

The communications officer gladly ceded his seat to them and watched as Acorna hailed the Condor.

"Well, Lady Acorna, fancy seeing you there. What's on your mind, hon?" The honest face of Jonas Becker reflected pleasure at the sight of her in his viewscreen.

"Captain Becker, Grandam Naadiina, 'whom you heard Aari say he knew and was fond of, is here, and she would like to speak to him. Aari's younger sister, Maati, who is Grandam's ward, is here as well. Maati has been informed of the nature of Aari's wounds but she wants very much to speak to him and well, I think it would be best if she could speak for herself."

"Right. If you think it's best, then I'll try to get him in here. But those jerks who were here with you are not welcome aboard this vessel again. I hope everybody understands that."

Acorna smiled. "I believe you made yourself abundantly clear on that issue, Captain." She looked around. "Thariinye doesn't seem to be here now, but Liriili asked him to send for the physicians. They should be arriving soon. We three would like to return to your ship with them, with your permission."

"Granted, with pleasure," he said. "Wait a minute and I'll see if Aari will come out to talk to his sister."

"I'm not entirely sure this contact is authorized," the communications officer said.

"No?" Grandam said. "Well, it is. Liriili appointed Khornya and me as her liaisons in this affair. Khornya is already showing great talent as an alien ambassador, don't you think?"

"Yes, Grandam," the officer said meekly.

"That's a good lad," Grandam said with an indulgent smile.

A moment later Becker appeared back on screen. Behind him loomed a tall figure with a cat wound around his neck. Maati had her jaw thrust forward and set. As Aari's ruined face appeared on the screen, she blinked twice but that was all. Aari also blinked, so perhaps he didn't see her, first instinctive reaction. Acorna thought he was trying not to weep again.

"Welcome home, elder brother," the little girl said, sounding less like a little girl than Acorna had ever heard her. "I am Maati, born here on narhii-Vhiliinyar to our parents before they returned to search for you and our brother. They-they never found you?" She had tried, Acorna knew, not to make it a question but could not quite keep the note of hope from her voice.

"To my sorrow, no. It is also my great sorrow to tell you that our brother has passed this life, but it gives me more joy than I have known in all of these ghaanye to see you and to hear your voice, younger sister. I am Aari, born many ghaanye and a world before you, but I am your kinsman and I love you already."

"And I you," Maati said. "Aari, when the doctors come, tell your friend I will come, too. I'll lay my horn upon you and keep you from any pain and speed your healing."

Tears did fall from Aari's eyes as she spoke. "My gratitude, Maati," he said, but his response was almost drowned out as both Acorna and Grandam said, "And I will do the same," in response to Maati's declaration.

"My gratitude, Grandam Naadiina, and to Khornya, who has already-my gratitude."

"Okay," Becker said. "But if you ladies are coming you'd better step on it. I see a bunch of people coming up the road right now. I'll send down the robolift for you so you'll be on board when they arrive."

"Thanks, Captain Becker," Acorna said.

"Thank you, lady. You, too, ladies."

The physicians were those most skilled in the healing arts, much more than the average Linyaari. Many of them, Grandam told Acorna, had studied off-planet, where there were more ills to be healed. Most Linyaari were never ill or hurt for more than a few moments, or at least not until they found the next Linyaari. In fact, being a physician on narhii-Vhiliinyar was largely an intellectual rather than a practical profession. The physicians didn't gasp when they saw Aari, but they shook their heads, regarded him with clinical interest, tried a few applications of their own horns with little effect, and then turned to look with interest at the piles of bones in the holds beyond their patient.

"So you say, Aari, that after you were injured you dragged yourself to the burial place and the power of the horns of our departed forebears healed you of your injuries-at least to a degree? As much as the lasting damage done to you by the Khieevi would allow?"

"Yes."

The physicians looked uncomfortably at each other. "Unfortunately, given the special nature of the tortures inflicted by the Khieevi, the horns' healing power only knit that which was broken-it did not straighten anything into proper position first. Khieevi take special pains when working with Linyaari to try and short-circuit the healing processes."

"I had suspected as much," Aari said dryly, regarding his own misshapen arm.

"But now that your arm is healed this way, there is little we can do. The tissue is not injured, as far as our abilities are concerned. As for your horn-well, a transplant might be possible when Maati is older, if she could spare a piece of her horn. But she and it are too immature to risk that at this time. And such a procedure has never been tried, you know. No one has-ever survived such an injury in the past."

"Oh, do try!" Maati cried. "I don't care if it hurts. It can't hurt anything like Aari has hurt. Please, can't you do something for him?"

One of the doctors, a female, Bidiila, knelt beside Maati and took her hand. "We wish we could, youngling," she said, and Acorna could see she was close to tears herself. "But he has suffered great harm at the hands of our enemies. Some will see his wounds and blame him for receiving them, as irrational as that may be, but some will be as wise as you and know that he is living proof of Linyaari courage and fortitude. You must be very proud of him."

"I am," Maati said, taking the doctors hand and trying to put it in Aari's, "but he hurts so terribly-am I the only one who feels it? Can nobody help him?"

Aari gathered her up and stroked her hair with his broken hand, shushing her. "I am used to it now, little sister. Please don't weep for me. Did you not hear what they said? Later, perhaps, when they know more, they can do more."

"But there must be something they can do now," the child insisted.

"Well, actually, there is," Becker said. "We could break the old injuries, one at a time, and you could reheel them. That should work." He looked at the doctors and cocked an eyebrow. Acorna translated.



"We do not do such things, Captain. Even in a therapeutic way, and to heal. Injuring any living creature is an act of violence and not our way."

When Acorna gave Becker the doctor's reply, he shrugged and asked, "They don't mind finishing the job if I do the dirty work though, do they?"

Acorna translated. "They have no objection."

Acorna asked Becker, "What do you have in mind? "

"Well, first, I just want to make certain of something. The way Aari healed me and RK when we were hurt, you can do that for him? I mean, make it so he gets patched up completely almost at the same time he's hurt so he doesn't feel anything for more than say, a split second?"

The others looked dubious, but Acorna, who had had considerable experience with the healing properties of her own horn, nodded. "Yes. Probably even more effectively than Aari healed you since he had to use the dead horns to accomplish the healing."

"Well then, all we have to do is rebreak the places that have set wrong and heal them again. I hate to put Aari through it, but it's the only solution," Becker said. "Your docs may have principles against it, but I don't."

Bidiila said, "I personally have never encountered old fractures such as these. Few of us have. When one can heal almost any wound immediately, one seldom sees old wounds, and even then, usually they have received some sort of attention prior to ours that keeps them from being in such sad shape as Aari's."

"I understand, doc. You people don't want to do it because the way you see it, hurting people is the opposite of healing. Me, I don't have any problem with breaking a few bones, especially in a good cause." He touched Aari's shoulder. "How about it, buddy?" he asked Aari. "You willing to let me bust you up a little so your medics can heal you right this time? I can't do much about the horn, but I got me a crowbar that will do a good job with a few surgical strikes. They promise it'll only hurt for a little while."

Aari only glanced at the doctors, who, except for Bidiila, had backed off slightly. "I can bear pain at the hand of a friend," he said. "Part of the pain of the torture was knowing that my captors intended their cruelty and delighted in my pain. They even amplified it. I know that you will be sharing it and helping me bear it."

"Maybe Maati and you other ladies should leave now," Becker told Acorna.

Acorna didn't need to translate. Maati was shaking her head, and clinging to Aari. Grandam said simply, in clear thought-speak, without hesitation or question so that even Becker could understand her, (Your concern for our sensitivities does you credit, Captain, but Aari will need our support more than ever. We will stay in contact with him as you perform your task. In that way, he may feel far less pain.)

Becker nodded. The other doctors were all protesting but Bidiila spoke to them sharply and, although they looked away as Becker fetched his crowbar, they remained close. Aari reclined on a table and Grandam, Acorna, and Maati stayed close by his head, their horns touching his face and

neck, and their hands on his arms and shoulders. Becker, without fear or squeamishness, and with the efficiency he might give to hammering some bent object into shape, brought the heavy tool down sharply on the misshapen part of Aari's leg. Aari let his breath out in a huff and a high-pitched whistle, and by then the doctors were closing in, applying their horns to the fresh wound as they manipulated the leg so that it would set correctly.

"You okay, buddy? " Becker asked Aari gently. With great effort, Aari said, "Yes." And in a moment, after several deep breaths, added, "My left foot now, please, Joh."

Maati had buried her face against his mane and Acorna felt that he was more concerned about her reaction than about the pain, which was dulled by their contact and quite brief compared to what he had endured walking around with misaligned bones, twisted tendons, and atrophied, overly strained muscles. Each break and healing found him breathing easier, though all of them, especially Aari and Becker, had sweat running from every pore. Worse yet was that the sound of Aari's crunching bones was drowned out only by the high, eerie keening of the Makahomian Temple Cat, who cowered beneath the table.

The process took hours and Acorna was very weary, as was Grandam. Acorna could see that Grandam's horn and those of the doctors were all becoming translucent, as hers had when she had cured the wounded following the battle between Rushima and the Khieevi.

Aari opened his eyes only after he had healed from the last break. Becker, )SLW set, functioned like a machine but his voice was always controlled, and always gentle and concerned when speaking to Aari or any of them. He knew that he was hurting to help the healing and had to keep a firm grip on himself so that each blow did not cause him almost as much pain as it did Aari.

When at last they were done and Aari sat up, straight and five inches taller, Acorna went to Becker and laid her horn against his forehead.

"Thank you, Khornya," Aari said. "I wish I was able to do that, too. You are spent."

"We are all spent," Grandam said.

The cat shot from beneath the table. Maati caught and held him, soothing him with a touch of her horn that soon had the beast purring.

Bidiila said, "We have been thinking about your horn, Aari. It is a new problem, as I said, but did you not say your brother perished on Vhiliinyar and that you have brought his bones back for reburial? Do you feel that his spirit would be offended if we took a small piece from his horn, which would have similar DNA to yours and therefore be less likely to be rejected, and tried to coax it to grow on the root of your own horn?" This was done, with Aari's and Maati's agreement. "Now you can come back with us," Maati told her brother. He put his hand up to the bandaged place where the horn implant had been. "I don't think so. I'll still be an outcast."

Acorna said, "Maybe you could wear a prosthetic hidden by a horn-hat."

"A what?" Becker and Aari asked together. Acorna explained and Becker said, "Yeah, we could give you a fake horn inside to stiffen it. Nobody would know if you didn't want them to."

"Aside from the people all over the planet who already do, thanks to those who were here earlier," Aari said.

"Never mind them. You want to see your old friends, and what this new world is like, or not?"

Acorna thought it was a good thing Becker didn't really wait for an answer.

The com unit came on again and the officer on the other end said, "Captain Becker, the people have gathered to rebury the bones of our dead."

"Okay. We'll get them onto the robolift and send them down load by load."

"I will need to supervise," Aari said. "I am the only one who still knows who was buried where and remembers the clan designations of each body. Where would I find a-horn-hat?"

Bidiila reached into her lab coat pocket. "Take mine," she said. "I have several others. They come in handy when you spend the day listening to minor complaints from patients who should have had the sense not to overgraze."

Becker had gone to work with a torch and hammer on a piece of lightweight alloy and in no time fashioned it into the semblance of a horn. A slot on either side held a band that slid beneath Aari's mane to hold it in place. With Bidiila's horn-hat, it was difficult to tell him from another Linyaari.

The three women stayed aboard the ship and helped Aari and Becker load the robolift time after time. Then Becker remembered something and came back with what looked like another man, albeit one somewhat scarred and with a peculiar skin tint. This, Acorna learned, was a KEN unit, an android, and he was able to work five times faster, if not more accurately, than any of them. Aari had to indicate to Becker whose bones were whose before riding down with each load and supervising its disposition. The road to the spaceport was lined with Linyaari of all clans, all come to claim the bones of their dead.

"How did they find out so fast?" Becker asked.

"Thought transference is a very swift form of communication when used correctly," Grandam said. "I suspect Liriili set up a relay of some sort to inform the clans."

"Will you look at that guy?" Becker asked, nodding toward Aari. "I was the pounder and he was the poundee and he is working rings around me. You'd think he'd been sitting around watching the stars go by all morning instead of getting every bone in his body rebroken and mended."

"He is a very determined young man," Grandam said. "He had to be or he would not have survived all that he has."

When Aari returned for the last time, he carried a single skeleton, this one carefully wrapped in the thermal blanket Becker had given Aari to sleep with.

"Grandam, I was very careful with Grandsire Niciirye but I brought him back to you. I do not wish you to be concerned, but Grandsire's horn is missing from his remains."

"His horn?" Grandam asked, and Acorna saw that she was trying to picture her lifemate as Aari was now. "Not the Khieevi?"

"Captain Becker will explain," Aari said. "I must go below now."

"Thanks a lot, buddy," Becker said.

Aari allowed himself a small grim smile. "You have nothing to worry about, Joh, even if I had not already hidden your surgical instrument. We are a nonviolent people. Grandam will not cause you much physical damage for desecrating the remains of her lifemate. I do not know if that will be true for the others whose kin are missing their horns. Those bones I have left in the hold for now, but Grandsire's at least I can return."

His voice contained elements of black humor, but his emotions were hollow and cold with grief, as they came to Acorna. His thoughts had been harder and harder to detect as the bones and horns left the ship and it came to Acorna that he might be lonely without them.

She turned back to Becker and to Grandam, who was watching the salvage man with a curious mixture of pain and reproach. "You are a grave robber. Captain?" she asked.

"I take full responsibility, ma'am," Becker said, and pointed at RK, washing on top of the control console. "It was the cat's fault. Your old planet is a mess. We landed there looking for salvage. Some of your people's horns were laying around on the ground. It was night, the light was poor, and I thought since the cat liked them I'd pick up a few and see what they were. Well, honest, they really were just laying around."

"So you took them?" she asked, the reproach still there.

"I'm a salvage expert, for pity's sake!" he said. "I pick up stuff nobody claims-and it sure didn't look like there was a living soul there at the time. I didn't even know what they were till we got back to Kezdet and a couple of people thought they belonged to the Lady Acorna or her shipmates."

Acorna was a little startled at the idea at first but it made sense. She and then her aunt and the others were the only Linyaari the people of Kezdet and Manganos had met.

"One fellow was ready to turn me over to the cops for murder, and one nasty little-female individual, an old enemy of Acorna's-trying to kill me more than once to take the horns. Then she followed us to your old planet and took the horns I had with me. If she hadn't I swear I would have returned them, I don't care how much they were worth."

"Were-worth. Captain?" Maati asked, touching hers.

Grandam looked horrified, and Maati said, "Oh, no! You mean like in the story of the Ancestors? How the people didn't want them, they only wanted the horns? But dead horn? Healing using dead horn doesn't work nearly as well as healing done by a living person!"

"It works better than no horn at all, I'm afraid, honey," Becker said. "And there are a lot of us out there in the galaxy without healing horns."

"You say this woman knew me?" Acorna asked. "Who is she?"

"Kisia Manjan." Becker filled her in on Kisia's attempts to murder him and RK.

Acorna sighed. She had hoped that perhaps when Kisia learned of her own humble birth from her adopted mother, the girl might have been cured of some other arrogance, but apparently she was even worse. Becker's thoughts were not as easily discernible now, nor were the cat's thought patterns as clear as they had been with the bones aboard, but from what she could tell, Kisia was more badly disturbed than ever.

"Could she have followed you here?" Acorna asked Becker. Becker shook his head. "We lost her this time. Aari scared her away with a Khieevi weapon."

Grandam looked vaguely shocked but Becker said, "It simulated explosions in the earth-maybe it was a mining tool instead of a weapon to use against people-he said they used things like that to destabilize the whole planet. Anyway, it worked, and she took off. She only found us that time because of a homing device on the droid, but we got rid of that finally."

Acorna sighed. "That's good, then."

"I also have an-idiosyncratic way of navigating that's unpredictable to me as well as other ships. Besides which, I had no idea where we were going. We steered by Aari's memory of what he had been told was the evacuation route before the invasion."

Grandam sighed. "I think that whatever the others do, I shall bury Niciirye in the field beyond my back door. And Captain-if you-if you should recover the horns, by any chance, I wonder if there is any way you could somehow return them to us? It is a very important link between us and our dead. I don't know why; maybe scientists would say that an extraordinary amount of DNA material is encoded in the horn and survives death. But however it is that it works, it is a connection and now-"

She looked away but Acorna felt Grandam's pain as if it were her own, a sudden cold void, an open pit of grief she had never before sensed in Grandam.

It took nearly a week-a ghiirl-ghaanye-from the time the bones were unloaded from the Condor and ^handed over to their descendants for the Council to decide where the burials were to take place. During this time, the bones stayed in the homes of their respective clan members.

The presence of the dead from the past cast a pall over the living that was at least partially connected to their fears for those who were currently voyaging through space and had been out of communication for days now, completely silent.

Grandam had accompanied Aari to a Council session where he told the story of the cemetery's unwitting desecration and how he had preserved the bones against further pilfering. He described the thought-images he had received from Becker regarding the unwholesome interest in the horns by some of Becker's fellow humans. The Council, Grandam said, had become rather agitated after hearing that, both concerned about the possible invasion of other horn-seeking aliens and troubled that there could be some connection between the alien interest in the horns of the Linyaari dead and the lack of contact with the space-faring Linyaari.

Liriili had dismissed that concern (rather shrilly, Grandam noted). "These particular aliens are galaxies away. This one found us only because of Aari's memory. And these humans had never

seen one of us before Khornya." The viizciar did not say that she wished the aliens had never seen Khornya, that she could almost wish the girl had perished with her parents rather than be the instrument of bringing such danger upon them. But Grandam heard the thought, even concealed. And worse, she knew that others on the Council shared it. The possible threat from aliens preoccupied the Council during that session to the extent that discussion of burial sites was temporarily tabled.

Later, Aan told Grandam, "I hope they will put the burial ground somewhere protected, where the graves will not be disturbed again. A cave would be good. Like the one I hid them in on Vhiliinyar. The bones were easy to guard there, and the cave could always be collapsed upon them if outsiders came to disturb them again."

Grandam told Acorna about it later, when Aari had returned to the Condor with food for Becker. "I got the strongest impression that what he intends to do the rest of his life is guard the burial ground."

Acorna could not suppress a shudder. "I suppose that's what the Khieevi did to him that none of our horns can touch."

"Yes, well, perhaps. But it's nonsense. That is a brilliant young man. He excelled at every aspect of our culture and had already traveled to other worlds as an ambassador and educator. He is like a shell, from which the little creature within has been stolen. No-I exaggerate. Perhaps his essence is only hidden, but hidden from himself as well as from others."

Later, when the Council decided that each clan would be responsible for burying its own dead in separate burial places, Aari insisted on attending all reinterments. The clans whose dead were not returned to them with the rest of the bones did not mention the missing remains, which Acorna found odd. However, the entire city of Kubiilikhan was actively, prematurely, mourning the ones now believed to be lost in the cosmos and so a few absent dead from the past mattered less than the burial of the many bones reclaimed.

Acorna accompanied Aari as he attended the first reinterment.

The sky looked like an open wound that day, yellow, with huge red and burgundy clouds boiling in the west, split now and then by the green lightning she remembered from before. The pavilions creaked, extruding and retracting their ramps like snakes' tongues, raising and lowering their floors as the breezes and dampness shifted.

Aari was very quiet and Acorna felt from him confusion and grief, and sensed this might be coming from the Council's decision to have no central burial place, so that even the tenuous position he had found for himself as guardian of the dead was now lost to him.

This was confirmed when she noticed that when a few people addressed him, he ignored them.

"Aari," she said softly, "Techno-artisan Maarye just greeted you."

Aari looked genuinely startled. "Oh. I'm sorry. That was real then?" He passed his hand over his face. Healed and wearing the prosthetic horn Becker had devised for him, he seemed a handsome, stalwart example of Linyaari manhood.

"Of course it was real," she said. "You looked right through him."

"I'm sorry. I should apologize. I've kept company with phantoms for a long time, Khornya. They don't generally expect manners, or even answers."

Thunder cracked just then and the rain drenched everyone within a single moment. No one ran for cover, however. This was a solemn moment. All of Kubiilikhan and most of the rest of narhii-Vhiliinyar was here. All of the clans had at least sent representatives, gathered up in the shuttle belonging to the new ship being assembled by the techno-artisans. Only one communications officer remained on duty at the spaceport, and even that officer was frequently relieved so that everyone could attend the appropriate burials.

The rain was welcome, even fitting. It made the new ground softer for burial of the old bones. The Ancestors were in attendance, and that alone kept the procession from speeding its slow, mournful pace.

This was the burial ceremony of Clan Neeyeereeya, the clan with the most members to be interred, and the most above ground, though many of the latter were far too young to remember those buried on the world they had never known.

And yet, the atmosphere was as heavy with sorrow as the sky was with clouds. Clansmen with heads bowed against the torrential rain carried the burial baskets containing the remains of their kinfolk to dark holes in the long blue grass. Acorna had sorely missed her dear, departed Mr. Li, but though her loss had been new while these losses were old ones, she had not previously experienced the raw expression of grief she felt from the other Linyaari. Unlike the grief of men, this feeling carried no morbidity about it, no consciousness of the flesh rotting or ghoulish fascination with death. There was no threat or anger here, only a kind of wounded wonder at the mystery of how a loved one who had walked, slept, and eaten beside you could be rendered to a few calcified fragments.

She picked up the clearest image of bones, not these bones wrapped for this burial, but of the bones of the Linyaari missing in space, as their relatives and loved ones imagined burying them. The grief for the long-dead kin was only part of the loss being mourned here. The planetbound Linyaari cried for future as well as past deaths, grief joined with fear for the safety of the missing husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. Acorna suddenly felt tremendously protective of her own people, and wished she could do something, anything, to help.

Aari stood perfectly still as horns touched in silent remembrance, and then, startlingly, clearly even to him, a keening began inside him, low at first, then rising and falling, until it turned into a melody and Acorna realized he was singing. As the first chorus began, other voices rose to join his, those of the older Linyaari, and then, more tentatively, a few of the younger ones, singing their lament for those missing as well as the dead.

Where do you graze now that you've gone away? I no longer see you; we no longer play together at sunrise, together at night, Gone is your laughter and gone your eye's light.

Your horn now is Pull, it cannot ease my heart, It cannot ease my pain now that we are apart. I deck you in silence, I deck you in crowd, I look for your face in the shape of the cloud.

Is that your laughter in the voice of the dream Where we drank together when our world was green?  
My colors are dark now that you've gone away and I cannot hear words that you used to day.

They tell me you live in my thoughts and my dreams, Someday you'll return in a newborn  
youngling. But my tears keep on falling till someday you do, And they'll make anew river I'll name  
after you.

The song continued throughout the burial and on to the next and the next until the dead of all of the  
clans were buried. The procession ended at last at Grandam's pavilion, where she and Maati stood  
beside the burial baskets of Grandsire Niciirye and Aari's and Maati's brother, Laarye. Grandam  
joined in the song, and Maati, too, their tears indistinguishable from the rain washing down their  
faces as the baskets were gently put in the ground.

Acorna had sung with her people as the verses were repeated over and over again, to no music but  
the beat of the hard Linyaari feet pawing the soaked ground and throwing mud back over the  
baskets.

She was crying, too, for the parents she had known so short a time, for Delszaki Li, for all of the  
children she had not been able to save, but most of all she was finally feeling what had made this  
place so cold and strange and distant, how the heart had been cut out of her people when they left  
behind the continuity of their own lines, when they left behind their home. Acorna cried for little  
Maati, who was left alone except for Grandam and her strange, sad brother. But it was for Aari  
himself that she cried hardest, Aari who had suffered as no other Linyaan had ever suffered, and  
lived, who had been abandoned and who had lost everything he had ever held dear, including a  
vital part of himself. And yet, when he had the chance to save himself, he had thought mostly of  
saving from pillage the bones of his people. Acorna had the distinct impression that he might never  
have returned except for that mission.

As the last strains of the song drained into the ground with the rain, Acorna noticed that people  
were standing closer together, males and females touching horns, arms around each other's backs  
and waists, -walking away side by side, gazing into each others' eyes. No one was wearing horn-  
hats today except Aari, and increasingly the thoughts being projected were unmistakably amorous.

Acorna felt a rather embarrassing warmth flooding through herself as well, and Grandam, wiping  
her eyes and nose on the sleeve of her garment, smiled at her. "It's a natural reaction, child. During  
these hard years our population has fallen off and as the song says, our loved ones will only return  
with future generations'-so our bodies tell us it is time to start making babies."

Before Acorna could reply, she saw Thariinye coming toward her and warm feeling or no, she  
stepped behind Aari, back into the shelter of Grandam's pavilion. This did not seem to be the smart  
thing to do either as other people, couples, were disappearing into the nearest pavilions with an  
urgency that left no doubt that they were taking care of needs far more interesting than a wish to  
escape the rain.

Acorna turned away from the dispersing crowd.

Suddenly, the front flap of Grandam's pavilion burst open and Captain Becker ran into the middle  
of the room, panting, the uniformed communications officer close on his heels.



He was shouting. "Okay, okay, I know I'm not allowed but this is an emergency! I need to find Aari and Lady AcorKhornya. Now! Where are they?" he demanded of Acorna, evidently not able to see her in the dim interior of the pavilion, darkened both by rain and out of respect for the ceremony.

"I'm here. Captain Becker. It's me, Acorna. What's the matter?"

Aari ducked inside behind her. "Joh?"

"I just got a Mayday on my remotest remote scanner. It's from a ship called Shahrazad, Lady Acorna, registered on a planet called Laboue to the House of Harakamian."

"Uncle Hafiz!"

"Yeah, that's right, Hafiz Harakamian. They're under attack."

"This is nonsense!" the communications officer sputtered as Becker's arrival began drawing a crowd, including Liriili. "We picked up no such communication!"

"No, well, maybe that's because you people don't want anybody to know you're here so you don't look very hard," Becker said. "But I have equipment that lets me pick up signals two galaxies away. Can you get somebody to sell me the damn fuel so I can go help them?"

"I will come, too, Joh," Aari said. "My work here is done and Grandam is taking good care of my sister."

"Me too," Acorna said. She thought someone would protest but Liriili actually looked relieved.

"I will also come," Thariinye said.

"No way," Becker told him. "You make a crowd all by yourself, buddy. Unless you Linyaari happen to maintain a cavalry, which, since you're pacifists, I'm inclined to doubt, all I want from the rest of you is refueling and we're outta here."

"Make it so," Liriili said with great relief to the communications officer and to the spaceport personnel among the crowd. She didn't bother to hide her thoughts, and Acorna and everyone else could read her clearly. Liriili was more than a little pleased to see the backs of the contentious Becker, and the troublesome Khornya. And Aari's presence was, as she had predicted, upsetting to many of the inhabitants. He didn't truly belong among normal Linyaari any more. Yes, off-planet was a very good place for them all, as far as Liriili was concerned, as far out into outer space as they could possibly go.

Acorna turned as she heard feet galloping up beside her. Maati called out to her to wait. She did so—there was no immediate need for haste. The Condor -was being refueled with one of the several mixtures that would power it.

"I like diversity, in case you didn't notice," Becker said to the world at large since Aari was already back in the ship and Acorna had turned to meet Maati. The Linyaari fueling the ship did so quickly and efficiently but paid the human no undue attention. "The hatch is the Mytherian toxic waste chute, got the robolift off a Pachean tanker, and the nose cone is from a Nupiak asteroid breaker. It can take any one of a dozen different fuels and runs good on all of them or a mix."

Maati's demands drowned out Becker's voice to Acorna. "I want to go with you!" she cried. "How can he leave again when I just got him?"

Grandam, panting a little, caught up with them.

"Maati, we're answering a distress call. It will be dangerous. Your brother is going to help Captain Becker and I'm going in case someone needs healing," Acorna said.

"I can heal, too!" Maati said. "I helped Aari. I did! He said I was the most help of everybody. I want to go into space, too, and be star-clad like he is and you are, Khornya. Make them take me along."

Grandam put her hand on Maati's shoulder. "Maybe next time, child. This time I need you here. We have lost too many already."

"Well, then, he should stay, too," Maati said stubbornly. "He only just got here. Captain Becker hasn't had him always. He can do things by himself or with the cat or-Khornya can help him."

"Being traded in, am I?" Acorna asked, chiding just a little. She squatted on her heels and said, "Maati, I don't think Aari can stay right now."

"Why not? We healed him. All but his horn."

"The thing is, we didn't. Not entirely. He is not used to being with people any more."

"I will tell you a state secret, child," Grandam said. "Do you know why the Council decided that the graves should be spread out according to clan?"

"I don't care about that!" Maati said.

"No, but Aari does. Do you know that if we had buried them all together, all he wanted to do here was what he has done these last few ghaanyl and made himself guardian of the graves'

"You felt that, too?" Acorna asked.

"He broadcasts quite well, even without a horn," Grandam said. "I-rather think he believes he belongs with the dead, no matter how much the living may care for him."

"That's Khieevi!" Maati declared. "Why would he think that?"

"That's just it, Maati," Acorna said. "He spent a long time with the Khieevi, You saw some of what they did to his body could you feel what they did to him inside?" "Yes," Maati said. "Yes, but he'll get better." "Yes, he will," Acorna said. "But he needs time to get used to being alive. If he stays among our people now, they will never forget how he is now, and it will be much harder for him to grow into his life and become again the man he once was or could have been. Captain Becker may be a little Khieevi around the edges, but he is a good man and he does not let Aari go into himself too much. I will go and make as sure as I can that he comes to no harm and comes back to you. Then, when you're a little older, you can come into space with us if you like."

"Into space-with you? Aren't you coming back, Khornya?" "I'm not sure," she said. "But my adopted uncle is out there in trouble."

"So is your aunt, don't forget, child," Grandam said, taking Maati by the shoulders. The girl was only partially mollified and later, as Acorna, Aari, and Becker watched the ground from the comscreen, they saw her looking after them as the ship lifted off.

Twenty-One

The Shahrazad was still transmitting her distress signal when she was boarded. Hafiz had taken the helm after the captain was hit by falling debris from the first volley fired against the ship. It had come from nowhere, before the Shahrazad was able to deploy her shields. Their attacker was cloaked.

Fortunately, the Shahrazad was as spacious vertically as the villa on Laboue was horizontally. And there was only one entrance, on the lower levels, and in between, the ship had a labyrinth of defenses.

Karina watched, with a sort of horrified fascination, as pressure-suited individuals entered the main air lock, brandishing large, gleaming, fearsome-looking weapons. The leader, a small person, shucked off her garment to reveal a form-fitting silver garment much like the ones worn by ancient film starlets in vintage Asian space operas. The invader fluffed her hair and demanded of the ship at large, "Hafiz Harakamian, your guests have arrived. Surrender now and save yourself a great deal of pain later."

Hafiz smiled and said softly to the computer, "The baths."

Dr. Hoa, standing nearby, nodded, and pressed the control buttons for the little bubble of weather he was not averse to using as a weapon under these circumstances.

Kisia and her phalanx of soldiers blasted open the air lock from the inside, as Hafiz had known they surely would do, disrespectful as they were of his investment in the finest, smoothest, and most aesthetic possible technology. The blast caused the onion-domed portal to the air lock to disassemble into a waterfall of beads which then tinkled away to a mere shimmer of energy as they were penetrated.

Once outside the lock, the invaders were quickly lost in a miasma of swirling steam. The last Karina saw of Kisia or her soldiers for quite some time was the sight of Kisia pulling frantically at the neck of her silvery garment. The invaders mopped sweat out of their eyes and tore off whatever bits of clothing they could spare. They were desperate to keep themselves from broiling in the 135 degree steam heat of the artificial Turkish bath generated by a combination of Hoa's weather wizardry and Hafiz's design for another homey little luxury he had planned to add to the Shahrazad.

After a bit, though, the invaders flashed their weapons again, and another of Hafiz's elegant portals was blown open. "The camels, please," Hafiz told the computer.

"What will those do, Hafiz?" Karina asked. "Where have you been hiding camels?"

"They are holograms, my beloved," Hafiz said. "Only holograms, but we have arranged for them to appear to spit great boluses of the most noisome and slimy mixture ever to spoil the high tone of a

caravan. Sadly, we did not mix the stuff with acid or poison or something a bit more lethal for fear of harming my own people. These are delaying tactics only, you understand, but perhaps this spawn of scum-born scorpions will find it sufficiently distracting that we will buy time until assistance may arrive. Meanwhile, the navigation officer is deleting our course from the ship's computer."

"Won't Yasmin have warned them about these things?"

Karina asked. "You did say she knew all of your security precautions."

Hafiz smiled sweetly. "Not these. The good doctor Hoa and I have been amusing ourselves with these little diversions only since we left Rushima-while you were involved in your spiritual activities, o pot of passion."

The camel charge was a sight to behold and it certainly did have the element of surprise. If only Hafiz and Dr. Hoa could have made the camels spit something as deadly as it was disgusting, Karina thought, so that these miscreants could be sent back to their creator to have their spirits adjusted and be refitted for their next lives as lizards, snakes, and insects of various species.

The girl pirate's head was encased almost immediately in a blob of green goo. Soon enough, all the invaders were wiping their eyes, coughing from the fumes, and otherwise displaying their displeasure at the welcome they were receiving from the Shahrazcu). They realized quickly enough that the camels were holograms, of course, but that did not stop them from slipping and falling on the pseudospit, causing their weapons to discharge accidentally. Two of the invaders were wounded in the struggle.

The ship's computer tracked their progress on the diagram of the hull's interior and showed that the next portal they blasted open led them through a maze of halls that caused them to actually go back the way they had come, though not through the Turkish bath.

Instead, the hologram this time was of a vast and endless desert and the walkway designed to help load the ship before takeoff was looped to operate treadmill fashion. The invaders walked, then ran, then walked, but never escaped the desert hologram, nor its arid climate, also courtesy of Dr. Hoa and the ship's computer. By the time someone had the presence of mind to shoot into the simulated rolling sand dunes beneath their feet, the tongues of all of the invaders, at least the human ones, were hanging out, and they were looking parched dry and burned from the sunlamps, fixtures from the ship's spa, that augmented the artificial climate.

The desert disappeared, the portal opened, and the very hot and weary invaders stumbled through to the desert oasis.

"Dancing girls," Hafiz said. The diagram showed that the invaders had climbed through the desert up to the next level. The oasis looked as inviting as it was supposed to, and featured a hologram of Hafiz's favorite garden with a fifteen-layer cascading fountain looking like a waterfall. At this point, Karina noticed that all of the crew except for themselves, Dr. Hoa, and the fallen captain had disappeared. "Where?" she began.

"Watch," Hafiz said. "In deference to the pacifistic nature of our dear Acorna's people, we brought no deadly weapons but this does not mean my crew has suffered a lapse of their very fine training that makes them the most skilled of warriors in all manner of martial arts and hand-to-hand combat. See you, my blossom, this is what the intruders will behold." And a squad of improbably endowed

and incredibly agile and flexible dancing girls-well, persons, as Hafiz had added a pair of dancing boys to the troop, all muscles and flashing dark eyes, with skills to match those of the women. Clad, but not very, in peekaboo veils of glowing, translucent silk in emerald, sapphire, garnet, raspberry, saffron, all were likewise adorned with jingling coins of purest gold fluttering from between lush breasts, cascading over rippling abdominal muscles, twinkling with the twitching of hips, sliding over sinuous arms and necks, and flirting from between brows and just under the lower eyelashes where coy veilings began. Two dancers for each invader, Karina saw, and the invaders, who surely knew this must be a hologram also, could not quite bring themselves to shoot. In fact, as the dancers kicked up little sprays of water from the quite-real fountain, quite-real water touched the parched, would-be conquerors, who disregarded their weapons long enough to drink, to wash their hot faces, to reach for proffered flesh.

Meanwhile, the crew members, clad in blue from head to toe, including transparent facemasks, were concealed by the dancing holograms. They snatched up weapons and disabled the invading troops before any of them knew what was happening.

Kisia Manjari squealed as the dancing boys disappeared and she found herself hoisted aloft by two blue clad crewmen.

"Oh, Hafiz, you are wonderful!" Karina cried. "You've saved us! Was it your ancient Hadathian spirit guides who told you how to do all of this?"

"Very close, o luscious lemon drop, it was the strategy of an ancestor portrayed in one of my collections of rare and venerable vids. The occasion was an athletic contest but the principles were much the same except we had to employ holograms and our own humble resources instead of the living creatures at the disposal of my ancestor."

"The invaders have been taken prisoner and the ship secured, my Lord," one of the blue-clad crewmen said across the ship's computer's com system. "What shall we do with them now"

"I haven't decided," Hafiz said. "The crocodile pit or being staked out in the desert. What do you think, my darling?"

"Oh, Hafiz, that's so very unevolved. Besides, the crocodiles would probably give Ms. Manjari professional courtesy, or perhaps die of indigestion. Why not just confine them to the ship's dungeons until such time as they may attain enlightenment?"

"Yes, my angel, but I am very cross with them. Because of them we may not continue our journey. Perhaps we should teach them the joys of spacial liberation?"

"It's a thought," Karina conceded. But they had delayed a bit too long.

Kisia Manjari broke loose from her dancing boys and pushed a button on her inconsequential left breast. "MQtU, send over the second, third, and fourth phalanxes! And watch out for the biohazards and the dancing girls!"

Her former captors recaptured her, menacing her with her own weapon. She simpered at them, "You wouldn't blast a girl for making a little call, would you?"

Karina looked at her husband hopefully but he shook his head. "Alas, we have no second line of defense."

"Shahrazad, this is the Condor. You still in one piece?"

"Condor," Hafiz said. "We are just barely. We are about to be boarded a second time."

"They're probably coming through that piece of oversized tubing linking their ship to yours, right?" the voice asked.

"That seems a safe assumption," Hafiz said.

"None of your people coming through, right?"

"No one but pirates."

"Okay, we're on the case, but Shahrazad"

"Yes, Condor?"

"Dibs on what's left of the tubing afterward. We're a salvage ship."

"With my compliments. Condor."

"Okay, then. Brace yourselves. You may get a little shook up."

Acorna had not realized quite the extent of the adventure she was in for merely by becoming part of the Condor's growing crew. "How close are they, Captain Becker?" she had asked.

"Only a wormhole away," he replied. "Looks stable, and it should let us out within striking range of the target. Hold onto your horn-hats, boys and girls, here we go." He had taken what he said was the unprecedented move of strapping the cat in, too, a procedure which caused RK's ears to flatten against his head. RK's tail would have lashed as well but it had no place to go. "Sorry about this, shipmate, but we gotta make up some time here."

He called back to the rest of them as he plunged the Condor into the first hole, "Salvage and recyclings usually a more leisurely kind of business, you understand."

Acorna smiled. He reminded her so much of her uncles. And Aari, for the first time since she had seen him, seemed to be actively enjoying himself. Or maybe not. He was baring his teeth. Was that hostile or had he just been around Becker too long? No, she thought he was happy, tie felt happy to her.

The ship jolted as it surged out of the wormhole and through the first of the two "pleats" as Becker called them. "Little speed bump there, ladies and gentlemen. Black water, as my daddy used to call it. Space rapids. Yahoo!"

One more of those and suddenly they were no longer in empty space. They were making visual contact with two similar ships, both posh spaceliners, connected by a long white umbilical cord.

Becker hailed the Shahrazca. Acorna nearly wept with relief to hear her uncle Hafiz's voice apprising them of the situation.

She was about to ask to speak to him when Becker declared he had dibs on the tubing and accelerated, aiming the Condor's nose between the two liners.

The tubing was no impediment at all for the Nupiak asteroid breaker nose cone. Space-suited bodies tumbled like corpuscles on a microscope slide of a broken capillary. Gravity boots were locking onto hulls and gloves grasping the gloves of spinning crewmates. Acorna was glad to see that most of them were managing to save themselves but even gladder to see that in order to do so, they had to let their weapons twirl out into the blackness of space.

Acorna and Aari watched for a moment, and Acorna thought again how terribly lonely it would be to go drifting in space till you died. She glanced at Becker, and at the pressure suits on the wall. Becker looked completely serious for one moment, then got up, threw pressure suits and jet packs at them and said, "Okay, boys and girls, salvage time. You too, KEN-bo, but you won't need a suit, right? When that little -female individual was kicking the stuffing out of me, some of her boys stopped her from making it worse so I guess I owe them. Besides, I want that tubing! And then we'll make a house call on your uncle. Lady."

Acorna was well used to maneuvering in jets and pressure suits from her childhood mining asteroids with her uncles, and Aari also had used them before his captivity on Vhiliinyar. Fortunately, Acorna's horn was not so long that it required a special helmet. Maneuvering in space was a lot like swimming, using the jets as fins, grabbing the drifting crewmen and bringing them back to the Shahrazad and shoving them through an airlock before going after the next one.

They managed to pluck two off the hull of their own ship where they clung like barnacles before that ship took off. As soon as they shoved the last one aboard Becker said, "Lady, you may want to visit the Shahrazad and make sure your uncle is okay. Aari and KEN, unless you like family reunions, come on back to the Condor and we'll eat our humble din-din of plant seeds and cat food and hope Acorna brings us back some highclass chow from her rich relative."

Acorna waved and climbed through the airlock. The previous hitchhikers had been taken into custody by the Shahrazad's crew but once she drew off her helmet, Hafiz himself was there to embrace her and welcome her aboard. As they repaired to the ship's lounge, she felt it suddenly lurch, and saw a bolt of light zipping across the view screen from the Shahrazcad to the departing Mu)cu. The Mu)cu exploded in a ball of flame.

From the corn set, she heard Becker yelling, "Yahoo! Instant karma for coming to the rescue, Aari, my man! Lookit the salvage! See ya later, Lady!" and the Condor with a wee waggle of its chassis zoomed off to retrieve its prizes.

"No!" cried Kisia Manjari, bound hand and foot to a chair in the corner of the lounge. "It's not fair! That junk man can't have the nice new ship my uncle gave me. Daddy, do something really nasty to him and his horrible cat."

Acorna saw that Kisia's eyes were turned up in her head so only white showed through her lids.

"As you see, dear Acorna, we are playing host, somewhat unwillingly, to an old schoolmate of yours."

Acorna rose and crossed the room, kneeling beside Kisia and looking into her face. She started to touch the girl's head with her horn but Kisia jerked away, batting at her with manacled hands.

"She's had some sort of psychotic break," Acorna said, recoiling slightly from the ugly chaos of the girl's mind. "She followed Captain Becker and took away the horns of the Ancestors he had gathered. She tried to kill him to make him tell where the Linyaari home world is."

"And no doubt it was for the same reason that she pursued us," Hafiz said with a heavy sigh.

"I wonder if she knows anything about the disappearance of my people," Acorna mused.

Before she or anyone else could pursue that line of inquiry, a familiar voice penetrated the room. "Shahrazad, this is the Haven. We received your Mayday. Shahrazad, come in. For the love of all the moons of Mithra, Shahrazad, don't tell us we're too late and that explosion was you! Please come in, Hafiz, you old camel molester, you."

"Mr. Greene," Hafiz said to the room at large. "There are ladies present, if you please. And no, quite happily, the explosion was that of a ship called the Mu) registered to Count Edacki Ganoosh. The MQcu attacked us and launched a boarding party. We managed to capture most of the party, and then we blew up the ship, once it uncloaked, in order to forestall future difficulty."

The sound of youthful cheering and squealing and one shrill celebratory whistle overcame Greene's transmission for a moment.

"Johnny, it's Acorna," she said. "What are you and the Haven doing out here?"

"We originally came thinking to give safe escort to the Shahrazad, Acorna, but things have gotten a little complicated. What are you, doing there?"

"That also is complicated, Johnny," Acorna said.

"Ladies and gentlemen and children of all ages," Becker's voice crackled in on top of the others, "I think it's time we all had a little real-time interfacing here. What say we pop over to the nearest dirt, set our respective vessels on their tails, and climb aboard Shahrazad so Mr. Harakamian can entertain us in the style to which it would be nice to become accustomed while we tell our respective war stories, hmm?"

"A very sound suggestion. Captain Becker," Hafiz said. "Please, bring your excellent crew."

"Bring the kitty, too. Captain," a young voice piped up.

"That request was brought to you by Ms. Turi Reamer, jeweler at large, Becker," Johnny Greene said.

"Course it was," Becker replied. "I'da known Turi's voice anywhere, Greene. You best not be coming between me and my lady friends now, John, you hear?"

"Lordee, I can tell you are on a salvage high, Joe. Get much from the wreck?"



"I did not. It's in a bazillion teeny pieces all moving rapidly away at warp speed. Not really worth my while."

"Gentlemen, when you have finished your bonding ritual, perhaps we might agree upon a place to meet?"

"There's a puny little planetoid not far from here that doesn't seem to have any life or want any," Becker said. "Let's set down there."

This they did. As Becker, Aari, RK, and the KEN unit boarded, Acorna and the Harakamians greeted them.

"What a splendid specimen of a Makahomian Temple Cat you have on your shoulder, Mr. Becker!" Karina said, clapping her hands. "I understand they are among the most enlightened of all creatures. It is said that when the Makahomian elders and priests begin to consider their next incarnations, the most favored of all possible fates is to be born again as a Temple Cat."

RK licked his paw, swiped it across his whiskers, narrowed his eyes, and purred appreciatively.

Becker was more single-minded. "I'd like to have a look at the human space salvage you and Aari retrieved, Acorna, if your uncle doesn't mind," he said. "Like I said, a couple of those guys who were with Manjari were not half bad. I'm sort of hoping they were among the survivors."

Acorna was pleased that he had dropped the "Lady" part now. It meant that he was starting to consider her a friend, instead of some legendary character he had heard about on Earth, which had been how he had regarded her before.

Uncle Hafiz waved his hand graciously. "Please consider my dungeon as your dungeon," he said.

Becker strolled up to the force field where Hafiz had confined the miscreants. The hologram behind them showed a Crusades-style dungeon, complete with sound effects of someone being dismembered in the background. Acorna was very glad it was just a hologram.

Becker said, "I like the ambience, sir. Amnesty Interplanetary would be less enthused, I'm sure, but if they ever come aboard because someone who deserves this has the brass to complain, there will be nothing anyone can put a finger on in the way of cruel or unusual punishment." Kisia Manjari was by now confined in a separate cell. Karina Harakamian kept sending troubled glances in the deranged girl's direction.

"Can you wall off her cell from visual or auditory contact for a little while, please, Mr. Harakamian?"

"My dear Becker, we are fellow entrepreneurs, businessmen, and adventurers. Do call me Hafiz, my friend, and I shall call you ..."

"Becker's okay, but Aari here calls me Joe." "Joh," Aari said, and looked challengingly at Uncle Hafiz. Acorna was pleased to note that either Aari's appearance was so much improved by his surgery, prosthesis, and horn-hat that the Harakamians noticed nothing unusual, or else Aari's wounds had only been particularly repugnant to Linyaan. Hafiz smiled and said, "And you too, my

dear fellow, must call me Hafiz. Our beloved Acorna calls me uncle. I practically raised her, you know. Why, I am all but a kinsman to your people!"

Acorna stifled a giggle and Aari gave Hafiz a slow baring of his teeth, rather like Decker's more wolfish grins. "I am Aari, Uncle Hafiz. I have lost much of my own family and will happily adopt you, since you wish it."

Oops. She wished she and Aari could thought-speak as easily as they had been able to among the horns of the dead. She could have warned him. Uncle Hafiz was a very nice man in many respects but he was not exactly to be trusted-not even by members of his blood kin.

"Splendid, splendid." Hafiz erected a hologramatic wall in front of Kisia's cell, adding some decorative manacles with a skeleton dangling from them on the outside, a burning brazier with implements of torture heating in it, and, as a finishing touch, a dish of greenish gruel crawling with virtual maggots. It matched the decor of the interior of her cell nicely, though that now was wholly blocked by a slimy looking stone wall. Had Acorna not witnessed some of the conditions in the child labor camps of Kisia Manjari's adoptive father, the Piper, she would never have believed human beings could incarcerate each other in such dreadful nonhologramatic conditions.

RK sat with lashing tail and narrowed eyes watching as Becker paced with his hands clasped behind him, studying the faces of the men Acorna and Aari had rescued. They were all men, which did not surprise Acorna. Kisia Manjari would have no other women in her entourage. Her ego was such that she would see any other woman as competition.

"I think I recognize a couple of you fellows," Becker said. "Pardon me if I don't quite remember your faces. I was dying at the time. But you failed to kick me when I was down and I like that in an enemy, fortunately for you. Now then, I'm wondering if any of you, being the lickspittles of Kisia Manjari and her uncle as you must be to find yourselves in this charming accommodation, would care to redeem yourselves a little further and fill us in about your employers' plans. You understand we're wondering why we have been singled out for the honor and distinction of being Kisia and Ganoosh's enemies."

Acorna saw them hesitate, and quite without shame she used some of the new skills she had acquired on narhiiVhiliinyar to give her wily old uncle a small psychic push in the right direction.

"I can assure you," Uncle Hafiz said suddenly, an inner smile lighting his eyes as if the brilliant idea he had just had was his very own, which, for all Acorna knew, it may have been. Perhaps her push was merely giving him the sort of cue an actor needed to speak his lines at the proper time. "That the man who proves to be of the most assistance to us will no longer need be in anyone's employ,

"So grateful for his services shall the House of Harakamian be that it shall reward him so that he will believe he has found the universe's most generous djinn in the most secluded and luxuriously appointed bottle in the universe. Should he be kissing his own mother on the lips, his identity would yet be a mystery to her when our physicians have concluded his transformation and yet, so handsome a-what is that idiomatic expression you so charmingly employ, o incomparable jewel among jewels, when referring to my personal physique and sexual prowess?"

"Studmuffin, Lord and Master," Karina replied with a demure lowering of her lashes and a coy curtsy.

"So handsome a studmuffin shall he be that all women will desire him and all men admire him. A far more attractive retirement program than being left adrift in space, would you not say, gentlemen?"

There was only a moment of silence before one of the men Acorna had rescued, one whose face wore a careworn expression that was perhaps the result of a troubled conscience, spoke up. "I'd do it for a new job and protection for my family, Mr. Harakamian. I understood that I was being employed to pilot an executive liner to take VIPs to business appointments. This kidnapping and torture stuff and posing as Federation Forces was not in my contract."

Acorna did not stay for the bidding war that ensued, each prisoner vying to give the most accurate details to which he was privy concerning Ganoosh's operation and plans. For at that moment, Johnny Greene and what remained for the crew of the Haven were boarding the Shahrazm). Acorna ran to greet them. It was so good to see her old friends again! She could hardly wait to see Pal Kendoro and 'Ziana. She wondered if 'Ziana realized yet how much Pal cared for her. And if Markel and Johnny Greene would be there.

Markel and Johnny were there, it was true, and Khetala, who stepped forward and hugged Acorna in an embrace that quickly degenerated into sobs. Acorna wondered what could be upsetting her so until she realized that here were Johnny, Markel, Khetala, red-haired Annella, a tall red-haired man with two children of the same coloring, and a passel of very young children. And that was all.

"Kheti, where are the others?" Acorna asked. "Johnny? They're not on the Haven, are they? What happened?"

Johnny took a deep breath. Becker and Hafiz had by that time noted that something else was amiss and joined Acorna and Karina.

"Well, honey, there's good news and bad news," Johnny said. "The bad news is. General Ikwaskwan is working for the bad guys. He and a bunch of his fake Federation Forces troops came home to roost about the time the Starfarers arrived to pick up Nadhari Kando for combat lessons. Ikwaskwan gassed Nadhari and our ship and took most of the Starfarers prisoner. If it hadn't been for Markel knowing how to use the vents and suggesting them as a safe space, we, too, would be guests of the general."

"Was that last part the good news?" Acorna asked.

Johnny shook his head. "No, the good news-though it's also kind of mixed-is that we know the course the general's ships took when they returned to their lair. We followed, and we know exactly where it is, but we couldn't take them on with only kiddy power to draw on. While we were trying to decide what our next move was, we picked up the Mayday from the Shahrazad."

When that and all of the other information had been shared and a plan requiring Acorna and Aari to be in two places at once had been formed, Hafiz Harakamian demonstrated the skill upon which his first fortune had been founded.

"My enemies have told many lies about me," Hafiz said. "Among them is the tale that my earliest enterprises involved the sale of addictive substances, with hints that these were illegal drugs. As any of my people can tell you, I am a devout man and am guided by the Three Books and the Three

Prophets. I would never consider such a thing. However, in one way, my enemies are correct. My fortune was founded on items that many find addictive. You will have noticed some of my specialty work here aboard the Shahrazad. Mr. Greene, I believe, will recall when I fulfilled my family obligation to make a profitable business of my own before I was named heir by running my business from a storefront on Todo Street."

Johnny snapped his fingers. "Harakamian Hologramatics! Fondest Fantasies Fulfilled! I remember it! I loved the holo of the music session in the Dublin pub."

"I think Dad mentioned your company a time or two, too, now that I think about it," Becker said.

"Why, Uncle Hafiz!" Acorna said. "I knew you had wonderful taste, but I had no idea you were an artist as well."

"Oh, yes, my dearest, and now, with your help and Aan's, I will create the vision of a lifetime. Meanwhile, the rest of you get to work."

"We're on it, Hafiz," Becker said. "C'mon, folks," he said, and the KEN unit as well as the crew of the Haven followed him to first the Condor and then, laden with various tools and spare parts, back to the Haven.

Day after day and hour after hour the tortured bodies of the children -were dragged into the bubble-badly bruised, broken, and cut; some with ruptured organs and splintered bone. The Linyaari on the healing rotation did their best for them, working until the healers were past the point of total exhaustion.

And all night long another team worked on Nadhari Kando, healing her flesh and bone, cleansing her spirit of the drugs which caused the disciplined woman warrior to behave in a way her sense of honor otherwise would not have allowed. The Linyaari were reaching their limits and feared they would soon become too exhausted to help.

It would have been different if the Linyaari had been given time to rest between rotations but they were not. Ikwaskwan's pet scientists were deliberately pushing the unicorn people to the limits.

Melireenya had often been taken to her ship and interrogated again about the computer system. Every Linyaari underwent this, usually in the middle of the night or before a long-delayed mealtime. Not that the meals were in any way adequate. Bales of old hay were all that Ikwaskwan provided for food for the Lmyaan.

After the interrogation, Melireenya had been shoved into the gas chamber. She had needed healing herself afterwards. So depleted had her horn become from the interrogation, it took much longer to purify the air than usual, and she absorbed some of the toxins before her system could purify them. Then it was on to the dismal swamp known among the inmates as "the pool." It took her hours of lying on her belly with her face almost submerged in scummy, stinking sewage to clear this water.

There were several different gas chambers and several different pools, actually, so that many Linyaari could undergo the same ordeals at once.

Melireenya's joy at seeing Hrronye, her lifemate, again was quickly dampened when others told her in whispers of thoughtspeak that they had been separated from their own families and told they would not see them again until they gave the soldiers the information they demanded. Nobody did, of course. The location of the Linyaari home world and the secrets of the horn were as locked into Linyaari psyches as their own DNA codes. Those who traveled from the planet learned from their superiors how to navigate from memory, and it became a part of them along with their newly white skins and silvery manes.

But she seldom saw Hrronye now, and wished she had dared embrace him, as they were kept apart anyway on the tedious deadly treadmill of torture called the "duty roster."

By far the worst part of it all was the healing. At first, it was not so bad. The average Linyaari in good physical condition could heal a deep -wound within moments. And there were many Linyaari in the compound. Only four were assigned to heal at the same time, and this was after their resources had been depleted by the other "duties," lack of sleep, and increasingly, by malnutrition.

Neeva had tried to reason with Ikwaskwan. "This is hardly a fair representation of our skills that you are seeing, General," she said in her best diplomat's manner. "We could show you so much more were we properly fed and rested."

He had actually reached out and run his hand down her horn, a violation of privacy that ran very deep among their people. Neeva had tried to pretend it did not distress her but of course it did. "And we could feed you so much better, dear ambassador, if you would tell us the location of the place where we might find your native grasses and other foods. If you continue to refuse to satisfy our very reasonable curiosity, why then ..." He stroked her horn with his fingers again and when she winced away from him, she was forced to stand still by two of the soldiers, and he repeated his repugnant gesture several more times. "The horns will survive all of you, I'm told. Perhaps they alter to their translucent and less useful state because, while on a living member of your species, they are less stable-having to self-heal as it were. It may be that detached horns, having fewer frivolous demands made on their powers, will be of more use to us. I understand these things have aphrodisiac properties. Is that true?"

"How would I know?" Neeva asked, undiplomatically. He retaliated by grabbing her horn with his fist and yanking on it so that she sobbed with pain and humiliation. "One way or another, dear ambassador, I will have yours for myself."

This had been too much for her lifemate, who, like other Linyaari present at the pond where she approached the general, was listening.

"Leave her alone!" Virii demanded, stepping forward, only to be grabbed by two more of the soldiers. He had spoken in Linyaari, of course, but his meaning was taken by Ikwaskwan, who wagged a scolding finger at him. "I'll have yours, too, stud. I wonder-are they a pair? How interesting." He had nodded at the pond. "Let's see how long it takes these two to purify that. Make sure it's good and foul."

The soldiers had eliminated in the pond and then forced the heads of both Neeva and Virii into the filth, not bothering to make sure their noses and mouths were clear of the water. No one else had been allowed to help. It was horrible. In the shape they were in it took both of them almost ten minutes to purify the water and by the end of it both had nearly drowned. Thereafter they

underwent a joint interrogation session. Melireenya and the others had not so much as dared to whisper while the interrogation was broadcast throughout the compound.

Today it was rumored something even worse would happen. The architect of this horror, the one who had retained the services of Ikwaskwan and his mercenaries, had arrived during the night. Ikwaskwan told everyone he had special entertainments planned for their distinguished guest.

(They almost make you miss the Khieevi, don't they?) Khaari asked sadly. (At least with the Khieevi, we were never sure if they understood what they were doing to us or not. The calculation of this is repulsive.)

The tournament was about to begin and during it, Melireenya had been specifically chosen for healing duty. Her horn was translucent, difficult to see now in some light, and it had even begun to droop. It was awful enough to think of its powers failing while she was up to her ears in fouled water or breathing poisoned air or enduring the mistreatment of the interrogators-but worst of all for her was the thought that it, and she, would fail in the middle of trying to heal a massively wounded child.

So far this had not happened but it now took all the Linyaari on duty many many long moments to heal each and every wound. All the time the victims were in terrible pain.

Now the soldiers and their masters had assembled in the stadium, and this time all of the Linyaari and all of the children of the Haven were being forced to watch as well. The lovely young captain 'Ziana of the Haven was bound at the wrist and ankle to that young man who would someday, if they lived through this, surely be her lifemate.

Poor Nadhari was healed once more of all but the massive amounts of drugs Ikwaskwan had injected into her system. The last three nights she had seen patients still undergoing healing. Once the drugs were leached from her system, she had begged them to kill her, or to at least let her die so she could no longer be used in this fashion. But of course, no Linyaari could do such a thing.

The soldiers were using their prods to push the young couple out to Nadhari when a soldier came running through the crowd and bounded up to the box where Ikwaskwan and Ganoosh sat waiting for the maiming to begin. The soldier saluted and said something to Ikwaskwan, who looked very pleased, which was not at all good, and nodded to him, then held his hand up to the soldiers below to desist for a moment. The first soldier bounded down the steps and out of the stadium bubble. He was headed in the direction of the bubble where the captured Linyaari ships were stored and the interrogations took place.

A moment or two passed, and Melireenya was wondering, along with the other Linyaari linked in thought-speak, what fresh horror was about to be visited upon them. Then the light shifted and the top of the bubble was filled with oversize faces and forms of richly dressed Linyaari people standing in front of colorful pavilions with a stately hill in the background cradling more egg ships than could possibly be left on narhiiVhiliinyar.

"Dearest ambassadors, tradesmen, students, and scientists, this is your vilzaar speaking," said the woman, who was not the viizaar at all, not unless Khornya had rapidly risen to power. She was speaking in her rather broken version of Linyaari, so Melireenya was inclined to doubt she had become the planet's administrator already. Beside her was a fellow who was vaguely familiar, and yet, different somehow. Melireenya was far too weary to try to place him. "Dr. Vaanye" Khornya

indicated the man beside her who was hardly old enough to be the Dr. Vaanye who was her late father-"has finally succeeded in widening the band of our broadcast so it can reach to the various planets upon which you should now be posted. We have had no word of you in a long while. Have you lost your way home? Have you forgotten how to contact your loved ones? In case such a disaster is happening, we will rebroadcast our coordinates on this band only."

Ikwaskwan was impatiently gesturing to a soldier who dragged Neeva and Virii, bound at wrist and ankle like the young Starfarer couple, out into the arena.

"Well, Ambassador? What's the message?"

Neeva raised her filthy face, her mane matted and chunks of it torn loose in parts, her horn barely visible.

She spat.

Ikwaskwan roared. "Let Nadhari have them both and bring me their horns when she's done with them!"

Melireenya and Khaari passed a signal between them and Melireenya sprang up and cried, "No! General, please don't hurt them any more! I'll tell you what it says! I know it will harm the rest of my people but I simply can't take it any more! Please let Neeva and Virii go and I'll tell you anything you want to."

Khaari ran into the arena after her and tried to pull her back. "Melireenya, you don't know what you're saying. You mustn't betray all of us for one person, not even Neeva."

Perhaps the general would not notice in the heat of the moment that they were both speaking Standard, for his benefit.

The message overhead was in a loop, repeating over and over again. Melireenya, babbling, stumbling over her words, forgetting the Standard that she had learned from Khornya's people what seemed like ghaanyi and ghaanyl ago, told Ikwaskwan what the transmission said. She hesitated over the coordinates until he threatened Neeva and Virii again, and then she allowed herself to cave in under the weight of his cruelty, as she had wanted to do for days. She lay in the dirt of this strange moon beside her poor tortured friends and wept and wept and wept until she thought her weeping would never cease. When at long last someone, Khaari, thought-touched her and she looked up, everything around her had changed. The most drastic change was that the bleachers were empty, with most of the soldiers, Ikwaskwan and Ganoosh, gone. Although the broadcast was still playing and replaying overhead, it was infused with far more light, and Melireenya realized that this was because there were no longer the shadows being cast by the towering fence of bullet-shaped troop ships that had surrounded the biosphere bubbles. All of these ships were also gone, and the atmosphere outside the bubbles was clouded only by settling dust and debris. The bubbles still resounded with the roaring of the troop ship drives as they lifted off.

That roaring seemed to continue for an awfully long time, Melireenya thought. With the games over, Nadhari was netted, sedated, and Melireenya and the other three on her shift -went to work healing her. This day there were no wounds except the psychic ones from the drugs and the shame she suffered to be so badly misused. So far this day she had maimed no one.

The lone sentry left to guard the Linyaari ship bubble was surprised to see two troop ships land so soon after the others had left. He thought he understood when he saw the cadre of uniformed Federation Forces men and women pushing one of the corns in front of them. This one was lipping off to them in her own horsey-sounding babble.

"Got another live one for the general," the short, barrelchested master sergeant said. "He's gonna want to interrogate this one personally."

"Well, he'll have to do it when he gets back from the Linyaari home world then," the sentry smirked.

"What?" "Didn't you get the message? The stupid corns broadcast to all of their ships, which we intercepted, of course, the coordinates to their planet. The general and the boss have taken off with most of the personnel to check it out."

"No kiddin'? Well, we'll just park her with the others then. What'd they have in the mess hall tonight?"

The sentry told him while the rest of the cadre marched the corn past him, and past the ships, into the biosphere where most of her kind were kept.

"Where'd you find her?"

"Pleasure house on Rahab Three."

"No kidding? You mean somebody wanted to do it -with one of..." The sentry didn't finish his sentence. Something banged against the backs of his knees, knocking him into the sergeant. The last thing he saw was the sergeant's belt buckle as the newcomer raised both fists and brought them down hard on the back of the sentry's skull.

Acorna heard the thump when the sentry hit the ground and saw only a brief flash of movement as Aari penetrated the biosphere. He had an uncanny talent for taking on the coloring of his surroundings, she saw. It was augmented by smearing himself with soil, but it was more in the way he became whatever was around him, though she would have said if asked previously that it was impossible for anyone to blend with a plastic bubble.

Khetala was giving the next trooper they encountered the same story Becker had about Acorna being a special prisoner they'd found in a pleasure house. Meanwhile Reamer guided her to the bubble where many other Linyaari were crammed into a place far too small for them. They were very subdued. At first she thought they all wore horn-hats to mute their thoughts, but then she saw that their horns were in very bad condition that they were emaciated and filthy, their bones protruding and their postures drooping.

She began to pick out the ones who looked the strongest and ablest and used her horn judiciously on them, meanwhile broadcasting in thought-speak, (We have come to take you home. Please be ready. Do as you are directed and with any luck, we will all leave here safely.)

(Khornya?) Her name spoken in her aunt's thought-speak sounded as if Neeva was seeing her as a ghost. Acorna waded through her people until she found an adjoining bubble where four Linyaari



were laying horns on Neeva and a male Linyaari, and also on someone who vaguely resembled the Red Bracelet who had once been Delszaki Li's chief of security, Nadhari Kando.

(Neeva!)

(We are doing what we can for her, Khornya, but she and Virii have been badly abused.)

(Melireenya! Khaari, I am so glad to have found you. Stand aside a moment-no, wait.) She laid her horn on all of them and in a few moments, except for looking very thin, they had recovered to the point that they once more resembled her old shipmates and her aunt.

(Oh, Khornya! You see how low we have fallen. Thanks be that your horn is still fresh. Can you help Nadhari? They have almost killed her with their wicked drugs that make her do terrible things to us all.)

Nadhari was feverish, and her eyes were staring, the blood vessels in her neck and upper chest standing out like those of her arms, seemingly in spasm. Acorna laid her horn against them and Nadhari relaxed.

Becker poked his head in. "Khetala, Reamer, Markel, and Hafiz's people have taken care of the guards. You got enough pilots for the Linyaari vessels?"

"Yes. But none of them are very strong."

"That's okay. They don't have to fly far. I swept all the ships for homing devices. Learned that lesson once already. Let's go, then."

"It is a fortunate thing that all of my gardens are not of the illusory variety," Hafiz said as he, Acorna, and Aari watched the Linyaari former prisoners stripping his hydroponics gardens like locusts in a field. The gardens in the Linyaari ships, which could have fed the prisoners, had been deliberately killed by Ikwaskwan's men or allowed to die.

"Very good," Acorna agreed. "Our people are looking much improved. But we need to get them home -where they can graze and rest and have the wounds to their spirits salved."

"I hope," Aari said in a voice so tight that it came out rather high, "that their families will not fear them, too."

Acorna laid her horn against his shoulder. "Your family did not fear you. Maati was very put out we didn't bring her along, in fact."

In the lounge and on the mess deck, the Starfarers were putting all of the gourmet selections in the Shahrazad's replicators to the test, while Karina and the staff busied themselves at other replicators on other parts of the ship, fixing food for the youngsters to take on their journey home.

Becker stuck his head through the onion-domed port, nodded to Aari and Acorna, and said, "Saddle up, crew. Time to go back in the sky now."

So they left Hafiz and the Haven in charge of the former prisoners, both human and Linyaari, and boarded the Condor once more, setting off for the coordinates that the hologram had given as those of narhii-Vhiliinyar.

Acorna was a little surprised to see Nadhari Kando, Neeva and Virii, and 'Ziana and Pal already aboard. "I'm amazed Johnny Greene isn't here, too," she said.

"He's still back on the Shahrazcad generating those messages with the coordinates, sending out fresh holovids every little once in a while just to keep Ganoosh and Ikwaskwan interested," Becker told her. "I figure they've been traveling maybe forty-eight hours by now, but using my special navigational methods, we'll be there several hours before them."

He was correct as, Acorna was learning, was usual. The Condor arrived at the Federation outpost well before the mercenary fleet. When the post commander heard the stories of the Linyaari ambassador, the legendary Nadhari Kando, and the young Starfarers, he was at first hesitant until Acorna said, "I can only bring you the words of my uncle, whom the Linyaari people regard as a sort of honorary kinsman and who considers all of my people to be under his protection while they are outside their own territory."

"Yes, ma'am," the Federation commander said. "And your uncle, can you give me a name?"

"Hatiz Harakamian," she said. "You may have heard of him. Patron Emeritus of the House of Harakamian? My other uncle Rafik Nadezda is the current patron and he naturally shares Uncle Hafiz's concern. In fact, Mr. Kendoro and Ms. Kando are close personal friends of Uncle Rafik's as well as mine."

The commander's demeanor changed. "You're Lady Acorna Harakamian-Li! At the behest of Mr. Rafik Nadezda, the Federation has been investigating certain crimes against it and unaffiliated races."

Acorna nodded.

"And-uh-two other uncles-your parents seem to have had a lot of brothers, ma'am." Acorna nodded. "Two other uncles were so insistent that we send Federation troops that there is a detachment on the way already. I'm afraid your uncles were so upset that they had to be forcibly detained to keep them from coming along. No civilians on troop ships, ma'am. I'm sure you understand."

"If you could just send them word that you've spoken with me and I am" she started to say fine but then amended it to, "I have survived, Mr. Harakamian is safe, and we are among friends, I would appreciate it."

"Roger that, ma'am." Within a few hours real Federation ships began arriving from outposts all over nearby quadrants, creating a formidable welcoming committee for Ikwaskwan's fake ships.

When Ikwaskwan's troops arrived, bristling with weapons but speaking words of peace to what they fondly supposed to be the Linyaari home world, they were flanked by the real Federation ships, locked into tractor beams, and escorted to the outpost, after a brief skirmish ending in the Federation's favor and providing so much salvage for Becker that he had to put it on the tractor beam to tow behind the Condor.

"Now then, Aari, here's something my daddy taught me about towing salvage. You always tow it at a thirty degree angle from your flight pattern. You know why that is?"

"Perhaps so it does not hit your ship if you must suddenly cease acceleration or reverse course?" Aari asked.

Becker looked disappointed, Acorna thought. He loved to lecture. "Very good. But that's not all. You know what else?"

"No, Joh," Aari said.

"Well, it's the ions we leave behind in our wake, see. They discolor some of the metals, pock others, can completely ruin a good load of salvage so it's not worth jack. This way, you tow it at an angle, you don't get hit in the butt or ruin your cargo. Only problem is, we can't tow through the worms and pleats so we gotta go the long way."

"Joh," Aari said. "The scanners."

The scanners had picked up the cloaked vessel ahead of them, now uncloaking to turn on them. The comscreen never brightened. It didn't have to.

"Ahh," Nadhari said in a hoarse and cracked voice. She had spent hours giving her deposition. "Ikky's flagship."

Becker bared his teeth at her in the grin Aari had learned to mimic. "So, Nadhari, I heard about what this old boyfriend of yours did to you. How about we send him a little love letter?"

Nadhari returned the grin with the first one of hers Acorna had seen since they left the biospheres. "Oh, Becker, sweetie, can we."

"For you, no sacrifice is too much," Becker said. "It's a good place to die--for them. We got black water behind us-everybody strap down."

Acorna reached for RK to secure the cat, as well, but he had made other plans. He lay inside the same harness that held the unhealthily thin form of Nadhari Kando.

Becker said, "Nadhari? Pretty name. Makahomian, isn't it?"

A bolt of light snapped toward them.

She nodded just before he said, "Okay, here it comes, three-two-one, reverse thrusters!"

Acorna didn't quite take it all in. One moment the ship loomed large on their screens and the Condor seemed to be standing still. The next moment, Nadhari's smile turned down, everyone unstrapped themselves and Aari unpointed at the comscreen. And in the midst of it all, several tons of wreckage were slingshot from the tractor beam on their starboard side.

After a moment or two the Condor slowed, and all movement reversed once more for a forward thrust. They reemerged from the "black water" just as the first red ball of light was dimming and the pieces of Ikwaskwan's flagship were making that part of space a dangerous place to be.

Nadhari Kando laughed and Becker winked at her. "Sending them a frag-load of salvage ricocheted their shot right back at them." He shook his head regretfully. "Just like the sick sucker to explode in too many pieces to make it worthwhile to collect."

"I appreciate your sacrifice, Becker," Nadhari said.

"Then it was worth it," he said, with grim satisfaction.

Karina was the one who thought of the brilliant idea of taking some of each of the grasses favored by the Linyaari and putting them in the replicator. And belatedly, Becker and Aari remembered the sacks of seed that had been blocking the crew quarters before the KEN unit cleared them out to make room for the bones. With these resources, the Linyaari were soon restored to relative health.

Karina again offered her services and Hafiz's to Acorna for her spiritual training. Neeva, who overheard the offer, thoughtspoke to Acorna, (Ask her to tell you how she manages to shield her thoughts so well, Khornya. When we first met her, just about the time we thought we had made contact, her mind became a complete blank.)

"Karina, you were the first contact for my people when they came to fetch me," Acorna said. "You learned thought-speech before I did, I'm told."

"Oh, yes," Karina said, "And thanks to my heightened level of enlightenment, I was able instantly to communicate with your species."

"Didn't you find it difficult at all? I certainly did-I have had so much trouble sorting out the thoughts of those around me from each other and not broadcasting every little notion."

"I had just the opposite problem, to tell you the truth," Karina said confidentially. "I would start receiving them and, knowing they were trying to reach me, I naturally made my mind completely open and blank to receive their thoughts and then I could hear nothing at all."

"Hmmm," Acorna said. "I'll have to try that."

"What?"

"I said, 'imagine that,'" Acorna replied. "When you were expecting just the opposite, I mean."

While everyone worked to regain the strength they needed to make the journey home, Acorna and her aunt talked.

Acorna was almost startled to find that of everything that had happened to her, what she wanted to talk about most was Aari and what had been done to him. After her aunt's ordeal, Acorna felt that she would understand what Aari had undergone. "Maybe you can make our people understand, help him fit in again," Acorna said.

"Do you think that's still necessary?" Neeva asked. "Look. Does he seem to be having a hard time fitting in now? "

Indeed, he did not, but was grazing with the others, listening to them talk and nodding, occasionally adding something of his own.

"He seems fine now but when we get home, when everyone's normal, will they be so upset by memories of their own ordeal that just seeing him or me might bring back, that they will be afraid to look at-well, especially him again?"

"Khornya, we're not all like that. You must realize that this particular crisis affected you and the people at home as well as us. We spaceborn and spacechosen are your kind, but because of circumstances, none of us stayed dirtside while you were there. You met only the most conservative element of our society. And the most fearful, because they look to the past for their strength. They have a strong aversion to change of any kind. And they don't like anyone who is the least bit different. Don't get me wrong. It is necessary that there be both traditional or agrarian, and progressive or technological and scientific Linyaari. The traditionalists give us our stability and sense of self and we -we give them the ability to continue to live. I don't suppose they mentioned that it was necessary to partially reform narhii-Vhiliinyar to make it habitable for our people?"

"Not in any detail," Acorna said. "Well, it was. Thanks be to the Ancestors that Grandam was there to help you."

"And Maati." "And Maati," Neeva agreed. "My point is, you are one of us. Aari is one of us. Nothing can change that, ever, not distance or time or even the sort of thing that has happened to Aari-and almost to all of us. Wherever you are, wherever we are, you are still ours and we are still your people."

Except for the inclusion of the Condor, Acorna's second homecoming was almost a reversal of her first. This time the bright Faberge egg ships bounced toward narhii-Vhiliinyar rather than from it, and only one lone ship, the new one she'd seen the technoartisans working on with the clan colors of Acorna's illustrious clan ancestress, bounced up from the planet's surface. Thariinye beamed at them from the comscreen until Becker switched it off.

"I don't like that guy," he grumbled. The Linyaari band was there to greet more than one person this time, Acorna could see from the viewport of the Condor. Grandam and Maati alone separated from the crowd and walked across the field to wait for the robolift to lower, and Acorna and Aari to join them on the surface. The vilzaar herself had extended the invitation to the welcome home fete to Becker as well, but if she had reversed her opinion of Becker, the same was not true of his opinion of her.

"Bureaucrats," he said. "They're all alike."

Maati gave Acorna a brief horn touch and then held onto her brother's waist with both arms until he picked her up in his and hugged her. Acorna touched horns with Grandam. "Perhaps we'd better leave them to catch up with us," Grandam said.

They walked slowly and silently toward the crowd. The returnees were being given wreaths of flowers by those greeting them, and there were many tears and much laughter. Neeva was explaining to Liriili that without the good or "Linyaari barbarians" their people would never have survived the bad or "Khieevi barbarians."

"In fact," Neeva said loudly enough for all to hear, "we Linyaari now have a kinsman among the barbarians. Khornya's uncle Hafiz, who fed us and helped us regain our health after our imprisonment, said that since he was Khornya's kinsman, he felt that all of the rest of us were also members of his clan, a very wealthy and aristocratic lineage of merchant traders."

"Hmmm," Liriili said, "It is wise to keep one's assets in the family. Perhaps we should send emissaries back to this new uncle of our people to discuss a favored trade agreement."

"I believe that would please him a great deal," Neeva said. "Some of us who spend much time off-world learning and bringing back technologies and trade items need to spend more time at home for a while, as we recover. This Harakamian is a genius at making holograms. Perhaps he could be persuaded to produce some hologramatic learning programs for the various guilds?"

Liriili gave Acorna a guilty, but still slightly frosty smile. "Perhaps. Perhaps Khornya would care to discuss it with him on our behalf? Now that she has spent time among us, in my estimation she is ready to assume her own mantle as videShaanye."

"Perhaps," Neeva said.

"But surely she will want to stay home and rest for a time, too," Grandam said. At that moment, Acorna looked across the field and saw Maati walking slowly toward them, alone. Acorna fought her way through the crowd to the comscreen and hailed the ConSor.

"There you are, Acorna. If you can tear yourself away from that mob down there, you might want to join me and Aari and the cat again. The board here is lit up like a pinball machine all of a sudden. We have us some serious salvage opportunities and they won't wait forever. Stay there or come along. What's your pleasure?"

Acorna, Grandam, and Neeva exchanged looks and thoughts. They were her people, it was true, but so were Uncle Hafiz, Rafik, Gil, Calum, the Kendoros, and so many others.

On the comscreen, over Decker's shoulder, she saw Aari's face, regrets and sorrow mixing with anticipation of rejection and-just a little-hope.

Grandam's eyes twinkled. Acorna turned back to the Condor and then swung back to face Liriili again. "I'm honored by the ambassadorship, of course, but for right now, there is still something I must try to"-she glanced once more at the comscreen, the cat's impatiently flicking tail, Becker's welcoming expression and most of all, Aari, and said aloud, in answer to Becker-"salvage."

End of Acorna's People

## **Acorna's World**

**by Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough**

One

Roughly six weeks after she had joined the crew of the Condor, flagship of Becker Interplanetary -SLM Recycling and Salvage Enterprises, Ltd., Acorna sat on "salvage watch" at the helm of the ship, surrounded by the softly glowing console lights in the cockpit and the billions of stars beyond. She felt contented, almost as if she were once more home-back in the first home she could really remember, the mining ship she had shared with her adopted uncles. Behind her for the moment were the intricacies of Linyaari society and culture. Before her instead were the intricacies of the universe as recorded in the notes, tapes, and files of Captain Jonas Becker and his illustrious parent, astrophysicist and salvage magnate Theophilus Becker.

To give herself something to do during the long watch, she was charting those notations methodically so that the planets, moons, wormholes, black holes, "pleated" space, "black water" space, and other locations visited by the Beckers could be easily relocated, and the sites where they had once been could be revisited if the need arose.

Becker had grumbled at first when she started this chore. Since the death of his adoptive father, Theophilus Becker, from whom he had inherited both the ConSor and the salvage business, Jonas Becker had been lord and master of the Condor, with only Roadkill (or RK for short) the huge Makahomian Temple Cat he had rescued from a wreck, for company. Becker didn't like his belongings tampered with or moved. But Acorna had found plenty of evidence that RK periodically made nests out of the hard copies of the notes, often shredded them when he felt the urge, and, in a few sorry instances, had added his own personal ( and remarkably pungent ) contributions to them when he was displeased with the state of his shipboard toilet. Though she could easily eradicate the odor and the stains, nothing could make the shredded notes legible again. It was high time someone charted the notes before RK had his way with the lot of them. After a few "reasonable discussions," Jonas had stopped grumbling and let Acorna get on with her task.

At first RK had stayed at the helm to assist Acorna with her job, but later had wandered off in search of food or a sleeping companion, probably Aari, the only crew member other than Becker currently aboard.

Like Acorna, Aari was Linyaari, a race of humanoid people -with equine and alicorn characteristics (including a flowing, curly mane and feathery hair from ankle to knee, feet with two hard toes each, and three-fingered hands with one knuckle on each digit instead of two. The most striking characteristic of the Linyaari, to humans anyway, was the shining spiral horn located in the center of their foreheads. But in Aari's case, the horn had been forcibly removed during tortures he'd suffered while he was a prisoner of voracious bug-like aliens) the Khieevi. While Aari's other wounds had been healed on narhiiVhiliinyar, the world to which the Linyaari had fled when the Khieevi had invaded their original homeworld Vhiliinyar, Aari's horn had not regenerated.

This was an appalling wound for a Linyaari. A Linyaari's horn had amazing (almost magical, even) properties. The horns had the ability to purify anything-including air and water and food, to heal the sick, and also acted to some extent as an antenna for psychic communications among the Linyaari.

Acorna had learned a great deal more about the powers of her horn and about her people when she had returned with a Linyaari delegation to narhii-Vhiliinyar. Unfortunately, once she had arrived, her aunt and two other shipmates had been dispatched into space again to deal with an emergency, and Acorna had been left among strangers to try to adjust to her native culture, a culture she'd left behind while she was still a baby.

Her only two real friends on narhii-Vhiliinyar had been the eldest elder of the Linyaari people, Grandam Naadiina, and Maati, a little girl -who was the viizaar's messenger and the orphaned younger sister of Aari.

When Becker had made his unauthorized landing on narhiiVhiliinyar to return Aari and all the bones from the Linyaari graveyard to the new Linyaari home planet, Acorna, Grandam, and Maati had been in the greeting committee. Aari at that time had still been terribly deformed from his ordeal with the Khieevi, and the viizaar Liriili and some of the less sensitive and compassionate Linyaari had not made his return easy.

Acorna, perhaps because her own loneliness had helped her identify with his, had been drawn to Aari. When an emergency signal had called Becker away from narhii-Vhiliinyar, Acorna and Aari had shipped out with him. They had been able to help in a crisis that had threatened some of Acorna's human friends as well as the Linyaari. As a result of their intervention, a branch of a Federation-wide criminal organization had been destroyed and many off-planet Linyaari, including Acorna's beloved aunt, had been rescued, along with all the other captives of the criminals. Acorna, Becker, Aari, and Acorna's Uncle Hafiz, who had also been on hand for the rescue, were now in great favor among her people.



Acorna could have stayed comfortably on narhii-Vhiliinyar once her aunt and the other ship-bred and ship-chosen Linyaari returned to the planet. But she had decided instead to leave with Becker and Aari.

She wasn't sorry. She might have been born on a peaceful planet populated by beings who had the ability to understand one another telepathically, but her upbringing had made her different, and that was sometimes a problem, both for her and for her people. Space was familiar to her, and its diversity of races, species, and personalities stimulated her. Of course, right now, just being here, quietly charting coordinates, resting her eyes by watching the stars, wasn't very stimulating, but the serene surroundings felt wonderful. She was comforted by the routine watch, at peace with the universe.

Perhaps, she thought, happily ever after, the permanent version, only happened in fairy tale, but happy every once in a while wa^ r&ftful ane) healing.

The cabin lights flicked on, bringing the harsh light of the day shift to her starlit world. She blinked a few times until her eyes adjusted.

"Yo, Princess!" Becker said. "Your watch is over. Whatsa matter with you sitting there typing in the dark? You'll ruin your eyes that way, didn't anybody ever tell you?"

He strode up to stand behind her, peering over her shoulder so intently his brushy mustache, which closely resembled RK's ruff, brushed her horn. Becker smelled strongly of the aftershave he had begun to use about the time he began to shave again, shortly after she arrived. It wasn't that he was trying to impress her in a courtship. and mating fashion, she knew. It was simply a rather old-fashioned, by human standards, sign of gender acknowledgment and respect. "Hey, now, how about that? You've charted the whole journey from the time we left narhii-Vhiliinyar the first time, to that moon where Ganoosh and Ikwaskwan held your people captive, and all the way back again! I figured, with all the excitement we ran into, and all the hopping around we had to do, nobody would ever be able to figure that one out. How'd you 2o that?"

"You kept good notes, Captain," she said, smiling.

"Well, it's terrific! And you did it so fast, too. Where'd a sweet young thing like you learn that?"

"Elementary, my dear Becker," Aari said, sauntering up behind the captain and towering over him. Tall, slender, and graceful now that his injuries had healed, Aari -was whiteskinned and silver-maned. These were traits he shared with Acorna and the other Linyaari space travelers.

Aari had been reading a trashed-out copy of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* lately. Becker and Acorna could see the immediate result of his current venture into fiction in the way that Aari had layered two baseball caps from Becker's collection, so that the bill of one hat stuck out in back above his long silver mane, the other in the front. It was not only a pretty good imitation of a traditional deerstalker, but the hat covered the indentation in Aari's forehead where his horn had once been. Aari also clutched a Makahomian ceremonial pipe between his teeth. It was a bit longer than an antique meerschaum, but with Aari's height, he could carry it off. The Holmesian effect was only spoiled by the RECYCLER'S RONDY '84 logo on the front of the cap facing them, along with an embroidered trash container rampant beneath the lettering.

"Space-bred and space-chosen Linyaari," Aari said, "develop a heightened sense of navigational interrelationships between space and masses, even energy fluctuations. Many of those relationships are imprinted telepathically upon our brains by our parents when we're young. That is partially how I was able to guide you to narhii-Vhiliinyar though I had never been there myself."

"Hmm," Becker said, surveying his shipmate's latest odd outfit. "You make me wonder if my old man might not have been part Linyaari. You're sure finding your way to the planet wasn't simple deduction?"

Aari looked puzzled. "No, Joh. We do not use footprints, types of mud, or tobacco ashes to do this thing. It is a matter of the mind."

"Must be," Becker said. "Acorna's indicated the wormholes and black space with a precision that you don't see on regular charts, given the instability of the features being charted and the dangers of getting close enough to map them thoroughly. Even got the whole wormhole system we ducked back through to blast Ganoosh and Ikwaskwan to kingdom come."

Acorna glanced up from her charting and shrugged. "We were there. The notations of the holes and folds are roughed out in your notes, and made precise in my mind." She paused to consider something else Jonah had said. "About your father—he is probably not part Linyaari. I do not think it is possible for our two species to interbreed. In the pictures you have shown me of your father, he certainly doesn't look Linyaari, though I will admit his intuition about such matters as spatial relationships, as well as yours, seems to me to be similar to some of the psychic abilities our race possesses. I can certainly understand that, lacking a crew and managing all phases of your operation alone, as you do now and as your father did •when you were a child, you did not take the time to properly collate and chart your observations. But, frankly, only psychic ability would explain how you were ever able to find anything in this chaos." Her spread hands took in the mounds of papers, chips, and recorded tapes scattered around the console.

"I usually know which pile or computer file to access for what I need," Becker protested. "At least, I did once," he muttered. Then he added graciously, "But I'm sure it'll be helpful to have it all nice and orderly."

Roadkill jumped up on one of the piles of hardcopy and sent the papers into an avalanche that slid clear across the deck.

"RK, you silly cat, you already had your chance at these," Acorna said, madly grabbing for the flying papers.

The cat chased the furthest sheets until they settled to the floor, pounced upon one and shredded it with his back feet, then abruptly lost interest and began washing his brindled belly instead.

Acorna bent down and shuffled the papers, somewhat the worse for wear, back into order.

"I'm pleased you approve, Captain. The task needed doing and it keeps me productively occupied."

"Yeah, I guess you must have been pretty bored after you reprogrammed that junked replicator I had in Cargo Hold Two to make all my favorite dishes, so I wouldn't have to eat cat food when I got busy, and after you and Aari turned Deck Three into a hydroponics garden for your own noshing needs, while you meantime inventoried and catalogued all my remaining salvage."

"It was not so much, Captain. It's not as if I am new to this sort of thing. I used to replicate food and help grow my own meals when my uncles and I lived aboard our mining ship. I also catalogued our specimens and assisted with charting. I like to be helpful."

"No kidding! Between you and KEN," he said, referring to the all-purpose KEN-6^0 android unit that they had acquired, more or less by accident, during the Condor's last voyage, "the way he keeps the ship soooo-"

"Shipshape, Joh?" Aari offered. "I have been reading the nautical works of Robert Louis Stevenson, and that term is employed to describe a flawlessly maintained vessel."

"Yeah, what you said," Becker agreed. "Between you two and Aari, I could take up knitting or basket weaving in the spare time I got these days."

"A very good idea, Joh," Aari said. "You have some excellent references on crocheting, beadwork, handweaving, pottery making, and origami, as well."

"You should know, buddy. I'm glad you've been getting so much out of the pile of old books I found in that landfill, not to mention the vid collection. But let me warn you-steer clear of the do-it-yourself veterinary books." Becker glanced down at RK who had one leg poised in the air and was looking up at him with suspicious, wide, golden eyes. In a stage whisper Becker continued, "I once tried some stuff out of one of those vet guides on the cat there. Bad idea. Neither of us came out whole."

Aan looked puzzled. "Why would I read veterinary books, Joh? If 'Riidkyii' "that was as close as Aari's Standard could come to pronouncing Roadkill's name"becomes sick, Acorna could heal him. We have no need for the invasive measures described in those books."

"Damn good thing, too," Becker huffed. "The problem with using invasive measures on ol' Riidkyii is he can't get it straight •who's the invader and -who is the invadee. We were both short a few bits of choice anatomy after that little adventure. Luckily, Roadkill and I eventually got put back together, courtesy of the Linyaan." He turned to Acorna and said, "While we're on the subject, you know you're welcome to the library, too. Princess. Anytime."

"Yes, Captain Becker, that is very kind of you, but I already accessed most of the reading selections you have available during the time I lived with my uncles and guardians. I was raised by humans unlike Aari, who had no previous exposure to human culture until he met you. So I won't be using the books. The vids are another matter. However, I regret very much that we have only vid goggles available to view the films. It would be such fun if we could all view them together."

Becker gave her a sly look from under his brushy eyebrows. Her psychic powers had been increased while she lived among her own people, but she didn't need them to know that he understood what she really meant. Teasing, he said, "Of course, really, only two people oughta watch at a time because somebody should be on salvage watch."

He knew that she wished to share the books and vids with Aari so that he wouldn't spend quite so much time alone, and so that they would have something to enjoy together. She blushed a little. "I simply thought it would be more companionable."

"Yes, Joh," Aari said, "And, as far as salvage watch goes, you once performed all the ship's duties alone, and your metabolism requires that you sleep for long periods. You must have let the ship's computers take over occasionally then. You could certainly do so now. I do not see the difficulty of sharing these vids."

Becker chuckled and shook his head. "What is it with you guys? Mutiny? But, okay, "we'll keep an eye out for something we can convert to a full screen setup for vids instead of the goggles."

"Thank you, Captain," Acorna said. She believed Aari would be much better off if he didn't spend nearly all of his time on his own. He had spent years alone in a cave on the deserted planet Vhiliinyar, hiding from the Khieevi who'd tortured him, before Becker had found and rescued him. Aari hardly knew how to speak to people anymore. And every time he disappeared while she was not on watch and Acorna decided to go to him to try to initiate a conversation, Captain Becker always seemed to have some task he needed her assistance with or some errand for her to run. RK, too, tried to deter her. His claws and piercing cries could be quite eloquent, even to one who possessed no higher understanding of cat language than vulnerable skin that could be spoken to with fang and claw. She sensed her friends were possessed by some sort of male protectiveness toward Aari. She was sure it -was not a reasoned response to her actions, but she was hard-pressed to understand it. She meant her fellow Linyaari no harm, and sought only to lead him to a deeper healing than had been necessary with the wounded she had previously treated.

She was also as perplexed as she "was amused by Aari's "literary disguises," as Becker called them. They were funny and sad at the same time. As he adopted the headdresses and costumes of various characters in the books and vids he was exposed to, Aari looked less like a maimed Linyaari and more like an interesting, if rather oddly dressed, human. Of course, she herself had at times donned disguises that covered her horn and feet so that she could pass for human, and it had been a useful skill. But in Aari's case, she sensed a huge chasm of loss underlying his attempts to be someone else. It was as if he no longer considered himself fully Linyaari. The horn transplant the doctors had attempted on narhii-Vhiliinyar had not taken. A living horn transplant from a close relative might be possible with a specimen from Maati when she was older, but could not be attempted just yet while her horn -was still growing. They'd have to wait until she'd reached full adulthood before they could risk harvesting enough tissue for a successful transplant for Aari.

The com unit button lit and emitted a beep as Aari replaced the fallen papers on the console, lifted RK to his shoulders, and headed back into the hold to continue his reading.

"You get it, Acorna," Becker said. "It's probably for you anyway."

She flipped the toggle, fully expecting to hear the voice of either her aunt, viife()haanye ferliii Neeva, checking to make sure she was all right, or that of the viizaar Liriili, spouting yet another list of instructions and requests that Acorna was to pass on to her contacts in the Federation in general and to her Uncle Hafiz in particular.

Since the rescue of all the off-planet Linyaari spacefarers, ambassadors, teachers, students, scientists, engineers, healers and their families, and the subsequent return of those rescued to narhii-Vhiliinyar, just six weeks before, big changes appeared to be taking place on the Linyaari world. According to Neeva, the governing council had been in almost continuous session, trying to decide if, when, and to what degree the Linyaari should end their isolationist policy with regard to most of the galaxy, and whether they should open trade alliances with Federation planets and companies.

The council had already unanimously decided on a most favored trade alliance with House Harakamian, the empire Uncle Hafiz had recently handed over to his nephew Rank Nadezda, one of Acorna's adopted uncles. The Linyaari hadn't yet decided whether or not to allow House Harakamian vessels enter Linyaari space, however. At this point, the majority of the council favored off-planet trading at some mutually agreeable location. But that wasn't a unanimous view. Some of the more progressive Linyaari space travelers even favored entering the Federation. As they pointed out, isolation had failed to protect their people from the Khieevi or from capture and mistreatment at the hands of Edacki Ganoosh, the Kezdet robber baron. The vocal minority of the council felt that knowledge of other civilizations, both friends and foes, was better protection for a peaceful people like themselves than ignorance and isolation.

Since most of the Linyaari diplomatic corps was currently recovering from their ordeal on narhii-Vhiliinyar, the council was entrusting all of the Linyaari's initial overtures to the Federation to Acorna, who was a newly appointed Linyaari ambassador and also, conveniently, Hafiz Harakamian and Rafik Nadezda's adopted niece. The council completely ignored her protestations that Becker did not intend to return immediately to federation space, preferring for the moment to search for salvage in the galaxies occupied by the Linyaari and their current trade allies, an area neither he nor any other Federation-licensed salvage company had previously explored. Acorna had passed on the Linyaari council's messages to Hafiz before his flagship, the Sharazoi, departed from Linyaari space.

Hafiz's last message to the ConSor, and to Becker in particular, had been suspiciously expansive and nonchalant.

"Of course, dear boy," Hafiz had said, "there is no need for you to hasten your business on our account. By all means stay in this congenial universe. Get acquainted. Find useful refuse. As long as Acorna is happy, her Aunt Karina and her other uncles and I are content. We'll see each other soon enough."

Perhaps Hafiz was really serious about retiring after all? In Acorna's experience, it -was very unlike him to fail to seize a business opportunity by the throat and milk it for all it was worth. If he wasn't retiring, he was clearly up to something.

So she had reason to hear from many people of her acquaintance just at this moment. But this time the com unit surprised her. When a face appeared briefly on the screen, it was not her aunt, or another Linyaari, or even the wily Uncle Hafiz. Instead, a heavily bovine face was being transmitted, male and jowly with a curving brownish horn above each ear. It spoke in a language Acorna didn't understand, so she reached for Aari's LAANYE, a Linyaari device that collected samples of unknown languages, analyzed them, then served as both a translator and a sleep-learning device to implant foreign languages into the brain of anyone who wished to learn them. But the transmission trailed off just as she got the machine activated.

According to the LAANYE, the last word the creature had said translated as "Mayday" or "SOS" in Linyaari. The only other words she'd caught in the transmission before the screen turned to white, crackling static were "Niriiian" and "Hamgaan)." She did recognize the race of the creature who'd appeared on her com screen. He "was from the planet Nirii-the Niriiians "were regular trading partners of the Linyaari. Acorna scanned the frequencies, trying to pick up the signal again, but to no avail. Becker put his hand over hers and pointed. She followed his finger and saw that the screens of the long-range scanners he used to detect possible salvage showed blips of white light in several locations. One of them was backed by a mass of green light. "There," he said. "There's a solid mass under that one. According to the readout, it's a small planet with an oxygen-based atmosphere. If the ship was seeking refuge, that would be the most likely place in this sector of space to retreat to. Let's go see what we can find."

Acorna nodded. "Yes, I see what you mean. Given the direction of the signal's probable source, it is likely that the salvage is the distressed vessel whose broadcast we just received. The LAANYE translated the last word before the message was interrupted to mean 'Mayday.' Possibly the signal we intercepted was a general one sent as the ship's systems were failing during some sort of accident or attack. I feel sure we received it only because we were within range of their emergency transmitters. If the signal had been meant for us, the broadcast would have been in Galactic Standard or in Linyaari."

Becker shrugged. "Yep. That's the way I've got it figured. Don't get your hopes up, though. We're probably not going to find the cowboy who was transmitting the mayday alive, or anybody else. None of those blips on the scanners look like an intact ship. But we may be able to tell what got him from the fragments. The time stamp on the message is a couple of days ago-if the problem was indeed an attack instead of an accident, whatever nailed them seems to be long gone."

So we will check the situation out and report exactly -what happened to the Federation?" Acorna asked.

Yeah, eventually," Becker said. "But mostly -we'll know what to avoid ourselves."

Intricately twisted vines and stems joined and twined, braided, knotted, and separated before bursting into jewel-toned rainbows of richly hued blossoms, reminding Acorna of pictures she had seen of the illustrated borders in Celtic holy books from ancient Earth. Except that this vegetation was no mere border, but a lush tropical jungle so interconnected that it was impossible to tell where one plant stopped and the next began.

At first, the tangle of plant life looked impassible. She, Captain Becker, RK, and Aari had stood on the lowered platform of the robolift, overwhelmed by the sight of it. Becker was fingering the sharpened blade of his machete while Aari held the portable scanner, waiting for it to indicate the hiding place of the large piece of salvage that had shown up on the Condor's screen.

Acorna was busy cataloging the minerals and elements that made up this planetoid. She had already notified the others that no breathing apparatus would be required-the atmosphere was void of any substances lethal to carbon-based life forms and far richer in oxygen than Kezdet or narhii-Vhiliinyar, and the soil was as rich in nitrogen. Of course, that was just her scientific opinion. In practice, once she was actually faced with it, the air was so heavily scented with the aromas of the flowers it felt too thick to breathe, laden with a heady mixture the like of which she had never smelled before. She detected elements of the incenses that had perfumed Uncle Hafiz's palace, like cinnamon, cloves, vanilla, and the kind of human cooking known as baking, and also smells like mint, rose, violet, lavender, gardenia, and lily of the valley, but all were much deeper and mixed together with new scents-things she'd never smelled before. The end result was so intense that it almost took on substance and color.

Captain Becker said the place reeked like a high-priced bawdy house, •which seemed to please him. Aari had sniffed curiously. "I have no basis for ascertaining the validity of your comparison, Joh, but I defer to your knowledge of such matters." For their excursion dirtside, Aari had removed his Holmesian baseball caps and pipe in favor of a colorful scarf tied around the top of his head and a plaskin patch, inked black, over one of his eyes. Acorna deduced, Watson-like, that he had been reading *Treasure Inland* and -was assuming a piratical disguise in lieu of his Holmes persona. Though he was giving the soil a very Holmesian inspection, what he could see of it from where they stood.

Soil was clearly foremost in RK's mind, too. The ship's cat leaped off the platform and hopped through the vines-which parted, almost as if the cat's reputation had preceded him, to allow him to pass easily through them. The roots and trailers along the ground seemed to shrink away as RK pawed the soil, turned his back on his work, and deposited his own ecological contribution to the planet.



Acorna started after the cat but Becker touched her arm and said, "Wait. Let us see if he gets out again okay."

The cat pawed backward to cover his work but the vines and other ground cover were already creeping back across the pile. Roadkill looked behind him, saw that this -was happening, gave a little shake that could have been a cat's version of a shrug, and bounded back through the path that had cleared for him on his way in. He then hopped up onto the robotlift platform and proceeded to wash his whiskers, as if they had been somehow affected by his previous chore.

"Okay, then," Becker said.

"That way, Joh," Aari informed him after consulting the scanner, and pointed in the direction from which the cat had just come.

"Well, then, onward." Becker raised the machete in one of the dramatic gestures he was fond of and pointed. RK leaped to his shoulder and the four of them dismounted the platform. As they set out, the jungle growth shrank even further away this time, leaving a wide lane open before them. It gave Acorna an odd feeling to see the plants moving and shifting out of their way. Becker walked over to one side and raised the machete to hack at a thick stalk, but the stalk bent in the middle to retreat from him.

"Wait, Captain," Acorna said. "The plants seem to be trying to accommodate us by getting out of our way. It hardly seems right to cut them."

Becker gave her a look. "Yeah, well, we don't know how long it will take us to find the ship. And we don't know what •wrecked it. We might be looking at the cause of the trouble right now. How do we know these plants "won't close up around the Coru)or and bury it so deep we -won't be able to get it loose again? They're several stories high, after all. We -wouldn't even be able to see the suns if they had decided not to part for us."

"I think 'decided' is a relevant term in this case," she said. "These plants seem to have some kind of limited sentience, or at the very least the ability to react quickly to stimuli. I think it might be wise to sheathe the machete. Maybe we had better not make them angry. Besides, we could find the ship with the portable scanner, couldn't we?"

"Yeah, but I always like to have a backup plan," Becker said, -while putting the long knife away.

Aan dug in the pocket of his shipsuit and pulled out a ball of shining thread. "I have just the thing, Joh." He tied one end to the robotlift and held the rest in his hand. "We can leave a trail behind us, like Theseus seeking the Minotaur in the

labyrinth. This also works very well in eaves when searching for lost cascades of gold and jewels."

"Caskets, buddy," Becker said.

"As you wish," Aan agreed amiably, and began unrolling his ball of string.

"Ow," Becker said as his shoulder -was punctured by the claws of the suddenly hyper-alert ship's cat, -who hunkered down and switched his brindled gray and black tail, his ears perked and his eyes intently following the gleaming thread as it unwound behind Aari. "Belay that, mister," Becker said.

The cat immediately leaped from Becker's shoulder to Aari's. "Aaargh," Aari said, rolling his as instead of his rs. "Avast there! It is my faithful paro, Pol."

RK made a dive for the thread. Acorna intercepted the cat and received a few scratches for her trouble.

"I am sorry, Khornya," Aari said. "I think Riid-Kiiyi does not wish to be a paro."

"It's all right," she said, cuddling RK up close to her body and scratching him gently under the chin. He immediately abandoned his quest to play with the string in favor of purring and rubbing the side of his face against her skin.

The small party set out into the jungle. The vegetation now made a path as wide as the Coru)or, the stalks bending almost flat to avoid contact with the people passing among them. The heady fragrance turned to an acrid stench.

"Sheesh," Becker said, holding his nose. "What are these, skunk vines?"

Acorna looked around. "No. They are the same sort of plants as the rest, but see how the flowers are closing up and the scent they are emitting is changing? It is as if they are afraid of us."

"Hmmm, well, it does smell like the last guy who tried to gyp me out of some money he promised me," Becker admitted. He leaned closer to a stalk and the stench grew stronger. "Joh, don't," Aari said.

"Just testing," Becker said. "Sony, plants. No harm intended."

Aari was busy unwinding twine with one hand and holding the scanner with the other. "It should not be far now, Joh," he said. "The salvage is just ahead."

An opening in the canopy was visible before them, and Acorna saw a long cylindrical pod lying among some twisted and charred stalks right in their path.

Becker prodded it and turned it over. Beyond it, they could see other bits of the downed ship visible among the stalks. Although there was nothing overtly useful in the wreckage they could see, Becker decided he wanted to haul all of the pieces back to the Condor. "We might be able to figure out why the Nirriians sent the mayday," he said. "Maybe find some clue to •who exactly they were, what kind of trouble they were in, who attacked them." He scratched his head. "Don't think that this is a normal part of my business, Acorna, because it's not. Finding wrecked ships, yes, but not stumbling on the wreckage before it's cold. And I have a funny feeling about this one."

"Me, too," Acorna said.

Aari looked up, surprised at their words. "I apologize, Joh, Khornya. I did not realize that you had not understood the Hamgaar()'s, broadcast. I would have translated it for you if I'd known."

"Hamgaarts?" Becker asked.

"That is the name of the Nirriian ship that broadcast the message that brought us here. Nirriians have been trading partners of my people for many, many years. Like us, they are a nonaggressive race. Before I-before my brother was lost-I traveled on more than one trading mission to Nirrii."

He turned away, stepping over nearer pieces of wreckage to retrieve others farther from the ship.

Acorna noticed as she picked up the fragments of ship that they were sticky with some reddish fluid. At first she thought it was blood, but then she saw that it was actually more of a deep amber in color and far too transparent to be either human or Linyaari blood. It was clearly the source of the acrid smell they had noted earlier, and she wrinkled her nose. "Phew," she told Becker. "This is what is causing the stink."

Becker looked more closely at the damaged vines all around them, gleaming with redness that Acorna had not noticed in the plants nearer the ship. "I think you're right. Look there. They're weeping this stuff."

Acorna looked. The redness ran down the stalks, pooled at the base of the stems, and was slowly encroaching on the wreckage.

"We're going to have to give this stuff a good scrubbing," Becker said disgustedly.

Aari was looking, too, and nodding. Then all of a sudden he turned toward them, leaped over the wreckage, and ran back to the ship as fast as Acorna had ever seen him run.

"Hey, buddy, wait up, -what is it?" Becker asked as they chased after their friend, but Aari was back on the robolift platform before they could catch him, curled up in a fetal position on the very center of the platform, his eyes tightly closed, and his entire body shaking. Sweat and tears ran off his face and wet the deck beneath him. RK dabbed at him -with an experimental paw and then looked up at Becker, wide-eyed.

Becker raised the robolift and he and Acorna shepherded Aari back to his bunk. "You stay here with him," Becker told her. "I'll get the KEN unit to help me load the cargo."

Acorna had leaned against Aari so that he was in contact with her horn all the time they were loading him and he was quieter now. His trembling had stopped and he was no longer sweating. Her healing abilities worked to some degree with mental as well as physical wounds, but she was learning that she had limits. There was only so much she could do with deeply embedded psychological injuries, particularly with Aari.

When he'd been tortured, his survival had depended on being able to escape mentally to a place where the Khieevi tortures couldn't touch him. Unfortunately, when he was in deep pain, he still retreated to that place. Acorna couldn't reach him there, and the healing power of her horn could not touch him either.

She tried, but she could not read Aari's thoughts, 'which were jumbled and incoherent. But the feelings that rolled from him were all too clear-deep dread, loathing that was kaLinyaan in its repulsion. It was as if Aan had been flung down into some dark and nightmarish place he could not escape from. He no longer knew where he was or who was with him. She could only hold him, her horn buried in his mane up tight against his scalp, trying to exude enough soothing energy to overpower the spiraling horror that gripped him in its vortex. Time seemed to slip away as she tried to give Aan some relief from the mental demons that gripped him. And then, as she reached the point of exhaustion, everything slipped away from her and the world faded to black.

When Becker returned to the main deck, he and the KEN unit both sticky with the foul-smelling sap, he looked in to see that Aari and Acorna both slept, she with her arms wrapped tight around him, he at last relaxed, though his face was still damp with tears. Becker saw that Acorna's golden horn -was looking a little transparent, as if the effort of trying to comfort Aan had drained her healing energy. Past experience had taught him that this was how it -was with Linyaari who pushed their limits of endurance. He had seen that all too clearly from the effects of the tortures inflicted on captured Linyaari by Edacki Ganoosh and Admiral Ikwaskwan. But normally it took a long time and a lot of injuries to deplete a horn to any degree. The fact that Acorna's horn was already

translucent instead of a healthy gold told him that poor old Aari had to be in a world of hurt.

RK, who had spent the time Becker and the KEN unit used to round up the salvage getting the sap off his fur, plopped himself within the tangle of Linyaari feet and buried his face in his own paws. The cat had apparently decided that a vigil was in order.

Becker looked at Acorna lying there, and thought that if her knuckles weren't already so pale they'd be white from hanging on to Aari. She was clutching him like a lifeline. He was hurting, and she "was bound and determined that he -was going to stop hurting. That was all very well on the surface, but Becker -wasn't sure Aari was ready to be out of pain, or ready to let Acorna in to heal him. He wasn't sure that, even with the Linyaari's legendary psychic abilities, Acorna had enough experience of men to understand how complicated her caring for Aari could be for both of them.

He touched Acorna's shoulder gently and -woke her, so that she turned toward him and relaxed her grip on Aari. He didn't need to do anything else. As soon as she saw -where she -was and what she -was doing, she rose, not as if she -were ashamed, but like she knew it -was the prudent thing to do.

"He was very frightened of something out there," she said. "Khieevi must have attacked that ship, Becker. Aari's mind was screaming about the Khieevi, and he was reliving his torture when they captured him again. It was very hard for him."

"It was no picnic for you, either, Princess. Better hit your berth and strap in. I'll strap him in, too. I've got all the salvage stowed. We can look at it at our leisure once we're back in space. I don't want to sit down here any longer than necessary and give those plants time to get so relaxed about having the CorSor among them that they decide to make us part of the scenery. Know -what I mean?"

It was an image she could visualize all too well. She nodded sleepily and stumbled off to her berth.

When at last the SharazaS returned to Maganos Moonbase bearing a triumphant Hafiz Harakamian and a host of others, Rafik Nadezda was so relieved to see the old pirate he could scarcely believe it.

While the ground crew tended to unloading the ship and servicing it, Rafik walked beside the Harakamians to the transit lounge, which was the most luxurious of the quarters at Maganos Moonbase. The soundproofed facility, with its deep carpets and soft, comfortable divans and chairs in the lounge, fully equipped business suites and conference rooms, had been designed to make a good

impression on visitors, potential employers, and clients for the skills and goods that were being offered by the base's residents. Maganos Moonbase was a mining, manufacturing, and training facility set up to reeducate the former child slaves of Kezdet. The children ran the base as a business, and were responsible for its financial and educational successes. The moonbase had been built -with money from both Hafiz Harakamian and Acorna's other benefactor, Delzaki Li, as well as with reparations seized from Kezdet's kingpin of the child-slavery operations, Baron Manjari. But it •was the children's job to ensure that the investment was a profitable one.

Now the former child slaves rushed up the gangway connecting the ship and gantry to the transit facility. They greeted the Harakamians and the ship's other passengers with cheerful familiarity that Rafik was pleased to see Hafiz apparently took as a compliment. He smiled and waved and spoke a word or two to some of the children he recognized from previous visits.

Hafiz looked somewhat trimmer and fitter than he had -when last Rafik had seen him. It was possible that this new trimness was owing to Hafiz's marital exertions with his bride, but if so, the old man was a considerate as •well as an energetic lover. His new bride, her ample form flatteringly draped in an expensive drift of violet and orchid silk embroidered with gold to accentuate her not inconsiderable bustline and hips, had not diminished by one curve or chin, and glowed with contentment.

As Hafiz embraced him, Rafik thought there was a renewed vigor and purposefulness to the old man's step as well, a gleam of reinforced steel in his eye and grip.

"You look well, my uncle," Rafik remarked. "Nearly being killed a thousand times can do that for a man of action, O son of my heart," Hafiz replied with a dismissive •wave of his hand, to indicate that real men of action knew this thing and found it beneath them to make too much of it.

"You were magnificent, my hero," Karina said, and turned to Rafik, -white gold carousels glittering with amethysts and blue diamonds swinging from each ear beneath the light veil she wore over her dark hair. She gestured dramatically with heavily bennged hands, and the jewels at her neck and bosom heaved with pride as she lauded her husband. "He was a lion! He saved a shipload of children as •well as most of Acorna's relatives!" Her hands fluttered down to cling like plump -white doves to her husband's arm. She batted her eyelashes and looked up at Hafiz adoringly-no small feat since she -was an inch and a half taller than he.

"So -we have heard from the Starfarers, Uncle," Rafik said. "They, too, are here on Maganos, recuperating."

"Are they? That is good. That is very good indeed. It fits in with my plans exactly," Hafiz said.

"Plans?" Rafik said.

"All in the proper time, most beloved of nephews. I don't suppose you have a few small viands at hand to comfort weary travelers?"

After Hafiz and Karina had been comfortably ensconced on a well-padded divan and refreshments ordered, and Rafik had seated himself in the throne-like carved chair opposite them, Rafik asked, "Back to the plans you spoke of, my uncle. Tell me more of them." The old man might have officially retired from the business, but when he stopped scheming, Rafik would know that Hafiz had stopped breathing.

Hafiz clapped his hands together and shook them for emphasis. "They are splendid plans, most splendid plans indeed, O son and heir of my heart! Thanks to your efforts and those of your partners to rid the universe of our enemies, our Linyaari friends and the relatives of our dear niece Acorna are opening their hearts to us, and perhaps their purses as well. But they are, as you know, very shy. And our beloved niece, appointed by her people to represent them in trade, wishes for a time to travel with the estimable Captain Becker and his intriguingly tragic new first mate."

"Ye-es?" Rafik said. "Some of the Starfarers have mentioned another Linyaari-a hornless one. They say he survived the Khieevi, but surely-"

"Survived he has, indeed! A worthy man in many ways, from what I have seen of him. But that is neither here nor there, he waved his hand dismissively.

Karma captured Hafiz's waving hand with her own ringladen one.

"Actually, nephew of my husband," she said, "the point is, that it is not here but there that Acorna wishes to stay for a time at least. Your uncle, benevolent and kindhearted patriarch that he is, wisely has chosen-with my help, of course-to view this circumstance not as an obstacle to our future trade with the Linyaan, but as an opportunity."

Rafik raised an eyebrow politely.

Hafiz slipped Karina's hand through the crook in his elbow and patted it. "Can you guess what I intend, scion of my house?"

"I believe there is no need for me to hazard such a guess, O founder of my fortune, as it appears you can barely contain your wish to tell me all about it."

"Even so, my boy, even so. I will give you a hint. Is it not written that if the profit cannot go to the mountain, the mountain shall go unto the profit?" Tea and kaf arrived, along with cool bowls of sherbet that had been flown in from Hafiz's main compound at Laboue in anticipation of his arrival, and many assorted pastries and savory morsels. The lounge began to fill up with people from the ship and those who had come to greet them, among them the Starfarers, many of whom now were young adults. The Starfarers were permanently planetless space travelers, their ship serving them as world, country, state, city, and family home all rolled into one. Rafik waited patiently until everyone had exchanged greetings, then steered conversation back to the matter at hand.

"The profit will go to the mountain. ... So it is written in the third of the three books by the third of the three prophets, Uncle," Rafik said with a respectful inclination of his dark and handsome head. Then he looked up sharply, a smile dawning on his face. "Uncle, surely you do not intend to . . .? No! I can see that you do." He was not really as shocked as he sounded, but he enjoyed watching his uncle's pleasure in his reaction. "But how? Is not the Linyaari homeworld still closed to visitors?"

"It is," Hafiz said.

"Then how? Surely you would not risk offending them and endangering our business, not to mention our relations with Acorna's people, by violating their privacy?"

"Absolutely not, my son! That would be unthinkable. Inconceivable. We will, of course, wait for an invitation-which will naturally not be that long in coming. In the meantime, however, we will undertake an enterprise so courageous, so farsighted, so monumental, that the fame of House Harakamian will rise like the proverbial djinn from the proverbial smoke of the proverbial bottle, and bring with it all of the riches, the luxury, the beauty, and the bounty that accompany such great good fortune."

"You mean to establish a branch of House Harakamian beyond Federation space, my uncle?"

Hafiz spread his hands this time, indicating his innate generosity. "Someone must, my son. These people are surely lacking all that we have to offer and possibly are unaware that they are even in need of it! How will they know unless we show them what they are missing? And the Linyaari are shy. Had it not been for their need to warn other innocent races about the Khieevi, they might never have ventured into Federation space, might never have found Laboue or Maganos Moonbase. While it is true they might one day venture out of their territory again, an enterprising businessman does not leave such matters to time and chance any more than a doting parent would the happiness of his adoptive daughter. We are in good odor with the Linyaari at present."



"Due to the bravery and innovation Hafiz showed in the rescue of all of their important space traveling people," Karma put in, looking up at her spouse with adoration.

"True, true," Hafiz said. "I covered myself with glory, it is true. But in my experience, gratitude is an ephemeral commodity, and the memory of those who are indebted to one is even more so. Therefore, we must move with the swiftness of a desert storm if we are to take maximum advantage of our past good works. We must organize our exhibitions, the travel for our exhibitors, sales and support staff, security, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

"Nadhari Kando might be available for security," Rafik said.

"Excellent! I am glad you concur. She has been traveling with us. She should be joining us here soon, as a matter of fact, but she wished first to oversee certain arrangements aboard the SharazaD before we set off again."

Karina placed her silver gilt fingertips to her temples and said, "Ahh-you see, Hafiz? Rafik said exactly what I foretold!"

"Indeed, my dear. Actually, nephew, Karina sensed that you would wish to employ that formidable lady, so I have already offered her command of the outpost's guard and given her full rein to recruit her own staff."

"It is well, my uncle, Madame Karina," he said with a courtly inclination of his head to his 'aunt.' Hafiz's bride had a gift for "sensing" matters that she would have had to be comatose not to know, but she made Hafiz happy, and for this Rafik was prepared to regard her "powers" with tolerance, if not with the awe she seemed to think they should invoke in him.

Hafiz continued. "If we are to be beyond Federation assistance, I will want the best people, even^ if Nadhari has to lure them away from Federation forces, and naturally she will require the latest and most effective weaponry as well. And she is one who may be trusted to acquire what is needed with the utmost discretion and dispatch."

"True," Rafik agreed.

"Your partner and your senior wife, the ugly one, will be required, as well as your current light of love and her illustrious km."

Rafik grinned. Hafiz's mention of Rank's senior, ugly wife was an inside joke. Back when Rafik had been a space miner, he and his partners-Calum Baird and Declan "Gill" Giloglie- had found the infant Acorna adrift in space, saved her from certain death, and raised her. The first time the three miners and Acorna had

approached Hafiz together, in order to keep Hafiz from attempting to "collect" Acorna as a "rare specimen," Rafik had veiled and robed both Acorna and Calum and presented them as his wives. He'd told his uncle he had converted to Neo-Hadithianism, a radical fundamentalist branch of the True Faith that permitted and even encouraged polygamy. He had counted on his uncle's respect for his nephew's "wives" to protect Acorna from acquisition. It hadn't worked, and before their visit was over Acorna had been revealed for what she was and Calum for what he was. But before Hafiz could resort to anything too nefarious in his quest to acquire Acorna, he had learned that Acorna was not a one-of-a-kind creature, but only one among many of a populous alien race. Consequently Hafiz had lost interest in Acorna as an acquisition, and learned to value her as an adopted niece. Calum, however, had never quite lived down posing as the senior, very ugly, wife.

"I'm sure they will be most eager to assist in this endeavor, Uncle. However, there is the small matter of Maganos Moonbase to manage, the education of the children ..."

Details! Such ideas as mine are as the towering pyramids of the ancients, not to be smothered in the details as numerous as grains of sand. Bring the children! Let them learn! They can staff the new businesses, apprentice themselves to the artisans and technicians, provide support. It will be a marvelous experience, an unparalleled learning experience for them!" He considered. "Also, many of the elder ones have already learned how to set up artificial atmospheres and life support systems on life less rocks such as this one was prior to its transformation. Their previous training -will, no doubt, be helpful-

"In which case, they should be paid," said Calum Baird, joining them with a mug in his hand, into which he poured a fresh infusion of tea from the tray between Rank and the Harakamians.

"Like all who join us, the students will be suitably taken care of," Hafiz said. "Food, lodging, travel, richly rewarding associations, toys for the young ones ..."

Calum rubbed the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand together in a time-honored gesture used for many generations by his canny Celtic ancestors. "The ready, Hafiz. If the children are to learn business, they must also learn to manage their own money. To do so, they need to earn some. If they are to -work, they must have a share of the profits. And even at that, I'm not sure "we should allow it. To take innocent children beyond the protection of the Federation!"

"Ah, yes," Karina said, regarding him with one of those flashes of sudden shrewdness that lurked like sharks beneath the fathomless sea of mysticism with which she drenched most of her utterances. "I heard how well-protected the children were when they were employed on Kezdet as child slaves, miners, prostitutes, human fodder for the mills of industry without decent food or

accommodation. The Federation forces protected them so well then I really doubt the little darlings will be able to bring themselves to part with such security."

"She has a point," said Khetala, a tall and sturdily built young woman with dark brown skin and a serious expression. She had entered from the gangway when the food had been delivered, accompanied by Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa, the meteorologist. Dr. Hoa's shyly tentative smile and the blazing intelligence in his dark eyes had kept him from being completely invisible as he and the girl silently listened to the exchanges between the Harakamians, Calum Baird, and Rank.

They were not the only spectators to this conversation, even though Khetala was the first to add her own contribution to it. As was often the case on Maganos Moonbase, a good-sized audience of avid listeners stood around the divan and the chair, taking in every remark and gesticulation. Which was fine with Rafik and which seemed to give the theatrical Hafiz and Karina an audience to play to.

Even if the children had not been included in Hafiz's plan, they would have been welcome to listen. They were at Maganos Moonbase to learn not only useful trades but also all of the other survival skills necessary to living independently and well, skills which could not be acquired in an atmosphere of adult secrecy or adult superiority. The kids needed to understand strategy and self-government, and they learned best by example. They discovered how to be effective adults by watching the adults in their lives make decisions, from the beginning of the process to the end.

Khetala, or Kheti, even more than many others, was already respected as a teacher, an organizer, and a leader. As one of the older, stronger children in the mines, Kheti had taken beatings for many of the younger ones and shielded them, lifted loads too heavy for them, and held them together when things seemed hopeless. Toward the end, she had been hauled off to the pleasure houses, and although Acorna had rescued her from that particular pit of despair, Kheti had taken a special interest in helping girls and women who were formerly used in those places regain their self-respect and sense of purpose. Among those who cared about Kezdet she was as much a legend in her own right as Acorna. All of the adults present knew her story.

Hafiz opened his hands, palm up. "I rest my case," he said.

Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa cleared his throat politely. "I was Just discussing with Khetala, Hafiz, which of the children have demonstrated an interest in meteorology. If I am to help you tnaintain a pleasant atmosphere within the compound at your outpost, energetic assistance from alert young minds -would be most beneficial." Dr. Hoa's particular specialty -was planetary weather control.

"And we Starfarers will go into action helping set up the communications relays you'll be needing," said Johnny Greene, the computer communications expert of the Haven, the Starfarers' ship.

"Good, then I think -we are all agreed," Hafiz said -with a universal beam of bonhomie at all who were gathered around him. He rubbed his palms back and forth, "We leave a skeleton staff to keep the moonbase running, and go to seek adventure. It is time to begin gathering what we shall need and, of course, a few small, essential luxuries."

"Oh, goody," said Mercy Kendoro from the edge of the gathering. "Shopping."

In far less time than anyone who had not witnessed the power of House Harakamian in action would have supposed, the initial supplies, provisions, and personnel were acquired, transport was organized, and a flotilla of space vessels, headed by the SharazaS, left several respective planets and moons, rendezvoused at a point just outside Kezdet's orbit, and began a long caravan through unmapped space toward the site Hafiz had chosen for his new "trading post."

Since Aari was the only one who really understood the language spoken in the Niriian transmission, Becker hoped the guy would be in a better mood when he woke up from his nap. There was no point in opening the pod until he did. Of course, if there hadn't been anyone aboard who spoke the language, Becker would have opened it, hoped the LAANYE and the computer were up to the task, and tried to figure out its secrets on his own, but right now he could afford to wait. Aari had to wake up eventually.

Becker had other reasons to delay that task as long as possible. Someone needed to note the original location on the planet where each piece of salvage from the wreck had been found, as well as where it was currently stowed aboard the Com)or, and except for RK and the KEN unit, Becker was the only one awake. Or so he thought.

It had only been a few hours since Becker had left Acorna sleeping next to Aari, totally exhausted. Now she surprised Becker by walking up behind him.

"I can take over again, Captain. Aari is still asleep." Don't scare me like that. Clomp a little the next time you Wander up behind me, okay? So how's Aari doing? You're pretty sweet on him, aren't you?" Becker asked.

Acorna blushed. "Captain, on narhii-Vhiliinyar people wear shields on their horns, in part to avoid questions just like that. He seems to be resting peacefully now. I am not sure that 'sweet' is the proper term for my feelings for him. I am very interested in Aari, it is true, and I want to help him, as you do."

"Yeah, but I'm not his type, " Becker said, running a hand through his grizzled gray and black hair. "I am going silver maned, can't argue with that. But I'm not a girl." He grinned at Acorna. Then he had a thought he hoped he was keeping to himself. Aari did like girls, didn't he? Becker figured he did. But there was no evidence here to go on. The guy had not exactly been in any shape for courting during the time that Becker had known him, nor had he mentioned any past loves, which seemed pretty natural considering what he'd gone through and how alone he'd been for most of his life. On the other hand, Aari's treatment of Acorna had been brotherly, though every so often Becker did see him watching Acorna closely, sometimes smiling, sometimes -with a troubled expression on his face. If he saw Becker watching him, Aari would look quickly away. And Acorna was probably unaware of Aari's interest, if that's what it was. He always watched her when Acorna was doing something else.

As Becker worried about his shipmates he heard Acorna let loose a big sigh.

"I dunno, Princess, you should probably tell me to butt out," Becker said, troubled by seeing her lovely eyes cloud.

"Oh, no, Captain, I would value your advice. My aunt intended that I should find a lifemate pn narhii-Vhiliinyar but- perhaps because most of the space travelers left early-I did not meet anyone I liked until you came with Aari."

"You really like him or just feel sorry for him?" Becker asked. Why did he feel so fatherly to this gorgeous young woman-well, gorgeous young alien woman-who was taller than he was, probably smarter than he was, and was in full possession of a number of rather spooky powers that were her birthright and had been Aari's, too, before some of them at least were partially looted from him.

"You don't have to answer that."

Acorna smiled and patted his hand. "I know you ask only because you care for my happiness, Captain. You are so much like my uncles-"

"Much better looking, of course," Becker said, huffing through his mustache. "Way better looking than Baird."

Acorna chuckled. "They say that sort of thing about each other all the time. I do not know what I am supposed to be looking for, to tell you the truth, I have never done this before. I am here because I like to be here and feel that it is time for me to move away from both of my homes, at least for a while. I care for Aari.

Perhaps as a healer cares for her patient, but also more than that. I have never decided before to linger beyond the immediate healing I can do. Something in him calls to me. Perhaps he will be a friend of my own species, and closer to my own age than either Grandam or Maati. Perhaps because of Maati, who is his sister, and is almost like my own little sister, I am here in her stead. ..."

They locked eyes and he could see that hers were disturbed in a particular way that made his heart ache. He had fallen for a few women over the years, but none of them -were -willing to live for long on a salvage vessel, though a couple of them had been quite happy to take off with everything on the vessel that wasn't bolted down and a few things that were. They seemed to consider him a little eccentric, too. Mostly he just had his tavonte bawdy houses and a favorite girl or two at each when he was in port. But nobody had ever looked at him the way Acorna was looking when she was thinking about Aari.

Roadkill jumped onto his lap and dug all of his claws in, purring madly. Becker sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth and waited for the pain to subside. Then he rubbed the cat's thick brindled fur with his knuckles. "I don't think so, Princess. But you know the guy has a lot of problems. And he probably thinks a classy gal like you wouldn't like a Linyaari with no horn."

Acorna shrugged. "I was raised by men -who had no horns. And he will have a horn again some day. But-"

That was as far as they got before they heard Aari's footsteps clanking on the deck plating. He wore no disguise this time, and he said in -what -was for him a brusque tone, "Now let us see what else the Niriians had to say."

"Okay," Becker said, and reached for a crowbar he kept on the bridge, just in case he wanted to pry or bash one of the second-hand parts that was no longer working. While he was wondering which method would work best with the pod, he heard a series of snaps and clicks.

Turning, he saw that Aari had opened the pod and pulled out what looked(and smelled)like the slimiest mess of cheese Becker had ever seen. It was full of holes, covered in places with green moldy luminescent stuff, and had the fragrancewell, RK had the right idea when he backed up to it and started making shoveling motions with his feet.

Aari grinned up at Becker, showing his rather large teeth in a way that could be intimidating if the guy -was pissed.

"What is that?" Becker asked.

"Niriian organic technology," Aari said. "They have developed ways to use products of their own bodies, slightly chemically altered, for functions some

peoples achieve with inorganic materials. The biotechnology does not supply all of their needs, of course, but with the properly stabilized balance of biological components and nutrients, quite sophisticated functions, including information storage and retrieval and energy generation, may be performed by ... lifeforms . . . such as these."

"Yeah, but how do you plug it in?"

Aari laughed. "You don't plug it in, Joh! But it is legible- nreanically-based arrays can provide a remarkably compact form of data storage. Its contents are accessible in an orderly fashion."

"Oh, sure. Mold and mildew and slime on Limburger cheese-I had an accountant like that one time. Real orderly. Acorna, sweetheart, can you do anything about the stench with-you know?" He was trying to be delicate, pointing at her horn while Aari's head was bent back over the cheesy thing.

"What do you use to retrieve the data?" Acorna asked.

"Yeah, whaddaya use? An ice cream cone?" Becker asked.

Aari rolled his eyes. "No, Joh. The usual scanner the computer uses to examine and analyze objects."

"The Anscan? I don't quite get how that would do the trick, buddy, but whatever you say-hey, you're not putting that thing on my console, are you?" Becker asked. He was not normally all that fastidious, but that smell was more alien invasiveness than he could handle. And the Anscan was expensive.

Acorna set the pod upright and Aari returned the cheese to it.

Then they set the -whole gizmo on the console. Aari pulled the Anscan over to where its probe could read the structure of the cheese.

"That is not what that delicate piece of equipment was engineered to do!" Becker said.

"The Niriians know that, Joh. Though it is true they have not probably encountered this particular piece of equipment, but they and their trading partners have similar technology and they have developed this device so it will work by this means. There have been many fascinating seminars about how Niriian organic devices can be used with conventional equipment-you should access them sometime."

Why couldn't they just get electronics like everybody else then?" Becker grumbled. He was getting a little lightheaded, trying to hold his nose so he didn't breathe in those fumes.

"Because this piiyi is cheaper, more efficient, and entirely homegrown for the Niriians," Aari answered, now using the keyboard to open the interface between the Anscan and ship's computer and corn unit.

If Becker wasn't actually astonished to see a bovine twohorned Niriian appear on the corn unit screen, he "was at least mildly flabbergasted.

"I'll be darned. That cheese Dou work, just like you said."

"It is a piiyl, Joh."

"It is a pee-yew as far as I'm concerned, but-"

Acorna put her hand to her mouth and made a hushing noise and they listened again to the broadcast.

"Can we stop it and start it so you can translate for us, buddy?" Becker asked.

"Yes. The piiyl forms a permanent linear archive, but access to information can be controlled by your . . . Anscan."

"Okay. Stop it then. What did he just say?"

"The same thing as before. It was a recorded broadcast, a call for help, what you call a mayday. Their ship was under attack. They identified themselves and gave their location, but the coordinates they listed were far from here and even farther from their home planet."

"Does it say who attacked them and why?" Becker asked.

"Not here."

"Okay, let's see if there's anything else on that monstrosity."

"Undoubtedly, Joh. The pliyi is a high-density storage device."

"Dense with stench . . . that I'll agree with," Becker muttered.

Aari went back to work. Once the static had cleared, a Niriian face appeared and began speaking. After a few seconds, Becker asked what it was saying.



"It is the ship's log. I believe we are receiving the last entry first. It is hard to tell, exactly, Joh. This is a different speaker- probably the captain. His dialect is difficult to follow. Wait! Yes! By the Niriian calendar they were transmitting- ummm, you would say, five days ago.'

Aari had made his answer quickly, and quietly, keeping one ear focused on the Niriian voice as it droned on.

"Ah, yes." Aari said. "He says that he and his crewmates were on a scouting expedition. You know, Niriians are always looking for greener pastures-like us, they are a grazing people, but they are a rather more numerous race than the Linyaari. He is referring to an earlier entry in the log, something about a very fertile planet and then, disappointingly, signs of previous colonization-no, present colonization. Very, very small signs. One-pod? Does he mean this one? No, he is saying something . . . something about Linyaari."

He shut it down and turned to them, his eyes wide. "Joh, he was saying something about a dwelling place, and a small downed Linyaari vessel, but it was not near where they detected the mammalian life signs. His accent is too thick, Joh."

Acorna said, excitement barely controlled in her voice, "This sounds very important. Perhaps we should forward all this information back to narhii-Vhiliinyar, where some of the Starfarers who have spent time on Nirii can translate it more accurately than we can. In the meantime, we can use Aari and the LAANYE to try to understand the rest of what is being said. I wonder who attacked the ship. . . . And I wonder if the Niruans really found stranded Linyaari outside our normal trade routes and, if so, how our people came to be there?"

If it was an escape pod, maybe the Linyaari got to the planet in question the same way you told us you reached the human galaxy-you know, ejecting from a ship in trouble." Becker offered.

Acorna's expression became so intense, her mouth so set, and there was such a determined look in her eyes that Becker thought she might be hoping somehow that there had been two life-support pods after all in the space ship her parents had been on, that perhaps they had escaped. He felt obligated to point out to her that it wasn't the most likely possibility.

"We need to get those coordinates and do a little searching ourselves," he said. "They could be people who escaped Ganoosh's and Ikwaskwan's goons when the fake Federation troops were 'arresting' all your people."

Acorna's posture relaxed slightly, dejectedly, at that. "I suppose that's what it must be."

"But you're right. Your people can probably sort this out quicker than we can, and also, maybe somebody who's been to Nirii more recently-wasn't that where your aunt was, Acorna?" he asked. She nodded. "Well, maybe they will know who to notify among the Niriiian authorities to let them know the Hamgaarf) ain't coming home no more, no more. And we should probably do a little searching around to find out who is responsible for taking out the Hamgaan) before we make that report."

If he'd had a hat, he'd have taken it off and placed it over his heart right then. He knew that the cowboy and his crewmates would have families -waiting for them in vain back on the old home -world. It was one of the hazards of spacefaring that all spacers tried not to think about.

"Yes," Acorna said. "You're right. We'll check all of the fragments of the ship and see if any provide useful evidence. Mean-while, -we can translate as best -we can the entire ship's log, and -while -we're at it, take the coordinates of the place •where they saw the escape pod."

"You're sure you don't find anything else about the attack in there, Aari?" Becker asked.

"I will attempt to scan throughout the device for such information." Aari turned back to the Anscan and the pay I. The monologue broke off, there -was a screech of static, and then, suddenly, there -were images on the screen once more. Horrifying images.

"Holy cow!" Becker said. "Who the hell are the big bugs and what are they doing-oh, no-Cosmos on a crutch! They're torturing that-Aari?"

Acorna's healing must have worked pretty well because Aari spoke in a very calm, controlled voice . . . well, actually, Becker thought, his voice was about as dead as the last fish who tried to swim in a Kezdet river.

"Those are the Khieevi, Joh. And that is me. The Khieevi transmitted the images of my torment to this Niriiian ship."

Once the Linyaari space travelers returned, everyC^ "V thing should have been fine again. Everybody should have been happy. Maati had thought that she, at least, -would be happy. But first Aari had decided not to stay on narhii-Vhiliinyar. And then Khornya, who had begun to seem like a big sister to Maati, had left.

Maati felt left out because none of the space travelers she knew wanted to talk to her about what had happened to them. If she'd been old enough to be able to read other peoples' minds, then maybe she wouldn't have been so lonely and alone, but she doubted it. From the shocked, hurt, and sometimes almost

nauseous way those who had not been in space reacted when meeting those who had been, Maati could tell that the spacefarers' experiences had been really bad. You could see in their eyes that the pain lingered inside them, in spite of all the healing the Khornya and the Linyaari doctors had attempted to do.

Because so many of the space travelers were seeking out Grandam Naadiina's counsel, since Grandam was the oldest living Linyaari and by far the wisest, Maati couldn't even talk to Grandam. Grandam was much too busy.

It was probably better that way. Maati would have hated to have to admit to Grandam that she didn't feel especially happy to see the others, not when her brother had left and then Khornya had left, too. It might be selfish of her, but it was the way she felt.

If the viizaar hadn't been so mean to them, Khornya and Aari might have stayed. Maati had really started to hate the viizaar. Hate, she knew, was not a thing a good Linyaari should feel. It was a violent emotion and her people were supposed to be gentle. But the viizaar was not gentle. She was mean. She just hid it from everybody, even the people who were good mind readers. Grandam said Liriili was a good administrator because, since she was less sensitive than average for a Linyaari, she could make more objective decisions.

Right. She had made one of those recently, it seemed to Maati. She had decided Maati was an object to be pushed around and sent here and there. Nobody even noticed how nastily she spoke to Maati. Everybody was too busy with the returned space travelers.

When the spacefarers weren't doing some kind of therapy, they were in council, discussing trade agreements and that kind of dumb stuff. Grandam was there, too. At least the council kept Liriili busy so she wasn't always yelling at or for Maati.

Although once, in front of the whole council, just because Maati dropped a piece of hard copy she was bringing from the doctors concerning the wellness of some of the returnees, Liriili had snapped at her.

"Honestly, you are the clumsiest messenger I have ever had! And the slowest! You would have never been given such a responsible position if the council hadn't been softhearted about you being orphaned. And now look at how you repay their trust!"

Everybody was so preoccupied with all the important things they were thinking of that nobody cared when hot blood rose to Maati's face or that her ears rang with Liriili's hurtful words. She couldn't read their minds, but they could read hers, and in former times people had always been kind. But now nobody cared

what one little flunky felt. They were worrying about the grievous hurts their scientists, diplomats, teachers, and traders had suffered.

A hundred faces -watched impassively as Maati bent to pick up the paper and hand it to Liriili, who snatched it from her hand. Maati would have been even more humiliated if she thought they -were really paying any attention, but clearly almost every single one of them had used the distraction to get lost in his or her own thoughts. Thoughts she couldn't read.

In times past, Liriili would have her stay close by during council sessions, in case messages needed to be delivered to outlying areas, but these days the viizaar couldn't wait to get rid of her. She sent Maati out on the silliest errands, errands that could have been handled easily enough with a beep on the corn unit, anything to get Maati out of her sight.

Maati had recently heard VLfec^haanye-feriiii Neeva remark to some of the others, "I wish Khornya and the young man, Aari, had chosen to stay with us. I cannot understand what was so urgent that they had to go collect salvage with Captain Becker."

The notion had crossed Maati's mind that ^he knew exactly who had made them feel like outcasts and made their lives miserable enough to drive them away. Just as that thought crossed her mind the viizaar's voice had cut through her musings like a laser.

Obviously our Khornya was attracted to the boy and they wished to be alone together without the weight of custom that ^as unfamiliar to Khornya and that, frankly, the boy is too unstable to deal with at this time. Maati, our water has grown quite stale. Please go fetch some more and see to it that this is ^sposed of."

Maati barely stopped herself from saying, "What do you think YOU have a horn on your head for anyway? Freshen it yourself!"

But that would really cause trouble. The half-formed thought alone brought a hard stare from Liriili. But Maati was a messenger, not some kind of a subspecies to be ordered to do busy work because the viizaar felt like exercising her authority.

Just when Maati thought it couldn't get any worse, the Ancestors-the one-horned four-leggeds who were one of two species from which, back in the time before the Beginning, the Linyaari had ultimately been formed-sent for Grandam Naadiina. They insisted that she bring with her the space travelers who continued to suffer from nightmares and other emotional ills, despite the healings of their families and physicians. All were to attend the Ancestors in their hilly home. The

personal attendants of the Ancestors called the occasion a "retreat." Maati thought of it as an abandonment.

No sooner had Grandam and the others disappeared from sight than the viizaar sent for Maati and informed her that, during Grandam's audience with the Ancestors, the viizaar could not allow a young girl to remain alone in the pavilion she shared with Grandam. Therefore, Maati would be given a guest mat in the viizaar's tent and would sleep there until Grandam returned.

"That way you will be handy in case I need you," the Viizaar said with a false smile. What she really intended -was to keep her own eye on Maati. Every time Maati wanted to go visit with someone, or -was asked to graze with a group of other youngsters, Lirili invented some urgent errand for Maati to carry out.

Maati finally realized that the only way she could have time away from the viizaar was if she did what the viizaar was already accusing her of, and dragged her heels on certain errands.

Like her last one. Late in the evening, in the middle of a downpour, she had been sent to the spaceport to take Tharimye, -who was on com-shed duty, a basket of hand-plucked greens prepared for him personally by the viizaar. A little note was attached to make sure he knew how he was favored.

When she'd handed him the basket, though, Thariinye had groaned. "Oh, no," he'd said.

Maati shook the water from her mane and peered into the basket. "What's the matter? Don't you like those sorts? Because I'm not going to take them back to her. My feet are sore. She keeps me running day am) night now. I'm tired." She flopped back into the second corn-console chair and sprawled.

"I'm sorry, little one. You want any of these? They're perfectly good grasses. I'm just not, you know, wanting to accept any favors from our lady leader."

Maati's eyes narrowed and she studied him a moment. Thariinye had changed a little since he and Khornya first returned from the galaxy of her people. He had been sooo full of himself when they arrived, and had boasted that he and Khornya were to be handfasted as lifemates. But later, oddly, Maati had heard from many young females to whom Thariinye had also paid court. They were all complaining that if only Khornya had no claim on him, Thariinye would gladly ask them to graze with him forever. But really, as he and Maati both very well knew, Khornya hardly liked him at all, much less wanted him for a lifemate. Thamnye was very handsome, if you liked the tall, slim, muscular type, but Khornya was somehow . . . older, smarter than he was, and she didn't like his attitude- Thariinye was a bit conceited. But Maati had to admit that any male who could successfully string along so many females who could read minds "ad to have

something going for him. A lot of nylirl, Grandam said. Which meant something similar to courage, except that it meant he was courageous enough to act on things he shouldn't actually be acting on and say things he shouldn't really be saying.

Maybe she's just letting you know she doesn't think you're so bad, even though those ladies complained about you wooing both of them," Maati ventured, with a little of her own nyliri, watching him to see what he would say.

A crack of thunder heralded a gust of wind that sent rain splashing in huge puddles against the viewports of the comshed. In the distance, jagged lightning sliced through the blackened sky, strobing the night with brief but brilliant flashes.

Thariinye snorted and gave her a smile as phony as the one he gave his extra girlfriends. "Such a sweet little youngling you are, Maati. Of course she doesn't think I'm so bad. After hearing all those other girls tell her what a splendid specimen of manhood I am, she's courting me herself."

It was Maati's turn to snort. "You've been away from space too long, Thariinye! You've got ground-sickness!" It was the sort of joke the spacers made about ground people and ground people made about spacers to explain their peculiarities. It was the only thing Maati could think of, other than Thariinye's high opinion of himself, to explain -why he would imagine that the vlzaar capable of any softer, more female feelings at all.

"No. No. It's true. She fancies me. Always says so. Told me she thinks I need a more experienced woman to guide me, keep me in line, and yet be able to indulge my little flights of independence. Youngling, that is the last thing I need. No Khieevi will ever scare me as much as that woman!" He shuddered so hard his mane shook and his skin twitched.

Maati was shocked. "But Liriili is really oG>. She's almost as old as Grandam, I bet as old as Neeva, anyway and you're well, I'm just a kid and even I remember when you were still a dapple gray!"

Thariinye made a wry face. "Maybe you see her as being old, but when I'm around her, Liriili acts' like a frisky filly. I don't think narhii-Vhiliinyar is big enough for both of us."

"I know exactly what you mean," Maati replied, remembering her own troubles. She wouldn't tell Thariinye about them, though. He'd get all adult and bossy on her if she did, she was sure. It was never a good idea to let him have the upper hand. She had figured that out because she knew several of those silly girls he'd been involved with. As long as they didn't seem to notice him, he sought them out and was very polite, even humble with them. But as soon as they started to like him, he didn't care for them anymore and went trotting off after somebody

else. That was part of why he kept after Khornya even though the two of them basically didn't get along very well.

Maati gave him a sly look, "I guess that's what you get for being irresistible! So, all right, I'll help you get rid of your gift if you'll pass me one of those thiiifi). They're my favorites." He handed her one of the tender yellow-green grasses which smelled spicy and tasted sweet with a little tang to it.

He gnawed absently on one himself. "I should have known what she was doing when she wouldn't let me go with Neeva and Melireenya. Now everybody who was anybody among the space-chosen has had a traumatic experience that will probably bond them forever, and because Liriili kept me planet-bound, I alone was left out."

"I can see why you would be mad at her for making you miss being mistreated until you almost died," Maati agreed.

"You're far too young to understand," he said loftily.

"Receiving transmission from the alien salvage vessel Condor," a quiet computerized voice said from the com set. "Please stand by."

The lightning flashed again and again, the thunder crashing Just after. Thariinye turned up the volume on the com unit.

"We have just recovered the wreckage of a Niriian vessel," Aan's voice said, sounding strange and flat. "Among the ship's artifacts is a piiyi containing the ship's log and several other messages. Please stand by to record the material you are about to receive." There was no visual transmission, but Maati was pleased to hear Aari's voice, no matter how fleetingly. This message -was evidently sent several hours ago, according to the time stamp, so that real-time exchange of communication now Wouldn't be possible. Maati wished she could talk to her brother, but that clearly wasn't going to be possible on this night.

"It is extremely urgent that the information on this piiyi be fully translated and interpreted immediately by an expert in the Niriian language. It contains evidence that the Niriian ship made contact with the Khieevi"-Aari's voice faltered for a moment-"and prior to that perhaps discovered a Linyaari escape pod and survivors on an uncharted planet. Once translation is made, please respond immediately to the Condor." Aari signed off and silence filled the com-shed.

Maati jumped to her feet. "I'll go try to find a specialist." Looking out at the slashing rain, she hated leaving the warmth and dryness of the com-shed.

"Where do you think you'll do that?" Thariinye said. "The spacefarers are on retreat, remember?"

"This is important enough to call them off retreat. I mean, if the Khieevi are involved, we'd better let Liriili know right away. She can call them back."

"I speak excellent Niriian," Thariinye told her. "My first off-planet mission was to Nirii and I have always been good at languages."

"Well, that's good," Maati said. "Get started right away on that broadcast. But Liriili will have my horn if I don't let her know at once."

"I'll let her know. Just stay put for a naanye, will you?"

He switched to the domestic corn unit. "Vuzaar Liriili, this is Thariinye at spaceport communications. We have just received a message from Aari aboard the Conoor concerning a recovered Niriian piiyi with information about a probable recent encounter with the Khieevi as well as something or other about a Linyaari escape pod with survivors left stranded on an uncharted planet. We are being asked to translate and advise the Conoor of the contents immediately."

"Then do so," Liriili said. They could only hear her voice. The uiixaar did not switch on visuals at her end. She sounded grouchy and sleepy. "You speak Niriian, do you not, Thariinye?"

"You wish me to do it, then, ma'am? You don't -wish, for instance, to send for Melireenya or vifeShaanye-feriiii Neeva?"

Liriili's voice took on a softer lilt as she woke up enough to realize to whom she - was speaking. "I have every confidence in you, dear boy. If Aari's impression that there is urgent information contained in the piiyi is confirmed by your translation, please alert me at once. If it is indeed as important as Aari says-though you know his experiences have made him somewhat . . . unstable, shall we say, mst between us? -then of course you should send the messenger girl after another expert. But I would prefer not intrude upon the retreat the Ancestors have declared vital to the recovery of our spacefarers unless I feel it is absolutely necessary."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And, Thariinye?"

Maam?

"I shall expect a personal and confidential report of your findings in my quarters as soon as you have finished."

"Yes, ma'am." He signed off, shaking his head in frustration.



It was a good thing Liriili couldn't see Thariinye's face, Maati thought. He gave the most awful grimace and bared his teeth something fierce.

"You probably should go back and sleep," Thariinye told her pompously. "I'll be too busy to baby-sit you while I have duties to perform."

You want me to leave? In this stuff?" she asked, nodding to the weather, which seemed to grow wilder by the moment. -No way! I am not bailing out just when something interesting is anally happening. Let's have a look."

I don't think this material is fit for children," he argued.

"If the Khieevi are in it-I have seen them in action. Trust me. They'll give a youngling like you nightmares."

"Aari said 'urgent! Thariinye. Don't you think you should stop arguing with me and get to work?" she asked.

"Are you sure Liriili isn't grooming you to be the next viizaar!" he grumbled. "You're very bossy for a youngling."

"The/wi//?" she pointed to the com screen, tension twanging through her body so hard she thought she'd snap. It worked. Thariinye turned back to the console. She watched the visuals and listened to the Niriian voice speaking as Thariinye began the painstaking work of translating and transcribing the Niriian broadcast from the beginning. Of course, he brought up a computer translation of the broadcast on screen almost immediately. But verifying the translation and interpreting the nuances of the broadcast took time and concentration. He listened to the alien -words •while watching the accompanying visuals and the streaming machine translation on the com screen. Sometimes he would amend the machine translation, and other times he let it proceed unchanged. Because he was working with a recording, he could halt the broadcast and back it up when he needed to. He was a lot better than she expected him to be at the work, actually. He didn't have to stop very often, and it was clear he took it quite seriously.

When he got to the shots of the escape pod lying in the greenery by the makeshift shelter, Maati got a funny feeling in her stomach. As the shot went by, she felt as if a part of her was still there, with the pod, wherever it had landed.

She was almost sure she knew those markings. In fact, the •whole pod looked familiar, though it was hustling by on the screen too fast to be sure. Even though she didn't make a sound, Thariinye hit the stop button on the broadcast and turned to her.

"What was that?" Thariinye said and then she knew for sure that he was reading her.

"The pod," she said. "Whose pod was that?"

"I don't know. And I'll need that information for my report. Go look it up for me, will you? There's no one at the other computer." He gestured to the opposite wall. All Linyaari ships were unique, and it -was a simple matter to match the markings to the master list of ships. She also wanted a listing of the people aboard the ship on the date that the Niriian broadcast indicated the shot had been taken. Lists of crews and passengers, projected and actual itineraries, manufacturing and maintenance records-in short, anything that affected the ships throughout their time in the Linyaari fleet could be found in the government computers.

So compelling was her feeling of connection with the pod that she didn't even wait to see what else was on the pdyi, but did as Thariinye asked and opened the flight records.

She started scrolling through the files, after telling the computer to check the most current entries first. Surely, she thought, the pod belonged to one of the ships whose crew? had been attacked by the criminals Khornya and her friends had freed the space travelers from. But the computer didn't list the pod as being registered to any of the ships now in active service and currently in space. That was odd.

She expanded the boundaries of her search. And kept digging, listening to the thunder crash and crack outside while inside the Niriian monologue mumbled away, and now and then Thanmye would say, "To the-sanctuary? No. Hiding place? lhats not it either-" as he tried to find the proper Linyaari translation.

Then she heard him say something about "Khieevi" and turned to look. She had never seen a Khieevi. She was curious, in a horrified sort of way. What did such vicious and voracious beings look like?

She turned her chair around to view? the screen over Thariinye's shoulder. The bug-like Khieevi were only visible as feelers and legs and shell-like carapaces around the margins of the vid. In the center of the screen was the main subject of the transmission. His face was distorted with blood, sweat, and agony, and his body was even more broken than it had been when she had first seen him. But she could not mistake her brother.

"Thariinye," she said, her voice tight with emotion, "that's Aari! The Khieevi have Aari! What can we do? Are we too late? We have to help him. Where are Khornya and Captain Becker? Have they been killed already?"

Thariinye turned slightly and looked at her, his face as serious as she had ever seen it, and perhaps a bit green, too. "This is an old vid, Maati. Probably a Khieevi broadcast to the Niriian ship. The Khieevi like to do that-send pictures of old tortures to the people they plan to make their next victims. Nobody knows why. But that's what this is. Look there-see-Aari still has part of his horn. Long slices have been carved away, but it's there. This is what happened to him before you saw him."

She didn't recognize the emotion that was making Thariinye's voice sound so strangled. Perhaps he was trying not to throw up. Abruptly, he switched off the visuals.

Maati felt as if her heart had been clutched in a tight fist and then suddenly released to fall thudding to the floor. Her breath came out in a rush. "That's horrible. Horrible. Are the Khieevi-are they coming-h-h-here?" She was stuttering now through chattering teeth and felt cold all over, a reaction that had nothing to do with the temperature in the room, and everything to do with what she'd just witnessed.

"No. I told you. It's an old vid. They sent this to the people aboard the ship that carried this pliyni. Any luck on that registration design?"

"Not yet," she said, and turned back to her task with a new sense of urgency, widening the parameters of her search. The ordinariness of looking for information steadied her and gradually her hands stopped shaking. And, at last, there it was-the design, the number, and the name of the ship that had carried that pod. And the names of the people aboard when it shipped out on its last flight. A chill engulfed her again.

"Th-Thariinye?"

"I'm almost done, Maati."

"B-but-Thariinye. I found it."

"Good. Just a moment."

"No, now. It's important. The ship the pod was on? It was registered to my parents. To mine and Aari's parents. The people on the Niriian ship found them. I thought they were dead- but if the Niriians are correct, maybe they're not. At least, not both of them, at least not when this pod -was found."

"That is 'wonderful,'" Thariinye said. "We need to let Liriili know at once. I thought this piyl was bad news, but it seems we have at least one cause for celebration among the information it brought us!" He put the final touches to his translation and uploaded it to the vlizaar.

"We have to tell Aari and Khornya and Captain Becker," Maati said. "They can go get our mother and father."

"Yes, yes, but first Liriili must know. It's procedure," he said, going all adult again. Thariinye turned back to the com station.

He hailed Liriili and told her what they had discovered.

I just thought it prudent," he finished, "to let you know the contents of the message before transmitting my interpretation to the Condor."

Thank you, Thariinye. That is very interesting. In light of your information, I think that tomorrow I shall send an emis<sup>^</sup>ry to the Ancestors to let them know what has been discovered. However, there will be no further transmissions from the Gom station. Not to the Condor or anywhere else."

But, honored lady! Aari, at least, should know immediately-the pod is apparently that of Aari and Maati's parents, to have been missing-

"I know that very well, Thariinye. I also know now, from hard past experience, that any transmission we send may endanger this planet. If Khieevi are out there, we will not let them know our current location. It is simply too dangerous. The evacuation ships must be prepared, and steps taken for all Linyaari to escape the planet, if necessary."

"Again?" Thariinye said. "Where will we go this time? And what about Acorna-she and Aari are out there near the source of the message. They sent it to us, in fact. Do they not deserve to know what we've learned?"

"As soon as possible I will consult the aagrani and make the decision as to where we must go. Dear boy, I know this is difficult for you to understand," Liriili said. "But you simply must trust my judgment. We cannot send transmissions, and that is that. I will not put this planet in any further danger, no matter -what. If anything else pertinent comes in, let me know."

Thariinye ended the transmission with an exasperated snort. "I can't believe that! Can you?"

"From her? Sure," Maati said. "The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"We?" Thariinye asked with maddening superiority. "We will do nothing, youngling. I, however, am going to borrow one of the ships from the spaceport, and fly it to wherever I have to go to so Khornya will know how much danger she and her friends are in, and how much hope there is that Aari's parents are still alive. And then I'll rescue your parents. If Khornya and her friends want to come along, well, so much the better."

"I'm going, too." Maati said.

"No, you're not."

"I am, too, and you can't stop me."

"I can, too. I'm bigger, in case you hadn't noticed."

"As if you'd let me forget. But if you try to go without me, I'll tell Liriili what you're doing in time to stop you." "You wouldn't do that. You -want to save your parents and your brother and Khornya as much as I do."

"More," Maati said firmly, crossing her arms across her small chest. "That's why I'm going. So you don't mess it up."

"So I don't-"

"That's what I said. My family have been spacefarers for generations, just like yours. I will do fine in space. And you need backup. To get it, all you have to do is teach me the controls. Two will be better than one. I think we should leave right now."

"In this storm?"

"The ships are built to handle worse. Once we leave the atmosphere, the weather won't be any problem, will it?"

"It's easy to see you haven't had the parental discipline you need."

"At least I don't tell the same lie to six different girls and expect them all to believe it and like me afterward."

Thariinye didn't say anything to that, and Maati didn't need to be able to read minds to know she'd won.

"Come on, then. We'll take the Nilkaavri. I've been checked out on her already and she's loaded and fueled and ready to go. We can be out of here before anyone can stop us."

In her quarters, Liriili mentally followed Thariinye as he and Maati boarded the Nukaavri and prepared for take-off. She was not ignoring the threat of the Khieevi. But if the information from the piyl was correct, their enemies were at the far end of the galaxy-weeks away even in the worst possible extrapolation of risk, and with many likely targets between them and the Linyaari to slow them down. Tomorrow-today, actu<sup>^</sup>ty, as it was early morning now, she -would send another, rmore trustworthy messenger than Maati to the Ancestors-one could control. She would ask for another translator, one e would hand-pick for discretion, and when Thariinye's find ings were either verified or modified, then would be time enough to send runners to the general populace, to alert the spacefarers, possibly even to prepare the evacuation ships if necessary.

But at present, she felt sure the Khieevi did not know where the new Linyaari homeworld was, and she had protected their position by disallowing all outgoing transmissions from narhiiVhiliinyar. Becker's vessel was hardly a Linyaari ship, and once the troublesome Maati and Thariinye had joined the ConSor they could all look after each other.

The girl had become a hazard, her very existence menacing Liriih's position by threatening to "expose" her to the spacefarers for alienating Khornya and Aari. The child didn't understand the delicacy of Liriili's task in leading the planet, the careful balance that had to be maintained for the good of all. And, as for Thariinye . . . Who did he think he was, ducking away from her delicate overtures? He, too, was a hazard, disrupting the peace of so many of the young females, and not realizing that he obviously needed a mate who could guide him and help him control his less responsible impulses. He blamed her, she knew, for she could read him even when his horn was shielded, just as if he was made of plasglas. He had wanted to go on the Balakiire's last mission, and he thought she had robbed him of glory. Very well, let him seek it now. Perhaps when- and if-he returned, he would be much wiser, would understand that her counsel had been for his own good. But, as for now, her two most difficult charges were, headed off-planet, possibly never to return. She'd sleep well tonight.

She arose the next morning at a leisurely pace, and halfway through cleansing herself, answered the call from the spaceport com-shed. "Yes?"

"Vuzaar, I am here to relieve Thariinye, only Thariinye is . here. The equipment is on and there is a strange message 1 opine through the monitor, but Thariinye is absent."

"How strange," she said. "In this weather, where can he have p-one? It's hardly fit outside for grazing." Thunder was once more booming outside the pavilion and the cracks of lightning could be seen indistinctly through the fabric of the walls. Liriili shivered lightly, and pulled a blanket across her shoulders.

"Also, ma'am, one of the spacecraft is not in its berth."

"How strange. Was it there yesterday? Perhaps it has been taken for repairs?"

"No, ma'am. I-wait-there u a note here from Thariinye. He says that he and Maati-surely he cannot mean little Maati the messenger!"

"Surely not," Liriili agreed.

"-Have gone to look for the girl's parents. He also wishes to warn others of a Khieevi presence detected in this galaxy by a Niriian vessel-that's the message on the com screen."

"How very extraordinary," Liriili said. "Stay at your post, then-is it liril this morning?"

Yes, maam.

"Stay at your post, liril. Be alert for incoming messages, but under no circumstances are you to answer them. There will be no outgoing messages of any kind from this planet until further notice from me. Do I make myself clear?"

"With Khieevi in the vicinity? Yes, ma'am, absolutely."

I will send to the hills of the Ancestors and ask those spacefarers on retreat to return for a special meeting of the Council on this matter."

I'll be right here, ma'am. Even if we're not to respond, ^harnnye may report back to us with more information about Ae Khieevi."

My thoughts exactly, liril," she said, and ended the transmission.

"I don't get it," Becker snapped, glowering at the com screen. "For six weeks that damn thing is squawking at all hours with messages from everyone from your grandma and your aunt, Acorna, to that-woman-who runs the place. 'Pick us up a nice trade alliance when you go home, honey. See if you can get us good terms on joining the Federation. And don't forget a pint of milk and a loaf of bread while you're at it.' "

Aari and Acorna looked at each other and shrugged, then returned their attention politely to Becker's rant.

"And now, when we have something really important to tell them, when we need to hear back from them right away, we get zip for a week and a half. What i) it with those people, anyway?"

He was not the only one who wanted to know. Aari and Acorna had spent every waking hour with the LAANYE and the Nirriian logbook, then, while sleeping, learning the nuances of the Nirriian language from the LAANYE's sleep-learning programs. They listened over and over again to the mayday message and the ship's log entries. If the captain had given specifics about the transmission from the Khieevi, the details of the ship's final hours, or any findings pertaining to the location of the vessel pictured on the verdant planet, they had not found them. They hcu) deciphered an entry that was a personnel list of the crew aboard the downed Nirriian vessel.

The Com)or had picked up more of the wreckage of the Nirriian ship in the meantime, but very little of the equipment •was intact.

All of them had been listening, even in their sleep, for a signal from the com unit, but not a single -word out of it did they hear the entire time.

"Well, RK doesn't seem to have any opinion about this, and normally I'd flip a coin," Becker said. "But since I have a crew I guess I better ask-what do you guys think we ought to do?"

"Do?" Aari asked. His voice was a little hoarse from disuse.

He and Acorna had been concentrating so hard on the translations he would have neglected to eat if Becker hadn't finally become worried about his crewmates and tromped down to the hydroponics deck to pluck some greenery for them. He had no idea what a tasty or nutritious combination was composed of but figured if they'd planted something, it was supposed to be edible. They both took his offerings, nibbled abstractly, and kept translating. Even after Acorna was as certain as she could be that they had made good sense of the messages, Aari continued to go over and over them.

Acorna could not help but read the anxiety Aari was broadcasting as surely as the com system was not. Her head pounded -with the strain he was experiencing, as well as her own pain. She couldn't usually read him literally, but this sense of anxiety was more of an emotional maelstrom spinning around him and enveloping her than a conscious stream of thought. Even Becker and the cat were out of sorts, all from dealing with the heavily charged atmosphere inside the ConSor.

Becker was continuing. "Yeah, what do you think we should do-you know, as in action? Here's our options, the way I see it. Number one," he ticked off the fingers of his right hand with the forefinger of his left. "We head on out of here, back to Federation space, and warn people about this. However, this area ain't Federation and they aren't going to come all this way uninvited by the locals. Two, -we can turn around and go back to narhii-Vhiliinyar and ask 'em face-to-face why they aren't speaking to us. Of course, it could be that the Khieevi's got



their tongue-sorry, Aari," he said. "In which case, we'll hope we see some evidence of the damage before we reach the planet and get our own derrieres in a sling or slings, as the case may be. If we do, we will return to option one and call out the posse. If we can round one up in time. Option three

appears if there are no Khieevi and everything is cool on the Planet. I kick some administrative heinie and make them promise never, ever, ever to ignore us like that again, no matter what. Or option four-we try to figure out what's going on for ourselves, keeping our eyes open so we don't get ourselves killed, and see what's needed before we hare off and run for help. End of options, unless you can think of any others. Aari? Acorna?"

"Joh, we must go back to my planet," Aari said. "They must know. The Nirriians must be warned, as well."

"Yes," Acorna said. "You know, it is possible we have gone out of range even for a delayed relay to narhii-Vhiliinyar. There are several wormholes and space distortions between us and them, and we are very far off the traveled routes where communications are routinely boosted at regular intervals. We cannot be sure they have received our broadcast. The likeliest explanation for their silence is that they have not heard from us. It's essential that they be aware of the presence of the Khieevi in this part of the world, and also of the possibility that Aari and Maati's parents are still alive somewhere. If the Khieevi are in the neighborhood, our people need to have the evacuation ships ready, and a plan to board them prepared. After we "warn the Linyaari, we should return to Federation space and alert the authorities that my people, who have been considering applying for membership, will possibly soon be under attack by the Khieevi. The Federation has already seen the nature of the Khieevi-after the battle on Rushima they're aware of the sort of creatures we are dealing with here-and know that they pose a threat that cannot be ignored. Also, we should consult with Uncle Hafiz and the others and ask them to prepare a new haven for my people, should it be necessary to evacuate, some temporary place where they may stay until the situation is resolved."

"That makes sense," Becker said. "But somehow I can't help but thinking that they're okay for now and it's that snotty lady-dog of a leader of yours who is behind this."

"You could be right," Acorna said, "but we cannot risk it. If our people are to be safe, they must get those ships ready, and that will take time."

RK, who had been sleeping with one eye open, idly flipping the end of his tail up and down, suddenly yawned and stretched. In a casual way his outstretched, kneading claw hooked Becker's arm.

"Ow!" he said. "Okay, the fourth member of the crew has voted. We're changing course."

Thariinye tracked the Codors erratic course from the data sent with the transmission. Maati watched him while he made his computations. Maati took to space travel like a kQaaki to water. Her favorite hiding places back home had been the techno-artisan village and the spaceport, and with a child's curiosity she had examined the interiors of all the ships, even the big evacuation vessels. She'd asked questions constantly, so many that she was afraid the workers would tell her to leave, or call Liriili and ask her if the government didn't have something better to do with its messengers than have them bother people.

But actually she had made friends with most of the people she talked to. Aarliiyana, a motherly techno-artisan, had explained all about the colorful designs on the hulls of the ships, how they were based on the banners of the most distinguished Linyaan clans and individuals. Aarliiyana had also told her that ne techno-artisans had developed a new and more advanced cloaking technology for Linyaari spacecraft. The very craft Maati was now riding in, named after her dear friend Acorna's grandmother, was the first craft to incorporate the new system.

Hidden among the brightly pigmented coatings used on the hulls were a field generator that could create the illusion of invisibility and a radiation absorption matrix, or RAM. The two would, between them, defeat sonar, radar, infrared, and all other traditional detection methods used to trace the location of a spacecraft. These systems could be turned on and off at will. In addition, the techno-artisans had developed ways to deal with the engine exhaust, the ship's communications, and so on so that the ship's location could not be determined by any means. Even the ship's locator beacon was routinely cloaked to both friends and foe, unless the ship's captain made the decision to turn it on. That had to be done occasionally so that the craft could move through crowded shipping lanes without running the risk of being rammed by vessels that had no idea she was there.

It made Maati feel odd, knowing that nobody could find them out here in space, unless they chose to be found.

Being on shipboard when the vessel was in space as opposed to being inside it when it was docked at the technoartisan's village was very different. For one thing, the air was drier, and it smelled peculiar, almost canned. Perhaps because of the drier air, she found her sense of smell was diminished, blunted in some way. It gave her a curiously light feeling. And also, consequently, the grasses in the hydroponics garden many fewer varieties than grew dirtside-were not as tasty as they were at home. Well, the tastes were subtler, maybe. She figured she'd get used to the change soon enough.

With her sense of smell reduced, her sense of sight seemed to be more important, somehow. The inner, surfaces of the ship were made of brightly colored materials softer to the touch than metals, and the crew's quarters were designed to look like small traveling pavilions. Sort of cozy, really. At first she missed the horizon, and the sweeping vistas of grass and town and distant hills she was used to at home, but when she went to the bridge and looked out the viewport into the stars, her homesickness of dead. How could those grassy fields compare with the beauty of deep space? She was lost in wonder. The galaxy gleamed like a jewel box before her. And she'd barely begun to taste the joys of space travel. How would it look at night on a planet with one moon? What about a planet with rings-how would that look from the ground? How thrilling to think she would soon be seeing for herself! Even with the looming threat of the Khieevi hovering in the back of her mind, she felt freed, somehow, for the first time in her life.

And if she was going to have adventures, she'd picked the right ship to have them in. In addition to being comfortable, the Nakaavri was equipped with all of the newest devices her techno-artisan friends had demonstrated. Maati already knew that because Thariinye had shown off the ship's features when he returned from his first brief flight, greeting the Condor and the many Linyaari ships when they returned carrying the spacefarers from captivity.

"Does this ship have any weapons?" Maati had wanted to know then.

"What would you know about weapons?" Thariinye had asked in that tone that made her feel like a total child.

"Grandam told Khornya that her father had developed a defense weapon that would destroy our enemies if they attempted to capture one of our ships. Grandam said it was how Khornya's parents were killed-when their ship self-destructed along with the Khieevi chasing them. She thought Khornya's folks must have used it on themselves after Khornya's pod was ejected. The force of the blast was the only way to explain how far away Khornya was when she was found by her the men ^o raised her." Maati had been wondering at the time if that ^a-s how her parents died, using a similar weapon to destroy themselves and their ship before the Khieevi could capture them.

"Yes, the Nilkaa vri is equipped with the defensive system," Thariinye said. "But no offensive -weapons. That would be kaLinyaari, against everything we believe in. The ship does have all the very latest innovations, of course. You ask too many questions."

Why, of all the people she'd ever met, did she have to be on the ship with himi Nobody else among the spaceport personnel, the techno-artisans, or the spacefarers treated her like she was inferior just because she was younger and

shorter than they were. In contrast to Lirili and her political friends, the spacefarers had, with rare exceptions, treated her with respect.

But she was stuck with Thariinye and supposed she'd have to make the best of it, at least if she wanted to get to Khornya and Aari, and maybe, just maybe, her parents. It -was an unfamiliar feeling in her heart, the thought that there was a possibility they -were still alive.

When Maati wasn't arguing with Thariinye, she -watched the tutorials that came with every new ship's complement of programs and she took herself through a simulation of Captain Becker's course.

The human employed unusual navigation methods, diving into unplotted wormholes and through unexplored folds in space rather than following conventional spaceways. If she and Thariinye were going to manage to rendezvous with the Condor, they -would have to do the same. Thariinye confirmed her hunch, -when she asked him point-blank about their course.

Now Thariinye looked nervous as the entrance to the wormhole loomed before them, but then he grinned and got a strange gleam in his eye. He shifted to manual controls. "Strap down, youngling," he said.

"I am strapped in," she said. "Hurry up, will you?"

"Okay. Yeeeeeeeeheeeee!" he cried, a little anticlimactically. She really didn't notice much. There was nothing to see. One moment the opening -was ahead of them and the next it was behind them. The stars were in different places. That was all.

And-something else.

"Well, look at you, little girl," Thariinye said, when he turned to glance at her and the glance became a stare. "You are now a bona fide star-clad spacefarer."

She was! She really was. Her skin had been getting a little lighter since they left, and the pale spots in her mane broadening to overcome the black parts, but now, her hands below the cuff of her shipsuit -were -white! Completely. As white as Thariinye's, or Khornya's, or Aari's. She -wanted to run for the nearest reflective surface but got tangled in her safety restraint straps, her fingers fumbling as she tried to release the catch. At last she got free and was able to examine herself in the grooming device. Her face was as pale as the second moon, her mane pure silver, and her horn golden, though still of a childishly stubby length. She frowned at her reflection.

"Does this color make me look plumper?" she asked Thariinye, and immediately regretted it.

He laughed. "Of course not. And even if it did, there's nothing to be done about it. You're star-clad now, youngling."

"How come it happened so fast?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Usually the change is more gradual. Maybe the shift of light inside the wormhole accelerated the process."

"There wasn't any light--was there?"

"Of course there was light. You're confusing your basic physics. That was a wormhole, not a black hole."

"I know that," she said. "I'm just young, not stupid. But I didn't see any light till - we came out on this side."

"You probably blacked out," he said. "Fear will do that. Your first time in space and all that."

"I Did not," she told him. "I just didn't see any light. Did YOU? Honestly?"

"Well, no, but then, probably I couldn't pick it up. We were travelling so fast and it~"

"Forgotten your basic physics?" she asked sweetly.

"What's next on the course?"

"Cross this planetary system from here," she put her finger on a purplish planet that -was farthest from its sun, "to over here," this was past the seventh planet from the sun, "and then there's a sort of funny part of space-bumpy, as if it's pleated. ..."

"You can see that?" he asked, peering at her finger as if it had eyes.

"I did the simulation, silly. Maybe you should, too. Oh. I forgot. Experienced Starfarers don't need to do that stuff."

"We'll have no insubordination out of you, youngling."

"Fine. You asked. I told you."

She left him alone on the bridge and stomped down to the hydroponics area to do some serious grazing. And pouting, if the truth be known. The Condor had been gone for six weeks before the Nlikaavri launched. They had only been in

space for ten sleep periods. Maati tried to think about what she would say to her parents if she saw them again, how she -would convince Khornya and Aari to let her stay with them instead of returning to narhii-Vhiliinyar. But even her vivid imagination began to run out of ideas after a while. She thought about it, analyzed the jittery feeling that made it hard for her to sit still. That wasn't all. Her attention wandered at any excuse, and everything Thariinye said was sounding even stupider than usual. She had a thousand questions about how everything on the ship worked, but lacked the patience to listen to Thariinye's lectures on the subject. She wanted to climb behind the panels and see how things worked instead of just sitting and waiting. And waiting. And waiting.

She was bored. Here she was on the greatest adventure of her whole life and she was sooooo bored. She was used to having the run of Kubiilikhan, keeping so busy she was exhausted at the end of the day. To having conversations with people from all walks of life all over the city and surrounding countryside. Here on this ship she mostly sat. And talked to Thariinye. Who treated her like a baby. By the Ancestors, something had better happen soon!

Her wish was granted in seven more sleep periods. She had been using the LAANYE Thariinye brought along to brush up on Khornya's language-Standard. She wanted to be as fluent as possible when she saw Khornya, Aan, and Captain Becker again. If she could speak the language, maybe they wouldn't fuss too much when she announced she intended to stay with them, wanted to go back with them to that moon Khornya had mentioned where all the children lived and learned new skills.

It was her watch and she was tired of studying. If only the Condor weren't still so far away! Linyaari ships were faster than those of the humans, so they should be overtaking the salvage vessel before long, but she wished fervently that they were there already. She ran the course simulation again, wondering if maybe she could plot a more direct route instead of simply following Thariinye's extrapolation of the Condor's course.

As she calculated and plotted her various trajectories, she noticed some familiar-looking coordinates among her calculations.

Thariinye?" she said, speaking into the onboard hailing system.

He huffed and snorted, from which she gathered that she'd awakened him.

"If we just deviate two degrees from Captain Becker's course for a few hours, we'll be at the point where the Niriians saw the planet with my parents' escape pod on it." "Hmm? Oh. Good."

"I think we should alter our planned route and find my parents before we go see Captain Becker and the others. Shall we change course?"

"Oh, yeah, okay. Fine, kid. Don't bother me," he said and then before she could draw another breath said, "What? No no, Maati, wait. Don't you <)are touch anything! I -was asleep. I'll be right there!"

She shook her head when she saw him, rubbing his eyes his mane all flattened on the left side. He stumbled a little when he walked.

"You-didn't touch anything, did you?" he asked.

"No. That's technically your job. That's why I called. But I do think we should try to get my folks since they're sorta on the way." She tugged at his sleeve, and pointed to the screen where the course she had been plotting intersected with the familiar coordinates.

"Absolutely not." He looked again, tapped a button, compared her course -with the original tracing of the Condor's. "What's this all about?"

"I was trying to make our trip shorter and faster. The Condor is just looking for junk. They are not in any hurry, and they are rambling all over the place while they are looking. They are not trying to take the most direct route through space. But we do not have to follow their path. We could reach them faster by plotting a more direct course."

"Oh, -we could, could we? I suppose now that you're starclad, you think you know as much about navigation as seasoned spacefarers, do you?"

"It's not that. It's just that if those horrible things that hurt my brother are out here too, I don't want them to find my parents all stranded on some deserted planet. I wanted to come with you so that I could help you save them. And if we keep on our present course, it will take forever to reach where the ConSor •was. Then we'd have to try to find it from there and, meanwhile, my parents could die."

"Ummm," Thariinye said again, tracing each route simultaneously with both hands. "If we take this shorter route, we could rescue your parents on our way and still rendezvous with the ConDor in half the time I figured." Maati looked up at him with wide, approving eyes but inwardly she was laughing about how he was making this whole thing sound like his own idea. "Very well then. I'll change course now."

He did, putting on quite a show for her benefit-embellishing his movements with graceful little flourishes, humming to himself the "Hero's Gallop" song. He evidently thought that, instead of being grounded for life when he returned to narhiiVhiliinyar, he would receive a hero's "welcome for the rescue of her parents, his account of which would no doubt be as embroidered as his current implementation of the course change, or maybe even more so. Let him be the

biggest fraaki in the pond if he wanted to. Maati didn't care. She would finally get to see her parents again.

Maati was at the helm once more when the ship prepared to enter the orbit of the planet whose coordinates matched those described by the Niriians. The planet was a pretty one from this distance. Overall it was the color of the small lavender flowers that grew in the best grazing grounds. Large pools of deep indigo appeared through the powdery blue clouds that swathed the world. It even had several blue moons. She wondered what they would look like from the surface. She'd find out soon enough. . . .

Maati was about to summon Thariinye when the corn unit Game alive. She heard, not words, but sounds like rocks being ^nged together, "Hick Klack, klick-klick-klickety-klack-klackklack."

Thariinye must have been on his way to the bridge already ecause suddenly he was beside Maati. The color completely famed from his horn and he looked like he was watching something terrible. "What's the matter, Thariinye? We're here!" she said.

"Yes," he whispered, nodding at the corn unit. "And so are the Khieevi."

Captain Becker, look," Acorna said, when he arrived on the bridge for his watch. She pointed out to him their present course back to narhii-Vhiliinyar, and a slightly altered one. "If we deviated here slightly, -we would intersect with the coordinates the Niriians mentioned in their vid. The ones where the escape pod was seen. Do you wish to make that detour? From the looks of the vid, at least one person survived. Even if that's no longer the case, perhaps you would find the pod valuable salvage?"

Becker beamed and patted her on the shoulder. "You're gonna make a junker yet, Princess. That's a great idea. While we re at it, we'll see if there's anybody there who can tell us more about the wrecked Niriian ship, and if so, we'll see if they d like a ride. If not, "we have salvage that looks like something your people would like to have back. Even if they don't, bet your uncle Hafiz knows somebody who would •want to view it as a curiosity."

Slight as the course change was, it had a profound effect on Aari, who stared at the pliyi broadcast continually while he was on the bridge, and particularly focused on the picture of the pod.



He had gone over the broadcast so many times that Acorna •was surprised he could still stand to look at it. He didn't even flinch away from the scene of his own torture anymore. True he went into an apparent trance while watching, but since he could be distracted from it if necessary, Acorna decided he was simply thinking deeply about his experience, trying to face up to it and process it, which surely meant he was growing stronger and healthier and better able to deal with it? She hoped so.

Becker rolled his eyes now whenever he looked at Aari. He had tried some conversational gambits with no success. Aari •would answer a polite "Yes, Joh" or "No, Joh" and return to staring at the screen. Acorna usually met with the same response.

Had it not been for the cat and the KEN unit, the situation might have never been resolved.

Once his initial curiosity about the pliyi had been exhausted, RK paid no attention to it for several days. As the same images playing over and over on the screen meant that Aari, who was one of the cat's favorite people, would be on the bridge, RK started spending more time there. But enough, in RK's opinion, was enough. When Aari refused to focus exclusively on the cat, RK, tail lashing, began watching the screen, too. Acorna noticed that every time the Khieevi appeared on screen again with Aari at their mercy, the cat -would enlarge himself to twice his already considerable size, flatten his ears, and hiss. The first time Becker had witnessed RK's reaction, he'd laughed until he fell out of his chair. The cat then hissed at Becker, too.

Even Aari couldn't help laughing.

But RK, as his apparent understanding of what he was watching grew, became even more agitated when the scene appeared on the screen. One day, when they -were all on deck and the scene appeared, the cat flung himself at the screen, claws and teeth bared. The force of his collision with the hard, smooth, and totally uninjured surface of the screen knocked RK onto the deck, where he lay for a moment. Then he sat up and licked the fur on his left side as if that had been his intention all along.

Aari picked the cat up, stroked his fur, and laughed. "You got yourself a defender there, Aari," Becker said. Acorna reached over and scratched RK under his chin. The cat graciously permitted her ministrations, though he did not go so far as to actually purr.

During the long hours when she was not on watch and the others were busy or sleeping, Acorna undertook to "educate KEN," as Becker put it.

The android was being underutilized, she told Becker. Though he was programmed essentially as a servant or at least an employee, he had a vast amount of unused memory.

"It would greatly expand your ability to collect salvage, Captain," she told Becker. "If you landed on a world rich in salvage but with an unbreathable atmosphere, for instance, the android could collect your salvage for you long after the limited oxygen supply in your pressure suit forced you to return to the ship."

Becker nodded. "Sounds good to me." "I'll need access to the Condor's memory banks." "ML ccua e<) ^u. ccua," Becker said. "Is that Standard?"

Only to the Pallomellese," Becker said. "It means 'my house is your house, my ship is your ship.' Go for it."

During most of this programming, the KEN unit was turned ' "ut during the rest, he remained conscious and participated in e 'ark. Acorna was surprised at how natural he seemed. He was not, after all, a particularly new model.

"Were you originally programmed to feel or display emotion?" she asked the robot.

"No," he said. And then, half a beat later, he asked with seeming anxiety, "Was that the wrong answer?"

She smiled to reassure him. It seemed silly to think that someone who was basically a machine needed reassurance- but, on the other hand, she had heard her uncles talk to their ship, she'd seen Becker talk to the ConSor in the same way he spoke to RK, so there was really no reason to think that machines didn't respond in some way to emotional input. Particularly machines -which appeared to be human. "I do not think that there is a wrong answer to that question," she said. "But I'm interpreting your responses as being emotionally motivated. This makes me more comfortable with you."

"I hope you are comfortable with me, miss," the KEN unit said. "You have taught me a great deal these last few days. I know many more things. I understand a great deal more about the people here, this ship, this universe. Kisia Manjari did not wish me to think for myself."

Acorna frowned. "Kisia Manjari -was a very troubled person. And she had the unfortunate habit of passing her trouble around to everyone she met."

"She was a very difficult user, miss. I believe I perceive •what you mean. Captain Becker, on the other hand, keeps me shut off most of the time. This recharges the batteries but does not add greatly to my knowledge."

"I don't think the captain realized your potential, KEN640," Acorna said. "I'll ask his permission to leave you on continually while you are assimilating the data I have added to your banks."

"Miss, I note that the captain, and you, and the other being like you, and even the fur-bearing creature call each other by casual appellations. KEN-640 is my model number. But it is not the same sort of appellation."

"I'm sorry, KEN-640. You may call all of us by our given names. Although Aari calls me Khornya, as do others of my race, my original name is Acorna and I prefer it. Do you wish to be known by a different appellation than KEN-640 yourself?"

"Yes, Acorna. I have scanned the selection of names for humanoids of Terran origin, which I resemble, and have decided it would be appropriate for me to be called MacKenZ. Mac means son of, which sounds more human than modeled by, does it not?"

"It does."

"And although my model number indicates that I was not the latest or most sophisticated unit made to date, I feel that your programming has put me on a par -with the most recent and updated of my series. And if an "A" indicates the first or earliest model in the Standard alphabet, then Z surely means the most recent upgrade. Hence MacKenZ."

"Fine, MacKenZ. If you'll accompany me to the bridge, I will reintroduce you to our crewmates."

She did so. After that, Becker readily agreed to leave the MacKenZ operational most of the time and began some programming of his own, teaching MacKenZ some of the important points to remember in collecting salvage. "I think Mac is selfprogramming to some extent anyway," Becker said, scratching his head. "Otherwise, I don't see how he could come up with some of the stuff he does."

Becker was nonetheless reluctant to trust MacKenZ at the helm alone, although he didn't mind tutoring him in Becker Enterprises navigational methods when he stood his own watch.

MacKenZ spent much of his time on the bridge, when Becker didn't have any other specific assignment for him. Acorna -was glad of the company. She used the time to input more data, using the books that Aari had now abandoned in iavor of studying the piyi.

She discovered, as she came on watch to relieve Aari, that KEN, too, had taken an interest in the broadcast.

Aari was involved in the liveliest exchange he had engaged in since they recovered the pod. He and MacKenZ were conversing in Linyaari. Acorna had programmed the android for Standard. The Linyaari was either the android's own idea, or perhaps Aan had taught him.

"From observation," MacKenZ was saying, nodding at a frozen frame of the Khieevi torture scene, "I have deciphered the meaning of some few of the utterances Khieevi make by rubbing their legs together, Aari," MacKenZ was saying in a puzzled tone. "But these sounds, while they have a definite pattern and twenty-one thousand four hundred fifty-two distinct combinations which can predictably be determined to have specific meanings, are not translatable -with the use of your LAANYE device, which I find odd. Can you enlighten me as to the meanings of these clickings? Are they the only form of communication employed by these beings?"

Aan sat back in the command chair and closed his eyes, rubbing the area around the cavity where his horn once grew. He looked very, very weary. "They use thought-speak," he told MacKenZ, sighing deeply. "I didn't realize it at first, but they touch their antennae together and thought transference takes place. The audible communication they perform with their leg rubbings is apparently a code for more complex thoughts they are able to transmit in full by antennae contact. This is what has made it so difficult for the LAANYE to make sense of their verbal communication in the past. I suppose I am the only living being who has spent enough time with them to comprehend their mode of data transference." He paused, then added dryly, "I suppose that dubious distinction also means I may be the only Linyaari qualified to try and program the LAANYE to decipher the Khieevi utterances."

"So the Khieevi have to be physically present to employ such a mental means of communication," the android said. "So they use the clickings of their legs rubbing together as an audible means of communication for longer distances, such as ship to-ship transmissions. Fascinating. What else did you learn while you were with the Khieevi?"

"How loudly I could scream. How long before my voice craved out," Aari said. "How I could be reduced to a mass of searing pain, with no thought, no higher purpose than to make it cease."

"And yet, clearly, from what you say, you were able to

withhold the location of narhii-Vhiliinyar, as well as your brother's hiding place. Was that not an act of will?"

"Willful memory loss perhaps," Aari said with a very faint smile.

"What meanings did you attribute to these various clickings "

"Perhaps on my next watch we will attempt to interpret them, Maakinze. Here is Khornya, come to relieve me."

He smiled at her, but she was looking beyond him, to the screens that were, as Becker would say, lit up like pinball machines. "Look, Aari! Signals from everywhere! And we are nearing the coordinates of the lost pod. Perhaps we should alert Captain Becker."

"I'm right here, Mac!" Becker called out from down the corridor, his bare feet clanking as he jogged across the grated deck plating. "What's up?"

"A diffuse sonar signal is emanating from the area around the planet where the Linyaari escape pod is located, Captain," Mac replied.

A strange feeling came over Acorna as she looked at the thousands of tiny blinking lights spread across the sonar screen. She had seen this pattern before. "I know what that is, Captain!" she said. "It's the sonar-blocking signal given out by cloaked Linyaari vessels. One of the techno-artisans showed me how it worked recently."

"So," Becker said. "If it's a cloaked Linyaari vessel, what's that?" He pointed to a substantial and solid blip rapidly entering the sonar array.

As if in answer, the corn unit began a "Klick-klack-klickklack-klick-klack" noise.

"Khieevi," Acorna and Aari whispered, while Mac said the same word in a matter-of-fact, almost cheerful tone.

"Those guys?" Becker asked, peering at the dot as if he could make out the shape of the ship from it.

"Scope," Acorna said, and the viewscreen suddenly zoomed so that the mantis-shaped Khieevi vessel was indeed readily identifiable, though still quite distant.

"So that's what one of the little buggers looks like." Becker said, quietly, as if afraid they would hear. Meanwhile the klickings and klackings continued. "We seem to have intercepted one of their transmissions. Anybody have any idea what it's all about?"

"Klickety-klack," the Khieevi vessel's message seemed to be tapping directly onto Maati's spinal cord. She sat for a moment with her eyes squeezed shut.

"You don't have to close your eyes and pretend they can't see you," Thariinye said, but not as scornfully as he might have. "We're cloaked."

"What does the noise mean?" she asked.

"I don't know. I didn't hear a lot of their language when we were up against them on Rushima. And I wasn't alone. So far, nobody has gotten enough of a sample into the LAANYE for reliable translations. All our contacts with them have pretty much been at the wrong end of a 'weapon. Maybe it's Khieevi for 'come out, come out, wherever you are.' But don't worry, youngling. We may not be coming out, but we're moving out right now. I'm putting us into the nearest wormhole and-"

Maati's eyes blinked open and she reached to intercept his hand on the controls. "But . . . my parents! They're still on that planet! The Khieevi will get them." A brief struggle ensued, which Thariinye won.

He gave her a pitying look and reached again for the navigation controls. "I'm sorry, Maati, but we don't know for sure they're still alive. If so ... well, they've escaped the notice of the Khieevi so far. Perhaps they can continue to do it until we can find help. We-"

He never finished his sentence.

A heavy blow thudded against the Niikaavri, knocking both of them forward, straining the straps that held them into their chairs. At the same time, the lights on the control panel flared and two blinked out.

"Oh, no!" he cried, and punched frantically at the board again.

"Oh, no, what?" Maati asked.

"Somehow, in that little maneuver of yours, -we turned our camouflage off. They know our position now."

"Put the cloaking device back on and move, then!"

"I'm trying to, but the ship is not responding!"

A bolt of light shot in front of the viewport and they were once more rocked by the force of some sort of energy weapon striking their starboard bow.

Suddenly the egg-like ship was spinning dizzily, and the blue planet grew larger and larger in their viewscreen.

Thariinye grabbed the com unit and yelled, as if it could carry across space, "Mayday, Mayday, we are the Linyaari vessel Niikaavri and we are under attack from a Khieevi vessel."

Maati thought he had lost his mind. Surely no one would hear them, but then she cried, "Tell them -who we are, Thariimye. In case my parents can hear us. Tell them it's me, so they'll know what happened. Tell them to hide!"

I am Ensign Thariinye of clan Renyilaaghe. My second in command is Maati of clan Nyaarya. We are under attack by a Kleevi vessel. Our coordinates are . . ."

Maati thought she was hearing things for a moment when the klikings and klackings and sound of failing systems were replaced suddenly by a familiar comforting voice.

"Thariinye, Maati, it's Khornya. You've been badly hit. Use the escape pod. We'll pick you up and get us all out of here."

Another, harder thud and the ship was spinning dizzily, the blue planet looming larger with every revolution.

Maati floated up from her seat. "G force has been cut."

"Khornya, the Khieevi! Save yourselves!" Thariinye bellowed into the com unit. To Maati he said, "No time to deal with it, youngling. Unstrap. Climb into the pod!"

The pod was located behind the command chairs. Maati snapped her restraint open and did a handstand on the back of the chair, flipping herself down to the top of the pod and popping its catch.

"No sweat, sport," Captain Becker's voice was saying. "We got 'em covered."

"Thariinye, the escape pod," Khornya said again.

Maati climbed inside the pod. She suppressed a nervous giggle. The zero G popped her up to the top.

"Oh," Thariinye said, and she saw the top of his head as it swirled to take in the wildly flickering console lights, the sparks flying from the board at many points.

Maati waited. It felt like forever. She felt sick from the spinning and thought that the stars swirling past the viewport looked like what she'd thought she would see in the wormhole.

She heard the snap of Thariinye's restraint, and saw his feet, then his legs as he bounced over the top of the chair and off the deck.

Maati held on to the pod lid with one hand and grabbed his foot with the other, pulling him in. He was barely inside the pod when all of a sudden the canopy slapped closed and locked, and they felt a bump as gravity returned, but increased fivefold, pressing the pod against the deck.

Thariinye pressed the release button to eject the pod and activate the recirculating oxygen supply. Oxygen flooded the pod with a hissing sound, but they were still stuck inside the ship. The ejection mechanism -was malfunctioning, just like everything else on the ship! And the gravitational force was so strong they couldn't pop the hatch again to see why the pod had failed to eject.

Thariinye's heart boomed against her ear.

"It's okay, Thariinye. The pod will help protect us during a crash. They're amazingly resilient, you know."

His breath rasped in and out a few times.

"Unless, of course, the ship burns up on entering the atmosphere or we're smashed in the wreckage when it slams into the planet," Maati said, and realized that what she was voicing was Thariinye's thought. He hadn't said a word. What a time for her psychic powers to kick in!

The pod insulated them a bit from the noises around them, but she knew they - were still inside the ship because she hadn't felt the explosive acceleration that would indicate the pod had separated from the mother ship. They were still stuck.

(I could open the hatch and . . .) she thought she said aloud.

Tharnnye hugged her close to his chest. "Not if it's stuck, you can't. I'll keep hitting the firing mechanism. We'll just have to hope that the relay decides to engage before the crash-or maybe even during."

(Oh, no, we're trapped!) Panic welled up inside her and tears began to flow from her eyes. She couldn't spend the pitiful traction left of her life cooped up in this tiny shell. She couldn't. She just couldn't.

Then suddenly it was as if they had hit a bump. They felt themselves sliding and then their pod was launched so that at first they were flying, then dropping.



(It will level out, won't it?) she asked. Or did she? They were wrapped so closely in each other's arms that it was no wonder she could suddenly hear his thoughts and he could hear hers.

(Yes,) he said. (But I am doomed anyway. Even if -we survive the crash and the Khieevi, Lirilli will kill me for stealing and losing her newest ship.)

Becker jerked his thumb backward, gesturing for Aari to surrender the command chair. The Condor's hiding place behind one of the moons kept it out of range of the Khieevi ship's sensors, giving the crew a little breathing space to make plans.

Aari got up, but gave the captain a level look. "I am fine, Joh. The Khieevi no longer freeze my ability to think."

"I know that, buddy, but you don't know my bird like I do." He clasped his hands, intertwining his fingers, straightened his wrists and flexed his knuckles, then shook both hands out and applied them to the buttons. "Let's deploy those Winding laser cannons we picked up last year."

"Sorry, Captain," the computer said, "but you have not yet found the right mountings to affix them to the gun ports."

"Oh, yeah. Then fire the Apatchipon micron splitters."

"You have not been able to fashion suitable ports, Captain, to accommodate both the micron splitters and your latest hull modifications."

"Well, I've had all these people around and-okay, so we'll just go for the plain old atom blasters Dad installed years ago.

"You removed those and stored them, Captain, when you traded for the Windigi laser cannons."

"Fraggit! So what have we got? Spit? We fired the last big load of cargo into Ganoosh's bird and we haven't acquired enough new stuff yet to do any good." He shook his head and said, "I guess we could board 'em and go mano a mano with the side arms and laser rifles. It worked on Rushima."

Acorna leaned forward, "You used the tractor beam before, Captain. How much will it hold?"

"A bunch more than we've got to throw at these buggers," Becker replied. "This was supposed to be a nice, simple cargo run. . • •" He and Aari exchanged long looks. Acorna did not care for the grim set of Aari's jaw or the glazed, doomed look in his eyes. Nor could she bear to think of Thariinye, much less Maati, at the

nonexistent mercy of the Khieevi. She had sensed some difficulty with the pod before their ship crashed, but she had no true reading of what it was.

"Joh, listen to me and do exactly as I say," Aari commanded, interrupting Acorna's train of thought. His voice was clipped and hard and she was amazed to see he had appropriated Becker's side arm, and was raising it in Becker's direction. "You have an operational shuttle in Bay Two. You will take Khornya and Riidkiyi and board the shuttle now. I will give you five seconds to clear and then I will ram the Condor into the Khieevi ship."

"Over my dead body," Becker growled, whipping around in the chair to face Aari. "That's mutiny."

"Over your stunned body if necessary, Joh. Khornya, you understand this is the only way to save Thariinye and my sister, don't you? The Khieevi killed me long ago. I live only to prevent them from doing to others what they did to me. So unless you wish to lose your horn to them as I did, and worse, you and Mac will take Joh and Riidkiyi now and evacuate."

"You're not gonna crash my ship!" Becker said belligerently, his jaw stuck out.

"If you will all just listen to me for a moment," Acorna interjected. "Aari, give the captain back his weapon. We will need the ConSor to rescue Thariinye and Maati and your par61118. I have a better idea. Remember in that old vid, when the evil western agricultural workers dragged the good quick-draw walTlor the indigenous inhabitants had hired to save them?"

Tksy dragged him through cactus, and over hardened trails, and he was much the worse for wear as a result. I remember thinking that actually it was highly unlikely he would have survived, especially maintaining his headgear as he did, had the event been an actual occurrence rather than a fictional one. Well, it seems to me that we could do much the same thing here. The atmospheric rim on this planet is quite dense and the gravitational pull strong. If the tractor beam will hold the Khieevi ship ..."

"Gotcha, Princess! You're brilliant!" Becker spoke to the computer. "Okay, Buck, engage the tractor beam. Hook onto that big, nasty piece of salvage off our starboard bow." He chuckled and said to his crew members. "Heh-heh. This is a great idea! They can't shoot us or anybody else while they're locked onto the tractor beam's gravity -well."

The beam locked onto the Khieevi ship and hauled it toward the Condor until it vanished from view beneath them.

"At least, I don't think they can, unless they got some new technology that lets them." Becker continued in a slightly more worried tone as he maneuvered the

beam so that the Khieevi was in tow behind and at an angle from the Condor, riding between the salvage ship's belly and the planet's rim.

The klick-klack noise on the com unit was now loud, angry, and very obviously intended for the crew of the Condor.

"They are telling you to surrender, Joh. They have us in their pincers," Aari said. He was baring his teeth, and it was not a friendly grin. Acorna reached up without thinking to wipe the sweat where it was suddenly dripping off his chin. He touched her hand lightly, his fingers stroking hers once, regretfully. She knew from the touch that he still could not imagine they -would come away from this encounter alive, much less unscathed.

"Strap down, crew," Becker said.

Acorna grabbed RK and strapped him in with her. Aari and Mac did likewise in the seats Becker had scavenged so that the entire crew could be together on occasion-though none of them had thought that such an occasion as this would ever arise.

"Buck, give us a visual of the cargo in the tractor beam, Becker told the ship's computer." Once he could see the Khieevi ship, Becker accelerated and the Condor shot toward the blue planet, past where the enemy vessel had originally hovered while watching the crash of the Linyaari craft. The screen showed the mantis-like ship dangling beneath the Condor's belly, while the clicking and klacking from the com unit rose in volume and variation. Threats, no doubt.

Becker dove and the blue planet grew larger and larger, until its vaporous cover seemed ready to swallow the Condor. "Manual," Becker said, and pulled back on an actual lever among the buttons of his control panel, with the effect that the Condor's nose swooped up, slinging the Khieevi ship behind it.

Acorna felt a bump as they changed course, and on the screen the Khieevi ship jumped and shook as it dipped into the atmosphere and was pulled out again. Becker did this three times. Diving and swooping, and-at the end of each swoop-a bump. As they pulled up, the pressure of acceleration pressed all of them to their seats. RK's lips pulled back from his teeth in a fierce grimace, as did Aari's. Acorna -would have laughed but her teeth were bared, too. Only Mac's face remained just the same, robotic flesh impervious to the force. Acorna's stomach could not decide whether to go into her throat or her legs, and the variations in gravity made her lightheaded and giddy.

Just as the Khieevi ship bumped the third time, Becker commanded, "Disengage tractor beam, Bucko. We're gonna play a little game of crack the ship."

The Khieevi ship -was flung wide from the Condor and skipped three more times against the resistance of the outer atmosphere, almost as if the ship was a flat rock and the atmospheric rim was a pond. But the ship wasn't solid, and the Mantis's legs and antennae broke off with the first skip, while large cracks appeared with the next before it plunged spinning toward the surface. It disappeared into nothingness as the Condor flew deeper into space.

"Whoa, Buck," Becker said.

When the Condor had slowed, Becker returned to the atmosphere and reversed thrusters. The Condor's screens were picking up signals from the Lmyaan escape pod as well as several from the Khieevi ship.

The planet appeared even bluer than it had from the air as the ship approached the surface.

Acorna didn't know she was humming until Aari asked, "You are singing-is it your death song?"

"Gill used to sing it sometimes," Acorna said. "It is an old Terran folksong of military origin."

Becker laughed and sang in a gravelly and tuneless voice, "Off we go, off into the wild blue yonder."

Seven

"Thariinye?" Maati said. "Tharnnye, we've landed. JVly arms are pinned. Can you open the canopy?"

His heart still beat in her ear slow and steady. He was alive, anyway. "Thariinye, are you okay?"

He blasted her other ear with a loud snore. She elbowed him in the ribs. "You fell asleep! We could have been killed and you fell asleep!"

He stirred and groaned. "Not asleep. More like unconscious, I think."

"Unconscious people don't snore. You were snoring." Where are we, anyway?" he asked, changing the subject. "I don't know. But it feels like we landed. That was too much of a thump for us to be still in space. Can you open the canopy?"

What if we have landed on some hostile planet where there is only nitrogen to breathe?" he asked. "If I open the canopy, we die."

Look at the sensors, you dope. The air's fine. Remember, "y parents lived here for long enough for the Nirriians to find roem. They must have breathed the air and still survived. And if you don't get us out of here, I wet my pants now and we both die of hunger or worse later anyway," she said. "Do you just want to sit here and wait for the Khieevi to snatch us?"

"Okay, you've got a point." He opened the hatch. While he was at it, he turned off the locator beacon. "Don't know who'll be looking for us, do we?" he asked. Through the open hatch, they saw periwinkle blue sky, lacy fronds of vegetation, one sun and half a dozen moons simultaneously, and some large and very beautiful birds with blue and green iridescent plumage soaring above them.

"How could you fall asleep -when the Khieevi were after us and maybe even got Khornya and Aari, too?"

"I couldn't do anything about it, could I? When you are older and more experienced, youngling, you will learn to utilize whatever quiet moments you can grab from the constant excitement of a spacefarer's life to conserve your energy and mend any damage done by life's travails."

"Right," she said, and tried to sit up. The pod moved under her, bouncing up and down. "Whoa, stop!" she said, and looked over the edge to see what was causing the motion. Lacy, fernlike growth held them in the air. "Thariinye, look. These are the tallest bushes I have ever seen!" All around them and high above them, blocking off the view in most directions, other lacy fronds fanned briskly back and forth.

He sat up, too, and the pod rocked even more perilously.

"They're not bushes, youngling. These are treetops. Can you climb down? If the branches support your weight, then maybe they'll support mine. I don't think we're up very high. All of the other trees appear to be higher."

She leaned over the edge and touched something solid, big enough it let her spread her whole hand. Thariinye leaned against the opposite side of the pod to balance it as she felt her way along. When she was sure the support was wide enough for her to step out on, she did, slithering her belly, pelvis, and legs over the side to follow her outstretched hands and arms.

She crawled along the limb on hands and knees, peering through the fronds to try to find more sturdy branches. When she reached the trunk, she had to lift more fronds to find the way down. "No wonder it wasn't very tall," she crawled back to Thariinye.

"Be careful, you'll . . ." "Oooops!" she cried, windmilling her arms as she let her legs shoot out from under her.

"Maati!" Thariinye cried, and toppled the pod reaching for her. It fell from the nest of fronds and landed below-about three feet below. Thariinye had covered his head with both hands anticipating the crash.

Maati laughed and laughed, and stood up. The fronds and the part of the trunk still in the ground rose only as high as her waist. "Gotcha!" she cried, clapping her hands. "We broke the tree when we landed and its branches cushioned our fall!" "Brat," Thariinye grumbled, extricating himself from the pod.

"Now what, O experienced spacefarer?" Maati asked cheekily.

"Standard protocol is to stay near your pod," Thariinye told her. "Which would be a good idea if Khornya and her crewmates are looking for us."

'But a bad idea if they lost out to the Khieevi, and it's the monsters who are looking for us," Maati said.

"Yes," he admitted. "I know what we can do," Maati said. "Oh, you do? Who put you in charge of the mission?" "The same power that put you in charge," she replied, "We're in this together. If I get saved, you get saved. If I get caught, you'll-"

'If I get caught I'll try to make sure they don't know you're alive,' Thariinye told her with unexpected gravity.

Right. Well, all I need to do is climb up one of the taller "ees, if it's climbable, and look around. I can maybe see where the wreckage of our ship is and if anybody is checking it out. That is the first place anyone will look for us, and it isn't like we can't tell our friends from our enemies in this situation. One look, and we'll know what to expect."

"Why, that's a very good idea. You learn quickly, youngling."

Climbing these trees was easier said than done, however unless you were one of the small blue-furred scampering things constantly running up and down trunks and through the underbrush. The trunks were smooth and thick-it was the broken off end of the trunk that Maati had crawled along when she first left the pod. But the frond branches were not very strong and snapped under the pressure of even Maati's small feet.

She made it halfway up one of the trees, and that was as far as she got. She felt around for handholds or footholds but found none.

Thariinye called up to her from below, "Keep going."

"Can't," she said.

"Well, what do you see from there?"

"More trees. But I think the ones over that way," she pointed to the west, "are on a hill, maybe. And there is some kind of clearing at the top. If we could go climb that hill, we could see more." When she'd pointed, she'd let go of the tree with one hand, and transferred all her weight to her other hand. That put more pressure on her grasping hand and the frond she was holding broke. While she was searching for another, her feet bore too heavily on the fronds she stood on, and those broke as well. She slid precipitously down the trunk, catching her shipsuit several times on protruding fronds on the way down. It was a sturdy synblend and didn't tear, but Maati wasn't so sure the skin beneath the suit was as undamaged.

"It'll take us farther from the pod," Thariinye said with a sigh. "But that might be a good thing."

"I don't think we ought to talk so loudly anymore either," Maati said. "In case the monsters hear us."

(We wouldn't need to talk at all if you weren't such a baby,) Thariinye grumbled.

She punched him lightly in the side with her balled-up fist. (I heard that.) Then after a beat, (Hey, do you think we could contact Khornya and my brother mentally from here? Or maybe even my parents? I can do that, can't I, now that I'm able to send and receive?) The last was thought quite proudly, and Thariinye received an image of a grownup Maati.

(Not if they're still too far out in space or too busy to listen-engaged in battle with the Khieevi, maybe,) Thariinye sent a withering thought. Maati realized that this was a frequent behavior with him. The idea had not been his and therefore he was trying to make it sound "worthless."

(It doesn't hurt to try, though,) Maati pointed out.

(Unless, of course, the Khieevi can read our thoughts and find us from them,) Thariinye said. (In case they folio-wed us down here.)

(Oh,) Maati said. (Yeah. Okay. I'll shut up. Back to the hill, then.)

They were nearly there when they heard the -whistling, roaring sounds. They scrambled quickly to the top of the hill and found the clearing in time to see the

wreckage of the Khieevi ship falling from the sky, splashing into a sea some distance from them. They could make out the -wreck of their own ship on the shore.

"At least if we lost our ship, they did, too," Maati said.

"I suppose that's some consolation," Thariinye agreed. "The Khieevi ship was - wrecked-maybe Liriili can blame the Khieevi for the whole mess, instead of me, if we live long enough to have to confess it." And then he pointed. For once, even he was speechless. Maati could see why.

Also tumbling down from the sky, but in much better shape than the larger ship had been, was a small Khieevi shuttle. As it fell, two figures could be seen emerging from it, trailing some sort of membrane behind them that caught the air and sailed them gently to the ground.

Maati, seeing the bug-like creatures alive for the first time, even at a distance, was filled with horror and loathing. Tears began trickling down her cheeks as she looked up at Thariinye.

"They landed somewhere over there," he said, pointing toward the beach. "So I think we should run in the opposite direction as far and as fast as "we can."

"Yes," she said, "But-but-Thariinye?"

"What?"

"If their ship is crashed and in pieces and only two of those creatures are getting out, does that mean the ConSor won?"

"We can't take that chance, youngling, though by the Ancestors I hope it is so. We are no match for even two of those creatures. Quickly now."

He didn't have to tell her twice.

The Linyaari ship lay broken in two like a giant egg that had hatched its chick. It was nestled deep in a beach of aqua blue sand, beyond which cerulean blue waters stretched to the horizon. Wreckage from the Khieevi ship was scattered like bits of large and particularly ugly seaweed on the surface of the water and along the beach, carried in by the waves. Behind the beach was a range of blue dunes and, beyond them, the fronds of a forest of graceful fern-like trees beckoned the Condor to land.

Once the ship had done so, Acorna released her restraint and RK's.



"Conditions are hospitable, Captain," the Buck Rogers voice of the ship's computer told him. "That blue stuff that looks like sand, is. The other blue stuff that looks like the water is. Salt water, though, so take your desalination and purification unit.

The temperature is sixty degrees Fahrenheit with moderate winds at three point two knots. The air is breathable, even fragrant, by human standards."

"Are there-life forms?" Aari asked.

"Other than here? How should I know? I'm a ship's computer, for heaven's sake, not an anthropologist. My heat and motion sensors are picking up something, but it could just be all that wreckage out in the water."

The scanners showed what Buck was referring to more precisely. Becker salivated at the sight of all that salvage.

Aari was more sober. "Does it show if there are any live beings there?"

Becker shook his head. "Don't know. My scanners are for salvage, mostly."

"I hope Thariinye and Maati were able to make it to the escape pod," Acorna said with a little shiver that made her skin twitch. "I don't think anything else would have survived that crash."

Becker said, "Look at the ship. I don't see any obvious signs of them or the pod in the wreckage. They're here somewhere. And if that's the case, Princess, we'll find them. What I'm hoping is that none of those stupid bug things made it to a pod."

"Their ships don't have pods, Joh," Aari said. "Their carapace protects them against many things that would kill others."

"What about that large shuttle-shaped piece of debris over there, captain?" Mac asked.

Rrrrrrowsst!" RK responded. "Cat says it's Khieevi," Becker told them.

"We heard him, Joh," Aari said soberly. "Well, from here I'd say it's not as badly wrecked as the Khieevi ship." He indicated the fragments of the ship floating ^ the water. "We can at least hope that any occupants are in ^e same fragmentary state as their transportation," Becker said.

RK bolted for his personal exit and they heard his claws scabbling as he slid down the cat chute to the ramp that led to the robotlift.

"We better get moving," Becker said. "Cat seems to have to go real bad. Must be that pretty blue sandbox out there just itching to have a Makahomian cat scratch in it. Aari, you get that Khieevi earthmoving weapon you brought along as your dowry. I've got the locator and laser rifle," he said, hefting a sleek and deadly looking weapon the length of his forearm.

"And I have my own array of attachments, Captain," Mac said, opening his forearm to display the corkscrew, can opener, knife blades, scissors, magnifying glass and other small equipment that were standard with his particular model.

Acorna made a side trip of her own. Taking a slight detour to an otherwise empty storeroom, she gathered up a lightweight titanium cargo net she had spotted earlier in the journey.

"Good idea, Princess," Becker said when he saw it. "We'll be able to net us some salvage from that Khieevi ship for sure."

Thus armed, they boarded the robolift and headed down. Acorna felt something sticky on her shoes. She took a closer look at her shoes, then at the source of the problem. "Mac, when we get back here, I want you to scrub the lift down. It's a mess from the plant sap on that planet where we picked up the piyl."

Mackenz looked surprised-probably because she was talking about minor housekeeping matters now, when so many more important things were at stake-but didn't say anything. Clearly the robot had never learned the trick of keeping fear at bay by concentrating on the trivia of life. Maybe robots didn't ever feel that kind of fear.

Once the robolift set down, however, Becker regarded the outside of his ship with disgust, too. "Those damn plants slimed my hull! Look at that! What a mess."

"Joh," Aari said softly, nodding to redirect the captain's attention to the halves of the Linyaari ship. "What if Maati and Thariinye are in the wreckage?"

"If they're there, they'll be easy to find. We'll know soon enough what the situation is. No sense borrowing trouble. Princess, anything to add here?"

"I was-receiving some impressions toward the last, before we picked up the Khieevi, that the pod might have become stuck in the ship. If so, they could still be alive but trapped in the wreckage in the pod."

"We must reach them before the Khieevi do," Aari said.

"If there are any Khieevi left," Becker said. "Come to think of it, maybe we'd better try to head the bad guys off at the pass even before we check the wreckage."

"There are Khieevi here," Aari said. "I can feel them."

RK, back up and tail brushed, apparently agreed with him.

They made their way cautiously down the beach, weapons at the ready. Acorna felt a little foolish trailing behind, preoccupied by the feeling that she knew Maati and Thariinye were here somewhere-alive-but she couldn't tell where. She only had a vague sense of them. Why couldn't she at least reach Thariinye? She couldn't shake the feeling that her friends were alive, but in trouble.

They saw wrecked Khieevi shuttlecraft lying in the dunes, broken up but considerably more intact than the Khieevi ship, lying in the dunes further up the beach. Something brown lay crunched around the edges, and a green fluid tinted the blue sand turquoise.

"Any Khieevi who survived were most likely in that shuttle," Becker pronounced. "Look at their ship. I doubt they could live through a wreck like that. The ship is toast, but the shuttle-well, that looks like it was spaceworthy till the last minute. No convenient vacuum or decompression to kill all the occupants for us."

As they drew nearer they saw movement and heard a sound that made Acorna's skin twitch-the klick-klack she had heard so often on Aari's video. The light wind carried a terrible stench-rot combined with vomit. RK stopped, dug his claws into the ground, and hissed like a tea kettle. Aari's steps slowed. Becker surged ahead like a missile, Mac outpacing him with nonchalance in the face of danger that only an android-particularly one who had once been the face of danger himself- could achieve.

"It appears we've got a live one," Becker growled as he rounded the dune where the shuttle lay. "Though it's half buried under that shuttle. It's not going anywhere fast. I'll just put this cockroach out of its misery,"

"Please, wait," Acorna said. "We must question it. Aari knows their language, at least enough to get something useful out of it. Perhaps we can get more from the LAANYE. We have to find out if this ship was alone or if others will be coming, where the main swarm of Khieevi is now, and where they are heading next. If my people are threatened again, they must know at once."

Aari found his voice and his feet, and in six more strides stood beside Becker. Acorna approached cautiously, curiously. The creature snapped its mandibles and reached for Becker with its pincers but the captain sidestepped smartly and beckoned for Acorna to give him the cargo net.

She wondered suddenly why it had occurred to her to bring it. Then she glanced at Aari and saw him smiling at her with both approval and triumph. That was it, of

course. Aari had sent her the suggestion. He thought he couldn't intentionally send any longer, but he was clearly mistaken. He had certainly just done it. Why hadn't he asked her aloud, she wondered? It would have been a reasonable request. How odd.

Aari was carrying the very large and heavy weapon which he'd retrieved when his torturers fled the death throes of Vhiliinyar. He trained it on the monster. Maybe that was it. Acorna had been the logical one to bring the net-but, still, he usually communicated with spoken words. She looked up at him again, frowning this time, but he was concentrating on the Khieevi.

"Okay," Becker said. "Aari, Acorna, and I are going to capture this thing. When we have the net over it and solidly anchored, Mac, you maneuver the shuttle off its leg and thorax, okay?"

"Yes, Captain."

Acorna was the only one who could use two hands, but fortunately the creature was trapped and rather badly injured by the crash. Much of its back end was crushed beneath the shuttle, from what she could see. It still gave her cold chills to be this close to a live Khieevi, no matter how much was wrong with it. When the android lifted the broken piece of the shuttle from the back of the Khieevi and tipped it aside, the Khieevi struggled mightily against their titanium net, but in vain. Mac then aided his crewmates in finishing netting the monster's hind parts. The monster clicked and klacked and gnashed its mandibles at them as best it could through the impediment of the net, but they paid it no attention. Finally it - was well wrapped enough that they could risk transporting it.

"Now, then," Becker said. "We'll put him in the brig and Mac can stay and guard him while the LAANYE collects language samples. As mad and as noisy as this beast is, we ought to get enough stuff to be useful. As long as he doesn't have any friends to scream for, we should be fine. I'm told they kill their wounded, so the fact that he's alive means he's probably alone. men, Aari, buddy, while that's going on, you and me are going to excavate that egg ship and make sure your little sister and that idiot punk she's with aren't trapped inside."

"I'll start searching through the debris while you're gone, and I'll broadcast that we're here, Captain," Acorna said. "If our friends are nearby, and conscious, Thariinye will hear me and he'll let me know where they are." "Good idea, Princess. We'll be right back with the plasma cutters."

Acorna climbed inside the half of the egg that should have contained the bridge. She could see the lower edge of the crushed viewport sunken deep into the damp sand. The sea was licking at the wreckage now, wide wet fingers teasing loose bits of smashed equipment and carrying them out and back with each wash of the waves. She wondered about tides-was the wreck in danger of being

flooded? Perhaps, with so many moons arrayed about the planet, that wouldn't be an issue. Maybe they would all cancel each other out, gravitationally, instead of amplifying the movement of the seas. She could hope so, anyway.

The shadows were growing long now. Becker and Aari would not have much more daylight. She began throwing everything she could over the side of the ship facing away from the water. Becker would certainly want his salvage. Nothing faintly resembling the bridge was visible yet. Fragments of burnt and ripped pavilion fabric passed through her hands, as did a mane comb, and the shards of a mirror. Acorna saw her own slender face reflected back in the device. She hadn't realized she was weeping until then.

(Thariinye? Thariinye, answer me if you can!) she thought as hard as she could. But everything within the ship was still. The only movement was the settling of the rubbish as it shifted beneath her feet, and the lapping of the waves against the ruined hull of the ship.

She heard the Condor's robolift descend again. Becker and Aari soon arrived carrying the plasma cutters with them. At Becker's signal Acorna climbed back out of the shell. Becker gave her an inquiring waggle of his eyebrows, but she shook her head sadly. She had been unable to make contact.

The men worked until well after dark, seeing by the light from their cutters. At one point, Acorna went up on the robolift and turned on an exterior floodlamp Becker had rigged above it for nighttime salvage expeditions. The shadows it cast made it look as if the two men were mining the pits of darkness, their grunts and the raucous scorch and sizzle of the saws adding to the general impression of demonic digging. The tide had risen and the wreck was beginning to flood. The men were waistdeep in water, so that they had to dive as well as cut. Meanwhile, Acorna carried salvage to the robolift.

She made mental calls to her friends from time to time, pleading for Thariinye to answer, but she felt nothing, heard

nothing. Not then.

When the men were up to their necks in water, Becker finally threw his plasma cutter onto the beach over the broken hull of the shell ship and hoisted himself out. "C'mon, Aari. We're going to have to wait for the tide to go out. If there's anything there to see, it's too far under water now. Maybe the tide will shift some of the junk still there so we can see more."

"My little sister might be in there, Joh. A child."

"Maybe, but I doubt it," he said. "I'm betting that she and Thariinye were smart enough to get out." He looked toward Acorna but all she could see were the

whites of his eyes and his teeth. "You sense anything from in there yet, Princess?"

She shook her head. "Nothing," she said. "It is possible the pod broke free -while we were discussing how to destroy the Khieevi ship. Thariinye and Maati could have escaped then."

The three of them climbed onto the robolift. RK had stayed aboard the ship during the salvage operation. "Our new guest better hope they escaped, or be prepared to tell us where they are. Aari, I've got a few questions I want you to translate into their kilck-klacL"

"Certainly, Joh. I can ask questions, but I do not think the Khieevi will answer. They have never answered questions. The Linyaari sent ambassadors to them and the only answers we ever received to our questions were vids of the ambassadors being tortured as I was. But those ambassadors never escaped. Our people met their deaths in those vids."

"Nasty stuff. Well, maybe your people asked the Khieevi right questions, but didn't ask in the right way. You Linyaari have got a few scruples that don't particularly apply to me. Aari, I want you to give Mac a little language lesson. He learned how to ask questions when he worked for Kisia Manjari. I'm betting our guest will be real happy to tell us anything we want to know before Mac is done with him. But we're still going to need you to translate. You folks are pacifists, I know. Is this going to bother you?"

Aari bared his teeth until they -were -whiter than his skin in the light of the two moons. "No, Joh. It will not bother me."

The sole Khieevi still alive and free on this planet cut a swath through the fern-like trees. At first it was a low swath. The creature was a bit stunned from his emergency departure from the shuttle, but it managed to properly decimate the undergrowth in the approved style. The Khieevi scoutship crew had expected that the strange craft that destroyed theirs would come for them on this planet, trying to protect the fragile little onehorns in the decorated space-borne food container. But the strange ship hadn't been fast enough. The Khieevi had made short work of the one-horn ship, and would have done the same to the strange ship had it not taken them by surprise and used unfair and totally uncalled for tactics to wreck them and cause the deaths of all of the other swarm members but the navigator and the self of the Khieevi who now ate Jits way through the forest floor.

That self-the inquisitor-had heard the klickmgs of the navigator for miles and miles, but the inquisitor -was not about to go back. The navigator had been half squashed -when the shuttle fell on him. The navigator would be recycled into food soon. The inquisitor -would see to it.

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The inquisitor had a communications device. It would be difficult to activate without the ship's power to fuel it, but organic activation could be implemented in an emergency such as the current one. It had only to reach a high point on the planet, arrange indigenous ingredients in a certain proportion, and chew, and the resulting chemical reaction would provide carrying power for the message the Khieevi wished to transmit.

The mission would not fail. The Khieevi swarm would come to this planet and find plenty and prosperity for another short time, and then all of the neighboring worlds and all their viable foodstuffs would also fall to his race's relentless mandibles.

Meanwhile, the other scout ships would search out other areas. But the inquisitor's sole purpose now was to notify its swarm of its own location, the location of the food, and the loss of the ship.

That, at least, was its sole intended purpose until, after eating its way through the undergrowth, it found at its very jaws a one-horn device, small and compact and shaped like a food container. To the inquisitor's regret it was empty, but the one-horns who had occupied it had left a trail of broken plant matter, scent, and vibrations. The inquisitor chomped its way after them up a steep hill and down it.

At the top of the steep hill, it looked at the seashore below it and saw the navigator being lugged down the beach by two hornless two-leggeds into the strange ship. The navigator was still alive and clicking. Not for long, the inquisitor was certain. That information would be noted when the inquisitor broadcast the next report to the swarm. It continued eating, tracking the missing one-horns.

As nighttime fell, the inquisitor was very full, but unsatisfied. It had a need to smell alien one-horn blood. To see it flow. As it ate its way downhill into a little valley, it saw how to fulfill that need, too. Leaning against a tree, apparently sleeping, was a one-horn. The inquisitor closed on its prey.

The healing retreat in the hills of the Ancestors, under their gentle, probing care, was meant to erase all pollution, all contamination, all taint, all pain, all shame left behind from the dreadful ordeal the Linyaari spacefarers had faced. The process

could go on for days, weeks, months, years, by Standard reckoning; a ghaanye or many, by Linyaari reckoning.

However, the deep healing had barely begun when personal attendants began handing the supplicant pilgrims their wraps and saying, "Go home. You are needed in Kubiikhhan."

Grandam had never known of such a thing to happen in all her life.

"Have we done something wrong?" one of the younger crew members from the liliura asked. "Are we being cast out because our taint is too great?"

"Don't talk nonsense, child," the personal attendant said. "Didn't you hear Us? You are needed. And as for being cast out, how can We possibly be casting you out when We are coming with you?"

Back in town, Liriili had been fidgeting, forgetting to graze, pacing until her feet were quite rough and sore, walking up and down the road to and from the spaceport. The viizaar had no messenger since Maati had vanished, though she had little to do for the moment except wait. Wait for the Khieevi to find them again. She did not know what to do. Now recovered from her anger, she told herself she had done a service to Thariinve and Maati. When the Khieevi came here, those younglings at least would be spared. If they hadn't already been consumed, a small voice inside her head pointed out. She ignored it.

Walking down the road from the spaceport, where she had once more been checking with the command officer of the day, refusing to believe that the remote reports to her office were frequent or rapid enough to alert her in time for an attack, she saw the stream of her people, two footed and four footed, flowing down from the hills on the opposite side of the bowl-shaped valley containing Kubiikhhan.

Alarmed, disturbed, frightened, and yet, somehow, relieved as well, she returned to her office to await the return of the pilgrims-and of the Ancestors.

The thought of questioning of the Khieevi prisoner bothered Acorna. Despite her fear and loathing, she knew she would not be able to watch without wishing to heal any hurts inflicted upon the Khieevi in the line of questioning. She also knew that trying to heal the destructive monster was not reasonable.

She could, however, feel its pain from two decks away. Despite Becker's threats to the contrary, no one had touched it since it had been brought aboard and its net locked into place where cargo nets were normally strung up. It hadn't been necessary to lay a hand on the creature. It was answering their questions sporadically, in between spasms of pain. But it was dying. She could feel it dying.



The feeling was so intense, it was as if she could feel herself dying, too. She couldn't stand it any longer. She had to leave - she'd be forced to interfere with what Becker was doing. A^J they needed the information he -was extracting. She abandoned the bridge for the robotlift, stopping on the way to tell the others what she was doing-that she was going to see if the tide was out yet, and if it was, she'd load some more cargo. She'd also continue calling for Thariinye and Maati while she was at it.

She got a "Yeah, ummm hmmm, okay," from Becker. Aari and Mac were totally absorbed by the Khieevi's rapid-fire klick-klacking'.

The door edged open for a moment and the impression of the pain within staggered her. RK pushed himself through the door, flipping his tail up along his back as the hatch automatically snapped shut behind him. With a light leap, he was on her shoulder.

She scratched his chin. "Thank you, my friend. It will be good to have company."

Ghostly blue vapors billowed across an indigo sky and the turquoise light of two of the planet's moons strobed across the sea, the beach, and the forest beyond. Sand skidded against Acorna's ankles and calves. Out here she could still feel the captive Khieevi's pain, but distance helped attenuate it. It also helped knowing that none of her crewmates was inflicting the terrible torture; they were only taking advantage of the monster's agony to obtain answers that might save her people, and any other creatures whose path the Khieevi crossed.

She breathed deeply of the night air. The fragrance of the sweet and spicy grasses and the fernlike trees, exotic and cit^sy, filled her nostrils. She realized she hadn't grazed yet that ^y, and was hungry. She didn't worry about venturing beyond "e dunes. Her Linyaari navigational instincts gave her an excellent sense of direction, and the light of the two moons above her was sufficient to see her - way to the grasses between beach and forest.

She was relieved to put some distance between her and the Condor now. When she had eaten, she would return, see what progress her friends had made, and, if they -were finished, ask them to let her examine the prisoner and tend to its wounds. She had not offered to tend to it so far out of fear that once she healed the thing, one of her friends would then have to reinjure it, in all likelihood, to obtain the vital information they needed. This could well be one of the very same Khieevi who had caused the death of her parents, but it was against her nature to cause or endure the suffering of another living creature. It -was against Aari's nature, too. Despite what the Khieevi had done to him, she could not help but feel that participating in actual torment of another creature, even one of the species who had all but destroyed him, would impede his inner healing, perhaps even prevent it altogether. He, more than she, was born and bred to the Linyaari way, which was nonviolent.

Back on the beach, Aari had brandished his Khieevi weapon with authority and deadly intent, however. She didn't blame him or judge him for that, but it worried her that he had undergone such a tremendous change, one that -was completely contrary to his upbringing.

She tested the grass with her horn-it was suitable for her to eat. So she took a mouthful of grass. It was peppery, not quite what she had in mind. She searched for another plant and found, growing sparsely among the peppery sort, a little reed with nodes on the stem. The nodes had a pleasant sour tang that offset the sweetness of the reed. They, too, were edible, and much tastier. She searched selectively for these, while RK slithered through the grassland as though he were a large jungle cat stalking prey.

She visualized Maati, who had been practically her only friend from narhii-Vhiliinyar. The child was just approaching puberty-funny, enthusiastic, lively, hard-working, inquisitive. She pictured Maati's soft pale brown skin and white and black spotted mane and feathers, her brilliant smile, short nose, and wide golden eyes below her little spiraled horn. She thought of Maati's immediate acceptance of Aari and her unquestioning love of her long-lost brother. The child's sadness and disbelief at being left behind by the ConSor when it had taken both her newly found brother and her friend away. They could have brought her along, even though Liriili had objected violently when the subject came up. If they had done so, Maati wouldn't now be lost, maybe dead, along with poor Thariinye, who, although he -was about the same age as Acorna, had not had as much experience or adventure in his life as she had, and so was still rather callow. Irritating, conceited, and arrogant, but not a bad fellow, really.

Her thoughts were anguished and regretful. She especially worried about her little friend, so sensible and knowledgeable about Linyaari ways but more willing than any to help a stranger. (Oh, Maati, Maati, I am so sorry, youngling. I thought you should stay with Grandam. I should have listened to your own thoughts more and not tried to decide for you. . . .)

(Khornya? Khornya! You're here! Oh, Khornya, come quickly. I can't find Thariinye and there is something awful out here in the bushes. Please, Khornya. I'm scared.)

(Maati! It's all right. I'm here. Where are you?)

(Looost!) The thought was a long 'wail.

(I'll come and get you. Just keep sending and I'll find you and bring you back. Can you see the beach from where you are? Can you see the Condor?)

(No, I'm in the woods and it's dark and Thariinye was right ^re standing guard while I slept. Now he's gone and the noises ^e terrible, Khornya.)

(Can he read you? Have you tried?)

(No. I think he must be unconscious. Knocked out, maybe )

Acorna was galloping through the grass now and into the trees, following Maati's thoughts as if they were spoken words tracking them to their origin.

The footing was treacherous in the dark but she leaped over bushes and roots. She had to pause frequently, however, to listen again for Maati's thought.

(Keep sending, Maati. I can't follow you unless I can read you.)

(I'm sooo tired, Khornya. And I'm almost afraid to think too loud for fear whatever it is that's thrashing around out there will hear me like you do.)

(I understand, dear, but if I'm to find you, you have to keep sending. If whatever it is hasn't bothered you yet, it probably can't read us.)

Acorna was halfway up a steep hill when she slipped and fell in a trail of slime. As she picked herself up again, she saw that she had fallen on the broken branches of what must have been brush. The raw ends of the branches were sharply severed at just above ground level for a long swath as wide as Acorna was tall. Where the foliage had been, a trail of foul-smelling slime covered the ground.

From the smell, she knew this -was a Khieevi trail, the creature eating, digesting, and excreting as it went. No wonder they could trash entire planets in such a short time!

Had the wind not been from the sea, and blowing the smell of the slime away from her, she easily would have picked it up earlier. Now she had a spoor to follow and she lost no time scrambling after it.

(Maati, I think it is a Khieevi who has Thariinye. Stay right where you are and do not make a sound unless you know it is me. Have you moved since he disappeared?)

(No, I was too scared of the things out in the bushes.)

(Okay, then, that is good. Just stay put. Somewhere right near you there is a trail of broken brush and smelly Khieevi slime.)

(Eeewww, is that what it is? I thought maybe this planet just smelled really bad in some places.)

(No, that's Khieevi spoor. They excrete as fast as they eat, apparently. You sound stronger. I'll be with you in a bit.)

Acorna scrambled further up the hill and down it, following the trail until, though she hadn't heard from Maati in some time, she suddenly caught a very loud thought. (Ouch! You stepped on me!)

Looking down, at first she saw nothing but more pale blue brush but then she saw, white and lustrous among the leaves, a face. She stared.

(Maati?) she asked uncertainly.

"Yes, it's me, Khornya," Maati whispered, and rose to her feet and threw her white arms around Acorna's neck so that Acorna's nose was buried in the girl's silvery mane. (But you look-) "Oh, yeah!"

(Think it, youngling. We don't know how near danger is.) (I'm star-clad now. Like the new me?)

(Why should I not? I liked the old you. You are beautiful! So let's keep you alive, shall we? I need you to follow the slime trail back down the hill and through the woods-your nose will help you if you get off track. When you get to the beach, you'll see the Condor. You need to get Aari and Captain Becker's attention and have them come to help Thariinye and me--)

(And leave you alone? Thariinye won't be any help. I can't read him at all. Something's happened to him. If that's a Khieevi, you need me.)

IvK bounded up to them and sat down, seemingly to wash, though he kept his ears cocked slightly back, as if he was listening to their nonverbal conversation. At some point in "elr Journey, he had departed from Acorna's shoulder and taken off on his own explorations. Probably -when she began galloping.

(It's a Khieevi. And it will be no trick to find it and Thariinye. The trail is extremely clear. Just go back and tell the others that we'll need their help. Meanwhile, I will try to keep the Khieevi from harming Thariinye anymore.)

(What if there are other Khieevi?)

(Captain Becker will know if there are. He has been questioning an injured Khieevi that -we captured. He'll be able to tell us how many of these things we're facing. I need that information very much before I tackle freeing Thariinye. And I'd

like you somewhere safe from this one,) Acorna said simply. And turned toward the slimy trail. But Maati wasn't done yet.

(You said you'd come for me,) Maati reminded her. (You were thinking all those nice things about me, and how you and Aan should have let me come with you. I'm not just a kid, you know. I'm smart. I could help you. What if I get caught on the way to get the others? What if I get lost?)

(Just follow the trail.)

(You're only one person. You need help, too. -You know Thariinye won't be much help. We could hear him if he was in a position to help us. You know, you didn't treat me like such a child back home.)

Acorna hesitated. She didn't want to put her young friend in harm's way but, then again, maybe that thought was a little ridiculous. Maati had already survived the wreck of her space vessel and eluded capture by the Khieevi once today. It was entirely possible, if the Khieevi were on this planet in force, that the ship was no safer place than trooping with Acorna through the forest.

(Very well. You can come with me. But thought-speak only. And stay behind me.)

(Okay.) Acorna felt Maati searching for RK, but the cat had vanished. Maati was a little worried, so Acorna sent her the calming thought that if anyone on the face of the blue planet could look out for themselves, it was that cat. Then they pushed forward, along the broken trail the Khieevi had left behind them, hoping against all hope that Thariinye was still all right.

The Council meeting -was brief. Liriili had been questioned. The accusations against her by comshed personnel and by Thariinye's many mourning soon-to-be-lifemates were verified, and a proposal was made for her dismissal. The evidence was examined, including a copy of the broadcast from the CorQor that Liriili denied had ever been received. One of the com-shed officers, who was also one of Thariinye's lady friends, had concealed copies of the pliyi transmission and Thariinye's translation of it, which she had taken from the com-shed before Liriili had given orders to have them destroyed. That was right after the vuzaar had told the com-shed officers to stop transmitting anything at all from the planet for any reason. Not only did the young officer realize that Liriili had for some reason allowed Thariinye and a child to go into space alone, but she recognized that the pliyi had great implications for the Linyaari, and that the people must know about it. The combed officer had been about to set off for the hills herself to fetch the spacefarers when the pilgrims came streaming home.

The Council had not been kindly disposed to having the bringing of a possible Khieevi threat withheld from them for no reason, no matter what Liriili thought. (??ed note. not quite correct)

After the matter of Liriili had been discussed, the Council was expanded to include Neeva, Khaari, Melireenya, and several of the ambassadors and high teachers and merchants and officers from the returned fleet.

In lieu of Liriili, Grandam now presided over the Council. Liriili faced them from the opposite side of the table where she'd sat for so many years, wearing her "Everything is in order, business as usual" face.

Grandam could not help but smile. "Liriili of Clan Riivye, ^iizaar of Kubiilikhan, you stand accused of treasonous acts against your people and your -world. We will not ask you how you plead. You of all of us are most skilled at concealing your thoughts, one reason we felt you -would make a good administrator. But you have betrayed not only the trust of your people, but my personal trust to you of the life of a young and parentless child, as well as the life of a brave officer of our fleet."

"It -was not my fault!" Liriili said. "I told them not to go. I told them-and this is perfectly true; any of you can read me-that we must not transmit further communications to the salvage ship that sent the piiyi message to us, for fear of the Khieevi tracing the signal back to us. It is perfectly standard procedure. I have saved us all by my actions and this is the thanks I get? That you hold me responsible because two feckless and rebellious young people stole our newest and finest vessel and took off on a pointless and dangerous joyride against my express orders?"

"Enough!" Grandam bellowed. "You knew very -well that the Condor had sent the piiyi here for translation-a translation Thariinye completed before the children departed. There is a record of the conversation in which he informed you of his translation. You knew at that time that there was a good chance of communicating with the Condor so that Captain Becker, as well as securing the safety of his ship and crew, could warn our allies of the impending threat without. Yo did nothing."

"Allies!" Liriili snorted. "Look at the Starfarers if you thin we have allies! Did our so-called 'allies' not turn over our fines ambassadors and officers, teachers and traders, to enemies wh imprisoned and abused them?"

"They -were deceived," Grandam said. "But you, Liriil were not deceived. You knew that the Condor and our allie could have been notified of the threat long before the Khlee\ were likely to be close enough to trace them. You knew tha Thariinye also knew this, and that neither he nor Maati wouli allow harm to come to Khornya, Aari, or to Captain Becker i it was in their power to prevent this. You even knew, Liriil that the piiyi contained evidence of the probability of the sui vival of Kaarlye and Miin of the Nyaarya clan, Maati's an' Aari's parents. All of this information was problematic for yoi And so you deliberately ordered the children

to do nothing knowing that they -would be forced to disobey you, and tha they- and all those -who depended on their information-woul be lost."

Liriili felt a sharp pain in the middle of her back and sh was Jabbed forward so quickly she fell to her knees. "I didn know that. How could I know for certain? All of you spacefaren as usual, were off someplace else -when decisions had to b made immediately. I did what I thought was best for the peopl( Licluding you. And is this the thanks I get for my dedicatio to duty? Some thanks ..."

She was weeping now with rage, -with fear, -with indigne lion, for she half-believed -what she was saying herself, as Grar dam well knew, or she could never have said it.

Oh, Liriili, my poor granddaughter," Grandam Naadiin ^id, pushing past the Council table behind which she had bee sitting and kneeling to put her hands on either side of Liriili •wet face. Liriili stared rebelliously back at her. "We have been aware of the flaw in your makeup since you were very young you know. You, of all of us, are best able to conceal your thoughts. You alone are capable of, if not lying, at least twisting the meaning of your thoughts to a degree that makes them difficult to read. We decided when the old Viizaar passed on to the land of the Ancestors that this-difference-in your makeup need not be a flaw, but could be used for the greater good of all. And you are correct. In general you have been an excellent and conscientious administrator.

"Much of the fault lies with us for not realizing that your- specialness-separated and isolated you, not only from the rest of your people but from the truth within yourself. Now we do not punish you, child, but seek to recompense you for the harm we have allowed you to do to yourself as well as to others. You must face the truth of your actions, if not within yourself, for you seem to be incapable of doing so, but by seeing for yourself the consequences."

Liriili was very easy to read now. Caution was trying to displace fear and disbelief in her mind as Grandam retreated to her official position, sat, then rose again, in unison with the other Council members.

"Liriili of clan Riivye, you are relieved of your duties as Viizaar of Kubiilikhan and administrator of narhii-Vhiliinyar by the High Council after consultation with and in accordance with the advice of the Ancestors. You are reassigned to duty as a junior shipman on the Balakiire, under the command of vifeShaanye-feriui Neeva and Melireenya. Your mission will be to pursue the information obtained from the pliyi, to attempt to warn the Condor of the peril contained in it, to ascertain the whereabouts and ensure the safety of Thariinye and Maati and the Niikactvn, to determine the whereabouts of Kaarlye and Miiri and rescue them or at least retrieve the data in their landing pod, and to warn our allies of the Khieevi danger, even if by issuing such a warning you allow the Khieevi to trace a signal back to the Balakiire. Vi^e()haanye-feriiU Neeva and her crew have volunteered

for this mission, and have agreed to take responsibility for you. They are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, if necessary, to accomplish this mission. You are hereby dismissed into the custody of the Neeva, her crew, and the Balakiire, and may the wit of the Ancestors and the Grace of the Friends preserve you all from harm."

The prisoner -was in unbearable pain. Aari had decidedly mixed feelings about the fact. His need for revenge was at odds with his hatred of seeing anything, even a Khieevi, suffer so. But there was one comfort to be found in the hold of this ship, as terrifying a place as it was right now. The prisoner was klacking out all the information Aari demanded, but neither Aari nor Becker nor even Mac, who had been quite prepared to "slowly disassemble" the Khieevi, had laid a finger on the creature. Whatever was causing the Khieevi so much agony, they weren't responsible.

Instead of disassembling it, Mac was rapidly processing the information he was given about Khieevi klackings by Aari and the LAANYE to help interpret Aari's and Decker's questions into simulated klacks and to interpret the answers.

The thing lay within the cargo net on the deck, and the net's couplings were securely fastened to the bulkhead. The monster was going nowhere. Aari was grateful the despicable creature's form was somewhat obscured by the grid of the net. •Is titanium strands pulled tightly across the creature's protruding Gyes, restrained its pincers, and bent one antenna flat against ^e side of its bulbous head. The putrid smell Aari had first ^ticed out by the Khieevi ship now filled the hold and seemed 0 grow worse and worse as time went on. Becker remarked on tne green icor draining from beneath the netted Khieevi.

"It's messing itself, it's so scared," he said. "Scared?" Aari asked. "A Khieevi? Scared? Of us?" "Sure. You were scared, when we found you for the first time, weren't you?"

"Naturally, but I am not a Khieevi." "Let me tell you a little something about people, buddy, any kind of people," Becker said. "These creeps," he gestured to the Khieevi, "they like to hurt anything they come across just to watch it squirm. It's how the buggers think. So when one of them gets caught and put in the same position as its victims, of course it's going to figure we'll do the same to it. Only difference is, we're after information. According to you, when you were a Khieevi captive, they didn't seem to care all that much if you said anything or not. They just liked to hear you scream, right?"

"Yes, Joh. I never understood any of that." "Well, understand this. As afraid as you were, this critter is even more afraid. Because to do to someone what the Khieevi did to you requires being a real lily-livered son of a gun at heart. Yessir, these Khieevi may look like bugs, but they're all piles of pure cowardice with legs, if you ask me. Cowards and bullies, every one." Becker threw his arms around



and let his voice ring to make it heard above the piteous but irritating high-pitched sound the Khieevi was making. Aari had never heard the bug-like beings make that sound -while he was among them. Though perhaps he might have heard the sound, or a variant of it, coming from himself.

"Now, Aari, if you have any more "questions, ask away. Mac, you follow and see if you can fill in any blanks for him" "What will you do. Captain?" Mac asked mildly. "I'll be thinking up threats and-uh-persuasions, Becker said.

"Very well, Captain. Aari?" "Mac, ask it what it was doing here, how many others like it there are close by, where the main fleet is, and the location of the homeworld."

Mac manufactured the klacking sound of the Khieevi, using his mouth alone. Aari was impressed.

The Khieevi let forth the high-pitched whining sound once more.

"Tell it we'll stop the pain if it gives us the data," Becker instructed Mac, his jaw clenched tightly, his teeth bared in what was an indisputable display of hostility-a hostility Becker seemed to be reveling in.

Aari, on the other hand, was not enjoying his position. He had certainly thought he -would enjoy giving back to a Khieevi what the Khieevi had done to him, but instead he felt filled with loathing-for himself. He was now doing a Khieevi thing. He might as -well be one. But the information was important. He put the thought on hold when he realized Mac -was speaking, and not in klacks this time.

"Theirs was a scout ship. The Khieevi have many such ships. Their mission was to locate a likely world with the proper atmosphere and nutrients for consumption by the horde. The horde's main fleet has already been notified that this being's ship had located a large number of suitable worlds, including this one, due to a lucky conquest of a scout ship of a twohorned race."

Mac turned to Becker and said, "That -would be the Niriians, surely? You understand, please, that many of the concepts this creature expresses can be interpreted only loosely. Fortunately, because of the remaining programming from my former i^er, I am quite conversant with the basic content of this creature's thought and language patterns and can assure you that "y interpretations are fairly accurate. The Khieevi have a lot I" common with Kisia Manjari."

And so it -went. To minimize the misunderstanding or trance of lying on the part of the Khieevi, ("Well, for pity's sake, Aari," Decker said, "any critter who would do to you what these guys did is certainly not going to stop at a little It£\") Becker insisted on asking the same questions over and over in many different ways.

Mac said, "You are very good at information extraction Captain Becker. Have you been in the business before yourself?"

"No, but my dad was great at giving pop oral exams on the subjects I was supposed to be learning when I was a kid " Becker said. "I never could put anything over on him. Who knew it would come in so handy? So let's go over it all one more time ..."

Aari found himself sweating during the questioning, remembering himself in the Khieevi's place and hearing the squeal ooze out of the creature along with the stench.

At some point during the questioning, Khornya stopped by. When she left, Aari noticed that RK was no longer in the room with them. By then, among them, they were trying to explain to the Khieevi that they wanted the coordinates of the horde fleet and of the Khieevi home planet, as well as the codes that would allow them to crack Khieevi communication devices.

The thing had just given them a useless string of babble that none of them could decipher when the stench suddenly became much worse, the klacking much more muffled, and the squeal thinner, higher, shriller. Then, suddenly, all was still.

Mac kicked at the creature. "I think it is unconscious, Captain."

"Sissy," Becker said. "We never touched it. Some people will do anything to get out of having to answer a few simple questions."

"Joh, you told it we would stop its pain if it told us what we wished to know," Aari said.

"Looks to me like the pain has almost stopped," Becker said.

"No, it is worse. The thing is dying. We must have Khornya heal it. I would but-1 cannot."

"Ain't it just too bad for old klacker here that they took out your horn, then?" Becker said, and Aari felt a flash of anger toward him.

"We must call Khornya back in to save it, Joh. It may ^ye \_ more information."

"Hmm, true. You look like you can use a break anyway, buddy. Go ahead then. Get her."

Aari left quickly. He was surprised to see that he had to call the robotlift to return to the deck for him to descend. Its deck was stickier than ever, despite the heavy

traffic, and when he tried to move his feet made a sucking sound. The patches of sap were -yes, they actually were larger than they had been when he and Becker ascended to the ship with the prisoner. He bent down, curious, to touch the stuff. It seemed innocent enough, but when he tried to right himself, he found that the hand he had been using to steady himself on the deck stuck to it. He lost his footing and fell, getting sap all over the front of his shipsuit. He unstuck himself and regained his balance with some difficulty. He also resolved to clean the deck as soon as they had disposed of the prisoner.

As the lift continued to descend, he saw that the bright blue day had become indigo night, lit only by the pale blue moons. The wind soughed through the tall sapphire grasses. Khornya was nowhere to be seen, but as he looked, he suddenly heard a raucous "Mrowl" and saw RK bounding across the field between the beach and the woods.

As soon as the cat saw him, RK turned and leaped back in the direction from which he had come. Sprinting a few steps, Aari turned and stared meaningfully, his gleaming eyes twin molten gold coins. He mrowled again and Aari followed, reluctantly. He had planned to take a slight detour and try to clean off the icky, irritating sap with sea water, but the cat was trying to lead him to Khornya, of that Aari was certain. "Where is she Riid-Kiiyi?" he asked.

RK ran another few feet and glanced back again, mrowling for Aari to follow him. The cat was conveying a sense of urgency that worried Aari. Through the long grass and to the ferny trees, Aari followed the cat's lead. Khornya. The cat was leading him to Khornya. She was in some sort of trouble, perhaps wounded, or maybe she had found Maati and Thariinye and they were 'wounded and she had sent the cat back for help and-

Aari smelled the Khieevi spoor before he was actually upon it. Old and cold, it had hardened to a nasty shiny trail. The Khieevi. The Khieevi had Khornya.

He vomited what little food he had eaten that day into the underbrush. Returning for Becker now was out of the question. Every moment counted-he remembered -what the creatures had done to him and his blood ran cold at the thought of Khornya in their clutches. Precious time would be lost if he went back to the ship- moments Khornya would pay for in unimaginable pain if the Khieevi did indeed have her. Somehow, somehow he had to find her, to free her, to protect her. No one must go through what he had. Especially not Khornya-beautiful, graceful, gentle Khornya. So kind. So caring. Practical and intelligent too and very strong, but no one could hold out against the Khieevi. That they should have a chance to break her into pieces as they had him was unthinkable.

Perhaps he couldn't yet feel what he, sensed she -would have liked him to feel for her-he still felt hollow inside, numb and cold, when he wasn't filled with pain

and fury. He had nothing to give to someone like Khornya. But he owed it to her to make sure she lived to receive it from someone else someday.

He followed the spoor uphill and down again and then into another section of forest, up another hill. He did not notice when the cat disappeared once more.

But when he heard the screams, the steady jog with which he was following the sign lengthened to a full gallop.

As far as Acorna could see, the problem was not finding the Khieevi. The thing was not stealthy.

Its excremental trail led straight to it. The only problem was how to get the better of it before it could harm Thariinye.

They found Thariinye first. He was at the end of the trail, wrapped up in the end of the trail in fact, pinned by a hardened twist of it to a tree. In the chill of the night air, his breath made a vapor, so they knew he was not dead. But neither of them could pick up any thoughts from him, not even a snatch of dream.

The Khieevi stood slightly uphill from him, its moondrenched shadow falling over them, mingling with the shadows of the trees. Its bug eyes were lifted to the moons, its head bobbing. Two of its legs tended what seemed to be some sort of electrical contraption. Sparks flew periodically between its legs and the machine, while two more of its legs burned a bit in the excrement, with predictably nauseating results. After each bit of legs had gone through the ritual, the pincers made a series of klacks, much like the Morse code Acorna had learned on the mining ship.

Maati and Acorna thought at the same time, (It's calling the mother ship. We have to stop it.)

(Free Thariinye first,) was their next simultaneous thought. Maati saw Acorna's teeth shining in the dark-humor and hostility mixed.

(Work your way behind the tree, Maati. See if you can get him loose from that stuff. Here, take my laserknife. I'll see if I can create a diversion.)

(Okay. Be careful, Khornya.)

The two split up, and Acorna circled wide in the forest and up the crest of the hill to one side of the Khieevi, who was actually within a slight clearing. Peering at the creature through the trees, she could see that it was busy with its work. Still, she had the feeling it was only trying to make contact, not that it had achieved its goal. Its pauses were to adjust the machine, not to listen. The Khieevi creature must be stopped before it brought an entire invasion force down upon them.

She needed to draw him off, away from whatever it was he was using to communicate and away from Thariinye and Maati. And she needed to have a plan to get away herself, if possible, once they were a safe distance from her friends. She thought for a second, took a deep breath, and started moving.

She picked up a stick, flung it at the creature, and raced off down the hill at a diagonal from Thariinye's position.

"Neener neener neener!" she yelled at the Khieevi, using an expression she'd picked up from the kids on Maganos Moonbase as she galloped down the hill. She glanced back to see if it was paying attention.

It gave two hops and was almost upon her.

She took off at a dead run, thundering down the hill, screaming at the top of her lungs, with the Khieevi hopping behind her, covering two or three yards with each hop.

(Khornya, run!) Maati cried inside her head. (I can't get through this stuff without Thariinye's help. And I can't wake Thariinye.)

(Try harder. Use your horn if you have to.)

(What if I hurt Thariinye?)

(Better that than what the Khieevi will do to him.)

Thinking and running at the same time was not easy. Acorna stumbled across a broken tree and fell sprawling among the branches. In two short hops the Khieevi was practically upon her. She dove under the fronds and wriggled her way to the trunk, then hopped up and tried to run again, only to find her leg wouldn't work. Sharp pains -were running up it.

The heat and stench and klack of the Khieevi were all around her as she tried to squirm and touch her horn to her leg.

The huge bug appeared nightmarishly dim through the fronds as it jumped-and landed on her hurt leg.

Acorna had not cried out for help, mentally or aloud, because she did not wish for Maati to run to the rescue and try to fight the Khieevi. But the sudden pain was so intense she let out a piercing scream.

"Hey you! Big old bug!" Maati sang out, followed by Thariinye yelling, "I'm over here, you slimy hulk of a feces machine!"

The Khieevi stepped back for a moment, uncertain. Then Acorna could swear it bared what passed for teeth in that gaping maw, and deliberately brought its foot down again on, well, on the area where her leg had been, because she had pulled the broken limb out of the way.

"Maati, you silly child, run!" Acorna cried.

"Don't you hurt her again, you dung-eating pile of-of dung!" Maati yelled. Footsteps ran in closer.

"Maati, no," Acorna screamed. And so did Maati. Acorna Couldn't see what happened, but she heard a crunch and a yelp, wen a sound as if the air was being let out of something.

"You pick on little girls, you bag of excrement!" Thariinye hollered. "Why not tie me to a tree with your slimy trail again!" He profited by Maati's example because his voice grew a bit fainter and Acorna heard the sound of his feet crushing brush as he retreated. The Khieevi gave a hop-and she was free. At least for a moment.

Bending from the waist she rubbed her horn against her leg once she had the bone properly aligned. The pain eased at once, but she was forced to concentrate on the healing of the limb rather than on anything around her. She had no idea, for a precious few moments, whether or not Maati was living - whether Thariinye had escaped capture while leading the Khieevi from her, or even if the Khieevi was about to step on her head this time.

As soon as the pain stopped and the bone had knitted, Acorna raised herself up to see the Khieevi grab for the dancing Thariinye with its front pincers. Thariinye screamed, and Acorna grabbed the nearest object-a rock from the ground beneath her-and threw it at the Khieevi.

The big insectoid was not so quickly fooled this time. It grabbed Thariinye and began slashing at him with its razorsharp pincers, leaving gruesome wounds on Thariinye's upraised hands and arms. Acorna leaped across the fallen trunk of the tree and pounded on the carapace of the creature with her fists -while her old shipmate's heart-rending cries rang in her ears.

"Let go, let go, let go!" she bawled.

The Khieevi did let go, and Thariinye, bleeding from many wounds, fell like a limp doll very close to Maati's still form. Acorna turned and ran.

The Khieevi rounded on Acorna, its pincers snapping. Only a single tree hung between them. Then, with a chomp and a noisome burst of gas, the tree -was

gone. Acorna turned and ran, leaping over the fallen tree this time, putting it between herself and the Khieevi. She dashed past frond after frond, only to have them vanish down the Khieevi's maw to reappear behind the creature as another smelly bit of trail.

The Khieevi seemed to smile as it took its last bite from the tree trunk, taunting her with its deliberate progress as it ate away her only barrier. She kept moving, mentally calling to Maati and Thariinye, hoping to hear a response but urging them to lie still.

The Khieevi finished the tree trunk. Acorna backed up against another tree. It followed her slowly, taking first one chomp and then another from fronds she thrust between them. It was clearly enjoying the game.

She shrieked as a pincer came within a centimeter of her face. The Khieevi snapped at her, then brought its pincers up again, close to her horn. She dodged and tried to dive between its lower legs.

All at once, from the corner of her eye, she saw a white blur. The Khieevi fell over backward, a Linyaari form bearing it to the ground, surrounded by its flailing legs and pincers.

(Khornya, run!) Aari's voice was mental, but far from a whisper. (Get Joh. Get weapon. I will keep it here as long as I can, but you must save yourself and my sister.) (You can't fight it alone, Aari.) (No, but I can Delay it. Go!) (It will kill you!) (I am carrion already.)

She ran through the woods screaming for Becker, screaming Ae names of her fallen friends.

Much to her surprise, Becker and Mac, brandishing weapons, bounded toward her through the woods, Becker yelling, "Where is he? Point and duck!"

She turned and ran back toward Aari, who, much to her surprise, was raising himself unharmed from among curled Khieevi legs and pincers. The creature made no attempt to stop him or damage him. Instead it stayed on the ground, emitting the same high-pitched "eee-eee-eee" sound their prisoner had made back on the ship. Decker paid none of that any attention at all. As soon as Aari was clear, Becker pressed his rifle against his hip and fired. A huge crackling hole opened up in the creature and it was still.

The echo of the shot had not yet faded when a pair of Linyaari figures carrying what looked like strips of metal came running over the hill. (Maati? Aari? By the ancestors, are they )ea()1)

Acorna grabbed Aari's arm and heard the mental call when she touched him. (Mother? Father?) he said, stunned.

Maati sat up, groggy. "Did somebody call me?"

Acorna released Aari and moved to kneel beside Thariinye. Her old shipmate did not look up, but she could see he was breathing. His shipsuit was a bloody mess. One of his hands dangled from a scrap of skin protruding from his sleeve. A chunk was missing from his right cheek and one of his eyes was swelled shut, the lid and brow lacerated. His horn was an inch or so shorter than it had been.

"Thariinye!" Maati cried, and rose to her hands and knees to do a very fast crawl to Thariinye's other side. "Oh, no, look at his hand."

"Maati? Baby, is that you, all grown up?" the male Linyaari who had appeared during the fight asked.

Maati's face rose to look at the two tall Linyaari strangers. Once she got a good look at their faces she ran to them, crying. "Mother? Father? Help us! Thariinye's hurt bad. He made the Khieevi fight him so it wouldn't kill me." She dragged her parents back to Thariinye's side.

"My goodness," her mother said. "The young man certainly is in a bad way, but this young lady is doing a fine job of healing him. Maati?"

The male Linyaari gently shoved Acorna aside and bent his own horn to Thariinye's hand. "Allow me, my dear. This boy was little more than a toddler when we left narhii-Vhiliinyar. And now he's been wounded protecting our little girl."

Acorna willingly surrendered Thariinye's care to the man. She was weary beyond belief from her own ordeal, but she needed to see to Aari. He hadn't appeared to be greatly harmed by his own encounter with the Khieevi, although he had been locked in its multilegged embrace. But there had been something odd about their "parting."

Becker and Aari were both bent over the corpse of the Khieevi, studying it.

"The Khieevi -was dying when you shot it, Joh. It could not hold on to me. See how its legs are curled?"

"Lead poisoning -will do that to you," Becker growled.

"Lead poisoning? Where was the lead?" Aari asked. "You used the laser canon."

"Figure of speech," Becker replied.



"Aari, are you hurt?" Acorna asked, looking him over careful. "The front of your shirt-it's a mess."

Aari looked down and said with satisfaction, "Khieevi blood, mostly. You or Thariinye must have wounded the creature before I reached it. I had no - weapons."

"Neither did we," Acorna said. "We weren't expecting trouble here." She knelt to examine the dead Khieevi. Gingerly, she touched its chest along the edge of the wound made by Becker's laser cannon. "What is this? It's not the same color as the Khieevi blood."

"Oh-that's from me," Aari said, "I fell in the sap on the robohft when I left the ship. It was all over the front of my ^ipsuit."

Acorna tried to remove the sap with her finger but it had ^tually sunk into the Khieevi's carapace. In fact, she saw as ^e pulled some of the sap aside, it had eaten away a portion or the creature's shell-like protection. She looked up at the two men who were frowning down watching her. "What became of the other Khieevi?"

"It was dying when -we left the ship," Aari said. "I came to get you to heal it."

"Did you harm it?"

"No-no, we did not have to harm it. It seemed to ... believe we were harming it, though, and we let it think so," Aari said.

"We really were going to let you heal it up, honest," Becker said. "As soon as -we got all the information we needed. Figured maybe the scientists could study the thing-" He tried to sound innocent. Acorna knew? that Becker had just thought of the scientists studying the Khieevi. He had been very much against healing its wounds. "Maybe it was hurt worse in the crash than we figured. It told us what we wanted to know and then- really, pretty conveniently-it keeled over. Aari was coming to get you to see if you could maybe heal it or something."

Both men looked very uncomfortable. Acorna looked from one to the other. "I don't think it was the injuries in the crash that killed that prisoner-and I suspect this one was mortally wounded from the moment Aari jumped on him."

"You jumped that thing, buddy?" Becker asked Aari, clapping him on the back. "Way to go. I didn't think you had it in you. Not bad for a pacifist."

"You miss the point, Joh. Khornya just said I killed the Khieevi. How did I do that, Khornya?"

"The sap on your shipsuit," Acorna told him.

"Ye-es," Aari said. "Yes. That makes sense. I remember the first time we saw the sap. It killed small insects preying upon the vines in the home-world."

"Yeah, the plants thought -we were a bug, too," Becker said. "They slimed the Condor, trying to get through its shell. Lucky us, it didn't work."

"The sap probably only destroys selected organic substances. Judging by the results, I would guess that the polysaccharides in the Khieevi's chitin carapaces are susceptible to it, Joh," Aari said.

"Good. Anything that eats up Khieevi shells is fine by me," Becker rejoined.

Acorna glanced over and saw Maati and her parents were helping Thariinye stand. His clothing was still bloody, but he was moving the fingers of his formerly injured hand, and all of the gashes and gouges were cleaned up. His horn, however, remained shorter than it had been.

Aari deliberately turned his back on the Linyaari quartet as he, Becker, and Mac began pulling another of the titanium cargo nets around the dead Khieevi. Acorna, panting and catching her breath, stared at his back, and shook her head. He was clearly not going to fall on the necks of his long-lost parents and rejoice at their presence. In fact, it looked like he was going to avoid dealing with them at all, if he could.

Miiri-Maati and Aari's mother-was the first to discover the rash on Aari's hands. While Aari's palms -were now mostly cleaned of sap, they were red and itching, swelling in places. He kept pausing in the journey to rub his palms on the legs of his shipsuit. His mother, who had been trying to run along beside him to talk to him, noticed.

Aari tried to ignore his mother but Acorna stopped him, turning to rest a hand on his arm, raised his palm and examined it. "I had an itchy red place like this on my finger just now, from where I examined the sap on the edge of the Khieevi's wound, but I put it up to my horn and it healed. Let me see if I can help you," she said, lowering her horn to Aari's palms and touching them lightly, first one hand and then the other.

The pain he was in was all too evident in his rigid posture and the look in his eyes. Finally he let out a sigh of relief and gave her a look half of irritation, half of gratitude.

"That sap, which eats into the Khieevi shells and kills them in short order, apparently merely causes an allergic reaction in our species," Acorna said. "It's irritating, but the sap doesn't appear to be lethal to us."

"Mac," Becker said, "-when we get back to the ship, priority one is for you to scrape all that sap off the robotlift and collect it, then stow it in one of the unpressurized cargo bays. I want samples of it analyzed as soon as possible. This stuff could be useful."

The next few hours were a blur of activity. Maati and Aari's parents thought-spoke with the other Linyaari while everyone worked, telling a little bit of their adventures while stranded on this planet. Their survival here was a testament to both their courage and cleverness. But Maati had so much to say to her mother and father that she chattered away like a magpie, using her newfound telepathic abilities. So, consequently, most of the conversation centered on Maati's recent escapades, rather than on her parents' doings since they left their home-world in search of their children. And, despite the need to reconnect with the -wanderers, there was too much to accomplish to truly do justice to the occasion. All the Linyaari, as well as the remaining crew of the Comfor, bent their backs to the tasks at hand. They wanted to load both the crashed Khieevi shuttle and the remains of the Nilkaavri aboard the Condor, as well as any other cargo they could reach or Mac could -wade out to retrieve. The main Khieevi ship was simply shattered, most of the resulting fragments of debris too small to be of interest even to Becker, though they salvaged what they could.

(Why are we bothering with this trash right now?) Kaarlye, Maati and Aari's father, asked Maati. (Don't we need to get in contact with our people? The Khieevi were here.) The parents, without time to sleep-learn standard Galatic from the LAANYE, could make no sense of Becker's or Mac's thought patterns, though RK-as always-managed to make himself understood.

(I will see what I can find out,) Maati told him.

"Captain," Maati said in Linyaari, following Becker down the beach until -when he turned back to pick up another piece of salvage he nearly stepped on her. "If the Khieevi are scouting this area and the swarm is near, shouldn't we leave this stuff until later and return to narhii-Vhiliinyar to warn the people ~ "

Becker tried to answer, first in Standard, then in the broken Linyaari he had picked up from Aari. Before Kaarlye's confusion became total, Acorna hurriedly translated Becker's answers as physically transmitted by Maati.

"Well," Becker said, "except for finding you and Thariinye here, we haven't had any communication from your planet since we sent the pilyi data, honey. We told 'em to get back to us with a translation, remember? I don't think they're listening to us, and I'm sure they're not talking to us. I don't imagine that's going to change

now, even though -we've got things to tell them. I hate to say it, but for all we know, the Khieevi could be there already, maybe even been there and left.

"That monster we -were able to question only knew the position of the fleet as of the last transmission he'd received, which was days ago. If it helps, as far as the prisoner knew, the Khieevi -weren't on your -world yet at that time. But -we dont know what's going on at your home, nor can we give them any solid information other than the warning about the iMueevi maybe being in the neighborhood that we already sent-you know, the one that made you and Thariinye go hur"ing into space? We gave your people that warning when we fansnutted the piiyi contents-though from what you've told us about that horse-faced vilsmar of yours, it might not have °Re any good. All we can really add to our first broadcast is at we've found your parents here. Whatever's happening back your planet, our help's too far away and will arrive too late to change anything. That's why I'm not in any hurry to talk to your planet.

"Right now, I'm more worried about us. That bug we talked to told the rest of the bugs exactly where this planet is, and how rich it is in Khieevi food. The swarm could be on their way here, for all we know. We could have a lot of time, or -we could have very little, before they arrive. My scanners don't show anything, but that's not conclusive. So that's why I -want all the salvage we can manage to get aboard the Condor before we take off. If the com system in the Khieevi shuttle is undamaged-it looks pretty good to me-and if we can turn it on and get it working, there's a chance it could still be getting signals from the fleet, which would tell us where they are, and maybe even where they're going."

So everyone pitched in and worked for hours gathering the cargo and transporting it to the ship. After they got it all stacked ready to stow, they watched Mac open his forearm and extract a paint-scraping tool. Then the android punched a button just under the skin of his wrist that switched him to what looked like a holoivid on fast forward. With rapid sweeps, he cleaned the robotlift of sap and stored the sticky stuff carefully in one of Captain Decker's ceramic yogurt containers-after first evicting the yogurt and cleaning the dish, of course. "What am I to do with this, Captain?" Mac asked. "Stow it in one of the outer holds, not a temperaturecontrolled one. The sap was doing just fine out there in the cold vaccuum while we traveled here. I don't want to mess with a working system. Great stars and asteroids, -will you look at my hull?" The ConSor was normally a silvery metallic color but now was covered with broad trails of the yellowish sap as vines would cover a quaint cottage. "I guess this stuff "was frozen in space and is having a field day here thawing out."

Acorna stopped relaying his words to the non-Standardspeaking newcomers, and suggested, "Captain, -we should make certain none of the sap is left behind since it is alien to this ecology, and may greatly damage it."

"I was gonna say that next," Becker told her. Once the lift was cleared and they were sure no sap remained on the ground, everyone helped load the cargo. Mac returned from stowing the sap and carried the heavier items such as the nearly intact Khieevi shuttle. Becker cast a regretful glance at the hull of the Linyaari vessel. "I really want to take that with us, but I can't justify the time it would take to grab it, disassemble it, and stow it. Well, I guess since you guys came with it, it's not really salvage anyway."

Acorna thought he was going to cry in his mustache at leaving such a valuable item behind, so she patted his arm and said, "When the crisis is over. Captain, we can always return for it."

"That's right," he said, and brightened up immediately. She translated for the newcomers again and Kaariye said, "Yes. Perhaps when he returns the captain could retrieve our escape pod as well. We're very fond of it. It saved our lives, you know."

I think -we'd all like to know how you came to be here and what has happened to you since you left narhii-Vhiliinyar," Acorna said much later to Kaariye and Miiri. Becker, RK, and Mac were manning and catting the helm. Aari and Acorna led their new guests to the hydroponics gardens to graze.

"There's not much to tell really," Miiri told her. "We left as soon as Maati could be cared for by someone else." She ran her hand over Maati's mane. "You do understand, my dear, that we didn't think we would be gone long, and we didn't wish to endanger you, should the Khieevi still be in the area of our old home. We hoped somehow our boys-you, Aari, and-"

"Laarye died. Mother, -while I -was a prisoner of the Khieevi," Aari said. "I'm sorry. I couldn't save him."

"Yes," she said simply. "I felt it."

(Did you feel me, too, Mother? Did you feel my suffering?) At his mother's shocked look, the stolid, mildly bored look Aari wore as a mask left his face and he, too, looked shocked. "I didn't say anything," he said a little pleadingly to Acorna. She let out the breath she had sucked in when he spoke to his mother.

(You used thought-speak, as you did with me earlier -when the Khieevi attacked me.)

(I-did not think anyone could hear me. I did not realize-)

(I heard you,) Acorna said. (I heard you this afternoon •when the thing -was attacking me. It gave me courage, knowing you were coming.)

"I heard you, too, my son," his mother said. The light in the hydroponics gardens was dim now, simulating nighttime to give the plants a rest. The air smelled sweet and fresh down here. The rest of the ship'd had a very pungent odor when the six Linyaari boarded. Even though Mac had dragged the Khieevi corpses into another outer hold, and cleaned the sap and the Khieevi blood from the decks, the Condor reeked. Of course, the Linyaari horns cleansed the air. But it still seemed like the dead Khieevi could stink up the place a little faster than the Linyaari horns could clean it.

This area of the ship was something of a showplace, one Acorna and Aari had worked hard to bring into being. They had draped drop cloths from the bulkhead above the space so that they resembled clouds and sky. The ship's artificial lighting now shone down on them, filtered gently by the "sky." All six Linyaari were squatted in grazing posture, in a circle, staring at each other through eyes shining with the reflection of the simulated moon. A little enclosed pond Acorna had created to make the area nicer as -well as to maintain the humidity needed for optimum plant growth sent rippling shadows across the billowing drop-cloth clouds.

"I heard you across the galaxies, Son. I heard your brother die and I heard your screams," his mother said. "Why do you think we left Maati with Grandam and returned?"

"To join me in the Khieevi torture chamber?" he asked. Aari's bitterness -was all too visible then. He could not choke it down, and Acorna knew that this was some of the buried pain she'd been unable to touch in him. "What a waste that would have been. You would have done better to have parented Maati, even if you hadn't given up on Laarye and me."

"Hear me," his mother said. "I heard you. We came when we could."

"She heard you," his father said, his face solemn and his eyes deeply sad. "She screamed at night along with you. She lost all sleep and appetite as she endured with you what you endured. Did you. not hear her as our enemies killed not only your brother Laarye, but the twins she lost before she carried Maati?"

Acorna gazed at Miiri more closely. She was very thin, but then, Linyaari -were inclined toward slenderness as a rule. Her eyes were a beautiful copper color, but set deeply in her head. The color and texture of her skin -were not good. Not sickly- her lifemate would have healed her if it had been merely an illness that troubled her-but unhealthy nonetheless. Strain had etched deep lines from her nose to her mouth, and other lines formed a diamond with points at the base of her horn and the bridge of her nose.

"And you, Father?" Aari asked. "You felt nothing."

"You know I have very little of the empathy that is your both your mother's gift and her curse. I concentrated on sending. Sending you the directions to our new world, suggesting ways to escape, and praying to our ancient friends that somehow you would be saved, that Vhiliinyar itself might cast out the invaders and preserve my sons."

Aari looked aghast. "But-I did know how to get to narhiiVhiliinyar. Were we not all programmed that way?"

Kaarlye shook his head, his mane flying and settling again, briefly silver in the lamplight, a slight whuffling snort emitting from his nostrils and lips. "Of course not. I am a strong sender."

Aari looked abashed for a moment, then defiant. He inclined his head briefly in acknowledgment.

"But-you had me," Maati said, almost wailing.

"Yes, youngling my own," her mother said, stroking her cheek with the back of her fingers. "We had you. It was your birth that delayed us. Grandam would not permit me to move, she kept me sedated with good herbs and sang me soothing songs through the night and a circle of women laid horns on me for hours a day until you were safely into the world. But then, oh Maati, my love, we haS to go. With you there to carry on the clan name, safe with Grandam, we had to go find your brother. I heard him no longer, you see, once you were born. And yet I had not felt his death. As terrible as his torment had been, I knew what it meant "while it continued. It told me Aari lived and he felt and that I was in contact with him. But then he was lost and I did not know what to think. I could not feel him, I could not-"

"My horn," Aari said, touching the slightly indented scar on his forehead. "They had taken my horn. It nearly killed me. No doubt the loss also . . . lessened . . . my ability to transmit to you, Mother."

"Yes," his father said. His mother could not speak for the tears choking her. Acorna was rapidly wiping away her own. Maati sniffled and snuffled. Thariinye, strangely quiet, put his arm around her. Maati's mother also held her daughter close. Acorna laid a hand on Maati's knee and one on Aari's. He lifted her hand and held it against his face for a moment, bending his head to press it between his jaw and his shoulder. His face was damp, but she thought it was perspiration rather than tears. This confrontation was very painful for him, but a good pain, she hoped, a healing pain. Aari's nerve endings burned with life again.

"To lose a child to untimely death is almost the worst thing there is for a parent. To know a child is being deliberately and terribly injured is even worse. But

when I lost you, when I didn't know where you were or what was happening to you, to know you were there but not to feel you-that was unbearable.

Had it not been for the twins, and then Maati, we -would have left to find you long before we finally departed."

Miiri reached out to Aari, but he flinched away from her touch. She withdrew her hand and rested it on her knee. Raising her chin, she continued her tale. "When - we could, -we flew back to Vhiliinyar. We maintained radio silence lest the Khieevi trace the signal. But our old home planet had been violently altered, and it seemed it was now fighting back. From our vantage point in low orbit -we could see that the beautiful greens, blues, and purples of our world were gray and black now, with angry red sores and craters all over. The seas had dried up, leaving behind cracked and broken soil, and where once streams had flowed through mountain meadows the barren riverbeds flowed instead with magma from the ravished peaks. Indeed, many of our mountains had hurled themselves into the heavens, erupting violently. One of these eruptions destroyed our spacecraft before we could raise our shields. It came from nowhere. We took heavy damage. Knowing that the ship was likely to break up at any time, -we headed toward the nearest habitable planet. As we approached the atmosphere of this world, we barely had time to slip into the pod and eject before the ship was destroyed. We landed here, much as Maati and Thariinye did, the pod's sensors guiding us to a safe landing. Here there was food and water, and breathable air. We survived and waited for rescue, so that we could continue our search for our son." Mini's voice grew small and stilled, her hands clasping and unclasping on her knees, her eyes dropping from Aari's.

Acorna, her hand still in Aari's, with her other hand took one of Miiri's and joined it with her son's. They did not clasp hands, but they touched. Miiri raised her eyes again and searched Aari's.

Kaariye took up the tale. "There was little we could do but survive, and wait, and hope that you would somehow free yourself from the Khieevi. And here you are."

He ruffled Maati's hair. "And here you are, too, our beautiful daughter, starclad and a young lady now."

Aari's hand clutched his mother's now, and Acorna slipped away as the family reunited. Thariinye sat there watching, so quiet it was hard to believe he was Thariinye.

Acorna joined Becker on watch. Mac had shut himself down to conserve his batteries. RK sat cleaning himself, warming his underside on the lights from the console. The piiyi that had played constantly on the corn screen was blessedly shut off for the moment.



Becker looked around as Acorna slid into the chair beside his.

"Family reunion stuff, huh?" he asked.

Acorna nodded, feeling happy but subdued. The emptiness that was in Aari was filling in like a dry spring after a dam had broken, and to a lesser extent, the same thing was occurring with Maati. It made Acorna feel wistful, wishing that perhaps her own parents had escaped somewhere, could rejoin her. But no, she did not feel that would happen. She had not known them, had missed them as a baby only long enough for dear Gil, Calum, and Rafik to learn her Linyaari baby names for mother and father, and then she had been wrapped in the loving care of her three "uncles" who -were actually her fathers, and all of her other new friends, who were her family. Now she had an aunt and a planet and so much more-and she did not begrudge Aari finding his parents and learning of their continued love for him and Maati. And yet-

Becker leaned over and patted her shoulder. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it, Princess?"

"What?" she asked. Becker was better at reading thoughts than she'd realized.

"What your own folks were like, what it would have been like to be with them, you know. I knew my mother a little- she was a scientist someplace, I'm not really sure where. I was about three "when there were a lot of explosions and gunshots and she fell down with blood all over her and then I was taken to the slave farm on Kezdet. Maybe it's because I -was only three then, but what I remember most about it was, it was boring being with my mom. And one thing about Dad-Dad Becker, I mean-there was nothing boring about him. I don't reckon I've missed anything, come to think about it." But she saw, in his heart, where that creek in him "was still dry, 'waiting for the dam to break and water it.

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And she knew that in spite of all of her friends and her adopted parents and her real Linyaari kinfolk, she had a similar dry creek inside herself. But dwelling on such things was pointless. Besides, she had work to do. She looked out at the stars and asked, "Where to now, Captain?"

For the Balakiire, tracing the signal to the blue planet -was not difficult. The coordinates had been on the piiyi, and the NiikcLavri's ion tracings led straight to the planet. But none of the crew was prepared, as the Kalakiire began to home in on the beach where once the Condor had landed, for the site of the Niikaavri's broken shell, lying open to the elements as if some massive chick had hatched from it and abandoned it there.

They saw wreckage bobbing in the sea as well, and washing up onto the beach. After a closer look at it, Neeva recognized some of the fragments as coming from

a Khieevi vessel. A quick trip back to the ship to consult the scanners gave no indication of a continuing Khieevi presence on the planet. From there it was just a matter of figuring out exactly what had happened. Beginning at a debris-littered indentation in a sand dune, they followed a trail of Khieevi excrement. Lirili was given the honor of walking in front, which she did with the poor grace Neeva expected of her. The broken trees, the large, coagulated pool of blood surrounded by many other blood-stained fronds and ruined trees and crushed leaves, drew a low, painful groan from all them. They followed the trail further up a hill, until they came to a place where a tree was surrounded by broken heaps of the solidified dung. They searched farther still, and found that beyond this last hill, the woods thinned once more into a low marshland of reeds, and beyond that stretched the "wide blue sea. Only a few pieces of debris bobbed on the waves on this side of the landspit. But tucked up next to the trees, in a small clearing that showed signs of occupation, lay an eggshaped vessel covered with a symbolic design. Lirili gasped as if this came as a surprise to her, which of course it should not have done.

The Linyaari made their way to the shuttle and examined it.

"This is the design registered to the . . . the ship Kaarlye and Miiri took when they went in search of their sons?" Neeva asked.

Lirili nodded reluctantly.

"You are sure?"

Lirili's eyes were reddened and slightly bulging, as they had been since the return of the pilgrims and the ancestors. She had not been a pleasant shipboard companion. No number of Linyaari horns could cleanse the atmosphere of her energy field, which was so discordant as to upset the harmony of even such a close-knit crew as the Balaklire's.

"I should know," she said hollowly. "I watched that transmission and checked over the information Thariinye had gathered from the files over and over again. It's not as if I made my decision lightly, you know. I was doing as I always have done, acting with the good of our people in mind, and this is the . . ."

"Yes, yes," Khaari, who was not a diplomat, said shortly. "Thariinye and Maati's ship lies in pieces, and we have found traces that indicate the Coru)or, containing Khornya and Aari, was in the vicinity of the armed Khieevi ship that wrecked the NiikaavrI. Khieevi spoor is all about, and here is the pod belonging to Kaarlye and Miiri, but this whole situation is still all about how badly misunderstood you are."

Lirili gave her a sullen look and sniffed. "Whatever . . . but since everyone you've mentioned except the Khieevi -who made these trails are no doubt dead, perhaps -we could end this futile mission and return home?"

"I'm surprised you want to," Neeva said. "In your place I would be considering a long mission that sent me to the farthest galaxy imaginable, preferably one where no one ever heard of me."

"That is your nature," Lirili said. "It is not mine. I am not a spacefarer."

"You are now," Melireenya said. "I can't believe you can look at all of this without some feeling of compassion, some sadness perhaps, even remorse in the case of Maati and Thariinye."

"If you think the arbitrary decision of a council influenced by an influx of my enemies is going to make me feel guilty, you are very much mistaken. I did what I thought best for the good of the planet. If harm befell anyone because of my decision, then it is the Khieevi who are at fault, not me."

Khaari rummaged in the pod and pulled out the tiny capsule that kept a record of its flight.

In the ship's shuttle, they did a low flyby circling the planet. Though they looked carefully, they never found another biped lifeform on the planet's surface, dead or alive.

Back in space once more, they discussed what should next be done.

"We must -warn our allies of the impending Khieevi threat," Neeva said.

"The same -way they warned us of the fake Federation troops?" Khaari asked - with a trace of bitterness lingering from that betrayal.

"Those enemies -were only human beings," Neeva said. "Bad ones, admittedly, but still merely human. And they tricked our allies. It "wasn't right, what happened to our people as a result, but letting the Khieevi overtake any civilization without -warning would not be right either."

"I suppose not. Should I begin a broadcast?" "No!" Lirili said, "You will lead them straight to us, and from us to narhii-Vhiliinyar."

Neeva sighed. "I'm afraid I have to agree -with you, Lirili. No, silence is still necessary this close to recent Khieevi depredations. I'm afraid we must deliver at least the Erst of our warnings personally."

They returned to their ship, docked the shuttle, and plotted a course that would take them toward the inhabited planets closest to their homeworld.

The ConDor transmitted broadcasts on all channels to all worlds and spacecraft within range about the Khieevi threat. The Linyaari response to their message proved to be typical- not a single reply came from any of the planets they'd targeted. But three days and a two wormholes away from the blue world, Acorna was startled and delighted to see Calum Baird's face on the com screen and to hear him say, "This is the Acadecki, ConDor. Read you loud and clear. Acorna, what in the cosmos are you and that junk ship up to now? Didn't we teach you better than to play with the Khieevi? They're not nice."

"Roger, Calum," Acorna said, baring her teeth at her beloved foster father, who was likewise baring his teeth at her. Before they could say more, however, other faces and signals replaced Calum's in quick succession.

Becker, hearing the unfamiliar voices, came running to the bridge, followed quickly by Aan and their Linyaari guests and Mac.

"Damn, are we back in the Federation already?" Becker bellowed. "We musta taken a wrong turn at the last wormhole. I told you that was a left, Aari."

Aari, who was used to Decker's odd expressions said, had picked up a couple of them himself. "I am sorry, Joh," he said. "I must have done the wrong thing while attempting to determine which turn signal to activate."

Maati stared wide-eyed at the faces on the screen, while Kaarlye and Miiri looked alarmed and Thariinye began translating with only a trace of his former pomp.

The younger male had changed his attitude quite a bit since being captured by the Khieevi. At first, right after he'd been rescued, he had retreated into himself, uncharacteristically tremulous and reticent. All Maati's goading, Becker's scolding, and Acorna's kindness couldn't reach him. But Aari had been wonderful with him, encompassing him in an exclusive wordless empathy extended from the first and heretofore only Linyaari to survive capture by the Khieevi to the second. Thariinye had responded to Aari's help with relief and something like hero worship. He'd had a taste of -what the Khieevi were capable of, and couldn't begin to imagine what Aari's ordeal had been like. The bond was clearly healing for them both.

Aari had begun to speak with his parents and Maati of his time alone and with the Khieevi on Vhilnnyar. Some of what he described was new to Acorna and even to Becker. Now that all of them had had such a close shave-Becker's description, but an apt one-with the Khieevi, everyone understood Aari's experiences much more fully. They were horrified for him, of course, but their reaction was one of grim comprehension, not shock or squeamishness.

With his new air of self-assurance, Aan faced the parade of faces on the com screen with a degree of comfort he'd never exhibited in the past.

Once everyone had been hailed, Acorna switched back to Calum. "Delighted as I am to see you, what are all these ships doing here?" Acorna said.

"We're en route to join Hafiz and his caravan at the House Harakamian Moon of Opportooooonity," Calum said, deepening his voice into a parody of a Scottish brogue. "It's on that moon you used as a base of operations to rescue the folks Ganoosh and Ikwaskwan captured."

Becker chuckled. The wily Hafiz's lust for trade reminded him of his own for salvage. "His timing coulda been a little better," Becker told Calum. "According to-uh-our informant, this whole sector will be crawling with Khieevi before long. On the other hand, if the old pirate had waited till later, there wouldn't have been anybody to trade with, so we'll just have to deal with it, I guess. I presume you're up for a bit of haggling over rescuing the galaxy once again?"

Caravan Harakamian had come to rest at its destination after sailing through vast distances of space. Along the way it stopped at various watering holes and oases to refuel and pick up a few forgotten but essential supplies, experts in various fields, security personnel, and general shopping. Its space-going "camels" were fat with the finest cargo by the time they arrived at the desolate moon.

In less time than it took the genie to build the castle of Aladdin, Hafiz and his colleagues in commerce had erected a gigantic trade center. Hafiz used his own hologrammatic magic to disguise the envirobubbles as giant Linyaari pavilions, such as those described to him by Acorna and Aari. From the inside the bubbles were all blue sky and flying birds, -waterfalls and forests and mountains in the distance. In the foreground was the flowering vine of goods and services, the commercial center that House Harakamian erected solely to attract the Linyaari and their allies to what Hafiz fondly hoped would be an exclusive trade agreement.

Calum Baird had taken charge of leading a second expedition of technicians who set up relays between the new sector and the old one, specifically Laboue and Maganos Moonbase.

Rafik, Gill, Mercy, Judit, Pal, Johnny, and Ziana ensured that the kids who came from Maganos Moonbase and the crew of the Haven were given all possible learning opportunities. Some of the older children were now of age for university training. Those whose brains had been damaged by deprivation or who had been

kidnapped into slavery so young that they were still catching up on their educations remained on Maganos Moonbase in the care of trusted teachers and some of the more gifted older children. They would help coordinate future supply caravans, and the transmission of orders from the new Moon of Opportunity, as Hafiz had dubbed his trading colony.

Dr. Hoa's weather wizardry created a climate both varied and pleasant, cycling through a temperate change of weather every thirty days. With the resident botanists, he came up with species well adapted for several days of warm rain with intermittent hard rain, interspersed with brilliant warm sunshine, followed by crisp autumnal days that caused the special trees to turn bright red and gold and drop their leaves before the snow that fell only on the lawns and in the mountains on the recreational portion of the moon, where residents and guests were provided with skiing, snowboarding, ice skating, sledding, and ski lodge activities.

In another part of the resort area, specially tailored palms swayed above a "white sand beach onto which surfable waves glistened and slid under sailable winds. Provisions were made for the alien recreational activities Hafiz had knowledge of as well, vine swinging (for the Limurian jungle dwellers), mudrolling (for the Porcinian beings of the Greater Ursine constellation), and of course, high and low gravity events-long distance jumping sports and soil diving among them. Hafiz's brochure promised that more exotic entertainments would be offered later.

His hologram wizardry also made the hotels playgrounds for both the children and the sophisticates, offering a variety of fantasy-oriented suites and facilities, even holographic houris. He was a bit surprised that Khetala, who had been reeducating former pleasure house employees, took it upon herself to visit the holographic harems of the houris. While there she attempted to convince the denizens they were being exploited and should perhaps take up courses in accounting or business management to empower themselves.

That was his first inkling that perhaps his colony was beginning to seem a bit too frivolous for some of his associates. But of course, the guest facilities had to be in place before the university and healing centers could be completed.

Karina ordered up the initial hologramatic ambience for the healing center. She also spent a fortune on crystals, candles, gauzy draperies, drums, incense, amorphous music, and real greenery and fountains. Hafiz was allowed to embellish her setting with his holograms, but she insisted on the genuine article as far as plant life and water features went, "for the ozone and the extra oxygen, beloved. One doesn't get that from a simulation."

A large portion of that pavilion was kept barren however, awaiting the arrival of the first Linyaari trade partners, who would of course have their own specifications.

Thus was all in readiness for the first trading partners. Hafiz and his staff waited. And waited. And waited.

Signals had been sent on all frequencies to all planets in the sector. Calum Baird and his technicians finished their work installing the appropriate links and relays to allow swift communication with Maganos Moonbase, Laboue, and all other previously known Federation worlds, moons, and space stations. But until Calum and his fleet intercepted the Condor's signal, not a single response did the newly created facility receive.

Finally these last ships docked and by the time their crews were welcomed and rested, the Condor, its sides virtually bulging with cargo and expanded crew, waddled into port to squat beside the other, sleeker vessels.

Becker gave a low whistle as the crew, including RK, descended on the spanking clean robotlift.

"Will you look at this spread?" Becker asked. "Your old uncle has done himself proud, Princess."

Acorna wasn't listening. She didn't even wait until the robotlift touched the ground before jumping off and flying into the collective arms of her uncles and old friends from Maganos Moonbase.

Hugs, kisses, tears, and exclamations flowed freely and to Maati, seemed to sadly contrast to her own reunion with her brother, mother, and father.

Finally, Hafiz Harakamian, mindful of the presence of four horned Linyaari and Aari, whom he had met before, detached himself from the storm of sentiment and greeted his new guests.

He was flanked by Karina on one side and Nadhari Kando on the other. As chief of security, Nadhari considered it her job to be with Hafiz in any crowd and put herself between him and harm.

"Welcome to my pavilion, and to this Moon of Opportunity, honored guests, Captain Becker, and er-crewman?" Hafiz said with a glance at Mac.

RK leaped onto Nadhari Kando's shoulder.

"It's that Makahomian warrior lady again. Hello, there," Becker said, perhaps a bit eagerly.

Nadhari gave him a slow smile and stroked RK's plumed tail. "I see the sacred cat has brought you safely through another journey, Becker."

"Yes, he was a lot of help," Becker said, reaching over to stroke RK too, and incidentally brush his fingers against Nadhari's sculpted cheekbone resting against the cat's side. RK growled and batted at him. "The hero of the whole thing actually," Becker continued. The growl lowered. "In fact, if he hadn't alerted Aari to the fact that the Khieevi was after Acorna, and then come back to lead me and Mac to where the Khieevi and Aari were duking it out, we probably would not be the hale and healthy party standing before you now."

RK was purring now.

Hafiz, who had been trying to ignore Becker to court the Linyaari, suddenly turned to him, very pale despite the artificial sunlight in his offices. "Khieevi? You encountered Khleevi!"

"Yeah, got a couple of dead ones up top," Becker said, jerking his thumb toward the Cow)or.

Acorna rejoined the crew, her friends and relations surrounding them all now as they strolled off the robolift and toward the sumptuously appointed reception area. "Uncle Hafiz, we will need to establish some sort of laboratory to study the dead Khieevi and to analyze a substance we discovered on another world."

"You need establish nothing, O flower of my family tree," Hafiz said. "We have the best of all laboratories here at your command complete with all the most advanced devices and equipment."

"And we have some top Linyaari organic chemists in our crew, Uncle," Acorna said with a nod to two of the newcomers, "Allow me to present Kaarlye and Miiri, father and mother of Aari and Maati."

"We are honored," Hafiz said. "And our laboratories of course are at your disposal. Just across the garden of a thousand succulent sweetgrasses and flowering fountains you will find luxurious pavilions designed with Linyaari tasks and requirements in mind." He clapped his hands and porters appeared. "When you have rested from your journeys, we will dine."

"No time to rest," Kaarlye said brusquely. "We must analyze this substance at once. When it is warm, it spreads rapidly."

Becker stopped the porters at the robolift. "Wait a minute, folks. We didn't come with a lot of baggage and I think my crew and I had better unload the sap and the -uh- prisoners. You might want to stand back. They stink. A lot. As for RK, Mac, and me, -we're staying aboard the Coru)or."



Nadhari lifted an eyebrow and made a very unconvincing pout with her mouth. RK laid his ears back and wrapped his tail possessively around Nadhari's neck. "Unless of course the cat has other ideas," Becker finished lamely.

That night a sumptuous meal was laid before them.

Under an open canopy, silvery platters of meats and sweets nestled among opulent arrangements of flowers and plumed grasses upon a long low table nestled within a bank of tufted divans covered with poufs of paisley silks and velvets. These topped thick soft rugs of various harmonious patterns and jewel-like hues.

Becker and his new crew sank into the divans and following Hafiz's lead, Becker, Karina, Dr. Hoa, Acorna's non-Linyaari family, and Nadhari Kando plucked succulent items from the trays on the table. Meanwhile Acorna, Aari, Maati, and the parental units grazed on the flower arrangements. Becker was a little startled until he realized that this was the intended purpose of what he had thought of as an overabundance of centerpieces. The old man had simply seen to it that the Linyaari "dishes" were arranged as appealingly as the savory morsels offered to the other guests.

"Uncle Hafiz, you are amazing," Acorna said. Becker was pleased to see that after the strain and danger and hard work the girl had recently endured, she looked as fresh as some of the flowers she was eating, glowing with happiness at being among her old friends again. "How long did it take you to build this installment, anyway?" Her eyes took in the gently lit garden with its fountains and mountainous background, the spired and domed palaces that formed Hafiz's chief residence and several of the hotels and office buildings besides. Overhead stars twinkled-not any stars Acorna had ever been among but artful stars, placed with an artistic interpretation of constellations and formations Karina had deemed auspicious.

"Little more than the twinkling of an eye, dearest child, that and many, many, many trillions of credits, of course."

Becker was seated on the end of one divan, Nadhari Kando on the adjoining end of another, the Condor's first mate still wrapped complacently around her neck like a living fur collar. Every once in a while a forkful of fish eggs or meat didn't make it all the way to Nadhari's mouth, however, as a paw or a set of feline teeth intercepted it.

"But enough of my little pastimes," Hafiz was saying while Becker was admiring the line of Nadhari's jaw and the curve of her neck, "I am consumed with curiosity to know how it is that you actually have two dead Khieevi with you?"

"Oh. Them," Becker said. "Well, they're survivors. I mean, they were survivors. From the crash of their ship. The one we caused since, you know, they had just finished shooting the kids' ship out of the sky."

"And by kids you mean . . . ?"

"Maati and Thariinye," Acorna put in. "They apparently decided at almost the same time we did to search for Maati's and Aari's parents on the blue world. But the Khieevi had the same idea, and had already launched an attack when we arrived."

"Tell me, Captain, I am intrigued," Nadhari said. "What powerful weapons do you carry on that salvage ship of yours that vanquished a Khieevi vessel?"

"Yes," Hafiz said. "Please, tell us. If they are that effective, I will order many for the protection of our moon."

Becker gave Nadhari a smile that urged her to wait a moment and answered Hafiz, "Well, sir, it is true that I have a bunch of very lethal weapons on the Condor. Some of them even work. Or would, if I had them assembled and installed. Which I didn't. So then Acorna here says, what about using the tractor beam?"

A smile played at the edges of Nadhari's mouth, which was the only thing about her with any extra flesh—her lips were sculpted but pleasingly plump, at least they were when relaxed. He seemed to recall seeing that same mouth set in a hard grim line above the jut of that firm and shapely jaw. It would have had him quaking in his gravity boots, if he thought she had any quarrel with him. But she didn't, and RK's tail tip flitted playfully from her shoulder bone to jawline to eartip, as flirtatious as a courtesan's fan.

"Captain, surely you have not acquired enough cargo by now to act as another slingshot bomb with which to fell your enemies?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. Not slingshot this time. We-uh-skipped 'em like a rock and then played crack the ship with their sorry carcass. Worked good, too, didn't it, crew?"

"Yes, Joh. Good," Aari said.

"Except for the survivors. We didn't know there were two at first," Becker said.

He regaled the table with the story of the questioning of the injured Khieevi while interweaving the story of Maati and Thariinye as if he had understood every word they spoke of their ordeal or had been with them while it was occurring. He gave it a few flourishes here and there and ended by saying modestly, "So I blew a hole through the bugger, but Aari here had already pretty much finished him off."

"How?" Karina Harakamian asked.

"Why, by giving him a great big old hug. See, that Khieevi was so purely mortified by all that Linyaari sweetness and light Aari was extending to it just because he's of such a highly evolved nature, that I figure the Khieevi came down with a monstrous case of sugar diabetes on the spot and it was such a shock to its system it curled up its toes and died."

Karina clasped her plump, beringed hands over her heaving amethyst-veiled and amethyst-encrusted bosom and sighed, "How thrilling! And what a triumph for the light!" Then she glanced around at the stolid Linyaari faces, and at Becker's determinedly innocent one. He was trying to keep his mouth from twitching. "Wait a moment. Is that true?" she asked.

"Not a word of it!" Becker exploded with laughter. Karina was exactly the kind of audience he loved. Gullible. "Well, the thing did curl up and die and it was because of something sticky as sugar, but not sweet. It was this sap stuff we picked up on some planet full of vines. But I had you going there, didn't I?"

Nadhari shook an admonitory finger at him, "Naughty, naughty, Captain. But I must say, I'm very impressed. You and your crew of pacifist warriors vanquishing such formidable foes without so much as a real weapon among you-

"You're forgetting that I blew a hole the size of the cat through that thing," Becker said, slightly offended at being lumped with the pacifists.

She shrugged like a panther rippling its muscles in preparation for a longer stretch. "Oh that. A mere coup de grace. But your ingenuity and wit amaze me. Anyone can win by force of muscle or superior firepower. But winning because of strategy and the ability to turn whatever you have at hand into a weapon, I find that-very, very impressive."

"You W Becker was surprised at first, then amazed, followed by stupefied. Him? Impress her! She was absolutely the most impressive woman he had ever seen in his entire life and fascinated him at the same time she scared the bejesus out of him. He hadn't done anything she couldn't do with both hands tied behind her back, but it was nice to hear it anyway.

"Absolutely." He couldn't tell if it was her or RK purring. Both of them were regarding him through slitted eyes.

"I certainly do. You and I should discuss-strategy."

He -was flummoxed. The truth was, he never stuck around for courtship or seduction much past the brief encounters in the pleasure houses-hadn't since he was younger and encountered all the ladies who wanted a good time but thought spending any part of it on a salvage ship beneath them. Nadhari Kando knew where he lived. She'd been there. "I-uh-I'd really like that. I need to check in with Mac though-that's the KEN-640 unit-he's repairing the corn unit on the Khieevi shuttle so we can maybe monitor their movements-"

"By the sacred whiskers, you think of everything, don't you?" She moved closer and offered him an olive. He held out his hand but she held it with two fingers and her thumb and waved it teasingly till he opened his mouth, then she popped it in. He could definitely get used to this. Her scent was a mixture of musk and citrus, and something like a forest after a rain. He liked it. He held out an olive for her.

"And I-uh-I guess I should get RK back, too. He hasn't had his usual eighty hours of sleep today."

"Oh?" she said. "That's funny. He's been communing with me. He -wants to stay with me tonight."

"Well, if that's not just like a cat!" Becker exclaimed, dropping the olive back onto his plate in his consternation at his first mate's defection.

Nadhari smiled. Her smile reminded him of RK-he just hadn't realized that was what a cat smile looked like. "What's that?" she asked as the cat rubbed against her cheek. "Oh, yes. He wants to stay with you tonight, too."

"Divided loyalties?" Becker asked.

Nadhari swung her sturdy but very shapely legs down from the divan with a sinuous slither and stood looking down at him. "Hardly. RK is a sacred temple cat. His wish is my command. If he wishes to be with me, and with you ..." her hand reached down to cup Becker's chin and with slight pressure on it, raised him to his feet. "I am not the one to gainsay him. Are you?"

"Disappoint my old buddy?" Becker asked, slipping her hand through his crooked elbow. "Perish the thought. Mind telling me where he wants to spend this time with us tonight?"

"Aboard your vessel," she replied, and he was surprised to see that she actually had to look up at him. How did she do that? He could have sworn she was taller. "In the hold -where you questioned the first Khieevi."

"Really?"

"Yes. The sacred cat thinks I would find that environment rather - stimulating."

"Kitty knows best," Becker said.

fourteen

Hafiz -would not hear of the Linyaari remaining aboard the Condor. Acorna was glad, particularly -when she saw Becker, RK, and Nadhari strolling arm in arm in the direction of the ship.

A self-contained trio of pavilions triangulated around a garden/grazing area. Kaarlye and Miiri were billeted in one, and although Maati could have stayed with her parents, she asked if she might share a pavilion with Khornya instead. This left Aari and Thariinye to share the third.

Acorna spent most of the rest of the evening with her adoptive fathers/uncles, describing what had befallen her since they had last seen each other.

"This Aari guy," Gill said. "You and he . . . ?"

"We're friends," Acorna said, off-handedly.

"Evidently, if he's willing to wrestle bug-eyed monsters on your behalf," Calum said.

"We -were all in danger," Acorna said, reasonably enough. "And Aari was trying to save us all."

"He didn't know that stuff smeared on his shirt would kill the thing though?" Gill asked. "He just dove right in and tackled it?"

"Well-yes."

"Sounds kinda suicidal to me," Calum said.

"I don't really think he is-at least, not now," Acorna said.

"But he was before?" Gill asked.

Acorna suddenly felt more uncomfortable than she had ever before felt in the company of these beloved men. "Why are you questioning me this way?" she asked.

"Why do you think?" Calum asked, exasperated. "Because we care about you, of course, and we've talked it over and it looks to us like you care about him."

"But we wish to make sure," Rank said, "That-well, you're not just feeling sorry for someone who cannot be a good mate for you, to put it bluntly."

"You must admit, pet, that we know a few more things about men than you do," Gill said, smiling.

"Human men, yes, but Aari is Linyaari," she said. "And we are friends. Nothing more."

"Not-yet?" Gill asked.

"No, nor will we be until he's-"

"Until he's ready, darlin'?" Gill pressed. "What about you? Are you going to crew on a salvage ship until the guy makes up his mind whether or not he could stand being mates with a beautiful, intelligent, funny, talented, warm, and loving girl? You must excuse us, but it's a no-brainer. Which makes us wonder about how intelligent or warm he is."

"Frankly, we thought you'd get snatched up by some young stud the minute you landed on your home-world," Calum said. "We're a bit surprised at this turn of events."

Acorna dimpled at them suddenly. "Is this one of those situations where you are going to ask me when I'm going to settle down and give you grandchildren?"

"Yes," Rafik said, "Usually mothers do it, well, used to, but you have no mother and we weren't sure your aunt would think of it, besides which she's not around, is she? So we thought- that is, Calum and Gill thought-maybe between us, we should discuss this."

"Ha£z started it, really," Calum said. "Hey, we did pretty well, I think. Gill "was all for calling the guy outside and asking him what his intentions were when we saw how he-how you- how things were. But then we figured a guy -who tackled a Khieevi bare-handed might be the sensitive type, so we decided asking you-"

"Was safer," Rafik finished with an impish grin.

Acorna laughed. "You've asked. We've discussed it," she said, giving them each a hug. "And I have nothing more to say-honestly, there if nothing more to say right now. Meanwhile, when am I going to get to give my fathers away in marriage is what I'd like to know? Judit and Mercy will not wait forever while you busy yourselves speculating about my love life."

"Actually," Calum said. "We um, have an announcement to make. But I will wait until she can-"

The other two started thumping him on the back. Talk turned to how the nuptials were to be handled and then all of them began to feel the need to talk to their mates and Acorna slipped away, back to her assigned pavilion.

Maati was not there. Acorna thought perhaps the girl was spending more time with her parents. That was fine. It would be nice to be alone for a while. As light as she had made of her dear friends' questions, they echoed questions in her own mind, and she didn't want a youngling new to thought-speech to read her, even accidentally.

Du) she care for Aari simply because she had pitied him, or was there more to it than that? How would she know? She had never chosen a mate before. She knew her uncles had only her best interests at heart and it was quite true that she hadn't noticed all that much difference between human and Linyaari males. And she felt, being raised by men, that she understood them as well as a female could. At this point in her life anyway. But she couldn't say she understood Aari at all. She could read his mind when he let her and she knew he cared for her. She could empathize with his pain. But she hadn't a clue why he behaved as he did. She wished Grandam Naadiina or Aunt Neeva "were here to consult with. She would have asked Gill, Calum, or Rafik about the matter but they seemed to be predisposed against Aari.

With a sigh, she settled down to an uneasy and dream-filled sleep in which she - was being courted by a Khieevi.

Aari, on the other hand, was getting no sleep, nor was he able to progress very far in the book he had chosen from the Condor's ancient hardcopy library, a collection of ancient European literature by various authors. Aari was currently reading an excerpt from a play called Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare. The language was not easy but Aari had read another book that referred to Shakespeare as inventing the language of love, so he thought it might be interesting to see what the Bard of Avon had to say. Although he could not imagine why a cosmetics firm from the twentieth century (the ship's library also contained a number of small brightly colored pamphlets from this company) would choose to sponsor an ancient poet unless it -was because he "was also an actor and they, as Aari was learning, also used makeup.

But •while he was struggling with the language, Thariinye was chattily giving him the benefit of Thariinye's spectacularly successful career (according to the young male) as a wooer of females. Aari had not had the heart to ask him to be quiet, as he knew that the loss of the tip of Thariinye's horn had made him feel disfigured and the younger fellow was relating his past exploits simply to bolster his own confidence.

But in that estimation, Aari was using the projection of his own feelings about the loss of his horn and empathy for Tharii nye's distress, not thought-reading, which he found impossible to do -while he was trying to unravel Shakespeare's thees and thous. So he was taken aback when Thariinye suddenly rolled over on his own pallet and poked Aari playfully in the ribs.

"That Khornya is quite a reed, isn't she?" Thariinye said with a wink.

"A--reed?" Aari asked, looking up from his book at the mention of Khornya's name.

"A-slender and succulent desirable mate, to old-timers like you," Thariinye translated with a tolerant wave of his hand.

"I-yes. Maati mentioned that you had considered yourself pledged to her. Is that still true?" His voice was steady and controlled.

"Me? No! No, no, no. By the ancestors, no! Oh, I was smitten, of course. She is beautiful-quite a reed, as I said. But, well, it really was just that I was the first Linyaari male she met and she -was so dewy eyed and innocent I felt protective, so I -wanted to warn off other males lest they not . . . appreciate her finer qualities . . . properly. No, now that I know her better, she is not for me."

"No? And -why not?" Aari asked, suddenly feeling protective himself, and rather angry at Thariinye dismissing Khornya. Who wouldn't want Khornya?

"Frankly?" Thariinye said. "She's too smart for me. And well, a bit too idealistic. And a little too strange, being raised by humans and all. She has peculiar ideas about things so I can't begin to guess what she's going to do next. That makes me nervous around her."

"I admit I am nervous around her, too," Aari said thoughtfully.

"I noticed. But you're crazy about her, aren't you?" Thariinye's voice was insinuating and his eyes sly. "You want her, don't you?"

"I ... have no right," Aari said. "She deserves a mate who is whole in mind and body. And horn," he said, a bit cruelly, since Thariinye was being cruel and discourteously invasive, to his way of thinking.

"Ouch," Thariinye said. "I guess I deserved that. But I'm told mine will grow back, in time."

Aari was quiet. Thariinye had responded to cruelty with cruelty of his own. That was one reason why the Linyaari usually eschewed cruelty. It was not only



unkind, it was unwise to start the spiraling descent that would lead with all parties having fallen to a lower level.

"Sony," Thariinye said again. "I'm trying to tell you something here and I keep on upsetting you. You're pretty touchy, you know that, don't you?"

"Perhaps it is because for so long, when anyone touched me, it was to cause pain," Aari said through gritted and bared teeth. Then he relaxed, "I am sony too. I have begun to think of you as a friend. Grandam says friends come together to teach each other. I sense you are trying to teach me something. Proceed."

"What I'm saying," Thariinye said, "Is no matter what YOU think she deserves, the females I know seem to feel that what they deserve is whatever their little female hearts decide they want. I think it's pretty clear she wants you."

"No," he said. "She is a kind and loving person. She feels sympathy for my injury, for what happened with the Khieevi. When she is sure I am as healed as possible, for she is a healer above all, she will return to her human people for good as our ambassador-stopping by narhii-Vhiliinyar to communicate with the government perhaps. By then Joh and I will be far away so I -" <)"o I will not have to watch her leave again, he thought to himself.

"You're just making that assumption!" Thariinye said "Why don't you ask her? Talk to her? Take her some of these beautiful, delicious flowers! Recite Linyaari love poetry to her!

She's never heard it, you know. I was going to try it out on her but I could tell she wouldn't believe me."

"What would it tell her that I bring her flowers from a garden that is also hers to graze?" Aari asked, shaking his mane.

"That you brought her breakfast in bed?" Thariinye suggested. "No, no, go back to your book. Forget I said anything."

But the next morning, Thariinye slept in while Aari went to see if he could assist his parents in the laboratory where they were analyzing the sap that had killed the Khieevi. Upon awakening, Thariinye saw the book Aari had left behind. His journey with Neeva, Khaari, and Melireenya to collect Khornya from her human foster parents had given him a superior knowledge of Standard, he felt. With the help of the LAANYE he had carried -with him from the Niikaavri, he was able to translate one of the stories, although the words fell in odd places. This particular tale, by a human named Rostand, told of a fellow with a disfiguringly long nose-which sounded perfectly attractive to Thariinye, since long noses were considered elegant by Linyaari tastes. The long-nosed chap was in love with a female also desired by a more attractive male, a friend of the longnosed chap.

Finally, because he -was a kind person and wished to see both his friend and the female he loved happy, and also because it allowed him to speak his own -words of love to the female, the long-nosed male hid and spoke his love words while the handsomer male pretended to speak them to the female.

Thariinye knew that it obviously would never work out. There were a few similarities in the personalities involved of course, but considerable mutation would have to occur before such a solution would in any way serve the present situation.

Maati was a youngling, but in her capacity as a messenger, she had been receiving a great deal of vicarious experience since she was very small. The only other females available to discuss this with, unfortunately, were Khornya and Aari's mother, who was quite busy and besides, Thariinye didn't know her. Maati would have to do.

Maati was thrilled to find herself among human younglings approximately her age. They had been alive much longer, as Linyaari children developed very rapidly and, once adult, maintained a healthy maturity of great longevity. The youngest of these children had been alive at least eight years, which was much longer than Maati's single ghaanyi. A ghaanyi was about one and a half years, by Standard time, which was how these humans measured their days.

But the younglings were barely sentient for a very long period in their early lives, so their experience, while different, was not much greater than Maati's own. Certainly none of them had been messengers for their governments, although Laxme, one of the boys, had developed unusual skill with the com units. Nor had they been shot down by a Khieevi ship, fought a Khieevi hand-to-hand, and lived. But the Maganos Moonbase children, she was sorry to hear, had all endured horrible lives as child slaves. The Starfarer children of the Haven had watched their parents die at the hands of hijackers, had defeated and dealt decisively "with the same hijackers, and now were in command of their home ship, with only a little help from a few adults. The thing all of the children had most in common was that they loved and admired Khornya, though the human children called her "Acorna," "Lady Epona," or "The Lady of the Light" and regarded her with •worshipful adoration Maati found strange.

"She's just a really nice girl, like us, only a little older," Maati told them.

"Like you, you mean," Jana corrected her. Jana was really nice and had been asking Maati lots of questions about healing. At first Maati had been unwilling to answer. Linyaari did not usually let outsiders know they healed directly through their horns. Doing so could lead to incidents like the one where bad humans took many Linyaari ambassadors prisoner and tried to force them to heal and cleanse water and air under horrible circumstances. Linyaari raised on the homeworld knew this, but Khornya had not.

"Don't be so cagey," Jana had said when Maati tried to play innocent. "We know all about how you can heal people. Acorna healed all of us when we were in the mines and other bad places. If it hadn't been for her, most of us would be crippled. I don't know why you wouldn't want people to know what you can do. It's wonderful! I wish I could do that. I -want to be a doctor."

"I'm going to create holograms, just like Mr. Harakamian," Annella, a redheaded girl from the Haven, said. "He's shown me a lot of what goes into it. It's not as hard as you'd think but then, he says I have a natural talent for it." Then she realized they weren't talking about careers, they were talking about Acorna's ability to heal and she added, "But it must be wonderful to be able to heal the way your people can."

Maati made a wry face. "It comes in pretty handy, like when the Khieevi attacked us. Thariinye got hurt real bad trying to save me and Khornya. He probably would have died if he wasn't Linyaari and we hadn't been there. Or at least lost a hand."

"That was really brave," Jana said. "Kheti is brave like that. And Acorna is, too."

"My brother was the bravest though."

"Which one is your brother? Thariinye?" Annella asked.

"Oh no-Thariinye is a friend, sort of, when he isn't being a hdnye."

"I don't know what that means," Jana said, "But I bet it's not good."

"No, it's not, but he's not that way as much anymore. My brother is the one -who doesn't have a horn. The Khieevi, um," Maati found she had trouble saying it, even now, "When they captured him they tortured him and, you know-"

"We get the picture," Jana assured her hastily, hearing the choke in the voice of the Linyaari girl. "Your brother must be very brave. We heard he tackled that monster bare-handed."

"He did. But the monster was about to get Khornya. That was a fatal mistake," Maati said with satisfaction unbecoming a member of a nonviolent race.

"I've seen how Lady Epona looks at him," Jana said with a sigh.

"Everybody sees but him!" Maati said. "He is so smart and so brave but he just thinks because he doesn't have a horn, Khornya would be getting a bad deal-that she might not accept him, even though everybody can see she really likes him."

"Why doesn't she tell him?" Annella asked.

"Cause she's afraid that even though he likes her, he would still maybe reject her and I think, well, actually, I sort of peeked. She is afraid that rejecting her would cause him more pain and she doesn't want to do that. Grownups are sooooo complicated."

"You'd think they'd realize that life is pretty short to be so backward about good stuff," Jana said wistfully. "Everybody is being so careful of everybody else's feelings they're never gonna get together."

"That's what Thariinye said," Maati agreed, heaving a deep and dramatic sigh. "He was talking about 'some male with a large nose who did the talking for some other male to a female they both cared for. Do males with long noses play the role of go-betweens in your society? Are there any of them here we could get to talk to Khornya for Aari-or the other way around?"

"Nooo," said Jana. The other kids shook their heads too.

Their educations on Maganos Moonbase had tended to the practical and technical and neglected the arts. Their former masters hadn't exactly provided them with cultural opportunities either.

However, Annella's mother, before she had been spaced by the invaders, had been very fond of theater. "He's talking about a character named Cyrano, Maati. It's from an old earth tale."

"I see," Maati said wisely. But she didn't.

"I think he's hit on something," Annella said. "Maybe they need a go-between."

"A matchmaker," put in Markel, another of the kids from the Haven who had been listening carefully to what -went on. He considered himself a very special friend of Acorna's, since it was with his help she was able to save herself, Calum Baird, and Dr. Hoa and help the youngsters of the Haven overthrow the hijackers. "Only, it sounds like a lot of people have tried to be one from what you say, Maati."

"Yes," Maati said. "Khornya's foster fathers talked to her about it and she didn't want to talk, Karina Harakamian can't read her mind, Thariinye said he knows she -won't talk to him, and she thinks I'm just a kid and can't understand. But I 9o. I understand they are both being dumb not to talk to each other. They don't really need to talk to some third person because neither of them will believe anybody else. They need to talk to each other. Aari needs to talk to Khornya and Khornya needs to talk to Aari or they won't believe it." She shrugged. "Not even a long-nosed male could help."

"Maybe there's a way for that to happen, kind of," Annella said slowly.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Markel asked.

"I think so. Do you think we could pull it off?"

"Maybe. It can't hurt to try anyway. Hafiz isn't going to care. He probably 'will even find a use for them later." "What?" Maati asked. The other kids looked at the two Starfarers as well.

"Come with us to the holo lab. We'll try to show you. It'll take a while, though."

In the days that followed, Becker staggered around the ship humming marching songs. While Nadhari was on duty, RK stayed on the ship. She was on duty a lot, but still found time almost every day for a little visit. Becker was chronically surprised that she really seemed to like him, and the Corufor.

And of course, Mac was conducting, under Becker's guidance, an extremely critical security operation. He could now receive signals from the main fleet, although he could not yet send them. While Mac was working, Becker regaled him with cute stories about Nadhari. The captain figured if he was going to be crazed about the woman, the android -was the perfect party to hear his jabbering. That way he wouldn't make a fool of himself to anyone who -was likely to gossip.

He was just getting to the part where Nadhari, in a fit of passion, had inadvertently reintroduced him to somersaults and handsprings, when Acorna arrived, looking bemused and distracted, but as usual, determined to be useful.

"Any luck with the corn unit, MacKenZ?" she asked.

"I have had some contact with the main fleet. They are wondering where this scouting shuttle is. They apparently received some communication before the crash onto the blue planet. However, these beings are on the whole unperturbed by peril to individual members or even vessels, from what I have learned from our captive, from what Aari has been able to tell me of his experience, and from what I have gleaned from their communications."

"Where are they? What are they doing?" Acorna asked urgently, hunkering down beside the thoroughly exhausted Becker and Mac.

Acorna looked down at the corn unit, still mounted on the control panel, and at a mess of other hardware from the shuttle. "What did you do with the rest of the shuttle?" she asked.

"Smells like Khieevi," Becker said. "Without you and the others on board, the smell was enough to gag a maggot. Maybe the smell w<u a maggot, for all -we know. Khieevi are bugs. They could have maggots."

"Ye-es," Acorna said. "We really should investigate their life cycle. We would have a better idea of their vulnerabilities if we knew more."

"True," Becker said. "Wonder if Hafiz has got any entomologists in this bunch of settlers he's imported."

"From what I can tell, Khornya," Mac said, "The fleet may be en route to the Niriian home-world-where the piyi came from."

Acorna nodded. "The Niriians have been warned already that their ship was intercepted and that the Khieevi are in this general area and still at large. Surely they will have taken defensive measures."

"In case they haven't," Becker said, "Nadhari was going to get Hafiz to dispatch a light drone with a prerecorded message to broadcast from space-well away from here. We still haven't heard from narhii-Vhiliinyar, Princess, but it looks like the bugs haven't got there yet."

"What's needed is technology that prevents transmissions from being traced back to their origins, at least by Khieevi devices," Acorna said. "Do you think we could do a diagnostic that might help some of the engineers develop something within the near future?"

"Yeah, if we survive that long," Becker said. "Anyhow, it won't hurt to ask Hafiz about it."

"If the Khieevi find the drone and destroy it, that would give my beloved uncle an economic motive anyway," Acorna said. "He just hates to lose something he'd hoped to make a profit on."

"You know, me too," Becker said. "Your uncle and I have got quite a bit in common."

Acorna smiled mischievously at him. "I know."

Becker gave her a sideways glance from under his bushy eyebrows. "Seen much of Aari lately?" he asked innocently.

"Not too much," she said, feigning lightness. "He has been assisting his parents in the laboratory, from what I can tell. They've determined that the sap contains a spore which, -when it comes in contact with an insect's carapace, metamorphoses into a fungal infection of great virulence."

"I knew it had to be something like that," Becker said. He didn't mention that she'd changed the subject away from Aari. "So all we gotta do basically is lure them to the place where we got the sap and tell them to eat their fill." He chuckled. "I'm getting good at this decoy business. We faked Ganoosh into thinking the Federation Outpost was the Linyaari homeworld and now all we have to do is convince the Khieevi fleet that whaddayacallit-vine worlds is full of yummy bug food and let them and the plants fight it out to see who eats who. Piece of-you should pardon the expression-cake."

"First, however," Mac said, "I must fix the transmitter on this unit. While I have no problem with concentration or distractions, Captain, you do happen to be sitting against the access panel. Perhaps you would consider moving?"

"Mutiny!" Becker grumbled. "C'mon Acorna, I'll treat you to a bouquet or something dirtside."

They ate together in one of the little bistros Hafiz had set, one to a building, circus, or block, for times "when people did not want to meet in one of the several great dining halls. All of the ones in the main compound, which contained the Linyaari compound, opened onto gardens for al fresco mixed human and Linyaari grazing.

"Have you tried any of the activities around here?" Becker asked Acorna casually. "Nadhari and I are going to take a room in one of the fantasy suites at the hotel. Complete holo landscapes in every suite." He sighed. "She's an amazing woman, Nadhari."

"You really like her, then?"

"That's a little mild. I mean, there's not many women I'd let take RK with them while they're working, but she said he wanted to see what she did. She's the first Makahomian he's been around since the crash. He likes being worshipped. I guess everybody ought to try it once. Being worshipped, I mean."

Becker did not need RK. He himself looked like the proverbial cat who had swallowed the unfortunate proverbial canary.

"I am pleased for you, Captain. Have the two of you made any long-range plans?" Acorna asked.

"It's a little early yet," Becker said complacently, "But I figure after we save the universe as we know it, -what with her brawn and my brains ..."

Acorna didn't warn him, but Nadhari herself, clad in her green security forces uniform, crept through the garden until she was directly behind Becker, where she caught his head in a hammerlock, "And then what, oh brains of the outfit?" she asked. RK, slipping through the weeds behind her, stopped at her feet and wound around her ankles.

"Whatever you want, babe," Becker said, removing her arm without difficulty and distributing kisses up the crease in her uniform sleeve.

Nadhari actually wrinkled her elegant, if oft-broken nose at Acorna. "Isn't that cute? He called me babe. Nobody ever calls me babe. If most men did it I'd have to break at least a finger. But from Jonas, it's not lack of respect, it's protective." She put both arms around his neck and gave him a half-comic noisy smooch before melting back into the garden as if she were one of the plants, the cat's plumed tail the last vestige of their presence.

Becker sat there with a silly grin on his face. Acorna remembered the word used for someone whose internal dam had broken so that the banks of their dry stream -were filled to overflowing. Besotted. Becker and Nadhari were besotted and Acorna was glad for them.

But she had to excuse herself before she choked on the lump in her throat.

Maati made Thariinye close his eyes as she led him by the hand into the holo-lab. Opening them, he saw a number of the youngsters from the station grouped around Aari and Acorna.

He looked confused. "Is this some kind of an instructional meeting or what? Where's Becker and the cat and your

parents?"

"Look closer," Maati told him, now letting go of his hand and herding him in among the children. "Aren't they awesome?"

He saw now that Aari and Acorna were standing in little pools of light. Neither of them greeted him and once in a -while, though very seldom, one of them would flicker slightly.

"Holograms?" he asked.



Annella Carter beamed at him. "Yes! What do you think?"

Thariinye scratched his chin and circled the two familiar figures. "Well, they do flicker sometimes. What are they? Tourist attractions?" "Noooo," Maati punched him lightly on the forearm. "Course not. They're to, well, be go-betweens for the real people."

"Go-betweens to what?" Thariinye asked.

"What's the matter with you?" Maati demanded. "Have you gone soft in the head from too much easy living? Go-betweens to each other, of course!"

Thariinye groaned. "I was afraid of that. You don't think it will actually work, do you? These things wouldn't fool either of them for more than a moment or two if they have their wits about them."

"That's why we wanted your help," Maati said. "You're the one who made me think of it. How do we make it work?"

"Work?" he asked. "Why ask me? I don't know anything about holograms."

"No," Maati said, "But according to you, you know all about loooove," she drew the word out mockingly and he gave her a look that would have sent older and more susceptible girls running away in tears. She just laughed back up at him and the other children giggled.

"Of course I know more than a lot of infant younglings," he said. "What is it that you need to know about it? And how does it concern your little holo dollies?" He flipped his fingers at the life-size holograms as if they were no bigger than his foot.

"We need to know what Khornya should say to Aari and what Aari should say to Khornya to get them together, of course!" Maati said. She did not seem to be getting the idea that she was a mere child being put in her place. She acted as if he was the one who was being stupid. He didn't much care for it, but as her words sank in, he did see -what the children -were trying to do.

"Oh," he said. "Well, she should tell him that she loves him and why and he-er-should do the same."

"But how would they say it without sounding corny?" Jana asked. Maati and Thariinye had both been speaking in Standard for the benefit of the others. Maati's Standard was quite good by now, he noticed, no doubt the result of her prolonged association with the other younglings.

A young male the others called Laxme tapped some keys on his control pad and the Aari figure swung toward the Acorna holo and said, in a comic mockery of Aari's own voice, "Oh, kiss me, my sweetie pie," and made sounds like hooves pulling out of a mud puddle.

Thariinye was indignant. "Stop that at once!" he said.

Laxme shrank back into himself as if he expected to be hit.

"He was just playing, showing you how it worked," Jana said softly.

"I know, but Aari is a brave man, the bravest man my people have ever produced probably, and I'll not have him and Khornya ridiculed, not even by friends."

"That's -why we wanted your help," Maati said. "To make them do and say the right things."

"What right things?" Thariinye asked.

"You know-to get them together. You say you're this big expert on luu-uuve. So you should know, right?"

He glared at his former shipmate. "I know how to attract a girl to me," he said. "But, uh-" he lowered his voice and spoke out of the side of his mouth so just Maati could hear, "as you'll remember, it didn't work with Khornya."

"Maybe not, but she's already attracted to Aari. We just have to have his hologram to encourage her, and vice versa. So what things should they say?"

"First of all," Thariinye told her, "You'll have to have the holograms appear to them after they've been sleeping for a while so that they're groggy and won't notice the shimmering."

"That's what we were going to do," Annella said. "But they don't shimmer that much."

Thariinye ignored her. He was thinking hard. "I know," he said. "I think I can find just the thing. Wait a bit."

He returned about a half hour later carrying the book of ancient European literature Aan had been reading.

For the next several hours, Jana read aloud and the others argued the use of this passage or that, 'while -Maati and Thariinye, with the use of the LAANYE, attempted to translate the agreed-upon phrases into Linyaari. Once they decided on the phrases, they had to program the holos to move properly.

"They should look seductive, but mustn't touch a real person, of course," Thariinye said. "They should lead Aari and Khornya to a real place together to continue in person ..."

"Or a holo place!" Annella said, "None of the holo suites in the hotels are filled yet, since we haven't had a single new guest, just the people who came with the caravan and they all have their own quarters."

Mac's performance and function had been greatly increased by his recent upgrades and education, and he knew the captain was pleased. Becker had puzzled him somewhat when Mac had shut himself down in the captain's absence with Nadhari Kando. "I thought you'd keep working on the shuttle, Mac," the Captain had said. "Not exactly a self-starter, are you?"

"No, sir, though I do shut myself down to conserve energy."

"I want you working on that shuttle day and night, whether I'm here or not. So program that and don't worry about conserving energy. There's energy to burn in this place and I don't think Harakamian will begrudge you some if it saves our butts in the long run."

"Yes, sir," Mac had responded. And he had of course been following instructions ever since. If he could have felt regret, it was that now most of his social interaction was in the Khieevi fashion. He had repaired the transmitter some time ago, though he had not used it yet, as he had not been instructed to do so.

But he practiced, nevertheless, imitating, interpreting, assimilating, and integrating the klicking and klackings until he used them-if only to himself-quite as easily as he conversed in Standard and Linyaari.

He 'was left alone a great deal these days. The captain and the cat spent increasing amounts of their time with the denizens of the Moon of Opportunity, particularly with Ms. Kando. Sometimes they had their get-togethers aboard the ConPor, but since Ms. Kando needed to be available to her staff, many times the three of them shared her off-duty time -with her in her quarters or in one of the hotel rooms available in the compound. Aari and Acorna were busy elsewhere as well, and the few times -when any of the Linyaari had come aboard, the initial smell, the noise emitted by the shuttle, its corn unit's volume on high so Mac could hear it as he moved about the ship, seemed to distress them and they left again quickly, particularly •when Mac accidentally greeted Aari with Khieevi klackings.

So it was that he was alone when he heard the ships sounding off, a roll call of attack, heard the staccato klickety-klackklack of orders passed from one unit to another. The essence was that the planet of Nirii, around which the fleet had

been gathering, was now being attacked, the fleet swarming down upon it much as hungry insects were said to do on some particularly appropriate foodstuff.

Mac listened with interest. Had he been capable of it, he might have been excited. He was still listening when Becker returned.

"Hi, Mac, can you turn that damned thing down? It sounds like an army of tap dancers landing on a flat wooden planet."

"Oh, no, Captain, nothing like that. The sound is simply that of the Khieevi invading the planet of the two-horned bovine beings. They are passing communications among their various ships, attempting to first conquer major cities and defense outposts, and to an extent prevent any possible escape by inhabitants. Their efforts are concentrated primarily on the attack however."

"Great galloping gravity, Mac, why didn't you say so?"

"You did not instruct me to do so. Captain."

"Do I have to tell you everything?"

Mac was pleased to now be able to employ one of the captain's own idiomatic phrases, "Yes, sir. Pretty much."

"Right. Okay. You keep monitoring that thing-remember everything you hear. I gotta go see a man about a drone."

Hafiz was explaining why the drone -was not yet in space as he had assured Becker it -would be with all possible dispatch. "I was preparing my message, dear Becker."

"Your message? How long can it take to say, 'The Khieevi are coming, the Khieevi are coming, lock and load or get the hell out now7.' "

"You don't understand, my boy. Even such public service messages carry delicate nuances. And of course, we did not know exactly -when or where they were coming, did we?"

"Now we have a pretty good idea, though. They're chowing down on the cowboy planet right now."

"Cowboy planet?"

Becker stuck a forefinger from each hand up beside his temple and wiggled them. "Two horns like cows, get it?"

"Ahh, the Nirriians. Yes, I have heard they have excellent organic technology."

"It stinks, if you ask me, but nobody deserves to have the bugs on top of them and that's what's happening right now. So, is the drone going up or do I have to take the ConSor up and make like Paul Revere?"

"Paul who, dear boy? And what was he revered for, exactly? "

"Getting his drone up before the enemy had a chance to eat every planet in the galaxy, that's -what. Now then, do you think you can finish your message?"

"Certainly."

"Good. I'll just wait then and carry it out to the drone for you."

Hafiz turned on his recorder and rewound. "Let me see, where was I, oh yes, 'This urgent humanitarian -warning is brought to you through the kindness and beneficence of the Federation's foremost philanthropic economic ambassadorial firm, House Harakamian.' "

"A commercial"}" Becker demanded. "You held off putting the drone into space while you made a commercial?"

Hafiz spread his hands -with an elegant shrug. "I am in commerce after all, dear boy."

"Not for long if the bugs attack us," Becker said grimly.

"Ah, an excellent point. Very well, I shall continue."

The message concluded, "The dastardly insect creatures of torture, doom, and enormous appetite, the Khieevi, are known to be attacking the Nirriian homeworld. Any who dare assist the Nirriians, feel free to do so, please, -with our commendations and blessings. All others in the same quadrant might think seriously about evacuation or defense, as your culture dictates."

Becker gave him a disgusted look, but said only, "Good. Now then, that should be translated to all of the languages of the nearby races. I don't expect, since -we're making first contact here, more or less, their Standard is going to be really up to par."

"Ah! A good point." He clapped his hands. A servant appeared. "Please fetch our Linyaari guests-all of them. Ask them to bring their clever translation devices and tell them it is a matter of some urgency."

Hours later, -which seemed like months to Becker, each Linyaari had contributed a translation of the message in all of the languages each of them knew. Since all but Maati and Acorna had spent considerable time visiting nearby planets at some point in their lives, they felt they had pretty much covered it.

Meanwhile, Nadhari and her staff went on red alert, and to the whine of the sirens, the first evacuation drill began, just as the drone was shot into space.

The Balakiire had not yet landed on the first planet on the list of those to be warned when they heard a broadcast that at once made their mission and their caution futile and provided them with a new mission.

Oddly, this new mission began in a similar fashion to their present one.

"Mayday, Mayday! This is the Niriian vessel Fo^en broadcasting a Mayday to all worlds and ships in the area. Our homeworld is under attack. The Khieevi have landed. Our ship escaped before the invasion. Mayday! Come in, please." With a glare at Liriili, Neeva picked up the communication device.

"Please give us your coordinates, Fo^en. The Linyaari ship Balakiire, is reading you loud and clear."

The Niriian gave the Fo^en's coordinates. "Hurry, Balakiire. We are nearly out of fuel and air. We were on our way in for both when the Khieevi attack commenced. The Khieevi have covered our cities like sweet-bugs converging on their hive."

"We are coming, Fo^en. Please do not send additional communication unless we request it or you are in further distress. To do so may alert the Khieevi to your- and our-position. Signal that you have understood and then please, silence unless we contact you."

"Understood, Balakiire. Be swift, be swift, please."

Liriili snorted. "I suppose we will join them just in time for a Khieevi attack."

"Perhaps," Neeva said. "But I, for one, hope not. At least their signal should be heard by nearby worlds and other craft, so our personal warnings to those worlds will not be necessary."

"I wonder what they will make of it on narhii-Vhiliinyar," Liriili said with a bitter smile. "I warned them."

"Yes, you did, and fortunately, with you no longer in charge, they will probably ready the evacuation ships, refuel the fleet, gather the lifeforms, and prepare to leave narhii-Vhiliinyar in the direction farthest from the Niriian world. I suspect they may fly into Federation space. That will be the recommendation of those of us who have been in contact with the peoples of that alliance."

"Yes, and they "will come with their weapons, disrespecting the principles the Ancestors taught us."

Melireenya turned in her seat and stared at the former viizaar, "What is it with you? You are not satisfied one way or the other. Would the destruction of our people please you now that you have been deemed unfit to lead them?"

Liriili gave her a superior smile but didn't answer. Neeva was becoming alarmed by the woman's attitude. Instead of helping her heal, this entire experience was driving her more and more into herself. She -was so aloof there was no question of touching her with a horn to try to heal her and besides, she seemed to be resistant to the usual bonding that cohered the Linyaari.

The next hours were spent in preparation to take the Niriians aboard. The Balakiire had no fuel to give them, and their ships were fueled somewhat differently. Extra berths were prepared, the gardens hyper-planted with varieties of plants the Ninians "were known to favor.

The Niriians were pathetically glad to see their Linyaari allies, and also somewhat shame-faced. "VLfe^haanye-Ferlili Neeva," the captain of the Niriian ship began. "We heard you and your crew had been taken into custody by false authorities. Please know that our lives are yours from this day forward and we will defend you always to any-"

She choked, sputtered, swallowed, and continued. "I was about to say, to any who seek you on our planet. But it is unlikely we will have a home to return to."

"Which brings up a good question," Khaari interjected. "Where should we go now? Return to narhii-Vhiliinyar?"

"Yes, but we should emulate Captain Becker and take evasive action, don't you think, rather than returning directly? In case the Khieevi have spared any ships to follow the Fo^en."

"A lot of good it did the junk man," Liriili sneered.

"How do you know what good it did him?" Khaari demanded. "We don't know what became of anyone yet."

But they were to learn very shortly. On the other side of the wormhole, they picked up a broadcast.

The first portion was in Standard, and while the Balakiire's crew were putting their heads together trying to remember enough of that language to decipher the message, it was rebroadcast in other languages.

The Nirriians became agitated, "They know! They know about the attack! Perhaps they will send help. They are speaking our tongue!"

Neeva looked up. Khaari said, "I know that voice! That's Thariinye speaking!"

"He's alive!" Melireenya said.

"Of course he is," Lirili said. "I told all of you that he would be perfectly all right, and no doubt the brat is as well."

The language switched again, this time to Linyaari, and Neeva smiled widely. "That's Khornya."

They recognized other voices as the broadcasts were repeated in other languages-Aari's and those of Miiri and Kaarlye, which made Khaari, who was related to Kaarlye on her mother's side, sigh with relief.

When the Standard broadcast was repeated, Neeva said, "I know that voice, too. Doesn't that sound like Khornya's kind and generous uncle Hafiz? He spoke before we parted of starting a trade colony on that moon where we went to recuperate after-"

The other two nodded, indicating she needed to be no more specific. "That must surely be where they all are now."

"I have the coordinates right here, Neeva," Melireenya's voice practically sang. "Perhaps he can contact the Federation and they will drive the Khieevi away." She smiled up at the Nirriians. "Your world may be saved yet."

They clasped each other so tightly their horns locked. "Only let it be so," the captain said fervently.

Acorna 'was awakened by a brilliant light shining in her eyes. She opened them wide. She was very tired, having spent the day formulating evacuation plans for the children. The first shipload carrying the youngest ones was to leave in two days' time with Calum on the AcaSecki. The crew of the Haven would send their youngest along too, but the older ones insisted they would stay and fight. Acorna had also done translations of follow-up messages to broadcast in the languages she knew-Linyaari of course, but also Federation-based languages. The Khieevi



had invaded Federation space once in search of Linyaari, who was to say they would not do it again?

The tension and her efforts both had •wearied her until she had fallen onto her cot too tired to say goodnight to Maati.

Now the light awakened her and her first thought was that she was being wakened because the compound was under attack.

Aari knelt beside her, a few feet from her sleeping pad. He looked rather odd, but not especially alarmed. Maati, on the other side of Acorna from her brother, was rolled onto her side and covered completely by her blanket. She did not seem to notice the light. Acorna rubbed her eyes. "What is it, Aari? Is something the matter?" she whispered.

"Hark!" he said.

"What?" she asked, thinking for one ridiculous moment that he might break into a holiday carol, though she had no idea why he would unless he had been inspired by something he had been reading. But the archaic term was the only word he uttered in Standard. The rest was in Linyaari.

"What light is breaking through the pavilion flap over there? It is the suns and Khornya is the moons!" he asked in a very soft version of their rather nasal native language. Evidently this was not, then, an alarm, unless it was perhaps in some sort of code.

Otherwise, oh dear, she had to wonder if perhaps he might have a fever? An infection perhaps? Or a poisoning? She had no idea really which dangers he might be more susceptible to, without his horn, than the average Linyaari.

"Aari, are you all right?" she asked. "You look rather well, no pale, but see-throughish. I don't like the texture of your skin. And what you are saying does not entirely make sense. Here, let me feel your pulse. . . ."

But he backed away a bit, babbling, "A reed is a reed by any other name and would still not smell very much but be as graceful and delicious as Khornya." He beckoned her to follow. Which she did because whether his strange utterances were a code for danger or because he was ill, she could hardly ignore them.

Aari thought at first he must be dreaming. Khornya knelt a short distance from his sleeping mat. She was surrounded by a very bright light, as if perhaps she'd taken .radiation, and was looking at him with a yearning that echoed that he felt whenever he looked at her.

"Khornya!" he said, when she did not speak. "Khornya, is something wrong? Are the Khieevi attacking?" He looked for Thariinye, to waken and warn him, but the other man was not on his mat. This was not unusual for Thariinye. He had been gone a great deal lately, working on translations and evacuation procedures and also apparently chatting up females, even if they were the wrong species, just to keep in practice, as he said.

Khornya did not answer him directly but instead said something very strange. He thought it might be code, but if so, no one had given him the key.

"How do I love you?" she asked in Linyaari. "Let me count the trails! I love the very ions scattered behind your vessel. I love the fragrance of the grains on which you sup. I love the-

"You do?" Aari asked, comprehending that what she said was complimentary if not particularly coherent, evidently not code, but her own pent-up feelings. Her tone of voice was rather declaiming and he could not read her at all. But then, there were times when that happened to him. "But-I have no horn."

"I love the horn you do not have and the horn you used to have and the horn you will have again," she continued, rather than answering him. "Come, my love, let us wander into a secluded bower and there take our ease, if you know what I mean?" Very un-Khornya-like, she wagged a silver-white eyebrow and winked at him. He wondered if perhaps Hafiz's gardens had inadvertently been planted with a stand of what was called "loco weed" in the ancient Zane Grey novels of the wild western America.

Either that or it was some peculiar female mating ritual his mother had neglected to tell him about. Well, there was no time to consult her now. Khornya was wafting away and he could not let her wander around this huge alien compound in such a state. Someone might take unfair advantage of her. He rose to follow her.

She flitted ahead of him like one of the ectoplasmic entities of the wraith-haunted ruined -world of Waali Waali his parents had taken him to as a child. Back in the early days of terraforming technology, a powerful company had rapidly terraformed planets, raised great cities upon them, and settled •whole transplanted civilizations upon their surfaces, where they thrived and bred, loved and warred for several eons. And then the terraforming destabilized, the ice caps melted, the seas froze, the mountains erupted, and the ground opened and buckled. The cities were ruined and the people were killed, but the heavy gravity kept them bound to the surface, which had an indelible memory of the former grandeur of its cities imprinted upon its ruins. A similar, more tangible memory of its inhabitants, now bodiless spirits seeking some solid vessel in -which to be reborn, flickered about the ruins in the same "way Khornya's white form was now

kindled, now quenched, as she wound her way through the ornamental back alleys of Hafiz's compound.

He could only follow, the winds and rain of Dr. Hoa's climactically generated monsoon soaking through his mane, his steps clicking quickly up cobbled steps leading through narrow passages and by doorways shrouded -with night-velveted rugs and blankets, their patterns picked out golden with the light of the holo-torches from the main thoroughfares. Suddenly he saw Khornya's -white form disappear through a doorway and he found it, concealed by a waterfall of luminous beads, then he too quickly entered.

He threaded through -what seemed a maze, except that instead of blank walls, there were more often curtains, blankets, rugs, beads, and once, the side of a large gray beast with flapping ears, long curving fangs, a nose like a snake, legs like pillars, and small, disinterested eyes that regarded him mildly, then returned to contemplating the infinite. Aari passed the beast, but when he looked back, all he saw was blackness.

He began to -wonder and to fear. Perhaps he was still in the Khieevi torture machine, and his mind -was playing cruel tricks on him, all of this a mere illusion to build his hope, to give him a dream they could cruelly dash? But--well, no. He didn't hurt. That was a sure sign there were no Khieevi. When he had been with the Khieevi the pain -was always -with him and now there -was nothing but his body, feeling whole and quite astonishingly alive, and the night, and Khornya flickering ahead of him, a beckoning candle.

Abruptly, her white form twinkled out ahead of him and then, much farther than he thought she could have gone in such a brief instant, he heard her call, "Aari?" in a rather plaintive and childish voice. He rushed forward.

"Khornya? "

"Aari, where are you?" she sounded not frightened but anxious.

"Right behind you. I'll be there in a moment," he called, and he -was. Suddenly he found himself facing her across not a room, but a moonlit field, much like the ones he remembered from Vhiliinyar when he -was a boy. The moons shone down through mist rising from a free-flowing stream, and night birds crooned softly from the boughs of scattered trees. Khornya stood near one of the trees beside the stream, and noted his arrival with relief.

"There you are!"

"Of course I am." He went to her. He -was relieved to see she seemed healthier and more substantial than she had at first appeared in his pavilion. Her skin radiated warmth and the sweet clean floral smell she carried with her. But there -

was another more enticing scent emanating from her as well. She looked up at him with her eyes wide and shining as the moons and her mouth moist.

"I feared you wouldn't come back," she said softly.

"Against love's fire fear's frost hath dissolution," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's something I read recently," he told her, his hand running through her mane, the backs of his fingers stopping to feel the curve of her cheek. "It seemed appropriate."

She sighed. "It sounds better in Standard."

"I will ask my parents to tell me Linyaari love poetry and fill your ears with it, if that's what you want," he said, realizing that the language of love must have been what she'd been trying to speak when she was in his tent. She was right, even with the meaning rather unclear, the poetry from the books he'd been reading did sound much better in Standard.

"That is not all I want," she said, her voice husky and her breath sweet.

He felt parts of himself he'd thought dead rushing to fill his veins with life as hot and strong, as urgent as magma seeking to escape a volcanic fissure. She lifted her arms, almost as if in a trance, and he took her into his own and held her. Her sweet musky scent swept over him as they slid together into the wildflower sprinkled grass, which was not damp and dewy as he expected, but as warm and comforting as a blanket.

Annella and Maati let out a sigh at the same time. Jana pulled them away from the control booth for the holo suite. She had Laxme by the ear. Thariinye lingered a little until Maati reached back and snagged his arm.

"They deserve a little privacy," she said.

"I maybe should have given him a few more pointers before we started this," Thariinye said.

"There was no time," Laxme said. "They're going to make us leave pretty soon and we had to finish it-get them together before whatever is going to happen, happens."

"Looked to me like he was doing-they both were doing- just fine, without your advice," Maati told Thariinye. "And we should leave them to do it."

Jana grinned at her. "I think you're wise beyond your years, Maati."

"Someone has to be," Maati said, with a meaningful look at Thariinye.

Feeling quite pleased with themselves and considering their good deed a job - well done, the group of young people emerged from the Spanish-Moorish castle that housed the grandest of the holo hotels. The curtain swags and bead-draped maze of back streets through which Aari and Acorna had followed each other's doppelganger was the hotel lobby. The suite Aari and Acorna occupied now was on the second floor. The field of fragrant flowers and grass was actually a rather nice Turkomoon carpet, the stream an en suite lap pool, in case they wanted to bathe after their . . . activities.

No sooner had they emerged however, than Maati realized the air smelled subtly different-she recognized the smell too. It was the smell of ships landing. Linyaari ships. She recognized it even before she heard the boots pounding in concerted double time down the street from the spaceport.

With each stroke of the hand, each gentle nip of teeth or lap of tongue, Acorna felt more and more bonded to Aari, as if they -were exchanging their very molecules, which of course, they -were, romantic as the thought might sound. It didn't feel unromantic however. The urges that had been mysteriously rising in her, troubling her dreams, thrilling her at inappropriate moments, were all about thi). This exquisite agonizing ache that made her feel as if she would burst from her skin if something didn't happen. She knew Aari felt the same -way and yet, he hesitated.

"If we-continue," he said. "There will be no going back."

"Why would I want to go back?" she asked. "You are my lifemate. I think I've always known that."

"Really? I didn't think-I couldn't hope-"

She shushed him with a kiss and they moved so that she was poised above him, his hands on her waist.

"Now, beloved?" he asked.

She bit her lower lip and nodded emphatically, "Yes. Now."

The double-quick pounding boots rounded the corner and the security forces halted with two quick and perfectly synchronized stomps. Nadhari Kando paced effortlessly at the head of the cadre and Captain Becker pantingly trailed behind the buff and ready cream of planetary militia from Federation -worlds.

Nadhari glared at the children. "It is long after curfew."

"What curfew?" Jana asked, innocently.

"Were you not at the briefing at twenty hundred hours this evening?" Nadhari asked. "We have a red alert situation and a curfew is in effect until further notice."

"So what're you gonna do, shoot us?" Laxme demanded. He liked being free after his childhood in the mines. He did not take kindly to orders, even from the good guys. Or gals.

Nadhari pursed her lips and regarded him seriously. "No, but you could ask Becker's friend Aari how much fun it is to not be where you're supposed to when the evacuation starts and be left behind when the Khieevi attack."

None of the kids said anything and Nadhari continued. "Now then, Maati, Thariinye, you are to report to the reception area. The Balaklire has just landed and they are very anxious to see that all of you are alive and well. I need to find Aari and Acorna, too."

Becker grimaced and told Maati, "That witch of an administrator came on the Balakiire, too. I bet the Linyaari couldn't take her on the planet anymore. But Neeva really wants to see everybody and make sure you're all okay."

"I'll go tell her Khornya is okay," Maati said. With a wicked grin she added, "Thariinye can fill Liriili .in."

"No, that's okay," Becker said. "Just tell us where Acorna is and I'll get her."

Thariinye's glance strayed toward the hotel entrance and Becker asked, "Are they still in there? Why didn't you say so?"

"Good. I'll fetch them," Nadhari said, and before anyone could stop her she pushed past them and entered the hotel. Moments later she emerged, looking most uncharacteristically embarrassed and shame-faced. "Why didn't you tell me they were-uh-occupied? " she demanded. "I thought you had all been playing a game or having a meeting or something! What were you doing, using their rendezvous as a training class?"

Maati's face fell. "Noooo, we were trying to get them together. And we did, too. And now it's all ruined!"

"Uh-not entirely," Nadhari said. "Not from what I saw. But I certainly spoiled the mood."

Annella groaned. "It took us weeks to set that up."

"Set what up?" Becker asked suspiciously, but Annella, Markel, and Jana were shaking their heads slightly that Maati should say no more.

In a few minutes, Aari and Acorna walked purposefully from the hotel, as if they had been interrupted in nothing more personal than a meeting, except that every once in a while one of them would steal a look at the other one. And smile. Or sigh. Or get lost in looking and stumble.

Nadhari said nothing as she led the way back to the spaceport. Becker talked rather a lot.

The Niriiian refugees endured the Linyaari reunion and the subsequent confusing introductions as well as they could, until at last they met someone whose name they recognized. "And this," Neeva said, "Is Mr. Hafiz Harakamian."

"The Hafiz Harakamian of the message?" they cried, and faced him with broad smiles. "Ah, it is you, exalted sir, who will save our world and our people. But it must be done quickly. Many die even as we stand here -wasting time with these formalities."

Neeva translated and Hafiz smiled broadly back at his guests. "I am very sorry for the plight of your planet, dear alien beings, but you see, I am a merchant. While it was within my power to provide you and the neighboring worlds with a warning about the Khieevi menace, I am not a -warrior or a warlord, merely a humble tradesman."

This was the point when Khornya was sorely missed. Neeva understood Niriiian very well indeed, but she missed many of the nuances of Hafiz's speech.

"He says he can't save them," Neeva said. "He is no -warrior, merely a rich merchant." Hafiz caught her look and saw that he had fallen somewhat in her estimation. The Niriiians weren't buying it, however. They set themselves even more squarely in front of him and stuck their round jaws out a bit and smiled even more broadly and determinedly.

"Sister-child's father's sister-brother Hafiz," Neeva said, for had he himself not said he felt as if he were related to the Linyaari as he was to Khornya herself -therefore he would naturally also be related to Neeva. "I must tell you that these Niriiians are very stubborn people. Once they put their minds to a thing, they do not budge until they have achieved their goals."

"Most admirable," Hafiz said nodding and smiling still. "But their tenacity cannot change the facts."

At this impasse, Nadhari Kando and Captain Becker and the little cadre of security troops Nadhari commanded marched into the reception area. With them were a gaggle of children including Maati, as well as Thariinye, Aari, and Khornya.

"My husband is a merchant, as he has explained to you elevated alien beings," Karlina Harakamian now addressed the Niruans with an apologetic flutter of lilac-and-violet draperies and a sparkle of amethyst-jeweled hands. "Surely you would not wish him to subject himself and those he protects to the same fate your planet has met? Hafiz is a genius at accumulating and distributing useful things and services. The idea of the sort of mass destruction the Khieevi wreak is abhorrent to him, but also totally incomprehensible. I don't know how you could possibly imagine he could be of assistance."

Liruli had a fine curl to her lip and to " Neeva, said in Linyaari, "It is as I suspected. Your great hero-our adopted 'uncle'-is perfectly willing to trade with us but as far as being a true friend of anyone but himself-hah!"

Neeva tried valiantly not to let the disappointment show in her eyes as she murmured to the unflinching Niriians.

Acorna was roused from her bemusement by this exchange, and separated herself from Aari and the others to go stand next to Hafiz.

To Liriili she said, "That is not fair. Uncle Hafiz is responsible for the lives of all of the people here and their welfare has to be his first consideration. And he and Captain Becker have been making some strides in perhaps finding a way to combat the Khieevi without risking more lives."

"Is that so?" Liriili demanded. And before anyone could stop her, she translated a version of what Acorna had said to the Niriians. The result of this was that one of them, following Acorna's glance to where Becker stood beside Nadhari, reached out a muscular arm and hauled Becker into a great crushing hug.

Liriili smirked. "Our allies say the junk man is their hero and surely if he knows a way to fight the Khieevi, he will use it quickly to save what is left of their world."

Acorna translated to Becker, "They want you to use the methods we have discovered to fight the Khieevi now, Captain, to save the rest of their -world."

"Okay, okay!" Becker hollered. "Just tell them to let me go! We'll talk."

This time Thariinye stepped in to translate, adding his usual flourishes.

The Niriian did not loosen its grip on Becker.



"What did you say?" Aari asked Thariinye. "It's not working."

"I told them the captain was a great hero and had already slain many Khieevi and would save their homeworld with the help of the philanthropist Uncle Hafiz."

"Tell them they have to let Captain Becker go before he can help them," Acorna suggested.

Thariinye spoke to the Niriians again and the one who held Becker released him with such an enthusiastic clap on the back that the captain staggered into the arms of Nadhari Kando, and stepped on the cat's tail as he stumbled.

RK rewarded him by opening his leg from kneecap to ankle.

Nadhari patted Becker absently and shoved him gently aside to pick up the cat and croon to it. "Your servant meant no disrespect, sacred feline. Is your magnificent tail broken?" She looked at the nearest Linyaari, -who happened to be Lirili. "Please heal the tail of the sacred temple cat."

Lirili, much to the surprise of anyone who was paying attention to her, abandoned her goading behavior of the rest of the humans to add one of her hands to Nadhari's in RK's thick fur, cradle his tail in the other hand, and gently lowered her horn to touch it. The cat immediately began purring and rubbed his cheek against Lirili's.

"If that isn't adding insult to injury!" Becker yowled, clutching his bloody pant leg.

Aan scowled at Thariinye, who quickly stopped jabbering to the Niriians and knelt beside Becker. "Sorry, Captain, allow me." He placed Becker's foot upon his own bent knee and ran his horn the length of the cat scratch.

Becker let out a long sigh of relief.

Lirili was crooning to RK. "I had a little pahaantiyir once and you are very like him, sacred temple cat, yes, you are, you lovely creature!" Tears were actually coming to her eyes now. "Oh, how I wish he were with me now, my little friend, when I am surrounded by ill-wishers."

RK purred as if he had found a new best friend.

"Traitor," Becker growled.

Come, my friends, let us refresh ourselves in the gardens and discuss this brilliant plan of ours." Hafiz waggled an eyebrow at Becker, but the eye under the brow was extremely skeptical.

Of course, Becker didn't really have a plan. Acorna knew that. But between the experiences the current crew of the Condor had and the skills and resources of Hafiz Harakamian, Acorna saw the components of a rather good plan taking form. All it took to formulate -was for everyone involved to pool their resources.

As the others trailed off behind Hafiz, Acorna fetched Mac. "The captain told me I should remain here, Acorna, and monitor the Khieevi broadcasts."

"You are recording them, aren't you?" Acorna asked.

Yes.

"Then you can listen to the recordings when you return. We need you now, MacKenZ. Captain Becker is going to explain to Uncle Hafiz how we can defeat the Khieevi."

"Oh, that would be most instructive. I am grateful you thought to bring me, Acorna."

She smiled and eased him away from the Khieevi shuttle. He had spent so long with it the smell had permeated him and she had to stop and give him a once-over -with her horn to erase the unpleasant odor.

"Of course you must come, Mac. Without you and your skills, we would not have a hope of defeating the Khieevi."

"Now then, Captain, we are all eager to hear your plan," Neeva said.

"Ye-es, dear fellow," Hafiz said. "Please enlighten us."

"Oh, you're part of it, too. Uncle Hafiz," Acorna assured him. "In fact, we can't do it without Uncle Hafiz's holographic magic can -we, Captain Becker?"

"Uh-no, of course not," Becker agreed.

They sat on low cushioned chairs positioned near the fountain. Servers brought delicacies for the humans, while the Niriians and the Linyaari -were invited to pluck -whatever appealed to them from the bounty of the lush gardens surrounding the pool into -which the -waters splashed from the horn of a unicorn, rampant. The Linyaari who had not yet seen this fountain regarded it with wonder, even Liriili. This was not the usual way in which homage was paid to the Ancestors, but no doubt the Ancestors would approve.

"And as I was telling Mac, we can't do without his skills. Of course, if Aari had not made an effort to recall all he knew of the Khieevi, had not concentrated so hard on the piyl that was, I am sorry to say, Toroona and Byorn, the legacy of one of

your brave crews, we would never have learned their language or anything about how they function." The Niriians were actually a mated couple, female and male, rather than two males as those unacquainted with the species had assumed. Becker was surprised to find that his ribs had almost been broken by Toroona, the female.

"Yeah," Becker said, "Aari found out about another important part of the plan too. Namely that a substance we discovered while on a salvage mission is toxic to the Khieevi. And what Kaariye and Miiri have been doing is analyzing the damage to the corpses as well as the effects of the substance on other things. What have you folks come up with anyway?"

"We are still exploring possible ways to synthesize the substance, Captain, and to utilize it in a controlled fashion outside its native environment."

"That's okay," Becker said. " 'Cause the truth is, there's nothing wrong with using it in its native environment. See, it's this vine world, full of these big plants that secrete the sap that eats through the Khieevi shells. The way I figure it, if Hafiz here can make use of his holos to make the vine world appear to be like a Linyaari outpost or something, and Mac can persuade the Khieevi that he's one of their guys who survived in the shuttle we've been-well, Mac's been-studying, and we can set up drones and such to make it seem inhabited, then the Khieevi will maybe leave the Niriians to come to the vine world, and the vines will attack 'em, sap 'em, and no more Khieevi."

Everyone agreed that it was a brilliant plan. Almost all of it could be carried out by remote control, once the vine world had been prepared to look inhabited. The only danger was that the vine world was closer to both the Moon of Opportunity and to narhii-Vhiliinyar than the Niriiian homeworld, but they could not, of course, let that weigh too heavily against the lives of any Niriians still surviving the initial Khieevi attack.

The Niriians listened anxiously to the translations, their faces stoic, but when they spoke at last their words sounded urgent.

"Time is of the essence," Neeva interpreted. "They implore us to begin implementing the plan immediately."

The Moon of Opportunity shut down its recreational functions and trade centers. Personnel were reassigned to emergency functions. If the plan worked as everyone hoped it would, security, medical, and reconstruction teams would be sent to Nirii following the destruction of the Khieevi.

Aboard the ConSor, Mac reassembled the Khieevi shuttle.

Kaarlye and Miiri continued their experimentation with the sap and their studies of Khieevi anatomy and physiology in the laboratory.

The children were assigned to either the AcaBecki or the Haven for evacuation. However, Annella Carter, Markel, and Jana were remaining as long as possible in order to help Hafiz prepare the necessary holograms.

"We must simulate a civilization sufficiently luscious to induce salivation among the Khieevi," Hafiz instructed his pupils. "We shall transfer the holos of Linyaari pavilions to nestle them among the vines. We will also need to use the Baiakiire as a model for simulating other Linyaari vessels of different designs."

"Oh, goody," Annella said. "It will be like decorating giant Easter eggs!"

"Also, we must have holos of individuals-Linyaari and the Nirnans. We can do several sims of each of the Linyaari guests and hope the Khieevi will not be aware of the duplication."

"We already have done ones of Aari and Acorna," Annella told Hafiz.

"Have you?" Hafiz asked. "That is excellent. Excellent indeed."

"Yes, and we can do me and Thariinye next," Maati said. "Except I want my holo to be really large and fierce."

"Why bother?" Thariinye said. "All they have to do is make an ^altered holo of Lirilli and she'll probably frighten the Khieevi into leaving a slime trail all the way back to their homeworld."

Seventeen

The first invasion of the vine world was both human and Linyaari. Acorna, moving gently among the fragrant vines, felt remorseful for what her people -were about to bring upon this self-contained ecology.

The plants felt far less alien this time, and far more friendly, now that she knew what their sap could do to Khieevi. She had scarcely noticed before how exquisitely beautiful the flowers were, with their petals shaded from cream to ivory to milky white and translucent, with the barest hints of pink near the stamen.

The scent did not seem so overpowering as it had before. Instead it was rather hypnotic, permeating her other senses so strongly that it seemed to be a color, a taste, a voice, as well as a smell. As technicians and scientists barged through the vines so quickly the plants whipped back and forth as if in a strong wind, Acorna merely held her hand aloft and the ropes of leaf and flower parted for her like a curtain. Perhaps she was thinking of these vines as saviors, champions, defenders of her kind against Khieevi kind, but they were altogether more attractive to her than on her last visit.

Kaarlye and Miiri led teams of volunteers in the harvesting of the sap. They brought containers, of course, but all that really needed was their own footwear and gloves, which collected plenty of the sticky substance as the people plowed through the vines.

Technicians carefully placed the drones that would transmit signals to lure the Khieevi away from the Niruans. These would be overlaid with holograms of Linyaari ships and pavilions being projected by other technicians while the programmed Linyaari holos began milling around among the holo-structures like so many ghosts.

Acorna found it quite startling -when she parted the vines with a small gesture to face herself on the other side of them, a self apparently kneeling to collect sap and murmuring oddsounding words. Acorna retreated two careful steps and the vines closed back over the projection.

"Hmmm," she said to herself, and returned to where the ships that had brought the technicians, scientists, and equipment were almost totally wrapped in vines.

"Captain, I think I may have learned something about these plants," she began.

"Yeah, well, save it, Princess. We got us a situation here. Most of the holos are being hidden by the vines. Except for the projections we can make from above, of the tents and the ships, and only the tops of them are showing, this is still looking pretty much like -what it is, a vine world. It's going to take either some earth-moving machines or some heavy machete work to clear spaces for the holos and then these things have a way of growing back. The only good thing about it is that mowing a few of them down will produce more sap. But how it's going to work for a decoy, I dunno." He scratched his mustache in a thoughtful way.

"Wait, Captain. Perhaps that won't be necessary. Perhaps we can communicate with them."

The Captain looked at her as if she were insane. "Acorna. Darling. Sweetie. Princess. Honey. Excuse me. You're a real bright kid, but they are plants. You eat them. You don't discuss strategy with them."

"Perhaps not. But if you use heavy equipment or even machetes to clear the area around the holos, then won't that defeat the purpose? Especially if the vines do not regenerate quickly enough in this area? Then the Khieevi will simply land in an area filled with holos, and once they discover that the bait is indeed, merely a collection of holograms, they will go back to the Niriians, or what will be worse for all of us, follow the projections back to the source and prey on the Moon of Opportunity instead."

The mustache bristled and Becker scratched it again. "OK. Guess we better have a council of war here."

Acorna made the same speech to Rafik, Gill, and via transmitter to Hafiz, orbiting the planetoid in the Ail Baba, one of his more modest vessels. Karina Harakamian, who had come along as the mission's "spiritual adviser," answered for Hafiz. "Of course, Acorna, dear, you are quite right to try gentle persuasion first. I will have the first officer transport me to the surface at once so that I may assist."

"How kind," Acorna said, quite insincerely, but there was no point in hurting Kanna's feelings. Fortunately, her new "auntie" was a mind reader only on very sporadic occasions, and those were never the ones Karina predicted or anticipated.

At Acorna's signal, the Balakiire landed beside the holos of the other Linyaari ships, some of them decorated with bunnies and flowers as well as the more usual rococo designs that symbolized the great families and heroes of the Linyaari people.

Thariinye and Maati, who had been setting up the smaller holos and who had also noted the problem of the vines obscuring them, responded to Acorna's mental summons, and Aari, who had been keeping her within sight as much as was possible, joined them.

"I don't suppose the LAANYE will be of any help here," Acorna said. "But I think we must try thought transference with the beings on this planet."

"The vines?" Aari asked.

"Yes," she said. "It came to me while I was out among them that they may communicate by their scent. Remember, the first time we came here, it was almost overpowering."

"It still is right around the ships, and where Captain Becker and the scientists are working," Maati said. "But I noticed as we got a little farther away, planting some of the holos, that the smell was actually kind of pretty."

"Sexy," Thariinye said.

-Maati put an elbow in his ribs. "Trust you to think so, even about vines!"

Aari shrugged. "I don't see what help I can be. I'm not very psychic without my-"

Acorna had to turn to face him as he was behind her, one hand resting lightly, reassuringly on one of her shoulders. "Aari," she said, staring, not into his eyes, but slightly above them.

The other Linyaari, including his parents, who had just arrived, panting, hefting their collection bags, followed her gaze. "Aari, what is that on your scar?" she asked, a little breathless with hope as she reached up to touch, thinking realistically that she would probably encounter a piece of a petal from one of the vine flowers. Her finger and his touched the little white protuberance at the same time.

"It's horn!" he said. "My horn is regenerating. The graft is finally taking."

(And I'll bet I know why,) Thariinye whispered, laughing.

Both Acorna and Aari blushed and Maati, who also picked up the whisper, stomped hard on Thariinye's foot.

Acorna embraced Aari and his parents and Maati touched him briefly.

Karina arrived. "I suppose we should start by everyone forming a circle!" she said brightly.

"Why?" everyone else asked, almost in unison.

"The better to commune, of course!" Karina said.

"With our species or yours maybe," Acorna told her gently. "But I think perhaps with these beings we might need to use different methods. One thing I do feel we must do, however, is to distance ourselves from the main part of the camp. The odor given off by the vines is the most overpowering and noxious near the ships."

Acorna led them into the vines, which parted almost politely before her and the others. They walked perhaps a half of a kilometer from the ships before Acorna stopped and inhaled.

"What do you smell?" she asked.

"It's nice here," Maati said. "Does that mean the plants here aren't as upset as the ones near the ships?"

"I don't know really," Acorna said. "It's just something I thought -we might try."

"It sounds pretty silly to me," Liriili said, though she had been unusually quiet until then. "How ever can you imagine that something can communicate with smells?"

Miin laughed. "What do you think -we do when -we're ready to mate, Liriili? Or other species for that matter? With pheromones!"

"It's not unheard of for species to communicate with something other than sound, after all," Neeva said. "Many do by sight, or touch, or, as we do ourselves, by thought alone. Had you spent more time investigating the universe around you, Liriili, you would know that."

Acorna said, "Now I remember! Ants! Little ants communicate by pheromones too-a fairly complex set of smells to give ", each other signals, indicate pathways, that sort of thing."

"Ye-es," Liriili said, sounding almost pleasant, "Of course."

Paha,ntiydr<f also leave scent marks on their territory, or for mating. I just never thought of it as communication before."

"Yes, well, live and learn," Neeva said as diplomatically as possible, clearly not wishing to discourage Liriili's willingness to consider for once that something someone else said might actually contain merit. "The problem is how we should interpret the scents given here."

"That probably won't be as hard," Acorna said, "As somehow managing to communicate with the plants themselves. But I wondered-if the scents symbolize their thought forms, perhaps we can find some common ground to teach them something about ours."

"Why?" Thariinye asked.

"There are many good reasons why one would wish to communicate with a new species, Thariinye," Neeva said. "But the specific one Khornya has in mind, I suspect, is so that we might

ask the vines to part and allow the holograms to be seen by the Khieevi."

"But first "we must find a common vocabulary," Khaan said. "What do we know about the vines? How could we show similarity?"



"We-ell," -Maati said, "If-we want them to part, maybe she should start with that. They come together and they spread apart. Maybe we can show that with each other."

"But they don't communicate by what they see," Liriili said, and for once she -was using a reasonable, if impatient, tone that only slightly hid the fact that she was as puzzled as any of the rest of them. "They communicate by smell."

"But they convey a thought, sort of," -Maati argued. Acorna thought the girl had matured a great deal since she had stopped being Liriili's messenger. She was much more confident now.

(Showing off for her parents,) Thariinye, catching Acorna's thought, -whispered to her uncharitably. But Aan scowled at him, as if he read the thought too, and Thariinye looked away as if the thought had been sent by someone else.

"Yes," Acorna agreed with Maati. "It is a thought form, however they express it and who knows? Maybe to the vines, we exude a scent too when we are thinking certain things. Only we'd be a lot more complicated for them to read, maybe, than they are for us. Let's try to simplify it for them. Everyone spread apart and concentrate, as we do so, that we are spreading apart."

"Our essential apartness," intoned Karina.

(Move gently, spread wide,) Acorna whispered. "Karina, think, 'Move gently, spread wide.' "

"A mantra! I love it!" Karina squealed. "Move gently, spread wide. Move gently, spread wide,"

"Softly," Acorna said. "In fact, don't say it, think it."

Karina nodded gravely and only moved her lips to the words.

The whisper was taken up by the others, in unison, (Move gently, spread wide). Their line spread until they could not touch outspread hands. As they moved at first the plants only parted to let each individual pass but gradually, as the people kept whispering, the vines softly lay themselves down upon each other until there was a large rectangular area open around the Linyaari and Karina.

When this concept seemed to be understood, Acorna said softly to Karina, who was on her right, while whispering to the others, (Close up, gather together, twining, tangling, plaiting).

The others took it up and gently came together, then pressed themselves in closer, Joining hands, lacing fingers, wrapping knees and feet around legs, hips,

and waists as tightly as possible-and then more tightly as the vines locked in around them, squeezing until Acorna gasped, "Move gently, spread wide" again and the others picked up the thought. It took the vines a breathtaking moment to realize that this time, they must spread first, but their scent lightened from the suffocatingly close aroma it had become while holding the Linyaari, and the vines spread once more.

"These plants are definitely sapient beings," Neeva said approvingly-and apparently somewhat fragrantly. The vines swayed gently back and forth, as if pleased, and emitted a light, sweet aroma.

"Good," Acorna said, "Because now we have to tell them about the Khieevi."

"Why?" Thariinye asked.

"And how," added JVlaati.

"Because," Aari said. "We are bringing the Khieevi among them to be killed, but the Khieevi may also kill many of the vine people. When we thought they -were not possessed of intelligence, then it seemed good to let the Khieevi graze here and be killed by the sap. But now that we bring this evil upon these beings, the least we can do is -warn them."

"Where are they going to go if they object?" Liriili asked archly.

"That is not the point," Neeva said. "Now that we know they are beings who would suffer from the Khieevi as we would, we naturally will continue Captain Becker's plan only with their cooperation."

"Which we will obtain how?" Liriili demanded with the same archness.

"My collection bag!" Miiri said suddenly. "Where is it?"

"There-among the vines," Kaariye said. "Mine too. They're open. Do you suppose the plants mind that we are taking the sap?"

"Perhaps they don't mind so much as-wonder -what we are doing with it," Acorna ventured. "After all, they know what function it serves for them, but it must be hard for them to understand why we would wish to take some away."

"Mother, Father," Aari said, "I know of one smell that is very evocative-that might demonstrate to them exactly what we are trying to convey. Do you have anything with you that smells like the Khieevi?"

"Oh no," Miiri said. "We bathe very carefully after our laboratory work."

"I'll bet MacKenZ does," Acorna said. "The ship still reeks horribly of Khieevi when you first board it, no matter how many times horns purify the air. That shuttle has the stench hardwired into its structure, I believe."

"I'll go ask him," Maati said.

She returned a short time later holding a peculiar looking object at arms length in one gloved hand, while she held her nose with the other.

"I guess I'm not old enough yet to purify it," she said.

"Good. Don't anyone else try to erase the smell till we can show the vine beings what it means," Acorna said. "Now then, set the thing down, Maati, and let us all allow ourselves to react as we would to a Khieevi with it-fear, disgust, horror, anger, feel them as hard as you can and send. Work yourself up into a sweat if possible."

They all did as she suggested. Aari grew particularly rank with sweat and the stench of fear so that even she could smell him, though usually the Linyaari had only a pleasant odor, if any.

The vines shook and trembled at first and then all at once they swept past the people and converged on the Khieevi object, pouring sap over it, almost shooting the viscous fluid from their stems and blossoms until the thing was entirely covered.

"They get it!" Thariinye cried. "They understand."

"Either that or they're simply acting from self-protection," Lirili said.

"Maybe we should make a holo of the Khieevi to show them?" Maati suggested.

"If they communicate by scent, they'll know the Khieevi -when they smell them, and apparently they know what to do with them too," Melireenya said.

"We need our collection bags back," Kaarlye said.

Acorna frowned. "Perhaps they'll understand now. Try to take it back. They know we are afraid of the Khieevi and they have probably noticed that -we can't exude sap as they can. That might be clear enough to them-we fear something they have a defense for that -we don't."

Kaarlye reached for the sack and met with no resistance as he reclaimed it and then Miiri's from the vines that had been curled protectively over it.

"Back to the original problem of the holos. I suggest that we simply go to the various holos and ask the plants to spread apart where they are. We will have to work on suggesting that they remain that way until the Khieevi are among them."

Neeva shook her head. "The initial problem isn't the main question now. With beings as intelligent as these, we have no right to sacrifice them to spare the Niriians, or ourselves for that matter."

"So, let's show them the piiyi," Thariinye said.

"If they can't see it, how can they judge?"

"Can they smell it?" Aari asked. "Becker -was complaining of the smell of the piiyi. We still have the capsule in which we found it. Perhaps the smell of that will convey information to the plants that it does not to us."

"I suppose it's worth a try," Acorna said. "Though I hope we're not giving them the wrong smells."

Thariinye and Aari duly boarded the Condor and emerged with the piiyi. They were trailed by RK, who ignored the smelly organic communications device to sniff the plants, after which the cat turned his hoisted tail to the nearest vine and, with a mighty shudder of his magnificently furred appendage, let fly a bolus of eau ^e chat that momentarily overpowered the scent of the flowers. The vines bent down and for a moment Acorna feared they would perhaps attack RK, but they seemed instead to be bowing to him.

"Look!" -Maati cried. "They recognize his scent! They know he's a sacred temple cat! It's like he's blessed them!"

Neeva wrinkled her nose. "If that is the blessing of the sacred temple cat, I should hate to smell the curse!"

The piiyi was attached to a portable scanner and played for the plants. The vines reacted to nothing until the Khieevi appeared on the piiyi. Then, to everyone's surprise, the plants sprayed the piiyi with sap.

"Well," Acorna said, "they clearly recognize the Khieevi. Even when Captain Becker behaved aggressively toward the plants, they didn't spray sap at him or us, but just the image and the klacking of the Khieevi cause the plants to attack."

Aari nodded. "Yes, I think it is because the Khieevi seem to the vines to be larger versions of the insects their sap is created to destroy. That first time -we were here-when I- when I had to return to the ship? I saw the resident insects in the sap and they reminded me of the Khieevi. Very much."

Neeva frowned. "If the plants regard the Khieevi as natural enemies, and respond aggressively automatically, then I think perhaps this plan will work and still be within the bounds of diplomatic integrity. Now then, all -we have to do is get them to spread themselves away from the holos."

With the communication they had already established, this did not prove difficult. Even Becker was impressed by the cooperation of the vines. When the last drones -were planted, the crew of the Cow)or looked down to see a little frontier outpost of the Linyaari, nestled among flowering vines. Tall unicorn people scurried to and fro among the buildings and vines.

"That ought to be enough to fool the Khieevi," Becker said, and turned to Mac, "Are you ready to transmit from your shuttle?" "Aye, Captain." -Mac said.

"Then stand by. As soon as the area is cleared, you can invite your friends to our garden party," Becker said, his mustache bristling as he bared his teeth in what Acorna decided was not a show of friendship.

"Uncle, I thought we agreed that the children were to be evacuated here to the Moon of Opportunity immediately," Rank Nadezda reminded Hafiz.

"Ah, but that was before the excellent Becker devised his excellent plan," Hafiz said. "And Ambassador Neeva and the eminent Lmyaari scientists Kaarlye and Miiri assure me it will succeed, as does our own beloved Acorna. So why send the kiddies home? And if they go, why not all of us? And if "we go, so goes a large portion of the assets of House Harakamian, which I have invested in the establishment of the Moon of Opportunity." Seeing his nephew's eyes snap and his mouth open, Hafiz added hastily, "I know, dear boy, I know, of course, that human-and Linyaari-life is not to be measured against mere profit. Naturally. But is it not true as well that these people, Acorna's people, have come to rely upon us for a certain measure of protection-•well, perhaps, support is a better word? And if we begin sending away our own children, indicating that we believe danger still exists, does this not imply that ours are more important than their loved ones? Such an implication hardly sets the right tone, you see?"

"Tone be damned!" Rafik said. "These kids have already been through a thousand kinds of hell and^we have definitely promised them our protection. The Linyaari are home, as are their children. Our kids should return to Maganos Moonbase and stay there until the Khieevi are no longer a problem. And the Haven has no business here either."

"The Haven is free to go whenever it wishes. Thus far the Starfarers have decided to remain with us." "You can't allow it. Uncle Hafiz. It's much too risky."

"Nephew, dear boy, listen to me. Life is risky. Business- successful business-is even more so. We are pioneers, son of my heart. If we are to tread the surface of

planets -which have never known a human footprint, if we are to trade in currency as yet untouched by human hand, risks are necessary."

Rafik's eyes narrowed and his tone -was filled with disgust he didn't bother to conceal. "You say this to me, you who cowered in the underground shelter of your compound at Laboue when you first saw what the Khieevi did to their prisoners?"

Sweat broke out on Hafiz's forehead despite the sweet and mild day Dr; Hoa's weather iriagic had provided. "The shock of first contact, dear boy." Hafiz blotted the moisture with a monogrammed scarlet synsilk tissue. "But, very -well, if you insist, your aunt and I will personally escort the children back to Federation space, while you as my heir and representative will naturally conduct business as usual until the crisis has passed and it is safe for us to return. At which time you will see the wisdom of your old uncle's counsel and realize how hasty you have been."

Rafik smiled ruefully, to let his uncle know he had been outmaneuvered. Hafiz could now take Karina and the children and retire from the field, leaving others to face danger for the sake of his profit. On the other hand, with the old man and the kids safely out of the way, Rafik could command the dismantling of the Moon immediately if it looked like Becker's plan to eradicate the danger from the Khieevi might fail.

Hafiz knew this, of course. And furthermore, he knew that Rafik knew that he knew. But it was much easier to handle matters this -way, allowing Rafik to make the decisions that would preserve or risk life, determine profit or loss. After all, Rafik was now head of House Harakamian, -while Hafiz was technically retired. But these things -were very difficult and must be handled delicately. If the Moon of Opportunity failed, it would be on Rank's head, and not Hafiz's.

Thus as soon as the holo team returned from the vine "world, the Acadeckt and the Haven were loaded with the children of Maganos Moonbase. As a mark of his faith that he would be returning shortly, Hafiz left the Sharazad on the Moon of Opportunity and submitted himself and Karina to the far less commodious accommodations of the AcaSeckl. Rafik had suggested the gesture, both because the plans were already in place to use the AcaSecki for evacuation and also because, should general evacuation become necessary, the Sharaza<) was larger and •would hold more personnel.

With Aari translating, Kaarlye and Miiri approached Hafiz just before he boarded. Miiri spoke first and Aari said, "My mother implores you to take my sister with you and the children. My parents vow to remain here and continue searching for a way to exploit this biological 'weapon the vine world has provided, although you understand of course that no Lmyaari can actually deploy it as an implement of aggression, even against the Khieevi. However, they say they can work better if

they know that Maati is safe. They wished for me to join her, but Khornya and I wish to remain with Captain Becker. My sister is young and longs for new experiences, and would very much like to see the Federation worlds. So take her with you. Take Thariinye as well so that one of her own kind bears her company." He looked back to his mother for further words but she was swallowing hard and looking away.

As Maati and Thariinye transferred ships, Thariinye complained that he wanted to stay -with the Condor but he drew only a stern look from Neeva, who silently indicated he should obey.

What no one said, or even whispered, was that if the Khieevi prevailed, despite the plan, and once more attacked narhii-Vhiliinyar, at least there would be one young male and one young female of the Linyaari safe in Federation space, as hope for the Linyaari. Meanwhile, the Balakiire's remaining crew worked on coordinating with other teams of volunteer rescuers, in the event it became possible to take a relief mission to Nirii once the Khieevi had been lured away. Distressing transmissions from the Khieevi showed them torturing stoic two-horned beings who were obviously in great pain, but refusing to utter a sound or show any fear at all. Even stranger, Toroona and Byorn, "who had been so emotional on their planet's behalf when asking for help, watched the transmissions -with the same stoicism. Their emotions showed only when they turned away as the frustrated Khieevi increased their efforts until their prisoners, still silent, died.

Becker and RK enjoyed a brief reunion with Nadhari. She, as security chief, was now second in authority on the Moon of Opportunity only to Rafik Nadezda. Since she was supervising the security arrangements for the evacuation, she had time only for a quick half hug with Becker, and to 'welcome RK as the cat draped himself around her shoulders while she worked.

As the passengers finished loading onto the Acaoeki, Miiri and Kaarlye supervised the loading of canisters full of sap into the cargo hold. Hafiz wished to take it to his corporate laboratories for further analyses and study. Should the Khieevi ever attack •within Federation space, the Federation would pay well in terms of influence and power, as well as great sums of money, to the holder of a secret weapon against this terrible enemy.

Aari surprised Hafiz by clasping the older man's round synsatin clad form in his own large embrace. "Farewell, Uncle Hafiz. Look after my sister and Thariinye and our friends and be well. Joh, Khornya, Riid-Kiiyi, and I too will let you know when it is safe to return."

"Er, farewell, my nephew."

Karina gave him a somewhat more effusive hug. "Farewell, Aari, and oh, my, is that a horn you're growing there?" She reached up to touch it and with difficulty he endured what she probably didn't realize was an inappropriate intimacy. "Oooh, I just had a flash. The plan will succeed but there will be difficulty-and danger! Be careful, dear friend-friends!"

Ready, Captain," -Mac said. The android was in the cockpit of the Khieevi shuttle. It was still in the hold of the Condor, which was now orbiting the vine world. The holograms moved below in their randomly programmed patterns. Some of them were speaking, some were not. It didn't matter. The Khieevi wouldn't understand anyway.

Becker rubbed his hands together as gleefully as a landlord about to foreclose on the heroine's mortgage in a vid melodrama. "The trap is set, the bait's in place, now all we need is to wiggle the string a little to make the bait look lively to the rats."

Acorna looked up from the console, smiled and stroked RK's head. "Captain, it occurs to me you've been hanging out too much with RK lately."

"Yes," Aari said. "You are beginning to think like a cat."

Becker shrugged. "I could do worse. Cats are good at strategy. " He flipped the toggle on the ship's intercom. "Okay, Mac, do your thing," he said, then, recalling how literal minded the android -was, added, "I mean, make the speech -we discussed to the Khieevi and try to lure them over here."

Acorna frowned. "I wish we were able to wait until the evac ships have time to reach Federation space." She let the words hang in the air. It -was a vain wish. All of them had seen the broadcasts of pain-wracked Niriian prisoners being tortured. All of them knew what the planet would look like when the Khieevi were finished. All of them knew that every moment they delayed cost more Niriian lives. They had to act quickly. And really, the evacuation ships would be heading toward Federation space, not near the vine "world. There should be no problem at all. Acorna wondered why she remained anxious, nevertheless. When her question popped out, it surprised even her. "I wonder why they do it, really."

"Who, hon?" Becker asked.

"The Khieevi. Why do they torture people? Did you ask the prisoner that?"

"No. I figure it's just cause they're mean mothahs and they enjoy it. Isn't that about right, Aari?"



Aari frowned. "I did not think of them as enjoying anything, Joh. In fact, now that you mention it, I don't believe they 9u) enjoy torturing me, as relentless and thorough as they were. It seemed more as if they were very anxious to be wringing from me every bit of pain and fear they could. The few questions they asked me did not seem to be important to them and they did not bother to try to understand enough Linyaari to be able to express themselves. And I am afraid that one thing our observers and diplomats have learned of the Khieevi is that they are very scientific about their torture. The first few of our representatives they captured and tortured died almost at once, so the Khieevi refined their techniques so that they would only cause maximum pain for the longest possible time without fatal results."

He shuddered suddenly and Acorna reached for his hand and held it. She knew from his thoughts that he had been shamed by his fear of the Khieevi, and by the pleading he had no doubt done with them to stop hurting him, natural as such responses were. He did not feel any of the merit Thariinye attributed to him for enduring what he could not escape. Acorna agreed with his assessment. It was pitiable what he had been through, horrible, but did not, in itself, make him a better person. No, he himself did that by his strength of character in facing what he feared most, and with reasons stronger than anyone around him could possibly understand. He faced the Khieevi, and their torture, and examined it to try to find answers and solutions that would help others.

Becker grunted. "Whoever said 'know your enemy' was right, even if he couldn't have known the enemy was going to be big, nasty, alien bugs. If he had known, maybe he would have told us how we were supposed to know them."

"Receiving reply from the Khieevi now, Captain," Mac said. "On our -way, Mac," Becker said. The crew clattered across the grated deck plate and down to the hold containing the shuttle. Klackings and klickings emanated from the freshly repaired corn unit.

"What do they say, Mac?" Becker asked. "They are coming here now, ^Captain!" Mac said. "Wow, that was fast. Already?" Becker asked. "The Nirriians do not make satisfactory victims, apparently," Mac said. "The Khieevi expressed preference for Linyaari prey. They scream better, apparently. This is a desirable trait in a host race for the Khieevi. They have been quite unhappy with the lack of response from the Nirriians, despite their best efforts. The Nirriian response has been judged inadequate." "Inadequate for what?" Becker asked.

Mac said, "I do not know, Captain. I repeat only the- scuttlebutt-I am picking up from their intership transmissions. Shall I ask?"

"No," Aari said. "If you were a real Khieevi, you wouldn't have to."

"True," Becker said. "So, they're on their way. Let's fall back smartly, gang." It had been necessary for them to transmit from the proper physical location to lend verisimilitude to their transmission, but the remote cameras located on the vine world and its moon would provide visuals of the Khieevi invasion. The Condor could detect the approach of the Khieevi from considerable distance, thanks to the bank of long-range scanners Becker normally employed for detecting ships in peril, recent disasters, and other juicy salvage situations. Once the Khieevi swarm was all focused on the vine world, the Condor could creep back into position for a ringside seat to the "the squishing," as Becker colorfully referred to it.

Once the swarm approached, radio silence would have to be maintained. However, the Condor's shuttle had been repaired and readied to act as a relay between the Moon of Opportunity and the Condor, to carry news of the mission's progress. Once the Condor was in position on the far side of the vine world's nearest planetary neighbor, their position was transmitted to headquarters on the moon.

The Condor lurked, waiting for the Khieevi to become carrion.

When the swarm's vanguard arrived, Becker, who was on watch, let out a whoop. "-Mercy gracious, boys 'n' girls, the scanners look like Kezdet's pleasure district on a Saturday night when the fleet's just docked! My oh my oh my!"

Acorna and Aari joined him on the bridge. Mac was still monitoring Khieevi communications from the wrecked shuttle.

The vid screen came to life as the remote cameras switched themselves on to record the landing of the Khieevi fleet. A shark-like school of the mantis-shaped vessels circumnavigated the smallish vine world as if they were the rings of Saturn. From the innermost ring of ships, shuttles shot to the surface, after which those ships spiraled away from the planet to be replaced by others with a fresh supply of shuttles and troops.

"We're going to need something to destroy the ships too," Becker whispered fiercely. Acorna knew why he was whispering. The attack was ferocious. She feared anew for the sapient vines. "If they don't land, the sap can't make contact."

"Perhaps they will land to investigate and infect each other," Acorna suggested.

But they did not.

The vines parted to permit the landing of the shuttles, each of which disgorged an amazing number of ground troops.

At first the vines allowed the Khieevi to pass until it seemed there were as many Khieevi on the ground as there -were vines, all marching relentlessly upon the holo compounds.

Acorna trembled at the sight of multiples of herself, Aari, Neeva and the Balakiire's crew, Aari's family, Thariinye and Liriili, going blithely and peacefully about their business while endless lines of Khieevi, ever reinforced by more shuttles dropping through vine-world space in lines of their own, deposited reinforcements.

The staccato klacking of pincers and mandibles was louder than any -weapon's fire.

"Why aren't the plants closing on them?" Becker demanded.

"I don't know, Captain," Aari answered. "In the communications we had -with them, the mere scent of the Khieevi caused the vine-beings to shoot sap upon the offending objects."

"They're waiting," Acorna said, excitement and awe in her voice. "We knew the plants were intelligent and they're proving it! I think our -warnings about the Khieevi -were understood much better than -we had reason to hope. The plants actually have formed a plan. They -want to trap the largest possible number of Khieevi before they counterattack."

"You're kidding!" Becker said, and whistled.

RK leaped onto the console. His fur stuck straight out on his body so he appeared to be twice his normal size. His tail bristled and switched so fast it slammed Becker's kaf cup to the floor -with one swipe, Aari's with the next. A low growl from RK's throat grew to a high-pitched caterwaul that made Becker cover his ears and Acorna lift the spiky creature into her arms to try to comfort him. He didn't attack her, but neither did he calm down. There was nothing to heal in his response. It was natural and healthy for a Makahomian Temple Cat to go into battle mode under the circumstances. Acorna understood this and when the cat remained stiff and distinctly uncomforted, she set him down again where he stood with his tail lashing the air like a saber.

The first phalanx of Khieevi reached the holo-compounds and opened fire on the holos, which responded by breaking up and reforming, continuing the postures, journeys, movements, and apparent tasks in -which they had been engaged before the attack.

Khieevi klacking escalated to an even higher volume. Shuttles no longer streamed from the skies. The ground troops, heedless of the klacks of the vanguard, charged forward, trampling some of those in front of them.

Mac looked up at the rest of the crew. "The Khieevi are very frustrated and dissatisfied," he said. The android could have saved the speech. The tone of the klacks accompanied by the activity of the klackers was more than eloquent.

Then suddenly, and seemingly simultaneously, the Khieevi exploded into action, all of them at once diving into the vines with open mandibles. The attack had been so typically single minded that it had drawn their attention-and the attention of Acorna and her friends-completely away from the plants, -which had been docilely shrinking away from the Khieevi, allowing roots and stalks to be trampled. Even before the Khieevi attack changed course, however, the plants slowly began thrusting upward again, unbending from being trod underfoot, as if reaching for sunlight, all very innocent and plant-like.

But as the first mandibles closed on the first stalk, the vines whipped into action, shooting sap from each fresh wound and from sap sacs hidden in the stalks and under the leaves as well. The Khieevi were surrounded, as they had previously surrounded the holo-compounds.

The cameras became ineffective as sap squirted everywhere. Becker switched to the moon-linked camera. A close-up of the planet's surface showed it glistening with turbulent swells and peaks of slimy sap. The Khieevi shuttle's corn unit squealed -with high-pitched eeee sounds. Acorna reached over and flipped the toggle, and the sound mercifully ceased.

The remote camera showed a handful of shuttles with rapidly dying Khieevi piloting them erratically towards the mother ships. Once the stragglers had been reabsorbed by the swarm, the ships veered off.

"Are they going back to the Nirriians?" Becker asked Mac.

Mac flipped the toggle back on again and monitored the noises emitted by the ships. "No, Captain. They are in disarray. This has never happened to them before, I think."

"Predators who prey on pacifists probably don't run the risk of getting beaten all that often," Becker allowed. "So what are they up to?"

"I do not think they know at this time, Captain. There is talk of returning to the homeworld. They are-unlikely as it may sound-I believe they are very frightened, Captain."

"Of the vine world?" Becker grinned. "They should be. Serves them right."

"Yes, but they are already discussing -what might be used to neutralize it. Actually, from what I can detect, I believe they are afraid of returning to their homeworld. That seems odd, don't you think?"

"Maybe the King bug is going to chop off their heads," Becker said with a shrug. "I hope he does and that teaches them not to mess -with us again. So, gang, I guess that's it. It's over. We win. Or the plant critters do. End of story."

Acorna could not think of a logical objection to this conclusion, though she felt it was somehow all-anticlimactic. So much horror so easily conquered. Who would have believed it. But she could tell from Becker's tone and his expression that he felt the same. Aari too appeared perplexed and unsatisfied. "What's the matter?" she asked him.

He shook his head, "Perhaps, after living with fear of the Khieevi for so long, it is hard to believe we have put an effective end to them. Perhaps I am merely having trouble adjusting to the idea that they are gone, that our people, and I in particular, no longer have the terror of them looming over us."

"Maybe that's it," Acorna agreed. But she remained uneasy.

No brass band greeted the ConSor, but everybody looked happy to see it return safely. Rafik Nadezda, Declan Giloglie, and Nadhari Kando were waiting at the landing bay, as were Aan's parents.

Before the robo-lift had touched the ground, Aari's parents were saying, "We made a significant breakthrough with the sap! Wait till you see. It's quite simple but very effective."

"That's good," Becker told them. "But I'm afraid we won't be needing it."

He deliberately pulled a long face and Acorna and Aari, picking up their cues from him, tried to keep their thoughts to themselves.

"Why? Didn't it work? What happened?"

"The plants pretty well annihilated the Khieevi army, that's what!" Becker said, grinning. "We-or rather the plantswhipped their buggy butts."

Cheers went up among the reception committee and as the word passed all through the compound. Outlying recreational areas had been closed for the red alert and the main city was bloated with anxious people, some of them bored because their functions had been related solely to the closed areas, some of them pumped with adrenaline, ready to take action against any threat.

The Linyaari delegation pressed forward, the Niriian couple preceding them by a step or two.

Acorna smiled at them and told her aunt, "According to the Khieevi broadcasts, they won't be going back to Nirii either. Mac says from what he can figure out, the Niriians did not make very good victims."

Neeva translated and Toroona smiled beatifically. "She says that's something they can be proud of," Neeva said.

Rafik was smiling too. "Whew. This is a wonderful turn of events! We had better call Uncle Hafiz at once, Acorna, so he can come back and broadcast a new message taking all the credit!" Acorna and Rafik exchanged knowing grins.

Aari's mother had taken his arm on one side and Acorna's on the other. "And we thought we had so much to show you.."

"We are most interested in your discoveries, Mother," Aari assured her. "While most of the Khieevi army was destroyed, there were still many ships aloft and we are unsure how many troops may have remained onboard."

"Yeah," Becker said. "Besides, they're bugs." Acorna translated.

Kaarlye looked puzzled. "Of course they are insects. Does the captain think we are unaware of this?"

"I believe what he means," Acorna said. "Is that insects reproduce rapidly and in large numbers. The danger from the Khieevi is not yet over."

Rafik, dear boy, and my good Captain Becker, this news!" Hafiz Harakamian said. The crew and passengers of the AcaSecki were cheering, holding hands, and hopping up and down, even as Calum reversed course in preparation for the AcaSecki's, return to MOO, as the children now referred to it. "You have vanquished the enemy, saved the Niriian homeworld, made the universe a safer place to do business, brought honor to House Harakamian, created the opportunity for much favorable publicity for the Moon of Opportunity, and all at a relatively low price point! Commendable, gentlemen, most commendable indeed."

The next hail was from the Haven. "I presume you've heard the news!" Johnny Greene said.

"We have indeed and splendid news it is!" Hafiz replied. "We are returning to the Moon of Opportunity even as we speak."

"We're within Federation space right now, and I haven't heard what the general vote was, but the Counsel is pretty sure the kids will want to come back to the Moon, too. Once the vote is in, if that's the case, "we'll caravan with you again."

"Very well, Johnny, but tell the children not to dawdle.

Uncle Hafiz has a great deal to do now that his staff has made space safe for our new friends and neighbors to travel freely once more."

"Uh-yeah, we knew that," Johnny said. "Catch you in a few."

"So that means we need to wait for them?" Calum Baird asked.

"Yes, indeed," Hafiz said. Laxme and some of the other children made impatient noises.

"Are they going to be long?" Laxme asked.

There was not actually a lot to do on the Accu)eck and the rations weren't that great either. It wasn't as big as the ships they had come on, and there hadn't been time to prepare properly for a long journey. Nutritious ration bars took up little space, did not require heating or freezing, and provided all of the basic requirements. Laxme knew he shouldn't quibble. Working in the mines, he and many of the others had far less to eat, nothing really, just enough to keep them upright and working. But now that he had tasted enough food, tasty food, lovely desserts and butter for the vegetables and even the succulent meats-he wasn't happy to give that up.

Maati had been indignant at being herded onto the evacuation ship as if she wasn't the former copilot of her own ship, the survivor of two battles, one in space, one on the ground, with the Khieevi. She knew that her parents had insisted she go because they wanted her to be safe, but part of her felt that they really just wanted to be rid of her again, when she had only just found them. And Thariinye was even more impossible than usual. Recently their mutual teasing had been playful and friendly but he was so angry at being kept out of the action again and treated like a child that he took it out on her with deliberately nasty and hurtful remarks. She snapped back just as angrily, and their mood made the other children angry and nasty or depressed too so there was already a lot of fighting on the ship. This didn't improve Calum Baird's temper any either, and Karina Harakamian fluttered about calling for peace and light. When she wasn't hiding in the berth she had to share only with Uncle Hafiz.

As for Hafiz, he could not but wonder how he had come to taking leave of his senses so far as to allow himself to undertake a long journey in the company of so many children. He was not a fatherly man, nor, if the truth be known, even an

avuncular one unless it proved profitable to appear to be. He could not stand whining children actually.

Of course, the unsettling thing about this lot is that they didn't whine. For the most part they were disturbingly adult. The larger ones seemed to be used to looking after the smaller ones, and even the youngest didn't cry, just looked at him with wide eyes that managed to be hopeful and suspicious at the same time.

Returning to the Moon of Opportunity seemed to please them, and he felt more gratitude than was strictly reasonable that they had perked up so much. Even the two Linyaari young ones stopped scowling at each other to cheer. But as the wait for the Haven grew longer, the children became impatient again.

Hafiz did not like the hostile silence. Karina disliked it even more, apparently. Complaining of a headache, she took to their berth.

"What troubles you, my little ones?" Hafiz asked finally, bravely, his own mood at least much improved by relief at not losing his corporate shirt.

"Well," Jana said. "There's not a lot to do here. I think they're bored." She herself, her tone implied, was above boredom.

"Bored?" The concept was not one with which he had much familiarity. Being fabulously rich and imaginative as well, he could usually avoid such unattractive moods.

Calum turned in his command chair and said, "In order to get maximum passenger space, we had to dispense with some of the amenities-there's only one set of phones and goggles for vids, the hardcopy books were offloaded to make room, and I'm getting sick of nutrient bars myself. Of course they're bored. Aren't you?"

"I've been enjoying the rest, frankly," Hafiz said. "And then, my beautiful Karina and I have not been married long."

"Uh-huh," Calum said, rolling his eyes.

"She has her trances and meditations and continuous search for what she refers to as enlightenment to entertain her," Hafiz said. "Perhaps you could tell the children a story, Baird?" he suggested in a helpful tone.

"Or maybe you could, Hafiz. I'm busy skippering this bird," Calum said, turning his back on him again.

"Me? Ah." Hafiz looked around him. "Very well, then. I shall need to employ the remote link to the ship's computer, dear boy."



"To tell a Story?' Calum asked incredulously.

"Audio-visual aids, homely former senior wife of my illustrious nephew, audio-visual aids," Hafiz said, and clapped his hands. "All young persons wishing to become unbored will now assemble in the hydroponics garden where your beneficent Uncle Hafiz shall entertain you so thrillingly you will completely forget to sulk and fret and otherwise contort your faces and voices into infelicitous conformations."

"That should charm 'em all right," Calum said.

"I shall also require the next meal's supply of luncheon bars and liquid refreshment," Hafiz said.

"Gee, I'd have the chef give them to the maitre'd to deliver personally, but they're both busy with this evening's banquet," Calum replied sarcastically. Hafiz knew, very well that if he wanted the damned bars he'd need to take them from the food locker himself. The replicator worked, but even it required supplies from which to manufacture foodstuff and those supplies took up more room than the nutrient bars and caps.

"Very well," Hafiz said, and beckoned imperiously to Jana and Chiura, who were following in the wake of the other young ones headed toward the hydroponics garden, which they would soon, Hafiz knew, come to regard as a garden of delights. "Young ladies, you will accompany me to the food locker and assist in conveying supplies to our destination."

The girls looked at each other and shrugged.

The driver of Khieevi ship designated by Fourteen Klaču am) Two KUdu was greatly agitated.

Partly this -was from the pain in his sixth foot, which had come into contact with the damaged shuttle pilot who managed to dock aboard Fourteen Klaču am) Two Klicfu before the crew of the large ship realized that both shuttle and the operator of same were infected with an alien substance that ate them. Once they had made this discovery, members of the crew attempted to neutralize the infected personnel in the customary way, by stomping them to death. Unfortunately, this brought feet, pincers, and in some cases other delicate body parts into contact with the alien substance.

The driver really didn't feel well at all and neither did the affected crew members, who could now truly be called a skeleton crew, if not an exoskeleton crew, since the exoskeletons were the first parts eaten away by the substance.

The high-pitched pain sounds they were producing made the driver's brain ache as well as his foot, which he realized would have to be sacrificed before long or it would involve his entire leg. Unlike the crewmembers, he had not done any actual stomping of the infected shuttle soldier. He had merely nudged the soldier with his foot to tag the tainted one for elimination.

He feared that he would be the next to be eliminated. If the disease didn't claim him, he would surely be stomped by the other, healthier ship drivers, or worse, his damaged part would be severed and he would be fed to the Young.

The Young would be even angrier and more ferocious than usual, as they had not received a good feeding in many, many lengthy time units. The Nirriians were a stingy, selfish race who kept their pain to themselves and did not beg or plead or weep, no matter how meticulously and slowly they were disassembled. They were so retentive of their feelings that they refused to writhe even under the worst provocation. They also were rather frail things and tended to die. Quickly. Quietly. No nutrition for the Young there.

When the shuttle from scout ship Fifty-three Kliclu am) Sewn Kiack.<) reported a juicy colony of the One-Horns, the swarm had been hungry for conquest, and more to the point, the Young had been even hungrier. The lair of the One-Horns had proved elusive and was much sought after, since the members of the race thus far encountered possessed a particularly satisfying capacity for emotional projection. Shock, fear, outrage, loathing, and an unplumbed depth of capacity to suffer and emote anguish when correctly manipulated made even one of these beings a sweet feast for the Young.

But this time the Khieevi had been worse than thwarted. According to the shuttle soldiers who survived, the world was filled with nothing but shadows of One-Horns and their buildings, shadows that could not be touched or hurt or killed and had no redeeming nutritional value to either soldiers or the Young. Worse, there were the growing things with the prominent white sexual organs, similar in appearance to stationary growing things on other worlds. These emitted pheromones of fear which had seemed promising, but when the shuttle soldiers attacked them, the growing things had the temerity to attack back! The entire ground fleet had been lost and many of the swarm ships infected by contaminated shuttles, which nonetheless returned to their ships. The Young knew. The fear and pain of their own elders had been fed to them as a substitute for the alien food, but it was not enough. So much time had elapsed since a proper feeding, nothing would satisfy the Young now but the actual physical bodies of their elders, whom the eldest of the Young would replace.

This was The Path, the driver knew. In time, the elders, such as him, grew weak and unable to serve, and had to be eliminated and replaced with fresh, fierce Young, who in turn served the even more vicious, malicious, and avaricious Younger. So now the swarm would return with nothing to offer but themselves,

their own bodies, their own pain and anguish and fear, to be devoured by the slaving hordes of their offspring.

The driver regretted this with a deep bitter regret that the Young -would find added a nice tang. He himself had replaced a used up, -worn out elder -whom he personally devoured only a few brief time units ago. His turn at the Gathering should have lasted many, many more time units. It was not right. It was not fair. It did not suit him. But it was The Path.

Between his agitation and his pain and the lack of attentiveness on the part of the other crew members due to similar distractions, he veered somewhat off course, folio-wing several other members of the swarm -who were also affected and also deviated from course.

His was the first ship to spot the alien vessel. It did not appear to be accelerating, nor orbiting, nor moving in any way. Nor did it appear to be damaged. The equipment detected life signs. The other ships of the swarm also spotted it. It - was still a great distance away and if it -was fast, it might yet evade them. But if it was not, here was food to offer the Young, -who might be so busy feeding, they - would forget to consume a few stringy old elders.

The hydroponics garden of the AcaSecki now blossomed with exotic flowers of crimson and orchid, lilacs so real they seemed fragrant, jasmine and roses of all descriptions vying with frangipani, plumena, and lush lotus blossoms floating in a pool of crystal water, fed by a sparkling fountain.

As each child looked at the others, he or she saw not another child but either a beautiful (if rather plump; Hafiz always made his holograms in the images of his own desire) houri or a dashing thief. The ladies were scantily clad in clothing that included many layers of silken veils and skirts, balloon-legged pants with slits down the sides to show shapely limbs, and lots and lots of clanking silver and gold coin jewelry. The thieves "were clad in Berber blues, their skins dyed by the indigo in their clothing, or in striped robes colored in the soft golds, saffrons, russets, and browns of a desert most of the children had never imagined. Now it stretched out before them, just beyond the boundaries of the gardens. Each child was alone among fascinating strangers, all of them listening respectfully, attentively to the voice of Hafiz Harakamian. Ouds and doumbeks, tambourines and zills, a whining flute spiraled and curled around Hafiz's words, illuminating each as colored inks adorned the alphabets of ancient holy books.

And that was only the backdrop!

Hafiz's tales came to life between him and the children.

The story began, "There was once in days of yore and in ages and times long gone before, on Kezdet, before the Federation, a poor but enterprising lad, by

name Habib, son of a lowly designer of inexpensive gaming software. Sadly for Habib, before he had reached his fifteenth year, his father passed into the land foretold by the Three Books and the Three Prophets, and Habib, whose mother had long ago run off with a smoothtalking merchant of space travel insurance, was left alone."

He went on to demonstrate how the young Habib found his fortune in a magic lamp - a lamp that, -when used in the sleep pods of space travelers in cryosleep, prevented deaths that had been occurring due to lack of vitamin D. But Hafiz made the lamp look like an ancient magic lamp and coming from it was a genie-in cryosleep.

He was just coming to the next plot turn in this tale when Calum Baird called down, "Hafiz, will you cool it with the special effects? You're draining the power of the ship's computer."

"Nonsense, my boy," Hafiz said. "My holograms take up very little power." Normally, he might have taken Baird's warning under advisement but he had yet to perform his best trick.

Finishing the story, he laid out the nutrient bars on an ordinary table, then had dancing girls in tinkling costumes cover the unappetizing fare with roast swan and hummingbird tongues. Discerning from the puzzled silence that met him, even through the holo-disguises he had cast upon the children, he tapped the computer pad and replaced the swans and hummingbird tongues with burgers, fries, onion rings, milkshakes, soft drinks, and ice cream treats.

The children lunged for the table.

The lights went out.

The burgers, fries, rings, and banana splits and sundaes turned back into nutrient bars and the sloe-eyed houns and slyfaced thieves turned into disappointed children suddenly shivering in the dark.

Soon another light appeared on the circular metal stairway no one used because the lift was more convenient. "Come on back upstairs, everybody," Calum said, "while I get the computer back up. Don't worry. Even if it proves to be difficult, the Haven will be here soon and we'll have help.

Unfortunately, the Haven was not the next ship to reach the stranded AcaSecki.

"What do you mean, you lost them?" Rafik demanded of an uncharacteristically flushed and flustered Johnny Greene.

"Just what I said," Greene replied. "After we got the allclear to return to MOO, we agreed to rendezvous at the AcaSecki's coordinates. But by the time we arrived, there was nothing there but empty space. We hailed them over and over but didn't get a blip. They just disappeared."

Rafik held his breath for a long moment before he replied. "Johnny, you folks turn the Haven around and get back to Federation space on the double. We know the Khieevi left the vine world, but we don't know where they went from there."

"You think they got the Accufekkil" Johnny asked. "But- we talked to them just a few hours ago."

"I don't know what happened. But one vessel full of kids has disappeared with Calum and my uncle. We can't risk the rest of you. Go back. Get the posse if you can-after all, Hafiz's baksheesh provides a lot of private schools and widow's and orphan's pensions for Federation forces, and even though this isn't their turf, we are under their protection. I hope."

"Gotcha," Johnny said. "But get word to us the minute you know something, okay?"

"We'll try," Rafik said grimly.

"Saltwater?" Acorna asked. "Is that all?"

Miiri nodded. "Simple saline solution. It breaks down the sap enough for it to liquefy but it doesn't seem to harm the sap's ability to alter to its fungoid form and destroy insectoid tissue. We replicated some of the remaining carapace tissue and the liquefied sap was if anything more virulent than in its original form, just as an acid's potency may be increased by mixing it with water."

"That makes sense," Acorna said. "Though it wouldn't be as tenacious as the sap."

"No," Becker said, scratching his mustache, "but you know if we could have had some in aerosol torpedoes to shoot into the orbiting Khieevi ships, we could have taken out more of them."

Miiri shuddered. "How horrible," and looked at her work as if she had given no thought as to how it would be used.

But Aari said gently, "Mother, these are Khieevi we're talking about, remember. You've seen them. You say you felt what they did to me."

"Your mother knows, Son," his father said. "It's just not the Linyaari way."

"Which is why you need people like Hafiz and Nadhari and me," Becker said. "There are still Khieevi out there. I think it's a good idea, in our copious leisure time, to whomp up a batch of sap and sea water. I can scrounge around here and see if I can find the makings of some aerosol torpedoes. You Just never know when that kind of thing will come in handy."

Acorna frowned. "Maybe it would also be wise to return to the vine world and collect more sap there. The plants not only buried the Khieevi in their sap, but also submerged themselves. I'd like to make sure the plants are regenerating properly too. If they need any special climactic conditions to help them grow, perhaps Dr. Hoa could be of assistance."

"Good idea, Princess," Becker said. "But you know RK. He wants to spend a little time with Nadhari before we ship out again."

"I see," Acorna said, smiling. "It doesn't have to be done right now."

But at that moment, Nadhari Kando burst into the lab. "Becker!" she said urgently, then nodded slightly to the Linyaari who were also present. "I have to ship out right away. Sorry."

"I'll go with you," Becker said immediately.

"No. You can't. This is my responsibility. Hafiz hired me to protect him and his people and now the AcaSeckl has disappeared." Acorna grabbed Nadhan's muscular forearm to get her attention, "What do you mean, disappeared? Calum was on that ship as well as Hafiz-"

"And Maati," Kaarlye, Miiri, and Aari said at once. "I know, I know. I should have gone with the Harakamians

but he wanted me here to protect his investment," Nadhari said.

"But time is wasting. I've commandeered the Ifrit. It's the fastest

ship in Hafiz's security fleet and well-armed."

She took the time to explain about the Haven's transmission. Becker frowned. "If they're not -where they're supposed to

be, I'm not sure fast is going to do you any good, Nadhari. I've

got those banks of long-range scanners on the Condor. And the

Khieevi communications device. And Mac."

"It's too slow, Becker. And you already told me, it's not

packing firepower." She hesitated and then said, "Although ..." "What?"

"You've had good success defeating the Khieevi without weapons and you do have that unconventional navigation style. Your tactics might come in handy. If you still -want to join me."

"No ifs ands or buts about it, lady," he said.

"Good," she said and turned on her heel, as if expecting him to follow.

"Captain," Acorna said. "We can follow in the CorSor and keep the scanners working and Mac monitoring the Khieevi transmissions. That way if we learn anything, -we can transmit to Nadhari's vessel and you'll have the advantages of both ships."

Becker leaned back and gave her a kiss on the cheek before Nadhari snagged his hand and yanked. "Thanks, Princess. But you can do that from here and we can read you. No sense you taking unnecessary chances. Besides, I need you to make sure the sap shells get made and Condor, at least, is outfitted with them. Don't want to get caught with nothing but a tractor beam to fight those klackers again." Nadhari released his arm and threw the door open. He followed her calling, "Hey, wait up, Punkin. Just a sec."

"What?" she asked sharply.

"What about the cat, is he going or staying?"

"He is already aboard the Ifrit but wouldn't allow the checkout procedure to proceed. I divined his purpose was that you should be told of the mission."

"I should hope so!" Becker huffed into his mustache. "That's the only reason you came for me?"

"Of course not," she said. "But -we -will discuss that later. "Yes, ma'am. I know. It's of the essence," Becker said, and -waved to the others as he allowed himself to be hauled away.

Acorna and Aari conferred -with Gill and Rafik.

"Do you think you can locate the materials for making the aerosol torpedoes Becker described?" she asked.

"Are you kidding?" Gill asked. "We have the best engineering help available in all areas."

"And Uncle Hafiz has never been one to turn his nose up at the lucrative business of arms manufacturing," Rafik added. "I can think of at least six of our friendly neighborhood merchants -who could supply what's needed immediately."

"Good," Acorna said. "Miiri and Kaarlye cannot be a party to turning the sap into -weapons, you understand, but since it's a simple matter of mixing sap and saltwater, there should be no problem with others mixing the formula. We need to return to the vine world. We Linyaari must communicate -with the vines, heal them if the Khieevi attack truly injured them."

"Good thinking," Gill said. "Some of the non-House Harakamian merchants may resist having their ships fitted with the torpedoes, but I think from -what we've seen, as long as they're in this sector it's really the only smart thing to do. Maybe if we show the vids the moon camera took of the sap's effect on the Khieevi, it will be easier to persuade the skeptical owners to accept the modifications."

"I'll talk to any of them who have reservations and make sure they've seen the vids," Acorna said. "After all, having the modifications made would be useful for their own protection from Khieevi attacks." She paused for a moment. "Of course, it would probably help persuade them if House Harakamian offered to pay for the modifications."

Rafik laughed. "You're beginning to think like a merchant, but not one who's the adopted daughter of Hafiz! However, I'll authorize it if only to aggravate the old boy into showing up again just to tell me off. Meanwhile I'll appreciate any help you can give me persuading the merchants to think like a team, at least during crises. I'm doing my best but I haven't Hafiz's gift for imperiousness."

"I'll see what I can do," Acorna promised. "And Aari and I have a somewhat different perspective on pacifism where the Khieevi are concerned. Both of us will be glad to help supervise the preparation-and maybe the deployment-of the torpedoes and the ships to carry them in case they're necessary to rescue the AcaSecki," she said, and her voice had a catch in it.

"Of course," Gil said reasonably. "We've no evidence yet to suggest that the Khieevi were responsible for the disappearance of Calum and Hafiz and the kids."

"No," Rafik agreed. "But it's a pretty big coincidence that they should disappear so soon after a Khieevi attack. I think that whether we have evidence or not, we have to be prepared for the worst."

"Of course," Acorna said thoughtfully, "The sap isn't the only thing that will kill Khieevi. For the merchants who can't be persuaded to modification, as long as they are otherwise armed, they have some protection."



"Yes," Aari said. "The Khieevi are used to preying upon people like mine and the Nirrians, who do not fight back with any sort of weapon."

Gill grinned. "We all saw that they blow up as easy as anybody if somebody lobs some ordnance at them."

Rafik grumbled into the little goatee he was affecting these days, to make himself look more lordly in the performance of his administrative duties as head of House Harakamian. "True, but the sap works better than anything we've seen."

Acorna and Aari rose. Rafik felt a bit sad. Their little girl was all grown up into a beautiful young lady, and from the look of it, had chosen her mate already. He hoped they'd all live and prosper long enough for him and Gill-and Calum and Hafiz-to have Linyaari grandbabies.

Acorna's voice caught, "I hope they're okay. I can't bear to think the Khieevi have them."

The crash of the computers was a temporary matter, of course, and Hafiz was rather put out with Calum for making such an issue of it. The man's panic had spoiled Hafiz's story for the children, who had been blessedly quiet while Hafiz had held the attention of all, which was practically his favorite way to interact with anyone, especially children.

For two such wizards of the keyboard as him and Baird, not to mention a certain amount of help from some of the children, who were quite talented in that area, restoring the ship's computer to operation was scarcely a challenge. Without the additional load of the hologram programs, the power soon returned along with all of the other amenities.

Including the com screen and the telescopic viewport. Hafiz was making final readjustments to certain navigational calculations when Baird tapped him on the shoulder and pointed at the viewport.

"Yes, yes," Hafiz said, glancing up. "It is good that it is operational ..." and then he stopped and stared, as a sinister looking vessel began filling the viewport. "Hut-hut, my boy!" Hafiz said. "Get us out of here this instant!"

"I'm way ahead of you," Calum said. "But we're going nowhere. They have us in a tractor beam."

The children were exclaiming, and some crying. The two Linyaari, the girl Maati who was so talented herself with holograms, and the youth Thariinye, crowded close to the console.

Suddenly the corn screen lit up and one of the ugly bug faces leered at them, before being replaced by a scene of the Khieevi torturing a Linyaari prisoner.

"Oh, no, you don't. Not again," Maati said.

The driver of the Khieevi ship designated Fourteen Klack<sup>^i</sup> am) Two Kiiclu was the first to put his tractor beam on the vessel containing the life forms.

As soon as he had them, he could not resist looking into their vessel to see what his courage and intelligence had netted. He could hardly believe his luck. The ship was filled with humans-most of them immature! How the Young -would love that! And even better, there were two tender One-Horns aboard.

With considerable glee, hampered only a little by the arrival of his fellow stragglers, he began running the demonstration of Khieevi diplomatic methods when dealing with aliens. The Nirriians had proved so unsatisfactory that the driver decided to give the One-Horns a little preflight fright by showing what had been done to dismantle the body of the last One-Horn captive.

That should tenderize their youthful emotions, get them ready to scream all the way back to the homeworld, providing a substantial emotional appetizer before what was left of them could be physically delivered to the Young.

The driver could not resist, before boarding the ship and scooping out the sweet One-Horns and humans from the hull, taking a look to see their fear and horror at the film he had just transmitted. The smaller of the One-Horns stared back at him, baring her teeth, Then she raised a metal canister of some sort, dipped a gloved hand into it, and pulled out a glob of the horrible, carapace-eating sap, which she smeared across the corn screen.

Perhaps the Young would rather extract the One-Horns and humans themselves.

The AcaBecki had simply disappeared.

Nadhari shook her head in disbelief. "How could it have just vanished?"

"There's a lot of space out there," Becker pointed out, sounding a lot more nonchalant than he felt.

"Of course there is," she said, her voice overly sweet, as if talking to someone with a bad case of stupid. "But the Ifnt and the other security ships have the ion trail ID for the AcaSecki and all of the other ships on MOO. And the trail ends here. Poof!"

"I wish I had my maps to check," Becker said. "Maybe they have a Bermuda Triangle in this quadrant."

"A what?"

"Well, long ago back on Mother Earth, there was this area in the ocean where airplanes and ships disappeared without a trace. It was called the Bermuda Triangle and people thought-

"Yes?"

"That maybe aliens from outer space were responsible." His voice faded off at the end.

"That certainly stands to reason in this case," Nadhari said dryly.

"Can your ion trail ID thing check for other kinds of ion trails-those not left by Hafiz's or his allies' ships?"

"Like Khieevi ships for instance?" she asked. "I don't know, to tell you the truth. We only had one encounter with the Khieevi in Federation space and that was rather brief. I'll check for any strange trails however."

She worked at the control panel for a bit, the colored lights bouncing off the planes of her face, and then said, "Got it."

"What?"

"There've been a number of other ships here. Similar trails all. I'm reprogramming so -we can follow them but the trails are confused."

"Think it's Khieevi?"

"Who else? It's not us, that's for sure."

"Follow that ion," Becker said.

"What?"

"You have just got to watch more of my antique vid collection, honey," he said.

Acorna and Aari had the Condor fitted for the sap shells first. They could use their installation as a prototype to show the others. After a few glitches, which the Com)or accepted with its usual savoir-faire, the modifications were made and the Condor -was pronounced Khieevi-ready.

The most effective way to persuade all of the other merchants to go along with the plan, Acorna decided, was to have a meeting and show the vids to all of them at the same time.

Once the vids had finished playing, the boardroom was absolutely still as the lights came up.

Then Holland Barber, the lawyer for Cascade shipping company, which had won the bid to transport merchandise to and from MOO, spoke up. "Ms. Harakamian-Li," the thin-faced blonde in the abbreviated silver synsilk power suit said, "Your allegation that we need to modify our ships in such a drastic way to deal with an alien race that clearly, from your own film, has been almost annihilated by those sticky things, appears to us to be unfounded. You are overreacting to a ridiculous degree. With Mr. Harakamian missing, there is actually no reason even to suppose that MOO will continue to be operational. Why, therefore, should we risk unnecessary modifications to our ships when we could simply claim because of your lack of foresight in providing a satisfactory business climate, we are no longer bound by our contract? We shall simply withdraw and return to Federation space."

"That is certainly your choice, Ms. Barber," Acorna said sweetly. "But I'd like to remind you that the AcaSecki has disappeared while attempting to do that very thing-return to Federation space, that is."

The bony blonde gave Acorna a supercilious look and said, "That was one small ship, Ms. Harakamian-Li. We control a fleet. I hardly think these cockroaches would consider us as easy a target."

"It's entirely up to your client, Ms. Barber," Acorna said.

At that moment Aari and Mac broke into the meeting. "Excuse us, Khornya. But Mac has just intercepted a transmission we thought would have bearing on this meeting."

"Yes?" Holland Barber, who had yet to sit down, acted as if she were in control of the meeting.

Mac earnestly repeated all of the klackings and klickings he had heard and Aari translated.

"The Khieevi are massing an attack on narhii-Vhiliinyar," Aari said.

"And that is?" Holland Barber asked.

"The Linyaari homeworld," Aari said. "Our homeworld."

"I can't see that your homeworld, however dear it may be to you, has anything to do with my client," the lawyer said.

"It doesn't actually," Acoma said. "Except that narhuVhiliinyar was the primary planet Uncle Hafiz hoped to entice as a trading partner when he established MOO."

"In short, Holland," said Michaela Glen of Hudson Interplanetary Realty, Inc. "Customers. If you want to sit around quibbling about a few modifications House Harakamian has agreed to pay for in order to save your client's penurious corporate butt while these cockroaches eat some of the most potentially profitable trade partners in the history of the Federation, feel free. But Hudson is willing to follow in the footsteps of our glorious voyageur founders and not only modify our ships to fight, but fight to protect our trade."

The rest of the merchants in the room applauded.

Becker and Nadhari were having a difficult time following the ion trail when they received a hail and Acorna's face appeared on the screen. "Captain, Mac has picked up a signal from the Khieevi fleet. They've located narhii-Vhiliinyar."

"On our way, Princess," Becker said. "Your uncles getting those sap torpedoes filled?"

"Yes, Captain. All available personnel have been collecting and diluting the sap and Gill says the engineers have made some very business-like torpedoes and are fitting the ships with them now. The Condor is ready to go. Have you found any trace of the Acadeckil"

Becker looked at Nadhari. He didn't want to break the news to Acorna.

"We haven't found a trail, Acorna," Nadhari said crisply, "But there are other trails that correspond with those of Khieevi ships. We were about to follow, but it seems we now have a good idea -where to find the Khieevi."

"Yes," Acorna said. "Though it's odd that you're finding traces there when the coordinates are so far from those of narhii-Vhiliinyar."

"Those bugs get around," Becker said.

The spaceport on narhii-Vhiliinyar took the first hit from the Khieevi missile attack. The third wave took out most of the techno-artisan's compound, including

the huge evacuation ships the Linyaari had used to escape their former homeworld.

Due to the Linyaari ability to heal infirmities as well as injuries and disease, even the old were not feeble and the staggered lines of refugees heading for the caves in the hills -where the Ancestors lived moved along smartly.

The com-shed officer of the day barely escaped with her life and the portable remote link as her duty station exploded behind her.

Trees were few on narhii-Vhiliinyar but the grasses beyond the primary grazing areas -were taller than the heads of the people, and provided visual cover. Council members directed people to the proper path and shepherded them through. The attendants of the Ancestors met the refugees at predesignated places to guide them to the caves.

At first, once the cities and chief settlements were behind them, the refugees faced little danger from the bombardment,

They made their way quietly toward the caves. Only the occasional whimpering of a child or the cough of an elder interrupted the muffled pounding of hard feet and the shush of the grasses as bodies wound quickly through them. The thought that guided everyone was, "Calm. Peace. Go swiftly but silently. Help your neighbors if they fall." The voice in -which everyone heard these thoughts was that of the one they loved best and trusted most. The best loved and most trusted heard the thought in the voice of Grandam Naadiina.

Then suddenly the bombing fanned out from the city and ignited the tall grasses, where hundreds of people still travelled. People ran, and screamed, and fell, and some were trampled.

Circling the planet, the Khieevi -were pleased at last to feel the terror rising in nourishing -waves from the surface. The transmission of it -would appease the Young for a -while longer, until the ships could land and begin loading the prisoners.

The House Harakamian ships rallied under Nadhari's leadership. Most of the security ships needed only to load the torpedoes in their own bomb bays to be ready to fly into battle. Cascade shipping company's lawyer -was overruled by her bosses, although one ship was allotted to take her and some of the other less committed executives and employees back to the company's headquarters. What Ms. Barber had failed to realize, Rafik told Acorna, -was that her company -was actually a subsidiary of one owned by Hafiz's second cousin, "whose holdings were dependant on the backing of House Harakamian.

Acorna and the other Linyaari meanwhile spent time with the plants of the vine world. The vines actually seemed to flourish in the sea of sap they had created, growing from it at an amazing rate and sending forth a pleasant floral smell as if the whole planet was merely a large innocuous bouquet. "Apparently the sap that kills the bugs has regenerative properties for the plants," Miiri said. "Fortunately it doesn't work that way for the Khieevi," Aari said with a small, tight smile.

Some of the less battle-worthy ships brought up the rear of the makeshift fighter squadron. They formed a supply line back to the vine world to reequip ships that, it was optimistically hoped, would expend all of their sap shells destroying Khieevi and their vessels.

Becker meanwhile was giving the skippers and navigators a crash course in gonzo astrophysics.

"If we use the folds in space as cover, we can pop in and out around the bugs and sap them before they have any idea where we come from. But with this many of us, we have to do it in strict rotation or we'll be ramming each other and lose the battle to friendly fire."

Becker was originally going to return to the Condor, flying it into battle and leaving Acorna and Aari with the other Linyaari back on the vine world, which was the only place certain to be safe from Khieevi attack.

But the Khieevi massed quickly around narhii-Vhiliinyar and, instead of sending in ground troops and shuttles as they had before, began a massive bombardment of the helpless planet. Becker stayed with Nadhari as she flew reconnaissance, spying out the Khieevi position, which was basically encircling the planet with ships, as it had done with the vine world.

"You're on your own, kids," Becker told Acorna and Aari in his last transmission to the ConSor before the battle was joined. "I'll miss my old bucket of bolts, but the I frit is lighter and more maneuverable and Nadhari needs me with her to

weave her troops in and out if we're going to have a prayer against the klackers. Aari, make sure Mac reports to you what he's getting from the Khieevi communications and if there's any break. ..." "Lately they've been almost impossible to read. Captain," Aan said sadly. "So many are klacking at once that Mac cannot decipher individual messages. And the sound of the missiles is also disrupting our sensors."

"We're going to start making a lot of noise ourselves pretty quick," Becker said. "Be safe, people."

"Be safe, Joh," Aari said, and touched the corn screen.

"Be safe, Becker, and keep the others safe as well," Acorna said.

But she felt so powerless. In the other battle, there had been something she could do to help, but this one, well, it almost went without saying that this was a lost cause. The sap was effective against the Khieevi. Perhaps they could be driven off in time to save the Linyaari people, if not narhii-Vhiliinyar, but it was hard to believe the combination of corporate security and civilian ships stood a chance against the Khieevi hordes.

More immediately saddening was that in the course of their reconnaissance, Becker and Nadhari had seen no sign of the AcaSeckl, and Mac could discern no mention of them from the Khieevi transmissions filling the Condor with their staccato.

The driver of the Khieevi ship designated Fourteen KLaclu am) Two KLiclu was not, as his non-Khieevi enemies sometimes presumed, incapable of independent thought and action. Quite the contrary. The driver, now trying to control the ship with only five feet, having sacrificed his sixth, knew that once he rejoined the other Khieevi, he -would not last long.

When the main swarm discovered the true home of the One-Horns and began bombarding it, the driver was so dismayed he sent an extra jolt of energy to the Young. His wonderful capture, so fortunately come by and so willingly carried to the Young, was about to be rendered insignificant by the might of the swarm. Unless, of course, he and his fellow stragglers delivered their contribution to the diet of the Young before the swarm was able to return with captives.

Some of the other stragglers were little more than dead weight. There had been six of them in his limb originally and he knew for certain that three of the ships no longer contained living personnel. No one was at the com units, and the ships were guided only by the tractor beams attached to the captive vessel from Fourteen KLaclu an() Two Klickd and the other two vessels whose crews still contained some living members.

The only comfort that the driver had was that he knew many of the ships in the swarm were as badly off as his own - as the others of his limb. The communications he received, and ignored, were quite often disordered and nonsensical and he suspected that only the structure of the swarm kept many of the ships in place.

Fourteen KLaclu and Two Klic/u would not remain in place. It sped, with as much momentum as possible pulling one alien and three Khieevi vessels plus two others whose drivers, he suspected, were suffering more of the effects of contaminated shuttle soldiers than him, toward the homeworld and the Young.



As the bombardment of narhii-Vhiliinyar continued, so did Acorna's healing duties.

The first to show the long-range effects of the damage done to the Linyaari was Aari's mother. Miiri, gathering sap on the vine world, grew more and more distracted and incoherent. Kaarlye said she was receiving telepathic signals from the homeworld, reading the suffering of her people. The time came when she cried out and fainted, falling face forward into a lake of sap. By the time they pulled her out, she had nearly suffocated.

Acorna, Neeva, Melireenya, and Khaari, as well as Kaarlye, all laid horns on Miiri to revive her. But the physical effect of her fall was not what caused her to thrash and cry out in her unconsciousness.

"This is how she was while Aari was a prisoner," Kaarlye said.

"I don't see why," Liriili said. "She's no good to anyone that way."

But as time wore on, and reports were relayed back along the supply channels of the fires in the fields, the decimation of the cities, the saturation bombing of the planet's surface, the bad news took its toll. First Melireenya, then Khaari, then Neeva and finally Kaarlye himself began to succumb to the disorientation and panic that had marked Miiri's decline in health.

Even Aari attempted to use his newly grown horn to soothe his parents and the Balakiire crew. He had no more luck than the others.

Acorna had not lived on narhii-Vhiliinyar long enough to develop a bond strong enough to affect her the way it did the others, but she missed Calum, and Maati, Grandam, Hafiz, and even Karina. Not to mention all of the children she had helped to rise from slavery only for them to fall victim to a more deadly peril. Jana would be taking care of the others now, she knew, and Maati would help. So would Thariinye, -who was not a bad sort, just a bit callow sometimes.

Calum had helped raise her and at times had been her closest friend. If she - were to bond with anyone out there, she thought, it would be with him. But she felt nothing from him. Nothing. Unfortunately, the hardheaded Caledonian, while as pragmatic and ingenious as the best of his race, had not fallen heir to their more magical qualities.

Grandam had lived through much in her long life, but even the Khieevi attack on Vhiliinyar had not been this horrible. The people had escaped then. Now they were ambushed on their own world, their escape routes cut off, the ground quickly being bombed from beneath their feet.

The noise outside her head was no worse than the clamor inside. Her people were dying. Dying. Dead already, many in the tall grasses, and she could do nothing. The keening of death songs in the caves was as loud in its way as the bombing.

Not just bombing either, but ships falling from the sky, huge chunks of them plummeting everywhere, blazing comets of death.

She healed burns and fractures, crushing injuries and shock, all the time trying to exude calm and control, as all the other elders -were also doing. But never had she felt so keenly every year of her age. The Ancestors attempted to help, but their energy was older than her own and they were not immune to the chaos and tragedy thundering down upon them.

She felt a sudden jolt of alarm and looked up from the badly burned body of young Hiiri, who had been caught in the first grass fire. One of the Ancestors bolted from an adjoining cave and galloped across the charred stubble that remained of the tall grasses, easily, gracefully leaped the small river fed by an underground spring in the hills, and charged into a remaining stand of tall grasses on the other side. Grandam watched as the grasses parted, and a line of figures, much burdened with cases and cages, humbled through the grass to meet the Ancestor. (Aagrone lirtyef) Grandam called in thought-speak. (Your laboratory should have been among the first to be evacuated!)

(We could hardly leave all of the new younglings we've been growing from the remains of the animals from Vhiliinyar, could we?) the aagrone demanded indignantly. (It took a little time to pack them out but everything has gone very well indeed.)

The Ancestor had gone to offer her services as a pack animal. (Of course, you couldn't,) Grandam replied. (I commend your dedication to your charges.) She turned back to the smoky den behind her to recruit some of the able bodied to assist with the bundles.

The ball of flame flashed across her eyes as she turned and •when she whirled back to look, it had landed in the tall grass. She could no longer see the Ancestor or the aagrone but she heard the screams and the frantic whinnying of the Ancestor. An attendant ran from one of the caves but he had Grandam's heels before him.

She tried to outrun the flame, circling around it to reach some of the scientists behind it, or the Ancestor. All of these precious beings must not die. So much had been lost in such a short time. This must not go too.

But she could see nothing but fire. She heard the roar of the flames and the screams and she saw the Ancestor leap from the fire with specimens upon her

back, her mane and tail on fire before she leaped into the river. Grandam leaped into the river herself and soaked herself thoroughly and then gave a great leap of body and mind and plunged into the flames.

After countless hours of healing work, trying to soothe and sedate Neeva, Khaari, Melireenya, Miiri, and Kaariye, Acorna was resting. Aari helped by holding the hands of his parents, speaking in a low voice to them of his boyhood, and also remembering some bits of Linyaari spiritual teachings, of how beloved souls returned with the new spirits of the young.

She had finally fallen asleep listening to him herself. His horn was not mature enough to use for healing, but what he was doing truly helped. More than Liriili, who wrung her hands and demanded that somebody do something. She seemed most distressed that all of these outsiders now knew the location of narhii-Vhilnnyar. Irrationally, she was somehow not understanding that the Khieevi had already found the planet. And something was being done. The Khieevi bombardment of the Linyaari world was now meeting with resistance from the outside, from the darting mosquito-like attacks of MOO's combined forces. Reports traveled back down the supply channels that the attacks were effective. Once a Khieevi vessel was sapped, it did not remain aloft for long.

On the other hand, another odd rumor was reaching the vine world. Many of the Khieevi ships that had not been hit, in fact, even before the MOO ships began their attack, were falling out of orbit and crashing onto the surface of narhiiVhiliinyar. Direct communication with the front wings was infrequent and terse, so Acorna had not been able to speak to any of the actual combatants about this, but she suspected that some of the Khieevi swarm had been infected with the sap from the swarm's previous attack on the vine world.

The MOO forces had actually been firing a relatively short time-less than forty-eight hours-but the psychic damage from the telepathic bonds between the Linyaari on narhii-Vhilimiyar and Aari's parents and the Balakiire's crew had been occurring since the first Khieevi bomb struck the planet's surface.

Acorna's dreams were fitful and troubled, she was running, hiding, ducking, while the world fell apart all around her. Some part of her mind knew that this was not only a dream. Nevertheless, the bonds of empathy that tied her to her own friends and kin were beginning to drag her into the morass of emotion experienced by the Linyaari under attack.

Suddenly, screams shattered her fragile rest and her eyes flew open. All of the Linyaari, including Liriili and Aari, cried out.

"What is it?" she asked, struggling to her feet.

"Grandam," Neeva cried.

"Grandam," Kaarlye and Miiri echoed.

Aari added, with wonder in his voice. "And Maati."

At the moment Grandam leaped into the flames, Maati was also sleeping. She and Thariinye had their hands full calming children, trying to heal them of fears they shared. It didn't help that Hafiz and Karina were so obviously frightened.

"Look," Maati had told the others. "I think the Khieevi really like it when they scare us. They get some sort of special kick out of it. So the scarer we are, the more they like it. Can we try not to give them the satisfaction?"

Jana nodded her understanding, "Some of the overseers at the mines were like that. And-Kheti said that some of the clients in the pleasure houses -were like that, too. They enjoyed scaring and hurting the girls because that was what they wanted really, not the sex."

"I can't help it," Chiura said, cuddling close to Jana. "I'm scared."

Karina Harakamian stopped trembling and tried to rally them. "I know what. We could group sing. Does anyone know the song 'Kum-bye-ya?' It's from an ancient Earth culture and very hypnotic."

Nobody did. Karina sang it with them. It -was slow and everybody swayed to it like she showed them to, but it was repetitious. It didn't change their mood or lighten their fears.

Calum Baird, who now had nothing to do, finally said, "That's a nice wee song, Karina, but we've sung it twenty times. Shall we try something else? I know a few. I learned this one from Giloglie one time when -we were drunk as skunks. His people were great ones for songs. We used to sing this one and some of the others to Acorna when she'-was little."

While he taught them, "The Rocky Road to Dublin" and they were all shouting, "One, two, three, four, five! Hunt the hare and turn her on the rocky road all the way to Dub-uh-lin one, two, three, four, five!" Maati and Thariinye were finally able to fall into an exhausted sleep.

And then she felt the flames and heard, for the first time ever, Grandam shriek, and she woke up shrieking too. Thariinye was screeching right back at her. Then Grandam was gone, somehow, but someone else was there, in her mind with her.

"Maati? Maati, where are you? It's Aari. Keep sending. I'm coming to get you."

Maati's thought was loud and clear and If Aari and Acorna both heard it, though Miiri and Kaarlye almost immediately lapsed back into their telepathic nightmares. (There's Khieevi ships all around us. They're taking us somewhere.)

(Can you read them, Maati?) Aari asked her.

(A-a little. I know they want to hurt us, but I scared one of them by rubbing sap on the screen.)

(That's good,) Aari told her. (You kept them from taking you off the ship.)

(Maati, ask Calum what your coordinates are,) Acorna said.

(Can't,) Maati replied.

(Is he hurt?) Acorna asked anxiously.

(No, nothing like that. He's doing a lot of clapping his hands and stomping his feet and bellowing. Everybody else is doing it too so I wouldn't be able to make him hear me. But I can read them.) She was silent for a moment, then recited the coordinates.

(Keep sending,) Aari told her. (We're on our way.)

The coordinates were nowhere near those of narhii-Vhiliinyar.

The Khieevi swarm spiraled in rings twenty deep around narhii-Vhiliinyar. Blossoms of red fire bloomed from the innermost ships as missiles silently connected with the surface of the planet. Then the ships that had fired spiraled back out to the outermost layer to be replaced by fresh ships.

Up until recently, no one who had witnessed this battle formation had lived to tell about it. One hundred percent saturation, domination, and decimation were guaranteed. Usually the innermost ships dispatched shuttles with ground troops instead of bombs, but sometimes the bombs came first, to soften up the enemy before the troops landed. This time the ships themselves intended to land and gather up the prisoners.

The strategy was time tested and utterly perfect against planets without missiles or other defenses of their own. Planets such as narhii-Vhiliinyar.

The attention of every ship was focused inwardly, on the target, though in many cases in this particular formation, individual ships were distracted by a substance brought onboard by disabled shuttles and wounded crew from the battle with the vine world. The substance was as intractable as the Khieevi themselves, creeping, infiltrating, oozing over any and all surfaces, and where it met with

susceptible carapace or Khieevi exoskeleton, burning and eating all that it touched, growing ever more rapidly as it fed. Much like the Khieevi. Very much like the Khieevi.

The ships that had been infected and remained within the swarm did not request assistance from the other ships. They did not know exactly -what was weakening them and causing them to suffer, but they knew that weakness -would be met with elimination, so they gave their suffering to the Young and carried on as usual.

Nine Klackt am) Seventy-two Klick<) had just returned to the outermost spiral ring when its hull imploded and the bridge was filled with burning, clinging yellow sap and the high pitched eeee's of the crew.

Nine Klack<f an3 Seventy-two Klictu was not one of the ships that had been infected on the vine -world. But it had seen that many other ships haS taken back shuttles and crewmembers damaged in that battle. No doubt one of them had become defective. The driver of Nine Klack.) ant) Seventy-two Kliclu thought in the split second before the liquid sap covered him that this -was just the sort of thing that made it necessary to strictly enforce the policy of eliminating the -weak.

Seventy-two Klackd and Nine Kiick^, on the other hand, had six crewmembers in various stages of being devoured by sap. When it<f hull imploded with ordinary explosive missile material, the driver thought to wonder, just before he crashed his ship into sixteen other vessels, which crashed their ships into a like number on the -way to the target's surface, how the swarm had known his ship was infected. And why they had not waited to eliminate him until after the battle. But, of course, by then the question was strictly rhetorical.

"This is like shooting ducks in a barrel," Nadhan complained, but not unhappily.

"More like shooting pool," Becker said. "Lookit that ricochet!"

"Somebody call for Ryk O'Shay?" the corn unit asked. "I'm right here with Cap'n Glen in the Hudson IT sapship Bananas. And we read you, wing command! One of the bugs just slipped on one of our peels and crashed through the Khieevi inner formation taking out, oh, maybe ten or twelve of its little bug buddies, and each of them bumped off at least ten more apiece.

"It hardly seems sporting," Captain Glen opined. "And I -wonder if we aren't wasting the sap. Whatever they're hit with, it looks to me as if it's their own tactics that are defeating them.

They seem to be totally unprepared for an attack from outside their formation."

"That's a roger, Cap'n Glen," Becker said. The scan scope on the Ifrit showed a long view of the Khieevi formation.

"Au contraire, ma capitaine," broke in Andina Dimitri of Domestic Goddess Intergalactic Cleansing Corporation, manufacturers of a multitude of cleaning products and providers of the most comprehensive housekeeping and interior design services in the Federation. "We've been compiling statistics here and according to our figures, the ships hit with sap shells hit three times as many of their companion vessels as the ships hit with conventional ammo. The sap shells are demonstrably superior."

"This is the Condor calling the Ifrit. Come in, Ifrit," the remote link crackled.

"Aan! Acorna, we're kicking butt here. Wish you were here."

"Joh," Aari's face on the corn screen -was both serious and hopeful. "Khornya and I are taking the Condor to find the AcaDeckt. My sister just sent us the coordinates."

"Oh, good, I'm glad they're okay," Becker said.

"They're not okay, Captain," Acorna said. "They're held in a Khieevi tractor beam. Maati is afraid they're being taken to the Khieevi homeworld. But the Khieevi haven't touched them yet."

"Mr. and Mrs. Harakamian?" Nadhari asked. "How are they?"

"Fine, except Maati says Karina has a lousy singing voice. Calum was teaching the kids Gill's drinking songs, Maati said."

"I'll pass it on," Nadhari said. "Keep us posted on the coordinates of the Khieevi vessels."

Acorna's voice was unsteady when she asked, "Do we- know how the people on the surface are doing? Any idea what happened to Grandam?"

"Something happened to Grandam?" Becker asked.

"I forgot you wouldn't know," Acorna said. "All of us felt it. I think maybe she-she's gone."

"We'll check it out as soon as possible, honey," Becker said. "Nadhari wants to shoot something so we gotta go now. Give me those coordinates again," he said. She did and they signed off just in time to hear a very staticky call from Hudson IT Bananas.

"What the devil!" Captain Glen called. "Wing command, we've been hit!"

"Fall back!" Nadhari cried, as a missile exploded to the port bow of the Ifrit.

"They finally shooting at us instead of the Linyaari?" Gil asked.

"Cloak and shield, people" Becker said. "Do it now."

The mosquito fleet obeyed the command, leaving the space surrounding narhii-Vhiliinyar to the Khieevi, but still the firing continued. The spiral of ships, formerly as tidy and symmetrical as a water ballet, already had gaping holes torn in its pristine formation from the crashes. All pretense of order vanished as the ships on the lower layer fired upward, the ships on the upper layer fired downward, and both hit the ships in the intermediate layers, which crashed. Fire blossomed and ships disintegrated into thousands of pieces, buffeting the shielded ships of the makeshift MOO fleet like a meteor shower.

"Holy smokes," Ryk O'Shay said. "Would you lookit the fireworks."

"Fireworks hell," Becker said, his voice thick with longing. "RK, wouldja look at that salvage, and us without the ConSorV

Nadhari snorted, "The Khieevi apparently decided what we threw at them was friendly fire-no longer so friendly. I don't know how they could have figured the crashes were deliberate as well but it looks as if they did, and good riddance. They're saving us the trouble of killing them by turning on themselves."

"I like that," Adina said. "It's economical."

"Banaruu, how bad are you hit?"

"I think we've contained it for now, Ifrit, but we'll need a tow back to base."

"Hang on. This will be over soon from the look of it."

It was. In a matter of less than an hour, hundreds of Khieevi ships destroyed each other. A few managed to flee the scene.

With the ships gone, however. Decker could see what was left of narhii-Vhiliinyar. The planet's surface, once a study in blue-green landscape and charmingly colored cities, was now a smoking black, cratered wasteland.

The Condor's computers found every shortcut between itself and the Acaoeki. Mac, no longer troubled by the cacophony from the fleet, easily picked up the signals from Fourteen Klacfu an<) Two Kticfu and its cohorts.



"They have injured aboard, Acorna," Mac said. "And they are returning to the homeworld-the captain of the limb, as the six ships are referred to, is attempting to precede the remainder of the fleet to the homeworld to appease those he calls "the Young" with the sacrifice of the AcaSecki's personnel."

The long-range scanners had enabled to Conclor to stay a safe distance from the limb of Khieevi ships without detection, and now Aari asked, "Shall we close on them, Khornya?"

"Hmm, not yet, I think," she said. "Mac, let us know if you can get the coordinates of the homeworld from the Khieevi vessel-or at least some idea when we're close enough that we have an idea where to locate their homeworld before we free the Acaoecki."

"Yes, Acorna." Mac said, and returned to his post at the Khieevi shuttle's corn unit.

Maati continued to send the coordinates every hour.

(Lots of the kids are sleeping now,) she said. (I told Calum and Hafiz that you were behind us and Calum says please don't get caught. I told him you had sap shells and he's worried you won't use them because of us Linyaan being pacifist and all.)

(A minor technicality in this case,) Acorna said as cheerfully as possible. (Mac can use the launch controls and he is no pacifist. But I suppose this is one case where even Liriili might be glad Aari and I are somewhat alienated from mainstream Linyaari culture.)

(Hmph!) Maati sent a picture of herself snorting and giggling (Are you kidding? If Liriili thought it would save her, she would pull the toggle herself.)

(I think you're right about that.)

(Khornya? Do you know any more about Grandam yet? I didn't even say goodbye. Do you think she might think I ran away from her I'm glad I found my-Aari's and my-folks, but Grandam is-Grandam was my real family, you know?)

(I felt -what you felt too Maati but I don't know any more about it. We'll just have to go to narhn-Vhiliinyar when you're free and find out. Captain Becker says the Khieevi mistook MOO's attacks for some kind of internal warfare and turned on each other and blew each other all across the quadrant. I could tell Captain Becker was slaving over all that salvage.)

(He if coming now, Maati. RiiS-Kiiyi if coming, too,) Aari said.

(You thought-talk to RK?) Maati asked.

(Yes, but you, know him. He doesn't listen to me or anyone else. But we have had a special relationship since I helped heal him on Vhiliinyar. Don't tell Job. He gets jealous. But 'RiQ-Kiiyijust scratched at the door of my mind. He wants you, to know he is coming and he will claw the eyes out of the Khieevi and spray their sockets.)

Maati giggled.

And after a while she said, (I think we're getting nearer. The Khieevi just came back on the com screen even though I scared him off once with the zap. He's showing that-you know, Aari, that vid of you from the piyi, to frighten us again. But we turned the sound off. Nobody speaks Khieevi anyway and many are sleeping now. Calum's songs are very energetic and involve much stomping, clapping, and hollering. He wore himself and everyone else out.)

(I missed those versions,) Acorna said. (Or at least the stomping and hollering arrangements. Gill did sing me an Irish lullaby or two.)

As they spoke, they narrowed the gap between themselves and the Khieevi limb until they were within firing distance.

(Calum says you should know that he thinks each of the ships have a tractor beam on us. But I think at least three of the ships are dead already.)

(That's what I call good news and bad news!) Acorna said. (But I have an idea. Tell Calum to be ready to accelerate and fire upon the Khieevi as soon as the connections are broken. Then to put up the shields and cloak and take you all away as fast as possible.)

(I don't think he will leave you.)

(He must to save the children.)

(They will all feel safer with you, Khornya.)

(That's touching but not helpful. Just tell him, Maati, and wish us all luck.)

She went to Mac's station and asked him, "Can you use the Khieevi shuttle's controls to remotely operate controls on their ships?"

Mac examined the controls and said, "No, Acorna. I cannot find such a mechanism on the shuttle."

"Oh," she said. "Hmm. There are six ships with tractor beams locked onto the AcaSecki."

"I could try to send them a command to release the ship," he said.

"Three of the ships are dead," she told him. "But if we fire on them to break the beam, I'm afraid we might damage the Acafeclu."

"Perhaps the other Khieevi ships in the limb will have a remote mechanism to control the tractor beams of the dead ships," he said.

"I suppose there's no harm in trying."

He transmitted command-style Hacking and clicking using the identification code from the mother ship of the shuttle.

Four ships fell away from the AcaSecki at once and when he repeated the command, so did the fifth.

But the sixth ship sent back a message saying, "This is the driver of the ship designated Fourteen Klaču aru) Two Klicki). How is it that you escaped the Planet of Doom, Fifty-three Klaču am) Seven Kliclu, when most of our shuttles were lost?"

Mac shrugged. "What do I say?" he whispered.

Aari had joined them and suggested, "Respond with this message," and he gave Mac a series of klacks and khcks to transmit.

The last ship immediately released the AcaSecki, which shot away from it and fired a round at each of its captors. Three of the ships were hit at once and flew to bits but the other three maneuvered out of range and returned fire. By then, however, the AcaSecki had cloaked and shielded, as ordered.

"That worked," Acorna said. "What does it mean?"

"I have no idea," Aari said. "Except that it is not very polite and those in charge seemed to say it when they were particularly annoyed-although with a Khieevi it was difficult to tell, of course."

The other three ships accelerated away from both the AcaSecki and the Condor along the same route they had been following, and were out of range before Aari and Acorna could return to the bridge.

"I am picking up strange signals, Aari," Mac said. "They do not sound like any of the Khieevi transmissions I have heard before."

Acorna and Mac heard a higher pitched sound, containing clicking but also something that sounded more like "snip snip" than a klack.

"However," Mac said, as click-klacks began transmitting and new blips appeared on the scanner, "ThoM do. And they are homing in on us. Fourteen Klack) ana Two Klclu is transmitting data regarding our position."

"I think it's time to sap Fourteen Klaclu ana Two KUclu," Acorna said firmly. "They have caused enough trouble for one journey."

The driver of Fourteen Klachf and Two Klckd -was in agony once more. Behind him the debris of four ships of his limb blew apart. He alone had realized that Fifty-three KlacLf and Seven KUdu was behaving in an irregular manner. But when the driver called him an eater of his own eggs, he thought the driver must be of very high rank, as such an insult to any but the lowliest inferior was an invitation to be devoured. Thus had he been tricked into releasing his prey. His only hope now was that he would leave the nestworld alive once more.

And then that last vain hope also was eaten.

Another of his crewmembers had become infected while tearing off the legs of one of the previously infected members. Now this crewman crawled up to the driver while the driver was arguing -with the false driver of the shuttle from Fifty-three Klack<f and Seven Klclu. Laying half-eaten pincers upon the driver's carapace, the crewman begged to be slain. The driver obliged at once, but not before the sap began eating through to his internal organs.

Meanwhile, signals arrived from several returning members of the swarm. "Deserter!" their clicks and klacks said, more or less. "The swarm has perished and now you will perish as well." That was the message from behind him.

And just ahead, on the nestworld, the Young were clamoring for their prey, demanding it be brought to them.

On the -whole, it seemed easier to oblige them after all. The driver of Fourteen Klaclu anc) Two Klclu raised his acceleration and shot for the surface of the nestworld without bothering to initiate a landing procedure.

"He crashed it!" Mac said. "Fourteen Klackf and Two KUclF crashed his vessel onto the surface of the nestworld. He killed some of the Young. The others seem to be-from -what I can tell, swarming over the dead to feast upon them."

"At least it seems we won't have to worry about destroying innocent children when we sap the nest," Acorna said.

"No," Mac said. "But you had better sap them fast and leave. The Khieevi ships behind are gaining on us."

"Khieevi ships to your starboard stern," Calum said. "We'll cover you, Condor."

"No!" Acorna said. "Take the children out of here, Calum. Now. You can't risk them."

"This is Wing Command Ifrit," Nadhari's crisp and authoritative voice came through. "You heard the lady, Acaoeki. Move smartly from the field at once."

"Do it," Becker's voice seconded the motion. "We got 'em in our crosshairs, Calum. Vamoose and don't let any salvage hit you in the stern on your way out."

The rest "was a bit anticlimactic for Acorna and Aari. The squad from the MOO fleet closed rapidly on the few survivors from the horde's self-destruction and demolished them with a combination of conventional fire and sap shells.

The majority of the sap shells were saved for the nestworld, where the Young had already begun to die from the sap oozing out of Fourteen Klačlu and Two Klick.

"Dimitri, Glen, and Giloglie each keep your wing here until you're sure it's over," Nadhari commanded.

"Don't worry, Nadhari," Andina Dimitri said, "I've just the cleanser to take care of this mess."

"Acorna? Aari?" Becker asked plaintively. "I don't suppose you could pick up any of this salvage on your way back to MOO, could you?"

For the first time since the Linyaari inhabited narhiiVhiliinyar, hordes of people of other species joined with the Linyaari and the Ancestors.

It had taken much imagination and very precise navigational memory to find the site of Grandfather Niicari's grave. It had once been marked by being located a few steps from the back flap of Grandam Naadiina's pavilion but now all pavilions were little more than pools of molten ash in the lake of such ash that had once been Kubiilikhan.

Neeva swallowed hard and spoke, "Friends and clankin, we are gathered to lay our beloved Grandam, mother, protectress, and wise counselor to our many generations of Linyaari, friend to the outsiders, to rest beside her lifemate, our Grandfather."

Maati was weeping quietly, supported on one side by Aari and Acorna and on the other by a dry-eyed but solemn-faced Thariinye. Miiri and Kaarlye stood behind their youngest, Miiri's hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

Grandam looked so beautiful lying there. The char had been cleaned from her silvery mane, the lines were smoothed on her face, her hands resting peacefully, naturally at her waist. And her mouth was curved in a firm and exultant smile. She had not died in the fire, as it seemed when Maati and the other Linyaari felt first the fire and then the extinguishment of Grandam's life force.

Grandam's leap at the fire had been a complete act involving not only her body, but also her extraordinary strength of heart, mind, and will, as she dragged the river waters from their bed to flood the fires threatening the scientists and the precious new species they had risked their own lives to save.

Never had anyone done such a thing in Linyaari history or fable, as long as any of them could remember. But Grandam Naadiina had lived longer than any two-footed Linyaari and had grown in wisdom and skill with every ghaanyi of her life. Unfortunately, her heart, which had grown in the strength of its love and kindness, had not improved structurally, and the strain of her final telepathic struggle to save others had been too much for it.

"Those who were with Grandam at the end said she wore the same smile you see here. Aagrone lirtye, do you wish to add something?"

"I do," he said. His mane was very short and irregular where the char had been chopped off, and he had no brows or lashes. His skin was reddened and peeling, as was that of several people around him. "Grandam died as you were just told, saving me, my staff, and most important, the young we have been growing from cells of species lost with our own beloved Vhiliinyar. I understand that her passing was felt by her foster daughter Maati and Spacefarer Thariinye across several galaxies. I was privileged to be nearest to her at her death and received her last thoughts. They were of you, Maati, full of pride for your bravery in risking your life to save your family and friends, and for all of us, her other children, and most of all, for Vhiliinyar. Just as Grandam knew, somehow, that we would be saved, she also knew that the destruction of narhii Vhiliinyar was not the end of a Linyaari homeworld. Viife<)haanye-feriilt Neeva?"

"I think Grandam would be pleased and proud now to hear the message brought by my sister-daughter, VueShaanye Khornya, called Ah-khorn-ah by those humans who saved her as an infant, and saved us from the Khieevi. Khornya?"

Acorna gracefully extracted herself from Aari, with a last caress to his fingers and a lingering touch on Maati's shoulder, and knelt beside Grandam to kiss her forehead before standing, quite close to Grandam, and saying, "As some of you know, the Khieevi were defeated by people my Uncle Hafiz brought into this

quadrant in hopes that you would trade with them. I want you to know that when these people, merchants, tradespeople, learned that you were in danger, they hastened to help you however they could. Not all could destroy Khieevi. Like the Linyaari, many are good only at building, not at destroying. Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa, in particular, has long sought to escape from those who would use the weather-control science he developed for martial purposes. He feels a great kinship with the Linyaari.

"He, along with the most expert terraforming specialists available in the Federation, have been brought to House Harakamian's Moon of Opportunity by Hafiz and Rafik Harakamian for the express purpose of helping us restore Vhiliinyar to its former life and beauty.

Her voice lowered for a moment and her silver eyes were covered by their long pewter lashes before she resumed, "I do not recall having seen Vhiliinyar with my own eyes. But in my dreams, since I was a baby, I have seen a beautiful world of rolling hills, snow-capped mountains, tumbling waterfalls and forests, and great tracts of delicious grasses. I am told that is what Vhiliinyar was like.

"Grandam's final sacrifice, which kept Aagrone lirtye and his staff's heroic efforts to preserve native species that would have otherwise been extinguished, was her last contribution to the restoration of this home I have never known, but many of you remember. Her first contribution, of course," and she smiled impishly, "Was to have her many children and grandchildren, all of us.

"My adoptive fathers have requested me to ask you if the Linyaari would please direct Dr. Hoa and the other specialists in a joint effort to restore our ancestral home to us. For those of us who require the solitude and seclusion of a peaceful world, Vhiliinyar's location will remain a highly classified secret. My uncles further propose that narhii-Vhiliinyar and Kubiilikhan also be restored as a trade base for Linyaari skills and goods, where our people may interact freely with people of all planets and species so that we may each learn the good the other has to offer.

She knelt once more beside Grandam and, laying her hand upon Grandam's folded hands, said, "Grandam, when the restoration is complete, you and Grandfather will be brought home to join your children on your world."

It was perhaps the first funeral in the history of the Linyaari in which the beloved deceased was interred to sobs of rejoicing and cries of hope for a better world to come.